

## Lee Breuer's Theatrical Technique: From *The Animations* to *Gospel at Colonus*

Kent Neely

Lee Breuer has not been particularly well known during his thirty years of theatrical activity. Although he has directed at the American Repertory Theatre, the New York Shakespeare Festival, in European venues and has written novels, poetry and plays, it is the success of his recent work *Gospel at Colonus* which has brought him international attention. This gospel rendition of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* has played throughout the United States since receiving wide acclaim at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Next Wave Festival in 1983. On March 10, 1988 *Gospel at Colonus* opened on Broadway.

*Gospel at Colonus* blends Greek tragedy, gospel music, and a black pentecostal church service. The technique represents a culmination of Breuer's writing and directing since 1972: his continued fascination with spiritual issues, his interest in creating theatrical metaphors and his ability to mix popular and formal art freely. This paper will describe how the theatrical techniques demonstrated in *Gospel at Colonus* developed as a result of four distinct phases in Breuer's life.

Born Asher Leopold Breuer in 1937 in Philadelphia, Lee Breuer's family moved repeatedly until finding a home in Venice, California when he was 14. Southern California would remain his principle home into his young adult years when he went to the University of California, Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup>

Breuer's first important developmental period began at UCLA when he took a class that introduced him to Beckett, Camus, Sartre, Artaud, Giraudoux, and Anouilh. A self proclaimed 50's "valley boy" who had pledged a fraternity and was majoring in prelaw, Breuer was taken with existentialism and the idea that the theatre could be more than a depiction of reality.

Breuer's initiation into the theatre occurred about this time as a

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playwright. He was only 17. Though he won playwriting awards that brought him attention and contributed to his artistic identity, he now calls his early works "quasi-existentialist, surrealist, neo-Cocteau shit."<sup>2</sup>

Breuer admits that southern California's popular culture profoundly affected him and his plays. He distinguished himself as a man who, barely out of adolescence, wrote existentialist plays, listened to Elvis and idolized James Dean, Genet and Beckett.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps an indication of his youth, it was the sight of Albert Camus' photograph that made Breuer decide that he would be a writer, move to Paris and "hang out with Camus," and Juliette Greco. Though he was unable to make Paris immediately, his commitment to writing was genuine because Breuer moved to San Francisco where he wrote a novel.

The novel remains obscure but his move to San Francisco was auspicious for it was his first opportunity to work in the theatre. Alan Schneider saw *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* that Breuer directed at the Actor's Workshop and convinced the Workshop to hire him as a director. It created a dilemma that Breuer would grow to dislike: being pegged a director when he wanted to be a writer.

His education and early theatre work prepared him for his second major formative period when he moved to Paris in 1965 with his longtime companion, Ruth Maleczek. Coincidence had the two living with JoAnne Akalaitis and Philip Glass. Under Breuer's direction the four of them, with actor David Warrilow, produced Beckett's *Play* and received rave reviews which further classified Breuer as a theatre director, not a writer.

Nearing 30 years of age, Breuer began to confront his artistic identity. Determined to define himself as a writer, he started a second novel and lived throughout Europe. His nomadic life there and his inability to complete the book may have prompted writer's block when he returned to Paris. Further, he realized that chasing his muse to Europe had only made him aware that his inspiration was in the United States.

Europe was a watershed experience for him. First, regardless of his ambivalence with the label, he proved himself a capable theatrical director. Second, his association with Maleczek, Akalaitis, and Warrilow provided the nucleus of the U.S. theatre troupe formed in 1968 and known as Mabou Mines. Third, and most important, was the writing project that he began in Paris that ended his writers block, *The B. Beaver Animation*.

*The B. Beaver Animation* was the first of three plays that Breuer would call "animations" and *The Shaggy Dog Animation* was the final one. The second play was *The Red Horse Animation* and the only one of the three that I have not seen in production. Each used an animal as archetypal character and explored some spiritual condition that Breuer had experienced.<sup>4</sup>

Some people think that the *Animations* were products of Mabou Mines collaboration. This is only partially true. Breuer wrote the plays but productions were reliant upon staging ideas from different members of Mabou

Mines.<sup>5</sup> Blending such diverse performance ideas as those from Brecht and Grotowski with Kathakali, Bunraku, new music and rock and roll, the *Animations* defied classification. A single hand, usually Breuer's, was necessary to pull these diverse elements together and make the plays work. It was a creative process fraught with brilliance and intense struggles. In fact, it was Breuer's single mindedness that prompted his split with the other well known director of the troupe, JoAnne Akalaitis.<sup>6</sup>

The *Animations* represented Breuer's third important development period. Each of the plays dealt with different themes but was similarly reliant upon duality of meaning expressed by an animal symbol. The *Animations* were symptomatic of his interest in popular and formal art, and of his reliance upon two dissimilar but complimentary talents, directing and writing. These plays are, in fact, the first of what critic Don Shewey would call "performance poems."<sup>7</sup>

The shortest of the *Animations*, *B. Beaver*, deals with the spiritual dilemma faced by a writer who cannot write. The beaver metaphor offers numerous opportunities for puns: a beaver who cannot work is dammed up himself. In an early monologue B. Beaver describes the irony when he writes to obtain dam building instructions. He says that the talent of construction has escaped him.

Presuming you find it strange. One of my ilk without this information at his fingertips. Born builder and such. Well. I had it. Misplaced. Mishandled. Swiped. You know the missus may have thrown it into the trash. Don't get me started on the missus. It's lost. That's a fact. I am a beaver who has lost the art of damnation at a crucial time. And come hell or high water . . . Address clearly please. Spare no expense. I eagerly await.<sup>8</sup>

Producing such a poetic form theatrically presents a number of challenges. For instance, what is the intent? Is it about a beaver? Is it about the difficulty of working? Critic Arthur Sainer articulated the confusion about the New York presentation in a *Village Voice* review. He asked, ". . . are they literally beavers? why so? . . . the focus is hardly on content, the finesse of activity is . . . separated from content."<sup>9</sup>

In truth the piece is about Breuer's personal condition; the writer's block that followed his stint in Paris when he was succeeding as a director but could not finish his second novel. The Beaver "animated" his condition.

A 1987 Minneapolis production by the Red Eye Collaboration tried to clarify the piece. In that production B. Beaver could not produce any work other than the crumpled and discarded writing attempts that have accumulated as so much paper on his bedroom floor. He cannot reconcile a repressed instinct (dam building) and his writing profession; a profession in which productivity eludes him. He sits at his portable, manual typewriter on one side

of his bed in stark contrast to his spouse who sits at a sophisticated micro computer console on the opposite side.

She is productive. She is not troubled by the inertia plaguing B. Beaver. In concentrated moments, B. Beaver's wife taps at her keyboard and creates constantly changing pictures that are seen simultaneously on her computer console, on three monitors over B. Beaver's bed and on a giant screen that is atop a real stream at the rear of the stage. The sophisticated, technical work that B. Beaver's wife does on the computer is an ironic antithesis compared to the labored, nature based construction of dams that is a constant counterpoint to B. Beaver's writing.

The director, Stephen Peabody, said the juxtaposition of the computer with nature was meant to indicate the irony of existing "inside and outside" and achieving productivity in either. It was meant to show the different implications of being creative or being "dammed up."

Still the Minneapolis production was allusive. The purpose of a beaver as character was unclear and the relevance of the text was lost in the separation from its creator.

Breuer has said that he was trying to create a parable with the play that would offer meaning on a number of levels.<sup>10</sup> The beaver does serve an archetypal function but the relevance of the story is tied to Breuer's personal situation. This is important to understand his technique because, as Bonnie Marranca said, the animations are Breuer's "formalizations" of emotions ". . . the animations reveal, not facts of life, but aspects of existence."<sup>11</sup>

Breuer was playing with a metaphor animating a spiritual condition. One negative result was that the specific significance of the metaphor might be less and less clear. Still his experiments with parable, archetype, punning and irony remain constants in the other animation plays and would be prominent aspects in *Gospel at Colonus*.

*The Shaggy Dog Animation* was a more successful "animation." The play is a love story about and narrated by the character Rose. Mistreated and dependent upon her lover and master for identity and purpose, an audience could quickly associate a woman as a "shaggy dog" and furthermore see the master/slave relationship of man to dog or to woman. Breuer suggested a love relationship gone awry through puns, as this brief speech by Rose demonstrates:

We went to the all night fruit stand. I wouldn't leave you long enough to piss on the snow. You told me to stay. I sat like a stone in a puddle. You came out with a hundred thousand dollar bar and threw a piece. You said. Catch. I opened my mouth in astonishment. Because right there. In midair. I got it.

John I said. I hate one hundred thousand dollar bars. I spit it at a parking meter. You didn't answer me. You stuck two fingers in your mouth and whistled.

I could not suppress a smile. In a wave of generosity. That you likened only to a wave of love. My heart declared you winner by default. Yes boss. I said. And came on the trot. . . . You looked like such a straight man. Boss. I said. I got the message. This is night school. You're training me to be a dog.

In the original production of *Shaggy Dog*, Rose appeared as a bunraku type puppet. An oversized radio dial was located upstage. Channels would change, giving a chorus of different performers opportunities to comment or speak part of Rose's role.

Though the master/slave relationship and the question of personal identity was clearly the focus of this presentation, some critics said it was still unclear. As Sylvere Lotringer pointed out in *Drama Review*: "Signs here do not represent something. They represent other signs."<sup>12</sup> Mel Gussow said: "It is the method rather than the message that is entrancing."<sup>13</sup>

Only Gerald Rabkin noted that Breuer was discovering his own particular style and voice. He said that the play's structure was like music and that the characters were "consciously ambiguous;" images and ideas were dissected, enlarged, reduced, reassembled and then animated.<sup>14</sup> But he also recorded the shortcomings of creating a very personal metaphor for the stage saying it became diffuse and fragmented. More indicting was his observation that one had to "will a cohesive through-line to maintain . . . attention."<sup>15</sup>

Most of the problems were resolved in a Minneapolis production of *Shaggy Dog* by the Red Eye Collaboration. The script was shortened and instead of a bunraku puppet, Rose was transformed into a dog making the significance of the metaphor very precise. Rather than Rose being presented as a facsimile of a woman with the dog metaphor merely suggested; an actual dog is presented allowing the relationship to a woman to be implied. This change strengthened the statement about the master/slave relationship and Rose's confusion.

The image of Rose, the dog, was projected onto a white screen from behind (like the shadow theatre of southeast Asian countries). John, her lover, was likewise absent from the audience's direct view. His role was performed by a real man but again from behind the translucent screen. He manipulated his relative size by drawing closer to or further from the light. This effect could produce ironic results when John moved close to the beam casting an enormous shadow and thus seeming even more imposing and controlling.

The chorus was kept. Rather than a changing radio dial cuing different comments on Rose's condition, the chorus would take on different singing and performing styles (e.g. a female do-wop group, a blues singer and so on).

Though one member might speak for Rose, never did the chorus become a character in the play. They were always detached observers or storytellers. This was consistent with the rest of the presentation which relied upon the projected silhouettes of the principle characters for action.

The themes of both the *B. Beaver Animation* and the *Shaggy Dog Animation* remained highly personal in the Minneapolis productions. As Bonnie Marranca pointed out, Breuer used his self as text in writing the *Animations*. He was attempting to create his own myths. Such work is poetic but perhaps too abstract for wide and easy access. To appreciate the *Animations* requires careful analysis--a meditative response. Breuer does not deny this and he has distinguished that sort of response from the type that he aimed to elicit with *Gospel*.

Although still poetic in form, Breuer wanted *Gospel at Colonus* to achieve immediate and visceral impact. He wanted to arouse an experiential response that would successfully integrate the spiritual nature and theatrical technique that had characterized the *Animations*.

*Gospel at Colonus* was the product of a final developmental period between 1980 and 1983. During those three years Breuer's association with Mabou Mines almost was ended. He realized that his own ideas and techniques needed independence from the other strongly individualistic troupe members.<sup>16</sup>

He began working in two areas, writing poetry and directing plays by other writers. As a poet he created *Sister Suzie Cinema* and *Hajj*. Both rely upon popular art forms. *Sister Suzie Cinema* was performed by an acappella rhythm and blues group, Fourteen Karat Soul. *Hajj*, a one woman show featuring Ruth Maleczech, incorporated a three mirrored vanity in which she could see her thoughts appear via elaborate closed circuit television techniques.<sup>17</sup>

Breuer was continuing his attempt to coalesce popular and formal art. *Sister Suzie Cinema* allowed him to experiment with Black music and rhythm. *Hajj* was an attempt to mix the "languages" of visual symbol and literary text into an ironic parable. With these pieces he made strides in developing a technique of interesting aesthetic dimension but lacking emotional immediacy.

Coincidentally Breuer tackled plays with spiritual overtones: Wedekind's *Lulu* at the American Repertory Theatre in 1980 and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at the New York Shakespeare Festival a year later. With both he used new directing techniques that affected both script and image. Both plays failed critically.<sup>18</sup>

His poetic essay, *The Theatre and Its Trouble*, articulated the process he was trying to master. There he called for poetry in the theatre; poetry that would address the spiritual concerns found in plays like *Lulu* and *The Tempest*. Popular art, like the music in *Sister Suzie*, was a worthy vehicle since art must speak to people in a familiar way. As he said, it must come "up from the street and down from the church;" a joining of the sacred with the secular.

Breuer went further in noting that the theatre should provide a call and response between performer and audience.<sup>19</sup> Referring to the use of call and response in primitive rites, religious services, even children's fairy tales, Breuer suggested that the effect might be exacerbated with devices like the drums used by African tribes or even the structure and rhythms of poetry.

Gospel music within the context of the Black pentecostal church service fulfilled Breuer's requisites for an expressive form like nothing else in modern western culture. Gospel was familiar to people and its secularized forms in popular music had "come up from the street and down from the church."<sup>20</sup>

Gospel incorporates the call from the performer and the response from the collective. It has always been an "experiential" event that permits a "simultaneous outlet for the individual and the community."<sup>21</sup> Within the Black church service the individual could be absolved of his pain and reunited with the community; again an element of spiritual rites.

*Oedipus at Colonus* was the dramatic vehicle that Breuer chose to adapt by integrating gospel music. His vision of a new theatre poetry thus could be fulfilled.

All the spiritual requisites existed in Sophocles' play. Oedipus suffers from a great sin. After suffering twenty years he arrives at Colonus to gain his final resting place. There his guilt will be absolved and his exultation will begin.

The theme and metaphoric device were joined. Oedipus' story became the source of a Black pentecostal church sermon. Oedipus' myth served as religious myth and foundation for *Gospel at Colonus*.

Utilizing the technique from the *Animations*, of manifesting a spiritual condition with an exaggerated symbol, Breuer cast a five member, black gospel group in the role of Oedipus. Clarence Fountain and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama (five men who are truly blind) played Oedipus.<sup>22</sup>

Breuer exploited the call and response phenomenon by integrating different gospel music groups within a large chorus. It included the groups, J.J. Farley and the Original Soul Stirrers and members of the J. D. Steele Singers. They performed away from the chorus proper and appeared in other parts of the action. The entire production was accompanied by Little Village, a ten member band complete with horns, organ and guitar.

The combined effect of spiritual theme, ritualistic celebration, and music that mixed the sacred with the secular prompted rhythmic clapping among the audience and, for the less inhibited, dancing in the theatre aisles. Breuer succeeded in removing the performance from the meditative to the experiential. Like the *Animations* he addressed spiritual questions but in *Gospel at Colonus* his introspective quest produced a play that united him with all humanity.

Breuer continues to experiment with theatrical technique. His latest project, *The Warrior Ant*, will be a three part, twelve hour epic poem. The piece has been only a workshop thus far but integrates two elements that seem

a logical extension of Breuer's work. First, he will use Latin American music. Second he will use actual Japanese bunraku masters and puppets.<sup>23</sup>

The theatrical idea that he articulated in *The Theatre and Its Trouble* and that worked in *Gospel* is his aim in *Warrior Ant*. As the following Breuer quote implies, he is perfecting a theatrical experience similar to one described by a theorist that he never mentions, Nietzsche. Breuer's theatrical technique does indeed blend the Apollonian with the Dionysian:

We don't want a theatre of give and receive, we want a theatre of give and *respond*. Cause response, see, it's performed empathy. I'm dreaming of putting on *The Warrior Ant* in this space where we take out all the seats, where instead of just watching the performance the audience *dances* to it.<sup>24</sup>

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## Notes

1. Biographical information about Lee Breuer has been compiled from different articles. Specific references are drawn from Ross Wetzsteon, "Wild Man of the American Theatre," *Village Voice*. May 19 and May 26, 1987.

2. Wetzsteon.

3. Breuer comments about this mix in the Wetzsteon articles. Also see Lee Breuer, *Sister Suzie Cinema* and Gerald Rabkin, "Performance Notes."

4. Shewey, *American Film* 17.

5. See Wetzsteon, Shewey and Breuer, "How We Work."

6. See Wetzsteon, May 26, 33.

7. Shewey, *American Film*.

8. All references to "Animations" texts are from Lee Breuer *Animations: A Trilogy for Mabou Mines*. References to performances of the *Animations* are drawn from productions by Red Eye Collaboration in which Breuer involved himself.

9. Sainer 56.

10. Steele, May 22, 1987.

11. Marranca 43.

12. Lotringer 89.

13. Gussow 13.

14. Rabkin, *On the Next Wave* 9.

15. Rabkin, *The Soho Weekly News* 27.

16. Wetzsteon, May 26, 33.

17. Breuer, *Sister Suzie Cinema*. Rabkin, "Performance Notes."

18. Shewey, *American Film* 7, Rich.

19. Breuer, *Sister Suzie Cinema*, 123 Rabkin, *Performing Arts Journal*.

20. Breuer, *Sister Suzie Cinema* 124.

21. Steele, February 15, Goines 3.



22. References to the performance of *Gospel at Colonus* are from the Guthrie Theatre presentation, February 28, 1987.

23. Wetzsteon 35.

24. Wetzsteon 36.

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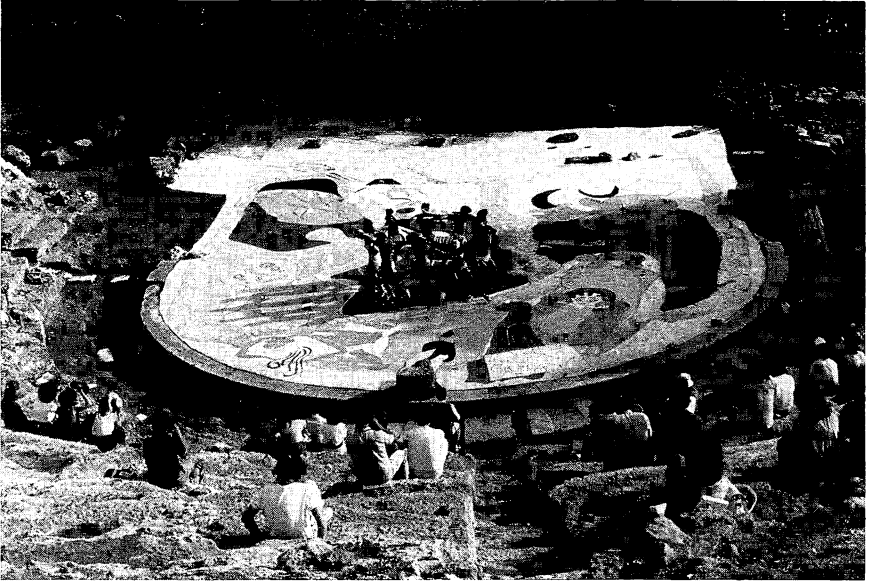
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The ancient theatre at Oeniades, Greece 1987. Foto: Jörg Landsberg.



The international theatre workshop for ancient drama. Foto: Jörg Landsberg.