

Books

KEN URBAN

A HAPPY UNION

Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart, and the SITI Company

by Scott T. Cummings

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In the creation of new theater, no partnership is as complicated as that of playwright and director. Countless textbooks, seminars, and journal articles devote themselves to uncovering the secret of making this relationship work. Is it a shared aesthetic grounded in a common understanding of the play? A similar background and personal history, which, in turn, allows the two artists to speak the same language? Is it precisely the opposite, where a difference of opinions and ideas creates productive friction? Or does it come down to communication, a need for a clear set of ground rules about the process? Playwrights are more than happy to share an anecdote—or four—about their own experiences, both good and bad, with directors to whom they have entrusted a new play. But all this collective wisdom often boils down to a truism: when it works, it works. And in those cases when it doesn't? Imagine a bad first date that never seems to end: a relationship that just wasn't meant to be.

Cummings's recent study is an extended meditation on one of those happy unions. Playwright Chuck Mee (as he more familiarly called in the American theater) and director Anne Bogart have worked together repeatedly, enjoying a long friendship. This comes as no surprise, as their aesthetics share much in common: a love of the irrational and spectacle coupled with a general disdain for realism's clarity. Mee's plays are highly open to directorial interpretation, and Bogart's reputation is built upon visually striking productions that often radically reimagine a text. Mee has described his attitude toward directors working on his plays as "I hope you have a wonderful time with it. I'll be back for opening night," an attitude of trust that no doubt gives Bogart a lot of room to experiment. By chronicling both Mee's and Bogart's long development

as artists, Cummings reveals a deeper kinship between the two that goes a long way to explaining the success of their working relationship, which he sees culminating in their collaboration on *bobrauschenbergamerica* at the 2001 Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville.

I first became aware of

Mee's work in the 1990s with his loose and thrilling adaptations of the Greeks, but Mee's career in the theater extends back to the early 1960s, when his early one-acts were produced in the nascent off-off Broadway scene. Mee turned away from theater in the decades that followed, pursuing a career as a political historian, but returned to writing plays in the 1980s, in part due to a growing frustration at the objectivity and Newtonian causality required of the historian. Writing for the stage freed Mee from those shackles and allowed him to develop his collage technique, where a variety of texts would be sliced and diced to form a new one. In some cases, Mee borrows the structure of an existing play (such as Euripides' *Orestes* or Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) to anchor these collages, often remaining close to the story of the original, even while retaining little or none of its dialogue. Other Mee texts (*Vienna: Lusthaus* or *bobrauschenbergamerica*, for instance) have an organizing principle or narrative that is harder to glean, not rooted in an existing play or story.

The collage technique was not so much an abandonment of his background as a historian but the development of a dramatic equivalent of a historical perspective. When speaking words which are not their own, but instead the language of *Vogue* and *Soap Opera Digest*, or George Bataille and Hannah Arendt, characters become the products of culture. As Mee puts it, "we often express our histories and culture in ways even we are not conscious of, that the culture speaks through us, grabs us and throws us to the ground, cries out, silences us." Mee's dramaturgical innovation is how this collage of language, this sampling of culture, serves as the basis for character. "Instead of conceiving a character and then imagining what that character would say," Cummings writes, Mee "gathers and combines various texts of interest and then imagines them being spoken by one figure onstage." There is no demarcation that clearly sets off citation from "original" speech. A character does not indicate that he is about to speak text taken verbatim from Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* or Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*; regardless of its varied sources, it all becomes the language of the character. Like electronic music or hip-hop, Mee's plays are made of samples, bits of "found sound" manipulated and remade into something new. By imagining characters as the sum of disparate quotations, Mee creates figures who are contradictory and polyvocal, oddly enough managing to be both highly theatrical creations and yet very real.



Hotel Cassiopeia, by Charles L. Mee, directed by Anne Bogart, Humana Festival of New American Plays, Actors Theatre of Louisville, 2006. Courtesy of SITI Company

As a director and teacher, Bogart is well known for popularizing her vision of Viewpoints, Suzuki, and Composition to a new generation of theater makers. Few downtown playwrights have not encountered a “child of Anne”—my nickname for directors who have studied with Bogart either at Columbia University or Saratoga Springs—for those who study with Bogart are almost always true converts. Cummings’s book devotes a chapter to defining these three techniques from the perspective of an observer in rehearsal. He details the guiding principles of Viewpoints and Suzuki, as well as how Composition brings together these two forms of training as an “alternative” means of creating theater, or what Tina Landau calls, “writing with a group of people on their feet.”

As a playwright skeptical of Viewpoints and Composition, and given the growing body of writings on these techniques, I was drawn more to Cummings’s discussion of Bogart’s less-documented accomplishments. Bogart’s radical approaches to classic plays and her contribution to the rise of site-specific work in New York strike me as an impressive part of her directorial project. Her productions asking “what if”—What if *South Pacific* was performed by veterans in a military hospital? What if *On the Town* was set on the deck of an aircraft carrier during the Second World War?—are imaginative ways to subtract the air of the museum from a staging of an American classic. Cummings discusses early productions in “found spaces” including *The Emissions Project*

(1980), a theatrical soap opera that ran on consecutive Sundays where audience members called Bogart’s answering machine to find out the location, and *Out of Sync* (1980), her loose adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, which involved the audience meeting Bogart at a restaurant in the East Village and then walking to various locations (a courtyard, a basement, a spot on Second Avenue) to witness the show. Bogart’s first collaboration with Mee was a piece of site-specific theater for the now-defunct En Garde Arts, *Another Person*



Charles Mee and Anne Bogart in rehearsal for *bobrauschenberg-america*, Louisville, 2001. Photo: David Perry/*Lexington Herald-Leader*

Is a Foreign Country, staged in the abandoned Towers Nursing Home in Central Park. The show was designed as a “multi-cultural freak show” that one critic described as “*A Chorus Line* for people who can’t get an audition.”¹ Even though I didn’t get to experience these events, reading about Bogart’s use of public spaces is empowering, especially for artists based in cities like New York, where real estate is at such a premium that it often inhibits the making of new work. It is also a reminder of the power of place in theater making.

Cummings's map of Bogart's and Mee's careers reveals the extent that both artists share not only a common aesthetic, but, more important, a common philosophy. Mee's ideas about "remaking" and borrowing from a variety of sources fit nicely with Bogart's own methodology as a "scavenger" who creates "a marriage of ideas" in her productions. For both, collage is an integral technique, and that idea is wedded to an American ideal about art. After spending time directing in Europe, particularly Berlin and Bern, Bogart realized something significant: "I had an American sense of humor, an American sense of structure, rhythm and logic. I thought like an American. I moved like an American." This realization allowed Bogart to embrace an American performance tradition. While Mee's work often evokes the classics (typically the Greeks), his characters speak the language of American popular culture—of glamour magazines and serial killers. In an era where patriotism has been so co-opted as to seem pathological, it is interesting to see artists reclaim an American avant-garde separate from a European model, looking back not to Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski, but to homegrown theatrical traditions like vaudeville, melodrama, and the musical.

The second half of Cummings's book is devoted to *bobrauschenbergamerica*, the production that Mee and Bogart created around the figure of the influential American artist. Mee, after seeing the Rauschenberg retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1997, wanted to create a theatrical equivalent of Rauschenberg's work and pitched the idea to Bogart. In Rauschenberg, Mee and Bogart find a fellow traveler: an American collage artist fond of chance and play. Cummings was present throughout much of the development of the play and describes in great detail its creation, from Mee's early lists ("Stuff in Rauschenberg's works," "Stuff it makes me think of") to last-minute changes before opening night at the Victor Jory Theatre in March 2001. Here the book collapses a bit under the weight of overabundant detail. For a play that is so light, possessing the feel of a 1960s variety show, there is something mind-numbing about hearing the minutiae of its creation. More important, the attention paid to narrating the play's development often prevents larger questions about its values from emerging.

Unlike many of Mee's plays, which use another work's narrative to structure the collage, *bobrauschenbergamerica* refuses any linear development, and the drama's subject never appears. The play attempts to capture the spirit of Rauschenberg rather than an unmasking of the man and his work. Like a Rauschenberg combine, the play is littered



bobrauschenbergamerica, by Charles L. Mee, directed by Anne Bogart, Humana Festival 2001. Photo: Richard Termine

with tire swings, rubber chickens, and all things Middle America, with a hint of brutality lurking underneath, rising to the surface during the production's highlight, Gian-Murray Gianino's Pizza Boy monologue. The play's lack of narrative makes it feel a bit like an iPod in shuffle mode: there is a randomness to the construction that sometimes stirs joy ("I forgot how much I liked that song"), while at other times, it has one wishing for a fast-forward button. For all its wink-wink irony, *bobrauschenbergamerica*, staged on a giant American flag, feels rather sincere about all things American.

It might have been interesting to contrast the production with another work similar in scope and even theme. One interesting counterexample might have been Mac Wellman's *Jennie Richie*, also first produced in 2001, about outsider artist Henry Darger. Wellman's piece, directed by Bob McGrath, manages to be a meditation on both Darger and his work. *Jennie Richie* literally stages Darger's images, created by Darger to accompany his massive mythology-cum-adventure tome *In the Realms of the Unreal*, while shifting back to Darger the man (played by Daniel Zippi). The play does not shy away from the sexual confusion of Darger's work. While by no means linear or straightforward, Wellman's piece becomes both a celebration and a critique of the American outsider. *bobrauschenbergamerica*, on the other hand, never fully questions the America it portrays. Cummings's book could have used a more critical approach to Mee and Bogart's production, bringing in other contemporary work for illumination in order to ask tougher questions of the material and develop a reading of the contemporary American theater scene at large. Sometimes when reading the book, I found myself hoping for more context, a look at other writers and directors of this moment.

Perhaps, all in all, it is unfair to ask that of a book that is so clearly a celebration of two artists. The sense I took from Cummings's study is that *bobrauschenbergamerica* represents the culmination of Mee's and Bogart's aesthetic development: a logical endpoint of their shared aesthetic as collage artists, "scavenging" from the American landscape. It is not so much the "remaking" of American theater that the book's title suggests. On the contrary, that remaking is now being undertaken by a younger generation of theater artists inspired by Mee and Bogart, by experimental collectives like Radiohole, National Theater of the USA, Elevator Repair Service, and Theater of the Two-Headed Calf, and playwrights like Lisa D'Amour, Sheila Callaghan, Adam Bock, and myself. Instead, what Cummings's study provides is a useful overview of these two influential artists. In the process, it provides some insight into what makes this playwright-director relationship so successful. For these reasons alone, the book is a necessary read for anyone interested in contemporary American theater.

NOTE

1. Jan Stuart, "Muted Waters for Sea of Outcasts," *Newsday*, September 12, 1991, 61.

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