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ART & NARRATIVE



Charles L. Mee Jr. is a playwright. His latest play, *BIG LOVE*, opened at the Humana Festival and is currently on tour. Now he is working on *bobrauschenbergamerica*, a play inspired by Robert Rauschenberg, with Anne Bogart and the SITI company. His published collection is *HISTORY PLAYS*. Some of his texts are available at www.panix.com/~meejr/remaking.html.

The following excerpts are from a talk Mee gave at the Columbia University Graduate Theater Program on September 18, 2000.

I'm a person who loves narrative, and when I did *Orestes*, it felt really great to get in the middle of a Greek play which is kind of a Rolls Royce of structure. But I also believe that narrative is essentially false and that history books are essentially false. They basically say: there is an effect and a cause, effect and cause, effect and cause. You are immediately placed in a mechanistic world that is reductionist and the reason it seems simple-minded to me—I think the reason people love narrative is because it's simpleminded. The reason people have a hunger for narrative is because they know it's false. And, as Nietzsche said, we tell each other stories in order to avoid understanding that beneath our feet lies an abyss, and I think that's true.

The experience of life itself is not a narrative. A narrative is not life, a narrative is a story about life, but it tries to persuade you that the narrative is true, that it's a true rendering of how it is to live, and that, if you can understand the narrative, you can get with it and you will survive. This isn't true.

Most narratives in American naturalistic theater also have, built into the narrative, an assumption about psychological norms. You can understand what it is to be a normal human being, you can become a normal human being if you get with the story, get with the program, have a happy ending. That's not true. This story is told over and over and over again, in movies and on television, because it's not true. That's why they tell it, to make people feel better, so they live in a coherent and safe world.

Although I myself love narrative and deal out of narrative a lot in the work that I do, I also love to fuck it up, to smash it and have stuff fall into the middle of it and make it so that, if you're in the narrative, you also get knocked back in some Brechtian sense.

The other thing that I think about a lot, which is really not true but I think of it a lot, in the theater, I guess what I've said so far is: Character: made by culture, not Freud; Plot: is a lie; Spectacle, I think, is the world. I mean I think what theater does is spectacle, it says: here is the world. And the characters who navigate through it are the inhabitants. And the texts that are spoken are the relationships between the inhabitants, and that's civilization. In other words, here's the set, here these people walk on stage, they speak to each other: that's the relationship.

I know people also relate physically, obviously, and then you get fancy about it and you say that the physical thing is a form of speaking. The thing

in traditional theater that generally carries the relationship is text. Relationship is civilization. In other words, you have a spectacle and you have a person standing on stage, that's not yet civilization. Two people standing on stage is not yet civilization. When they relate to each other, that's civilization. That's what Aristotle meant when he said human beings are social creatures. They aren't human yet until they have a relationship. This is what the Greeks believed, that you're an animal until you have a human relationship.

This is why it is so painful, in *PHILOCTETES*, for a man to live on an island. If he lived on an island, he was an animal. That's why, even after he had been abused by the Greeks, and badly used, and they came and said, "Now come and save our lives for us, because you have the bow and arrow, and we can't win the [Trojan] war without you," he said "Okay," because he's an animal until he goes back to civilization. I think this is why theater is an essential artform; because it is the artform of all the relationships between living human beings.

So, if you go way back, Homer is alone telling a narrative—"Homer," by the way, means to stitch together in Greek. So he's the first maker of collage. So, there is Homer giving a story but then, what happens in the birth of theater is that a second character is placed on stage. And then amazing things happen. The first thing is: there is not an author who communicates the truth. There's a human relationship, and the truth is not in what this person says or in what that person says, but in the relationship. And the drama that happens, it's like the light bulb theory of art. The light bulb theory of art is that, in a light bulb, there's not just one filament, because that makes no light. You have to have a second filament, and the light occurs not in this filament or in that filament, but in the spark between them. That's where the light comes from. And it's also why, in the leap, is where the life is. It's also why, when you read poetry, and it's a fabulous poem, and you remember a great line, and you go back to the poem to find the line that was so brilliant, and it's not there. Because the brilliant line was the one that occurred between this line and this line, when you took the leap, from this image to this image, in there was the poem. And the same deal is the deal on stage. Between this character and that character, between these characters and the setting, between the setting and the audience, these are the leaps.

Q: You are currently working with Anne Bogart and the SITI Company on "bobrauschenbergamerica". Could you talk about your process of working, and also what you think about the new Rauschenberg pieces on display at the Whitney Museum?

A: Well, I've loved Rauschenberg for years and I think that we're all descendants of Rauschenberg, whether we know it or not. There are people who came before him, namely: Max Ernst and Homer. Rauschenberg takes the stuff of the world, takes in the world, and then it comes out again as hallucination. So that he doesn't just take stuff from the world and stick it there, he internalizes it, and then out comes the vision. So he takes the hard material of the real world; he's not a fantasist, he's not a dreamer. He starts with the material of the world but he puts it

through his own psyche and shows you what it makes him see, how he sees it, what his vision of it is. And he doesn't re-make it so it feels better to him in some sense. He doesn't take somebody's face and make a face that he likes better. He takes the face, he doesn't mess with it. That's the given, that's the fact. That's the thing of the world that he can't alter. That's the data. Like a historian not being able to change what Napoleon did; free to interpret it, free to re-contextualize it, free to see it in some different way, free to render it in some fashion, but not free to change the fact of it.

And what's happening to him, obviously, is all these sort-of violent juxtapositions, the complexity of walking through the world when it's not pre-fabricated coherent, and it doesn't already convey its meaning and its form. Because he did this kind of juxtaposition and simultaneous vision of contradictory stuff or irrelevant stuff, and you think: Oh, this means this, and that's because that relates to that, or this doesn't relate at all, and what's the point of this? It's like watching television, it's like: oh here's a story about friends living in New York and then you cut to a highway in

California and then you cut to the Eiffel Tower and a woman smoking, and then you go back to the friends in the apartment in New York, and you say to yourself they're all related to some global economy or they're not.

Arthur Miller takes you into a play and you're there for 2 hours, but none of us live that way anymore, actually. And network TV is smarter than that. Network TV assumes that you can say, blah blah blah, California, Paris, back to the New York apartment and that's cool, that's called relaxation.

But most theater thinks we're stupider than that and can't deal with more than 2 contradictory thoughts at the same time. Rauschenberg thinks you can deal with many contradictions, and we think, yeah, that's true. Different narrative lines, different plot lines, different levels of imagery; Martin Luther King, a stuffed chicken, a pair of shoes. And this feels like life to us. And you bring it together, all into one composition and you feel: that feels like the real world to me, and I feel liberated because nobody has placed a structure on that that is like a boot in my chest and I can't breathe. Nobody has said, this is the way to think about it, this is how to feel about it. It's very liberating.

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LISTINGS

BOXING2000
A new play written and directed by Richard Maxwell
Last days, Sept 29 & 30 at 8pm.
Present Company Theatorium, 196-198 Stanton St, 212-420-8877, \$15/\$12.

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS
Monologist Jen Mitos: dolls, porn, Vera, the Cold War in a bathtub. Paired with Julie Goldman's comedy show, "Julie Goldman Works It Out".
October 13-15, 20-22, Fri & Sat at 8, Sun at 6. Brooklyn Art Exchange, 421 5th Ave, corner of 8th St, Park Slope, Brooklyn. 718-832-0018, \$12/\$6.

BORIS BY THE SEA
Text by Matvei Yankelevich, dir by Daniel Kleinfeld, sound by Todd Polenberg. With the ineffable Dima Dubson as Boris.
Sept 29-Oct 22, Fri-Sun at 7pm. HERE, 145 6th Ave. \$12.

WAN DOLLAH?
Choreographed and performed by Joyce L. Lim & Nami Yamamoto
October 5, 6 & 14 at 8. Oct 15 at 3.
Dance Theater Workshop, 219 W 19th St, 212-924-0077, \$15/TDF.

SLAY THE DRAGON
Created and choreographed by Jody Oberfelder. Music by John Zorn and Tchaikovsky.
Through Oct 7; Thurs-Sats at 8pm.
The Flea Theater, 41 White Street, 212-226-2407, \$20/\$15.

COMPANY
Take part in Samuel Beckett's last prose work as it is transformed into an "interactive performance event." Rude Mechanicals directed by Lane Savadove.
October 4-29, Wed & Thu at 8, Fri & Sat at 7 & 9:30, Sun at 7.
The Rude Room, Access Theater, 380 Broadway, 4th Floor (contact www.rudemechanicals.org) \$15.

MEDEA
Euripides' Medea told through dance, video and music by Dor Green (performance artist/storyteller) with Wilber Morris on bass. Oct 7 & 14, 7pm.
Collective: Unconscious, 145 Ludlow St. \$10/\$8 w/flyer

IN ANIMATE OBJECTS
Minneapolis: New Puppetry festival, includes SQUEEZEPLAY (Dan Hurlin & Guy Klucsevsek), Basil Twist's PETRUSHKA, and more.
Walker Arts Center, 725 Vineland Place, Minneapolis, 612-375-7622.

WOMEN AVANT-GARDE FILM-MAKERS IN AMERICA

The end of the series at the Whitney Museum. Sept 30-Oct 1, films by: Chick Strand, Abigail Child, Heather McAdams, Julie Murray, and Betty Ferguson. Whitney Museum, 945 Madison Ave, 570-3676. \$5 for films (w/o museum ticket).

FILMS AT ANTHOLOGY
Francois Boué: Some Very Short Films (Super-8), Oct 4 at 8:30pm.
Short Films by Jean Genet (I), Isaac Julien, Kenneth Anger and John Scott Matthews. Oct 5 at 9pm.
Bulgarian Film Festival. Oct 12-15. Anthology Film Archives, 32 2nd Ave, 212-501-5181, \$8/\$5.

WILLIAMSBURG BROOKLYN FILM FESTIVAL 2000 EXPO

Films include: *BONBON* by Franziska Stuenkel, *BROKE* by Matt Goldman, *KYOUKIN* [Mad Harp] by Ryuta Kira, *META* by Marcella Steingart, and more.
Tuesday, Oct 3 at 8pm. (Come at 7 for free pizza and beer in The Den, 44 Av A.)
Projections at Two Boots Pioneer Theater, 155 East 3rd St, www.wbff.org, \$8.50/\$5

ROBERT BECK MEM'L CINEMA

3 October: *CINEMA ISN'T I SEE BUT I FLY* (Films from Squeaky Wheel...) Ghen Dennis screens a program of her Kodachrome-as-B/W Super-8mm films and Arcana films by Buffalo filmmakers.
10 October: *SPATIAL ENIGMAS AND PEOPLE'S ENIGMAS* (or, The Cinema According to Vincent Grenier). All programs on Tues at 9pm at Collective: Unconscious, 145 Ludlow St, [\\$5](http://www.crosswinds.net/~rbmc).

Y E S : YOKO ONO

First American retrospective of Yoko Ono's prolific 40-year career of pioneering avant-garde artist premiers at Japan Society Gallery. Her collaborations with John Cage, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Andy Warhol and Ornette Coleman are also represented.
October 18, 2000 through January 14. Japan Society, 333 E 47th St, 832-1155.

BOX OPERA

Box Opera will present three performance acts—drawn from a pool of New York's edgiest performance artists—and three sparring matches. Artists of all disciplines, male and female dancers, actors and models are encouraged to audition. A background in boxing training is a big plus.
Debut: October 14.
Luvvyplex, 353 Broadway.
Info: (212)219-3053 / www.boxopera.com



AT THE LITTLE THEATER

KRISTEN KOSMAS and **JUDY ELKIN** run the **LITTLE THEATER**, a cabaret-type series that happens on roughly a monthly basis. Each **LITTLE THEATER** event features a different set of performers, and the whole show happens on the tiny stage in Tonic's main space. There is a bar in the room, and it is not infrequent to see the audience moving around, drinking, smoking, chatting during the show. This lends the event a kind of informality more characteristic of jazz shows than of theater performances.

The last **LITTLE THEATER** event happened on September 25th, and included Juliana Francis, Emily Cass McDonnell, Johanna Meyer, Oqwui Okpokwasili, and Colleen Werthmann wrestling on a mat in Tory Vasquez's wild **WRESTLING LADIES**, and Gary Wilmes with a metronome in his pocket performing Jim Strah's **HOW TO ACT**. The room was packed, the feeling in the room was friendly and casual, and the performers rocked out.

Although downtown cabaret events are all the rage, the **LITTLE THEATER** distinguishes itself in the quality of the curating and the final effect of a space where something can happen. Yelena Gluzman electronically interviewed Kosmas and Elkin to find out more, more, more...

Kristen, you recently moved to New York from Seattle. What were you doing in Seattle? Why, and when, did you leave Seattle and come to NYC?

I was there making plays. Acting and writing. I did a lot of solo work. I made four full length solo plays while I was there, and several collaborations in and out of town. I was also a company member of New City Theater for about five years. New City is an artist run organization, so I did a little of everything. Curating festivals, cleaning bathrooms, developing new work, answering the phone, writing, performing.

I moved to New York in December of 1998. I wanted to be a receptionist. This dream came true. But I recently had to give up my receptionist posi-

tion to go back to Seattle and do my last play, the scandal!, which was presented at New City in the spring, and will be presented at **LITTLE THEATER** later this year or early next.

Also, I wanted to be closer to my family. Judy was here too, and I wanted to work with her again. We went to college [Harvard] together, and we made **FANTASTIC!** performance pieces together **ALL THE TIME** at our kitchen table in Cambridge.

Judy, what is your background?

I grew up in New York in the East Village. I started going to Mabou Mines' pieces when I was four. I think their early work influenced me a lot. I studied acting and playmaking in college, and I came home when I was done to live my life. I've travelled a lot, lived in other countries... I've written three plays, **PLAYSTATION** (Excellent Art Manufacturing), **A PHAIDRA PLAY** (Soho Rep, directed by Daniel Aukin), and **SUNDAYS OUT OF COUNTRY** (Ontological -Hysterical Theater), and performed in New York with Mabou Mines, Robert Cucuzza, Ford Wright, Marizio Cattalan (as Picasso at MOMA), and Judson Kniffen. I have a show on Manhattan Public Access, **CHESTER** (channel 67) the first Wednesday of every month at midnight. I make **CHESTER** with photographer Banu Cennetoglu.

How did you two conceive of the **LITTLE THEATER** project?

We have a friend (Jim Fletcher) who told us he was writing five minute plays, the liar!, and we both loved this idea, of the short form. We thought

short plays were more likely to be funny, which we have a deep affection for—laughter, and the absurd. We were interested in presenting theater in a more relaxed atmosphere as well, where the relationship of the audience to the play would be less rigid than it might be in a traditional theater space.

Kristen used to work at **TONIC**, so we asked them if we could do it there, and they said yes. It was exciting that the technical capacities are so limited, because they're not really set up for this sort of thing. There's nowhere to hide anything, no space for a helicopter, no fancy lighting—so the work has to rely on strength of text and performance—which are the essential elements of theater, more or less. We love limitations. They spark the imagination. Also, it makes sense that we would be doing it at **TONIC**, because it's an artist-curated music venue—so they were already doing with music what we wanted to do with plays.

Plus, because we both write, we wanted to make an accessible venue for writers (including ourselves) to put up their work, where it wouldn't cost a lot of money, and we could experiment and play freely. We thought it would be fun. It is.

Can you write descriptions of all your previous events?

No. There have been too many. We've been doing this once a month since February [2000], and there have been anywhere from three to six pieces on a given night. The tone of the evening varies radically according to the aesthetic of the writer, writer/director, director, or choreographer whose work we're showing. It spans a fairly wide spectrum, formally — from straight-ahead naturalism to some pretty out performance.

How do you gauge the success of a given event?

If people come back, we assume the last one went well. So if no one comes in October, we'll blame it on Gary Wilmes. No. It's very personal, this idea of success. We think they've all been great in one way or another. Sometimes a certain magic happens between the pieces—they echo or respond to each other in compelling or beautiful ways, themes will appear and explore themselves, or the arc of an evening will be really satisfying in precisely the way it is when one sees a really good play. Or sometimes the pieces are so unlikely together it's hard to believe they all go by the same name of Theater. But even that is an experience we welcome. Sometimes it works better than other times, but we'll keep doing it in any case. It's very rewarding to give people a place to do their work. And for all of these writers and actors to meet each other and possibly form connections for collaborations or other working relationships—this all factors in.

It means a lot to us also that many of the artists want to come back—they want to make second and third pieces for the venue. This is a great compliment.

How do you get audiences there?

The artists and the actors bring their audience with them—so, to a certain degree the audience changes month to month. But there are also regulars, people who come every time.

TONIC is also just a great venue. Everyone always tells us how great the vibe is there. It's true for the music they present as well. The people who run it are really wonderful, and so are all the people who work there. It's just a good place to go to see things.

In terms of publicity, we do a mailing and an e-mailing. That's it. Everything else is word of mouth.

We just want it to keep going. It's unfolding in its own way.

How do you finance it?

It pays for itself. Musicians always get paid, and **TONIC** made the same arrangement with us that they would make with a band. We get a percentage of the door. We pay our expenses out of that, the producers get a cut and we

split the rest between the people who take responsibility for the pieces (the writer, director, etc.), and we hope they then split that with their actors.

What are you excited by, in theater?

When something seems impossible. When something is impossible.

What are you dissatisfied with, and excited by, in the **LITTLE THEATER**?

We're not dissatisfied with anything. We're excited by the idea of putting a hundred people on the stage (which is 10' x 25') in a five minute play about the fall of the Roman Empire or some other such epic event. We haven't nailed down a date for that yet, but...

Do you ever give artistic advice or guidelines to the performers?

Not so much. We help of course because we have the most familiarity with the space.

But the only guideline is the time frame, which is anywhere from 20 seconds to 20 minutes (give or take).

Nobody's written us a 20-second play yet, but we're waiting. Patiently. Oh, actually we do have a couple of ideas.

Do you see the acts before booking them?

We generally ask people whose work we're interested in to create something specifically for the venue, so no we haven't always seen the pieces themselves.

But usually at least one of us knows the person's work. It has been the case though that we've met people at parties and liked them and given them a slot on faith. This has gone well. Then, we just like to see a rehearsal so we can structure the evening itself.

Is your host always the same? Who is he?

We just asked Alex Eiserloh to be our permanent host. Finding a host each month was more difficult than finding playwrights and performers. Alex was our host for the April **LITTLE THEATER**. He's a natural. Alex is a performer/ songwriter who most recently starred in Ford Wright's **I, MEXICO**.

Who are your influences?

KRISTEN: Influences? I don't know. My inspirations come mostly from outside theater. From literature and poetry and music. Frank O'Hara, WS Merwin, Laurie Anderson, Ann Magnuson, DT Suzuki, the Flaming Lips, the Pixies, Rilke, Throwing Muses and Kristin Hersh, Jim Carroll, Palace, Sparklehorse, Bach, Samuel Beckett's stories, Blonde Redhead, and lately this downtown music has been giving me a lot—Chris Speed's yeahNo, Tim Berne's Miniature record **I Can't Put My Finger on It**, Jim Black's sleight of hand. Also Richard Buckner. And I like the circus.

JUDY: Hmmmm, I am influenced... I am influenced by the life of the street and on subways and in homes, offices, stores, restaurants, massage parlors.... And persons, any person.

Artists you'd like to work with?

We want to work with Jim Strahs again (and again), Jim Fletcher, Lawrence Krauser (who has a book coming out on **MCSWEENEY'S PRESS**, called **LEMON**), Ruth Margraff, Richard Maxwell, Ingmar Bergman and Peter Sellars.

Is there anything you would not allow on the **LITTLE THEATER** stage? (nudity? defecation? Shakespeare? Liza Minelli?)

We keep making rules and then breaking them. We think Liza Minelli could really take some risks at **LITTLE THEATER** which she may not feel comfortable doing on a Broadway stage. Kristen is against defecation. In public. Judy agrees.

What events are coming up?

In October: works by Chay Costello, Kourtney Rutherford, Deke Weaver, Linas Benedictas, and possibly ourselves. In November: Michael Weiner, Renee Topper, Carey Friedman we hope, and possibly, ourselves.

Chuck Mee CONTINUED from page One

Q: What about Synapsis Shuffle? [Rauschenberg's new exhibit, was on exhibit at the Whitney Museum. Each piece is composed of three panels, made by Rauschenberg but the panels were assembled by a group of well-known people.]

A: Actually, I wasn't so crazy about it. I love Rauschenberg's recent work; I think a lot of it is really wonderful, but I thought that this was sort of softer than his work had been in a long time. I mean the panels that he made, before anybody put them together, seemed a little softer, seemed like he is a little bit of an old man. Although some of his recent work I think is very sharp.

And then I thought, well, nobody's as good as Rauschenberg at this. I mean these people created juxtapositions and they didn't pop somehow. And they felt so desperate about that, that one person put the panel sideways on the wall, and another person had two panels and then the middle one reversed so it was exposing the backside of the panel. So you're uncomfortable about being put into this box by Rauschenberg and so you try to do something cute, but actually it was not so interesting.

So I thought what was really informative about it was that this is not easy to make this kind of work and to make it pop. And the only thing that makes Rauschenberg coherent is his sensibility. And if his sensibility is not present, the thing is not coherent, it's a jumble of images and you get dissonance from it. I thought.

To go back to narrative and stuff like that, if you make a play that has a plot-line and people get on board and they ride it to the end, then that's the coherence of it, then we feel that it is coherent. If what you do, on the other hand, is say, "Here's a piece of music, here's an image, here's a character, let's throw them together on stage," it's a jumble. People feel disoriented and it makes them anxious and frightened and they stop listening.

Let me say this in another way. With certain arts, that is, with painting and sculpture, you, the audience, can see the whole work and any detail simultaneously. So you can read a detail

against the whole of it, and the detail can be wonderful and delicious and fascinating to you and you are oriented by the whole work.

Any work of art that unfolds in time doesn't do that. You're in this detail but you can't see the whole. So the function of narrative in a work of art is to give you the whole. Boy Meets Girl. Got it. Now I know that Get Girl or Lose Girl or whatever happens, I understand what the story is. And I'm on for the ride. And I'm never disoriented.

The trouble with presenting material to an audience is that an audience is not just people, they're animals, like amoebas. They require orientation. If you turn out the lights on an amoeba, it panics. It needs light to orient itself, otherwise it's afraid it's going to die, its gonna be snuffed out. So when you're dealing with an audience, you're not just dealing with people who don't go to the theater much, you're dealing with people who still have brainstems. And if you turn out the lights, they will panic. And if you disorient them, they will panic.

And so one of the things you're always dealing with as theater artists is the edge of panic, unless you want to do reassuring, amusing stuff where the audience feels fine all the time, they know exactly where they are and everything is cool. If you don't give them standard orientation devices, you're always in danger of taking them over the edge where they panic and then they can't hear you anymore. They can't take it in because they're frightened. This is not a failing on their part; this is a requirement for being alive.

So, in Rauschenberg's work—even when you see the whole work—a stuffed chicken a pair of shoes, Martin Luther King, the color red, what makes it cohere is actually Rauschenberg's heart. That's the place that it coheres. It doesn't cohere otherwise.

