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Richard Foreman, at Play in the Theater Lab

The Pioneering Theater-Maker Talks About His First Production in Four Years

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**



Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

Playwright and experimental theater pioneer Richard Foreman in his home on Wooster Street

Richard Foreman is a playwright who does a lot more than simply write plays. Since founding the experimental Ontological-Hysteric Theater in SoHo more than four decades ago, he has presided over heady spectacles that mingle the conventions of theater with multimedia effects enlisted through sound, video and stroboscopic stage sets designed as embodiments of the working mind. His new play, "Old-Fashioned Prostitutes (A True Romance)," opened this month at the Public Theater and runs through June 2.

Focusing on an aged man thinking back over his life in the company of two alternately coquettish and cerebral ladies of the night, "Old-Fashioned Prostitutes" follows a familiar mode for the Ontological-Hysteric, which briefly made its home in the 1980s at Joseph Papp's Public Theater, before moving to the St. Mark's Church from 1992 to 2010. Dialogue is doled out in strangely stylized philosophical vignettes, and action assumes head-scratching form in flashing lights and a



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character who mysteriously marches across the stage with a drum.



Enlarge Image

Joan Marcus

Alenka Kraigher, Nicolas Noreña and Rocco Sisto in 'Old-Fashioned Prostitutes (A True Romance)'

Theater of the sort, ever enterprising and absurd, has earned Mr. Foreman a wealth of awards and a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant." The 74-year-old artist, who has written, directed and designed more than 50 of his own plays, recently turned away from theater to focus on film—his impressionistic feature "Once Every Day" began a theatrical run in February—but has since returned to the medium he has helped expand for decades.

At his home in SoHo, with "more than 20,000" books on shelves all around him, Mr. Foreman spoke with The Wall Street Journal about his new play, his fondness for disorientation and his unusual theatrical predilections.

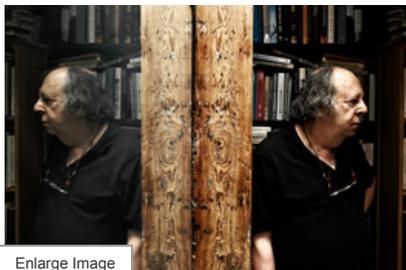
It's been four years since you staged your last play. How does it feel to be back?

It feels good. It doesn't feel any different than it ever felt. I've spent my life doing this. I stopped [to make films], but I discovered that making film is mostly editing, and sitting there for a year and a half not seeing anybody while editing by myself for 10 hours a day began to seem a little debilitating. I thought I needed contact with people again, even though I'm ambivalent about that.

What does theater offer you that film doesn't?

I realized I couldn't use the kind of rhetoric or the kind of language that normally is present in my plays. It didn't work in film. It was too obvious and pretentious. Everybody says that films are about imagery and what's happening, and I found that certainly to be true. Language just seemed excessive and unnecessary.

How long did you rehearse the new play with the stage-set in place?



Enlarge Image

Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

The play is Mr. Foreman's first production in four years.

Eight weeks. It's like we had eight weeks of what is the equivalent of one "tech week" for a normal play. Of course, there are continual adjustments. I can't tell you why. It's just watching and, by intuition, wondering what could I do that wouldn't seem so stupid. I've written a lot about the theory behind what I do. I read a mammoth amount of material, mostly philosophy, psychoanalysis and aesthetic theory. When it comes time

for making art, however, I try to erase all of that from my head and just proceed thoroughly by instinct.

Having worked for so long, are you closer to answering existential questions posed in your plays, or do they continue to vex just the same?

The real questions always elude you. You make another stab at them and you just miss, so you have to try again. It feels the same always. There's one thing that I'm interested in: capturing the head, the consciousness, bumping into the world. How can I use that moment of bumping into the world, hopefully without habit and preconditions, and see it fresh, again and again and again?

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Richard Foreman, Back at Play in the Laboratory

Has what you want from theater changed?

I still am looking for something... I remember sitting backstage with my actors before a show and saying, "What would you rather see tonight, a play that you think is moving and wonderful, or one when you walk out and say, 'What the hell was that?!'" They knew who I was, so they knew the proper response.

You once referred to your work aspiring toward a "disorientation massage."

That's from a book I read 40 years ago by the American philosopher Morris Peckham, "Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior & the Arts." I still think it's true. There are still plenty of people who get very angry at my plays. I have a devoted audience, and I also have people seeing my work for the first time and think, "This is terrible!"



Enlarge Image

Joan Marcus

Alenka Kraigher

Do you like that to some extent?

No. When I was young I thought, "Wow, this is great—this proves I'm really good because I'm having a negative effect on people." We all know that great art has always split people. But as I'm older, it bothers me because I'm doing what I think is beautiful. Why don't they see?

You've also aspired toward a state of "static tension." What does that mean to you?

A mantra of mine for many years has been that stories hide the truth. Most people think that stories are the heart of everything. For myself, I think that stories involve you to want to see what's next, and you stop seeing what's really there. I'm interested in what's there in each moment and how that implies a whole network of associations, a depth to what is present that you can see on different levels. When you get involved in stories, the opposite of something that is static, you forget all that.

With the omnipresence of media making artistic experience so readily available, what is the appeal of theater today?

It's an alternative that will always appeal to certain people. But you are speaking to somebody who for 40 years has never been shy about saying I have great ambivalence about the theater. To me the theater is necessarily somewhat corrupt because you have to appeal to a great many people at once. Some people like what they call "contact" between an audience and live actors on the stage. To me, that is not important, and it is not thrilling.

Do you feel any affinity for the "live" aspect of theater?

I don't feel that at all. For me, all interesting art is a compositional matter, and it doesn't depend on that palpating, breathing presence. That has never seemed important to me. It's not what I'm interested in.

What's your take on the state of theater in New York right now?

From a distance, I can see there are many more young people doing work that is exploratory and adventurous than there were 15 or 20 years ago. I'm limited in what I can say because for perhaps 25 years I have not gone to the theater. I used to go see everything and most of it I would go crazy having to sit there, especially the work of people downtown. I couldn't walk out because it would be too cruel and I didn't want to do that. Every year I would see one or two things that I would think

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were wonderful. But there are serious people now being rewarded with attention and praise, so I assume that means something good is happening.

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