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THEATER REVIEW; A Collage of Sly Tricks In Honor of a Collagist

By NEIL GENZLINGER

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That is not always the case in the theater-about-artists genre, where the temptation is to present the arcane workings of the artistic mind through allusion and obscure reference, making them doubly arcane. There are plenty of allusions here, images from Mr. Rauschenberg's works, fragments of text drawn from Merce Cunningham and other contemporaries. But somehow Mr. Mee and Anne Bogart, who directs, have created a work that will resonate even with someone who has never seen one of Mr. Rauschenberg's famous collages.

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Not that "bobrauschenbergamerica," running through Saturday as part of the Next Wave Festival, is anything resembling a standard linear play. Instead it is a collage in tribute to the collagist, a collection of colorful, daffy vignettes featuring a trucker (Leon Pauli), a girl on roller skates (Jennifer Taher), an on-again off-again couple (Ellen Lauren and Danyon Davis) and other generic characters, as well as an apron-wearing, occasionally deranged woman identified as Bob's Mom (Kelly Maurer).

Mr. Mee and Ms. Bogart use these misfits to turn the tables on the artistic process. Where an artist tries to fix a moment or feeling in two or three dimensions, they take Mr. Rauschenberg's work as inspiration and then extrapolate it out into six dimensions or so. Time is one. (The vignettes proceed in a rough chronology.) Our collective memory of the 1950's, 60's and beyond is another. Music is a third.

The result is something much richer than simply bringing a Rauschenberg artwork to life; it is an effort to see our times as they were seen by this artist, who over his long career has shown how junk can be

beautiful and how juxtaposition, the mixing of incongruous elements, can be a statement.

The incongruity here is dizzying. Mr. Pauli and a woman in a bikini (Akiko Aizawa) body-surf through a giant martini poured onto a sheet of plastic. Chicken jokes are recited while a shooting victim lies dead or dying on the stage.

And it all makes a sort of sense, which is unusual for this type of show. Credit the actors, who pull off this seemingly sloppy mélange with deceptive skill. Ms. Lauren is a special treat. Aspiring comic actresses could take a lesson: it's not just the eating of almost an entire cake onstage that's funny, it's how you eat it.

If there can be defining moments in a hodgepodge theater piece, two come to mind here. One is when a character tries to make a high-minded speech about art but keeps getting drowned out by mundane background noise like vacuuming and hammering.

Another is when a homeless man spews out an intricate plot scenario for a conspiracy-oriented movie in which a box of cereal plays a central part. The brand of cereal? Life, of course.

Only Mr. Rauschenberg, now 77, can say whether this stew, first seen two years ago at the Humana Festival in Kentucky, bears any relation to his view of the universe. But a good indicator maybe is that by the time you leave the theater, you are seeing things a bit differently, much the way his breakthrough work in the 50's and 60's provided a new perspective. Certainly neither the Dollar Dreams store next to the theater nor the Popeyes Chicken across the street looks quite the same as it did when you came in.

BOBRAUSCHENBERG-AMERICA

Created and performed by SITI Company. Written by Charles L. Mee; directed by Anne Bogart; costumes and sets by James Schuette; lighting by Brian H. Scott; sound by Darron L. West; produced in association with True Love Productions. Part of the 2003 Next Wave Festival. Presented by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Alan H. Fishman, chairman of the board; William I. Campbell, vice chairman of the board; Karen Brooks Hopkins, president; Joseph V. Melillo, executive producer. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene.

WITH: Kelly Maurer (Bob's Mom), Ellen Lauren (Susan), Akiko Aizawa (Phil's Girl), Leon Pauli (Phil), J. Ed Araiza (Becker), Will Bond (Allen), Barney O'Hanlon (Carl), Danyon Davis (Wilson), Gian-Murray Gianino (Bob) and Jennifer Taher (Roller Girl).