

# Theater Company's Lost French New Wave Film Gets Its New York Premiere

Future members of Mabou Mines produced the footage over 50 years ago. Now it's a film with new dialogue spoken by children of the original cast.



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The French film industry was hardly the only force spurring the barricades, Molotov cocktails and worker strikes that were synonymous with Paris in May 1968. But the French government's attempt to fire the head of the Cinémathèque Française earlier that year supplied crucial kindling. And while the Cannes Film Festival managed to open amid the unrest, with a glittery restoration of "Gone With the Wind," Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut were among those who helped scuttle the festival at the halfway point.

This is the environment in which Lee Breuer and other ambitious New York theater artists found themselves dubbing French films into English for the Hong Kong market. They were also absorbing lessons in elliptical, pugnacious, visually striking theater from the likes of the Berliner Ensemble and the Living Theater, a group of New Yorkers living in voluntary exile in Europe.

By 1970, Breuer had returned to New York and formed Mabou Mines, the influential Off Off Broadway theater troupe. (The other founding members included fellow dubbers Ruth Maleczek and David Warrilow, as well as JoAnne Akalaitis and Philip Glass.)

But first the Paris-based gang set out to produce a silent film, called "Moi-même," about a 13-year-old boy who tries to create a film collective through begging, hustling and sometimes armed robbery. They wrote some provisional lines of dialogue on a few envelopes and grabbed cameras, bankrolled by the man who owned the dubbing studio.

They began shooting just as the protests were winding down — and then their unfinished project ground to its own halt. Now, over 50 years later, “Moi-même” will finally make its New York debut at L’Alliance New York on Thursday, co-directed and co-written by Breuer and his son Mojo Lorwin, who wasn’t born until 1984. Additional screenings are scheduled for next month at Yale University Film Archives (April 24) and as part of a film festival in Athens, Ohio.



“We all knew the basic contours of the story from sitting around and talking to Lee, and the assumption throughout was that we were going to dub it and have a script when we got finished with the shoot,” said Kevin Mathewson, who was 13 when he played the film’s central role. (His parents were academics who had befriended met Breuer and Maleczech at a Christmas party.) “We just never got around to that.”

The “Moi-même” footage resurfaced in 2009 after Breuer had returned to Paris to film a production of one of Mabou Mines’s most famous works, “Dollhouse.” A few years later, his son became involved and had more modest ambitions. “I thought I might put together a little montage of the footage for Mabou’s 50th anniversary,” Lorwin said. “I really looked at it for the first time, and that’s when I realized there could be a feature there.”

Although Breuer was in poor health by the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, he and his son discussed the project via Zoom. “There was this beautiful footage and a bare-bones plot, but not much else,” said Lorwin, who also had a notebook from the time in which Breuer devoted some 30 pages to snippets of dialogue and ideas for scenes.

“Lee remembered a lot of names and gave me the skeleton of the plot,” Lorwin said. “But it wasn’t until after he died in 2021 that I really tried to channel him and figure out what he had tried to do.” Then began the painstaking process of creating a script and the accompanying soundtrack for the 65-minute “Moi-même,” essentially a French New Wave film reconstructed in hindsight. In several cases, the new dialogue is spoken by children of the original cast members.

The L’Alliance film curator Jake Perlin, who called the original footage “an enthusiasm in search of a film,” described May 1968 as a major moment in film history as well as political history. “For anyone who’s interested in French New Wave cinema moving into post-New Wave, 1968 is the pivotal event,” Perlin said. “Godard is on the barricades, but so is Philippe Garrel,” another French film director, “who was 20 at the time. And the fact that a bunch of New Yorkers were running around capturing this on film — I was all over that.”

And when Godard wasn’t on the barricades or at Cannes in 1968, he also managed to make a cameo in “Moi-même.” “He just showed up one day,” said Mathewson, who is traveling from Brazil to see his 13-year-old self at the L’Alliance screening. “He stood there laughing at the production, and then he walked through.”

Lorwin pointed out that many of Breuer’s early scripts use film metaphors, particularly the Beckettian early works that helped cement Mabou Mines’s reputation. But he never fully understood what his father meant by them until he saw the raw “Moi-même” footage in 2020 and gained new appreciation for what Breuer was attempting to do.

“Lee had this incredible theater career,” he said, “but he was always talking about making a movie. I feel like this was maybe the one that got away.”