

# The Electric Company

Troupe Is All Wired Up, Even Fired Up. But Let's Not Mention That.

By Tamara Jones  
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Benoit Maubrey is inspecting the costumes of his avant-garde dance troupe, a critical part of every rehearsal ever since the unfortunate flaming tutu incident.

Elizabeth Brodin is on the stage of the empty Clark Street Playhouse in Arlington, where Die Audio Gruppe performs its electronic ballet tonight. Brodin wears a transparent Plexiglas skirt that resembles a disc jockey's mixing board, mounted with cheap speakers, looping devices, solar cells, sensors, amplifiers, receivers and computer chips housing digital memories.

Brodin twirls in slow motion, and

her tutu is suddenly broadcasting talk radio. "Ten percent of the total budget," it intones angrily, before drifting across the AM dial to a commercial in progress. "On store shelves now!" the tutu announces brightly. Brodin moves her arms in graceful arcs and picks up static. Lots of static. She turns up the volume on her tutu, creating an infernal racket. Maubrey is pleased. He loves static.

Maubrey, a 43-year-old American born of French parents, considers his Berlin-based Audio Gruppe more orchestra than ballet, and feedback is the music. His audio costumes capture sound waves in whatever site they are performing and then instantly distort them as they are

broadcast via Radio Free Tutu. The ballerinas also use tiny hand-held samplers that record five-second snippets of sound—a glass breaking, a knock on the door, a curse—to play along with the static.

"Essentially we're a sound event," says Maubrey, a reedy English literature graduate from Georgetown who began experimenting with electronic performance art 15 years ago after he grew tired of creating abstract paintings of torsos. "One morning I woke up and just couldn't paint anymore," he says. So he started putting speakers and cassette players in clothes. For a while, he had a group known as the Herd, which walked around Berlin wearing

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suits of synthetic animal skin wired to broadcast jungle sounds.

"It just became boring because there was nothing to control anymore," Maubrey recalls.

The electronic tutus were developed in 1989, and the 10-member Audio Gruppe began choreographing ballets set to the bizarre sounds dictated by their 15-pound skirts. The experiment has been a great success, Maubrey believes, since the group now performs at a dozen international festivals a year and recently won a lucrative German prize for "flexibility and mobility." But polishing the act involved a lot of trial and error, and also a fire extinguisher on at least one occasion.

The tutus are 30 watts, he notes, "the equivalent of a decent ghetto blaster," and the batteries powering them are 12 volts, "like a car battery. You can get sparks. Once, when we first started, a ballerina's tutu caught on fire. The dancer's saying 'Help, help, my tutu is burning!' Elizabeth, do you remember how we put Isabelle's fire out?"

Brodin pauses from her rehearsal. "I think we just took off the tutu," she says. "We smothered her or something."

"I think someone got a fire extinguisher," Maubrey adds. "It wasn't a bad fire. We were a little afraid. Plexiglas is a petroleum product. It was a very hot day, and her battery did have a short circuit. Let's talk about something else."

Maubrey's own role in the performance involves wearing an audio smoking jacket. He also plays his favorite character, Feedback Fred, who discovers a speaker on his back and becomes a prisoner of its noise. Feedback Fred tumbles around the stage in a frenzy, crying "Stop the noise!"—but his own despair is broadcast back to him over and over. Kafka meets Crazy Eddie.

The mini-samplers—\$4 devices cannibalized from Dictaphone key chains—are the most fun for Die Audio Gruppe. The performers record bursts of sound wherever they go. In

New York City for the Buskers Fair last week, they came upon a Chinese woman on a bench in Battery Park.

"In New York, I don't know, I guess people freak out because you see these people who talk and talk to nobody there," observes Maubrey. They recorded the stranger's Chinese babbling. "When we started sampling her, she left," Maubrey says. But her madness was captured and is performance art now.

Maubrey lives in a 700-year-old village an hour outside Berlin in what used to be communist East Germany, where an electronic tutu would have once meant certain arrest by the secret police. The 200 inhabitants of Baitz have embraced Maubrey's strange art.

"Essentially we're working with what we find in space and turn it into sound," Maubrey goes on. "In our little village, we pick up the clock tower. We have seven dancers picking up that DONG-DONG. We can loop it. We can pitch it down, DONG-DONNNNNNNG, or we can pitch it up, dongdongdongdong. The local village people find that fascinating, because it's a normal sound they hear every day.

"You can turn that whole village into one big dong concert, and they're very, very happy you're using something that belongs to them."

The local firemen once built a big midnight bonfire for Die Audio Gruppe to dance around and record, and on a trip to Munich, the corps recorded a yodeler and walked around the streets in yodeling tutus. In Oslo, it was a ship's horn in the harbor.

"We're just taking their sound and making something new out of it," Maubrey says.

He cannot decide what sound he would take from Washington, where he spent his youth. "Hmmm," he ponders. "I don't know what sound Washington makes. Maybe get a street musician playing bluegrass, a fiddler."

Only four members of the ensemble, including Maubrey, traveled to the States, transporting their tutus in huge hatboxes lined with bubble wrap. Talking their way through airport security has been a challenge "ever since Lock-

erbie," Maubrey says. "Basically everything here could be used to make a small bomb."

They ended up in Arlington this week courtesy of Robert McNamara, artistic director of the Scena Theatre who makes it his business to find strange performers.

"Part of the education of Washington is to have unusual artistic events," says McNamara, who is also involved in a Danish deconstructionist version of "Antigone" featuring videos, conveyor belts and a lot of sand. He also points out that he has had an actor play Hitler on stilts.

Brodin and Irina Korneyeva, a Ukrainian artist, are rehearsing a number called "Die Bluemchen," which is German for "Little Flowers." Lighting is everything in the performance, since it provides the energy for the gizmos that capture and play back the sound waves. If the dancers wave their fingers across a solar cell on the tutu, less light is received and the sound is different. "Die Bluemchen" is supposed to sound like birds twittering, but the lighting isn't right and the piece sounds more like a police helicopter buzzing a flock of parakeets.

"We don't know yet how it will affect us," Brodin says, about wearing so much electronic gear. "With the weight of the tutus, of course you can't do pirouettes because it has its own inertia. It would keep taking you." She spins her arm dramatically, suggesting a ballerina set in perpetual motion by tutu-vision torque.

Maubrey is discussing lights with the theater's lighting engineer, Benjamin Hay. Maubrey would love to use a searchlight but restrains himself. "It's too hot to handle," he laments.

Hay needs to know what color light to use on the little flowers.

"Blue? Green? Red? Purple?"

"Green," says Korneyeva.

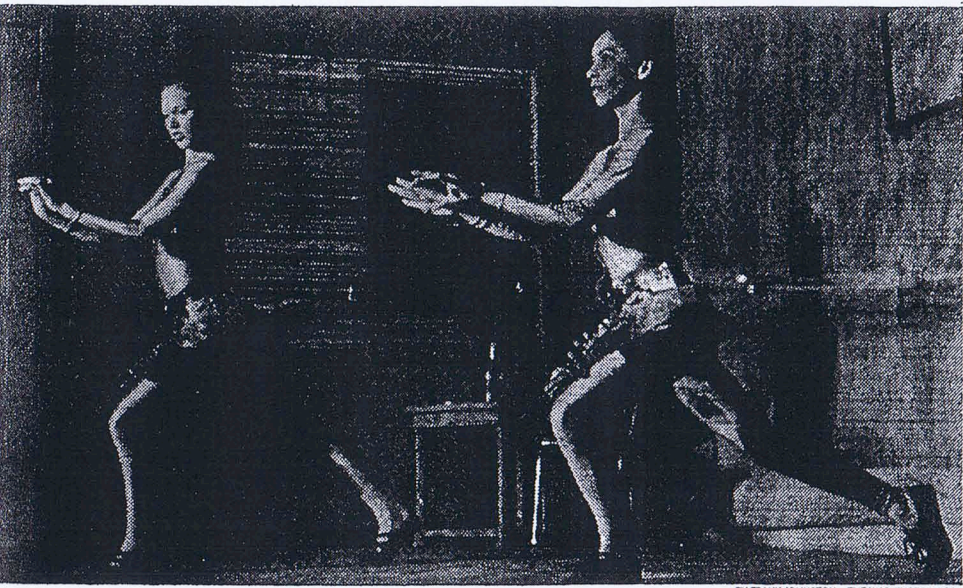
"I can probably scare up some green somewhere."

Maubrey is contemplating a smoke bomb. "Should we use his fog machine?" he wonders aloud. "How fast does that smoke go away?"

"Not terribly," Hay replies. "It's just enough to keep us from dying from carbon monoxide, basically."

"Between that and the flaming tutu..." McNamara interjects.

"We weren't going to talk about that anymore," Maubrey says firmly.



Die Audio Gruppe dancers Irina Korneyeva and Elizabeth Brodin do the (really) electric slide.

BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST