



GO BOBRAUCHENBERGAMERICA

When Bob Rauschenberg's mother (Mari Marks) delivers her tender slide-show about the rural Texas childhood of her artist son, and none of the slides matches the descriptions she's offered, you have to know something's up, conceptually. Whether or not you're familiar with the '50s-'60s collagist painter-sculptor, Charles L. Mee's 2001 extrapolation of what Rauschenberg might have written in order to explain how he assembled junk into evocative reflections on our place in the world stands alone. Marina Mouhibian's set decorates the stage and the proscenium walls with vintage kitsch as the 10-member ensemble plays out a series of somewhat interconnecting sketches about romances gone awry, violence, politics and metaphysics - though there are digressions for a series of chicken jokes. Bart DeLorenzo's staging preserves the tone, inherent the text, that's both wry and frivolous, abstract and pop, with one breakout poetical excursion into Walt Whitmanesque grandeur, delivered by a hobo (Brett Hren) and accompanied by Dvorak's Symphony from The New World. [Inside] the Ford, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. E., L.A.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; thru Feb. 28. (323) 461-3673. SpyAnts Theatre Company. (Steven Leigh Morris)

LA WEEKLY FREE

ARTISTS IN AMERICA? HUH?

Bobrauschenbergamerica

By **STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS**

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PHOTO BY DEBI LANDRIE

"Art was not a part of our lives," says Robert Rauschenberg's aproned Texan mother (Mari Marks) in Charles L. Mee's *Bobrauschenbergamerica*. It's a line repeated, like an anthem, in Mee's 2001 play, which opened in a SpyAnts Theatre Company production last weekend at [Inside] the Ford. Mee is attempting to create a performance piece in the way that his subject — the late artist — might have imagined the story of his work.

The play's beauty lies in how its form replicates the very shifts of perception Rauschenberg was aiming for in his sculpted collages of found junk. In the '50s, abstract expressionism was yielding to pop art, and there are elements of both in Mee's play, fully supported by Bart DeLorenzo's sometimes goofy, sometimes wry and occasionally earnest staging.

A series of short scenes more or less crash into each other, which is exactly the feeling you get from viewing a Rauschenberg collage. Some of the scenes contain words, some don't. Some ensnare the essences of gender divides, one dramatizes the murderous mentality of a pizza delivery boy (John Charles Meyer). In one scene, a guy bashes a trash can with a baseball bat. From the top of a stepladder, scientist Allen (Eric Bunton) ruminates on the beauty of the landscape and his grim work at Los Alamos. In another scene, he ponders the relationship between time and space, how we misunderstand what we see because our senses can't capture the multiplicity of physical dimensions beyond our grasp. And that's really what Rauschenberg's collages are trying to get at.

On Marina Mouhibian's set of sculpted vintage kitsch — some of it attached to the proscenium wall — a girl (played by the aptly named Breeze Braunschweig) on skates and wearing short shorts breezes by. A young woman named Susan (Jennifer Etienne Eckert) falls in lust with a hobo named Becker (Brett Hren) — befuddling her blue-suited boyfriend from Chicago (Adam Dornbusch). She just as quickly falls out

of lust with Becker, describing her passion as a "summer storm." The smallest of insights between these two are what I found most affecting: "And then it was over," Susan explains.

Retorts Becker, "Maybe it wasn't over for me."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think you can just drop someone like that and just say 'I'm sorry.' "

"I didn't just say 'I'm sorry.' I am sorry. "

"This is why some people call women fickle."

"I don't think it has anything to do with being fickle... Women feel what they feel when they feel it, and then when they don't feel it anymore, they don't feel it. Unlike a man, who won't know what he feels when he feels it, and then later on he'll realize how he felt and so he'll talk himself into feeling it again when he doesn't feel it because he thinks he should be consistent about the positions he takes and stick to them . . . so a man always thinks he feels things he doesn't feel, and so he never really knows how he feels at all."

Hren's Becker has the best and worst moments in this production. His enactment of a movie he envisages is interminable, yet near play's end, he recites a Whitmanesque ode, a celebration of America's agonies and beauties, gently accompanied by Dvorák's Symphony *From the New World*, which sends the event spiraling into one of those dimensions that scientist Allen insists we're incapable of grasping. In this way, director DeLorenzo underscores Mee's kaleidoscope of words, characters and actions, a kaleidoscope that defies the logic of a traditional drama by exposing multiple dimensions in tones both ethereal and pop, not unlike a Rauschenberg sculpture.

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2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hlywd. | Through Feb. 28 | (323) 461-3673