

Mabou Mines Tries Again: Past, Present, and the Purgatory of Performance Space

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The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 32, Number 1 (Fall 2019)

ISSN 2376-4236

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The American avant-garde company Mabou Mines inaugurated its refurbished theater in the East Village's 122 Community Center by conjuring performers who are trapped on stage. *Glass Guignol: The Brother and Sister Play*, which opened in November 2017, was created from works by Tennessee Williams and Mary Shelley and conceived by founding co-artistic director Lee Breuer and artistic associate Maude Mitchell. Mitchell and longtime Mabou Mines collaborator Greg Mehrten play (among other roles) Clare and Felice, the brother-sister acting duo from Williams's *The Two-Character Play* (1967). In the original and in Mabou Mines's riff, the sibling actors have been abandoned by the rest of the company and are caught in a meta-theatrical loop of improvisatory performance, possibly because they rely on their touring income to survive. In *Glass Guignol*, this improvisation-under-duress includes short and long form citations of Williams's works. Breuer and Mitchell imagine literary references as ready-mades, repurposing flashes of Williams and Shelley to pose questions about the relation of artist to creation, just as, for example, Dada's controversial commode did in a concept long credited to Marcel Duchamp but more recently attributed to Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.^[1] *Glass Guignol*'s theatrical reframing of fragments from well-known artworks is especially poignant on location in the company's first purpose-built theater in its half-century long history. As actors in exile, Clare and Felice underline Mabou Mines artists' epoch as nomads during the extended period of 122 Community Center's remodeling.

In 2013, the City of New York began a \$35 million renovation of 122 Community Center on 1st Avenue and East 9th Street, a nineteenth-century former schoolhouse where Mabou Mines has resided since 1978. The space was slated to reopen in 2016. The company had planned to present two premieres in their refurbished space in winter and spring 2017: *Faust 2.0*, directed by co-artistic director Sharon Fogarty, and *Glass Guignol*. By summer 2017, the building had not yet passed code for occupancy. In a climate increasingly hostile to arts funding, the delay caused additional financial duress for a company already familiar with the relationship between risky artistic choices and economic instability. Co-artistic directors confronted an absence of ticket income, the loss of grant funding contingent upon production, and deferred opportunities to tour completed productions. The itinerant state all but suspended the radical spectacle for which Mabou Mines is renowned as they found themselves in a sort of performance purgatory. What was supposed to be a watershed moment became a dream indefinitely deferred.

Mabou Mines artists are likely to feel that the space was worth waiting for. Gay McAuley asks what "the physical reality of the theatre building" tells artists "about the activity they are engaged in and about the way this activity is valued in society."^[2] New York City's substantial investment in the company is a resounding response. The refurbished 122 Community Center provides a distinctly different scenographic environment for the company's activities. Sleek and modern, the interior now resembles the many gut-renovated pre-war buildings in New York City. A steel and glass overhang above the new lobby entrance

is reminiscent of the Pershing Square Signature Theater's design by Frank Gehry Architects, though the city contracted with Deborah Berke Partners for this renovation. Although Mabou Mines has performed in state-of-the-art theaters in New York and beyond, its recent productions began and ended in their small office and adjoining slightly dilapidated ToRoNaDa studio in 122 Community Center. These spaces, shabby but spirited, served as a tangible connection to Mabou Mines's origins in a pre-gentrified East Village. On a preview tour of the new space with co-artistic director Fogarty (we wore hardhats), I could not help but feel nostalgic for the demolished interior architecture and slightly nervous about what a polished backdrop will mean for Mabou Mines's revolutionary artistic aims.

"Try again. Fail again. Fail better," says the narrator from Beckett's novella *Worstward Ho*, staged by the late Mabou Mines co-artistic director Fred Neumann in 1986.^[3] Here, as elsewhere in his writing, Beckett forthrightly acknowledges a process of perpetual trial and error—a creative purgatory—as organic to artistic exploration and the human experience. Mabou Mines artists gravitated early to Beckett's work, staging eight of his texts between 1971 and 1996.^[4] The company's attraction to his writing is rooted in a corresponding philosophy that embraces uncertainty as an element of artistic creation. Co-founders JoAnne Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, Philip Glass, Ruth Maleczech and David Warrilow as well as current co-artistic directors Breuer, Fogarty, Karen Kandel, and Terry O'Reilly have long been engaged in the business of taking calculated theatrical risks. These ventures, always both aesthetically ambitious and financially hazardous, have frequently resulted in critical disparagement and/or financial insolvency. Mabou Mines artists have regularly viewed risk as necessary to the creation of avant-garde work. The company has almost always been willing to stake economic stability and critical praise for a claim of unfettered artistic discovery.

This claim is most readily apparent in the company's investment in a creative process that absorbs, reiterates, and modifies previous approaches, while simultaneously adopting new techniques and adapting them to new spaces. When Mabou Mines stages a production in front of the audience, this encounter becomes an opportunity for artists to understand and evaluate which aspects of the process have achieved their objectives in performance. This appraisal continues retroactively, as when Breuer expressed dissatisfaction in 2014 about acting choices Maleczech made in her 1990 OBIE-award winning performance as Lear under his direction in Mabou Mines's gender-reversed production of Shakespeare's play.^[5] Breuer's assessment of this critically lauded performance demonstrates the scant regard company members have for external evaluation. But perhaps more importantly, Breuer's scrutiny of previous artistic decisions suggests that the company's desire to conquer uncharted artistic territory requires a constant practice of self-assessment and refinement, akin to the "Rep & Rev" process Suzan-Lori Parks has described in her own work. In Mabou Mines's (and Beckett's) world of creation, future artistic possibilities depend upon an artist's willingness to confront the implications of past choices. The result is a process and product that are one and the same and a project that is ongoing, never "finished." As a consequence, the company sees process and product as fluid, rather than as binary. Each Mabou Mines production is only fully visible in the moment of performance, after which elements of projects continue on their orbits. The ToRoNaDa—more equipped for rehearsal than for performance and yet not originally designed for either—underscored the company's synergy of process and product.

If, as Laura Levin suggests "identity is, both consciously and unconsciously, constituted through space," Mabou Mines's new theater invites the possibility of a reimagined personality for the company.^[6] What will happen to Mabou Mines's reiteration and modification of past impulses, times and spaces in a new, exclusive, purpose-built theater? As McAuley points out, theatre "space is, of course, not an empty

container but an active agent; it shapes what goes on within it, emits signals about it to the community at large, and is itself affected. ... The theatre building...provides a context of interpretation for spectators and performers alike.”^[7] In order to imagine how the new space may re-energize the company’s aesthetic, it is crucial to consider the effect of performance spaces on the company as they move away from an old space and return to a new one.

Ghosts of Performance Spaces Past

It is probably impossible to create a complete rupture between the Mabou Mines of the present and its East Village past. Mabou Mines artists simply cannot escape their own geography; their performance history dots the East Village—ghosting it, in Marvin Carlson’s terms. The company’s temporary inability to move forward made Mabou Mines’s link to its history all the more palpable. The delay in presenting planned new work thrust the company into a liminal state of expectation; the set for *Glass Guignol* stood idly on the company’s new stage as spirits of future performances hovered hopefully around the construction site, mingling with the specters of past performances. Such past productions established a record of revolution, paving the way for the company’s recognition as a fixture of counter cultural “downtown” performance. Because the East Village functions as a palimpsest for Mabou Mines’s history, the company’s relationship to its history is in this respect inherently site-specific. Their presence in the East Village has likewise shaped the story of the neighborhood. As Kim Solga, Shelley Orr, and D.J. Hopkins argue, “performance can help to renegotiate the urban archive, to build the city, and to change it.”^[8]

Though the company debuted uptown at the Guggenheim Museum with *The Red Horse Animation* in 1970, the production was sponsored by the mother of downtown performance, La Mama’s Ellen Stewart. In 1971, Breuer directed Samuel Beckett’s *Come and Go* under the Brooklyn Bridge in a performance that anticipated Maleczech’s 2007 piece *Song for New York*—here the audience viewed the reflections of the performers in the East River. After years as East Village nomads, Joseph Papp invited co-artistic directors Akalaitis, Breuer, Glass, Maleczech, Fred Neumann and Warrilow to take up residency at the Public Theater in the mid 1970s. Thus, unabashedly avant-garde performance was institutionalized within the structure of New York theater, albeit in a marginalized position—Papp described Mabou Mines artists as his “black sheep.”^[9]

Those black sheep used the stability of the Public’s performance space to produce work on a larger scale than previously possible, although they continued to pursue more intimate works as well. *Red Horse* and the company’s early forays into Beckett were minimalist spectacles. In the Public’s Old Prop Shop, Akalaitis and company’s sprawling *Dead End Kids* (1980) was devised by more than thirty multidisciplinary collaborators and featured a cast of fifteen. The company’s residency at the Public lasted into the mid 1980s. Mabou Mines’s bold and diverse aesthetic aims, spurred by its collective structure, meant that the company continued to exploit the rawness of failure and success in emergent downtown performance spaces. Another Beckett text, Maleczech’s performance installation based on the short story *Imagination Dead Imagine*, was presented at the Wooster Group’s space, the Performing Garage, in 1984. Mabou Mines was part of a movement of New York avant-garde companies activating new spaces, often ones that were unequipped for the mechanics of performance. “Theatre artists,” McAuley points out, “are frequently obliged to work in buildings designed for earlier periods, and this can cause problems if there is too great a distance between the practice of theatre as predicated by the building and practices deemed appropriate to the present by the artists (and spectators) involved.”^[10] The

Mabou Mines artistic directors are among those theatre artists McAuley describes.

In order to imagine how a new, technologically sophisticated space might alter Mabou Mines's aesthetic, it is crucial to consider the ways in which the company's former spartan site in 122 Community Center contributed to past works. For thirty-five years, the company's administrative operations were run out of a tiny office and productions were rehearsed, workshopped, and often presented in the adjoining, bare bones ToRoNaDa studio. The ToRoNaDa was a large rectangular classroom with giant windows, midnight blue walls and a basic lighting grid named in honor of four deceased collaborators: Tony Vasconcellos, Ron Vawter, Nancy Graves, and David Warrilow. Appropriately enough, it is also a nickname for "no bull."^[11] It accommodated approximately 50 seats. The walls opposite the windows were lined with built-in cabinets fronted by chalk boards—relics of the room's past life as a classroom. A loft space over an improvised office in the northeast corner of the room doubled not only as storage for lighting equipment but also as a staging area, featuring prominently in works such as *Belén: A Book of Hours* (1999), when Monica Dionne was stationed there as she provided contemporary commentary on the history of the notorious Mexican women's prison. In this case, as in many others, the ToRoNaDa's poor theater aesthetic provided a springboard for creative choices that were critically lauded; performers Liliana Felipe and Jesusa Rodriguez were honored with OBIE special citations and Julie Archer was nominated for the American Theatre Wing's Hewes Design award.

This charmingly dilapidated home, though constant, was insufficient for supporting the company's integration of technology with live performance. Though Archer used projections artfully in *Belén*, her projection design for *Lucia's Chapters of Coming Forth by Day* (2011; premiere 2007 at Colby College), based on the life of Lucia Joyce and directed by Fogarty, found a more sophisticated backdrop down the hall from the ToRoNaDa at Performance Space 122's larger theater. A consideration of the history of this institution and other peers in the East Village contextualizes the growing pains Mabou Mines is experiencing as it faces its future in a refurbished space.

The company has long shared the building with Performance Space 122, Painting Space 122, and the AIDS Service Center. Performance Space 122, better known as PS122, and now known as Performance Space New York, was founded in 1980 and quickly became integral to East Village theater and hosted artists including Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Spalding Gray, Penny Arcade, and Carmelita Tropicana. Its past, like Mabou Mines's, is intricately connected to its geography. The organization proudly acknowledges its role in East Village history on its website: "As decades passed the city became cleaner, safer, greener and more expensive, and the neighborhood gentrified. Although PS122 became an 'institution' during this time, it also managed to retain its gritty non-conformist character."^[12] PS122 audiences grew intimately familiar not only with its bold programming of audacious artists, but also with its awkward horizontal layout and the Ionic columns that intruded into the stage pictures. The institution bills its new, custom spaces as "column-free." These larger theaters "raise the roof to feature a two-story ceiling allowing for more agency for artists and more expansive experiences" for viewers.^[13] In a sign of how significant the renovation is for Mabou Mines's fellow tenants, PS122 has changed its name to Performance Space New York: a new name for a new architectural and artistic life.

The changes to the interiors and inhabitants of downtown performance sites are not limited to 122 Community Center. The Old Prop Shop is no more. Richard Foreman bequeathed his Ontological-Hysteric Theater at St. Mark's Church, itself the former site of Theatre Genesis, to Incubator Arts, a new generation of artists who were unable to sustain the space. The Living Theatre has gained and lost three

East Village spaces, closing their 14th street space in 1963, its Third Avenue space in 1993, and residing at its Clinton Street theater from 2008 to 2013. The Living has now returned to the nomadic state embedded in its history. La Mama has been more successful at putting down permanent spatial roots, expanding into two large buildings of prime property. This, too reflects institutional emphasis; as a producer, Ellen Stewart prioritized real estate from La Mama's founding. New York Theatre Workshop, founded in 1979, opened its own scenery, costume, and production shop in 2011. Recent advances by La Mama and NYTW have been supported by the Fourth Arts Block (FAB) Cultural District, founded in 2001 by neighborhood cultural and community groups. The organization's mission included the purchase of eight properties from the City of New York to "secure them as permanently affordable spaces for non-profit arts and cultural organizations."[\[14\]](#)

The refurbished space Mabou Mines inhabits includes a high-tech, 50-seat performance venue, a modern office, dressing rooms, storage space, and two rehearsal studios. Audiences no longer ascend well-worn stairs with intricate, wrought iron detailing in a dank stairwell, but enter instead through an airy and modern lobby and glide up to the theater in an elevator. The move into a deluxe suite marks the dawn of a new era for Mabou Mines in more ways than one. Maleczek died in 2013, leaving Breuer as the last remaining co-founding artistic director at the company's helm. But both *Glass Guignol* and *Faust 2.0* continue the company's tradition of radicalizing classic works. And both take up recent and present company concerns, confronting the pleasure and pain of waiting as Clare and Felice tread water onstage and Faust postpones the consequences of mortality. It remains to be seen how the spectacle of a swanky, gut-renovated East Village building will continue to foreground risk for a company founded by a group of artists who once shared an apartment and worked as short order cooks in the same restaurant. After all, as McAuley suggests, "the point of access to the building, the foyers, stairways, corridors, bars and restaurants, the box office, and of course the auditorium are all parts" of the audience experience, "and the way we experience them has an unavoidable impact on the meanings we take away with us."[\[15\]](#) Mabou Mines artists are unlikely to be terribly concerned about this. A space that will support the needs of their adventurous exploitation of technology and distinctive integration of design elements in early phases of development is surely overdue for the half-century-old company. Levin offers a useful claim in support of Mabou Mines's colonization of renovated real estate: "While performance critics often view the absorption of self into setting as a troubling act of submission – reading 'blending in' as evidence of assimilation or erasure...it can also facilitate socially productive ways of inhabiting our physical and cultural environments."[\[16\]](#) In this sense, the company's absorption into a refurbished habitat signals a "socially productive" and crucial cultural acknowledgment of their contribution to the East Village in particular and to New York City at large.

Attainment in Other Spaces

Although the ToRoNaDa was undoubtedly a hub of creativity for Mabou Mines and served as an occasional performance space for full productions, its schoolroom aesthetic and limited technical capabilities meant that the company presented most performances off-site. The co-artistic directors' early and sustained affinity for Beckett's works reflects, in part, the resonance they found in the playwright's ability to dramatize a perpetual state of limbo. This is certainly echoed in the company's commitment to taking artistic risks regardless of the critical consequences, but also in Mabou Mines's transitory relationship to the many performance sites away from 122 Community Center where its work has been presented. While the Living Theater's work has always been suited to their nomadic existence, this is not necessarily the case for Mabou Mines (even the company's name refers to a specific place in Nova

Scotia). Although it is atypical for artists to rehearse regularly in performance spaces prior to technical rehearsals (the cost would be prohibitive), the resulting geographical split between process and product presents a particular challenge for Mabou Mines's synthesis of the two, in part because the company emphasizes the early integration of design elements. This artificial divide is likely to have affected Mabou Mines artists' goals as well as critical reception of works performed away from the ToRoNaDa. Confronting the unknown quantity of off-site space thus presents yet another risk the company has been willing to take.

While its many awards and critical successes are likely responsible for the upgrades to Mabou Mines's home, it may be its so-called failures that truly reveal Mabou Mines's avant-garde mettle. As Beckett writes in *Three Dialogues*, "To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world... ." [17] But to what extent do Mabou Mines co-artistic directors take critical reception into consideration? Maleczek claimed she mailed negative reviews to a post office box unread. One way to understand how Mabou Mines artists evaluate their process and product given their healthy disregard for critical accolades is to examine works that others perceive to have failed but which make a significant contribution to the company's sustained artistic priorities, despite a tension between their goals and the performance space in which they have found themselves. In the productions examined here, negative reviews are attributable, in part, to fundamental misunderstandings about the relationship between the company's marriage of process and product and a lack of sensitivity to variables presented by the performance space. I will rely primarily on reviews from the *New York Times*, in part because the company's critical ups and downs are most readily apparent in the context of a single source and because, for better or worse, the *Times* wields an outsized influence as an arbiter of theatrical taste. It is also useful to consider how Mabou Mines artists conceptualize their relationship to the audience in considering their creative values and prerogatives.

Maleczek presented an ambitious project in 2007 that represents a logical progression of many of the company's collective origins and impulses. *Song for New York: What Women Do While Men Sit Knitting* was organized around original poems about New York City, and produced site-specifically on a barge docked in the East River in Long Island City, Queens. Admission was free; Maleczek described the performance as her gift to the home that had given so generously to her as an artist. The landscape of reviews is mixed, but Claudia La Rocco, writing for the *New York Times*, panned the production in no uncertain terms: "This self-proclaimed 'celebration of New York City' by the collaborative theater ensemble Mabou Mines does not inspire. It does not satisfy. It does little more than prompt head shaking at all the very hard work and passion that must have been squandered in getting it off the ground." [18] This is resounding critical disapproval. But what does *Song for New York* mean in the context of the company's taste for adventurous collisions between process and product?

As audience members arrived at Gantry State Park for performances of *Song for New York*, they could enter a photo booth and have their pictures taken with a pinhole camera as part of an interactive design (by former co-artistic director Julie Archer) that emphasized New York as a hometown. Spectators then gathered on the dock for the show. Maleczek had commissioned five artists to write poems, one for each borough. Some of the writers, such as Migdalia Cruz and Patricia Spears Jones, were seasoned playwrights. Another, Kandel—now a Mabou Mines co-artistic director—is primarily a performer. All of the writers and featured performers were women who represented a range of cultural backgrounds. Poems were set to live music. A chorus of men delivered interludes, or "yarns," inspired by the city's bodies of water as the barge—and the performance itself—rocked gently on the East River. Maleczek's thank you note to New York was nothing if not writ large.

While La Rocco's review of *Song for New York* gestures towards an acknowledgment of Mabou Mines's collective structure, it does not engage the relationship between product and what, even after thirty-seven years, remained a radical way of working in an unusual space. The text was not devised by the *Song for New York* company; each writer worked independently on her own contribution. This is precisely how Mabou Mines co-artistic directors operate. Productions initiated by artistic directors are produced in a queue. Often, co-artistic directors collaborate on developing new work, as Archer did in designing the barge and shore set for *Song for New York*; but there is no requirement that co-artistic directors be artistically involved in every project. In this case, Breuer and O'Reilly did not collaborate. Such artistic independence and choice are hallmarks of the company's self-defined success.^[19]

Song for New York is equally revealing of Mabou Mines's staunch commitment to artistic risk. In inviting Kandel, known for her performance work, to participate as a writer, Maleczech demonstrated a zest for interdisciplinary exploration. The decision to commission women writers and performers of varied cultural backgrounds takes subtle yet unmistakable aim at patriarchal historiographic and artistic convention. Here, widely diverse female voices tell the story of a great American city. This is a more inclusive Walt Whitman for the twenty-first century. Maleczech envisioned performance on an epic scale, integrating a male chorus and live music and refusing to give up on the idea of the barge space even in the face of dire economic consequences and logistical nightmares.^[20] In her invocation of New York City's waterways alongside its diverse population, she evokes Levin's idea of a "performance's 'environmental unconscious,'" a "notion of 'site-specificity,' central to space-sensitive performance practices" that "call attention to marginalized entities (human and non-human) and thus directly engage with the political dimensions of art making."^[21] While this production may not have satisfied the *New York Times*, *Song for New York* insists upon the political nature of public space and demonstrates avant-garde ideals in its embrace of an interdisciplinary way of working, its rejection of inherited societal standards, and its rebuff of bourgeois economic and logistical concerns as well as conventional spatial expectations. The complexity of the site for this production also tested the company's organizational agility, perhaps preparing them for their unforeseen extended exile from 122 Community Center.

Finn (2010), directed by Fogarty, also disappointed an establishment *New York Times* critic. Following in the company's tradition of adaptation, *Finn* is a technologically ambitious live-action video game riff on the Celtic legend of Finn McCool described by Jason Zinoman as "soul-less." It was presented at New York University's enormous, state-of-the-art Skirball Center for the Arts. In his review Zinoman contrasts Mabou Mines's use of technology unfavorably with the Wooster Group's, arguing that "most theater companies fail to integrate video as well as the Wooster Group does."^[22] The Wooster Group, probably Mabou Mines's closest peer in sustained theatrical invention, has had its own permanent space in which to rehearse and perform since its founding. When Wooster Group audiences arrive at the Performing Garage, they already have a context for the work they will see there and the company is in the enviable position of rehearsing where they frequently perform. Meanwhile, the cavernous Skirball Center, which seats 867, is strikingly dissimilar to the modest ToRoNaDa. Although *Finn* was not Mabou Mines's debut at the Skirball Center—the company had presented *Red Beads* there in 2005—the space is not one that audiences and critics automatically associate with the company. The effects of this estrangement between performance and performance space for artists, audiences, and critics, are perhaps unquantifiable, but nonetheless significant for a company that is at once process-driven and technologically ambitious.

Zinoman also fails to acknowledge that Mabou Mines was on the vanguard of technological innovation in

the American avant-garde with the *Red Horse Animation* before the Wooster Group was founded. For this production, Philip Glass's specially designed flooring amplified the sound performers' bodies made as they came in contact with it. *Hajj* (1983), written and directed by Breuer and featuring Maleczech, was one of the first American productions to combine video with live theatrical performance. The OBIE-award winning *Hajj* was a result of a collaboration with SONY that allowed the company to work with state-of-the-art equipment. In fact, it was partially developed at the Wooster Group's Performing Garage, where *Imagination Dead Imagine*, groundbreaking in its holographic vision, would also be presented. Writing for the *New York Times* in 1983, Mel Gussow lauds Mabou Mines for its integration of video in *Hajj*: "the pictures in this mysterious piece - contrasting, overlapping, coalescing - demonstrate the virtuosity of video as an instrument in live performance art."^[23] Zinoman's review omits *Finn*'s context within the company's pioneering history of utilizing cutting-edge stage technology. For the company, however, Fogarty's encounter with video gaming is a part of a logical progression in an ongoing engagement with technology—one that its longtime space was incapable of adequately supporting.

Audiences, too, have sometimes found Mabou Mines's work perplexing. This befuddlement is often tied to the inventive nature of the work. In one such case, audience confusion derived from the technological accomplishments Zinoman overlooks. A representative of Actor's Equity Association attending *Imagination Dead Imagine* sought to confirm that the performer who played the hologram was being treated properly. This hologram was a pre-recorded image of Maleczech's daughter, Clove Galilee, dissected into three parts—to produce a single holographic image of that size was not technologically possible at the time. The result was the largest hologram ever to be featured on stage at the time of *Imagination Dead Imagine*'s premiere. Maleczech recalled showing the holographic equipment to the Actor's Equity Association envoy to demonstrate that there was no one inside. Here Mabou Mines's innovations outpaced at least one audience member's technological literacy.

In another instance, spectators were uncomfortable with stylistic interventions the company introduced to a classic text. When the company presented a workshop of *Lear* (1987), initiated by Maleczech and directed by Breuer at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey, half of the audience walked out. Although Maleczech ultimately won an OBIE for her performance, the production confronted spectators with a number of disruptions: a gender reversed cast featuring a female Lear (long before Glenda Jackson), a drag queen Fool (played by Greg Mehrten), dogs as Lear's retinue, and golf carts tricked out as sports cars to transport performers around an American Southern setting. Here too the juxtaposition between site and content may have augmented the gap between expectation and reality for audiences. But as Richard Caves writes, "The smaller the pecuniary rewards of normal creativity, the more attractive are the highly uncertain and largely subjective rewards of assaulting the aesthetic frontier."^[24] Maleczech once lamented that many contemporary artists assume they "know what the audience wants to eat for dinner."^[25] Mabou Mines simply serves what is on their menu.

This may suggest that the company does not consider the audience. Rather, Mabou Mines artists set high expectations for both spectators and themselves, challenging us to meet them in the middle in performance. Breuer identifies a dialectical relationship between audience reception and his work. Maleczech, meanwhile, described a process of attracting the audience's attention without pandering to them: "you startle them or you push what you are doing so far that you get them to laugh, or you do the opposite of what you're doing, and you have them for a second, and then you lose them again."^[26] Both approaches suggest an experience of performance that is reciprocal without being coerced.

In Mabou Mines's new space, the potential risks (or lack thereof) for artists and audiences are also evenly balanced. Artists will have tools that more easily and comfortably accessible, and audiences will know what to expect technically and architecturally at 122 Community Center, marking a departure from Mabou Mines's history of producing in a variety of New York City venues. Will this lull spectators (and critics) into a state of comfort that is at odds with the alertness Breuer and Maleczech seek? Despite the potential excitement of what Sarah Bess Rowen described as a "masturbatory bubble cycle"[\[27\]](#)—a bubble machine resembling a bicycle positioned between Mitchell's legs during a ready-made of Williams's *A Cavalier for Milady*—Alexis Soloski complains in her review of *Glass Guignol* for the *New York Times* that the production fails to surprise the audience.

In this brand-new theater, many of Mr. Breuer's gestures, like a mostly nude Christ or Meganne George's fetishwear costumes, point back to the company's 1970s and 1980s heyday. This is shock treatment with a low current.

Mabou Mines was always an exemplar of the theatrical avant-garde. The company is nearly 50 now. Maybe its members have slowed down. Maybe the rest of us have finally caught up.[\[28\]](#)

Soloski's critique suggests that the company may confront a new audience mentality attuned to its new space, one that requires a recalibration of the relationship to critical reception. But as is usual for Mabou Mines artists, Breuer and Mitchell seem to have accounted for this possibility; the company takes up the question of critical failure in its project description: "Glass Guignol explores the nature of the creative process, its triumphs...and its terrors."[\[29\]](#)

Despite Soloski's concerns, *Glass Guignol* is best contextualized as part of a meta-conversation within the company's work, and Breuer and Mitchell's in particular. Coming on the heels of their celebrated 2011 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Comédie Française, which marked the first time in the theater's 330 years that a play by an American writer was presented there, *Glass Guignol* continues Breuer and Mitchell's interrogation of Williams's work. *Glass Guignol* also takes up an artistic engagement with the history of Parisian theater, referencing the Grand Guignol—Paris's late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century "bucket of blood" horror theatre—in its title and utilization of the grotesque. This stylistic affiliation is evident throughout the performance. Aside from Mitchell's encounter with the bubble-cycle, at one point in the performance an actor dressed as a chained gorilla in a tutu makes an appearance; an S & M Nijinsky also materializes only to become the Gentleman Caller. These fleeting, cacophonous, and often opaque references are themselves homages to ghosts of Duchamp (but perhaps von Freytag-Loringhoven) and Alfred Jarry—two French artists renowned for playful, well-choreographed chaos, whose philosophies were foundational to Breuer in developing *Glass Guignol*.

Glass Guignol also articulates an explicit but obscure link between the Grand Guignol and Tennessee Williams. As Annette Saddick notes, "In a page typed by Williams and dated August 1982, located in the archives of the Harvard Theatre Collection, he announces his plan for what he calls 'Williams' *Guignol*,' three evenings in repertoire of late plays in this tradition."[\[30\]](#) In addition to "The Two Character Play," the company also cites the relationship between Williams and his sister Rose as a guiding narrative in *Glass Guignol*'s patchwork of references to plays, short stories, and poems by the writer. This microscopic engagement with intricacies of theatre history is typical of Breuer's method of radically resurrecting classic works, as when he was inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's connection between African-

American church traditions and Greek tragedy in creating *The Gospel of Colonus* (1983), an adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus* set in a gospel church.

Nevertheless, the juxtaposition inherent in Soloski's critique between a half-century old company and the experience for audiences in a slickly renovated space remains. Once again, Beckett has expressed the challenge Mabou Mines artists face. "We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment," he writes in his essay *Proust*, "But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died—and perhaps many times—along the way."^[31] What will rise from the ashes on Mabou Mines's next try in their new space?

A New Generation

Mabou Mines is not only at a longitudinal crossroads, but also at a philosophical one. Breuer is the only founding co-artistic director remaining at the company's helm. Julie Archer, who began working with the company in the late 1970s and became a co-artistic director in 2005, resigned her post in 2013, following Maleczek's death. O'Reilly and Fogarty have been artistic directors since 1973 and 1999, respectively, and remain with the company. Kandel, who first worked with the company on *Lear*, is the newest co-artistic director. This transition from artistic associate to guiding voice will surely invite permutations of past investigations as well as fresh endeavors, but she is hardly a newcomer to the company. One radical way to consider the company's ever-changing aesthetic is to consider the work of a new generation of artistic associates in Clove Galilee and David Neumann. Significantly, both are children of Mabou Mines artists: Galilee is the daughter of Breuer and Maleczek and Neumann is the son of Fred Neumann and the late artistic associate Honora Fergusson. Both founded their own performance companies that have co-produced new work with Mabou Mines since 2015. These co-produced pieces, *Imagining the Imaginary Invalid* and *I Understand Everything Better*, present intergenerational, meta-theatrical and meta-historical questions about the future failure or success of Mabou Mines. *Wickets*, another production by Galilee's company, takes sustained Mabou Mines priorities in new directions. By briefly examining these artistic contributions by Neumann and Galilee, we can begin to speculate on what we might see on the company's new stage in its reconfigured space.

Of the offspring of Mabou Mines artists, Galilee has been the most frequent collaborator on Mabou Mines productions. Her company, Trick Saddle, co-founded with her wife Jenny Rogers, has produced or co-produced several bold productions. *Wickets* (2009) re-conceptualizes Maria Irene Fornes's canonical feminist play *Fefu and Her Friends*, setting it on a trans-Atlantic flight by installing a recreated 1970s airplane in New York's 3-Legged Dog (3LD) Art and Technology Center. Fornes's characters become flight attendants. Seated as passengers, the audience goes along for the ride on this fictitious feminist flight. In a clever alteration of Fornes's five environments, performers stage scenes in the nooks and crannies on the plane: aisles, galleys and bathrooms become playing areas. Here Galilee and Rogers escalate the tension Fornes exposes between women's public and private selves.

Wickets, developed as part of Mabou Mines/Suite residency program, follows in the footsteps of the company's interest in adaptation. Feminist representation has also been a sustained priority for the company, and here we see Galilee and Rogers in the process of exploring original ways to stage feminism. This new generation of feminist artists brings a fresh perspective that may be gradually incorporated into Mabou Mines's shifting process and product. Trick Saddle's foray into new terrain brings with it the usual critical attempt to parse failure and success. In an otherwise positive review for

the *Village Voice*, Garrett Eisler notes, “There’s much for *Fefu* fans to dispute in this radical adaptation...and, inevitably, many details just don’t translate,” citing in particular the production’s titular airborne game of croquet.^[32] In *TimeOut*, Helen Shaw also praises *Wickets* but takes the production to task for evading “Fornes’s free-floating dread,” finding it excessively “sweet.”^[33] It is too soon to know precisely where Galilee’s Generation X perspective on feminism will take the company’s aesthetics, but the journey is undoubtedly underway.

Imagining the Imaginary Invalid was initiated by Maleczek for Mabou Mines based on Molière’s *Imaginary Invalid* and *Versailles Impromptu* as well as the history of medicine. Galilee, who began as a collaborator, became the lead artist and Trick Saddle a co-producer when Maleczek died before the project was completed. Galilee’s keenest contribution was her insistent underscoring of Maleczek’s absence. In a certain sense, the production, which never came to fruition in Maleczek’s lifetime, stages the failure of the human body and the limits of medical intervention. In a doctor’s office scene during which Maleczek declines further treatment for cancer, Marylouise Burke plays Maleczek, Christianna Nelson plays Galilee, and Galilee plays the doctor. This dislocated round-robin casting is a visceral reminder that the real Maleczek is not there, as is a chair that sits empty on stage for much of the performance. Galilee’s intervention in *Imagining the Imaginary Invalid* follows in the footsteps of another Mabou Mines production in its meta-theatrical representation of personal family drama: *Hajj* was based in part on Maleczek’s regret about an unpaid debt. Her father died before she had the opportunity to repay the money he lent her to her to fund her first directing work, *Vanishing Pictures*. Fittingly, *Imagining the Imaginary Invalid* was staged at the Ellen Stewart Theater at La Mama: another old company’s new space.

David Neumann’s co-production with Mabou Mines also exteriorizes his private process of mourning parents who were public figures of the theatre. Neumann, a Bessie-award winning director, choreographer, and performer, founded the Advanced Beginner Group, which “utilizes experimental dance-making approaches with a humorous outlook and an inclusive layering of disciplines to create complex, thought-provoking dance works.”^[34] *I Understand Everything Better*, which premiered at the Abrons Arts Center in 2015, was inspired by Hurricane Sandy and the death of Neumann’s parents in 2012. Honora Fergusson passed away quickly in July of that year, while Fred Neumann was in the throes of a long decline into dementia. ““He would have terrible dreams,” David Neumann told the *New Yorker*’s Joan Acocella, ““He’d wake up and tell me. He was driving in the mountains and there was all this furniture in the road. He didn’t know how to get past it.”” Acocella documents the younger Neumann’s correlation to Hurricane Sandy: “Meanwhile, on the TV, weathermen would stand on beaches and report that the hurricane was moving north.”^[35] She also makes note of another parallel: Fred Neumann’s ignominious aging process and his history of performing Beckett’s unflinching exposure of mortal fragility with Mabou Mines. While David Neumann does not reference Beckett explicitly in his piece, he embodies the link between the storm and his father’s decline by playing both a meteorologist and “a man of distinction.” As Gia Kourlas writes for the *New York Times*, the production “dances around dementia and double meanings – the cleanup of a storm, the cleanup of a body....”^[36] Those familiar with Fred Neumann’s fluency in Beckett’s works can connect the dots easily enough. *I Understand Everything Better* is also linked to Mabou Mines’s aesthetic in its pastiche style, evident in its juxtaposition of comedy and pathos and blend of Japanese dance-theatre techniques, weather reports, and family history.

Imagining the Imaginary Invalid and *I Understand Everything Better* dramatize Galilee and Neumann’s

process of grappling in artistic terms with the personal and aesthetic legacies of their parents. These productions are thus apt metaphors for Mabou Mines's current liminal state in its newly minted space under the guidance of an updated composition of co-artistic directors and artistic associates. Galilee and Neumann's works show us both where the company is now and suggests where it might be going. How will the next generation of Mabou Mines artists "try again" in the refurbished 122 Community Center? Both came of age as artists in upgraded performance spaces in the East Village and in newer, sophisticated spaces for alternative work that appeared in surrounding neighborhoods; Neumann has worked regularly in a number of capacities at NYTW and *Wickets* premiered at 3LD in lower Manhattan.

Although *Guignol* baptized the new theater, it was work by a former Mabou Mines resident artist that spoke particularly poignantly about the ebb and flow of the company's past and future. Mallory Catlett's *This Was the End*, a cerebral rumination on *Uncle Vanya*, was presented at the refurbished space in June 2018. Catlett developed the piece between 2009 and 2011 as a resident artist in SUITE/Space, a residency program that provides artists with space, mentorship, and funds to create new work. Mabou Mines resident artists worked in the ToRoNaDa studio prior to the renovation, and Catlett came to rely upon the built-in cabinets along the wall in her spatial conception of the piece. "I knew the building was going to be renovated," Catlett writes in her director's note, "so I asked Mabou if I could take it and they said yes. This wall carries with it a history of their generosity. Think of all the things that happened in front of it." [37] *This Was the End* was commissioned by and presented at the Chocolate Factory in Queens in 2014. Catlett stored the cabinet in her parents' barn before returning it to the reconfigured 122 Community Center for this revival.

Catlett employs several strategies to distort the relationship between past and present. She casts older actors to play the typically youthful Sonya and Yelena; Black-Eyed Susan as the former and Rae C. Wright as the latter. As a result, not just Vanya, but Yelena too seems to be a fly stuck in amber. Any hopes we had that Sonya might have escaped are dashed; the three are trapped where Chekhov left them in 1898 but now aged (as Chekhov's characters are in Brian Friel's *Afterplay* [2002]). The production also features prominent performers from the history of downtown New York performance: in addition to Black-Eyed Susan, a founding member of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Paul Zimet, a member of the Open Theater, plays Vanya. There is a jarring juxtaposition between the rugged East Village history that Black-Eyed Susan and Zimet personify and the sleek interior of the updated building.

And then there is the cabinet. Extracted from its schoolhouse surroundings, the cabinet appears to float in the cavernous, ageless black box, the last ice cap in the melting Antarctic of a twenty-first century East Village. But the cabinet does not appear exactly as it did in the ToRoNaDa—the interior has been embellished in size to accommodate the presence of more than one performer. For those familiar with the original built-in, the revelation that even the cabinet has been renovated augments the strange sensation that actors and audience are caught outside of temporal boundaries. One performer, G Lucas Crane, remains inside the cabinet for the entire performance, playing cassette tape recordings of Sonya, Vanya, Astrov, and Yelena back to them. This archivist is literally, corporeally, stuck in the past. The use of the old cabinet in this new-old space emphasizes what McAuley describes as "the constant dual presence of the performance space and the fictional world or worlds created. The space the spectator is watching during the performance...is always both stage and somewhere else. ... [H]owever convincing the fictional world may be, the stage itself is always also present at some level of our consciousness." [38] Here, Catlett simultaneously evokes 122 Community Center pre- and post-renovation, engaging in what Levin might describe as "a mischievous tactic of" spatial "infiltration." [39]

Video work by Crane and Ryan Holsopple further warps our sensibilities. As the performers climb in and out of the cabinet and circle it, looking for someone or something, pre-recorded images of the performers doing the same thing flicker eerily on the cabinet's façade and on the actors as we watch Chekhov's characters try to catch up with or outrun other versions of themselves. "We were working with *Uncle Vanya*," Catlett explains

but also with Proust's notion of time as the convergence of past and present, which came from optics—the popular science of his day. The stereoscope showed how our eyes worked to create three-dimensional perception and Proust applied this to memory. In the studio we were projecting and mapping this wall onto itself—playing with the idea of blur and convergence.^[40]

In a certain sense, *This Was the End* fills in the dramatic dots between Chekov and Beckett. Time and habit have worn Catlett's characters into threadbare versions of the originals who are still waiting. "There is no escape from the hours and the days," Beckett writes on Proust,

Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous.^[41]

In *Guignol*, Breuer and Mitchell stage the artist as Frankenstein as they transmogrify *The Glass Menagerie*'s Laura into a monster, stitching Mitchell into a gruesome, larger-than-life puppet.

Catlett's monster is a theatre purgatory where Chekhov, Beckett, and Mabou Mines co-artistic directors come and gone collide with East Village architecture of the past and present. In Mabou Mines's new space, *This Was the End* bids a fond farewell to 122 Community Center as we knew it.

In an homage to the ToRoNaDa, Fogarty says that the new theater was initially painted midnight blue, the color Archer selected for the walls of the former studio. But the blue walls were quickly painted over with black for the *Guignol* set. A flash of blue remains on the ceiling, just visible behind the lighting grid. This is for the best; should the company insist upon a distinction between its past and future, it would betray the boundaries of its own avant-garde perspective which refuses to categorize process and product in oppositional terms. For Mabou Mines artists, as for Beckett, "The creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day."^[42] The purgatory of performance space can be ecstasy as well as agony. Each day in Mabou Mines's new theater is an opportunity to try again.

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**MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
PUBLICATIONS**

"Mabou Mines Tries Again: Past, Present, and the Purgatory of Performance Space" by Jessica Brater

ISSN 2376-4236

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 31, Number 3 (Spring 2019)

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