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'Under Construction' embraces life

By Judith Egerton

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"My attitude toward old age is one of gratitude for each day. It strikes me that since there's obviously a shorter length of time left than I've already had, I'd better hurry up and be interested in whatever I can."

With these words, a character in Charles L. Mee's new play, "Under Construction," makes the experimental playwright's point: Life is short. Live fully with all your senses.

The list of what Mee finds interesting is boundless: American history, Greek drama, sexuality, music, contemporary art, sports, dance, politics and more. And what the phenomenal SITI Company does with Mee's script, under the direction of Anne Bogart, becomes high-wire performance art with a sense of humor.

"Under Construction" is a freaky, wondrous, dance-inducing piece created for the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

The play is the third in a series inspired by American artists. For this one, Mee juxtaposes two radically different stylists: One who was a fixture in his childhood (illustrator and painter Norman Rockwell); the other (installation artist Jason Rhoades) he discovered in the 21st century.

Neither artist is a character in the play. In fact, their names are never mentioned. Instead, Mee creates scenarios of language and movement as a way to capture a sense of the artists' styles and their place in American culture. Seeing the play may be a richer experience if you know the work of the artists, but it isn't necessary.

The two previous plays in Mee's artist series also premiered at the Humana Festival. The laudable, free-spirited "bobrauschenbergamerica" and the transcendent "Hotel Cassiopeia," about collage artist Joseph Cornell, were not biographical works, either. They were surreal, abstract visions of the artists and their works.

The title "Under Construction" refers to the ever-changing political and cultural landscape of America. The idea is carried off in the small Victor Jory Theatre by illuminating the stage with strands of yellow construction lights. Props include wooden sawhorses, plastic buckets, orange safety cones and crates. The actors move them about to form various tableaux, such as the familiar Rockwell illustrations of a family Thanksgiving dinner and boys in a barbershop.

Rhoades' three-dimensional installation pieces are less well-known than Rockwell's iconic works. But the artist's unrestrained, bizarre spirit lives in the play. You can see it in a strange, wild scene that involves Stephen Duff Weber being wrapped with duct tape onto a pole to form a human cocoon while a naked Tom Nelis rolls himself into a huge plastic tarp and writhes on the floor like a pupa in a chrysalis.

The other SITI Company players are no less entertaining, even when we aren't sure what their actions mean. The ensemble includes Ellen Lauren, Akiko Aizawa, Barney O'Hanlon, Samuel Stricklen, Makela

Spielman, J. Ed Araiza and Leon Ingulsrud.

Compared to the first two works in the artist series, this play reveals more about the playwright than its artist subjects. With "Under Construction," Mee, 70, a polio survivor, looks without nostalgia at his own Norman Rockwell past and with gratefulness at his present artistic life.

To contemplate the future means to consider one's own mortality, and it seems that's what Mee is doing here. The playwright's sense of the frailty, fleetness and sweet joys of life reverberates loud and clear every time an actor or the ensemble dances in "Under Construction."

Reporter Judith Egerton can be reached at (502) 582-4503.

Additional Facts

'Under Construction'

- **Playwright:** Charles L. Mee
 - **Next performances:** In repertory through April 5 at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 316 W. Main St.
 - **Tickets:** \$30-\$55. Call (502) 584-1205 or online at www.actorsTheatre.org.
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