

A Pilgrim's Progress through the *Angel Project*

James Westcott

"Angel Project?"

"Yes."

"Get in."

The car bowled gently down the empty road and we were silent for a few strange seconds.

"I've never been to Roosevelt Island," I said.

"This is exactly the spot where everybody tells me that," the driver said.

Deborah Warner, the English director revered for her salvation of the hitherto hopelessly violent *Titus Andronicus* (1987), hounded by the Beckett estate for her unorthodox production of *Footfalls* (1994), and adored by New Yorkers for her *Medea* (2000), has a reputation for taking the audience to unexpected places.

"Where are we going?"

"Not far."

The car deposited me on the southern tip of Roosevelt Island near a crumbling gothic castle suffocated by ivy; it could have been Miss Havisham's house but was in fact a smallpox hospital. This is where the *Angel Project*, the centerpiece of Lincoln Center Festival 2003, began. It was a suitably ghostly and serene beginning, just a tiny sidestep from normal New York life but one that took the audience into an unfamiliar, plaintive parallel city.

Warner has done something like this before, in a derelict hotel in London in 1999 and in various buildings in Perth, Australia, a year later. Audience members become participants in a performance that uses all the city as a stage. Warner sketches a trail between abandoned buildings and intervenes in those empty, yet pregnant spaces to suggest a recent angelic presence. Occasionally visitors may encounter an angel directly. There were reports from Perth of solitary pilgrims taking 12 hours to complete the trail; along the way they were apparently provoked to contemplate their own divinity—or otherwise—and the fallen state of the city.

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But never had Warner made an *Angel Project* on this scale, and never in a city as congested, anxious, and over-explored as New York. How would the stubborn city yield to Warner's delicate, dreamy theatrical treatment? And with New Yorkers more nervous, property owners more suspicious, and insurers more conservative than ever before, how could Warner pull off such an ambitious scheme? *The Angel Project* in New York encompassed *nine* separate, specially manipulated sites. Since there was no money (a \$90 ticket charge was still massively subsidized), all of the spaces had to be donated. The first two weeks of the performance, scheduled as previews, were canceled because buildings were lost at the last minute—regulations weren't met, things weren't safe enough, realtors got cold feet. It was a miracle that the *Angel Project* happened at all.

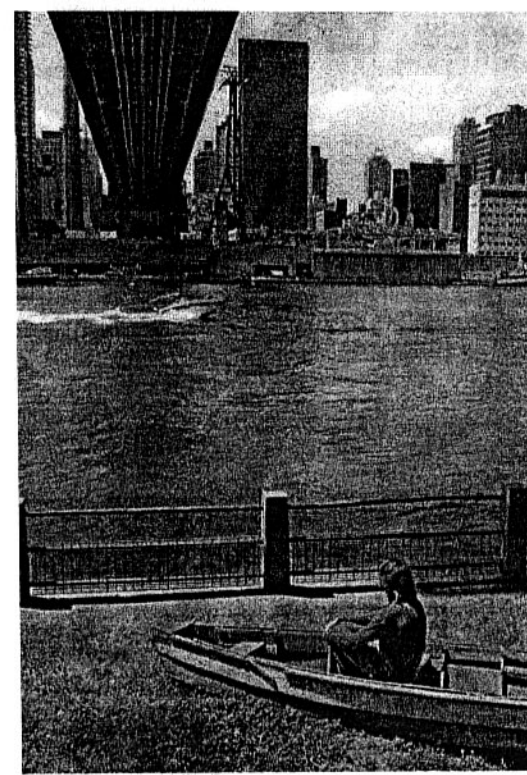
I stepped into a white cabin near the castle and was given instructions: No talking. No cell phones. Be alone. Take your time. Here's a Metrocard. Here's your trail map.

"This is weird," I said, needing to say something. She just smiled.

"But I guess that's the point," I said, pointlessly.

The same car took me to the first site proper of the *Angel Project*: underneath the Tramway bridge, looking over the East River. A placid-looking man sat in a rotting rowboat fingering an ancient hemp net, occasionally glancing at the river, never looking at me. He was unmistakably an angel, even though he had no wings. His calmness was otherworldly. Opposite him sat an old man with flabby, leathery cheeks and big friendly eyes. His umbrella was poked in the ground and his open lunch box lay beside it. His fishing rod was resting against the railing. I wasn't sure at first whether he was an angel or just an old Roosevelt Islander doing his thing. Then I stepped inside the beat-up hut on the grassy knoll and looked through its glassless windows. The two creatures were composed so perfectly through each window, in a painterly way—with the arch of the bridge, the river bank, the river, and the city behind it just so—that I felt sure they were both angels, thoughtfully positioned by Warner.

Following the directions on the trail map, I went down into the subway. Only when I got to the platform did I realize that I had missed Site 2: Outside the Station. Then I remembered that, on my way to meet the car in the first place, I'd half-noticed a strange presence sitting on the wall outside the station. But, not yet being in angel-detection mode—still being in city tunnel-vision mode—I had shaken off the momentary uneasiness and instantly forgotten about it. Now, I couldn't even recall exactly what it was about the figure that had unnerved me for a split second. As the train pulled out of the station, I mentally kicked myself for being so inattentive, but I started to realize something of what the *Angel Project* might be about: control and uncertainty. Warner had choreographed everything on the trail; even though you moved freely through it, utterly alone, it was a ponderous simulation—like a ride on a very high-brow ghost train. The reciprocal of Warner's managerial impulse, though, is her ability to cultivate accidents and uncertainty. I didn't know for



1. Site 1 of the *Angel Project*, underneath the bridge on Roosevelt Island, looking toward Manhattan. *The Angel Project* (2003), directed by Deborah Warner. (Photo by Stephanie Berger)

sure what was part of the performance and what was just “normal” city life, and already it made me look at everyone on the subway differently.

Site 3: a blackened, sagging tenement on 6th Avenue near Bryant Park. The guidebook instructed me to press buzzer 4S. It buzzed immediately; no one spoke. There was nothing on the door to indicate that, yes, this is part of the *Angel Project* performance installation, part of Lincoln Center Festival 2003 sponsored by Bloomberg and Altria, and you have come to the right place—Do Not Be Afraid. I walked up four flights of stairs to 4S and slowly opened the door. It was a bare apartment with dirty grey wooden floors and a single lightbulb. Carefully scattered around the floor there was angel paraphernalia: an old bible, its leaves fluttering in the breeze, a *How to Speak Italian* book, various trinkets. On the walls: aerial views of New York, maps, pencil scrawlings...flight plans. I poked my head out through the back window into a forest of extractor fans, fire escapes, and air conditioners—and was that a dirty old set of wings just over there, almost out of sight?

The illicit, quiet thrill of padding around in someone else’s apartment was heightened by the sense that the room had only recently been abandoned. It was like being at the scene of a crime after the event, or on a film set. The room ached with the desperate presence of the departed angel; it had spent lonely months in here planning its escape.

The apartment had a poky, dirty bathroom. There was no one else around, so I shut the door and went to the toilet. When I came out again, the next person in the procession was in the apartment, pussyfooting around, peering at the evidence of evacuation. He turned round and looked at me quizzically. I wondered whether he thought I was the angel.

Walking to the next site, at 1065 6th Avenue, the city was starting to transform: everything and everyone had a frame around it and seemed to exude loneliness. I entered the lobby of a huge office block, fingering my guidebook. The concierge said nothing—as instructed, of course—but gave me a tiny nod and smile. I got into the elevator and was massively irritated to find another person in there, also fingering her guidebook.

“So what do you think?” she said, breaking all the rules.

“It’s interesting,” I said, not wishing to be rude but clearly not wishing to have a conversation.

“Yeah, but I’m not really sure where it’s going.”

We alighted on the 18th floor to find a huge room ankle deep in white feathers with a clear pathway round the perimeter. Down the center of the room there was a row of locked lockers with angel names signed in chalk on each one. At the end of the room nearest the elevators a birdcage hung from the ceiling by a white rope. Inside the cage was a small, red, silent bird.

I waited for my elevator companion to finish her cursory trot around the room. Then I was alone in an empty office high up in the city overlooking Bryant Park. Again, I had the feeling that I was doing something forbidden, and the excited churning in my stomach came on. I was in the angel training room. The title—*The Angel Project*—I realized, is not just a reference to the logistical nightmare of producing the piece itself—a Project as much as a creation; it is also—or only—a label for something New York’s band of angels have been working together on for some time and have just recently finished: planning their escape from the forsaken city. These ghostly sites evidence the result of their collaboration. There were no angels left up here, and there were no humans here either, so I stepped onto the feathers and swished around the room. They were so thick it was impossible to displace them; it felt like floating. I picked up a handful of feathers, stuffed them in my bag, and left.

The sun was setting and the air was cooling. The night felt clean and glossy. The trail hit 42nd Street, and it wouldn’t deviate much from New York’s mainline of depravity for the rest of the show. I paused outside the blacked-out door of Peep-O-Rama, again unsure whether I’d come to the right place. A man sitting outside the souvenir store next door interrupted a conversation on his cell phone to lean over and tell me: “It’s closed, buddy.” No peeping tonight, you pervert. I ignored him—how could I explain succinctly what the hell it was that I was doing?—and pulled on the door. It yielded with almost embarrassing ease and I slipped inside.

I moved through the small peeping chamber into a room with crates full of



2. Peep-O-Rama, on 42nd Street, now stuffed with religious texts. The Angel Project (2003). (Photo by Stephanie Berger)



3. A nun—who I never saw when I was there—was always on the island in Times Square. The Angel Project (2003). (Photo by Stephanie Berger)

discarded old Bibles, Talmuds, Korans, prayer books, guides to sin, tracts, pamphlets, church board games—any kind of theological work. Over each bin there hung a bare lightbulb. The stairs at the back were brightly lit but cordoned off; they were strewn with yet more frantically rejected books. I felt sure that something was going on in the basement, even though it was silent. The atmosphere of abandonment and resignation pervaded the place like a heavy fog and made me shiver. I tried to soak up the fear and think about what was going on here: a lament for the fallen world in its center of sin? Not quite: the *Angel Project* is far from puritanical and is actually in love with desolation. But the Fall is not a happy one; it is beautifully melancholy.

I sat in the peeping chamber looking out onto the street. Warner had flipped things round: now, the tint of the glass made it impossible for people to see in, but I could see all of them. For a while, it was a voyeuristic titillation to see unseen. No matter how hard I stared at the passersby, they could not feel my presence behind the glass. Then my invisibility became deeply troubling. I did not exist.

Walking to the next site, people on the street looked utterly lost and alone, paper-thin, like ghosts. All sounds came in gentle, muffled waves like the way things sound just as you go to sleep. I looked at people more closely and compassionately than I ever imagined I could, but still felt impossibly distant from them. The people and the city seemed beautiful and hopeless.

The next site was the tip of the little island in the middle of Times Square but there was nothing there except people taking pictures of each other stranded in the neon wilderness, grinning. They were unwitting participants in this larger performance. Maybe this was a little cruel of Warner; maybe it was compassionate.

One Times Square, the ruined old headquarters of the *New York Times*, was the epicenter of the *Angel Project*. Rooms on three floors—you ascend, naturally—had been given over to the installation. The building is weeping softly and Times Square is too busy preening itself to notice. It's a moldy edifice propped up by its digital façade. The mask is also the skeleton, and that's hardly a firm foundation. Echoing stairwells, grimy carpets, a filthy old kitchen, smashed plasterboard puffing out dust, wobbly elevators. On the 16th floor there was a room crammed with old computers. On one of the screens there was a lurid green Jesus-like face with a window offering the option to airbrush the image. One computer deep in the pile beeped rhythmically. In another empty office a telephone rang. When I picked it up, the line was dead. The angel paraphernalia here was thinner: a glimpse of a wing behind some glass, a single feather in the bottom of a shower tray, a dictionary opened to the page with "angel" on it (the most heavy-handed of the otherwise subtle set designs). Walking through the dark corridor, I almost stumbled on an angel. He was splayed out on the floor, fast asleep, his feathers crumpled beneath him.

On the next floor up there was a corner office carpeted in salt (meant to be snow) with lilies poking out of it. This was the most storybook set of the tour but it didn't seem too fantastical. Then, through a corridor to a lawyer's office at the back. His fax machine had spewed out *Paradise Lost*. The floor was thick with it.

In the interactive spirit of the performance, I was opening every drawer, trying every door. One opened. I plunged into a tiny brightly lit room with a boy and girl angel inside and a crab-apple tree in the middle. These angels were awake and they were both looking at me. My first instinct was to leave immediately but instead I fought hard to hold the stare of the girl angel crouching on the floor.

Warner has said that only one in 10 human beings can hold another human being's gaze benignly. She knows this because she has auditioned hundreds of angels in London, Perth, and now New York.'

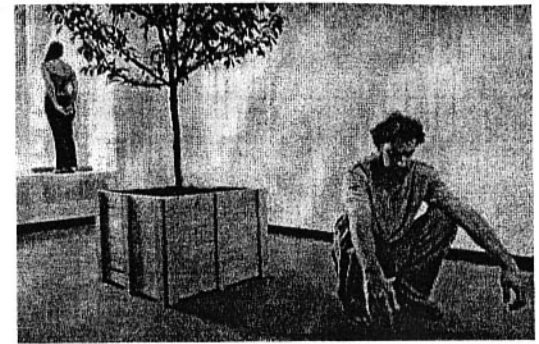
After a while her eyes fell away from mine, not from rejection, I hoped, more from listlessness and sadness. But I couldn't stop looking. She was completely open and seemed to be able to offer herself totally and to absorb everything. She flopped forward after a while, shuffled around more later on. Leaned her head against the wall. Stared at the floor. At a leaf on the tree. Back at me. I sat down on the floor. I didn't want to leave the room. The boy angel was looking out the window down at the muted cacophony of Times Square. The atmosphere in the room was unbearably tense: this was at once an achingly contrived performance and the most natural, the most real interaction imaginable, where we were all equally vulnerable, without language to veil ourselves.

Later, someone clutching his guidebook stepped into the room. He glanced at the three of us nervously and walked out. Then he came back in again and looked at us like we were sculptures.

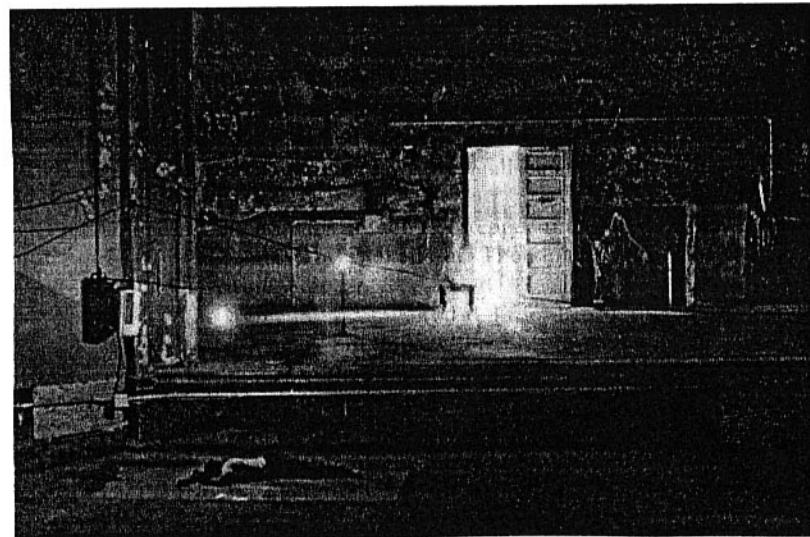
The man left the room and eventually I did too. I took the elevator up to the next floor. On the wall, part of Rilke's "First Elegy" was scrawled: "Angels (it is said) often don't know if they walk among the living or the dead."

The next site was the Liberty Theatre, which is quietly decaying behind the Applebees shopping mall on 42nd Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Do the people who run the store in the lobby know about the theatre? And do they notice the trickle of bemused-looking people heading for the blank door at the back of the lobby? The door offered no resistance: New York was offering up its secrets at the slightest touch, and so the pleasure of taking them was tinged with guilt and wonder.

Warner has said that there are actually very few empty spaces left in Manhattan. She saw all of them and fought tooth and nail to get these sites. The



4. In a tiny room on the 15th floor of 1 Times Square, two angels—or are they Adam and Eve?—wait patiently for something. The *Angel Project* (2003). (Photo by Stephanie Berger)



5. Behind the Applebee's Mall on 42nd Street, the Liberty Theatre is rotting away. One angel sleeps on the floor, another guards the door. The *Angel Project* (2003). (Photo by Stephanie Berger)

enduring myth of the culture of congestion may well be true even in a recession, but Warner was making the entire city seem like an empty shell. And, even more skillfully, under her direction the city's façade was cracking under the slightest pressure.

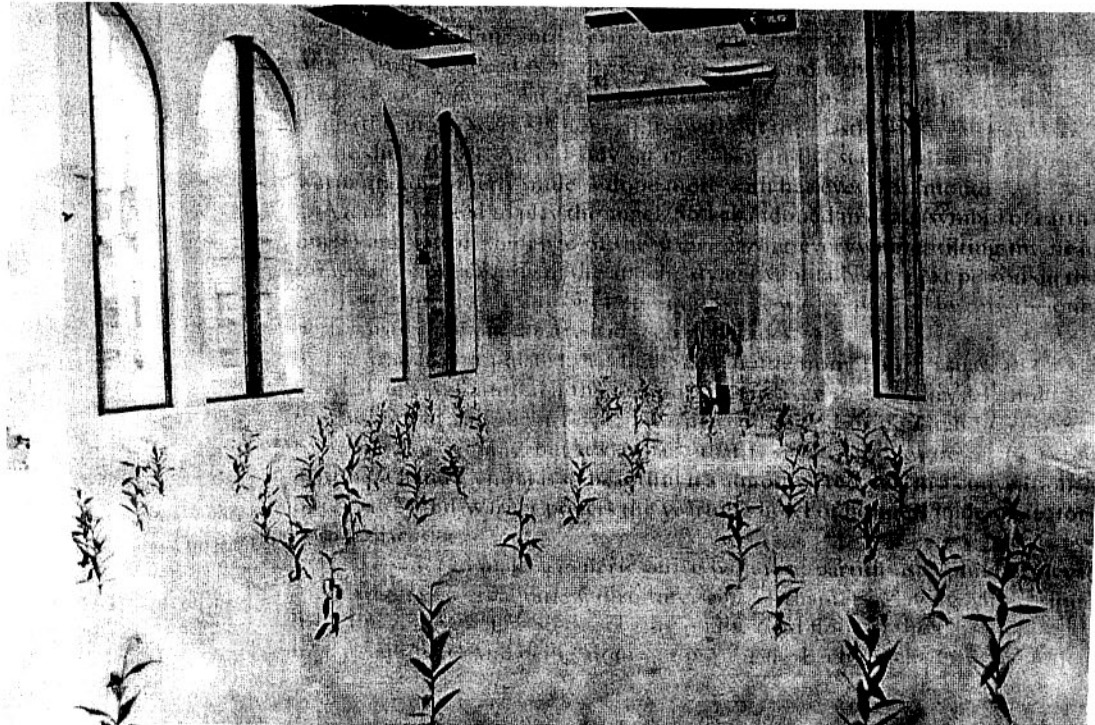
The portal led me into a crumbling, once regal theater with paint peeling off the walls like dead skin, the seats ripped out from the stalls leaving a naked, dusty wooden floor. An angel lay asleep on a transparent plastic sheet by the stage (the angels work six hour shifts; without the plastic the sweat would stick to the dirty floor). An old lady sat in a chair in the stalls and smiled at me, a warm grandmotherly smile—done more with her eyes than mouth.

Again, I wanted to play the angel. So I abandoned my bag (symbol of earthliness) and sat on the edge of the stage, gazing everywhere, tilting my head slowly and ponderously in the angelic style. Eventually the next person on the trail came into the theatre but I don't think she was convinced by this, the only performance the old theatre had seen in decades.

The trail map stipulated that I take the shuttle from Times Square to Grand Central and walk through the terminal on my way to the Chrysler Building, the last site of the *Angel Project*. Warner considered using Grand Central in some more overt way, but it's a space that is already too aware of itself, too pristine. Grand Central is so beautiful it's almost sacred, but in a conventional, pure way—and Warner prefers the yearning howl of holiness in desolate, forgotten places.

It takes a lot to make a generic office with neat partitions, a pinging elevator, a water cooler, and new furniture seem enchanted. Playing Mozart loud from the ceiling helps. So does being on the 63rd floor of the Chrysler building late at night. And being alone among angels. Each one had its own office,

6. High up in One Times Square, a caretaker/angel smooths over footprints in the snow in the lily room. The Angel Project (2003). (Photo by Stephanie Berger)



and they stared out of their windows at the speckled lights of Queens and, nearer, the gridded luminescence of Manhattan. With the music playing, it was unbearably sublime. I went into the kitchen at the back to catch my breath and found an angel curled up on the counter. He didn't see me come in. The windows were dangerously wide open. It was an invitation to jump, to test your holiness. My feet rooted to the floor but I stuck my head out the window and my heart lurched out. Vertigo is the desire to jump. I stepped back and stood in the doorway. The angel got up, did not look at me, walked across the room and sat on the windowsill. Then he lifted up his legs, twisted himself round and dangled his feet out of the window. He shuffled forward, pressing his hands on the edge of the window, looking down at the earth. He had wings. I walked away and left him sitting on the edge.

Note

1. From a talk Warner gave at Lincoln Center, 14 July 2003.

James Westcott graduated from Oxford University with a degree in English and is the former Features Editor for several arts and fashion "boutique" magazines with TANK Publications, London. He is currently pursuing an MA in Cultural Reporting and Criticism at New York University.