

The Ten Year PRELUDE:

A Forward-Looking Backward Glance

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Ten PRELUDES. Ten snapshots of a coming season. Ten glimpses into the near-future of the only kind of theatre that seeks the future. Now I've been asked to examine the entrails and say what it all means—where we have been and where we are going, in 2,000 words or less. Reader, I may not be up to it.

Because, after all, how much really changes over the course of a decade?¹

When PRELUDE began, for example, the sitting president was the son of a former president and the grandson of a US Senator and Wall Street banker, while the mayor of New York was the 85th richest person in the world. This year, by contrast, the sitting president is the son of Kenyan exchange student and grandson of an unsuccessful furniture salesman, while Michael Bloomberg, having fiddled with the rules to stay in office, is now the 13th richest person in the world. You could as easily say that everything changes as that nothing ever does.

Which is equally true of PRELUDE. It is easy enough to find change: Consider that when the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma first surfaced² in PRELUDE.05, its extant body of work consisted of a 20-minute dance piece at an obscure downtown performance series held in a former Kosher winery with a very leaky roof. Or that Young Jean Lee, also in PRELUDE.05, had only presented her first full-length play the year before, over two sweltering weeks at the Incubator summer series (and Incubator itself wouldn't take over the St. Mark's space for another five years). Or that, in 2005, Anne Washburn was the only playwright to have been produced by 13P³. Even PRELUDE itself was different in those early days; there were no lines, seats were readily available, and a good part of the audience looked like retirees on a budget, who after a lifetime of theatergoing had learned to sit equably through anything⁴.

But it is just as true that the ten years of PRELUDE demonstrate constancy and continuity. Consider that the nine ensembles⁵ in PRELUDE.05 were at least five years old, and some much older--Elevator Repair Service (1991), The Builders Association (1994), Division 13 Productions (1995), Big Art Group (1999), New York City Players (1996), Radiohole (1998), Big Dance Theater (1999), NTUSA (2000). Ten years on, all but one remain, still at the

¹ It pains me to say that in writing this piece, I realized that the shorthand I've always used to represent a decade—two years with the same last number, e.g., 1950-1960—is actually 11 years. I now know the first decade of PRELUDE is 2004 – 2013, but it still looks funny and includes an initial season so different from the rest that it's like an inning of baseball that suddenly turned into nine holes of golf... I'm really only talking 9 years here, and not even that because I haven't seen 2013, so we're down to 8 (2005-12), and counting.

² Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper had been making work under their own names since the mid 1990s, but adopted the name in 2005 at the insistence of Actors' Equity, based on some Equity rule only they understand. You can't make this stuff up.

³ (2003-2012, death by implosion)

⁴ If you don't know the word "*sitzfleisch*," it's now yours at no extra charge.

⁵ Any exact definition of "ensemble" gets pretty slippery. Absent the rare collective, the Platonic ensemble consists of a company of performers gathered around one or two principal creators. This was as true of the Performance Group as it was of Byrd Hoffman and the Ridiculous. At the other extreme stands the lone-polymath theatremaker who may nonetheless gather a company about him, or her. The Ontological-Hysteric comes to mind, as does SITI. But where does the hydra-headed NTUSA fit, or the traveling sisterhood of Half Straddle? Is Richard Maxwell a playwright, a director, a producer? It all depends.

forefront, touring even bigger venues, acclaimed⁶ in family newspapers. Not that this should be surprising, for ensembles are the closest thing we have to institutions⁷, and like all institutions tend toward self-perpetuation (as long as human self-perpetuation is held in check. Nothing threatens an ensemble like the pram in the hall.)

What was surprising about PRELUDE.05—genuinely surprising, and almost inconceivable even ten years earlier—was the presence of nine experimental American playwrights, representing almost half the programming. Throughout the 20th Century, experimental American playwrights came—if they came at all—as single spies: O’Neill (don’t laugh), Wilder (ditto), Kennedy, Baraka, Fornes, Shepard, Albee (sometimes), Foreman, Jenkin, Shawn, Wellman, Jesurun, Mee... (surely I’m forgetting *someone*).

Then, around the turn of the millennium, they show up at battalion strength:

Scott Adkins, Jess Barbagallo, Adam Bock, Thomas Bradshaw, William Burke, Sheila Callaghan, Robert Quillen Camp, Barbara Cassidy, Alex Collier, Corina Copp, Erin Courtney, Lisa D’Amour, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Will Eno, Rob Erickson, Sara Farrington Stephanie Fleischmann, Ben Gassman, Madeleine George, Melissa James Gibson, Elana Greenfield, David Greenspan, Rinne Groff, Jason Grote, W. David Hancock, Rob Handel, Trish Harnetiaux, Ann Marie Healy, Lucas Hnath, John Jahnke, Julia Jarcho, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Karinne Keithley, Sibyl Kempson, Madelyn Kent, Matt Korahais, Kristen Kosmas, Carson Kreitzer, Aaron Landsman, Young Jean Lee, Casey Llewellyn, Kirk Lynn, Charlotte Meehan, Kevin Oakes, Andrew Ondrejcek, Sylvan Oswald, Suzan-Lori Parks, Amber Reed, Kate E. Ryan, Tina Satter, Heidi Schreck, Jenny Schwartz, Normandy Raven Sherwood, Mark Sitko, Peggy Stafford, Ariel Stess, Kelly Stuart, Lucy Thurber, Alice Tuan, Ken Urban, Anne Washburn, Gary Winter...⁸

Something fundamental had changed in the practice of experimental theatre⁹, and PRELUDE captured it.

To understand how playwrights have transformed the field, consider first how ensembles have historically made work. While there are certainly actor-driven companies and those devoted mainly to script interpretation, the default method has been assemblage, bricolage, collage: building pieces out of smaller, discrete pieces of ... stuff¹⁰. Text was but one element and rarely expected to carry the burden of structure, while the prevalence of cheap and reliable audio/video recording devices allowed a layering strategy which sidestepped once and for all the pesky challenges of the traditional play form. Out the window went plot, situation, character, psychology, dramatic arc, narrative through-line, pity and terror and that damned third act.

Playwrights have never had that luxury. No matter how weird and woolly a play may be, it is first and always a language structure written to be spoken, and for a play to “work,”¹¹ people must be willing to sit and listen to it.

⁶ Or not.

⁷ That the repertory company, their closest equivalent in funded non-profit theatre, has been virtually extinct for decades tells you pretty much all you need to know about the respective differences. There is also the matter of clerical staff. Once your clerical staff gets big enough, you have to put the temps on stage.

⁸ Most of these playwrights have not (yet) appeared in PRELUDE. Other than that, this list is entirely objective, comprehensive, inclusive, diverse and non-fattening.

⁹ This is actually all I am trying to say.

¹⁰ I’m not sure if this is what is meant by “devised theatre” because I don’t know what “devised theatre” means.

¹¹ Plays we are told, must work. Suffering the curse of Adam; they are not allowed to play.

Which, without getting too technical on you, ain't beanbag. All but the dreariest plays "work" in the limited sense that you can and will follow¹² them. The conventional play form¹³ is durable precisely because it is the result of so many years of trial and error, the sum total of the dramatic constructs that will reliably hold an audience for an hour or two, independent of content. Many of the earlier experimental playwrights tried as hard as possible to get away from the play form: one thinks of Mee's collage experiments, Shawn's monologs, Foreman's pointillist dreamscapes, Jesurun's manic talking heads and Wellman's nonsense plays. The new generation, by contrast, generally take the play form as their starting point, then mess with it.

Some, in fact, have written what might pass for realistic plays save for the one telling detail which calls the whole representational framework into question. Erin Courtney's *Demon Baby* tosses a malign garden gnome into a group of young professionals in contemporary London; Madeleine George's *The Zero Hour* finds World War II Nazis on the 7 train; Julia May Jonas'¹⁴ *Evelyn* steps straight out of celebrity rehab into *The Bacchae*. Others—as with Will Eno's *Thom Paine (Based on Nothing)* or Kristen Kosmas's *There, There*--work in the opposite direction, setting an ordinary three-dimensional (i.e., "rounded," *moyen-sensuel*) character against an erased, blurred or otherwise featureless landscape. Playwrights as different as Lisa D'Amour (*Detroit*) and Thomas Bradshaw (take your pick) start with realistic premises, step on the gas, and let increasingly out-of-control passions drive the whole thing off a cliff. In *Crime or Emergency*, Sibyl Kempson shifts between dramatic realities with each successive scene, while her *Secret Death of Puppets*¹⁵ presents the "story" on audiotape, as a kind of radio drama, as the author runs around the stage, shifting the empty chairs that represent the "characters." Still others play even more complicated games with structure: the linguistic trceries and arabesques of Jenny Schwartz's *God's Ear*; the loop-the-loop and threaded mazes of Jason Grote's *1001*; Erin Courtney's *A Map of Virtue*, based on the ring composition theories of Mary Douglas. Madelyn Kent's *Peninsula* and Kempson's *Ich KürbisGeist* are more or less normal plays written in fractured English. Rob Erickson's *Off the Hozzle* is autobiographic monolog fed through a loop machine while Andrew Ondrejcek's *Feast* channel-surfs through a linguistic Jabberwocky. Richard Maxwell's *People Without History* and Young Jean Lee's *The Appeal* trash the most basic conventions of the history play (including but not limited to, historical accuracy). Jackie Sibblies Drury (*We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*¹⁶) and Lucas Hnath (*A Public Reading of an Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney*), each in their own way, have even written recursive history plays, in which "actual" characters comment on the very play which they're performing.

It seems safe to say the American theatre has never experienced a decade of such feverish invention.

Is it too early to gauge the impact of the resurgent playwright? Probably; yet I find it striking that many of the newer groups (Hoi Polloi, Half Straddle, The TEAM, 600 HIGHWAYMEN) have also moved toward a more text-

¹² Even more to the point, you will also be able to anticipate them, which is the key to maintaining audience attention. Once you know the play form, you can drop into any play at any point and almost immediately orient yourself in terms of time and action. Even if you don't know exactly how it will end, you can make a very good guess as to *when* and how much more there is to come.

¹³ Play (n): a story in dialog about characters going about their business, whom you're meant to care about.

¹⁴ a/k/a/ Nellie Tinder

¹⁵ For the sake of example, I am limiting myself to playwrights who have been part of PRELUDE, and trying not to repeat myself. But the fact is most of these writers have pursued several of these strategies in different plays: thus Washburn has also written several history plays and another piece which also shifts dramatic narrative with each scene; Lee's also written a church service and a cabaret act; etc. etc.

¹⁶ In terms of long, weird titles, this rivals the German bestseller, *Four and a Half Years of Struggle Against Lies, Stupidity and Cowardice*.

centric approach, while other companies (ERS/*Gatz*; Daniel Fish ...*A Supposedly Fun Thing...*) are literally staging books and some go even further, into a kind of documentary theatre (ERS's *Arguendo*, OK Theatre's massive *Life And Times*¹⁷). But the long-term impact of playwriting may be the final bridging of the gap between the experimental and the institutional theatres. Plays, after all, are portable; they are designed to be repeatable. And if it is also striking how little impact 40 years of the American avant-garde has had on seasonal subscription theatres, it may be significant that plays as quietly radical as *The Designated Mourner* and *Mr. Burns* have been produced within the last few months at The Public Theatre and Playwrights Horizons.

I've left out a lot, of course—completely skipped over solo performers like Andrew Schneider and Cynthia Hopkins and Carl Hancock Rux and Joe Silovsky (but how could one classify *them?*), along with the choreographers, dancers, composers, musicians, media artists, even (*yikes!*) critics. Many PRELUDES featured mini-festivals of work from other countries I never even saw, extensive panel discussions I had to miss, and media showcases I didn't hang around for. I hear the parties were pretty good, too. For that matter, how is it even possible to speak of PRELUDE without mentioning the indefatigable Frank Hentschker, who seems throughout to be in two places at once.

But I'm out of space. Over my word count. As to what the next decade of PRELUDE may bring?

Well, first of all, that's totally ...

Correction

This essay erroneously states that "in 2005, Anne Washburn was the only playwright to have been produced by 13P." In fact, 13P had also produced Winter Miller's *The Penetration Play* in November, 2004.

¹⁷ This piece is the closest thing to a "hit show" in contemporary experimental theatre, though *Gatz* and *We're Gonna Die* come close. As on Broadway, with a "hit show," mass appeal counts more than critical acclaim. One of the most interesting trends in contemporary experimental theatre is radically lowering the barrier to entry. LeCompte, Foreman and Wilson were all to some degree deliberately difficult, aggressively odd, unashamedly arty. The newer stuff is typically obvious on the surface, and often downright goofy. This may be the wave of the future...