24

TASK AND VISION
Willem Dafoe in LSD

Philip Auslander

> I'm this particular guy who has to go through these particular paces. It's not so much that I'm putting forward my personality, but because of the various actions I have to do, I'm presenting my personality in how I field those actions. That is the acting in it. I'm a guy given a character, a performing persona, and I'm going through these little structures and how I field them is how I live in this piece.
>
> *(Willem Dafoe)*

> Task and vision, vision in the form of a task.
>
> *(John Ashbery, "Years of Indiscretion")*

A discussion of Willem Dafoe is inevitably a discussion of the Wooster Group, the performance collective of which he is a member and which has been the most important formative influence on his approach to acting/performing. Dafoe draws a distinction between these activities; his hesitation to make it categorical reflects the Group's multi-tracked, polysemic production style. The essential structural principle of its work is juxtaposition, often of extremely dissimilar elements (e.g., a reading of *Our Town* and a comedy routine in blackface in *Routes 1 & 9*). The performers refer to and practice a variety of performance modes and styles in each piece, ranging from realistic acting to task-based collage (*Point Judith*), from work on familiar texts to recreations of the Group's own processes and experiences. The Group's current (at time of writing) production, *LSD (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*, is, amongst other things, a performance compendium which includes all of the interests just mentioned and restates images and concerns explored in previous pieces.

The baseline of the Group's work is a set of performance personae adopted by its members, roughly comparable to the "lines" in a Renaissance theatre troupe. These personae, while not fixed, recur from piece to piece and reflect to some extent the personalities and interactions of the collective's members.

> These [pieces] are made specifically for us. In this configuration of people, we do tend to make characters, life characters and characters in the productions. If you want to get real blocky about it, Ron [Vawter] is tense, kind of officious; he's the guy who's the link to the structure, he stage-manages the thing, he pushes it along, he's got a hard edge. I serve the function of sometimes being the emotional thing. The man, *a* man.

Or, as Dafoe also puts it, Everyman.[1]

The interaction of these personae has provided the Group with a theme which, with variations, has been explored in a number of productions. In the first section of *Point Judith*, a one-act play, Vawter's character mocked Dafoe's (younger) man, calling him "Dingus," questioning his sexual prowess. In *Hula*, Vawter portrayed the leader of a seedy hula dance team trying to keep his second banana (Dafoe) in step and in line. Dafoe, in turn, seemed to be competing with him for the attention of the third dancer, acted(?)/danced(?) by Kate Valk. The second section of *LSD*, a reading of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, finds Vawter's Reverend Parris incoherently accusing Dafoe's John Proctor of witchcraft. Variations on the thematics of older man/younger man, boss/subordinate, oppressive conformity/good-natured anarchy are interlaced with undertones of sexual competition whenever the two performers work together.

The choice of Dafoe to represent emotional man is itself a (successfully) eccentric one. In films, he has played a series of punks, villains, down-and-outers. "[Film people] tend to see me as pretty tough, but they do on the street as well. The way people treat me in life is they treat me like I'm gonna slug 'em if, you know . . ." Dafoe's stereotypically "tough" physiognomy plays against his emotional performance persona to create a blur: the actor who's perceived as tough on the street or in the context of film and its system of signs and icons is a leading man in Wooster Group performances because that is the function he fulfills in *that* context, relative to *those* other performers.

The Wooster Group's personae occupy an ambiguous territory, neither "non-matrixed" performing nor "characterization." This ambiguity was exemplified in *Hula* by the audience's uncertainty as to whether it was watching a group of New York avant-garde performers doing hula dances for reasons of their own or whether there was, in fact, a kind of scenario being played out. Dafoe smiled frequently and seemed genuinely to enjoy his dancing (by contrast with Vawter, whose main focus was on keeping the others in step). But who was smiling: Dafoe, enjoying the dance, or a dancer played by Dafoe, or both? There were characters, but so slightly delineated as to function almost as "subtext," but subtext for what? Dafoe observes that the characters were not formalized in any way; perhaps, as he suggests, what appeared in the performance to be a minimal, but nevertheless present, degree of characterization was simply "the baggage that comes along with having these particular people on stage" dancing together. The "characters" arose from the activity: the task and the specific performers engaged in it.

> When we make a theatre piece, we kind of accommodate what [the performers] are good at or how they read. They have functions, so it's not like we treat each other as actors and there has to be this transformation. We just put what Ron brings to a text and formalize it: it definitely comes from Ron as we know him, as he presents himself to the world and then, of course, when you formalize it and it becomes public in a

performance, that ups the stakes a little bit. That's not to say Ron is just being himself, but you're taking those qualities that he has and you're kind of pumping them up and putting them in this structure.

The Wooster Group's process is self-referential and hermetic. Performances are structured around the performers and their personae, personae which are produced by the performers' confrontations with their material and with the act of performing. Dafoe: "I'm serving a structure I helped make and it helped make me in this public event."

The absence of transformation in Wooster Group performance, as compared with more traditional modes of acting, is important to Dafoe – he insists that the Group does not place the premium on believability demanded by realistic acting, with its implication that the actor is really experiencing the emotions he portrays. Referring to a section of LSD which he places glycerin in his eyes to s(t)imulate tears (a motif of many Wooster pieces), Dafoe states,

> Once you show the audience you're putting it in, it takes the curse off of it. Then it takes away, "Oh, what a fabulous, virtuoso performer he is, oh, he's crying!" That's something I could do. But [using the drops] makes things vibrate a little more, because you get your cake and eat it, too. You see the picture of the crying man, you hear the text, you see the whole thing before you.

The Wooster Group would trade illusionism for a more profound ambiguity. The technical processes of acting are demystified, as by the glycerin, but the central issue of mediation, of what intervenes between performer and audience, is raised but left intentionally unanswered.

For Dafoe, performance is essentially a task, an activity: the persona he creates is the product of his own relation to the "paces" he puts himself through in the course of an evening. While unconscious of the audience, he is hyper-conscious of creating a public image. The multiple, divided consciousness produced by doing something with the knowledge that it is being observed, while simultaneously observing oneself doing it, yields a complex confrontation with self.

> The more I perform, the more my relationship to the audience becomes totally abstract. Different performers, actors need different things. For example, Spalding [Gray] loves an audience. He *really feels* them out there. I don't. It's a totally internal thing. Even when [I] have a character, I'm always curious to see how I *read*, what people think I am, who I am, and then you lay the action on top of that so you're confronting yourself in these circumstances. It's open-ended. I'm not presenting anything; I'm feeling my way through. If you were acting something, if you were very conscious of acting a character, somewhere you would close it down, you'd present it. You'd finish it. In this stuff, you never know.

"Feeling his way through" the actions he has been assigned, the effects he knows he must produce, is the subject of Dafoe's performing. *LSD* is a layered production. In Part 1, the performers read from books; in Part 2, they "play" characters from *The Crucible*. Part 3 consists of a minutely accurate recreation of the Group's behavior while trying to rehearse Part 2 on acid. Even when playing a character, Dafoe perceives his internal process while performing only in terms of his consciousness of and relation to the performance context. He makes no distinction between being himself in the first part, playing John Proctor in the second and playing himself
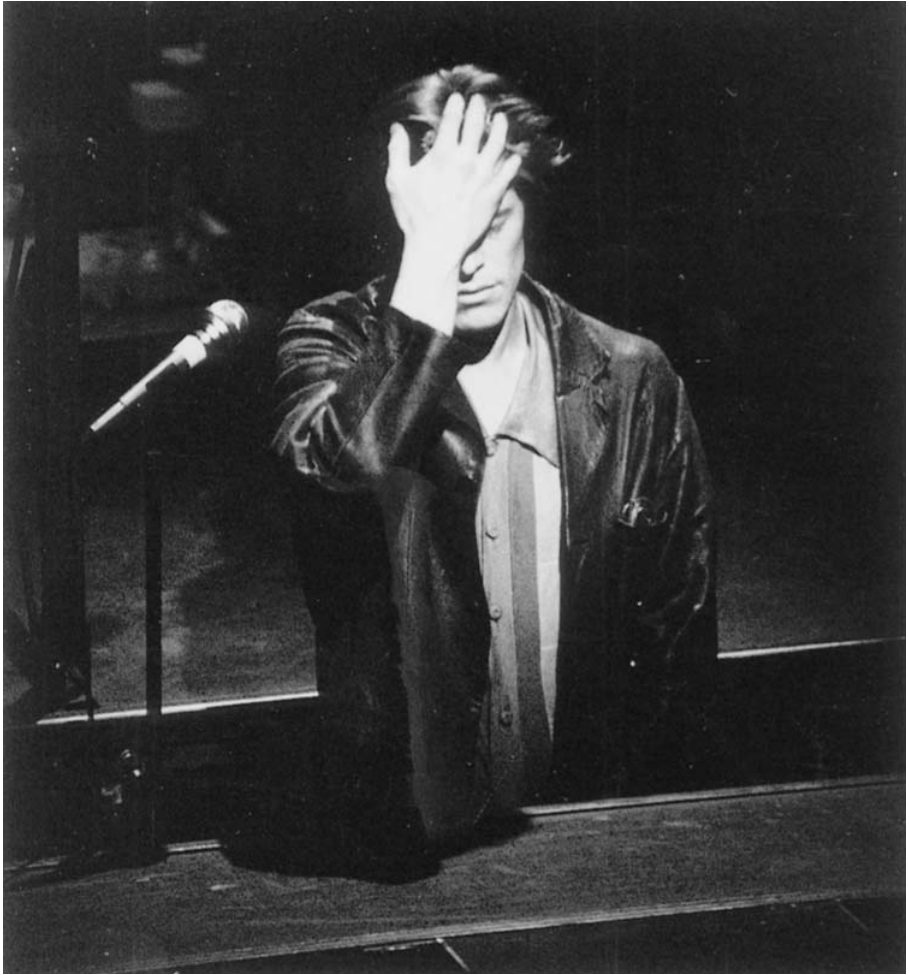
Fig. 24.1 Willem Dafoe in the Wooster Group's *LSD* (. . . *Just the High Points* . . .). (Photo by Nancy Campbell.)

(stoned) rehearsing John Proctor in the third. All are manifestations of a single performing persona (Figure 24.1).

> I never think about John Proctor. I do think about what the effect of a certain speech should be, or a certain section should be. I do respond to "here, you should relax a little bit more because you should have a lighter touch, he should be a nice guy here. Here, he can be pissed. Here, he's had it." And "he" is me because "John Proctor" means nothing to me. There's no real pretending, there's no transformation, John Proctor's no different than the guy reading the Bryan book [in Part I], he's no different than the guy in the third section who's saying, "Hey, come on, where the hell are we?" Just different action is required of him.

The complexity of his physical and vocal scores is liberating to Dafoe. Because his performance is not a matter of interpreting a role but of reenacting decisions based

on the evolution of the Group's personae made in the construction of the piece, "it's just about being it and doing it." This leaves the mind free – instead of trying to fill the moment with emotions analogous to the character's (Stanislavsky), the performer is left to explore his own relationship to the task he is carrying out.

> There are kinds of meditative moments in even the most active parts, of even *The Crucible*. There's a speech where I say, "Whore!"; I accuse Abigail. Sometimes my mind kind of wanders in that. There's a double thing happening. I'm saying the text, but I'm always wondering what my relationship to the text is. Me, personally, not the character – 'cause I don't *know* about the character. If someone asked me about John Proctor the character, I wouldn't be able to tell him a thing.

The possibility of meditativeness leads to a kind of catharsis, defined entirely in terms of the performance structure.

> The way I get off in the performances is when I hit those moments of real pleasure and real clarity and an understanding about myself in relationship to the structure; it is work, it is an exercise of me for two hours, behaving a certain way and it can become meditative.

The creation of persona from self results in a measure of self-understanding, although both process and product are bound by the idea of performance: persona as performing self/understanding of oneself as performer.

Film acting is the unavoidable point of reference for a definition of performance as the development of a persona. Dafoe has appeared in half a dozen commercial films as well as experimental ones. He sees his film persona (the tough guy) as basically similar to his Wooster Group persona (the vulnerable man), "the only difference being that I usually play something dark. In these films that I've done there's a real dark streak, there's a mean streak that I don't so much have [in Wooster Group pieces]." Dafoe draws parallels between the process of making a film and that of making a theatre piece. Typecasting, "the fact that they've cast in this role, is not unlike a certain kind of tailoring that we do at the [Performing] Garage." The technical requirements of film acting correspond to the score of a Wooster Group performance and provide Dafoe a similar opportunity for reflection on his relationship as a performer to an inclusive process.

> When you're doing a scene, you've gotta hit that little mark and if you don't hit the mark it spoils the shot. And, somewhere, I respond to that. Most people find that distracting, but that allows the frame for something to happen; it cuts down on my options and I'm a little more sure about what I want to do at any given point.

As in Group pieces, the imposition of a specific task creates a degree of freedom within the structure.

> You get no sense of having to produce anything. What you're thinking about in a funny way is your relationship, almost literally, to this whole big thing, the 20 guys around, the black box, you're dressed up in a suit or you're dressed up in leather. You get some taste of what they want you to come across with, but what energizes you is the *whole* situation.

It is this consciousness of the whole situation that Dafoe finds valuable in both his theatre and film work and which becomes the material of his performance.

The issues he raises – persona, distance, audience perception of the performer, the performer's perception of himself – are always part of performance, but are usually sublimated, at least in conventional work, to emphases on character and psychology. Film has frequently played consciously with the ambiguities of persona, but often in a purely manipulative way, as when movies are tailored to the gossip surrounding their stars to create a low-grade illusion/reality frisson for their audience. The intent of Dafoe's work with the Wooster Group is to make these issues part of the performance's subject by acknowledging that the performers' personae are produced by the process as much as the process is produced by the performers. "Task and vision, vision in the form of a task"; the work's vision *is* the task as performed by a certain group of people, and the task is a vision of what the performance should be and what those people can do. Within this circular system, the performer's persona is at once his presentation of self to the audience and his image of himself performing. There is a certain frankness to the approach; the performer's image is generated by the activity of the moment, by what the audience sees him doing under the immediate circumstances. Task/vision, vision/task; "The perfection of a persona is a noble way to go."