

JewishCurrents

FEB

14

2025



**ALISA SOLOMON
(CONTRIBUTING
WRITER):**

What is the role of an avant-garde artist during a revolution? The great experimental theater director Lee Breuer (1937–2021) pondered that question through his renegade artwork amid the student and worker uprisings in Paris of May 1968. Breuer was based in Paris at the time for a few years of Euro-wandering, along with fellow artists with whom he would soon form the ground-shifting theater company Mabou Mines when they returned to the United States in 1970. As a member of the Mabou Mines collective for the five decades between its founding and his death, Breuer remained a brilliant, bohemian iconoclast. He created ingenious new performance forms that he called “animations” and also radically adapted classics: His *Gospel at Colonus* (1983) transposed Sophocles into the Black church, and his *Peter and Wendy* (1996, based on J.M. Barrie’s original) starred one actor as Wendy—and as the voice of all the other characters, represented by entrancing puppets. For *Mabou Mines Dollhouse* (2003), Breuer cast Ibsen’s canonical drama with men under five feet tall and women nearly six feet tall on a miniaturized set, so that the main character, Nora, physically chafed against a constricting world built by and for men. And for *Lear* (1990), Breuer reversed the genders entirely so that Shakespeare’s disintegrating protagonist transformed into a mother of three sons. (Full disclosure: I served as the dramaturg for *Lear*.)

But before all that, Breuer tried to make a movie called *Moi-même*—a super-meta satirical short about a pre-pubescent boy trying to make a movie about himself during May 1968 in Paris. Breuer shot many hours of silent black-and-white film in Paris that year, intending to dub in

dialogue later. He never finished the project. More than half a century later, Breuer's son, the filmmaker Mojo Lorwin, began a collaboration with his father, which he continued on his own following Breuer's death. Lorwin wrote a script and hired actors (some of them the children of original cast members) to voice the lines. Composers and sound designers added underscoring and effects. And Lorwin edited it all into a coherent shape—which is not to say an undemanding, straightforward story. Rather, *Moi-même* revels in the moody abstractions and disjunctive narrative style of the French New Wave—and of Breuer's later work. (Jean-Luc Godard himself appears in *Moi-même* in a cameo role.) The finished film—lambent, layered, and lyrical—will have its [New York premiere](#) on February 27th at L'Alliance, followed by a Q&A with Lorwin.

The way Breuer's son completed the film uncannily mirrors the doubling at its core: Kevin, the film's protagonist, is played by two actors—one a child, the other a budding young man; a jump-cut or dissolve sometimes replaces one actor with the other, while some scenes include both actors. Occasionally, we see Kevin in bed, dreaming. The events that follow could be from his dreams, from the film he is making, or from the frame film in which he is the narrating hero. The viewer is never sure. These scenes include images of him riding in the back of a luxurious taxi through gorgeously gray Parisian streets, pitching his movie to creepy men to procure “bread” to fund it, observing some goons on the cab's running board shooting down a woman in the road, and, often, lighting up a smoke.

Along the way, *Moi-même* presents only small glimpses of the general strikes and demonstrations that were roiling Paris at the time: a fleeting shot of a poster of Che, a couple of quick cuts to footage of student protests outside the Sorbonne, some vague crowd chants in the soundtrack, and a wry line here or there, like when Kevin is advised to “cut the politics and consolidate the characters.” Despite the setting, no one could quite call this *cinéma engagé*, work intended to support

political action; to Kevin, “my film is everything,” even as May ‘68 activists were taking over factories, universities, and cultural institutions. And if Breuer participated in the [famous occupation of the Théâtre de l’Odéon](#) (where his fellow American experimental theater makers, the pacifist-anarchists Julian Beck and Judith Malina of the Living Theater, joined in), he never publicly mentioned it.

And yet, the slogan of that occupation — “Power to the imagination” — is not only quoted in *Moi-même*; its spirit permeates it. “The theatre, the cinema, art and literature etc., have all become industries under the control of an elite bent on alienation and profiteering! Sabotage the cultural industry!” proclaimed a leaflet distributed at the occupation of the theater. “You are art! You are the revolution!” In its dreamy 60 minutes that take up questions of personal and artistic legacy, *Moi-même* reminds us, too, of the abiding commitment beneath Breuer’s — and Mabou Mines’s — oeuvre: that refusing commercial narrative logics can help inspire new visions for the world.