

Loony vaudeville limns American psyche

THEATER REVIEW

'BOBRAUSCHENBERG-AMERICA'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

WHEN: Through Sunday

WHERE: Athenaeum Theatre,
2936 N. Southport

TICKETS: \$29-\$35

CALL: (773) 722-5463

BY HEDY WEISS
THEATER CRITIC

In one way or another, all great artists are the product of the nation in which they were born and raised, whether their work is overtly political or not. Take the case of Robert Rauschenberg, whose "combine" paintings of the 1950s—three-dimensional collages that incorporated everything from his own bed quilt to Coke bottles—were a precursor to Pop Art.

Rauschenberg was born in Port Arthur, Texas, and grew up during the Depression—in a home big on Christian values, skeptical of sensual indulgence (linoleum was a luxury), yet full of the simple



The SITI Company's "bobrauschenbergamerica," with Danyon Davis (from left), Leon Paull, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, J. Ed Araiza and Akiko Aizawa, displays a whimsical and wayward genius.

pleasures of rural American life, from picnics and square dances to scouting and dreamy adventures in the boundless open landscape. And the same quirky, playful sensibility of childlike delight in making things—whether from Popsicle sticks or freshly dried laundry—endured into adulthood, endowing his art with a joyfulness, winking mischief and accessibility.

It is part of the whimsical and wayward genius of "bobrauschenbergamerica," a Performing Arts Chicago presentation at the Athenaeum Theatre, that none of

this is spelled out in documentary style. Rather, the spectacle devised by playwright Charles L. Mee and director Anne Bogart—and performed by the eclectic actors of her New York-based SITI Company—conjures the Rauschenberg psyche by means of a thoroughly loony yet ultimately deeply moving vaudeville. By extension, it limns some very particular aspects of the American psyche, too. Like Rauschenberg's work, it also is at once meticulously controlled, yet shot through with some of the zany unpredictability of the "hap-

penings" that he engaged in during the 1960s.

There is something for everybody here, from moonlight waltzes and clog dancing, to a hilarious interlude of chicken jokes, to a tutu-clad stuffed goat that recalls the artist's famous 1959 piece "Monogram." There are unorthodox romantic pairings, forebodings of nuclear war, and the stop-action horror of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. There also are classic Mee-sian meditations on guilt and forgiveness, and the madness of love, with Ellen Lauren (who played writer Virginia Woolf so brilliantly last season) delivering one of the show's more hilarious and memorable monologues on the subject. The joy of love—defined as nothing more than mutual delight—is also the subject of one of the show's most tenderly and charmingly rendered scenes.

The actors include Kelly Maurer as Bob's apron-clad, irrepressible Mom; Leon Pauli as a tattooed trucker; Akiko Aizawa as his sexy girlfriend; Will Bond as the artist's alter ego; Barney O'Hanlon as a modern dancer; J. Ed Araiza as a wise homeless man; Danyon Davis as a befuddled lover, and Gian-Murray Gianino as a psycho

pizza deliverer. James Schuette's stars-and-stripes-emblazoned prairie house set and period perfect costumes and Darron I. West's time-setting pop-tune soundscape work lovely wonders. And if the show's penultimate words are borrowed from Walt Whitman, it is only fitting and proper.