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THEATER REVIEW | 'MABOU MINES DOLLHOUSE'

Fun-House Proportions Turn Dominance Upside Down

By MARGO JEFFERSON

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The setting for "A Doll's House," George Bernard Shaw said, was every suburb in Europe. We can now add the suburbs of every continent along with the high-rises. How many thousands of times since the play opened in 1879 has Nora Helmer slammed the door on her martinet husband and her child-bride self?

"A Doll's House" still has the force of social truth and the force of art. But how can new productions bring back the sense of revelation that first made people feel (in one writer's words), that Nora's slamming door had "reverberated across the roof of the world"?

You may have already read that in the "Mabou Mines Dollhouse," at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn through Dec. 7, Ibsen's constricted women are played by actresses nearly 6 feet tall, while the men, masters of their Victorian universe, are played by actors under 5 feet. And if you've been lucky enough to see the work of Lee Breuer over the years — "Oedipus at Colonus" "The Warrior Ant," "Peter and Wendy," "The Shaggy Dog Animation" — you know that he's a wizard-director, an alchemist who blends ideas, genres, styles, texts and technologies to make new kinds of theater.

He bases his adaptation on the knowledge that our bodies instinctively crave order, that from infancy on we try to control the world's scale and proportions. That's why the dwarfs and giants of folk tales are powerful; likewise the fantasies of Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll. (Not to mention the centuries of false claims that because women were smaller than men, they must be inferior to them.)

The stage at St. Ann's is wide and deep. It is framed by red-velvet curtains with gold tassels, and a chandelier hangs center stage. Welcome to a 19th-century theater. Stagehands enter with a dollhouse frame in beige and Easter-egg blue. Its walls are the confines for much of the play: the little door that Nora (Maude Mitchell) and her friend Kristine Linde (Honora Fergusson) must crawl through on their knees, the diminutive furniture they crowd onto in full gowns with bustles, the tiny tea cups they sip from and the toy piano they play to emphasize their more sensitive reflections.

The set of Narelle Sissons, the costumes of Meganne George, the expressionistic lighting of Mary Louise Geiger: all are of a piece and look exactly right.

Enter the men: Torvald Helmer (Mark Povinelli), the paterfamilias and newly appointed bank manager; Dr. Rank, his suavely dissolute friend (Ricardo Gil); and Nils Krogstadt (Kristopher Medina), a bank clerk whose shady past has led to a side profession as loan shark. They wear perfectly cut Victorian jackets and trousers (though Krogstadt's clothes are seedier, and his green clerk's spectacles look menacing). They swagger through the doorway, smoke cigars and slap one another on the back. They are like toy soldiers.

Meanwhile Nora scurries and flutters about, tossing her flaxen curls, wheedling money out of Torvald with desperate coquettishness and trying to cover up that she has borrowed money from Krogstadt, whom Torvald

despises. Krogstadt tries to blackmail Nora; Kristine, a widow made stern and sad by a loveless marriage and low-paying work, watches her with envy, pity and finally with horror.

Everyone lies; everyone keeps secrets. (Torvald believes that he does neither; his power gives him the luxury of emotional obtuseness.) The plot joins suspense with psychological consequences perfectly. Still, we have lived through many productions of "A Doll's House." If this were just a new high-concept one, it would be a cheat.

Instead Mr. Breuer gives us a passionate allegory that works — and plays — on many levels. The men embody small-minded convention and stunted possibilities. The women's big forms exude trapped energy, but they also remind us of the outsize roles that women played in the Victorian imagination. There they were angels, monsters, delectable maidens and decadent temptresses. Mr. Povinelli makes us feel Torvald's repressive sexual virility at every turn. Ms. Mitchell keeps us tense to the point of anguish with her ingratiating little cries and compulsive movements.

There is such physical intensity here. Actors faint, shout, hurl furniture and lurk in corners to spy on one another. Often, when a character speaks intimately, the listener moves along the outside wall of the dollhouse, as if on the edge of the speaker's consciousness. The exaggerations are true to Ibsen. Emotional violence always pulses beneath his stern prose.

Mr. Breuer loves to play passion against parody. His "Dollhouse" is an extravaganza of 19th-century theater conventions: the romantic grandeur of dance and opera; the lavish declamations and gestures of melodrama (arms outflung, trembling hands clasped). There is even a pianist (Ning Yu) who underscores peak moments with appropriately dramatic period music. (I recognized pieces by Grieg.) And — a grand visual touch — her piano is encased in a large fake one whose black top becomes part of the stage.

Nora's last, devastating confrontation with Torvald is staged as an opera, played to us and to an audience of husband-and-wife puppets who suddenly appear in evening dress. (I couldn't hear all the words, though, and I wanted to.)

Mr. Breuer keeps tossing theatrical ideas our way, too. Did I like them all equally? No. Does that matter? No. The whole experience is so fascinating — thrilling here, confounding there — that it must be seen. The night I saw "Mabou Mines Dollhouse" there was a lot of laughter. Some of it was a response to the parody, some a response to modern, broadly sexual scenes. But I think more was going on. I think what I heard was the laughter of pained recognition (who hasn't seen a woman make a fool of herself to get something she needs from a powerful man?) and of chagrin (we've all had to admit that someone we loved turned out to be an emotional dwarf).

As the play ends, we watch Nora disappear, hear Torvald cry out her name and catch a chilling glimpse of their young daughter on a rocking horse. For us it isn't just the slammed door. It is the lives on either side. What will these people make of themselves now? And what will they do to each other?

MABOU MINES DOLLHOUSE

From Henrik Ibsen's "Doll's House" with snippets of "The Vikings of Helgaland." Adaptation and direction by Lee Breuer. Music by Eve Beglarian; sets by Narelle Sissons; lighting by Mary Louise Geiger; costumes by Meganne George; puppetry, Jane Catherine Shaw; sound by Edward Cosla; choreography by Martha Clarke, Eamonn Farrell, Clove Galilee, Erik Liberman, Ms. Shaw and Norman Snow; dramaturgy, Maude Mitchell and Jocelyn Clarke; stage manager, Martha Donaldson; production manager, Jim Findlay; technical director and production supervisor, J. Ryan Graves. Produced for Mabou Mines by Lisa Harris. Presented by Arts at St. Ann's. At St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water Street, at Dock Street, Brooklyn.

WITH: Maude Mitchell (Nora Helmer), Mark Povinelli (Torvald Helmer), Kristopher Medina (Nils Krogstadt), Honora Fergusson (Kristine Linde), Ricardo Gil (Dr. Rank), Lisa Harris (Helene), Ning Yu (the Pianist), Tate Katie Mitchell (Emmy Helmer), Zachary Houppert Nunns and Matthew Forker (alternating as Ivar Helmer) and Sophie Forker (Dream Figure).