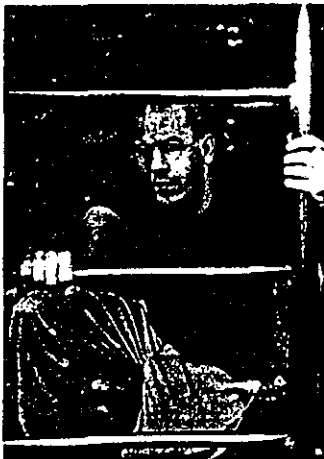


# Over Hill and Dale with Gorilla Rep

By David Gluck

Strange sights on sticky summer nights are the norm in New York City's Washington Square Park. The usual assortment of skulking dealers, mumbling park-dwellers, hustlers, street poets and skate punks crowd the paths. There's a husband and wife in a fencing match, literally, complete with foils, white bibs and helmets. A perfectly coifed collie glides by on a motorized skateboard. But perhaps the strangest sight is a shambling mountain of a man, long white hair and beard cascading over sparkling sequined robes, standing in the middle of a children's playground with his fists raised to the sky and Shakespeare's words booming from his lips:



Gorilla Rep artistic director Christopher Sanderson.

"Oh let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!"

King Lear is alive and well, and camped out in Washington Square with the rest of the homeless. And he has Gorilla Rep, an adventurous New York theatre company with a seven-year history of free Park performances, to thank for it. This summer the group presented *King Lear* alongside its perennial *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for the first time offering audiences—a mix of curious pedestrians who happen by as well as deliberate theatregoers who arrive at curtain time—a double dose of its distinctive performance style.

The three key words in the Gorilla lexicon are "environmental," "interactive" and "democratic." The company adopts the unmodified environment of the Park as its sprawling stage, sweeping the audience from location to location as the actors play their scenes in, on and around various structures and open spaces. Technical elements are minimal, with only rudimentary lighting and no sound amplification. The spectators soon discover that they can choose a new vantage point with every shift of scene, and position themselves close to the action on all sides of the playing space. The actors incorporate the roving crowd into the world of the play, plowing through the audience, addressing their soliloquies to startled spectators, and here or there completing a bit of slapstick business with an unwitting part-

ner. The democratic idea behind the rough stagecraft is to provide an accessible, active experience for people with any level of theatre literacy.

The force behind the Gorilla Rep aesthetic is 32-year-old director Christopher Sanderson, who celebrated his graduation from NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing in 1990 by immediately launching his first environmental *Midsummer* in the Park. Influenced by the theories of Richard Schechner and the work of environmental sculptor Cristo, Sanderson aims to use theatre to transform the downtrodden turf of

Washington Square into a "radically activated public space." When performers and audience actively inhabit a space together, the director believes that a "behavioral sculpture" arises, and changes the gathering of strangers into a ritual community—the litter-strewn, everyday public space is reclaimed as sacred communal ground.

Bringing people together is a central tenet of the work. "Democratization," says Sanderson, "means bringing high-quality work to people who don't usually see theatre, and for people who see a lot of theatre, helping them realize that seeing it with people who usually *don't* increases the quality of the experience."

Performing a constantly moving Shakespeare in the open air requires an acting style that is intensely physical and technically precise, yet flexible so the cast can interact creatively with the audience and adapt to the many distractions of the Park. The signature element of Sanderson's process is a three-day retreat, or "paratheatric rehearsal"—just before opening,

the entire cast is transported to a rural site where they bond by living together, put the final touches on the production and practice the art of making theatre in a non-traditional space. (Sanderson uses the word "paratheatre" to mean "outside the theatre," a completely different connotation than the "paratheatre" of Jerzy Grotowski, on whose exercise Sanderson partially bases his work, which describes a performance event that breaks down the distinction between actor and spectator.)

The first day of the paratheatric is spent in site-specific exercises and improvisations that reinvoke the spirit of exploration and creative freedom of early rehearsals; the second consists of the "paratheatrical run." The actors begin by "blazing" the territory—in character and as a group, they scout the entire retreat area, looking for sites which evoke emotions relevant to their roles. At the end of the walk-through, they select the most resonant locations for each scene to be played. Then the entire play is



Copernicus and Christina Cabot in *King Lear*: alive and well and camped out with the rest of the homeless.