

LEE BREUER & CONOR LOVETT AT UCLA LIVE

BY TOM PROVENZANO

LEE BREUER AND HIS MABOU MINES are creating a worldwide stir with their version of Henrik Ibsen's 19th century *A Doll's House* in what may sound like a laughably bizarre take on the classic but has audiences and critics hailing it as a masterpiece. The play is regularly produced as a turgid melodrama about the perfect wife who loses faith in gender roles. This production becomes highly theatrical, some say circus-style, to make its point. The childlike but ultimately rebellious Nora and all the other women in the play are statuesque and can barely be contained in the small dollhouse set, in which the men are all under four feet tall.

Breuer explains how this fits into turning classical texts inside out. "There is no way you can't see the patriarchy as an illusion if you are looking at a 3' 6" man bossing around a 5' 10" woman who has to get down on her knees to look at him in the eye. She has to lift him up when they do love scenes. You have a comic rebalancing in which concept plus classic text equals the kind of production I am interested in."

Breuer is most famous for his phenomenal *Gospel at Colonus*, an African-American adaptation of *Oedipus*. Both *Gospel* and *Mabou Mines DollHouse* represent his view of art and the world. "In my adaptations I wait until I have a special idea of how to bridge from the original period of the work to the contemporary. If I have a metaphor I think will hold, that gets me all excited. I was influenced by Brecht's theory, particularly the dialectic aspects where you balance two opposing points; a kind of production where you put the subtext on top and text underneath. Definitive productions are those in which there is a conceptual bite that is not just another rendering but a real critical point of view."

These concepts reach back to the 1960s when, as a radical

artist, Breuer was one of the great influences of the avant-garde theatre movement that thrilled and scandalized San Francisco before the more staid regional theatre movement took over in the 1970s. With co-conspirators such as minimalist composer Phillip Glass, a taste for Brechtian theory and a pre-fashionable sense of deconstruction, Breuer established some of the most exciting and disturbing theatre trends of his generation. At 70, Breuer's sense of the avant-garde has only expanded, albeit with a bit more humor and humility than that of the 25-year-old revolutionary.

In 1970, along with fellow artists Glass, JoAnne Akalaitis, Ruth Maleczek and David Warrilow, Breuer created the Mabou Mines, which describes itself as "an avant-garde theatre company that emphasizes the creation of new work either from original texts or through the adaptation of existing (often classic) texts staged from a re-imagined point of view." In addition to *Gospel* and *DollHouse*, Breuer has had great critical and popular success with a 1996

bunraku puppet version of J. M. Barrie's classic *Peter and Wendy*, which is still touring internationally.

In the 36 years since the company was formed it has managed to survive in tact while many of the once high-powered regional theatres have been reduced from large rotating repertoires to small cast single productions. Breuer laughs when asked how the company has lasted. "How? We have been in debt non-stop since the theatre opened its doors. We produce about one show a year. We have no theatre, no property. When we perform in New York we go into a theatre that is right for the piece. With *DollHouse* we found a great theatre but it was in Brooklyn and it was snowing the whole time. Not too many people got there but we were lucky that somebody from Oslo saw it and invited us to Norway; that got us to Europe and we've been touring around the world ever since.

"We are able to shrink to nothing. None of us get more than half a year's salary and hopefully we can scoot through on unemployment the rest of the year. We've been lucky recently. *DollHouse* and *Peter and Wendy* attracted a new booking agent who seems to have the contacts, so we now have a world-wide circuit and international festivals that want our work."



Lee Breuer

Conor Lovett in *The Beckett Trilogy*





Johnny Murphy, Alan Stanford and Barry McGovern in the Gates production of *Waiting for Godot*

About half of Breuer's artistic life is spent with Mabou but even outside the company he is guarded about working for hire. "I have made a lot of choices in my life. I have never made a commercial work in my life, or even tried to. It's taken a long time to get to a place where I can make a living off of my work. I haven't gone the system route. I have a reaction to the system that is pretty heavy. All I want to do is say my piece as clearly and uncompromisingly as I can and not pretend I have more effect than I do."

So when he does have an effect, he is very pleased. "We went to two of the most reactionary places with *DollHouse*: Charleston, South Carolina and Israel. In Charleston we were headline news every day. Bloggers were screaming. It probably shocked upper-middle-class Charleston the way Ibsen probably shocked Oslo and Denmark 125 years earlier. We were getting nasty in-your-face comments; we get that kind of insulting attitude from strongly patriarchal societies. We don't get it in Paris or London or China or Chicago, none of the smarter, hipper areas, but in Charleston and in Israel we actually hit some nerves and people became insulting. Fortunately that was countered by people who absolutely went crazy for it; they loved that it was highly controversial."

While Breuer's sense of independence is extremely important to him, he is also one of the most generous (and awarded) theatre artists of his generation. Fourteen of his productions have garnered Obies and he has received the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship among dozens of other honors and prestigious teaching positions. His energy is nonstop and he

shows no signs of slowing down but he does admit to being a bit less angry than in his radical youth. "I never lost my political stance but I don't want to pretend I can go out on the street and be a 60s hippie. I don't feel my plays are great activist productions. I don't think people will run out of the theatre and start a revolution. I have more of a tongue-in-cheek, humorous cynicism about things."

CONOR LOVETT / JUDY HEGARTY LOVETT

One hundred years ago Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland. He was destined to become one of the most important literary figures of the 20th century, writing in both English and French in his adopted home in Paris. It is hard to imagine a theatre practitioner who had not been involved in or at least seen a production of *Waiting for Godot* but Beckett is far more than that seminal work. He

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produced 32 plays as well as scores of prose pieces, earning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, 20 years before his death.

Beckett's plays are never out of production but even his non-dramatic texts are so powerful that a long tradition of staging his prose works has been established internationally by such artists as Joseph Chaiken. The contemporary theatre boasts one of the most prominent interpreters of Beckett's work in Irish actor Conor Lovett whose performances, created with his director wife Judy Hegarty Lovett, have gained critical and public praise for a decade.

The Lovetts teamed with the Paris-based Gare St. Lazare, established by ex-Chicagoan Bob Myer in 1983 and ultimately created their own Irish-based branch of the company. Although they rehearse and live in Paris, the Lovetts jealously guard their Irish identity: "We are based in France but called Gare St. Lazare Players

Ireland. We do consider ourselves an Irish theatre company."

UCLA Live has tapped Lovett to perform two of his one-man Beckett pieces: *The Beckett Trilogy*, a cutting of three novels, and *Text for Nothing*, a series of 13 short pieces that Beckett personally trashed as "the grisly afterbirth of *L'Innommable*." Lovett explains, "They are very short meditations on nothing. The approach I tend to take when I do the prose is as if Beckett was talking directly to the reader, so I speak directly to the public. I try to be very casual and simple without being irrelevant, to keep the integrity and the humor and beauty of the work as the main point."

As with most theatre artists, Lovett's first realization of the beauty of Beckett was in *Godot*. "As soon as I picked it up I just found the writing so beautiful and the humor so real. I read everything I could get my hands on. *Godot* is such a well written play that it allows people to take what they want from it. I think great art does that: It is so well put together by the artist that it means so much to them without finding exactly what the artist was doing. They can at least find something clear for themselves."

Though Lovett is most famous internationally for his Beckett work, he is also a highly trained physical comedian, having studied at the renowned Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris. His next project with his wife is a celebration of Lecoq's "Buffoon Theatre," which they have been developing during the last year. Judy Hegarty Lovett describes the work in progress: "The buffoon in theatre since Shakespearean times is the jester or the fool, who has permission from the king or royalty to mock or make ridicule of society. The buffoon characters were kept outside so they had a great vantage point to put a mirror up to society. The theme we are working towards is war. We plan to premiere this piece in Ireland."

Though the Lovetts are committed to the work with Gare St. Lazare and Europe, they are currently enjoying their time in Southern California. Conor Lovett admits, "I absolutely love it here. There is such a difference in the climate and environment than I was brought up in. It really is wonderful. In Ireland we grew up watching a lot of American television so around every corner I turn and feel like I am in a different movie or TV show." And now he wants to really be in one of those shows. "You know, I have increasingly been doing film work outside of our theatre work." And he's getting the Hollywood lingo, "I suppose I'll take a few meetings." ■

Mabou Mines production of *Dollhouse*

SAMUEL BECKETT CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Gare St. Lazare Players Ireland
Plays Nov. 7-12; Tues.-Sat., 8
pm; Sun., 7 pm
Tickets \$15-\$40

MABOU MINES DOLLHOUSE

Plays Nov. 28-Dec. 10;
Wed.-Fri., 8 pm; Sat., 2 and
8 pm; Sun., 2 and 7 pm
Tickets: \$17-\$60

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REAL CRITICAL POINT OF VIEW." —LEE BREUER

