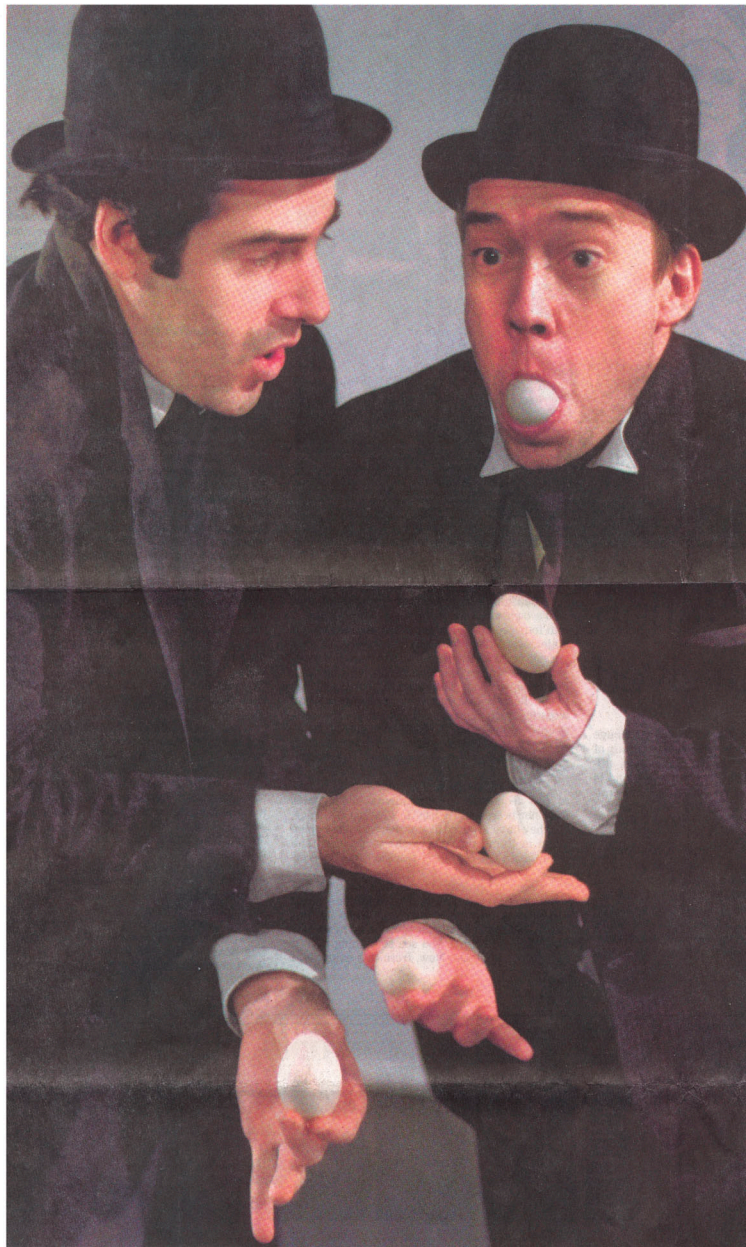


THEATER



Geoff Sobelle, left, and Trey Lyford in "All Wear Bowlers." Above right, Jacob Grigolia-Rosenbaum in "Boozy." J. J. Titone

The Avant-Garde Goes to Clown School

A new generation of experimental performers discover you don't have to be humorless to be taken seriously.

By JASON ZINOMAN

THE old stereotype about theater in New York was that you went uptown to forget your troubles and downtown to be reminded of them. But by the looks of the current season, the reverse seems to be true. There are still plenty of musicals and one-man shows on Broadway, but the classic boulevard comedy — once the backbone of commercial theater — has become scarce. By contrast, Off Off Broadway, home base for the avant-garde of Big Ideas and Serious Intentions, is filled with vaudevillian high jinks and low-brow satire.

Experimental companies in Lower Manhattan like Les Freres Corbusier have been fragmenting narratives and deconstructing historical characters in pursuit of a few laughs. The Civilians has imbued a form not known for its hilarity — the docudrama — with a strong sense of humor. And in Brooklyn, the adventurous outfits Radiohole and the National Theater of the United States are mounting deliriously oddball entertainments that mix brainy references and surreal slapstick. In these works and others, high and low culture merrily coexist, and the performers continually draw attention to theater as theater.

Consider "All Wear Bowlers," which reopens on Friday for five weeks of performances at Here Arts Center. It is easily the most original and funny show this year. Trey Lyford and Geoff Sobelle star as two Laurel and Hardy-like silent film actors who find themselves lost and lonely on an empty stage after accidentally popping out of a movie screen. It's a scenario straight out of Samuel Beckett and, naturally, "Waiting for Godot" is referenced within the first minute.

As soon as they stumble onstage, these tramps look frightened by the audience and racked with insecurity about being away from home. They comfort themselves with nonstop shtick — magic, pratfalls and ventriloquism; humor is their strategy for fighting off their nightmarish reality. And it is the particular triumph of these actors that they turn their neuroses and anxieties into hilarious comedy.

In one scene, they switch roles with the audience when they pull up chairs onstage and stare out with looks of supreme concentration. Time passes silently. One clown scratches his head, looking perplexed: "I don't get it," he says to his willier friend, who provides the explanation: "It's avant-garde."

The joke highlights experimental theater's newfound love affair with comedy: once inscrutable, the avant-garde can now laugh at itself.

In a recent interview, Alex Timbers, the 26-year-old artistic director of Les Freres Corbusier, said his work was, among other things, a satire of avant-garde artists like Philip Glass and Meredith Monk. "When I was in college, those were people that I thought of when I thought of avant-garde theater," Mr. Timbers said. "And they were completely humorless. But then I moved to New York and realized the best



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

'ALL WEAR BOWLERS'

HERE ARTS CENTER
145 Avenue of the Americas, at Dominy Street, South Village. Opens Friday for a run through May 29.

'BOOZY'

45 BLEECKER STREET THEATER
Previews May 1 through May 10, opens May 11 for a run through May 29.

avant-garde is very funny."

Even now Peter Brook, 81, the innovator who brought us the more than nine-hour epic "Mahabharata," calls his latest work, "Tierno Bokar," a research, because, he says, he doesn't want audiences to think they are going to see "fun theater."

Still, Mr. Brook notwithstanding, the avant-garde's reputation for humorlessness has always been something of a bum rap. The chaotic, live-wire productions of Richard Foreman, for example, can be as delightfully silly as a Looney Tunes cartoon; he is "happiest when people are laughing a lot," Mr. Foreman has said, "even though I have some friends who get very offended when people in the audience laugh." And the Wooster Group, which has particularly influenced the latest generation of experimental theater troupes like Corbusier, has always been fascinated by the art of comedy. Routines of Lenny Bruce and Pigmeat Markham were inspirations for their early work. One of the most memorable video clips from "House/Lights," which ran earlier this year at St. Ann's Warehouse, was from Mel Brooks's "Young Frankenstein."

Corbusier's most recent work, "Boozy: the Life, Death and Subsequent Vindication of Le Corbusier and, More Importantly, Robert Moses" has the overlong, nonsensical title that is one of his company's signatures; their last play, a drama about the Church of Scientology cast entirely with children, was called "A Very Merry Unauthorized Scientology Pageant." Returning

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The Avant-Garde Enrolls in Clown School

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on May 1 at 45 Bleecker Street Theater, "Boozy" is a tongue-in-cheek history of the rise and fall of Robert Moses. Conceived by Mr. Timbers, Juliet Chia and David Evans Morris, the show is presented as an all-out attack on the senses. The story is told through pop music, sendups of various theatrical and television genres and a surprising amount of dance. Oh, yes, there are also several live bunions onstage.

If anything, it is too eager to please; the hectic actors are so wor-

ried about losing the audience's attention that they skim the surface of the material. You wish it were a little more boring, or at least a little slower, to avoid sensory overload. Judged as a thoughtful meditation on Robert Moses, the show may be somewhat unsatisfying. But looked at as a light-hearted comedy, it's a delightfully good time.

"Increasingly, artists are using old comedy formulas to provide meaning without being ponderous and weighty," said Vallee Gantner, the artistic director of P.S. 122. "Companies are also trying to hit audiences

in a multisensory way — and part of that is to make a joke out of everything."

The downside of this kind of comic accessibility is that most of this downtown theater humor is as shrill and broad as a sub-par "Saturday Night Live" sketch. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the New York International Fringe Festival. When it was founded in 1997, the Fringe featured a potpourri of confessional solo shows, silly musicals, self-indulgent adaptations of classics and wildly ambitious new works. Then came "Urinetown," an ironic,

self-mocking musical, and everything changed. Once it transferred to Off Broadway in 2001 and then to Broadway later that year, the Fringe turned into the Sundance of downtown theater.

It's now a magnet for producers, and while it remains a huge and fairly diverse showcase, the commercial influence is palpable. In many of the shows you feel that the artists are auditioning for a shot on a bigger stage. And the menu has become heavily weighted with zany musicals and outrageously named skitlike plays.

The giddy tone of the Fringe festival has too frequently been taken as

the norm. In Off Off Broadway houses over the past three months, I have seen four comedies in which murder is played for laughs, three sendups of the John Hughes film "The Breakfast Club," two clown shows and a pair of humans playing puppets.

What many Off Off Broadway shows are offering is actually a very accessible commercial entertainment in the wrapping of an experimental theater piece. It's not that surprising given that the old distinctions between Off Off Broadway — a term coined in early 1990's by the Village Voice critic Jerry Tallmer to describe the rambunctious theater emerging downtown in coffeeshops, lofts and on other makeshift stages — and the rest of the theater world have blurred. Broad-

way performers can be found slumming in black boxes and a downtown artist like Julie Taymor works for Disney.

At the same time, though, small theaters are doing what they always have: providing an alternative to the mainstream. With middlebrow comedy writers defecting to television and film, light and silly comedies have become more difficult to locate outside of Broadway musical theater where such frivolity often costs too much to enjoy properly.

Shows like "All Wear Bowlers" and "Boozy" may not signal a new golden age of innovation, but they are clever, slickly produced and consistently entertaining. In this often dull theater scene, that's about as avant-garde as it gets.