

The director of the celebratory “bobrauschenbergamerica” at the Walker Art Center’s new theater says her chief concern is the audience’s pleasure.

The avant-garde lightens up

By Rohan Preston
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Does the performing-arts avant-garde, long known for its dour demeanor and its interior, self-reflective irony, know how to have regular fun? Director Anne Bogart, one of the deans of avant-garde, says yes, she cares deeply about the audience’s enjoyment.

The Obie-winning director of such stage shows as “Gertrude and Alice,” which was presented at the Guthrie Lab in 2001, and “War of the Worlds,”

her take on the making of Orson Welles’ epic, has staged Charles Mee’s pageant, “bobrauschenbergamerica,” which opens Tuesday at Walker Art Center.

The show, a random collage of America, is an imagined work of what the painter, sculptor and graphic artist Robert Rauschenberg might have created if his medium was the stage. The show, in which found songs and sounds coexist in a colorful soup — from the Earth, Wind & Fire pop hit “September” to sporadic dancing — is the first long-run production in the Walker’s new McGuire Theater.



Avant-garde director Anne Bogart goes for “exuberance” in her latest work.

Rauschenberg created work from found objects and photographs as well as all-white, all-black and all-red paintings. Before entering the McGuire, performance patrons can linger by “Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp),” a Rauschenberg work in the Walker’s collection. The three-panel piece is made of charcoal, fabric, metal chains, a drinking glass, spoon and necktie. It is typical of an artist who once used a stuffed angora goat in one of his best-known pieces, “Monogram.”

In a recent conversation, Bogart shared her take on the show:

Why was Robert Rauschenberg the inspiration?

About eight years ago, I asked [playwright] Chuck Mee to work with me on a piece about Andy Warhol. He politely said no. He didn’t like Warhol at all. I went ahead and made it anyway, not entirely to my satisfaction. A couple of years later, Chuck asked me if I’d like to do something about Rauschenberg. I didn’t know Rauschenberg, but what Chuck was doing was showing me what a real artist is about.

Rauschenberg is known for surprising images made of the darnedest things. Were you trying to honor that aesthetic in this piece?

Absolutely. We’re trying to take his notions of visual disruption and translate them into a language of the stage. The work takes over and leads the way, so it’s a dramaturgy of intuition, rather than Aristotelean storytelling. The piece is like a dream.

It doesn’t have a plot, but tell me some more about it.

The set is a giant American flag. In it, all these fun, scary, dark, colorful things take place. It’s a pageant, really. And it’s free, like the imagination. At the beginning of

the play, there’s a quote that’s used from a voice-over: “You put out a red thread and just follow it, see where it wants to go.” The play is like playing a Ouija board — you put your hands on it and just follow.

This approach seems so different from the structured, disciplined way you’ve staged your other works.

As a company and as a director, I spend huge amounts of time on transitions — how to get from one scene to the next. With this show, we just bump from one scene to another without explaining it. It’s like how the mind works.

You have done this piece in the United States, Germany and France. Were there big differences in how you have been received in the respective countries?

We’re just coming off a performance in Paris at a left-wing, avant-garde place. You put a huge American flag in the middle of a stage in Paris and you’ve got a problem. Through French eyes, the event looks like the inside of a Wal-Mart — something that’s hideously ugly. But we also did it at BAM [the Brooklyn Academy of Music] and for Americans, it’s a joy fest. For us, it says, look at the plural world of this stage. You could say it’s a mess but it also glorious.

I wonder if the ambivalent French reception was also based on aesthetics.

Yes. In France, we performed in a theater where they expect every play to be a critique of theater itself. But this is a celebration. They were waiting for us to upend everything. And they were also not used to such exuberance in acting.

That’s true of the avant-garde here, too, no?

Absolutely. People are used to cynical acting that undercuts itself, comments on itself, kills itself, then rises again — that sounds like its own religion, doesn’t it?

What did you discover in the process of staging this piece?

Chuck taught me a huge amount — mostly about freedom. My background and company [are] all about rigor and discipline. His basic aesthetic is pleasure and happiness and freedom. It’s nice to go to those places. This show is a poetic magnification of the human spirit.

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