Inside the Performing Garage on Wooster Street in SoHo, chaos reigns. We’re deep into the afternoon rehearsal session for the Wooster Group’s new show, and nothing is going to plan. The actors are sitting on stage in full make-up and costume, but the video screen behind them has frozen while a technician scrambles to re-edit a sequence — a process that has now been going on for the best part of 40 minutes. Meanwhile, Elizabeth LeCompte, the group’s director, has embarked on a fierce debate with one of the cast over the intonation of the word “drama”. The sound designer appears to have given up, and is scrolling through funny videos on YouTube.

When LeCompte calls a break — a sub-argument has broken out about whether they should be rehearsing this section at all — I express my sympathy that they’re having so many issues. She looks genuinely surprised. “Oh no, this is great,” she says, beaming. “This is exactly the way it should go.”

The Wooster Group prefers not to do things the easy way. Its breakthrough work, 1977’s Rumstick Road, was an audacious assemblage of audio recordings, projected slide photographs and choreographed movement that confounded critics and was hailed as a landmark of experimental theatre. More recent pieces have remixed Arthur Miller’s The Crucible with “random readings” taken from Burroughs and Huxley (1984’s L.S.D.), deconstructed Eugene O’Neill with techniques derived from Japanese kabuki and Noh (1992’s The Emperor Jones), and tried to bring Richard Burton’s 1960s production of Hamlet back to life. For the last show, which first went on stage in 2007, the company dressed in semi-Elizabethan garb, projected footage from the original performance and re-enacted it, as if possessed. It was somewhere between an exhumation of a long-dead event and a kind of exorcism.
Not everyone has liked the Woosters’ impious approach to burnished classics: Miller threatened to sue, and their productions have been attacked as being self-referential to the point of impenetrability. But their best work finds hypnotic patterns in apparently jumbled fragments. It calls to mind the collages of Kurt Schwitters — deconstructions that are also entirely fresh constructions.

Even by their standards, the show they’re working on when I visit has more layers than the average archaeological dig. Entitled A Pink Chair (In Place of a Fake Antique), it is a meditation on the anarchic Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor. An icon in his own country but less well-known in the UK and US, Kantor — who died in 1990 — became a leading light of the postwar avant-garde, founding a fringe theatre group in opposition to the Soviet state, organising experimental “happenings” and doing his utmost to confound the boundaries between drama, performance art, Duchampian sculpture and existentialist philosophy.

LeCompte saw some of Kantor’s work in New York in the 1980s — she admits even she was nonplussed — but it wasn’t until the Wooster Group was approached by the Polish ministry of culture in 2013 that she considered focusing their combined energies on it. Several members of the group travelled to Poland and dug through film footage of Kantor’s performances. Gradually the concept developed of restaging part of his final play and farewell to theatre, I Shall Never Return (1988), in which Kantor himself appeared, assailed by characters from his previous works.

Employing the techniques that have become their signature, Wooster actors appear alongside video footage of the original, listening to sound cues on earpieces and imitating the footage. The title of A Pink Chair references a manifesto in which Kantor ruminates on the tension between onstage reality and illusion, and why “fake antiques” — for which, read: conventional props and settings — have no place in the theatre he wanted to create.

“I wanted to track the two companies, in a way,” LeCompte explains. “Where we come together, where the styles collide. It’s like trying to discover Kantor by shadowing him.”

A Pink Chair is still very much in development when I see it — an early version was staged in upstate New York last summer — but is billed as an “encounter”, a hallucinatory experience that melds Kantor’s ruminations on death and artistic creation with the group’s own reflections on their practice (for those in the know, there are embedded references to previous Wooster shows).

“It’s a ghost story all the way,” says LeCompte. “Maybe a horror story, too.”

To ask the obvious question: do they ever worry that audiences simply won’t get it? “Oh, all the time. It’s a conversation. I go with something I love, then I go, ‘Will they come with me?’”

Although the technology they deploy is far more complex than when the company was founded in the mid-1970s, the Woosters’ methods haven’t changed all that much. Most pieces are devised, created in the rehearsal room by a free-form network of collaborators. Previous associates have included Willem Dafoe and Frances McDormand, but there is also a steady flow of interns and associates, many of them in their 20s.

A pre-existing piece of theatre or text is often a starting point, but this is slowly disassembled and reconstructed, using a mixture of group research, improvisation and fierce argument — a process now documented online in droll and often baffling snippets of video released on the company blog. Theoretically, it’s entirely democratic, but you don’t have to spend very long in their presence to sense that LeCompte, who has a fidgety, combative energy that belies her 73 years, is very much in charge.

She compares it to editing film, working with materials generated by the group to create new configurations and combinations. “If I say, ‘No, that’s not going to work’, then we all go back, everyone lets go, and we start again.”

“It is a bit of a free-for-all,” Kate Valk, who has performed with the group since 1979, concedes.
Do they consider what they do theatre? Somehow the term doesn’t seem entirely adequate. “It’s theatre the way it should be,” LeCompte fires back. “Our pieces are what they are.”

Not long after the reworked *A Pink Room* goes on stage in LA and New York, they will bring their reimagining of the infamous 1971 debate about feminism between Germaine Greer, Diana Trilling and Norman Mailer, *The Town Hall Affair*, to London, and then to Japan. They are also hopeful they can tour another recent piece, *The B-Side*, internationally. One of several “record album interpretations” they have done, it brings a classic field recording of African American folk songs to life with a team of on-stage vocalists, whose voices harmonise with those on the LP in a kind of ecstatic communion.

Several other projects are in the works, but LeCompte is chary about specifics, anxious of getting into tangles like the one they experienced with the Pinter estate in 2016, which was unimpressed with their treatment of the playwright’s 1957 drama *The Room* and withdrew the rights. “We’ll see what happens,” she says. “But I’m excited.”

Despite the valedictory tone of *A Pink Chair*, and the fact that they have now been at this for 40-odd years, LeCompte and Valk are adamant that the group are as full of steam and ideas as ever. “You’re always seeing how you can take it to greater heights or depths,” says Valk. LeCompte is nodding vigorously. “Oh yeah, there’s something more to reach for. Always.”

*A Pink Chair (In Place of a Fake Antique)*, REDCAT, Los Angeles, April 5-15, REDCAT.org, then Performing Garage, New York, April 28-May 19, thewoostergroup.org