zabeth LeCompte and the Wooster Group d Theater

npte, much-feted director of the Wooster Group, on her life at the apex of the avant-garde—and gendary moment in '70s feminism.

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Elizabeth LeCompte has an impressive arsenal at her disposal—all charmingly deployed—dedicated to the business of not answering questions.

Her favorite method is to claim that she doesn't remember whatever event or moment in her life it is you're asking her about. She professes genuinely not to remember—but her memory turns out to be better than she claims. Another method is to draw her colleagues into our conversation, claiming they would be better people to answer questions.

One possible explanation of these diversionary tics is that the work she does is everything for LeCompte, and talking about the work is, at best, an irritation, and even an obstacle to a day of work she'd rather be immersed in.

The 72-year-old co-founder and director of the Wooster Group, one of the country's foremost and most storied experimental theater groups, claims she is always thinking ahead of herself. Economical with her words and drily witty, LeCompte affects neither to have the time nor the inclination for rumination and self-reflection.

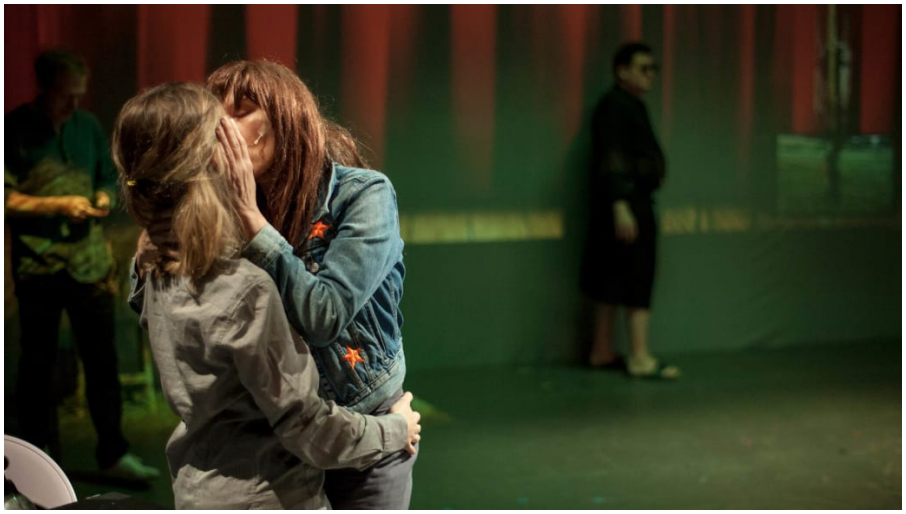
We met at Wooster Group mission control at 33 Wooster St. in New York's SoHo, the theater group's "Performing Garage" home since its foundation in 1975: an upstairs office space filled with costumes and scripts and books on packing shelves and wall-space, and then downstairs the theater itself.

LeCompte helped found the group with Willem Dafoe (with whom she had a 27-year relationship, and a son), Jim Clayburgh, Ron Vawter, Kate Valk, Peyton Smith, and Spalding Gray. Their first play, part of a series called "Three Places in Rhode Island," was *Sakonnet Point*.

The theater LeCompte has overseen in those 42 years is bravely conceived and staged, whether adaptations of classics like *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*, or original conceptions like *Early Shaker Spirituals* and its upcoming New York staging of *The Town Hall Affair*, starring Maura Tierney of *ER* and *Affair* fame. Tierney, a Wooster performer for several years, originally brought the idea to LeCompte, who then took some time to figure out how best to perform it.

This inventive adaptation was inspired by *Town Bloody Hall*, the Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker 1979 documentary that—in all its grainy, weird glory—revealed what happened at New York's Town Hall in 1971, when the author Norman Mailer chaired a panel about feminism. Guests included Jacqueline

Ceballos, then-president of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women, *The Female Eunuch* author Germaine Greer (a scowling, glamorous young gun back then), the author and activist Jill Johnston, and the critic Diana Trilling.



It is a truly mesmerizing intellectual debate and occasional car crash to watch. Mailer is predictably sexist and awful (the debate was provoked by a piece he had written for *Harper's* magazine, "The Prisoner of Sex"), but he is also funny, and the women, trying to counter his misogyny, are just as commanding and just as funny.

Greer has her own swagger, Trilling seems too grand for the earth, and—among the audience asking questions—is an unusually coy Susan Sontag and Betty Friedan.

The Wooster Group will not be simply re-enacting this evening of cultural and political fireworks, but taking the words spoken that night and creating a unique theatrical experience from that. All this time the Wooster Group has made the kind of theater it is committed to rather than to fit any expectation, trend, hype, or niche—and the public has come.

The august laurels and fellowships LeCompte and the Wooster Group have been garlanded with is testament enough to their originality and ingenuity. Just last autumn LeCompte was awarded the $300,000 Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize.

Chosen by a committee of arts leaders for their groundbreaking work in their chosen fields, previous winners have included Spike Lee, Bob Dylan, Laurie Anderson, Robert Redford, Frank Gehry, and Ingmar Bergman.

Is the space on Wooster Street an emotional one, I asked LeCompte, given its theatrical history? "I probably wouldn't be emotional until I was dead and thinking back from heaven," LeCompte responded sharply. "I'm not very sentimental. I'm very into change. I don't hold on to things. I have to work for nostalgia. I'm always very fascinated when it comes, and I'm always suspicious of

it too. Everything seems to be in the present."

LeCompte doesn't have emotional attachments to memories, she said. She remembers the past, "but not in a faraway wonderful way."

Like me, LeCompte was struck by the humor of the Town Hall debate, and by the lesbian separatist Johnston, who freaked Mailer out by not playing nice or cute and polite as the other women did, culminating—much to the delight of the audience—with her kissing another woman on stage.

"There was a certain kind of camaraderie between the sexes on stage, with the exception of Jill Johnston," said LeCompte. "They all lived in the same universe. Most of the women had come up through men, so had learned a way of dealing with men that's sometimes an imitation of men.

"That's interesting to watch. I don't think we would see that now. Women can't identify like that now—if you do you would be accused of submitting to patriarchy, and reinforcing it. We're going through a change where women fight against that, and the younger women don't recognize what we older women had to do in most cases to get along." LeCompte laughed.

For LeCompte, Mailer was "a performer with a certain kind of ego, testing the edges of his power" with the women on the panel and the audience. He gets upset with Jill because he senses she is not of his world, she's an outsider."

LeCompte knew Mailer when he was older, and more avuncular than combative. "He reminds me of Donald Trump. He thought that women loved him, but didn't understand that they had to."

LeCompte didn't attend the debate herself. She had been aware of it, but it seemed like an establishment event. "I'm not a hippie, but I came up through the '60s and drugs. It was too refined, it cost too much money. It wasn't where my fight was at the time."

Watching the movie now, LeCompte is struck by Greer "passing off as an attractive feminist, which was huge for women back then. But her need for Mailer's attention is much more obvious now. Diana Trilling is more interesting, because she's working in an older system. She had a husband [Lionel] whose name was famous. Germaine had no man by her side but had the ability to make every man in the room be into her. You see these two ways of threading a way through patriarchy of the time."

The timeliness of the piece—with the expression of women's collective anger against Trump—is coincidental, said LeCompte. "It really is a historical piece. It might be in dialogue with what is happening now, but I'm not trying to fix it. I'm not trying to make it relevant. It might not even seem relevant or forward-thinking to younger women. They might ask why we are reifying women who seem so behind the times."

LeCompte is not an artist who feels it necessary to engage with the Trump

presidency directly. “For me, Trump is trouble for us in a whole different way. He’s bigger than that—and more dangerous than most art is. I don’t want to touch that. I don’t want to make it normal, make it part of culture. It’s too much for me.”

Running the Wooster Group is “always perilous, and has been from the beginning,” said LeCompte. Laughing, she likened the situation to being an endangered heroine in a silent film. When a representative from J.P. Morgan rang to say they’d been awarded the $300,000 Gish award, he was told the group was rehearsing and couldn’t be disturbed. LeCompte was in “pure ecstasy” when she finally heard the news, after initially tetchily demanding of the representative, “What do you want to bleed us of?” She thought the call had to be about the group losing money, even the property—not the sudden windfall that she was informed of.

The money immediately went to the company, and the salaries of 16 full-time employees. The award came at a time when the Wooster Group was a month away from having to lay off half its staff, said LeCompte.

The last couple of years had been particularly trying because of “the rising cost of everything,” LeCompte said, and the Gish money was vital because “no one gives us money. We don’t make art that can be invested in. It goes away, and we’re political in a way that’s a problem.”

With such hardscrabble times, did she ever want to give up? “No, another piece comes up and I go, ‘This is the last piece I’m going to do. I’ll just get to get this one finished, then I’m free.’” She laughed. “A little like *Death of a Salesman*. And they keep coming, and as long as they keep coming, things come into my head and we keep going. I couldn’t do anything else. I have no other talent than whatever it is that is here.”

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LeCompte grew up in New Jersey, the second of four children. Nobody was artistic in her family, although her father was a musician who gave that up during the Depression when he got a degree in engineering, eventually becoming an architectural engineer. She spent a lot of time watching him drawing, designing buildings and products.

Her mother, who attended Barnard, read a lot. Her father was from a poorer family, and won a scholarship to college. “Oh, you girls, you’re all going to be artists,” he said to LeCompte and her sister. “She was a very good piano player,” LeCompte said. “But he didn’t push or encourage us that much.”

LeCompte acted out nativity scenes as a little girl, and at school she fought to be the only girl to be accepted into the architectural drawing course, especially enjoying drafting images of pipes and mechanicals.

She recalled the girl gang she led at 7 or 8 that always fought a boy gang, and successfully, “as we could climb quicker and higher in the jungle gym and so we

could kick them. I liked to win and I liked to compete. I was the head of the cheerleading squad. I wasn't a cheerleader, but I liked to make the cheers.

"Cheerleaders are supposed to be popular people, but I don't think I was popular. I was always a little outside. I was always conscious I wanted to be an artist from 8 years old, but didn't know what that meant. I knew I couldn't join in regular culture. I had to figure out a place to stay outside it. I remember thinking I could learn all these cheerleading dances—Bill Haley & His Comets—because I was really good at that but didn't want to put all my energy into it. I knew I was going to do something outside of that culture."

The book *Benjamin West and His Cat Grimalkin* impressed her by relating how West made his paints from natural materials.

LeCompte attended Skidmore College and began working at the Caffè Lena, a Saratoga Springs coffeehouse whose patrons included Bob Dylan, Dave Van Ronk, Joan Baez, Don McLean, and Arlo Guthrie. A theater company—whose number included Spalding Gray—would use an adjacent loft. LeCompte was the only young person, and woman, as most were "handsome gay men" enlisted by actor John Wynne-Evans. "He would dress me up, make me sit in a chair, and whisper lines into my ears, as I couldn't remember them."

She and Gray became friends, and although she continued with her art—selling postcards when she returned to New York—she learned the craft of being a theater director alongside Richard Schechner of the Performance Group company. "I liked working with people and making them do the things I wanted them to do," she said. In 1975, after five years with the Performance Group, she helped found the Wooster Group.

As for how she feels about being called the queen of experimental theater, or even the term "experimental theater" itself, LeCompte seems nonplussed. "That's for somebody else. I just make theater and make it out of the company."

When I asked if LeCompte ever wanted to direct on Broadway or TV, she said women in the '80s and '90s would ask her how to make it in theater, and she would recommend they go into TV. She suddenly said one of her actors had called her "a totally realized person."

Meaning what?

"Meaning I am very happy in what I do and I do it very well."

LeCompte suggested Dafoe go into film, and that brought him huge fame. "I think the problem with film for me is that is too intuitive," she said. "I'm not a good organizer. I'm a little bit scattered and intuitive, and that's not a good thing for film or TV."

She loved going to Hollywood with Dafoe, but as a visitor rather than filmmaker. "I like trash television, but I never had any real drive to do that work."

LeCompte's trashy tastes extend to the Westminster Kennel Club dog show, home

improvement shows on HGTV, *Supernanny*, cable news, silent films on TCM starring Lillian Gish, and the movies of Fritz Lang. One has to love LeCompte's relatively highbrow definition of trashy: It's not exactly a rampant *Real Housewives* addiction.

LeCompte doesn't have a favorite Wooster production, though was annoyed not to have been able to secure the rights to Harold Pinter's 1957 play *The Room* recently.

She is not nostalgic. She doesn't think about how SoHo has changed or see classic Wooster pieces through a golden-hued filter. "Every piece is a new configuration of ideas and people," LeCompte said. Her love for theater is "active," she said, then added vehemently—when I asked if she worried about the company closing down because of a lack of funds—"I don't care. I don't care if everybody dies and I die. I just want them to keep them alive enough so I can keep working. I really don't have the feeling for what they call 'legacy' stuff. It's not in me. And I don't really like theater, frankly, if you want to know the truth."

What did LeCompte mean? She has devoted her entire her whole life to theater.

"I think that's enough right there," she said grandly, to the laughter of her colleagues.

Baffled, I asked if she was joking.

"I'm not that interested in theater. I like musicals. I like big musicals. *Oklahoma*, *West Side Story*—they influenced me when I was young and came to New York City. I like opera, oddly enough. I go to the Met once or twice a year."

More laughter.

"This is not who I am. I'm not a consumer. This is all a joke. You can't make something of what I just told you."

What a conundrum. I'll try to figure it out, I said.

"Good luck," LeCompte said.

With Dafoe she attended the Oscars three times. "I loved it the first time. It was fabulous. All these old movie stars were there. It was a blast, but also tiring because there was so much 'business' Willem had to do at certain parties. The second time was really tawdry. I lost it. I saw everybody working in the same way I work, hoofing it. I lost interest. It was like one of those car shows where you just have to go and sell the goods."

She and Dafoe were together for 27 years (they separated in 2004). "I say 26. He doesn't know I was seeing someone," LeCompte said, laughing, adding again she is "a fully realized person," an idea that apparently grew from attending therapy with Ari Fliakos, a Wooster Group actor she once had an antagonistic relationship with. The therapy they had together "worked brilliantly," and their relationship improved, and helped her relationship with other performers and made her a

better director.

“I recommend therapy to anyone in a work situation and you think you’re not communicating properly, but *not* if you’re married,” LeCompte said, laughing.

Had parenting changed LeCompte? “I don’t remember it, to be honest. Jack [born in 1982] was around all the time. He was with the company, and he just seemed to be part of my working day.” Now he’s a lawyer.

There are no dream future projects for LeCompte. She doesn’t “sit around thinking” about what she’d like to do, as she is doing what she likes to do in that moment.

She does not contemplate what being fulfilled means unless she’s had enough white wine, she joked. She likes it if people are happy watching the Wooster’s work. A pause. “Then it takes me a short time before I start to think, ‘Maybe they’re not very smart.’ That’s part of my personality. So then I start to think, ‘What am I really doing?’ So the next piece I try to do is what I really, really want to do, and if they don’t like it I feel really fulfilled too.

“That’s why I think I am a realized person. If the piece is a failure in terms of a commercial success, I feel I’ve won. If it’s a commercial success I feel really good, like a child.”

Was LeCompte still thinking ahead of herself now at the end of our interview as she was at the beginning, I wondered.

“Yep. Right now, I am wishing to god I could get home and get a glass of wine, a cool glass of Riesling,” LeCompte said. “So we should speed this up.”

She sounded serious, but also laughed. She also said, after my seeing *The Town Hall Affair*, she would like to chat some more—except this time she would be the one asking the questions.

The Town Hall Affair *is at The Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St., New York City, Feb 4-25. Book tickets here.*