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## Tribute play to Rauschenberg deserves a tour

In 1998, the American playwright Charles L. Mee attended the massive retrospective covering the works of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Mee, totally taken by what he saw, determined then and there, as he later recalled, that "I would try to do in the theater what Rauschenberg had done in his art."

Joining with the innovative director Anne Bogart and her company of actors, Mee set out on his task, and this year, at the 25th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, they unveiled their remarkable collaboration, "bobrauschenbergamerica."

The multimedia "pop art" work by Rauschenberg, which inspired their work, achieved its high-water mark in the 1960s. It juxtaposed tabloid with Renaissance images, high art with junk culture, the prosaic with the poetic. In so doing, it summoned up visions of contemporary America in such works as the 1964 "Retroactive I," an oil and silkscreen ink work that combines a large portrait of John F. Kennedy with a parachuting astronaut, or the 1963 "Tracer," which includes a classic nude along with an American eagle in its patches and blurs of paint and photography.

It was this "combine" (Rauschenberg's term) of disparate images in an imaginative assembly that became the starting point for Mee and Bogart in their own performance art.

Mee was particularly well equipped for the task. As with Rauschenberg, he has frequently put a contemporary spin on classic themes in such plays as "Time to Burn" and "The Berlin Circle" at Steppenwolf Theatre and in "Big Love," his spirited adaptation of an ancient Greek drama, Aeschylus' "The Suppliant Women," which is tentatively set for production here next season at Goodman Theatre.

Bogart, an experimental director who works with her tightly knit,



Leon Pauli and Ellen Lauren in "bobrauschenbergamerica" at the 25th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays.

New York-based SITI Company, had similar qualifications. In such pieces as "War of the Worlds" and "Cabin Pressure," she has created performance works that explore not only the art of such American icons as Orson Welles but the very nature of the art experience in the relationship of performer to audience.

Their 90-minute, intermissionless work is filled with references to Rauschenberg and his work. Strange hybrid animals and specific images such as a bathtub, a doorway, a toaster, tires and chairs are part of the play's scenery. The text uses bits from Rauschenberg's writings, evokes Americana images from his childhood in Texas and unleashes a long string of chicken jokes, taking off from the artist's antic sculpture "Odalisque," which features a stuffed rooster. The basic set (by James Schuette), a giant painted American flag that flows from the back wall down into the floor of the thrust stage, is derived from the Rauschenberg paintings.

But this is more than a *homage* to an artist. It is Mee's and Bogart's attempt to create in the theater the same kind of vibrant American imagery that they saw and appreciated in Rauschenberg's art.

Along with the artist's words, their theatrical collage includes excerpts from the poetry of Walt Whitman, a novel by William S. Burroughs, Mee's own memoirs and seemingly casual reflections on art by the actors.

The gallery of characters, from a folksy "Bob's mom" to a bathing beauty, a rowdy trucker, an urban derelict, a girl on roller skates, a young man in a sweat suit and a man in the shower singing the old

pop tune "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" are all part of Mee's American environment.

Even if you have no knowledge of Rauschenberg's turbulent life or prolific work, the rush of imagery is often striking. A woman in a bathing suit spills a bottle of gin and a sniff of vermouth onto a plastic sheeting on the stage floor, empties a bottle of green olives and recklessly dives into it for a mock swim in the martini mixture. Two men confess their love for each other. A young man and woman who have had trouble getting together finally meet in a dreamy waltz. A joyous dance by the cast is interrupted by a gunshot and the sudden, shocking death of one of the dancers.

And, in the play's eeriest and most brilliant sequence, inspired by a program Mee had seen on a cable public access channel, there is a long, haunting monologue by a young, vacant-eyed murderer who has become a pizza delivery boy. Mee's writing and the dazzling, chilling portrayal of the pizza kid by Gian-Murray Gianino, an apprentice at Actors Theatre, turn this into an indelible moment of high drama.

Not all the imagery is as stunning or as inventive as that brief scene. Do we really need yet another visual joke making fun of Grant Wood's "American Gothic"?

But in its combined exuberance of performance, vigor of imagination and boldness of innovation, "bobrauschenbergamerica" is a liberating, life-giving work of art.

It has ended its premiere engagement in Louisville. Now what needs to happen is for this very American creation to tour America.