

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PERFORMANCE

Fear of the unknown can be very exciting. Using this concept as a basis, I have assembled an “organism” that will capture some aspects of “hive mind” intelligence and can act out and communicate certain ideas. It is important that these skits are not presented on a stage. By definition, performance on a stage is for an audience. The audience gives its attention to the performers and the performers perform for the audience. This kind of symbiosis is not what I want to create.

Maude Baum, the performers, and I have created an impression that the performers do not perform particularly for the audience, but rather that the audience has just arbitrarily walked in on some particular action that happens whether the audience is there or not. I find this very similar to that of coming across a trail of ants transporting some large bit of food. I may never know where they are going nor from whence they came. Furthermore, they pay no attention to my presence, but continue on with their work. This is the way *50-Man-Machine's* performers act. They come into the audience space and begin an action only to leave when it is completed without establishing any real relationship to the audience.

Another borrowed personae is that of a door-to-door salesman. During the performance there are periods when the performers consciously interact with the audience - but, it is with token acknowledgement to a targeted market. These periods include the offering of hors d'oeuvres and the mock selling of a compact disc. Partial inspiration for these skits comes from the actions of store representatives in shopping

malls. Quite often an uniformed worker is made to stand in front of their store and to offer some sample of food or spray of perfume to the passing shopper. For the most part these people are on automatic pilot and exhibit no personality even when provoked. This characteristic has been adopted by the troupe. It is an attitude which says: “you are important only because of your money.”

Costuming went through many different phases. Early on the uniforms were to be identical black suits with the possibility of white gloves and designer briefcases. This idea evolved into custom-made suits that would allow exposure of human machinations at the elbows and knees. I was still holding onto the idea of paper identities, an idea explored in a past performance work called *Flagwavin'* (which can be seen on compact disc). In *Flagwavin'* each draftee was measured and then fitted for their forced identity. Paper identities lead through a series of experiments like total newspaper suits with cardboard and newspaper briefcases, sewing-pattern paper suits, disposable painters paper overhauls and finally to the simple newspaper advertisement tie. To complete the wardrobe I borrowed ten dark pinstriped suits from a local Salvation Army Thrift

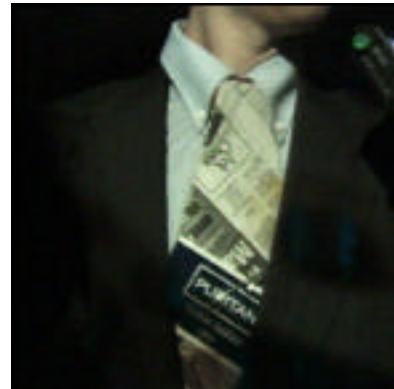


Figure 4.1: *50-Man-Machine* performer displaying his newspaper tie.

Store and allowed each performer to pick from the pile. The briefcase evolved into a multipurpose prop constructed of a one-inch by six-inch pine wood frame with a jute cord handle. This briefcase becomes an essential prop in the context of the performance. Other costumes and props include deconstructed FM sports radios, a two-inch loud speaker, attached near the voice box or larynx, for each of Caucasian performer, two different sets

of party whistles (one for each troop of four performers), and a mockup of the *50-Man-Machine* compact disc.

The performances are offered in segments that can be presented in a randomized order and can also be repeated any number of times during the course of the night. In effect, the performances are a part of an instrument to be improvised upon by the director. Improvisation depends entirely upon the mood of the director, on the conditions of the space and the conditions of the audience immediately prior to a given performance. Pieces performed are loosely titled as follows: “wake-up and wander about in the working-man’s-underwear-suit”, “processed by machine”, “step marching”, “jog marching”, “troop crossings”, “the man-machine”, “a walking stack of briefcases”, “king of the corporate ladder”, “death of a salesman”, “soylent hors d’oeuvres”, “the sell”, “a day in the life of a corporate man suite”, “bowling 1-2-3”, and “stocks and bonds mean the end.” Several of these are repeated during *50-Man-Machine’s* one-and-a-half hour event period, while others are modified to meet an occurring challenge.

“Wake-up and wander about in the working-man’s-underwear-suit” begins with four performers leaving backstage to wander into the main-space while yawning, rubbing their eyes, scratching their various itching body parts and generally acting like sleeping young boys just awakened for school by a



Figure 4.1: The “underwear suit” just prior to “main gear” process.

parent. The four snake through the audience wearing tight sleeveless undershirts, large white boxer shorts, and black nylon socks with sock garters. This uniform is another carry-over from *Flagwavin’* as described in Chapter Seven. After the four have

wandered about the space for a few minutes they suddenly come to a strange trance-like



Figure 4.2: Performer marching trance-like through the audience.

attention and line up before the “main gear.”

“Processed by machine” is an extension of the previously discussed skit. After a pause the first person enters the “main gear” to be processed. Video projection interacts with the person’s form creating strange shadows that can be seen through up to eight overlapping layers of semi-transparent projection surfaces. A triggering of motion detectors, strobe lights and a red

laser array, for a period of five seconds, signifies the processing. In a sense, this is the performed realization of the cartoonish Acme-Pressing-Plant mentioned earlier in this document. The processed person then leaves the center chamber of the “main gear” and immediately seems to reappear on the opposite side as a fully dressed businessman complete with briefcase in hand. Four dressed businessmen waiting for entrance cues from their underwear wearing counterparts facilitate this illusion.

Marching is a predominant theme here. Businessmen marching in tight formation is one of the original key images for the *50-Man-*



Figure 4.2: Whistles keep time as Troop One marches by.

Machine project. An influence and guideline for this element comes from my undergraduate university where various forms of hazing were publicly visible in the many American-of-African-descent fraternities across campus. In some cases, a group of fraternity pledges were made to move extremely close together and exactly in-sync.

These pledges were dressed identically; they wore identical expressions, and acted as if they were programmed. On a campus of lackadaisical college students this was an awe-inspiring occurrence. With this in mind we created a series of marching events.



Figure 4.3: Troop One “step marching.”

“Step marching” is the standard operating procedure for Troop One. “Jog marching” is the standard operating procedure for Troop Two. Both marches utilize a “left, left, left, turn (right), left” or

“1, 1, 1, 2, 1” structure. “Jog marching” is performed in a light jog and is double-timed. These marches are used throughout the show as either a method of arriving at the main performance area (the largest open area in the installation environment) or as standalone actions. Baum’s “troop crossings” features Troop Two running perpendicularly through the spaces between marching members of Troop One. This action happens when Troop Two has been standing silently on location for several minutes. As Troop One approaches, Troop Two bursts into a full chaotic run only to get back into formation and begin marching.

“The man-machine” holds the key topic for this work. This segment begins with a Troop One performer slowly making his way to the performance position in a slightly robotic-dance



Figure 4.4: A two camera video wipe of the “man machine” in action.

fashion. Once he arrives at this spot he begins a slow repetitive rotating action. Troop Two immediately begins running in a counterclockwise orbit. Troop One's remaining



Figure 4.5: "Man machine" in action.

three members make their way to the first performer and each person becomes a "single-action part" of the machine for which the first person is the hub. Troop Two's members begin falling out of orbit and join in the mechanism. Once the

machine is completed it is allowed to run for a few short minutes before a whistle is blown signaling the performers to unwind. Unwinding is accomplished opposite to Troop Two's original counter clockwise motion. The last person in the machine disembarks and begins running backwards in a clockwise direction. This is continued until the machine is deconstructed and the performers run backwards towards backstage.



Figure 4.6: Reverse march from machine.

"A walking stack of briefcases" begins and ends "king of the corporate ladder." This work sees a performer slowly meandering into the audience with all eight of the hollow briefcases stacked vertically around his body. He looks like a wooden monolith with legs. Once in position the other seven performers march in and surround him. The actors begin removing the briefcases from the top one-by-one and parceling them out. Each man with a briefcase walks two steps, puts down his briefcase, looks at his watch, and repeats the cycle. This leads to the construction of the "corporate ladder," which is

made by stacking the briefcases in a ladder type fashion. Once completed, they study this structure and then begin fighting or otherwise climbing to the top of this “corporate ladder.” Here we begin to see individual characters emerge. First, we have a power mogul force his way to the top. Then, a blind man is helped to the top by his co-workers who clap to give him a sense of direction. A politician goes up shaking hands while others stab him in the back with imaginary knives. One businessman is too scared to make it to the top. Finally, there is one



Figure 4.7: The “walking stack of briefcases.”



Figure 4.8: Building the “corporate ladder.”

that makes it to the top and then jumps off. In doing so, he rolls over the top of a nearby performer and is caught by four other businessmen only to be placed in position and all briefcases are reloaded onto his body leaving him standing still in location. All other businessmen immediately leave the premises except for one that helps to direct his blind journey to backstage.

“Death of a salesman” begins with the carrying in of a prone body in traditional three-per-side coffin fashion. Banging briefcases while entering, they place the body on the floor and arrange the briefcases in what appears to be a white pine coffin complete with headstone. A tearful mourning begins and quickly turns into a rampant theft of all remaining possessions on the body. Items such as a pocket computer, cellular phone, watch, jewelry, and even the shoes are taken and brandished as trophies before each thief

makes his way to backstage leaving the victim behind. The victim eventually saunters off through the crowd, an image of the Haitian zombie.

“Soylent hors d’oeuvres” makes reference to the science fiction movie, *Soylent Green*, in which the lead character, played by Charlton Heston, discovers that the most popular food chip in his world is made from people. “Soylent green is people!” he cries as the movie ends. Our version of this consists of green jalapeno corn chips. Businessmen on automatic pilot wander around the space offering audience members modular food presented in trays on top of their briefcases. This action is repeated very often until all food is consumed.

“The sell” is another action repeated often throughout the performance. The sell consists of all eight businessmen reporting to the space to act as salesmen representing the *50-Man-Machine* compact disc product. As soon as the troupe enters the main space they quickly begin worshipping one of the five sculptures. What they are actually doing is tuning in their FM radio receivers to a transmitter located within this sculpture playing a thirty-second endless tape-loop sales message.

“...Greetings! Coming soon! It’s the *50-Man-Machine* enhanced CD-ROM, packed with audio and video to delight you for hours. Yours for only nine ninety-five plus five cents handling. Yes! That’s ten dollars. Notice the gorgeous details and unique cover art by the recording artist! (static)...”

The eight businessmen include five Caucasians and three Asians. The Asians allowed to sell using only their native languages with very few English words. The Caucasian businessmen are not allowed to speak with their own voices at all, but only through a radio. Each FM receiver broadcasts the message quoted above through a small speaker pinned to the tie near the performer’s voice box of each performer. Businessmen

are allowed to mouth the words of the broadcast while using any hand motions or body language to attempt to sell. These actions are further accentuated as salesmen gang up on potential clients and attempt to out sell each other. At some point it will be possible to hear up to four different languages at the same time with the same goal in mind. If any sale succeeds the seller will quickly retreat with his merchandise and go to a new potential client leaving the successful sale unfulfilled.

“A day in the life of a corporate man suite” is a brief description of daily goings on for the corporate businessman. Transportation to and from work via subway, car or bus gives way to monotonous computer/desk/stock market work which gives way to a lunch/smoke break balancing on the edges of a briefcase which leads to more work and finally to the ride home...only to repeat the process tomorrow. This segment uses many of the concepts included in an earlier performance entitled *Corporate Ladder @ Play*. The earlier work consists of a seven-minute day-in-the-life-of dance choreographed to music by Sue L. Cherry. Some of that piece’s more humorous sections have to do with men, masculinity and the silly-ness of sports.

“Bowling 1-2-3” includes six guys standing in a triangle simulating bowling pins while a seventh businessman actually bowls the eighth into the first six. For this piece we have created several variations including a strike, a gutter ball, a scene where the pins actually get up, move, reset and then burst into mock laughter as the ball rolls by, and an overly dramatic clapping scene that is more reminiscent of the “here! batter, batter, batter” of little league baseball than of bowling.

Our ending skit takes the basic form of “king of the corporate ladder” and replaces the fight for the top with a single composed CEO throwing stocks and bonds (the

time cards) to the seven remaining businessmen's groping hands. As he runs out of these paper objects he begins to signal the others. And, with whistles blowing, all audience members are herded out of the *50-Man-Machine*. "Stocks and bonds mean the end."