



RICHARD FOREMAN

Ontological-Hysterical Theater—

Ontological: “The principal area of metaphysical speculation, called ontology, is the study of the ultimate nature of being.”—Actual, mystical, truthful, imagistic, poetic, witty, intellectual.

Hysterical: “Freud concluded that hysterical symptoms, in which psychological conflicts are converted into bodily disturbances, were symbolic representations of a repressed unconscious event accompanied by strong emotions that could not be adequately expressed or discharged at the time. He found that cathartic reactivation of the memory could remove the hysterical symptoms.”—Hidden, iconographic, hieroglyphic, subliminal, allusive, histrionic.

Theatre (of the absurd): “Apparently pointless situations and dialogue, typically expressing the existential nature of man’s self-isolation, anxiety, frustration.”—Hallucinatory, vaudevillian, illogical, burlesque, alien, visceral, menacing, inscrutable.

A deafening thud, blinding lights, an irritating buzzer, and Kate Manheim is revealed in the nude! What is an audience to think? Does anyone quite understand what Richard Foreman is doing while he baffles, amuses, shocks, bewilders and entrances audiences with a precisely choreographed directing technique that is as perversely dense and symbolic as the plays he himself writes?

Foreman's productions command our interest because they are meticulously crafted, intensely intelligent works that result in a flow of funny, erotic or frightening images that appear to have a logic that is itself imbalanced—a realism that is unreal. The challenge then is to find the meaning of the symbols, to understand the insinuation of style. But Foreman rejects such an approach, saying, "The minute man knows the message, he sleeps." Viewing, Foreman believes, is more important than understanding; yet his theatre aggressively demands an intellectual response. What a spot for an audience to be in! Those famous lights flashed in the eyes of the spectators are not just a disquieting theatrical technique—they literally put the public in the spotlight, placing the burden of effort on them to be aware, to postpone making conclusions—to keep the sleeper awake! In the best Brechtian tradition, the audience is constantly reminded of its own feelings, while Foreman uses the work to notate his own consciousness.

A major influence for much of Foreman's mystical and intellectual speculation is to be found in his interest in the ancient writings of the Jewish Kabbalah, with their teaching of the patterns of poetic interplay between literal and figurative meaning, the enigmatic joining of soul and body, the balance of and oscillation between "a state of grace" and "rigorous judgement." The title of his 1977 play *Book of Splendors; Part II (Book of Levers) Action at a Distance*, appears to be a direct reference to the Kabbalah, which is based on the belief that every word, letter, number, and even accent contains mysteries interpretable by those who know the secret. These esoteric Kabbalistic teachings are theories of trope, or turns of language, which are complex substitutions for God—like poems. God and language are one and the same. Like the Kabbalah, Foreman's writings suggest a reality that stands behind our world of appearances—neither things nor acts, but relational events, representations of the inner reality of our lives.

Foreman is a theorist/writer/director/designer. His production designs for his early works were playfully constructivist, three-dimensional mathematical creations that constantly shifted, manipulating the stage's proportions. The settings constructed in his tiny seventy-seat loft theatre in the Soho district of New York, were cabinet-like doll-houses that, with the deep perspective of the narrow loft space (the stage was fourteen feet wide and eighty feet

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deep), took on womb-like qualities. An architectural signature of his work has always been strings stretched across the stage defining some nonexistent area, overlaying the playing space yet strangely out of sync with it.

The actors he preferred to use in the early productions were nonprofessionals, visually interesting, "found objects" chosen for their spiritual qualities rather than their acting technique. Kate Manheim, Foreman's perennial actress-muse, has performed in more of his productions than any other actor and will forever be associated with Rhoda, the vulnerable heroine of such epics as *Rhoda in Potatoland*, *Sophia = (Wisdom) Part 3: The Cliffs* and *Classical Therapy or A Week Under the Influence*. (The Kabbalah manifests the God Presence as being in the shape of woman, an image of erotic mysticism.) Abundant nudity was an integral part of the early Foreman plays but has diminished as he has matured.

While Foreman's approach to theatre ultimately rejected the traditional training he received at Brown and Yale universities, the rigorous approach to literature and playwriting that he acquired in those institutions focused his talent for organization of mind and effort. Even among the extraordinary collection of American avant-garde theatre artists developing in the 1960s, he was unique. Much of the experimental work of that period was body-oriented; Foreman, meanwhile, was at work creating a new language for the stage, an amalgam of environment, sound, movement and text. This *Gesamtkunstwerk* insisted that all of these elements were vital in the attempt to evoke the source of nature and spirit, abstraction and dream.

While struggling with the notion of striving to be a mainstream playwright in the years immediately following college, Foreman came under the influence of American avant-garde filmmakers, and that experience encouraged him to write and produce his own personal, poetical visions of what theatre ought to be. In 1968 he wrote and directed the first of the Ontological-Hysteric Theater productions, *Angelface*, which passed largely unnoticed. But, with each new production, followers of the Ontological-Hysteric grew in number and avidly crowded into the second floor loft, curious and baffled, amused and challenged. However, it was not until 1972, when *Dr. Selavy's Magic Theater*, with music by Stanley Silverman, premiered at Lenox Arts Center in Massachusetts and later was presented for a respectable Off Broadway run at the Mercer-O'Casey Theater, that Foreman began to receive "uptown" attention. The collaboration with Silverman continued through a series of highly praised, cheerfully wacky musical plays.

When he began directing in 1968, Foreman's staging was relentlessly detailed. Every movement, every body position of the actors was meticulously dictated. He states, "I was never in favor of the kind of free-formed, undisciplined 'soup-theatre' of a lot of the work done in the 1960s." In his desire

to control all production elements, and to be an integral part of the work at all times, Foreman is visibly present at every one of the Ontological productions, sitting at the lighting console, manipulating each light and sound cue, his bespectacled face peering impassively out at the audience, sometimes calling, "CUE!" as a part of the performance. Again, "shaking the sleeper awake!" Over time, Foreman's rigorously controlled work has become less intellectually aggressive—more outward with sweeping choreography, utilizing fewer disassociation techniques and allowing viewers to experience *emotion*. Foreman describes this mellowing of the work of his middle-years as "autumnal."

A meeting with Foreman at his Soho loft is not unlike sitting down with a middle-aged Albert Einstein, amid rows and rows of bookshelves, he in his comfortable slippers, kindly, patiently and sometimes eagerly explaining for the 739th time his theory of relativity.



At first the world thought of you primarily as a playwright. Now there is the sense that the director-side of your ego has taken control. What separates these facets of your talent?

I am driven by a desire to put something into the world that I find lacking in my life, and I try to correct for that lack by making works of art that give me the environment I would rather be living in. Originally, I became a director simply because nobody else would direct my plays. I didn't really direct any material other than my own until I did *Threepenny Opera*, at Lincoln Center in 1976.

How does a young man born on Staten Island, removed to Scarsdale, who goes to Brown and Yale in the 1950s, and then goes to New York to write Broadway comedies, become a unique revolutionary artist in the theatre?

For some reason, from the time that I was very young, I had an attraction for the strangest material. I read *The Skin of Our Teeth* for the first time at about twelve and thought, "It's like a dream, it's so weird, it's wonderful." I remember seeing Elia Kazan's production of *Camino Real*, which I dragged my Scarsdale parents to, and they said, "What's this all about?"

I have always gravitated to things that try to talk to some more spiritually oriented level, rather than realistic discussions and manipulations of the real, practical, empirical world in which we live.

Then the big revelation was discovering Brecht—and especially his saying that you could have a theatre that was not based on empathy. For some reason, even at an early age what I hated in the theatre was a kind of

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asking for love that I saw manifested on the stage, getting a unified reaction from everybody in the audience. Brecht said it didn't have to be like that, and until I was in my middle twenties, he was the beginning, middle and end of everything for me. That only changed when I came to New York and encountered the beginnings of the underground film movement, and that reoriented me, because up to that point I had thought of America as being rather unsophisticated, naive and simplistic, as compared with the complexities and aggressiveness of European art and thought. Then in America, in the middle 1960s, I discovered people my age were making their own movies, operating on a level that was akin to poetry rather than storytelling. And I thought, "Aha! Why can't the techniques of poetry that operate in film, operate in theatre?" I came to terms with trying to make an American kind of art that exploited and put onstage everything that up till then I had wanted to reject about myself. I gravitated to theatre even though I was opened up by filmmakers.

Your plays have been examined and explained and analyzed in an effort to understand their meanings. As a director, do you feel the need to insert guidelines in your work to give it clarity?

Yes, more and more. Oftentimes, however, people find those explanations confusing. First of all, things change and we get older, and I don't know if what I do is quite as hard to understand these days as it was fifteen years ago—because other people are doing similar things. Other currents of thought are in the air.

In fact, some of my explanations are couched in terms that are rather difficult because to be true to what I'm trying to get at is difficult. I don't think of myself as doing anything radically new or different. I think of myself as being a meeting point for all kinds of ideas, all kinds of feelings, that are around us at hand. It seems to me that I'm dealing all the time with things that are in the air, both as a director and as a writer. I take them and I try to play with them in an exhilarating way. Part of the difficulty is that people are sitting there thinking, "Yes, but is he saying that we should be this, that or the other thing?" And I don't think that's my function as an artist. My function is to enjoy and help my audience enjoy an exhilarating kind of play with all of the elements that are present in this very heterogeneous culture, where we have hundreds of years of history—and everything that's been thought and felt in all those hundreds of years—readily available on bookshelves, TV, cassettes, records. It's all there as never before, and how do you keep your head above water? Well, you learn how to ice-skate on the crystallized surface of the pond, underneath which is the morass of hundreds and thousands of years of history.

I'm trying to be a medium, to let all of these messages come through. The task is to make some kind of harmony out of them, to eliminate part of the noise so that something is perceptible. I have never been in favor of the kind of big undisciplined soup theatre that for me a lot of the 1960s mixed-media things were. Even though many people can't perceive it, I've always been an extremely structurally oriented artist who tries to clean everything up. As a director, my one criticism of myself is that I'm too neat—I've tried to keep the event too clean, too defined, too much under control, and I wish at times that I could be a little messier as a director, as I am in my writing.

Is this cleanliness, this structure, tied to the manner in which you work with actors? You've said before that you tend to be dictatorial in terms of detail, movement, placement and timing.

This is less true today than five years ago. Unless I am totally deluded, these days the vast majority of actors I work with find it a positive experience, whereas in the early days some of them definitely felt very constrained. As I move into directing plays that are not my own, this becomes increasingly the case. I still block the play and I still ask for all kinds of specific things. I never ask an actor to do something he's uncomfortable with.

Your use of space and the scenography for your plays are also "neat" and "defined," to use your words.

There's no denying that my main interest in the theatre is compositional, that I am interested in the interplay of all the elements. I am not interested in the theatre where the audience becomes seduced by a kind of empathetic relationship to the actors.

And yet, in a sense, audiences do empathize because there's so much humor in your plays and that tends to unify an audience. We laugh, we find it amusing.

I think people should laugh more. Audiences are often afraid of laughing because a) things are going so fast that they think they might miss something, and b) I come with this reputation of being tough and intellectual and radical. I've had friends of mine sit in the theatre watching my plays laughing, and people sitting in front of them look back as if it were some sacrilege.

Your famous wires stretched across the stage in your productions suggest an alchemy, a science. It has come to the point where a designer can't put a wire across the stage without having it referred to as "a Richard Foreman wire."

Yes. But all those things of mine are slowly disappearing, at least becoming more minimal. When I did a revival of Arthur Kopit's *End of the World With*

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Symposium to Follow for American Repertory Theatre, we were starting to rehearse, and Bob Brustein, the artistic director, came and sat next to me. He said, "You know, this is really going well. But tell me something, are you really committed to those strings?"

With those taut strings, are you trying to frame stage areas, to bring them into more concise focus? Visually, there's somehow a connection with those drawings in antiquity, where human figures are extended along straight lines.

It's hard for me to talk about really, but somehow there is an articulation of the space—so that it's almost as if the actors are overlaid by a kind of grid. It's almost like a musical staff. I like knowing where I am physically, somehow, and also on the spiritual and emotional level those strings define some kind of force field, some kind of reverberation box, so that whatever is going on in the play reverberates even more intensely. It's like someone sketching who starts drawing lines of force, feeling the need to work with a diagonal, and then the body grows out of that.

Almost a connection with God.

Well, it does connect with God in that it connects with what I think are the most abstract spiritual energies—the kind of nervous motor energy that wants to find a way to concretely manifest itself in the three-dimensional world. It starts out as impulse. And my technique in the theatre is to feel the impulse, not knowing yet what it means or how it wants to work, but to let the impulse lead me. Then it takes on a three-dimensional, actorly, proplike form—but I always remember to keep present for the spectator a kind of interplay between the original thrust, the place that it came from and the real three-dimensional human, physical manifestation that it takes on at this particular historical moment. This impulse leads to another impulse, which leads to another impulse. I work the same way when I'm doing Brecht or Molière or Kopit.

That method is easier to envision when you're directing your own plays than in something like Don Juan or Threepenny Opera. In those cases, how does that impulse manifest itself in you as a director?

Even though I theorize after the fact, when you're actually working on something, you don't think conceptually. At least, I don't. It's important for me to delineate the way in which the play grows. The first thing I do is make a set. These days I generally design the set even when I'm working with a designer—I basically build a model that I give to the designer. The set for me means creating a kind of space that both implies the grid of this original thrust, the energy of this original abstract thrust, as well as the specific locale

of the play. Given the proper set, I then have within it different layers of being so that this impulse can realize itself.

In addition to strings, a lot of my sets use railings and sorts of specific geometric divisions of space that might suggest a courthouse, a bullring, a synagogue. Now, all of these enclosures somehow immediately give me a gridlike place within which to work. That's both the suggestion of the impulse for wanting to present things to your fellow man plus defining special sacred, private places where you are alone with your soul or whatever. At the very root, it allows me to play with more public impulses as well as more private impulses within any text. That's an oversimplification, of course, but it seems to me those are the energies that are set up.

The next thing I do is get music organized. All my plays, including the classical plays and the contemporary plays that I haven't written, have music behind the text most of the time. If I'm working with a composer, I can't conceive of going into rehearsal without having the music completed, because that's going to be my play. When I'm not working with a composer, or even when I am, sometimes I've asked for forty different kinds of music with the freedom to recombine them and do whatever I want. Working by myself, I make long or short loops, and if four or five are played at the same time, they're hardly loops anymore because they're going in and out of phase all the time. From the first day of rehearsal, I insist on having my soundman, who is busy shuffling these tracks, and it evolves organically as we're rehearsing. I spend just as much time altering my music as I do dealing with the performing and I think that all kinds of wonderful things happen that way. Again, I choose music that somehow takes a section of the text and makes a comment on it or lifts it into a slightly different plane. For instance, in Arthur Kopit's play, while a general is talking about why the United States has such and such a nuclear policy, the music has an energy that suggests the kinds of desires about how one wants to live one's life that end up producing a general who's going to work for the Pentagon, who's going to try to defend America.

Do you sometimes choose music that is in opposition to the action of the play?

Oh, sure. That's an old Brechtian technique, of course, to distance, to estrange. But I don't think about that conceptually. It's a way of working that happens almost automatically. At the moment, I don't tell myself why it's interesting. It just seems right to me. We start rehearsing from the first day with all that music.

Your major collaboration has been with composer Stanley Silverman working on some five operas including Dream Tantras for Western Massachusetts,

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Hotel for Criminals and Doctor Selavy's Magic Theater, all of which you directed.

The productive thing about Stanley and me is that he understands completely what I'm doing. In that sense, he's one of the most perceptive and intelligent people I've ever worked with in the theatre. We have somewhat different tastes and I think he isn't as interested in some of the really far-out things I'm interested in. We generally have one or two meetings where I give him the words and he's interested to find out what I think is going on and what kind of music I imagine. That doesn't necessarily mean he would write it that way. We're friendly, but we've never talked that seriously about anything.

What kind of predigestion of the play takes place before rehearsal?

Before I go into rehearsal I know my stuff, but I don't sit pondering over the play. I read it once or twice and make very brief notes about staging ideas in terms of the set I've designed. But they're all tentative. Any text includes hundreds of possibilities. Until I hear the specific actors that I am using, I don't know in which direction I'm going to be logically led. I will discover certain things they are emphasizing or that seem to be true because of their personality that relate to certain possibilities in the play. Then my task is to strengthen that line of interpretation.

I have a clear idea of what I think the play is saying and the direction I want to take it. It's like being shipwrecked on a new planet. How do you live on this planet? It demands certain things. There are certain rules you have to abide by to live on this planet. But, within that, you could build a house with five rooms, a two-story house or a lean-to. Those are the decisions you make in rehearsal period. The only way I know how to work is three-dimensionally, to get up immediately on your feet with the actors and feel things in the body and make it happen that way. It's my articulation of the actors and space, vis-à-vis the text psychologically, that I'm proudest of, and I have absolute total confidence that I know how to do it.

What kind of images do you give the actors?

I remember I used to say to the actors in *Don Juan* that what we were trying to evoke was something that resembled what you would see if you pictured the seashore, the waves crashing against the rocks, and there's all this foam. I'm trying to create a theatrical event which is like the energy and activity of that foaming as the waves crash against the rocks. Out of that foam, "Oh, look! There's Don Juan!" And then he gets swept back into the foam of cosmic energy. "And there's Sganarelle!" And he goes back into the foam, and what happens in the play rises and sinks in this foam of life energy. With my music and with the particular kind of blocking I do, that's what I'm after.

Your stage movement with crowd scenes is especially skillful.

Even though I've often been called a hermetic artist—and in certain ways I am—to stage a play to me is to stage a public event. That influences the way that I use crowds. That goes further than simply saying that I'm not interested in fourth-wall theatre. I want everybody to be aware of the fact that they are watching a show.

Once I wanted to do an opera for the New York City Opera. I was very young at the time. I went to Julius Rudel, and he said to me, "What are you trying to do here, and what's your interest in theatre?" I said, "Well, the best thing that was ever said to me by a friend was, 'Richard, you know, I really enjoyed watching your play. Even more than I enjoyed watching it, I enjoyed watching myself watching it.'" Rudel looked at me and said, "That is the most disgusting comment I've ever heard. That is self-indulgent. You should want to capture the audience and make them forget about themselves." Well, we come from different worlds.

This is a major conflict for audiences and theatre artists alike.

Sure. I'm perfectly open to the fact that five years from now I may decide, "Hey, Rudel was right. What is all that junk I've been doing for the last twenty years?"

Is that ability you have to move groups of people beautifully something that can be learned?

It may be. There are various theories that any talent you have is a compensation for a lack. I am terribly physically inhibited. I have never had the guts to get up in a disco or anywhere else and dance. All of a sudden, when I was staging *Threepenny Opera* at the Vivian Beaumont in Lincoln Center in 1976, I was confronted with Raul Julia and Ellen Greene, and shy Richard had to stage musical numbers and dances. Well, I can't tell you how thrilled I was when I just got up and started doing it. I can make a fool of myself because it's a controlled environment where I'm the boss and everybody knows I'm sort of smart.

A lot of people have been overwhelmed by your intellect. Is that a requirement of your work?

It's certainly not. When it comes to making art, the last thing in the world I would ever think of doing is to try applying any of the things that I've learned from reading philosophy, psychology, aesthetic theory or science. It has to be a spontaneous process, and I never think about all of that intellectual baggage when I'm making a work of art, never. At this point, when I sit down

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to make a work of art, I probably don't think about it any differently than Neil Simon or Hal Prince, but it just comes out different because we're different people.

Then is it a matter of substantially differing styles? You once said, "Style attacks with truth—where man most deeply is, but where he has the least developed navigational techniques."

Believe it or not, even when I was fifteen years old and used to go to Broadway theatre every weekend, I hated all the hits but occasionally I'd see flops that I thought were wonderful. Americans just don't understand that style can be content and style has things to say. Invariably, people never understand that in art, stylistic position is a moral position, an intellectual position, and carries the real content, the real meaning. That lack of understanding is continually frustrating. But it's easy to see why it's so difficult. In order to live your life in a normal capitalistic society, you have to put blinders on so that you are not distracted from the things that you have to do to get on in this world. And the message that comes through these artists' style is, "Hey, look! There's all this distracting stuff out there that contains truth, contains life!"

To add to that conflict, your early productions shocked audiences by your use of sound and lights.

I think people still tend to find my work kind of abrasive and aggressive. I still use lights in the audience's eyes. I don't use loud buzzers anymore. But a lot of that stuff is still there because I want to wake the audience up, to stop them from being seduced by what they're watching. Lucidity, clarity, waking up. That's what I'm interested in, both in my life and in my art for myself and my audience. I've discussed this with some other modern directors like Elizabeth LeCompte at the Wooster Group. We make these things up because it makes us feel better. It's not to torture people. It's to feel good, like after you've had a workout in the gym. But, of course, by doing that you sometimes run into hostility.

I've been very lucky because I've been able to do exactly what I wanted to do in the theatre for twenty years. That quest is an attempt to bring onto the stage the operations of some other energy that is not the energy of the human—the socialized human personality. I am trying to do it, believe it or not, through rhythm, serving a kind of dialectical relationship between what you see and what you hear, which becomes a kind of rhythmic articulation—an evocation of a different level of being, a different kind of energy that one can bring into life.

Since that is far easier to control when you direct your own plays, why have you extended yourself to other works?

The reason I'm doing plays other than my own now is to see if this particular kind of rhythmic articulation is applicable to all kinds of works. One way to relate to it is through the old theory of the Jewish Kabbalah, that the world we live in is a world of broken pieces of physical material, reality, and our task as human beings is somehow to find the spark of light in these things and lift them back to God, to the wholeness that they're supposed to have. I know how pretentious that sounds, but I'm trying to take things that show the picture of our fallen physical world and to find a way in which to organize them rhythmically so that somehow that material starts to swirl and lift and some other quality comes through that restores it to its rightful place in the cosmos.

Do you find yourself limited by your own frame of reference when directing your own work?

When I am directing my own material, I have no inhibitions about treating Richard, "the author," as a joke, with contempt, making fun of him all the time, making fun of my text. And I automatically do that with all texts that I'm working on. So I have to watch my p's and q's if an Arthur Kopit is around. It doesn't mean that I don't respect his text, but to me you've got to play with this stuff, you've got to handle it like it's just stuff. It's not holy. The great relaxation of dealing with one's own script is having permission to say, "What is this garbage this guy wrote? How are we going to fix this mess?"

You worked abroad for a number of years, but then returned to this country for a committed period of work. Was that because you felt that the pendulum had swung back to where audiences were willing to hear all kinds of disturbing, less rational truths?

I'm interested in America because I had a problem most of my life in wanting to cast out all of those traits that I didn't like about myself, and one of the traits I didn't like about myself was being, to the bottom of my soles, an American. I feel that the American culture is an adolescent culture. I feel that I'm an adolescent and I idolized what I thought was the greater maturity and sophistication of Europeans. I wanted to identify with that but, finally, it ain't me. European culture is more sophisticated. But I don't think that sophistication necessarily can save us. I did at one point. I had to come back and work out of the dumb, naive openness that is a great strength of America but was very hard for me to accept.