

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Kate Valk

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Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. Anne Hamilton is the producer and host. You may listen to the podcasts and read the transcripts at www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com



Kate Valk in The Wooster Group's HOUSE/LIGHTS
Photo by Paula Court

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Interview with Kate Valk, Actress
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AH: Welcome to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! This is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. I am your host, Anne Hamilton. Today, we are launching our third season with a conversation with actress Kate Valk. Ms. Valk has been a driving force in The Wooster Group since 1979, appearing in all of its productions, including ROUTE 1 & 9, LSD [...JUST THE HIGH POINTS...], THE TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY, THE EMPEROR JONES, BRACE UP!, THE HAIRY APE, and HOUSE/LIGHTS. EARLY PLAYS, the group's newest show, opens this month at St. Ann's Warehouse. I had the opportunity to interview her there just before a performance. Welcome, Kate.

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Kate Valk

AH: How did you begin working with The Wooster Group?

KV: [My outside job] was working as a seamstress, [when I met with Liz LeCompte] and I just started making stuff [for her]. I just thought it was terribly exciting. I was very intuitive. There weren't any calculated choices [concerning my career] on my part. I don't really feel like I'm conflicted about the whole thing, like, "I'm a great artist with a career". I've got a little bit of a self-destructive streak. My process is [that I do] whatever needs to be done to make the work happen, to make [The Performing] Garage keep going, to help Liz [LeCompte] make these pieces, and to do anything.

I'm really stupider than that, [in planning out a career]. I think even at this point in my life, I want to stay in touch with an early impulse. I want to kill the Kate Valk that gets called up to do interviews and has expectations or something. I mean, like doing this show [EARLY PLAYS] is interesting because I have to be a beginner. You have to be a beginner each time, and this is really writ large in this piece [EARLY PLAYS] because it's a very different director [Richard Maxwell]. Liz is an amazing auteur director. She has an eye and ear for the orchestration and vision for the whole thing. I'm in a situation in a room that's very exciting, that's very kinetic, and the playing field can get very democratic. It's like wherever the ball is, you've got to be there. I'm probably only and truly free when I have a big mask on.

I mean, if you want to talk about particulars, I don't really think I have a feel for naturalism. I don't really consider myself an actor. I don't really have those skills. When I found the Wooster Group, I was in acting school, and I was looking for another way, because I would see plays, and something seemed false or phony. I would always come away thinking that the clothes were wearing them, you know. You could tell they were costumes. I was looking for something. Something, I didn't know what. And then, when I saw SAKONNET POINT, RUMSTICK ROAD and NAYATT SCHOOL, it was like the whole room was speaking to me, everything. It's not that there were lies. I just felt alive and that I wasn't projecting my ideas. I was synthesizing everything.

Everything in the room was vibrating like Artaud talks about, and in the formal sense. Because for Liz, a technician might perform. A performer might have to do technical cues. The lamp stands and chairs are as important as everything else. They're not just something that gets added on later, they're huge for her. That's where she lives, in the architectonics of the space and the imbuing of the material items with spirituality. As much as a human being might imbue a piece of wood to make a puppet. I just knew, like, "Oh, this is great". There is this place to go every day and meet some great people to work with. And so it was like, whatever needed doing [I would do]. So Liz [asked me], "What can you do?" And I said, "I can sew."

I started making things for her, stage managing, transcribing tape recordings, running the fog machine, the lights, and running whatever needed to be run. Then I started performing in ROUTE 1 & 9. And I think all of my development as a performer has been vis-à-vis her.

So, she's coming up with ways to manipulate me so that I'm present, and I don't carry with me the baggage of acting. I don't have that thing where [I say to myself], "I can't do that! That will get in the way of my acting." No, I came up [in the theatre] with her, so to be adjusting a camera and framing, and moving things, and saying lines that come in through my ear - that is my life as a performer. It's not like I'm an *actor* who's doing this work. It's my work, too, because I developed whatever tricks, or manipulations, or strategies that we employ to make a performance. They're

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Kate Valk

equal parts, my failings and my talent, if you will. You know what I mean? I don't have a facility with the language of Tennessee Williams or Shakespeare. I don't perform Shakespeare. I don't have skills in that direction.

So Scott [Shepard], he has a feel for the language. Ari [Fliakos] – we all have different skill sets, or talents, and she [Liz LeCompte] finds something that is going to unify us. And in that case, it was the Richard Burton films. In the early days it was a table that we all sat behind, because then you don't have to watch a huge disparate group of people move in different ways on the continuum of performance. She frames it so that everybody's in this same world. She is brilliant at framing. I've been framed very well. And I'm not discrediting myself at all. I have a real tenacity and a real belief in the effort in The Wooster Group and that there's a place, a body, a consciousness, that is bigger than any one person – although Liz is the visionary. That's the most important thing to me.

AH: It sounds so much like the creation of modern art, what you do. I've seen your shows, but the way you describe Liz is as an artist, like a visual artist.

KV: At this point in her life she's a theatre artist. I mean, she's been at it for 40 years, it's not like she's a visual artist. Her main medium is theatre, and she's been at it since she was a young woman. She's a theatre artist, but she's doing it her way. That's where she lives. She loves the theatre. It's not some visual artist who's defined in visual art who comes in and makes theatre. No, she totally came up in the crucible of the theatre with The Performing Garage, and Spalding [Gray], and the work they made together which was very symmetrical, and the company that congregated around that then went on to stay congregated around her.

AH: Do you still make costumes, or make anything for the stage?

KV: Sure.

AH: Whenever is needed, right?

KV: Right. I mean, we have somebody who's doing that now because my responsibilities have shifted more towards fundraising and project cultivation, whatever. But yeah, we all do a little bit of everything. A lot of the people from The Wooster Group side that are performing in EARLY PLAYS. The costume guy performs in it, too.

AH: That's wonderful.

KV: And the sound guys and the video guys. [Laughter]

AH: I love that.

KV: But people are drawn to work with us who want to perform. Andrew, who does the video, is a performer. That's why they're drawn to the work, because it's fluid between all of the different departments. The departments aren't so cordoned off or separated. We're all together in there.

AH: It must be nice to work with an ensemble for so many years. It's comforting, I think. Does it feel comforting or kind of stable to you?

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Kate Valk

KV: No, because every year we have to figure out how we're going to make a go of it. We just have to figure out how we're going to raise money and make it happen every year. So no, it doesn't feel comfortable at all. My salary is commensurate with everybody else's. It's a choice for me, though, to stay, because what there is, is artistic liberty. So why would you change that for [financial] comfort?

And the comfort in the ensemble? No. People die, they go crazy, they get divorced, they leave, and new people come. And you have to deal with letting go of the past and, without over-controlling, letting the new thing happen. Liz is really good at that.

AH: I love the way the company advances. Through the years, it stays on top of the technology and just brings everything in.

KV: Well, right, because the young people bring it in with them so it's in the room. As new people come, the new technology is in their lives, and they bring it in with them. And that's what changes it. It's very core, that way. Very rarely have we said, "What's that new technology? We must go get it and learn." No, people have just walked in with it. All the guys come in and they have their [own knowledge of new technology.] And everybody is very different.

AH: That's good. I like to learn new things too. Do you live close to The Performing Garage?

KV: I do. I live behind the same street, Grand. It's funny - the theatre's on the corner of Grand and Wooster, and Liz lives on Wooster and I live on Grand, but all the way east near the East River.

AH: That's nice. It must be nice to walk to work every day.

KV: Yeah. Well, I really couldn't afford to rent anymore and I wanted to live alone, and Liz didn't want me to leave for the boroughs, so she actually gave me the down payment for [my apartment.] I bought a little one-bedroom in an old Union Co-op. So, yeah, it's really nice, and it was when the market was down so I got it for a steal. It's really great.

AH: Have you enjoyed working on this show?

KV: Very much. Very, very much. It's scary and challenging, because there's not at all the mediation and modulation, and there's no microphone. We're not on mike. It's very, very different. It's great though. It's great. I'm learning a lot. I hope I'm learning a lot.

AH: Do you want to say anything about that process for you, about working with Richard Maxwell?

KV: Yeah. I had to take it way down, make it way simple, way plain, and not go for affect or style. To him, it's in the writing, and he prefers a neutral delivery so that it's open and the performer isn't putting anything on it to tell you what he knows, that he knows more than you. No, just putting it in a clear, open neutral delivery. Now, that doesn't mean affectless or robot-like -- that's not what he's interested in. He's interested in lift and presence, and hearing the words resonate as Mr. O'Neill wrote them. He's interested in the dialect as written without an accent. I mean, he really just wants to see who we are up there. I mean, Liz does the same thing. She just comes at it from a way different angle. She wants to see who people really are, and it's just a very different way of going

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Kate Valk

about it.

AH: Have you noticed your body as an instrument changing?

KV: Well, we do singing, and that just has been really great to work on three songs, as a group. It's been great, because I'm not a singer. So it's really good for performing. Are you a singer?

AH: I am, yeah.

KV: Yeah, so you know. You must know.

AH: Yes.

KV: So, I'm not, but I hope to offer up the songs to you and not hurt your ears. [Laughter]

AH: Well, that's going to be a wonderful experience.

KV: We'll see.

AH: Yeah.

KV: You can tell me later. [Laughter]

AH: Yeah. I'll write you a letter. I will. You'll get a little feedback. Yeah. [Laughter] Well, is there anything that you'd like to talk about, to have known? I mean, I think you've done a beautiful job of just letting us [get to know you], by just talking.

KV: I don't mean to come on strong, but I have to be honest . It's almost scary to get to a point where... I mean, if you hang around long enough, then people come to you because they're like, "Oh, you're in The Wooster Group!" and blah, blah, blah. I feel like, "Wow! Oh, God! I'm just figuring this out as I go along. It's interesting."

I would like to say one thing that I've been thinking a lot about. I went to see Marianne Weems at The Builders Association, doing Susan Sontag's early journals, and there was a great selection from one of Susan's early journals where she said that as an artist, you have to be an idiot, a moron, a stylist, and a critic. And the most important are the first two.

I have always felt idiotic, and like, "I won't think about career choices. I'm doing this out of love and out of some unbridled thing I can't even articulate." And then, the moronic is something that's like a divine state. And it's funny, because Liz has always said that. She said that during FISH STORY. She'd go, "We're going for the moronic here, because it's a divine, transcendent state."

And the stylist and the critic, of course. The stylist, because you do make choices. Even if you think you're being neutral, somehow, you have a personal style that you can't help, but that you have developed over your life. And the critic, where you are discerning and you say, "I like this. I don't like this. I'm not going to do that, I am going to do this. This is how we should market ourselves." And I find that, as I get older, it's dangerously easy for me to only be a stylist and a critic. To be like, "Oh, I don't want [this]. No, that's not good. I don't want that. That's not how you do it, you

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Kate Valk

do it like this.” And so, I've been thinking a lot about letting go of that, consciously letting go of the critic, and being more open as a beginner. [Laughter]

AH: That's a wonderful place to end it. [Laughter]

KV: That's really wonderful. Thank you. Thank you so much.

AH: You have been listening to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! We have been speaking today with Kate Valk. You may read more about her on The Wooster Group website, which is www.thewoostergroup.org. You may read a transcript of this interview and download this podcast on our website, which is www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com. The podcast is also available on iTunes. Our theme was composed by Nancy Ford. Otto Bost is the sound designer, and Cate Cammarata and Walter Chon are the program assistants. I am Anne Hamilton, your producer and host. Thank you for listening.

TheatreNow!'s Sound Editor is Otto Bost (www.folkdude.com) and our Program Assistants are Cate Cammarata and Walter Chon. Helaine Gawlica is our Archivist and Web Developer. Nancy Ford composed our theme. Anne Hamilton is the Producer and Host. Visit www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com to subscribe to our RSS Feed and get notifications when new podcasts are released. The podcast is also available on iTunes. Hamilton Dramaturgy is an international script development consultancy located on the east coast of the United States. You may contact Anne Hamilton at hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow@gmail.com. © 2012 Hamilton Dramaturgy.