Performance as Design. The Mediaturgy of John Jesurun's Firefall
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John Jesurun has been working in New York for more than two decades as a playwright, director, and media artist, in *Deep Sleep, Snow*, and *Slight Return* creating theatre productions that incorporate video and film in live performance, and, in *Faust* and *Philoctetes*, revisioning classics. At the same time he has written and staged more than sixty episodes of his long-running *Chang in a Void Moon*, which he calls a "living film serial." A pioneer in the use of media in theatrical performance, Jesurun has explored theatrical styles that extend from storytelling to drama to music theatre and computer-based theatre through his ongoing challenge to the "reality" of performance space.

His recent production of *Firefall*, produced in February 2009 at Dance Theater Workshop in New York, is a ground-breaking example of a work that lends itself to what I call "mediaturgy." This term refers to a particular focus on methods of composition in media works that I hope will suggest new critical modes of comprehending and writing about them. In the present context, I have moved away from the familiar use of "dramaturgy" because of its historical ties to drama, and now prefer "mediaturgy," which situates media as the center of study, though I am acutely aware of the tension between these two terms. I first proposed the concept of mediaturgy in a 2006 interview with Marianne Weems, the artistic director of The Builders Association, in reference to her use of text and image, live and virtual performers, in *Super Vision*, a work that embeds media in the performance rather than simply using it as illustration or decoration[1]

Likewise, *Firefall* is a play that is completely activated through the live use of the Internet for the entire length of the performance. It is a rare example of a playwright's creating computer-generated work using a dramatic text as a starting point rather than the collage or fragmented collection of scenes that many other artists working with media frequently rely on in theatre. In its idiosyncratic poetics, Jesurun's writing points to a new contemporary theatre language-media-saturated-that reflects the way ordinary people now think and speak in a form of disassociated circuitry. *Firefall* is a depiction of that very world, one where characters draw from a vast body of information-literature, science, geography, painting, religion, film, and business intermingled with their own attempts to design a narrative-that reaches the point of absurdity (or pathos) in its inability to make any sense for them. Where are they? Who are they?

Here is the setup of *Firefall*. There are eight characters, one of whom appears only on video. Some of them have names, others are distinguished merely by letters, such as "K" or "F." They have certain instructions for their behavior, which can be to spread chaos or to change the perceived reality of what is happening in the performance. The performers sit at several tables in the performance space in front of individual laptops equipped with an Internet connection. Apple computers are used, with the exception of a Dell which was altered to work with the others.

There are two video projectors and one live camera. Behind and above the performers is a big wall screen approximately thirty feet long and fifteen feet high, which from the start displays a "body" of sites larger than the human body in terms of scale. Each projection is split into four separate images by means of a "quad splitter." Thus, four separate and different images from any of the four different performers' laptops are projected at the same time. The eight images are from pre-recorded and live camera sources. It is a completely automatic process in which computer, live camera, and pre-recorded images interact and overlap.

A Website was set up during the run of the performance and rehearsals as an archive consisting of the play text, rehearsal notes, documents, images, e-mail, video and music clips, and miscellaneous files. Each character has his or her own Website to which new material can be added. Any of the pre-recorded material available during the performance is stored on this central Web hub and can be used during the performance. All communication is done through the Internet and is always visible to the audience. The performers' laptops have Webcams, and they communicate with each other by means of iChat. When the audience arrives, the performers are at their computers sending e-mails, surfing, shopping, retrieving documents, and so on—from the start highlighting the erasure of the actors' private and professional activities. Live Internet streams are continuously activated by the performers, with the addition of the director's personal site that can also provide material. Jesurun made the decision not to contribute live streams during the performance so that the Internet choices of the performers alone determine the outcome of

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[1] I have had a long-standing concern for the relationship of text and image, beginning with my early volume, *The Theatre of Images* (1977). The idea of the theatre of images grew from my view that there were many more languages of the stage than the drama, and that a theatre founded in images offered complex modes of perception and a new visual grammar. Knowledge was in imagery. I also concluded that it could not exist without the benefit of technology and that perhaps in the future experiments would lead to a theatre of total images, with holography perhaps leading the way. Little did I imagine three decades ago where the new technologies would take us. Not long after this book was published I explored approaches to critical writing that I came to think of as "essaying images" or image essays. I wrote one such essay on *Recent Ruins* by Meredith Monk (1980) and another on *The Forest* by Robert Wilson and David Byrne (1989). In creating these essays I began to use photographs and write short commentary based on the images; sometimes they were arranged on the page in new typographical formats and spatial arrangements.

the work. Though the starting point for *Firefall* is Jesurun's play, the work itself unfolds as a collective text that during the course of the performance is being remade from selections of the world digital archive and individual human memory. The Internet stream acts as a stream of consciousness, as it were, created by all the players who in turn try to control and regulate the narrative stream. At times the live action stops and only the screen is active—images can be static or moving.

The result of this open textual strategy is that the issue of authorship is called into question by Jesurun's refusal of control over the outcome of the work. There is also no live mix by a technician during the performance. However, one performer, by the name of Pee Wee, has in his pocket a wireless remote controller called a "Wii" to send out frequencies that interact with the projections on the screen. The interactivity of the cast has a quality of calculated gamesmanship. Every performance is a different one. Already in the first few minutes of the performance many of the techniques of *Firefall* are evident: the use of both pre-recorded and live material, the multiplicity of random images, the performers' disconnection from reality, and their disjunctive speech patterns as they interface—to the tune of Boz Scaggs's "Loan Me a Dime" played on the guitar by one of the performers. *Firefall* continues in this manner for one hour.

As *Firefall* unfolds, the split-screen projections begin to function as a "character" whose articulation takes the form of an audio-visual language that highlights compositional strategies. They are constantly in play with overlapping Web pages that are being sized and resized in changing scales as they move horizontally and vertically around the entire screen wall. At times there are as many as two-dozen layered sites in "dialogue" for the audience to look at or read as they listen to the speeches of the characters simultaneously. Often it is merely the technology that is on display rather than any artistry or content, as in, for example, a photograph or film image. In this dyssynchronous world the audience is looking, reading, listening—confronted by the narrative of the live performance in the space and the continuous Web stream narrative of images—one activity fixed, the other random—with the added complication of the performers also appearing as live video image and voice on the computer screen, now staging the dilemma of "liveness."

Here is a partial list of the images, which are both "live" sites or "found" footage:

• pages of documents, e-mail notes, Google searches
• President Lyndon Johnson giving a speech about racial incidents in the American South
• news reports from CNN
• an interview with the rock musician Jimi Hendrix
• images of figures of the day, like the corrupt Wall St. financier Bernard Madoff
• scientific data, diagrams, maps
• an image of a skull
• a picture of Gandhi
• rock bands singing
• street scenes
• documentary footage
• front page of the *New York Times*

Comparing *Firefall* to an earlier political form of the 1930s the screen could be read as a contemporary version of the "Living Newspaper," though a didactic politics is not its aim. In our own time the accretion of this data, comparable to the expansion of a digital archive, is perhaps best considered as the equivalent of open-source material. Looked at in another way, this compositional process is a form of literary cut-up now digitized into live collage. None of these sites relates to each other but they exist as the actors' own research and files saved on their laptops as well as new ones they are browsing during the performance. The Web pages appear in different configurations every night; material may be added or taken away. Density is displayed as surface. Images tend not to illustrate or deepen understanding and create no sense of depth. Everything is what it is. There is only the *flow* of pages across the screen. Scene is realized as site. Data is dialogue. The mediaturgy of *Firefall* would be impossible to imagine without the concept of globalization whose universe of images collapses time and space and any sense of history, making reality appear obsolete. It generates the experience of what I call "iconomania."

There is only performance time in which the characters foreground their human presence or electronic presence indiscriminately. They are forced to apprehend their own pixilated image. *Firefall* confronts the question of whether the endless Web stream makes performance space less real, exposing the equivocations of cyberspace as performance space. In a challenge to any actor the characters are reciting the memorized text and at the same time surfing the Web, offering multitasking as performance style. This is even more complicated than The Wooster Group's practice of the actors watching different television monitors during a performance or receiving spoken text in an earpiece. Jesurun's mediaturgy demands a radical, flexible approach to performance on the part of the cast that is not based on working with a stable text or set of images unfolding through the real time of the event. The concept of character is linked to its configuration by the performers in virtual space as the theatrical event moves toward construction of its own Website. Some scenes are taped and replayed as documentation of the event itself.

The entire work is a working through (mediation) process; in other words, a workin-progress in which the performers struggle with the creation of a new form of dramaturgy-that is, "mediaturgy" – whose familiar elements of theatrical life point to newly discovered features in computer-based theatre. One of the intriguing elements of *Firefall* is its integration of old and new forms. In *Firefall*, dramatic conflict is played out in competing images on the screen rather than exclusively in performance space. Computer rhythm now creates the dramatic tension. The principles of mediaturgy as they appear in *Firefall* demonstrate *performance as design*.

The performers interact with the computer screen in numerous ways:

• a live character speaks to an image of a character on the screen or a live actor is addressed by an image on the screen
• characters sit and watch the live screen
• in a split screen, two monologues occur in sequence, as in the opening of the play with Mary and "F" shown in pre-recorded images
• using their personal Webcams, characters distort their own image on the screen. An image may be out of sync with the live speech of a character while it is fed through the Internet on iChat and addresses characters sitting at other laptops
• the layering of images throughout the screen interrupts and become part of the flow of dialogue
• when one Website with sound dominates the screen the characters have to stop and listen to it
• characters can be in competition with the Website and the real vs. the virtual is then set in conflict as different levels of reality
• In what might be conceivable as an update of the Pirandellian concept of character someone compares himself to his image on the screen. The screen is now the mirror of society. "I'm telling this to the Website," says the young man known as "K," who at times in the play serves as its raisonneur. It can also provide a mask in a world of hidden identities.

"The idea is to take someone and make something out of them. For yourself. Making something out of someone else's soul"—the character Mary sets the tone for the world of her colleagues, a false reality made up of found language, where the replica is valued over the real thing, and the lives of characters in novels are used as a substitute for personal experience. The preference is for simulation. Song lyrics, images from paintings, poems, and historical events are all jumbled in their minds, which are more like databases than repository of poetic memory. The characters have shifting identities and at times see themselves in cross-species images as monkeys and donkeys. One of them, Noseworthy, is transgendered. A group rather than a community, the characters in *Firefall* are disaffected youth who seem to exist outside of real time but are now attempting to organize the world of the future. "As we know, every two years there is a new generation, a new system of thought and being," says a young man named Iscariot.

These characters gradually lose individual personalities in their will to conformity and what they perversely admire as the purity of vacuousness. Lou Reed's lyric, "Oh, it's such a perfect day," is a constant refrain in the performance that serves as ironic counterpoint to their hapless circumstances. Educated, highly verbal, and petulant, they don't know if they are real people or characters, or where they are. Some of them seem to share a past, others are hired to do a job that is never described. Everyone has agreed to keep it a secret so no one can be compromised. Do they work for an organization? A corporation? A religious sect? Where do their directives come from? One fact is certain, that they work "down here," rather than high up in the building that houses them.

The power center of *Firefall* is invisible, unlike that of former centralized systems of control with their punishing codes and behaviors, and all-too-human outsized personalities. Jesurun's view of power emanates from virtual space. Somewhere else. It is the cold, abstract, computed authoritarianism of a future world order that represents unidentifiable institutional power rather than the human oppressor of old whose arbitrary directives occurred in the real world. Shadowland-a contemporary kind of hell.

In the narcissism of their self-regard these charmless characters try to construct a story that they desperately want to believe in. This story, whose thread keeps getting lost, is confused with Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the Apostles. Anna Karenina also keeps getting into the picture, and a text about Atlantis. It presents itself absurdly as a founding narrative in a disordered world of floating signifiers. Someone is talking about power, another one a dog (named Lucifer), another a poem, and still another speculates on the Website as a ghost. *Firefall* is the search for narrative by people who can no longer communicate in a rational, expressive language but who helplessly duplicate fragments that are ever receding phantoms. The breakdown of social order is reflected in their loss of meaningful dialogue and dependence on a databank of readymades. When two characters engage in a romantic exchange their language sounds like a quotation from another era. Still, in such a world the need for a story prevails as a quality of human desire.

It is noteworthy that in recent years worldwide cultural changes have brought about a transformation in the conception of speech in theatre. In the most compelling cases dramatic language serves as a critique of reality. One play that comes to mind is *Far Away* by the British writer Caryl Churchill. In her portrait of a catastrophic totalitarian future, the young girl Joan speaks in a distorted syntax that reflects the perversion of the natural order. Here is how she describes the landscape:

> …there were piles of bodies and if you stopped to find out there was one killed by coffee or one killed by pins, they were killed by heroin, petrol, chainsaws, hairspray, bleach, foxgloves, the smell of smoke was where we were burning the grass that wouldn't serve…

A selection from Jesurun's *Firefall* similarly demonstrates a new world order. Here is a conversation among a few characters:

Noseworthy: We're part of a mood, a colorization, a wash.
F: Can't you just lose yourself in it, in the blinking lights, and be happy?
Iscariot: I am not going to Funkytown!
K: It's what Biggie Smalls or Hobbes said: "the war of all against all."
R: Can we change the subject?
Noseworthy: I'm sorry, but we are going to have to rewrite you.

In their world metaphor, syntax, word and action are scrambled and unhinged from reality. Remarkably this new behavioral grammar, which in my view reflects Jesurun's extension into the twenty-first century of the language interests and esotericism of the theatre of the ridiculous, the characters have absorbed the rhetoric of computer language and commands. If the conversation wanders and one character wishes to return to the story, he instructs them to "rewind." A character may speak of the necessity to "take that out," or "erase," as if he is editing a text. "Fact check" is another form of control. Anyone can "delete" another character.

In the impermanency of this world any person, image, or text is a stroke away from erasure. Disembodiment is a permanent condition of being a character or an image. If "search" is the operative word, surely it exists both in the existential and in the digital sense. However, the process does not reflect the seeking after self-knowledge of dramatic literature. The uploading of layer upon layer of pages of text and image leads not to an epistemological site, or to personal discovery, but to an unending stream exceeded only by its contentlessness. The accumulation of information is not a form of knowledge production. There is no dialectical worldview but rather a fall from the grace of social life.

Firefall can only be as expansive as the actors' imagination and risk-taking in their choices of material. Each performance is a comment on the creativity and intelligence of the cast, with the potential to uncover new dimensions in the organizing abilities of the human mind. A mediaturgy for today demands from the spectator the comprehension of an event that takes place in physical space and virtual space, while offering no fixed perspective—only altered modes of perceiving space and time, image and text, bodies and their disappearance. Indeed, the very notion of presence is called upon to assert itself in the surfeit of images always on the verge of fading out.

What Jesurun offers is a portrait of *homo media*, an ontology of the mediated character: how the human being exists linguistically, visually, spatially, and digitally in our global age.