

Redecorating the Fourth Wall

Environmental Theatre Today

Steve Nelson

It has been 20 years since the term "environmental theatre" first entered the critical and practical performance vocabulary. The intervening years have brought about a different audience sensibility. Performers and techniques once considered part of the theatrical fringe have become decidedly mainstream. Philip Glass now makes scotch ads while Robert Wilson and Spalding Gray have become fixtures of public television (Gray is even available on home video). The stylistic and methodological innovations wrought by these practitioners are also becoming more familiar. Actor/audience relationships that were daring and novel in 1968 are now commonplace. The growth of performance art during the past decade, and its steady emergence into the mainstream of aesthetic consciousness, has served to make environmental theatre a more complex and less straightforwardly theatrical enterprise.

This article will explore the evolving nature of environmental performance in the theatre by examining four contemporary environmental productions, their relationships to one another, and their connection to the larger tradition of environmental performance. The shows discussed by no means represent a comprehensive survey of productions utilizing environmental staging, but they do provide a representative sample of the directions taken by contemporary artists.

Environmental theatre has meant many things to many people since Richard Schechner first applied the term to the experiments of the late 1960s (see plate 1). At the very least, it implies nonfrontal staging and a flexible approach to the actor/audience relationship (see Aronson 1977). The concept has also been largely associated with the avant-garde, although the past decade has seen the increasing use of environmental techniques in the commercial theatre. Today's environmental productions lack the urgent political and artistic agendas that typified such efforts in the '60s. They are also more reliant on the eclectic, smorgasbord-style blending of techniques and traditions that typifies much postmodern performance.

There is also a very definite shift in focus from engagement to entertainment in the pieces themselves. Terms such as "theme park," "carnival,"

Plate 1.

6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre

Richard Schechner 1

From *TDR* 12, no. 3 (T39), Spring 1968

1. The theatrical event is a set of related transactions.
2. All the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience.
3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in "found space."
4. Focus is flexible and variable.
5. All production elements speak in their own language.
6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no text at all.

and "fun house" appear often in descriptions of these shows and in their own publicity jargon. One of the most remarkable things about today's environmental theatre is its ability to draw not just on the aesthetic tradition of earlier avant-garde practitioners (Artaud, Cage, Kaprow, Grotowski, Schechner), but on the older and more varied traditions of popular environmental staging.

Tamara, an elaborate environmental mystery/melodrama with food and drink now playing in New York and Los Angeles,¹ is a perfect example of this kind of assimilation. The audience selects different actors to follow and moves with the performance through ten different rooms on three floors of the Seventh Regiment Armory in Manhattan, which has been decorated to resemble an Italian villa in 1927. I recently overheard a conversation in the ticket line at *Tamara* which reveals how much the environmental revolution has seeped into the consciousness of the average theatregoer:

WOMAN: I hope this isn't some '60s shit. They don't actually make you do anything, do they?

MAN: It's a kind of *Nickelby* thing where they walk around during intermission and talk to the audience.

WOMAN: Oh.

MAN: I think it's sort of like *Edwin Drood* where you figure the ending out for yourself.²

This exchange points up two very important differences between today's environmental theatre and the experiments of previous decades. One obviously relates to the complex set of expectations, preconceptions, and contemporary cultural baggage that an audience brings to the performance. Today's patron seems equally interested in a novel experience, but without the participatory demands or political agendas that characterized much of the late-'60s avant-garde. Theatre is viewed very much in the apolitical materialist terms that characterize the culture consumption habits of Yuppies and other well-to-do types who make up the bulk of theatre audiences.

The second aspect relates to the different thrust and style of the performance itself, which may be viewed as an attempt to cater to a more

withdrawn and voyeuristically inclined audience. *Tamara*, for example, is more akin to Broadway's *Nicholas Nickelby* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* than to its largely noncommercial environmental predecessors of the '60s and '70s. *Tamara*, *Nickelby*, and *Drood* are each enormously successful period spectacles that make judicious use of environmental staging and audience involvement techniques explored in the '60s. From the strolling actors and carefully orchestrated food-fight that begins *Nicholas Nickelby* to the audience-as-jury outcome of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, each show seeks to temper its innovative aspects with a judicious awareness of the audience's capacity for the unusual. In any event, there is a conscious effort to move away from the frequently confrontational style of earlier avant-garde environmental productions. "I'm embarrassed by that kind of thing, and I think most people are too," explained *Tamara* director Richard Rose. "When an audience feels uncomfortable or put upon, they tune out" (1988).

Tamara

Very much like a complex amusement park environment or Disney-style ride, the audience at *Tamara* is carefully coddled and prepped for its journey. The Seventh Regiment Armory is a magnificent high-ceilinged affair that appears to have survived untouched (and undusted) from the turn of the century. One enters the space from Park Avenue up a long, awning-covered double stairway and through two imposingly ponderous oak doors into a grand 40-foot high foyer. Regimental banners, ornately framed paintings, and assorted military paraphernalia festoon the halls. Patrons are greeted by attractive young performers in black, miniskirted serving-maid costumes who proffer "Tamara Cocktails," a sweet alcoholic drink featuring liquor donated by a sponsor. They also speak in carefully subdued Italian accents as they welcome you to Il Vittoriale, the opulent villa-like setting for the performance. Producer Moses Znaimer even went so far as to hire speech coaches for the support staff so that their ersatz Italian would have an authentic lilt.

Waiting in line for tickets, I was struck by an atmosphere more appropriate to a gallery opening or large cocktail party. One of the performers plays soft, languid piano music as background to the buzz of lobby conversation. Upon arriving at the reception area (which resembles the check-in ambience of a small European hotel), one receives a "passport" from a gentleman and lady in formal evening dress. Very much in the manner of Disneyland, the concern with the totality of the illusion is scrupulous. Audience members are referred to as "guests" and are constantly welcomed and admonished to enjoy their stay by the roving maids and other appropriately attired support staff. After obtaining a passport (covered in heavy textured blue paper to resemble the real thing), the audience stands in another line to have the document stamped by one of the show's main characters, a fascismo policeman in black jackboots who stares coolly at patrons and advises them to "obey our laws or face deportation." He also sternly suggests that one remember the date on the front of the passport and (most importantly) NEVER lose the thing.

The passport contains the usual cast and production credits as well as the aforementioned laws, "The Ten Commandments":

The Ten Commandments

1. Read your Passport. Know its contents. Get caught without it and you will be deported.
2. For greater comprehension, previous guests have observed that following only one or two characters yields greater order. But, if variety is the spice of your life, it's OK to follow your impulses.
3. Ten people live in this house. Always follow one of them. If you wander about on your own you break the law. Worse, you will lose the thread of the story you are creating.
4. Be brave. Act on your choices with conviction.
5. Be bold. Go directly to an opposite side of the room. Chances are you will see more.
6. If you are here with friends, split up. Several sources of information are better than one. Interrogate those around you. Compare notes during "Intermezzo" or later over coffee and dessert.
7. Watch the stories or watch the watchers. One way or another, get involved.
8. If you become tired, you will be comforted to know there is always a story on the main floor.
9. For your own safety, do not stand in a doorway. Do not open a closed door. Do not follow someone who deliberately closes a door in your face.
10. Move quickly. Move quietly. Speak only when spoken to.

The last commandment is largely irrelevant, since the audience is almost never addressed directly, except during intermission and after the show when certain cast members mingle with the crowd. Once during a scene I was asked by a performer to comment on the personality of a particular character. I was later informed by the stage manager that the actress had been told that I was a reviewer. Of the eight times I visited the production, this never recurred, nor was any other spectator I spoke with ever confronted directly, by an actor during the performance.

The parameters of acceptable audience behavior are also dealt with in the show's introductory segment, which is spoken by the actor playing the valet. A large ship's bell is rung in the foyer to end the pre-show music and gather the audience together. The crowd is addressed from the stairway with a hearty "buon giorno," to which they are asked to respond in kind. The valet is accompanied in his introductory remarks by the fascist cop Aldo Finzi who stamped the passports. Gabrielle d'Annunzio, the enigmatic proprietor of the villa appears along with his coquettish maid/whore Emilia and several of the other principal players. We learn that Finzi has suspicions about Mario the new chauffeur and that d'Annunzio has designs on Tamara de Lempicka, the woman who is coming to paint his portrait.

The valet also reiterates the passport "commandments" in a joking but serious tone reminiscent of the "keep your hands and feet inside the car at all times" warnings issued at amusement park rides. Although the audience is strongly encouraged to follow one person, anarchic choices are not prohibited, provided one agrees to remain in a room for the duration of a

valet, Dante Fenzo (Murray), greets guests with a "buon giorno" from way. (Photo by Nelson)



sa Baecara (Laura n) with the fascist s Finzi (Thom er): "The bad guys st cartoonish in their obsequiousness." y Steve Nelson)



scene. This tight but relatively unobtrusive means of crowd control is one of the keys to the success of *Tamara's* elaborate actor/audience choreography. Wandering is permitted, provided you don't amble about the halls in the middle of a scene. Those who stray are quickly directed to the room of their choice by the support staff, who know the moment to moment location of each performer.

At the end of the introductory session, the audience is divided by the valet into three groups and packed off to three different parts of the environment. After brief expository sessions in which they learn more of the villa and its inhabitants, the groups reconvene briefly in the foyer, at which point one may follow the same performer or choose another.

Given the great distances the performers cover dashing from room to room, the pace of the show remains remarkably crisp. Advertisements suggest that the audience wear "sensible shoes." It is sound advice, as some of the more frenetic characters often cover 50 yards or more over stairs and hard stone floors on their sprints around the space.

The meat of the plot centers on the efforts of Mario the chauffeur, a secret Communist agent, to induce d'Annunzio to challenge Mussolini openly and on the subsequent attempts by Finzi to uncover the plot. The title character Tamara is primarily window dressing for the intrigues that result from Mario's presence at the villa. Ostensibly, the play comments on the rise of fascism and how the decadent apathy of those at the villa contributes to its success. But despite the sinister doings of Finzi and his slimy rival DeSpiga, the fascism of *Tamara* is largely backdrop for a sexy soap opera cum mystery, rather than a sustaining political commentary. The bad guys are almost cartoonish in their sneering obsequiousness and the dilettantes of the Villa seem to have emerged from a European remake of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

Nothing is allowed to intrude on the melodramatic energy of the evening, which is generated by getting extremely close to talented actors and watching them simulate sex, violence, and gut-wrenching emotion. The show adheres closely to Harold Clurman's oft-quoted observation that, "once you fake the truth, you've got it." *Tamara* is certainly an enjoyable environmental piece, taken on its own terms. Its pretensions to any substantive "content," however, are not to be taken seriously.

The show has a definite "upstairs/downstairs" structure, both in terms of plot and in the physical division of the space. The play takes place in ten different rooms spread over three levels. The servants are downstairs and the masters up, with each sharing the action on the main level. The servants, who get most of the steamy sex and violence scenes, tend to draw the biggest crowds, although d'Annunzio's efforts to bed Tamara are also popular.

Taken purely as voyeurism, *Tamara* is indeed a great deal of fun. The action, though by necessity somewhat complex, is nicely suited to the follow-it-from-room-to-room approach. The Armory's stuffy Victorian atmosphere and marvelous period fixtures have been used to great effect. One gets the feeling of actually being in a functional villa, down to the working kitchen in which D'Annunzio cooks and eats an omelet. One spectator remarked to her companion that Tamara was obviously the guest since her bedroom was the only one with air conditioning. In many respects the show is a logical extension of the hyperrealism advocated by Belasco and Antoine. But rather than hanging meat before an audience, *Tamara* serves it to them.

Tamara may well be the first show in which a chef receives equal bill-

ing with the author and director in the advertisements. The production's lavish promotions trumpet the culinary efforts of Daniel Boulud (chef at LeClrque, currently one of New York's premier French restaurants) and the availability of "free-flowing" champagne, courtesy of Perrier Jouet. The sumptuous buffet is indeed delicious, given the limitations of intermission fare, but one pays for it. *Tamara* ticket prices range from \$60 for Wednesday matinees to more than \$100 on weekends.

The show's advertisements also seem aware of the problem created by \$100 ticket prices. Conscious of the danger of being labeled upscale dinner theatre, producer Znaimer has distributed ad copy that compares the *Tamara* price to a typical Broadway evening, with food, drink, and other attendant costs thrown in. It is a familiar ploy of pop forms when taking on cultural icons: i.e., we're the better value.

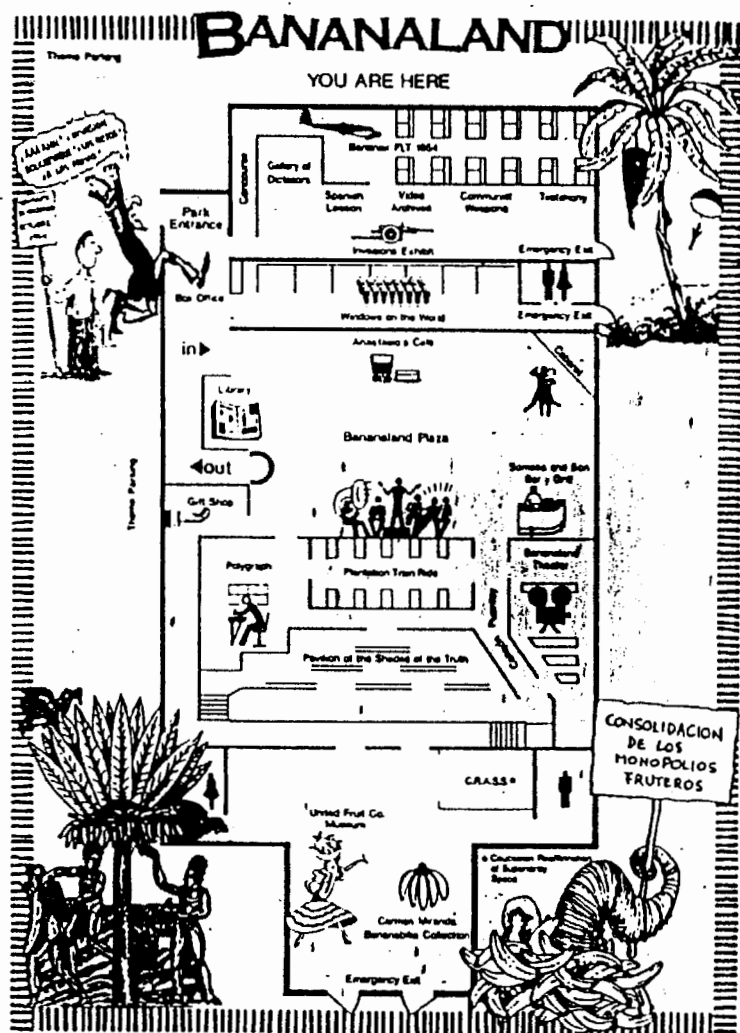
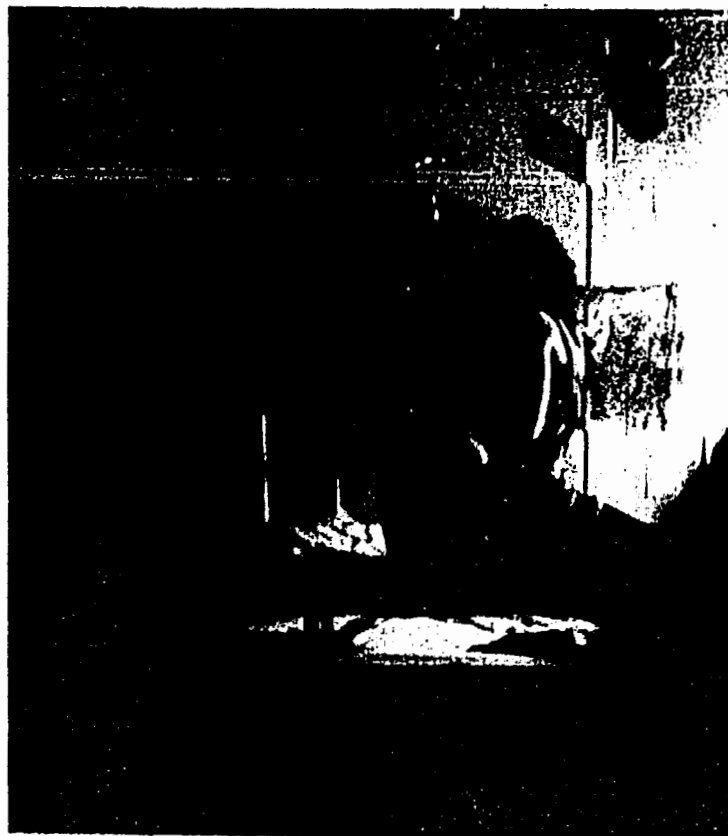
While the audience dines (they are allowed to eat anywhere in the performance space), Dante the valet mingles in character to answer questions and chat with the audience. The other performers are not seen. The bell is sounded to end intermission and the audience is herded to the foyer. Dante addresses them as before and reiterates some of the caveats about not entering closed doors and moving to the back of a room. Finzi then speaks and summons a hapless patron who has "misplaced" his or her passport. This person is questioned and then led off by Finzi amidst much audience snickering. The *Tamara* staff insure the presence of a sucker at each per-

formance by snatching someone's passport at intermission. At the end of the performance, which concludes in the foyer with a flurry of gunfire and sprawling bodies, the audience gathers for dessert and coffee with the cast.

Tamara is a fun show in both the best and worst senses of the word. It is slick, well acted, and deftly staged; an eminently enjoyable production that is easy to like. It also makes no more demands on its audience than the physical stamina required to sprint from room to room. In terms of brain drain, it's about on the level of a PBS mystery series. Had the intellectual content of the material been as challenging as the movement and decor, the show would have some claim to being a genuinely arresting experience.

Bananaland: A Central America Theme Park

A more political use of familiar popular forms is employed by Seven Stages Theatre of Atlanta in its environmental piece *Bananaland: A Central America Theme Park*, which, as its name implies, attempts to appropriate



5. Map of Bananaland performance space.



the features and techniques of theme parks and world's fairs to a theatrical setting [see also Paul Evans' article in this issue]. Essentially a walk-through environment (see plate 5), *Banaland* takes visitors on a tour of the more repugnantly colonial aspects of U.S./Central American relations during the past century. With the feel of a Brechtian-flavored "Saturday Night Live," *Banaland* alternates between the silly and the serious, mixing archival film footage with live performances, puppet shows, dioramas, and such standard theme park fare as a gift shop, train and plane rides, and guided tours of a banana museum.

The show was developed by writer/director Ruby Lerner and visual artist and documentary filmmaker George King out of their realization that most Americans know very little about Central America or the history of U.S. involvement there. "We felt that if we didn't understand, our friends

probably didn't either," Lerner told me (1988). They began by extensively researching the recent history of the region at Tulane University's Middle American Library, a collection endowed appropriately enough by the United Fruit Company, a principal villain in the exploitation of Central American resources. What Lerner and King found was the bizarre and chilling story of how the United Fruit Company, frightened by the prospect of land reform in Guatemala (where it was the largest landowner), engineered a major PR and lobbying campaign that resulted in the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of the legitimate Guatemalan government in 1954. The surreal quality of this and other low points in U.S./Central American relations prompted Lerner and King to search for an equally surreal means of realizing the story theatrically. "We decided the way into that story for us would be through bananas," remarked Lerner, wryly referring to the main reason why the United Fruit Company bothered to topple a regime. The problem was making the performance work as entertainment as well as politically charged history. Wishing to avoid a traditional approach, they turned to popular entertainment.

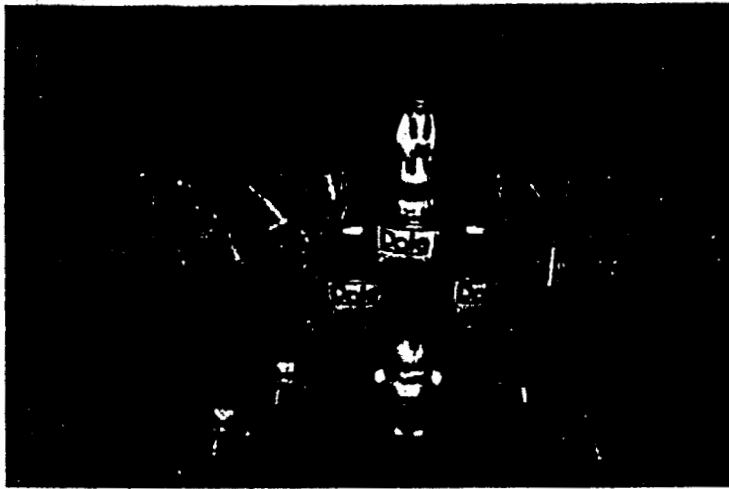
The format that most suited King and Lerner's mix of seriousness and absurdity was a combination of world's fair and theme park. They felt an expansive multifocus environment would allow them to play with the wealth of historical information in a more free-form and nonlinear fashion. They then embarked on a second round of research, visiting theme parks (from EPCOT to the Tupperware Museum in Florida) and researching the history of world's fairs (including my article on EPCOT in T112, Nelson 1986) as performative cultural advertisements. According to Lerner, "we wondered whether it was possible to take a form—the theme park—which seems to promote fantasy and passivity, and twist it around so that it explores reality and encourages engagement" (1988).

The performance itself is a comic-book mix of vaudeville routines, museum exhibits, puppet shows, newsreel footage, and audience sing-alongs. Audience members have ample opportunity to participate as well as to observe in such segments as the "Polygraph" in which the park's "trained psychiatrist, Dr. Mengele" interrogates audience members who are strapped into a chair and adorned with wires. There is the Caucasian Reaffirmation of Superiority Space (C.R.A.S.S.) and what appears to be a Disney-style automated "founding father" of the United Fruit Company (in actuality, a live actor). The heavily satirical and slapstick tone of the show is reinforced by what Lerner calls "a high-tech cardboard aesthetic," referring to the intentionally sly but cheesy feel of a sideshow funhouse that permeates the environment's design (1988).

The audience enters the theatre (a 40 x 100 foot black-box space subdivided into different areas) to a central plaza which includes the Somoza and Son Bar and Grill, Anastasio's Cafe, and the Mrs. Somoza Memorial Library, all of which peddle food, drink, and souvenirs. Patrons are greeted by a performer playing General Somoza, who speaks from a balcony and explains some of the evening's activities. The plaza also features strolling vendors, cabaret acts, and a Carmen Miranda send-up named Juanita Marimba.

From the plaza, the audience is taken on tours of the "museum" and "Guatemala." These activities include a plane flight to Guatemala and a train ride through a banana plantation. The plane and train "rides" are intentionally slapdash assemblages of canvas with stationary wooden benches and are designed to mock the pristine sleekness of Disney's environmental rides. After the tours, the audience is free to move through the

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 King)



space and select what parts to view at will. Throughout the environment there is a mix of factual materials (displays, slides, and videos) and campy performance that parodies museums, documentaries, and theme parks while simultaneously utilizing their most potent techniques to good effect. There is a videotape of the 1954 Guatemalan coup d'état and film footage of U.S. Secretary of State Dulles congratulating the people of Guatemala for "liberating" themselves.

One of the most fascinating components of the show is the use of the character Edward Bernays, the insidious public relations godfather who helped mastermind the United Fruit Company's PR campaign. The actor playing Bernays bases his address on Bernays' writings and the various accounts of his work for the United Fruit Company. The company's exploits are also celebrated in the lyrics of one of the show's many satirical jingles:

United Fruit, United Fruit
 Bananas made us lots of loot.
 We took the peasants' land away
 Avoided taxes we should pay
 With good PR and lobbying
 You can't get away with anything (King and Lerner 1988).

The *Bananaland* environment has a rambling homemade look reminiscent of the Bread and Puppet Theater or England's Welfare State, although its content is less overtly "political" and more historical. The \$10.50 ticket price, and the show's appearance during the 1988 Democratic National Convention, assured a broader audience than might normally attend an avant-garde show in Atlanta. Lerner and King were careful not to let the information side of their "infotainment" overwhelm the entertainment side. Part of the goal of the show was to be political without being dogmatic; to provide information and let the audience draw its own conclusions about the correct course of action. This is where the theme park



environment comes into play, and also where the show takes its greatest risks. This safe and familiar popular format is indeed ripe for political and social satire, but it also lets people off the hook by allowing them the comfort of light and easily digested humor. The sale of food and souvenirs makes for a more effective theatrical realization of the theme park atmosphere, but it also occasionally dilutes the impact of the satire.

But then again, its creators are not out to change the world. "This is not an attempt to spread the word universally," notes King. "We're after a theatre audience that is arguably somewhat apolitical, which we attribute in part to the fact that they're uninformed" (in Murray 1988:5). Perhaps, but the larger issue (at least as far as the performers discussed in this article are concerned) is that environmental theatre today is more concerned with a good time than with any specific content. Just as *Tamara* used the evils of fascism as a backdrop for melodrama, so *Bananaland* gives us postmodern environmental satire packaged as historical commentary.

YOU - The City

Where *Tamara* and *Bananaland* draw heavily on the popular entertainment side of the environmental tradition, *YOU - The City* by Scottish poet/performance artist Fiona Templeton is more firmly rooted in the aesthetics of Allan Kaprow, John Cage, and other seminal contributors to the genre. But unlike the primarily visual and aural orientations of Kaprow and Cage, Templeton's medium is language.

YOU - The City—which ran from 18 May to 5 June 1988 in New York City—is presented for an audience of one. To see the show, one makes an "appointment" and is assigned a time to appear at a prescribed location—in this production of the piece, a midtown Manhattan office building. The prospective audience of one (referred to as a "client") arrives at the building and is directed to a waiting room where s/he is asked by a receptionist to complete the following questionnaire:

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YOU - The City CLIENT QUESTIONNAIRE

- A. Your name
 Your address
- B. Why you?
- C. Are you now or have you ever been?
- D. Isn't that exactly why you're here?
- E. What is this making of you?
- F. If you can't know if you mustn't ask, why look?
- G. Do you know where you're going?
- H. You see enough of yourself, don't you?
- I. Do you believe you can act?
- Will you yield anyway?
- Should I be sorry that I could not satisfy you in person?
- J. Are you to end there?
- K. Does it help?

THANK YOU



Receptionist (Kachin) greets the client who has made an appointment for YOU - (Photo by Zoe)



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After receiving the completed questionnaire, the receptionist introduces the spectator to a second performer who, while delivering a vague but pointedly inquiring monolog to her audience, leads the client down to the street to be whisked away in a car by a third performer. The following speech is delivered to the client while waiting with the performer for the elevator to the street:

Why you? Why you? The exclusive everything makes you impossible. Bite with your heart the only in two. [. . .] Did you see what I saw? Oh you missed yourself, sister/brother. But you mustn't know. And I tell you. Because does it matter if I tell you the truth when I'll only speak to you in the smile of the game? You must invent the truth, and you must choose the lie.

During the next two hours, the client is passed from performer to performer for a total of 14 scripted encounters in 12 different locations throughout the Times Square area. These include a subway station, a variety of outdoor locales, a sleazy club, a church, and a particularly arresting encounter in a peepshow booth. In this sequence performer and client sit in adjacent sections of a booth where the performer can see the client through a two-way mirror. The client sees only his/her reflection while listening to the performer:

You . . .

What do you mean?

Of course you were what was intended, but I've had to take your place, because . . . I mean you.

How would you like me to be for you? Would you like me to surprise you more?

Twenty-two individuals can be accommodated during a single day's performing, with each client beginning the journey at ten-minute intervals from 1 P.M. to 8:20 P.M. Since clients also encounter one another as well as performers during the course of the event, the first and last clients to begin the performance are augmented by "fake" clients to maintain the consistency of the experience. The complex shuttling of clients between performers and locales—in a beat-up clunker with fake leopard-skin seat covers and numerous empty beer bottles littering the floor—both blurs and contrasts with the tightly scripted poetry. It is difficult to know who might be a performer and when—or where—the next encounter may occur. In a scene that takes place in a shabby 46th Street club called the Harlequin, one is never certain who is who: Is everyone in the place part of the performance or are the performer and client just "blending in"? One of the interesting by-products of performing on the streets of New York is the tendency of even the most overtly theatrical performance to become subsumed in the chaos of Manhattan life. The uncertainty generated by performing in the "real" world proved troublesome for the disguised actors in other ways, as many of them were confronted by the area's street people. One actor claimed to have been propositioned on the street by a stranger during the course of the performance.

The script of *YOU - The City* is oblique, elliptical, and frequently cryptic, resembling Beckett, Pinter, or Heiner Müller, although in performance it has a more direct and pointed effect. The tone is often probing, but never really threatening. The client is frequently accused of various indiscretions and there is always the sense that the performers mean both more and less than they say. The lines are always addressed directly to the client or occasionally to a second performer about the client. And always they orbit about the personal pronoun "you":

How can you be dumb when only you make me speak? You think you don't understand but you do. Do you know what I'm talking about? Then you understand as much as I do. I'm the one who doesn't understand the meanings you've agreed on, which are not meanings but where to stop. I'm the one who believes you when you think I know it's not true. I don't want to stop with you. There are words I want to say to you because you might recognize them and think you do understand, but I'm afraid because you might recognize them and stop. How can you know yet what I mean by,

them and not only what someone else meant, or what you meant before. So I say all these other words meaning that because they mean themselves and don't stop. If I surround myself with strange words between us it is because I don't know how to speak to you. Things are things and change and words do, all while there is something that I want to say, that is, all I know is that I mean to tell you what you mean to me. And if you want to hear, you make me mean something, because then you understand. Only because of you can I not be dumb.

The neatly ordered but enigmatic poetry both nettles and shields the client. So although the experience of being led around town by actors speaking strangely is often confusing, it's never really scary. This is art and no effort is made to make one think otherwise or to completely submerge the piece in its surroundings. As Templeton notes, "There is no [. . .]



11. It's dumb when only you make me speak? You think you don't understand but you do. Do you know what I'm talking about? Then you understand as much as I do. I'm the one who doesn't understand the meanings you've agreed on, which are not meanings but where to stop. I'm the one who believes you when you think I know it's not true. I don't want to stop with you. There are words I want to say to you because you might recognize them and think you do understand, but I'm afraid because you might recognize them and stop. How can you know yet what I mean by, (Photo by

expectation that the client participate verbally in the encounter, and the texts are basically conceived as monologues pretending to be dialogues" (1988). Like *Tamara*, *YOU - The City* relies on the detachment and passivity of the spectator. While there are ample opportunities to respond to the performers' questions, the replies seldom crack the wall of words, although, according to Templeton, some clients did make attempts at outperforming the performers. Anticipating a certain degree of audience befuddlement, Templeton wisely provided for an after-performance session in which clients and performers could meet to discuss the show at the private club that was the final scene of the performance.

The words of *YOU - The City* serve to insulate performer and client from the real world at the same time they play against the grain of the piece's environment—the edgy, threatening world of New York City's streets. Reference is seldom made by the performers to an actual place, rather they seem to be trying to construct a counterpoint to the ongoing random cacophony of street action. Although a variety of places are visited, there is little in the way of conventionally performed action. The performers spend most of the time talking to or about the clients. The performance is a protracted interrogation of the audience in which they are not obligated to respond; one is both isolated and surrounded, alone and intimately "with" another.

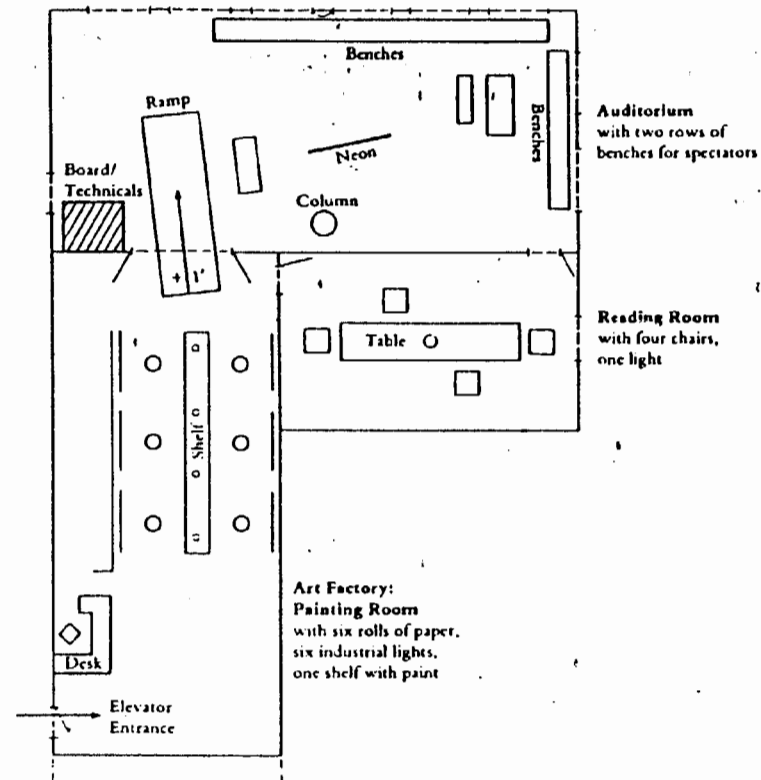
The frequently numbing circularity of the words washes over the client and provides a strange but familiar reassurance: You can relax. This is art, and therefore safe. We may speak oddly and take you to places that might otherwise be menacing, but we won't *do* anything to you. The postmodern craze for voyeurism and simulated experience is well served here. You observe and are observed; you are spoken to and about; you are at the center of things but at the same time invisible, safe, unchallenged and unchanged. The show is a house of mirrors in which the image reflected is different for each participant. Like a good thrill ride, *YOU - The City* succeeds in providing the sensation of risk without the consequence of it.

A film version of the show is currently in the works, and a book version is being published by Segue Books, with full script, directions, photos, and notes on the New York City production. Templeton produced the piece again in London in July 1989, and has made tentative arrangements for additional performances in Amsterdam, Glasgow, and San Francisco. Recognizing that the performance is largely defined by the character of the city in which it takes place, she plans script revisions for each new locale.

Description of a Picture/Explosion of a Memory

An interesting environmental attempt to bring together the "high" art tradition of the European avant-garde and the political agendas of various new and Third World cultures was made recently at the Castillo Center in New York City. The first staging in this country of Heiner Müller's *Description of a Picture/Explosion of a Memory* (1985) ran at the center from 22 May–6 June 1987. The Castillo Center was created in 1983 to bring together various traditions—feminist, gay, Latino, black—that its founders felt were not being accommodated by existing cultural institutions. At the time of this performance, the Center was housed in a loft space that was formerly a sweatshop for the manufacture of police uniforms.

Director Eva Brenner decided that the Center needed to look at the work of European contemporary theatre artists. "I wanted to bring in the European avant-garde theatre tradition and say 'you need to look at this.' I think progressive culture has to be international, and there is a lot to learn from



Müller. I wanted to see the clash, to see how people responded to this."³ Although Müller is a Communist, and very much a political being, his work does not often contain an obvious or easily discernible partisan content. *Description of a Picture/Explosion of a Memory* is perhaps the least overtly political of his plays.

At the first reading, the Center's patrons were less than enthralled. One woman, a black stand-up comedian said, "This is bullshit. I don't know what this is, what this guy believes, how he's going to change things. This may be for you, but it's not written for me." Nonetheless, Brenner persisted. "At first I thought people would follow me. I had credentials, I'd done a lot of plays, but they said, 'No, if I don't know what this does for me and my community, I don't want to do it.'"

In the process of trying to convince the Center's constituents to go along with the project, Brenner brought in a variety of community leaders to join the discussion. She began to see, after so many people reacted to the piece as detached, white, and arrogant, that maybe the European historical avant-garde was out of touch with the Third World and needed to deal with it. An eight-page monolog that talks about a painting isn't easy to sell as political theatre. "But I still felt that we needed to go beyond the existing forms, beyond agitprop, social realism and all that," Brenner noted. "Müller asked me why I wanted to do this play; why not pick another of his works that does make a statement? I told him I wanted the line of greatest resistance and most potential conflict."

Brenner feels that Müller touches on the tragic side of the European political dilemma by illuminating the stagnation, the stalemate between

East and West. His work poses the question, "what happens to a country where the revolution was imported and imposed by an outside power?" Brenner notes that Müller's work always comes back to the deadly fixedness of European society, the killing of possibilities. "The picture in this play is a picture of stasis; it's why I left Europe," she observed.

Müller's densely packed description seeks literally to explode the picture, an image appropriate to the conflict that arose around the piece at the Castillo Center. And indeed, this became the *raison d'être* of the performance—the depiction of the clash between slick, finished, European "high" art and the volatile, impulsive input of the Center's diverse constituency. The tension, though seemingly insoluble, did have a potentially useful energy. "We finally decided that staging the conflict rather than the play itself was the only way that all of us could remain in the same building. The environmental design of the piece came up because we didn't know how to resolve the conflicts that broke out." Brenner found that the normally autocratic process of directing ran head on with the egalitarian aims of the Center's political agenda. "Now here's this big loud guy talking about the revolution and the people and I think 'Oh my God.' But who am I to tell him what's more important or to say 'you don't fit our aesthetic, go read your poem outside?'"

Out of a desire to accommodate everyone involved, Brenner and codirector Josef Szeiler of Vienna's Angelus Novus Theater, devised what they call "the art factory." Basically a participatory option for the audience, it consisted of three rolls of paper suspended from the ceiling of the first room the audience entered. The paper and a variety of writing and drawing materials were offered to those who wished them by a "shop steward," who also told people of their option to move around the space. Throughout the performance, the sound of the text being read in the main space was piped to the art factory.

The play text is literally a description of a painting, and it was from that basic premise that the work began. The actors in the main space first played with the idea of museum visitors stepping into the Müller picture. The focus later shifted to the performers' selecting pieces of the text that they wished to explore through movement and vocalization. Brenner began to function as a conductor (in the fashion of Tadeuz Kantor)—intervening, stopping, shaping, and restarting the process at different points during the performance. The movements were slow and deliberate, emphasizing grouping and regrouping, the formation and dissipation of tableaux.

The text itself was read in the main room by a performer seated at a table with a glass of water and a stopwatch. She began reading precisely at eight o'clock and read for one hour, taking one-minute breaks every three minutes. The music for the piece followed a similar pattern of sound/silence, playing for five minutes followed by a minute of silence.

In addition to the art factory and the main space where the Müller play was performed, there was a third area called the reading room. Here was a long table with chairs, texts of the play, pencils, and paper. The performer stationed in the room was a Harlem high school principal named Barbara Taylor who wrote poetry and read from the text. She also encouraged others to join her, write, or take the texts into another room and read on their own or with the actors.

The space accommodated close to a hundred people, with crowds ranging from a dozen to near capacity during the two-week run of the show. The rooms were gray and dimly lit with a minimum of properties and



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seating for only 30, which forced the audience to circulate through the space. The actors wore white and black and gray. The sounds and movements of the performers were augmented by the sounds and sights of the city, as all of the windows in the space remained open throughout the evening.

"The place had a feel like a mausoleum which was heightened by all the life outside," Brenner observed. "We wanted to show our struggle and failure to communicate inside the mausoleum, like the characters in Müller's painting." The clash between the highbrow art and the chaos outside was further reinforced by the tension between those performing the Müller text and those doing their own thing in conjunction with the play. Many of the actors felt resentful and threatened by the activities in the art factory and the reading room, which many viewed as peripheral. Turf battles erupted during rehearsal as to whether those reading a poem by Rene Castillo outside the theatre should be permitted to do so inside the space.

Many of those attending the performance were unsure of whether they could move from room to room or to what degree their participation was required. As Brenner noted, "Some felt that they had paid their ten dollars and should be left alone in their seat," a reaction hardly new to those who stage environmental theatre. Several spectators thought that the comments of the shop steward were an imposition; they did not wish to be told to paint or where to go. Brenner said that the audience seemed to react positively to the playground/sandbox qualities of the environment (one reviewer called it a "postmodern kindergarten" [Massa 1987:97]). Most people moved through the initial art factory space, perceiving it to be a lobby, into the main space, which, with benches along opposite walls, bore the greatest resemblance to a performance space. It was also the darkest room in the space, heightening its status as the most "theatrelike" and "important" of the three rooms.

The question arises as to whether *Description of a Picture/Explosion of a Memory* is "political" in the usual sense of the word or if it simply represented the Castillo Center's internal conflict over this play. While the conflict between aesthetics and action is always interesting, it is not in itself good theatre, political or otherwise. Political theatre may or may not be prescriptive, but it must on some level engage its audience and reveal its own values and attitudes. Many people attending the show seemed more intrigued by the cleverness of the staging than by anything that might be construed as political content. After attending the performance, John Cage referred to it as "restful," an adjective not usually applied to political theatre.

As was the case with *Bananaland*, the environment took on a life of its own and often upstaged the written text. In many respects there were two performances: one that revolved around the Müller play and one that developed as a reaction to it. The performers who read a Rene Castillo poem, entitled "Apolitical Intellectuals," outside the theatre during the show seemed almost to be protesting against the piece rather than participating in it. Audience engagement, as such, tended to be more with the postmodern/funhouse quality of the space and its gimmicks than with any message the piece might have conveyed.

There is a misconception on the part of many critics that environmental theatre is an intrinsically participatory experience. Writing in the *New York Times*, Stephen Holden described audiences at *Tamara* and other current environmental offerings as "not just passive spectators but active participants" (1988:1). Nothing could be further from the truth. All of these

offerings employ specific rules and boundaries that rely as much on spectator passivity as do conventional proscenium shows. Movement of actors and spectators in a space does not necessarily eradicate boundaries or require participation. The use of elements from popular environmental entertainments (theme parks, carnivals) serves to emphasize the shows' status as "party worlds" (Holden's phrase) in which amusement is more central than engagement or participation. Most of the audience members I spoke to at these shows talked about the novelty of the staging or the proximity of the performers. The content and purpose of the work seemed to get lost in the shuffle.

Environmental theatre is no longer a novelty, but neither is it currently possessed by the urgency to find new forms or effect social and artistic change that characterized many environmental works in the '60s and early '70s. The issue of audience participation is critical here because "environmental" implies not just a different physical relationship between actor and audience, but a different understanding of the performer/spectator contract—of what is expected and delivered by each party.

Participation was not simply an option in the 1960s—to many it was a necessity, the *raison d'être* of the performance itself. Schechner once wrote of the audience's "responsibility" to respond in an active way (1973:19), an idea that seems a long way from the relatively passive (intellectually if not physically) audiences at many contemporary performances. Radically altering the audience/performer contract is no longer the concern. People walk about and get close physically, but the barrier between actor and spectator remains intact. Today's environmental theatre may move the fourth wall around a bit, but no one is put up against or through it. The actors say their lines and go through their routines without being unduly affected by what the audience does or does not do. "Confrontation," a term so endemic to the social/political/aesthetic discourse of the '60s, is alien to the new environmentalism. The need to change, provoke, alter, or transform spectators no longer seems central to the aims of many practitioners.

The interesting link between the pieces coming from an "art" background (*YOU - The City* and *Description of a Picture/Explosion of a Memory*) and those drawing on popular environmental forms (*Tamara* and *Bananaland*), is that each is more concerned with the illusion of intimacy than with communicating a specific message to the audience. In this sense, these works are truly indicative of their times. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan: the package is the product; the means of staging have become the ends. The point could be made that form is content; that the manner in which something is done is inseparable from what it is saying. But this falls back on the art-for-art's-sake argument used to justify the self-absorption typical of much postmodernist performance. Even *YOU - The City*, the most provocative piece conceptually, uses the same voyeuristic hook as its contemporaries, it simply reverses the equation: rather than observing, you are observed. People may opt to respond; but it is hardly required. The show still maintains the essentially passive role of the spectator and the carefully wrought barriers between audience and performer.

But perhaps it is unfair to castigate the current crop of environmental productions for failing to challenge or engage audiences in the manner of their more activist predecessors. Formalism and detachment remain, after more than a decade, the preeminent aesthetic values in contemporary performance. The irony of environmental theatre today is that its very success has prevented it from functioning as a viable catalyst for new directions in