

THE WOOSTER GROUP

EARLY SHAKER SPIRITUALS
a record album interpretation



Press for
EARLY SHAKER SPIRITUALS
at The Performing Garage
May 17 - June 15, 2014

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THE NEW YORKER

THE THEATRE

SHAKING IT UP

The “Meryl Streep of downtown” turns to directing.

BY HILTON ALS

MAY 19, 2014



The actress Kate Valk directs and performs in “Early Shaker Spirituals,” for the Wooster Group. Illustration by Josh Cochran.

Kate Valk is an interesting theatrical figure, one of the greatest the American stage has produced in the last forty or so years. Yet she is largely unknown if you don’t get to see the work of the Wooster Group (Valk was a founding member, in 1975), or Richard Foreman, or Richard Maxwell. The Public Theatre programmer Mark Russell has called her the “Meryl Streep of downtown,” and if you think about the variety of roles Valk has taken on as an actress—O’Neill’s Emperor Jones, Racine’s Phèdre, Stein’s

Faustus—that description works, but not entirely. Unlike Streep, Valk has made her name as a classical actress who performs in an experimental medium; also, Valk doesn't like the camera as much as Streep seems to—she has said it's a black hole she doesn't know how to play to.

Valk, born in Spokane, Washington, works from the outside in; her style is never less than pure and direct, and disciplined. Her face fascinates, looking neither black nor white, while she is vocally nimble and can do various dialects, as well as, sometimes, m.c. duties. (She was terrific as the narrator in "Brace Up!," the Wooster Group director Elizabeth LeCompte's legendary version of Chekhov's "Three Sisters.") From May 17 through June 15, at the Performing Garage, Valk will not only act in but also direct a new piece. Titled "Early Shaker Spirituals," it's inspired by a 1976 recording by the Maine-based Sisters of the United Society of Shakers. An offshoot of the Quakers, the Shakers promoted equality for women, were against procreation, and performed ecstatic religious ceremonies. For her project, Valk has assembled an impressive array of female talent: Frances McDormand, LeCompte, Bebe Miller, Suzzy Roche, and other luminaries. The piece is about ecclesiasticism, and the big but contained joy that informs the act of creativity—along with power and elegance and modesty. Not unlike the Shaker women, Valk is making another home, with a different kind of ceremony. ♦

Songs of Devotion, Songs of Rapture

'Early Shaker Spirituals,' Plain-Spoken Tribute

By BEN BRANTLEY MAY 29, 2014



A scene from the Wooster Group's "Early Shaker Spirituals."

Richard Termine for The New York Times

The gift of being simple has never been widely associated with the [Wooster Group](#), whose austere and profoundly affecting “Early Shaker Spirituals” opened on Thursday night at the Performing Garage in SoHo. Throughout its almost 40, unceasingly fertile years of existence, this genre-bending troupe has taken theatergoers through twisting labyrinths of productions, in which reality and its representations are splintered by technology and irony.

So to find the Wooster Group paying plain-spoken tribute to the [Shakers](#), a sect celebrated for its religious ardor and unadorned aesthetic, feels like a setup for a joke. Abstemiousness is also a hallmark of the Shaker religion, a celibate 18th-century offshoot of the Quakers and now nearly extinct. Such rigor scarcely comes to mind in relation to the Woosterites, who forged their collective identity during the hedonistic 1970s.

Still, a certain paring away often occurs with age, a stripping down to bones and basics that reveals a previously camouflaged core. As it approaches its fifth decade, the Wooster Group stands naked before us as the Puritan that, on one level, it always was.



From left, Elizabeth LeCompte, Suzzy Roche, Frances McDormand and Cynthia Hedstrom sing and dance in "Early Shaker Spirituals," directed by Kate Valk. Richard Termine for The New York Times

Directed by Kate Valk, best known as the troupe's leading chameleon performer, and featuring a precision-drill ensemble that includes Elizabeth LeCompte (the troupe's longtime artistic director) and the Oscar-winning actress Frances McDormand, "Early Shaker Spirituals" testifies joyously to the discipline, dedication and conviction that have allowed one band of artists to endure and flourish on its own uncompromising terms. The show lasts only an hour, yet it seems to span not just decades but centuries of creative evolution and ancestry.

The production is described in its program as "a record album interpretation." This is a form not unknown to the Wooster Group, whose early work included riffs on records titled "Hula" and "LSD (... Just the High Points ...)." The album in this case is a [1976 recording](#) of hymns, marches and working songs, performed a cappella by Shaker women. It includes interviews with some of these women, who describe how they learned the songs from older members of their community at Sabbathday Lake in Maine.

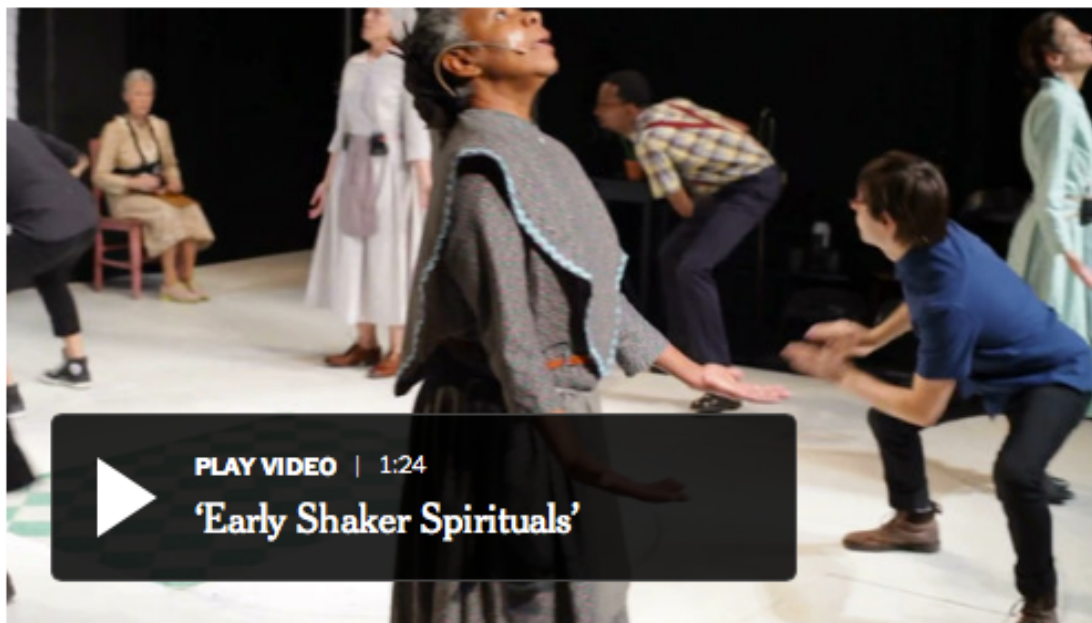
Those songs and spoken words are recreated here — inflection for inflection, pause for pause — by four actresses who, for the most part, sit calm and straight

backed, their hands folded in their laps. The set, by Ms. LeCompte and Jim Clayburgh, with subliminal lighting by Jennifer Tipton and Ryan Seelig, is no museum period room but an impressionistic and fragmented evocation of Shaker style.

In addition to Ms. LeCompte and Ms. McDormand, the female performers are Cynthia Hedstrom, a Wooster veteran, and the singer and actress Suzzy Roche, a member of the vocal group the Roches. A fifth actress, Bebe Miller, joins them in the production's latter half.

Most of these women are known for distinctively stylized approaches to their art. Here, though, they aspire to be only transparent conduits for the voices from the album, which is vinyl and is played as they speak on a turntable by a disc jockey, Max Bernstein. You can see the record revolving, if you look offstage to the right.

The actresses hear the album, clearly I assume, through earpieces. (While “Early Shaker Spirituals” is low-tech by Wooster standards, it is not no-tech; the modest Shakeresque clothing the women wear is accessorized with audio equipment.) We in the audience can detect only a faint under-layer of the original recorded sound. The aural effect is subtle and eerie, suggesting a kind of phantasmal possession of the present by the past or, if you prefer, the eternal.



Rehearsal footage of the Wooster Group's new show, which interprets historical songs and dances.

This [channeling of distant voices](#) parallels stories not only of how the songs were passed down among the Shakers but also of how they were received originally, through ghostly visitations and divine afflatus. On a more mundane level, the process evokes the ways we are subsumed by the music we listen to daily, via the

radio or smartphones, as we sing along and start to feel that it is somehow personally ours.

Early on, you may perceive a seeming contradiction between the impassive serenity of these women and the agitated passion within many of the lyrics they sing. The Shakers were millennialists, and their songs often foretell a second coming, which is to be heralded by transporting and ecstatic dancing.

One of these songs proclaims: “The gospel is advancing, and freedom is commencing. With leaping and with dancing, we’ll hail the jubilee.” Another refrain promises, “I’ll be reeling, turning, twisting, shake out all the starch and stiffening.”

It should be funny that such fervid words are being intoned by women who, if not starchy and stiff, look preternaturally placid. But you never feel like laughing — at least not derisively; maybe in that spontaneous way elicited by unexpected happiness.

The performers here have only respect for the women they embody, though there’s no cloying piety in this representation. Instead, what you feel is a true communion of artists with their predecessors. The Wooster Group, for the record, has similarly paid homage to inspirational kindred spirits, in work that takes its cues from the choreographer [William Forsythe](#), the acting teacher Jerzy Grotowski and the Japanese theater troupe Ichikawa Sentaro.

But none of these tributes, as resonant as some of them were, had the feeling that emerges here, of a creative impulse distilled to its most concentrated essence. In the show’s climax, four young men join the actresses to perform Shaker dances to songs we have already heard.

One of these is “Simple Gifts,” the best known of Shaker hymns. It was adapted by Aaron Copland for his “Appalachian Spring,” and has been covered by performers like [Judy Collins](#). I promise you’ll hear new things in its lyrics, though. Yes, it tells us, ’tis a gift to be simple. But it also says that “to turn, turn will be our delight,/Till by turning, turning, we come ’round right.”

That’s a pretty good description, I think, of what happens in transcendent theatrical performance as well as in religious celebration. A Dionysian spirit is reined in and refined until it becomes a precise worldly expression of something impalpable and divine. That’s what the Wooster Group, like the Shakers, has aimed for. May their lessons, too, be preserved for the generations to come.

Correction: June 6, 2014

A theater review last Friday about “Early Shaker Spirituals,” at the Performing Garage in Manhattan, misspelled the surname of one of the lighting designers. As the listing of credits correctly noted, he is Ryan Seelig, not Selig. The listing

of credits, using information from a news release, erroneously included a role for Kate Valk. While she is the director of the show, she does not narrate it.

Early Shaker Spirituals

A Record Album Interpretation

Based on a 1976 LP of Shaker hymns, marches, anthems and testimony recorded by Sister R. Mildred Barker and the sisters of the Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Me.; directed by Kate Valk; sets by Elizabeth LeCompte and Jim Clayburgh; lighting by Jennifer Tipton and Ryan Seelig; costumes by Enver Chakartash with Christine Stevenson and Naomi Raddatz; sound by Bobby McElver and Max Bernstein; production manager, Emily Rea; stage manager, Erin Mullin; technical director, Bill Kennedy; assistant director, Jamie Poskin. Presented by the Wooster Group, Ms. LeCompte, artistic director. At the Performing Garage, 33 Wooster Street, SoHo, 212-966-3651, thewoostergroup.org. Through June 15. Running time: 50 minutes.

WITH: Cynthia Hedstrom, Elizabeth LeCompte, Frances McDormand, Bebe Miller, Suzzy Roche, Max Bernstein, Matthew Brown, Modesto Flako Jimenez, Bobby McElver, Jamie Poskin and Andrew Schneider.

A version of this review appears in print on May 30, 2014, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Songs of Devotion, Songs of Rapture.



Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation

Theater

Experimental theater

Various venues

Until Sun Jun 15

\$\$\$



Photograph: Paula Court

Time Out rating: ★★★★★

Time Out says

Posted: Tue May 27 2014

Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation. Performing Garage (see Off Broadway). By Sister R. Mildred Barker and Daniel W. Patterson. Directed by Kate Valk. With ensemble cast. Running time: 1hr 20mins. No intermission.

Early Shaker Spirituals: In brief

The Wooster Group spins vinyl in a performance piece based on a 1976 album of Shaker religious music and testimony. Frances McDormand (*Fargo*), Suzzy Roche, Cynthia Hedstrom and Wooster leader Elizabeth LeCompte do the singing; Kate Valk directs.

Early Shaker Spirituals: Theater review by Helen Shaw

A supremely gentle, recessive piece, the Wooster Group's *Early Shaker Spirituals* may not actually be a piece. Better call it work; each night a labor completed—yet also left unperfected for the next day's doing (a Shakerish ethos of tempering pride in product). Despite the introduction by a cheerful Jamie Poskin (who reads Daniel W. Patterson's liner notes between songs), director Kate Valk offers little interpretation of the eponymous Sabbathday Lake field recording. First: Downtown elders Cynthia Hedstrom, Liz LeCompte, Frances McDormand and Suzzy Roche channel the 1976 LP by using earbuds to re-sing the recording, false starts and all. Later, there's an outpouring of pure joy: uninhibited dancing.

The austerity refreshes like cool water. No text but the record sleeve, no sound but the invocation of long-ago, creaky-voiced Shakers. The women, beautifully severe, don't even "perform," beyond looking gravely at the audience. The Wooster gospel has ever been complex, sophisticated and arch. *Early Shaker Spirituals* has such simplicity and vulnerability, I was surprised to find that they're charging money; it has so much the aura of a proffered gift.—*Theater review by Helen Shaw*

THE BOTTOM LINE An old album furnishes the Wooster Group with hushed and holy material.

THEATER

A Resurrection of Eternal Joy

The Wooster Group Presents 'Early Shaker Spirituals'

By MICHAEL PAULSON MAY 23, 2014



Crew and cast members of "Early Shaker Spirituals," from left: Matthew Brown, Max Bernstein, Bebe Miller, Andrew Schneider, Elizabeth LeCompte, Suzzy Roche, Frances McDormand, Modesto Jimenez, Cynthia Hedstrom, Bobby McElver and Jamie Poskin. Emily Andrews for The New York Times

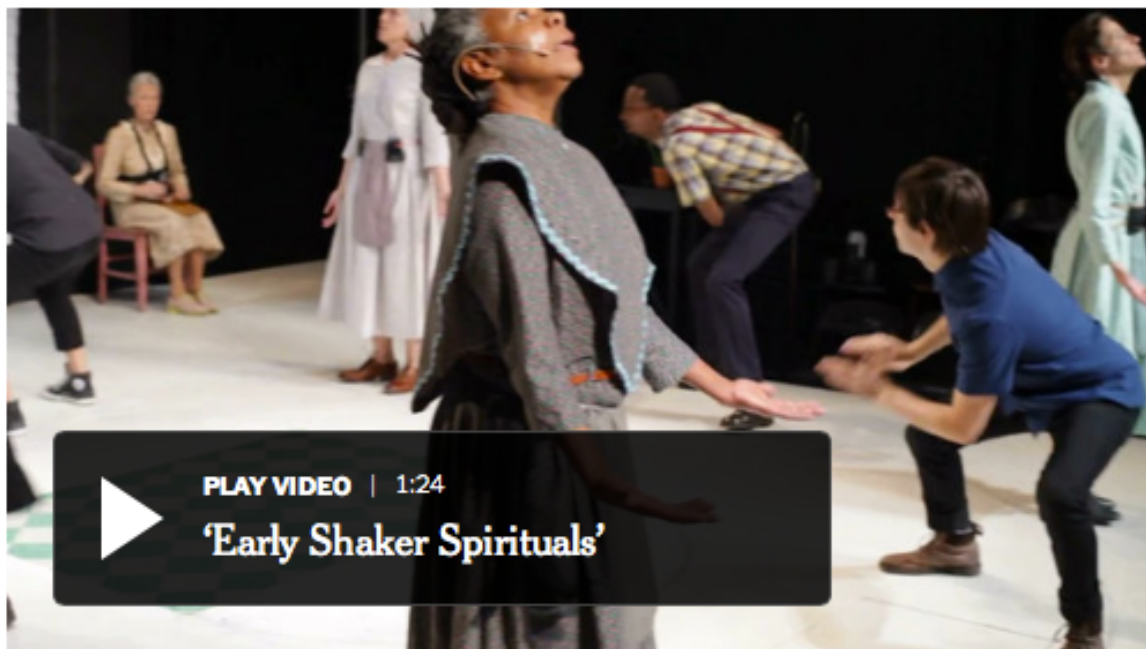
For three decades, the album sat on a shelf.

Elizabeth LeCompte had found it in a used-record store, back when there really were record stores, in a section titled "religious," and something about the release caught her eye.

Over the years, Ms. LeCompte, a founding member of the [Wooster Group](#), an

avant-garde theater collective, would occasionally listen to the album, “Early Shaker Spirituals,” for reasons she can’t quite explain, other than that she liked it. And in 1980, while developing a piece called “[Route 1 & 9](#),” she packed members of her troupe into a van for a trip to Shaker communities, concluding in Sabbathday Lake, a Shaker village in Maine, where the actors met Sister R. Mildred Barker, who is the featured singer on the recording.

Now the Wooster Group is taking the album out for a serious spin. The company — which in the 1980s did “record interpretations” of albums of dance music (“Hula”) and of psychedelic monologue (“L.S.D.”) — is staging “Early Shaker Spirituals.” In it, a group of actresses, including Frances McDormand, perform 20 album tracks, and then, joined by four much younger men, dance ecstatically to seven of the songs.



Rehearsal footage of the Wooster Group's new show, which interprets historical songs and dances.

The company’s decision to stage the piece, which is running through June 15 at the Performing Garage in SoHo, was prompted in large part by the interest and availability of Ms. McDormand, a longtime collaborator who has won both an Academy Award (for “Fargo”) and a Tony (for “Good People”). She had [a Christian upbringing](#) — her father was a Disciples of Christ minister — but now calls herself a pagan for whom “theater is religion” and the Wooster Group “a utopian community.” She said she became intrigued by Shakerism, and in particular the role of women in the sect, while doing a workshop at Lincoln Center Theater with the choreographer Martha Clarke and the playwright Alfred Uhry for a show that became “[Angel Reapers](#),” which ran at the Joyce Theater in 2011.

“We’ve all been fascinated by them — the discipline and the rigor,” Ms. McDormand said. “None of us are espousing a belief in the second coming of Mother Ann Lee,” she said, referring to the leader of the Shakers, “but we certainly can get behind the egalitarianism of the community.”

Ms. McDormand, at 56, is the youngest of the women in the cast; the eldest, Ms. LeCompte, is 70. Only one, Suzzy Roche, is an experienced singer; she is the youngest member of [The Roches](#). The rest, like the Shaker women they are channeling, are untrained, and they sing without accompaniment in an unpretentious, unhurried and occasionally unpretty fashion.

“We all leave very, very happy — joyful,” Ms. McDormand said. “We’re full of something we need to get empty, or empty of something we need to get full. And to have this group of vital elders together, and to be celebrated with our age, and to get out there with the young guys and sweat it out with them — leap higher! go farther! — and to be able to sing, is deeply terrifying and deeply exhilarating.”

The Shakers, a radical offshoot of Quakerism, are now nearly extinct, partly because their commitment to celibacy meant they depended on conversion for new members. The Shakers are best known for a simple design aesthetic, particularly of [furniture](#). But the Shakers were also prolific creators of song and dance, using melodies and movements that believers often described as revealed to them in visions.



A scene from the show, which interprets historical songs and dances. Emily Andrews for The New York Times

One of the songs, “Simple Gifts,” is widely known because Aaron Copland used it in “Appalachian Spring,” but thousands of other songs survive thanks to the Shakers’ practice of writing them down in books and letters. “Early Shaker Spirituals” was recorded in the 1960s and 1970s, and features 40 tracks, including some spoken-word recollections.

“The Shakers placed a lot of emphasis on getting songs from heaven,” said Daniel W. Patterson, an emeritus professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who wrote the liner notes for the album, as well as “The Shaker Spiritual,” a 1979 book. “It might happen in dreams, which they would remember or write down, or they would have a scribe in the meeting house. One sister said she would sit in the window at twilight and hear them sung by angelic voices in the air.”

“Early Shaker Spirituals” combines several of the Wooster Group’s interests. Over the years, the company has produced experimental theatrical, dance and video performances that often key off existing texts. It has at times used modern technology and toyed with using video in this show, but it is trying to keep it simple to make it more tour ready. The production is already booked for a run [in Europe](#).

In their singing, the actresses seek as closely as possible to replicate the sound of the Shaker women — in fact, they wear earpieces through which they listen to the recording, played on a turntable, as they perform. There is no plot and minimal talking: A narrator reads liner notes between songs, and the actresses recite two of the spoken-word album tracks. The interpretive elements are clearest during the unpartnered dancing, which features gestural movements, or “motioning,” created by the cast after watching videos of Shakers, Native Americans and African-American shape-note singers.

“Original Shaker dancing was not just the beautiful steps and patterns you can read about or see in drawings or journals, but, during Mother Ann’s time, barking and leaping and unstructured ecstasy,” said Kate Valk, the production’s director. “We use the record as a relic that we are fetishizing, that we are committing ourselves to recreate, interpret, channel.”

“This is not historical or religious or anthropological,” she added. “But there’s a love for the aesthetic and the dedication to the spiritual aspect of work, which is something that we find in our own house here. I love imagining that we sing these songs and make up these simple dances as an expression of what we do. It lifts my life up in the theater.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 25, 2014, on page AR4 of the New York edition with the headline: A Resurrection of Eternal Joy. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

McDormand, Roche bring 'Early Shaker Spirituals' to life

By Elisabeth Vincentelli

May 21, 2014 | 5:41 pm



Elizabeth Lecompte, Suzzy Roche, Frances McDormand and Cynthia Hedstrom in a scene from "Early Shaker Spirituals."

If the Amish are famous for their beards and buggies, the Shakers are reputed for their elegant, minimalist furniture.

But that second religious group — its formal name is the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing — has a much broader legacy that includes a repertoire of about 10,000 songs.

“Early Shaker Spirituals,” the new show by the Wooster Group theater company, features just 20 of these tunes — along with some traditional dances. They’re performed by an eclectic cast that includes “ Fargo ” star Frances McDormand and Suzzy Roche of the singing sister trio the Roches.

“For the Shakers, songs were received as ‘gifts’ from birds, trees,” Roche says. “I’ve been singing them every day for the past six months in my house. The songs are all about simplicity, humility, devotion — they make you feel good when you sing them.”

Because the Wooster Group is known for its experimental daring, this ain’t no straightforward recital. The ensemble is re-creating side A of the 1976 LP that gave the show its name — a collection of field recordings made at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine.



Suzzy Roche in ‘Early Shaker Spirituals.’

Photo: Paula Court

And that re-creation is exacting: The female members of the cast hear the original voices through earpieces and try to duplicate them as precisely as possible.

“You’re speaking with them, breathing with them, you repeat every ‘ah’ that they say,” Roche explains. “You’re trying to meet the person exactly, both in singing and in speaking. It’s very simple but it requires incredible concentration.”

“The Shaker handiwork was exquisitely beautiful and very disciplined, which is very much like the Wooster Group,” Roche continues, smiling. “That and the tireless dedication to the process, no matter what the outside is thinking!”

“Early Shaker Spirituals” is at the Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St., until June 15. Call 212-966-3651 for tickets (\$25).

the PARIS REVIEW

OUR DAILY CORRESPONDENT

Having a Moment

May 23, 2014 | by [Sadie Stein](#)



Shaker Church Family Barns, Sabbathday Lake Village, Cumberland County, ME, 1970; photo via Wikimedia Commons

Big in 2014: the Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Founded in 1783 in what was then called Thompson's Pond Plantation, the community consists of eighteen buildings, an orchard, a tree farm, vegetable and herb gardens, livestock pastures, and hay fields, all spread over eighteen-hundred acres of land. The community practices traditional Shaker crafts—basket-making, weaving, printing—although only three of its members—Sister Francis, Brother Arnold and Sister June—are still active today.

This summer, the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine, will honor the Sabbathday Lake community with its 2014 Maine in America Award, which is presented to an individual or group who has made an outstanding contribution to Maine's role in American art. Prior honorees include Robert Indiana and Alex Katz. They and the three elderly Shakers may seem like strange bedfellows.

Equally unlikely is their association with the famously innovative Wooster Group, whose *Early Shaker Spirituals* is currently playing in New York. The show—part of an ongoing series based on recordings—is grounded on an eponymous 1976 LP recorded by the Sisters of Sabbathday Lake. Using a technique the company pioneered, the actors wear earpieces through which they hear, as they perform, the actual recordings of Shaker songs. The show also includes pattern dances, inspired by surviving fragments of Shaker ecstatic dance. (You can see clips of a rehearsal [here](#), and watch the actors morph from ecstatic Shakers back into actors, joking and laughing.)

These are real and fitting tributes to people whose work and art have added genuine beauty to the world—it's gratifying to see the community receiving attention while there are still Shakers around, and to know that there is a living record of their history. And yet, one wonders: will the three surviving members come to New York to see the show? Will they go to the Farnsworth Summer Gala to accept their award?

Here's the schedule of their days, as laid out on the Sabbathday site:

Daily Schedule

We all rise as duty dictates.

7:30 a.m. The Great Bell on the Dwelling House rings to summon all to breakfast.

8:00 Morning Prayers. We read (responsively) two Psalms, followed

by Bible readings, prayer, silent prayer and ending with the singing of a Shaker song.

8:30 Work begins.

11:30 Mid-day Prayers

12:00
p.m. Dinner. This is the main meal of the day.

1:00 Work begins.

6:00 Supper.

Prayer Meeting is held on Wednesday at 5:00 p.m., followed by a class on Shaker Studies.

Sunday Meeting is held at 10:00 am. During the summer months Meeting is held in the Meeting House. The remainder of the year we meet in the Chapel in the Dwelling House.

The site is a museum, yes, and open to tourists. You can visit; it is very beautiful. But of course it will go on whether we do or not—for a little while yet.



Philip Sandstrom

Singing and Dancing towards the Heavens.

INTERVIEW WITH KATE VALK BY PHILIP W. SANDSTROM

**The Wooster Group will present "Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation"
At The Performing Garage (33 Wooster Street, SoHo, Manhattan)
From May 17 through June 15, 2014.
Tickets at www.thewoostergroup.org and 212.966.3651**



Left to Right: Elizabeth LeCompte, Suzzy Roche, Frances McDormand and Cynthia Hedstrom. Photo by Paula Court.

The newest Wooster Group work directed by: Kate Valk, "Early Shaker Spirituals" is a performance based on a 1976 LP of Shaker hymns, marches, anthems, and testimony recorded by Sister R. Mildred Barker and the sisters of the Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. The show features Cynthia Hedstrom, Elizabeth LeCompte, Frances McDormand, Suzzy Roche with Matthew Brown, Modesto Jimenez, Bobby McElver, Bebe Miller, and Andrew Schneider.

Philip W. Sandstrom: I know you as an incredible actress and a founding member of The Wooster Group. Is this your first time directing for The Wooster Group? And tell me about your history as a director?

Kate Valk: Yes, this is the first time directing a piece by The Wooster Group. I used to make dances. Or I used to do recreations of dances that I videotaped and then transposed. So I'm used to organizing people in *Brace Up!*, *Fish Story*, and *Emperor Jones* (all Wooster Group works). I would work on dances and bring them to Liz (LeCompte, director of the Wooster Group) and then she would incorporate them into the piece. I also directed the Wooster Group Summer Institute. But this is the first time I've been on the outside and Liz has been on the inside. So, it's

not like a giant jump but more of a modulation of what I've already been doing.

PWS: So in terms of choreographing, have you always choreographed for the group?

KV: Yes, but again, I wouldn't call myself the choreographer; I'm more part of The Wooster Group's creative tradition of copying, transcribing, and transposing. I might have taken dances from a film then changed it or taken a sequence and transposed it to other music. It's more like I'm a dramaturg; it's the same way we work when we are working with source material for one of our theater pieces. I call it just making dances, that I then bring to Liz to incorporate into the shows (that we're working on at the time). I wouldn't really call myself a choreographer.

PWS: In the tradition of choreographer in plays, you are the choreographer. You decide where people move and how they move; you bring these ideas to the director who then makes the final choices. This is typical of theatrical choreographers, including musicals. I think you should just accept it; you're a choreographer.

KV: With the Wooster Group, I offer up the movement as text, and since it's a collaborative process, we're all involved in how it all works, but Liz is the one who incorporates the contributions into the piece.

PWS: How did it work out that you became director of this piece?

KV: Years ago, I think it was in 1981, Liz had the idea to take this record album called *Hula* and with Ron (Vawter), Willem (Dafoe) and me, we made up dances to every part of the album and Peyton Smith read the liner notes. She was the hostess, she read the liner notes to the audience and we danced, (the dances that we created) every cut on the album in order. The album became the artifact that was also the fetish item. That was our novel approach to making this evening of dances.

PWS: So, this process of making dances from existing records is part of The Wooster Group history; what makes this show different?

KV: One of my first experiences with Liz, when I started working with her, was driving up to New England, to all the different Shaker communities. Because we were reading about the Shakers and we were interested in the ecstatic dancing that was part of the formal worship

of the Shakers. We visited many communities and actually met with some of the Sisters of Sabbathday Lake (a Shaker group), Mildred Barker, being one of them. We purchased the album (of Shaker music and song that this show is based on) at that time, and it's been in our shared record collections for 35 years....

PWS: This show has been incubating for quite awhile...

KV: The idea of the show came about in a weird way. Awhile ago, Frances McDormand and I were talking about her experiences working on the Shaker piece for Martha Clarke (the creator and director of the musical "Angel Reapers" with text by Alfred Uhry Cutler, which opened in fall of 2011 and toured the US for several months and was presented at The Joyce Theater in New York City in November of 2011). Frances still had Shaker desires; she was really into investigating the Shaker's esthetics of music and movement. I immediately made the connection between Fran's desire and Liz's research and thought that we should do another record album interpretation. In the beginning of the creative process it was Fran, Liz, and me. Then I thought of including Suzzy Roche, who we had been working with on a number of projects. She was just in love with the songs on this album. Soon it became clear that I was the driving force behind this project. I saw that those three women (Liz, Frances, and Suzzy) were so perfect together in this project that I sort of dropped out (of a stage role) and asked Cynthia Hedstrom to join so we would have four women and I could be on the outside "hosting" and reading the liner notes. I, of course, wanted to work on the dancing. I wanted to keep it real simple I wanted to just use the fragments of descriptions that I encountered (in the liner notes and on our New England Shaker visits). I wanted to just make a series of simple dances that might evoke the spirit of this music.

PWS: So as the show continued to develop where did the men come in?

KV: I knew that I wanted to keep going along with the feminist theology that is very attractive to me about the Shakers. I wanted to keep the older women at the center of the piece. All the women are 55 plus. I wanted four men to balance the four women; I wanted younger men to balance the ages. So we have 55 plus women and men in their early 30's and younger. I enlisted two of the men who have already been working with the Wooster Group on other projects and another I had been working with on other projects. I have been working with this young man since high school in an arts and education program. I knew I wanted him to be involved.

PWS: How did you proceed with the piece now that you had both the men and the women?

KV: The dance and the piece is all based on a circle, so when I got the men involved I had them and the women dancing in the circle in different directions. When you see renditions of the Shakers dancing, you will often see huge numbers of people; we opted for a simple evocation of what these patterns and steps might have been.

PWS: I noticed that there were 40 songs in total on the entire album. Why are you just using 20?

KV: We're only doing side A of the album, the 20 songs that you listened to, there are more on the other side. The A side are the labor songs, the hymns, an anthem, and two interviews.

PWS: Labor songs?

KV: Labor songs, which for Shakers meant the spiritual exercise, which would definitely have been the songs that they danced to. The second side (B) is more hymns; the first side (A) is as far as we've gotten so far.

PWS: How does this work as a show?

KV: I see the first part of the show as a recording session with the four women. In the second part of the show we play the recording and the women are free to dance. When the women are singing with the in-ear monitors they are listening to the record and you see the technician and the record player as artifact; this is very visible.

PWS: Did you get any of the movement ideas from Sister Mildred? Where you able to observe any of the proceedings?

KV: Oddly enough, when we started working on this project we found a documentary that was made at the same period of time when this album was being recorded. In one section of the documentary, one of the sisters demonstrates the motioning, the hand movements that go with some of the songs. The Sisters of Sabbathday Lake had never seen the original dances; that fact is in one of the interviews on the album. Although Sister Mildred has not seen the original dances she had seen one of the older women do some of the dances. In the original dances there were no prescribed steps; it was truly ecstatic dancing. Any thing you needed to do, the shaking, the twirling, the twisting, was all spontaneous. But when Mother Ann (one of the founders) died and Joseph Meecham, who was selected by Mother Ann to lead the communities he codified the dances into simple steps and marches with patterns on the floor. In the 2nd Flowering, in the mid-19th Century, many of the communities were receiving gifts of songs and dances; that's when these steps were codified. I have this one little book that I love called A Shaker Dance Service Reconstructed it provided descriptions of what the movement and patterns on the floor would have been. This book is brought to us by the Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture. It's a great little book.

PWS: What all did you include in the movement from your studies?

KV: We took much from the book and documentary such as the patterns and the steps and worked with things like the arm swinging and coming up on your toes; we sort of spun off from there. I originally thought we'd work with children but instead we used our study with children, like getting dizzy by spinning and incorporated some of those ideas in the work. Shaker communities have lots of children...

PWS: I thought the Shakers were celibate??

KV: They had lots of children; they took in children who were orphans or from families who could no longer care for their children. It was a very child filled community.

PWS: From the video clips that I saw of your rehearsals, and in contrast with Martha Clarke's "Angel Reapers" in which sexual urges, meanness, jealousy, and damnation were the focus of the work, your work dwells more on the ritual and appears very respectful of the Shaker community; there is no layer of judgment in your approach.

KV: No judgment, this show is totally an ecstatic pursuit. We love these songs and we love these little dances that we made. I want the feeling of a big open community hall; it's not a theatrical narrative. We're interested in getting as close as we can to the women on this album. Did you listen to the two interviews with the Shaker women on this album?

PWS: Yes, very touching.

KV: They are with Mildred Barker and about how she learned the songs. Fran does one of the monologues and Suzzy does the other one. In one of the monologues Mildred says she couldn't read the Shaker music notation but instead learned the songs from hearing others sing them. That's exactly what we are doing. Now this doesn't say that there isn't some whimsy in our approach we are after all five old ladies (including Bebe Miller, who is not one of the main four) making a show. There are some flights of fancy, it's not always serious but we don't have a point of view on who these women are and we haven't invented any narrative.

PWS: Earlier, you touched on some of your casting choices, with Frances being the impetus in getting you to move forward with the project. Tell me about your casting of the other female roles; then about casting the men.

KV: I've worked with Fran before, we're friends, and she was the impulse; she really wanted to do some more Shaker. And for me, with Liz as head of the Wooster Group, I make a simple transposition of the idea of art, actually, my life and art, she (Liz) to me is Mother Ann (one of the Shaker Founders), she is the female leader of the group. And Suzzy Roach, whom we've worked with quite often, is such a beautiful singer. She is perfect for the role and the same with Cynthia, who isn't a trained singer, but she comes from a strong dance background; she's perfect too.

PWS: Isn't Cynthia also the producer of the Wooster Group?

KV: Yes, she is our producer too.

PWS: I've never seen Liz perform, this seems like such a special occasion.

KV: The show is a little bit of a giveback. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to see Liz performing. Liz has worked so hard as a director and that's what she's driven to do, but she doesn't have the pleasure of performing, so it's nice that we have this opportunity. Liz is perfect, she has a beautiful voice; it's perfect for this piece. She loves these songs. I feel we have the perfect four women to do this piece. As soon as we started working I knew why I was doing it.

PWS: Among the dancers who join the singers, you have one female, mature, experienced, dancer/choreographer; Bebe Miller. How did it come about that you brought in Bebe?

KV: Well that was a gift. She had called up the Wooster Group and she wanted to observe rehearsals. Right when she wanted to observe rehearsals is when we were working on the Shaker piece. While we were in rehearsal and she was observing, I encouraged her to join in and she did and wanted to perform with us so I worked this run that begins in May to work with her schedule. She has been invaluable.

PWS: You mentioned some additional research and other influences that have worked their way into this piece; tell me more.

KV: Being a modern person I looked on You Tube, of course there are no Shaker dances on You Tube, but I did read the obituary of one of the last original McIntosh County Shouters and that got me interested in their worship style. In addition to their singing, their dancing is part of their worship. It takes place in a circle, like the Shakers. Now, this is modern, it's happening now. In watching the dances of the Shouters, it became clear that it has a similar definition of spiritual dancing as the Shakers and you can get away with anything as long you don't cross your feet. That was the key for me; they have all kinds of crazy rhythms and they get away with these rhythms as long as they don't cross their feet. This influenced the piece, there's a little of that in there.

I also saw a documentary on Malcolm X where they showed some of the marching done in the Temples in The Nation of Islam in Harlem; I see a correlation between those marches and the marches of the Shakers. Malcolm X called it "movement in search of the miracle" and that "the miracle is in the movement". This all makes sense to me. We've used these marches in our research too.

And, of course we watched Dan Graham's "Rock my Religion" and drew connections between the Shakers and more hard-core rocking religion.

PWS: Earlier, you mentioned ecstatic movement; will that feature in this play?

KV: To some extent; I don't want to give the people the wrong impression that they are going to witness a charismatic service. The series of dances are simple and they might evoke that kind of feeling but no one is called upon to shake themselves into frenzy.

PWS: Will the movement all be set or will there be moments where the performers would be allowed to carry themselves beyond the fixed structure?

KV: No, the performance will be set. But hopefully, like all good dancing, we might see some off balance moments. There are some places in the piece where that's possible. But there will be some spinning, turning, twisting, reeling, and shaking.

PWS: May the dance take us to a higher plane! Thanks for your time.



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When Worlds Collide

By [Richard Brookhiser](#)

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In September 1810 Gouverneur Morris, draftsman of the Constitution, visited a Shaker community at New Lebanon, New York. The Shaker religion had been founded by Ann Lee, an Englishwoman who was married to a bum and who lost four children in infancy. In a vision Jesus told her that the original sin was sex. In 1774 she came to America with a handful of followers, who burgeoned in the nineteenth century, fortified by their own visions. Morris, a wit and a skirt-chaser as well as a patriot, was the unlikeliest man in the country to appreciate their ways. The Shakers of New Lebanon sang, danced, and urged him to abandon “the conjugal pleasures.” In his diary he called their doctrine “unnatural (and therefore impious).”

Worlds collide again in Soho where the Wooster Group, an almost-forty-year-old institution of the avant garde, is performing *Early Shaker Spirituals* – songs and dances recorded at a Shaker community in Maine in 1977. Aaron Copland made one song, “‘Tis the gift to be simple,” the centerpiece of *Appalachian Spring*, and thus a pop/classic hit. It is however but one item in a vast Shaker repertoire of revelation. In the Wooster Group production four actresses sing sixteen songs, then are joined by four actors in vigorous dances. The women are in their fifties and up, the men decades younger. The age differential propels you back in time, from reminiscence to youth. Occasionally the audience chuckles at some seeming incongruity — one song, we are told, was conveyed to a female Shaker by a bird, others by spirits — but the Wooster Group plays it straight. They want to convey you to a world of men and women in denim and gingham who let loose, though they never touch each other.

Shakers were not alone in their zeal. Mormons, Millerites, spiritualists, feminists, abolitionists, and ordinary evangelists burned with kindred fires, many still smoking today.

Outside afterwards was the summer ant-swarm of Manhattan — bellowing soccer bars, Tribeca with its restaurants and ziggurats of money. Gouverneur Morris would have ordered a cocktail and chatted up the ladies at the next table. Two worlds — both all-American.