

# Stage: The Imagery of Gertrude Stein

By RICHARD EDER

**T**HE SPECIAL QUALITY of Gertrude Stein's writing is that it is funny, sad and dignified in a world somewhere between a prison and a catastrophe. She is subversive, but it is the subversion of someone who pretends the bars are not there because she knows she can't get through them. She was too bulky, perhaps. The answer to desolation is an ingenious disorder: She is the last child, playing alone among ruins.

"A language tires.

A language tries to be.

A language tries to be free."

She wrote in the poem "Photograph." Her freedom was to juxtapose commonplaces in improbable ways, like hanging a grapefruit from a hatrack. She gathered tag-ends of ordinary speech, dismantled them and reassembled them in odd combinations so as to jolt the power in them. "Photographs are small. They reproduce well. I enlarge better."

Although it is a poem, "Photograph" is set out in five sections of varying length—one is only two lines long—labeled "acts." This has provided an occasion for the Performance Workshop to give it a staging at the Open Space in SoHo. It is a lovely and remarkably successful attempt to render the qualities of Gertrude Stein in theatrical terms.

The Performance Group, directed by James Lapine, shares a roughly common theatrical territory with avant-garde groups such as Robert Wilson's, the Ontological-Hysterical Theater of Richard Foreman and Mabou Mines. Although they differ somewhat in style, intention and, above all, mood, they all produce what might be called a theater of the subconscious.

They use music, rhythmic sounds and silences; they use mime and movements that have the discipline and expressiveness of ballet; they use lighting to enhance these movements and, just as frequently, to blur them and make them indistinct. They use disassociation as a cardinal principle: One image seems arbitrarily related to the next, as in dreams.

Finally, they use a text; but this is as submerged, as disconnected as the other elements and only slightly more prominent. If it is more prominent, in fact, it is because words serve more clearly than anything else to mark the disconnections, and to nail down for us the distance between what is happening at one moment and what is happening at the next. "Alice is serving tea to John," a voice may say, and we see John suddenly hoisted to the ceiling while Alice meditatively stacks a pile of books.

This approach can accomplish some remarkable things, though it has its limitations, and they are more serious than those who believe it constitutes the sole approach to contemporary theater may admit. This is not the occa-

## Juxtapositions

**PHOTOGRAPH**, by Gertrude Stein. Directed by James Lapine; costumes and settings by Maureen Connor; lighting by Paul Galle; music by Dwight Andrews; narration by Walt Jones; production supervisor, Jennifer Hershey. Presented by the Open Space in SoHo, Lynn Michaels, artistic director, 44 Wooster Street. WITH: Gwendolen Harcwick, Elaine Harnett, Gabriel'e Oleiniczak, Gloria Pilot, Robert Rood, Neil Sawyer, Pamela Smith, Evelyn Telloff.

sion to discuss these virtues and limitations, but only to say that in the case of "Photograph" the method works extremely well.

Partly, this is because Gertrude Stein's kaleidoscopic, leap-frogging disassociations are particularly suitable, and partly it is because the Performance Group's delightful version manages to suggest not only her jumps but also the sad and funny spirit that makes these jumps.

The setting is a square, useful space with columns at each side. "Photograph" starts in blackness. Flash bulbs suggest rather than pick out the presence of the performers: five women, two men and one child. The light comes up part way and we see the eight, their backs to us, each isolated in a kind of gray illumination.

Suddenly a vivid color photograph is projected onto the back wall. It is momentarily more real than the real figures. "For a photograph we need a wall," the narrator says, reading the first line of the poem; and it is true. The figures standing there are homeless; only the slide projection seems comfortable.

"Photograph" proceeds in this fashion. The actions do not so much follow its lines—some narrated, some spoken by the actors—as accompany and intersect them in the way that a river appears and reappears beside a railroad track.

"And so we resist," says the narrator, and the actors heave and bunch up, effortfully and untidily. The child half turns at the end of the struggling group, and voices a tiny "Wow." It is more description than exclamation.

The child's name is Evelyn Telloff, and her marvelous deadpan amid her role-changes—she is a miniature flapper in a gap cloche, and later, she is a lampshade—occasionally breaks down, and this is just what it should do.

The transformation proceed — the group turns into cardplayers, contest winners, dream-couples promenading in an Edwardian park, sea-bathers—within hailing distance of Miss Stein's lines. Some of them are better than others, but throughout there is a lovely humaneness, a delicacy toward the images and toward the audience, whose possible bewilderment in the face of an elliptic and abstract work is allayed with the old theatrical resources of humor, variety and a pace that respects the human capacity to sit still. I think Gertrude Stein would have been delighted.

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