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January 17, 2012

THE Arts



From left, Jay Scheib, Sarita Choudhury (on floor), Mikéah Ernest Jennings, Tanya Selvaratnam and Laine Rettner in "World of Wires," at the Kitchen.

Worlds Within Worlds Within Worlds. And a Duane Reade.

All sorts of walls come tumbling down in "World of Wires," Jay Scheib's slap-happy, mixed-media murder mystery at the Kitchen. Divisions between reality (that old chimera)

BEN BRANTLEY
THEATER REVIEW

and perception — not to mention the borders that separate screen from stage and human from machine — are stomped upon with the glee of a precocious, permanently stoned, science-fiction-reading 14-year-old who has just discovered, like, philosophy, dude.

But the most exciting instance of wall-smashing comes early in this show, which runs through Saturday. That's when the fourth wall — you know, the one that separates the stage from the audience, and which in this case isn't just metaphorical — falls smack into the laps of theatergoers in the front rows. I won't go into detail here since it's a spoiler just to hint at the existence of this nifty coup de théâtre. Suffice it to say that the moment delivers the message that crossing realities is dangerous with a clout that nothing else in the production quite matches.

"World of Wires" is the third installment of Mr. Scheib's "Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems," a performance trilogy

about the mind-scrambling overlap of natural and technology-generated worlds. All three productions were (appropriately) developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Mr. Scheib is a professor of music and theater arts. According to the program notes each installment "re-imagines itself through dialogues with civil engineering and urban planning, computer science and artificial intelligence, aerospace and astronautics."

Gee, all this sounds awfully academic. Especially when you learn that "World of Wires" was also inspired by an essay in *The Philosophical Quarterly* (by Nick Bostrom), titled "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?" But the existential questions posed here shouldn't surprise or unduly challenge anyone who knows the movie "The Matrix," from 1999. Or, for that matter, "Blade Runner," from 1982. Or even certain "Twilight Zone" and "Star Trek" episodes from the 1960s.

In fact, "World of Wires" is adapted, with a free hand, from "Welt am Draht," a 1973 television series by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which in turn was based on a 1964 novel by Daniel F. Galouye called "Simulacron-3." By the way, "Simulacron-3" was also the basis for the movie "The Thirteenth Floor," which came

World of Wires

Adapted by Jay Scheib from a teleplay by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, based on the novel "Simulacron-3" by Daniel F. Galouye; directed by Mr. Scheib; sets by Sara Brown; costumes by Alba Clemente; lighting by Josh Higginson; sound by Anouschka Trocker; stage manager, Susan Wilson. Presented by the Kitchen, Tim Griffin, executive director and chief curator. At the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea, (212) 255-5733, theKitchen.org. Through Saturday. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Sarita Choudhury (Dr. Fuller), Mikéah Ernest Jennings (Wayne Von Goldwyn), Rosalee Lowe (Richie), Jon Morris (Fred Stiller), Ayesha Ngujah (Vana Ng Ivanova), Laine Rettner (Friday) and Tanya Selvaratnam (Hillary Gardner).

out in 1999 — the same year as "The Matrix." I don't know about you, man, but these connections are making me paranoid.

The hero of "World of Wires" is sure paranoid, and with good reason. That's Fred Stiller (Jon Morris), a rising employee at Rien Inc., which creates virtual worlds, via environmental simulators, inhabited by digitally created people who do not know they aren't real. Anyway, the death of a colleague, Dr. Fuller (Sarita Choudhury), has Fred wondering what's really going on at Rien (which means "nothing" in French).

To uncover the secret the doctor left behind, Fred must enter that other, virtual world, which may be only one of many worlds within worlds within worlds. Oh, and for good measure, Mr. Scheib recreates a robbery he witnessed in a Duane Reade, which somehow fits right in with the general mayhem at Rien.

A theater, at least for now, is not a computer. So Mr. Scheib is able to summon only two levels of reality on stage, but he does so with panache. The director himself holds a camera on his performers, so that what they do happens on screen and onstage simultaneously.

The actors are an energetic, limber and attractive lot (a good thing because they regularly shed Alba Clemente's swinging '70s costumes). And they appear to be having a helluva time, as their characters reprogram, murder, insult, upset and make love to one another. (They also regularly comment, a bit wearily, on a consumerist marketing system that has hijacked national politics.) Sara Brown's clever multiroom set (with a sinister corridor running down the middle) becomes the actors' gymnasium, of which Mr. Morris (an alumnus of "Puerza Bruta" and Cirque de Soleil) makes dazzlingly acrobatic use.

Mr. Scheib pulls off several startling trompe-l'œil effects. And as usual with such interdisciplinary endeavors (which were a big part of the recent Under the Radar festival of experimental theater), it's fun to see how actors and environment are transformed by the lens and frame of a camera.

He's not breaking into new experiential realms of theater here, though. The Wooster Group, among other companies, has been working the same territory with greater sophistication, and to greater disorienting effect, for years.

"World of Wires" recycles other avant-garde staples, including cliché-quoting genre mash-ups of different types of pop and pulp fictions, most obviously classic film-noir and futurist fantasies and the later mainstream novels and movies that are descended from both. Even at 90 minutes, the show exhausts what it has to say long before it's over.

But it has flashes of real wit along the way. (Loved the Garden of Eden simulation.) And its revved-up young ensemble exudes a real-life, in-the-moment, hormone-popping glow that no computer simulation has managed to replicate. Or as a character in "World of Wires" would surely add, "Not yet, anyway."

Carmen García Durazo: Posthuman at Last: Chaos and Cunning in Jay Scheib's *World of Wires*

January 12, 2012

BOOKMARK

Are you living in a computer simulation? Jay Scheib's recent work, World of Wires, may have the answer.



Photograph by Paula Court.

Jay Scheib's *World of Wires* is meant to disorient. It is a carefully executed, masterfully acted exercise in discord. However, despite the repeated gunshots, cruel splashes of cool water, and nauseating, unrelenting multimedia onslaught, Scheib's work comes through with one clear message: although your life outside the cramped theatre may *seem* slightly less cacophonous, it, too, may be even more complicated than it seems.

Wires is a re-visioning of *Welt am Draht*, filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1973 science-fiction television series. The quixotic, plot-ridden maze follows protagonist Fred Stiller as he makes his way through the uncannily unraveling universe of personality simulation. His life as head of a prestigious experiment in reality simulation quickly unravels, as—in the manner of *The Matrix*, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg* treatise, and the landmark N. Katherine Hayles study of the Posthuman—he begins to doubt the appearance of “reality” as defined by his physical environment and interpersonal relationships. Gradually, as hilarity and hysteria ensue, Stiller begins to suspect the reality experiments are growing to be beyond his control, and may be beginning to control him. Shots are fired, clothing abandoned, a Biblical and Dante-esque visioning of Paradise and Hell mastered (complete with throbbing walls, crisp white interiors, ripened fruit, and the obligatory wailing and gnashing of teeth).

Scheib develops his work along this carefully plotted agenda of creative destruction without allowing the chaos to overwhelm his viewers. Voices overlap, props topple, and costumes flit from body to body, yet no matter how disorienting and frenetic the stage becomes, *Wires*' audience seems able to maintain a highly engaged sense of safety, as if in the eye of the storm. This sense of omniscient distance is crucial to Scheib's piece.

In a work that is so dutifully befuddling and purposefully discomforting, it is often helpful to the viewer (or reader) to have one character, motif, or location of certitude. The consistent repetition of at least one, omni-textual trope reassures and centers the reader in the wake of thematic and aesthetic chaos (or, at times, improvisation). In *The Matrix*, to which *Wires* is often compared in recent reviews, that was the ringing pay telephone; in *Don Quixote*, it was trusty squire Sancho Panza; in Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*, the plodding, almost maternal bass line. In his work, Scheib effectively employs his wayfaring video camera, recording his actors and capturing their brilliant exertions at angles impossible to experience through a standard offstage-onstage blocking.

But even further, the effect of the camera supersedes a merely theatrical purpose. In addition to being a symbol of the director's power, as well as a useful prop which adds to the dynamism of the multimedia extravaganza, the live-feed video camera poised in front of the sweaty thespian kerfuffle serves as a comforting reminder to the audience: don't worry. These people are the ones "acting." You, the viewer, are real, and you're going to be just fine.

Although the Baudrillard-inspired premise of a post-human, man-machine battle royale is by no means new, Scheib's work places it (Disneyland reference intact) —at the very least—in a profoundly relatable context.

In *Wires*, after all, the characters are at last queasily accepting of their perpetually scrambled personality crossfire. In the span of ninety minutes, they experience (and seem to learn from) love, death, searing anger, and crushing joy. Even when in their digitally fabricated forms, Scheib's characters—much like the Second Life or, say, Facebook personalities of his audience members—express, emote, and pine. Most importantly, it seems that despite their staccato-like appearances onstage, behind mirrors, blazoned on a video screen, or projected ten feet high, they, like you, hope that they going to be just fine.

Jay Scheib's World of Wires, starring Jon Morris and Rosalie Lowe, is performed at The Kitchen through January 21, 2012. For ticket information, please visit [here](#).

Carmen García Durazo lives in Brooklyn. Follow her on [Twitter](#).

Review: World of Wires

Multimedia director Jay Scheib blurs reality and computer simulations.

By David Cote

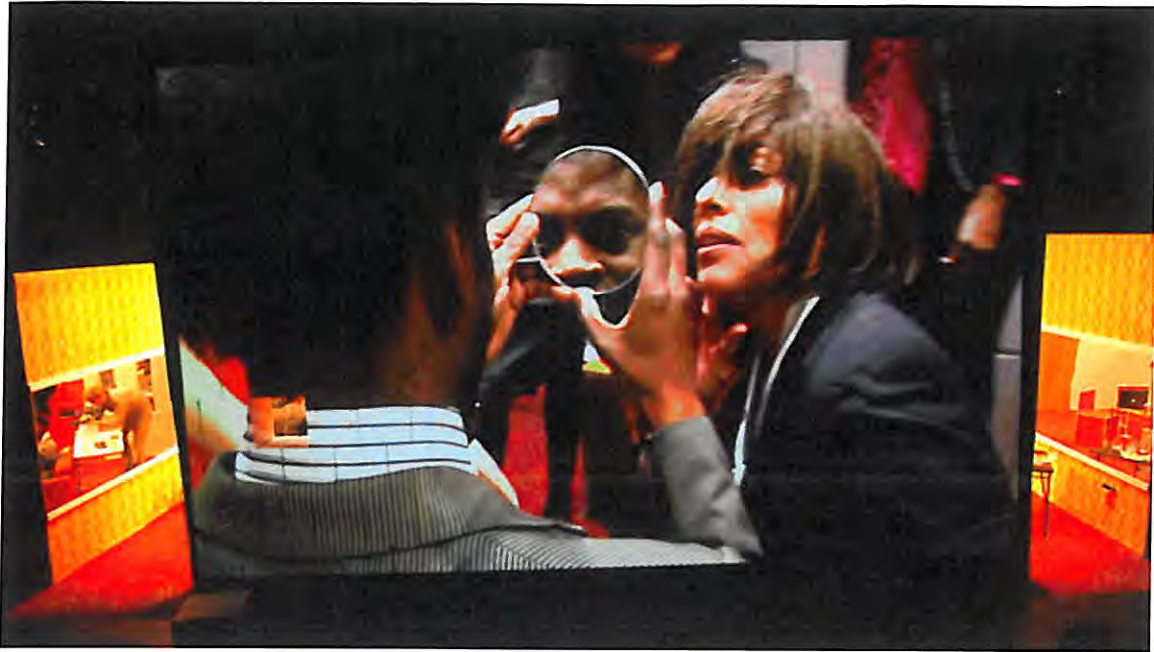


Lurking inside every experimental-theater auteur is a film director itching to light, shoot and edit a movie's every pixel (just ask Richard Foreman, who chucked playwriting for *Final Cut* and an editing suite). Even though film can be just as collaborative (and compromised) as the stage, cinema dangles the promise of total control. So Jay Scheib is trying to have his cake and eat it, too: In his latest, heavily mediated assemblage, *World of Wires*, he trails behind his performers with a video camera, feeding strikingly composed, deep-focus images to monitors and screens. Normally, I go to the theater to evaluate language, acting styles and set design; I don't find myself admiring canted close-ups or photojournalistic jitter.

Not that ordinary theatrical values aren't also part of the experience. Scheib bases his loopy, spaced-out script on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1973 television miniseries, *Welt am Draht*, itself drawn from Daniel F. Galouye's 1962 sci-fi novel, *Simulacron-3* (both precursors to such simulation-or-reality works as *The Matrix*). Plot is never wholly absent from Scheib's plays, but he does his best to blur it under

We Are Living in a *World of Wires*

by Benjamin Sutton



"It's a living world," explains Fred Stiller, the new chief engineer of Simulacron-3, "but it's inside an electronic box. I mean, we are alive, but they're on television, and it's like making, making itself." This analogy, offered early on in Jay Scheib's new multimedia theater adaptation of Daniel Galouye's 1964 sci-fi novel *Simulacron-3* at the Kitchen, *World of Wires* (through January 21), is one of the most coherent given during the hilariously tense and trippy performance. It's the stuff of classic worlds-within-worlds mind-fuck scenarios like *Strange Days* or *eXistenZ*, in which the intensity of simulated environments increasingly undermines the validity of reality. That this scenario is performed on stage and simultaneously on screens placed throughout the performance space—which display a live feed from a camera toted by Scheib throughout—adds to the sense of dislocation between the real world and the one made up of wires. (The format recalls Liz Magic Laser's similarly successful experiment, *I Feel Your Pain* at Performa 11.)

The occasion for our insight into the project headed by Stiller (Jon Morris) is a visit from the Secretary of State (Mikéah Ernest Jennings) to check up on its progress. "Our prognostics are still flawed in 5.8 percent of total cases," reports Stiller's boss Hillary Gardner (Tanya Selvaratnam), CEO of aptly-named Rien Incorporated. "I see," the secretary hesitates. "Is that impressive?" The very chaotic, irrational and cyclical format of the performance further breaks down boundaries between events occurring in the the play's "reality" and the simulated world into which the characters repeatedly travel through a *Matrix*-like neural hookups. This journey into

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the simulator—specifically, a thrice-repeated visit to a convenience store robbery scenario whose consequences are more real than intended—involves rapid costume-switching and actor substitutions that are plainly visible onstage, but choreographed to appear almost seamless for Scheib’s closed-circuit camera, further underlining the disjuncture between stage and screen. There are really two performances here: one for the audience, and one for the camera.

Such a complex and self-aware production could easily falter in the hands of a less talented ensemble, but every actor here brings the right mix of irreverent humor, intensity and adaptability. And there are innumerable variables to respond to throughout the show. The scenic design, by Sara Brown, necessarily involves trashing the whole set, from the wall of cardboard boxes that comes crashing down early on to the many items of furniture that are thrown and smashed—on the night I attended Scheib even tripped climbing over an upturned chair, falling on his side but keeping his camera held aloft and trained on the actors like an impeccable cartoon waiter dodging obstacles to deliver a drink. The reality-undermining narrative of the novel gains another layer in this mediated live performance, showing us two versions of the same acts (one on stage, the other on screen) and thereby suggesting the possibility of countless alternate realities. If only for a moment, Scheib makes us question how hardwired into this reality we’ve become.

<http://www.thelmagazine.com/newyork/we-are-living-in-a-world-of-wires/Content?oid=2203545>

NEW YORK

Theater Review: Warhol Gets Tweaked in *Kitchen* (*You've Never Had It So Good*) By Scott Brown, 24 January 2012



Gobsquad's '*Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good)*,' at the Public Theater.

Andy Warhol's 1965 film *Kitchen*: Is it 70 solid minutes of stoned, half-scripted prattle in a cramped New York City kitchen — or, as Norman Mailer suggested, a mighty prophecy of the culture to come? Or maybe, if you're the witty U.K./German conceptual theater collective Gob Squad, it was just a preview to a great participatory stage experiment. *Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good)* runs live current through the irony circuit Warhol invented: First the period-bewigged cast members querulously attempt to recapture not just *Kitchen*, but also *Sleep*, *Blowjob*, and other films. (Three discrete projections run concurrently on a giant screen that divides players and crowd.) Then, one by one, they replace themselves with stunned audience conscripts. Many bystanders will get their "fifteen minutes"; some will get quite a bit more.

Stage-and-screen combinations seem to be enjoying a midwinter surge. The recently concluded *World of Wires* — which I caught lamentably late in its run, and which must return immediately — was theater artist Jay Scheib's latest experiment in "live cinema," where the sets and the blocking serve the sightlines of both a roving camera (operated by Scheib himself) and the audience. (The viewer's attention is split between the screens and the action on stage.) *World* (based loosely on a seventies Fassbinder TV series about a computer-generated virtual environment) opened with one of the most thrillingly witty displays of illusion I've even seen on a stage or a screen — a genuine challenge to one's fixed notion of reality — and then barreled through another 90 minutes of riveting near anarchy. I'm hereby sending a brain transmission out to some Off Broadway/nonprofit Morpheus: Please, reboot this soon.

Kitchen (You Never Had It So Good) is running at the Public Theater through February 5.

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ROCKS AND GRAVEL: JAY SCHEIB

by Alex Zafiris

Alex Zafiris talks to theater director, writer and media designer Jay Scheib about his recent play, *World of Wires*, which closes his trilogy, *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems*.



In Jay Scheib's new play, *World of Wires*, a computer simulation mirrors the world as we know it, prompting the question: are we the actual world, or an immaculate reproduction of one? Adapted from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1973 television series, *Welt am Draht*—itself adapted from Daniel F. Galouye's 1962 science-fiction novel, *Simulacron-3*—Scheib creates, with live performance, a virtual consciousness to investigate what is, and what might not be.

World of Wires is the third part of a trilogy, *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems*. First was 2008's *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)*, based on real-life space simulator pods inhabited by hopeful Mars visitors, together with the ideas of Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem and Kurd Lasewitz; then last year's *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*, an adaptation of Samuel R. Delany's overwhelming science-fiction novel, *Dhalgren*. All three were developed during Scheib's current residency as Professor for Music and Theater Arts at MIT, where, in contact with a world completely different from that of his own, his perception of realities, and ways

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in which to think about them, was stretched. The plays are captivating. Fear, delirium, humor, sex, love and hate are magnified, like dream states. Meaning and context shift, and truth runs amok. Conflict thrashes itself out within this battleground, pushing and shoving between balance and tension. Throughout all of it, humanity persists. Cameras are positioned on stage to project live video, bringing more perspective to the set and ultimately, towards the final argument. For this new production, Scheib will be on stage, as director, with a handheld camera, capturing the action, even giving direction.

Scheib himself is an embodiment of unusual connections. He credits his upbringing on a farm in Iowa to making him resourceful—fixing a broken down four wheel drive tractor on his own in the middle of a field, running the combine, using an auger to fill a grain bin—and finding beauty in a freshly plowed landscape. A professional high-jumper at an early age, he reached 6th place in the junior Olympics, only to switch to the arts once he arrived at the University of Minnesota. Choosing theater over painting and sculpture, he then went to complete an MFA at Columbia, attracting mentors such as Anne Bogart along the way. His enthusiasm for other forms, such as cinema, reappear through his work: 2005-8's *This Place is a Desert* was inspired by six of Michelangelo Antonioni's films. More traditional plays assume different identities, such as his adaptation of Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* (2005), and Chekhov's *Platonov*, which evolved to become *In This Is The End of Sleeping* (2004). As a director, he leads another career in Europe, staging national productions like Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Brecht's *Pantaleone und Sein Knecht Matti* in Germany. A new personal project, *The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove*, a dance-theater piece with choreographer Yin Mei in Hong Kong is upcoming in March 2012, and then he's off to Oslo to direct Heiner Müller's *FATZER* with the Norwegian Theater Academy. *World of Wires* is at The Kitchen January 6th through the 21st.

AZ I want to ask you about movement and space. You can tell right away from the action that it's dealing with an alternate reality. And physicality. You have very charismatic, sexy actors.

JS It's true! People do comment on that a lot. We work really hard at being unselfconscious, and the more unselfconscious, the more attractive. And also, pushing the world into a place where these kinds of existence questions are really in the fore. That's where a lot of conflict happens, so it makes good theater.

AZ It's bare bones: you hear the treading of the boards, you see the sweat.

JS Space is one of the best narrators. How we handle space, especially negative space, is something that we talk about a lot. It is very central to how I think about theater, even more than text. Which might be why I like Antonioni's work so much. It's not always the words that carry the information. Sometimes it's composition. I'm a writer, so I do like language, but finding a way to make space function, and have it play a role and have a character, is really important.

AZ There's so much cinema in your work. And now, Fassbinder.

JS Now Fassbinder. Another filmmaker. There are a few reasons for it. One is: trying to get to reality. I started working on the issue of naturalism, a genre of theater that was a huge failure. The idea was that it should be a one-to-one representation of life. Like a scientific process: let's examine a social situation under a microscope, rehearse it, then take away a

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fourth wall. Which meant that you would rehearse in a room with four walls. At the very end, you would decide which wall to take away. That would be the perspective through which an audience could view, say, a divorce—actually learn something about that suffering and pain. I started out trying to do that, and eventually decided that it was never real enough.

AZ Do you mean in your whole career, or for *World of Wires*?

JS Not in this production, but I consider *World of Wires* to be toward the end of a series of about twelve works. That's why I'm on stage in this one. And I wanted to use the camera in terms of representing reality, to find a way to use it architecturally in the theater. To hijack the camera's cultural capital. People complained for a while. They would say, "Oh, I feel so bad, because here's this phenomenal actor onstage, live, but I really only want to watch the screen." Or, "I don't understand. The screen feels much more realistic to me than the stage." I think we are ultimately a cinema culture. Germany is still a theater culture, but the US is really a cinema culture.

AZ I wonder how much of that has to do with the fact that with TV, there's no chance of anyone looking back at you.

JS That could change!



AZ When you go to the theater there's that tension. We're all in the room together. It could break at any moment.

JS It's funny, sometimes when we're rehearsing—especially if we're using a live camera

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onstage—I still always say, “Look at the audience,” but actually I mean the lens of the camera.

AZ For your last play, *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities*, you adapted Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*. Science fiction is obviously suited to your sensibilities.

JS This is part of a trilogy that is all about borrowing ideas and methodology from science, engineering and urban planning, and using them to put pressure on dramaturgy and theatrical form. The first one was called *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)*. It was based on something that I heard at MIT, where I’m a professor. Joseph Gavin, the director of the lunar lander for the Apollo mission to the moon, wrote this very famous letter that basically proposed a one-way mission to Mars. He criticized the moon landing as having been “a huge expense to bring back a couple of bags of rocks.” Essentially, he proposed we send a habitat to the martian surface, then supplies, then people. I was teaching a freshman arts seminar, and I asked them what they would be doing in fifteen years, if their dream came true. This girl said, “I’ll be the first woman on Mars.” I asked her if she would go one way. She said, “Yeah. Duh.” I asked everybody in the room, and all but one person agreed.

So that became a kernel for the first production of this trilogy. There’s a couple of research stations where they do false simulations of life on Mars. One is in the Canadian arctic, where the temperature is close, and they live there in full simulation, pretending with very real consequences. Well—with very fictional consequences. I contacted these guys, and asked if we could do a series of experiments where we would play out scenes from Philip K. Dick’s *Martian Time Slip* as a means of testing crazy social scenarios on the Mars surface. Like, what happens when two crew members have an affair? Because they simulate everything else: a hole in the wall, someone forgetting to close the door, taking soil samples, everything. You need a big experience bank. And I thought, how do you simulate having to take showers around each other, or attraction, or greed? And they said yes! So we started building this production.

AZ Is there a date for when these people in the simulators get to go?

JS That’s the sad part. It keeps changing. Obama took it off the table. We could have not done Iraq and built a hotel on Mars for roughly the same price. I asked a private space agency, SpaceX, which was created by the guy who founded PayPal. Elon Musk. I asked somebody from their office what would it cost me to take a crew and talent, to Mars, film this piece, and then bring everybody back. I asked him about the one-way issue. He said, “You know, I wouldn’t go two ways.” His thing was different. It wasn’t about being Columbus. It was, “If you manage to land on Mars, then imagine the difficulty of landing on Earth. We have a lot of infrastructure here.”

AZ That’s the technical way to look at it.

JS Exactly. That’s an engineer thinking very well. Your chances of success dramatically shift. But he put the cost at about 16 billion dollars. Tag 20 percent on as rates of inflation. He said, “If you pulled the trigger today, and you front that cash now, 16-17 billion will get you there and back. With a studio.” 16 billion? I could recoup that in Pay Per View! I’d get OJ Simpson on board, or some very famous person who’s twirling their thumbs. But that’s MIT. It’s been a place which really made me think that there’s another world, and it’s in this one. I didn’t do that much science fiction before then. I read it, but I didn’t realize that some of

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our most prominent practitioners of artificial intelligence are reading it, taking ideas and making them reality.

AZ When I came to the *World of Wires* rehearsal, I was surprised to see that you are on stage with your actors, while directing them. In this production, you're going to stay there.

JS Well—who knows. I may freak out and fire myself in the last rehearsals, which I have done before. But I'm going to make a concerted effort to stay. It's a very challenging thing. How we see is wildly important to me. You're so close to this thing that you can't see the frame. You only see the details. It's a bit nerve-wracking. One of the actors, Mikéah [Ernest Jennings] said in a post-show conversation, "It's an insane feeling because Jay is so close, and then he just gets farther and farther away." Which is kind of funny. But in this case, I'm going to stay very close.

AZ Have you always worked like this?

JS Yes. It's really important for me to get to know the people I'm working with. I make it possible to be at speaking distance. I talk a lot about postponing the leap to performing, when the wall gets cut away and you're aware of the audience. I want real behavior, and real reactions and life as we understand it, to be solidly in everyone's bodies. It helps me notice if one of the performers is flexing or pushing toward an audience.

AZ I think that happened when I was there on Saturday.

JS Because you were new in the room. That's the amazing thing. It's like the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle business: as soon as you start looking at something, you change it.

AZ I also noticed that your actors really love your notes. Then it suddenly all comes together, and is so compelling.

JS In the best situation, everyone is hunting this thing. No idea belongs to anybody. An actor can understand what they're doing from any of the improvisations that we began with, or this, or that or whatever. They just take what they need.

AZ Can you tell me more about this transition to actually being in the play?

JS Fassbinder was in a lot of his films. He was a playwright and a director. I don't know if he was in his plays. He had a theater company called the Anti-Theater. He got into some trouble, but he was a really interesting artist. We wanted to get a sense of his vast productivity. We spent the first two weeks shooting 90% of a feature, with a lot of improvised text, vaguely based on the plot line of one of his early works. Our goal is to make roughly four feature films this year, and a couple of plays, which would get us on track with his schedule. If I do a play in January, a ballet in March, another play in Oslo in May, and four features before August, we'll pretty much be in Fassbinder's league. Something he did in his films that almost nobody has done was use the same actors again and again. His theater company was really a film studio. I should go intern at one of these big Hollywood film studios just to understand how it works. How many actors are there? What does their ensemble look like? These studios were all built by theater people from Eastern Europe. It would be interesting to get a sense for that, because we don't have a true repertory theater in the US anymore. That's a bit of a dream of mine. To have an ensemble with ten or eleven productions in repertory, and actually play a role in the cultural life of the community. And

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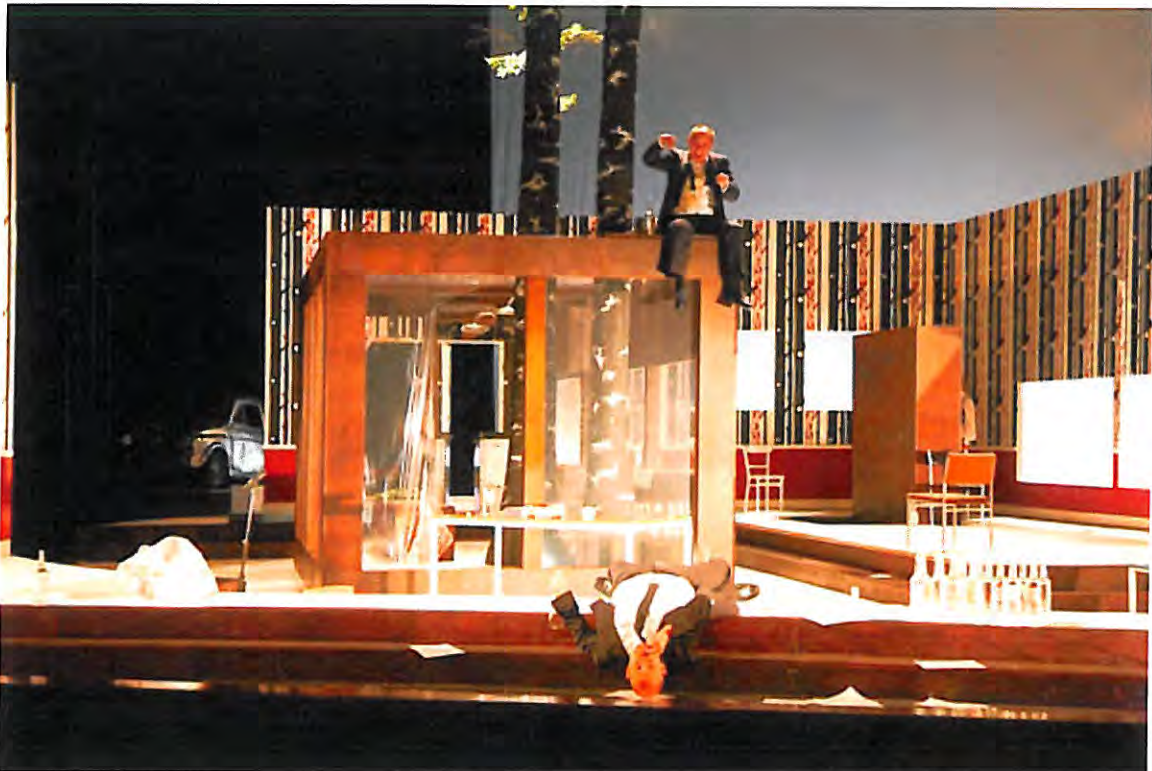
film makes sense as part of that. In a way this is all launching that idea.

AZ Is it a coincidence that his *World of Wires* was just issued on DVD?

JS I proposed this whole trilogy in 2007. I was in Berlin, and I called his estate and they lent me a VHS recording from the television. It still had the TV logo in the corner. The film is based on a novel by Daniel Galouye, *Simulacron-3*, which also was just reprinted in June, and before that it had been out of print for years.

AZ I think science fiction is popular again because of the depression. Maybe because people can't see the future anymore?

JS Well, this play is about a computer simulation set up to simulate the future. The play itself attempts to simulate what might actually be the future. But I don't think about the future that much, because I feel too in the trenches, but maybe that's exactly what you're describing. There's a sort of leveling that's going on, culturally. A really conservative attitude. People are afraid. It's hard to see far away, to take risks. A lot of what Marx had to say has come true. People are stammering through the issue of capitalism folding in on itself. It would be very interesting for somebody to show up with a great paradigm shift. I don't know who that is. I'm not hearing much about it.



AZ I feel that a lot about your style revolves around balance. You direct a lot of traditional plays in Europe, on a much larger scale.

JS They do inform each other, though there's not that much difference between how I'm working. In some regional, repertory, and state theaters, the performers are making six

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productions a year. Like when I did *Fidelio*: it's the German national opera. The guy who played Florestan, this was the 17th production he's done of this opera. He's done it once or twice a year for fifteen years. He just asks, "Where do I stand?" He's not cynical, he's an artist and he's engaged, but he's done so many of them, and seen so many possible solutions. German theater actors have done all the standard plays, everything by Brecht, Shakespeare, and Chekhov. Twice. You're always in the footsteps of some other famous director who has had a particular take on it.

AZ That seems claustrophobic.

JS It is. The good artists are the ones who take that, and make their next experience deeper. So then, your job is a little bit different. You help people in that process of breaking through different barriers. We have those barriers too, but they're different. In the American theater, we don't do repertory, so an actor is in one theater for six weeks, then they're unemployed, then they're in another theater for five weeks, then they're doing a commercial, a TV show. They have a really disjointed experience. The hard part is that you don't meet actors who are playing King Lear on Thursday, and Tussenbach in a Chekhov play on Wednesday. They don't have that massive range. Which I like, and learn a lot from. They say to me, "You want me to hang from the chandelier and do this speech? OK." They have the tools to do it, and they don't have a preciousness about them. It's not the only time they'll ever get to do this production. There's no pressure. The Germans are always like, "Let's try." That's the German word for rehearsal. Probe. To test. In French it's to repeat. *Répétition*.

AZ In English it comes from 'to hear or listen to again.' Re-hear.

JS Then I guess it's a reader's theater in the end. That makes action really scary.

For more information on Jay Scheib and his work, visit jayscheib.com. To purchase tickets for *World of Wires*, visit [the Kitchen](#).

ARTS BEAT
The Culture at Large

The New York Times

THE Arts

JANUARY 12, 2012, 5:00 PM
Theater Talkback: The Stage, the Screen and the Screen on Stage

By *BEN BRANTLEY*



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times In “Super Night Shot” a film is made outside and then screened indoors.

12:11 p.m. | Updated Can film and theater live happily together in the same room? It’s not as if they haven’t had a long relationship already, with each regularly borrowing stories and stars from the other. But now these separate but equal art forms are attempting to practice cohabitation.

As in many relationships, only half of the couple is truly equipped to make the effort. Film, after all, is recorded action and exists mostly in two dimensions (even when it’s 3-D), which means it can’t invite live theater into its world. On the other hand, there’s nothing to stop theater artists from setting up a projector and showing a movie onstage, letting live performers interact with, or ignore, their two-dimensional equivalents.

Which is what has been happening more and more recently, reflecting the role that recorded reality and screens large and small now play in virtually every aspect of everyday lives. At the Under the Radar festival of experimental theater in New York this month I came upon striking works in which film or video played a significant (and in one case dominant) role, reminding us

that, these days, everyone's potentially a moviemaker.

In "Alexis. A Greek Tragedy," a rousing meditation on youthful rebellions past and present from the the Italian troupe Motus, video footage and elemental theater existed cheek by jowl. In "Super Night Shot," the British-German company Gob Squad set itself the task of creating a complete film with hand-held cameras on the streets near the Public Theater within the hour. It then showed that film, unedited, on a Public stage.

There has been some argument as to whether "Super Night Shot" even qualifies as theater. But in its sweaty immediacy and sense of just-displaced reality, it unquestionably feeds the debate about the relationship between screen and stage.

In 1987 the master avant-gardist Richard Foreman presented a work with the bald and declarative title "Film Is Evil: Radio Is Good." The show's premise wasn't hard to figure out: Film, in its literal and detailed representation of the world, leaves little to the imagination, while radio (and by extension, the kind of nonlinear, metaphoric theater that was Mr. Foreman's specialty) challenges our minds to fill in the blanks.

That doesn't mean that Mr. Foreman, who has been absent from the theater in recent years, didn't admit film into his creative sanctuary. An honest-to-gosh movie within the play figured briefly in "Film Is Evil." And his late-career theatrical works offered parallel universes embodied by eccentrically stylized live performers and more naturalistic-looking, if artificially posed, actors on film.

The stage actors would gaze and paw quizzically at the projected images in the way cats sometimes react to what's on television. We audience members, in turn, were likely to find both sets of performers equally enigmatic, though in different ways. And pondering that difference was what made these mixed-media chamber pieces so stimulating.



Paula CourtScott Shepherd in the Wooster Group's production of "Hamlet."

Such dialogues between live and recorded realities have long been an invigorating part of the modus operandi of the Wooster Group, that eternally vital experimental troupe. Its

“House/Lights,” staged in New York in 1999, mixed a Gertrude Stein opera libretto and an obscure vintage bondage movie so thoroughly that dimensions were scrambled beyond distinction.

The ensemble members — particularly, the troupe’s longtime (and incomparable) leading lady, [Kate Valk](#) — were so mechanically ritualized in their movements, with voices so layered and distorted by artificial amplification, that their in-the-flesh selves often registered as less “natural” than their on-screen counterparts did. “House/Lights” played wittily and disturbingly on how, in an age of increasingly mixed, attention-fragmenting media, it becomes more and more difficult for us to trust our senses. When I think back on that show, it’s not a specific image of Ms. Valk in person or on screen that I recall so much as some phantasmal, in-between version.

Memory, of course, is what enshrines live theater and gives it more of a mystical, elusive afterglow than film, which you can usually revisit and replay. When in 2007 the Wooster Group took on that Olympus of theater “Hamlet,” it did so by contrasting a grainy 1964 film of a fabled stage production starring Richard Burton [with live actors performing the same material](#), in and out of sync with what was on screen. That production was an oddly affecting evocation of how we remember and preserve the ephemeral art of the stage.

When mainstream theater uses film, it often seems self-conscious and disruptive in ways its creators surely don’t intend. For example filmed sequences using the actors who appeared in Alan Bennett’s “[History Boys](#)” (on Broadway in 2006) were used to conjure a sense of place (a traditional British boys’ school) between scenes. And in a generally flawless production by Nicholas Hytner, those video sequences sounded false notes that somehow called into question the self-contained world of the play.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times Patrick Wilson as Chris Keller in “All My Sons.”

I felt the same way about Simon McBurney’s 2008 revival of Arthur Miller’s “[All My Sons](#),” which used documentary footage of factory assembly lines and war scenes from the 1940s. But since Mr. McBurney’s production was so theatrically stylized in its acting and its design, the use of film seemed in a way to patronize the play. The suggestion was that we needed to be reminded that the artificial, symbolic activities onstage were emblems of something that had really happened.

On the other hand, Sam Mendes’s touring Anglo-American production of “[Richard III](#),” at the Brooklyn Academy of Music through March 4, makes pointed and sardonic use of film in ways familiar to today’s television audiences. As a conniving nobleman determined to capture the

crown of England, Richard the politician, played by Kevin Spacey, takes his case to the public via a televised speech, with his videotaped face projected on the stage.

Here you're aware of the manipulative intelligence of a character, shaping a projected image that both glorifies and disguises. (Knowing Mr. Spacey's work on both film and stage adds an extra tastiness to our sense of the discrepancies between Richard in two and three dimensions.)

The Belgian director Ivo van Hove — who takes theatrical deconstruction to the point of detonation — uses simulcast video with varying success. He has said his aim is “to make an X-ray of a character,” and a camera would seem the obvious tool for this endeavor. Yet its use in his productions of Molière's “*Misanthrope*” and Lillian Hellman's “*Little Foxes*,” both staged at the New York Theater Workshop, felt more decorative than analytical.

On the other hand, the same technique truly enriched his adaptation of the John Cassavetes movie “*Opening Night*,” a portrait of the necessarily divided identities of actors in performance. The projected images in this show, seen at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2008, became a natural reflection of the doubleness of both acting itself and the experience of being an audience member.

For the interdisciplinary auteur Jay Scheib mixing media is as much a socio-philosophical statement as an aesthetic one. His “*World of Wires*,” seen this month at the Kitchen in New York, follows the descent of one brave computer techie into an alternative, digitally simulated universe. Based on a 1973 television series by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, “*World of Wires*” shares the high-tech political paranoia of more recent films like “*The Matrix*.”

It seems to ask, with equal measures of wonder and anxiety (and, thank heaven, a sense of humor) that favorite collegiate question “What if the reality we're living in has been created by somebody else?” Mr. Scheib was his own cameraman for this production, trailing his actors and turning them into on-screen simulacra before our eyes. The show pulled off some nifty *trompe l'oeil* effects. But its most startling and convincing moments — like the collapse of a wall into the laps of audience members — were not cinematic but purely theatrical.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times Silvia Calderoni, rear, and Benno Steinegger in the Under the Radar Festival production of “*Alexis. A Greek Tragedy*.”

Ultimately of course every artistic representation of reality is imperfect. And one of the things I loved about “*Alexis. A Greek Tragedy*” was its awareness of such limitations. An impressionistic analysis of the student rebellions in Greece in 2008, following the killing of a 15-year-old boy by a

policeman, “Alexis” featured both documentary videotape and in-the-moment Method-style acting sessions (portraying scenes from Sophocles’ “Antigone”), as well as boundary-melting sequences that instantly translated live action into frozen photographic images.

All these representations were deliberately and consistently undermined by the Motus troupe. Heated exchanges from “Antigone” would turn into arguments between the performers playing Sophocles’ characters. And the computer-projected footage would regularly be shrunk into near invisibility or shown on surfaces that mottled and warped the images.

These distortions suggested, to me at least, how hard it is to capture what people feel in times of crisis. Our awareness and suspicions of the inexactitude of art are heightened in those moments when apocalypse seems to threaten.

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CULTUREBOT

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“World of Wires” at The Kitchen: An Interview With Jay Scheib

By Julie Potter



World of Wires, From L to R: Laine Rettmer, Tanya Selvaratnam, Jon Morris, Sarita Choudhury, Jay Scheib, Mikeah Ernest Jennings. Photo Courtesy of Jay Scheib

Capping the trilogy *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems*, *World of Wires* is [Jay Scheib](#)'s adaptation of filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht*, opening Friday at The Kitchen. Catching Scheib on the phone during his final week of rehearsals, he talked with me about science fiction, simulations and the new work.

***World of Wires* is your third production in the trilogy *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems* created in residence at MIT. What's it like making work there and what has the environment offered to your process?**

Six or seven years ago I asked a group of students what they expected to be doing in 10 years and one student said she'd probably be the first woman on Mars. That was the first I knew there was a really serious Mars program out there in the world. Then a month later I had a conversation with Joe Gavin, the guy who directed the moon lander. He was the lunar lander brain. He said he wouldn't go to Mars unless it's a one-way trip. He didn't want to be involved in a mission to Mars to go there and bring back rocks. The only mission he'd do is to first build a habitat, and then six months later send people, and then after that send supplies and more people and actually have a station on Martian surface. This is the famous one-way mission model, which was essentially adopted and there's an entire community of people who are engaged in that.

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So that's the seed that started the human simulation trilogy. I learned about the Mars Desert Research Station in the Utah desert where scientists and researchers go and wear spacesuits and live in full simulation for months at a time. So I began putting together the pieces, combining that with some of my other interests. Although I've been doing other productions in between – operas and plays, the ballet in Hong Kong – this trilogy it has remained a real focus of my life.

For this part of the trilogy you focus mostly on the disciplines of computer science and artificial intelligence. Can you describe how those areas helped you generate material and the interface with professionals or research in these fields?

For this production, someone approached me after a performance of *Untitled Mars* and said “Oh my god, do you know the work of Nick Bostrom?” So I found this guy who is the Director of the Future of Humanity Institute and Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University. He wrote a paper called [Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?](#)

In the white paper he speculates that there's a pretty high probability that we are in fact living in a computer simulation. It turns out that the idea has a healthy following. The article is brilliant and synthesizes a number of interests that I've had over the years growing up, reading about simulation and finding myself drawn into the world of MIT and artificial intelligence, so it's been an interesting ride. A lot of artificial intelligence is actually like Amazon.com can tell you what you want based on your preferences. We have these computers gathering information and drawing conclusions about our lives, which can be pretty nice in a way, but is also very dangerous.

There's also my love of science fiction, which in the United States, is one area where, in my mind, really interesting thinking about the world and the way in which its changing is reflected. I don't draw a line between science fiction and literature. I find that many of our science fiction authors are the greatest we've produced. The ideas are interesting. I worked with Philip K. Dick first and then spent a couple of years building a piece based on Samuel R. Delany novel *Dhalgren* and getting to know Chip Delany was really the highlight of the decade. Now we're working with a novel by Daniel F. Galouye called *Simulacron-3*, although the piece is really based on Fassbinder's adaptation of Galouye's *Simulacron-3*. Galouye wrote this novel that's about people who discover that they're living in a computer simulation and it's one of the first novels that contains the trope of plugging yourself into a network. I found that interesting pre-*Matrix*.

So in *The Matrix*, would you take the red pill or the blue pill?

We make a joke about that! In the play, this character in the Garden of Eden pours a whole handful of pills into his hand and everyone gives him advice: “Only take the blue one...Only take the red one.” I agree with Mikéah Jennings who decided in the performance to just eat all of them. That's what happens. It would just double the affect.

I understand that a robbery you witnessed at Duane Reade influenced this work. Can you talk about what happened and what it got you thinking?

So Galouye writes in *Simulacron-3* that simulations have this uncanny ability to migrate into the real, and sometimes the simulation becomes real before you expect it to, so if you want to test the theory, try simulating a bank robbery. Enter a bank with a fake pistol and stage a robbery and very quickly a customer will die of a real heart attack, the bank teller will hand you with shaking hands real money and the police officer will likely shoot you with real bullets. This is kind of a bland example, but of course if you told the cop that you'd be robbing the bank with a fake gun, you wouldn't really learn a lot about bank robberies. It wouldn't be a worthwhile simulation. So this is one of those ideas that stuck with me and there was something about it that didn't make sense to me.

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Then a couple of years later I was in a Duane Reade drug store on 111th and Broadway and I found myself in the middle of a really violent robbery. I had a gun held to my head for what seemed like an hour and was probably only about 40 minutes. People got beat up and hurt really badly and there was a moment where he pointed the gun at someone else and I saw it and I swear it was fake. I didn't test the theory at the time but it stuck with me forever where I thought that's definitely a fake pistol and if he pulled the trigger, maybe a little fire would have come out the end like a lighter or something. So that was a really scary horrifying event. There is nothing funny about what happened in that room, but the pistol – I still carry that with me that the pistol was fake. Was it all real?

In terms of working with your performers, can you give an example of what you might ask to do in rehearsals to work with this material?

We spent three weeks on Governors Island thanks to a residency from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. We took the ferry and hung out on an island. We watched a lot of Fassbinder films. We read the entire novel out loud. We read the screenplay based on the TV series. We improvised for two and a half weeks and came up with a list of tasks: maybe that's 10 entrances and exits, someone has to accidentally get hurt, and we improvise with these small event structures. Then we showed a work in progress assembled again in November. This is where things got interesting. We decided that in order to start the project we'd make a different work by Fassbinder first. We did a little work on a play of his called *The Garbage, the City and Death* and then switched to another early film called *Katzelmacher*. We actually shot our own version of *Katzelmacher*, in which we improvised text and new situations in a week and a half. Basically, we made a knockoff Fassbinder film and that's how we started our preparation and re-entered this work. We had a studio in Tribeca for a month in an old office building, then had another residency with the Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural Center on the Lower East Side, a month on Governors Island and one at MIT.

What else are you thinking about during these final rehearsals before the opening?

The thing I'm thinking about a lot right now since I am making final decisions, is that I am onstage during the whole play, which means that there are almost two plays. The play staged for the audience and the play that I see. I'm operating the camera the whole time. What comes from the *Katzelmacher* experiment is that essentially the making of the production is also the making of a 90-minute single take film. So there are a number of dimensions to the work, which is an interesting prospect. It's not staged in a traditional sense because I never leave the stage. It's a live film, but at the same time, because we're working on material that questions live-ness, we are trying everything we can to continue questioning live-ness from beginning to end and there are a lot of things that go into that. I don't think I should say anything else about it!

World of Wires runs January 6-21 at The Kitchen. Tickets \$20.

<http://culturebot.net/2012/01/12128/world-of-wires-at-the-kitchen-an-interview-with-jay-scheib/>

Culture Count

Variations on a Simulation

Jay Scheib's new mind-bending play, 'World of Wires,' is based on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1973 TV series 'Welt am Draht,' which was itself based on Daniel Galouye's 1964 sci-fi novel 'Simulacron-3.' Here's a look at the three works.

'SIMULACRON-3'

STORIES BY



NUMBER OF CHARACTERS:



USES OF THE WORD: 'COMPUTER'



'LOVE'



ATTEMPTED MURDERS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER:



'WELT AM DRAHT'

FILMS BY



'WORLD OF WIRES'

THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS BY



Theater director Jay Scheib based his new science-fiction thriller, "World of Wires," on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Welt am Draht," a 1973 television series that was in turn based on Daniel Galouye's 1964 novel, "Simulacron-3."

We asked Mr. Scheib to compare elements from the three works: his own, Fassbinder's and Galouye's. One set of figures that struck him was the list of featured characters, which decreased from novel to TV to theater.

"There's not a whole lot of budgetary concerns with having a lot of characters in a novel," he said with a hint of jealousy.

All three "texts" explore the possibility that humans are living in a simulated virtual reality. Asked if he personally believed that he was part of a grander invisible simulation, Mr. Scheib said that while the possibility was a "source

of existential horror that was impossible to overcome," in the worlds created by Fassbinder and Galouye he felt he might actually be comforted to learn that he and everything around him was being programmed by a computer.

"It sure would explain a lot of crazy things in my life," he said.

In Galouye's novel and Fassbinder's TV show, a major plot element dictated that any character who was able to realize that he was being manipulated would be in violation of the societal code and consequently deleted by programmers. But this wasn't a possibility that frightened Mr. Scheib.

"I'm still here," he said, "so it must be OK."

The Kitchen will present the world premiere of "World of Wires" Jan. 6-21.

—Lizzie Simon



Jay Scheib

Jay Scheib, with camera, at a rehearsal for 'World of Wires.'