Mabou Mines: Making Avant-Garde Theater in the 1970s by Iris Smith Fischer (review)

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"monumental" power of his craft (1:36–7). These essays belong in any musical theatre syllabus or bibliography.

The dominant project of *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat* is to frame Sondheim himself as a candidate for just such an incisive assessment. Though the tone of the books is often pedagogical, aimed at those aspiring to his profession, Sondheim implicitly demands that his work be taken as seriously as he takes it himself. For those whose appreciation of his lyrics borders on hero worship (I place myself in this category), the effect of reading these volumes is like discovering a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* annotated by the author, only to find that he systematically argues for the sloppiness of the first line. The point is not to offer the last word on the final product, but to demythologize it so that it can be viewed critically, as one option among many, and maybe not the best one. Thankfully, an increasingly proficient genre of musical theatre criticism is emerging that is worthy of the task. Sondheim, not surprisingly, pushes such critics to think further than they may imagine possible.

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Mabou Mines: Making Avant-Garde Theater in the 1970s. By Iris Smith Fischer. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011; pp. xii + 266, 23 illustrations. $60 cloth, $29.95 paper.
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It is somewhat astonishing, given its significance, influence, and longevity, that Mabou Mines is only now receiving its first full-length scholarly treatise. The company was founded in 1970 by Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczech, JoAnne Akalaitis, Philip Glass, and David Warrilow as a theatre collective dedicated to the collaborative creation of nontraditional theatrical forms; by the 1980s it had come to be seen by many as the "preeminent avant-garde theatre company in the United States" (201), a legacy that continues to the present day. Iris Smith Fischer's *Mabou Mines: Making Avant-Garde Theater in the 1970s* examines the company's origins and history in detail, with particular emphasis on its first decade. Based on extensive interviews with its founding members (Fischer was able to speak with Warrilow once before his death in 1995) and with numerous other company members and associates, as well on access to Mines's archives, Fischer creates a vivid behind-the-scenes exploration of a fascinating collective couched within a meticulously considered scholarly framework.

Fischer's decision to focus on the company's first ten years allows her to highlight performances from the least well-documented period in the company's history. Most of these early productions were not recorded, and some do not even have typed scripts. Fischer's reconstructions, culled from interviews and, where available, correspondence, publicity, reviews, photographs, and other ephemera, thus required her to work in the fashion of both archaeologist and detective,

applying patience and skilled deduction in order to create a detailed portrait of each event. She begins her introduction with a brief overview of American performance in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, situating Mines's work in the context of other contemporary avant-garde troupes even while acknowledging and problematizing the term *avant-garde*, a word she admits has, for many readers, "lost its meaning" (8). The introduction also sets out several theoretical discourses that are prominent throughout Fischer's extended analysis, including an examination of the ways in which gender and power differences shaped the relationships among Mines's directors, and the question of art as cultural production versus art as commercial commodity.

The remaining chapters are organized around clusters of productions, arranged in rough chronological format—although given the group's history of extended collaboration and open-ended start-and-stop development of new works (*The Shaggy Dog Animation*, for example, was developed over the course of four years) the temporal organization here is approximate and necessarily imprecise. In the first chapter, "Coming Together: San Francisco, Paris, New York," Fischer traces the initial meetings and remeetings, work, and influences of the company's five founding members. While Mabou Mines was officially founded and named in 1970, its original members' lives and work intersected both at home and abroad for more than ten years prior to that. Fischer discusses early mentors and influences on the founders, including Herbert Blau and the Actor's Workshop, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Jerzy Grotowski. She also discusses Mabou Mines's first patrons, including Ellen Stewart—whose La Mama Experimental Theatre Club underwrote the company for the first three years of its existence—and Joseph Papp, who forged a ten-year relationship between Mines and the New York Shakespeare Festival.

Chapter 2 focuses on two early works: *The Red Horse Animation* and *The B. Beaver Animation*, the latter of which became a signature piece for the company after its three-year incubation period (1971–4). As head writer of these plays, Breuer drew inspiration from his own life in their creation; while they are not autobiography, he labels them "autographical" (65) for the way they distill personal experiences into actions onstage. Fischer refers to these elements of autobiography in Breuer's writing, but at the same time insists from the outset that her focus is on the collaborative process and performance, not on the personal lives of the company's key players: "I have left biography to the biographers," she avows in her introduction (21). Fair enough—yet when biography is so inextricably woven into the fabric of these creations, the decision to forgo its examination sometimes creates gaps in understanding that leave the reader wanting more.

Chapter 3 looks at the company's initial Beckett productions, including *Play*, *Come and Go*, and *The Lost Ones*. Despite their founding intent of creating original pieces, Mines's performances of Beckett's work remain some of its most recognized, particularly Warrilow's brilliant adaptation of the prose *The Lost Ones*. Fischer explores some of the relationships among various Mines members and Beckett, touching on the author's willingness to grant the group permission to adapt his work for performance (a practice that would continue with *Cascando*,

Mercier and Camier, and *Worstward Ho*), although there is room here for expansion.

The book's final two chapters, based in part on an analysis of productions directed by Akalaitis (*Dressed Like an Egg*, *Cascando*) and Maleczech (*Vanishing Pictures*), look at the shift in Mines's organization away from a "leaderless collective" to what Fischer labels a "company of directors" (159). Here Fischer convincingly argues that Mines was able to transform into a mature group that allows individuals a chance to express their directorial vision in distinct ways. She includes in her argument a corollary analysis of the gendered approaches of these directors, pitting Breuer's hierarchical style against Akalaitis's feminist sensibilities.

Today, Mines remains a company of directors. As Fischer explains, there are now two rules for all productions: members must each take turns developing individual projects, and they must support each other's work, even if they are not directly involved in it (47). Some of the company's best-known work has been created according to these rules over the past three decades; Fischer's epilogue is just one of the places in the book where the author touches on these more recent Mines productions. As she concludes her study, Fischer notes that there are many more stories about Mabou Mines remaining to be told, and she vows to tell some of them herself in the future. Her book ends on a cusp—with the foundation of Mabou Mines's history now so convincingly established, the reader eagerly awaits the next installment in the story of this groundbreaking company.

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The Sarah Siddons Audio Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice. By Judith Pascoe. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011; pp. xiv + 160, 17 illustrations. $50 cloth.

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Reviewed by Celestine Woo, SUNY Empire State College

Judith Pascoe's third monograph appealingly unites the major preoccupations of her prior two, and reveals more of her innovative methodology. Her first book, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Cornell UP, 1997), examines theatricality and performative behavior in venues outside of the theatre. Her second book, *The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors* (Cornell UP, 2005), critiques the practice of collecting material objects. From her fascination with the public personae that permeated Romantic society, to her study of a whimsical, original, and materialist subject, Pascoe has progressed to a whimsical, materialist exploration of a theatrical persona. Chronicling her obsession with learning about the sound of Sarah Siddons's voice, Pascoe's new work—winner of the 2012 Barnard Hewitt prize from ASTR—is a quirky and unorthodox enterprise in cultural studies, endeavoring to theorize how the Romantic audioscape differed from that of today.