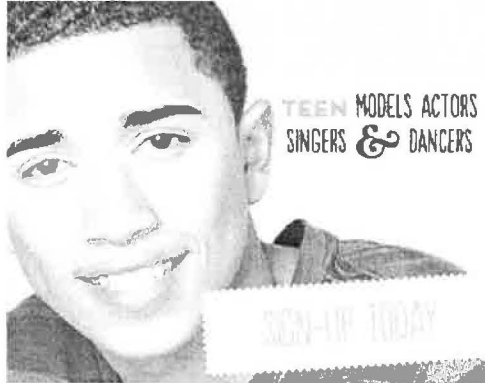


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Anne Bogart's 'Café Variations' is a love letter to C. Mee

April 13, 2012 | By Laura Collins-Hughes

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At no point will a character send circular saw blades spiraling through the air. There will be no wild frenzy of tossing, tearing, and breaking that leaves the set in ruins. No one will hook anyone's body up to a car battery. And never will a soldier walk into a Norman Rockwell moment and jolt the proceedings with a monologue about the ugliness of war.



The cast of 'Café Variations' rehearces the Boston Globe show. (Emanuel M. Suarez/Daily

So Anne Bogart is, perhaps understandably, a little bit nervous about "Café Variations," her remix of the work of Charles L. Mee Jr., the sole playwright member of her 20-year-old company. In Mee's plays, lyricism and brutality tend to live side by side, jagged-elbowing in on heart-melting romance.

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"My fear is that the genius of Chuck is that he puts the violence in," Bogart said this afternoon in the greenroom at the Cutler Majestic Theatre, where "Café Variations" had its world premiere beginning Friday. "We don't have that kind of jarring, alienating that Chuck is not afraid to confront."

The Obie Award-winning director knows she is taking a leap by leaving it out of "Café Variations." But she also knows that this piece, whose text she assembled from Mee plays, is a different kind of animal, with a different purpose.

"This, for me, is a love letter to Chuck," Bogart said. "He doesn't know it."

Longtime friends, they have worked together for more than two decades. When Mee produced its first play, it was his "Orestes." When he got married, she officiated. When he got married, he officiated.

"We're just incredibly close," Mee said by phone from Brooklyn, N.Y., where he lives.

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A former historian, he makes his plays out of found texts. He posts his scripts on www.charlesmee.org, where he encourages visitors to “pillage the plays as I have structures and contents of the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of Soa and the evening news and the internet, and build your own.”

“Lots of strangers have done it,” Mee said.

But “Café Variations” marks the first time a good friend has taken Mee up on the production, which features SITI Company actors alongside Emerson College per students, has music by George and Ira Gershwin — an idea that came from Robe executive director of ArtsEmerson, which is coproducing the play with Emerson Company.

Bogart had already been thinking about making a piece from Mee’s plays, knowing be music in it — “always in Chuck’s plays, there’s music,” she said — but not know might produce it. She began pondering the American Songbook.

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"I thought, music from the public domain, so we didn't have to pay for it. And then I started saying, 'Anne, do you have any thoughts about a musical? Is there anything you're thinking about?' " So she told him about her Mee idea.

"And he said, 'Well, what would you think of the music of George and Ira Gershwin?' I said, 'Are you kidding?' And of course I called Chuck immediately. I said, 'What do you think?' He said, 'Are you kidding?' That would be like a fairy godmother coming down at you. 'Here, poof, you can use this music.' I hardly believed what Rob said."

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But they got permission to use the songs, and Bogart went to Rachel Grimes, for new arrangements for the show's live orchestra.

For Bogart, "Café Variations" is a way of exploring themes that are vital to Mee — relationships — and celebrating their friendship.

"There's a strong current in his work, which is probably based on Heidegger or Adorno, a notion that we become who we are through our relations to others. He says that. And basically all of his plays say that," Bogart explained.

"A lot of who I am is through my relationship with Chuck," she added. "Whenever I despair, I come to the end of my rope, I call him up and I say, 'Let's have dinner.' And during the course of our conversation ... I find the will to live again."

"Café Variations" is set entirely within cafe culture, its text appropriated partly from plays that had already set in cafes, like "Limonade Tous les Jours" and "Café le Monde," and scenes in other plays that could conceivably be set in that milieu.

"I wanted to make a play," Bogart said, "that was about the heroism that it takes to be another person: you know, to get out of bed, to leave your apartment, to actually go somewhere, to walk into a public place and say, 'Is this seat taken? Can I sit here

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yourself at risk.”

To find the ingredients for such a piece within Mee’s plays, Bogart went through She worked intuitively, knowing what was right when she saw it.

“There’s a term that I use when I’m working on a piece, which is Vice. I say, ‘That comes from the TV program ‘Miami Vice,’ ” she said. “Apparently, there was a guy on ‘Miami Vice’ for the whole time that it was being made, and his job — and he was paid a lot of money for this — was to every week go on location where they were going to shoot the director of the week to look for costumes. And his job was to say either ‘That’s Vice.’ ”

So when Bogart found something that fit her “suspicion about what this play was about,” Vice to her.

It was also, very likely, a duet.

“I thought that the idea of a dynamic between two was really important,” she said with the notion of one person changing another, through conversation and interaction.

And that, Bogart said, is where the love letter to Mee comes in.

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