“THIS IS WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN”: THE DRAMA AND HISTORY OF CHARLES L. MEE JR.

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

In his career, Charles L. Mee, Jr. (1938- ) has moved between the fields of history and theatre. Between 1960 and 1965, Mee participated in the Off Off Broadway movement as a playwright and a journalist. From 1966 to 1999, Mee wrote nineteen books: two memoirs, three children’s books, and fourteen histories. In 1986, Mee returned to playwriting, with his Obie-award-winning *Vienna: Lusthaus*.

The plays Mee created after 1986 are heavily influenced by his career as a historian. His plays have taken historical events as their topic. In addition, Mee creates his scripts as collages, sampling from a variety of literary and popular texts. Further, several of Mee’s plays are rewrites of other texts, including *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Orestes*, and *The Trojan Women*. Mee claims “there is no such thing as an original play,” and thus views all texts as part of a collective culture from which he may sample. Via his website, he then returns his work, copyright-free, to the culture for further use.

Mee’s battle with polio (which he contracted in 1953) has also shaped his aesthetic view. Describing himself in his memoirs as “nearly normal,” Mee finds the shattering destructiveness of his disease to have been creative. Drawn to making theatre that reflects his experience of fragmentation, Mee takes the works of Dadaist Max Ernst and Pop Artist Robert Rauschenberg as further inspiration.

This study draws upon Mee’s history books, memoirs, articles, and plays as the foundation for analysis. Because Mee refers to his own experiences and personal history
as the core of a series of aesthetic choices, I use that narrative as a framework for this thesis. Each chapter opens with a portion of Mee’s biography, taken chronologically, in order to identify a key moment in his life. These moments are then used as touchstones for explicating his spiraling aesthetic, political, and historiographical concerns. The chapters take in sequence: Polio and the Fragmented Self; History and Theatre; and Success, Nostalgia, and Love. In adhering to this order, I attempt to take the measure of Mee’s prolific career in order to locate his place in contemporary drama.
DEDICATION

To Henry and to Brad, who daily teach me about patience, focus, and joy.
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Special thanks to Charles L. Mee, Jr., who generously shared many of his unpublished works with me.
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I do still fuse my private and public worlds. The urge is irrepressible. All visions of the world are autobiographies.
Charles Mee (Haldeman 210)

If, as Charles Mee writes in *A Visit to Haldeman and Other States of Mind*, the first of his two memoirs, all visions of the world are indeed autobiographical in nature, then his own body of work—some twenty-five plays, seventeen histories, and two memoirs—is fraught with references to and resonances with his personal life. In interview after interview, Mee has been candid about a handful of major events that have permanently altered his world view and shaped his playwriting aesthetic. Most significant among these was his contraction of polio at the age of fourteen and his subsequent struggle for self-acceptance in the conformity-minded 1950s. To this day, Mee, who began life as a promising athlete, walks with a cane and one fire-engine-red crutch.

Mee has written two memoirs: *A Visit to Haldeman and Other States of Mind* and *A Nearly Normal Life.* Haldeman takes as its ostensible topic a commission offered to

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Mee, in 1975, to coauthor a defense of Nixon’s White House with chief of staff H.R. Haldeman. Haldeman, like John Ehrlichman, was forced to resign in April 1973 after a White House tape was revealed to contain damning proof of his, and Nixon’s, involvement in the Watergate coverup. For Mee, whose own politics were decidedly liberal, defending or even describing Haldeman’s point of view created a difficult situation. Mee was founder and chair of the National Committee on the Presidency, “a nationwide, grass-roots, citizens’ organization of some thousands of good middle-of-the-road, respectable, decent people . . . who desired and lobbied tirelessly for the constitutional removal of the President” (Haldeman 23). Ultimately, the book on Haldeman went unwritten, but not because Mee’s politics caused him to bridle at the prospect; rather, after many interviews with the man, he learned nothing at all about secret plans to bomb Cambodia or missing White House tapes and instead discovered, he says, an incarnation of Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil. In the end, the book was simply unwriteable—there seemed to be nothing to say.

So, instead, Visit to Haldeman deals only nominally with this turn of events. In one sense, the book is both a eulogy and a call to arms for our American republic. Raging against our failure to maintain a civilized government, Mee uses key statements from Toqueville and Montaigne to support his attack on contemporary political and business corruption. Further, the book recounts Mee’s personal history and how it informed the way he perceives Haldeman. Mee describes his two failed marriages (two

*Other States of Mind.* It’s about Watergate and the sixties. A very personal book. It got a rave review in the *New York Times*, which is why I found out about it. I went out and bought it, and read it. I’ve read it three or four times since. It’s a very strong, unsentimental, weird book about the nature of the American republic, rebellion, private life. Beautifully written. Completely ignored....It’s a lost book.” (Golden 163).
more would follow), his genealogy, his rejection of Catholicism, his nostalgia for a "home," and, most crucially, his polio and his subsequent intellectual awakening. The eponymous Visit to Haldeman triggers Mee's Other States of Mind, and it is these states of mind that, he says, define his politics. The personal is indeed political.

A Nearly Normal Life, Mee's second memoir, accomplishes this same intertwining of private and public life. Yet, while Haldeman takes an external issue and makes it internal, Nearly Normal does the opposite. It is a memoir designed to specifically recount Mee's personal experience with polio. In it, Mee spends two chapters laying out the history and social perception of polio, and one chapter quoting extensively from first-hand accounts of various polio victims. He cannot keep himself from contextualizing, from combining his personal life with broader social, political, and historical events.

Taken together, these two memoirs evince that polio is the pinpoint beginning of a spiral of influences that expands into Mee's careers as an historian and a playwright. Polio, Mee explains, left him with a broken body. In this brokenness, he discovered two opposing needs—to dismantle and to rebuild. Mee's post-polio hunger to fit back into his old life and to seem "normal" again is at the root of his urge to rebuild. Eventually realizing he could never return to his pre-polio comfort, Mee took the pieces of his broken life and remade himself, seeking new knowledge in old books. Yet Mee does not rebuild permanently; rather, he comes near to completion only to dismantle again. Sometimes this dismantling is self-destructive, as his frequently discordant personal life exhibits. And sometimes it is at the root of a conscious desire to regenerate: first to plow
under and then to recultivate. The urges to break and to remake flow through the spiral of Mee’s life and work, spinning outward to find their fruition in the collage aesthetic of his playwriting, in his fraught relationship with the field of history, in his abiding attraction to the classics, and in his complex negotiations between personal and public life.

In *Haldeman*, Mee says of his life, “rebirth has got to be a habit . . . I seem to be reborn again and again, and I am finally getting to enjoy it and welcome it” (153-154). Perhaps the most significant rebirth in Mee’s life after his bout with polio has been his shift from a career as an historian to a playwright. Yet even this shift has not been total: Mee “authors” his plays, rather than “writes” them. Mee, in all cases, puts his plays together collage-style. He samples from a variety of texts, generally selecting sections up to the three-hundred word limit historians use as their “rule of thumb” for fair use. His playscripts offer a bibliography of his culling, which ranges widely in material selection. The introduction to his *Orestes* demonstrates the omnivorousness of Mee’s tastes:

*Orestes*, based on the play by Euripides, incorporates passages inspired by or taken from twentieth-century texts of Apollinaire, William Burroughs, Cindy, Bret Easton Ellis, John Wayne Gacy, Mai Lin, Elaine Scarry, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Vogue*, and *Soap Opera Digest*. (88)

This eclectic list is indicative of Mee’s style and creative method. His plays are filled with chunks of text from such a wide range of sources. When music is called for, it is also sampled, from genres as disparate as opera, contemporary pop, old country, and ballad standards. In addition, nine of Mee’s plays are, like *Orestes*, rewrites of other texts: *Agamemnon, The Bacchae, Caucasian Chalk Circle* (retitled *Full Circle*), *Hippolytus* (retitled *True Love*), *The Lower Depths* (retitled *Time to Burn*), *The
Suppliants (retitled Big Love, or, the Wedding of the Millenium), The Trojan Women, and a piece constructed from the fragments of Sophocles’ lost plays (called Requiem for the Dead).

The fact that Mee’s plays rely on borrowed texts, plots, and musical selections frequently lands him in the middle of the debate on the nature and purpose of the “postmodern.” In her review of Wintertime, Anne Marie Welsh speaks for many when she describes the “postmodern penchant” in Mee’s style (Matter E1). For some critics, this postmodernism is a badge to be worn proudly. For others, it is a sign that his works are little more than cobbled-together heaps of cultural detritus. Michael Feingold, for example, wrote of Mee’s early plays, “... it’s not always easy to tell postmodernism from lack of artistry” (67). John Istel saw the same set of plays as “Merry Prankster goofs on the Western Canon: let’s stick an M-80 up this play’s ass and see what’ll happen when it blows up. Heh, heh, heh. Cool” (Sinewy 99). Critics have tended to line up in positions of support or opposition, either celebrating a free-wheeling approach to the classics or denouncing poorly constructed shenanigans.

On the surface, Mee’s collages can seem to demonstrate the techniques of pastiche, intertextuality, sampling, and all the other traits that designate postmodern artistic creation. In her article “The Trojan Women a Love Story: A Postmodern Semiotics of the Tragic,” Sarah Bryant-Bertail, like other critics, takes postmodernity as a given in Mee’s reworking of Greek tragedies. Her article is primarily a detailed description of the workshop production of Trojan Women at the University of
Washington in 1996; however, Bryant-Bertail labels Mee’s play “postmodern tragic” as the foundation for the theoretical framework for her argument. She writes,

what I call the postmodern tragic signifies . . . reality, whereas the classic tragedy expresses it. The tragic is semiotic whereas the tragedy is expressive, evoking an image of some ‘deeper’, more mysterious reality whose power lies in its supposedly vast interiority, which we can never quite see. In other words, ‘tragedy’ is an essentializing generic concept that resists historical specificity, whereas the tragic is incomplete unless tied to specific historical signifieds. (40-41)

The suggestion that Mee’s plays based on Greek tragedies operate on a material level, requiring resonance with historical events to make sense, is (partially) true. However, Bryant-Bertail’s assertion that this state is, of necessity, postmodern is mistaken.

Critics who assume “postmodernism” in Mee’s collaged works fail to trace his deep roots in modernism. Mee’s political and aesthetic agenda directly calls up modernist rebellions against the ordering conventions of bourgeois culture and art. Collage, as it was practiced by Pop Artists like Bob Rauschenberg and Dadaists like Max Ernst, is Mee’s more precise aesthetic lineage, as he himself asserts. An analysis of their works, which I will undertake in Chapter 1, provides the necessary background for understanding Mee’s techniques and aims. Once that groundwork is laid, the success or failure of his collages can be more clearly determined. Ultimately, questions of Mee’s postmodernity (or lack thereof) fall outside the purview of this thesis, which instead focuses on his modernist (and early modern) interests.

The matter of collage in Mee’s writings is further complicated by his stance on copyright law. Mee maintains a website (http://www.charlesmee.org) through which his playscripts can be downloaded for free. He does so because, he says, he “borrows”
Suspected missing pages 7 and 8
This is my model. (E. Mee 97)

For Mee, the dramatic models to be emulated are the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and Brecht—not, notably, Ibsen, Chekhov, or Pirandello. Freudian psychology, then, seems to be the least significant of character determinants. “Most of our theatre,” Mee says “actually makes us stupid and ignorant of the conditions under which we live because it focuses on psychological interactions . . . . Once you decide that the basic truth about human relationships is psychology, you can no longer understand anything else” (“The Theatre of History” 186-187). A major part of Mee’s mission for the theatre is moving beyond psychological definitions of character into a comprehension of what it is to be a human being shaped by the larger forces of culture and history.

This is the same Charles Mee who also posits that “all visions of the world are autobiographies.” And it is the same Mee who suggests in both of his memoirs and in countless interviews that his personal bout with polio changed the way he thinks and feels. Mee simultaneously disavows and acknowledges the role of individual, idiosyncratic psychology in the determination of character. The dialectical tension between his twin desires—to break and to rebuild, to subvert and to salvage—play out again in this aesthetic posture, to a curious end. Interestingly, the subject matter of Mee’s playwriting since 1998 has tended to focus on his own personal history, unlike his earlier works, which dealt with broader issues of democracy and civility. His two memoirs mirror this shift: Haldeman examines the personal in the context of the political and Nearly Normal examines the political in the context of the personal. Chapter 3 of this
this thesis will attempt to critically engage this shift in order to evaluate this more popular strain of his writing.

Because Mee so consistently refers to his own experiences and personal history as the core of an outwardly expanding series of aesthetic choices, I will use that narrative as a framework for this thesis. Each chapter will open with a portion of Mee’s biography, taken chronologically, in order to identify a key defining moment in his life. I will then use these moments as touchstones for explicating his spiraling aesthetic, political, and historiographical concerns. The chapters will take in sequence: Polio and the Fragmented Self; History and Theatre; and Success, Nostalgia, and Love. In adhering to this order, I will attempt to take the measure of Mee’s prolific career in order to locate his place in contemporary drama. Such findings as I elaborate must be taken as provisional: Mee’s career is still very much in process. By necessity, I have terminated my analysis with those plays produced in 2002.

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4 As of this writing, Mee has four new plays in development. Salome (a solo performance piece that takes the transgressive woman as its topic) is slated for performance in April 2003 by Needcompany (Brussels and Paris). Snow in June (a musical based on a fourth century Chinese legend) is scheduled for December 2003 at the American Repertory Theatre (Cambridge, MA) under the direction of Chen Shi-Zheng. A operatic reworking of Mee’s The War To End War is scheduled for April 2004 at the University of California-Irvine. Finally, The Wedding Funeral is scheduled for June 2004 at the Holland Festival (Amsterdam) under the direction of Ivo van Hove.
CHAPTER 1

POLIO AND THE FRAGMENTED SELF

Biography: 1938-1960

Born September 15, 1938, in Evanston, Illinois, Charles L. Mee Jr. started life as the athletic son of Charles L. Mee Sr., a vice president at Commonwealth Edison, and Sarah Mee, a homemaker. Mee Jr. was the youngest of three children, and the only male child in a Catholic household.

In the summer of 1953, at the age of 14, Mee was stricken with polio. After a day of swimming, Mee attended a high school dance. As the evening progressed, he found his legs increasingly less responsive. By the time he arrived home, paralysis was already setting in; he was able only to drag his body forward with his arms. Mee’s parents rushed him to a hospital, where a diagnosis was made. His condition quickly worsened to near-total paralysis. He was, at one point, able only to move his eyes, but could feel the pain of the nerves dying throughout his body.

After a six month hospital stay and subsequent physical rehabilitation, Mee learned to walk again, with the assistance of a crutch and a cane. But he was not the same boy. He had become an outsider. Instead of fitting easily into a 1950s world
where, as he declares, normality was the ideal, he found himself suddenly unique during adolescence, a time when conformity is always a goal.

This was a world-shattering event for him. For a time, he tried to pick up the pieces. He eased back into school, at first accessing his class from home via one of the earliest prototypes of a speakerphone (Mee, Nearly 153). Upon his return to high school, he was determined to prove that he was still “normal.” He ran for, and won, the positions of student council vice president and president, and was a member of a variety of clubs. Mee maintained a guise of affability not only throughout his school days but also well into his adult years, through three marriages and a career in writing history books. Only with great difficulty did he finally began to shed the need to appear “regular.” Although he never felt comfortable using the word “crippled,” he began to grapple with his status as “different.”

Mee’s sense of himself as a writer is based on his awareness of his physical body:

I find, when I write, that I really don’t want to write well-made sentences and paragraphs, narratives that flow, structures that have a sense of wholeness and balance, books that feel intact. Intact people should write intact books with sound narratives built of sound paragraphs that unfold with a sense of wholeness and balance, books that feel intact. 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, so that its pieces, when they are picked up and arranged on a table, still describe a whole glass, but the glass itself lies in shards. . . . If a writer’s writings constitute a “body of work,” then my body of work, to feel true to me, must feel fragmented. And then, too, if you find it hard to walk down the sidewalk, you like, in the freedom of your mind, to make a sentence that leaps and dances now and then before it comes to a sudden stop. (Nearly 40-41)

Mee’s aesthetic is fundamentally shaped by his experience with polio. Fragmentation has become his watchword and the re-membering of such fragments his hallmark. First, he
must break; then, he can rebuild. This, he writes, “feels good to me. It feels like my life. It feels like the world” (History i).

The world that Mee feels part of is the same one inhabited by modernist artists. Modernism is a fraught term that generally applies to a period of marked innovation in the arts, beginning around the end of the nineteenth century. Although it incorporates a plethora of “isms,” modernism as a whole is understood to have at its core the disruption of traditional artistic forms and bourgeois morality. It encompasses the varied works of writers like T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce, as well as artists like Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Marcel Duchamp, and Marc Chagall. The full catalogue of modernists is far more extensive, of course; however, this random sampling highlights the multiplicity of styles, perspectives, and techniques that coexist within modernism’s purview. Thus, modernism is itself fragmented, built of diverse movements, each attempting to define what is “real.” The Futurists proclaim that technology is what is real; Surrealists, dreams; Cubists, simultaneity.

For Charles Mee, psychological realism is the assumption to be undone (as it was for many of the modernist movements). Fragmentation—of narrative, dialogue, and character—is the method by which he attempts to achieve this. The works of Dadaist Max Ernst and Pop Artist Robert Rauschenberg are Mee’s primary formalistic inspirations. Max Ernst is quoted at length in The War to End War; Rauschenberg has an entire play written from his point of view, bobrauschenbergamerica. Significantly, Mee prefers to place himself in relation to visual artists, rather than writers. Of his own work,
which tends to play out variations on a theme, he has said, "I think I write plays the way painters paint paintings" (E. Mee 87).  

Mee directly draws upon Ernst’s and Rauschenberg’s creative techniques in the visual arts. In the introduction to an anthology of his works, entitled History Plays, Mee writes: “These plays were composed in the way that Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces towards the end of World War I: texts have been taken from, or inspired by, other texts” (History i). For the bulk of Mee’s playwriting career, until he produced bobrauschenbergamerica in 2001, Mee cited Ernst as a driving force behind his work. However, following bobrauschenbergamerica, he stated in an interview:

I’ve been influenced by Rauschenberg for years . . . so finally I just decided to acknowledge it . . . I’ve been inspired by his spirit and way of making things—this idea of collage, taking the stuff of the real world and remaking it in your imagination to make shocking and pleasing and disturbing juxtapositions. I’ve always felt that my dramaturg was Max Ernst, whose collages at the beginning of the 20th century took the stuff of the real world and rendered it as hallucination. (Wren 58)

Mee admires the ways that Ernst and Rauschenberg use “the stuff of the real world” to construct their works. They then take this material and, through the technique of collage, create works that comment on the world around them. According to Franz Mon, in his Prinzip Collage, collage is an omnivorous technique given to the breaking and rebuilding to which Mee is drawn:

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5 As early as 1981, Mee was referring to his writing style as “painterly.” In an interview with Robert Dahlin for Publishers Weekly, Mee discussed his desire to “pay the rent with certain things I love to do because they involve my political self and my personal self.” At the time he was referring to the popular histories he was writing. He went on to say, “I always wanted to get to the position where I can work on my writing as a painter works on a painting. You can have a lot of things going on at the same time, and you can work on what strikes your mood at any particular moment. You don’t need to start writing on page one and work straight through to page 61. You can come to the work as if it’s on a canvas, start at the upper corner or sketch some other subjects in or rework it 10 or 15 times.” See Robert Dahlin, “Charles L. Mee, Jr.” Publishers Weekly 26 Jun. 1981: 12-13.
Collage transposes received reality, as seen through the filter of civilization, into an artistic world ripe for reconstitution. There is nothing real that might not become an element in collage. . . . The principles and techniques of composition in collage—such as the selection of seemingly incompatible materials, assembly and destruction, integration and disintegration, superimposition, juxtaposition, and confrontation also govern the experimental work which takes place in other artistic disciplines, in literature, in the theatre, in the film, and in music. (Schneede 122)

Both Ernst and Rauschenberg work in collage; however, each “reconstitutes” a very distinct world. In choosing Ernst and Rauschenberg as his two primary formalistic inspirations, Mee has also placed himself within the complex artistic lineage leading from Dada to Pop Art. Thus, an analysis of Ernst and Rauschenberg as they influence Mee’s playwriting is crucial to understanding his own specific style.

**Max Ernst (1891-1976)**

Max Ernst has been labeled both a Dadaist and a Surrealist, and his body of work reflects qualities of both movements—movements which were themselves complexly intertwined. A look through a catalog of his works reveals a remarkable range of styles, including realistic renderings of skewed situations a la Magritte to primitivistic sculptures and collages made from Victorian novel illustrations.

Ernst bridges Surrealism and Dada because, while his content evokes the dreamworld, his artistic form is consciously iconoclastic. His collages have an almost clinical sense of anonymity—who made this? what is it made of? where did the images come from?—and all these questions, raised by the stark nature of Ernst’s works, directly challenge the assumptive principle of originality in artistic creation. Here, Ernst is of one mind with other Dadaists. Ernst’s “official” time as a Dadaist extended from 1914, when
he met Hans Arp in Cologne, to about 1921, when his concerns shifted to the subconscious as might express itself on the canvas.

Ernst, along with Arp and Alfred Grünwald,\(^6\) formed the core of Cologne Dada. Unlike Zurich Dada, led by Tristan Tzara, this Cologne branch of Dada was, in its participants' views, more interested in artistic exploration than in political provocation. Both groups, however, were largely concerned with the elimination of the cult of the artist. In pursuit of this goal, Ernst collaborated with Arp to create a series of collages under the title *Fatagaga*—an acronym for Fabrication of Pictures (Tableaux) Guaranteed to be Gasometric. Both men worked on each piece in an attempt to eliminate any trace of personal aesthetic arrangement or connections between elements. The final works, which contained images from print sources as well as photographs, were overpainted and manipulated in order to evoke creatures and situations at once familiar and estranged.

Between 1919 and 1920, Ernst made a series of collages that used book illustrations from the end of the nineteenth century as their source material. In mining this seemingly trivial set of images and transforming them into collages, Ernst created disturbing vignettes of the hidden sexuality implicit in the Victorian era: rather than randomly selecting material, he created works that simultaneously evoked a culture and criticized it. Later in his career, Ernst returned to similar material and created two collaged novels, *La Femme 100 têtes* (*The Hundred-Headed Woman*—1929)\(^7\) and *Une Semaine de bonté* (*One Week of Kindness*—1934), both based on reassembled book

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\(^6\) aka Johannes Baargeld, a social activist.

\(^7\) The title is a pun on the French for hundred (*cent*) and without (*sans*).
illustrations. Directly taking up André Breton’s critique of the Realistic novel which Surrealism rejected, he created a series of loosely connected plotless images that still evoked a semblance of “reality.”

Ernst did not so much move away from Dada as he moved towards Surrealism.\(^8\) His interest in psychology (which he studied at Bonn University) was amplified by his reading of Freud, and the subject matter of his paintings from 1921 to 1924 directly reveals his knowledge of Freudian theory (see Turpin). Ernst wanted to challenge the reliance on Reason so prevalent in contemporaneous values. Collage provided a good way to do that; at the same time, he insisted that “the picture is a ‘found object’ from the subconscious” (Schneede 56). He moved away from the artist’s status as the conscious creator of a work to acknowledging that what he made sprang from his unconscious.

In creating his works, Ernst experimented with techniques other than collage, all addressed to bypassing his conscious creative impulses and inviting chance into his art. These included: *decalcomania* (ink is pressed between layers of paper and the resulting image is interpreted), *frottage* (rubbings are taken from three-dimensional objects, like floorboards, and then interpreted), and *grattage* (wet paint is scraped from unstretched canvas draped over three-dimensional objects). Ian Turpin described Ernst’s body of work as “characterized by an attitude of enquiry” (5), and Ernst did move from method to method, rarely perfecting one before he moved to the next.

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\(^8\) In fact, he never really belonged solely in either camp. His formal association with Dada was short-lived, and while he was, and is, most commonly labeled a Surrealist, he declined (or was not invited to) sign Breton’s 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*. 
However, while he experimented with technique, Ernst returned repeatedly to specific images in his work. Turpin suggests that he had “an obsession with the internal references of the iconography of his own oeuvre” (110); this may be a polite way of saying, as Uwe Schneede has, that Ernst “deliberately invit[ed] the accusation of self-plagiarism” (192). Whatever the case may be, certain images do recur, including forests and, especially, birds, both caged and free. In fact, Ernst had an alter-ego named Loplop, an easel with a bird head and feet, which appeared in many of his works.

Ernst defined collage as

the systematic exploitation of the fortuitous or engineered encounter of two or more intrinsically incompatible realities on a surface which is manifestly inappropriate for the purpose—and the spark of poetry which leaps across the gap as these two realities are brought together. (Schneede 29)

For him, disparate objects, images, and techniques, when combined, lead to a “spark of poetry.” It is the resonances between elements that is the art.

In one sense, Charles Mee comes to such Surrealism naturally. Because of his polio infection, he was, at one point, lying in bed, completely paralyzed except for his eyes. For Mee, that moment “broke down a lot of the distinctions I formerly drew between the real world and the dream world” (Blumenthal 1). But Mee’s affinity for Max Ernst is primarily founded on five shared qualities of their works.

First, Ernst’s collages, both those made solely from cut-and-pasted documents and those made from overpainted found objects, have their correlative in Mee’s playwriting. Mee both samples from a variety of texts and overwrites pre-existing pieces, creating textual collages. Second, the Fatagaga work that Ernst did with Arp had as its intellectual impetus the desire to delimit the hand of the author of the work. Mee
attempts something similar, in combining his texts with those of others. Not only does Mee quote from material he has read, he also uses (with consent) the work of students and workshop participants and is highly collaborative with his directors. All this is geared towards replicating Mee’s sense that his plays are written to and from the culture at large. Third, like Ernst, Mee experiments with various forms, often moving to a new technique before perfecting the old one. Fourth, Mee returns again and again to certain images and pieces of text just as Ernst revisits forests and birds. Finally, Ernst’s penchant for the Surreal is frequently in line with Mee’s plays, which abut disjointed elements, creating a dream world onstage.

Robert Rauschenberg (1925-present)

Max Ernst functions as Mee’s “dramaturg.” More amanuensis than guide, Ernst figuratively provides stylistic and material suggestions from which Mee draws as he creates his work. Robert Rauschenberg is something more of a mentor. In his memoir *A Nearly Normal Life*, Mee articulates his affection for Rauschenberg’s work:

it was in the mid-fifties that Robert Rauschenberg began to make art by picking up stuff off the street, broken stuff, rejected stuff—junk—and putting it into paintings and sculptures, saying: ‘This, too, belongs in a museum; this, too, is worthy of attention and respect’; this is the stuff of which great art can be made, great thoughts and feelings, astonishing pleasures, art that feels fresh, vigorous, unafraid, liberated, inclusive, democratic, free, beautiful. (190)

Mee’s affinity is twofold. First, Rauschenberg’s aesthetic is similar to his own—both make art out of other pieces of the culture. More important, however, is Mee’s suggestion that Rauschenberg was drawn to “broken stuff, rejected stuff” as something beautiful. Mee sees Rauschenberg’s work as paving the way for making his own
fragmented life and broken body acceptable. On a practical level, however, Rauschenberg’s work as an artist also provides Mee with formal inspiration.

Robert Rauschenberg (nee Ernest Milton Rauschenberg) was born in Port Arthur, Texas, to a fundamentalist Christian family. After being drafted into the Navy during WWII, he served as a neuro-psychiatric technician. While making sketches of his fellow soldiers, Rauschenberg discovered that he had a gift for drawing. Following his discharge in 1945, Rauschenberg was at loose ends—his family had moved from Texas to Louisiana without informing him. He decided to use his GI Bill support to study art at the Kansas City Art Institute. It was at KCAI that Rauschenberg selected the name “Bob” for himself.9

Rauschenberg studied at KCAI for a brief period, went to Paris to study at the Académie Julian, and became quickly disillusioned. In 1948, he returned to the United States and enrolled at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The College became a home for him, and he continued to return to the College throughout his career, never formally graduating. The ferment of the minds at Black Mountain in this period was crucial to his development. Rauschenberg studied painting under Josef Albers, whose stringency shaped his style. In addition, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, John Cage,10 and Merce Cunningham were also all on the faculty and their work influenced Rauschenberg as well. Black Mountain was a multidisciplinary arts college that

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9 Later, writers assumed “Bob” was short for “Robert,” and the rest is history. To maintain consistency with sources, this thesis will use the more common “Robert.”

10 John Cage and his wife Xenia lived with Max Ernst and his then-wife Peggy Guggenheim for most of 1942. The link between Dada and Pop, which is often suggested to be Marcel Duchamp, can also be traced to this arrangement.
emphasized collaboration between fields; fittingly, it is credited with the first Happening in 1952, a forty-five minute seat-of-the-pants affair orchestrated by John Cage and involving Rauschenberg and Cunningham.

For Rauschenberg, who rejected the possibility that one sort of material is more appropriate than another to the work of an artist, the principle of the “combine”—combinations of painting, collage, and construction—ruled his aesthetic. Thus, from the late fifties forward, Rauschenberg became known for his found object creations, including *Monogram* (a stuffed and painted angora goat with a tire around its middle, standing on top of a painting) and *Bed* (the quilt and pillow off his own bed, stretched like canvas and overpainted). These combines were not delicate, cut-and-paste collages; rather, they were massive creations built of chunks of household and urban detritus. Rauschenberg also created traditional collages. In 1959, for example, he took as his subject Dante’s *Inferno*, for which he produced a series of illustrations using images from magazines and newspapers. In the early 1960s, Rauschenberg began to experiment with the use of large-scale silkscreens made from magazine images. Several of these images, including, most famously, a portrait of John F. Kennedy, were used in many of Rauschenberg’s collages. Unlike those who painted or drew their images (as Ernst did his forests and birds), Rauschenberg could reproduce his favorites exactly. Silkscreens—of the Sistine Chapel, a clock, a bird, John F. Kennedy, astronauts, parachutes, and a golf player from the pages of *Sports Illustrated*—made this possible.

Like Max Ernst, whose work is categorized as both Surrealist and Dadaist, Rauschenberg has proven difficult to label. In general, Rauschenberg’s work has been
termed “Pop Art.” However, this category is disputed by some art historians, who favor the historically resonant “Neo-Dada.” Although the details of the debate are beyond the scope of this investigation, the basic issues are worth examining.

Pop Art is an umbrella term, encompassing the works of such artists as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenberg. In general, Pop Artists are said to concern themselves with popular, consumer culture of the 1950s, often using images from advertising, comic books, or Hollywood as the basis of their creations. Moreover, the creative techniques employed by each artist vary widely: the term “Pop Art” is based on the content of the works created rather than their form. Thus, Barbara Rose contends that it is “possible to talk of the iconography or attitudes of pop art, but not of pop art as an art style, as one would speak of Baroque or Cubism” ("Pop" 22). Pop Artists are formally very different from each other—Warhol uses silkscreens, Lichtenstein reproduces comic book images large-scale, and Oldenberg makes outsized, soft sculptures of items of daily life, like toothpaste tubes or hamburgers.

The variance of styles and perspectives within Pop has led critics to offer other names for certain subsets of it, including New Dada (or Neo-Dada), New Sign Painting, New Realism, Factual Art, and the New American Dream. Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns have often been placed in the New Dada camp. Their work is void of the glitz and cheek that marks creations by Warhol or Hamilton.11 New Dada, according to Barbara

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11 In fact, both Johns and Rauschenberg have been seen as allied to Abstract Expresionism, for their scale and painterly qualities. See Robert Rosenblum “Pop Art and Non-Pop Art.” *Art and Literature.* Summer 1965, 80-93.
Rose, is linked directly to Max Ernst.\footnote{12}

New Dada, like the Dada of Max Ernst and Picabia, is interested in the irrational, the seemingly unrelated, which, when juxtaposed, takes on new meaning. In the ‘twenties the discoveries of Freud and Jung were uppermost in the minds of the Dadaists as they sought to involve the subconscious of the viewer, sometimes in spite of himself. The source of the irrational element in new Dada, however, is rather the existential concept of the “absurd” than the working of the subconscious. Thus they equate the trivial with the essential, elevating the ridiculous to the level of the sublime. ("Dada" 26)

The difference between the New Dada and its progenitor is that, though the word “dada” conjures up associations with political protest and anti-art gestures, New Dada evokes neither of these. It is most similar to Dada in its use of the techniques of collage and assemblage. However, whereas Dada has destructiveness as the source of its innovations, New Dada finds an innocent, even optimistic, sense of experimentation. Rauschenberg can say “I am, unintentionally, against the grain” (Rose Interview 63). A Dadaist would say “intentionally.”

For example, in 1951 Rauschenberg did a series of all-white paintings, titled simply, \textit{White Paintings}. They varied in size, and were presented singly and in groups. On the surface, it seemed that Rauschenberg was making a Dada criticism, challenging the artistic establishment with his presentation of blankness. But when asked directly, “Were they a Dada gesture?” he responded, “No. They had to do with shadows and the projection of things in a room onto the blank whiteness. . . . John Cage once called them a ‘clock of the room’” (Rose Interview 65).\footnote{13} Thus, although the blank white canvases

\footnote{12} When describing the work of Ernst and Picabia, Rose conflates Dada and Surrealism. As discussed earlier, Ernst was part of both movements.

\footnote{13} This is not to suggest that Rauschenberg was above pranksterism. When asked to do a portrait of Paris art dealer Iris Clert, he sent her a telegram stating “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.”

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could be read as Dadaist critique, Rauschenberg’s intent for his works was idealistically simple: to experiment with the play of light on a surface and light’s impact on the painting as a whole.

Robert Rauschenberg’s content and style, like that of Max Ernst, has important influence on Charles Mee’s playwriting. First, and most obviously, the technique of collage and the use of readymade materials are formative for Mee’s aesthetic. Rauschenberg was fond of picking up worn items off the street, of using what others would consider trash for his combines. Second, Rauschenberg’s penchant for seeing the beauty in the discarded and in traditionally non-artistic items (stuffed goats, cardboard boxes, rotting crates), can be found in Mee’s own work as he draws from such non-literary sources as *Soap Opera Digest*, for example. Third, like Ernst, Rauschenberg reworks a set of images throughout his creations, just as Mee reuses bits of text from play to play.

**Ernst, Rauschenberg, Mee, and Performance Art**

Clearly, Mee has been inspired by the use Ernst and Rauschenberg make of collage in their artistic works. Equally significant is the way in which Mee draws from the heritage of performance art that ties Ernst’s and Rauschenberg’s visual works to the theatre. Sometimes Mee calls specifically for performance art pieces and happenings in his plays. In general, the antic spirit of performance art animates Mee’s theatrical works, which integrate stylized physicality with highly literate text. Thus, understanding the
tradition of performance in Dada, Surrealism, and Pop Art is crucial to evaluating physical imagery in Mee’s plays.

Although Max Ernst did far less performance work than either Rauschenberg or Mee, he did create a few paintings that took the theatre as their inspiration, including *Ubu Imperator* (1923) and *Oedipus Rex* (1922). In 1926, he worked for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, designing Act II of *Roméo et Juliette* (Miró did Act I), and in 1937 he designed the world premiere of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu enchainé* (written in 1899) at the Comédie des Champs-Elysées. Far later in his career, Ernst created a few more stage designs, including Giraudoux’s *Judith* at the Paris Odeon in 1961 and Messiaen’s *Turangalîla* at the Paris Opera in 1968.

More important in the history of performance art, however, is the Cologne Dada exhibition in April 1920. For this Dada performance and provocation, Ernst created innocuous-looking flyers illustrated with birds and cattle to advertise the event. Arp, Baargeld, and Ernst rented a small glass-enclosed courtyard behind a café to serve as an exhibition space. Audience expectations of a classy art show were disappointed from the first: in order to enter this courtyard, visitors had to cross through the bathroom of a local bar. The first thing viewers saw was a young girl in a first communion dress; she shortly began reciting “obscene” poems, by Jakob van Hoddis. Ernst exhibited a large wooden piece that had an axe attached to it, inviting the onlookers to smash his work to bits. Next to Ernst’s piece was Baargeld’s: an aquarium filled with red water, with a woman’s hair floating on top, an alarm clock on the bottom, and a wooden arm sticking out. Other objects and drawings were scattered throughout the space. Some visitors, who had after
all paid admission for this travesty, were outraged. The exhibition was destroyed, probably by viewers of the exhibit as well as by passers-by who noticed what was going on from their vantage point in the bar urinal. Complaints were made to the police, who closed the event down.\textsuperscript{14}

Dada spectacles, such as the Cologne Dada exhibition, have been taken as one of the precursors to the performance art movement (see Goldberg). If Dada in general (and Ernst in particular) influenced Happenings and performance art, then Rauschenberg, by way of John Cage, was the receiver of such influence. Barbara Rose is emphatic:

\begin{quote}
The fact is, American new Dada has its source outside the visual arts. . . . It is in the ideas and experiments of the avant-garde composer John Cage. . . . Tracing new Dada’s genesis to Cage, we point to his organization in 1952 at Black Mountain College of an “event” involving works by Rauschenberg, the dancing of Merce Cunningham and films and slides. (Since then Rauschenberg has at various times collaborated with Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Niki de Saint-Phalle, and Jean Tinguely in producing such “events.”) (Rose “Dada” 27-28)
\end{quote}

Accounts differ as to what precisely transpired at this “event,” which has come to be called the first Happening. Most witnesses agree that the piece lasted approximately 45 minutes, and was titled “Theater Piece #1.” The audience was seated in concentric circles (or squares) around a performance area, and found white cups on their chairs. Four of Rauschenberg’s \textit{White Paintings} were hung over the stage space. Each performer involved had a brief amount of time to do something. Cage read from atop a ladder (the Bill of Rights? a lecture on Meister Eckehart? the Huang-Po Doctrine of the Universal Mind?). M.C. Richards and Charles Olson read poetry while David Tudor played a prepared piano and Rauschenberg played records (1920s or 1930s recordings?) on a

\textsuperscript{14} See Robert Motherwell’s \textit{Dada Painters and Poets} (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979. 159-161) for an account of the exhibition. It was eventually reopened for a short time.
hand-cranked player (Victrola? Gramophone? Edison horn recorder and wax records? and perhaps at double speed?). Cage played a "composition with a radio." Merce Cunningham, followed by an unexpected dog, danced in the aisles. Someone (Rauschenberg? Nicola Arnowich?) projected abstract slides and old film strips on the walls and on Rauschenberg's White Paintings. Jay Watt played musical instruments in a corner. At the end, the audience was served coffee in their white cups.15

The piece was spearheaded by John Cage and, although Rauschenberg was but a participant, it fed his already burgeoning interest in performance. Subsequently, Rauschenberg provided settings for several non-traditional dance companies. In 1954, he designed his first set for Merce Cunningham's Minutae. Between 1954 and 1964, Rauschenberg designed over twenty settings for the Cunningham Company, which sought to reject the notion of gesamtkunstwerk in favor of chance operations (Spector 231).16 Later in the 1950s, Rauschenberg worked with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, which explored stillness and "real" movement. In the early 1960s, Rauschenberg linked up with the Judson Dance Theatre, for which he not only created set pieces, but also began to work as a dancer himself. The company, led by Steve Paxton, employed dance in a non-narrative and non-technical fashion. Their work was more Happening than dance as it is traditionally conceived.

15 For recountsings of this event see Goldberg 126-127, Tomkins 117, Rose Interview 34, and Hopps and Spector 229.

16 Background on Rauschenberg’s collaboration with the dance companies mentioned above is covered in great detail by Nancy Spector in "Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963-67: A 'Poetry of Infinite Possibilities'" on pages 230-241.
While with the Judson group, Rauschenberg originated several works that he also participated in as a performer. *Pelican* (1963) was staged in the America on Wheels roller rink in Washington D.C. In it, Rauschenberg, along with two other performers, made their way about the stage on roller skates with large fin-like sails on their backs. A soundtrack of birds, cars, snippets of “I’m in the Mood for Love,” and pieces of works by Handel and Hayden provided accompaniment. In *Linoleum* (1966), Rauschenberg built combine-style structures for dancers to move about in. Steve Paxton, lying flat on his stomach, was encased in a ten-foot rolling chicken coop (complete with chickens) that he wheeled about the stage, pausing to eat fried chicken. Alex Hay wore a bedframe that he moved by scooting himself forward. Rauschenberg wore a suit wired for sound and occupied himself by outlining small, constantly moving sculptures in chalk.

The playful sense of experimentation in *Pelican* and *Linoleum* pervades other of Rauschenberg’s work with the Judson group. For example, *Spring Training* (1965) was illuminated by some thirty turtles with flashlights strapped to their backs. *Map Room II* (1965) featured Rauschenberg in a pair of shoes encased in twenty-pound cubes of plastic, striding slowly through the performance space, picking up and laying down two neon tubes that lit up when he held them. The shoes, he said, prevented him from being electrocuted in the process.

Rauschenberg’s sense of theatricality extends beyond his overtly theatrical works. Frank O’Hara noted that as early as 1954 Rauschenberg’s combines were highly interactive: “He provides a means by which you, as well as he, can get ‘in’ the painting. Doors open to reveal clearer images, or you can turn a huge wheel to change the effect at
will...There is a big talent at play, creating its own occasions as a stage does” (O’Hara 47). His Broadcast (1959) was probably the first painting that had sound added to it: three radios, when tuned by viewers, emitted fragments of news, commercials, neon static, and truck ignitions. Even his set designs sometimes were performative. For Cunningham’s Story (1963), Rauschenberg’s set changed nightly, and variously involved the stagehands sweeping, two men ironing shirts, and himself creating a combine. Of his persistent use of performance in painting, a traditionally static medium, Rauschenberg said, “I like live art. A painting is just too passive. The artist can never really feel what contact, if any, has been made between the spectator and the painting. I want to give the spectator a far more active role. I want him as part of my work.” (Gruen 34).

In his play texts, Charles Mee incorporates the kind of playful Happenings that Rauschenberg pioneered. On a few occasions, Mee’s stage directions directly call for a piece of performance art. For example, in The Constitutional Convention: A Sequel, he writes, “A performance piece by The Alien Comic. This can change from evening to evening so that a number of different performance artists are used” (7). The openness to chance that John Cage emphasized is apparent in Mee’s willingness to give over control of such events to the performers and directors of his works.

Moreover, Mee’s plays in general have a performance art sensibility; that is, they are infused with the exuberant spirit of Rauschenberg’s dance pieces. A Summer Evening in Des Moines is built on a series of interludes that feel like a Happening:
Cotton Candy

We hear a banjo playing furiously
as the projections behind Darling show a medley
of ten thousand amusement park rides and adventures
that whirl through at great speed

..............................................
while Darling does a performance piece with cotton candy.

The Roller Coaster

While Darling continues with the cotton candy
Nancy enters as
a film of a roller coaster is projected.

Nancy stands in front of the roller coaster film
her arms in the air above her head
and screams over and over again.

Note:
Throughout the piece
as one scene nears its end,
the actors for the following scene can enter
so that the scenes are continuous, or even overlapping.

Balloon Head

Morton comes out, with a plain wooden chair.
He sits in the chair
opens his mouth.

A country western song.

Nancy squirts a steady stream of water into his mouth
with a power squirt gun.
A balloon inflates on top of Morton’s head
until it explodes.

Then Morton and Nancy dance. (10-11)

This kind of stage direction, so prevalent in Mee’s writings, indicates the influence that
Rauschenberg and others have had on his writing.
Some of Mee’s physical theatre work has been developed in conjunction with dancers, much as Rauschenberg cooperated with Cunningham and the Judson group. *Vienna: Lusthaus* was developed by Mee in collaboration with Martha Clarke. A dance-theatre piece about *fin de siècle* Vienna, it won Mee an Obie for best play in 1986, marking Mee’s first foray in theatre since the years just following his college graduation. Its text was taken from and inspired by “Freud, Musil, letters of the Austro-Hungarian imperial family, principles of Viennese architecture, and Diane Wolkstein, among other sources” (*Vienna* 2). *Lusthaus*, choreographed by Clarke, evoked the pleasures along with the militarism of pre-World War I Vienna. *My House Was Collapsing Towards One Side* (1996), billed as a “dance-theatre-music” performance, was developed by Dawn Akemi-Saito (choreography and performance), Mee (text), and Myra Milford (music). Called the first example of *butoh* to incorporate spoken text, *My House* juxtaposes excerpts from *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon with first-hand accounts of the carnage following the bombing of Hiroshima.

The influence of dance is easy to trace in these two works. However, Mee’s non-dance creations also have a heightened, sometimes surreal, physicality. *The Constitutional Convention: A Sequel* closes with the image of a man running in place. In the stage directions, Mee writes: “Rhythmical running. [Quasi-soft-shoe moves.]”

Rhythmic chest pounding, double arm slapping. . . . Violent slapping and stomping and

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17 Mee met Clarke when Joseph Papp asked her (among others, including JoAnn Akalitis) to direct *The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador* at the Public Theatre. The project fell through, rankling Mee. “The Public held onto the play for three years, saying they were going to do it, and I shouldn’t take it anywhere else....Then they dropped it,” he said. “They might be interested again, but the only way I would give a piece to Joe Papp would be if he gave me $250,000 up front, which I would refund after he opened the piece, and if it didn’t open, I’d use the money to produce it elsewhere.” (in “The Theater of History” in *Conversations on Art and Performance* 186).
kicking, sustained... to exhaustion” (14). The man has microphones placed all over his costume, including on his shoes, so that his activity can “be amplified into an explosive sound, and those explosive sounds can be manipulated to different frequencies, pitches, and so forth to produce thuds, pings, explosions” (14). This technology-infused image recollects Rauschenberg’s multi-media performances, as well as his sound-enhanced paintings.

In *Big Love*, based on *The Suppliants* by Aeschylus, three sisters go into an extended man-bashing dialogue and their words (“these double dealers, / flim-flam artists, / litterbugs, / psychiatrists!”) are accompanied by the following movement:

She is throwing herself to the ground over and over
letting her loose limbs hit the ground with the rattle of a skeleton’s bones,
her head lolling over and hitting the ground with a thwack,
rolling over, bones banging the ground,
back to her feet,
and throwing herself to the ground again in the same way over and over
................................................................
all three women are yelling their words
over the loud music
and throwing themselves to the ground over and over. (245-246)

The men in the play have their turn as well: three brothers betrothed to these three sisters are just as frustrated (“I thought: girls will like this / but they didn’t”; “I said to my dad / I don’t want to do this / this isn’t me / I felt so ashamed”). They duplicate the women’s body-slamming routine, but add to it something more violent.

Oed... picks up circular saw blades, one after another, from a pile of saw blades, and hurls them across the stage so they stick in the side of another building... , yelling... then jumping into the air and stomping back down on the ground and yelling. Constantine cuts out of the synchronized collapsing and starts jumping up in the air and landing with apparent full force on Nikos. (264)
These routines are so physically demanding that the original production had a fully padded floor that resembled a large gymnastics mat. Clearly, the men and women are frustrated with each other; but the physical movement carries meaning beyond that. It is overtly non-realistic (the saw blades, for example, are wheeled in specifically for the sequence) and designed to offer a dance-like storytelling style. Early in Big Love, Mee tries to make clear that the physicality is integral to the world of the play:

Olympia goes to the bathtub,
pulls up her dress and sits on the edge
with her feet in the tub
and sings with all her heart.
Thyona, meanwhile, unpacks wedding gifts from the trunk—
plates and glasses and cups and saucers,
and—to set the scene for what kind of play this is,
that it is not a text with brief dances and other physical activities added to it, but rather a piece in which
the physical activities and the text are equally important to the experience—
she hurls the plates and cups and glasses with all her force against the wall shattering them into a million bits.
Olympia sings a song of coming through trials to triumph. (228)

The catalog of such physicality in Mee’s works is extensive as well as fascinating; all his works are driven by kinetic expression. If we revisit Mee’s statement about his fragmented sense of style, the possible autobiographical reasons for such gymnastic works come clear: “if you find it hard to walk down the sidewalk, you like, in the freedom of your mind, to make a sentence that leaps and dances now and then” (Nearly 40-41). His plays maintain a physicality that he himself cannot hope to achieve in his daily life. This fact, in combination with his affinity for Bob Rauschenberg and his dance pieces, helps to explain this style.
The physicality inherent in Mee's work is rooted both in Rauschenberg's dance pieces and in Mee's own awareness of his handicap. His settings, too, draw much from the environmental art and installations which were equally as significant in Rauschenberg's career. They also spring from Ernstian surreality. The setting for Mee's *Requiem for the Dead* provides a useful example:

**Darkness.**

The high, thin music of a Vietnamese violin, the piercing music played on only one or two strings.

Out of the darkness we see a young man walking slowly downstage.

Gradually, we make out the ruined shell of an ancient building.

A torn and burnt-out metal Coke sign on a pole.

An immense shard of rusted steel embedded in the dirt as though it had fallen from the sky.

On the back wall, a line of 6 bird cages horizontally across the wall with live crows in them.

**Dirt.**

An old man, extremely frail, lying in the dirt, or lying on an iron bedstead, painted white, his head resting on a balled up piece of clothing, his eyes wide open. (1)

The place Mee describes is more than simply a post-apocalyptic environment. Although it involves several familiar elements from everyday life—the bedstead, the Coke sign, the bird cages—it arranges them in such a way as to be profoundly disturbing. Where are we? The ancient building gives a clue, as does the rusted steel in the dirt, but the caged
crows move the viewer to an altered reality. The place is starkly menacing, and it also tells a story, in the same way that Max Ernst's Victorian drawing collages, in one still moment, possess a visual history.

Not all of Mee's surreality is disturbing or dark. *Summertime* offers a decidedly bright vision in its setting.

A hundred slender white birch tree trunks.
A scattering of casual, summer-house furniture all covered in white muslin.
Grass grows on a desk
and there are stars in the sky
A woman's white summer dress hanging from a tree branch.
Violin music, quietly in the distance.

Tessa wears something in the colors of Spring.
She may have a flower in her hair.
She sits at the desk.

James enters.
He, too, is wearing something the color of Easter eggs,
and he carries a bright yellow umbrella. (1)

Here Mee has again taken the material of daily life and arranged it to create an alternative, surreal world. The grass growing from the desk, the dress in the tree, the yellow umbrella, and the hundred trees together evoke a dreamily perfect early summer, lazy and soft. At the same time, their collective effect is one of estrangement.

If these locations seem more like sculpture than set design, this is as Mee wants it.

He is clear in the stage directions for *Big Love*:

But the setting for the piece should not be real, or naturalistic.
It should not be a set for the piece to play within
but rather something against which the piece can resonate:
something on the order of a bathtub, 100 olive trees,
and 300 wine glasses half-full of red wine.
More an installation than a set. (224)
Rauschenberg has said, “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two)” (qtd. in Solomon “Robert” 1). We may recall an earlier statement by Max Ernst, who refers to collage as “the spark of poetry which leaps across the gap as these two realities are brought together.” In his playwriting, Charles Mee also senses the creative potential of a “gap.” For him, though, the spacing is found in the disconnect between what his body and his mind can do. His perception of his own personal fragmentation because of polio has drawn him to the artistic style of collage. In being drawn that way (specifically to Bob Rauschenberg and Max Ernst), Mee has also found inspiration in Surrealism, dance, and Happenings. Thus, both in the physical movement as well as in the settings for his plays, Charles Mee is inspired by the aesthetics of both Max Ernst and Bob Rauschenberg.

The Classics and History

Charles Mee went through intellectual as well as physical changes following his polio. If polio ravaged his body, it served, indirectly, to broaden his mind. First, Mee could no longer trust a body that “let [him] down. I moved into a mind that promised to be more trustworthy, more devious and elusive; that can escape when it needs to; that still, today, lives in a realm where it can take flight” (Nearly 18). This movement away from his physical body and into his mind was aided by his high school English teacher, Miss Maude Strouss.† She came to visit him in the hospital during his convalescence.

† Mee mentions Strouss in both A Nearly Normal Life and A Visit to Haldeman. In Normal, he spells her name Strouss. In Haldeman, he spells it Strauss. I am following his spelling in Normal.
and brought him her own copy of Plato’s *Symposium*. Mee claims that, prior to this, he had only skimmed books for class and read comic books. But he tore through the *Symposium*, and then read a number of Plato’s dialogues, including *Crito, Phaedo, Euthyphro, The Republic*, and the *Apology*. “Before I could hold a book with all my fingers, I had read all of Plato. I loved the dialogue form, the opposing arguments, the turmoil of conflicting ideas and feelings; he spoke to my own warring mind and heart.”

Following his convalescence, Mee was aided by another teacher. Alan Peshkin ("my Virgil in this descent into the world of books") was Mee’s student council advisor and took him to used book stores in Chicago. The first time they went together, Peshkin gave Mee ten dollars and told him to buy whatever he wanted. Over time, he guided

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19 See Charles Mee *A Visit to Haldeman* 157-162 and *Nearly Normal* 31-33. The accounts of Strouss’ gift vary significantly: in *Haldeman*, Mee claims that “Miss Strauss [sic] and I loved each other, although, of course, neither of us had admitted it to the other. . . . How difficult, and how bizarre, was this tense, unadmitted love affair between the bedridden boy and his aging mistress.” In *Nearly Normal*, the picture is altogether different: “[The Plato] I remember came from my high school English teacher, Maude Strouss [sic]—an old maid, as I thought of her then, a woman probably just a year or two shy of retirement, with tight curls of hair that had been (badly) dyed coal black. She lived with the high school algebra teacher, Grace Wandke. They were odd women, good teachers, awkward in any setting outside the classroom, shy, almost reclusive. . . . Why she imagined I’d be interested, I’ll never know. . . . Only years later did I think back and realize that what Miss Strouss had first brought me, Plato’s book about love, was her extraordinary way—this idiosyncratic, introverted woman of mysterious erotic preferences—of telling me she loved me. Her gift has informed my entire life.”

20 Mee *Nearly Normal* 33. Plato was not the only gift Mee received in the hospital. His friends also brought him a copy of *Life* magazine that contained the Kinsey Report. Reading it aroused him, but he failed to climax (see *Haldeman* 146) due to his present state of paralysis. This was a major concern, obviously, for a 14-year-old boy. Mee wrote of the evening on which he contracted polio, “This night was the beginning, and the end, of my adolescent entry into the world of sex and the transition to adult love. My rite of passage into grown-up love would have to be scattered messily through my twenties and even thirties, a moment of transition returned to again and again before I got it quite right.” (*Nearly Normal* 12). Mee has had a string of failed marriages and relationships (his marriages to Claire Lu Thomas, actor; Suzi Baker, poet and actor; and Kathleen Tolan, playwright; and his long-term partnership with Laurie Williams, actor and playwright, all ended unhappily).

Although he has four biological children, questions of power and impotence, in all their connotations, have remained a concern for the adult Mee. He states this clearly in *Haldeman*: “A boy stricken with polio thinks a great deal about power and impotence, strength and weakness, justice and injustice” (162). Mee’s plays are rife with such issues, often playing out in passages of graphic sexual horror. A study of this aspect of Mee’s career could provide a window into his thematic tendencies.
Mee’s selections, helping him build a personal library of the classics. Of this time, Mee has written “I traveled in my reading from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle through most of Western philosophy, and then to history, and at last to biography—from the realm of pure thought back to the world of daily life” (Nearly 181). In the mid-1950s, Mee went through a profound shift of interests and ideas. He was, in fact, “reborn in books.”

I was reborn first in philosophy; and I read it all. Within two years, I had sampled every philosopher from Plato to Sartre and I had read almost all of Plato, most of Descartes, much Hegel and Kierkegaard and James and Santayana and Wittgenstein and Carnap. . . . I read for many reasons: First of all, perhaps, because nature abhors a vacuum and my head was a vacuum. Second, I read because I had great need to understand why it was that I had got polio. (Haldeman 160-161)

On one of his book-buying excursions, Mee discovered, by accident, Büchner’s Woyzeck. Its fragmentary style, as well as its content—“a shattered world, fucked up and roughhewn”—appealed to him deeply. He also began to gravitate towards Renaissance histories, coming to see the emergence of Europe from the Black Death as a reflection of his own changes. The Renaissance, he wrote, “could be seen as the world’s recovery from a dread disease into a new life” (Nearly 182).

As profound as his encounter with the classics was, Mee’s bout with polio did more than just give him the time and reason to read great books. It also changed the way he perceived the past and the present:

I became a historian then—that is to say, someone who lived at least in part in his memory, feeling it vividly, able to project myself back to a football game, a locker room . . . of going over and over the story to rewrite it, to see where it went wrong, to know what happened and what it meant. I don’t remember having been much interested in the past before I had polio. (Nearly 120)
This double awareness of the past in general (especially as it was represented in the many books which he devoured) and his own personal past combined to shape the fundamental elements of Mee’s playwriting.

Beginning in 1992, with Orestes, Mee produced a series of plays based on classical Greek pieces. He reworked Euripides’ Orestes, Bacchae, Hippolytus (as True Love, which also draws from Plato’s Symposium), and Trojan Women (also based on Berlioz’ opera)\(^{21}\); Aeschylus’ Agamemnon and The Suppliant Women (as Big Love); and fragmentary plays by Sophocles (as Requiem for the Dead). By taking these texts as the basis for his themes and plots, Mee is able to layer in his own writing and other source material and draw contemporary parallels with ancient concerns.

Mee’s plays are not simple updatings of classics. Rather, Mee takes the concerns of the plays and addresses them from a modern perspective, reasking the questions raised by the original text. So, his Big Love\(^{22}\) approaches The Suppliant Women, the Danaid-based myth of fifty women who flee prearranged marriage to their fifty cousins, by revisiting the fraught relationships between men and women in modern times. At the same time, Mee raises questions about political asylum and the role of power in society.

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\(^{22}\) Big Love was commissioned by the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1998, when Jon Jory asked Mee to write a play for the new millennium. Mee turned to The Suppliants, which has been called the oldest surviving play in the western world. Big Love (subtitled The Wedding of the Millennium) was performed at the Humana Festival in 2000. Big Love is primarily based on The Suppliant Women, but follows the presumed outline of the two lost plays from Aeschylus’ own trilogy (Egyptians and Danaids); it also forms a third of Mee’s own trilogy, which includes True Love and First Love. In addition to this trilogy and the intended Euripidean Orestia, Mee has written other groupings. Summertime and Wintertime form a bookend pair; The War to End War, The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador, The Constitutional Convention A Sequel, and The Imperialists at Club Cave Canem form a tetralogy under the title The American Century which was to have been produced at the Public Theatre.
The Trojan Women examines madness provoked by genocide and the impact of class on individual opportunity. Orestes explores the dangers implicit in self-satisfied world power and the seeking of justice in an ambivalent world.

Like the work of Plato that first introduced him to the Greeks, Mee's plays emphasize "the dialogue form, the opposing arguments, the turmoil of conflicting ideas and feelings." These are not plot-driven plays; rather, characters tend to expostulate on ideas. In part, this is a product of Mee's playwriting technique of collaged text; yet, he also wants a theatre that is driven by debate. In Orestes, Orestes begs to speak with his grandfather, even though he has just murdered Clytemnestra, his own mother and Tyndarus's daughter. Tyndarus criticizes his grandson in an eloquent fashion, drawing his criticism out to the state of civilization in general.

Shall I apologize?  
This was your mother, after all,  
my daughter  
even if she was a slut.

There are words these days, I know that cause a certain pain—like "slut" or "sweetie" or "dear" or "peg leg" or—"watermelon"

There is some quality of magical thinking in this, a certain primitive turn of mind, if I may use the word, that seems to fly to the belief that if one disposes of a word, one disposes of all the dreadful or disagreeable things that have become attached to it

And yet, one can commit murder and find the words to justify it.

This is your sort of civilization, then. It speaks nicely and behaves barbarously

You remember nothing: not your parents, nor the values they held dear, not your country, nor the polity it once held in its grasp, or at the very least aspired to, not your history, nor your religion, nor even the most rudimentary tenets of ethics or gentleness.
And this is what you ask me to give my blessing to.
No.

And I will tell you this:
for the murder of my daughter,
I expect the murderer to suffer the punishment of the state.
No more. No less.
That’s what I mean by a civil society.
I’ll hold you responsible.
Let us begin there to put the world to rights. (113-116)

In this dialogue, Mee adapts the ancient Greek text to contemporary issues: Tyndarus argues against the false hopes of political correctness and the slippery rhetoric it has engendered. Yet, his train of thought comes around again to the central concern expressed in Euripides’ original: the price that must be paid for acting against the state.

In his preface to his anthology History Plays, as well as in his personal statement/manifesto on his website, Mee articulates another reason for his attraction to the Greeks:

I like plays that are not too neat, too finished, too presentable. My plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me. It feels like my life. It feels like the world.

And then I like to put this—with some sense of struggle remaining—into a classical form, a Greek form, or a beautiful dance theatre piece, or some other effort at civilization. (History i)

Here Mee draws together his fascination with both the fragmented and the reordered, calling his playwriting an “effort at civilization.” He takes the stuff of the life he perceives around him—violent, broken, surprising, twisted—and captures it in an ordered theatrical form that allows the disorder of real life to roil under the surface. He civilizes without denying the anarchy seething beneath his dramatic form.
This idea that civilization masks violent and destructive urges forms a central thesis in all of Mee’s Greek plays. *The Trojan Women a Love Story* opens with a prologue in which “a hundred dark-skinned ‘Third World’ women” are making computer components on tables set out on dirt, as ash falls from the sky. The women are clearly shell-shocked, and “behind them, the city is a smoking, still-burning ruin.” Hecuba steps forward, and the first words of the play, taken from texts detailing war atrocities in Kosovo, are spoken.

Last night: a child picked up
out of its bed by its feet
taken out to the courtyard
swung round by a soldier in an arc
its head smashed against a tree
all this done while another soldier held back
the child’s mother
all this done right before the mother’s eyes

and the mother
could not even cry.

I heard a young girl call out
Mama—

*[Hecuba and the other women look suddenly to the side, as though hearing the girl’s voice, hold for a moment before Hecuba resumes.]*

the last word she ever spoke.

A child saying to her mother:
Look what I have lived to see before my death.

A world destroyed
by the hands of those who thought
themselves the creators of civilization. (162-163)
Other women, recounting similar atrocities, begin to agitate for revenge. But seeing the disjoint between the “civilized” men who had so brutally destroyed their families, Hecuba argues for restraint:

No.
Enough.
Let it end.

There is nothing predestined in all this:
if rage and violence is in our bones
the let us rise beyond it—
this is what it is to be civilized. (167)

Hecuba suggests that efforts at civilization are efforts at transcending the dangerous urges within our own bones.

At the same time, Mee does not allow Hecuba’s “let us rise beyond it” to serve as a panacea for all social ills. Mee also points out that “civility” can be a disguise, a way of hiding true motives and actions. For example, Talthybius comes to Hecuba as a “liason from the Greeks” dressed smoothly in a pin-stripe suit. He bemoans the state of things following the war:

Here, at the end
when we would all wish to restore some order,
return to some world of civility,
we discover instead that
the aftermath of war is
a riot in a parrot house.
This is not to my taste, I must say.
I confess I am the sort of man
who enjoys what is familiar.
I have a sweater I like to wear
that I have had since my days at Princeton

I have a favorite walking stick,
I love to tell the stories my father told to me.
I don’t think of myself as a rude man
or harsh.
And so I would not say it is in my nature
to have to say to you
that the council of my countrymen
has reached some decisions
about how you women have been allotted
each to a man.\(^1\)

He delivers the horrific news of further exploitation to the Trojan women with a dapper apology and a wistful smile. In effect, his gestures towards civility do not make him civilized.

In *Big Love*, Mee sets out a more provocative example of civility delimiting anarchy. Constantine, the most overtly “masculine” of the grooms-to-be, offers a civilized defense of violence, drawn from Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*:

> of course I think everyone should be civilized
> men and women both
> but when push comes to shove
> say you have some bad people
> .................................
> and people need defending
> then no one wants a good guy any more
> then they want a man who can fuck someone up
> .................................
> and then when it’s over
> .................................
> a man is expected to put it away
> carry on with life
> as though he didn’t have such impulses
> or to know that, if he does
> he is a despicable person
> and so it may be that when a man turns this violence on a woman
> in her bedroom
> or in the midst of war
> slamming her down, hitting her

\(^1\) Ibid 168-169. See also *The War to End War*, where much of this monologue is delivered by Woodrow Wilson. In Mee’s book *The End of Order*, Woodrow Wilson is personally described in much the same terms. See Chapter 2 of this thesis for a detailed analysis of this borrowing.
he should be esteemed for this
for informing her
about what it is that civilization really contains

because it has been just a luxury for her really
to not have to act on this impulse or even feel it

whereas in reality
it is an inextricable part of the civilization in which she lives

so that when a man turns it against her
he is showing her a different sort of civilized behavior really

this is a gift a man can give a woman. (266-268)

This defense maintains a dark logic, and suggests that civilization is simply a gloss over
the most essential elements of human desire. It is a dangerously seductive argument, and
though Constantine is set up as a woman-hating extremist (as Thyona is a man-hating one), in this moment his explanation for his behavior is lucid. Thus, Mee comes at
questions of civility and civilization from a multitude of angles, never allowing one
simplistic aphorism to guide the debate he raises. Cracking open the word “civil,” he
holds each of its fragments up to examination.

In *Orestes*, Mee goes further to posit a world in which civilizing forces are
completely impotent, submerged beneath an ocean of babble. When Orestes has come to
trial for the murder of his mother, the matter of real importance—the arguments for and
against his death—cannot be heard over conversations about soap operas, sex, and other
trivia. Mee describes the situation in his stage directions:

During the trial, there are two levels of text: one delivered in the foreground, one
in the background, sometimes simultaneously. The foreground text, which is
mostly what we hear, is all about private—indeed, intimate—life. The
background text, which we mostly don’t hear, is the text of public life, the trial—
which is treated as so irrelevant that even those speaking it sometimes neglect to listed to it. In short, the judicial system is in ruins. This is the Crazy Trial. (127)

Mee hammers his critique home when Apollo (who stage directions suggest should speak “in the manner and affect of whoever is the current American president”) arrives, and “the city goes on burning, even as Apollo speaks. And one by one, those who listen to him become bored and stop listening” (154-155). Apollo pronounces his solution. Helen is not dead. Orestes will not die, but will rather be banished for a time, and will eventually marry Hermione and rule Argos. The people onstage who had been not listening now go so far as to exit the stage, leaving Apollo alone and unheard to pronounce:

This is a land whose citizens have always believed and still believe today, that they have a heritage they have a civilization and a culture, a set of practices and well-known customs values and ideals that are the rightful envy of the world. The traditions that help them make a world that will endure as long as their faith and their goodwill remain intact and they share their gifts with all those in the world born less fortunate than they. Then may we say with confidence truly this is a blessed people, the rightful envy of the world. (156)

And with that Apollo is picked up “like a piece of furniture” and carried offstage by his bodyguards. The play ends with a madman, being rebandaged by a nurse, announcing, “If you were married to logic / you’d be living in incest / swallowing your own tail. / Every man must shout: / there’s a great destructive work to be done. / We’re doing it!” Yet, the madman does nothing but go to sleep.

The madman’s outburst is a reworking of pieces of Tristan Tzara’s “Dada Manifesto 1918.” In it, Tzara writes, “Married to logic, art would live in incest,
swallowing, engulfing its own tail. . . Let each man proclaim: there is a great negative
work of destruction to be accomplished” (Motherwell 80-81). Mee mimics the
revolutionary words of the Dadaists, and then allows them to dissolve into inaction.

In this dark vision of human suffering, Mee simultaneously announces the
impotence of our declining civilization and pines for a time when such statements as “this
is a blessed people” rang more true. He smashes the already cracked world he is evoking,
exposing its hollowness and filth. And then he holds up the shards and the dust and
mourns what they once had made. Ultimately, the questions surrounding the tension
between civilization and anarchy remain unanswered for Mee. But he insists on raising
them, nonetheless. This is as the Greeks would have done, he says.

The Greeks took no easy problems. They put on the stage a world of unspeakable
anguish, of matricide and fratricide and patricide, and then they refused to blink. They looked into the abyss of human life and human nature with open eyes and
understood that the thing to do is feel life as it is, in all its anguish as well as its
aspirations, its missed opportunities and its savored beauties, never to falsify it, never to pretty it up; but rather to look at it bravely, unflinchingly. In the sheer
steadiness . . . of that gaze you will you achieve real understanding of the
complexity of life; and from that come acceptance, grace, and enduring peace. (Nearly 214)

Finally, the Greeks also represent to Mee the beginnings of historical reflection,
of a method for thinking about the world historically. In Mee’s Agamemnon (based on
Aeschylus’ play), Mee casts Herodotus, Thucydides, Homer, and Hesiod as a kind of
chorus. All four are handicapped in some way: Herodotus is a quadriplegic; Thucydides
is a dwarf (or double amputee, according to the stage directions); Homer is blind (as he is
purported to have been); Hesiod is an epileptic who suffers throughout the play from
violent tremors. They are old men, physically useless in the ensuing struggles in the play.
Yet their presence serves not only to place all the action in its historical context but also to raise questions about the meaning of history.

Each of the four is characterized by his historically given traits. Periodically, each speaks words from his own writings. So, Herodotus digresses into anecdotes and emphasizes moral lessons, as he does in his History. Thucydides seeks objectivity, and bemoans the unreliability of eyewitness accounts, as he does in his History of the Peloponnesian War. Homer’s poetic turn on history is emphasized, and his Iliad is a major reference point. And Hesiod, about whom perhaps the least is known, is given primacy in Agamemnon and delivers its final speech. The basic issues in his Theogeny and Works and Days, including above all his sense of moral decay in a lawless time, form the basis for his perspectives on the dramatic action. In fact, the opening dialogue of the Agamemnon sets up the historians’ attitudes clearly, even for someone not familiar with their writings.

After a silence, as the men sit about a campfire, they begin.

HERODOTUS. When I was a boy
    all this was open field.
HESIOD. There’s some comfort
    in the memory of it.
THUCYDIDES. If it’s true.
HERODOTUS. I was here.
    I know it to be true.
THUCYDIDES. What one remembers
    and what is true
    are so seldom the same. (1-3)

Later, after Cassandra prophesies of the horrors to come (drawn from text about the four horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation), Thucydides responds, “What sort of person / would think civilized men and women / would give serious attention / to this sort
of wild superstition?” to which Homer responds “There is more truth in poetry / than in a mere rendering of the facts / of any matter.” Thucydides replies, “That’s nothing but a recipe / for lunacy” (35).

Although the play is nominally about Clytemnestra’s retributive murder of Agamemnon because he slaughtered their daughter Iphigenia, it is really a piece about memory and longing, as well as denial and truth. Agamemnon and his messenger, questioned about a series of war atrocities by the historians, continually respond with variations on “that’s not true” or “these are fictions made up by demented people.” And while the historians challenge the falsehoods purveyed by the war heroes and criticize each other’s perspectives, they themselves are challenged by Clytemnestra:

Where were you
when this man destroyed every shred
of justice?
That was your time to speak,
not now. (38)

So, the historians see through the lies told by the makers of history. And the historians are called to task for a lifetime of criticizing and analyzing, but failing to act.

Agamemnon marks Mee’s personal struggle with what would be his primary career for the first part of his working life: that of historian. The play was first performed in 1994, one year after Playing God, Mee’s last book of history, was published. It is as though, with this play, Mee is holding up his own civilized historical writing career and challenging himself to attempt something more immediate. Once again, he breaks in order to renew.

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CHAPTER 2
HISTORY AND THEATRE

Biography: The Historian and the Playwright (1960 to 1998)

Following Mee’s high school graduation, he attended Harvard University, where he graduated in 1960 with a B.A. in English literature. Although he had been interested in theatre in his high school years, it was in college that he delved deeply into “that arena of warring passions and voices that seemed to be my natural life. I acted in plays—to hell with it, I played old men—and directed plays, and wrote plays” (Haldeman 174). When directing The Good Woman of Setzuan for the fiftieth anniversary of the Harvard Dramatic Club, he met the woman who was to be his first wife, Claire Lu Thomas. He cast her as the Good Woman; they were married in 1959. Following Mee’s graduation in 1960, they moved to New York City and became peripheral participants in the growing Off Off Broadway movement there afoot.

In his introduction to Eight Plays from Off Off Broadway, Michael Smith nails the birth of the Off Off Broadway movement down to a specific day:

Off-Off Broadway’s birthday can be given, somewhat arbitrarily, as September 27, 1960. On that date a production of Alfred Jarry’s King Ubu opened at a Greenwich Village coffeehouse called the Take 3. The program contained an inspirational note: “This production . . . represents a return to the original idea of Off-Broadway theatre, in which imagination is substituted for money, and plays
can be presented in a way that would be impossible in the commercial theatre.” A few weeks later the term “Off-Off Broadway” was coined in print by Jerry Tallmer, then theatre critic of The Village Voice. (6)

In volume three of his Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, C.W.E. Bigsby offers a different birthday for this enfant terrible. December 1958, he says, marked the opening of Joe Cino’s Caffe Cino; Ellen Stewart’s Café La MaMa began in 1960; Bigsby splits the difference and finds in 1959 the “first stirrings” of Off Off Broadway (26).

Whatever the precise moment, the Off Off Broadway movement was a phenomenon of the early 1960s, mounted in opposition to the growing commercialization of Off Broadway, which had itself been instigated to oppose the commercialization of Broadway. Though Off Broadway’s roots can be found as far back as 1915, with the first works of the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players, it was in 1949 that the Off-Broadway League of Theatres was founded, largely as a means for obtaining Equity actors at sub-union scale (Bigsby 22). Off Broadway blossomed in the early 1950s with the founding of The Living Theatre (1951), the Circle in the Square (1951), and the New York Shakespeare Festival (1954). By the 1957-1958 season, there were more productions Off Broadway than on Broadway, and “by the 1959-60 season, which for the first time more than $1 million was invested, there were twice as many productions Off-Broadway as on. In the following year it was three times as many” (Bigsby 24).

Thus, whether we choose Bigsby’s 1959 or Smith’s more fastidious September 27, 1960, as the origin of Off Off Broadway, it is clear that the last years of the 1950s and
the first years of the 1960s were a rich time of theatrical exploration in New York city. It is into this milieu that Charles Mee and Claire Lu Thomas stepped in the summer of 1960. On arrival, Mee hoped to embark on a playwriting career. Apparently, the strains of making ends meet while continuing creative work took their toll on what proved to be an immature relationship. By November 1962, Mee’s marriage to Thomas was over and his marriage to Suzi Baker, another actress, had begun.

From 1962 through 1964, Mee saw five of his plays produced in New York. This spate of work is a microcosm of the Off Off Broadway world in the early 60s. His works were staged at The Writers’ Stage Company (*Constantinople Smith, Anyone! Anyone!,* and *Players Repertoire*—1962), Theatre Genesis at St Mark’s in the Bowery (*The Gate*—1963),24 and La Mama E.T.C. (*Players Repertoire*—1964). Each of these venues was a bastion of experimental theatre. Theatre Genesis, for example, was created as part of an arts program sponsored by the free-thinking congregation of the St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery. It is credited with “discovering” Sam Shepard, whose *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden* premiered there in 1964 (Orzel and Smith 11). Performances were held in small rooms above the worship space, and productions were selected by Ralph Cook, a lay minister to the arts at the church and artistic director of Theatre Genesis. Genesis was, according to Cook, designed to “serve the playwright at that point in his career when he needs to be produced with maximum freedom and with continuity” (Orzel and Smith 93).

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24 This date is disputable. It comes from the chronology of Mee’s works published in Erin B. Mee’s “Shattered and Fucked Up and Full of Wreckage: The Words and Works of Charles L. Mee.” *The Drama Review* 46.3 (2002): 102. However, according to Ralph Cook, the artistic director of the space, in an essay published in Orzel and Smith’s *Eight Plays from Off Off Broadway*, “Genesis began in August 1964” (93). I have been unable to confirm the precise date of performance of *The Gate*; it is possible that the piece was not reviewed. However, the Mee chronology has other errors in it. My suspicion is that this is a case of misremembering.
Like Theatre Genesis, Ellen Stewart's Café La Mama E.T.C. was founded in 1960 as a haven for new play experimentation. Stewart defined her company as "an experimental theatre club, dedicated to the playwright and all aspects of the theatre. That tells everything" (Orzel and Smith 163). In functioning as a private club, Stewart's La Mama managed to subvert city licensing and occupancy laws; it remained frequently on the move to accomplish those same ends.

That Mee's plays were produced in Off Off Broadway venues is part of his linkage to the movement. Perhaps more significant was his work at the Tulane Drama Review. He began in 1963 and became Associate Editor under Richard Schechner from 1964 to 1965. In his American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History, Arnold Aronson has emphasized the importance of TDR to Off Off Broadway. According to Aronson, TDR was founded in 1955, and became a primary organ for dissemination of information on the European avant-garde, particularly absurdism. When Schechner took over in 1962, he shifted editorial focus from literature to performance. He added "TDR Comment" as a section for polemics and advocacy (47-48). TDR's impact was sizeable, Aronson argues, because it devoted a whole issue to Happenings in 1963; it covered the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre; it was responsible for introducing the work of Jerzy Grotowski to the USA; it virtually defined postmodern dance; and it played a significant role in the success of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Meredith Monk, and the Wooster Group among many others. It was as much a player in the evolution of the American avant-garde as the artists and the theatres themselves. (48)

Thus, through his contributions to TDR, Mee, like Schechner, was one of the few theatre practitioners who also formally contributed to the discourse surrounding the field.
The facts that, in the early 1960s, Mee had plays produced at Off Off Broadway venues and edited and wrote for *TDR* seems to position him at the center of the American avant-garde. The influences of movements like the theatre of images can certainly be found in his more recent work. Yet, if his articles and plays from the period are examined, his relationship to the avant-garde seems more problematic.

The majority of the articles Mee wrote for *TDR* focused on the Living Theatre. In the Winter 1962 issue, his article, “The Becks’ Living Theatre” chronicles the development of the company. Its perspective oscillates between praising and eviscerating the company. “As a repertory company, they’re incompetent,” he writes; “Judith Malina herself is . . . dull, truthful to the point of fakery, occasionally bursting into a tantrum (never reaching tragic heights), and owning a very annoying voice” (198). In the same article, Mee declares, “Few theatres possess such an unusual and uncompromising personal vision, a vision which makes hard demands on its audience” (194). He found the chaos of their work “demoralizing”, and he condemned their chance-reliant performance technique as “refusing the responsibility of controlling [their] material” (205).

In his 1964 piece, “Epitaph for The Living Theatre,” which followed Richard Schechner’s famed interview with Malina via megaphone,25 Mee is even harsher—and at the same time more ambivalent:

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25 The Living Theatre had been ordered to vacate their premises for nonpayment of taxes. The space had been padlocked by the IRS, but the company gave the last performance of *The Brig* in the building anyway. The audience entered through windows. Schechner interviewed Judith Malina on the subject by speaking to her from the street through a megaphone. The company subsequently elected to tour Europe for four years.
The stupidity of running up a tax bill of thousands of dollars, the personal and social irresponsibility of running up debts to landlords and others who probably needed the money to exist themselves, is preposterous—and thoroughly in keeping with the way the Becks run things. The TDR interview with Judith Malina and Kenneth Brown captures The Living Theatre quintessentially: its contradictions, its naïveté, its contemptibleness, and its marvelous sense of life. (220)

Mee was at once seduced and repelled by the work of The Living Theatre. Their brand of experimentation struck him as decidedly juvenile, if well-intentioned.

Despite his participation in the Off Off Broadway movement, Mee was, in many ways, a traditionalist. He straddled the mainstream and the avant-garde worlds. For example, his first job out of college was working as a financial analyst on Wall Street. In 1962, during the same time he was working at TDR, Mee became editor of Playbill magazine, a glossy publication distributed to audience members at Broadway performances. Between these two, Mee was working on radically different publications that dealt with theatre. Further, in 1961 Mee had just begun working at the American Heritage publishing company, home of such middlebrow publications as Horizon magazine. By 1971, Mee would be that publication’s editor-in-chief. Throughout the sixties, he wrote short articles for American Heritage publications (as well as for The New York Times) that ranged in subject matter from playground equipment to Audubon—all very tame stuff. Thus, Mee was holding down three jobs—at TDR, Playbill, and American Heritage. His writing ranged promiscuously from Broadway to the avant-garde.

Some of this employment can be explained by Mee’s need to support his family, which had grown to include two children by 1970. In fact, Mee’s theatrical output, both
for *TDR* and in his own playwriting, ceased in 1965, the birth year of his first daughter, Erin. It did not start up again until 1984, when his play, *The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador*, was published in *Wordplays*. At this point, his oldest child was 19; his two youngest were not yet born. Yet, Mee’s status as a father cannot entirely account for his tentative relationship to the avant-garde in the first years of his career.

Mee himself gives a clue to his awkward fit with Off Off Broadway in his 1962 *TDR* article, “Theatres—not THEATRE.” Like many other critics in the early 1960s, Mee declared that Broadway had become a coterie audience of the rich and of tourists; Off Broadway was but an “amateurish reproduction of Broadway . . . neither good theatre nor an elegant night out. Without being dogmatic about it, we wish it would be the former, since it hasn’t the style nor the means to be the latter” (89-90). His solution to the lack of good theatre engendered by such an arrangement was self-imposed fragmentation: “we are coming upon a time when economic necessities will force us to stop appealing to the so-called mass audience and to start appealing to the many minority audiences” (92). However, instead of suggesting that an overhaul of the old order was necessary for artistic reasons, Mee proposed a business model for fiscal success:

Thirty theatres devoted to musical comedies means thirty theatres that do bad business. But hypothetically eight theatres presenting only musical comedies would prosper. What to do with the other theatres? Have some devoted to light comedy, some to straight plays, one to Shakespeare, one to Shaw, one to young American playwrights, one to established American playwrights, one to the European avant-garde, one to the young British writers, etc. (93)

This is not the anarchic manifesto of an avant-gardist, nor is it the idealistic dreamings of theatre-as-social-salvation espoused by many Off Off Broadway groups. Rather, Mee is offering a practical proposal for a theatre world that purposefully attempts to satisfy
every taste. "Young American playwrights" compose but one small segment of this proposal; the avant-garde he calls for is European; Shakespeare and Shaw, those literary stalwarts, each gets his own space. Ellen Stewart, Joe Chaikin, Malina and Beck, or Richard Schechner would not have made the same argument.

In fact, when Mee reminisces about his early years in the theatre community of New York city, his remembrances are not really about the work created.

We had a wonderful time. Suzi was an actress, and I wrote plays for her, and we would hang around with friends of hers from Strasberg’s Actors’ Studio, and we went to the theater all the time . . . . I was an associate editor of the Tulane Drama Review and the editor of Playbill magazine, the theater program. So we always had theater tickets. We went to everything. We saw everything. We despised much. We loved a lot. We spent time backstage. We spent time at Sardi’s and Downey’s. We had tea in the Palm Court at the Plaza Hotel and drinks in the Oak Room and lunch at the Hotel New Weston. We had dinner at P.J. Clarke’s, and we used to play chess and checkers and Go at Elaine’s before Elaine’s became one of the fashionable spots of the New York literati. I wonder where all our money came from. God, we had a wonderful time. We saved not a penny. (Visit to Haldeman 35)

Mee is rhapsodic about the world of which he was a part. However, he is not describing the community he felt at a production of Paradise Now, perhaps, or the experience of chasing Café La MaMa. His rose-colored glasses are aimed at the glamorous, and more mainstream, elements of the period. Although he enjoyed being young, in love, and in New York City, Mee was not taken by the fervency of the Off Off Broadway movement.

Consequently, Mee’s plays written in the period are generally forgettable academic exercises, the work of a young playwright taken with the joys of the stage. Constantinople Smith, which was produced at The Writers’ Stage Company in 1962 and published in New American Plays in 1965, is a self-consciously Pirandelloesque meditation on the nature of performance. Constantinople Smith, a King Ubu grotesque,
is in love with Christina, a naïve beauty. When Reality appears as a character in the first pages of the one-act, Constantinople and Christina realize they are trapped in action dictated by the author. Smith exhorts the audience, a la Waiting for Godot, to “please remember” that he existed. The play ends with Reality quoting Jaques in As You Like It: “Last scene of all in this strange, eventful history is second childishness and mere oblivion.”

Similarly, God Bless Us, Every One, published in TDR in 1965, takes the overtly theatrical form of a shabby and cruel circus performance. The performance rapidly unravels, until trapeze-swinging Sharon, the only kind-hearted character in the piece, commits suicide at the end of act one because, “There’s never anything but bickering, and hurting, and humiliation” (185). The other performers are stunned by her act, and spend the rest of the piece attempting to grapple with what occurred. Act two opens with the Ringmaster saying to the audience, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have been ... ah ... criticized somewhat for not presenting a solution to the problem we bring before you this evening. We have, during the intermission, planned several new tableaux” (187). The “tableaux” are darkly comic (if crudely obvious) meditations on questions of peace, race, gender, and art. The play ends with the cast stepping forward to sing new lyrics to the tune of “God Bless America”:

    God bless us, everyone—we whom we love.
    Stand beside us, and hide us
    From the sky that keeps falling from above.
    From the ringside, to the freak show
    It’s the greatest show, it’s our home—
    God bless us, every one, and Erich Fromm.

26 This date presents a discrepancy with Erin B. Mee’s chronology, which lists the publication of the play as 1964.
God bless us, every one—we’re all alone. (205)

The pessimism about and frustration with America that forms the core of *God Bless Us* resonates with the concerns of other avant-garde playwrights, including Megan Terry, Sam Shepard, and Jack Gelber. Its overtly theatrical form, like the work of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and Mabou Mines is similarly resonant. Yet, *God Bless Us*, though published in *TDR*, was never performed. Although Mee was clearly influenced by the work of such writers and companies, his own version is flatly derivative

Mee’s plays of the 1960s present little of the historical acuity, formal innovation, or dynamic control of his post-1986 plays. So it is not surprising that his early playwriting did not meet with unequivocal success. “One of the reasons I stopped writing plays for twenty five years,” he says, was a 1963 review in the *New York Post* that “mocked” his work.27

In addition to feeling that his playwriting was failing, Mee’s shift away from the theatre was also touched off by his work, beginning in 1961, at American Heritage. Gradually, Mee began to do more editing and writing on “general interest” and less on the field of theatre. Throughout the sixties, Mee wrote short articles for American Heritage (as well as for *The New York Times*). His first two books—*Lorenzo de ’Medici and the Renaissance*, and a “translation” with Edward C. Greenfield of *Dear Prince: The

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27 In the introductory matter to Erin B. Mee’s chronology, Charles Mee is quoted as saying, “And we did a play upstairs at the Ontological at St. Mark’s that was mocked by Jerry Talmer [sic] in the *New York Post*. Not panned, but mocked. And that was devastating to me” (102). I have been unable to yet find the review, in part because the *Post* is an unindexed paper not kept by many libraries. However, other problems are presented by Mee’s recollection. Jerry Tallmer (not Talmer), who founded the OBIE awards in 1956 and coined the phrase “Off Off Broadway,” wrote for the *Village Voice* for most of his career. It is probable that the review to which he refers was written by Tallmer and run in the *Village Voice*, itself a paper unindexed in the 1960s. Further, “upstairs at the Ontological at St. Mark’s” seems to refer to what the chronology lists as a production of *The Gate* in 1963 at Theatre Genesis at St. Mark’s in the Bouerie. See previous footnote; Theatre Genesis did not begin operation until 1964.
Unexpurgated Counsels of N. Machiavelli to Richard Milhous Nixon—were both published in 1969 by the company. By 1971, he was editor-in-chief at American Heritage's Horizon magazine.

From 1971 to 1986, Mee was a prolific author of history books addressed to the general public. These books took up such topics as the Renaissance, summit diplomacy, and American political history. Several of his works in this period, including The Ohio Gang (1980), The End of Order (1980), and The Marshall Plan (1984), were Book of the Month Club or History Book Club selections. Meeting at Potsdam (1975), perhaps his most successful book, became both a Literary Guild selection and a TV movie. Then, after an almost twenty year hiatus, Mee returned to the theatre with his play The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador, published in Wordplays in 1984. In 1986, he moved back into production work, collaborating with Martha Clarke on Vienna: Lusthaus, for which he won an Obie award for Best Play.

It is tempting to separate Mee’s career progression into three neat categories: first theatre, then history, then theatre again. In reality, the path is far more tangled. His work in the theatre did more or less cease in 1965, giving way to a career writing history books until 1986. However, between 1986 and 1993, Mee worked in both fields. During this time, two of his most successful books were published. Playing God: Seven Fateful Moment When Great Men Met to Change the World (1993) garnered him a Booknotes interview; and The Genius of the People (1987) was a National Book Critics Circle nomination for best literary work, general non-fiction. Mee sees his twenty-four years of writing history books as an unplanned, and sometimes unwelcome, turn of events.
So I had a general sense that I wasn’t succeeding in writing for the theatre. And at the same time I had gotten increasingly caught up in anti-Vietnam war activities, which led to political art, which led to political writing, which led to historical writing, and in a way I got caught up in a political argument that I couldn’t extricate myself from. And I spent twenty years writing political history books that were essentially about the behavior of America in the world and how that came home to damage life and politics in America. And I had a family to support. And I didn’t know how to step off that life. I didn’t understand how to honor the obligations I had to support my family, while making a career in the theatre. (E. Mee 102)

Mee seems to say that two profound desires propelled him away from the theatre: to support his family (which eventually grew to four children), and to protest a disintegrating American culture. But this is too tidy a summation. First, though he had a desire to support his family, he had a difficult time in sticking with one. His second marriage, which produced his children Erin and Charles, ended by the mid 1970s. He married Kathleen Tolan in 1983, and had two more children, Sarah and Alice. That marriage, too, would come to an end. He was partnered with Laurie Williams from 1996 to 2001; he has recently become engaged to Michi Barall.

Second, and more importantly, Mee produced a disjointed collection of works in the years from 1960 to 1993, not all of which were “political history.” For example, he wrote Seizure in 1977, which tells the true-life story of a young model rendered helpless by a brain disease. He wrote several articles for Smithsonian magazine and for The New York Times, on a wide variety of topics. He wrote three children’s books about Christian icons. He worked as an editor for Rebus, a Johns Hopkins medical publisher. Even at Horizon, where he became editor-in-chief, he remained restless, “from time to time, taking a leave of absence, or quitting and coming back” (Haldeman 35).
Each time his life approached a kind of order, Mee disrupted it. His time outside of the theatre, not unlike the plays he has written, became a collage, built of irreconcilable fragments of a cobbled-together career. It is informed by shattered and renewed relationships. It is an explosion of events that resists a tidy narrative. This resistance to ordering the messy, confusing, and illogical events of his own life eventually propelled Mee away from “nineteenth-century” narrative constructions that he found perpetuated in his own writing of historical books and essays. In moving away from such narrative assumptions, he moved back towards writing for the theatre.

**Historiography and Theatre**

By the early 1980s, Mee began to question the veracity of historical writing in general, suggesting that “a passionate life of writing history books . . . finally seemed pointless in the pretense that it is possible to speak dispassionately about what life is and how it unfolds” (Nearly 213). Essentially, what Mee came to question was the nature of narrative itself. As a writer often accused of overtly driving forward a political agenda in his histories rather than just “telling it like it is,” Mee moved away from his history books and towards a different way of narrating history—through theatre. Mee has written twenty-five plays that are (1) based on historical events (e.g., *The Constitutional Convention: A Sequel* and *The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador*), (2) adapted from historical texts (*Orestes*, from Euripides’ *Orestes*, and *Time to Burn*, from Gorki’s *The Lower Depths*), or (3) derived from historical material (all of his plays are collaged texts).
So, as a playwright, Mee has not strayed very far from his roots as a historian. Even though he now views his non-theatrical writing as doing something “that I did not want to do so that I could earn enough money to do the things I wanted to do” (Christiansen 2), the rigors of reconstructing the past has fundamentally shaped Mee’s playwriting aesthetic, as he acknowledged in an interview with Scott Cummings: “I look at this material [for his plays] as a historian does, that is, as evidence of the world we live in” (“Love” 20). At the same time, Mee frankly admits that, in writing plays, he is more interested in “the world we live in” than in the world of the historical past. Like Brecht or Büchner, Mee’s usage of historical material and situation is geared toward its political reflection on our world, today. Of course, as Herbert Lindenberger points out in his *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality*, “It has long been a commonplace that historical plays are at least as much a comment on the playwright’s own times as on the periods about which they are ostensibly written” (5).

Mee’s historiographical concerns as a historical playwright are well illustrated in the ways he has represented the resolution of World War I. On this subject, Mee wrote a narrative history (*The End of Order: Versailles 1919*), a play (*The War to End War*), and an essay (in *Playing God: Seven Fateful Moments When Great Men Met to Change the World*); together, these works provide a template for tracing Mee’s perspectives and agendas.28 Taken together, these three works can expose two abiding elements of historiographical concern in Mee’s writings. First, they illustrate a progressive distillation of an historian’s idiosyncratic narrative focus, as Mee moves from book to

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28 Furthermore, an April 2004 production of Mee’s *The War to End War*, as an opera, is planned for the University of California-Irvine.
play. Second, they crystallize Mee’s disillusionment with what he calls “cause and effect” narrative, as he attempts to see beyond the façade of objectivity in order to discover a more effective way of recapitulating knowledge of events in order to generate dialogue and debate. In his works, Mee explodes the belief that a few good men consciously make and break political history. His “history from below” perspective informs his narrative choices in his histories and in his history plays. Because of this perspective, Mee attempts to give voice to those participants in history who did not control the unfolding of events but who bear the brunt of its consequences.

In 1993, Charles Mee published an extended essay on the nature of power entitled *Playing God: Seven Fateful Moments When Great Men Met to Change the World*. The book examines the decision-making processes at seven “summit” meetings throughout history (including Pope Leo the Great’s meeting with Atilla the Hun; Henry VIII’s with Francis I; Woodrow Wilson’s with Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George). In each chapter, Mee focuses on the specific problems that the participants experienced and exemplified. In his prologue to the book, Mee writes, “The sources of the big, repeated mistakes in history are the conceptual pitfalls that undo the best made plans of the most able practitioners. There are many such pitfalls, large and small. This book deals with seven of the most common and upsetting of them all” (14). The categories Mee elucidates include “the difficulty of knowing the facts,” “the illusion of power,” “the inevitability of surprise,” “contingency,” “the false lessons of history,” “the rule of unintended consequences,” and “the fantasy of realism” (15-18). In each case, Mee takes
these momentous occasions of "change" and problematizes them by addressing the actors within the occasions not as inscrutable monoliths but as fallible humans with (sometimes) less-than-altruistic intentions.

The chapter on "the false lessons of history" deals specifically with the 1919 Versailles peace summit. Mee leads into his analysis of the actions of Wilson, Clemenceau, and Lloyd George with this statement:

Even if everyone might agree on what lesson a given historical event teaches, there are probably no true lessons of history, if what is meant by that is a mine of specific lessons to be applied to specific events. Because all historical moments are unique, because history does not repeat itself, the wisdom of history is an elusive quality. (138-139)

Yet, according to Mee, the major players at Versailles were each working from a false conception of the applicability of their past experiences to the incomparable moment of making the peace. Clemenceau, for example, had powerful memories of seeing the Germans take Paris in the Franco-Prussian War, and believed wholeheartedly that the only way to protect France from any such future action was to decimate Germany. Wilson possessed stubborn faith in the democratic "ethos" of the United States, which led him to believe that the democratic principles outlined in his Fourteen Points would indeed make the world a better place. Lloyd George had a habit of compromise born of his lifetime of work in the British Parliament, which led him to approach the peace process as a game of manipulation. Mee suggests that these bedrock beliefs of each man set the stage for a failed conference: "the remembered past contained the wrong lessons, or at least the wrong combination of lessons. In Paris, in 1919, the memories of the past helped to create the nightmare of the future." (139).
In reviewing the book for *The Washington Post* in 1993, Edwin Yoder, Jr. took issue with Mee's thesis, writing:

> at the bottom of the indeterminacy Mee preaches lies the suspicion of power. Mee, like all good liberals, dislikes admitting the role of power in history, especially when exercised by realists and conservatives like Metternich and Castlereagh. To admit that power may at times be exercised to deliberate or humane effect is to concede its constancy and centrality in human affairs. Charles Mee seems to prefer to think that the problems we believe we are controlling are in fact controlling us. He is welcome to his view, but I don't buy it. (X6) 29

Whether or not Mr. Yoder buys it, he identifies a consistent thread in all of Mee's works: power is inconstant, rarely effectively exercised, and dangerous to those who don't have it. Mee's political concerns express a difficult duality in his work—while he is fascinated by sizeable moments of change (as evidenced by his *Playing God*, as well as his other historical works on Versailles, Potsdam, the Marshall Plan, and, in fact, the Renaissance in general), he is also repelled by the top-heavy nature of power. Thus, Mee's body of work illustrates an urge to use the technique and the philosophy of history from below to better comprehend and criticize the activity of the actors at the top.

In an interview with Alisa Solomon reprinted in *Conversations on Art and Performance*, Mee discusses how this perspective influences his theatrical work:

> There still exists the idea that history is created by a few great men. I don't think that all theatre needs to be informed by the new history or deal out of that sensibility, but I do think it should start from the understanding that history is created from the bottom up, not from the top down. (188)

Describing "new historians as Braudel, Le Roy Ladurie, Peter Laslett, Robert Darnton, and Carlo Ginzburg" (189) as his historiographical influences only further places Mee's

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29 Perhaps with the intention of adding insult to injury, Yoder stated: "Historical indeterminacy is all the rage...It was perhaps inevitable that this fashionable view would finally trickle down into the writings of *amateur* historians." [emphasis mine]
history from below perspective. As a field, history from below sometimes exhibits Marxist tendencies, and is often marked by a creative use of sources and evidence, as we can see, for example, in the case of Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Its standpoint on war, for instance, follows the life of the soldier rather than the actions of the general. This has often led critics (and practitioners) to ask, "Where, exactly, is 'below' to be located, and what should be done with history from below once it is written?" (Sharpe 27).

Moreover, many of the historians that pursue history from below also enter into the debate surrounding narrative, that is: "... narrative is no more innocent in historiography than it is in fiction" (Burke 235). In essence, constructing an historical narrative requires that the author make rhetorical choices in the writing of the history and intellectual/intuitive choices in the research on that history—all of which suggests that there can never be an absolutely, definitive historical study of any event.

Because the event is no longer present, and because we only have its traces to work from, the reconstruction of the event hovers between its tangible evidence and the inventive imagination of the historian. Narrative slides between the historical evidence and the historical imagination; thus, approaching history in a "from below" manner will shape not only the topics chosen and the evidence selected, but also the narrative choices and forms used.

For Charles Mee, this relationship between historical perspective and narrative choice is central to historical research and understanding:

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30 See R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* for a further explication of this concept, pages 241-249.
The notion that history should have a narrative derives from the notion of a Newtonian universe where you have a certain set of causes and effects to be discovered. Gertrude Himmelfarb and Jacques Barzun probably think that they will turn out to be rational, ordered, structured. But if you’re dealing with a world where those orders and structures are disintegrating or being purposefully destroyed, then you won’t have an old-fashioned narrative. Indeed, to understand the world of the past you are often better off dispensing with the artifice of narrative and working with the artifices of such new historians as Braudel, Le Roy Ladurie, Peter Laslett, Robert Darnton, and Carlo Ginzburg. (“Theatre of History” 189)

It is impossible, of course, to dispense with narrative altogether. However, the cause-and-effect structure that most narratives use unquestioningly is, for Mee, misleading. History does not happen in an organized fashion, with one event leading directly into the next—so historical narrative misrepresents events when it purports to set history up in just that fashion. More than anything else, it is Mee’s perception of traditional narrative as artifice that has driven him from his history books back to the stage. In the theatre it is acceptable to tell a story non-linearly, with sudden flashbacks or changes in action. In the theatre, it is possible to use the exact same material that grounds a history book but in a manner that eschews the cause-and-effect convention of narrative writing.

As Mee himself points out, his time spent writing history served as a kind of rehearsal for his theatrical work:

The books I’ve written have almost been long preparations for writing plays. The War to End War came out of my having written a book about the Versailles peace conference of 1919. It also comes out of the feeling that I never got it right in the book because that nineteenth-century Newtonian cause-effect construction of narrative is a lie about how history happens. (“Theatre of History” 185)

The “book about the Versailles peace conference” to which Mee is referring is his The End Of Order: Versailles 1919 (published in 1980). In it, Mee sets the stage by
reminding readers of the milieu in which Wilson, Clemenceau, and Lloyd George operated:

these three were only the most conspicuous among the frock-coated Foreign Office men, the generals, motorcycle messengers, aides and gossip columnists, society matrons and modern dancers, Walter Lippman and Sarah Bernhardt, Ho Chi Minh and Lawrence of Arabia, Marcel Proust and the Maharajah of Bikaner, and the crowd of others who converged on Paris to press their cases before the mighty, the influential, the press, and on one another. (xv)

From the preface forward, Mee consistently asserts that the decision-making process in Paris and at Versailles involved more than just world politics and peace-making strategies; it also involved smaller influences from gossip columns and aides’ agendas. In fact, Mee goes on to suggest that, “Ordinarily the happenings and significance of such diplomatic gatherings can be understood by examining each of the positions taken by each of the participants, standing back to watch the give and take, and summing up the outcome” (xv). Not so for the end of World War I, which Mee sees as a time of tremendous breakdown, not only of nation-states but of the fabric of world civilization in general. This was the proverbial last straw, occurring within

a collapse of many of the traditional ideals and usages that had underlain the political order of the nineteenth century. But the war had discredited much of the rhetoric of national pride, honor, and sacrifice, as well as faith in the notions of reason, progress, humanism. Nor did the notions of God, representational art, or Newtonian physics appear to be in such good repair. (xviii)

Thus, Mee’s title and his preface make clear his narrative stance on the peacemaking process following World War I. A broad conception of disintegration and change creates his central thesis and perspective on the evidence he selects.

Mee’s methodology of history from below (and his concurrent distrust of the cause-and-effect narrative form) combined with his disintegration thesis ground both the
form and the content of *The End of Order*. The text is arranged in a series of sections (*Arrivals, The American Offensive, Entr’acte, The French Offensive, Loose Ends, The German Counteroffensive, Epilogue*) that are further divided into discrete sketches. Although loosely arranged by chronology, these sketches serve to offer more a cumulative sense of understanding than a linear one. So, in the *American Offensive* section, which attempts to detail Wilson’s strivings (and those of his entourage) towards the League of Nations, a three-page sketch on Colonel House and his troubled relationship with Wilson is followed by a half-page recounting of Clemenceau’s analysis of ancient Greek literature and his friend’s collection of skulls. The connection between the two vignettes lies in Mee’s perception of barbarism only thinly veiled by the decorum of the diplomats. Yet, this connection is never overtly stated within the narration of the events; though Mee’s thesis is implicit, the material is not laid out in a cause-and-effect manner.

Moreover, rather than telling the story of the Versailles peace conference chronologically, Mee pauses mid-book for a section entitled *Entr’acte.* Mee’s *entr’acte* begins with a recounting of Clemenceau’s near-assassination, and moves into a description of the “smart set” that formed the social background to the political exchanges, including Ruth Draper, Sarah Bernhardt, and Marcel Proust. Mee then describes some of the literary and artistic movements that were active in France at the same time as the peace process was unfolding. The focus is undoubtedly on Dada and

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31 It cannot escape notice that, if the book itself is arranged in brief vignettes or scenes, this hiatus in the linear progression of the story also takes its name from a theatrical convention, the intermission or a mid-play entertainment.

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Surrealism, with the works of Andre Breton, Tristan Tzara, and Robert Desnos forming a series of extended quotations. After a brief digression into the state of affairs in Russia in 1919, Mee moves to a discussion of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logio-Philosophicus*, a wide-ranging and fragmentary work that, according to Mee, asserted:

most of what is truly important cannot be encompassed in logic: ethics, values, idea of beauty, justice, religion, and morality—all these are in a realm beyond models, and philosophers ought to keep their hands off such things, cease to believe that such matters could be reduced to logic—leave them to poetry, satire, irony, music. ‘Whereof one cannot speak,’ the *Tractatus* concludes, ‘thereof one must be silent.’ (132)

Why does Mee include this digression into art and philosophy in a book ostensibly on the Versailles treaty? In some ways, these elements of popular, intellectual, and artistic culture serve to contextualize the event of the peace conference. However, Mee has an agenda more overt than that:

Wittgenstein had nothing to say about the diplomacy of Versailles, but when his methods of analysis are applied to the peace conference, the vision is appalling. The diplomats dealt in a world of wishes, not of what was but of what they wished would be, of questions of justice and of intention, of bitterness and uncertainty, of formulations of hope and resentment that had no correspondence with any facts about the world; and, then too, what facts there were kept changing.

Wittgenstein might have said that no language could have been drafted to correspond rigorously to the facts. “The world,” his first sentence of the *Tractatus* states, “is everything that is the case.” But Wilson spoke as though the League of Nations was the case; and Clemenceau as though French hegemony was the case, and Lloyd George as though the survival of the empire was the case. Strictly speaking, the models of the Dadaists and the Surrealists were more firmly grounded in the real world than the formulations of the diplomats. Wittgenstein would have known at once that the diplomatic formulations were hopelessly meaningless. (133)

Mee envisions the major players in the events at Versailles as all-too-human. Driven by their own fantasies, they lost touch with what could have or should have realistically
been accomplished in the wake of the destruction following World War I. This historical perspective matches Mee's assertions in his *Playing God* on the false lessons that Wilson, Clemenceau, and Lloyd George had learned from history and insisted on misapplying at Versailles. For Mee, it was the artists and the philosophers of the time that fully understood the world and comprehended the ramifications of the seismic events that had transpired. This is not a completely unusual take on the results of World War I, nor is it necessarily the most fruitful perspective. However, it is clearly Mee's point of view, overtly articulated in the midst of his historical narrative.

The narrative of World War I, like any historical event, can be (and has been) told in any number of ways and from any number of political perspectives. Hayden White, in his *The Content of the Form* names this phenomenon "emplotment," and draws rhetorical analogies between theatrical performance and narrative construction:

The production of meaning . . . can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning. (44)

Mee takes White's analysis of the "emplotment" of historical narrative one logical step further, actually translating his own narrative perspective on the Versailles events from a book into a play on the topic, *The War to End War.*

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*The War to End War* is organized in three basic movements; the first two focus on Versailles and Dada. The last creates an imagined game of poker between Oppenheimer, Teller, Fermi (all instrumental in creating the atomic bomb), and John von Neumann (creator of game theory, which heavily influenced mid-twentieth century economics and provided statistical/probability frameworks that the atomic bomb scientists utilized). The final thesis of the play is that, in the words of von Neumann, "One can play or not play, but the game goes on in any case, with new players replacing the old; and it has its own logic on which the players are carried along with ever-increasing stakes. There are no exact parallels since the play
Using events from history as an inspiration or a foundation for a theatrical work is hardly a new activity. From Aeschylus to Marlowe, Shakespeare to Brecht, Büchner to Mann, playwrights of all stripes have created works that address historical figures and events, in varying degrees of “faithfulness” to source material, from literalist docudrama to fictions loosely based on real events. The concerns raised by narrative theorists in historiographical circles are amplified when the storytelling hand of the author becomes more apparent. In essence, “facts” are taken into a “fictive” medium. In his book *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Freddie Rokem echoes Hayden White when he writes:

we must also accept that the historical past can be told in a number of different ways; that the narrative presented by a historian may be based on a specific point of view and on different vested interests; that it is this historian’s individual version of what actually happened. . . . Only when such forms of subjectivity are clarified is it possible to understand that a playwright and, on the basis of his or her script, the directors, sceneographers, and actors are also presenting their specific version of what actually happened or what is significant. In some cases they present an intentional revision or even an allegorization of that past. (8)

Thus, theatrical representations of history are overtly emplotting history, subjectifying and subverting, but always working towards the essence of the events, from the perspective of the author of the historical play.

When Mee translated his narrative thesis in his book *The End of Order* into twenty-four pages in *The War to End War*, he was forced to distill his perspective into the most significant and/or theatrical elements of his original narrative. This process of
selection is one that every historian undergoes as he or she constructs a narrative, but under the heightened constraints of dramatic realization, the choice-making process becomes prominent. Rokem reminds us that “historical realities do not have a beginning, a middle, and an end; therefore, the notion of performing history inevitably confronts the tensions between such narrative principles of selection, on the one hand, and the seemingly chaotic and sometimes unimaginable dimensions of these historical events and their catastrophic characteristics, on the other” (10). Thus, what Mee chooses to maintain within (and what he chooses to discard from) his play tells his audience much about his perspective on the Versailles events.

Act I of *The War to End War* is completely created out of passages from *The End of Order*. Mee samples from his own prose, as well as from the quoted material he selected from the journals, diaries, letters, memoirs, and creative works of his cast of characters. However, the play does not attempt to summarize the Versailles events; rather, it aims to encapsulate the conflicting forces at play and the resultant destruction left by these forces. So, while Mee bases his play on true historical research, *The War to End War* is shaped by his narrative thesis as first articulated in *The End of Order*. For example, Wilson and Clemenceau appear in the play, but Lloyd George is nowhere to be found; rather, his aide, copious note-taker Harold Nicolson, stands in for the British perspective. Lloyd George, widely known to be a womanizer and somewhat less than effectual at the conference, functions as an invisible figurehead in the play, not one with whom anyone deals directly or one who has any direct effect on the negotiations. In making this choice, Mee is directing his audience’s attention (and, potentially, blame)
towards Wilson and Clemenceau, whom he envisions as the two opposing forces, unable to compromise, that drove the peace treaty to its unsatisfactory close.

Mee builds much commentary into the first appearance of both Clemenceau and Wilson. According to the stage directions, “Clemenceau enters, helped in by an African in a burnoose and an Asian in a chef’s hat. Clemenceau wears grey gloves, holds one hand to his heart, where he has been shot, and is bleeding . . . and coughs, his lungs filled with blood” (16). Visually, Mee is condensing the character of Clemenceau into a few key images. Clemenceau, who was known for wearing grey gloves, indoors and out, was called “the grey tiger,” and was caricatured with his ubiquitous gloves covering his claws. In addition, an attempted assassination during the peace process left a bullet lodged in his chest that caused him periodically to cough violently. Surviving this attempt on his life and continuing his work for France, Clemenceau strengthened his diplomatic position following the successful vote for Wilson’s Fourteen Points.

According to Mee in The End of Order, “Having shot Clemenceau, the assassin had wounded Wilson” (101). Accordingly, in The War to End War, bleeding Clemenceau dominates Wilson.

The African and the Asian who accompany Clemenceau are flexible metaphors with multiple purposes within the text. First, while France, Britain, and the United States dominated the conference at Versailles, most other countries in the world had a presence at the conference or sent delegates periodically to lobby for their interests. So, Mee is hoping to remind us of the (generally silenced) needs of non-major powers. At the same

33 Also called the “Oriental” in the text.
time, Britain was not the only country with colonies about the globe—Algeria was a French colony, and France maintained a presence in Morocco (End 10). The colonial powers, seeing it as their province to guide the development of non-Western countries, tended to treat these countries patronizingly. Thus, China’s Shantung province (held by the Germans but taken by the Japanese during the war) was secretly promised to Japan in a joint agreement between Britain, France, and Italy, without China’s permission. The figures of the Asian and the African, then, serve both to remind the audience of the silenced voices in the traditional narrative of World War I and to reflect widespread faith in colonial power.

Wilson’s presence in the play is also commentary. For his entrance, the stage directions suggest, “He wears pince-nez, high starched collar, is sick and weak, has difficulty breathing, is helped in by a dead soldier, who wears white gloves, has a white bandage around his head, perhaps carries a bouquet of flowers” (16). The glasses and the collar are quintessentially Wilsonian: he was seen as stiff and proper by most of his contemporaries. His progressively debilitating series of strokes are indicated by his weak look, and the dead soldier who serves as his familiar throughout the play is a reminder of Wilson’s personal feelings of guilt over entering the war in order to make the peace. As his League of Nations and Fourteen Points began to look less and less likely to affect any real change, Wilson was haunted by a fear that “we sent these boys to die in vain” (23). More telling, perhaps, is Wilson’s first (and only) monologue in the play:

I am the sort of person, I must admit, who likes the same sweater, for instance, the same automobile ride, the same woman. In fact, nothing pleases me more than taking an automobile ride along a familiar route wearing the sweater I wore in my Princeton days. Think of it. You know. Poetry. The same passages from the
same books. Old college songs. The good things, the simple pleasures I suppose. We might all agree. Nothing extravagant. When I take a vacation I go to the same place every time, the lake country in England, and ride my bicycle over the hills. I’m fond of England, Europe generally. Exceptions here and there, of course, who wouldn’t have? But on the whole, you know. And even so, one must admit, sometimes. Of the possibility of the new. 34

Mee chooses to focus his characterization of Wilson on his staid, reticent character and his stubborn reliance on the past for solace. The perspective is the same one laid out in the introductory pages of Mee’s *The End of Order*:

The president . . . looked, and dressed, like a Presbyterian minister, with a three-piece suit, firmly buttoned, silver-rimmed pince-nez. . . . He was not easy or outgoing: he had arrived at the White House after his election to the presidency with coal tar headache tablets and a stomach pump. . . . He loved all things familiar—old southern songs, the Princeton song, such hymns as “The Son of God Goes Forth to War” and “How Firm a Foundation”; he liked to read the same books over and over, to take the same automobile rides repeatedly, to revisit the same vacation spots in the English Lake Country, to wear the same old cape and, quite particularly, an old gray sweater that he had bought on a bicycle trip through Scotland some years before. . . . Once he got hold of something that he liked and that was comfortable, he hated to let go. (4)

Clearly, Mee has an agenda for Wilson, who is, to him, intractable. However, there is a crucial distinction between Mee’s treatment of Wilson in his book and in his play. In the book, it is the voice of the author that describes Wilson; in the play, Wilson describes himself the way Mee, as the author of this history, sees him. Wilson’s voice in the play is

34 Mee, “The War to End War,” *History Plays* 17. Mee is fascinated with Wilson’s “type.” In his *The Trojan Women a Love Story*, Talthybius speaks a similar monologue, built out of the exact same information as Wilson’s in *The War to End War* (History Plays 168). In fact, Mee has a multitude of favorite passages which he reuses throughout his plays. There is no space in this thesis for a complete catalog; but, such a catalog, that traced the origin of all his sampled material, would offer additional insight into Mee’s creative method.
not taken from his own personal quotation, but from an author’s created narrative—built on evidence, surely \(^{35}\)—but nonetheless subjective.

As *The War to End War* continues, it becomes increasingly clear that the parties with the power in the making of the peace are getting nowhere as their conversations digress into anecdotes and avoidances. Mee’s theme of disintegration is also located in the character of Brockdorff-Rantzau, the lead diplomat for the “vanquished,” who speaks not his own, documented words, but rather a selection from Hans Arp’s *Notes from a Dada Diary* (1932):

> People have not yet succeeded in unveiling the world through reason! A great deal in the new doctrine does not fit together like a meander in patent leather shoes who goes walking on the arm of a somnambulist box of sardines through the sooty *hortus deliciarum*, if you see what I mean. Einstein does not want to cover up the asphodel meadows. Einstein’s poems have nothing to do with modern alarm clocks. Before them reason takes its tail between its legs and goes philandering somewhere else. \(^{36}\)

Following this questioning of reason in both content and form, Clemenceau’s African and Asian have the following exchange: “Are they at an impasse then? / And yet life goes on. / You see what’s come of it” (24). The representatives of the voiceless groups in the peacemaking process look at the collapse of reason dispassionately, knowing that, no matter what transpires in the stately, paneled rooms of Paris’ fine hotels, their situations in world politics will change but little.

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\(^{35}\) Mee depended upon the diaries and letters of Shotwell, Seymour, and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as the London *Times*’ coverage of Wilson’s arrival. He also turned to several secondary sources. For a full listing of his sources, see *The End of Order*: 275-76.

\(^{36}\) Mee, “The War to End War,” *History Plays* 24. See also Arp’s *Notes from a Dada Diary* in Robert Motherwell’s *The Dada Painters and Poets* 223-224. The Einstein he refers to is not Albert, but Carl, who edited a Dada magazine. See Motherwell 145. This is disingenuous on Mee’s part, since Albert Einstein figures prominently in the third movement to *The War to End War*, where the atomic bomb is discussed.
Just as the dead soldier is Wilson’s constant companion and the African and Asian are Clemenceau’s, Wittgenstein is partnered with Brockdorff-Rantzau. Wittgenstein had nothing to say about the peace process directly; yet, his philosophical statements served as a striking commentary on what transpired at Versailles. In *The War to End War*, Wittgenstein figures prominently, voicing quotation from others (including Tzara and Nicolson), Mee’s narration, and his own writings. He is one of the few characters in the play that carries over into the second movement of the piece, entitled Dada.37

In his stage direction setting up this section, Mee writes, “the play begins here” (30). Over the next few pages, Mee combines parts of Robert Desnos’ poem “The Voice of Robert Desnos” (1919) and pieces of “Noir Cacadaou,” the Tzara-arranged evening of Dada performance held at the Club Voltaire (1919) to create a counterpoint to the articulate rationalizations of the diplomats in the previous movement. Wittgenstein reappears, as does the dead soldier, the African, and Brockdorff-Rantzau; they are joined by Kurt Schwitters and the Mona Lisa. As the Dada movement progresses, Wittgenstein moons the audience. Then, “A Rube Goldberg contraption of enormous complexity and stupidity slowly descends, deus ex machina fashion, from above. . . . The actors stand amazed. . . . Wittgenstein steps up to it, takes out a cigar. The contraption whirls, cranks, flails, rocks, and finally produces a light for Wittgenstein’s cigar . . . the contraption

37 The role of Wittgenstein was played, in the 1993 original production, by Mee’s then-partner Laurie Williams. See “The War to End War” *TheatreForum* 5 (1994): 47. Mee has a history of creating roles for his lovers, and so it is equally possible that Wittgenstein bridges two movements of the play for the very practical reason that it made the role larger for Williams.
explodes . . . and ascends into the flies. The music ends with clanking, echoing banging against steel walls, hoarse crying out and wailing in the night” (37).

The futility of the “solution” offered to the disorder on the stage lies in the impotence of the machine. For all its magnitude and complexity, it is only capable of lighting a cigar—and it can’t even do that adequately. The machine is similar in many respects to Mee’s perspective on the treaty ultimately signed in Versailles: gigantic, long-awaited, and ultimately useless. In The End of Order, Mee describes how the delegates had worked until the last second putting the treaty together and none had had a chance to read it in its entirety or make any revisions; hence, when the final draft was printed (“440 articles, detailed in some 200 pages, 75,000 words”) many, including Herbert Hoover, Jan Smuts, and Robert Lansing, reacted with disgust and shame at the terms they were about to offer the Germans (End 211). The Fourteen Points were diluted until they were without meaning—and the United States Congress ultimately rejected the treaty altogether. What the Versailles treaty did successfully establish, Mee argues, was rancor in Germany sufficient to pave the way for Hitler to rise to power.

Mee’s perspective on these events is consistently rendered in the book and play, and yet his stance is more potent and sharp-edged in the play than in his more polite book. Mee feels freer to exercise his political/critical sensibilities in the theatre than in his narrative history, where “truth” seems less arbitrary and an objective perspective is more prescribed. In doing so, Mee engages both a critical sense of the failure of the participants at Versailles as well as an artistic realization of those events on the stage. According to Rokem:
What may be seen as specific to the theatre in dealing directly with the historical past is its ability to create an awareness of the complex interaction between the destructiveness and the failures of history, on the one hand, and the efforts to create a viable and meaningful work of art, trying to confront these painful failures, on the other. (3)

It is exactly this sense of interplay between the failures of history and the creation of art that Mee pursues in his playwriting. In fact, Mee consciously abjures a psychological-realistic approach in the writing of his history plays:

What we really mean by history is the historical condition—politics, economics, society, and the interaction of those things, and how they shape individual and collective lives. But most of our theatre excludes that understanding of history, so it actually makes us stupid and ignorant of the conditions under which we live because it focuses on psychological interactions. It sets a frame of discourse in which you cannot have historical perspective, and therefore makes it impossible to arrive at political understanding. In a political play written according to the rules of psychological naturalism, it’s possible for you to achieve political passion, but not political understanding. . . . Once you’ve entered that frame of discourse, there are certain modes of understanding that are excluded. Once you decide that the basic truth about human relationships is psychology, you can no longer understand anything else. . . . You can have all sorts of emotional reactions, but you can’t have a political understanding. (“Theatre of History” 187)

Above all, Mee hopes to discover in his audience this political understanding. To do so, he works with the historian’s materials of source and evidence, and persistently struggles with the restrictions (and liberties) of the narrative form, both in historical writing and in playwriting.

**Full Circle and the Third Way**

Mee’s desire to draw his audience toward a “political understanding” is central to his 1998 play Berlin Circle (revived in 2000 under the title Full Circle). In it, his
aesthetic, political, and philosophical concerns fuse. The introductory material to the
play matter-of-factly reads:

This piece is inspired by The Chalk Circle (Huilan ji) a Chinese zaju play by Li
Qianfu, written in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), which inspired The Chalk
Circle by the German poet Klabund, which inspired Bertolt Brecht’s Caucasian
Chalk Circle, which inspired the Beijing Opera production of Huilan ji by Hu
Zhifeng. (2)

In *Full Circle*, Mee is consciously working within the deep layers of this work’s history.
Although most recognizable to a Western audience in Brecht’s version, the text, as Mee
reminds us, has both a history and a future, in which it has returned (full circle) to China.

Mee’s revision starts with the skeletal outline of Brecht’s plot. The location of
the story has been shifted to Berlin in 1989, just moments before the Wall comes down.
*Full Circle* opens at the Berliner Ensemble, where a play is in progress. Mr. Market and
Ping, a white actor in “oriental” makeup, execute a business deal through a translator.
The deal culminates in Ping’s exclamation, “Thank God! We used to think that
communism would solve all of our problems. Now we see that capitalism will solve all
our problems” (5). The “audience” to this play-within-a-play, including most notably
former East German leader Erich Honecker, object to its apparent revision of Brecht’s
work. The artistic director of the Ensemble is called for: he happens to be Heiner
Müller, the playwright.

From this setup, Mee takes *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* on a ride, upending its
Marxist politics which, to his mind present an idealistic view of social change. The
rampant corruption that was present within communist Germany is exposed, yet, at the
same time, capitalism is not offered as an ideal solution. In this version of Brecht’s play,
the fall of the wall in 1989 leads Honecker and his wife to flee the impending revolution, leaving their baby (named Karl Marx Honecker) behind. Two women step in to take care of the abandoned baby, one wealthy American woman (modeled after Pamela Harriman) and one German student radical (named Dulle Griet). Although Dulle Griet stands aside in the baby-tugging match between the American woman and its real mother, the judge of the event declares the American woman the best parent because

in the olden days the law was that
whoever let go
not wanting to hurt the child
proves her love of her child
and shows she is the true mother.

But what we’ve come to see in our day
is, to be frank, this is a little bit naïve,
a little bit too much wishful thinking
because what we have come to understand
is that people who let go
just get things taken away from them.

We live in a new age now.
And the new rule is
the real mother is the one
who grabs the child and holds on for dear life
who holds on and keeps holding on
who never lets go
until she and she alone has the child in her grip
that is the true mother. (110)

Following this pronouncement, the American woman decides that, since she and Dulle Griet both love the baby, they will raise it together, and Dulle Griet will become her

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38 Dulle Griet (generally translated as “Mad Meg”) is a female firebrand in a 1562 painting of the same name by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In Flemish, “Griet” is a nickname given to any ill-tempered, shrewish woman. The painting shows Griet and a troupe of women preparing to storm the gates of hell. In Foucault’s Madness and Civilization, this image of Dulle Griet is a favorite example of insanity in an age of reason. Mee again takes up the Renaissance concept of madness in his play, A Summer Evening in Des Moines, which centers on a contemporary Ship of Fools.
permanent au pair. In ending his play in this fashion, Mee eradicates all traces of idealism or naïveté from the text. In an interview on *Full Circle*, Mee described his fraught relationship with Brecht: “Here’s this incredibly tough-minded cynical guy, Brecht, and yet his utopian politics were built on a naïve and sentimental view of what it is to be a human being” (Cummings “History Player” 2).

When asked about the play, Robert Woodruff, who directed its 2000 revival, said, “It is tearing down icons that I have held very close. I think that Brecht was the greatest theatrical mind of the first half of the 20th century, and Müller was the greatest in the second half. That covers a lot of ground. There was some difficulty for me in deciding if I wanted to dance on their graves.” Yet, he discovered in the rehearsal process that the play was “more like fun with Bert and Heiner than stabbing them in the back . . . the play seems to be a journey of surrender—of naïveté, idealism, and utopian vision. I think Chuck is more a realist than a fatalist, and as anti-utopian as the play is, I think it still cleaves to some image of a better thing, a greater society beyond capitalism” (Cummings 2).

We get a glimpse of the “better thing” that Mee is seeking when Ursula, unpleasant sister-in-law to Dulle Griet, declaims:

I say, let us pray that we find a third way
neither communism nor capitalism
but a third way
some middle ground
to get rich, like in the West
and to share like in the East
Because this choice that we are being given
this should not be our only choice. (78)
This desire to find the third way, and to move his audience to think socially, recalls Mee’s own political activism during the Vietnam War era. In *A Visit to Haldeman*, Mee disputes Hannah Arendt’s assertion that, in his words, “any politics addressed to the material needs of the people, to filling bellies, is inherently foredoomed to undermine liberty, because, she believed, any politics that is responsive to need will always have need, not liberty, at its core” (165-166). Mee suggests that the Founding Fathers demanded both liberty and justice for all. Each condition, he says, requires the other. There can be no liberty without (social) justice, just as there can be no justice without liberty. This dilemma provokes in Mee a belief in the necessity of a “third way,” in which everyone is clothed and fed, and, at the same time, has full freedom. Democratic socialism is Mee’s modest proposal.

Clearly, this model of democratic socialism does not exist in the United States. Consequently, Mee persistently raises the questions of American democracy and its abuses in his theatrical and non-theatrical writings. Of this concern, Mee has stated: “It has lots to do with power and impotence, with how much we are self made people and how much we depend on the help of others—all these issues that course through politics and have preoccupied me” (Blumenthal 1).

**America and Democracy**

In *A Visit to Haldeman*, as well as in many of his history books—*The Genius of the People, The Marshall Plan, The Ohio Gang* and, to a certain extent, *The End of Order* and *Meeting at Potsdam*—Charles Mee focuses on American democracy and threats
against it from corruption, hubris, ignorance, greed, and a cornucopia of other vices
possessed by those in power. Early in Haldeman, Mee elucidates his distrust of power by
borrowing Karl Popper’s assertion that the history of power politics “is nothing but the
history of international crime and mass murder (including, it is true, some of the attempts
to suppress them). This is the history taught in schools, and some of the greatest
criminals are extolled as its heroes” (15-16). Mee articulates the ways in which power
ran amok in the 1970s, from Nixon’s White House to the jungles and fields of Vietnam.
But, he is more appalled that the American populace watched the events unfold with
detachment, as though the Republic were already dead.

It appeared that the Republic had once been alive and well—not perfect to be
sure, never ideal of course—but alive and well and capable of growth and
improvement. Alexis de Toqueville, touring America in 1831, had reported on a
country that still had slavery and some other, lesser evils, some dislocations of
wealth and power and privilege, some total exclusion of women from the polity,
but a Republic nonetheless, one worth preserving and extending, enriching and
deepening. And then, sometime between the time of Tocqueville and our own
time, it ceased to grow; it stopped . . . it ossified in the form of oligarchy, and
died. Sometime, it seemed, or so the common wisdom went, after the robber
barons, after Tammany Hall, after the Spanish-American War and World War I
and the twenties, even after the Great Depression, after Roosevelt, sometime,
finally, in fact, within my own lifetime. But when? (21)

Mee began to seek the answer in his history books, but he completed the search in his
plays. His “American Century” tetralogy as well as his more recent Summer Evening in
Des Moines bring the issue into the arena of theatrical debate.

In a 1988 interview with Alisa Solomon, Mee explained the shape of his
American tetralogy:

The movement of my four plays goes from War to End War, which includes
historical figures who are fairly representative, to the El Salvador piece [The
Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador], where characters descend from the
ruling class to the upper-middle-class civilians, and then to the next piece, which is the *Constitutional Convention*, to the final piece, *Imperialists at Club Cave Canem*, and by the time you’re there, you’ve gotten to the middle- or lower-middle-class people who are hanging out in the East Village. . . . The people at the end think about daily life but are totally politically and historically unconscious, whereas one can’t say that about Wilson . . . (191)

The tetralogy is an ambitious grouping of plays that attempts to elucidate Mee’s perception of the disintegration of democracy in America. As Robert Brustein wrote in his review of *Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador*, “Mee’s hidden theme is how America became the first country in history to go from barbarism to decadence without ever having encountered civilization” (30). As in his works drawn from ancient Greek texts, Mee’s fascination with “civilization” emerges.

In *The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador*, the second play of the intended grouping, the eponymous murder is of little consequence to the wealthy residents of a fantastic beach house in El Salvador. A prolonged discussion of what is in style and what is out gives a sense of the extent to which the characters are disconnected from all but the most superficial.

LADY AITKEN. Swiss bank accounts are out, as you know, I’m sure.
   Loulou de Waldner is in again.
   Omelettes are out. Too bad.
   But mashed potatoes are in.
STANTON. Ah-ha.
MERIDEE. The Forties are out.
LADY AITKEN. Surfing is out . . . .
MERIDEE. Fucking is out, although you wouldn’t know it, the way people talk about it.
LADY AITKEN. Chintz is out.
MERIDEE. Owning your own island is in, for sure, and I can see why too. . . .
STANTON. Dining in your greenhouse is in.
PETER. Sicily is in.
LADY AITKEN. No, dear, Sicily is out . . . .

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MERIDEE. Caviar is out.
LADY AITKEN. Thoughtfulness is in.
   Lunch under an apple tree is in.
   Politics are out. (58-60)

In this world, politics are so far out that there seems to be no awareness of the revolution that is clearly happening just outside the villa gates. When the silent and obsequious servants come onstage covered in blood, the first question asked of them is a curt, “What is it?” because they interrupt a conversation. Slowly, it dawns on the owners of the house: “It looks as though someone has been murdered.” In fact, an unknown man had been shot and stuffed in their dumbwaiter. When the owners inquire where the body is at present, they discover:

   BUTLER. It’s gone, sir.
   GALLEJAS. Gone?
   BUTLER. Yes, sir.
   GALLEJAS. Gone entirely, you mean.
   MAID. Entirely, sir.
   [Long silence.]
   GALLEJAS. Well, in that case, you may serve dessert. (75-76)

This matter-of-fact unconcern with a human life, albeit one of the natives’ lives, causes Peter and Meridee, the upper-class guests of these ruling-class people, to briefly consider leaving. However, they ultimately remain for dessert, made indolent by the richness of their surroundings.

The third play in Mee’s American tetralogy, *The Constitutional Convention: A Sequel*, picks up with the dangerous disavowal of politics and history Mee perceives in the American upper class. Two men and a woman are seated on Louis XVI chairs, while anachronistic rules of etiquette (“The lady who rides side-saddle may wear green informally”) and other guidelines for living (including quotation from a handbook on
sadomasochistic domination and a primer on dressing from the pages of *Vogue*) are interposed between the conversations these three hold. The man and woman are under the sway of urban myths, believing, for example, that clothes sent out to laundries are rented to poor people until they are dirty enough to actually warrant cleaning. If the conversants have any awareness of history, it is apparent in their confused remembrances from grade-school textbooks:

ARTHUR. I remember the first Thanksgiving—Captain John Smith had gone back to England for help. A boat came over. There was a terrible storm. The ship was wrecked, on the shore of Bermuda. You knew about that.
SUSAN. Sort of local gossip.
ARTHUR. Yes. So, they ate rats, I think.
SUSAN. Rats?
ARTHUR. Norwegian rats.
SUSAN. No, I don't think that could have been the first Thanksgiving . . .
ARTHUR. And then they took to digging up the dead . . . Dug them up and ate them. No other food . . .
SUSAN. No, I don't think that can have been it.
ARTHUR. (With complete indifference). Maybe not. I don't remember. (3-4)

The characters have no sense of the actual political workings of their society, and are equally unaware of the historical background in which they exist. Their minds are filled with half-truths, ridiculous rumors, and glamour magazine highlights. And this situation doesn’t plague the three in the least. The play comes to no resolution, leaving Susan, Arthur, and David hanging in a limbo of their own ignorance and indifference.

*The Imperialists at Club Cave Canem* has a double-entendre in its title. Club Cave Canem was a club for young urban professionals in the East village in the late 1980s. *Cave canem* is also Latin for “beware the dog,” a phrase which, carved in various locations in the late Roman empire, can still be seen in ruins today. The title suggests Mee’s thesis for the play. American society is crumbling, and is doing so because of the
willful ignorance of its citizens. The Yuppies in Cave Canem, who have no idea what the
title of their bar really means, are fiddling as their own Rome burns.

* Cave Canem * is structured as a sequence of three conversations interrupted with
performance art pieces. In each conversation, a couple sits in bed and discusses, or
attempts to discuss, what they imagine are erudite topics. However, most of what they
talk about is self-aggrandizing, pseudo-philosophical, or television-soaked confusion.
The overall effect is one of mockery, says Mel Gussow, of “post-modernist pretension, in
the visual as well as the performing arts” (C.3.1).

Two of the key issues at the center of Mee’s American tetralogy are the collapse
of personal communication and the collapse of political responsibility. Mee declares that
such irresponsibility to the world and to each other cannot leave a person unscathed:

You pay for it in the most intimate recesses of your life that you think you can
keep free and pure. Exploitative and brutal public behavior can’t just be shut off
inside some realm that doesn’t touch people in their personal lives. Private
fantasies shape public events and public events invade and shape our dreams.
(Blumenthal 2.3.1)

His criticisms are made, as Gussow writes, “with all malice intended.” What angers Mee
is not that Americans are cut-off and protected from the world by their wealth (as in
* Investigation *) or are so interested in the petty details of high-class life that they forget
about history and politics (* Constitutional Convention *) or self-obsessed to the exclusion of
reality (* Imperialists *), but rather that, in being all these things, they willingly acquiesce
their rights in a democracy to those with the most power. Once again, as in his Greek
plays, the veneer of “civilization” peels back to expose the filth of real life.
In *A Summer Evening in Des Moines* (2001), Mee presses this perception of a lost America to its most pathetic extreme. "Bewildered and frazzled—but cheerful and expectant," Benny purchases a ticket into an amusement park only to discover that he has entered the false funworld of contemporary America. He encounters other park visitors who are onboard a Ship of Fools. Among the travelers is a ventriloquist with two dummies, a man permanently dressed in a (Mickey?) mouse suit, a transvestite, a family of three, and an assortment of puppets and mannequins that fill the rest of the space onboard. The Fools have been all over the theme park. They have visited Teatimeland, Trigger's Happy Trails, Tuscanyworld, Tom Sawyer's Swap Shop, Hamptonland, and Trader's Paradise, "where one could hedge and arbitrage / send the Thai bhat into freefall / and have some sense of the powers and possibilities / that come from completely unlimited /and irresponsible Wealth" (14). And they are lost. Edgar's dummy, Charlie, suggests that the places they have visited are hollow shells, precisely because they deny the "real" matter of life.

CHARLIE. One is not entirely insensitive, you know,
to the fact that some of these fantasies
deny the brutal forces of the real world
the politics and economics
the sheer muck and filth of life
the seething animal nature of the human species itself
the very things that have made these fantasies possible
the substructure if you will that sustains these dreams—

39 Named Charlie and Mortimer, after Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd. The ventriloquist is named Edgar, probably referring to Edgar Bergen. The name play doesn't end there: Benny (Goodman?) falls in love with Ella (Fitzgerald?). The nuclear family onboard—Morton, Nancy, and Darling—might refer, obliquely, to various people: the Mortons were George and Gracie Allen's neighbors on their show; in 1938, Lucille Ball played Nancy in *The Next Time I Marry*; one of her husband's last names was Morton; in 1956, she was in a film entitled *Forever Darling*. Add to this the fact that the play takes as its settings several all-American locations, like a ball game or a front porch, and it is clear that Mee is stirring up a pot of Americana.

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that these fantasies finally cease to satisfy
because one cannot escape the feeling
that something really immense is missing from the picture,
which is to say the underpinning of human suffering
and power politics.
And once one cannot escape the feeling of the falseness
the fantasy loses its power.

EDGAR. Indeed.
And yet this never happened to you in Hamptonland.

CHARLIE. Well, no, it doesn’t.

EDGAR. Isn’t that odd?

CHARLIE. Well, it may seem odd to you.

EDGAR. Yes, in fact, it does.

CHARLIE. Whereas, to those who were born to it,
it seems quite natural.

EDGAR. I see.

CHARLIE. To one who is accustomed to these sorts of things,
it feels completely comfortable.
Hamptonland, you see, is civilization
And civilization is, by its very nature,
unhinged. (15-16)

Once again, Mee stresses his vision of ordered civilization as a veneer, masking
disordered reality. In the contemporary United States, this is nowhere more apparent
than in such playgrounds for the rich as the Hamptons. Massive wealth is often
accumulated through a kind of savagery, Mee argues; yet the shiny politeness of the
culture that wealth creates is divorced from these roots. That “civility” comes to
encompass both the violent and the refined marks it for Mee as crucially “unhinged.” To
paraphrase Foucault, madness is civilization.

Describing American theatre in the 1960s in his Critical Introduction to
Twentieth-Century American Drama, C.W.E. Bigsby wrote, “For a brief time the
theatrical event and political event genuinely seemed part of a continuum and it was only
logical and natural for people to flow freely between them” (11). This same sentiment is
true of Charles Mee’s playwriting between 1985 and 1998. For a little over a decade, Mee steadily produced exciting works of theatre that engaged his political and historiographical concerns. He experimented with theatrical form and found his particular authorial voice. These works form the most striking and satisfying portion of his oeuvre. But Mee would not long remain in this critical and experimental mode. In 1998, he would forge a partnership that would permanently alter his playwriting style and concerns.
CHAPTER 3
SUCCESS, LOVE, AND NOSTALGIA

Biography: Success and Love (1998 to present)

Recognition as a playwright came slowly to Charles Mee. Between Vienna: Lusthaus, his 1986 Obie-winning turn, and Big Love, his breakout hit at the 2000 Humana Festival, Mee was steadily produced by a series of avant-garde directors. In 1992, for example, Mee’s Orestes had three productions: (1) Robert Woodruff’s at University of California-San Diego, (2) Tina Landau’s for En Garde Arts, and (3) Anne Bogart’s as the inaugural production of her collaboration with Tadashi Suzuki. Despite the cachet conferred by such luminary directors, Mee’s work remained relatively unknown beyond an exclusive part of the theatre community. In 1994, Matthew Wilder, director of Mee’s War to End War, celebrated Mee’s marginal status in an article for TheatreForum:

I get a dirty pleasure out of spreading the gospel of Charles L. Mee, Jr., the strongest living American dramatist. Because Chuck’s dramatic texts fly so low beneath the accepted radar—until now they have only appeared in three issues of Performing Arts Journal—I experienced a peculiar hidden-contraband sensation, the smug pleasure of spreading a dissident’s smudgy manifesto, when I gave out copies of Mee’s Orestes to student apprentices at a regional theatre. I privately urged the students to pass the play to friends and perform it themselves; I envisioned a gathering underground of Meeheads, a grassroots cabal of formal/political theatre radicals united by Xeroxes of poetic-historical
This marginal, below-the-radar status continued through much of the 1990s, but in 1998, Mee forged a unique partnership that completely altered the way he wrote plays. With Richard B. Fisher, and Fisher’s wife, Jeanne Donovan, Mee created what he calls “a playwriting company.” Fisher is a former director at Morgan Stanley; he and his wife have agreed to pay Mee to write plays, functioning, in effect, as his patrons. Under this arrangement, Mee is paid twice yearly to do nothing but write plays. Patronage has released Mee from the need to write history books or edit magazines in order to make a living for himself and his children (as late as 1993 he was the editorial director of the Johns Hopkins Medical Letter). Mee has always been prolific; however, since finding his patrons, he has produced a startling quantity of work, some ten plays and one memoir in less than five years. “It’s wonderful,” Mee says. “I write whatever I want, however much I want, without having to answer to anyone” (Berson “Playwright” G25).

This new freedom, somewhat surprisingly, has not led Mee to write more plays about history and politics. Instead, since 1998, Mee has been writing love stories. Of the plays Mee has produced since garnering patronship, all but one take as their central theme the vagaries of love and marriage. This interest comes, Mee says, from his (now defunct) relationship with Laurie Williams: “So all these thoughts, relationships and strange and beautiful and painful things are from the life we had together. I think she was my first love in life, in spite of my advanced age when I fell in love with her, which was

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40 In 1999, the Fishers donated $15 million to Bard College to build a Performing Arts Center. Mee’s daughter Erin, who is his most frequent director, is a PhD candidate at New York University, and has been a visiting assistant professor of theatre at Bard since 1999. See “Bard College Backs Plans for an Arts Center” in The New York Times (26 Mar 1999) B10.
57. She was certainly my true love. It happened suddenly, in a millisecond. And it ended just as suddenly about six months ago. I think the plays have in them the reasons we found each other and the reasons we broke apart” (Mandell AR3). In fact, Mee’s time with Williams coincides with his period of rising fame following the initiation of the Fisher’s patronage. Williams and Mee were cohabiting by 1996, and their relationship was over by early 2001. During his years with her, Mee wrote Big Love, True Love, and First Love, a trilogy of plays about love, as well as Summertime and Wintertime, a pair of mannered comedies on the same topic. He also wrote Limonade Tous les Jours, a two-hander about a relationship between an older man and a younger woman (Williams herself is significantly younger than Mee).

Mee’s relationship with Laurie Williams served as more than topical inspiration for these plays. Of her role in his playwriting, Mee said:

My whole life is in my plays now. I pour everything into my plays. Laurie’s in the plays. Her dreams are in the plays. I’ve stolen stuff from her. I feel she signed a contract four years and eight days ago [the length of their relationship at the time of the interview]” (McCabe N3).

Mee’s cavalier statement about Williams’ place in his creative process may rankle some observers. Apparently, he sees nothing wrong with the notion that he might “steal” from his lover or that, in partnering with him, she tacitly “signed a contract” in which her dreams and ideas would become his property. Yet perhaps Williams is less a victim of theft and more a willing participant in Mee’s work. Of her role in bobrauschenbergamerica, another play written during his time with Williams, Mee said, “I just wrote what she told me to write” (Wren 58). Whatever her role truly was, Mee’s creative technique of appropriation and collage becomes most troubling as his plays deal
less with political and historical events and more with his own, personal life. Like
Brecht, who wrote that in “literature as in life I do not recognize the concept of private
property,” Mee not only draws freely from textual and musical sources but also from
personal material of the women in his life. 41

Though the relationship with Williams has ended, Mee is still very much a man in
love. In mid 2001, he took up with Michi Barall, a significantly younger woman,
identified on his website as Japanese-Canadian-American. 42 Mee has said that he is
unable even to listen to music as he writes without the music appearing directly in his
play: “I think that other people have a more solid and stable sense of self; I don’t. I pick
up a lot” (de Poyen ‘Things’ 30). Thus it is no surprise that love forms the basis of his
most recent plays. As he draws more from his own life, Mee’s playwriting naturally
takes up the new-found happiness he professes. “My plays often used to be dark, nasty,

41 Questions of more direct influence and borrowing are raised by Mee’s marriage to playwright and actor
Kathleen Tolan (which lasted from 1983 to the mid 1990s). Successful in her own right, Tolan saw her
play, A Weekend Near Madison, staged at the 1983 Humana Festival by Emily Mann. Subsequently, while
bearing Mee two children, Tolan had plays produced at the Public Theatre (Kate’s Diary, 1989) and
published in playscript form by TCG and Samuel French, as well as anthologized. In July 2000, Mee’s
Summertime premiered in San Francisco. In January 2001, Tolan’s The Wax premiered at Playwright’s
Horizon (Shewey 2.6). Summertime takes the form of a Chekhovian estate entrapment combined with the
conventions of a farce and characters expostulating on the topic of love. The Wax was “billed as an
existential farce, it crossbreeds the physical conventions of French farce...with flights of literary discourse
and philosophizing about love, desire and identity.” The similarities between the pieces do not end there.
The first production of The Wax was staged by Brian Kulick, who also staged the first production of Mee’s
Agamemnon, as well as a 2001 production of Mee’s Big Love and a 2002 production of Wintertime (the
bookend piece to Summertime) at ACT in Seattle. In the program to Wintertime, Mee noted that Kulick, his
“longtime friend” turns his work into Shakespeare (Wiecking 92). The striking resonances between
Summertime/Wintertime and The Wax have raised questions about the originality of Mee’s play, especially
in light of his avowed penchant for using the ideas of the women in his life.

42 According to an August 2002 review of Mee’s Wintertime, he is “now engaged to stage actress Michi
Barall.” Wintertime was directed by Les Waters and co-produced by the Long Wharf Theatre and the La
Jolla Playhouse. In the Long Wharf incarnation of the play, Barall took over the role of Ariel from Emily
Donahoe, who originated the role at La Jolla. Aside from that shift, the cast remained largely the same. To
make matters more awkward, the play incorporates text by Laurie Williams.
twisted in tone . . . [but I’ve] been in a very happy mood the past few years, with a warmer more delighted-with-life attitude than I had before. It’s not surprising people find that more appealing” (Berson ‘Playwright’ G25). Mee’s appealing “love” plays have catapulted him into the regional theatre circuit; 2001 and 2002 have seen more productions of Mee plays than those in the previous decade combined.

The love in Mee’s life, combined with the fact that the Fishers’ patronage has afforded him more time to focus solely on his own passions, has altered the feel of his plays. They are, generally speaking, more optimistic in tone. Yet the historiographical and political questions that provoked him in his earlier writings have not entirely disappeared. They have, however, been engulfed by Mee’s fascination with love.

**Love: the Past Impinges on the Present**

Six of Mee’s most recent plays—Big Love, First Love, True Love, Summertime, Wintertime, and Limonade Tous les Jours—take love as their ostensible topic. Each, however, addresses the theme from a distinct perspective and, notably, in a slightly different style. Big Love is drawn from Aeschylus’ The Suppliant Women. In Mee’s remake, the thesis of the play is “love trumps all” (286). First Love compresses the explosive waxing and waning of a romance (between two elderly people) into the time that elapses onstage. True Love combines Euripides’ Hippolytus, Plato’s Symposium, and Racine’s Phaedra to portray a woman falling in love with her fourteen-year-old stepson. In doing so, it questions what actions love can justify. Summertime and Wintertime take an almost-identical cast of characters through a Byzantine, and comic, series of couplings and uncouplings; but whereas Summertime ends with hope for some relationships,
Wintertime leaves most characters out in the cold. Limonade Tous le Jours depicts an older American man falling in love with a younger French woman, as they struggle with the meaning of such a relationship.

As in Mee’s other plays, plot is less central than character. Thus, what the characters declare, argue, debate, and question about the nature of love drives these works. Both Big Love and True Love still use other texts as their basis, but the other four plays are original plots.43 That is, while Mee still uses quotation from other sources within his plays, he has moved away from the spate of works built on Greek or other “classic” texts. This trend continues into bobrauschenbergamerica and A Summer Evening in Des Moines. Moreover, Mee sees what appropriated material he does use as “packed . . . less densely than I used to” (Berson ‘Playwright’ G25).

In garnering the support of the Fishers as his patrons, Mee was freed from writing and editing history as a way to make a living. That freedom, combined with the beginning of his relationship with Laurie Williams, helped Mee make a transition from his concerns with the historical past to a focus on his own personal past. This is not to suggest that Mee has not attempted to combine public and private matters in the previous plays. Without question, his earlier plays are certainly infused with autobiographical elements. But, as Stephen Kern wrote of modernism in The Culture of Time and Space,

43 Although, as Mee told Jonathan Mandell in 2001, First Love did have an impetus in other literature. “Everybody writes a story called First Love,”’ he said. “Turgenev wrote a wonderful novel called First Love and Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet. A literary source for my play, in a way, was Samuel Beckett’s story First Love which I read years ago, or I should say I misread. They were young people who fell in love and I thought it was about two old people.” See Mandell 3. The inspiration is cagily acknowledged within the play itself when Edith spells out her nightly routine and says, “Rest towards southeast. / Estimate star, / weather glimpse. / 10 glimpses through the room (left, right, above). / Remember Beckett.” See First Love 44.
"The shift in attention from the historical past to the personal past was part of a broad effort to shake off the burden of history" (63). For Mee, his years of writing history were a burden; once fully delivered from them by his patronage, he began to focus more exclusively on his own personal history.

Hence, in First Love, Harold expresses many of Mee’s own personal regrets, including his approach to his career.

You know, you go through life.
There were certain things I wanted to do
certain ambitions
some things that had to do with politics and the world
things I thought when I was a boy
what I wanted to be when I grew up
and so I pursued it
worked at it
it preoccupied me
I did it with more or less success
and then it turns out really
all life comes to be about is
I miss my kids
I think, well, I threw away a lot of time on my career
worked nights and weekends
neglected my family and friends
end up all these years later
and I just wonder where my kids are. (9)

Mee’s daughter, Erin, directed the first production of First Love. Of its personal relevance to her father’s life, she said:

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44 Mee’s personal perspective can also be heard in Edith’s voice who, when asked if she knew John Simon, the prickly drama critic for New York magazine, says, “There's a jerk if ever there was one / a real jerk. / I was there when Joe Chaikin tried to throw an ice cream cone at him / in the Theatre de Lys / and missed him and hit some innocent bystander in the face / and then he had to apologize / and that shit Simon got off free. / What a prick. / Opinionated little prick. / Stupid, opinionated little shithook that fucking creep” (10). In his review of the play (the only one he has written of Mee’s work), Simon did not address this diatribe. He did, however, call the piece “inept” and jabbed, “Under the direction of his daughter, named in a resistible imperative Erin B. Mee, the play lurches ahead jarringly as the affair progress and disintegrates with equal predictability” (74).
There are many speeches that I recognize from my father’s life—about my mother, my stepmother, about things I’ve heard my father say in other ways. Some of the dramaturgical research I would do as a director has been done over the course of the last 37 years, and has been done very thoroughly. I haven’t just read about it; I’ve lived it. (Mandell 3.10)

But the burden of history is not completely shaken off in Mee’s movement from the historical past to the personal past. If his recent plays are more tilted towards his personal concerns of love and family than were his works prior to 1998, they still present a critical awareness of the pitfalls of such a focus. Tessa, in *Summertime*, questions this directly:

> You look around the world,
> and you think:
> *should* there be any love in a world like this?
> Or should there only be politics? (63)

Mee cannot settle the paradox. History has become, in his recent plays, personal, but it is by no means escapable. In *First Love*, Harold bridles at Edith’s desire to start fresh:

> you want to start with a tabula rasa
> as though there were no history.
> We are all creatures of our histories!
> We don’t come naked into the world again every day
> born anew.
> I have a past. (17)

Part of Mee’s own past is an insistence on the key role that the Greeks played in his personal development and perception of the world. The Greeks, he argues, were brave in their confrontation of complex issues. In his “Notes Towards a Manifesto,” Mee declared:

> I love the Greeks
> because their plays so often begin with matricide and fratricide,
> with a man murdering his nephews and serving the boys to their father for dinner.
> That is to say, the Greeks take no easy problems,
no little misunderstanding that is going to be resolved before the final commercial break at the top of the hour, no tragedy that will be resolved with good will, acceptance of a childhood hurt, and a little bit of healing. They take deep anguish and hatred and disability and rage and homicidal mania and confusion and aspiration and a longing for the purest beauty and they say: here is not an easy problem; take all this and make a civilization of it. (E. Mee 94-95)

Throughout the grouping of his six “love” plays, Mee’s characters bring up the Greeks and Greek philosophy. However, rather than addressing the “rage and homicidal mania and confusion,” Mee purports to honor, they instead focus on the Greek conception of love. For example, Harold in First Love explains to Edith:

We are ourselves only in our relationships. We are human only in our societies. And this is how it is to be human whether your love is erotic love for another individual person what the Greeks called erotik or it takes the form of friendship which the Greeks called senike or was that heteraike

In any case that’s what the Greeks knew that love is not just an agreeable option love is the glue of human society we can’t life without it. (29-30)

Or, in Summertime, Frank declares:

Because the Greeks thought love is not just a sentiment but is actually the physical principle of the universe itself the very stuff that binds the universe together. And without it the whole world just falls apart. (62)

Or, in True Love, Polly recounts an experience seeing a Greek play.
I remember
when we went to see the Greek play
_The Danaids_45
in the abandoned marble quarry
and I thought:
we are connected to this human life
and to one another
for all eternity. (79)

What has happened to Mee’s hard-nosed Greeks? In his “love” plays, they have become soft, thoroughly focused on the sentimental notion that what the world needs now is love. Mee self-consciously raises this paradox in _Wintertime_. Maria, a woman in love with two men, declares that the Greeks knew nothing of love: “I’ve seen Greek plays, you know. / There’s not a single one that’s a love story . . . . / They’re all about killing your mother and killing your father.” Bob, a plainspoken handyman, has dropped by almost exclusively to deliver this response:

... the thing that starts everything is:
Helen
falls in love with Paris
and he takes her

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45 Mee’s _Big Love_ is based on _The Suppliants_ and the lost plays to follow it, _Egyptians_ and _Danaids_. This intertextual reference to elements of his own oeuvre is prevalent throughout all Mee’s plays, but it is most obvious, I think, in his “love” plays. This is but a small sampling of the whole—the types of Greek love appear in dialogue in _Summertime, Wintertime, True Love_, and _First Love_. Certain imagery or performance pieces recur throughout the six love plays, including boldly colored parasols, bathtubs, sets made of “one hundred trees”, throwing oneself to the ground repeatedly, smashing dishes, hands engulfed in flames, and anger-motivated stripteases. In fact, some images and pieces of text—certain war atrocities (like those mentioned in _Agamemnon, Orestes, Trojan Women_, and _Bacchae_) or phrases (“It’s a nightmare really” is laced throughout _Agamemnon_ and _Orestes_) are threaded throughout many of his plays. Most notable is the text of an interview with the Menendez brothers in which the killing of family members is recounted. This piece appears in several Mee plays, and is generally delivered by a pizza boy named Bob. Most of the time, Bob shows up unannounced with a pizza no one ordered; in _Wintertime_, he appears with a composter no one wants and, rather than speak Menendez’s words, makes shadowy references, suggesting that he has “had some time” to read the classics. He also points out to Jonathan that he cannot ever know that he will not kill someone, saying “Maybe you don’t know what sort of person you are / until you do something / and then you see what sort of person you are.” These internal references as well as repeatedly used material resonate with the work of collage artists in general, and specifically with the work of Ernst and Rauschenberg, mentioned earlier. A thorough study, cataloging Mee’s samplings, could yield much.
to Troy,
and then Helen’s husband,
to get her back,
starts the Trojan war,
and then Agamemnon,
to get the favor of the gods for the war,
has to sacrifice his own daughter,
as a result of which Agamemnon’s wife,
Clytemnestra
kills him,
and their son Orestes
murders Clytemnestra—
all the murders and wreckage and ruin of Greece
comes from a love story. (46-47)

With this monologue, Mee takes the totality of the Greek plays he revised before Big
Love, and posits that each and every one of them, no matter how violent or political they
may have seemed, were, at root, love stories. The cycle of Greek plays he took up told
the stories not of Oedipus and Antigone, but rather those of Agamemnon, Orestes,
Electra, Clytemnestra, and Menelaeus. These stories, he argues, stem from Helen’s ill-
fated love for Paris. Through this argument, Mee’s growing optimism is foregrounded.

A Summer Evening in Des Moines further synthesizes Mee’s burgeoning
sentimentality. Despite the falsity and inequality of the world around them, the
characters in Des Moines mainly struggle with their own individual, human concerns.
They fall in and out of love, and speak of it eloquently. Edgar, a ventriloquist, has a
conversation with his dummy, Mortimer, in which he ties individual love, via Aristotle,
to social love.

EDGAR. Indeed, probably you would say love is even the ultimate escape
and that is the reason for our obsession with it.
MORT. Oh, yup, I probably would.
EDGAR. Although, paradoxically, probably you would say
at the same time this ultimate escape
is necessary for the survival of species
and not just this kind of love that results in procreation
but also love that does not result in bearing children
but in caring for our children
and as far as that goes,
caring for our neighbors and their neighbors,
for society as a whole, really . . .
the mutual love within society as a whole
that we call social love,
that is an essential glue to hold society together
and to allow society to survive,
to allow life itself to continue.

MORT. Yup, well . . . uh . . . no doubt.
EDGAR. So, you would probably say
we come full circle to escape as the ultimate means for the species to
survive
so that in fact love is not just the ultimate escape
but also the ultimate reality . . .
And probably you think:
If Aristotle was right
that human beings are social animals
that we create ourselves in our relationships to others
then, because the theatre
is the art form that deals above all others in human relationships,
then theatre is the art, par excellence,
in which we discover what it is to be human
and what is possible for humans to be . . .
I say, you probably think
that theatre, properly conceived, is not an escape either
but a flight to reality, a rehearsal for life itself
a rehearsal of these human relationships of which the most essential
the relationship that defines most vividly who we are
and that makes our lives possible
is love. (66-67)

In Des Moines, Mee moves from a criticism of the hermetic nature of contemporary
American political participation to the assertion that love, as he writes in Big Love,
“trumps all.” Love, especially social love, makes life possible in the face of injustice,
inequality, cruelty, and all the other social ills. Simply put, love is the basis for
meaningful civilization.
Mee is pulling out all the stops here. The convoluted monologue, expostulating on the necessity and beauty of love, quite literally segues into his own manifesto, in which he argues that theatre is the art “par excellence, / in which we discover what it is to be human.” In this play, Mee has moved from vitriolic criticism of America to downright Pollyannish celebration of the healing powers of love.

“There is love of another person, and there is love of books,” Mee wrote in his memoir *A Nearly Normal Life*. “These are the two great loves of life. Anyone who has ever felt like an outsider knows this” (178). As Mee’s approach to history and the Greeks has become sentimentalized by his plays about love, so too has his vision of America become suffused with affection and nostalgia in *bobrauschenbergamerica*. Although it is true that Mee has taken Rauschenberg’s creative technique as one of the inspirations for his entire career, Mee wrote *bobrauschenbergamerica* (2001) during a time in which he was already moving towards personal concerns in his playwriting. This personal focus is coupled with his nostalgia for an America that no longer exists (if in fact it ever did).

**Pop Nostalgia**

In his memoir *A Nearly Normal Life*, Mee rakes the paint-by-numbers popular culture of the fifties over the coals. Disneyland, Ozzie and Harriet, home economics courses, the grey flannel suit—all of these normalizing forces served to make Mee, disabled by polio, feel like a tremendous outsider. At the same time, Mee celebrates the subversive element of fifties culture. The 1950s saw the emergence of such countercultural icons as James Dean, Bob Rauschenberg, Jack Kerouac, and Allen.

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46 See Appendix B for Mee’s *Notes Towards a Manifesto*, in which much of this monologue is reused.
Ginsberg. More importantly, Mee sees the 1950s as the triumph of the popular over the proper. Mee explains:

No one cared if television critics thought *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best* and *This is Your Life* and *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *Captain Kangaroo* and *Wyatt Earp* and *Gunsmoke* were stupid; we watched them anyway and loved them. No one cared if design critics thought the cars of the era were vulgar excrescenses; we loved them. No one cared if Elvis Presley struck cultural commentators as repellant. And as the old standards of judgment were increasingly thought to be irrelevant to people who wanted to make up their own minds about what resonated with them, pop culture eroded all authority and so, even as it was mindless and stupid, it was also liberating, and helped to pave the way for an open society capable of embracing a multiplicity of values. (*Nearly Normal* 190-191)

Thus, Mee both rejects and celebrates the popular culture of the 1950s that so permeated his sense of self. His complex relationship to America continues. “I think this society’s days are numbered, and that’s ultimately the historical condition of this country,” he said. “But it’s my society, so I feel a little bit nostalgic. This is my family. This is my childhood. It’s going, it’s just going” (Mee ‘Theatre of History’ 193).

Nostalgia for a kinder America is at the core of Mee’s *bobrauschenbergamerica*. Mee effused, “What I love about Robert Rauschenberg is that his work seems so open, so democratic, so optimistic, so inclusive, so vigorous, unafraid, free—so much of what we wish being American to be” (Wren 58). Mee idealizes Rauschenberg’s optimistic and democratic spirit. And so, the glowing wholesomeness of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* or Norman Rockwell’s rosy-cheeked rascals haunt Mee’s *bobrauschenbergamerica*.

*bobrauschenbergamerica* is a play in which Bob Rauschenberg never appears as a character. It is, rather, a world created, via Mee’s imagination, of Rauschenberg’s point of view. It takes the form of fifty-six discreet scenes and sequences, which range from a
long series of chicken jokes (which spring from the prevalence of chickens in Rauschenberg’s creations) to country line dances. It includes monologues about the bomb as well as the creation of a human-sized martini. According to Mee, the play came from looking at recurring images in Rauschenberg’s work—cardboard boxes, astronauts, stuffed animals, roller skates—and letting them resonate for him theatrically. Ultimately, the play is suffused with joy and loss, a paean to an America that no longer exists.

At the Humana Festival in 2001, James Schutte’s scene design for the SITI company production of *bobrauschenbergamerica* consisted of a backdrop of a huge American flag with lightbulbs for stars. Small doors opened within the backdrop so that characters could periodically peep out, drop ping-pong balls, or sing songs. Under certain lighting, though, the flag seemed pale, even ominous; then the lightbulbs would blaze on and suddenly it was garish and comical. The stage was perpetually filled with junk of the sort that Rauschenberg used in his combines, including boxes, toasters, a stuffed deer in a pink tutu.

Actors passed in and out of the space. “Bob’s Mom,” a practical, pie-baking woman who “never had time for art” was always delighted to discuss her son. Assorted love relationships combusted and collapsed. A trucker spoke a poem by Walt Whitman (“I hear the workman singing and the farmer’s wife singing / I hear in the distance the sounds of children and animals early in the day”).\(^47\) Moment to moment was unpredictable, and then, a moment of clarity arrived: Allen (Ginsberg) came onstage, alone, in a space filled with stars and said:

\(^{47}\) from Whitman’s “Salut au Monde”, #74 *Leaves of Grass* (1900).
You think that you can see what’s present . . . but you don’t, you never do . . .
All you can ever see is the past.
Look in the mirror,
you see a person in the mirror who is younger than you are . . .
because the light has to go from you to the mirror
and from the mirror to your eye

So whenever you see yourself,
you see yourself a little earlier.
It’s actually unimportant. It’s nanoseconds.
But the truth is:
all any human being can ever observe is the past. (32)

Suddenly all the playfulness and delirium onstage began to be laden with a longing for a
rapidly disappearing past.

In the play’s most telling moment, a speech is given in honor of the opening of a
gallery show. A curator announces:

You know, that’s how it is to deal with art
because art is made in the freedom of the imagination
with no rules
it’s the only human activity like that
where it can do no one any harm
so it is possible to be completely free
and see what it may be that people think and feel
when they are completely free . . .
and so art lets us practice freedom
and helps us know what it is to be free
and so what it is to be human

often we might think
well, that’s a piece of junk
but that’s how this fellow sees the world
and there’s a certain pleasure in seeing things from his point of view
we are a patient people
no matter what you hear people say
and a tolerant people
and a fearless, open people
that’s how it is for us . . .

I have a dream:
I don’t want a picture to look like what it is,
I want it to look like what it isn’t.

I think if there is any idea I have that I could actually predict
how it would turn out
it obviously wouldn’t be necessary to do it.

I think that’s how it is to be an American. (37-38)

Charles Mee has never been shy of manifestoes or sweeping generalizations. His website has several statements of purpose, the preface to his anthology History Plays echoes those statements, and he has been candid and (sometimes) challenging in his interviews. But this speech, more even than his tribute to live theatre in Summer Evening in Des Moines, sums up his creative ethos at its most idealistic. In essence, Mee argues that making art is the ultimate American act, because it is free, unhindered, and unpredictable. In this play, Mee presents us with a perspective on Rauschenberg’s world as filtered through Mee’s own nostalgia. Rauschenberg, he says, is “a great American sensibility: completely open and nonjudgmental, terrifically egalitarian and democratic, positive in his energy. Without denying the dark stuff of America, he’s what an ideal American might be: happy, outgoing, inclusive, tolerant” (Cummings ‘Love’ 83). This is Mee at his least critical, seduced by his own narrative.

Since garnering patronship from the Fishers, Charles Mee’s playwriting has become at once more sentimental and more popular. These plays have tended to foreground Mee’s personal musings on love and family and, concurrently, background (or even overwrite) his social and political critiques. Wintertime, for example, is little more than a witty and urbane sex farce. Yet, it has received more productions than any other play by Mee. Not surprisingly: by producing it, regional theatres are able to stage
a thoroughly comfortable work by a "new" playwright. This is not a case of a playwright "selling out" to get produced. Rather, the easy comfort of writing with patronage has allowed Mee to indulge his self-reflexivity and nostalgia.

It is ironic that Mee himself named the danger of such comfort in his 1990 speech to the Theatre Communications Group. Asked to discuss the growing wave of NEA cuts and restrictions, Mee said:

In the golden triangle of government subsidy, the favor of rich patrons and the fortunes of the marketplace, we preserve our freedom best by becoming addicted to no single source. (‘When in Trouble, Start More’ 25)

In succumbing to easy single-source support, Mee has become self-focused and lost the breadth of interest that made his earlier plays so richly challenging.
CONCLUSION

SPIRALS

In 1968, at the peak of his career, Robert Rauschenberg created a sixteen-and-a-half-foot-tall lithograph entitled *Autobiography* (Figure 1). The piece, so large it was created on a billboard press, is made of three sheets of paper. Each contains an image of Rauschenberg. The top image is his full body x-ray, almost life-sized, superimposed on his astrological chart. The bottom image is of Rauschenberg in his performance piece, *Pelican*, set in a collage including the New York skyline and a navigational chart of the Gulf of Mexico off Port Arthur, where he was born (Hopps and Spector 569). The central image is a childhood snapshot of Rauschenberg and his parents at the core of a spiral of text cataloging key people and events in his life.

The spiral of words consists mainly of disembodied facts. It begins:


Rauschenberg unfolds his autobiography along a continuous chronological line that circles outward from his birth. And so it goes, in an affectless manner, until
Figure 1. Robert Rauschenberg. *Autobiography*. 1968.
Rauschenberg reaches the period in his life when he began performance work. Suddenly, the text ceases to run from fact to fact and slows to introspection:

I became the lighting man & designer for Merce Cunningham Dance Co. [following are titles to the pieces he designed] Summerspace, Crises, Antic Meet, Winterbranch, Field Dances, Nocturnes, Spring Weather & People, Paired, Suite, Changling, Night Wandering, & Story. Local touring with dance co. was awkward, but beautiful addition to my work. The dances, the dancers, the collaboration, the responsibilities and trust which are essential in cooperative art because the most important & satisfying element in my life worked positively with the privateness and loneliness of painting.48

For Rauschenberg, performance was an essential part of his body of work—so essential, in fact, that references to performances make up almost half of the spiraling textual catalogue (Spector 229). It is telling that in this triptych, Rauschenberg does not include an image of his painted or collaged works as an example of his art. Rather, he locates his family at the center of a coil of text detailing his life, and displays his dance performance in Pelican superimposed over a map of the coast off of Port Arthur. For Rauschenberg, these two elements—his physical birth and the birth of what he found to be the most satisfying of his creative endeavors—form the core of his autobiography.

Charles Mee’s life and works can also be traced as a spiral; however, Mee’s spiral, unlike Rauschenberg’s single chronological one, is a tendrilled galaxy rotating out from the genesis point of polio. Polio, because it left Mee physically and emotionally “broken,” triggered the first tendril: an aesthetic attraction to the fragmented and a repulsion from the artificially whole and perfect. As Mee writes in the preface to his

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History Plays, “My plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns” (i). His characters are not unified, psychological wholes; they are unpredictable, mercurial mixes of philosophy and pop culture. His plays are not the neat product of one mind; they are collages of text and plot from many sources. Collage led Mee to an intense affinity for the works of Max Ernst and Robert Rauschenberg, both of whom used the form to great affect in the plastic arts.

Mee’s post-polio sense of himself as “nearly normal” caused much difficulty in his adult love relationships, as he himself admits. His struggle towards self-acceptance and awareness forms a second tendril in his autobiography. Mee is frank about the failures of his three marriages and his one long-term partnership; many of the difficulties came from his own inability to reach outside of himself. He came to true love late in life, as he says of his recently-ended relationship with Laurie Williams. Thus his recent spate of plays on love—Big Love, True Love, First Love, Summertime, Wintertime, and Limonade Tous les Jours—sit in contrast to his previously more political oeuvre. He has come, in these plays, to focus on the internal, rather than external, landscape of conflict.

Polio also propelled Mee into a third tendril: a life of the mind. First, the philosophy and theatre of the ancient Greeks formed a basis for his intellectual awakening. During his convalescence, Mee, who had read little beyond comic books prior to his illness, read all of Plato: “I loved the dialogue form, the opposing arguments, the turmoil of conflicting ideas and feelings; he [Plato]spoke to my own warring mind and heart” (Nearly 33). Mee continued to read, and continued to be drawn to civil
debate, ultimately becoming a historian, who focused on the issues of democracy and diplomacy. Eventually, he ceased writing history books, but he continued to address himself to political and historical concerns in his tetralogy of America plays (*The War to End War; The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador; The Constitutional Convention: A Sequel; and The Imperialists at Club Cave Canem.*)

Mee also formed a more direct relationship to Greek theatre, building seven of his plays atop ancient Greek plots—including *Agamemnon, The Bacchae, Hippolytus, Orestes, The Suppliant Women, The Trojan Women,* and the fragmentary plays of Sophocles. More importantly, in all of his works, Mee taps the animating spirit of the ancient Greek tragedies. In his manifesto, he writes:

> That is to say, the Greeks take no easy problems, no little misunderstanding that is going to be resolved before the final commercial break at the top of the hour, no tragedy that will be resolved with good will, acceptance of a childhood hurt, and a little bit of healing. (E. Mee 94-95)

Especially in his works pre-1998 (before he was patronized), Mee strove for a similar breadth and depth in his playwriting. He took up questions of democracy, civility, and history in his works, which sprawled and rarely came to tidy conclusions. The scope of ancient Greek theatre is also linked to the fourth tendril of Mee’s spiral: his powerful attraction to dance and physical expression on stage.

Mee’s plays are, without exception, massively physical. Some physicality comes in the form of performance art pieces; some is purely acrobatic. Dances erupt in the middle of monologues. Characters smash dishes, throw saw blades, and make human-
sized martinis on plastic sheeting. Mee finds the root of this physicality in the work of the Greeks:

Unlike Western theatre since Ibsen, which has been essentially a theatre of staged texts, the Greeks employed spectacle, music, and dance or physical movement, into which a text was placed as one of the elements of theatre. The complexity and richness of form reflected a complexity and richness of understanding of human character and human history . . . .

My ambition is to do the same for a new form of theatre, composed of music and movement as well as text like the theatre of the Greeks and of American musical comedy and of Shakespeare and Brecht . . . and of theatre traditions in most of the world forever. (E. Mee 95)

The spectacular physicality of Mee’s plays is, in one sense, derived from his understanding of Greek theatre. But, beyond such inspiration, Mee argues that his boisterous combination of “high” art, like ancient Greek tragedies, with “low” art, like square dances and circus acts and pop songs, is an attempt to find a new theatrical form.

In The New Republic Online, Robert Brustein agreed, declaring that Mee has found a “harmonious union between serious and popular art.” Mee has said that he is drawn to the egalitarian spirit in Rauschenberg’s art; it is this same sense that animates his own desire to revitalize American theatre.

Awareness of Mee’s work is at its peak. He had three productions in a row at the Actors’ Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival—Big Love (2000), bobrauschenbergamerica (2001), and Limonade Tous le Jours (2002). In 2001, Big Love toured to the Long Wharf Theatre, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, The Goodman
Theatre, ACT, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, and the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In 2002, *Wintertime* toured to the Long Wharf and La Jolla Playhouse. Mee has international recognition—*True Love* was first produced in 2001 at the Holland Festival. He is a new member of Anne Bogart’s SITI Company.

From 1986 forward, Mee was regularly produced by such avant-garde directors as Robert Woodruff and Les Waters; however, it is in the last four years that he has become a “name” in the theatre. With this growing recognition comes harsher scrutiny, and the return of a persistent criticism. In both his career as a historian and his career as a playwright, charges of dilettantism and superficiality have plagued Mee’s reputation. Allen G. Weakland, in a 1976 review of Mee’s *The Meeting At Potsdam* entitled “Pop Art History,” complained that Mee had less than a mastery of his subject matter. Citing Warren F. Kimball’s five categories of cold war historiography, he added a sixth specifically for Mee:

> popular synthesis of scholarly writings. . . .Mee’s book is a sort of history as pop art. . . .It isn’t that a little color cannot be used to fan interest in the story. It’s just that this kind of thing represents too accurately the intellectual tone of the book. Anyone desiring to sink his teeth into some good, chewy history had better look elsewhere. (281-282)

Melvin Urofsky employed a similar criticism in his 1988 *Journal of American History* review of Mee’s *Genius of the People*, writing, “[Mee] has written a ‘popular’ account of the Constitutional Convention that is long on anecdote and trivia and short on serious analysis. It is a familiar story, and one that has been told before and told better” (1325). Such statements can be found throughout the review literature on Mee’s history books. His historical works are steadfastly *popular*. That is, Mee never wrote these
books out of a desire for scholarly recognition or evaluation. They were overtly designed for popular consumption. In light of the fact that almost all were Book of the Month Club selections, one was turned in to a TV movie, and several won awards, Mee seems to have succeeded. He is clear about this in a 1981 interview with Robert Dahlin printed in *Publishers Weekly*:

> Despite the books Mee has written, he doesn’t call himself a historian, but a “writer with a strong interest in politics.” He likes to approach history for the lessons it contains: “I think the only reason to write popular history in a republic is to engage in a communication. That’s my motivation, to talk politics with my fellow citizens. It’s not a disinterested pursuit of the truth, which is what I think academic history is, disinterested.” (12)

Mee’s objection to the veneer of disinterestedness or objectivity layered over “academic history” fueled his approach to playwriting between 1986 and 1998. His plays in this period used historical material and events in an attempt to directly engage his “fellow citizens” in a political debate. They represented a channeling of his historiographical concerns into a theatrical form. If Mee’s historianship had been derivative, his historical plays were iconoclastic.

Yet, charges of chatty anecdotality resurface in criticism of Mee’s recent plays. James Hannaham is savage when he writes, “Mee . . . is a garrulous playwright whose introspective monologues ring of encounter groups and whose dialogue smacks of the couch. . . . [Big Love] subject[s] New York to the cheapest middlebrow spectacle this side of *Mamma Mia!*” (67). Rush Rehm raises a similar charge in a less inflammatory manner in his 2002 review of *Big Love*, saying, “As to where Mee chauffeurs those of us familiar with and interested in the Greek original [Aeschylus’ *Danaid* trilogy], I am tempted to
say that he takes us, and Aeschylus, to the cleaners” (112). Ultimately, Rehm argues that Mee has made a satyr play with no tragedy to parody:

*Big Love* has only itself, which makes it resemble escapist theater pure and simple. . . . Given the mood and dramatic context . . . Mee’s irony does not make us think or protest; it simply makes us laugh. . . . If we look deeply into Mee’s *Big Love*, we find our own homegrown megamyth that should be retired—“Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” Erich Segal, meet Charles Mee. (116-117)

In fact, for all Mee’s posturing where the artifice of cause-and-effect historiography is concerned, there are some easy narratives that he swallows whole. The most significant of these is centered on the redemptive nature of love. Both of Mee’s autobiographies conclude with a description of (sexual) love as his salvation. On its final page, *A Nearly Normal Life* offers a glimpse of Mee’s relationship with Laurie Williams:

Laurie and I do some gardening. In the afternoons, we go out to Roberto’s café and drink coffee and tea. We sleep through the night in each other’s arms. We lie in bed in the morning in each other’s arms. We hold each other a lot; we just hold each other. We make love a lot. I hope it lasts forever. Maybe by now I am able to forget myself and think of Laurie, of my children and my friends, set aside my own concerns as no longer the most interesting drama in the world, turn my feelings outward to embrace life. (223)

Written twenty-two years earlier, *A Visit to Haldeman and Other States of Mind* registers a similar epiphany. After a two-page description of his lovemaking with Beatrice, a woman he had long known, Mee writes, “It is a heavy conclusion, this: to imagine how much garbage I have gone through just to arrive at a point of being able—again—to be alive and fresh, confident and spontaneous” (220). The tendency to reduce richly complex issues to aphorisms like *Big Love*’s “love trumps all” is part and parcel of Mee’s own narrative world view.
However, in a review provocatively entitled “Critics Fail Charles Mee,” Jeremy McCarter suggests that Mee has been simultaneously overestimated and underestimated by theatre critics. It is true that Mee’s “love” plays can be disappointing—more than one critic has pointed out, as McCarter has, that the resolution to *Big Love* “snatches banality from the jaws of intrigue.” Mee does play fast and loose with the conventions and original intentions of many of the Greek plays from which he springboards. Some of what he writes is, as *New York*’s John Simon writes, “hollow, kinky.” Yet, in the face of all these legitimate criticisms, what McCarter celebrates about Mee’s work is this: “It is supremely theatrical . . .” Mee is bravely juggling high and low culture, attempting to create a vital theatrical idiom. That he sometimes missteps is a testament to the riskiness, and import, of the experiment. Even if his intellectual work becomes slipshod, Mee’s theatrical imagination remains vibrant. The irony is overt: polio limited Mee’s physicality as it propelled his intellect. Yet Mee’s greatest contribution to contemporary theatre may be the inspiring physicality of his intellectually derivative plays.

The body can both betray and redeem—this is the irreducible truth with which Charles Mee struggles. What the body can belie and disguise is also the final feature of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Autobiography*. The topmost portion is a full x-ray of his body, into which the viewer literally peers. His natal zodiac chart surrounds his body, and the combined image calls to mind Leonardo DaVinci’s *Vitruvian Man* (1492) (Figure 2). By including this image, Rauschenberg seems to assert that, to know the artwork, we need to know the man; to see, in essence, the skeleton beneath the surface. The resonance with Leonardo’s sketch (itself a kind of collage, surrounded as it is with text from Vitruvius’
Figure 2. Leonardo Da Vinci. *Vitruvian Man*, 1492.
De Architectura) underscores the questing, experimental nature of Rauschenberg’s own work. Like Leonardo, Rauschenberg was never satisfied with one medium, one answer, one field of study. Not only did Rauschenberg branch out into performance, but, later in his career, he became a social activist. In 1984, he started the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, which was an ever-changing exhibition of nearly 200 works based on collaborations with artists worldwide to further world peace. In 1990, he founded the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, which is focused on increasing public awareness of issues important to him, including medical research, education, the environment, homelessness, hunger, and global arts. The last words in the spiraling fingerprint of text in Autobiography sum up his humanist aspirations: “creating a responsible man working in the present.”

Of his own writing on humanism and the Renaissance, Charles Mee confessed

Little did they know that these books were all autobiographical and that to me the Renaissance was nothing but the immediate, palpable story of my own life, of my own rebirth, of my own awakening to the richness of life, and that I liked nothing better than to recall it, to touch it again and again, to live through it repeatedly, as misers love to wallow in their gold. (Haldeman 162)

Mee finds his own story in the larger narrative of Renaissance rebirth. The seismic change he underwent subsequent to his bout with polio is repeated throughout his chameleonic career. From playwright to historian to playwright again, from political activist to optimistic lover, Mee reinvents his work and his concerns. Yet always, like Rauschenberg, he asks what it is to create a responsible man working in the present.

Of all the text and images that are repeated and recycled in Mee’s plays, one statement echoes, in various forms, throughout them all—“this is what it is to be human.”
A character can declare "this is how it is to be a man" or "this is what it is to be American" or "this is how it is for them" or, simply, "this is how it is." In the conclusion to *Agamemnon*, Mee's play that fuses his love of history with his love of the Greeks, Hesiod expresses most clearly Mee's vision of reality. It comes down to love:

This is the riddle of time:
the human capacity to achieve remembrance
is the capacity to transform time
into eternity.

Nothing human is forever;
everything perishes;
except the human heart
that has the capacity to remember
and the capacity to say:
never again
or
forever.

And so it is
that our own hearts
and nothing else
are the final arbiters
of what it is
to be human. (41-42)

In a 2002 interview conducted by his daughter, Mee said much the same thing: "I think I write political plays. I don't write issue plays that have an answer to a political or social problem of the day. I write plays that really speak, at a different level of engagement, about what it is to be a human being and what is possible for a human being to be" (89). With such statements and play text, Mee flirts dangerously with a well-meaning sentimentality. Yet, Mee is also admirable in his optimism. Todd London sensed the same thing in 1996:
[Mee]'s clear, though, about his goal: “A broader sense of what it is to be human.” This clarity of purpose running through his life and art gives Mee, I find, a compelling integrity. Of course, integrity is a strange word to use for someone with such disparate selves: civilized thinker and outlaw, 19th-century mechanistic historian and post-World War I radical artiste, healthy man in a hobbled body. Strange, too, for a man so devoted to destruction. (85)

It is apt that Mee has entitled his website, on which he distributes his playtexts, “the (re)making project.” Mee’s aesthetic project is both to create and to destroy, and in doing so, to rebuild. Like his own life, shaped as it was by destruction and reinvention, Mee’s theatre is in a constant state of renewal.
APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY OF FIRST PRODUCTIONS
Another chronology was recently published by Erin B. Mee in “Shattered and Fucked Up and Full of Wreckage: The Words and Works of Charles L. Mee.” *The Drama Review.* 46.3 (2002): 83-104. We differ on various dates and productions; this chronology was developed by close reading of production reviews. In addition, this chronology is more current.


*Salome.* Produced at Needcompany (Brussels) and Theatre de la Ville (Paris).

2002 *Wintertime.* Coproduced by the La Jolla Playhouse (Los Angeles, CA) and the Long Wharf Theatre (New Haven, CT). Dir. Les Waters.  
*Limonade Tous les Jours.* Produced at the Actors’ Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival (Louisville, KY). Dir. Marc Masterson.  
*Summer Evening in Des Moines.* Produced at Boston College (Boston, MA). Dir. Scott T. Cummings.

*True Love* (translated into Dutch). Produced at the Holland Festival (and in rep at The National Theatre of the Netherlands). Dir. Ivo van Hove.  
*bobrauschenbergamerica.* Produced at the Actors’ Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival. Dir. Anne Bogart  
*Big Love* (translated in Malayalam). Produced at the School of Drama in Thrissur, Kerala, India.

2000 *Big Love.* Produced at the Actors’ Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival. Dir. Les Waters. Production toured in 2001 to the Long Wharf Theatre (New Haven, CT); the Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Berkeley, CA); The
Goodman Theatre (Chicago, IL); ACT (Seattle, WA); the Woolly Mammoth Theatre (Washington, DC); and the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.


Summertime. Produced at Magic Theatre (San Francisco, CA). Dir. Kenn Watt

1998 Berlin Circle. Produced at the Steppenwolf Theatre (Chicago, IL). Dir. Tina Landau

1997 Time To Burn. Produced at the Steppenwolf Theatre (Chicago, IL). Dir. Tina Landau

1996 Trojan Women A Love Story. Produced by the American Repertory Theatre and En Garde Arts (site specific, New York, NY). Developed at the University of Washington (Seattle, WA.) Dir. Tina Landau.


1994 Agamemnon. Produced by Actors’ Gang (Los Angeles, CA). Dir. Brian Kulick

1993 The War to End War. Produced by the Sledgehammer Theatre (San Diego, CA). Dir. Matthew Wilder.

The Bacchae. Produced by Mark Taper Forum’ Festival of New Work (Los Angeles, CA). Dir. Brian Kulick.


Orestes. Produced at the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, Japan. Dir. Anne Bogart.

1991 Another Person is a Foreign Country. Produced by En Garde Arts (site specific, New York, NY). Dir. Anne Bogart.


1986 *Vienna: Lusthaus*. Produced at St. Clement's Episcopal Church; transferred to the Joseph Papp Public Theatre. Dir. Martha Clarke. Also performed at the Kennedy Center (Washington, DC).
* Obie Award-winning production

1964 *Player’s Repertoire*. Produced at LaMaMa E.T.C. (New York, NY).


1962 *Three By Mee* [*Constantinople Smith; Anyone! Anyone!;* and *Player’s Repertoire*]. Produced at the Writer’s Stage Company (New York, NY). Dir. Stephen Aaron.

**Dates are unclear on the first productions of the following plays. I have been unable to find reviews to verify production.**

*Constitutional Convention: A Sequel*

*The Gate*

*God Bless Us Everyone*

*The Life of the Party*

*Wedding Night*
APPENDIX B

Charles Mee's “Notes toward a Manifesto”
If Aristotle was right
that human beings are social animals
that we create ourselves in our relationships to others
and if theatre
is the art form that deals above all others in human relationships,
then theatre is the art form, par excellence,
in which we discover what it is to be human
and what it is possible for humans to be. 49

Whatever else it may do,
a play embodies a playwright’s belief about how it is to be alive today,
and what it is to be a human being—
so that what a play is about,
what people say and how things look onstage,
and, even more deeply than that,
how a play is structured,
contain a vision of what it is to have a life on earth.

If things happen suddenly and inexplicably,
it’s because a playwright believes that’s how life is.
If things unfold gradually and logically,
that’s an idea about how the world works.
If the characters are motivated by psychological impulses
that were planted early in a character’s life in her childhood home,
it’s because a playwright believes
that’s what causes people to do the things they do the way they do them.
Or,
if a character is motivated by other things, in addition,
or even primarily motivated by other things—
by the cumulative impact of culture and history,
by politics and economics,
by gender and genetics and rational thought and whim,
informing by books and by the National Enquirer,
given to responses that are tragic and hilarious,
conscious and unconscious, ignorant and informed at the same time—
it’s because the playwright believes

49 This text comes from Mee’s play A Summer Evening in Des Moines, page 66-67. Mee is quoting from his play in his manifesto.
this complex of things is what makes human history happen.

Most of the plays I grew up seeing didn’t feel like my life. They were such well-made things, so nicely crafted, so perfectly functioning in their plots and actions and endings, so clear and clearly understood, so rational in their structures, in their psychological explanation of the causes of things.

And my life hadn’t been like that. When I had polio as a boy, my life changed in an instant and forever. My life was not shaped by Freudian psychology; it was shaped by a virus. And it was no longer well made. It seemed far more complex a project than any of the plays I was seeing.

And so, in my own work, I’ve stepped somewhat outside the traditions of American theatre in which I grew up to find a kind of dramaturgy that feels like my life. And I’ve been inspired a lot by the Greeks. I love the Greeks because their plays so often begin with matricide and fratricide, with a man murdering his nephews and serving the boys to their father for dinner. That is to say, the Greeks take no easy problems, no little misunderstanding that is going to be resolved before the final commercial break at the top of the hour, no tragedy that will be resolved with good will, acceptance of a childhood hurt, and a little bit of healing. They take deep anguish and hatred and disability and rage and homicidal mania and confusion and aspiration and a longing for the purest beauty and they say: here is not an easy problem; take all this and make a civilization of it. And the forms in which they cast their theatre were not simple. Unlike Western theatre since Ibsen, which has been essentially a theatre of staged texts, the Greeks employed spectacle, music, and dance or physical movement, into which a text was placed as one of the elements of theatre.
The complexity and richness of form reflected a complexity and richness of understanding of human character and human history.

The Greeks and Shakespeare and Brecht understood human character within a rich context of history and culture.

This is my model.

In 1906/07, Picasso stumbled upon cubism as a possible form. Immediately, he made three pencil sketches of a man, of a newspaper and a couple of other items on a table, and of Sacre Coeur—
that is, of the three classic subjects of art: portraiture, still life, and landscape.
And he proved, to his satisfaction, therefore, that cubism "worked."

My ambition is to do the same for a new form of theatre, composed of music and movement as well as text like the theatre of the Greeks and of American musical comedy and of Shakespeare and Brecht and of Anne Bogart and Robert Woodruff and of Robert LePage and Simon McBurney and of Sasha Waltz and Jan Lauwers and Alain Platel and of Pina Bausch and Ivo van Hove and of others working in Europe today and of theatre traditions in most of the world forever.
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