

## Collective Creation and ‘Historical Imagination’: Mabou Mines’s Devised Adaptations of History

*Jessica Silsby Brater*

The American avant-garde theatre company Mabou Mines was founded in 1970 as a collective; each founding member was a co-artistic director. This structure of collective creative leadership has endured throughout the company’s history. Each artistic director, past and present, has provided Mabou Mines with an independent yet interrelated artistic approach to both process and production. The company is known for producing original works by a single author (most frequently co-artistic director Lee Breuer) and for wildly imaginative adaptations of plays, including classics such as *King Lear* (*Lear* 1987) and *A Doll’s House* (Mabou Mines’ *DollHouse* 2003). But the work of several of the co-artistic directors also reveals a common interest in adapting people and events of the past into contemporary characters and stories for the stage. The resulting body of unconventional history plays are often devised through processes of collective creation.

---

J.S. Brater (✉)  
Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA  
e-mail: braterj@mail.montclair.edu

JoAnne Akalaitis's, Ruth Maleczek's, and Julie Archer's work for the company on *Dead End Kids* (1980) and *Bélen: A Book of Hours* (1999) illustrate Mabou Mines's interest in devised adaptations of history by troubling the relationship between women and conventional master narratives about the past. These productions exemplify Mabou Mines's intensively collaborative process and commitment to producing original, American work for the stage. This chapter explores each production's distinctive approach to devising and adaptation as a mode for reimagining women and events of the past.

In *Dead End Kids* and *Belén*, Mabou Mines changes identifiable historical source material to challenge accepted notions of history, confronting audiences with new perspectives on people and events of the past and undermining the authority of traditional master narratives. Each production illuminates a different facet of their approach to the collaborative process and adaptation: *Dead End Kids*, with its intricately embroidered patchwork of adapted research material and invented scenarios, uses historical pastiche. Meanwhile, *Belén*'s imagistic fictionalized scenarios are better described as partisan iconography.

In *Past Performance: American Theatre and the Historical Imagination*, Roger Bechtel writes that his aim is to

investigate and understand what I perceive to be new and complex theatrical strategies for representing—or perhaps a better word might be *engaging*—history. History, in the plays and productions I examine, is not understood as a mere reference to the historical record; rather, these productions marshal historical reference to interrogate history—the idea of history, its uses and abuses, as Nietzsche would have it, rather than its facts alone—and our relation to it. (Bechtel, 16)

This is a useful framework for examining *Dead End Kids* and *Belén* within the milieu of historical drama. These productions take an energetic and muscular approach to wrestling with their respective histories, inserting themselves assertively into the record of the past and insisting that we do not take the idea of history or the figures and stories it has documented for granted.

*Dead End Kids* and *Belén* lend weight to the importance of these women's histories by going through the motions of representation night after night, for different spectators. As Freddie Rokem writes of

the repeated appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet* in *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*:

What can be seen in *Hamlet* is how a burden (some kind of unfinished business from the past) becomes transformed into an actor's being and doing 'this *thing*' on the stage, appearing again in tonight's performance, continuously performing a return of the repressed on the theatrical stage. History can only be perceived as such when it becomes recapitulated, when we create some form of discourse, like the theatre, on the basis of which an organized repetition of the past is constructed, situating the chaotic torrents of the past within an aesthetic frame. (Rokem, xi)

Likewise, the female figures and stories in these productions haunt the stage to remind us of those who have been ignored, such as the prisoners of *Belén* and those, such as Marie Curie, whose discoveries unwittingly led to tragedy. These figures also ask us to re-examine the traditional master narrative, pointing us toward a feminist historiography by intertwining the personal with the political and reorganizing hierarchical arrangements of historical reference.

Although Mabou Mines is organized as a collective, not every artistic director participates in every production and projects have resulted from collaborations of almost every imaginable combination of artistic directors and associates. There is, nonetheless, a shared set of concerns among the co-artistic directors: a dedication to language and research, an interest in a multi-media approach to storytelling (though not necessarily conventional narrative), a blending of comedy and sentimentality, a highly collaborative development process that in some cases borders on collective, a rehearsal process that integrates design elements with performance, and an emphasis on giving performers significant power in shaping and guiding artistic decisions. These characteristics have tended to influence the approach to making the work rather than resulting in a 'house style'; though Breuer and Maleczech are both founding artistic directors, it is hard to imagine two productions more dissimilar in mood, style, and scope than her 1999 production of *Belén: A Book of Hours* and his 2003 *DollHouse*, despite the fact that both engage with questions about the representation of gender. Breuer suggests that if there is a common stylistic thread among productions, it may come from the sheer number designed by former co-artistic director Julie Archer during her tenure with the company from the late 1970s until her resignation

in 2013. In describing Mabou Mines's lack of a unified house style, Breuer suggests that the distinctive approach of the Wooster Group is attributable to the company's sole artistic director: 'I honestly don't think there is a discernible Mabou Mines style that spreads to a number of different people, just like there is no Wooster Group style—it's just Liz [LeCompte]'.<sup>1</sup> Mabou Mines is distinct from the Wooster Group, of course, because of its structure of shared artistic directorship, but Breuer is pointing to the discrete nature of the aesthetics of the Mabou Mines co-artistic directors.

Mabou Mines does, however, have a strong tradition of textual adaptation, and the use of historical source material in the collectively created projects examined here can be considered in the context of productions such as Akalaitis's work with Colette's writing in *Dressed Like an Egg*; Maleczech and Breuer's reimagining of Shakespeare in *Lear*; Breuer's inventive take on Ibsen in *DollHouse* and on Tennessee Williams in *Glass Guignol*; and Maleczech's *Imagining the Imaginary Invalid*, which combines Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* with material drawn from texts on the history of medicine. Because each artistic director has contributed an autonomous aesthetic and methodology, the two case studies that follow do not represent overarching approaches to devising and adaptation for the company. Instead, their development processes and characteristics in production point to similarities as well as to original, distinctive qualities of particular productions in Mabou Mines's body of work.

*Dead End Kids* is one of the most famous productions in Mabou Mines's history. Conceived and directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, it was developed and produced at New York City's Public Theater during the company's extended residency there, premiering in November 1980 and was adapted into a film in 1984. The company of actors researched, wrote, and helped to develop scenes and text. Maleczech played Marie Curie. This role, which emphasized Curie's contribution to science as well as elements of her biography, proved to be central to Akalaitis's version of the history of nuclear power and its relationship to patriarchal and capitalistic structures of authority.

With *Belén: A Book of Hours* the company took up gender, power, and history again under Maleczech's direction with a design by Archer. The production, which premiered in March 1999, was performed bilingually in Spanish and English and based on Mexican history. It also expands Maleczech's assertion that the company 'makes American work', to include the USA's southern neighbour, as Maleczech had already done

in *Sueños*, a piece about the life and work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1989). *Belén* featured poems by US poet Catherine Sasanov and performances by Mexican artists Liliana Felipe and Jesusa Rodriguez.<sup>2</sup> *Belén* was performed internationally, opening in Mexico City as part of XV Festival del Centro Storico at El Claustro de Sor Juana. The US premiere took place in April 1999 at Mabou Mines's former ToRaNaDa studio at PS 122 in New York's East Village. The production also toured to Chicago, San Francisco, the University of California at Northridge, and back to Mexico City (this time to Rodriguez and Felipe's Teatro de La Capilla), and then back to PS 122 in 2000.

The Catholic Church built *Belén* in 1683 as a refuge for prostitutes and pregnant, indigent women. It quickly underwent changes that made life for the women there increasingly restrictive as clergy who ran the institution, initially founded as a sanctuary, began to search the streets for women they deemed undesirable, abducting and imprisoning them. As the *Belén* production program explains, 'once a woman entered, she could never leave'.<sup>3</sup> *Belén* was converted into a prison for men and women in 1860 by the Mexican government and became so notorious as a site of torture that it was torn down in 1935. In contrast to the famous Marie Curie, the lives of *Belén* women have been lost to history. The research, development, and production of this piece functioned as an excavation of sorts, unearthing fragments of personal histories and daily living and then inventing characters and stories that tell us who these women were and how they spent their days.

*Dead End Kids* and *Belén* are history plays that establish an interrogative relationship with the past. The nature of this relationship is different in each case; each production establishes a distinct methodology particular to its perspective on the history it investigates. Nonetheless, these productions have certain characteristics in common. They are not realistic attempts at historical reconstruction. Neither do they pretend to be objective. They are, as Peter Weiss described his documentary drama, frankly 'partisan' (Weiss, 294).

### *Dead End Kids*

Akalaitis created *Dead End Kids* as a "response to the tremendous political movement" in the USA surrounding the use of nuclear power.<sup>4</sup> "It seemed kind of natural to me that Ruth would play Marie Curie," she says, describing the similarity in looks between the women and Maleczek's facility with accents. Curie provided the fulcrum for

Akalaitis, and when the director adapted the work to film in 1984, she expanded Maleczech's role. Curie was, Akalaitis says, "a woman who was a pre-eminent scientist and basically killed herself doing her work, who was incredibly important in a world where women are not important." Greg Mehrten, a former company member who also performed in *Dead End Kids*, remembers that Maleczech was intent on learning the science behind the activities she portrayed onstage as the Nobel Prize-winning chemist and physicist. 'She had this scene where she was taking the radioactive elements and she really learned how to do that', Mehrten says. The science that secured Curie's entry into the historical record was crucial to Maleczech's portrayal of the important figure.

In reviews of the production, Akalaitis is often credited with writing as well as directing *Dead End Kids* as she is in the film version, although the Mabou Mines website attributes the text to Akalaitis 'with the company', with excerpts from other documents written by a lengthy list of figures from Paracelsus to General L.R. Groves.<sup>5</sup> Akalaitis agrees that the script was indeed written 'with the company'. Collaborators recall that the performers immersed themselves in the research process alongside Akalaitis. The subject was 'too vast for one person to do all the research', Maleczech said, 'it needed all the people in the piece to do it'.<sup>6</sup> Mehrten recalls a process of interdisciplinary collaboration:

Originally it started out as a workshop where a lot of people who weren't in Mabou Mines were invited to think in collaborative ways—musicians and filmmakers, all kinds of people—because it wasn't meant to be like a normal play. It had all these vignettes from different periods in history all around the subject of nuclear power.<sup>7</sup>

The development process, with its heavy emphasis on research, was one to which Maleczech readily responded. According to Maleczech, she developed a performance that eventually became scripted, while Akalaitis remembers the performance as 'always slightly improvised'. Maleczech's attention to the research that facilitated her creation of Curie is an early example of Mabou Mines's investment in this phase of the process. Maleczech's costume for Curie, the performer recalled, was copied from a dress that she and Akalaitis had seen slung over the back of a chair when they visited the scientist's former home, now a museum in Paris.

Akalaitis, according to Maleczech, selected material she wanted to include in the piece from the research brought in by the company and

put it in order. 'JoAnne is a structuralist', Maleczek said in describing Akalaitis's directorial approach,

she structures everything. She doesn't ever want anything on the stage that isn't a structure. It can be an emotional structure, it can be a physical structure, it can be a movement structure, it can be a language structure, but it's got to be structured. That's where her heart goes. When we made *The Red Horse Animation* we each had a part of the red horse. David Warrilow's part was the Story Line. My part was the Heart Line, and JoAnne's part was the Outline. And it's very appropriate that that was her part.

Mehrten's description of Akalaitis's process for *Dead End Kids* in which artists from various disciplines came together to collaborate, is also characteristic of Maleczek's directorial approach. But where Akalaitis actively shapes the contribution of her collaborators, Maleczek worked with what she got. 'Julie Archer could have made any set for *Belén*', Maleczek said, 'it's up to her what she makes. She makes it, I'll work with it'. Maleczek's description of divergent directorial inclinations highlights the distinct nature of aesthetic prerogatives among co-artistic directors as well as resulting stylistic differences.

## A STAGED HISTORY OF NUCLEAR POWER

Much of the critical attention surrounding *Dead End Kids* centres on the notorious scene in which David Brisbin's sleazy stand-up comedian leads a naïve female audience member, played by Ellen McElduff, through a series of sexually exploitative manipulations of a raw roasting chicken as he suggestively reads excerpts of a document describing the consequences for livestock in the event of a nuclear war. In 'Staging the Obscene Body', Elinor Fuchs describes her own discomfort as an audience member during this sequence and the widespread disdain with which critics greeted the scene. In the end, however, Fuchs writes, 'most critics, sympathetic with the director's political intentions, finally "allowed" it on political grounds'. Fuchs also documents an audience walkout during a presentation of the scene:

In an interesting sequel, the nightclub scene was presented as a single excerpt at a joint anniversary celebration of the War Resisters' League

(WRL) and Performing Artists for Nuclear Disarmament in May 1983 ... women in the hall began to shout to the female character, ‘Don’t do it honey, don’t let him do it to you!’ Within moments, accompanied by mounting booing and hissing, there occurred a full-scale feminist walkout from the hall ... The performance was broken off and an angry confrontation with the director followed. (Fuchs, 36)

The melee Fuchs describes followed a presentation of the scene outside of the context of the play, but Akalaitis subsequently developed a reputation for controversy—she is now the veteran of a showdown with the Beckett estate over her production of *Endgame* (1984) and an infamous ousting by the board of the Public Theater which ended her brief and tumultuous tenure as the only female Artistic Director in the organization’s history. It should come as no surprise, then, that this earlier, intentional provocation was so successful.

The confrontational nature of this scene makes it an excellent microcosm for examining the larger patterns at work in the piece. *Dead End Kids* puts familiar figures, images, and histories together in a provocative and uncomfortable way. The result disrupts what we know about the appearance of nuclear power on the political landscape and points to our complicity, as well as that of the scientific community, in its proliferation.

One mode of disruption in *Dead End Kids* is Akalaitis’s emphasis on comedy, a strategy that Mabou Mines has relied on regularly for the purposes of distancing and juxtaposition. *Dead End Kids* avoids the polemical by incorporating satire and parody as well as visual gags, as when Marie Curie appears with a black poodle (on a walk through Central Park in the film version), book-ended by scenes of Faust and Mephistopheles (the latter in human form). Akalaitis even parodies comedy itself with Brisbin’s decidedly unfunny stand-up comedian. But Maleczek’s adaptation of Curie *is* funny, and her ability to control the comedy invests the figure with power. Akalaitis recalls that Maleczek employed ‘a kind of comedic Polish accent. It was very, very funny and I have no idea how she did it, but she did it’. Maleczek remembered a process that relied on a collective adaption of historical information. ‘She had a Polish-French accent’, Maleczek explained,

and of course I’d never heard Polish, so I would make it up! And then in the Faust section, which was done in German, I was the translator—Marie Curie was the translator—and so I had to translate Goethe’s *Faust* ...

But it had to be funny, so at first it was improvised and eventually it was scripted because I said the same thing over and over.

Although no video survives of the stage production, the film adaptation is now available for purchase.<sup>8</sup> It opens with a scientist drawing on a chalkboard and delivering an enthusiastic explanation of the atom. Less than five minutes later, the late Mabou Mines co-artistic director Fred Neumann's cigarette-smoking armchair intellectual sets the stage for a historic reconstruction of medieval-looking attempts at the alchemical transformation. An evening talk show dedicated to pseudo-scientific inquiry ('Welcome to the incredible, unbelievable world of alchemy', one co-host beams) in which a magician makes a handkerchief into a dove and enacts other improbable feats and the co-hosts discuss the history of alchemy. Then, of course, there is the stand-up comedian. These narrative threads establish surprising juxtapositions between familiar situations and figures, pairing birthday party magicians with ancient alchemical theory.

In fact, such contrasting scenes highlight another unlikely and ultimately lethal pairing: the US government's machismo and jingoism and its access to science with the capacity to create an atomic bomb. As Fuchs notes, despite her discomfort with the too-stupid audience member and the too-seedy comedian, she 'recognized ... the most unsettling version of the connection Akalaitis had been making all along between the war state and the sexist state, male nuclear fantasies and the exploitation of women'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, *Dead End Kids* develops two trains of thought. One has to do with the abuse of nuclear power, both in the real world and in male fantasies. The other has to do with how we ended up with the capacity to make a nuclear bomb in the first place.

The latter question takes us all the way back to Aristotle and other Classical proponents of alchemy. The first third of *Dead End Kids* functions as a sort of history of alchemy or perhaps as a history of the gestational period of science. As the drama unfolds, alchemy and modern science collide with the introduction of Marie Curie. Once she appears on the scene in *Dead End Kids* she continues to lurk around the corners of the production, demonstrating the centrality of this character to Akalaitis's conception of the project.

Later Curie tells her own story, one that resonates with an overlapping of interconnected personal and professional triumphs. She describes meeting her husband, Pierre Curie in terms that glow with a shared

commitment to science, not the traditional language of romance. ‘A conversation about science began between us,’ says Maleczek’s Curie, ‘soon he caught the habit of speaking to me about his dream of a life consecrated entirely to scientific research and he asked me to share that life’. Among the *Dead End Kids* cast of characters, only Curie possesses this sense of an integrated professional and personal life, and Maleczek and Akalaitis are careful to embed this intersection throughout Curie’s story in the film. This distinguishes her even among the female characters; we are not, for instance, privy to the home life of Ellen McElduff’s teacher or the professional life of McElduff’s naïve female audience member.

Curie and her husband Pierre worked in a shed that served as their laboratory, just outside the home they shared with their daughter, we learn. ‘It was in this abandoned shed that the best and happiest years of our life was spent entirely consecrated to work ... This period was for my husband and myself the heroic period of our common existence’. In this shed, Curie decided to ‘devote’ herself to the purification of radium. ‘In 1902 I possessed one decigram of radium. It had taken me four years to produce it’, she continues,

The baby had been put to bed and cried again. I stayed with her until she fell asleep then I went down and tried to sew, but I was too restless. I suggested to Pierre that we go to the laboratory. We opened the door in the dark. I begged Pierre not to light the light. The reality was more entrancing than we had wished. It was spontaneously luminous.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Curie’s husband, child, and scientific innovation are linked together in the pride she feels for her accomplishments. Maleczek’s voice is warm, and we have the sense of Curie as a particularized individual because of her slightly untraceable yet charming accent. She describes the qualities of radioactivity, its ability to make images on photographic plates through black paper and to disintegrate the paper in which it is wrapped as if she is a parent talking about a precocious child. ‘What could it not do?’ she asks proudly.<sup>11</sup>

Marie Curie is the only character in *Dead End Kids* whose view of science and domesticity are so irrevocably interwoven. This makes her the ideal figure to haunt the later, post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki scenes. As a mother, she is a poignant presence in the doorway of the auditorium where she watches the schoolteacher played by McElduff read eyewitness accounts of the horrors of Nagasaki aloud to children in a

singsong voice. McElduff holds a large picture book and pauses occasionally to make sure the children understand the more difficult words. 'Those people who managed to get out by some miracle', she reads in a sweet, soothing voice, 'found themselves surrounded by a ring of fire and the few who did make their way to safety died twenty to thirty days later from the delayed effects of the deadly gamma rays'.<sup>12</sup> Marie Curie looks on with a mixture of regret and wonder.

The sinister intermingling of sophisticated nuclear activity and innocent daily life also inserts itself into a scene in which high school girls, played by Maleczek and Akalaitis's daughters, Clove Galilee and Juliet Glass, respectively, demonstrate the wonders of nuclear power in a science fair exhibit. They admiringly describe a nuclear-powered coffee pot, plutonium-heated long johns, and a nuclear-powered pace maker. 'Radiation is the most recent step in man's ancient quest to preserve food', they rave, eating irradiated hamburgers.<sup>13</sup>

We see Marie Curie in the film version staring out the window at a nuclear power plant as she travels past it in a train and again, sitting in an armchair and watching another television program in which McElduff plays a crazed mother who helps her son to assemble a hydrogen bomb as a scout project. Curie's repeated appearances, in which she silently observes the consequences of her scientific contribution, are infused with regret. They leave the impression that Curie is haunting the history she handed down, unable to detach herself from her beloved radium and the series of consequences she could not have foreseen.

Although Marie Curie may be at the centre of the drama for Akalaitis and for the audience, *Dead End Kids* is, without a doubt, an ensemble piece. It makes use of the pastiche that has resulted from its process of collective creation, presenting its story of nuclear power as a collage of fact, fiction, science, and stage magic. By blending selected history with imaginative invention, *Dead End Kids* suggests that we can alter the course of the future. The juxtaposition Fuchs identifies between Curie's maternal presence and the 'manifestations of the sexist state' is a unifying motif that functions to humanize a political problem of colossal proportions. Akalaitis's imaginative coupling of real and fictional scientists and narratives underscore *Dead End Kids* as *story* of nuclear power rather than of a *history* of it, just as the subtitle suggests. Akalaitis and company are adapting historical sources, not staging history to provoke the audience into taking action.

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME: *BELÉN'S* BOOK OF HOURS*Belén: A Book of Hours*

In 1995, Maleczek was in Mexico City on a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) fellowship to observe the work of performer and political activist Jesusa Rodriguez. While visiting El Habito, the political cabaret that Rodriguez ran with her partner Liliana Felipe, Maleczek first saw Felipe perform songs she had also composed. Maleczek knew that she wanted to collaborate with Felipe, though on what she was not yet sure. Coincidentally, Maleczek was staying in the same hotel as the American poet Catherine Sasanov, who was also in Mexico City on an NEA fellowship. Over lunches and dinners during their stay, Maleczek and Sasanov talked about Mexico City. 'One night', says Sasanov,

I told Ruth about something from Mexico City's history that interested me greatly, and that I was sleuthing around, trying to find out more about, el Recogimiento de Belén (the sanctuary of Bethlehem), a Catholic run sanctuary for women without means of support, run like a prison, and eventually, turned into a secular prison.<sup>14</sup>

This conversation, which began as an earnest personal conversation between artists working in different mediums would blossom into a theatrical collaboration.

Six months after parting ways in Mexico City, Maleczek contacted Sasanov to say that she was interested in Belén and to ask her if she would like to write a libretto for a theatre piece about it. Felipe would set the poems to music that she would sing live; Rodriguez would also perform. Because Felipe didn't speak English, Sasanov would work with a translator so that Felipe could compose the music and perform the poems in Spanish.

Maleczek recalled that Sasanov sent her a number of poems, almost all of which Maleczek promptly returned because she thought Sasanov could do better. Sasanov recalls an interactive fluidity in the early days of the process:

I would write a poem, then pass it by Ruth for her blessing. We might talk about a type of poem she would like to see in the piece (or a tone, a viewpoint), and I would go back with that and see what I could do (this became more common as the piece began to take form; at the beginning,

I was free to see what I came up with). If she liked the poem, it then went to the translator.

Maleczech worked in a similar manner with the five writers she gathered together to create the poems for Mabou Mines's *Song for New York*, which premiered in 2007.<sup>15</sup> The artistic team on *Belén* worked by mail until being granted residencies in 1998 at the Sundance Theatre Laboratory in Utah and the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center at Lake Cuomo in Italy, where they spent concentrated time working with each other and with Archer, the designer, who had done her own visual research in Mexico.

In fact, Maleczech had drawn Archer into designing for the theatre in a similarly intuitive manner. Initially Archer was a babysitter for Maleczech and Akalaitis's respective children when the women's two families shared an apartment in New York's East Village in the 1970s. Maleczech discovered through conversations with Archer that the latter was a sculptor. When a Mabou Mines sculpture piece for Akalaitis's *Dressed Like an Egg* (1977) was in need of repair, Maleczech suggested Archer for the job. Maleczech and Archer teamed up for the OBIE-Award winning design of *Vanishing Pictures* (1980), Maleczech's directing debut, and continued to collaborate until Maleczech's death in 2013.

According to Maleczech, during the developmental residencies for *Belén*, Sasanov and a translator, Luz Aurora Pimentel, worked in the mornings, handing translations off to Felipe in the afternoon. Maleczech and Rodriguez worked throughout the day, developing a scripted series of gestures and movements depicting household chores that would unfold in a non-verbal parallel track as Felipe performed the songs. Sasanov, who is nearly fluent in Spanish, recalls working closely with the translator 'to make sure each translation was as close as possible to the original'. When they were satisfied with the translation,

it was passed to Liliana to set to music. Amazingly, it was rare that Lili needed to make much of any change in wording for the music to fit. Once she had a song ready, we gathered around her and listened (or, if we were all scattered long distance, we listened via cassette tape). At this point, Jesusa and Julie Archer, came in, thinking about movement and visuals. I was exceedingly lucky to be present at all the rehearsals as *Belén* was created. I loved how the work came together, all very organic. I didn't just write a finished piece and pass it on to Ruth. Each of us had our part with

each individual song/poem that I created. At times, I might make suggestions of images I had seen that my collaborators might be interested in working with or incorporating into the visuals or as part of the movement of the piece. Or I might bring up one of my obscure details that we'd consider working into the piece.

This overlapping interchange—cultural, linguistic, and multi-media in nature—was crucial to *Belén*'s development. It also proved to be characteristic of the final product, which capitalizes on the porous boundary between translation and adaptation. A note in the programme describes the process:

A challenge in developing a theatre piece with artists that speak different languages is to work in a way that the collaborators are not struggling with language as they create. Catherine Sasanov wrote the twelve poems in English. Ruth Maleczek suggested they be translated into Spanish so that Liliana Felipe could freely set them to music. Julie Archer then worked to integrate the English of the poems into the visual life of the work. Ruth Maleczek wrote a silent scenario for Jesusa Rodriguez to be understood by all. By this process *Las Horas de Belén - A Book of Hours* became a truly bi-lingual, bi-national, bi-cultural collaboration.<sup>16</sup>

This international, intercultural exchange was successful for audiences and collaborators alike; Felipe and Rodriguez were given OBIE Special Citations for their performances, becoming the first Mexicans to receive the award, and Sasanov says 'working on *Belén* was one of the great events of my life'.

Contrasting her own directorial approach to Akalaitis's and Breuer's, Maleczek explained, 'neither one of them gives their collaborators the leeway I do, but it's not leeway really—that's not the right word because it sounds like permission. No, neither one of them involves their collaborators at the level that I do. The collaborators have completely free reign'. Perhaps this is why, throughout her career, Maleczek was drawn to artists with backgrounds in more independently created forms of art, such as sculpture and poetry. And perhaps this is why Sasanov, a poet, and Archer, who began as a sculptor, responded so keenly to Maleczek's directorial inclinations. Maleczek sought out collaborators who bring a strong point of view into the room. 'I like it when it's feisty', she said, 'and I like it when things are messy for a long time ... I'm a real

appreciator of people rooting around and coming up with whatever comes to mind and then trying to figure out why exactly that came to mind and how it crosses with somebody else's passion'.

In *Belén*, the indignities perpetrated against Rodríguez's character are unfurled in the guise of normality, unfolding as part of the rhythm of daily life. The sense of the quotidian surrounding episodes of oppression and abuse underscores the production's explicit message that subjugation is, in fact, part of habitual life for many women. The subtitle of the play, 'A Book of Hours' refers to Christian devotional books, drawing attention to the religious origins of the institution in which these women find themselves. It also underscores the hours that made up the days and years spent at Belén in captivity.

Sound, light, projection, and performance are all calculated to invoke this reference, astonishingly clear even in a recorded version of the performance at the ToRoNaDa. Before the lights come up on stage, a projection appears on the wall: 'like certain refined forms of torture, household chores must be repeated as soon as they are done'.<sup>17</sup> The words disappear abruptly, accompanied by a jarring aural effect that seems a cross between thunder and the door to a prison cell clanging shut (Fig. 2.1). This aural trope will recur throughout the performance. As the play begins, four distinct tracks emerge. Felipe, at a piano, sings Sasanov's poems in Spanish while the English translations are projected on the wall. Meanwhile, Rodríguez enacts a variety of household tasks—the ones we were warned about in the opening projection. Sometimes she is the woman in the poems and sometimes she is another woman, engaged in routine work that parallels the lines of the poem in some way, and who, according to Maleczek, may not even know the women at Belén. All of this is punctuated by outbursts in English delivered by a woman, our contemporary, who is looking back over the past history of Belén. The fourth track is provided by Archer's design. Images collected by Archer of saints and photographs of women line the walls. Projected outlines of plants and flowers, giant in scale, infiltrate the stage with a mysterious menace.

In her review of *Belén* for the *Village Voice*, Alisa Solomon writes 'sound, text, and movement follow separate trajectories that sometimes intersect, sometimes run parallel, and sometimes, by contradicting each other, collide.' Solomon argues 'the clash and confluence of these events' results in

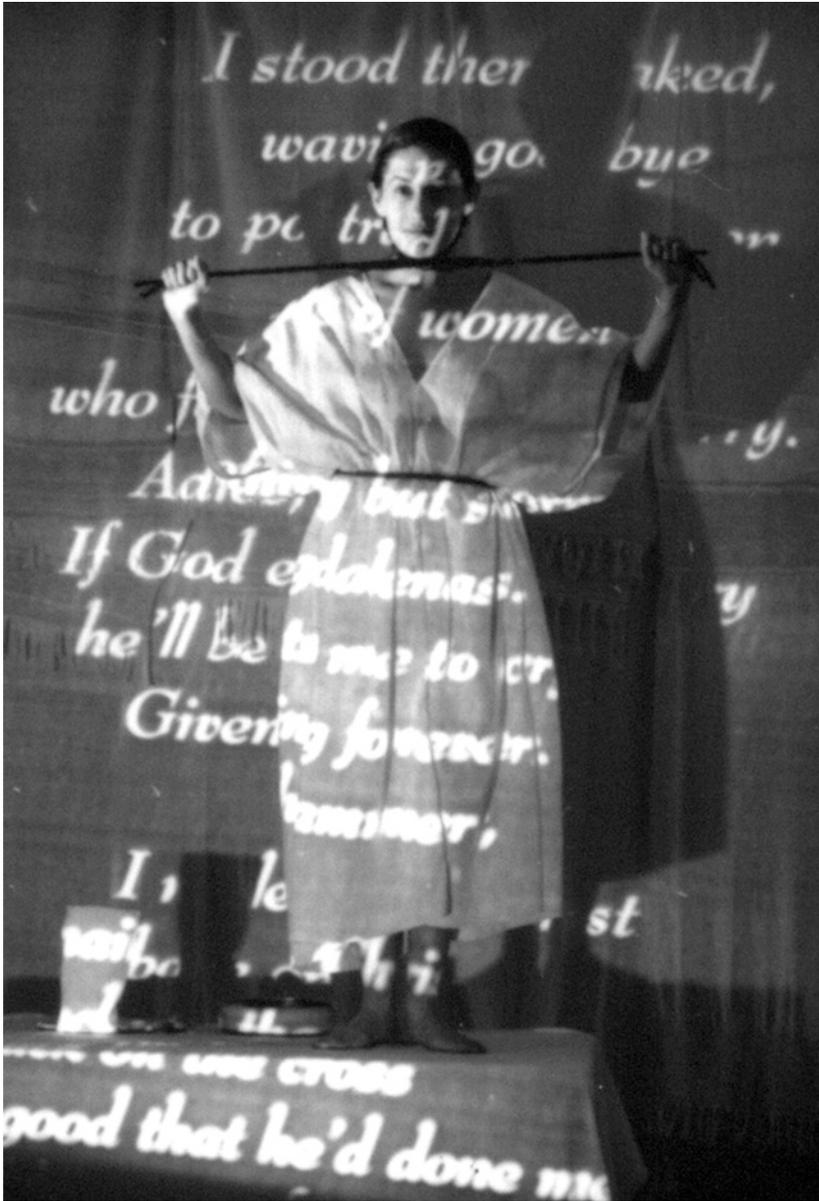


Fig. 2.1 Jesusa Rodriguez in *Las Horas de Belén*, 1999 with generous permission from Julie Archer

a complete, disquieting universe. More associative than narrative, the performance never actually tells the history of Belén. Rather, it summons Belén's ghosts—and their cousins from all the places women have been tormented—for a ghoulish yet gorgeous encounter.<sup>18</sup>

Space is crucial in the encounter Solomon describes; although Rodriguez and Felipe are near to each other, it is clear that they inhabit separate areas. The outbursts, performed by Monica Dionne, come from a lofted space above and away from Rodriguez and Felipe, while the projections appear on every available surface, including Rodriguez's body.

Solomon's description recalls Rokem's notion of staged spectres haunting history, one that reverberates with Marvin Carlson's *Haunted Stage*. Here, however, Belén's ghosts have gathered to haunt us with unfamiliar spirits: women whose records were long ago expunged; their histories deemed unimportant to Mexico City's scribes.

In her 2001 article for *Theatre Journal*, Roslyn Costantino mines the production's visual imagery for its subversive retelling of the history of racism that played an insidious role in the oppression of women in Mexico. In one particularly arresting scene, Rodriguez sets out flour and whisks eggs. We expect her to make bread. Instead, she undresses, smears herself with beaten egg, and covers herself in flour, whitening herself up before our eyes. Though this exploration is based in Mexican history, the production's imagery is expansive enough to evoke struggles of women throughout time and across the globe. 'Without speaking a word during the play', writes Solomon,

Rodriguez enacts women's timeless chores—ironing, sewing, cooking—in exacting ways, sometimes transforming these labors into stark images of women's subjugation. Her movement, neither realistic nor romantic, jerks and sputters ever so slightly, as if to emphasize the archetypal nature of this endless drudgery. Maleczek likens it to Meyerhold's biomechanics; Rodriguez says she found inspiration in watching stop-action films of growing plants.<sup>19</sup>

Rodriguez's distancing style of performance is juxtaposed with Felipe's impassioned singing and the tortured outbursts. Maleczek's use of binary tension, the alienating style of Rodriguez's performance, and epic storytelling techniques force the audience to confront a brutal history of women without sentimentality.

Where *Dead End Kids* makes use of ensemble playing to re-envision the past and present of nuclear power, *Belén* relies on virtuoso performances to magnify the lives of women who have been swept aside in history: Rodriguez's striking physical performance, the forceful and exuberant cabaret style music composed and performed by Felipe, and prominent and arresting projections by Archer that appear and disappear as if they have a life of their own. Sasanov's poems permeate the stage. They are sung by Felipe, projected on the wall, and wordlessly enacted by Rodriguez. Maleczek and company make the lives of their subjects in *Belén* as large in performance as they have been small in recorded history.

Maleczek's direction in *Belén* creates a space between the performer and her enactment and between the performers and each other, thereby augmenting the scale of presentation. The space between performers is emphasized by Felipe's singing and Rodriguez's near silence, the fact that Rodriguez appears not to be aware of Felipe's presence, and by placing Monica Dionne in an entirely separate area above and away from Rodriguez and Felipe for the outbursts. The projections, which give an impression of giant, two-dimensional puppets, seem driven by an unseen exterior force and help to create a sense of hyper-reality in which images and emotions are invested with acute intensity.

It is Rodriguez and Felipe's performance styles that establishes room between each of them and the audience. Rodriguez, Maleczek noted, is a seasoned cabaret performer and her natural instincts were for a broad, bold, and fluid physicality. Maleczek worked with Rodriguez to circumvent her physical routine, breaking her movement down into a precise unfolding of tiny gestures that add up to a larger picture. What results here, a physical landscape that seems to unfold in time lapse, has a jarring effect on the viewer. Felipe's singing and piano playing are so ferociously forceful that they prevent the audience from slipping into the easy comfort that performance by such an accomplished musician can induce. Felipe's passion and volume in the small space of the ToRaNaDa juxtaposed with Rodriguez's finely tuned alternation between stillness and hyperactivity and the grim humour that is incorporated into most of her scenarios keep the audience engaged but at bay, providing them with room to process what they are experiencing on an intellectual level.

The images projected onto Rodriguez's body are part of a pattern of tactics underscoring her corporeal presence. Roslyn Constantino's 2001 article makes the case that Rodriguez's figure embodies the struggle of Mexican feminist activists:

for the last 30 years in Mexico, where the female body has served as the stage upon which national identity has been constructed, feminist scholars, writers, and artists have devoted much energy to the task of locating the persistence of women's intervention into spaces to which they supposedly denied access as well as to representing women's resistance to systems designed to control every aspect of their life.<sup>20</sup>

The episode in which Rodriguez whites up with flour and the one in which she dances in her underwear with a knife, holding its glinting form against her skin, are also associated with this trope, as is her nudity in such close proximity to the audience. These images serve to spotlight Rodriguez's body, making it appear to be hypersensitive to stimuli and emphasizing its subjectivity to outside forces. These forces are what consigned the women of *Belén* to be prisoners. 'The hand that stretches out to strangle operates in full daylight and has many names', a projection warns us, 'Oppression, Poverty, Injustice, Dependence'.<sup>21</sup>

Both *Dead End Kids* and *Belén* make use of everyday life as a backdrop for the horrors that Maleczek and company require the audience to acknowledge. In *Dead End Kids*, manifestations of daily life appear as distinct episodes, such as the high school science fair. Other scenes, such as the one in which Mephistopheles appears to Faust with nine heads, are infused with a magical feeling. In *Belén*, there is no escape from the ominously ordinary. Every day elements may take on surreal qualities, but this is because of the way in which Rodriguez and Maleczek manipulate familiar objects. A trench coat on a hanger begins as a sewing project and becomes a dance partner and later a rapist. Costantino reports that the collaborators were moved by the then current news about 'unsolved rapes and murders of hundreds of young women working in the *maquila* factories in US-Mexico border towns. Official indifference to this violence echoed the stories that they were uncovering about' *Belén*'s women.<sup>22</sup> In this imagined version of another time and place, elements of everyday life morph into monstrosities.

As if nightmarish versions of recognizable objects weren't enough, a calculated strategy of interruptions further unsettles the audience. Flashes of light, the clanging sound that repeatedly signals the end of an episode, and the outbursts from the chained contemporary woman (Dionne) above our heads create a feeling of disjunction. Even Rodriguez's stop motion movement style keeps the audience from settling in. For the US audience, the singing in Spanish and outbursts and

projected words in English also amount to an interruptive strategy; although the projections of the poems mean that non-Spanish speakers can understand the words, the simultaneous use of two languages also establishes a complex process of reception, especially for bilingual members of the audience. These interruptive techniques unravel narrative threads and disrupt our sense of time.

Maleczek's unmooring of linear time gives the audience a taste of what it might be like to spend life in prison; routine days, with little to distinguish one from the next, Maleczek and her collaborators suggest, have deprived Belén's women of their sense of progression. Maleczek's strategy of interruption is also a practiced method of undermining conventional narrative structure, one that has long been advocated by feminist critics as a tactic for promoting non-patriarchal representation on stage.

### 'HISTORY NIBBLED INTO BEDS'

The close of the first poem in *Belén*, 'A Memory of Things to Come', reads

From Belén, I can see  
how they'll lock prisoners away  
in the arms of a star

Rats will nest in the archives:  
Our history nibbled into beds.<sup>23</sup>

Here Sasanov speaks simultaneously to a desire for acknowledgement of lost histories and the improbability of recovering records that would make such recognition possible. In *Belén* and *Dead End Kids* Akalaitis, Maleczek, and their collaborators sift through scraps of the past and piece them together to revisit forgotten episodes or reconstruct them from a point of view that has been relegated to the off-site storage of history. What these artists lack in historical documentation they make up for with political conviction and theatrical imagination.

Although *Dead End Kids*'s historical pastiche is distinct from *Belén*'s partisan iconography, both productions ask audiences to formulate their own 'idea' of internationalized American history. This is no less than what the highly collaborative development process for each production

demanded of its co-creators. The eclectic artistic backgrounds of these collaborators makes them particularly suited to such a task, providing them with a variety of approaches with which to interrogate research and respond theatrically. Mabou Mines insists upon a place for these figures and stories in the collective historical record by assuring their place on the stage night after night in performance.

Where Akalaitis’s project in *Dead End Kids* is more overtly political, Maleczek’s is in part a recuperative effort to revitalize forgotten and misunderstood figures, though her engagement with the famous scientist Marie Curie demonstrates that her initiative is a more expansive one. What distinguishes Mabou Mines’s staging of history is the degree to which interpretations are shaped by the contributions of collaborators working in concert. The results are representations that encompass a range of points of view about Mabou Mines’s subjects, insisting that historiography must acknowledge the multiple perspectives of its players and storytellers.

While *Dead End Kids* insists that the audience confront the dangers of nuclear proliferation and the patriarchal structure that enables it, *Belén* demands that the audience recognize the institution’s female ghosts, who have haunted the outskirts of history. By recognizing them, we assign them their rightful place in our record of the past and acknowledge the significance of subjugated women around the world and across time. These productions, furthermore, ask us to reimagine the contours of the historical narrative. By incorporating women’s work—baking, sewing, mothering—into the staged lives of their central characters, *Belén* and *Dead End Kids* interrogate the very meaning of what Bechtel describes as historical reference. What do we record, these artists ask us, why do we record it, and who creates accepted ideas about our shared history? Rather than present audiences with neatly bundled packages, Maleczek, Akalaitis, and Mabou Mines send us home with a puzzle, inviting us to participate in constructing another possible configuration of the past.

## NOTES

1. Lee Breuer, interview with the author conducted in May 2012.
2. Felipe was born in Argentina though she lives and works primarily in Mexico.

3. Program, *Belén: A Book of Hours*, presented at Teatro de La Capilla in Mexico City in 2000, Mabou Mines office archives.
4. All quotations by JoAnne Akalaitis in this chapter are taken from an interview conducted by the author in December 2011.
5. The Renaissance physician Paracelsus is credited with founding toxicology and studied alchemy and the occult, among other fields. General Leslie Richard Groves oversaw the secretive US government initiative to develop atomic weapons during World War II, known as the Manhattan Project.
6. All quotations by Ruth Maleczek in this chapter are taken from interviews conducted by the author between July 2011 and March 2012.
7. All quotations by Greg Mehrten in this chapter are taken from an interview conducted by the author in July 2011.
8. *Dead End Kids* is available for streaming through Cinema Guild at <http://store.cinemaguild.com/nontheatrical/product/1144.html>.
9. Ibid.
10. *Dead End Kids*, directed by JoAnne Akalaitis (New York: Cinema Guild, 1986), VHS.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. All quotations by Catherine Sasanov in this chapter are taken from e-mail correspondence between Sasanov and the author in November and December 2011.
15. *Song For New York* featured poems by Migdalia Cruz, Maggie Dubris, Patricia Spears Jones, Karen Kandel, and Imelda O'Reilly.
16. Programme, *Belén: A Book of Hours*, presented at Teatro de La Capilla in Mexico City in 2000, Mabou Mines office archives.
17. *Belén: A Book of Hours* (Mabou Mines, 1999), DVD. Copy provided to the author by Mabou Mines.
18. Alisa Solomon, "Prison Prayers," *Village Voice*, 25 May 1999.
19. Ibid.
20. Roselyn Costantino, 'Embodied Memory in Las Horas de Belen. A Book of Hours.' *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 4 (2001): 608.
21. *Belén: A Book of Hours*, DVD.
22. Costantino, 608.
23. Catherine Sasanov, *Belén: A Book of Hours*. Printed in production programme supplement by Mabou Mines, Mabou Mines office archives.

## WORKS CITED

- Bechtel, Roger *Past Performance: American Theatre and the Historical Imagination* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), Print.
- Belén: A Book of Hours* (Mabou Mines, 1999), DVD.
- Fuchs, Elinor. 'Staging the Obscene Body,' *TDR* 33, no. 1 (1989): 36, Print.
- Rokem, Freddie, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), Print.
- Weiss, Peter, 'Notes on the Contemporary Theater,' tr. Joel Agee, in *Essays on German Theater* (New York: Continuum, 1985), Print.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-137-59782-3>

Contemporary Approaches to Adaptation in Theatre

Reilly, K. (Ed.)

2018, XXIX, 357 p. 20 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-137-59782-3

A product of Palgrave Macmillan UK