



Charles L. Mee

If playwright Charles L. Mee could have his way, he would spend part of every day at a museum. His mornings would be dedicated to writing and his afternoons devoted to viewing sculptures, installations, paintings and collages. “Painters are my dramaturgs,” he explains. “I’ve seen and read a whole bunch of plays, but I think I’ve learned at least as much from visual artists about how to compose an experience.”

One artist in particular has served as Mee’s über-dramaturg: Max Ernst, the German collagist of the early twentieth century who was immensely influential for his contemporaries. “Ernst took clippings out of newspapers and magazines left in cafés where he had a cup of coffee,” Mee says. “He took the stuff of the real world, unedited, unaltered by his own imagination, appropriated from daily life and then, simply in the way he brought it together in his compositions, he transformed it into stuff of hallucination.”

Collage technique—or “remaking,” as he calls it—is the basis of Mee’s aesthetic. A finished Mee play is probably half original text that he has written himself, and half appropriated text: scraps taken from classic plays, *National Enquirer* articles, internet ads and more. He places these varied fragments together in the same play, sometimes next to each other in the same scene. In *Big Love* (which premiered in the 2000 Humana Festival), Mee re-makes Aeschylus’ *The Suppliant Women*. Using the Aeschylus play as a scaffold, Mee has built a piece in which characters not only speak his own words, but also expound from a fiery 1960s feminist manifesto, sing a George Gershwin love medley, and recite poetic lists from a medieval Japanese pillow book. His use of collage turns this Greek tragedy into an examination of contemporary gender politics. To Mee, the appropriated text fragments are “historical documents—evidence of who and how we are and what we do.” By juxtaposing them, he demonstrates the layering of history, how cultural movements of the past inform the culture of today, making his characters “people through whom culture speaks.” Mee extends this philosophy of remaking to how his work is offered to the world, placing his plays on his website www.charlesmee.org and inviting the public to “pillage” his texts at will.

An interest in history and its connection to contemporary culture has long played a central role in Mee’s life. Before he was a professional playwright, he worked as a political activist and historian, participating in anti-war protests and organizing a presidential impeachment movement during the Vietnam War. As a twentieth-century historian, Mee authored twelve books, including *Meeting at Potsdam*, which received great acclaim for the way it brought history to life. Ultimately, however, Mee found writing history books unsatisfying. “The basic assumption of history is that you are going to be able to formulate detached statements about events that really make you want to scream and cry out and weep,” Mee explains. “Theatre is the place where I can write about the world and not pretend that my view is dispassionate.”

He has certainly found his voice in the theatre. Mee’s body of work includes romances, tragedies, comedies and dance theatre pieces—all part of a career that spans a little more than twenty years and features over thirty plays that have been produced at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, American Repertory Theatre and other major regional American companies, as well as at illustrious theatres and festivals abroad.

In the end, Mee’s writing springs from his understanding of culture and history as the ultimate collages. “I write out of the belief that we are creatures of our history and culture and gender and politics,” he reflects. “That our beings and actions arise from that complex of influences and forces and motivations, that our lives are more rich and complex than can be reduced to a single source of human motivation.”

—Rachel Lerner-Ley