

Richard Foreman is Angry

Interview with Laura Winton

Richard Foreman has created over 50 plays, for which he has received 5 Obie awards for best play and 5 others for his directing and “sustained achievement.” He has received a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship, the PEN Club Master American Dramatist Award, and an award from the National Endowment for the Arts for “Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre.” In 1968 he founded the Ontological-Hysterical Theatre, housed at New York’s St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery, which has also been home to the influential Poetry Project since 1966. Foreman describes his work as “total theatre,” uniting “elements of the performative, auditory and visual arts, philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature.” His work is known for its nonlinear structures and exploration of language as well as for his unique stagings, fantastic costumes and sets. His work is difficult to sum up or generalize, but to say *Richard Foreman’s theatre* conjures a certain type of work for those who have experienced it, and it is, in fact, the experience that people talk about most.

His plays have been collected and published in several volumes, along with his writing notes and manifestos, including *Unbalancing acts: foundations for a theater*, *Reverberation machines: the later plays and essays*, *Plays and manifestos*, *No-body*, *My head was a sledgehammer*, and *Love &*

Laura Winton is a writer, performer, and doctoral candidate in the Department of Theatre at the University of Minnesota. She creates experimental works, often in the Dada and Surrealist tradition, and frequently works under the name Fluffy Singler. She is interested in issues of consciousness and language and the “nonrational” use of language to elicit a creative response in her audience. After hearing Richard Foreman talk about these same issues, she approached him for an interview. This conversation took place in New York City in May 2004.

science: selected music-theatre texts. Portions of his notebooks are available online at the Ontological Hysterical website and photos and excerpts from nearly all of his works are in the process of being uploaded to the site as well. His writings *about* his work are an important extension of the plays themselves.

To celebrate the acquisition of Richard Foreman's collected papers and archives, the Fales Special Collection Library of New York University's Bobst Library sponsored a talk by Foreman on the subject "Making Art in Bad Times" in April 2004. Foreman touched on several topics during his talk, discussing art as a kind of withdrawal, in which artists turn their backs on discourse, coherence, and that which is known and knowable. He offered his own work as a contrast or opposition to plays that function in the language of current logic and conversation. "All of the discourses are wrong," he insisted. He pressed the idea of art as escaping the now, releasing us from being imprisoned by the present, preferring instead for language to lead us away from ourselves. "Consciousness comes when you run into things."

My own performance work focuses on nondiscursive, nonlinear uses of language, and is motivated by the Surrealists' goal of liberating the imagination. We met for this interview at his Soho apartment on a Sunday morning in May 2004. Our talk took place in Foreman's library/office, a large room next to his home that is filled with giant bookshelves, a wooden desk, and some scattered chairs and couches in the middle of the room. The room was dark with its wood floors and dark wood bookcases, and its expansive size evoked an impromptu dance studio or a personal theatre space.

In Spring 2004, Foreman's play *King Cowboy Rufus Rules the Universe* was finishing its run. *Rufus* was hailed for being Foreman's first overtly political piece in years. Even though Foreman said that he is not usually seen as a political writer, "I noticed down through the years . . . about every 4 or 5 plays there is something more directly political." This time, however, he felt frustrated at "having" to create another political piece:

In a funny way I feel victimized by having to do it. The world made me do it. And I think it's a mistake and I wish I wasn't drawn into that. Because what's going on is so terrible. What contribution can I make? [. . .] I know Richard [Schechner] said it was one of my best plays. There were a lot of other people that liked it. [. . .] In a sense, the play was saying I can't make any contribution. People realize you have to free yourself from being obsessed with this."

Foreman said he had decided earlier in the day of his Fales Library talk that his work no longer needed to be utilitarian in any way, that it needed no justification. When I later suggested that "useless" art could be seen as having a social utility as creative resistance, he still insisted that "now I want to release that heavy load of justification that I've been carrying around on my shoulders . . ."

Since our conversation, Foreman produced what he announced would be his final play, *The Gods Are Pounding My Head AKA Lumberjack Messiah* and announced that he would cease making theatre in order to focus on film and video work. This November will see the debut of *ZOMBOID! (Film/Performance Project #1)*, described as "a series of performances dominated by projected tableaux vivants against which live actors . . . appear and disappear. *ZOMBOID* marks the space of a new and uniquely Foreman kind of philosophically oriented performance which lives in the heretofore unfathomable territory between projected image and on-stage corporality." Despite the murmurs of disbelief and shock after his initial announcement, Foreman has not abandoned the stage altogether, but has moved on to a new set of concerns, a new resistance for his own consciousness to run into.

Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theatre at St. Mark's Church in Manhattan's Bowery district has become an incubator for new experimental theatre work, including new play reading series, festivals, and residencies. Foreman and the Ontological-Hysterical remain a vital force in New York's downtown theatre community.



LW: There's always been a lot of talk about your work in terms of language and consciousness. So I was interested in how your view of language and consciousness might have evolved or changed in the course of your work as we've seen it.

RF: Well I certainly don't think about consciousness too much anymore. In the beginning I did and it was a stripped-down language that was trying to represent consciousness banging up against the resistance of objects and things that would make one stumble, and problems of one's body moving through the world and language just registering that collision, that encounter. Then everything started to get much more complex as basically I added a lot of props, much more prop-oriented theatre and object-oriented theatre. And the language, instead of just representing the phenomenological collision with those objects, started almost riffing on what the objects would suggest, the different possibilities of using the object, seeing the object in different ways, all of this intersecting with the people and a certain degree of personal interaction between people. And then at the same time I didn't want to become totally cerebral—ever—so I wanted the language and the narratives of the play also to reflect some kind of archetypal themes—archetypal structures—and I did realize that my plays were always sort of searches for the Holy Grail, some kind of spiritual search and the language at a certain point, as the language developed, it became very complex, and still has been in recent years. But over the last two years I began to feel very funny about that because I myself was a reader over the years, and I spend most of my time reading when I'm not making plays. For many years I could only read philosophy, psychoanalysis, spiritual literature, and it was very hard for me to read fiction, not to say plays.

LW: Why?

RF: Well, I just couldn't believe in it. Occasionally I would find a book of fiction that would still capture me. But a few years outside of college, it didn't work for me anymore because it seemed not to deal with the step-by-step collision of consciousness with the world. But in later years in reading a lot of theoretical work, in the last two or three years that's sort of worn out for me also and it seems to me a kind of going in circles. It doesn't serve much. Recently I was re-reading a great article about how wisdom is really a dead end. Wisdom takes away energy. And I had begun to have somewhat similar feelings for a couple of years. I still read, but finding it more and more frustrating, and with reading drying up, and writing drying up as a result in the belief in articulating insight and true life through writing, I became more and more fixated on just these tiny fragments of ideas in an aphoristic style.

And then I wondered . . . and for years I've loved the aphoristic style, and I finally did a play two years ago that was just aphorisms [*Maria del Bosco*]. Not really aphorisms, just small statements on tape treated with different kinds of voices, repeated again and again in the play. I did that twice. And when I say aphorism, the thing I've noticed that works best for me is [that] I can write aphorisms that make a twist and [each one] indeed becomes an aphorism that sums up some sort of morsel of experience in a clever way. But even those I tend to reject more and more in terms of just a statement that cannot be tidied up into knowledge, into a little parcel of knowledge. I want to write little statements that frustrate the attempt to derive wisdom so that you're really dealing with the few words and their associations and the way that they might ring the bell of a whole range of experience, and that's maybe what will develop in the next few plays. I don't know. At the same time, it's hard not falling back into the trap of wanting to say certain things, get certain things said. And then of course, my theatre has for years, probably since the beginning, depended upon the fact that language is going around, starts going in circles, and then it's as if you've run up against a wall and there's a loud

explosion of noise or music or dance that is saying in effect, you can't say it, you just have to explode into music. It's almost as if it's the explosion of an orgasm at the end of controlled activity that leads up to that. It's almost as if language itself, thinking itself, has a kind of orgasm and then you start again. And that's been a feature of my theatre since almost since the beginning.

LW: One of the things I'm interested in my work—and I'm starting to come across more and more people that are doing this—is performing texts that really don't have a discourse at all, that really is just full of images that can take the audience somewhere else, and trying to get past the rational, so-called seemingly rational messages that you keep getting from the world that you have to decode. So, trying to get away from “meaning”—using language in a way that has a purpose, but doesn't necessarily have a “meaning”.

RF: It's very hard for me to get away from meaning. Your mind automatically gravitates toward resolving things into meaning, and I'm, interested, I guess, in eliminating that struggle. It's either a lack of courage or feeling that it's more interesting to work in that in-between area. I have not gone all the way to making totally meaningless, totally musicalized structures. As I say, I don't know if that's good or bad. I might go there someday. I might not. It's hard to imagine in the theatre. Because the corruption of the theatre is you're performing in front of all these people and basically you don't want them to walk out.

LW: [Laughs] Yes.

RF: And if you go all the way into meaninglessness, unless you have such a gigantic spectacle that it takes over, I think they will walk out. So and that seems sort of pointless to me at this point. It didn't when I was young and had different beliefs than I have now . . .

LW: So when you talk about being interested in consciousness, what does that mean to you in terms of what specifically you're interested in and what you're interested in giving to or getting from the audience?

RF: Well, I really don't know. Maybe years ago I thought I knew. Now . . . I mean I've read a lot of books about consciousness, and I know how to attack it from various ways. But I'm not interested in that when I work. I've said many times that I work totally by intuition. I work totally having this large database of moods, texts, available actors, repertoire of gestures, and it's just trying things in juxtaposition to other things until I just have some intuitive feeling of "ah" that seems to produce a super alertness. That seems to produce a slight hint of superconsciousness. So I will keep it. Then unconsciously the play is still organized around a theme of some sort, a thematic center. So maybe that's cheating. Maybe I should do something that has no thematic center whatsoever. But I'm not capable of doing that at this point. So I would prefer not to use the word consciousness anymore, as I did a lot in the beginning. Because lord knows what consciousness is. What consciousness is, is this ocean that we swim in like fish swim in a real ocean and the fish are unaware of the ocean. We have built ourselves certain devices, certain reflecting devices, so we are aware sort of that we are swimming in an ocean of consciousness. But what that is I have no idea. It's the inescapable. We are inescapably conscious. You can drug yourself, you can sleep, you can drink yourself, sort of, out of consciousness, but that doesn't . . .

LW: So is there something that you want from the audience, or that you want the audience to get from what you're doing? Is that something you're thinking about as you're preparing a piece?

RF: Goodness, no, I'm really not thinking about that. Like everybody else . . . there are many different people inside of one [an audience].

LW: Not having them walk out?

RF: No, I want them to think this is great art. But . . . But, I can't do anything to convince them of that. What I make is something that seems right to me. And what seems right to me is something that all of a sudden creates a certain kind of mental tension in myself that seems like the place I would like to be all the time. I don't experience that mental tension in normal life. Sometimes when I'm making the pieces I can experience that, and for me my work is paradise because it presents this evidence of this state of mental tension, mental suspension, that I only get when I'm making the work and that's the only place I get it. I'm trying to think if you get it anywhere else. Do you get it, for instance, if suddenly you fall in love or become infatuated with someone? You could maintain that's a kind of blindness, falling in love is a kind of falling out of the world and investing that relationship with this incredible quality that any objective outsider shouldn't have. However, you are attuned to the world in a different way. So I guess, yeah, I want to create an object that attunes one in a different way to the world.

LW: One of the things you said in your talk at Fales was, "discourse deals with the known." It made me think of conceptual art, of Sol Lewitt. "Rational judgments repeat rational judgments." You were talking about that in your work. How the language of current "logic" in conversation can only produce what we already know.

RF: Not that I was terribly influenced by conceptual art. Minimalism, just before that, had a profound awakening influence on me. But it is true that from the early days when I had my notebooks, it was the equivalent of doodling. There would be a phrase in my notebook—"the green hat"—so in early plays I always took what I had in my notebooks and had a rule never to change anything. This line "green hat" came up and I had to use that as a fragment. I can see how, for instance, that can be

something that is looped, part of these sort of aphoristic statements in the play I was doing now. I mean, I had certain phrases that are that simple. And by repeating them and by echoing them in a different voice, a slurred voice or a high voice, things that are part of logical normal day to day discourse can become whirling circling objects that create a force field that you can't get into because . . . I say to you right now, "Oh, I like your hat" and you say, "Thank you." Now if I turn that into a loop with different treatments onstage there was a voice saying [deep] *I like your hat* [high] *your hat* [deep and slow] *I like your hat* [normal] *I like your hat*. This does not allow normal discourse and there's a certain point where the brain says, "What the hell am I supposed to do with that?" And that moment when the brain says, "What the hell am I supposed to do with that?" is the interesting moment to arrive at. But the base material can be anything, like normal discourse, personal unconscious material, anything. So for many years people have said or people always ask well, how much of your plays are just very personal, almost like diaries? Not really, because the material I use maybe comes from that particular well, or a certain amount of it, but it's what you do with it. And what you do with it when you repeat it or lay it against other things, produces a phenomena that is not part of your personal unconscious. That is something else, and that's the talk. Because all we have to experience the world is our own personal take on the world. Now, how can we use that material and build a different kind of palace, a different kind of garden?

LW: It was interesting when you said earlier—and I read in one of the interviews on your [website](#)—that you were making the kind of art that you want to see. That you went home before one of your plays and said, "If I were going to go out tonight what would I want to see?"

RF: Right.

LW: And I wonder to what extent people do that or what extent that's kind of what you're doing, is creating art that you like that you wish someone would make for you that you could just go and enjoy it.

RF: Yes. Sure. But having made it for so long, I never think about that. Having made it for so long, like any artist, the problem is not to be trapped in your own style. And I am trapped in my own style, like any artist, and you fight punch little holes in it so light comes in from elsewhere, but you can't escape yourself. Who was it who said—probably many people have said—basically artists have one idea in their life. You're lucky to get that one. And then you spend the rest of your life growing the garden of that one idea. Shrubs grow there and you change it around, but it's basically one idea. And that's why I don't mind people hating my work, but I find it so ludicrous when people say, "Well, yeah but his plays are always sort of the same." I find that an absolutely absurd statement. They don't know what art is about.

LW: One of the people in the audience that spoke at the Fales lecture said, "If you're not going to use language as discourse then what's left is silence." Is the only alternative to language silence?

RF: Well, it's not up to me to answer. I mean obviously, if you dance, it's not silence. If you hum, that's not language. I mean, I'm not a person who . . . [I'm] a shy person, so often in certain situations, social situations, I don't quite know what to say. So I remember, especially when I was younger, thinking, "wouldn't it be nice if you weren't allowed to talk?" You had to meet somebody or go out on a date or something and there was a rule you can't talk. And could much more comfortable communication evolve that way as opposed to, I have to share a taxi cab with someone and [ask], "Well, what's up?" or "What do you do?" Why do you have to talk?

LW: I wonder, since we're so language-oriented, if that just wouldn't be more excruciating. It's hard to be who we are and trying to imagine not being who we are.

RF: I was just watching again one of my favorite filmmakers, not my favorite, but one of my favorite, have you seen these films by this Japanese filmmaker [Beat Takeshi](#)? He makes these sort of gangster films mostly, and other kinds of films, and he's in them all and a lot of his films are silent, a very silent kind of cop or something who would just sit there and you wait for him to say something and he doesn't say anything and then maybe he says a word and then he shoots somebody. [Laughs] But his silence is very powerful and I was admiring his ability in the movie to be silent, because he seems comfortable in just making people look at him and wonder, "Why aren't you talking?" and I'm not able to sustain that.

LW: Yeah, that would be excruciating for me. The small talk thing is excruciating enough, but then having to be silent . . .

RF: No, I admire people who can do that.

LW: One of the things I'm interested in is the way that opening up the audience's imagination through art is a political response. That it doesn't have to be didactic and again, back to the idea of everything coming at you on the rational level, trying to give people the message "do this, do this." I do spoken word performances, and one of the things I confront is so much seemingly transparent message-oriented work, as opposed to something that takes the audience someplace that they wouldn't otherwise go but which might help them think in a different way. So I'm interested in how art can make this other option for creative response.

RF: That's a justification I've used for many years, that training in being able to function lucidly amidst ambiguity and disorientation, and I felt that was the progressive message, the

progressive technique that could work, particularly in terms of American politics, with people being uneasy when they didn't know what side was right, what side was wrong. I think back to a phrase by a philosopher I used to read who wrote a lot, totally forgotten nowadays, Morse Peckham, I think he used to teach at the University of Pennsylvania, who wrote a big book called *Art and Chaos* maybe? I forget¹. But anyway, he used this term "disorientation massage," that art was supposed to give you a disorientation massage. I made reference to a lot of that for most of my life, yet now, I suspect, like everything else, it was a pretext. Because I don't know . . . Well, this week, since I've discovered the notion that my art doesn't have to be useful in any way, I don't know if it's useful as therapy or not. the release is to accept the fact that there can be so-called important things in life that are in no way useful, because you have an identity, you have played this role in life, tried to make certain things happen in life, but you also have another level of your being that does not participate in this life in which you are participating. And I think art can reverberate with that level of your being that does not participate in life. And that's what interests me.

LW: And it seems to me that's a sort of politics. In this kind of culture, at the moment, it's a sort of politics.

RF: I don't know if it is or not. I think it's too easy to say that, and then you drag back into the loop. Because then somebody says, "well, that's one kind of politics, but my kind of politics is

¹ The book is *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts* (originally published by Chilton Books in 1965 and reprinted most recently by Masionneuve Press in 1997). The term "disorientation massage" has become associated with Foreman himself, as it appears in many of his writings. See for example, "Program Notes on 'Pearls for Pigs'" (*TDR* 42, 1998: 157-59).

better.” And I don’t want to get into this. I refuse at this moment to go down that road. Because, no, it’s different.

LW: I was talking to someone recently about the idea behind these ads that music is good because music education makes kids better at math, as opposed to music is just important and it’s how we hear our world and I said, “Well maybe all those Arthur Andersen accountants can start taking violin lessons in prison.” This idea that everything has to be utilitarian I guess is what I’m getting at. I like the idea that it doesn’t have to be utilitarian and it’s still important.

RF: Yes, but it may be. But that’s not my responsibility.

LW: Once you say that, I suppose you could say that cultivating consciousness is utilitarian in its way.

RF: That’s why I don’t like to say any more that I’m cultivating consciousness. I think that after doing it for 37 years or whatever it is, look, I just accept the fact that I do what I want to do. Certain people have been interested in it, certain people want it. I hope that they do. The purpose they use it for is their business. I am obsessed with doing it. Period. This is what I’m obsessed with doing. And I hope that I don’t get cast out into the wilderness because everyone decides that I’m an irresponsible bum. But, this is what I do. And I refuse. I want to have the courage to refuse to justify it. Because I’ve spent many, many years trying to justify it. And a lot of people, even people who have said, “Oh, but your justification is very interesting, very interesting ideas, more interesting than your plays.” Well, I don’t think so. But if that’s true, OK. Plenty of what I’ve had to say about it is out there and now I want to release that heavy load of justification that I’ve been carrying around on my shoulders for the few years remaining me and I just say that this is what I do.

LW: There's a lot of talk about your work being abstract, so how do you balance abstraction vs. ambiguity, because I think we think of those as the same thing.

RF: Yeah. I don't know. I use those terms freely because most of the time when I talk about my work it's to justify it to other people. I think well, it's abstract. I don't know. I was thinking of this because every year I have a big problem because they want a press release of some sort. What's your play about this year? It's a new hook. I thought--I don't think I'll do it, but I thought maybe I should say this year "Richard Foreman is angry" because they never ask Shostakovich when he wrote a new symphony—well, that's a bad example, it was *about* things. They never asked Schaumburg, when he wrote a new string quartet, "What's this one about?" So why the hell should you ask me what my play's about? [Laughs] What can you do? You come up with something. In fact I've been working on a press release for this year, which was "two mystical lumberjacks search for paradise inside a perverse castle." What nonsense. But they've gotta print something in the newspaper, you know, these little blurbs. Or maybe they should print, "Richard Foreman is angry. He refuses to tell anybody what his play is about."

LW: I think that would be great. That would be just as good. I'm constantly going to shows thinking, "Oh this sounds perfect" and I get there and it's not what I expected at all. That's the thing I struggle with, too—setting up the audience's expectation versus just saying, "Look, just come without it."

RF: Yeah. I know. I don't think you can do that. Unfortunately I run a theatre; I want people to come to my play. So I don't . . . I'm not sure.

LW: You don't think at this point they'll come on name? It's not enough to say, "Richard Foreman is angry"?

RF: No. No.

LW: No?

RF: Maybe “Richard Foreman is angry . . .” [Laughs] But the truth is I’m not. That anger is not in the play. That anger is only in my relationship to what you have to do to get people to come to the play.

LW: I feel very heartened by that! To justify my own work, I keep telling people that Ionesco’s work opened to 11 people.

RF: But in the end, I’ll tell you, my work opened to 11 people too, not that I’m as famous as Ionesco finally became, but I assure you that by the end of his life Ionesco didn’t want to have only 11 people come to his play. And neither do I. [Laughs] Maybe Beckett didn’t care.