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

Scott T. Cummings

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Remaking American Theater

An account of contemporary theater practice in its most collaborative and dynamic form, this is the first book-length study of two of the most important American theater artists at the start of the twenty-first century. For twenty-five years, Mee and Bogart have pursued independent but sympathetic visions of theater rooted in the avant-garde of the 1960s, guided by a view of art and culture as a perpetual process of “remaking.” Since 1992, the SITI Company has pioneered the unique combination of three training practices (Viewpoints, Suzuki, and Composition) as the basis for collective creations that layer language, gesture, and image in a complex and often stunning fashion. This study provides both a general introduction to Mee’s unorthodox playwriting, Bogart’s innovative directing, the ensemble work of the SITI Company, and an in-depth case study of their work together on *bobrauschenbergamerica*, a piece inspired by the art of Robert Rauschenberg.

SCOTT T. CUMMINGS teaches courses in dramatic literature and playwriting and directs plays in the Theater Department of Boston College. His productions there include Charles L. Mee’s *A Summer Evening in Des Moines*, Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* and Beckett’s *Endgame*. As a theater critic and arts journalist he has written for *American Theatre*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Phoenix*. His scholarly essays and reviews have appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Modern Drama* and *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, among others.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

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*for Janet
with abiding love*

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She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. Not that she thought herself clever, or much out of the ordinary.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

Carlo watched this silly madness with slitted eyes. Finally he slapped his knee and said, "I have an announcement to make."

"Yes? Yes?"

"What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?"

"Whither goest thou?" echoed Dean with his mouth open. We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go.

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)

My art is just about paying attention – about the extremely dangerous possibility that *you* might be art.

Robert Rauschenberg (Interview by Barbara Rose, 1987)

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Acknowledgments

I first met Charles Mee in January 2000 when I interviewed him for an article I was writing for the Boston *Phoenix*. He mentioned that he was in the early stages of a new play that he would create with Anne Bogart and the SITI Company inspired by the art of Robert Rauschenberg. I knew little of Mee's work at that time, but I had been following Bogart and the SITI Company with interest since their *Going, Going, Gone* in 1996. I had a hunch that this might prove to be a unique and fruitful collaboration, and so, not knowing at first what might come of it, I asked for permission to observe the process leading to the premiere of what was already titled *bobrauschenbergamerica*.

I got lucky – on at least two counts. First, permission was granted. To observe an artist at work is a privilege. Even the most scrupulous bug on the wall cannot claim to be a neutral presence. At any moment in my research I could not have blamed those involved for shutting the door on me. That never happened, which is a courtesy and a gift for which I am forever grateful. Second, the play turned out to have a life. Since its premiere in Louisville in 2001, *bobrauschenbergamerica* has traveled on different occasions to Stamford, Champaign-Urbana, Chicago, Brooklyn, and Minneapolis, as well as to Bonn and Paris. This itinerary-after-the-fact lends some validation to my impulse to center my research on the collaboration of Mee, Bogart, and SITI on a single project.

The book that has resulted would not have been possible without the aid and participation of a great many people. At Boston College, where I teach, material and moral support have come from all corners, including Joseph F. Quinn, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; Michael A. Smyer, Associate Vice President for Research; and my colleagues in the Theater Department, especially Stuart J. Hecht and John Houchin. At Media Technology Services, Michael Swanson and April Rondeau advised

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on the cover design and Stephen Vedder went above and beyond in preparing the photographs for publication with care. The cast and crew of my 2002 production of *A Summer Evening in Des Moines* helped me to understand Mee's dramaturgy from the inside out. Over the years, my dedicated undergraduate research assistants – Claire Darby, Dan Brunet, Marin Kirby, Megan Rulison, and Sarah Lunnie – provided much valuable help, from fact-checking to hand-holding to proof-reading and other services. They were great.

This book is based primarily on field research, which means that I have communicated through in-depth interviews and casual conversations, in emails and phone calls and face-to-face meetings, with many people who have worked or studied with Mee, Bogart, and SITI over the years. These people include (in alphabetical order) Elissa Adams, Christopher Akerlind, Michi Barall, Wendell Beavers, Melina Bielefeldt, Claudia Brown, Rebecca Brown, Kyle Chepulis, Jane Comfort, Tom Damrauer, John Dillon, Michael Dixon, Alec Duffy, Leslie Ferreira, Christian Frederickson, Tali Gai, Jackie Goldhammer, Rachel Grimes, Anne Hamburger, Eric Hill, Naomi Iizuka, Tina Landau, Troy Lavalley, Gideon Lester, Jon Jory, Brian Jucha, Marc Masterson, Erin Mee, Carol Mullins, Jason Noble, Tanya Palmer, Aileen Passloff, Sandy Robbins, Susan Ryan, Zan Sawyer-Dailey, David Schweizer, Kathleen Turco-Lyon, Les Waters, Kenn Watt, Amy Wegener, Julia Whitworth, Matthew Wilder, Laurie Williams, and Robert Woodruff. Very few of these people are quoted directly in the book, which nonetheless rests in part on their collective experience. I thank them (and others not mentioned here) for the gift of their time and their insight.

Artists would not survive without institutions to nurture and promote them. I pay tribute here to the many theaters, presenting organizations, and universities who have supported the artists discussed in this book, and I thank the many individuals at these institutions who helped me to gain access to information about their work. In particular, I would single out the staffs of the Actors Theatre of Louisville and the American Repertory Theatre for their friendly and generous accommodation of my repeated presence on their premises and my requests for all manners of help.

At Cambridge University Press, Commissioning Editor Victoria Cooper, Assistant Editor Rebecca Jones, Production Editors Alison Powell and Elizabeth Davey, and Copy-editor Maureen Leach have all demonstrated uncommon patience with me and my fussiness over innumerable details regarding the manuscript. Series Editor Don B. Wilmeth

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provided unwavering support and a calming influence throughout the entire (prolonged) process. I owe him a great debt.

In an effort to save me from embarrassment, Leslie Ferreira, Greg Gunter, Adrienne Krstansky, Ed Walters, Peter Ferran, and, especially, Janet Morrison have favored me by reading portions of the manuscript and offering feedback. Any infelicities that remain are all mine. Also, at different times, I have benefited from extended dialogues with Julia Whitworth and Jennifer Schlueter, younger scholars with research interests in Mee, Bogart, and SITI Company.

Another category of gratitude altogether must be reserved for the individuals whose work is the subject of this book. Whatever the strength and commitment of its individual members, a theatrical ensemble is always a precious and delicate thing. The SITI Company's survival for more than thirteen years is perhaps their greatest accomplishment, and they are right to be protective of it. Their willingness to grant me behind-the-scenes access to their work was tested each time I showed up with a tape recorder or a notebook in hand, and despite their misgivings or wishes at moments that I would just go away, they were always welcoming, accommodating, and professional. To Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Will Bond, Tom Nelis, Barney O'Hanlon, Leon Ingulsrud, Akiko Aizawa, Stephen Webber, J. Ed Araiza, and Susan Hightower, to Darron West and Brian Scott, to James Schuette and Neil Patel, to Megan Wanlass-Szalla and Elizabeth Moreau, to Danyon Davis, Gian-Murray Gianino, and Jennifer Taher, I wish to express my sincere and personal thanks for making this book possible.

Finally, for their trust, their cooperation, their candor, and their patience, I thank Chuck Mee and Anne Bogart. Their reputation for a great generosity of spirit is legendary and, I can attest, well earned.

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In an effort to avoid confusion, the following notes explain some of the practices and conventions that governed the writing of this book:

1. Which Mee? The man known to friends and colleagues as Chuck Mee has been known professionally over the years as Charles L. Mee, Jr., Charles L. Mee, and sometimes Charles Mee. My usage in this book varies according to context and Mee's practice at the time of a particular reference to him. (Thankfully, Anne Bogart has always been Anne Bogart.)
2. Bibliography. In order to save space and because so much of this study is based on firsthand research, this book contains no bibliography. Full citations regarding all sources, primary and secondary, are contained in the notes. I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause the reader.
3. Quotations from Mee plays. Charles Mee is well-known for posting his plays on his website (www.charlesmee.org), and I have taken advantage of that practice by excusing myself from detailed citation of quotations from his texts. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Mee plays are taken from the texts on the website and can be easily found there. With longer quotes I have maintained Mee's practice of registering sentences on the page in a free-verse form that has a few words (or sometimes only one) in a line of text. With shorter quotes contained in the body of a sentence, I have indicated a Mee line-break with a back slash, as in the following quote from Phil's Girl in *bobrauschenbergamerica*: "What I think about is / I'd like to have sex with you in the parking lot / behind the Exxon station / near that diner on the Malibu highway / you know the one?"
4. Punctuation. On the American model, my practice is to use double quotation marks for all direct quotations from interviews, printed sources, and so on. This is to reserve the use of single quotation marks for setting off a word or a phrase in an effort to coin a term or to indicate an implied

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A NOTE TO THE READER

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quotation (as if to say, ‘so to speak’). I also have a fondness – I hope not an affectation – of using a long dash to set off a parenthetical thought or observation that is of more than parenthetical importance.

5. National nomenclature. Lacking a satisfactory alternative, I use the words “America” and “American” to refer to the United States of America and characteristics of that nation. The words themselves – their resonances, their contested meanings, their cultural freight – are too central to the book’s concerns to be swapped out for politically correct substitutes.