

A Festival of Images, via Rauschenberg and Others

By **BRUCE WEBER**

LOUISVILLE, Ky., April 1 — A young woman in a two-piece bathing suit spreads a clear plastic dropcloth across the stage floor. She exits, returns with a bottle of gin and empties it in the center of the dropcloth. She fetches a bottle of vermouth, which she waves over the puddle of gin. She exits again, this time for a jar of olives with whose contents she garnishes the now spreading martini. Then she dives forward and slides exuberantly on her belly through the whole mess. Shortly she is joined by her boyfriend, and the two of them frolic like dolphins in a cocktail sea.

The scene, a hilarious pantomime, works as a stand-alone snapshot, both an appreciation and sendup of suburban hedonism. But it occurs in the middle of a spectacular pileup of performance pieces that collectively celebrate the life and vision of the artist Robert Rauschenberg. A vibrant collaboration among the playwright Charles L. Mee, the experimental director Anne Bogart and Ms. Bogart's troupe, the SITI Company, the show is called "bobrauschenbergamerica."

It was the high point of the 25th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, which will conclude



Richard C. Trigg/Humana Festival

Leon Pauli and Akiko Aizawa in the play "bobrauschenbergamerica."

Sunday at the Actors Theater of Louisville.

On the one hand, in its jumble of realistic and abstract imagery and its quirkily inquisitive spirit, the play is

meant to emulate the style of Mr. Rauschenberg's well-known assemblages. On the other, it is also a kind of history lesson, tying the evolution of our culture in the 20th century to the

education of the artist.

Mr. Mee has incorporated citations from Walt Whitman, John Cage and Mr. Rauschenberg himself, among others, into his vivid script. The artist never appears as a character, but his mother does; in a clever framing device, Mr. Mee makes her the narrator.

Emerging intermittently "through the screen door of the family's house in Port Arthur, Tex., she recalls her son's typical childhood — he was born in 1925 — of bikes, barbecues and boyish pranks, and admits, with an irony supplied by the playwright, "art was not a part of our lives." The house, painted as a huge American flag, is the backdrop of Ms. Bogart's staging. She uses some of Mr. Rauschenberg's favorite props (taxidermically preserved animals) and found objects (an automobile tire) and her own animating visual sense to prove that Mrs. Rauschenberg is only literally correct.

As usual, the festival consisted of six full-length plays and a stew of well-meaning gimmickry: five telephone plays; an hourlong sequence of minutes-long playlets by 16 writers; and an amusing serial play by Arthur Kopit, an apocalyptic cartoon delivered in three 10-minute segments. The festival

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was the first administered by Marc Masterson, who became artistic director of the Actors Theater last year, succeeding Jon Jory; they jointly put this year's program together, and perhaps not surprisingly, it was largely themeless, except for the notion that the theater is a perfect venue for the connection of abstract and concrete ideas.

Oddly, maybe distressingly, the two biggest clinkers in the festival can be laid at their feet. "Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage," a silly, farcical parody of romantic western movies and Sam Shepard's "True West," was written by the ordinarily admirable Jane Martin, the pseudonym for a playwright widely assumed to be Mr. Jory. And "Wonderful World" by Richard Dresser, an allegedly acerbic satire of family and marriage that has been better and more economically served by "Saturday Night Live," was so woodenly directed by Mr. Masterson that it yearned for a laugh track.

But in plays like "Description Begared; or the Allegory of Whiteness" by Mac Wellman, not to mention "bobrauschenbergamerica," the melding of script and production was so evident, so necessary, that the festival became a showcase for directors as much as it was for writers.

"Whiteness" is a play that seems to be about the vagaries of memory, but in typical fashion for Mr. Wellman, it is willfully baffling in its deconstructions of language and meaning. It is set during a reunion of the distinguished Ring family in a hypothetical city in a hypothetical state; it's called Newport, R.I., but the state is the size of America and possessed of vast mountainous regions. When a photographer attempts to capture a family portrait, something metaphysical goes wrong and the play slips through the looking glass, giving us a glimpse of a fractured and fuzzy family history.

The script is fraught with the irritating challenges that Mr. Wellman normally visits on the audience. But this is, improbably enough, a musical, and the engaging score by Michael Roth is tuneful, eclectic (it has a number of rock elements but begins with a medieval-sounding antiphony between a French horn and a trombone) and most pertinently, ac-

cessible where Mr. Wellman's narrative is not. And the director, Lisa Peterson, has created a beautiful and useful production.

Wearing elegant all-white costumes (by Linda Roethke) that reflect changing styles over the last 100 years, the actors clown, declaim, threaten, whine and jabber, wandering not only the small, in-the-round stage of the Victor Jory Theater but also launching their conflicting views from high in the audience. There's a lot of snow. It's all dizzying, but thematic; you understand you're being purposely misdirected and turned about so that your own perspective retreats into blankness; the production slowly whites out what you think you understand.

Two of the festival's more conventional narratives were also well supported by their directors. The less

Sixteen writers, six full-length plays and one woman on the lam.

satisfying of the two, "Quake" by Melanie Marnich, is about a young woman pursuing her selfhood. She takes up impetuously with a number of ill-suited men, and in the play's most dubious contrivance becomes obsessively worshipful of an astrophysicist, a brilliant woman who happens to be on the lam because she has a habit of murdering men.

The situation gives the playwright a chance to soar off into ostensibly poetic fancies involving celestial metaphors and spiritual mystery. But despite an appealing central performance by Tracey Maloney, the script has the feel of a dumbed-off idea with flashy new varnish; the language is not nearly as evocative as the playwright thinks.

Where words fail the play, however, the director, Susan V. Booth, doesn't. Eventually her effort to keep things brisk flags — the last 15 minutes seem very, very long — but she ferries scenery and props on and off the stage inventively, paints stage pictures cleverly and has obviously

encouraged Ms. Maloney to keep it snappy. The energy of the production is largely hers.

Finally, Michael John Garcés, the young director of Eduardo Machado's "When the Sea Drowns in Sand," enhances a largely moving script. In it, a Cuban-born man in his 40's (played by Joseph Urla), accompanied by his best friend (Ed Vassallo), returns for the first time since childhood to his native island. There they hire Ernesto (Felix Solis) as a driver and guide. The play is accompanied by a seductive Latin drummer, Hugh Petersen.

To explain the complex relations among the three characters would be to undermine the play's surprises. (At least one producer has expressed interest in presenting it Off Broadway.) But they manage to embody a variety of conflicts that Mr. Machado perceives as parallel and potentially self-dividing: between capitalism and Communism; between hetero- and homosexuality; between the Cuban and Cuban-American character. The play does rise to an overly fervid political pitch (Elián González is involved), and the various personal relationships end up being articulated to an unnecessary degree. But even with these caveats, it is a plausibly touching and intellectually solid piece of work.

As for the contribution of Mr. Garcés, he has cast three actors with alternately magnetic and combustible chemistry and guided them to beautifully delineated performances. And though a particularly winning sequence is constructed around a tiny video camera — Mr. Solis does a delightful turn performing for himself — the play is largely proless. And Mr. Garcés stages most of it as a jittery three-way courtship dance.

The dynamic among the actors is generated less by any specific action than by their constant shifting of positions. It recalls Michael Blake-more's staging of "Copenhagen," which had the actors moving in mimicry of the restless structure of an atom. Here the actors are mostly poised on a circular platform on the four-sided stage, and their movement creates triangles with ever-changing vertices, a choreography that generates tension and also enforces the play's proposition that perspective is a matter of both predisposition and circumstance.