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978-0-521-81820-9 - Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company

Scott T. Cummings

Excerpt

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Introduction: of hiccups and fireflies

ON A SUNDAY MORNING IN THE FALL OF 1953, ROBERT Rauschenberg laid down a long, narrow strip of paper on the pavement of Fulton Street near his studio in downtown Manhattan. Then, his buddy John Cage drove his Model A Ford along the strip of paper with slow care, as Rauschenberg applied black house paint to one of the rear tires. The result was *Automobile Tire Print* – 22 feet (6.5 meters) long and 16.5 inches (42 centimeters) wide – a crude monoprint that forecast Rauschenberg’s career-long pre-occupation with making large-scale work, with collaboration, with the mechanics of making and transferring images, with everyday objects as material and subject, with space becoming time, and with American iconography.

That same fall, with Abstract Expressionism and the New York School all the rage, the twenty-eight-year-old Rauschenberg asked Willem de Kooning, “the master of the new movement in American painting,”¹ for one of his drawings so that he might erase it and present it as a work of his own. De Kooning obliged, providing a pencil-and-crayon drawing that he knew would resist obliteration. After a month, Rauschenberg came back with *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, matted, labeled, and mounted in a gold-leaf frame, with faint smudges of de Kooning’s original still visible. Here again Rauschenberg’s fascination with the surface of things and the process of making (or unmaking) is evident, as is a puckish imagination and a young artist’s willful effort to distance himself from the Abstract Expressionism out of which he emerged. More significant though is the provocation to viewers to confront their assumptions about what constitutes a work of art.² If the sentiment behind *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was not clear, Rauschenberg made it plain when, in the spirit of his friend and inspiration Marcel Duchamp, he responded to the request of a French gallery owner for

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a portrait of her by sending a cable that read: “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so – Robert Rauschenberg.”³

The gesture was cheeky, even radical, in its day. If, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it seems like a cliché, that is one measure of Rauschenberg’s permanent influence on our culture. Along with his friends and collaborators, composer John Cage and dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham, Rauschenberg was at the forefront of a post-Second World War avant-garde that changed the idea of art forever. The tire track laid down in Fulton Street led to a vast new territory, a realm of possibility in the visual and the performing arts that to this day has not yet been fully explored. While countless abominations have been created in the name of “this is a work of art because I say it is,” the true legacy of this triumvirate stems from their recognition of the beauty of the ordinary and their willful incorporation of chance into the artistic process. Their transformation of the understanding of art, from an object in a museum or on a stage or in a concert hall to a mode of perception and a quality of life, has enriched the lives of millions who will never even know their names.

When director Anne Bogart first conceived a theatrical meditation on the subject of Andy Warhol and American consumerism, she approached her friend, the playwright Charles Mee, to see if he would provide a text for the piece. They had collaborated twice before in the early 1990s: on a site-specific piece for En Garde Arts called *Another Person is a Foreign Country* and on Mee’s radical revision of Euripides’s *Orestes*, one of two inaugural productions of what became known as the SITI Company (pronounced “city”). They were eager to work together again. So, Mee immersed himself in Warhol, only to find himself uninspired. He withdrew from the project, which went forward without him. *Culture of Desire* premiered in Pittsburgh in the fall of 1997, just as the Guggenheim Museum in New York was opening a massive retrospective of one of Warhol’s chief contemporaries: Robert Rauschenberg. Already a Rauschenberg fan, Mee saw the Guggenheim exhibit and later proposed to Bogart that they collaborate on a piece inspired by it. Bogart would say later that she suspected all along that Mee, in countering Warhol with Rauschenberg, was trying to teach her and her company a friendly lesson about “what a real artist is.”⁴

bobrauschenbergamerica – written by Mee, directed by Bogart, and created and performed by the SITI Company – received its world premiere as part of the Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival of New American Plays in March 2001. In keeping with the spirit of its namesake, it takes the

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form of a collage play. It has no plot or narrative through-line, and its eight characters are cardboard archetypes. Over the course of forty-three short, discontinuous scenes, the play presents a seemingly random series of American events. From moment to moment, there is a line dance, a back-yard picnic, a game of checkers, a square dance, an assassination, a pizza delivery, a beating, a yard sale, and lots of chicken jokes. The piece exudes a Midwestern charm and boyish insouciance, one which celebrates the feeling of freedom and adventure that begins with exploring the woods at the edge of your neighborhood and stretches as far as a man walking on the moon. While its dominant mood is happy-go-lucky, there is also a recognition of what the play calls “the dark side,” the inclination towards violence, destruction, and murder that is such an integral part of American culture.

Unlike *Culture of Desire*, which has the figure of Andy Warhol at its center, Rauschenberg is nowhere to be found in *bobrauschenbergamerica*, although a character named Bob’s Mom is. Despite her presence, the piece makes no attempt to convey Rauschenberg’s biography or to represent Rauschenberg’s art in any literal sense. Instead, it borrows images, techniques, and themes from his profuse body of work and combines them with Mee’s own writing, lots of appropriated texts, and the inventions of Bogart and the SITI Company in order to create an impressionistic and personal vision of the American experience in the era of Rauschenberg, the second half of the twentieth century. Rather than a biographical portrait, Mee and company sought to create a play that generated much the same response as Rauschenberg’s art itself. Mee described it this way:

What I think is so great about Rauschenberg is that he is a great American artist. He makes work that creates a world that we all wish America would be, which is to say, without being a Pollyanna, without turning a blind eye to the violence and tragedy and nastiness, his work is very open and very small-d democratic. He brings into his work not just what has been ignored or unseen or neglected or not previously visible, but stuff that has been positively rejected, garbage that has been thrown away. He brings it in off the street and says this, too, is worthy of attention. Before there was a word inclusiveness, he was inclusive. Before anybody did sampling, he was sampling. Before the French literary theorists knew what appropriation was, Rauschenberg was doing it. When he brings stuff together the way he does – a stuffed goat with an automobile tire around its stomach standing on a platform with wheels on it – if that is a sculpture, then anything is possible. I think that is the feeling that he creates: that anything is possible. And what more do you want out of life than anything being possible?⁵

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In less capable hands, this ‘anything-is-possible’ approach might have resulted in a work that is incoherent, pretentious, and narcissistic. Mee, Bogart, and the SITI Company managed to avoid such pitfalls and create a work that was glorious in its randomness and exhilarating in its sense of freedom. The play’s disconnected, self-contained events presented themselves as individual works in a museum exhibit or independent acts in a variety show or separate attractions at an old-time amusement park. If the viewer did not care for what was happening at the moment, something different was just around the corner. Some of the bits were gratuitously weird or suspiciously ironic or just plain corny, but on balance they were imbued with a sense of wonder or simple fun that gave the action an infectious, helter-skelter momentum. The lack of continuity from one segment to the next, the radical shifts in tone or mood, and the constant theatrical non sequiturs, all seemed to be designed to test the limits of the audience’s willingness to go with the flow and give their undivided attention to the present moment, whatever that happened to be. With this strategy, *bobrauschenbergamerica* went beyond being playful and carefree to generate a complex experience of freedom, which it then used to characterize both the process of artistic creation and the culture of the United States of America.

How did they do that? How do playwright, director, designer, and actor each prepare and shape their material in a way that anticipates or, better still, elicits the contributions of their collaborators? And how do all of them leave room for the audience, whose extraordinary act of paying attention constitutes the ultimate act of theatrical composition and the perceptual ground on which the whole theatrical enterprise rests? These are the questions at the heart of this study, which will introduce the work of Mee and Bogart independent of one another and then examine in detail their collaboration on *bobrauschenbergamerica*.

In life and art, Charles Mee and Anne Bogart are kindred spirits. Both are known for a tremendous personal generosity, and their professional visions as playwright and director are complementary. Both sacrifice some of the authority of their positions in order to pursue a theater that is as open, inclusive, and collaborative as it can be. Both have aesthetics that are rooted in the American avant-garde of the 1960s, particularly the off-Off-Broadway dance and theater movements centered in Greenwich Village and SoHo, and influenced by international vanguard directors from the 1970s on. Both have embraced collage as a basis for structuring new work and what each calls “stealing” as a method for filling out that

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structure. Both have demonstrated an abiding fascination with twentieth-century American culture and history and, more generally, with the mechanics of change, be it in styles and conventions of theatre or in national historical process. And, as the new century dawned and they set to work on *bobrauschenbergamerica*, both found themselves in the prime of their careers, major figures in the reshaping of American theater and drama.

In form and content alike, the plays of Charles Mee demonstrate his view of culture as a process in which a society sifts through the past and its artifacts, salvages what is of interest and value, and redefines itself by combining recycled materials in new ways, from a new perspective, and with new ideas and materials. This aesthetic of “remaking,” as he calls it, accounts for two primary features of his playwriting. Many of his plays are radical revisions of extant texts, from Greek tragedies such as *Orestes* and *The Suppliant Women* to modern classics such as *The Lower Depths* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Mee describes his method as a matter of using a classic text as a scaffolding or armature on which to shape his own construction, which he then smashes into fragments and presents held together by a more intuitive structure. From play to play, the ur-text may remain visible and recognizable, leading some to refer to his plays as adaptations, or it may recede into the conceptual background, leaving only trace evidence and haunting the play like a ghostly spirit. Some of Mee’s plays, including *bobrauschenbergamerica*, have no single, discernible antecedent, but there is always some aspect of the work that is building on the past.

Mee supplements his own writing by taking texts from his wide-ranging reading and inserting them verbatim into the play. This postmodern, quotational technique is subversive, pluralistic, and celebratory. It challenges the strict, legalistic notion of intellectual property that has evolved over the history of capitalism and has been complicated more recently by the seemingly unbounded access to information made possible by the internet. It incorporates a cacophony of voices and sensibilities into his plays, in a manner that does not smooth over their dissonance or resolve their differences; in this way, Mee adds a subtle democratic dimension to the work. And, by the sheer vehemence, lyricism, sincerity, or offensiveness of the borrowed passages, Mee celebrates First Amendment freedoms as he depicts writing, theater, art, and culture as a violent collision of images, ideas, and values that propels societies, like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, into the future facing backwards. Mee’s work combines a critical perspective on the past with a cautious faith in democratic process and

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historical progress to create works that are complex, provocative, and imbued with the joy of life.

Anne Bogart's theater is driven by the joy of discovery. She makes plays as theatrical essays in which she investigates subjects of interest and confronts nagging questions about the world around her. She came out of high school wanting to be a director, and in the past thirty-five years, she has rarely gone a year without directing a play. Her insatiable thirst for inquiry, marked by the twin questions "What is it?" and "What is it really?," have led to a sustained and experimental investigation of traditional American drama, various forms of American popular culture, key figures in twentieth-century American culture, and the nature of artistic creation itself, particularly theatrical creation. In the process, she has demonstrated a particular fascination with the question of the audience, most obvious in her early site-specific creations on the streets of New York and in the Audience Project she conducted at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in the late 1990s. She directs plays with the mind of a choreographer, scoring the motion of bodies in time and space with a keen eye towards rhythm, visual composition, and other formal principles. At the same time, she is known for the freedom that she extends to her actors, for her commitment as a teacher to the development of young, independent theater artists, and for her long-standing pursuit of ensemble work and the ideal of company.

All she ever wanted was a company of players with whom to make theater. After pick-up work in the East Village theater community and an aborted stint as artistic director of Trinity Repertory Company, she got what she wanted – properly speaking, began to get – in 1992 when she partnered with renowned Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki to create the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, known today as the SITI Company. Over time, the SITI Company refined a unique approach to theater training that combines the rigorous physical practices pioneered in Japan by Suzuki, an improvisational orientation to theatrical space and time known as the Viewpoints, and a collective strategy for generating raw material called Composition. These techniques became the bedrock on which the SITI Company's performances rest. In addition to staging classic plays by Shakespeare, Marivaux, and Noël Coward, Bogart and the SITI Company have created a series of original works based on such influential cultural figures as Marshal McLuhan, Andy Warhol, Orson Welles, Robert Wilson, Virginia Woolf, Leonard Bernstein, and, of course, Robert Rauschenberg.

These productions have been characterized by the particular manner in which they layer three quasi-independent texts on top of each other: a

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spoken or verbal text, often comprised of quotations taken from outside sources; a physical or gestural text, marked by non-behavioral movement executed with crystalline precision; and a design text, a combination of scenic elements, expressionistic lighting, and near continuous sound or music. Whatever its particular subject, a SITI Company creation is always about two things: the idea of theater, how it works, the audience–actor equation; and the idea of company, collaborative creation, the rare power of people working together.

bobrauschenbergamerica came at a conspicuous moment in the respective careers of Mee, Bogart, and the SITI Company. In the six years between September 1997, when the Rauschenberg retrospective opened at the Guggenheim, and October 2003, when their homage played the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, playwright, director, and company moved from the vanguard into the mainstream, creating high-profile work at a prodigious rate and reaching expanding audiences in New York, at regional theaters and performing arts centers around the USA, and in Europe.

Mee had no fewer than eight plays receive their world premieres in this six-year period, nine if you count a modest college production of *A Summer Evening in Des Moines*.⁶ Many of these received immediate second and third productions. For example, *True Love*, his riff on the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, received its world premiere at the Holland Festival in Amsterdam (2001), inaugurated the new off-Broadway Zipper Theater (2001), and then was produced at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin (2002). At the same time, Mee's early, edgy plays, such as *Orestes* and *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, continued to be remounted by fledgling directors and start-up theaters seeking to plant their flag and establish an identity. His first success, his 1986 collaboration with director Martha Clarke on *Vienna: Lusthaus*, was "revisited" in 2002 by New York Theatre Workshop, a reunion which led Clarke and Mee to start work on a piece about Toulouse Lautrec. And in 2002, at the age of sixty-three, he won the PEN/Laura Pels Foundation Award for "an American playwright in mid-career."

In this same six-year period, Bogart and the SITI Company also premiered nine original creations and staged three operas, two Noël Coward plays, and Marivaux's *La Dispute* as well. Bogart's move into opera, not uncommon for mid-career theater directors, included two high-profile world premieres composed by Deborah Drattell: *Lilith* at New York City Opera (with Lauren Flanigan) and *Nicholas and Alexandra*

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at Los Angeles Opera (with Plácido Domingo). Bogart directed all fifteen of these productions and found time to work outside the SITI Company as well, collaborating with Laurie Anderson on her *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick* and with Lola Pasholinski and Linda Chapman on their *Gertrude and Alice: A Likeness to Loving*. In this time, Bogart also received a Guggenheim Fellowship, published her first book, *A Director Prepares*, to generally positive reviews, and was awarded tenure at Columbia University, where she heads the graduate directing program. The SITI design team – Neil Patel (sets), James Schuette (costumes), Mimi Jordan Sherin (lighting), and Darron West (sound) – received a major design award from *Entertainment Design* magazine. The SITI Company's actor training workshops grew more and more popular as the influence of the Suzuki method, Viewpoints, and Composition work spread. And, many SITI members, actors and designers alike, did significant work outside of the company to various degrees of acclaim.

This prolonged moment of fruition is defined by what I would call the Actors Theatre of Louisville–Brooklyn Academy of Music (ATL–BAM) axis. Both Mee and Bogart had new pieces premiere at the 2000 Humana Festival in Louisville that went on to the Next Wave Festival in Brooklyn. After touring to the Edinburgh Festival, the SITI Company's *War of the Worlds*, written by Naomi Iizuka, played BAM in October 2000. Mee's *Big Love*, directed by Les Waters, ended up at BAM in December 2001, after stops at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, and Chicago's Goodman Theatre. *bobrauschenbergamerica* premiered at Humana in March 2001, and two and a half years later, it opened the Next Wave Festival in October 2003. If the Humana Festival is the resident regional theater's premiere showcase for new American plays and the Next Wave Festival is New York's premiere American showcase for vanguard work from home and around the world, then there can be little argument that Mee, Bogart, and SITI were at the forefront of the American theater at the start of the twenty-first century. The coincidence of this zenith with their collaboration on *bobrauschenbergamerica* makes it all the more appropriate as an object of study and a lens through which to look at their body of work.

This, then, is a book about a playwright, a director, a theater company, a play, and a production of that play. To the extent that it aims to analyze the nexus of these five subjects, it cannot hope to be comprehensive about all of them. Things have been left out. For example, the SITI Company's important trilogy of solo pieces – *Bob*, *Room*, and *Score* – receives scant

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attention here. I have sacrificed a measure of breadth for the sake of depth, but in chronicling the step-by-step development of *bobrauschenbergamerica*, I do not mean to suggest that this is always how Charles Mee writes or Anne Bogart directs or the SITI Company creates a play. Each process of creation is unique, and if artists do not grow in their work, it gets repetitive and dull. Nevertheless, the practices and principles incorporated in this one collaboration do reflect aspects of their work in general and my hope is that a close examination of it will shed some light on them as artists. If I focus on minutiae at moments, it is because theatrical truth dwells in the details – the choice of a word, the turn of a foot, the timing of a fade – and because any given moment onstage can be seen to represent the convergence of all time and all space. Perhaps this view is romantic. After all, *bobrauschenbergamerica* lasts only 110 minutes in performance, little more than a hiccup in the life of those who came to see it, most of whom spat it out with their toothpaste that night before they went to bed. What difference could a play make really?

Nevertheless, my ongoing fascination with the phenomenology of theater compels me to regard that insignificant hiccup, from the catch in the throat when the lights go down to the gasp of air at the curtain call, as the tipping point on which for a moment all life is balanced. In the here-and-now of performance, the past and the future, the actual and the possible, the many and the one are all held in brief, glorious suspension. If I had to choose a single moment from *bobrauschenbergamerica* as an emblem of that suspension and a paradigm of the whole, it would be one that comes almost an hour into the show. An actor, Japanese by birth and done up like Annette Funicello in a 1960s beach movie, kicks off her platform sandals, tosses aside her purse, and dives into a puddle of gin. For reasons that this book aims to make clear, this moment of hilarity for the audience is also a symbol of the joyful, ludic spirit at the heart of the play, a prime example of the unusual manner in which Mee wrote it, a crucial pivot in Bogart's orchestration of its many jumbled elements, and a demonstration of how the SITI Company's techniques give its actors a commanding presence. It is also an in-joke, but we will get to that later. Not every moment of the play is worth explicating in detail and to do so would be tedious, but the principle of close analysis remains at the heart of my enterprise.

The plan of the book is simple. It has two parts. Part I provides a general introduction to the lives and independent careers of Mee and Bogart, up through their first collaboration in 1991. It goes on to outline the early history of the SITI Company and to describe the training

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methods on which their work is based. It discusses in brief a number of Mee, Bogart, or SITI creations, many of which merit the same more extensive analysis given to Mee's *Full Circle* and Bogart/SITI's *Cabin Pressure* in an interlude chapter that leads to the second part. Part II is a case study of *bobrauschenbergamerica*, from its roots in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and the 1997 Guggenheim retrospective through its rehearsal and the Actors Theatre of Louisville premiere in 2001 to its revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2003. The focus here is on process, on how these theatre artists came to create something out of nothing, and on the million and one decisions that go into making a single play. In tracing the play's evolution, no doubt, I have missed things. My research has been thorough, but I could not attend every rehearsal or meeting, interview every artist involved, or examine every decision that went into the production. And trying to capture the fleeting moment of performance and put it down in words is akin to chasing fireflies. Even if you catch a jarful, the glow is not going to last for long. My hope, dear reader, is to have just enough fireflies to illuminate, if only in fits and starts, the work of some of the most interesting and important American theater artists at the beginning of the twenty-first century.