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New York

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# Time Out New York

Jan 27–Feb 2, 2005  
Issue 487

## Features

### 12 "It was familial, incestuous, dysfunctional"

Experimental-theater company the Wooster Group relives 30 years of controversial exploits—on and off stage.

### 20 "Christo and Jeanne-Claude had this dream..."

Documentarian Albert Maysles has spent 26 years chronicling mega-installation *The Gates*.

### 24 "The comparison to Coldplay is misleading"

Piano-driven Brit outfit Keane has perfected the art of the pop anthem.

## Service & Style

### Eat Out

**27 Peek performance** Open kitchens are like reality TV: Sometimes there's way more dirt than you ever wanted to see.

**30 Just opened** Stan's Place in Brooklyn does Cajun its own way.

### Check Out

**35 Tress management** A crop of new hair products rescue our winter-worn manes.

**39 Critics' pick** Graffiti-inspired stencils take street art indoors.

### Chill Out

**40 Health report** Five health-food stores turn up, well, bugs and stuff.

**42 Just opened** Fitness gets swinging with the Soho Dance Studio.

## Departments

**2 Letters**

**4 Out There**  
Shopping-cart showdown...eavesdropper's delight...3 questions for Donny Osmond...home rule for NYC?...and more!

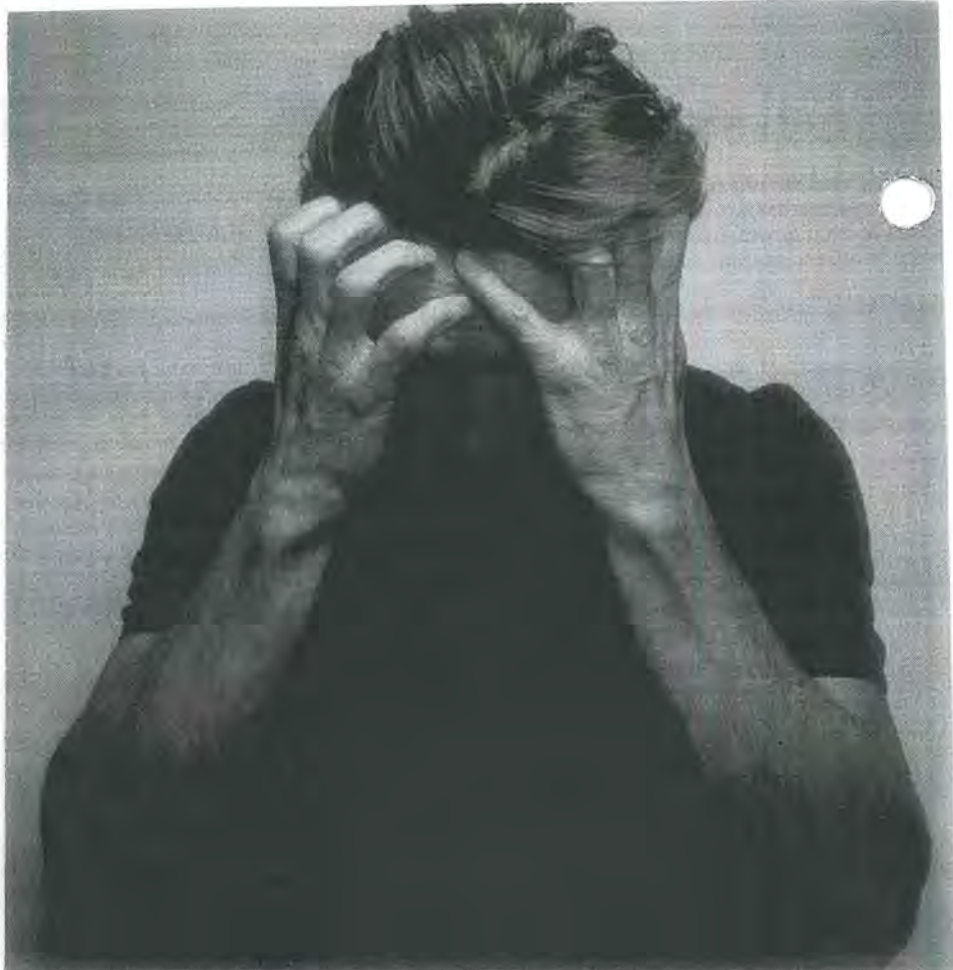
**149 Time In**  
Television, video and radio

**153 Classifieds**

**157 Planet Terry**

**159 Get Naked with Jamie Bufalino**

**160 The Hot Seat**  
Naughty Broadway bombshell Jane Krakowski has handpicked a batch of banned songs for her concert debut.



### 12 THE WOOSTER GROUP



### 35 HAIR TREATMENTS

### Also this week in...

**Around Town** Beauty and squalor: Literary workshops celebrate the Bowery's past **Art** Rubens's dazzling draftsmanship is revealed in a show at the Met **Books** Better living through chemistry: John Falk tells how war and Zoloft changed his life **Comedy** Nightlife Awards' picks for best stand-up give a sneak peek of their ceremony shtick **Television** BBC America brings two U.K. police series to stateside viewers

### This week

Event listings, previews, reviews and more.....	43
■ Around Town WITH KIDS AND SPORTS .....	44
■ Art .....	58
■ Books & Poetry .....	66
■ Clubs .....	70
■ Comedy.....	75
■ Dance.....	79
■ Film .....	85
■ Gay & Lesbian .....	104
■ Music .....	107
■ Theater .....	135

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Jim Clayburgh won an Obie in 1982 for sustained excellence in set design.

Peyton Smith lured Arthur Miller to a Wooster show—and Miller promptly issued a cease-and-desist letter.

Spalding Gray's first production with Wooster explored his mother's suicide.

Ron Vawter's film career was just taking off when he died.

Elizabeth LeCompte has directed all of the Wooster Group's shows.

Willem Dafoe bared all in a porno filmed for the 1984 show "L.S.D."

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN The founding members show their up dynamic in a 1986 photo.

TIME OUT NEW YORK | JAN 27-FEB 2, 2005

# "It was familial, incestuous, dysfunctional."

THE WOOSTER GROUP: AN ORAL HISTORY

As the Wooster Group turns 30, its surviving founders (and some of their peers) relive the saga of the provocative company that's still revolutionizing New York theater By **Jason Zinoman**

Kate Valk one of the city's best actors, has only appeared in Wooster productions.

The 30-year story of the Wooster Group, the premier experimental-theater company in America, can be as melodramatic as a soap opera. Tangled romances, political brouhahas and shattering tragedies abound, alongside the troupe's trailblazing narrative manipulation and high-tech innovation.

At the center of it all is an unlikely protagonist: an unassuming, maternal, 60-year-old creative dynamo named Elizabeth LeCompte. In a field filled with drama queens, LeCompte, who has directed all of the group's productions, does not seem starved for attention; in fact, she comes off as a little shy. She had little interest in the theater until, while attending Skidmore College in the mid-'60s, she met and fell in love with a handsome New York actor named Spalding Gray. After she graduated and moved to New York, Gray helped usher her into the world of Richard Schechner's influential Performance Group, which worked out of a dank Soho space on Wooster Street known as the Performing Garage. It was there that LeCompte encountered and began collaborating with a core group of fearless actors: Jim Clayburgh, Ron Vawter, Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe and Peyton Smith, along with Gray.

In 1975, LeCompte launched a series of now-legendary plays—in effect the first Wooster Group productions—known as the Rhode Island Trilogy, in which Gray explored his childhood, his mother's suicide and the monologue form that he would eventually master. The company soon established its house style, working communally round the clock to build shows from found texts and improvisation. (The group eventually took over the Performing Garage when Schechner disbanded the Performance Group in 1980.)

Early productions like *Rumstick Road* and *L.S.D. (...just the high points...)* are now studied in universities and imitated by countless

young directors and actors. But along with their many successes, the seven founding Wooster members have endured more than their share of turmoil and heart-break, from the mental illness of actor Libby Howes and the early death of Vawter (from AIDS in 1994), to the dual blow last year of Gray's suicide and the breakup of LeCompte and Dafoe, who had been a couple for 27 years (the pair declined to be in the same room together for these interviews). But through it all, LeCompte and Co.

remain resilient and stubbornly avant-garde, producing boundary-pushing work with an all-consuming dedication. In early February, a new rendition of *House/Lights*, originally staged in 1998, opens at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn. According to LeCompte, the Wooster players' new show—like all of its predecessors—is about themselves.

### The early days

**Peyton Smith (Wooster Group founding member):** The difficult part was living that life—the totally involved, communal life. I had a family and a child. I wasn't looking to make this my life. First of all, there's no money, and I had a child to support. I worked at bars—that's all I'll say.

**Kate Valk (Wooster Group founding member):** I was amazed how un-middle class it was. I grew up in a solid middle-class home, but I was never interested in marriage and children. When I met these people, it was very exciting.

**Richard Schechner (founder of Performance Group):** Those Spalding shows were a totally new idea, disarming and autobiographical. It was before Eric Bogosian. Lenny Bruce

may have done it, but not like Spalding, who had that New England reserve.

**Elizabeth LeCompte (Wooster Group founding member):** One reviewer from *The Village Voice* said [1977's] *Rumstick Road* was exploitative because Spalding had illegally taped a conversation with a psychiatrist talking about his mother's suicide.

**Richard Foreman (experimental playwright and director):** I remember Spalding running around pushing a lawn mower and everyone screaming. I used to like the sudden explosion of wild manic energy. Everyone remembers the scene in *Rumstick Road* when Libby Howes stood on stage waving her big

tional. Spalding and Liz were breaking up and Willem and Liz were just getting together. I just remember being amazed at how they negotiated new relationships and still worked together.

**Smith:** I was helping to care for Spalding. He had gone up and down in his mental health. In 1979, that was not a good time for him—he was having some kind of a breakdown. That was part of my job, taking care of him and cleaning his dressing room.

**Willem Dafoe (Wooster Group founding member):** When I first saw Liz, she was turning off the lights to start *Rumstick Road* and I was like, "Who is that?" I saw Spalding, but I was attracted to Liz.

**Valk:** There was a lot of energy between Willem and Liz. They had just fallen in love. Once in rehearsal, Liz read something; she was always reading to us. She read a passage from [French playwright] Artaud, and Willem grabbed a laundry-detergent bottle and read with the same authority

"The audiences were strange. The audiences were very charged."

from the back of the bottle. He was always for cutting the highbrow stuff.

**Dafoe:** The audiences in the early days were small. I

remember someone offered to hire us for a private party after seeing *Hula*, in which we dance wearing very little clothes. It was, like, a lot of money—and all we had to do was go there and dance for ten minutes. So we went to this party, not knowing what it was going to be. They thought we were like Strip-O-Gram people. And they wanted to know what we were doing after the show.

**Valk:** Libby was like a mad aristocrat. It's a long story.

**Schechner:** [Howes] was nuts. She was put in a mental institution. It's ironic that she represented the spirit of Spalding's mother in *Rumstick Road*.

**Meredith Monk (artist):** Liz once told me that in the early '70s she saw lines around the block for one of my works, and she came in and saw *Education of the Girlchild*. She told me that this made her rethink what theater was. Seeing work not anchored in text was liberating, I think.

**Foreman:** Back in those days, Liz was just Spalding's girlfriend—in that sexist world. She didn't talk that much. She was an attractive young woman.

**Valk:** In Liz, here's a woman who was identifying herself with, by and for men, but ultimately she was the primary artist in her work.

**LeCompte:** I was surrounded by big egos, all of them, and part of the reason that Spalding and I broke up is that I like to see a lot of people on stage and he really wanted to be seen alone.

**Valk:** It was familial, incestuous, dysfunctional.

### Insight and infancy

*Route 1 & 9* (1981), the Wooster Group's first major production without Spalding Gray (who was concentrating more on his solo career), was so inflammatory that the critics almost overlooked the fact it featured a porno movie on stage. The show opened with a video reconstruction of a 1950s educational film, in which Vawter dryly analyzed *Our Town*. Next, four white actors in blackface performed an Amos 'n' Andy-style routine based on a sketch by vaudeville comedian Pigmear Markham. The final chapter included the sex tape, starring Howes, Vawter and Dafoe. The show angered just about everyone, including the Thornton Wilder estate, the New York State Council for the Arts (which

## SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

The Wooster Group has relied on a revolving mix of actors, artists and even academics

**STEVE BUSCEMI:** Before he was Mr. Pink, Buscemi performed in *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points...)* and *Brace Up!* He returned to the Garage stage in 1999, starring in *North Atlantic*.

**ROY FAUDREE:** A veteran of numerous Wooster productions, Faudree has created and directed several pieces for the Young at Heart company, a troupe consisting of performers in their seventies, eighties and nineties.

**JOAN JONAS:** Jonas toured with the Wooster Group in *Brace Up!*—an unusual respite from her work as a seminal video artist and her MIT professorship in new media.

**JOHN LURIE:** The Lounge Lizards frontman (and actor in Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down by Law*) composed the music for *The Hairy Ape* and *House/Lights*.

**FRANCES MCDORMAND:** During a break from the big screen, *Fargo*'s Sheriff Marge Gunderson brushed up on her badminton skills for Wooster's *To You, the Birdie!*

**SUZZY ROCHE:** In addition to recording 11 albums with her singing sister act, the Roches, Suzzy Roche has played both a goddess (Venus in *To You, the Birdie!*) and a devil (Mephistopheles in *House/Lights*) for the group.

**PAUL SCHMIDT:** The late Schmidt, a professor of Russian literature at Wellesley College and the University of Texas, translated Chekhov and Racine for the group. He also appeared on stage—well, on a television monitor—during *Brace Up!*

**MARIANNE WEEMS:** After serving as dramaturg and assistant director of the company for six years, Weems founded the Builders Association, an Obie-winning group that explores the interaction between humans and technology. —Alexis Soloski



withdrew funding for the Wooster Group) and many in the audience who cried racism. In terms of provocation, it was a homerun.

**LeCompte:** We were looking to structure a show in some way other than sense memory or techniques based on [Method acting]. We looked at all kinds of performance styles and started to act out the records that we had of comedians. We were going about it the opposite of the way most people build character: We were doing it from the outside in. We listened to an old Pigmeat Markham record and tried to figure out what made it funny. Was it the timing? The rhythm? So we built the show around that.

**Jim Clayburgh (Wooster Group founding member):** *Route 1 & 9* caused an incredible scandal. The blackface brought up a lot of questions that were poorly answered by many critics. There was kind of a knee-jerk liberalism that came to light.

**Valk:** We had public discussions where people were very angry.

**Smith:** Liz responded articulately and I cried. I remember it in such a visceral way. It's hard to do a work that hurts people.

**LeCompte:** I was shocked. I had no idea putting on black makeup would make people call us racist. We were in the theater!

**Clayburgh:** Spalding's taping of his family never struck me as exploitative, but what struck me as questionable was when in *Route 1 & 9*, Kate would call people in New York—ice-cream stores, chicken stores, bars—and have conversations that were amplified into the theater. I think this was a larger question of invasion of privacy. But since the people were never identified, it was more like an early version of sampling. Sampling our world, our society.

**Valk:** The audiences were strange. People came because they heard others say, "You can't do that." The audiences were very charged.

**Smith:** The controversy made the Wooster Group much more recognizable. There was so much press about it and people heard about us and came down.

**Valk:** When we played the show in Zurich, there was also controversy, but it had nothing to do with blackface. They couldn't have cared less. They thought we were Americanizing their grand theater tradition by putting screens on stage. They screamed, "Go back to Disneyland!" before hurling eggs and tomatoes.

### Miller's crossing

The Wooster Group has faced a number of legal battles, none more famous than when Arthur Miller's agent sent a cease-and-desist letter for the unauthorized use of *The Crucible* in the production of *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points...)* in 1984.

**LeCompte:** I was so upset when people said you can't use blackface. I was hurt by that and driven to examine why that was. I found *The Crucible*, where Arthur Miller had written a black character. Well, if we can't play a black character, why can a white writer write a black character? That was one of the driving forces behind *L.S.D.*

**Valk:** That was the second show in which I wore blackface.

**Clayburgh:** *L.S.D.* was the first time when there was an attempt to use microphones on stage, and that gave the company a new performance style.

**LeCompte:** I got the idea from the McCarthy hearings. It was the image of the politicians in front of the microphones that made me think of using them.

**Smith:** I heard that Arthur Miller was going to be at an event at the Chelsea Hotel, so I went. I thought I would get some wine—and who's there, pressed up against me, but Arthur Miller. I was so nervous that I said, "Mr. Mi-Mi-Mi-Miller?" I gave him the address and invited him to the show. And he came.

**Valk:** He came upstairs afterwards, and he seemed really bemused, like, Who are these people and what are they doing? He didn't

understand it. Liz had terrible eczema, and I remember her bandaged hands going to shake the hand of this great American playwright who I had studied in school. And then the next day, I remember the cease-and-desist letter.

**LeCompte:** I think he didn't get it—and that probably bothered him. So we rewrote the show using the original testimony from the Salem trial.

### High-tech happenings

After a particularly harsh review of *L.S.D.* in *The Village Voice*, the Wooster Group stopped inviting critics to its shows—but its notoriety continued to grow. The film careers of Willem Dafoe and Ron Vawter took off, adding Hollywood glamour to the 99-seat Performing Garage. American academics championed Wooster, and even the mainstream press, which had been decidedly cool in the early years, started praising the productions. By the

'90s, the company, whose work had become increasingly rigorous, abstract and technologically complex, had joined Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman as the most celebrated avant-garde theater artists in America. Two decades after *Route 1 & 9*, the Wooster Group, in a sure sign it had entered mainstream culture, received a B+ from *Entertainment Weekly* for its production of *To You, the Birdie!* (*Phèdre*).

**Andre Gregory (director):** The audiences were very intellectual, and unlike my audiences, they didn't care what the critics said.

**Dafoe:** I started having people come up to me and say, "I wrote my dissertation on you." Very weird.

**Smith:** Ron started to leave before he died. But we made [*Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony*] around and about his dying, and he was part of it.

**Monk:** Ron was completely fearless, a whirlwind, a lightning rod.

**Smith:** When Ron died, it changed things a lot. He was the glue. We still had Liz and her brilliant mind, and that held things together. When he was gone, we had to do more and be better. Liz loved to look at him, and it felt like it was up to us to fill that spot. And that was hard, because none of us could fill it.

**Clayburgh:** *Brace Up!* [1991] was the first time that characters who were live on stage were also presented live on video. The layers of sound had gotten continually more complex. The maturity of Liz is the ability to bring all of this together. To get the necessary precision of timing requires hours and hours of work.

**Dafoe:** It can be a kind of mechanical process. It's tedious. Something happens, then you technically refine it. You find something and then you crystallize it.

**Ken Kobland (Wooster member, film director):** In the early work, the film pieces were

## CURTAIN CALLS

Blackface, porn and cease-and-desist letters—the Wooster's best shows were anything but ordinary

**Three Places in Rhode Island (1975–1979):** This trilogy (plus the epilogue, *Point Judith*) constituted the Wooster Group's inaugural work. Elizabeth LeCompte and Spalding Gray used Tchaikovsky, T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* and secretly taped telephone conversations to explore Gray's childhood and his mother's suicide.



**Route 1 & 9 (1981):** This infamous production, a riff on *Our Town*, featured actors in blackface; the show didn't sit well with certain audiences and foundations, leading to a temporary loss of New York State Council for the Arts funding. Oddly enough, a sequence involving a porno film generated no such controversy.

**Hula (1981):** Under the sobriquet Ray Whitfield and the Johnsons, a topless Kate Valk and a nearly bottomless Ron Vawter and Willem Dafoe danced to a record titled *Hula* by the Waikiki Hula Boys. The piece concluded with three-part urination.



**L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...) (1984):** This concatenation of the memoirs of Timothy Leary's baby-sitter and *The Crucible* spurred Arthur Miller to serve the group with a cease-and-desist letter. The group then substituted in a Cuban dance portion, sections of the Leary-Liddy debates and a meticulous recreation of an LSD-saturated rehearsal.



**The Hairy Ape (1995):** The only Wooster Group work to achieve a Broadway transfer, this staging of Eugene O'Neill's expressionist drama starred Dafoe as a ship's stoker and Kate Valk as a debutante and a gorilla. Critical praise was plentiful—as were audience walkouts.



**To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre) (2002):** A sweat-slicked Kate Valk acted the part of a lovesick, enema-addicted queen in this version of Racine's *Phèdre*. A badminton coach—who'd trained the Chinese Olympics team—subjected the entire cast to rigorous drills. Several grueling matches were played on stage.



**Poor Theater (2004):** This work-in-progress explores the theories of director Jerzy Grotowski, the practices of choreographer William Forsythe and artist Max Ernst, and the group's own performance history and methodologies.—AS

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: BOB VAN DIERZIG; PAULA COURT (3); MARY GEBHART

# UNDER THE INFLUENCE

## Many Off-Off Broadway players take their cues from the Wooster way

**M**any of the leading lights in New York's risk-taking theater community talk about their first Wooster Group show as if it were a conversion experience. "I'll never forget it: 1988. I was a Duke student, and I saw *Saint Antony*," says John Collins, artistic director of Elevator Repair Service, who worked on several Wooster productions in the '90s. "The show changed the way I looked at everything." "When I first saw the Wooster Group, I had two reactions," says Randy Sharp, artistic director of the Axis Theater. "One, I wanted to kill myself because I could never do that. And two, I couldn't wait to go back to my company, tell them about it and get to work."

Steve Cosson, artistic director of the Civilians, credits the Woosters with expanding the vocabulary of theater, allowing for others to adopt new approaches and modes of expression. "We can all say a hell of a lot more now," he states, adding, "I think of the Wooster Group as something akin to a founding family of the place where I live and work."

Another major reason behind Wooster's pervasive influence is the impressive number of ex-members, including Collins and Marianne Weems, artistic director of the Builders Association, who have gone on to start their own companies. "I worked with Wooster Group on *Brace Up!* for two years and three more touring," Weems says. "The sense of being able to luxuriate in a project was something that was unique and influential."

"So many groups say, 'Let's sex up our show and Wooster-Group it,'" Collins says. "That means putting technology on stage, but the Wooster Group didn't invent that and that's not Liz [LeCompte]'s genius. Her genius is her rigor and her commitment and her courage."

Josh Fox, the artistic director of the International WOW Company, says the Wooster members set an example by buying their own space and continually doing their own work, while also building their careers through other outlets. "I remember meeting Willem Dafoe and asking him, 'How did you get your career working in both movies and experimental theater?'" Fox says. "He said, 'You can't get there by always playing by the rules and you can't get there by telling everyone 'Fuck you' all the time. You've got to find someplace in the middle.' I thought that was cool. I think about it all the time."—JZ

eparate narratives. Now with film and monitors, Liz integrated the technology into the physical space. In [*Birdie*], the screen is used as an almost illusionary window and a whole fake reality. Liz is brilliantly playing with the illusion of being live.

**Monk:** The recent work is so much more structurally complex. The images and text are put together so beautifully that it's like musical orchestration.

**LeCompte:** Gradually things changed with the critics. I think our success in Europe had an effect here and they warmed up.

**Foreman:** A couple years ago, I told Liz, "I hate coming to your shows. I get so paranoid. You have so many glamorous people in the audience and I think, Why aren't these people coming to my plays? Can't I come to a dress rehearsal?" She said: "We don't have a dress rehearsal, and when I came to your show, I sat next to Eric Bogosian. What are you talking about?"

### Findings and beginnings

The past year has been a difficult one for Elizabeth LeCompte. One decade after the death of Ron Vawter, Spalding Gray commit-



**STAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE** A new production of the 1999 Obie Award winner *House/Lights* begins in February.

ted suicide by jumping into the East River. Around the same time, Willem Dafoe ended their relationship of nearly three decades (the couple has a son, Jack, who is currently making a documentary about *To You, the Birdie!*). Through it all, she has poured herself into her work, directing *Poor Theater* (about director Jerzy Grotowski, choreographer William Forsyth and visual artist Max Ernst) last year and *House/Lights* (opening February 5). Next up, she has set her sights on the Everest of drama, *Hamlet*.

**Smith:** I feel like *Poor Theater* was a return to a more personal work for the group.

**LeCompte:** Perhaps I felt nostalgic about the loss of Spalding because we saw Grotowski to-

gether in the '60s. Spalding came to see *Poor Theater* the month before he died. He was late. We waited and waited and sure enough, he eventually arrived.

**Kobland:** He was a gem. I was supposed to meet him for a drink before the show and I was deeply worried about him. He was not in terribly good shape. I think he had gone to the ferry. I don't know if you know any people who committed suicide, but they practice.

**LeCompte:** I remember he said that he liked the play. But he was so not Spalding the last few years.

**Dafoe:** In the group, you're involved in all aspects of the others' lives, so there's none of that coming home from the office and saying, "Honey, what did you do at work? Oh, nothing much?" You create a camaraderie in work and you become accomplices in life. There's a terrific power in that. The other side is there's no place to run.

**LeCompte:** [Willem and I] had a life, 27 years together, and we had a child, and one day he left with my life. He, like Spalding, just wanted more attention than I was willing to give him. And that's one way to explain it; that's one narrative.

**Valk:** I think it got harder and harder for [Dafoe] to move in both worlds [film and theater]. There were more demands. I miss him and love his energy, but I think when someone is having a difficult time managing their life, it doesn't make for a pleasant work experience.

**LeCompte:** How much he was worth was determined by what his quotes were, how much money he was making or how many times his picture was in the paper or people recognized him. I'm not putting that down. That's part of that business, and if you don't pay attention to it, you better have something else up your sleeve. And for many years, he had [Wooster] up his sleeve. Gradually that became corrupted.

**Dafoe:** Look, this could get all tabloidish, but sometimes we would try to exploit any celebrity—though at other times, I'm determined to deny it and give over to the identity of the group. But to put

it in crude terms of money, it's really hard when someone in the room is making \$30,000 a year and the other person is making a helluva lot more. And you can try to help out to even things out, but it's never enough.

**LeCompte:** I've heard from [Dafoe] off and on but the truth is, I'm on to something new and so is he. I can't imagine working with him again, but he's still part of the company.

**Dafoe:** I maintain that though I haven't worked with the group in a year, I intend to work with them again. This is only a new beginning, another chapter.

**House/Lights** opens at St. Ann's Warehouse on February 5.