

Excerpt from:

## **OFF THE GRID: NEW YORK CITY LANDMARK PERFORMANCE**

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Top: *Total Detroit* by  
Niegel Smith (Elastic City).  
Photo: Danya Abt. Bottom:  
**Thieves Theatre's teepee.**  
Photo: Margaret Morton,  
OmbraLuce LLC.

of work that has been generated. While many performances were not necessarily meant as “aesthetic interventionist practices” or “spatially engaged practices” at the time of their production, they nevertheless became entrenched with New York City’s spatial history, marking the land in some way at a moment when that land was literally in transition: either at the brink of becoming redeveloped or vanishing for so-called urban improvement.

On August 17, 1993, bulldozers plowed through “The Hill,” the unofficial name of one of the oldest shantytowns in New York City, located at the corner of Canal and Chrystie Streets right at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge. “Its fifty or so occupants were uprooted in an early-morning action that officials said was for their own safety,” Ian Fisher of the *New York Times* reported the following day, “crushing into bits of plywood and muddy rags one of the most visible symbols of homelessness in Manhattan.”<sup>12</sup> By the time The Hill was taken down, the number of homeless New Yorkers had skyrocketed, even though then-mayor David Dinkins had vowed to champion their rights during his 1989 campaign. Dinkins’s tenure and New York City’s subsequent urban renewal practices, as Neil Smith and many others have documented, were predicated on cleaning up the city without attacking the roots of the problem, leaving many people utterly displaced.

It was amidst this urban context that Thieves Theatre, which had staged Jean Genet’s *Deathwatch* with prisoners at the Illinois State Penitentiary and *Marat/Sade* with ex-mental patients in Toronto prior to coming to New York, presented Heiner Müller’s *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* in early September of 1991 at The Hill. Dramaturgically, the production had two levels, as Thieves’ founders Nick Fracaro and Gabriele Schafer explained to me. The first was the theatrical staging of the play itself for a limited audience of fifteen, and the second was a teepee, which housed the play and its creators from November 1990 through May 1993. This “three-year-long enactment and para-theatrical performance of the Müller piece,” as Fracaro described it, had a much larger impact, with “more than 78,000 vehicles and 350,000 people crossing the Manhattan Bridge during an average day . . . gazing at the evolving living history of the teepee in the shantytown.”<sup>13</sup> Following their site-specific and “zeitgeist-specific” vision of theatre-making, as they called it, which incorporated the real-life context of the subjects they were dealing with (as had been the case with *Deathwatch* and *Marat/Sade*), and also wanting to expand the reach of theatre in the city, Fracaro and Schafer explored where to stage Müller’s text, which called for “the naturalism of the scene” by its author. They decided that making an Indian teepee in homeless territory would create a strong juxtaposition of survival against the backdrop of Dinkins’s New York.

Indeed, the teepee’s height, which stood out against the rest of the shantytown’s wood and paper shacks, gave The Hill a high visibility of the kind the Dinkins’s administration was set to suppress. Made of seventy-eight opened, two-by-four-foot U.S. Domestic Mailbags that had been sown together by Schafer, the structure was held together by seventeen pine trees the artists collected upstate. At eighteen feet tall and twenty feet in diameter, it was hard to miss. The Thieves’ production

rejected the theatrical establishment, choosing instead, as C. Carr reported in an interview, “to ‘embody and articulate’ the voice of the disenfranchised,” in *their* land.<sup>14</sup> Erecting a teepee there and staging *Argonauts* inside it would ground Müller’s play in living history. It would also mark the land with an alternate poetics, a “warring landscape,” as Fracaro called it, even when The Hill would be long gone. Connecting Gertrude Stein’s famous quotation from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—“a landscape is such a natural arrangement for a battlefield or a play that one must write plays”—and Müller’s desire, in Fracaro’s words, to “stage battles,” Thieves Theatre’s *Argonauts* embodied the tension inherent in the continuing urban struggle for land, between The Hill’s underlying history and the right to ownership (tenant/landlord). It illustrated the situation of displacement and reconquering of lands, specific to New York City, which persists to this day.

Thieves’ production embraced the reality of its location—its inhabitants, its history, and its contradictions—in ways that marked a passage between its existence and its destruction. Reza Abdoh’s *Father Was a Peculiar Man*—the seminal urban site-specific piece co-written with Mira-Lani Oglesby, which premiered in June of 1990 in the Meatpacking District—also landmarked a neighborhood at a moment of heightened transition. During the early nineties the site was a sketchy destination, dark and desolate, notorious for its semi-abandoned warehouses and its stench, extremely different than the more cosmetic and manicured destination it would eventually become. “Meat was still being packed there, though the industry seemed small, family-operated, and on the decline,” recalls the actress Juliana Francis-Kelly, who was barely out of college and had never been to or heard of the place before she was cast in the show.

Inspired by Dostoyevsky’s classic *The Brothers Karamazov*, it was one of the most ambitious spectacles produced by En Garde Arts, staged through sixteen different locations over four square city blocks in the vicinity of West 12th Street and Ninth Avenue. More than sixty performers rehearsed daily on location and on the streets, “with interns watching out for traffic,” as Francis-Kelly told me, as well as “indoors, in what had been the meat lockers—creepy, cement rooms with giant freight elevators that we opened by pulling an old rope.” The audience, who easily numbered around two hundred per night, circulated through the streets—witnessing a full marching band, Jackie O riding in a red Cadillac convertible, a cemetery full of gravestones, and a 120-foot banquet table that occupied the length of West 12th Street, over which was suspended an enormous meat cleaver—as they would through a journey, an exhibit, a haunted house.

Besides the smell, the Meatpacking District was also known for its marginalized population, which consisted of many transgender sex workers who had survived the AIDS crisis of the mid-eighties. In the 1970s there were few legal residences in the neighborhood, which according to *The New York Times* partly brought about the “raucous night life” that would flourish later on and cater primarily to the queer community, which included clubs like L.U.R.E. (Leather, Uniform, Rubber, Etc.), J’s Hang Out (shut down by the city’s Department of Health for “unsafe sex”