

AMERICAN THEATRE

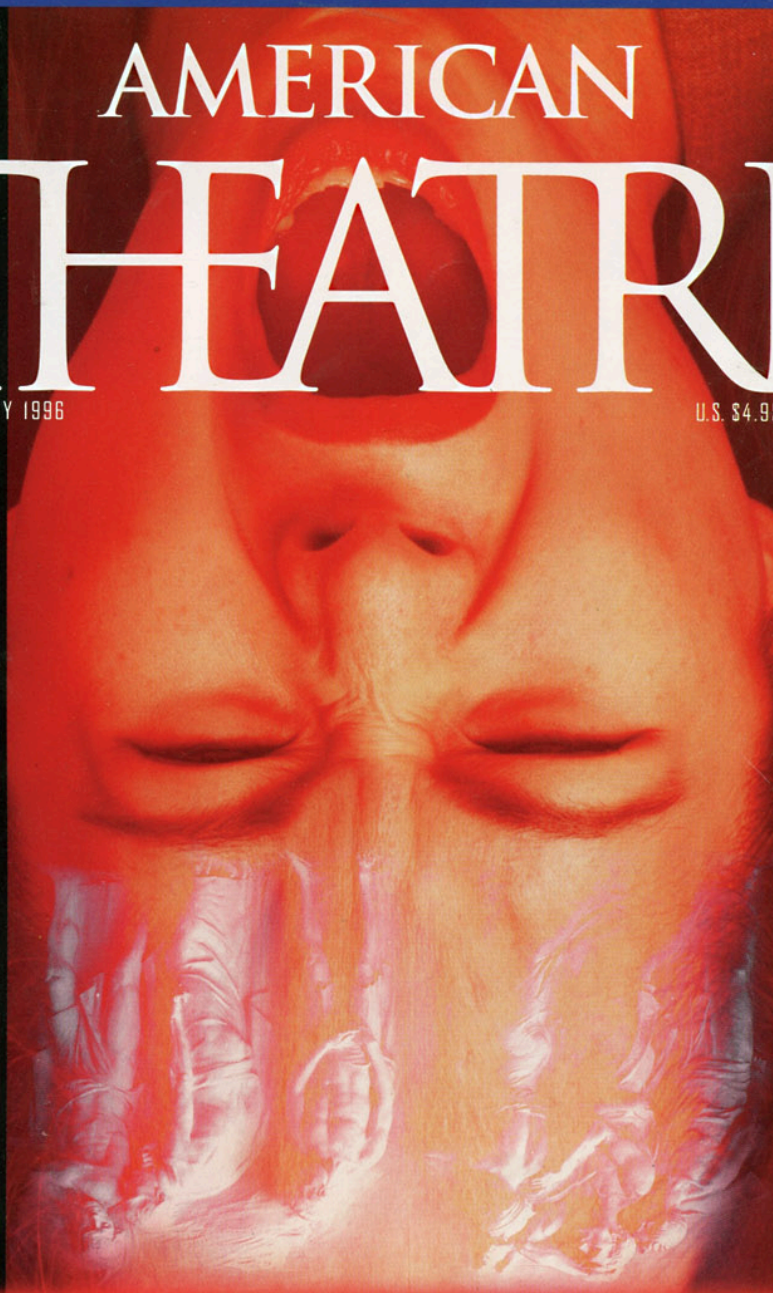
JANUARY 1996

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MABOU MINES
In Cyberspace

Plus:
HAROLD PRINCE
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MAE WEST



Computerized
projection by
Karen TenEyck
for Mabou Mines'
Red Horse
Animation



Mabou Mines Lives On in Cyberspace

By Chris Haines

There's something paradoxical about an avant-garde theatre troupe celebrating a silver anniversary, but Mabou Mines has never shied away from contradiction. Twenty-five years after Lee Breuer directed Ruth Maleczek, JoAnne Akalaitis and the late David Warrilow in *The Red Horse Animation* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, he is re-interpreting both the production and the process. Signature Mabou Mines fingerprints are smudged all over the latest version: They are again collaborating with theatre artists from outside the 10-member company, exploring new technology, employing a healthy dose of nepotism and approaching the actor/audience configuration in startling ways.

Never one to rest on his laurels, the peripatetic Breuer is pairing the *Red Horse Animation* revival with the premiere of his latest play, *An Epidog* (a winner of a grant from the 1995 American Express/Kennedy Center's Fund for New American Plays). The third installation of a trilogy that includes *The Shaggy Dog Animation* and *The Warrior Ant*, *An Epidog* is the after-death account of a dog's life told through Japanese Bunraku puppetry. Both productions are scheduled to run Jan. 31–Feb. 11 in New York City, co-produced with the

Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre, a resident company at HERE in SoHo.

In typical Mabou Mines fashion, the collaboration happened serendipitously. Breuer was rehearsing *Red Horse* with what he calls "Mabou Mines: the Next Generation"—Clove Breuer (his daughter by Maleczek), David Neumann (Mabou member Fred Neumann's son, named after Warrilow) and Abigail Crain—when he bumped into Gertrude Stein Repertory artistic director Cheryl Faver on the street. They had met at the Yale Drama School, where Breuer had taught while Faver was a student. The director invited Faver and her husband, the theatre's co-director John Reaves, to a rehearsal. "What we discovered," says the kinetic Faver, "was that Lee was exploring the same territory on stage that we were exploring with computers."

Gertrude Stein Rep—part of a coterie of New York performance groups and multimedia companies working in what some

have dubbed "Silicon Alley"—has attracted national attention for its interpretation of the theatrical applications of computer technology. "Lee's mind works just like a computer, linking symbols in a series of digressions," continues Faver, "which mirrors the processes of Gertrude Stein that we've been using theatrically."

According to Breuer, "*Red Horse Animation* didn't have anything to do with technology originally. It was conceived to unfold in two planes. The metaphor is that the Red Horse achieves consciousness in mid-air."

When the show was first performed, that metaphor was made literal by placing the actors horizontally

against the stage floor with their feet on the vertical back wall, as if they were cradled in an open book. Breuer then re-defined normal theatrical planes and spaces by relocating the audience *above* the stage. Twenty-five years later, computer technology allows him to redefine space without moving the audience.

"Using the computer, we can now look at the stage from any angle," Breuer suggests, "which is how people think—from many angles at once. I've always wanted to invent a theatre that mirrors the way a person thinks. Working with this technology is the greatest step forward."

For a rehearsal observer, describing exactly how that technology will finally appear in *Red Horse Animation* is like translating Duchamp's surreal painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* into words: There are so many different angles from which to view the subject that it may appear blurry, due in part to a rehearsal process where the nature of the stage craft constantly changes. As a work-in-progress, *Red Horse* pioneers the theatrical use of some computer technologies that are so new that they evolve on a weekly basis. The upside of this, says Faver, "is that you can throw these new tools at Lee and they get his theatre juices going."

Three of the technologies being tugged, tested and redefined as theatre applications are video-conferencing, Java animation and the World Wide Web. Video-conferencing, a conference call with live images commonly used in the business world, works

"Users on the Internet will see the performance as if from behind the scrim."



Gritty technology: this virtual set is a video image of a sand painting by Brando Rogers.



Shifting terrain: CU-SeeMe video technology allowed this picture of the revival of *Red Horse Animation* to be captured digitally. Here, left to right, Abigail Crain, David Neumann and Clov Galilee recline against Brando Rogers's sand painting.

like a closed-circuit television that transmits over a telephone line. As a rehearsal tool, video-conferencing enables Breuer to kill two birds with one stone. While directing his actors in New York, the action is transmitted live to the theatre students he teaches at the University of California at Santa Cruz, thanks to the support of Edward Houghton, dean of the arts division. In addition, the work is recorded for later use as the rough material to be molded and refined by the other technologies. For actual performances, another form of video-conferencing designed for computers, known by the evocative acronym CU-SeeMe, will link the actors to audiences sitting at their home computers who are browsing the World Wide Web.

Java is a developing computer language that Gertrude Stein Rep uses to transform videotaped action into animation. For instance, a videotape of the actors running horizontally against the floor is fed into the computer, digitally broken into pieces, pared down to essential images (the floor behind the actors' bodies is removed), colored and fed into a repeating loop. The final product employs a movement vocabulary that recalls Grotowski's plastiques crossed with Hanna-Barbara cartoons.

If one considers these materials as the paint applied to a stage backdrop, then the World Wide Web represents the backdrop itself. The Web, the popular global interactive system on the Internet, allows users to visit various sites and flip through

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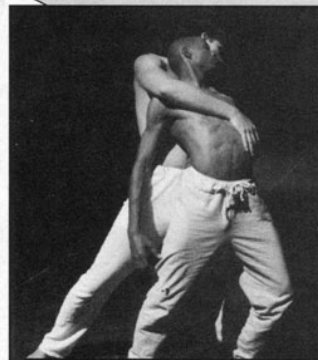
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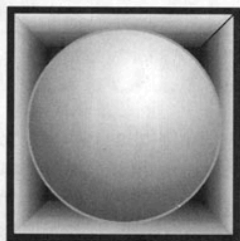
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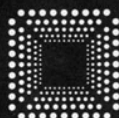
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"pages" of images. When viewed on a computer screen, the *Red Horse* site, designed by scenic artist Karen TenEyck, unfolds like a series of curtains, revealing stylized horse images, digitalized photographs of the original cast and animated movement (the *Red Horse* homepage can be accessed via www.inch.com/~kteneyck). In actual performance, it functions as the literal backdrop when it is projected on a scrim behind the actors on stage, while appearing simultaneously on computer screens around the world. The *Red Horse* has reached mid-air.

As an interactive technology, the Web-page backdrop functions as a breathing set piece that changes and responds to the actors' movements, manipulated by a technician backstage who will determine the pace of the "virtual set changes" with the click of a mouse. Under Breuer's direction, the image of the cursor moving across the scrim becomes a visual pun: The actors



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respond to the moving pointer as if it were a fly swooping through the air, swatting at it on its way to selecting the next virtual backdrop.

Faver compares the experience of the on-line Web audience to the theatrical distinction between front-of-house and back-stage; as the audience in the theatre watches from front-of-house, users on the Internet will see the performance as if from behind the scrim. Depending on the technology available in late January, the actors and some Web viewers may be video-conferenced via CU-SeeMe onto the backdrop itself, adding a new dimension to the audience-performer relationship.

Breuer believes this kind of theatre has been performed for thousands of years. Citing the example of the Kali of the Snakes, which he witnessed last year in southern India, Breuer said, "The Kali dancers paint a mandala in the sand and absorb the psy-

che of the goddess as they perform. That's exactly what the actors do with *Red Horse*, using the computer as a mandala. It is primitive and ritualistic. The more primitive you get, the more modern you get."

"When Lee wrote *Red Horse* back in the '70s, none of us realized at the time that he wrote the first Web page," jokes Faver. "It was just waiting to be put on the computer." According to Reaves, Breuer's work represents the kind of journey that theatre handles best. "By presenting a variety of perspectives at once, you're asking more of the audience. You acknowledge that people can handle things in multiple layers. The best theatre has always done that." **AT**

Chris Haines is a freelance writer based in New York City.

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