

# LA STAGE

EMPOWERING ARTISTS AND ENGAGING AUDIENCES SINCE 1975



## TheSpyAnts Create a Colorful Canvas

by [Janet Thielke](#)

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*bobrauschenbergamerica*, produced by TheSpyAnts, continues Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 3 and 7 pm; through Feb. 28. Tickets: \$12-\$20. [Inside] the Ford, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood. Free on-site, non-stacked parking. For reservations and information, call the box office at 323.461.3673 (323.GO1.FORD) or FordTheatres.org.

Visual artist Robert Rauschenberg said, “A painting is more like the real world if it is made out of the real world.” With that as his mantra, Rauschenberg went on to create “Combines,” provocative collages created out of nontraditional materials. His work would mix traditional art with “found” objects, from tennis balls and stuffed goats, in effect gathering art from the everyday. Not only does Charles L. Mee’s play *bobrauschenbergamerica*, performed by TheSpyAnts, reflect the idea of creative collecting but the company itself can be said to have been gathered together, starting as little more than a group of friends reading plays and evolving into the theatrical juggernaut they are today.



### Danny Parker-Lopes

Remembers Danny Parker-Lopes, a founding member and on the board of directors since the group’s inception, “Three or four of us started reading plays on a Tuesday night. More people started showing up and by the time we got to 10 or 11 people we came up with the idea of actually doing the play as opposed to just reading them.”

The Tuesday night reading group evolved into a production of one-act plays, eventually progressing onto full lengths and an established company. “We’ve done around 23 productions and this June will be our 10<sup>th</sup>

anniversary,” says Eric Bunton, another founding member. He is very aware that, in this town, merely surviving is no small feat. “A lot of companies come and go so fast. It’s been tough to stay in town that long and every one of the founding members is still in the company or still involved in some way. We’re pretty proud of that.”

More than just surviving, TheSpyAnts continue to thrive. In their evolution as a company, they have gone from producing traditional pieces to more experimental theatre, making it their goal to always offer theatergoers a unique experience. “We used to want to say we’re edgy,” says Parker-Lopes. “I would say we’re best at ‘just on the other side of reality.’ Surreal or a little over the top, something more than just the kitchen sink drama.”



### **Eric Bunton**

Bunton agrees but maintains the move towards more experimental, less linear theatre is in part to create audience dialogue. “We’re just trying to find new eclectic pieces that make a statement, whether it’s political or entertaining, and make people walk out and say, ‘What was that?’” He adds hopefully their response will be positive but, regardless, the important thing is to get people talking. “Either they love it or they hate it, so long as they have a strong opinion walking out.”

*bobrauschenbergamerica* is set up to create just such a dialogue. With this unusual piece, the company has reached yet another level of achievement in their 10 year history. For everyone involved, the show’s opening also marks the triumph to a long labor of love. “Our producer, Lorie Evans Taylor, who joined us in 2002, found this play about four or five years ago and it’s just been one of her dreams,” says Bunton. “We’ve applied for it every year and every year they weren’t allowing smaller companies to have the rights to it. But for some reason just this year they decided to let it out.”

Perhaps that reason had something to do with Parker-Lopes’ proactive initiatives to get the rights. “I actually wrote Chuck Mee on a whim. With the electronic age you can contact just about anybody. And he responded to me, ‘Yeah, the rights have just freed up so you can do it.’”

Talk about a classic case of persistence pays off. But what was it about this play that had haunted the company for so many years? Here, both Parker-Lopes and Bunton have trouble vocalizing what about the play hooked the company’s imagination. “We all loved it but I’m not sure what it is,” said Parker-Lopes. “We’ve never done any Chuck Mee plays before but for some reason we really latched onto this play.”

Bunton agrees. “When I first read it, I had no clue what I had just read, but! -” He adds, with a big emphasis on the “comma, but! But I really loved it. And so I read it again and

read it a couple times and was like ok, I'm getting it, I'm getting it...still didn't quite get it," he laughs. "But now that we're up on our feet and I'm seeing it in the theatre and I'm seeing all these non-verbal things and now I understand how a bouncing ping-pong ball relates to this couple fighting and breaking up. And it's just all these interesting, bizarre, funny things you wouldn't expect to happen but if you watch it carefully you can see how they relate to the relationships in the play."

The non-verbal images are also a key element of the play for Parker-Lopes. "From the beginning there's a girl on roller skates with a red umbrella. That image itself is enough to take us through."



### **Bunton and Jennifer Etienne Eckhart**

So what kinds of non-linear touches can the audience expect? Anything and everything. "There's a couple dances, there's a song, a couple projections," lists Bunton. "But there's also just activities going on. There's ironing. There's bouncing a ping-pong ball. There's swimming around half-naked in a giant martini. There are these moments that can be really linked to the relationships and the characters and the journeys they're going through. As much as it's a non-linear play, it still has moments that move along the characters' linear paths."

The idea is to make the stage a canvas and the actors a living "combine," thus reflecting the original Rauschenberg art. "The play absolutely reflects his art, which is about contrasts," says Parker-Lopes. "Like something we consider beautiful with something that's just a found object. (Rauschenberg) took someone else's trash and made it art. Every scene kind of reflects that."

In order to really reflect the different facets of Rauschenberg's work, Director Bart DeLorenzo made the rehearsal process extremely collaborative. Says Bunton, "Bart just brought us in and said, 'Let's look at this section; let's see what it is.' Everyone would get up on their feet and start walking around. It was not a normal rehearsal process where

you go in and work on a scene and work on the next scene and the next scene. He'd have us keep doing things and when he saw what he liked he'd say 'Ok, that was good, we're keeping that. Keep trying, keep working, keep moving around.' He just tried to keep his opinions open and wanted to see what we could bring to the table. He gave us the opportunity to create what we wanted."



### **Maria Tomas and Parker-Lopes**

Cast members were also encouraged to bring in their own “found objects” and imagine different activities to incorporate into the show. “We’d bring in objects we found, objects from the street or just objects that meant something to us,” says Parker-Lopes. “And most of them are on the set. People won’t know what pieces are ours and what pieces were designed as part of the set. It’s as collaborative as it can get.”

What each ensemble or theatre company can bring to the table is part of what makes the play unique. “I don’t know how any other company would do it the same,” says Bunton. “You’re told a certain dance must happen now but that’s your whole direction for the scene. This is one of these kinds of things where I’ve heard other actors talk about how they had the opportunity to bring so much to the table, the opportunity to throw anything and everything on the table. It just gives you the opportunity to do things you’d never have the chance to do and have always wanted to do.”

Well, not quite everything Bunton wanted to do: “I did want to get a cheerleading sequence in there,” he laughs. “But I wasn’t able to do that.”

Still, both Bunton and Parker-Lopes insist the activities are there to contribute to the storyline; underneath the colorful imagery and imaginative staging there are relationships and themes being explored. “There are a couple of relationships in the play,” says Bunton. “And they’re struggling with the same things: What is love? When do you love somebody and can you ever be in love with somebody?”

Using story, characters and relationships, the play recreates the visual art through a theatrical medium. Parker-Lopes hopes audience members are reminded of Rauschenberg’s art but even if they are not familiar with his art he thinks they will enjoy the play as its own colorful canvas. “I hope it makes you think. And reminds you that one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

For Bunton, *bobrauschenbergamerica* fulfills the company’s mission to inspire conversation. “I kind of hope when audiences walk out the first thing they say is, ‘What was that? It was amazing, fantastic, but what was it?’ And then as they start to think further and further about it, and talk about it with their friends, they start to realize that there was actually these relationships and love and pain and agony but yet there’s such a fun, exhilarating point of view they just want everyone to know about it.”

**Article by Janet Thielke**

**Feature image of Breeze Braunschweig by Jeff Ellison. Story images by Jeff Ellison and Debi Landrie**