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The Collage Artist

Theater

By KATE TAYLOR
July 30, 2007

New Yorkers will be seeing a lot of Charles Mee this year. The Signature Theatre, where he is the playwright-in-residence, will offer three world premieres, beginning next week with "Iphigenia 2.0," directed by Tina Landau. In October, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, as part of its Next Wave Festival, will present "Hotel Cassiopeia," based on the life of the artist Joseph Cornell and created in collaboration with the director Anne Bogart and the SITI Company.

Mr. Mee's plays are mosaics of cultural fragments, with plots borrowed from the Greeks or Shakespeare and text lifted from sources as disparate as Homer, Hannah Arendt, the Internet and Vogue magazine. But they are far from being cerebral postmodern experiments. They are full of music, dance, and stunning visual spectacle. And they express a view of life, as shattered and disorienting, that is deeply personal.

In a recent interview in his kitchen in Brooklyn, Mr. Mee, 68, cited the influence of visual artists who have practiced forms of collage, such as Cornell, Max Ernst, and Robert Rauschenberg. Mr. Mee spent many years writing history books, including "Meeting at Potsdam" and "The Marshall Plan," and is used to quoting primary sources to make an argument. He also sees us as products of our diverse collective culture.

"In the world today there's not one story that's privileged over all others," he said, "and what we're really trying to do is find out how to live in a world with many stories, many values and points of view, and how to live from day to day happy and at peace."

In 1953, when Mr. Mee was 14 and an avid football player, he contracted polio and nearly died. His legs never regained their full strength, and he still walks with crutches. As he explained in his 1999 memoir, "A Nearly Normal Life," the possibility of sudden and random events such as his illness affected how Mr. Mee chose to write.

"Intact people should write intact books with sound narratives built of sound paragraphs that unfold with a sense of dependable cause and effect, solid structures you can rely on," he wrote. "That is not my experience of the world."

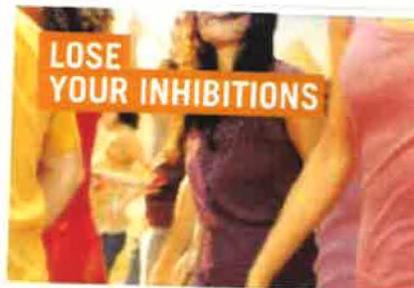
"Iphigenia 2.0" is his adaptation of Euripides's



Richard Termine

Using bits of ancient, literary, and pop culture, playwright Charles Mee weaves theater from life and legend, Kate Taylor writes. Above, Barney O'Hanlon, Will Bond, and Akiko Aizawa of the SITI Company in 'bobrauschenbergamerica.'

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"Iphigenia at Aulis," in which Agamemnon must decide whether to sacrifice his daughter so that his ships can depart for Troy. Mr. Mee said he delayed writing this one for a long time, since he always had daughters living at home. But his youngest daughter is going to college in September. Now, he said, "I thought I could do this."



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