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An Interview with Alex Timbers

David Savran



Figure 1. Le Corbusier (Daniel Larlham) investigates the amount of space a man needs to live. Boozey: The Life, Death, and Subsequent Vilification of Le Corbusier, and, More Importantly, Robert Moses. Ohio Theatre, New York City, 2005. (Photo by Joan Marcus)

Since World War II, New York theatre has been periodically reinvigorated by a succession of avantgardes whose legendary companies, from the Living Theatre and the Performance Group to Mabou Mines and the Wooster Group, are well known to readers of *TDR*. By the early 1990s, these artists (and their kin) acquired enough cultural capital to become a consecrated avantgarde, drawing dedicated and increasingly bourgeois audiences in New York and elsewhere, headlining international festivals, and becoming canonized by academics and the subject of reverential articles and reviews in the *New York Times* (see Savran 2005). Given the dominance of a cultural system that places a premium on youth and innovation, however, the consecration of middle-age rebels inevitably sparks the appearance of a young neo-avantgarde, one that returns to the seditious and denunciatory strategies of the historical avantgarde (of the early 20th century) while both critiquing and venerating the work of its immediate predecessors.



Figure 2. An angel (Alison Stacy Klein) shows L. Ron Hubbard the way. *A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant*. John Houseman Theater, New York City, 2003. (Photo by Alex Timbers)

Among the companies that emerged in the ferment of early 21st-century New York, Les Freres Corbusier finds itself in the peculiar position of being consecrated upon arrival. Its second piece, *A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant* (2003), earned a glowing review from Ben Brantley on the front page of the Arts section of the *New York Times* in which he labeled it the “gutsiest gimmick” of the theatre season and “a cult-hit blueprint for a young generation” (2003:E6). And while Brantley's continued championing of this “nerdy-slash-cool troupe” (2006:B7) does not in itself have the power to anoint it the new theatrical savior, his approval does put it in the august company of the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, and Richard Maxwell. Under the artistic direction of Alex Timbers, Les Freres has carved out a niche for itself as a pur-

veyor of an especially loopy variety of what many, including Timbers, call post-ironic theatre, an “aggressively visceral theater combining historical revisionism, multimedia excess, found texts, sophomoric humor, and rigorous academic research” (Les Freres Corbusier n.d.). Exploiting these methods and materials, the works that followed the *Scientology Pageant* include *Boozy: The Life, Death, and Subsequent Vilification of Le Corbusier*, and, *More Importantly, Robert Moses* (2005), a musical about city planning that pits Moses against the rebellious Jane Jacobs and features appearances by Le Corbusier and Daniel Libeskind, as well as real rabbits in miniature human clothes, masquerading as Roosevelt, Mussolini, and Goebbels; *Heddatron* (2006), a fantastical version of Ibsen's play in which a pregnant Michigan housewife is abducted by robots to the rainforests of Ecuador and forced to enact scenes from *Hedda Gabler* over and over with her metallic captors; *Hell House* (2006), a more or less literal staging of Pastor Keenan Roberts's evangelical Christian haunted house do-it-yourself kit that dramatizes the evils of abortion, homosexuality, drugs, heavy metal, and secular humanism; *Dance Dance Revolution* (2008), a disco musical set in an Orwellian future in which dancing is illegal; and *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (2009), a musical history pageant that uses the genocide-packed life of the seventh president to consider the virtues and (mainly) the vices of populism, the emblematically American political philosophy that cuts across left and right.

Given the anarchic, infantile, wildly theatrical, and hyperliterate nature of Les Freres's work, it would seem far closer to Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism—or Monty Python—than to the serious, austere, and militant work typical of much of the New York avantgarde. Only *Hell House*, the group's most enigmatic piece, can be easily accommodated to the avantgardist tradition. Filling St. Ann's Warehouse, the piece—“part installation, part performance, part haunted house” (Les Freres Corbusier, *Hell House*)—allows groups of visitors, with a demon for a guide,

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to wander through an eight-room labyrinth displaying the horrifying results of un-Christian behavior: a high school cheerleader getting a grisly abortion, a date-rape at a rave, a social out-cast gunning down his classmates, a gay marriage that ends in an AIDS ward, and a coffee klatch of secular humanists set upon by devils. Like the confrontational work of the Living Theatre or the Wooster Group, *Hell House* deliberately refuses to signal whether it is serious or satirical, leaving spectators to deal directly with the inflammatory material. No matter what their beliefs, they are likely to feel ill at ease, if for no other reason than they know there are millions of people in the US who really believe that latte-sipping ironists are doomed to an eternity in hell.

Although the other Freres pieces are more unambiguously comic, they also have been problematic for critics, who, Timbers recognizes, have a harder time dealing with comedy than a large swath of the theatre-going public, especially comedy that is deliberately silly and juvenile, and that depends more on horseplay, “well-rehearsed amateurism” (Snook 2006), and over-the-top theatricality than wit and verbal ingenuity. Indeed, the prospect of analyzing Les Freres’s work is daunting because I don’t want my analysis to eviscerate and overintellectualize theatre that so revels in the joys and unpredictability of live performance. For me, the challenge of writing about the thrill of Les Freres’s liveness is linked to the difficulty of analyzing pleasure, which the company delivers in vast quantities but which inevitably evaporates in the act of description. At the same time, I feel obliged to point out that the off-the-chart pleasure a piece like *Heddatron* provides for its audience places Les Freres in a sticky position culturally. The avantgarde, after all—of yesteryear and today—was consolidated as a reaction against a commercial theatre whose not-so-innocent pleasures have been relished by a bourgeoisie that uses it as relief from the storm and stress of business and family life. And many avantgardists through the years have rebelled against theatre as a commodity by generating performances that resist commodification, delivering *unpleasure* in the form of dense, arduous, arcane, and often confrontational experiences.

If Les Freres aims to *épater la bourgeoisie*, it does so in an inordinately user-friendly way, that is, by reimagining and reworking the epitome of theatre-as-commodity in the US: the musical. Given the explosion of Off-Off Broadway musicals since the 1990s, Les Freres is by no means the only small company to be tinkering with the genre. And there is a long history of the avantgarde poaching forms regarded as lowbrow, tawdry, or obscene. But Les Freres is unique in its radical mixing of elements from high culture (like Michel Foucault, Ibsen, and Le Corbusier himself) with middlebrow culture (especially middlebrow music, like disco, bubble-gum pop, Cher, the Spice Girls, and “Total Eclipse of the Heart”). For example, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (written and directed by Alex Timbers) represents a kind of Brechtian musical, with catchy songs (written by Michael Friedman, who is also a member of the Civilians) in the style of Emo, or “emotional hardcore,” a guitar-driven, melodically expressive post-punk with prominent, impassioned, and confessional vocals. The performance feels at times like a cross between a rock concert and a play and looks like what might happen if a bunch of very talented, 20-something slackers got together and decided to do a musical about American populism and the politics of the early republic, using Andrew Jackson as its fulcrum. Jackson, the frontiersman, is much too interesting, angst-ridden, and charming to hate, despite his genocidal practices, while his antagonists, in fake period costumes, come across as “doily-wearing muffin tops” (Timbers 2009:37). Much of it is directly presentational, with the actors careening between their performer selves and historical personages. As in Brecht, songs interrupt the action while elaborating on the personal feelings of characters and the political context. The contemporary feel of the piece, along with political slogans that sound as if they were spewed out yesterday (“It’s time for us to take this country back!” [Timbers 2009:41]), makes it clear that this piece about Jackson is also a critique of the modern populism of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.

If *Andrew Jackson* provides a new model for the theatrical genre most stigmatized as middlebrow, *Heddatron* (written by Elizabeth Meriwether and directed by Timbers) is the Les



Figure 3. Tom Cruise (Anthony Quinonez) testifies in court. A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant. *The Powerhouse Theatre*, Los Angeles, 2004. (Photo by Alex Timbers)

Freres show that most explicitly reflects on the company's high-brow antecedents, the art theatre inaugurated by Ibsen and emblemized by his most celebrated and suicidally frustrated housewife, Hedda Gabler. This "brainy highbrow" comedy riffs on themes central to theatrical modernism, and especially to Ibsen—entrapment, objectification, and the desire for transcendence—by literalizing Hedda's imprisonment and the mechanization of human subjects (Smith 2006). The stage is divided into three domestic spaces, each located in a different temporal moment: the present-day living room of a suicidal woman named Jane with a fondness for Hedda Gabler; her kitchen some

time after her abduction; and the dining room of Ibsen and Mrs. Ibsen in which the reserved playwright idly flirts with a Kitchen Slut some minutes before his feral archrival, Strindberg, fucks her. About 40 minutes into the play, the walls suddenly swing aside to reveal the shadows of an enchanted, emerald-green rainforest into which Jane steps, as if by magic, and in which she is forced to enact Ibsen's play word-for-word with an ensemble of six robots (designed by Botmatrix, a robot arts collective), among them, a delicately silhouetted Aunt Julie, a slithering broom as Berta the maid, and a skulking cluster of vine leaves.

By using robots, *Heddatron* presents a clever updating of Ibsen's tragedy that plausibly imagines a contemporary housewife as imprisoned and despairing as Ibsen's, with a husband, Rick, no less stultifying than George Tesman, encircled by a society as unfeeling and impersonal as robots. A crucial part of the updating is the detonation of Ibsen's well-made play structure by a series of interruptive narratives that antedate and postdate Jane/Hedda's ordeal and are tangentially related to her story. Like so many of the modernist classics for which *Hedda* helped pave the way, *Heddatron* reflects upon itself via Jane and Rick's 10-year-old daughter, Nugget (as in Chicken Mc), who is preparing an oral report on Ibsen and the well-made play for her theatre history class and provides a running metacommentary on the piece.

But *Heddatron* represents more than an updating of Ibsen's masterpiece. It is also a meditation on the position of live theatre in the 21st century. For like the Wooster Group, Builders Association, and countless other avantgardist theatre troupes, Les Freres mixes media promiscuously. Indeed, mass-mediated and televisual forms are used so regularly south of 14th Street that one would be hard-pressed to find a company or director with serious avantgardist credentials that does not employ them. Several times during *Heddatron*, the video image of an interloping Engineer appears on the living room wall while a film student in the kitchen tapes and projects an interview with Rick and his Rambo-esque brother. The persistent contrast between live and prerecorded media serves perhaps as a reminder that *Hedda Gabler* was first performed as cinema was emerging, a new medium that would soon supplant theatre as a popular form. With *Heddatron*, Les Freres resurrects Ibsen's heroine 120 years later (when theatre is in much more dire straits) and foregrounds recorded and robotic performance to dramatize and protest theatre's supersession and obsolescence by a host of mass-produced and distributed media.

Les Freres Corbusier

All productions directed by Alex Timbers. Date and location of premieres.

- 2001 *Un Piece de Mouvement de Mouvement Historique Avec Le Mathematique*. Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- 2002 *Reconciliation of the Dialectical Articulations*. chashama, New York City.
- 2002 *The Franklin Thesis* by Bradley Bazzle. HERE Arts Center, New York City.
- 2002 *The Shaker Sisters*. The Flamboyant Theater and Collective: Unconscious, New York City.
- 2003 *A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant* by Kyle Jarrow, conceived by Alex Timbers. The Tank, New York City.
- 2004 *Manifest Destiny: A Historical Rock Spectacular* conceived by Alex Timbers. The Tank, New York City.
- 2005 *Boozy: The Life, Death, and Subsequent Vilification of Le Corbusier, and, More Importantly, Robert Moses* by Alex Timbers. Conceived by Juliet Chia, David Morris, and Alex Timbers. Ohio Theatre, New York City.
- 2006 *Heddatron* by Elizabeth Meriwether. HERE Arts Center, New York City.
- 2006 *Hell House*, with official text by Pastor Keenan Roberts. St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, NY.
- 2008 *Dance Dance Revolution* by Alex Timbers. Ohio Theater, New York City.
- 2009 *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* by Alex Timbers. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman. Public Theater, New York City.
- 2009 *Hoover Comes Alive!* by Sean Cunningham. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman. La Jolla Playhouse (workshop). La Jolla, CA.
- In process *Incompetent Scumbags*. Written by John J. Avlon.

Ultimately, *Heddatron*, like all Les Freres pieces, represents a celebration of live performance, of evanescence, and of error; of the chasm between here and there, now and then. Even the robots gaze backwards as well as forwards. With their unmistakably retro look, they come as the sign not of some posthuman future but of the fantasies and fears of playwrights and filmmakers a generation after Ibsen. Although impressively constructed and animated, the clunky and cumbersome machines are spellbinding because of their fallibility (some of the biggest laughs are sparked by robots accidentally on purpose colliding into furniture). They are a reminder that live theatre is messy and unpredictable and the well-made play a formal device as unstable and flimsy as an animated piece of tin. But *Heddatron* celebrates more than liveness. It dares even to commemorate theatre as a cultural tradition. In the work of what other company would a fourth grader be studying theatre history? Les Freres, in short, makes theatre for theatre geeks. In the age of digital performance, only theatre geeks could possibly care about the genesis of *Hedda Gabler* or the rivalry between Ibsen and Strindberg.

The most scandalous aspect of the work of Les Freres Corbusier—and of Alex Timbers—is not its irreverence but its accessibility and popularity. Timbers has been engaged since his college days at Yale in imagining and constructing a theatre in which avantgardism and commerce are no longer enemies. Unlike so many of his peers who work only with their own companies, Timbers is a director for hire, staging new plays (*The Language of Trees* for Roundabout [2008]) and musicals (*Gutenberg! The Musical!* [2006] and *Fat Camp* [2009] for the New York Musical Theatre Festival and *Bat Boy* [2008] for John Hopkins University) in addition to his work with Les Freres. But given the antipathy toward the Great White Way on the part of so many avantgardists, Timbers will be hard-pressed to retain the allegiance of those who think the Antichrist has appeared in the shape of Disney Theatrical Productions, with which he is developing two projects. In other words, populism is more than just the subject matter of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. It also represents Timbers's philosophy as an artist. Yet as he well knows, populism is



Figure 4. *Dancing Freemasons instruct Le Corbusier in the “hidden architecture.”* *Boozy: The Life, Death, and Subsequent Vilification of Le Corbusier, and, More Importantly, Robert Moses.* *Ohio Theatre, New York City, 2005.* (Photo by Joan Marcus)

easier to enunciate as a belief system than to practice. Aficionados of “downtown theatre,” he notes, consider Broadway “the enemy.” But what if, he asks, “Broadway might just be its salvation” (in Kamer 2009)? If Timbers has his way, Walt Disney will be doing somersaults in his grave.

The interview that follows was conducted on 28 September 2009 at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

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DAVID SAVRAN: How did you get interested in theatre?

ALEX TIMBERS: I went to an all-boys school in New York and did theatre every year, beginning in first grade. I was the Angel Gabriel.

SAVRAN: In the Christmas pageant?

TIMBERS: I was in the Christmas pageant; I played Charles Dickens in sixth grade; I played Madame Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* in seventh. And I saw theatre when I was growing up. *Tommy* was probably the thing that got me most excited about theatre. But since I had a public access TV show when I was 11, my plan was to do TV/film things. And I pursued that in high school while doing theatre. When I applied to college, I had a choice between a film-training program or a liberal arts school and I ended up going to Yale because it just seemed difficult to pass up. When I went to Yale they had all these requirements before you could use the equipment, so I thought, "Screw this." The only practical way to apply all I was interested in was to do improv comedy and theatre. And I started becoming interested in the management side. I would sneak into graduate classes at Yale School of Drama and I ran the college theatre company, the Dramat. And read Bob Brustein's *Making Scenes* [Limelight Editions, 1974], which got me really excited about regional theatre. But in terms of experimental theatre, the only thing I knew about it was from class, when Marc Robinson would show things like [the Wooster Group's] *Brace Up!* [1993]. And *Brace Up!* on video out of context, with a bunch of 20-year-old snotty kids, is, like, a disaster. So my experience with experimental theatre was to think it was very navel-gazing, very serious. And when I came to the city and actually saw *Brace Up!* [in 2003], I thought it was hilarious and I was crying at the end. Someone had pulled something over on me.

My final year in college [2001] I created a piece called *Une Pièce de Mouvement Historique avec la Géométrie* and I was trying—without actually having seen it—to send up as well as celebrate early BAM Next Wave stuff. So it was four guys in sherbet-colored pants and wife-beaters with no socks or shoes doing, like, gestural choreography to Steve Reich and Philip Glass. And we were the descendants of Corbusier, telling the story of math in six discrete sections, and there was a Corbusier Machine Monster who wanted us to stop dancing, for telling the history of math vilified him. It started with the formation of the earth and ended with postmodernism. Math and man came together in the fourth section, which was the life of Thomas Jefferson, in which Le Corbusier turns Sally Hemmings into a Sally Hemmings Machine Monster—and it was preposterous. It had the things that have been in all the Les Freres shows: it was mocking academia while celebrating it, mocking avantgarde theatre tropes while celebrating them. And we created a course packet that was six pages of outline of what was going on in the piece, with footnotes. If you didn't read this, you would have had no clue. Plus there were primary sources and blank pages in the back so you could take notes. There was a reading period before the show that was actually longer than the piece itself.

So when I came to New York, the first thing I did was intern at the Manhattan Theatre Club with Lynne Meadow. MTC was interesting to me because it quickly disabused me of the idea that the regional theatre movement was still vital. I realized that regional theatres were just producing whatever MTC or Second Stage had done two years before.

SAVRAN: The same small group of directors working with the same small group of playwrights.



Figure 5. Jane (Carolyn Baeumler) reading Hedda Gabler with robots in an enchanted jungle. Heddatron. HERE Arts Center, New York City, 2006. (Photo by Joan Marcus)

TIMBERS: So I started producing on dark nights for different companies, and directing a little bit. And doing the dark nights was a way to produce other people's work and learn how to do so in a thrifty manner but also to start getting your friends involved and doing your own work. What I had quickly figured out was that no one gets an opportunity in New York to direct O'Neill or Chekhov before the age of, like, 45, unless they do something...unless they have some sort of momentum from a breakout project or found their own company. And the most successful people who had created their own theatre companies had a really specific mission. In the first press cycle the company gets well known, in the second press cycle the director gets well known, and then you can potentially leverage that into doing other work. It wasn't quite as cynical as that sounds, but I knew the only way I was going to direct the stuff I wanted was to create my own company and control the entire event. Alexis Soloski [in the *Village Voice*] picked Les Freres up early on as being worthwhile, so she gave us a little momentum. Over the years, the press has been really kind to us in terms of helping us take the work to the next level.

After MTC, I got this amazing job in programming at the New Victory and I was going out of town to see a lot of US theatre as well as watching videotapes of international companies, circuses from Australia and all sorts of crazy things, and really training my eye. And then we did our second show [*A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant*, 2003]. I'd been wanting for a while to create a show about Scientology with little kids, thinking that idea was interesting and potentially kind of emotional. And I convinced the writer [Kyle Jarrow] and we went quickly into production to get it ready for the holidays. I knew it was a good enough idea that it would be worth getting a good press agent, Don Summa, to exploit it because otherwise people would miss it. And the Scientologists started coming after us, which was really stupid. (Actually, just yesterday I passed the head of East Coast operations walking on the street and it was kind of chilling. He looks like Willem Dafoe. Like a taller, scarier Willem Dafoe.) Ben Brantley came and he really liked the show but questioned whether the writer and I had any idea that what we had done was good. Because he'd never heard of us before, he thought we might have lucked into the show, which is a fair response. But then that in theory set us up to get him to cover our

other shows. And honestly, he's been very kind to us—he's always given us positive reviews. For experimental artists, it's incredibly helpful to have some consistency in terms of who is adjudicating your show in the critical community. That was especially crucial with *Andrew Jackson* [2009]. Doing it at the Public, it was really important to me that my company be involved, because framing it as a new rock musical puts it in the line of *Spring Awakening* or *Rent*, which doesn't benefit anyone. But saying it's a Les Freres show, suddenly you understand. One commercial producer came and had a very literal, very critical response, "The opening song is called 'Populism Yea Yea,' but the rest of the show's not about populism at all. What are they doing?" And then the first sentence of Ben Brantley's review is a single word—"Populism." We always knew the show was ultimately a dissection of populism and now the most important theatre critic in the world has rung that truth up a flagpole. Talking about its political or intellectual merit, not how it relates to *Spring Awakening* or the choreography in *Rent*, helps shape the dialogue. *Andrew Jackson's* been interesting because he is, like, eternally zeitgeist-y, and every politician, whether Democratic or Republican, comes from his rib. He represents a lot of things we love in our leaders.

SAVRAN: Thinking about companies like the Wooster Group, Radiohole, Elevator Repair Service, and Richard Maxwell, I see a tradition in the American avantgarde of mixing high art and popular art. The Wooster Group, for example, juxtaposing Thornton Wilder and Pigmeat Markham. But unlike most of those groups, you turn to middlebrow culture, where things are not cool, except maybe in a kitschy, campy way. I mean, you're making musical theatre, for God's sake, the most un-cool theatre there is.

TIMBERS: I have a very complicated relationship with musical theatre. My biggest problem with theatre more generally—because I love it so much—is I think there's very little dialogue with popular culture. People like Will Ferrell movies and Ben Stiller movies and listen to Fall Out Boy and things like that. People do not listen to show tunes—and while I love show tunes, now that I've been doing more film and TV stuff, I'm reminded (and I don't mean to sound obnoxious) how close to culturally irrelevant theatre can be.

SAVRAN: It *is* culturally irrelevant.

TIMBERS: For me that's really tough. Too often there's no reason why a thing is a show, a piece of live theatre. While I enjoy some classic musicals, and I'll go see *South Pacific* at Lincoln Center and be fascinated and wowed by it, what interests me in directing are things that are much more visceral and relate to contemporary popular culture. Why do no musicals feel as cool as music videos? Why does all the music and video technology within them still feel at least 10 years old? The biggest vacuum right now is in comedy, which seems still to be stuck in the 1940s. Today, when you talk about broad comedy in the theatre, you think of Neil Simon, not *Superbad*. And heaven forbid there be any interesting visuals. Every comedy is a single-set, door-slamming farce or it takes place in a kitchen. This is theatre that appeals to dull and aged



Figure 6. Jane confronts Rick (Gibson Frazier) and Cubby (Sam Forman). Heddatron. HERE Arts Center, New York City, 2006. (Photo by Alex Timbers)

temperaments. How do you bring a visceral, comic, pop-culturally aware sensibility to the stage, so that a young person might feel that it actually competes with anything on the internet?

SAVRAN: I think of your work not in relation to *Spring Awakening* but to the Golden Age of musical theatre and movie musicals, the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. *Anything Goes*, "The Carioca," "The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat." In my eyes, *Dance Dance Revolution* was a rewriting of a '30s musical in the age of disco, a sort of insane *Saturday Night Fever*.

TIMBERS: It's funny because my college thesis was on "the bump" in movie musicals, whenever the visual or narrative or emotional vocabulary allows something to spring into song. I watched over a hundred of those movies and am fascinated by that.

I have an attraction to things that are somewhat, well, nerdy. And I have a sincere affection for it while realizing it's kind of silly. And I think other people like these things too but are per-

haps unwilling to admit it. The thing about building a post-ironic theatre is, how can you tip the hat while saying, okay, this is pretty preposterous. And yet, once we admit these things are silly, can we then wholly commit ourselves to how much we love them? That's how I feel about musical theatre, or about the didactic, educational material in the shows. And it's how I feel about even the references we make to avantgarde theatre. All these references are very, very tightly controlled and thought through. Radiohole is fascinating to me because it's so technologically nuanced and constructed so tightly, yet what they love is a sort of chaos. Especially when they get drunk or high onstage.

But I would flip out if that actu-

ally happened in one of my shows. I like to tightly control the experience of what the audience is seeing.

SAVRAN: Of course, one thing that distinguishes Les Freres from a lot of other groups is that you work with many different collaborators, while retaining a very definite fingerprint.

TIMBERS: Elevator Repair Service was inspirational in terms of constructing a company, while adobe theatre was in terms of ethos—downtown theatre with an uptown sensibility, or uptown theatre with a downtown sensibility, whichever it was. I thought it would be really great if you could combine the best of the downtown theatre with the smarts and professionalism of uptown theatre. And so for *Boozy* [2005], Doug Cohen was doing the music but Katherine Profeta from ERS was doing the choreography. That juxtaposition seemed really interesting to me. I wanted to be able to create more like a dance company, with two producers. I would have artistic control, and a relationship with a group of people I use over and over. But there's no institutional obligation to work with them over and over. People change, get older, their aesthetics change, they want to do different things. So I don't want to be tied down to what other people want the company to be.



Figure 7. A girl (Katie Vagnino) gets raped at a rave then contemplates taking her own life. Hell House. St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, NY, 2006. (Photo by Richard Termine)

SAVRAN: How do you think about the range of work you've done?

TIMBERS: There have been two strains to the company's work. *Andrew Jackson* was the apex of one strand and *Dance Dance Revolution* the other—it's completely sophomoric, glib, and way over-designed. Whereas *Andrew Jackson* has a lot more rigor and intellectual and emotional merit. And I think that show's a first for the company because it delivers much more of an emotional payload. And Jackson is, like, a real '70s anti-hero, acted by such a charming person, Ben Walker, and so we identify with him in a way and want to like this awful man.

SAVRAN: Which, I believe, you studiously avoid in the other pieces, most obviously *Hell House* [2006].

TIMBERS: In Los Angeles, *Jackson* had less of a moral position. It was more, "Isn't it difficult to be Andrew Jackson? Wow, that must have been a really hard decision." It was interesting to me to actually get someone to identify with Andrew Jackson—I mean, LA wouldn't exist if Andrew Jackson hadn't done this horrible thing to the Native population. And people came out with that reaction, which in itself was cool and complicated. But as we changed the character, this no longer seemed a worthwhile path. We had to take more of a stand on our feelings about Andrew Jackson. On the other hand, *Dance Dance Revolution* is much less calculated. It's about taking the company's style and just sending it to the limit—and I feel some people hated that show. Some people hate every show our company does because high style and raucous comedy are always divisive. But the thing with *Dance Dance* is that people don't know how to talk about comedy. With comedy, even if a critic had an enjoyable experience, the more you think about it and actually have to set things down in words, you start feeling stupid, so you start to worry: "I guess this could have been funnier. I guess that other thing I laughed at was pretty sophomoric." Analyzing it kills it. What's tough about New York—and I don't think is true of Seattle or Austin or LA—is there's not a single theatre company devoted to producing comedies, unless they're very, very traditional or sketch comedy. So while *Dance Dance Revolution* probably didn't deserve a production as lavish as it received, it was fun to produce a comedy and give it visuals on that scale because it's ultimately a unique experience for an audience. To see something like that. And then it went away...and that's the glory of theatre.

SAVRAN: *Hell House*, on the other hand, sparked a lot of discussions with colleagues, friends, students. In other words, experienced theatergoers did not know what to make of it. I liked the lack of a clear signal of meaning and the fact that it was so deadpan. But as I said, I think a lot of people, or at least a lot of my friends, were sort of frustrated. They wanted satire.

TIMBERS: When we were doing the *Scientology Pageant* [2006/2007] in LA, there were people doing a comedic *Hell House*. And it was fine but definitely missed the point. It was people running around, "I got shit on my hands"—it was like, easy. And the evangelicals were furious with



Figure 8. *An abortion gone awry*. *Hell House*. *St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, NY, 2006*. (Photo by Joan Marcus)



Figure 9. *The 53-member cast in flight. Dance Dance Revolution. Ohio Theatre, New York City, 2008. (Photo by Joan Marcus)*

them, because they lied to them in order to get the rights—it was just awful. So we were thinking, how do you pull this off? And we contacted Pastor Keenan Roberts and said, “Look, we want to do this. And we want to *really* do it. We don’t want to make fun of it.” And he said, “We think the message will win out.” And we said, “We don’t think it will, but okay.”

SAVRAN: So you were up front about it.

TIMBERS: We said, “We think this is a theatre of hate, but we also feel like it should be seen by people.” Because at the time it was really about the Red State/Blue State conversation. A lot of our shows start out with a question and for this, it was, Did you know this was happening in America? That was fascinating to us. And casting was really tricky because we wanted to make sure we weren’t getting people who were doing it for political purposes. Because then you get into trouble. And we took it to Susan Feldman [at St. Ann’s Warehouse] who thought it was a great idea. But we disagreed about how you tell people about it. I thought we should say to the press simply, “This is happening.” She wanted to say—understandably—it was a comedic satire or a serious anthropological look at another group’s beliefs. And then we had different opinions about postcards. Eventually we found a cartoon that *Time Out* had run the year before when we initially planned to do it, a cartoon that had an irreverent spirit but wasn’t overtly comedic. The only thing we intentionally excluded from our Hell House was the final group prayer room, which you do have in a real Hell House, but we thought seemed inappropriate and disrespectful. What was interesting to us was the whole sincerity/irony thing because I kept saying, we’ve got to play this straight. We even slightly trimmed existing scenes because they were so outrageous that we were concerned people would think we were editorializing. Ultimately, if you went in wanting to see irony, it was an irony fest. If you went in wanting sincerity, it was sincere. There were these drunk bachelorette girls who thought it was hilarious, and Ugg-wearing hipsters who thought it was really ironic, and 50-year-old Latino men who were, like, weeping,

because they were evangelicals. It was a Rorschach test. But some people did not like that aspect of it. They want to be told what it is.

SAVRAN: In thinking about the tradition of which you're a part, I can't help but think of Charles Ludlam, Ethyl Eichelberger, or early Charles Busch. And really bizarre, campy, weird, grotesque comedy.

TIMBERS: The funny thing is I don't really like Ludlam's shows. I read Ludlam's plays but I never actually saw him do them, and I know it's not the same seeing others stage them. I think of Ludlam as one of my forebears, my grandparents. And yet I have a real aversion to camp. I think you could describe some of our work as camp, but I like to think that it isn't.

SAVRAN: Well, there are so many different ways of defining camp.

TIMBERS: And I direct drag queens a lot. I direct Miss Richfield and Dixie Longate—I love camp in that way. I just don't think of it in the context of the company.

SAVRAN: What about your name? What about Le Corbusier? I can sort of imagine you the illegitimate progeny of a modernist icon.

TIMBERS: The name came from that first piece when we were the disciples of Corbusier, so we were *les frères* Corbusier. The reason I liked it was because it seemed exactly what the company's about. It sounds like a completely pretentious, experimental theatre company name, but then when you think about it, it's really stupid. It's the Corbusier Brothers. And that is just dumb.

SAVRAN: And of course, that was not even his real name.

TIMBERS: And it's not grammatically correct either. That's why I find it funny when the *New Yorker* always puts an accent on the company name. No one else ever does that. There's a very mischievous, little-boy side to me that likes it when the company is able—and we can't do this so much anymore—to pull one over on people. That used to happen more in the days of the *Scientology Pageant*, which is still very complicated to think about. Because I've actually been with Scientologists and when they started talking to me about it, they get very upset.

SAVRAN: Like *Hell House*, it's a kind of blank parody.

TIMBERS: It's sort of like kids doing [Richard] Maxwell. I saw *Drummer Wanted* [2003] and thought, It'd be really funny if kids did this. There's something about kids, particularly ages 8 to 12—after that, a loss of innocence happens, so it's not funny anymore when kids are saying crazy things. And all the kids in that show *do* understand what they're saying. We talked them through it, but we also explain that when they do it in a particular confused manner, people love it. People want to believe that they haven't a clue what they're saying.

SAVRAN: And I could spot the kids who just want to be stars.

TIMBERS: Oh, yes! I very carefully pick the kids, I always get a girl who kind of lisps or stutters as the angel. Because you would think you would have someone who, as your narrator, can at least speak. And you always see a couple of kids who want to be on Broadway, and a couple who might have just wandered in, some kid's brother. I want the mix of different types.

SAVRAN: I know that you were brought up Roman Catholic. And besides the obvious connection with the *Scientology Pageant*, isn't there something about the pageantry of the Catholic Church?

TIMBERS: Right out of college, I was seriously considering going for an MA in performance studies. For me, ritual technique is really interesting. And I think one of the successes of the company is in trying to follow a format rigorously. Particularly in mash-ups. The Wooster



Figure 10. *Male Soloist* (James Barry): “Take a stand against the elite.” Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson. Public Theater, New York City, 2009 (Photo by Adrienne Campbell-Holt)

Group does that too. It’s all in the little details that make you feel like it’s the disco era again, the little nods and winks. Or when you’re flipping the argument, which is the other thing we do a lot, that Brechtian negative argument where you’re celebrating vilified people or vilifying celebrated people—the rigor with which you pursue that, and that point of view, is what makes it successful.

SAVRAN: I’m a little surprised to hear you mention Brecht. Why Brecht?

TIMBERS: I’m a huge Brecht fan. The basic idea of a *Lehrstück* is valuable as it relates to Les Freres. To some extent, you could describe the company as performing educational theatre and the persuasive, bald-faced didacticism of a *Lehrstück* is a close cousin to that. Also, stopping the dramatic action to have a song—that is very pertinent to *Andrew Jackson*. I like how he describes the theatre as a boxing match, serving up aggressive, lowbrow, subversive entertainment to the bourgeoisie—these sorts of things are completely relevant to our work. *Boozy* and *Scientology Pageant* were the most clearly influenced. Like two-thirds of Brecht’s plays, both of those ended in trials and kangaroo courts. *Boozy* actually ended in a *Caucasian Chalk Circle* thing where they’re, like, pulling Le Corbusier back and forth. And we had titlecards, the whole nine yards.

My final college production was a Brechtian *How to Succeed [in Business without Really Trying]*. Which was crazy, all the women were impregnated by their bosses, all the bosses were ruthless mercenaries, and it was performed on this stark white and glass sort of avantgarde American Repertory Theatre set...it was bonkers. We had confetti cannons as they were pulling out the innards of the CEO at the end and shooting them across the theatre. And then the curtain call had someone on a megaphone announcing every single actor’s full name. It was not what Yale had expected. (*Laughs.*)

SAVRAN: Other playwrights or practitioners?

TIMBERS: I really like Dürrenmatt, I feel there's a sensibility relationship. And certain plays: *Coriolanus* is a model for *Andrew Jackson*. And then the companies we've really loved—I guess when I say “we” I mean “me”—Elevator Repair Service, Richard Maxwell, Radiohole, Wooster Group, exactly the people you mentioned. *Wurst*, Radiohole's *Nibelungen* show, was one of the best I've ever seen. It's up there with *Brace Up!* the Ivo van Hove *Hedda Gabler*—my top-ever shows.

SAVRAN: Do you ever see anything on Broadway?

TIMBERS: I see tons on Broadway. I try to see almost every musical unless I think it's going to be just a throwback. I'm developing a couple things for Broadway for commercial producers and so it's been interesting to figure out how that relationship's going to work. The next thing I'm going to do is the Pee-Wee Herman show with Paul Reubens. That'll be in LA [12 January–7 February 2010; on Broadway 26 October 2010]. Then for Disney is a Peter Pan prequel called *Peter and the Star-Catchers*. We did it out in La Jolla in January [2009] and it went really well, as a Page To Stage [a play development program]. It's about how Peter Pan became Peter Pan and Captain Hook became Captain Hook, and it utilizes Mary Zimmerman-style story-theatre techniques, but more virile. I find some of her stuff is amazing and some of it...precious. I'm codirecting that with Roger Rees; and Rick Elice, who wrote *Jersey Boys*, is writing it. I'm doing another show for

Disney that's a bigger musical based on a holiday film they have the rights to. The thing with commercial theatre is you need a credit, and then you're in the club, but until you get it, there's no way to become part of it. The Disney show came about because of *Hell House* and *Gutenberg*, while an upcoming Roundabout musical ultimately came from *Heddatron*. All my larger-scale work can be traced back to a Les Freres show. And my goal would be someday to be a Steven Soderbergh type. There is no theatre director out there who does big commercial shows and also small, complicated, political, experimental theatre. That's the sort of career path I would like to have. We'll see what happens.

Postscript, 20 September 2010: Context changes everything. On the Broadway stage, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* is explosive. Given the Tea Party's recent electoral victories, the play testifies to history's excruciating habit of repeating itself. It discloses the tragedy not of Jackson, but of the USA. It is baldly, viscerally about the *now*.



Figure 11. *Andrew Jackson* (Ben Walker): “Populism, Yea, Yea!” *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. Kirk Douglas Theater, Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles, 2008. (Photo by Craig Schwartz)