

Faux Pas

STEPHEN SQUIBB ON DAVID LEVINE'S WOW

"WHEN YOU INVENT THE PLANE, you also invent the plane crash," Paul Virilio once observed. Every technology carries the seed of its inevitable failure and, as Virilio's aphorism also suggests, there might be collateral damage when the flameout occurs. And so we can imagine a line running from the beginning of recorded sound—the initial, scratchy separation of voice from body—down to one fateful live MTV broadcast on July 21, 1989. It was then that the CD to which Fab Morvan and Rob Pilatus were lip-synching skipped, exposing Milli Vanilli, the ridiculously ubiquitous pop duo, as just a couple of dancers in Hypercolor bike shorts. Edison, it turned out, had given us not only the electric lightbulb and the phonograph record, but the eventual revelation of the latter's mendacity under the harsh glare of the former. The spectacle choked, spectacularly. In late 1990, after a rumor-filled interregnum, suspicions were confirmed: Neither Morvan nor Pilatus actually sang, either in performances or on their platinum record. An angry public filed no fewer than twenty-seven lawsuits.

It is difficult to imagine this level of outrage today, when lip-synching is a more or less accepted part of show business. Part of the appeal of *WOW*—an immersive opera about the rise and fall of Fab and Rob, directed by David Levine and recently performed as a work in progress at the Brooklyn venue BRIC House—is that it depicts that prelapsarian moment when our relationship to mass culture was not totally saturated with irony. But then, our growing acceptance of theatrical artifice in pop music is, like *WOW* itself, evidence of a slow-building reconciliation in the antagonism between theater and performance; that is, between mimesis and proscenium spectacle on the one hand and presence, immediacy, and active spectatorship on the other. The show,

with a libretto by Christian Hawkey and a score by Joe Diebes, turned the entire BRIC building, from studios to bathrooms, into a kind of media fantasia built on the ruins of 1980s music videos, even as the degree of spontaneity and autonomy granted the audience—who were given leave to move among the different spaces—recalled the tradition of performance art. It seems appropriate that Diebes chose the prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as the basis of his score, for it is in the reaction to Wagner that antitheatricality becomes a constitutive part of the modernist project. Critic and philosopher Martin Puchner—who studied with Levine—offers one of the more nuanced histories of this process in his 2002 study *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*, arguing that Wagner's commitment to the virtues of theatricality pushed these into relief as values separate from the theater itself. Theatricality became something that could be recognized—and opposed—across the cultural spectrum. Yet *Die Meistersinger* is actually the least Wagnerian of Wagner's works. His lone comedy, it is also his only opera without magic or myth. It depicts a guild of mastersingers, *craftsmen*, who substitute technique and artifice for talent and inspiration.

The fetish of craft is also central to the discipline of acting, whose role in dividing theater from performance has concerned Levine for some time. For *Bauerntheater* (Farmer's Theater), 2007, an exceedingly loose adaptation of Heiner Müller's rustic drama *Die Umsiedlerin* (The Resettler Woman, 1961), Levine trained actor David Barlow to farm and then directed him to spend ten hours a day cultivating potatoes in a field in Germany. How much fatigue before acting becomes a performance? Before it becomes, in Hannah Arendt's

sense, labor—that is, the maintenance of bare life? For the 2008 project *The Gallery Will Be Relocating over the Summer*, Levine instructed actors to take on the role of artists; he showed the works they produced in a gallery, complete with an opening party during which the actors played the artists. What was the status of their artworks? On the one hand, there ought to be no categorical difference between actor-artworks and artist-artworks. Insisting otherwise posits some magical expressive essence; it requires, in other words, asserting that it matters if the actors are lip-synching. But acting has always sought the mechanization of emotions, the science necessary to produce affect industrially, as it were, night after night. And it is this embrace of emotional technology that makes acting *theatrical*, and thus suspect, not least to actors themselves, who display serious-

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ness by gaining weight, learning to farm, or whatever else will minimize their awareness of themselves as actors.

Late in *WOW*, the actors playing Fab and Rob (Randall Smith and Joey Kipp, respectively) give a press conference in which they announce that they will lie no more forever. In an allegory for the antitheatrical condition, the performers lip-synch their lines, which are sung by opera singers in the next room. Their public renunciation of artifice is already untrue, and it retains the Wagnerian position it ostensibly obviates, namely, that the audience is as simple and credulous as children. But if the audience is free to wander from room to room and choose its own perspective, then the influence and responsibility of the artist are not so divinely significant. Instead, talent and skill appear as what they are—social relationships—rather than as a myth or a natural force, like the rain on which everything can be blamed. □

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Left: David Levine, *WOW* (work in progress). Performance view, BRIC House, Brooklyn, NY, January 24, 2014. Fab Morvan (Randall Smith) and Rob Pilatus (Joey Kipp). Photo: Ryan Muir.

Right: David Levine, *WOW* (work in progress). Performance view, BRIC House, Brooklyn, NY, January 24, 2014. Fab Morvan (Randall Smith) and Rob Pilatus (Joey Kipp). Photo: Ryan Muir.

