

# Mee celebrates artist in Humana fest highlight

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was the helmer of the Richard Dresser play "Wonderful World," and would surely have hoped for a more auspicious directing debut. Next year will reflect Master-son's first full year of artistic control — he could easily do a lot better than this year's slate.

## Art in America

Typically eschewing "Pollock"-esque biography in favor of imagistic celebration, Bogart's "Bobrauschenbergamerica" is, in essence, an exploration of what Rauschenberg might have done if he had been a playwright instead of a painter, sculptor, designer and photographer.

Mee's play incorporates brief texts by such writers as Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. With the help of her performers, Bogart turns it into an American collage chock-full of Rauschenberg-inspired, emotionally resonant images. Transitions are intensely startling and intentionally discordant. Gunshots rattle throughout this play, interwoven with diverse images of such calming American institutions as a parade, a love affair and the pleasure of swimming in a martini.

There is no traditional narrative, but the nostalgic piece is awash with warmth and has a vibrant emotional and intellectual center. The guileless SITI actors (along with a couple of lucky interns) combine the enthusiasm of kids with the performance sophistication of old pros. It's a stunner.

Perhaps some wise entrepreneur will put together a small-venue SITI tour that will allow others to experience Mee and Bogart's amazing theatrical tribute to an iconic American artist. The piece would certainly find an appreciative audiences in sophisticated urban centers.

Machado's play is far simpler but deftly manages to avoid the traps of his polarized subject. "When the Sea Drowns in Sand" follows a Cuban emigre who was shipped away from Castro on the Peter Pan flights of the early 1960s. Accompanied by a seemingly platonic male friend, he goes back to Cuba, where he encounters his doppelganger — a man who never left.

By the end of the lightly comic piece, some cultural common ground has been achieved. But Machado is most interested in the complexities of an expat's roots ("Did they kick me out or did I walk out on my own two legs?") and the way in which today's Cuban must concern himself with both Communist ideology and the need for a decent pair of spark plugs. Superbly constructed, and

requiring just three actors for a complex personal and political tale, this is a very moving play.

The one unknown writer this year was Melanie Marnich, whose "Quake" was given a deft and slick production by Susan Booth. Using an exploratory metaphor somewhat akin to Eric Overmeyer's once-trendy "On the Verge," "Quake" follows the journey of a young, single woman through the minefield of relationships. Each fellow she meets comes with some sort of geographic locale — the woody guy from the Northwest, the selfish slacker in the coffee shop and so on. By way of distraction from all these men, the heroine (Tracey Maloney) keeps dreaming about a mass murderer (zestfully played by Lusia Strus).

Marnich has promise, but the play — which feels like a first work — travels familiar ground and gets bogged down in the predictable issue of its heroine's conflicted desires.

Mac Wellman's staggeringly oblique "Description Beggared; or the Allegory of Whiteness" is billed in part as a riff on "The Ghost Sonata." But you'd be hard pressed to discern much Strindberg in this exploration of the iconic properties of the color white in Rhode Island. The highly conceptual piece comes with striking original music from Michael Roth and demonstrates Wellman's typical fascination with the formative qualities of language. And since one rarely hears people talking about being white in the theater, there's a certain interest there.

## Distant figures

But the eccentric family gathering for a collective portrait remain distant, misty figures. This show feels rather like "Ragtime" without any drama or humanity. It's the kind of intensely intellectualized work that may be of interest to grad students but has little to offer a general audience.

At the other extreme, Martin's "Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage" was a cheap and campy faux B-movie that relied for its appeal on perceived shock value. There are some outrageous yuks in this dumb tale that revolves around a female rodeo rider on the wrong side of 40. Jory adroitly directs the physically manic comedy involving body parts, eccentric kids, sexual gropings and the like. But since there seems to be nothing in the way of redeeming social theme, it's hard to see many future theatrical resources invested in this nonsense. Perhaps the usually more accomplished playwright had something else on her mind this year.

Dresser's, "Wonderful World," the real dud of the fest, concerns

people on the edge — a guidance counselor fantasizing about murdering his wife, a woman whose job is to answer complaints.

But thanks in part to an overblown production, none of the play's characters are remotely credible or believable. Falling between "Dinner With Friends" realism and Durang-esque social satire, "Wonderful World" flails hopelessly in its stylistically inconsistent milieu.



**LUMINOUS COLLAGE:** Charles L. Mee's "Bobrauschenbergamerica," an imagistic celebration of the artist, was the strongest entry in Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays.

# Humana plays tackle art, Elian

By CHRIS JONES

LOUISVILLE, Ky. Thanks to a dazzling, prismatic production from Anne Bogart and her ever-extraordinary SITI Co., Charles L. Mee's fascinating and luminous "Bobrauschenbergamerica" was the memorable highlight of a weaker-than-usual Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theater of Louisville.

And although the savvy scouts and agents were also buzzing cheerily about Eduardo Machado's "When the Sea Drowns in Sand," a moving and thoughtful drama dealing with Cuban-

American relations in the aftermath of the Elian Gonzalez affair, the other mainstage works on offer this year proved to be oblique, overly derivative or just plain dumb. And since it's hard to imagine the script for "Bobrauschenbergamerica" working remotely as well without this superb but highly conceptual production, even the star script presents some tricky issues for anyone attempting future exposure.

There were no breakout plays this year offering clear commercial potential. Machado's sweet and intelligent piece probably comes the

closest, but its B.O. pull will likely be limited. It would, though, make a very nice art-house pic.

Jon Jory, ATL's former, long-serving artistic director, was conspicuous by his absence at the media weekend, especially when Jane Martin's play "Anton in Show Business" was honored in a Saturday night award ceremony by the American Theater Critics Assn. as the best new play of 2000 to premiere outside of Gotham. Jory was the work's director at the fest last year, and presumed to be its author. He usually collects Martin's trophies.

This year, though, he was presumably leaving center stage to his successor, Marc Masterson, who inherited most of this year's selections and certainly cannot be judged by them. Masterson

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WHEN THE SEA DROWNS IN SAND

