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theatre Reviews

bobrauschenbergamerica

With Ellen Lauren, Leon Pauli, Will Bond and Kelly Maurer. Written by Charles L. Mee; directed by Anne Bogart. At Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Inspired by the works of visual artist Robert Rauschenberg — whose sculptures and paintings combine such items as stuffed animals, Coke bottles, old tires and images from newspapers and billboards — “bobrauschenbergamerica” is a collage of people and situations that reflect American culture.

The characters include a farm wife, a Chicago businessman, a drifter, a bathing beauty, a fisherman and a guy who could have been borrowed from the musical spoof “Forever Plaid.” The play takes a lighthearted look at picnics, relationships, martinis, chicken jokes, the mystery of the universe, big business, dancing, shopping and golf. A highlight is a sketch, featuring Phil (Leon Pauli) and Phil’s Girl (Akiko Aizawa), that equates social drinking with sex.

A “parade” scene could be a metaphor for pop culture in general. The cast watches in anticipation as the sound of a bagpipe is heard. But as soon as the piper passes, everyone turns to see what is coming next. (The piper, unidentified in the program, is Carolyn Cook of the Louisville Fire & Rescue Pipes and Drums.)

Although many elements smack of 1950s, ’60s and ’70s culture (with

musical reinforcement by Herb Alpert, the Captain and Tennille and disco tunes), several aspects seem quite contemporary. Some of the chicken jokes have appeared in mass e-mails in the past couple of years, and a hilarious routine that has Susan (Ellen Lauren) ranting about the difference between men and women while stuffing her face with cake falls somewhere between *Cosmopolitan* magazine philosophy and the comic strip “Cathy.”

The actors are not self-consciously satirizing America in such a way as to demand that one find profound truth behind the sketches. One can simply enjoy the play as a mostly light-hearted look at various aspects of America. The opening-night audience laughed frequently and gave the show a standing ovation.

The cast performs with considerable spirit and energy. Running nearly two hours with no intermission, the play establishes a good rhythm of tension and release. There is also space provided for the audience’s imagination to assign its own meanings to events — especially in a scene that could represent anything from the Kennedy assassination to recent school shootings.



Submitted Photo

Whatever meaning one chooses to give it, the play implies that violence is part of the American landscape and that life goes on around it.

“Bobrauschenbergamerica,” part of the Humana Festival of New American Plays, continues through April 1 at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 316 W. Main St. Tickets are \$30 and can be reserved by calling 584-1205.

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