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THEATER

Sacrifice Goes With the Territory at Mabou Mines

By DON SHEWEY

THESE is an audience in New York that gravitates toward theater that is unpredictable, innovative and high-quality, especially if it is not being thrust at them with an aggressive Broadway-style marketing campaign.

This is the audience that finds its way to surprise hit shows like last year's "Mnemonic," performed by the Theatre de Complicite from London, or the long-running play "The Syringa Tree" by Pamela Gien. And this is the audience that sustains experimental theater companies like Mabou Mines, the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater, which spend months, even years, mounting productions that play for sometimes very limited runs in small theaters.

"Ecco Porco," the nearly four-hour comic spectacle at Performance Space 122 in the East Village through Jan. 27, is both a state-of-the-art portrait of Mabou Mines and a career retrospective for the 64-year-old writer-director Lee Breuer, one of the company's founders. The main roles are performed by Ruth Maleczek, 62, another original member of Mabou Mines (along with JoAnne Akalaitis, Philip Glass and David Warrilow), and Frederick Neumann, 75, who joined the company not long after its inception in 1970.

The play itself is an acid-trip collage of philosophy, mythology, corny jokes and lyric poetry. Set in an interspecies rehabilitation center for animation addicts, the play incorporates traces of Dante's "Divine Comedy," the trial of the Russian stage director V. S. Meyerhold and a lecture on tantric sex, with cameo appearances by Orson Welles and Marge Simpson.

"It's very chaotic," Ms. Maleczek said recently. "That's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. It's the nature of the thing."

She, Mr. Breuer and Mr. Neumann had gathered for an interview at their publicist's midtown office during final rehearsals for "Ecco Porco," which began performances on Jan. 3. Also present was Karen Kandel, an actress in her 40's who is relatively new to Mabou Mines — she has been working with the others for only 11 years. Ms. Kandel's first appearance with the company

At 31, the company is frisky: it has opened a new production and will revive an earlier one.

was in "Lear," a gender-reversed version of "King Lear" that Mr. Breuer staged in 1990 (with Ms. Maleczek as Lear), and her most recent is "Ecco Porco." But she is best known for playing all the speaking roles in "Peter and Wendy," the 1996 puppet-theater adaptation by Liza Lorwin of J. M. Barrie's novel "Peter Pan," directed by Mr. Breuer. One of the best-received and most popular of the 50 theater pieces Mabou Mines has created, "Peter and Wendy" is returning to the New Victory Theater for a four-week run beginning Feb. 1 (see accompanying article).

Thriving on chaos has been a survival

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Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Lee Breuer, above, with the puppet "John" on the stage of Mabou Mines at P.S. 122, where Mr. Breuer is directing "Ecco Porco." Left, center, Frederick Neumann rehearses the title role with Clove Galilee, aloft, and cast members.



strategy for Mabou Mines, which is an unusual entity on the landscape of American theater. Named after a town in Nova Scotia near where it began in 1970, the company is distinguished for its sheer longevity as a continuously collaborative ensemble and its interdisciplinary working process, in which theater artists engage actively with guest composers, visual artists and technology designers. And Mabou Mines provides a home base for Mr. Breuer's plays, which are written specifically for its core of award-winning actors. (Among them, Ms. Maleczek, Mr. Neumann and Ms. Kandel have won seven Obie Awards.) "I'm one of the few playwrights in history who've had this many great actors working on their original material," said Mr. Breuer, whose own numerous awards include a 1997 MacArthur grant. "There's me, Shakespeare, Molière and maybe Brecht."

In the 1970's, the group divided its time between lesser-known works by Samuel Beckett and a series of Mr. Breuer's texts — "The Red Horse Animation," "The B. Beaver Animation" and "The Shaggy Dog Animation." In Mabou Mines parlance, animation means both bringing characters to life and cartoon, and it intentionally conjures both animus (the Latin word for soul) and animal — the multiple meanings enriching

the word rather than canceling one another out. Mr. Breuer's work exemplifies post-modern literary playfulness and parodies it at the same time.

The main characters in "The Shaggy Dog Animation," a four-hour play performed at the Public Theater in 1978, were a canine named Rose and her unfaithful master-lover, John. A section of that work, featuring a tour de force performance by Bill Raymond as John, was presented separately as "A Prelude to Death in Venice." The story of Rose was further elaborated on in "An Epidog," performed at Here in 1996. "Ecco Porco" weaves together bits and pieces of "Shaggy Dog," "Prelude" and "Epidog," with new material for the character of Gonzo Porco (played by Mr. Neumann), a pig who also impersonates Truman Capote, Orson Welles and "Fred" Nietzsche.

Sound complicated? Don't worry. Mr. Breuer understands how this all fits together and is happy to explain. "I realized I'm going to be working for the rest of my life on a trilogy called 'La Divina Caricatura,'" he said. "It's a loose sendup of Dante, with an Inferno, a Purgatorio and a Paradiso. But instead of being sequential, they are intercut. And the main characters each have their own realm — the dog is in hell, the pig

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