Ron Vawter

For the Record

an interview by Richard Schechner

Ron Vawter joined The Performance Group in 1974 as business manager. In 1975, while counting the Group's nightly take, he had a few lines and played drums for Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children,* which I directed. Moving from the business side to acting, Vawter's first large role at The Performing Garage was in *Rumstick Road* (1977) directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. Up until 1980, Vawter continued to work closely both with me as well as with LeCompte and Spalding Gray playing feature roles in *Nayatt School* (1978) and *Point Judith* (1980) directed by LeCompte, and the Killer in Terry Curtis Fox's *Cops* (1978) and Irma in Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (1979) directed by me. Since 1980, when The Performance Group became The Wooster Group under the artistic direction of LeCompte, Vawter has been a core member performing in *Route 1 & 9* (1981), *LSD ... Just the High Points* (1983), *Frank Dell's the Temptation of St. Anthony* (1987), and *Brace Up!* (1991). Vawter's recent work at The Performing Garage was *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992), directed by Greg Mehrten. Vawter has also been seen in several movies, including *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez,* and has completed *Philadephia.*

Jack Smith, Roy Cohn

SCHECHNER: It's the 31st of July, 1992. Let's start with that marvelous piece, *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith.*

VAWTER: You know, I never wanted to have a career doing solos like Spalding [Gray]. I was very content to work with The Wooster Group but after Jack Smith died in September of '89, I thought, jeez, I'd like to make something that memorialized him in some way. I began thinking about Jack. Penny Arcade took me through Jack's apartment. There were tapes and photographs and posters and slides. I got very turned on with the idea of taking one of Jack's pieces and reconstructing it for a revue I was asked to be part of in Amsterdam. Jack would make very funny slide presentations. So I took notes on the composition of Jack's slides and when I got to Amsterdam I reshot them with myself as Smith. Then I took a tape recording I had of a 1981 performance of *What's Underground About Marsh-*

1 & 2. In 1992 Ron Vawter played both men in Roy Cohn/Jack Smith, *directed by Greg Mehrten. The anti-gay homosexual right-winger Cohn is on the left, the extravagant-visionary Smith on the right. (Photos by Paula Court)*

mallows?—that's what he'd named this little thing—and I took a slide show which was separate and began to put them together. Jack used his slide shows parenthetically.

I have a funny story. When I saw Jack's slide show, Ron Argelander was assisting him at the time. Ron was a great assistant, a great helper of Jack. It was really crazy. Ron was frantically putting slides into the projector tray, yanking them out of the sheet, and he was putting them in wrong. And when Ron came to see the Cohn/Smith show at The Performing Garage this past spring, the slide projector jammed and Ron had to get up from his seat because the technical people were trying to get this slide out. Ron helped them do it—and he told me afterward it was exactly like he was still working with Jack, with that slide machine haunting him.

So I made this Jack Smith reconstruction for Amsterdam and after I finished it, it occurred to me that if I made a compliment to this personality, another portrait that in some way balanced Smith, that I would have a very strong evening of theatre. Now I've been interested in Roy Cohn for a long time. I thought these two jokers would make a very interesting duo. There are a lot of things about them that are really similar—and a lot that's wildly different. So in 1991 I was working with Mark Rappaport, the filmmaker. He was working on different ways of handling Roy's life as a screenplay, but it didn't work out, I couldn't get hold of a script that I was happy with. But there was this one entry in the Nichols-Hoffman biography of Cohn. Cohn's chauffeur was talking about driving Cohn—all dressed up in his tux—and his boyfriend to a dinner given by the American Society for the Protection of the Family. Cohn was the featured speaker for the evening. He gave this speech attacking homosexuality. That idea really might be fun, I thought, and so I just wanted to recreate that speech. So I worked with Gary Indiana, the playwright, for nine months developing a version of—

SCHECHNER: How did you do that? How would you develop a version of that speech? Is there a transcript of it?

VAWTER: No, we looked. No tape, no transcript. And the American Society for the Protection of the Family didn't want to talk to us. So what we did was launch a major research thing. Roy was prolific, he wrote a whole lot, although he didn't write many of his speeches down. One of Cohn's books is called *Fool for a Client* where he talks about his life and also about legal issues, but nothing much on homosexuality. But from Roy's writings we got a good deal of biographical information. Gary began writing in about how we would attack him remembering his past or his mother and the trials he faced and the committees he worked on.

About homosexuality, we decided we were going to try to write the most intelligent persuasive denunciation of homosexuality that we could possibly muster. We went through all the psychiatric writings pre-'73, when homosexuality was considered a disease or a disorder. We were looking for good arguments, for intelligent, sensible arguments. If people believed being gay was a disease, why did they?

And we came up with sort of classic answers. You know, fear of women, arrested personality, those sort of things. We fashioned those arguments and segued them into biographical information we had on Cohn—using his own words wherever we could. But though Cohn was a famous back-room lobbyist, and an opponent of gay rights legislation, there were few things he would actually say publicly about homosexuals. But from all reports—and we talked to a number of people who were with him, he real-

ly did pull a lot of marks on people: "If you don't vote for this, we'll make sure that you get this and this."

SCHECHNER: But people knew he was gay. How did they deal with that? Didn't anybody say to him, "But you're gay"?

VAWTER: If they did, he would respond, "I'm not." He would publicly deny it.

SCHECHNER: But I mean, in the backroom wheeling and dealing.

VAWTER: No. I mean, there's this one story of Carmichael going to Cohn's house. There were all these boys there and Carmichael wondered if this was like a gay brothel, or what. But Roy just coolly said, "These are my servants and butlers and cooks and hairdressers." No, but you're right, of course. Everyone knew Cohn was gay.

SCHECHNER: So wouldn't people be talking behind his back? And wouldn't that affect his political clout?

VAWTER: Exactly. But still, for instance, he brought one of his regular boyfriends to the White House three separate times. So he didn't hide it, he just verbally denied it.

SCHECHNER: Right.

VAWTER: And the fact is, Cohn led the opposition to the gay rights bills

3. Ron Vawter (with his head on the table), Spalding Gray, and Joan Jonas read from T.S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party *in The Performance Group's* Nayatt School *(1978), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. (Photo by Bob Van Dantzig)*

in New York for 12 years or more. He didn't want to be known as a gay person. He wanted to practice homosexuality but not advocate it.

SCHECHNER: You know, Cohn's always fascinated me, like Nixon. There is nothing about Cohn's politics I like.

VAWTER: Right.

SCHECHNER: My entry into political consciousness and action was around the McCarthy years. And Cohn was to me the most despicable person, he and Joe McCarthy. And yet, like Nixon, like Richard the Third, he's so fascinating. He was not the kind of person to be on the wrong side of.

VAWTER: Oh no, the worst. Cohn seemed to be a pure incarnation of evil.

SCHECHNER: How did you handle that? What was your attitude toward him as you worked on the piece, as you involved yourself in Cohn's personality and values. In seeing the performance, there's very little judgment in it. Did you take a Brechtian stance in relationship to Cohn? Were there things you found that you admired?

VAWTER: Well, I began by having the same kinds of feelings toward Roy Cohn that you just expressed. I thought he was a contemptible scumbag. I still think so. My piece is more in the nature of spitting on Cohn's grave. I mean, I think his kind of behavior is absolutely reprehensible and I've made this piece as a warning to homosexuals and a warning to heterosexuals. Warning homosexuals that this kind of behavior is unacceptable. Not only the duplicity of hiding your sexuality but turning around and leading the attack on the homosexual community. That is the lowest form of behavior. To heterosexuals, I'm saying, look what happens when we repress a person's sexuality. Look at the warping of the personality that can occur, creating a monster like this.

But the piece is not a psychological portrait. I'm not trying to show the psychological mechanisms and how and why and what happened when he was four years old that would have produced this kind of behavior. I'm saying this kind of behavior is bad. So right off the bat, the piece is deeply judgmental. I'm not taking an open look at Roy Cohn, I'm using him.

SCHECHNER: But at the same time, like watching a good production of *Richard the Third*, watching your impersonation, I smiled and laughed. Because you know, the gift of theatre is that you have social reality once removed even as you come face-to-face with the reality of the performers. And I can't believe you can play someone so effectively if you don't admire him at some level.

VAWTER: Yes, that's what happened. I mean, I can say that I hate the man but when I went into rehearsal and permitted these things to come out of me, I connected to all sorts of things from the time I was first coming out—the period when I first met you, in the early '70s, when I was leaving the military. Before then everything I did, even though I felt homosexual, was a dodge and a hide and a veil: ways of passing. So when I began working on Cohn, I realized the tragedy of his life in trying to pass all the time. I connected with that, and it gave me a kind of sympathy or empathy.

Plus, you know, Cohn liked to think of himself a little as sort of a gangster, a scrapper, like Sinatra, he actually patterned himself after Sinatra, a little tough guy. His masculinity was wrapped up in that. And that was a

4. Spalding Gray interviews his father, played by Ron Vawter, in Rumstick Road *(1977), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte with The Performance Group. (Photo by Elizabeth LeCompte)*

lot of fun to play. I've also been interested in Sinatra for a long time, in his brand of heterosexuality. With Cohn, it was such a mask, that sort of '50s behavior. And you're right, of course, once I got the text together and began working on it, it was hard not to identify, not to recognize in my own life that I had done a lot of things like Cohn had.

SCHECHNER: What struck me as similar was the intensity. You're one of the most intense people I know, that was clear right from the very first time I met you. And over the years this intensity has shown more and more clearly in your performances. In other words, you are extraordinarily focused and compact—I would say, compressed. Now over time, you've become unrepressed but not uncompressed.

VAWTER: Hmm mm, you're right.

SCHECHNER: And that intensity I feel also in Cohn's personality as you presented him. In other words, I saw him more clearly through you than I ever saw him in himself. When I see him in himself, I just want to kill—

VAWTER: Yeah, right.

SCHECHNER: —but when I see him in you, I have a little distance and you're someone I love and here's someone I despise but I can appreciate his intensity through you.

VAWTER: Cohn was pretty intense. [Susan] Sontag in her essay "On Camp" talks about Jews trying to assimilate into American culture and homosexuals trying to assimilate into American, Western culture—she says these two are parallel. Cohn was also an extraordinary Jew-basher, apart from his McCarthy days. There's the story of how he'd call Sy Newhouse Sy "Jewhouse," and Newhouse was an old childhood buddy and client. And there's this other story about the time just after the Army-McCarthy hearings. The chairman of the Anti-Defamation League went to Washington and Cohn, spotting him in the corridor outside one of the Senate chambers, yelled out to him, whatever his name was, "Hal, how are all the

fuckin' Jews doing up in New York?" And this guy yelled back, had the presence of mind to yell back, "Fine, I just had dinner with your father last night."

SCHECHNER: How did you get Cohn's mannerisms and speech patterns? You saw Jack Smith and we'll get to that, but did you study videotapes of Cohn?

VAWTER: Oh yeah, I got hours of tapes. I mean, fortunately for me, Cohn gave nine one-hour classes at the New York Law School and those classes are on videotape. I also bought everything that the networks had on Cohn through the Museum of Broadcasting. I went to CBS and actually bought the "60 Minutes" program he was on. So I had a lot of stuff.

But if you look at Cohn carefully, you see I'm not doing an impersonation, it's not a copy. I've created another little portrait lifted off the surface of Cohn. I didn't say, oh, he tipped this way, he lifted his right shoulder that way. But I did watch those tapes over and over again and I made audio cassettes of the videotapes. I'd put a timer on at night with earphones on and then fall asleep. About two hours after I go to sleep the tape comes on and plays for an hour. I've done that before with other roles. It gives me a lot of unconscious feed.

SCHECHNER: That's a good idea.

VAWTER: It is because when I relax or when I work myself up into a state, when the adrenaline starts, there's a moment where you pass over. If you get yourself excited enough, you pass over beyond the agitation. What I have to be able to do is get to that flip. If I feed my unconscious in a direct way, I can connect over into that.

SCHECHNER: Let's go back to Jack Smith. How did you work?

VAWTER: With Jack I still perform, and I intend always to perform, with a Walkman and a recording of Jack's performing this piece in '81 in my ear. It's not just because I'm trying to get his voice right. What I'm trying to get right is his timing. So I use the tape as a kind of metronome.

SCHECHNER: Oh, I didn't know that. So it's actually playing all the time?

VAWTER: All the time. I know the monolog by heart, it's only six pages of actual script. But Jack performed with a sense of time that I would never try to pull off in front of an audience. I can't imagine performing without the audiotape. Once my machine didn't work and I stopped the show and got another one brought on stage for me.

SCHECHNER: Does he slow you down?

VAWTER: Slows me way way down. And Jack was famous for his long extensions and attenuations of speech and so the tape keeps me on his track.

SCHECHNER: So you are performing a particular piece Smith did in '81?

VAWTER: Yeah.

SCHECHNER: What about the setting and the costume and that stuff?

VAWTER: It's more of a conglomerate, condensed, I mean, like the slide show. The slides I show he didn't show as part of his performance. I've put together a 40-minute condensed evening with Jack Smith where you get an idea of his whole work: the kinds of projections he would use, the

kinds of setting he would make. I want to give a lot of people who never saw Jack a sense of who he was as a performer. You know, not a whole lot of people saw him. He would usually do two or three nights, that's all. I wanted to show people what he was about, what he was after, what this world, this universe, was that he created.

SCHECHNER: So how did you develop the piece?

VAWTER: From the outside in. I mean, I took all the stuff and put it on myself like a skin.

SCHECHNER: When you started to rehearse, at the very beginning, did you use costumes and sets and things?

VAWTER: Yeah. I mean, Penny took me over to the costume shops where Jack would buy his material. You know, Jack was for turning junk into art. He really was one of the early pop artists. And there were a lot of photographs of him in costume. So I sort of recreated, rebuilt costumes. A lot of his things are over at P.S.1. I went through the collection carefully. Both monologs were research projects. I tried to immerse myself as deeply and as carefully and in as much detail as I could with both. I mean, that little tuxedo that I had for Roy Cohn I had made by Roy's tailor.

SCHECHNER: And who worked with you directing the piece?

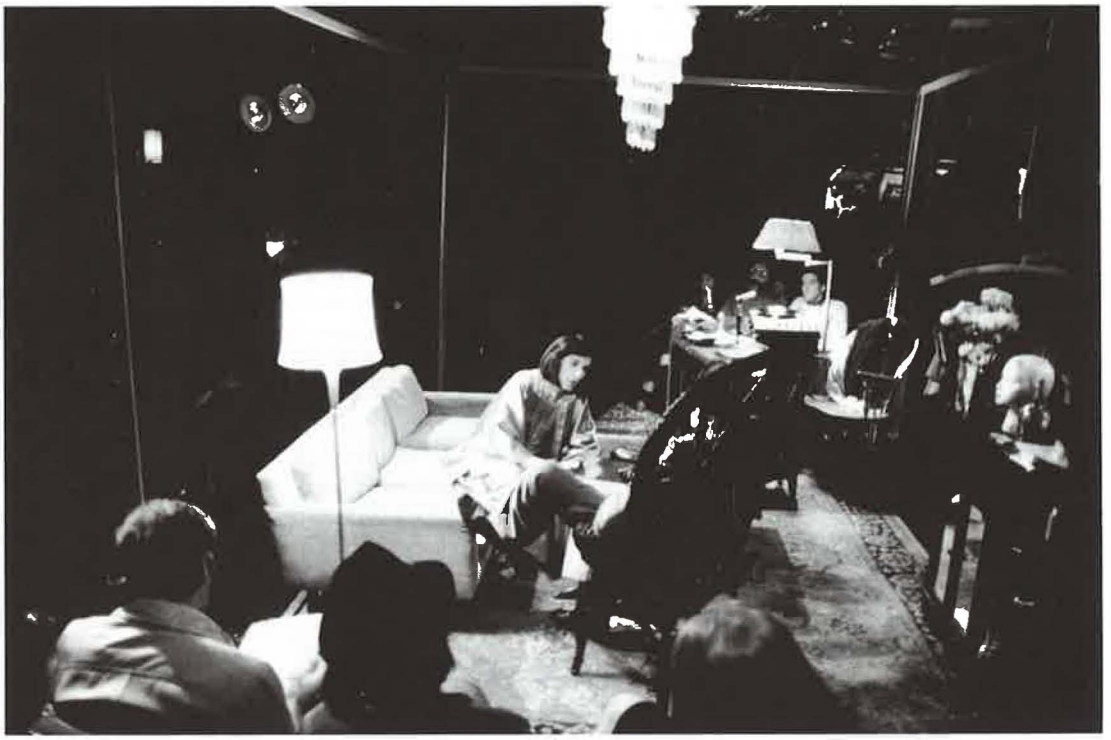
VAWTER: Greg [Mehrten].

SCHECHNER: What was his role in developing the piece?

VAWTER: Well, I made the Jack Smith all by myself for that Amsterdam appearance. Then, I knew that if I were to make an evening that was well balanced and was going to contain another portrait, I needed somebody who would be able to sit outside, an outside eye. Greg was actually more involved with the making of the Cohn and the balancing of the Cohn with the–

SCHECHNER: –Smith. And what about the importance of Jack Smith's ashes?

VAWTER: Yeah. Two years ago, I was in Los Angeles working on an ABC/Disney film and there was a powwow of American theatre artists with native American blood. I was fascinated with it because I'm quarter Choctaw from my father's side. My father's mother lived on a Choctaw reservation. Her name was Tabitha. She died when I was about five years old so I never got any information through her about any rituals or stuff. So I went to this powwow where there was a group workshop on the use of ceremonial ash in Indian performance and dance ceremonies. There are mantras that get sung and dance steps around ashes. Then you mix the ash with the color you're using as makeup. So when I was starting to work with Penny on researching Jack, she let me have some of his ashes, and because Jack's sense of how to paint himself for a performance was so extreme and in a way was a kind of warpaint itself, I thought well, I'm going to use the ash, I'm going to return him to his own makeup. So I use the ash for every performance. I mix it with the glitter I put on my eyes and it charges me. It empowers me in a way that–I mean, when I'm sitting there and I know that Jack is on my face literally and I hear him coming through the earphones and I'm amidst this whole world of his I've carefully engineered to have around me–the slides, the reconstruction of space–something spooky comes through. I don't mean a trance or a kind



5. In 1979 Ron Vawter played Irma in Genet's The Balcony, *gradually changing his attire throughout the production from blue jeans to full drag by the final moments. (Photo by Richard Schechner)*

of possession but I get a very very heavy charge which pulls me through the performance.

SCHECHNER: Why do you defend against saying it is trance or possession? Because it sounds to me like a classic instance of induced trance possession. People have the wrong idea if they think trance means you're unconscious or you can't do this or that. Trance just means inducing a second reality which you inhabit and which is very powerful. It doesn't necessarily erase your primary reality. You know, there are many different theories of how trance is induced but the use of the ash, putting yourself in the environment, the hearing of the voice, creates a second actuality which is coincident with your own on the stage—so why would you resist acknowledging that?

VAWTER: Well if that's the definition of trance, then this is trance work.

SCHECHNER: It's one kind of trance. Not hypnotic trance where you forget. It's more like Balinese trance where they know very well what they're doing but their actions are guided not by their conscious self.

VAWTER: Richard, that's exactly how it feels. I mean, it feels as though there is a second will at work. Although I'm very aware of everything I do on the stage.

SCHECHNER: That's exactly what the Balinese would say. You are still there but there's this other force that is helping you make the movements and keeping the movements safe, proper or correct or within bounds or whatever.

VAWTER: You know, one of the things that sends me off is I have to flip, particularly as the performance goes on, I get caught in a rhythm that is not, that is totally not mine and that rhythm opens me up to the second will. It's quite rhythmic, the differences. It's like a different rhythm than mine.

SCHECHNER: Right, right.

VAWTER: I wanted to say, this is interesting, getting into the rhythm of another person. Remember the dancer Spalding [Gray] had an affair with when you were directing The Performance Group? A beautiful, beautiful dancer, very tall. When she saw the piece she said she got so into the rhythms of Jack as differentiated from my own that when it came to that little dance I do, she said, "I felt like I could've gotten up and done that dance. I knew what the dance was before you even danced it."

SCHECHNER: Right, right, right.

VAWTER: Now, I think, that is the success of Jack Smith. This trance or other energy which, when I've played my cards right, this other energy has the opportunity to come forward. But it's not impersonation. I've talked to friends of Jack who say I didn't imitate his voice or anything like that.

SCHECHNER: No, what you do is not like this actor who imitates Mark Twain or something like that.

VAWTER: Right, this is not Hal Holbrook.

SCHECHNER: It's what I would call a re-creation not a reproduction.

VAWTER: Yes. That's right. That's exactly right. The remarks I make to the audience before are as rehearsed as the pieces themselves. I spent a lot of time on how to present myself at the beginning and how much information to tell. I want the audience to know there is another personality at work in the room, apart from these created ones.

SCHECHNER: Right. Exactly. And you used to have somebody sit at the table—

VAWTER: I still do. Each night I have onstage—when I can get them—some persons whose lives were really deeply affected by Cohn. One man, for instance, was a card-carrying Communist in the '50s in New York and a lot of his friends had their careers destroyed or committed suicide. This man is a real Cohn hater. The other two are in the same situation. They were socialists. Whenever I'm up there and my energy begins to slack, I look over to them and I get this hit of, "Oh, right, this is what I'm doing up here."

SCHECHNER: Cohn and Smith died of AIDS and you are HIV-positive. That must have had an effect on why you chose to do this in these times.

VAWTER: You know, I had just learned of my positivity about six months before Jack died and when I began work on the piece, I still had not been diagnosed with full blown AIDS but I was sero-positive. See, the thing, the big problem as I see it, one of the horrible aspects of this disease is that it has a . . . it . . . it's such a potent and destructive force that it's taken over the whole spectrum of gay problems or the problems of the homosexual in American society. Very little else is being said except responses to the AIDS virus. But the homosexual today has as many problems as he or she had 30, 40, or 50 years ago. I mean, homosexuality is still illegal in half the states and we are the only minority which is legally discriminated against. There used to be a lot more said about that and a lot more energy and activity went into the problems the homosexual faces. But AIDS has loomed up so large that it's taken so much of the conversation and the public discussion.

So what I want to do is without sidestepping the AIDS issue, I want to

6. Portraying Vershinin in The Wooster Group's Brace Up! *(1991), Vawter prepared by "saying the words over and over and over again until they came out of me, until they sounded right." (Photo by Paula Court)*

take two people with AIDS, go beyond that, and continue the discussion about the forces of repression in this country. I think repression is still far more destructive to the homosexual than the AIDS virus. I mean, when you were told as a child, as you're growing up, that every impulse you feel inside you is abnormal or immoral or wrong or bad, it creates a system of self-loathing. I mean, you don't want it to be there, yet you can't deny it. That conflict, that push and pull, I believe, deeply, profoundly warps the personality. My performance is a study of two individuals who I feel were warped. If Jack or Roy worked or lived in a society that did not tell them that homosexuality was wrong they would not have become the people that they became. I think Jack was as warped as Roy, a totally different

warp but still warped. So I chose them because they had AIDS but I sort of did that to get it out of the way so I could talk about something else altogether. I mean, I'm really focusing on the effects of sexual repression. I wanted people to see that AIDS is only part of the problem that homosexuals have to deal with. It's a big and an extraordinary one but it's only part of the destructive force.

Does that answer your—?

SCHECHNER: Yeah, very clearly.

VAWTER: I wanted to make a good comedy, an evening people would enjoy coming to.

SCHECHNER: Of course. And it really is a lot of fun. It's ironic, sometimes bitter, sometimes hilarious. It's not sentimental.

VAWTER: As you know, I'm looking to use comedy to disarm the audience, to open them to my ideas. I put them at so much ease and comfort, then I can sock it to them with what is essentially an essay on oppression. And as you said in our earlier talk right after you saw the show, we have to create a community through which the discussion is even possible. Comedy is one of the best ways to create a community.

SCHECHNER: Absolutely. Absolutely. Is there anything more you want to say about that piece? If not, I want to move on and talk about some other stuff.

7. Ron Vawter (with megaphone) depicted Edmund in the Long Day's Journey into Night *section of The Wooster Group's* Point Judith *(1980). (Photo courtesy of The Wooster Group)*

VAWTER: Just that I'm not interested in taking two more characters and doing them.

SCHECHNER: You're not about to become Spalding Gray.

VAWTER: Eric Bogosian. No, this form seemed to be necessitated by the thing that wanted to be said.

SCHECHNER: Actually the Cohn/Smith show isn't a monolog. These are mono-dramas–a full play performed by one person. Kind of like the stuff Jeff Weiss does.

VAWTER: You know, I was very very affected by Jeff's work. I connect with it deeply. Jeff is not afraid to throw out his worst fantasies, his worst demons, to fully inhabit them, what he fears about himself and what he fears others think of him. When I was first making Roy Cohn, I thought, shit, the gay political field is screaming that only positive representations should be made. At the time I thought about Jeff and the power of releasing those demons onstage.

SCHECHNER: What was the reaction of the gay press? Did anybody hammer you for what you did?

VAWTER: No, everyone was very positive. They saw the Cohn part as a warning to homosexuals, that we can't permit this kind of behavior to go on. I think if I hadn't given that speech before the performance, there might have been a question of what my motive was.

The Performance Group, The Wooster Group

SCHECHNER: Now I want to talk with you about the work you've done with the Wooster Group and some of the work you did with me earlier. Three characters I've seen you play that I particularly admire are Irma in *The Balcony*, which I directed in '79, Reverend Hale from *The Crucible* as part of Wooster's *LSD*–

VAWTER: Or "Hall" as Kirby would have it in his version of those scenes.

SCHECHNER: –and Vershinin in *Brace Up!* I want to talk about how you "make characters" who are increasingly over the years "deconstructed," or presented not as their authors may have imagined them. I see you on the frontier of inventing character in a new way, a way for the postrealist theatre. You are opening the road for different interpretations of the so-called "naturalist" classics–Chekhov, Wilder, Miller–and any other writer of that kind. Long ago, people decided they could do Shakespeare in non-Elizabethan ways and find new meanings and delight in the old texts. But everyone still does the naturalists naturally–of productions I've seen only Wooster, Squat (with their *Three Sisters*), and Wilson (with his *When We Dead Awaken*) have radically done "non-naturalistic naturalism." What I want to hear from you is not Wooster's approach–that I can get from Liz LeCompte–but your approach as a performer.

VAWTER: It's quite a story. Because I don't approach character with any kind of Brechtian method. I don't attempt to stand next to the character. The way I work is a product of a lot of forces which actually began with you, Richard. Because when I came to The Performance Group back in '72 or '73, I didn't want to do "masterpieces." I remember reading [Joseph] Chaikin's *The Presence of the Actor*. It was an extraordinary moment here in

8. Spalding Gray (standing), Kate Valk (top), Mike Stamm, and Ron Vawter (bottom right) in Jim Strah's North Atlantic, *a 1983 Wooster Group production directed by Elizabeth LeCompte at the Performing Garage. (Photo by Nancy Campbell)*

New York when texts were no longer primary. To hear a text wasn't the reason why people came to the theatre.

I wanted to perform but I had no theatre training whatsoever. I had never taken an acting class. I was in the army, running the recruiting office down on Centre St. It was December of '72 when I contacted you and asked to work with you. In September '73 I began as The Performance Group's administrator and as a bongo player. It was a wonderful moment because you allowed humans to come on to the stage who weren't trained by the schools on how acting should be conducted. And so people performed their true selves. The essential qualities of the performers themselves was what the performance was about, what the theatre space was about, regardless of what hat or skin was put on. The whole thing was built on the actual live presence of the person, of the actor.

9. In The Wooster's Group's Route 1 & 9 *(1981) Ron Vawter appeared in blackface as Pigmeat Markham. Here Vawter shows his agility in leg extensions. (Photo by Nancy Campbell)*

For a person like me who had no training and who had taken this full spiritual path through the Roman Catholic priesthood and was looking for a place where I could develop my sense of spirituality, it was the ideal place to be.

SCHECHNER: How far advanced did you get in the priesthood?

VAWTER: I spent four years in a Franciscan seminary upstate. I became a zealot. I left it when I felt that contemporary religious life was a total corruption of Christian precepts.

SCHECHNER: And you went from the seminary to the military?

VAWTER: I enlisted because I had to get out, I had to do something. I didn't know what to do. You know, my parents had military careers so it was an easy thing for me to return to. But after I met you, Spalding, Steve

[Borst], and Liz, it didn't take long for me to undo the program I had been living through since childhood. You had produced this environment in which I could step forward and say that I was an actor and at the same time, go after, go deeply after the same things I was interested in going after in my religious preoccupation: seeking transcendence or raising my consciousness and seeking enlightenment in the theatre.

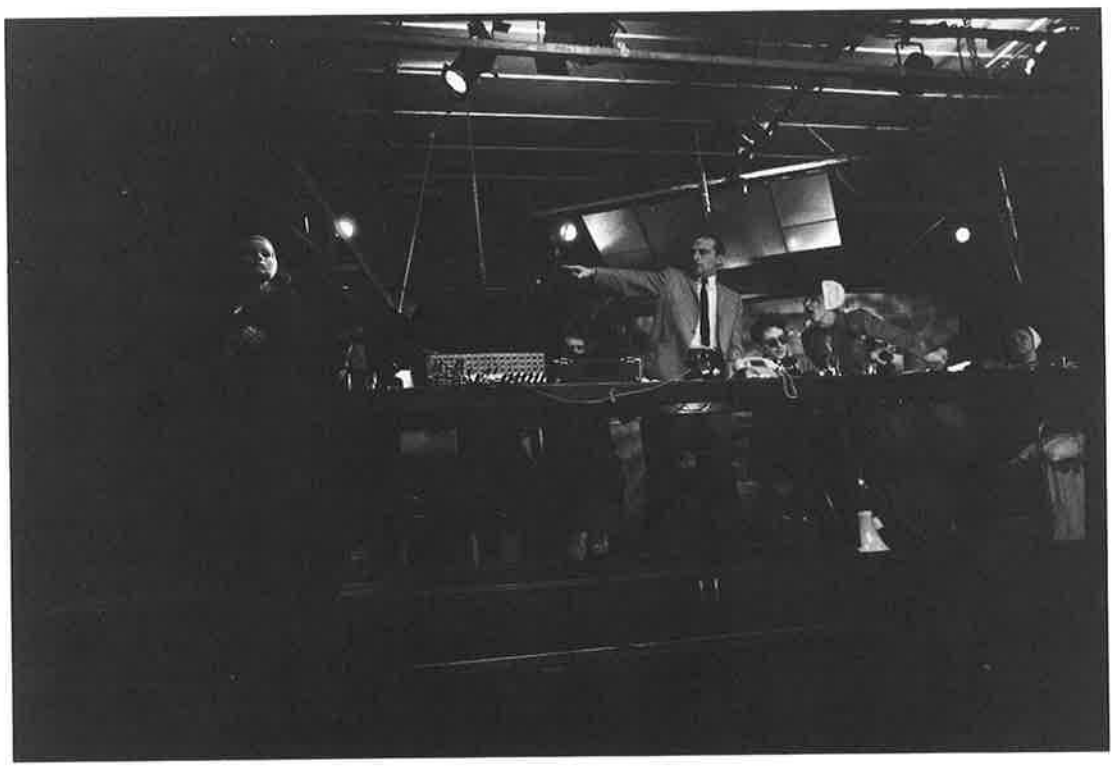
So these characters for me, if you'll pardon the expression, are kind of, I see them as kinds of prayers. They are the vehicles through which I am trying to get deeper and deeper understandings of myself as I change and age and I'm willing to use them in almost any way that works. You know, I don't have any set of rules. One way of approaching a character is useful to me in one piece and an altogether different way in another. I don't have a formula for creating these things.

I remember when we were working on Genet, you know, there was a lot of transvestite performance in the '70s and I remember how I didn't like the way that women were feminized in a cliched fashion by drag queens so I was eager to hit Irma as close to myself as possible. I tried not to camp it up. I remember Charlie Ludlum saying that he felt Irma was a fascinating transvestite, very sexual, very erotic, the way I didn't try to feminize her even though I was fully made-up.

That was like one of the best compliments I had.

SCHECHNER: I loved the transformation you underwent, the step-by-step change. You enter the theatre in your blue jeans, you get completely naked, and it takes almost the whole play—till the scene where Irma appears on the balcony with the Great Figures—for you to be fully her, in total drag. I felt you were profoundly woman without being camp. I have nothing against camp, it's one style—

VAWTER: —there's nothing wrong with it at all—



10. In 1983, Ron Vawter—with an exemplary accusatory gesture—played Reverend Hale in The Crucible *section of* LSD . . . Just the High Points. *(Photo by Nancy Campbell)*

SCHECHNER: —and there are other styles. And I felt that what you did and what Steve did really got deep into the fundamental text of Genet's play, the love between the two men.

VAWTER: You see, I was very very fortunate in landing you and Spalding and Steve and Liz and Joan [MacIntosh] who were all at that moment interested in this idea of the theatre as a kind of personal liberation and an emancipation for yourselves and a raising of consciousness and so, these things that we call characters were somewhat secondary to the main impulse of being there. So though I take these characters very seriously, they are all ways in which I can go about this much more fundamental process.

SCHECHNER: They're vehicles, as the Hindus would say.

VAWTER: They are, they really are vehicles. You know, I love them, I hate them, and I am willing to play with them but they're not the reason I'm there.

SCHECHNER: Right, but they're not vehicles in the old star sense, to show yourself. They're vehicles to know yourself, to find truth and to find yourself.

VAWTER: Yes, yes, that's right.

SCHECHNER: They take you someplace, they don't show you as something.

VAWTER: That's what I really was in '78 or '79, trying to discover the womanhood in myself and so I didn't need a lot to put a mask in front of me. I was trying to find what wanted to surface if I focused on it.

Making Movies, Making Theatre

SCHECHNER: What is the relationship between your theatre work and your film work?

VAWTER: It's always been for me a way to subsidize the theatre work. I try to take only as much film work as I need to make the money that I need to make.

SCHECHNER: Why is that? Why do you like the theatre more than the film?

VAWTER: It's odd, but I think theatre work has much more meaning to it. Filmmaking is an extraordinarily abstract experience, even though The Wooster Group is known as abstract theatre makers. But I'm much more connected to the material and to the process here. You go into a film and you're working on scene 32 today and page 1 the next day and you have so little control over what they're taking and they're are going to use. To build a character in a film is extraordinarily difficult. You generally have to be so bland, particularly at the beginnings and the ends that you don't know how they're going to be joined to other sequences. But in the theatre, you step on the stage, you know what's been shown to the audience two minutes prior. You know how to take that and manipulate it into something else. It's just so much more of a creative process.

SCHECHNER: And that immediate, face-to-face eye-to-eye with the spectator.

VAWTER: There's a power there that you just can't get facing the camera.

11. Ron Vawter (left) and Willem Dafoe flank Kate Valk dancing their shoes in LSD . . . Just the High Points. *(Photo by Bob Van Dantzig)*

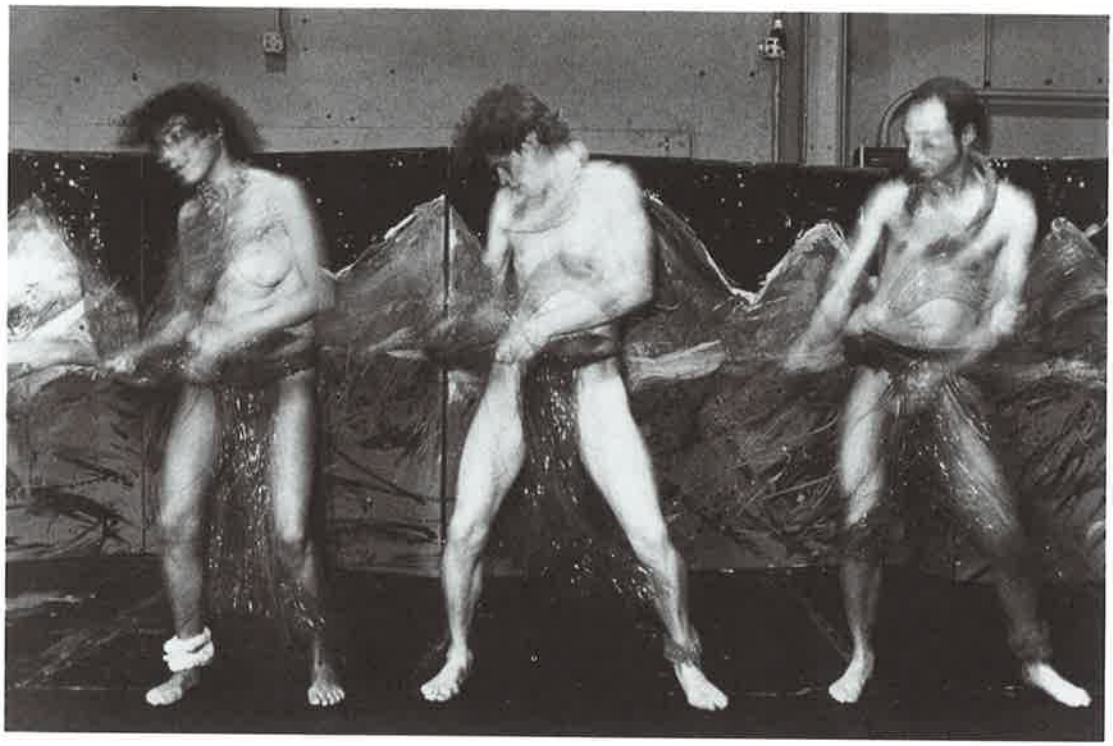
You don't know who's going to see it or what they might think about it. In theatre you're near the audience. If you've bored them, you know it immediately. If you've thrilled them, you know it immediately. You get back energy, it feeds into the performance. Makes it even more powerful.

SCHECHNER: And it's also exciting when X or Y or Z people you know, like a community, like family, come into that room. All these people have made an appointment to meet you at a certain place at a certain time. Godot does come, the waiting is over at curtain time. That's why I always like to work the door. I want to see exactly who's coming.

Elizabeth LeCompte, Richard Schechner

SCHECHNER: What are the similarities and differences between me and Liz as directors? Since you and Spalding are the only persons who've worked extensively with both of us.

VAWTER: I actually see more similarities than differences. To an extent she was a student of yours. I mean, she watched you carefully and a lot of her basic premises are the premises that you were developing back in the late '60s and early '70s which she has held onto. So when I compare or contrast you two, I generally think about how similar an impulse the two of you share. I mean, right off the bat, right off the bat, your interest in creating an event that does not rest on the shoulders of a play or a playwright. Right off the bat, the primacy of the performer. But then you know, the use of music and selective attention and inattention and performers vis-a-vis character, bringing many texts together, enlarging texts. I mean, if you, if you think about it, there are major threads of work that



12. Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe, and Ron Vawter (right) dance in formation in the 1981 production of Hula *done by The Wooster Group and directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. (Photo by Nancy Campbell)*

have passed from you to her and I assume that you still are working in a similar way.

What's different? I guess one of the things is a time difference. You know, back in the early '70s, we were much more into creating the collective as much as creating the theatre experience. There's less of that now.

SCHECHNER: Yeah.

VAWTER: There is a ruthlessness that the two of you have about attacking your work that is quite anarchic. Both of you are willing to toss any rules or guides or ways to go after what you find attractive in a work, regardless of the consequences, regardless of what it will look like at the end. It's one reason why both of your productions have very individuated and distinctive feels, textures. It's because of a kind of boldness the two of you share.

SCHECHNER: Stubborn stupidity!

VAWTER: Or some would call it vision.

SCHECHNER: It's also because we've worked with extraordinary people. As Stanislavsky said, nobody can create talent. The best thing a director can do is give it a chance. And I always hear Brecht's great advice: "If you want to build a house, use the bricks that are there." The playwright's usually not in the room. The performers are. They can be permitted, goaded, instructed, helped, pushed, whatever to find out who they are with, who are the others they are in relation to, at this moment, in this room. That's where the ruthlessness comes. If you see something inside a person, or just a glimmer of something, the director's got to be an archaeologist of the soul. You want to uncover those bones and structures, or allow those bones to get up and dance. Those bones, not the bones that somebody else has brought in.

VAWTER: Richard, last spring I heard Liz say in an interview something very similar to what you've just said. The identical ideas and I think that is really where you do share. I've heard Liz say she feels she could make a theatre piece out of nothing—except what's there. And that's what you both do. Maybe there's some text there in the room too.

SCHECHNER: Right. Exactly!

VAWTER: Everything is given, if not equal weight, an equal opportunity to come forward and be part of what's being built. Actually, I haven't met too many other people who work in that way. Foreman doesn't. Wilson doesn't.

SCHECHNER: It's very risky. It's so much fun though.

VAWTER: It's such a real triumph of the artist over his or her material. Really, the kinds of things we were working on back in '73 are the kinds of things we're working on in '93: the willingness we had back then to not to be guided by any rules, to throw away all the rules each time you walked in to the theatre space to work on a new piece is still pretty strong. You would be surprised if you could peek through the walls at how close to what we were doing in '73, '74, '75 is still happening.

SCHECHNER: Maybe I'll peek through the walls one day.

VAWTER: You should because it's still very much a life of interpersonal relationships of a few people who are very important to one another. The theatre experience grows out of that conversation and things of interest between those people.

On Acting That Soaks In

VAWTER: A lot of it is intuitive work. I mean, I certainly didn't go into Vershinin knowing where I wanted to get to. I started work with no motive or goal to which I wanted to get the performance to. I just kept on saying the words over and over and over again until they came out of me, until they sounded right.

SCHECHNER: They kind of soak in, don't they?

VAWTER: They do. That's just what they do.

SCHECHNER: Words have their own meanings, lots of them, more than any single brain can handle. You don't have to struggle too much to "get" meaning. If you just say the words and begin to move, stuff'll start to emerge and make sense. What a brilliant idea, to play the words in your sleep. Relax, and you may find something new. Think too much, and you'll get tangled into what's old.

VAWTER: Exactly.

SCHECHNER: It's very hard to tell this to a beginning actor who is insecure and wants to know exactly where she's "going."

VAWTER: It'll tell you.

SCHECHNER: It'll tell you. Don't think too far ahead of yourself.

VAWTER: Right. That's true.

SCHECHNER: Stanislavsky's system, as most Americans have interpreted it, may have worked for some people but it poisons creativity because you

know too much too soon about your role. Doing must precede knowing. If your doing isn't ahead of your knowing, you make no discoveries.

VAWTER: That's right. One thing in common with all of the work that I've done or derived from '73 on has been not deciding in advance what it is that I want to do with this character but letting it open up and reveal itself to me.

SCHECHNER: That way you meet something that you never knew was there.

VAWTER: Of course we have the advantage, Richard, of being able to live with these creations for a long period of time. I mean, you know, after three years of doing Vershinin, I began to sense who this person was.

SCHECHNER: Right. But that's the poverty of most American theatre. Too poor—in money and in imagination—to allow the art to sink in. Funny, Americans let baseball sink in, and other sports. Sports players know all about practice, time spent on basics, and a long period of gestation. And of the best, audiences never get bored, even when they're past their prime, even though one game is much the same as any other. Why aren't they bored? Because even though it's the same each game, it's different in its details, in its strategies. And spectators know the records, the statistics, the game's history, the player's development. Brecht was right, of course: sports audiences are educated and sports stars are trained. The theatre ought to envy that.

VAWTER: It just doesn't make sense.

SCHECHNER: No sense at all. It's greed and stupidity that throws away theatre pieces instead of letting them develop over time, like yeast rising.

VAWTER: Yeah. I've been asked, "How did you come up with that particular read on Vershinin?" and I can't answer the question. It came up because I lived with him for three years. I became him. I didn't go out and look for him. I just let him sit there. I had to say these same things over and over again, day after day and Vershinin just came up, just surfaced.

SCHECHNER: Acting is so much simpler than people imagine. I always tell actors and directors, "Simplify, cut, stop, stand still, be quiet, listen."

VAWTER: It's so simple, it's not magic. One of the things that makes characters like Hale [or Hall] in *LSD* different than Irma in *The Balcony* or Vershinin is that with Hale I was much more interested in making a musical performance. Really I was forced to do it because [Arthur] Miller refused to let us use his words.

SCHECHNER: But didn't you speak it fast even when you used *The Crucible* text?

VAWTER: Yes. The effect I had in mind was fast forwarding the videotape and then bringing it to a quick stop, then rewinding fast. I wanted to speed scan through the performance so that you'd get the sense of it but at a much accelerated rate. For me it became a series of arias. I also wanted to see just how much I could communicate without having to rely on the words themselves but rather on the sped-up sound. I worked with that before Miller said we couldn't use his text.

SCHECHNER: In The Performance Group we used speed rehearsals

13. Ron Vawter and Peyton Smith appeared in Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Anthony *(1987), a Wooster Group production. (Photo by Louise Oligny)*

where you do the whole play—words, actions, everything—as fast as you possibly can. I felt that would squeeze the words and actions so that all that would be left in your memory and your body would be the essential stuff.

VAWTER: I remember that.

SCHECHNER: But I never had the courage to do a speed performance.

VAWTER: Well the work in *LSD* was much more abstract in performance than the Genet or the Chekhov.

SCHECHNER: Still, the meanings, *The Crucible*'s subtext come through. The pressure being put on Tituba is felt. To think of the text as rational word-expression, as Miller wrote it, is kind of a bore but to think of it as the pressure of prosecution and of torture is terrific.

VAWTER: You do get that sense of it, that feeling of it.

SCHECHNER: Right. Right.

VAWTER: It was an attempt to use an abstraction to get that feeling without the boredom that would come from speaking words at their normal pace.

14. Ron Vawter played the Killer in Terry Curtis Fox's Cops *(1978), directed by Richard Schechner with The Performance Group. (Photo by Richard Schechner)*

Living and Working with AIDS

SCHECHNER: You're just about to go to Germany to work on Sophocles' *Philoctetes*?

VAWTER: Yes. I'm using the [Heiner] Müller text which is much more about the machinations of men against men than even Sophocles'. Müller made it much more cutthroat.

SCHECHNER: I didn't know Müller did a version of it.

VAWTER: Yeah, at about the same time that you did the play, in '58 or '59.

SCHECHNER: Are you directing as well as acting in it?

VAWTER: No, no. It's directed by this wonderful Dutch director, Jan Ritsema who's worked with Müller. He wants me to come with a kind of American version. I've been working on it. For the long laments of Philoctetes I'm devising a language that begins in English but then passes over into other languages. I love the sort of confessional tone, with lots of prayers, lots of confessions, exaltations to deities in different languages, in English, German, and Spanish.

I'll start work in Berlin in the spring of '93. I can't say when I will finish it, but my hope is to bring it to BAM for Day Without Art, December the 1st, 1993.

SCHECHNER: What happens to The Wooster Group while you're gone?

VAWTER: I've asked not to be in this next piece. And it's weird, it's weird for me not to be in this one.

SCHECHNER: It's the first one you haven't been in since, since 1974, isn't it?

VAWTER: That's right. That's true. Although I wasn't in *Oedipus*. Except for that I was in everything The Performance Group or The Wooster Group did since 1974.

SCHECHNER: *Mother Courage, The Marilyn Project, Cops, The Balcony*—

VAWTER: Yup. And then everything The Wooster Group has done. But as I'm more and more cautious about my health, I wanted the Group to have one piece that . . . We still get offers to do *Brace Up!* and I've had to be replaced, I just can't tour like that any more. I can't do these weeks and weeks of one week in one city and one week in the next. When I was in Europe this past winter [1992] I was in and out of the hospital the whole time. "Is he going to make the performance, is he going to be released in time?" That's why I'm going to Berlin—to situate myself. I have an apartment there. I'm not doing a lot of transatlantic crossings. I'm going to do the Cohn/Smith while I'm working on *Philoctetes*, that's all. I love being in Europe but I can't tour in that old way any more.

SCHECHNER: What about AIDS and your work? Do you want to say anything?

VAWTER: Oh, oh, oh, yeah. I don't know quite what to say except that one thing is very important to me. I know a lot of people with AIDS because I'm in these support groups and I also work over at GMHC. The thing that's most depressing about the disease is the loss of human potential. One of the most destructive things is that people just give up. They learn about their HIV-positivity and they go into permanent retirement which might be the most wrong thing for them to do. They just give up on their wishes and dreams and projects and the importance of their work and go into a kind of retired state. They become almost dependents of the state. Not that I don't think the state should have the responsibility to take care of these people, but I think it's a really bad thing for the people themselves to give up.

Of course, if you're sick, you're sick, you can't work. If you're too weak to work, you can't work. But if work is important to people, I think it's important for them to continue going after it. I fortunately have projects which bring me into '95. It's good to have goals.

SCHECHNER: Absolutely.

VAWTER: But dropping out of The Wooster Group's new piece and saying I can't tour in the old way are some of the adjustments I've had to make. I'm looking for situations where I go to a place and stay there for a while. But I can't bring my entire company with me. So it has changed how I work. Still, even though I'm not going to be in this next piece, I intend to stay involved in the Garage. I've been very very lucky over these past 20 years and I wouldn't change a minute of it. I wouldn't have chosen to just do films or something. I'm very very happy.

SCHECHNER: But it seems to have expanded your horizons, too. You wouldn't have gone to Europe to work on *Philoctetes*.

VAWTER: That's right. I probably wouldn't have. Also, frankly, I've wanted some of the other members of the company to take center stage. I feel I've dominated the Performing Garage stage for quite a while. I want to let some people with great talent who are there and who had to take more peripheral roles come to the fore. I want to see some of my cronies get up there and hold stage for a couple of hours.

Richard Schechner's *latest book is* The Future of Ritual *(Routledge 1993). His most recent production is* FAUSTgastronome *with his new company, East Coast Artists.*