

# Mabou Mines' *DollHouse* at the Kennedy Center, Reviewed

Posted by Chris Klimek on Oct. 21, 2011 at 3:45 pm



The New York-based experimental theater company Mabou Mines' puppet-assisted production of *Peter & Wendy*, which played at Arena Stage in 2007, was a perfect union of format and material, one that didn't skimp on the darkness at the heart of **J.M. Barrie's** tale of a boy who refuses to grow up. *Mabou Mines DollHouse* – the troupe's baroque-bordering-on-grotesque interpretation of **Henrik Ibsen's** 19th century shocker *A Doll's House* – is less whimsical and more lurid, albeit far less shocking than Ibsen's women's-lib affirming play (though he resisted that reading) probably felt upon its premiere in 1879.

This glossier gloss, first staged in 2003, takes the infantilizing terms of endearment with which the banker Torvald addresses his wife, Nora – “my little songbird,” “my helpless little thing,” etc. – as reverse stage directions: Here all three male roles are performed by adult actors barely more than half the height of the show's adult women. The set, by **Narelle Sissons**, is an enlarged but not life-sized replica of the doll's house given to Nora and Torvald's children at the beginning of the play; its furniture scaled is for the men, naturally. So the way the women of the era were expected to reduce themselves emotionally for the comfort of their men here becomes a matter of physics, too.

In case **Maude Mitchell's** fearless, child-voiced performance as Nora – wherein she spends much of the longish first act on her knees or on her back, groveling for the bank notes Torvald dispenses like doggie treats – doesn't creep you out enough, there're also hallucinations involving strobe lights and horned beasts. Again and again, director **Lee Breuer** pauses the piece to acknowledge its artifice: The stagehands emerge from their hiding places to watch Torvald and Nora enjoy (or “enjoy”) marital relations, for instance; and when Torvald (**Kristopher Medina**, at last night's performance; he shares the role with **Mark Povinelli**) complains that knitting is “awfully Chinese,” **Ning Yu**, the pianist performing **Eve Beglarian's** tinkly score, stands up in a huff and must be coaxed back with the plea, “It's in the script.”

Hey, if the Muppets can get away with it, why shouldn't these guys?

If Act 1 feels like **David Lynch** in his less assured, *Inland Empire* mode, Act 2 is positively **Baz Luhrmann**, right down to the bombastic singing (lip-syncing, I'm pretty sure). Nora finally asserts herself physically. The scene wherein she pleads with Torvald not to check his mail, dreading the revelation that awaits him there, here finds her throwing a napkin over his head and carrying him back to his chair. Medina and Linde earn some laughs with a slapstick sex scene, but later, when Torvald tells his wife, “I wouldn't be a man if this feminine helplessness did not make you doubly attractive!,” he's abed alone, humping the mattress. That bird has flown.

Nora's liberation from him, if that's what it is, finally swells the production to spectacular proportions, and it is a jaw-dropper. It's surely another in-joke when Torvald is given to remark that Nora's performance of the Tarantella at the New Year's Eve ball “strictly speaking, overstepped the proprieties of art,” but if you can get tickets tonight or tomorrow, that quandary is well worth chewing over yourself.

*Mabou Mines DollHouse* is on stage at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater through Saturday. \$30-\$50.