



# OFF SITES

CONTEMPORARY  
PERFORMANCE  
BEYOND  
SITE-SPECIFIC

BERTIE FERDMAN



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## The Teepee in the Shantytown

On August 17, 1993, bulldozers plowed through “the Hill,” the unofficial name of one of the oldest shantytowns in New York City, located at the corner of Canal and Chrystie Streets right at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge. “Its fifty or so occupants were uprooted in an early-morning action that officials said was for their own safety,” Ian Fisher of the *New York Times* reported the following day, “crushing into bits of plywood and muddy rags one of the most visible symbols of homelessness in Manhattan.”<sup>35</sup> The Hill had been one of the last remaining homeless encampments left around New York City in a decade where homelessness had skyrocketed. David Dinkins, who as Manhattan borough president had run in 1990 on a platform for the homeless, vowing to champion their rights and the city’s obligation to house them, quickly changed gears once he took office as mayor.<sup>36</sup> His tenure is characterized by a cohesive and aggressive campaign to rid the streets of



the homeless. In just three years, the city "bulldozed homeless encampments, barred 'unauthorized persons' from public spaces and tentatively embraced the Transit Authority's eviction of disorderly homeless people from the subways, even in winter."<sup>37</sup> The series of shantytowns erected on vacant lots throughout the city, often made from tents, cardboard, wood, and scavenged material that would provide shelter, were often called "Dinkinsvilles," a comparison to the "Hoovervilles" of the Depression era.

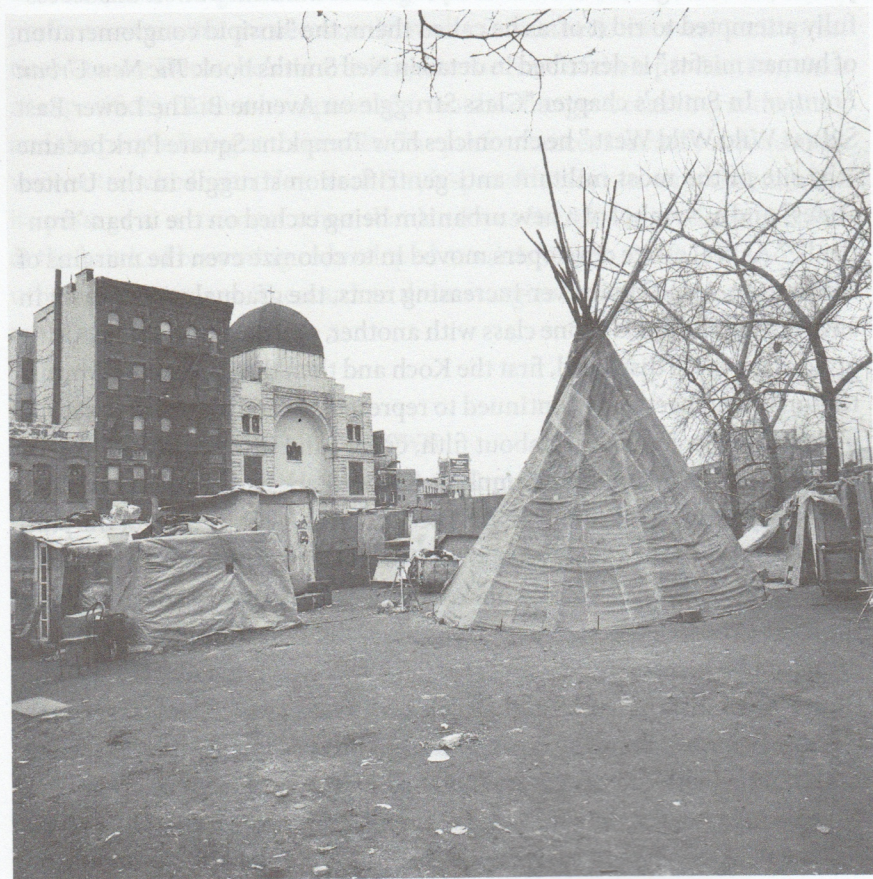
The Hill's 1993 demolition was one of many in New York City.<sup>38</sup> Two years prior, in June 1991, shortly after a Memorial Day concert organized under the "Housing Is a Human Right" slogan, city crews infamously destroyed another homeless encampment in Tompkins Square Park (evicting between two hundred and three hundred park dwellers and demonstrators) in the East Village. The fight over the park, which peaked with the violent police riot of August 1988 when Mayor Koch's administration unsuccessfully attempted to rid it of, as he called them, the "insipid conglomeration of human misfits," is described in detail in Neil Smith's book *The New Urban Frontier*. In Smith's chapter "Class Struggle on Avenue B: The Lower East Side as Wild Wild West," he chronicles how Tompkins Square Park became "the site of the most militant anti-gentrification struggle in the United States" and a "symbol of a new urbanism being etched on the urban 'frontier.'"<sup>39</sup> As real estate developers moved in to colonize even the margins of Manhattan, resulting in ever-increasing rents, the gradual replacement in entire neighborhoods of one class with another, and no alternative housing options for those displaced, first the Koch and then the Dinkins's administration unapologetically continued to represent those apartment-dwelling neighbors who complained about filth, crime, and drug dealing. Dinkins went so far as to claim that Tompkins Square Park had been "stolen from the community by the homeless."<sup>40</sup> The \$2.3 million renovation of the park began almost immediately after the 1991 demolition of the encampment. Urban renewal was predicated on "cleaning up" the city without attacking the roots of homelessness or providing affordable housing options for those displaced by increasing rents.

It was amidst this turmoil that Thieves Theatre, which had staged Jean Genet's *Deathwatch* (with prisoners at the Illinois State Penitentiary) and *Marat/Sade* (with former mental patients in Toronto) prior to coming to New York, presented Heiner Müller's *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* in early September of 1991 at the Hill. Dramaturgically, the production had two levels, as Thieves' founders Nick Fracaro and Gabriele Schafer explained to me.<sup>41</sup> The first was the theatrical staging of



the play itself for a limited audience of fifteen, and the second was a teepee, which housed the play and its creators from November 1990 through May 1993. This “three-year-long enactment and para-theatrical performance of the Müller piece,” as Fracaro described it, had a much larger impact, with “more than 78,000 vehicles and 350,000 people crossing the Manhattan Bridge during an average day . . . gazing at the evolving living history of the teepee in the shantytown.”<sup>42</sup>

Thieves Theatre’s vision for site-specific and “zeitgeist-specific” theatre making, as they called it, called for the incorporation of the real-life context of the subjects with whom they were working. This had been the case with *Deathwatch* (they performed with the prisoners) and *Marat/Sade* (they lived in the Toronto halfway house with the subjects). Fracaro and Schafer wanted to expand the potential impact of theatre in an urban



Thieves Theatre’s teepee at the Hill, 1991. Photo by Margaret Morton, copyright OmbraLuce LLC.



environment as they explored where to stage Müller's text, which called for "the naturalism of the scene." They decided that making an Indian teepee in homeless territory would create a strong juxtaposition of an image of survival—the teepee marking that 1990 was the hundredth anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre—against the backdrop of the shanties of Dinkins's abandoned, homeless New Yorkers. As they explained to me, New Yorkers' attitudes toward the homeless seemed to be shifting from sympathetic to disparaging, while at the same time there was still a romanticism, albeit superficial, regarding the Native American and "living on the land," evidenced by the novel and subsequent Hollywood success of *Dancing with Wolves* in 1990.<sup>43</sup>

The tall teepee stood out among the shantytown's wood and paper shacks, bringing renewed visibility to the Hill—the kind of visibility the



Thieves Theatre's teepee at the Hill, 1991. Photo by Margaret Morton, copyright OmbraLuce LLC.



Dinkins administration was determined to suppress. Made of seventy-eight US domestic mailbags that had been ripped open and sown together by Schafer, the structure was held up by seventeen pine trees the artists collected upstate. At eighteen feet tall and twenty feet in diameter, it was hard to miss. The Thieves' production rejected the theatrical establishment, choosing instead, as C. Carr reported in an interview, "to 'embody and articulate' the voice of the disenfranchised" in *their* land.<sup>44</sup> "The performance ended with us removing the cover of the teepee, thereby reminding the audience that they are sitting in a shantytown under the night sky, and thus also reminding them that 'homes' of any kind are neither permanent nor safe and that we all have a false sense of security."<sup>45</sup> Erecting a teepee in that place and staging *Argonauts* inside it grounded Müller's play in living history. The material the artists wrote around Müller's play talked about the history of Manhattan and the site of the shantytown in particular. The tepee and its performance also marked the land with an alternate poetics, a "warring landscape," as Fracaro called it, even after the Hill was long gone. Connecting Gertrude Stein's famous quotation from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—"a landscape is such a natural arrangement for a battlefield or a play that one must write plays"<sup>46</sup>—and Müller's desire, in Fracaro's words, to "stage battles," Thieves Theatre's *Argonauts* embodied the tension inherent in the continuing urban struggle for land, from the homeless of the Hill to those fighting eviction by landlords and developers—a struggle that persists to this day in New York City and elsewhere.

### *Father amid the Meat*

In June 1990, the late theatre visionary Reza Abdoh mounted *Father Was a Peculiar Man*—a seminal urban site-specific piece written by Mira-Lani Oglesby and produced by Anne Hamburger, founder of En Garde Arts. *Father* spanned four city blocks in the vicinity of West Twelfth Street and Ninth Avenue, a neighborhood known as Meatpacking District, now trendy and home to the High Line park,<sup>47</sup> luxury designer stores, and the new Whitney Museum. When *Father* premiered, the site was a sketchy destination, dark and desolate, notorious for its semi-abandoned warehouses and its stench, extremely different from the gleaming, manicured destination it would eventually become. Actress Juliana Francis-Kelly, who was barely out of college and had never been to or heard of the place before she was cast in *Father*, recalled how "meat was still being packed there, though the industry seemed small, family-operated, and on the decline."<sup>48</sup>