

# Loony vaudeville limns American psyche

THEATER REVIEW

## RAUSCHENBERG- AMERICA'

STYLISHLY RECOMMENDED

Running Through Sunday

At: Athenaeum Theatre,  
111 N. Southport

Tickets: \$29-\$35

(773) 722-5463

EDDY WEISS  
THEATER CRITIC

One way or another, all great artists are the product of the nation in which they were born and raised, whether their work is purely political or not. Take the case of Robert Rauschenberg, whose "combine" paintings of the 1960s—three-dimensional collages incorporating everything from an old bed quilt to Coke bottles—were a precursor to Pop Art. Rauschenberg was born in Port Neches, Texas, and grew up during the Depression—in a home big with Christian values, skeptical of material indulgence (linoleum was a luxury), yet full of the simple



The SITI Company's "bobrauschenbergamerica," with Danyon Davis (from left), Leon Pauli, 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 and clog dancing, to a hilarious interlude of chicken jokes, to a clad stuffed goat that recalls the artist's famous 1959 program. There are unorthodox romantic pairings, foreboding nuclear war, and the stoppage of the horror of the assassination of F. Kennedy. There also are Mee-sian meditations on forgiveness, and the mad love, with Ellen Lauren (who played writer Virginia Woolf brilliantly last season) doing one of the show's more haunting and memorable monologues on the subject. The joy of loofah is defined as nothing more than a tual delight—is also the one of the show's most touching and charmingly rendered

The actors include Keller as Bob's apron-clad, edible Mom; Leon Pauli as a tooed trucker; Akiko Aizawa as a sexy girlfriend; Will Bond as the artist's alter ego; Barney as a modern dancer; J. Ed as a wise homeless man; Danyon Davis as a befuddled love Gian-Murray Gianino as

pizza deliverer. James Scarsdale stars-and-stripes-emblazons a prairie house set and perfect costumes and Darro time-setting pop-tune so work lovely wonders. An show's penultimate word borrowed from Walt Whitman is only fitting and proper.