

# Rich Forum launches a hit with 'bobrauschenbergamerica'

By L.P. Streitfeld

Special Correspondent

Square dances, picnics, checkers, Walt Whitman, a tire swing, a tag sale and a chicken doing the

moon walk.

## REVIEW

Playwright Charles L. Mee is shaking up theater with the celebration

of Americana in the Robert Rauschenberg spirit of wide-eyed optimism that revolutionized the national arts scene in the 1960s.

The marriage of these two American iconoclasts is the essence of the SITI Company presentation of "bobrauschenbergamerica." Stamford's Rich Forum is hosting the production for its first performances since the play's introduction at the 2001 Human Festival. The run, continuing through Sunday, launches a national tour.

Sept. 11 has certainly added a profound significance to Ann Bogart's incisive direction that boldly communicates more emotion in reflective silences than words. These risky performances are obviously guided by the optimistic spirit of Rauschenberg, who believed collaboration leads to a universality of expression. The multilevel resonance of this play is undoubtedly the result of Mee interacting with the SITI ensemble process.

The playwright has not sacri-

ficed his obsessive investigation of romantic love, the driving force behind his recent trilogy, including the Long Wharf production of "Big Love" last year. Yet, here he seems to have come to some sort of resolution of the dynamic between the opposites by painting eros into the perspective of a broad cultural landscape with other forms of love, such as patriotism and a mother's devotion to her son.

Mee approaches text in the inclusive manner that Rauschenberg works with the found object. The play is a multidisciplinary American quilt, utilizing a collage of vignettes incorporating music, dance, poetry and stand-up comedy to weave an eclectic narrative of memory, spontaneity and hope. The American flag serves as the sole stage set. Doors and windows in the stripes frame various portraits of our national identity — the bathing beauty, the businessman, the devoted mother, the uptight debutante, the outlaw, the all-American boy and the bum. What makes these personalities fresh is the casting in opposition to type: the bathing beauty is ethnic, the businessman is black and the golden boy is gay.

Remarkably, the original cast has remained intact and their performances exude an infectious familiarity and vitality. Working simultaneously with and against type, they uphold a collaborative spirit represented by the stars on the

American flag, no performer outshining the other. Instead, they pull together to present strange yet compelling juxtapositions of objects and characters that succeeded in confounding audience expectations, thereby extending the fun. The "happening" was perhaps the most resonant expression of the Rauschenberg philosophy of including spectators as participants in artistic creation. Mee pays homage with a hilarious martini cocktail stirred with human bodies that rocked the audience.

The Rauschenberg found object, as a slice of Americana, embraces a discontinuous narrative integrating art with life. Yet, what makes the objective reality in "bobrauschenbergamerica" so multidimensional is the addition of movement. The departure of the stage set from the static quality of the museum piece is achieved through the characters' engagement in the emotional power of the object, chiefly the American flag. In this manner, Mee and Bogart's form of collaborative theater invades the terrain of the visual arts in a new century, just as Rauschenberg's inventions impacted theater during the '60s bcultural revolution. As the text of the play makes

clear, art at this time is charged with finding new ways of reflecting a paradigm of an interconnected universe in perpetual motion.

Observations about the cosmos in this theatrical collage bring art together with science in the reverent manner of artists' early experimentation with technology. A particularly transcendent moment results when the enraptured ensemble gazes at the stars illuminated on the American flag. This brilliant metaphor for the fusion of the eternity of space with the unbounded optimism of the American imagination takes on a whole new meaning since Sept. 11.

The revitalization of an American icon within the context of the 21st-century avant-garde happens to be just the tonic we need right now. Those who take the plunge into "bobrauschenbergamerica" will be rewarded with an enduring American quality — joy.

*"bobrauschenbergamerica" will be performed through Sunday at the Rich Forum, 307 Atlantic St. in Stamford. Performances are at 8 p.m. tonight through Saturday, and 2 p.m. on Sunday. Tickets range from \$20 to \$40. Call 325-4466.*