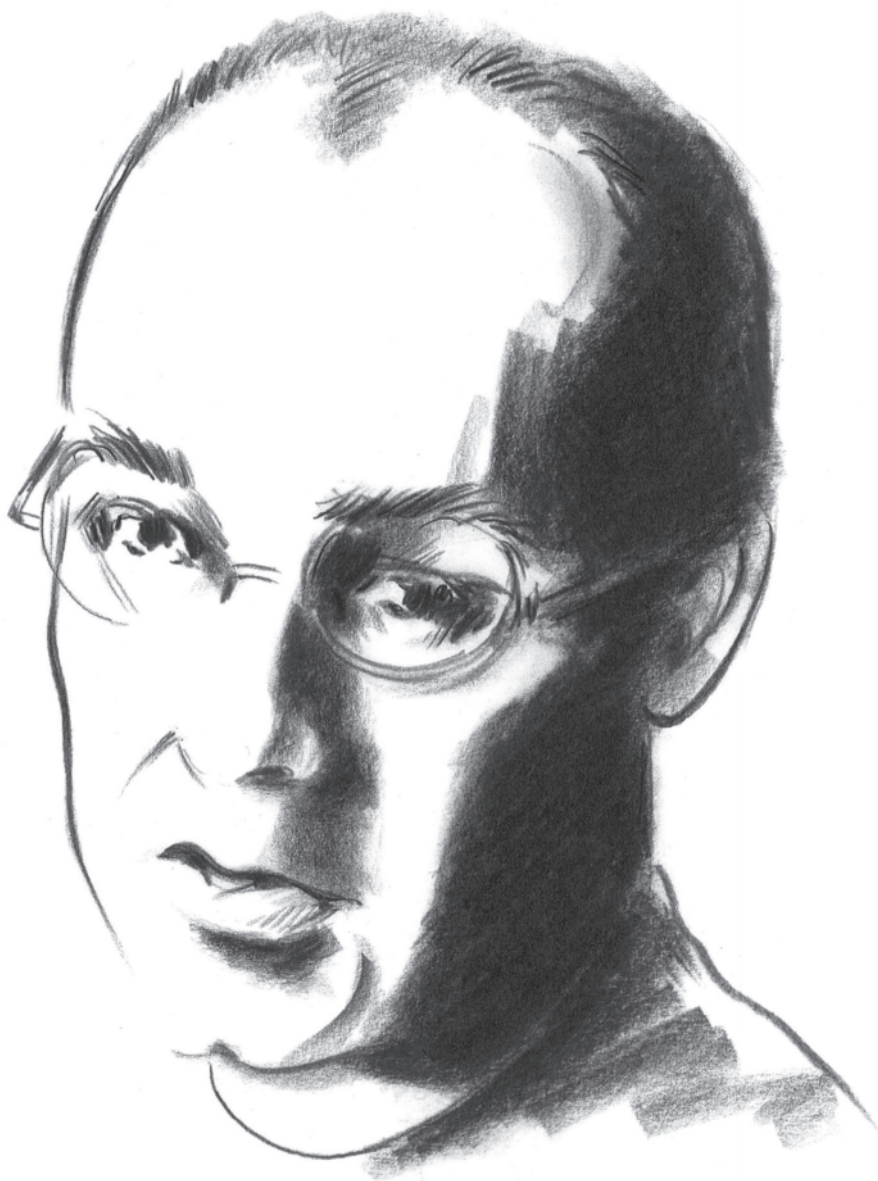

MAC WELLMAN

ON THE
DOWNTOWN SCENE



FWP

Mac Wellman is a teacher who changed my life. He is one of the smartest and most generous writers I have ever known; maybe one of the smartest and generous ever to exist. Since he is an avid theatregoer and a lover of new work, I asked him for his take on the 2011/12 season in downtown NYC theatre.

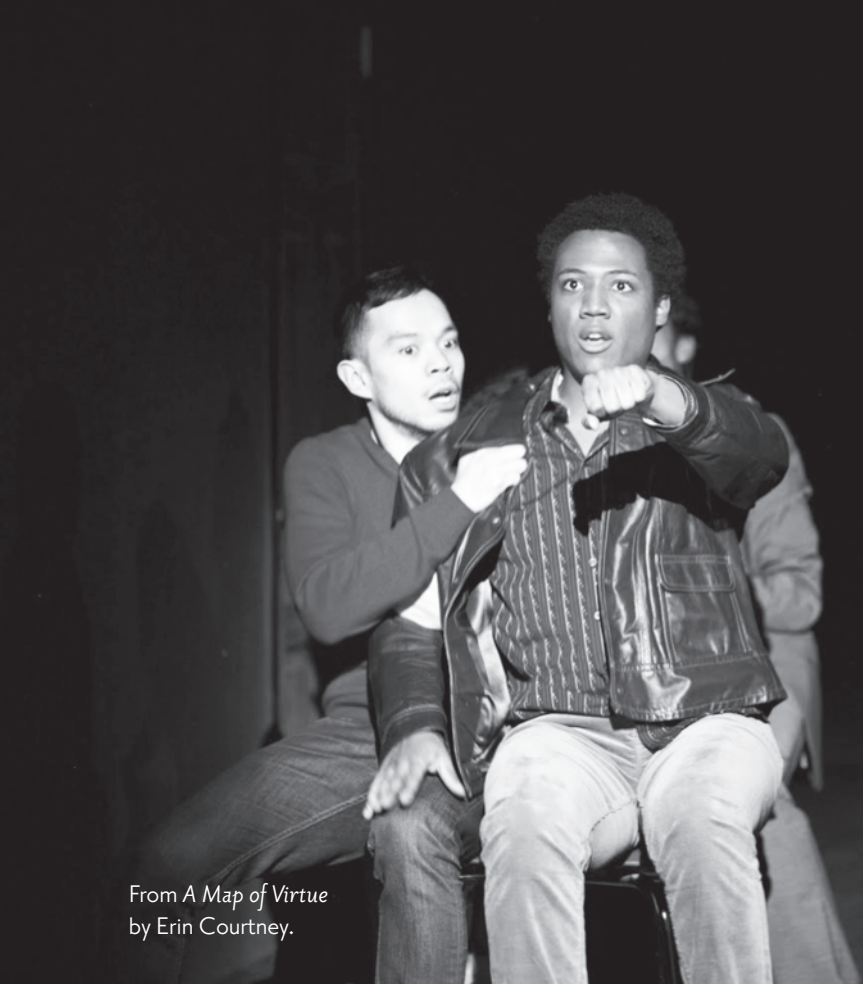
– ANNIE BAKER

ANNIE BAKER: What were some of your favorite shows this past season and why?

MAC WELLMAN: Hmm. Definitely Erin Courtney's *A Map Of Virtue* and, surprisingly, our Brooklyn College/Classic Stage Company Weasel Festival of last August (four plays based on the mystery novels of Norbert Davis – the favorite mystery writer of Ludwig Wittgenstein) by Caitlin Brubaker, Alexandra Collier, Ariel Stess, and Sara Farrington with brilliant direction by Brubaker & Sarah Rasmussen. Also, I very much liked Thomas Bradshaw's *Burning* and Young Jean Lee's *Untitled Feminist Show*. And, of course, Sybil Kempson's splendid *Secret Death Of Puppets*, Julia Jarcho's *Dreamless Land*, and *Away Uniform* by Tina Satter.

AB: What do these (apparently very different) theatre writers share?

MW: An attitude towards story-telling that is very different from the norm in our theatre in These States. Often their plays operate like a game of three-dimensional chess: characters who are firmly located in one apparent world suddenly find themselves in a situation that is drastically elsewhere (*A Map of Virtue* for instance); or we as an audience find ourselves so transported (in Bradshaw's *Burning*). Sometime the apparent explanation for a series of events is more baffling than the events supposedly elucidated (*Dreamless Land* and *Away Uniform*); and still other plays, a series of apparently unrelated



From *A Map of Virtue*
by Erin Courtney.

PHOTO: BLAINE DAVIS

scenes take on a evocative, if malign, mood when linked together (*The Secret Death Of Puppets*).

Of course, there is an element of teasing in all this, coquetry and sheer imaginative exuberance (*Untitled Feminist Show*). But there is also in such strategies, a recognition that the truth is that this is how life is, feels moment to moment as we live, blundering from one incredible scene to the next, often with absolutely no sense that the reality of one is apparent either in what has come before or what will come after.

The shock of the moment, of the very indestructible reality of the present – considered as an absolute (both as a terror and as a bliss) is what rules the dramatic truth of such plays.

A theatre of the ongoing Epiphany, always an enemy to the Theatre of the Already Known!

AB: What is the downtown theatre scene like now compared to, say, 10 or 20 years ago? Is it



From *The Secret Death of Puppets*
by Sibyl Kempson.

PHOTO: CATHRYN LYNNE



From Julia Jarcho's
Dreamless Land.

more vibrant? Better? Worse?

MW: Better writers, I suspect; crappier institutions for sure. Corporate takeover land. It is however a very good sign when Signature Theater is doing your work, and that of people like Will Eno.

AB: Do you think there is some kind of new “theatre movement” happening now in New York City that scholars will (hopefully) look back on and describe with reverence? How would you characterize that movement?

MW: There are quite a few: 13P, and its spin-offs. Joyce Cho. Writer driven work is happening more and more.

AB: Can you tell me more about Joyce Cho and who they are?

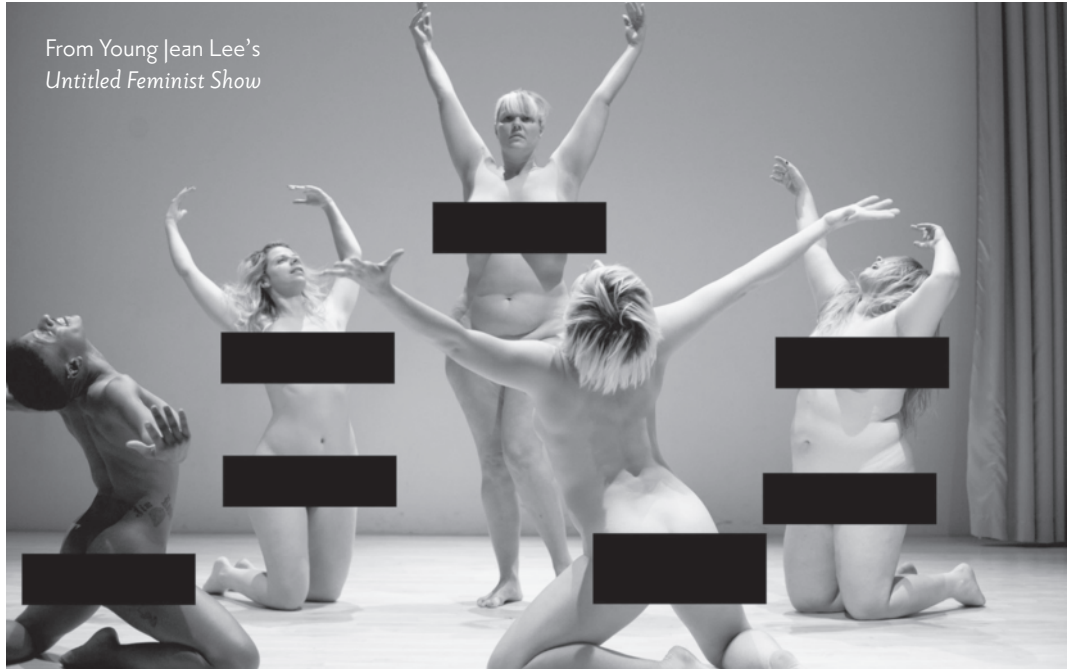
MW: Joyce Cho is a group of writers (Scott Adkins, Kelly Copper, Rob Erickson, Sybil Kempson, Amber Reed, and Karinne Keithley Syers) who are interested in new ways of making, per-

forming, and (especially of) understanding theatre texts. They are very critical of the performance standards in our time. Incidentally, some of them are remarkable performers themselves, i.e., Copper, Keithley Syers, Erickson, & Kempson. They also started her own small press, 53rd State, which publishes their plays, often very linguistically complex ones – most recently they published Erin Courtney’s *A Map Of Virtue*.

AB: Many of your former students are self-producing right now (Tina Satter and Young Jean Lee as a couple of examples). I remember you telling our class how important it is to put your work up on its feet and not wait around for a literary manager to notice you. Why is that?

MW: There are simply not enough adventurous venues for the young talent. It is a rare bright spot on the corporate landscape.

AB: Do you think there’s a way to change that? Or is most off-Broadway programming doomed to be conventional and fear-based?



MW: As for the future of mainstream institutional theatres, I really don't know.... However, the fact that you and Will Eno and Sarah Ruhl are able to get produced in some of these venues shows that there is perhaps some hope. The problem is with the structure of these places, and the fact that the Artistic Directors are for the most part directors – and hence suspicious of their colleagues who are viewed as rivals; they are intelligent, but not learned or curious; thus they are prone to merely imitate the successful productions of their TCG colleagues, etc. Writers should run theatres. We have ideas and, for the most part, writers get along with each other. I used to put it this way: The typical Artistic Director is a person with a Major Personality Defect, surrounded by an inner circle of underpaid flunkies, and an outer circle of unpaid interns with only youth as an excuse for their folly.

AB: Who are some of your favorite self-produc-

ing playwrights in NYC right now?

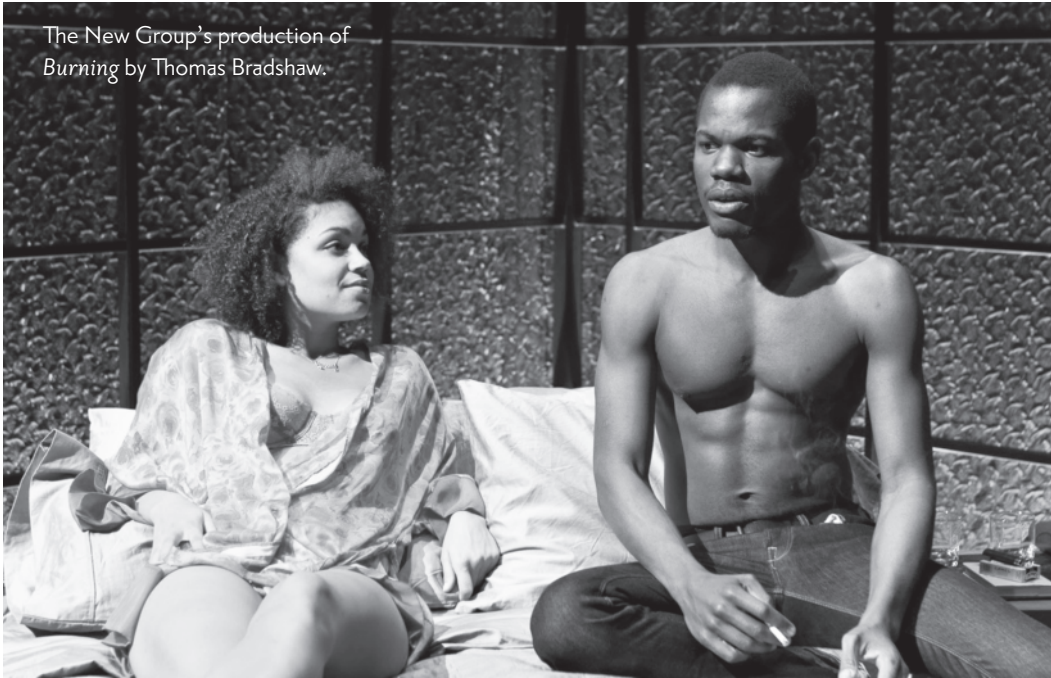
MW: Both Young Jean and Tina, and folks like them.

AB: What do you think of the state of theatre criticism right now? Are there any critics you really like? Do you think we theatre artists should be making more of an effort to write in a scholarly and rigorous way about one another's work?

MW: Theatre criticism is a remarkable one-note only interested in what I call Sentimental Melodrama. They miss any intellectual sharpness, visual or physical acuity. They are only interested in what I call Face Value theatre. What you see is what you get, and no time for reflection (incidentally they miss the sharp, hard edges of your own work, for instance). Best critics? Claudia LaRocca, Helen Shaw, and Alexis Soloski. Others can shine from moment to moment. And yes, playwrights should be writing their own critical

The New Group's production of *Burning* by Thomas Bradshaw.

PHOTO: MONIQUE CARBONI



work, both essays and volumes.

AB: Are there any as-of-right-now unproduced playwrights whom you would recommend to an artistic director looking for more adventurous work?

MW: Well, for a start, Rachel Hoefel's *Quail*, Misha Shulman's *Apricots*, anything by Constance Congdon and Jeffrey M. Jones (both very important and very much ignored)...Madelyn Kent's wonderful *Shufu* plays....*Moral Garbage* and *Mercato* by Siobhan Antonioli....and furthermore someone should remount Anne Washburn's *The Small*. I could go on and on...

AB: What are you working on right now?

MW: A play called *A Little Chronicle Of The Offending Gesture* about a dog in Helsinki (true story) in 1941 who leaned to do the Nazi salute when his master said "Heil Hitler." 

MAC WELLMAN'S recent work includes *3 2's*; or *AFAR at Dixon Place in October 2011*, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* (with composer David Lang) at *Montclair in the fall of 2006* (and elsewhere more recently), and *1965 UU* for performer Paul Lazar, and directed by Stephen Mellor at the *Chocolate Factory in the fall of 2008*. He has received numerous honors, including NEA, Guggenheim, and Foundation of Contemporary Arts fellowships. In 2003 he received his third Obie, for *Lifetime Achievement*. In 2006 his third novel, *Q's Q*, was published by *Green Integer*, and in 2008 a volume of stories, *A Chronicle of the Madness of Small Worlds*, was published by *Trip Street Press* as well as a new collection of plays *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* from *Minnesota Press*. His books of poetry include *Miniature* (2002), *Strange Elegies* (2006) both from *Roof Books*, and *Left Glove*, just out from *Solid Objects Press*. He is Distinguished Professor of Playwriting at *Brooklyn College*.

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