

"Bobrauschenbergamerica"

Painter's life staged as art

by Molly Grogan

From his shabby childhood in a Gulf Coast oil port to the consecration of his art at New York's Guggenheim museum in 1997, Bob Rauschenberg's life is the kind of bootstrap-lifting tale that fuels the American Dream. Its nearly 80-year span encompasses not only the defining decades of contemporary American society, from '50s optimism to '60s prosperity to '70s rebellious youth culture, but knits together such quintessentially American landscapes as the Appalachian mountains of rednecks, the open road of Kerouac, the urban grit of downtown Manhattan and most recently the palm-lined trailer retirement communities of Southwest Florida, where America's greatest living artist now makes his home.

In its startling ability to encapsulate the spirit of a nation, Rauschenberg's life is the appropriate subject of a project by playwright Charles Mee and director Anne Bogart, member and co-founder, respectively, of the New York ensemble theater collective known as SITI, committed to intercultural exchange but with an interest in exploring, according to Bogart, "what it means to be an American." The phrase sums up perfectly "bobrauschenbergamerica," Bogart and Mee's latest work, which, in a surprising programming twist, plays this month at the MC93 Bobigny's second annual festival of performing arts from the former Eastern bloc countries (see inset). The connection? A certain thinking-outside-the-box, which the MC93's Artistic Director Patrick Sommer intended to celebrate in the ironically named "Standard Idéal" festival and to which Rauschenberg's art is a vibrant testament.

"Think different" was a Rauschenbergian mantra long before it became a marketing tag for personal computers. He's the man who painted all-black canvases in the 1940s, then all-white ones in the 1950s, then all-red ones and finally dirt ones. He's the one who erased a drawing by Willem DeKooning in a "collaborative" piece meant to challenge the very nature of the creative act. He's the artist credited with founding Pop Art, who pioneered assemblages with objects unearthed from the detritus of our metropolises, who used his body as a living canvas for electrical current, who... the list of revolutions he authored seems endless. But as he explains in the play that bears his name to artists who might look to him



MICHAEL BROSILOW

Scene from the play based on Bob Rauschenberg's life

for inspiration in finding their voice, "The biggest thing is, don't worry about it." Just let the intuition flow, no matter how the public and critics weigh in.

In his renegade approach to art, Rauschenberg is both an icon and an iconoclast of American culture and creation, and it's precisely what Bogart calls "an intense sensibility of freedom" in his work that convinced her and Mee to make him the subject of a play. "Everybody today is a Rauschenbergian, whether they know it or not," Mee has written. "Rauschenberg is who we would like to be as Americans at our best, with this spirit of egalitarianism and openness to life."

To express those qualities, SITI creates a fluid, careening collage of highly graphic tableaux that pay discreet homage to Rauschenberg's art, while layering vignettes of American life, from its most neighborly side to its darkest impulses (family slide shows, picnics, square dances, yard sales, parking lots, martini mixers, shootings...) with themes inseparable from American culture and society (conspiracy theories, the romance of the criminal life,

the reinvention of the self...). "More important than the art is the feeling," says Bogart about "bobrauschenbergamerica" and an undeniable sense of American-ness pervades the piece, from its chicken jokes to its back porches to its New Mexican deserts, but is celebrated most explicitly in the words of other American originals upon whom Mee draws for inspiration: William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and the father of American modernism, Walt Whitman, with whose famous calls to celebrate life in all its diversity the play finishes.

"Art was not a part of our lives," intones Rauschenberg's fictional Mother several times during the play, but the real artist's life and work belie her words. Art may be separate from experience and living, according to another great American modern, Gertrude Stein, yet art has the power to transform life and as Rauschenberg and SITI together demonstrate, life can even become a work of art. *In English, French subtitles, Apr 13-17, Tue-Sat 8:30pm, Sun 3:30pm, MC93 Bobigny, 1 bd Lénine, Bobigny (93), M° Bobigny-Pablo Picasso, tel: 01 41 60 72 72, 8-23€*

Le Standard Idéal

by Molly Grogan

Bobigny's annual rendezvous for the rising stars of Eastern European theater wouldn't be complete without two names that are redrawing the parameters of theatrical expression while challenging the dreams and desires of the new consumers of the former Soviet Bloc. Árpád Schilling and his Budapest-based Krétakör Company present "Blackland" (March 22 to April 3, in Hungarian, French subtitles), a provocative, burlesque, cabaret-style study of the market-driven aspirations of Hungary in the new, enlarged Europe. Director of the Volksbühne's Prater theater in East Berlin since 2001, René Pollesch writes and directs his own texts, grounded in current sociological and economic studies and eschewing theatrical metaphors for straight talk to examine the ways neoliberalist economies can imprison consumers' very attitudes and will. In "Telefavela" (April 7-10, in German, French subtitles), Pollesch transports the theme to Rio's sprawling slums, to understand how mass consumerism and exploitative labor are destabilizing social structures and values. *Mon-Sat 8:30pm, Sun 3:30pm, MC93 Bobigny, 1 bd Lénine, Bobigny (93), M° Bobigny-Pablo Picasso, tel: 01 41 60 72 72, 8-23€*



THOMAS AUBIN