

PAUL LAZAR ON *THREE AMERICANISMS*, WRITTEN BY MAC WELLMAN

I have had the profound and complicated opportunity to direct many of Mac Wellman's plays over the years and collaborate closely with him on all of them. So, when asked to choose a play for this troubling moment, I immediately considered Wellman as one of the few writers who can encompass the strangeness of the world. I re-read "Three Americanisms", and was instantly startled by its uncanny, prophetic attunement to our times, despite its having been written close to thirty years ago. Via the simple structure of three interrelated monologues, the play depicts a trio of defensive, angry, reactive, suspicious, superstitious, vulnerable, and fierce--yet, compelling people. These people are burdened with the cruel task of finding a viable way to live in an environment that is physically and psychologically threatening, and so they utilize extreme physical and verbal postures and language in order to survive on a beleaguered planet (ours).

Mac Wellman's writing is a rich challenge for actors. The language of the play is grounded in reality, yet it is poetically heightened. The play asks actors to create vivid, real characters who speak a language that is more than real.

At the suggestion of the author I am quoting from his introductions to two of his plays, "Cellophane" and "Three Americanisms". Although "Cellophane" is the not play we are enacting it is the beginning of an experiment in language and theatre which culminated with "Three Americanisms".

From the introduction to "Cellophane"....

"Sometime in 1984 I decided to make a language experiment, using as a basis, some aberrant verb forms I had come across, once again, in H.L. Mencken's *The American Language*. For a long time these bothered me, got under my skin. I found myself shuffling phrases around, making new, even awfuller combinations: "If I hadda been, I mighta could." Terrible, terrible, terrible. This was based on slang or on some debased idea of slang, but wasn't really slang at all. No one ever talked like that. And yet, the more I considered the matter, the more it seemed that the phrase comprised a very exact statement, both philosophically and emotionally, of an idea very difficult to express in any other way. Eurika!

This was the undiscovered continent of bad writing, and so I set out to explore the place. For two and a half years I wrote a page or two every day, pages full of clumsy constructions, double (and triple) negatives, demented neologisms, and every conceivable combination of out of fashion, dated, or wholly artificial slang. Not to mention argot, cant, the tortured language of the workplace and the pitchman. I explored verbal detritus of every kind. I found to my great surprise that the stuff possessed great expressive power, was usually about important ideas, and almost always was far more speakable than the better class of American language....."

From the introduction to "Three Americanisms"

"After my extended language experiments, "Cellophane" (1986) and "Terminal Hip" (1990), I made the conscious decision to forego this drastic direction lest it become a manner of its own, a mere style.....But in 1990, or a little later, I had occasion to write three more pieces, not entirely in the earlier vein, but similar.....As with "Cellophane" and "Terminal Hip" a ghostly narrative runs through the series."