

# STAGE LEFT

EXPERIMENTAL THEATER  
CURRICULUM GUIDE





*The White Woman, Soon 3. Photo: Theodore Shank*

## OVERVIEW

This guide is designed to accompany the segments of *STAGE LEFT* about theater companies that experimented with traditional forms and structures of theater in a variety of ways. These companies, including *Soon 3*, the Blake Street Hawkeyes, the George Coates Performance Project, Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Snake Theater/Antenna Theater, worked with their physical bodies, the visual elements of puppets and costumes, and new audio and video technologies to disrupt the linear narrative/text-based structure of theater. They also experimented with new ways of connecting with their audiences.

## BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### Historical Context: A Brief History of the 1970s

In the 1970s, the countercultural ideals and left wing politics of the 1960s became more mainstream. The civil rights and women's rights movements became even more prominent, and concern about protecting the environment (marked by the first Earth Day in 1970) increased. The first half of the decade was marked by escalating casualties in the Vietnam War, and Americans' increased opposition to the conflict. The killing of four students at an antiwar protest at Kent State University, the release of the Pentagon Papers, which revealed confidential details about the handling of the war, and President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974 created a sense of disillusionment in government.

In the 1970s boundaries between artistic disciplines became more fluid, and new performance forms emerged. This included performance art, a genre that emerged from the visual arts world. Performance artists contested traditional ideas about the relationship between audience and performer, and experimented with time and space. The Fluxus movement, which included artists such as John Cage and Yoko Ono, was interested in breaking down boundaries between everyday life and art, and emphasizing the creative process as well as the finished product. Artists such as Gilbert & George experimented with video documentation as a part of their artwork and musician Laurie Anderson was a pioneer in electronic music.

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Experimental performance in the 1970s and early 1980s was also influenced by the development of major new technologies during that time period. The invention of the memory chip and microprocessor led to the first personal computers marketed to consumers. Video games were invented along with computer graphics. The first portable video cameras became available, and portable audio players using cassette tapes led to the invention of the Walkman in 1979. Digital audio became available in 1983.

It was this combination of progressive ideas about performance and new technologies that fed the visions of the companies in this guide. They all worked in experimental modes that they themselves invented.

## Soon 3

Soon 3 was founded in 1972 by Alan Finneran. The company saw its work as “performance landscapes,” or sculptural installations inhabited by performers who performed durational actions over a period of time within these visual spaces. Photographs of Soon 3’s work often look like living sculptures, with bodies placed into a setting along with lighting, film, and other elements.

## Blake Street Hawkeyes

The Blake Street Hawkeyes were founded in 1975 by Bob Ernst, John O’Keefe, and David Schein. The Hawkeyes were strongly influenced by Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski, who developed an innovative actor training that has influenced much experimental theater. Grotowski saw the actor’s physicality as the essential element of theater, and the most effective vehicle for true communion between performer and audience. He believed that his intensive physical training led performers to develop immediate and truthful responses that strip away the superficial tricks or techniques of acting.

The Hawkeyes’ performances were noted for their intense physicality. They saw the whole body as a tool for performance. They also created work that was “in the moment,” which evolved spontaneously and always changed from performance to performance. In 1978, Bob Ernst broke a Guinness World Record with his 24-hour solo performance. This performance was presented in the context of one of the Hawkeyes’ Actualist Conventions, or marathon performance events, presenting a different performance group every 30 minutes for 12-48 hours.

## George Coates Performance Works

George Coates, a member of the Hawkeyes, formed George Coates Performance Works in 1977. Coates’ work used projected video, audio soundscapes, and evocative visual images to create imaginative worlds. He partnered with software companies and developers in Silicon Valley to utilize the latest technology. For example, during 1984’s seehear, a group of musicians came onstage and begin playing, while performers appeared behind a screen and then entered the space with stylized, measured movements. Video images were projected onto the performers and the stage space, and

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visually interesting props such as large white balloons were used. All of these elements were set against a complex electronic musical score composed by Paul Drescher. There is no narrative story; rather, the interaction between music, images and movement were what the audience connected to.

## Snake/Antenna Theater

Snake Theater was founded in 1972 in Southern California and moved up to the Bay Area several years later. They created site-specific pieces, which were performed in places like Fort Cronkhite Beach in Marin County and in front of Sausalito City Hall. Large sculptural heads worn by the actors were a distinguishing feature of their work, as was an underlying critique of issues such as militarism. During 1979, Snake created a major new location piece called *Auto*, a piece that was performed at an abandoned Mohawk gas station in Sausalito.

In 1980, the company became Antenna Theater, and increased its exploration of site specific and environmental pieces, where it created an environment that the audience entered into and experienced as individuals. The theater group first did this by recording scripts onto tape that audience members listened to through a Walkman. Antenna was interested in interactive, immersive experiences, all with content linked to sociopolitical issues: personal histories tied to important events, science and environment. In 1981, Antenna created *High School*, a narrated walk-through of a high school campus from the perspective of the students. Audiences walked around the school site, listening to student voices on walkmans while interacting with student actors and puppets. Students assisted in the creation of the piece by conducting interviews with their peers and others at the school.

## Guillermo Gomez-Pena

Guillermo Gomez-Pena is a Mexican-American multimedia, experimental performance artist. His work examines issues of race, cross-cultural identity, borders and immigration. He is a co-founder of the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo and La Pocha Nostra, an organization that supports artist collaboration and experimental performance. Gomez-Pena is considered one of the pioneers of performance art and has produced a large body of work spanning four decades. In one of Gomez-Pena's most well known early performances, *Couple in a Cage*, he and video artist Coco Fusco spent many days living in a gold cage, which was on public view in four countries. Presenting themselves as aboriginal inhabitants of an unidentified island, the couple performed "authentic" and "traditional" tasks, including writing on a laptop computer, watching television, sewing voodoo dolls and working out. Gomez-Pena and Fusco quickly realized that many audience members believed that they were actually "savages;" therefore the performance, which started as a critique of the exhibition of non-western people in the theaters, museums, zoos and circuses of Europe and the United States, also became about ongoing cultural misperceptions and prejudices.



*The Way of How, George Coates. Photo: Theodore Shank*

## PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students what words and phrases come to mind when they hear the word theater, and make a class list of these words and phrases. As they watch the segment of *STAGE LEFT*, have them consider if the words and phrases they listed describe the performances they see in the segment.
2. Have students read the history of Performance Art:  
<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-performance-art.htm>
  - Then ask them to consider how the body, media, and durational actions were used by the companies and performers featured.

## POST-VIEWING REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of theatrical traditions did companies like Soon 3, the Blake Street Hawkeyes, George Coates and Snake/Antenna Theater break away from?
2. What are different ways that these companies interacted with their audiences? How was this different from how theater is usually presented?
3. Have students watch the video of *Couple in a Cage*:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLX2lk2tdcw>.
  - In what ways is this performance similar or different to those of the other groups featured in the *STAGE LEFT* segment?
4. Can you think of performers or theaters you know today that have been influenced by these companies?

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Audiovisuals:

Excerpts of Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com/educators/excerpts/>

Experimental Theater - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53358347>

A video about Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco's Couple in a Cage

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLX2Lk2tdcw>

Excerpt from Laurie Anderson's Home of the Brave

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-4xatLeWF8>

### Webites:

Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com>

Interactive timeline of Bay Area theater history

<http://stageleft-movie.com/timeline/>

## THEATER ACTIVITIES

### Exploration in Multimedia Theater

Prep Activity: Have students read the interview with George Coates: <http://www.transmitmedia.com/svr/vault/coates/>. Ask them to think about the following quote: "It's the mix that's important, in the sense that, for example, sometimes music will have a new meaning if it's accompanied by a visual or a sculptural moment in a scene. A character and a speech or a dialogue or a filmic event can take on new meaning depending on how it's mixed with the other elements. And being able to make performance out of sculpting a mix of media is a very strange art form."

Multimedia Scene: Break students into small groups and ask them to choose a topic that interests them. Then have them write down the following words on a piece of paper: text, movement, audio and video. Ask them to work together to decide how each of these elements could address the topic in a two-minute scene, and how all of the elements could "tell the story" of the topic. Students can then write the text for their scene, record their audio and shoot video using smartphones, flipcams or school computers (using Audacity for audio).

Presentation and Reflection: Have students present their scenes to each other, including all of the elements. Ask students in the audience to consider how each element (text, movement, audio, video) was used to explore the topic, and how the group used what is unique about that element to create the scene.

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## Site Specific Tableau

**Prep Activity:** Introduce the definition of tableau, and then have students form pairs. Ask them to shake hands with each other and freeze, as if their action has been paused. Have them share ideas about what an audience member could see if they were looking at this tableau: two friends greeting each other, a business deal, etc.

**Complete the Image:** Have the pairs of students shake hands and freeze to form a tableau. Then ask one student to remain frozen while the other moves into a frozen shape that creates a different tableau (have students think about levels and proximity as ways to make the tableau different). Then have the student who was frozen move and freeze to form yet another tableau. Then have students go back and forth spontaneously to form a series of tableaux. After a few minutes, ask them what they noticed about the kinds of tableaux they were making.

**Site Specific:** Ask the pairs of students to explore the classroom (or outside the classroom, if possible), noticing the architectural features of the space they are working in, including the objects in the space. Then ask them to create a two-person site-specific tableau that makes effective use of the space they've chosen. Have the group view the tableaux, noticing what is effective about the interaction of each one with its site. Tableau to Physicality

**Prep Activity:** Have students break up into groups of four or five. Have one student in the group be the "sculptor" who builds a tableau with the other students. They can do this by silently demonstrating what frozen shapes they would like to see, or by gently moving students into the shapes (making sure to not touch heads or torsos, and tapping arms and legs as signals to move them).

**Moving Tableau:** When the "sculptors" have finished their tableaux, have them place themselves in the tableau as well. Then ask students to begin doing a repetitive movement that starts and ends with their frozen shape: a movement out of the shape and back in. All members of the tableau will do this repetitive movement at the same time. Then have students think of a sound to go with their movement and repeat that as they repeat their movement. Have them freeze in their original tableau again and then tell them that you will clap your hands ten times, and each time you clap, they have to move and freeze into a different, more exaggerated shape. Tell students to remember their repetitive movement, sound, and frozen shapes for the next exercise.

**Movement Sequence:** Break students into new groups of three. Ask them to work together to create a 30-second performance that includes: one moment of unison where they are all doing the same repetitive movement or making the same sound at the same time; one moment where they are all frozen in a tableau; and one moment where they are all doing completely different things (one student could be frozen while one is making a sound and the other is moving, for example). Have students share their performances with each other and reflect on what they saw from the performance and what meaning they drew from it.

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## Interactivity

Break students into groups of three or four, and ask them to create a short performance that involves audience interaction in some way. It might help to brainstorm some possible ways that performers can interact with audience members with the class first.

## REFLECTION FRAMEWORK

Prior to facilitating these activities with students, it may help to familiarize them with the theater terms in the toolbox, as well as reviewing the following framework for having students reflect on and analyze other students' performances.

After students watch their peers' performances, ask them the three following questions:

1. What do you see or hear? Have students be as objective and neutral as possible, focusing on what is clearly observable or audible.
2. What do you think or feel based on what you see and hear?
3. What questions do you have/what more do you want to know?

Many of the exercises also provide specific things for students to reflect upon after watching the performance.

**Performance Art:** An art form combining elements of other art forms, such as film, dance and drama, in a presentation in which the artist brings together images and ideas on various themes in a non-narrative way. It can be any performance that involves four basic elements: time, space, the performer's body and a relationship between performer and audience.

**Non-Narrative:** Lacking a story where events are arranged sequentially (one after another). Many performance art works are non-narrative; they may reference a story or theme, but do not follow a linear sequence.

**Durational Action:** An action or task performed by an actor in a play or performance artwork that takes place over time.

**Tableau:** A group of performers frozen onstage, creating an interesting or evocative image.

**Level:** The different physical positions of a performer in relation to the ground (could be low, middle or high). Interesting tableaux and stage pictures often have performers in different levels for contrast.

**Proximity:** The distance between one performer and another onstage, which can convey meaning and relationship between characters or performers.

**Site-Specific Theater:** A type of theatrical production designed to be performed at a unique, specially adapted location other than a standard theatre. This specific site either may be originally built without any intention of serving theatrical purposes (for example, in a hotel, courtyard, or converted building), or may simply be considered an unconventional theatre space (for example, in a forest).

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