



OUTSIDE THE BOX: BOBRAUSCHENBERGAMERICA AT [INSIDE] THE FORD

By M.R. Hunter



Breeze Braunschweig in *bobrauschenbergamerica*

Photo by Jeff Ellingson at jeffphoto.com

What does a man in a chicken suit, a giant bowling pin, a rooster and a kitchen whisk all have in common? Everything and nothing in the LA premiere of Charles Mee's zany collage-montage tribute to the late modern artist, Robert Rauschenberg at [Inside] the Ford.

One of the most forward-thinking

artists of his time, Rauschenberg's work combined ordinary materials and objects with spectacular splashes of color and familiar images to create pieces that were not entirely art and not entirely sculpture, but something in the space between. Predating the Pop Art movement, Rauschenberg's "outside-the-box" method inspired the likes of Pollock, Joseph Cornell, and Oldenburg with his break from the traditional, fixed space of the canvas. Art then, literally became for Rauschenberg something outside of itself, a thing discoverable in the everyday and a hodgepodge of the seemingly contradictory connected in tandem and unity.

Inspired by Rauschenberg, Mee conceives a play not bound by conventional Aristotelian unities, but channels the absurdist and radical approach of the artist's



Photo by Debi Landrie
Maria Tomas and Danny Parker-Lopes in *bobrauschenbergamerica*

innovative spirit. Like a gallery of Rauschenberg collages brought to life, the action is both startling and disjointed, it confronts and challenges the very idea of art and performance itself, yet is cohesive enough to be visually entertaining. Bart DeLorenzo polishes what might otherwise come across as amateur and raw into

a provocative performance that if nothing else is definitely *unlike* anything else.

The only discernable thread keeping the wildly assorted vignettes from spinning completely out of control are the recollections of Rauschenberg's early childhood, as told by his Mom (Mari Marks). Projected on a backdrop behind her are black and white photos of what is otherwise an ordinary, almost painfully average little boy whose humble beginnings hardly indicated the great influence in art he would one day become. As if these family photos were not convincing enough, Bob's Mom ends each shared memory with the repeated refrain, "Art was not a part of our lives." Whatever it was that taught Rauschenberg to see the world through his distorted kaleidoscope lenses is a wonder and will remain a mystery much like his vividly odd collages.

All the rest is simply off-the-wall non-sequiturs featuring some amusing anecdotes on relationships, acceptance, and love—if one is intent on ferreting out a theme here. It is better not to try to interpret or judge the merits of each scene, but rather to sit back and let the scenes roll on by like a passenger on a journey through a strange landscape or lucid dream. Eventually, nonsense becomes perfect sense in this wonderland filled with delightful, whimsical characters.

Where else can one find a Roller Girl (Breeze Braunschweig) gliding by on retro-styled skates, while a man dressed in a chicken suit crosses the stage? Then there is the shaken, not stirred body writhing martini bath or the random attack on a metal trashcan with a baseball bat. A pizza delivery boy (John Charles Meyer) recounts his homicidal past with casual indifference while Phil, the Trucker



Jennifer Etienne Eckert and Eric Bunton in *bobrauschenbergamerica*

Photo by Debi Landrie

(Danny Parker-Lopes) delivers his own brand of torture with a series of chicken jokes—actually, the one about the egg is pretty funny. While these particular characters and scenes do not directly relate to Rauschenberg himself, they do capture the essence of his work.

Music numbers liven up the uneasy transitions with line dances and hoe downs choreographed by Ken Roht. Marina Mouhibian's set design utilizes the open wings on of the proscenium, filling it with splattered canvases and bric-a-brac in keeping with Rauschenberg's technique. A bicycle and a High Flyer cart hang from the catwalks and the otherwise minimalist space finds room for a ten-foot high stack of cardboard boxes.

Bob Rauschenberg would probably reject the idea of anyone trying to review this play. His vision defies interpretation, went against the grain of it, and like him this production by TheSpyAnts Theatre Company shouldn't be read by proxy, but seen without any expectations. In the nonsensical yet cogent world of Rauschenberg, the best review for this show would be to tell a chicken joke and end with that.

Q: Why did the chicken cross the playground?

A: To get to the other slide.

Fin

"bobrauschenbergamerica"

Runs through Feb 28

Thurs, Fri, Sat at 8pm

Sundays at 3pm & 7pm

[Inside] the Ford

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