

# Mabou Mines's *Lear*: A Narrative of Collective Authorship

Iris Smith

Let's begin with a few endorsements.

"The name Mabou Mines has become a kind of totem in today's theatre. To their peers, this New York-based company represents a model of avant-garde theatricality—in writing, in acting, in directing, in production, in technology and in collaboration. To mainstream theatregoers and critics, Mabou Mines remains a curiosity, by turns fascinating, puzzling and infuriating. Since its beginning almost 20 years ago, the group has accumulated a powerful, almost magical aura despite the fact that (or very possibly because) it's unbelievably difficult to say exactly what Mabou Mines is."<sup>1</sup>

"Mabou Mines begins its year-long celebration 'Mabou Mines—20 Years' with the premiere of our boldly American production of Shakespeare's masterpiece, set in the South where divine right is replaced by money, sex and racial might."<sup>2</sup>

"Mabou Mines is an experimental theatre group that specializes in the works of Samuel Beckett and in original pieces called animations. It is also known for its blending of conceptual and traditional performance styles.

"Named for a small mining town in Nova Scotia where the company members spent a summer working together, Mabou Mines has had to fight the image of being thought a mime troupe, and at the same time find its identity as a theatre group.

"Mabou Mines is a tightknit group whose members (JoAnne Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczech, Frederick Neumann, William Raymond, Terry O'Reilly, and David Warilow) conceive, write, direct, produce, and stage all of its works collectively. There is no clear division of responsibility and no artistic director, although the articulate Lee Breuer, who has most frequently staged the group's plays, is often thought (at least by outsiders) to be the leader.

"In the beginning, the group was not even sure it was a theatre company. Mabou Mines began in 1970, cross-breeding art forms, inspired by the work of, among others, choreographer Yvonne Rainier [sic] and painter Robert Rauschenberg. Originally the group

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<sup>1</sup> Don Shewey, "The Many Voices of Mabou Mines," *American Theatre* (June 1984): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Mabou Mines flyer, printed courtesy of Philip Morris Companies, Inc. 1990.

performed in art galleries and museums, only gradually achieving its identity as a performance theatre."<sup>3</sup>

"'Contemporary experimental theatre at its most incendiary'—Frank Rich THE NEW YORK TIMES . . . 'The most original acting company in this country'—Don Nelson [N.Y.] DAILY NEWS."<sup>4</sup>

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This essay traces out a portion of what I call the "Mabou Mines narrative." This narrative could be understood as an account of Mabou Mines's work in its contexts, i.e., as it is intertwined with public interpretations of it made both by journalists and other writers, and by Mabou Mines themselves. Of course, there is more than one possible narrative in the work of such a group. When Mabou first became widely known as a theatre collective in the late 1970s, the concept of the collective shaped the narratives of several article-length studies, whose authors struggled with the apparent novelty of the concept. How does a collective work, they asked, and how do we write about it? Have these artists discovered new ways of working and living together? To put these questions as one writer did, how can "Mabou Mines" be both plural and singular?

As appropriate as these questions were at the time, the investigation into the collective nature and collaborative work of Mabou Mines was superseded in the 1980s by attention to the achievements of individual members. For example, C. W. E. Bigsby's chapter on Lee Breuer in his *Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*<sup>5</sup> attempts a "historical" treatment of one member of the collective. Applying a biographer's strategy to the narrative of Mabou Mines, Bigsby chooses the member who best fits the familiar categories of author and director and focuses almost exclusively on him. More than that, he writes of Breuer as the *auteur*, the creative self in charge. Here, as in other accounts of Mabou Mines written in the last ten years, the collective process by which Mabou Mines produce their work is not so much addressed as assumed and moved aside, so that individual achievements may be summarized. This approach is not without merit, for individual members of Mabou Mines have branched out, working for part of any given year with non-Mabou artists. Breuer's most widely-seen work may be *Gospel at Colonus*, a musical rendition of Sophocles's play done in collaboration with composer Bob Telson and several African-American gospel groups. Yet, Breuer refused a Tony award nomination, saying that the writing for which he was to be honored could not be separated from the collaborative efforts of the other artists. For Breuer, as for the other members of Mabou Mines, the collective continues to be the paradigm that gives their work its originality and historical interest. In treating Breuer as an *auteur*, Bigsby may have responded to Breuer's primary self-definition as author. But he has failed to report that Breuer's distinctive writing and directing have been shaped in part by the creative talents of the others. Further, Bigsby's error is greater than that of slighting the other members:

<sup>3</sup> H. Merton Goldman, "Where Conceptual and Performance Art Meet," *Theatre Crafts* (March/April 1978): 21.

<sup>4</sup> Mabou Mines promotional flyer, issued by Performing Artservices, Inc., n.d.

<sup>5</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 204–18.

it reveals the gulf between much writing on contemporary theatre and the work itself, which resists strongly the notion of a rigorous individualism. In this treatment Breuer is misread into history, and Mabou Mines, which continues to function as a collective, is lost there as well.

This misreading is a major obstacle to the politically conscious writing of avant-garde theatre history. Those in the media and academia who write on contemporary theatre groups, and thus determine in large measure the culture's collective memory of them, have to wonder how they can best render *Lear*, *Company*, or *Dead End Kids* without betraying the dynamics of the piece's conception and development. Nor is the audience's role in creating these works unimportant. Often the work is treated as though it were produced in a vacuum, without any relation to the artists' and audiences' lives or their awareness of what has been done on experimental stages. The unfortunate notion of isolating the work as an event under glass—a "text itself"—survives. Perhaps rather than asking what it means to call Mabou Mines a collective or approaching any given Mabou play as a world unto itself, we need to locate Mabou Mines among the theatrical, economic, media-generated, and other discourses that have participated as well in creating and maintaining the collective.

Prominent among these discourses are the publicity materials generated in staging a show. They, and any advance work done by the press, form the initial environment for contact between artists and audience. In these pages I propose to sketch in preliminary fashion the narratives of Mabou Mines known to (and developed in part by) audiences who attended their production of *Lear*. This demonstration involves an examination of previews, reviews and interviews that have interceded between readers (some of whom became spectators) and the artists' work. As we will see, the public was prepared for *Lear* in commonplace, yet extraordinary ways.

### Mimicry and the Gendered Stereotype

The Mabou Mines production of *Lear* was the collective's first attempt to stage Shakespeare. It is unique among their work for this reason, but at the same time it could be considered a signature piece of the 1980s Mabou Mines, when they adapted (or constructed from "found" material) rich, complex shows like *Flow My Tears*, *the Policeman Said* or *Sueños*. An even more expensive, complicated undertaking than these other Mabou pieces, *Lear* had a large cast and a set loaded with technical equipment (a turntable was considered but the idea abandoned for lack of money). Director Breuer, known since the late 1970s for his large-scale projects, saw *Lear* as a fundamental story about the interrelations of power and gender, and set about to provide the show with an American context that would suit the breadth and significance of these contemporary concerns. Thus, *Lear* joins earlier Breuer projects, *The Shaggy Dog Animation* and (outside of Mabou) *Gospel at Colonus*, *Lulu* and *The Warrior Ant*, as large-scale productions. Perhaps I should call them "provocations" for audiences have found all of these shows very controversial indeed. *Lear* antagonized some spectators and enraptured others. Like *Lulu*, which had outraged subscription audiences at the American Repertory Theatre, it did not leave spectators a middle ground.

*Lear* also finds a place in Mabou's work as a long (four-year) collaboration among Mabou artists and associates. Like the first two "animations," *The Red Horse* and *The*

*B. Beaver*, *Lear* developed through a lengthy series of rehearsals. Unlike the animations, which Mabou worked on steadily (the artists combining rehearsal with part-time, or full-time, employment in odd jobs), the more complicated *Lear* rehearsals, like other recent shows, were often interrupted by lack of funding needed to muster the large cast, and by the individual artists' obligations to other, often less extended projects elsewhere. Although they worked on *Lear* intermittently, Mabou Mines were no longer "part-timers." In the 1980s it had become possible for many to avoid the long stretches of non-theatre work or unemployment compensation they had had to rely on in the earlier years. The interruptions became performance-related: jobs in the film industry, or with other theatre groups, or in university or workshop teaching. The money had improved, but the distraction from the collective's primary work remained. Still, both Mabou Mines's members and associates found useful the open-endedness of the group's long-term, loosely structured collaboration, primarily because it is also open-minded, in that it makes collaborators of all its participants. For *Lear*, plot, character, set, costume, gesture, and sound all received input at one time or another from the company at large. For these and other reasons, *Lear* can be seen as a signature piece for Mabou Mines, the theatre collective.

*Lear* appeared as workshop material for three years before it received its New York premiere in January, 1990. The premiere was well publicized in advance, its gender reversal of the title character seeming to stimulate the press's curiosity. To some critics it was merely clever to transform *Lear* into a matriarch, the daughters into sons, the Fool into a transvestite. Another campy Mabou Mines rendition, they said. However, director Breuer's and actor Maleczek's foregrounding of gender issues left an extraordinary impression. Maleczek had been attracted to Shakespeare's language, yet as a woman she seemed barred from the role of *Lear*. In early discussions of a possible production, Breuer removed that obstacle by reversing the genders of the characters. In addition, though, it was important to offer American audiences a contemporary point of entry into the play, in this case the politics of gender and race. For this reason as well, Breuer and his collaborators settled on the American South as the visual and auditory analogy that would complement the gender reversal.

I first saw a full staging of *Lear* at the Triplex Theater at Manhattan Community College in February, 1990. Flanking the action at center stage were the skewed facades of two houses: at stage left *Lear*'s manor, reduced to a fairy tale shack with gingerbread carvings and short stoop; at stage right Gloucester's tarpaper shack, taller than *Lear*'s, upright, with its back porch facing the audience. This environment suggested a poor backwater of the American South, identified in the program as Smyrna, Georgia, in the late 1950s. In a common backyard, between the two poles of servant and master, black and white, *Lear*'s domestic kingdom found its shape. It is important to add that this was the *fictional* South of such writers as Erskine Caldwell and Tennessee Williams, a South reconceived as a limited set of broadly drawn images and sounds.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lee Breuer has attributed his vision of the American South more to William Faulkner and Orson Welles than to Caldwell and Williams. Welles might seem a curious influence until we recall his role in the 1958 film *The Long Hot Summer*. More important to Breuer, of course, is Welles's style as a director, a style that bears some resemblance to the "cinematic" quality of Faulkner's writing. During an interview that appeared as preview material, Breuer explained his nightmarish vision of *Lear* as

Preview articles on *Lear* had been appearing in nationally distributed theatre publications a full two years before the premiere, often in conjunction with a work-in-progress presentation of selected scenes. These previews gave the spectators the first "texts" of *Lear* to read. *American Theatre*, for example, ran a feature in 1988 on both the Mabou production and one in preparation by Tadashi Suzuki.<sup>7</sup> The writer, Arthur Holmberg, contrasted the productions, finding Suzuki's metaphysical and Mabou's political. Like Bigsby, Holmberg focused almost exclusively on the director's vision, in this case as it related to issues of gender and power. Similarly, just as the production was opening in New York, another preview quoted Lee Breuer as commenting, "I'm doing a work about an aging matriarch . . . a classic mother figure in a country where the mother is an essential archetype. The women's movement has been the most important political event in my life. I can see how it has changed my mother, age 86, Ruth, age 51, and my daughter, age 20."<sup>8</sup> *Lear* represented Breuer's first dramatic foray into the feminist politics of gender since his late 1970s productions of *The Shaggy Dog Animation* and *Lulu*. Those who know his work will recognize in his remarks signs of the difficulty with which he has responded to this "most important political event." Seeing himself as a writer first and director second. Breuer has often seemed caught up in a familiar type of *auteurism*, that of the solitary, somewhat alienated male visionary. He does not speak of himself as a participant in the artistic changes wrought by the women's movement, but rather as an observer of them. Yet Mabou Mines has a reputation for both gender-blind collaboration and an emphasis on "the work" over the contributions of individual members. Breuer's artistic life seems to combine this "feminist" sort of collaboration and a modernist form of solitary, masculinist authorship.

When he talks about his work, Breuer produces an easy stream of metaphors that can cloud as much as they reveal (perhaps a voluble artist's way of frustrating critics into turning their attention back to the work). Breuer is clearly interested in questions of gender, but critics have not always known what to make of his interest, often mistaking the ironic analogies in his writing and direction for crudely adopted stereotypes. In her review of *Lear* for *The Village Voice*, Erika Munk complained: "The Southern world Breuer creates has more to do with media than with any real place, and my suspicion is that it was chosen because it rouses an instant, stereotyped expectation of mindless violence and sexy primitivism in the mind of an urban

one that employed cinematic techniques: "There's a lot of close-up acting, under-the-chin shots like Orson Welles. . . . [After reading a biography of Welles] I started looking at all Orson's Shakespeare films. I got absolutely fascinated by how he made them voluptuous, melodramatic, stagey—and they moved like wildfire. I decided to get rid of all the entrances and exits in *Lear*, so there's no time wasted with people walking on and off stage. Instead of five acts, we've got about 32 sequences, separated one from the other by shots. I worked this thing out with [lighting designer] Arden Fingerhut to try to get a seamless continuum. I tried to make it feel like a Welles movie." [Quoted in Margaret Spillane, "King Lear, Queen for a Day," *In These Times*, 31 January–6 February 1990; n.p.] Besides Welles's films of Shakespeare (and his "voodoo" staging of *Macbeth*) his *films noir*, particularly *Touch of Evil*, set in a murky Southwestern border town, also seem relevant to the grotesque qualities of set, sound, and character in Breuer's staging of *Lear*.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear," *American Theatre* (July/August) 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in William Harris, "Mabou Mines Sets *Lear* on a Hot Tin Roof," *The New York Times*, 21 January 1990: H5.

audience.”<sup>9</sup> I would ask: roused the expectation or roused the stereotypes? I submit it was the former.

Breuer anticipated this sort of objection when he announced before the premiere that this production owed much to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*. Stereotypes accepted and reproduced in a “Southern” film like *The Long Hot Summer* are not consumable on this stage, where habitually “male” behavior becomes disturbing when appropriated by women. But perhaps Munk is referring to the difficulty of keeping the estranging element in the foreground. Brecht recognized this problem in his play *Mother Courage*, in which the audience often chooses to sympathize with Anna Fierling’s struggle to stay in business, rather than to censure her for complicity in the bad business of war. Similarly, Lear in the second half of the Mabou Mines production tended to be a sympathetic character. Despite the production’s on-going efforts to keep the audience off balance (hints of lesbianism between Cornwall and Elva, for example), Lear’s wild-maned madness and then her pieta-like grief over the body of her youngest son did not fascinate me, as her initial entrance did. Pity replaced that sense-bending attention elicited by act 1.

Still, “estrangement” informs this production of *Lear* and, in fact, all of Mabou Mines’s work. Stepping back from the play and its writing of Lear’s “narrative,” we can see a similar estrangement in the ways Ruth Maleczek’s own narrative has been written in the press. In her acting and in her interactions with the press she does not seem to draw on familiar analogies, as Breuer does. (He speaks, for example, in a 1987 interview with Ross Wetzsteon of his early “Camus period.”) It is often difficult to reconstruct Maleczek’s work, because she tends to say that it speaks for itself, that she lives the piece, in a sense, and moves on. When she does speak of past work, she often focuses on the collective rather than on her own involvement. These tendencies, plus interviewers’ often exclusive interest in the thoughts of the director, have made her less visible as an actor in the press. Yet it is fair to say that Maleczek’s growth as an actor has been shaped by two primary factors: first, she, like Breuer, has integrated ideas from the European avant-garde, such as Brechtian estrangement and Grotowskian acting techniques; second, within the group environment she experienced at first hand the conflicting demands of work and children, and, presumably, the demands of her colleagues, a diverse group on whom she has likely made demands of her own. Chief among these colleagues is Breuer, who has directed her often and is also the father of her two children. (Both children took roles in *Lear*, Clove Galilee as France and Lute Ramblin’ as Lear’s youngest son, Cordelion.) In *Haji*, directed by Breuer, or in her portrayal of the Mother in Genet’s *The Screens* (directed by JoAnne Akalaitis at the Guthrie Theatre), Maleczek’s approach to gender draws on and plays against stereotype. Maleczek’s own work as director, begun in the mid-seventies, reflects a deep interest in gender: for example, *Vanishing Pictures* looks at the murder of a woman through the nineteenth-century sensibilities of Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire; *Wrong Guys* dealt with the images of film noir; the more recent *Sueños* champions the work of Sor Juana de la Cruz in a context of current events in Latin America. In all of her recent professional activities, Maleczek’s work has reminded audiences of the ubiquitous presence of gender.

<sup>9</sup> Erika Munk, “Subversion by Concept,” *Village Voice*, 6 February 1990: 98.

Maleczek's public statements about her work are seldom couched in the garrulous, highly theoretical fashion of Lee Breuer. *Lear* is a case in point. While Breuer theorized the myths that lie at the base of the play—"Lear is about power"—or announced that this role was Maleczek's entry into greatness as an actor, Maleczek emphasized that she wanted to speak Shakespeare's lines. Not interested in playing Lear as a man, Maleczek was following a desire that had no model. As Lear, she engaged the play—and the press—in what might be called a "specular" fashion. That is to say, she acted as an unsettling looking glass, a probe that takes the shape of what is being probed. While, as Munk claims, stereotypes are invoked in *Lear*, Maleczek's portrayal creates gendered behavior that has never really existed. As she commented to Ross Wetzsteon of *The Village Voice*, "When a man has power we take it for granted. But when a woman has power, we're forced to look at the nature of power itself."<sup>10</sup> This view of mimicry in advance of its model contrasts with Breuer's view of the production as "[a] struggle for power . . . more basic than men and women. . . . Our unending competitive drive lives on regardless of gender[;] the different ways men and women deal with power are essentially differences in *style*. It'd be the same if *dogs* played all the parts—'cause in a sense it's a play about the dog-eat-dog of it all."<sup>11</sup> While Breuer and Maleczek seem to feel that they hold similar views of the play, I submit that their perspectives are far apart. For Breuer gender is one of many possible analogies; for Maleczek gender has been the material obstacle between her and the chance to play Lear, and became, once the production was underway, the elemental link between Shakespeare's words and (her) contemporary American experience.

Let us turn now to the play "itself." Maleczek's *Lear* is the matriarch of a dysfunctional white-trash family whose members prey on one another's vulnerabilities. Both older sons are greedy, lascivious, and lazy; Cordelia, here called "Cordelion," is an inarticulate, earnest young man (Lute Ramblin'). Gloucester (Isabell Monk) and Kent (Lola Pashalinski) are matronly friends and supporters of Lear, the latter White and the former African-American. Edgar, or "Edna" (Karen Evans-Kandel), is also African-American, a pinafoored good girl, while Edmund, or "Elva" (Ellen McElduff), Gloucester's illegitimate daughter, is a blond bitch in black. Breuer describes her as a daughter who tries to "pass" as White, rather than a White actor whose color should be overlooked. Breuer wants not to overlook color differences but to look at them squarely.

In contrast to these broadly drawn characters, Shakespeare's words were observed closely. Breuer's contemporary analogy was the actors' Appalachian dialect that, oddly enough, suited the language well. The company had developed a Southern setting as they came to feel that their original choice, a suburb in the American Southwest, offered neither a culture with a strong matriarchal tradition, nor a dialect tied directly to the Renaissance English of Shakespeare's own time. The twang of a backwoods accent seemed to present the sounds of a culture marked with a strong matriarchal presence, as well as an escape from the often pompous delivery of the

<sup>10</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, "Queen Lear: Ruth Maleczek Gender Bends Shakespeare," *Village Voice*, 30 January 1990: 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Victorian Shakespeare still popular today on stage. Breuer and Maleczek felt that that familiar upper-crust approach to Shakespeare carried the stamp of Victorian class culture, rather than the mark of Shakespeare's original productions. They mentioned often in interviews their debt to the PBS program "The Story of English," which had linked the distinctive accent of isolated Appalachian communities to the dialects of the English North and West countries from which their ancestors had emigrated.

Thus, Maleczek's Lear spoke in the soft tones of a Southern matriarch, but one of a working-class, semi-rural background. In anger Lear's voice lost its veneer of gentility; she became a woman whose place lay outside both respectable Southern society and mainstream bourgeois American culture—in terms of gender, geography, and class. Because language and character had been transformed together, I seldom was reminded during the play that these lines had been written for a male character. This was true for other characters as well. The troupe seemed to delight in "male" language coming out of women's mouths, or vice versa. Yet critical reaction to the Southern sound was mixed, and generally negative to the textual changes that accommodated both the gender reversal and the Southern setting. (Substitute expressions that transformed "dear highness," for example, into "deah muhtha" were not always successful.)

In the rehearsal process, Breuer had polished the gender reversal with other aspects of the "Southern" analogy: the family barbeque that opens the play, images of a 1950s car culture, the lynching of the transvestite fool. Although all of these features are notable, the woman Lear and the "woman" fool, played by Greg Mehrten, are a duo needing particular scrutiny. In the mayhem of the opening scene, Lear's birthday barbeque, the fool appears inside the door of Lear's house, then steps out onto the stoop carrying a large, obviously fake birthday cake from which two small pieces have already been cut. This is the division of Lear's kingdom, of course, with the remainder of the cake intended perhaps for her youngest, and favorite, son. Played from the first as a transvestite, here in fringed short-shorts and bolero hat, the fool is gender-reversed in a different sense. Critics often remarked that s/he is the only male character to remain male (not exactly true if we are discussing gender rather than sex), but critics did not generally notice that in selected promotional material Mabou Mines presented the fool as both a foil for Maleczek's Lear and a beloved adopted son who had somehow fulfilled Lear's expectations, while her actual sons disappointed her. (This would suggest that Cordelion is presented as estranged from Lear from the first, a surmise confirmed by his withdrawn sullenness.) Given the fool's unconventional appearance and behavior, it is not surprising that neither spectators nor critics seem to have understood this aspect of his position in Lear's family. While it makes theoretical sense to outline the fool as beloved son, the fool's outrageous appearance and behavior put him in a class by himself in the actual production and leave the favored son status to Cordelion, who does not always seem deserving, but with whom it should rest in any case. This issue aside, Mehrten, both hilarious and affecting, manages to project the fool's irony and dignified loneliness, as well as his love for Lear. In the opening scene the fool clears the way for Lear, stilling the raucous family and setting a dignified pace for his mistress. Perhaps this fool is so effective because he clearly demonstrates how gender "lies," that is, how it is constructed, not given, and how both living and commenting on these "lies" can ~~be~~ put an individual at risk in the community.





Lee Breuer's *Lear*. (Photo: Beatriz Schiller)

In her first appearance on stage, Lear's power over these people is already in place; although small in stature, smiling, leaning on a cane, she holds them in suspense. She gets to business immediately. Stepping off the porch—"Now we shall express our darker purpose"—she announces the division of her property. Yet this "woman" does not evoke the image of the patriarch, nor is she an overbearing harpy. The wonder of Maleczek's performance lies in its self-contained understatement: the assumption that this matriarch's power, personal and economic, is the most natural thing in the world. And, as Maleczek has noted, that assumption directs us to the issue of power itself. Gender is visible as a marker; it highlights power by giving it a context. More than this, as the play progresses it becomes apparent that Lear, like the fool, has become (to paraphrase Jacques Lacan) a subject who seems to know. The human understanding that comes so painfully to Lear is, in this case, the result of a woman's entry into a male language of power—or, rather, consciousness of that language. In act 1, however, Lear enters the stage as a woman who has refused the knowledge of the subject position she inhabits. She is not ignorant of her family's disordered state, but she is oblivious to her own part in its corruption, and her obliviousness is chilling. Later, Lear comes to look upon herself and upon gendered power with irony. Is it surprising, then, that between this woman and the "woman" played by Mehrten there is a special friendship?

Still, the grim darkness of Shakespeare's play remains. The events that follow from the gendered betrayal by Lear's sons offer no alternative to patriarchy; the bleakness of Lear's madness and death seems unrelieved. Nor is the Brechtian indictment of Lear lifted. While Maleczek played Lear's grief over the death of Cordelion apparently to elicit our sympathy, this late reconciliation with son and audience seemed too easy, as Michael Feingold pointed out in his review.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Breuer directed the scene against Maleczek's "heartbreaking" interpretation, for mother and son were placed at the rear of the stage, literally distancing the audience from the spectacle of grief. The production's complicated treatment of Lear apparently communicated itself to the audience. Spectators (Munk, for example) were moved by this scene, yet never lost sight of Breuer's frame. Breuer and Maleczek avoided the danger of unalloyed pathos that pushed so many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century directors to the opposite extreme of ending *Lear* happily, with the return of France, or the prospect of a marriage between Edgar and the revived Cordelia. Avoiding all of these options, Mabou Mines sought out a reluctant indictment of specifically gendered behavior. As Herbert Blau said in regard to his own production of *King Lear*, in 1961:

You [Lear] are in command of a certain function—tribal, familial, political—and everything around you tells you that you are the cynosure of all eyes. . . . They told you you were everything. They may have had reservations, but they behaved that way. Until something strange, darkling, and horrible comes up, as if from Nothing, from the one you love most. And only then do you start to wonder what it is like to be a man.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Michael Feingold, "A Mythic Immediacy," *Village Voice*, 6 February 1990: 95, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Blau, "A Subtext Based on Nothing," *Tulane Drama Review* 8 (1963): 132. Both Breuer and Maleczek recalled this San Francisco Actors Workshop production in the course of preparing *Lear*. In 1987, during rehearsals at Atlanta's Theatrical Outfit, Maleczek was quoted as calling Michael O'Sullivan's Lear "ephemeral" and remarked, "I plan to steal as much of it as I can." (Quoted in Dan Hulbert, "Mabou Mines Goes on 'Lear' Gender Bender," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 25 September

Of course, we now can say as well, "what it is like to be a woman."

Maleczech's play with female stereotypes as Lear did not prevent other characters from mimicking male behavior: for example, the critics responded strongly to the fight scene, in which Elva (Edmund) and Edna (Edgar) grapple and parry in obvious imitation of male hand-to-hand combat. This scene was described repeatedly as chilling, both in its rehearsal/workshop versions and in the New York production. Of an early workshop version, Arthur Holmberg remarked:

The Edmund-Edgar duel in the play's fifth act is another scene that takes on new flesh and blood in Breuer's version. The director is right: seeing two women fight is physically—and metaphysically—different from seeing two men fight. Breuer pulls out all the stops to turn this scene into a tour de force, flipflopping from parody to terror, from caring to tragedy. The actresses strip down to kinky wrestling gear; they switch back and forth between breathy, Marilyn Monroe voices and gruff male war cries; [in this version] the fight takes place in a garbage dump, and the weapons included saws, pitchforks, knives, broken bottles. The scene ironically quotes stage fights, female boxers, mud wrestlers and horror movies—by the time it's over, the audience had had its own brains dashed out.<sup>14</sup>

While the setting had changed from this suburban milieu to the semi-rural South by the time of the New York premiere, this odd brutality remained. The parody elicited not laughter, but rather a prolonged fascination, an attentiveness that is the mark of a well-staged piece of estrangement.

Again a different form of mimicry, though less successful in the opinions of several critics, was the use of miking to lend to the actors' voices a breathy, intimate quality. The amplification was designed to "place" the actor's voice, supposedly making it easier to link speaker and speech. In fact it had the opposite effect, separating voice from body to such an extent that Shakespeare's language often seemed entirely disembodied from the gender-reversed images. Yet either way the miking could be startlingly effective. It tended in intimate scenes to throw the voices of the actors directly into our ears, a "graininess," to use Roland Barthes's phrase, that drew us into the scene. Like a film frame that eroticizes the image, amplification made Shakespeare's lines reverberate. Most memorable were the intimate voices of Regan (Ron Vawter) and Goneril (Bill Raymond) as they sat on their mother's stoop, swigging liquor out of a hip flask, grumbling and plotting. The timbre of these cinematic Southern voices, languid, full of self-possessed cruelty and irony, might have been lost by declamation.

All of these elements considered, Ruth Maleczech is right—gender issues are at the heart of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Lear's misogyny is only the most obvious example. When Lear is played as a woman, the patriarchal dynamic of the play itself is highlighted. In *King Lear* the father gives up power with the expectation, his and the audience's, that his daughters must in some sense return it to him. Gender problems are embedded in these expectations. How can the inhuman excess of the

1987: n.p.) To Jerry Talmer of the *New York Post* she recalled that while watching O'Sullivan in 52 performances, she memorized all the lines in the play, some thirty years before she was able to take on the role herself. ("Lear' with a Switch," 9 January 1990: n.p.)

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear," *American Theatre*, July/August 1988: 17.

elder daughters' rejection be separated from the taboo of any daughter's rejection of the father? To say what Mabou Mines want to say, to foreground gender, *Lear* does not just happen to be a woman—she must be a woman.

And her children must be sons. Reports of Robert Wilson's production of *Lear*, which was planned for a Frankfurt opening in June 1990, make this clear. Wilson's *Lear* was Marianne Hoppe, an eighty-year-old German actress who was quoted as saying, "I will not try to play a man, but I will forget I'm a woman."<sup>15</sup> This approach seems contradictory: what relationship between parent and child can be defined exclusive of gender? Each time Regan and Goneril say "I love you," we hear the echoes. In working on the earlier Mabou Mines piece *Shaggy Dog Animation*, Breuer seemed to understand this: "Saying 'I love you' doesn't sound right any more without an echo chamber. I wanted to strike a balance where it was all parody and all straight at the same time."<sup>16</sup> Breuer could be speaking of *Lear*, which in its Mabou incarnation places Shakespeare's language in this postmodern echo chamber.

Fredric Jameson has described parody as a modernist practice which seizes on the idiosyncracies of selected styles "to produce an imitation which mocks the original."<sup>17</sup> With the exception of the parodied male combat, this is not the type of mimicry under discussion here. What *Lear* demonstrated is closer to Jameson's term *pastiche*, "the neutral practice of such mimicry . . . without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic."<sup>18</sup> Jameson places this practice at the historical moment when private languages seem to supplant the very notion of a public language. The recent popularity of plays that recast public sexuality as privately-coded gender (e.g., David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* or David Mamet's *Oleanna*) suggests that gender has become such a painful postmodern preoccupation, full of "private languages" that echo one another but do not provide a common vocabulary. Despite Breuer's search for myths that will link our experience and understanding, the Mabou Mines production of *Lear* reinforces our consciousness that there is no such norm; that our understanding is partial and provisional. We realize that Breuer and Maleczek as gendered individuals have lived events, historical and personal, in very different ways. More, this consciousness is a very specific refusal, by Maleczek, to interpret herself; she prefers a more local, private, anti-analytical stance to her work.

### Mabou Mines Meets the Press

In order to address *Lear* as an event fully charged with the cultural preoccupations of its time and place, we must go beyond this initial discussion of staging to the constitutive elements of audience expectations and reactions. I have suggested both already by weaving into my discussion information and interpretations offered by

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Arthur Holmberg, "'Lear' Girds for a Remarkable Episode," *The New York Times*, 20 May 1990: 7.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Tish Dace, "Mabou Mines Collaborative Creation," *The Soho Weekly News*, 18 May 1978: 23.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay P, 1983), 113.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

journalists and critics who kept their readers apprised of the progress of the *Lear* project as it moved from early rehearsals to semi-public work-in-progress to more formal and "complete" staging. The dissemination of this information was, in the case of newspaper accounts, dependent on the geographical proximity of the publication to the location in which the work was taking place. While professional theatre journals did not generally take note of *Lear* during its development (these journals being by nature reactive rather than proactive in dealing with performance), weekly and monthly theatre magazines such as *Theater Week* or *American Theatre* ran several work-in-progress reports and the occasional feature.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, by 1987 the English-speaking American theatre world knew that Mabou Mines was developing a gender-reversed adaptation of *King Lear*. Alisa Solomon, who joined the production as dramaturg in 1987, wrote an early report on the rehearsal process as it bounced from location to location.<sup>20</sup> At the time of that article, Mabou Mines had followed initial meetings in New York City with a workshop at the Theatrical Outfit in Atlanta, where the cast could begin to work through the production's analogies in a quiet environment far from the daily demands of life in New York. While no public performance was given, subscription members of the Theatrical Outfit were invited to open rehearsals, scenes from which were also videotaped by filmmaker Jill Godmilow for a yet-to-be-broadcast television documentary on the making of *Lear*. In Atlanta Breuer and the cast developed the Southern analogy, thinking their way (in an open-ended, stop-and-start fashion) out of the original Southwestern setting. This process began again several months later at the rehearsal space at the Musical Theater Works in Manhattan, then moved once more to the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where Mabou presented their most recent version of selected scenes. While the play was billed as work-in-progress in New Brunswick, Mabou actually had a slot in the Playhouse's 1987–88 subscription season, an unusual arrangement made by Mabou's then-director of development, Anthony Vasconcellos, and Geoffrey Merrill Cohen, general manager of the Playhouse at that time. After a month of public performances at this venue early in 1988, the cast reassembled the following July at Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, where for four weeks they rehearsed acts 3 and 4 as the resident artists of the Theater Institute at Storm King. Freed by having to give only a single, informal presentation of selected scenes as part of "A Day in the Country," a program to which the public was invited, the cast seemed to put this four-week period to good use by working further on the heath scenes. In the hiatus following this "retreat," from July 1988 to January 1990 when the play premiered in New York City, work-in-progress was seen by the public only once, at Smith College in March, 1989. (Following its premiere *Lear* traveled to Toronto, where it was featured in the Harbourfront Festival in March 1990, but thereafter it did not travel as a full production, due to the prohibitive cost of moving the large cast and complicated set. It was instead presented, most prominently at the new Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio, as part of an evening of excerpts taken from *Lear* and *The B. Beaver Animation*.)

<sup>19</sup> Scholarly reviews did, of course, appear later in *Theatre Journal*, *Theater*, *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, and other quarterlies.

<sup>20</sup> Alisa Solomon, "Cracking Nature's Molds," *The Village Voice*, 12 January 1988: 92.



*Lear* in rehearsal, The Theatrical Outfit, Atlanta.  
 From left to right: Bill Raymond, Karen Evans-Kandel, Ruth Maleczech,  
 Pauline Oliveros (composer), Ron Vawter. (Photo: Paul Ryan)

As the production developed from 1987 to 1989, *Lear* was reported minimally in the national press, not unusual for a production they would consider avant-garde. It had, however, received coverage in the Atlanta, Hudson Valley, and New Jersey local newspapers during the periods mentioned. More important for the fate of future performances, it reportedly was seen by representatives of important regional theatres while it appeared at the George Street Playhouse in early 1988. A wide variety of New Jersey newspapers, large and small, previewed and reviewed *Lear*, a breadth of coverage that in itself does not explain audience response, but apparently reflected it.

While the George Street Playhouse had presented a number of “unusual” productions in the 1980s (including a staging of *Tartuffe* set in a replica of a New Brunswick shopping mall), it operated—and continues to do so—with the sort of light entertainment-oriented season common to local theatres around the country. *Lear* was preceded in the 1987–88 season by *Nunsense* and followed by *Max and Maxie*, by James MacLure, described as “a funny, loving and sad portrayal of an aging vaudevillian,” and *I’m Not Rappaport*, by Herb Gardner, the latter play mentioned as the 1986 Tony award winner for Best Play.<sup>21</sup> Obviously if a work-in-progress adaptation like *Lear* was to

<sup>21</sup> Program, *Lear*, George Street Playhouse, New Brunswick, NJ, 6.

succeed, it needed explanation. Preview articles appeared in the Newark *Star-Ledger*, the Trenton *Times*, the New Brunswick *Home News*, and others. Many of these previews quote Breuer and/or Maleczech extensively, suggesting that the Playhouse, and Mabou Mines, had realized the public's need for information.<sup>22</sup> While it is hard to judge the effect such advance material has on audiences (or even to judge who may have read it), the writers followed journalistic convention in their approach to a group that most of them were seeing for the first time. Previewers introduced Mabou Mines, often lingering on the origins of the group's name and briefly outlining their artistic pedigree. Then the bulk of the article was usually devoted to the production's focus on gendered power in the American South, and the reader's curiosity piqued by the implications of an African-American, female Gloucester or of the fool as transvestite. Generally, previewers seemed curious and open. They also tended to reproduce Breuer's speculation on where *Lear* might next appear, but these reports differ, perhaps in tandem with the variation in Breuer's speculation from one interview to the next. Mabou clearly intended to stage a full production in 1989, possibly at a prominent regional theatre like the Guthrie or the Mark Taper Forum. Yet it is just as apparent that no regional theatre had yet committed itself to the first full production of the project, and (to my knowledge) none did, the premiere landing instead in Mabou Mines's own backyard, at Manhattan Community College.

It would be an understatement to say that *Lear* displeased New Jersey audiences. "They hated it," said Maleczech to interviewer Ross Wetzsteon. "I think they wanted nobility, but *King Lear* is a mean, dirty, angry play."<sup>23</sup> Several reviewers noted that at least half of the opening-weekend audience fled the theatre each night at intermission. Eugenie Taub, writing for the *Metuchen-Edison Review*, opens by remarking:

Audiences at the George Street Playhouse, particularly on opening weekends, tend to be large amiable groups of people who've come to be entertained. Indulgent husbands accompanying their wives for a few hours of Culture before grabbing a late-night bite, subscribers who don't really know what to expect . . . good people, all, but not as a rule adventurous, and certainly not the audience for trying out a difficult, intense work. All

<sup>22</sup> In fact, Mabou Mines went to unusual lengths to explain themselves. The program notes written by Alisa Solomon take a scholarly tack in arguing for the plausibility of a female Lear in the American South. She quotes Raymond Williams, Maynard Mack, and Michael Goldman while pointing out the relevance of Maleczech's *Lear* to "women bartering in boardrooms at the highest levels" (17). Newspaper critics were especially attentive to Solomon's question: "We've seen women take on roles defined and traditionally held by men; in their rise to the top, women have adopted the values of these institutions. Is that inevitable?" The critics tended to take such questions seriously, even though they did not always find the production's answers relevant or interesting. More extraordinary than these notes, though, was the pre-show commentary provided each night, initially by director Breuer, then by a Playhouse spokesperson who read an announcement written by Maureen Hefferman, acting artistic director, and quoting Breuer. Both apparently sought to prepare the audience for the fragmentary nature of the scenes selected, and the estranging effect likely to be produced by an experimental production. As Breuer recounted to Alvin Klein, his original remarks had not been received well by the audience, who apparently felt "patronized." (*New York Times* (New Jersey edition), 24 January 1988: n.p.) I cannot help but think that Breuer was happy to relinquish this task to Hefferman and her spokespeople, such audience education being more appealing to regional and university theatre administrations than to Mabou Mines, who usually shun self-commentary whenever possible.

<sup>23</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, "Queen Lear," 40.

of which is to explain why, when the lights went up for intermission at the Saturday night performance of *Lear*, I was nearly trampled by members of the audience making a lemming-like rush for the exits.<sup>24</sup>

Inclined to praise the production, Taub notes with a hint of pique that “the acclaimed experimental troupe Mabou Mines . . . brings *Lear* to our area with ample notice to all who read the advance publicity that this is a work still in development.” She urges her readers to keep their final assessment for a full production, when Maleczek takes center stage, rather than appearing as “something of a bit player.” Despite the program’s announcement of scenes from all five acts, opening weekend audiences apparently saw no scenes from acts 4 or 5; Taub reports that the evening ended with Gloucester’s blinding. Audiences later in the run presumably saw more, for a *New York Times* article later in the year notes that “changes were made and scenes added.”<sup>25</sup>

Although many reviews were scathing, Taub was not alone in urging cautious optimism for the production. Bob Campbell of the *Star-Ledger* comments:

The George Street Playhouse will take a lot of heat for this avant-garde beau geste, but they deserve credit for their courage. It’s a shame that a special category of presentation wasn’t available for such a special category of creation. Serious students of theater will relish the chance to see this “*Lear*” in embryo, but no others need apply.<sup>26</sup>

Campbell notes that *Lear* was “wildly out of place” in the Playhouse’s “fluffy main-stage season,” suggesting that no amount of audience preparation could have reversed its ill fortune. In fact, despite the many negative reviews *Lear* received at this venue, it appears that a substantial portion of the New Jersey reviewers were not, as Ross Wetzsteon of *The Village Voice* later termed them, “middlebrow critics” who torpedoed the production. By and large, the critics seemed to understand *Lear*, while audiences—despite extensive outreach efforts by the Playhouse—did not. Although they were taken aback by the hostility of the George Street spectators, Mabou Mines did not discontinue or extensively retool the production. Later in the year Breuer seemed to take an even tone about the experience:

I’ve never seen a more hotly debated emotional reaction. It was edifying and sobering. One feminist lecturer said that it was a major statement on women and language. Others were vociferous, saying that it trashed and insulted Shakespeare. . . . It’s a long uphill battle, conceptually and politically, to find credibility for whether you can do Shakespeare this way or not. I believe some people come to the theater to see what they expect to see—and in Shakespeare they expect the cultural elite, and our production represents the working-class mentality. I think people are more alienated by changes in class, not sex.<sup>27</sup>

Breuer made these remarks at the time of the Storm King retreat, which seems to have given the troupe a chance to recover their energy and consider the complexities that had emerged by workshoping the piece in widely different venues. Interestingly, Breuer had noted earlier in the rehearsal process, in Atlanta, that the gender

<sup>24</sup> “Don’t Be Leery of GSP’s ‘*Lear*,’ ” *Metuchen-Edison Review*, 15 January 1988: n.p.

<sup>25</sup> Alvin Klein, “Turning *Lear* Into a Matriarch,” *New York Times* (New Jersey Weekly), 24 July 1988; n.p.

<sup>26</sup> “Mabou Mines’ ‘*Lear*’ Earns Points for Boldness,” *The Star-Ledger*, 12 January 1988: n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Klein, 24 July 1988.



reversal had seemed to draw audiences' concern, while the class issue remained largely unnoticed. Maleczek too had stressed gender as the element apparently hardest for audiences (and critics) to swallow. Now, however, her working-class *Lear* seemed to many a figure diminished by her lack of refinement, status and political power. Several New Jersey reviewers were particularly distracted by the trashy, dog-excrement-strewn environment that renders a king and his family as "degenerate white lowlife." Bob Campbell continues: "It's more edgy and more compromising to recognize such extremes of cruelty, folly and treachery among the flower of our race. Breuer has backed the play into a surprisingly reactionary stance."<sup>28</sup> This is not an unthoughtful view. As I noted in a different context above, though, it is a mistake to see *Lear*'s characters as uniformly and pejoratively stereotypical, or to attribute the creation of stereotypes either to Breuer or to the production "itself." In reminding spectators of such stereotypes and eliciting Campbell's sort of unease, *Lear* attempted to make spectators aware of their own participation in creating them, i.e. that, like it or not, the cinematic images of a degraded South are interwoven in our cultural fabric. If Regan and Goneril are recognizable caricatures, spectators have helped make them so. Moreover, Mabou Mines's *Lear* is not peopled exclusively with "degenerate white lowlife." As in other productions, as in Shakespeare's written text, it juxtaposes caricatures with characters of fuller dimensions, both likable and dislikable. *Lear* and her family do not *as a group* constitute the "flower of our race," if in fact we are talking about nobility of soul as well as elevated station. No production (except, perhaps, that of Peter Brook) has argued for moral or spiritual superiority in Regan and Goneril. *Lear* and Cordelia, however, are another matter, as are Kent and Edgar. In the latter scenes of Mabou Mines's production we clearly see nobility of soul in Maleczek's working-class, homeless mother, bereft of her reason and her community's respect. Pashalinski's Kent and Evans-Kandel's Edgar (Edna) also have a moral stature that did not escape the critics' attention. Yet, to ask for a *Lear* cast as the Victorian dream of aristocracy is to cling to those Victorian tastes, and the class system that made them possible. Breuer and Maleczek preferred to create characters whose class and national origins—and types of moral strength—are closer to our own.

Of greater concern are complaints that without *Lear*'s royal status and a kingdom to rule, much of the play does not make sense. Several New Jersey reviewers were particularly distracted by *Lear*'s dogs, which they felt did not serve as an adequate corollary to King *Lear*'s rowdy knights, whose bad behavior was less important than the symbolism of their fealty to *Lear*'s abandoned and betrayed kingship. All images of authority, these critics argued, are not created equal; *Lear*'s invoking a living will in the presence of family and community is not an adequate analogy for simultaneously abandoning State power and undertaking a test of your children's love. Such objections would be heard again in New York, and elsewhere.

It is not clear to what extent Mabou Mines listened to such criticism in the course of developing *Lear*. Certainly, as Michael Feingold has pointed out, excessive attention to critical rejection can damage an artist's ability to assess his or her own work, or the public's reaction to it. In fact, reviewers have gained such ascendancy among

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, "Points for Boldness," n.p.

both Broadway and downtown performers that these critics are sometimes unwittingly accorded by the artists an unwonted power over their self-esteem and artistic direction.<sup>29</sup> To their credit, Mabou Mines seem to have avoided this problem, trying not to attribute too much importance to reviews, whether positive or negative. Yet, there is an important difference between, on the one hand, accepting the judgment of often uninformed, cavalier criticism from the daily newspaper reviewers, judgment usually rendered on finished work, and, on the other hand, keeping an open mind to the doubts of reviewers who have witnessed work-in-progress. The portions of *Lear* presented in New Brunswick and elsewhere constituted a part of a dialogue that the artists, as a collective, undertook with themselves, to be sure, but also with the communities in which they were working. Why, when Mabou Mines seemed actively to seek audience response in workshops or discussions, did those discussions seem to influence the production so little? What did Mabou Mines learn in New Brunswick? Given that changes *were* made in each phase of the work, including the period between the George Street Playhouse and the Triplex Theatre, certainly Mabou Mines were not inflexible. Perhaps Breuer, Maleczek and the company never found a satisfying contemporary analogy for Shakespeare's Renaissance version of ancient English kingship.

It might be more accurate to say that academic criticism bothered Mabou Mines less than did the visceral reaction of audiences to the production. Breuer and Maleczek continued to emphasize in interviews that they were not interested in these historical issues of kingship and, not surprisingly, they did not alter tangibly the production's concept. Even the joke-like dog analogy ("man's best friend") essentially remained. What did change in New York, in limited but interesting ways, was the presentation of Mabou Mines and *Lear* in the press.

### Strange Bedfellows

In the second section above, I have given an account of *Lear* as it was performed in New York in early 1990 and reported in the local and national press. The production played to audiences very different from those in New Brunswick, of course, since it appeared at a community college theatre located in the TriBeCa neighborhood of Manhattan's lower West Side. At the performances I attended I saw a mixed audience: students, artists (some of them friends or colleagues of Mabou Mines), older women in pairs or threes, singles of both genders, couples both straight and gay. This audience makeup was not unusual for Off-off-Broadway theatre, but it certainly differed from the subscription audience Mabou had played to in New Brunswick. That is not to say that the TriBeCa audiences were unqualifiedly enthusiastic about *Lear*. The mixing of the actors produced audible whispers of confusion among spectators before the first intermission. The device of the dogs, barking noisily over characters' lines from time to time, was taken with a weary or amused familiarity. Clearly these spectators were not seeing work by Mabou Mines for the first time. But while certain aspects were dismissed, others gathered considerable respect. By all accounts, audiences applauded the production with some enthusiasm. And, with the exception of Frank Rich, John Simon and other "daily" critics, who found little to praise, the critics

<sup>29</sup> Michael Feingold, "The Truth About Criticism," *The Village Voice*, 16 June 1992: 93.

lauded Maleczek's performance thoroughly and often cited the production for its historical importance. Following several preview features (in *The Village Voice* notably and elsewhere) Ruth Maleczek went into the run as an Off-off-Broadway "star" who was finally getting the national attention she deserved. (In "Queen Lear" Ross Wetzsteon quotes Lee Breuer as saying, "One of the things that *Lear* is gonna do is announce that Ruth has crossed the line into greatness. She's been on the verge, but now we can say she's a genius."<sup>30</sup>) And, of course, *Lear* won awards for Maleczek, Karen Evans-Kandel, Isabell Monk, and Greg Mehrten at the Obie ceremony held the month after the play's closing on February 18. The play's run at the Triplex Theatre had been extended a week, due to large, often sold-out houses.

As Tish Dace noted in her review for *Plays International*, weekly and monthly magazines ran reviews generally more favorable than the New York critics' had been: "The weekly and monthly reviewers are responding better because they're less likely to bring to the theatre rigidly preconceived notions of 'correct' staging for classics. Oh, and they're distinguished from the daily New York critics in still another way: they're not all men."<sup>31</sup> Of course, the material effect of such delayed reviews is slim: by March 1990, when these words appeared, the production had already moved on to Toronto. One review that did appear during the New York run provided an exception to the general praise offered by such "weekly critics." *The New Yorker*, in a brief, catty sidebar article, dwelled on *Lear*'s corporate sponsorship, using it as a tool to disparage the production.

*Lear* had been supported by a variety of public and private sources since its beginning, and these sources had been acknowledged repeatedly in the programs for each work-in-progress presentation.<sup>32</sup> Until the show reached New York, though, this sponsorship had not received press attention. There it elicited some comment, mostly limited to noncommittal reporting of the underwriting, or to singular barbs designed by the daily critics to question these corporations' judgment in supporting a "chicken-fried *Lear*." Taking a similar stance for very different reasons was the trenchantly negative review by David Kaufman for *Downtown*, a lower Manhattan newspaper that has its offices directly across the street from Mabou Mines's workspace in P.S. 122. Calling *Lear* "at best a poorly executed idea," Kaufman accused Mabou Mines of "old crony-ism," seeming to imply that *Lear*'s corporate sponsors, dramaturg Alisa Solomon (who often writes for *The Village Voice*), and the *Voice* itself

<sup>30</sup> "Queen Lear," 42.

<sup>31</sup> Tish Dace, "Tish Dace in New York," *Plays International*, March 1990: n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Breuer's early script development had been underwritten by a Rockefeller Foundation Playwrighting Fellowship (1986). *Lear*'s development as work-in-progress received support from the Southern Arts Foundation and Margaret Cox (Atlanta); later, the Wallace Funds and the Inter-Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (New Brunswick). Its New York premiere was made possible by the AT&T Foundation, and further supported by the Wexner Center (Ohio State University), the Jerome Foundation, the Reader's Digest/Wallace Funds, the Philip Morris Companies Inc., the NEA and the New York State Council on the Arts. In addition, Mabou Mines, or institutions that participated in *Lear*'s development, received general operating funds in the late 1980s in the form of "soft money" (limited-term grants) from the NEA, the National Council on the Arts, (in Mabou's case) the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, such corporate sources as the Mobil Foundation, the New York Times Company Foundation, and Morgan Guaranty Trust Company, and the contributions of private individuals.

(which published expectant preview material), all colluded with Mabou to hoodwink a “middle-brow public” into thinking *Lear* “the best of what’s not mainstream.”<sup>33</sup> This singular response appeared in a newspaper that may see itself as the true voice of “what’s not mainstream,” i.e. as the real alternative to the alternative news source that the *Voice* claims to be. Kaufman is not alone in seeing the *Voice* (and Mabou Mines) as part of an older, more established “avant garde.” (*Voice* readers occasionally lament that it has lost its earlier, risk-taking openness to new artists.) I hesitate, though, to treat Kaufman’s view as representative of newer artists. It should be noted that Kaufman’s broadside against Mabou is also a broadside aimed at *Downtown*’s more prosperous rival in the alternative-news business. Certainly by painting *Lear* as corporate/mainstream Kaufman ignores the difficulty that groups like Mabou Mines have in finding support and venues, both in and outside of New York. While Mabou hires young artists and student interns to staff their office, both they and the associate artists involved in the shows find a familiar situation at Mabou Mines: lots of talent, no (as yet) fixed performance space, little steady money. Only from a window on lower First Avenue could Mabou Mines look like an emerging artist’s enemy.

In fact, the confrontation that Kaufman’s article attributes to Mabou Mines and younger artists is an outmoded model of the avant garde. When Mabou Mines first coalesced as a collective, in 1969–1970, the squaring off of avant-garde modernism against “mainstream bourgeois culture” had already given way to a plurality of cultures that groups like the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, the Judson Dance Theatre, and the artists of La Mama were exploring in complex, provisional ways. While Mabou Mines was clearly marginal in the art world (they were not yet perceived as theatre people), they were fortunate in receiving grant monies from organizations that had recently begun to recognize and respond to the need for a plurality of artistic voices. Their first support came not from an organization but from an individual who had already been underwriting avant-garde work for more than ten years. Ellen Stewart, of La Mama, was Mabou Mines’s first underwriter, providing them minimal salaries, production funding, and both rehearsal and performance space. Only after Mabou’s first year or two under the wing of “The Mother” did the Ford Foundation provide the first grant monies to La Mama; very soon thereafter Mabou began to win institutional grants of its own. Over the next fifteen years their list of corporate supporters, as well as federal and state grantors, grew very long. Thus, like many other artists who emerged after the “death” of the avant garde in the 1950s, Mabou never had a clearly confrontational stance in regard to corporate America or federal agencies. Rather than opposition they have cultivated resistance and dialogue; rather than trenchant Brechtian agit-prop or Artaudian theatre of assault, they took a youthful, wiseacre approach to mainstream culture, often imitating or parodying it but never rejecting it wholly.

Mabou’s work in later years, from 1975 to 1980 (roughly), when the collective developed multiple directors and larger, more complex projects, was both the source and the result of the greater attention and funding that began to come their way. By the late 1980s, however, the slowdown in arts funding began to show itself in smaller, and occasionally fewer, Mabou Mines shows. Out of necessity, and due to

<sup>33</sup> David Kaufman, “This Way Madness Lies,” *Downtown*, 7 February 1990: n.p.

Mabou's greater visibility in the alternative theatre community, members worked more frequently outside the collective. Yet, once again, Mabou Mines found itself in a cultural position little changed from its inception as marginal (i.e., largely unknown to the American public), non-profit, sporadically underwritten, and—in terms of a permanent, adequate work and performance space—homeless. As Bonnie Marranca notes in regard to established-but-marginal playwrights like Maria Irene Fornes,

The American theater has never found a way to integrate its avant-garde artists into the larger world of theater the way Europe did, by giving them a place in their major institutions after they've proved their worth, nor even the way that the film, literary and art establishments/industries have done here. In theater, the avant-garde spirit is made perpetual outcast.<sup>34</sup>

What is gained, then, by characterizing older artists (as Kaufman does) as unfair competitors for funds that should go to the "fresh blood" of emerging artists? As Marranca points out, if development funds are geared to support emerging talent (and there is evidence to support the contention that there is more of such funding now than there was in 1970), that orientation tends to strand artists in mid-career. To the extent that they can, Mabou Mines *have* both worked with and learned from younger artists. Kaufman's picture of them as mainstream, overfunded, and resistant to new ideas in performance is a complete misstatement.

Still, Kaufman is not entirely incorrect when he notes that Mabou Mines use advertising and sponsorship for their own purposes. (He neglects to mention that media-consciousness is more the rule than the exception on the downtown post-modern theatre scene.) *Lear* kicked off Mabou's twentieth anniversary celebration, a milestone that the group apparently made mention of in appealing for funds. Certainly they made it distinctly visible in their promotional materials for *Lear*. Given the press's interest in the anniversary, and the prominence of the preview material written for it, I'd like to turn for a moment to the skillful advertising used to market *Lear* in New York. The chief element of Mabou's campaign was a closeup photograph of Ruth Maleczek accompanied by the phrase "The woman who would be king. Ruth Maleczek as LEAR." Appearing in mailers, newspapers, and posters, the ad seems very much like advance material put out by a wide variety of Off-off-Broadway theatres. Mailers were sent to known supporters of Mabou Mines, while posters appeared here and there in lower Manhattan. *Village Voice* readers found the ad prominently displayed, but still one among many in the theatre section. There were, however, remarkable aspects to this advertising. Drawing indirectly on Maleczek's growing stature as one of the country's best and (to *Village Voice* readers) best-known actresses, this advertising played to its readers' respect for the "renowned Mabou Mines Company," an "avant-garde ensemble." It probably caught their curiosity with a promised spectacle "redrawing the play's sexual, geographic and racial boundaries . . . in contemporary America—with the roles reversed in gender, but the verse and text intact." Flanking this commentary the reader found endorsements ("a crowning achievement") and the signature of the commentator, that is, the corporate symbol of AT&T. In fact, the ad seemed to be "authored" by AT&T as much as by Mabou.

<sup>34</sup> Bonnie Marranca, "The Aging Playwright and the American Theater," *The Village Voice*, 16 June 1992: 94.

# The woman who would be king.



Ruth Maleczech  
as  
**LEAR**

*AT&T and Mabou Mines present  
the New York premiere of "Lear."  
Directed by Lee Breuer.  
The Triplex  
199 Chambers Street, TriBeCa.  
Limited engagement begins  
January 9 through February 11.  
For ticket information, call 212 618-1980.*

Photo © 1989 Jonathan Atkin

With the renowned Mabou Mines Company and director Lee Breuer, performer Ruth Maleczech can be just that. The avant-garde ensemble has adapted Shakespeare's *King Lear*, redrawing the play's sexual, geographic and racial boundaries. This *Lear* takes place in contemporary America—with the roles reversed in gender, but the verse and text intact.

The ultimate drama of power, politics and mortality is now the story of a matriarch in a modern world, a tale to challenge the standards of a new decade. AT&T brings the premiere of this bold experiment to TriBeCa's Triplex Theater. For Mabou Mines, it's a crowning achievement. And for AT&T, it's the latest example of our 50-year commitment to the arts.



© 1990. AT&T

Advertising for *Lear*. (Photo: Jonathan Atkin)

Perhaps it was the stamp of corporate sponsorship that drew to the Triplex Theatre *The New Yorker*, not a magazine that generally takes note of Mabou Mines. If corporate sponsorship was the impetus for this anonymous review, it certainly did not dispose the reviewer to be kind, for s/he sniffed that "Shakespeare, of course, never heard of Georgia." Despite being "in the presence of the cream of the downtown theatre movement," the reviewer lamented the production's "cartoon aesthetic" and regretted having "ventured south" on a Thursday evening.<sup>35</sup> Had this review fragment not been so firmly entrenched in a mindset that owes as much to the corporate cultures of Broadway and publishing as to elitism, it might have seemed less ominous. But the placement, vocabulary, and length of the piece made it quite clear that the most powerful assumptions at work were expectations of corporate fiscal responsibility and of a resulting conservative approach to the arts, which can, and often does, determine which experimental works make it to the stage. Moreover, the "corporate" authorship ("as *we* wandered out of the theatre onto deserted Chambers Street") of such unsigned reviews, which appear each week in the front pages of *The New Yorker* and not in the later, lengthier pieces by Edith Oliver, Mimi Kramer or other individual staff critics, has long given the magazine the aura of aristocratic disdain that its readers so much enjoy.<sup>36</sup>

This sidebar "review," the AT&T-sponsored advertisement, and the audience expectations they arouse, for well or ill, have become part of *Lear*. That numerous reviewers in New York, New Jersey and elsewhere, mentioned *Lear*'s significance as a theatrical *event*, as a controversy that involved journalists, spectators, theatre administrators and corporate sponsors, demonstrates how pervasive "collective authorship" is becoming as a concept in the arts today. Like Mabou Mines's collective authorship, it goes beyond the traditional roles of author, director, and actor to a broader, joint creation. However, for critics and scholars collective authorship is more specifically a useful way to frame and define avant-garde performance, to give attention to all of the discourses that surround the production and, indeed, constitute it. I have articulated only two of these discourses here, those of the press and promotion, while hinting at others that participated in the creation of *Lear*: funding, whether corporate, governmental or private; the cooperation between New York's alternative theatres, and regional theatres and universities; the "aging" of the avant garde and its audiences; the influence of the women's movement (to take just one socio-cultural phenomenon) on the expectations and assumptions that both artists and audiences bring to the theatre. In addressing *Lear* as not a text but a "reading formation,"<sup>37</sup> I have tried to re-create *Lear* on the page as a theatre event running head-on into the prejudices and issues of its time.

<sup>35</sup> "Goings On Around Town: The Theatre," *The New Yorker*, 12 February 1990: 4.

<sup>36</sup> The magazine's new editor, it should be noted, has dropped the practice of speaking in the corporate pronoun.

<sup>37</sup> I am indebted for this term to Tony Bennett, who has coined and used it extensively in his substantial work on popular culture. In his article "Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and Their Texts," Bennett outlines reading formations as "set[s] of discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading, . . . constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways. . . . Texts exist only as always-already organized, or as activated to be read in certain ways, just as readers exist as always-already activated to read in certain ways: neither can be granted a virtual identity." (*Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 18 (Spring 1985): 7.)

*Lear's* path to New York was not straight or narrow: it involved discarding ideas for lack of money; giving public performances when perhaps the work was not ready; staging a premiere when in fact *Lear* remains, even now, less a polished, BBC-style interpretation than an inspired exploration. *Lear* was the result of a major theatre collective's efforts to accomplish meaningful work reflecting their mature talent and considerable experience, yet also stretching themselves in ways in which they had not been challenged before. It also was a project whose successful presentation was never free of controversy and always embattled by the contradictory elements of financial need and artistic desire. With each grant proposal, with each new sponsor, additional interests had to be served, complicating the work both for good and ill. Yet, as Michael Feingold remarked, "If you have any brains, you know you're going to be thinking about [*Lear*] for the rest of your life."<sup>38</sup> Attempting large-scale, nationally visible, artistically innovative work puts a contemporary theatre group in the position of embracing strange bedfellows—artistic, administrative, or financial liaisons that become integral to the work and invest it with its postmodern character. It is this conjunction of interests and discourses that best characterizes postmodern avant-garde theatre: an intertwined set of collective authorships that go far beyond individual authorship, or indeed that collective I began with, the artistic collective of Mabou Mines "itself."

<sup>38</sup> "A Mythic Immediacy," *The Village Voice*, 6 February 1990: 95.