

ONE FROM COLUMN A, TWO FROM COLUMN B

Richard Foreman on the Writing Process

George Hunka

“It’s been years since I used a script in the traditional sense,” Richard Foreman says of the rehearsal process for his recent production *Deep Trance Behavior in Potatoland*. For quite some time, he’s gone into the first day of rehearsal with a fully-built set and, as text, two or three thick black boards, irregularly and crudely cut with a knife and held together with tape. On these boards, Foreman has cut-and-pasted small fragments of text (usually no more than three or four lines) and, on a facing board, a list of sound cues. Each one of them has a unique number, like “34A” or “57B.”

They are not scripts, Foreman says. “I don’t have a name for them,” he admits. “Charts, maybe.” During rehearsals his eye and his ear will leap from fragment to fragment and cue to cue, as, like a chef, he assembles the elements of spoken text and sound cues. The temporal order of the theatrical assemblage is often inspired off-the-cuff by the videos that have accompanied his stage work over the last few years, which are fully-edited and complete by the time rehearsals begin.

Many of the text fragments have been recorded by Foreman himself. These, along with fragments of music and sound effects, are programmed into a machine so that his stage manager and technical directors can access them immediately at the touch of a button. “We make jokes that it’s like a Chinese menu, and I guess it is,” he explains. In rehearsals, Foreman may say to his sound technician, “Let’s try 204 here,” and the technician can instantly call up the cue and play it through the speakers. “One from column A, two from column B . . . and we see what we end up with,” he laughs.

To keep track of the visual flow of his productions, Foreman sketches out storyboards, indicating the general position of the performers (represented by crude stick figures) through the length of the play. These storyboards, which resemble Egyptian hieroglyphics, are rarely revised in the rehearsal work, unlike the charts, which may be heavily annotated with various colors of highlighter and pen, connecting the fragments across the boards like a spider web.

Like the assembly of the final Foreman text itself, rehearsal for the performers is an assembly of seemingly discrete and unrelated moments. “I expect the text to be memorized by the actors at the first day of rehearsal,” Foreman says, in contradistinction to the usual American process of working script-in-hand through the first half of the rehearsal period. “I like to get off the text as soon as possible.” Rehearsals themselves are laborious for director, technicians and performers alike. Fifteen-second segments might be repeated over and over again as a gesture is perfected or the director tries out one or another sound cue or text fragment to accompany a *mise-en-scène*. When a portion of the performance is finalized, the stage manager sits with the performers for a “stop-and-write,” in which the performers notate their movements in a copy of the text.

The proscenium frame of a Foreman stage picture is paralleled by the use of the text fragment as a frame itself. “I was always interested in framing as a kid,” he says, bringing his hands together like a movie director to form a rough frame with his thumbs and forefingers, then peering through it as he pans his arms around the room. “These words, these phrases on the charts are like little frames in which events can take place. Really, anything in the world can be in a frame.” Reflecting his long-time interest in film, Foreman then uses these frames as he splices together a play from moment to moment, rearranging and replacing them through the rehearsal process, which begins to seem more like film editing—the stage itself his editing console.

For the published texts of his plays, the stage manager prepares a “final text” that resembles traditional scripts; it’s this text that is distributed to critics during the press nights of the shows.

In directing work by other dramatists and artists, however, Foreman retains an interest in the traditional text. His future projects will include the staging of a new opera by John Zorn in 2009 and the production of a play by Federico Garcia Lorca. Foreman will not deconstruct the Lorca text before he begins rehearsal. “But,” he says with a smile, “it will be my own version of Lorca.”

GEORGE HUNKA is a theatre writer and playwright. The artistic director of theatre minima, he is the recipient of a 2007 Albee Foundation Fellowship. His reviews and essays have appeared in print in the *New York Times* and *Time Out New York*, and online at his blog, Superfluities <<http://ghunka.blogspot.com>>.