

A publication for our valued theatre patrons

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## **BOBRAUSCHENBERGAMERICA**

**BY CHARLES L.  
MEE**

An empty stage covered by a blank canvas.

A ladder.

The actors come out to remove the ladder and canvas.

Big Music.

A chicken slowly descends from the flies on a string.

It has a sign around its neck that says: bobrauschenbergamerica

A fantastical road trip through the American landscape, written as Robert Rauschenberg, one of America's greatest living artists, might conceive it. Traveling easily through time, the play is a glorious collage of images and sensations — Rauschenberg's childhood home, a human martini, a pizza delivery boy, the world's worst collection of chicken jokes...

On a set that is one big Old Glory serving as a clapboard Texas house, the surface of the moon and other locales, a serpentine group of characters, both particular (Rauschenberg's aproned Mom) and generic (a bikini babe, a biker, a curator, an engineer and a homeless guy, among others), hook up, separate and recombine for an hour and 45 minutes like fragments in a

## **CHARLES L. MEE**

### **THE PLAYWRIGHT**

The defining moment of Charles Mee's life came at the age of fourteen, when what he has described as a vibrant youth was interrupted by a case of polio that would leave him disabled for the rest of his life. In his memoir, Mee finds the roots of his dark, fragmentary writing style in his struggle with his own body: "Intact people should write intact books . . . That is not my experience of the world. I like a book that feels like a crystal goblet that has been thrown to the floor and shattered."

## **ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG**

### **THE ARTIST**

Robert Rauschenberg was born Milton Rauschenberg on October 22, 1925, in Port Arthur, Texas. He began to study pharmacology at the University of Texas at Austin before being drafted into the United States navy, where he served as a neuropsychiatric technician in the navy hospital corps in San Diego. In 1947, he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute and traveled to Paris to study at the Académie Julian the following year.

In the fall of 1948, he returned to the United States to study under Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina, which he continued to attend intermittently through 1952. While taking classes at the Art Students League, New York, from 1949 to 1951, Rauschenberg was offered his first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Some of the works from this period included blueprints, monochromatic white paintings, and black paintings. From the fall of 1952 to the spring of 1953, he traveled to Europe and North Africa with Cy Twombly, whom he had met at the Art Students League. During his travels, Rauschenberg worked on a series of small collages, hanging assemblages, and small boxes filled with found elements, which he



*Artist Spotlight*  
*Position*  
*Name*

Rauschenberg assemblage.

They argue, fall in love, order pizza, iron, play checkers, have cheerfully metaphorical sex (sliding around on a piece of plastic sheeting greased with gin, vermouth and olives) and dance to this being current American theater soundtracky snippets of very period-specific music. It's a kind of "Our Town" for the 21st century.

Rauschenberg himself doesn't appear as a speaking character, as if Mom's recollection to the audience that "art was not part of our lives" is still the way things are. But, of course, all of this is indeed art, and we may well be watching from inside Rauschenberg's head.

Rauschenberg's art, albeit jauntily designed in the extreme, always arrives with intimations of deep meaning, or at least hints that behind his juxtapositions matters are a little David Lynchian. Sure enough, in "bobrauschenbergamerica," the homeless guy crawls out of his cardboard box to direct a conspiracy-theory movie. The fellow who delivers pizza also delivers a soliloquy on human self-forgiveness that comes with the anchovy-like revelation that he committed a triple murder of his sister, her husband and their kid while carrying a Bible in his pocket.

But in the finale, Mom returns to reminisce about the local Church of Christ and linoleum on the kitchen floor, and to tell us that her son "can see the beauty in almost anything." The implied lesson here is that we, like the multicultural cast, which ends up dancing joyously together to Cuban music, should, too.

I'm down with that, at least part way. Rauschenberg once said that he wanted to operate not entirely within art, but in the "gap between art and life." That gap is a funny place, somehow devoid of a lot of the sentiment peculiar to both art and life. Theater, however, often uses sentimentality to establish an essential emotional connection with the audience, and, in effect, repair the gap. Which, like Rauschenberg's art, is a very generous thing.





After Mee graduated from Harvard University, he briefly worked on Wall Street before taking a job at the American Heritage publishing company. His first play was produced in 1962 at the Writers' Stage Company, and over the next two years he would have additional plays produced by theaters such as La MaMa E.T.C. He also worked on *The Drama Review* in various editorial capacities from 1963 until 1965, at which point he lost confidence in pursuing a career in the theater. From 1965 until the early 1980s, he focused on working as editor of *Horizon*, a magazine on history and the arts, and wrote numerous books on European and American history.

Mee's interest in history and politics did not abate when he returned to playwriting with *The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador*. Even when adapting numerous Greek tragedies, he injected allusions to contemporary events and samples of contemporary texts into the dialogue. Indeed, Mee has referred to his works as assemblages or collages because they consist in no small part of excerpts taken from numerous texts integrated with material written by himself—and sometimes co-authored by theater ensembles with whom he collaborates. In *The Berlin Circle*, for example, Mee takes the story of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (which was taken from other sources itself) and imposes its structure on East Berlin just as the Soviet Union is crumbling. His daughter, who has directed Mee's *The Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem* and *First Love*, has characterized the plays as "blue-prints for events" that are "full of excess" in terms of language, movement, themes, and dramaturgical structure. True to his own creative process, Mee has posted his scripts online and, as part of a so-called "(re)-making project," invited others to take the texts and "pillage" them to build an "entirely new piece out of the ruins."

Mee has worked with some of America's most prominent directors, such as Anne Bogart and Robert Woodruff, and he shared an OBIE with director Les Waters for their 2001 collaboration on *Big Love*. As recently as December 2001, however, critic Jeremy McCarter could complain that Mee's plays deserve "more scrutiny than they've received," singling Mee out as the "rare serious artist whose innovations make his work more popular and more accessible without making it any less serious." Critics such as Robert Brustein have ranked Mee with the likes of Wallace Shawn and John Guare, but few lengthy studies of Mee's work have been published

exhibited in Rome and Florence.

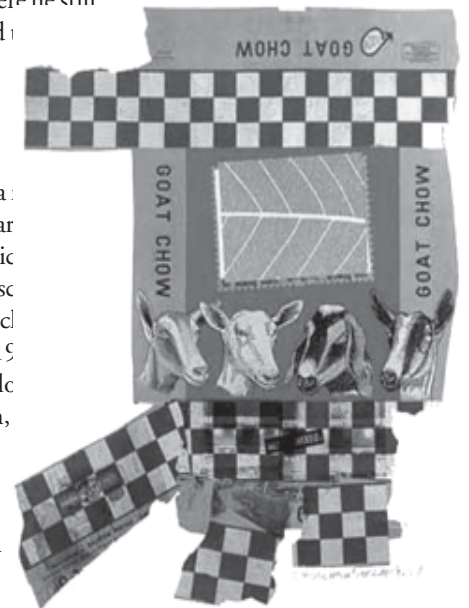
Upon his return to New York in 1953, Rauschenberg completed his series of black paintings, using newspaper as the ground, and began work on sculptures created from wood, stones, and other materials found on the streets; paintings made with tissue paper, dirt, or gold leaf; and more conceptually oriented works such as *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) and *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). By the end of 1953, he had begun his *Red Painting* series on canvases that incorporated newspapers, fabric, and found objects and evolved in 1954 into the *Combines*, a term Rauschenberg coined for his well-known works that integrated aspects of painting and sculpture and would often include such objects as a stuffed eagle or goat, street signs, or a quilt and pillow. In late 1953, he met Jasper Johns, with whom he is considered the most influential of artists who reacted against Abstract Expressionism [more]. The two artists had neighboring studios, regularly exchanging ideas and discussing their work, until 1961.

Rauschenberg began to silkscreen paintings in 1962. He had his first career retrospective, organized by the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1963 and was awarded the Grand Prize for Painting at the 1964 Venice Biennale. He spent much of the remainder of the 1960s dedicated to more collaborative projects including printmaking, Performance [more], choreography, set design, and art-and-technology works. In 1966, he cofounded *Experiments in Art and Technology*, an organization that sought to promote collaborations between artists and engineers.

In 1970, Rauschenberg established a permanent residence and studio in Captiva, Florida, where he still lives. A retrospective organized by the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C., traveled

the United States in 1976–78.

Rauschenberg continued to travel widely, embarking on a series of collaborations with artists and workshops abroad, which culminated in the *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI)* project from 1980 to 1991. In 1997, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, exhibited the largest retrospective of Rauschenberg's work to date, which traveled to Houston and to Europe in 1998.



### *TICKET & BOX OFFICE INFORMATION* *PHONE (251)-460-6306*

Tickets for Theatre USA's Production of *Robert Rauschenberg's America*  
General Admission \$12.00 Faculty/ Staff \$10.00  
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The Box Office will be open starting (time and date) Monday through Friday and one hour before each performance.

The Box Office is located in the lobby of the Laidlaw Performing Arts Center on the main campus of The University of South Alabama. Tickets are sold first come first served. All seats reserved. All sales final. No refund or exchange.

\*Student tickets available for all students with valid ID. One ticket per ID.



The Department of Dramatic Arts  
University of South Alabama  
PAC 1052  
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Mobile, Alabama 36688-0002

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