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Destabilization and Subversion of Racial Identity on Stage: Eugene O'Neill, Charles Gilpin, and The Wooster Group in *The Emperor Jones*

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Playwright Eugene O'Neill's expressionistic text-based approach to *The Emperor Jones*, with an emphasis on fixity, was at odds with African American actor Charles Gilpin's improvisational performance technique, stressing rupture, spontaneity, and discontinuity. The contemporary avant-garde performance troupe The Wooster Group likewise produces subversive and interrogative forms of identity in performing the play, which challenge the normative approach to gender, race, and an imagined orientation. The historical foundation of subversion and destabilization laid by O'Neill and Gilpin were manifold in the Wooster Group's production of *The Emperor Jones*, and not only formed a backdrop to it but also played a central role in the group's representation of race and even gender on the stage. In this essay, I use O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*, a crucial example of racialized fantasies of identification, to explore how the modernist stage through the performances of Gilpin and The Wooster Group constructed racialized subjects of both its performers and audiences. Gilpin and the Wooster Group's strategies each shared a similar complexity in the portrayal of black identity in performance. Offering an examination of how ideologies of race and gender overlap in *The Emperor Jones*, I hope to show how each performance signifies a range of subversions and differences simultaneously and sometimes oppositionally that needs to be explored both holistically and in detail to offer a fuller picture of these remarkable attempts. Through this approach, I examine Gilpin's creative adaptations of O'Neill's text and illuminate how it is that the Wooster Group's appropriative use of blackface in their performance has come to gain critical acceptance.

[Eugene O'Neill/*The Emperor Jones*/Charles Gilpin/The Wooster Group]

I. INTRODUCTION

A play is arguably the most effective way of reflecting the contemporary moment. More than just author and content furthermore, a play does not include merely dialogue, gestures, people, and sets. It is a composite incorporating theme of conflict, passion, and – as concerns this essay – identity. In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) eloquently advocates a paradigm of living that takes into consideration identity's uniqueness and reciprocity.

Until 1940, various forms of racial discrimination prevented black authors from presenting the black experience cogently to a discerning public, so the task of creating representative black characters in works considered compelling and of literary merit fell chiefly upon white writers. Among the distinguished white writers who took up this challenge were Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, and Eugene O'Neill. The challenge was a severe one.

This was especially the case with O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) which coincided with the early days of the Harlem Renaissance. One of the goals of the Harlem Renaissance was to define a black aesthetic including in the realm of theatre and performance. The emergence of an African American theatre movement during the Harlem Renaissance raised larger questions about the meaning of black theatre (Krasner, 2005).

The Emperor Jones secured O'Neill's place as a writer of experimental theatre worthy of international attention. O'Neill scholar Travis Bogard (1988) claimed of the piece: "Not only the literature of American Drama, but the American theatre came of age with this play" (134). O'Neill made use of African American materials for what he understood as "the extraordinary richness of his [African American] daily life" (Bigsby, 1982, p. 237).

The Emperor Jones occupies an important place in American theatre history. Until its debut, black parts had been played by white men in blackface. With *The Emperor Jones*, a black actor was for the first time given the opportunity to play a major role. Charles Gilpin made the role famous, and his fame and prowess were succeeded only by the Wooster Group sixty years later. In fact, O'Neill had become perhaps the leading American white writer to confront directly the psychological problems emanating from the black/white polarity in American society. Therefore, blackness is thematically at the very core of *The Emperor Jones*.

Recently, scholars have struggled to make sense of the racial construction of the title character, of the relationship between that construction and formal modernist themes, and of the play's relationship to the history of colonization. However, many of these critics have either completely rejected the play for its racist qualities or have unaccountably

attempted to redeem it from being an exercise in racist exploitation.[1]

However, I wish to use O'Neill's play, a crucial example of racialized fantasies of identification, to explore how the modernist stage constructed racialized subjects of both its performers and audiences through Gilpin and the Wooster Group.

In the history of racial representation, the actor's body has been an important medium through which the struggle over authority, authorship, and authenticity has taken place. Gilpin's struggle as a black actor to represent a black character and the Wooster Group's historicization and subversion of those struggles in their production of *The Emperor Jones*, therefore, provide a remarkable opportunity to examine the complexities of the actor's body in performance. Gilpin and the Wooster Group's strategies each shared a similar complexity in their performance of black identity. This is essential for the construction and representation of racial hierarchies, which is important for understanding Gilpin's and the Wooster Group's rendition of *The Emperor Jones*.

By offering an examination of how ideologies of race and gender overlap in each performance of *The Emperor Jones*, my aim is not to criticize the play's content. Instead, I want to show that creative expressions in each performance cannot be separated from theatrical intention, and that each creative performance can signify a range of subversions and differences simultaneously and sometimes oppositionally – something that needs to be explored holistically as well as in detail to offer a fuller picture of these remarkable attempts. Through this approach, I will examine Gilpin and the Wooster Group's performance of black identity, addressing the ways in which both during their time challenged normative constructions of blackness.

II. Eugene O'Neill

Critic August Wilson has attempted to refocus on a style of theatre by pointing out that the definition of black theatre is not only biological but also cultural and economic.

[1] On the racial construction of Brutus Jones, see Richard Brucher, "O'Neill, Othello, and Robeson," *The Eugene O'Neill Review 18* (1994): 45-58; and Thomas D. Pawley, "The Black World of Eugene O'Neill," in *Eugene O'Neill in China: An International Celebration*, ed. Haiping Liu and Lowell Swortzell(New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 137-48. On the relationship between the construction of blackness and the formal qualities of modernism in O'Neill, see Gabriele Poole, "'Blarsted Niggers!': *The Emperor Jones* and Modernism's Encounter with Africa." *The Eugene O'Neill Review 18* (1994): 21-37. On *The Emperor Jones* within the history of United States colonial policy, see Philip J. Hanson, "*The Emperor Jones*: Naturalistic Tragedy in Hemispheric Perspective." *America Drama 5:2* (1996):23-43; and Peter R. Saiz "The Colonial Story *in The Emperor Jones." The Eugene O'Neill Review* 17 (1993): 31-38.

Defining black theatre has become apolitical (Krasner, 1995). It is not color that defines the work, but culture. The different categories of rank, gender, race, and nationalism overlap, necessitating a more holistic approach. The discussion of racial dynamics in America has traditionally been framed in terms of black and white; however, race has been more recently seen as far more varied and multiple a site of identity production, encompassing a broader range of ethnicities outside black and white.

Black literature aims "to reincarnate and reinvest with value the culture's lost sense of being and belonging" (Cooke, 1984, p.5). For the Harlem Renaissance leaders, one of the ways to retrieve black culture was with black theatre. Among the undeniable accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance was the momentum it gave to black culture and its shaping of the perennial African American need to rediscover blackness, which for its leaders implied the study of the black history and literature as sources of inspiration that guaranteed expression for the black experience – "to write about life as they saw it and look deeply into the black race's existence in America" (Wintz, 1988, p.231*).* O'Neill wrote his plays with the same goal, even though he was a white playwright.

John H. Raleigh (1967) argues that O'Neill "as a writer is best considered first as a creator of stage directions" and then as a creator of dialogue, since in writing stage directions "he was consistently effective, from first to last" (210). For this critic, O'Neill described his settings "with great accuracy and vividness; not only what they looked like but what symbolic value or feeling was to be attached to them," and used stage directions to create characters which were "acute, detailed, and psychologically convincing" (211). Stage directions in *The Emperor Jones* show O'Neill's predilection for explanatory and dense introductions.

The Emperor Jones focused on the display of Gilpin's skin, fetishizing the contrast between the surface of his skin and the white cyclorama backdrop with which the Provincetown Players experimented with great success. A staple of experimental stage design in Europe by 1920, the plain white backdrop was incorporated into the American visual imagination for the first time as Brutus Jones battled his formless fears in his Caribbean forest. The exposure of black skin has become virtually indissociable from the visual imagery of the play; the striptease convention is so fundamental to its performance that even the Caedmon audio production of 1970 features pictures of James Earl Jones in an unbuttoned military jacket in its sleeve notes in order to display the body recently celebrated in Jones's tour de force *The Great White Hope*, despite the fact that the record is meant to be a purely auditory performance.

It was undeniably true that *The Emperor Jones* had a tremendous impact on the Harlem Renaissance and on the image of the black man it projected. According to Richard A. Long (1987), this was so because:

> The black is clearly the protagonist; the role is virtually a monologue. The performance requires a 'tour de force' of the actor, serving to indicate the high caliber of black dramatic talent. Secondly, Brutus Jones is a highly complex character capable of considerable introspection, and this seemed to be an improvement on the black-as-buffoon. Finally, though he sustains a morally appropriate defeat, it is at the hands of other blacks whom he has attempted to subjugate in a colonialist manner. (44)

It was O'Neill who was widely applauded, both by white and black critics, for having marked a new step with *The Emperor Jones* in the treatment of the African Americans on the American stage. The play brought the Provincetown Players their first real recognition from Broadway audiences and managers. It also thrust the Players into national prominence when it opened on Broadway on December 27th, 1920 with special matinees at the Selwyn Theatre. Its popularity led to a regular run at the Princess Theatre, where it arrived on January 29, 1921. The engagement lasted for 204 performances, a spectacularly long run in those days, and then the production began a road tour that was to continue for two years (Gelb, 1965). The decision to cast Jones, a black actor, in the Provincetown Playhouse production played a part in the play's contradictory attitude to race. O'Neill made an important intervention in the racist orthodoxy of theater in early 20th century America.

In 1925 Montgomery Gregory, the organizer of the Howard Players, and their director from 1919 to 1924, praised O'Neill in "The Drama of Negro Life" as the author "who more than any other person has dignified and popularized Negro drama" and given "testimony of the possibilities of the future development of it" (153). *The Emperor Jones* would remain in history as "a beacon-light of inspiration," since it marked "the breakwater plunge of Negro drama in the mainstream of American drama" (157).

Talking about the film version of *The Emperor Jones*, Paul Robeson said in an interview that O'Neill "dug down into my racial life and has found the essence of my race. Every word he wrote for *The Emperor Jones* is true to the Negro racial experience" (Duberman, 1988, p. 622).

O'Neill treated human character on the cultural level, which shaped the surface personality: the psychological level, which examined the masking behavior that derived from this surface personality and the spiritual level, which depended least on racial/ethnic identity. Culture produces the "form," or outward self, that is recognized by others, one's language, code of dress and deportment, often even one's loyalties, values, and prejudices (Manheim, 1988). O'Neill also studied the individual's struggle to preserve integrity, his unified self: the tendency of an individual to seek to preserve his personhood behind an acceptable counterfeit when he cannot accept American society's attempt to shape him.

However, O'Neill's characters meet on an existential common ground. Therefore,

O'Neill dealt with racial matters as well as a fundamental question of what it means to be human. This attempt has been followed by Charles Gilpin's courageous and tenacious efforts and the Wooster Group's epoch-making performances.

III. Charles Gilpin

When *The Emperor Jones* was first produced, no black person had ever played a major role in the American theatre in a non-musical production. The Provincetown Players decided that only a black man should play the role of Brutus Jones. They chose Gilpin, who like the title character had once been in lowly service as a Pullman porter. He was one of the most superb actors of the time and arguably the black community's very best actor. The play was such an instant success that it was moved from the Players' theatre in the Village to Broadway, "where on December 27, 1920, for the first time in American history, a serious play by a serious playwright about a 'human' Negro, intelligent, and resolute, and was played by a Negro before a white audience opened on Broadway" (Raleigh, 1967, p. 108).

No actor received a higher accolade from O'Neill than did Gilpin, the first Brutus Jones. Although Gilpin sometimes created problems by coming in drunk and improvising on stage, O'Neill named him one of three actors who had realized his intentions most fully. In 1946 this was emphasized in S. J. Woolf's (1946) interview with O'Neill: "As I look back now on all my work, I can honestly say there was only one actor who carried out every notion of a character I had in mind. That actor was Charles Gilpin" (62). Gilpin also won high praise from Theophilus Lewis who wrote, "In *The Emperor Jones*, Gilpin dazzled the theatrical world. He made stage history and had a great deal to do with making the reputation of a great dramatist" (n.p.). Furthermore, John G. Monroe (2004) suggests:

> During an era of fragile and unstable relationships between blacks and whites, Gilpin realized that his course ahead was a tightrope which he must successfully maneuver or else face a plunge to depths from which he had just recently surfaced…. Charles Gilpin was a pragmatist, who, like other black men before him, dealt with the realities of his time in a way which, he thought, would assure his professional and economic survival and which would, simultaneously, engender respect and opportunities for others of his race. ("Charles Gilpin" 141)

Gilpin created his own character: "I created the role of The Emperor. That role belongs to me. That Irishman, he just wrote the play" (Bogard, 1972, p.139). As Toni Morrison (1989) insisted, "It is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us [blacks] and imagine for

us" (22); in the same way, Gilpin performed the role his own way. In this respect, O'Neill's expressionistic text-based approach, with an emphasis on fixity, was at odds with Gilpin's improvisational performance technique, which stressed rupture, spontaneity, and discontinuity. Gilpin was continually reinventing the role implementing new interpretations, new gestures, and new language. As an actor, Gilpin appears to have rejected a fixed performance in favor of a more flexible approach.

From the beginning, Gilpin challenged the racism of *The Emperor Jones* through the character he created. He made theatre history with the boldness of his performance, becoming a star. Still, in the course of its early runs, Gilpin, a proud black man, began changing the word "nigger" to "Negro," "black-baby," or "colored man," as well as other changes in the dialogue.

Gilpin's own dialogue changes contrast sharply with the original language of O'Neill. As he noted in the *Cincinnati Times Star* of February 2, 1922: "O'Neill's performance of "Brutus Jones" to-day is vastly different from my interpretation given when the play opened. My understanding of the character has developed as I have worked with it, and new meanings are constantly unfolding. Mr. O'Neill has been very kind in this respect, giving me the liberty of changing the lines to suit the characterization."

As an actor, Gilpin appeared hardly to deteriorate in his ability to convey the strong magnetism and visceral embodiment required for the role. Ronald Wainscott (1988) called attention to the contradictions and aspects of the trickster in Gilpin's performance: "In the midst of all this control and intensity, … there must have lurked a wry sense of humor, because in several production photographs one can discern Gilpin wearing a belt buckle bearing the initials 'CSA,' a relic from a military uniform of the Confederate States of America" (57). In addition to his creative powers, Gilpin's technique at characterization and body control enabled him to supply the role of Brutus Jones with necessary physicality.

Gilpin changed not only the text to avoid racist language, but reinterpreted the role through his skills at characterization and improvisation, which offers a significant clue into the actor's outlook. His attempt to decode the script according to his ideas of the role suggests his belief that he was better suited to interpret the nuances of Brutus Jones than the playwright.

Investigating the underlying meaning behind Gilpin's actions may provide us with clues into the actor's interpretation of the role. Gilpin's alterations of the text include making Brutus Jones less offensive to African Americans, changing O'Neill's language, which Gilpin perhaps viewed as overly general, repetitive, and at the same time imprecise, given its use of African American dialect and affirming, through performative elements, his own creative and artistic interpretation in a role which he believed that he understood better than the writer.

In an effort to deflect the racial controversy inherent in *The Emperor Jones*, Gilpin

argued that the play represented humanity in general. For Gilpin, the story of Brutus Jones was not racial, but universal. *The New York Age* quoted Gilpin as saying at the Denver banquet:

> No offense should be taken because of the fact that Brutus Jones, the Negro, is a villain. This is not a racial play; it is universal in its application. The fundamental idea of the play is this: a bully is always a coward, and its moral is simply this: the bigger the bully, the bigger the coward…. As to the superstition revealed in the character of Brutus Jones, we as a race have been superstitious, just as every other race has been superstitious, and many of us still are. But superstition is merely ignorance; and we are all more or less ignorant. And that doesn't apply to any one race. To appreciate Mr. O'Neill's play, you must look into it; not merely at it. It was designed to make you, and all those [who] see it, think. Don't imagine for one moment that I, a Negro, would hold one type of our race up to ridicule. (25 Nov. 1922: 6)

The motive for change emerges from the context of Gilpin's career as an African American actor during the Harlem Renaissance. As Gilpin saw it, the play was not racial, and therefore not offensive. In order to support his claim, he needed to undermine the play's racial tendencies. The word nigger takes on a one-dimensional reference; fragmenting the singular word into several words is one way of shifting emphasis to a more ubiquitous meaning. The following quote suggests Gilpin's opinion about racism in the play:

> It is the educated black that criticizes me most harshly. They ask why I should take the role of a thief, murderer, and ignoramus. Of course, Brutus Jones isn't much of a criminal—that is, his crimes are treated in a friendly way and the audience takes them lightly. … But I tell my friends who protest against Brutus Jones that stage characters are mere stage characters. You take them as you find them. I ask them to consider that the worthy presentation of a character by a Negro actor is a credit to our race, even though the character itself is unworthy. The better educated Negroes understand this and are extremely sympathetic toward my work. (qtd. In Monroe, 2004, "Charles Sidney" 86)

Acting for Gilpin was his art form, one that he believed entitled him to interpret the role as he believed it should be performed. In order for Gilpin to maintain the necessary tension and depth required for the role, the actor had to change the shape of his performance to suit the demands of his audience, his environment, and his ever-changing interpretation. His physical, imaginative, verbal, and vocal skills contributed to the continuing complexity and inner power of his performance. "He has the artistry," wrote one reviewer, "to return to the

scene after each intermission, and to grasp and hold the emotional values of the part unerringly" (Clipping, Gilpin File, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York).

Gilpin's Brutus Jones was shown to be a purely theatrical construction mediated with material effects so that by the performance's end, audiences and performers could better understand humanity. The use of the analogous but asymmetrical theatrical methods showed how theatre itself can operate as a disciplinary mechanism in culture, creating production through its theatrical measure and contributing to the way that people view race.

True to Gilpin's claim that his performance drove the phenomenal success that prompted the eventual transfer of the play from the Provincetown Players' small Greenwich Village house to Broadway, his success was in fact epoch-making, succeeded only by the Wooster Group.

IV. The Wooster Group[2]

A large span of time passed between Gilpin's 1920's interpretation of the Brutus Jones part and 1993, when the Wooster Group gave their outstanding production with the same goal as Gilpin. In other words, over seventy years after Gilpin performed O'Neill's work,

[2] The development of the Wooster Group's consciously appropriative aesthetic strategies emerged from their origins within the New York avant-garde theatre community of the 1960s and 1970s, whose performances worked in similar ways to O'Neill's modernism. These artists positioned themselves as counter-cultural and worked to critique and rebel against mainstream culture from the margins of society (frequently, by identifying themselves with non-white and non-western identities). However, the Wooster Group positioned themselves differently in relation to the political interventions of their work. By the 1980s, the avant-garde's marginality and "outside" status had become commodified as the next alternative movement in consumerist culture's endless search for novelty.

The Wooster Group emerged from the Performance Group, which was led by Richard Schechner, in 1967. The Performance Group was joined by the actors Spalding Gray, Ron Vawter, Willem Dafoe, Kate Valk, and Peyton Smith. Elizabeth LeCompte joined Schechner as an assistant director in 1975. In 1968, the Performance Group purchased a disused garage in Soho in downtown New York and renamed it the Performing Garage, which later became the home of the Wooster Group. In 1980, after a break with Schechner and the Performance Group, LeCompte, Valk, Vawter, and all named themselves the Wooster Group and have developed work which "'speaks to an age' where we can talk on the phone, look out the window, watch TV and be typing a letter at the same time" (Dafoe; qtd. In "The Wooster Group's *Route*"). Famed for their use of new media on stage (such as microphones, television monitors, and live camera footage), and their radical fragmentation of canonical texts, the Wooster Group have established an international reputation for their deconstructive approach to theatrical performance(see Auslander; Savran; Kershaw).

the Wooster Group performed the play and simultaneously deconstructed the historical legacy of O'Neill's original script. The Wooster Group was able to relieve the racism of the play by using blackface in their production.

The Wooster Group's major political achievements, according to Phillip Auslander (1992), are their capacity to represent "the voiding of historical and political discourses under mediation" and their capacity to "enable the spectator to position herself relative to such an environment" (171). The spectator can position herself relative to this ahistorical, apolitical environment in part because the Wooster Group gives this environment a landscape. Therefore, the Wooster Group's contribution to politically engaged postmodern performance consists not only of representing "the voiding of historical and political discourses" but also of constructing new discourse to describe and even reflect contemporary life.

The program of The Wooster Group's *The Emperor Jones* reprints W. E. B. DuBois's "The Negro and Our Stage," taken from a leaflet first issued during the 1923-24 Provincetown Playhouse season. DuBois (1926) suggests in his essay that a series of concentric societal shells surrounds the identity of African Americans, hindering sincere and artistic representation. This problem inspires The Wooster Group's contemporary presentation of *The Emperor Jones* and continues this avant-garde group's exploration of the mask in American theatrical iconography. The use of DuBois to frame their program was also indicative of a larger historical project within the Wooster Group's production of *The Emperor Jones*. The Wooster Group printed DuBois' defence of O'Neill's use of black actors in their 1998 program for their production of *The Emperor Jones*. However, there were no black actors in their production. Instead, actress Kate Valk wore blackface in her performance. DuBois' defence of the representation of "The Negro as he is" in O'Neill's work acted as a frame for the Wooster Group's performance, in which a white woman played a black character, written by an Irish American—O'Neill—in blackface.

While the Group's use of make-up constructed a blackface/whiteface binary which implicated theatre in the materialization of race, their use of video technology re-negotiated this duality. Representing the character of the old black woman at the beginning of the play, an image of lips from a ghastly white face is shown on the television screen. This image was Valk's blacked-up face made white through negative imaging on the screen. As Roger Bechtel points out, this image had a deconstructive effect on the black/white binary on the stage, fragmenting the stability of that duality by adding white as a further effect minus the black make-up, but instead imprinted with an added layer of color through the negative imaging on the screen: "the negative image does not serve simply to erase the black make-up on Valk's face, but instead creates a hybrid that neither melds the two races nor privileges one over the other"(4). Here, the use of technology destabilized the operation of the real in performance, calling into question the original color of Valk's skin, through

technological means thus conveying humanity in general. This distribution of characters across the stage and screen expresses a relationship between biology and technology, in which technological production threatens the powers of biological production at every turn.

To use blackface in a contemporary production of the play is very startling. However, critics rapturously greeted the Wooster Group's use of blackface in their work as a deconstruction of racism. Some performance artists subsequently began to question the stability of race and gender as categories, and their work deconstructed and historicized fixed categories of race. As Jacqueline Wood (2003) argues, "[B]lack appropriations of early performances of whites in blackface have inevitably complicated the politics of blackface on the stage and have provided models for more recent black dramatists' parodic inversions of minstrel figures"(5). The repositioning of blackface within African American performance may have done some work towards making the Wooster Group's own use of blackface more acceptable to critics and spectators, simply through ensuring a greater familiarity with the form. The Wooster Group's use of blackface also took place against a backdrop of controversy over the representations of race by white actors (Monks, 2005).

While the use of blackface in Valk's performance can be read straightforwardly as an indictment of O'Neill's construction of race, the use of blackface in the production was in fact far more complicated. Willem Dafoe, in a cosmetic approximation of a white Kabuki[3] mask, plays the supporting role of Smithers and Valk, in blackface, appears as Brutus Jones. As Bechtel points out, the use of color on Valk's body subverted the possibility of a straightforward blackface reading: "Valk may be in blackface, but her neck is shaded red, her hands remain white, and she is wearing pre-modern Japanese clothes." While Valk's blackface was destabilized by the various colors included in her make-up, it was also

[3] Kabuki is usually traced back to 1603 when Okumi, a female dancer began to give public performances on an improvised stage set up in the riverbed at Kyoto, Japan. Her program was composed of playlets interspersed with dances. Kabuki was a genuinely new expression of an optimistic, hedonistic urban society. Most of the performers were women, although they sometimes dressed as men, and they were obviously erotic. Many critics consider dance to be the basis of Kabuki, although dance must be understood to include rhythmical movement, studied posture, and conventionalized gesture. Originally only the female roles were danced, but by the late eighteenth century dance was such an essential part of all performances that a professional choreographer was added to each company. Since then dance has grown more complex and new forms have been created.

Dance in Kabuki is always expected to reflect the verbal text. It seeks to distill the essence of real emotions and deeds into stylized gesture, movement, and posture. Thus, weeping becomes a rhythmical movement of the head accompanied by precise hand gestures. Kabuki acting is a combination of speaking and dancing. Because it follows established rules, it requires long and diligent study. Kabuki actors do not wear masks, but some roles require boldly patterned makeup to exaggerate the muscular conformation of the face (Brockett & Hidly 613-623).

reconfigured by its contrast with the whiteface of Dafoe. While both Dafoe and Valk wore mask-like make-up in the production, the rest of their bodies were left unpainted apart from Valk's red neck and Dafoe's feet, which were also painted red.

While Valk's blackface first appeared to be a representation of the vision of blackness in the play, next to Dafoe's whiteface it also became a theatrical referent, calling to mind various theatre traditions: blackface and the white masks of Japanese drama, which theatricalized the construction of race in the production. Even while Valk's blackface recalled the original social conditions of *The Emperor Jones*, evoking the racism of the minstrel stage, Dafoe's Japanese whiteness undermined the sociological implications of the blackface, by positioning whiteness as a theatrical device. Because Dafoe's white Japanese mask evoked not a racial whiteness but a theatrical one, blackface also became a theatrical mask, positioning minstrelsy as a theatre form equivalent to Japanese Kabuki. The fact that the performers' bodies were left unpainted maintained this effect by constantly reminding the audience that the actors' colored faces were a theatrical rather than a biological construct.

The mask is both symbol and substance in this performance as a series of masking devices brings identity issues to the foreground. Race and gender are seen as roles. Acting style becomes another mask. Valk draws upon the tradition of minstrelsy and Kabuki as she struts around the bare stage wielding a microphone as though it were at once both scepter and cane. She entertains the audience with a vocal cadence that imitates stereotypical black speech even as she indicates that she is doing an imitation. She strikes commanding poses and demands to be watched at all times, often rolling her eyes to set the whites against black.

Technology itself functions as a kind of mask. Technicians sit in front of their electronic equipment in plain view of the audience on one side of the stage. Microphones and three video monitors, including a large monitor in the center, are spaced evenly across an upstage plane. Microphones mediate all of the spoken text accompanied by a very effective original and percussive score by David Linton. The combination of sound, video, and live performance produces several exceptional theatrical images. The recurring sound of a whip, made quite distinct from the physical response to the lash by Valk lying downstage, proves anguishing. The image of Dafoe as a slave trader in a live video peeking over childlike drawings of a slave ship is at once humorous and chilling. Dafoe's frenetic dance as a crocodile apparition, backed by equally violent music, is an intelligent solution to one of O'Neill's more difficult stage directions.

In a bare bones production, designer Jim Calyburgh presents a metallic, cold world set upon a white paneled floor. Jones's throne is nothing more than a covered chair built upon large casters that allow it to ride around the tropical locale. Valk and Dafoe energetically perform the entire one-hour play by themselves, aided by a couple of stage assistants

dressed in black. Costumes of the two principals are layered to evoke an eastern style.

The best moment of the production comes in the very first scene in which Smithers stands alongside Jones and they perform a rhythmic, synchronized dance together. The precision of the movement and the grace of the moment is a joy to watch. The meaning remains unclear and this interlude does not advance any narrative, as though the performance itself were a kind of mask asking the audience to admire the polished surface of appearances.

Critic Michael Feinglod (1998) summed up the production as a "parade of dislocations and seeming irrelevancies [which] not only animate […] O'Neill's play but enrich […] it. […] Elizabeth LeCompte's staging of *The Emperor Jones* is both great and outrageous" (137). Critic Ben Brantley also writes:

> America has long passed the point where a straightforward production of *The Emperor Jones*, with a black man delivering O'Neill's dialectical speeches as written, could be other than embarrassing. Yet the drama remains fascinating and it would be a shame to consign it to the shelves of unplayable plays (*New York Times*)

Jonathan Kalb (1998) also gave a remarkable critical account of the company's subversive intentions as he writes, the production "[…] restor[es] theatrical life to what was occluded by antiquated style and language" (6).

The Wooster Group produces subversive and interrogative forms of identity in performance which challenge the normative approach to gender, race, and an imagined orientation. The historical contradictions and relations continuities and discontinuities between the Wooster Group's work and O'Neill's played a central role in the production, which incorporated these relationships into its character development. The foundation of subversion and destabilization laid by O'Neill and Gilpin are equally manifold in the Wooster Group, and not only formed a backdrop to their production but also played a central role in the group's representation of race and even gender on the stage.

V. CONCLUSION

O'Neill thought that the duty of the modern playwright was "to dig at the roots of the sickness of today" (Bogard, 1988, p. 23). That was why O'Neill dealt with black issues and themes even though his attempts received much criticism.

As Diana Fuss (1992) suggests, the "delimiting of boundaries or mapping out of critical terrains is not a problem in and of itself (especially if it allows us to devote serious attention to previously ignored or trivialized issues); however, it becomes a problem when

the central category of difference under consideration blinds us to other modes of difference" (116). It is no coincidence that the play which made O'Neill famous, and raised the standard of American drama in European eyes, was also the first play to cast a black actor in the main starring role on a major stage. While the traditional historical account of the play has emphasized O'Neill's courage part in making it possible to put a black man on Broadway, I would suggest that the presence of the talented black actor Gilpin made it possible for O'Neill to present his play on the New York stage. Gilpin did not follow the acting norms of his time but rather avoided racist language, and created and reinterpreted his own roles as Brutus Jones by drawing from his own experience as a black man. In doing this he undermined the theatrical norms of his time.

The parts that Gilpin created which included language with radical implications, troubled how the audience viewed the play and how they understood and perceived the identity of the main character. This destabilization of parts forced the audience to become more aware of the issue of race on a much broader level: namely, how an individual from one race can be no different from an individual from another, if given the power to control people.

The Wooster Group's adoption of blackface is worthy of analysis due to the sheer complexity of its use on stage, offering radical concepts of the body and of racial identity. By making black and white faces interchangeable in *The Emperor Jones*, the company attempted to subvert and challenge notions of race and gender as distinct categories, thus blurring the lines between them. The theatrical devices employed by the Wooster Group – the use of color on Valk's body, the symbol and substance of the mask, and the effects produced by audio/video technology – all combined to destabilize reality in the performance.

In revealing his body, Gilpin showed his intentions on stage. Through his role as Brutus Jones, he suggested that despite being once a part of an oppressed race, he too could be corrupted by power and oppress others. Thus he suggested how human conduct could blur the distinctions between of one race and another. By using their various stage devices and acting techniques, The Wooster Group also blurred these distinctions –in a different way, but with the same effect, which was to destabilize all racial categories into one basic category of humanity, be it good or evil.

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