

Theatre at UBC Presents a companion guide to:

big love

by Charles L. Mee





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JANUARY 24 to FEBRUARY 3, 2007
TELUS STUDIO THEATRE

Directed by **JOANNA GARFINKEL**

Scenography by **RONALD FEDORUK**

Costume Design by **JAY HAVENS**

Composition & Sound Design by **PATRICK PENNEFATHER**



Notes toward a Manifesto 2002

Charles L. Mee

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.

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 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,
informed 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
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 explanations 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.

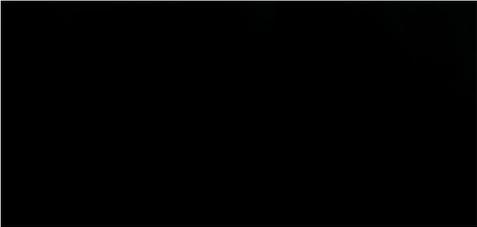
And I've been inspired a lot by the Greeks.
I love the Greeks
because their plays so often begin with matricide and fratricide,
with a man murdering his nephews and serving the boys to their father for
dinner. That is to say, the Greeks take no easy problems,
no little misunderstanding that is going 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 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 Le Page 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.



Severing the writer's unseen hand

Alex Lazaridis
Ferguson, Editor

CHARLES MEE'S PLAYS ARE COLLAGES of other people's writing filled out with his own interpolations. He likens his method to Max Ernst's constructions of visual collages: "in effect [Ernst] took the unedited material of the real world and rendered it as hallucination. And that's what I think I'm doing all the time. I think Max Ernst is my dramaturg." Because Mee has borrowed freely, he allows others to rummage his plays for material and, as long as his scripts aren't used in their entirety, royalties are not required for the service. Says Mee: "Eventually we all die and we lose control over our work. If the stuff you left is worth anything at all, then people will take it and mess with it. If you're lucky, that's what will happen after you die: people will do your plays, but they'll do them however the fuck they want." I find Mee's attitude liberating. But, as a playwright, I also find his notion of uncertain authorship unsettling.

In 1999 my play *War of the Worlds* (a meditation on time and identity loosely connected to the famous 1938 radio broadcast) was premiered by Vancouver's Rumble Productions. I had attempted to construct a complex dialectic that pit person against persona, past against future, women against history, and poverty against fame. It wasn't quite what director Norman Armour was expecting. The ensuing production was a big disappointment to me. Through the run Norman and I argued intensely, even in front of the patrons. In conversation one night, a close friend put a stop to my ranting with the following admonishment: "Norman should tell you to fuck off. You're not the author anymore—he is." I took his point, but redirected it: "Therefore," I thought, "in order to fulfill my vision as a writer, I must become a director." I was soon given the opportunity, but the shows I directed (by other writers) stubbornly resisted the aesthetic I tried to impose on them. Then, two years ago, I had a chance to maximize authorial control: I was commissioned by Studio 58 to write an adaptation of Euripides's *Trojan Women*; I would also get to direct the show under the title *City of Love*.

Several colleagues told me to check out Charles Mee's treatments of the Greeks. I was amazed that he would allow his scripts

to be freely pillaged. But, not wanting my authorship put in doubt, I didn't use any of his text. I wasn't about to give up the extra leverage of being writer and director. And yet something in the nature of my directing (and writing?) led to a run in which the performers careened from brilliant to dysfunctional, depending on the night. Sometimes I would watch and think, "but that's not what I intended," or "that's not what I wrote." I think I was witnessing a conflict between my notion of what a performance should look like, and the actor's desire to "co-write" her part. Although I write plays that employ multiple genres, the sense of a singular authorial voice remains in force. Contrary to this, Mee sees every contribution as part of the collage, and that collage is very much a collective effort, one that is co-authored by every artist involved, and also by the culture that, to some extent, writes the artist. It's an exercise in detachment.

Time passes. No one declares me Nobel playwright of the century. There's no anxiety in the theatre world about getting the rights to my next script. Then the Solo Collective (a Vancouver company that specializes in one-person shows) asks me to write a piece for their next production. I write something called *Two*, about a two-year-old boy who discovers he's dead. I pass it off to the director, offer a suggestion on casting, drop by rehearsals once for half an hour, and then show up for one of the performances. My name is on the program, but it's been a pretty hands-off affair. And it turns out to be a great production. Director (Johnna Wright) and actor (Josh Drebbit) have sufficiently "messed with" the textual rhythms and verbal images. They've successfully co-written the event. It becomes clear to me that, when it comes to theatre, the notion of "great author" is a bit of a fiction. Sure, on paper Shakespeare looks great. But we've all seen more bad productions of the bard than good ones, and it's not because the actors weren't good or the director wasn't smart. It's because they were bad co-writers of the live act of a stage performance. When the production is great, we get on our feet and applaud—not for Shakespeare, for the performers. Paradoxically it is Mee's loose hold on his scripts that brings him so much credit. And he's very conscious of the fact: "I'm



eager to see what will be done after I'm dead and gone and no longer have any control over what people do. Plus, I'm not a person who thinks there's a definitive version of anything—of civilization, of a history book, or of a production of a play.

Plus, I've always thought the playwrights who get the best productions are the dead playwrights, so I thought it might be best to behave like one."

Alex Lazaridis Ferguson is a 20-year veteran of the professional stage and a qualifying student for an MA in Theatre at The University of British Columbia.

WE USED TO UNDERSTAND Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*. Scholarship was clear about what the play represented: 'primitive...stiff, helpless, and unintelligible,' Gilbert Murray wrote in 1930, but 'extremely close... to the original choric or communal dance out of which tragedy arose.' The predominance of the chorus (three fifths of the play was sung), the sparseness of the action—it was clear that this was the earliest Greek tragedy that survived, produced in the first quarter of the fifth century, and that its structure could tell us of the origins of Greek tragedy. But then, in 1952, a papyrus fragment was found, which clearly indicated that the play was later than had been thought—dating almost certainly to 463, only a few years before Aeschylus' long career was over. All of its features, then, were there not because the weight of tradition meant nothing else was imaginable, but because the playwright chose this form. It was no longer an accident: scholars were forced to recognize that Aeschylus had meant something with this play.

Suppliant Women presents one of the most aggressive challenges to dramatic illusion that Western theatre has produced. The fifty daughters of Danaus are, collectively, the hero of the play. They are not individuated—while in later plays in the tragic trilogy one of them emerges with an independent identity, here they only are a group. There are other groups, too: their handmaids, Egyptian slaves, and Greek soldiers. Symbolically and visually, each of these groups should be the same size in the play, as masses of humanity cross the stage. Are we to believe that each group in fact numbered fifty? Athens had choral groups of fifty, such as the circular dances of the Dithyrambs, sung by men and

boys. Nowhere else are such numbers even imagined on the Greek stage. Far more likely is that a smaller group—twelve, probably—represented the fifty daughters of Danaus, and that the chorus as a collective character emblematically embodied a much greater number.

But the truth is, we don't know. Once *Suppliant Women* was no longer the link with the proto-drama of Archaic Greece, scholarship on the play decreased significantly, and its mysteries remain. Were special dark masks used for the daughters of Danaus and the Egyptians? How did the Athenian audience perceive this, when feminine beauty was associated with the colour white? Was there a stage building, and if so, why does Aeschylus ignore it? What was the music and dance like? So many practical questions remain unanswered, that interpretations of the play must operate only at a symbolic level. But even questions of plot remain: why do the sisters reject marriage with their cousins? do they reject all men? Answers to these would greatly affect interpretations of the play. All we are left with is a primal conflict, which Aeschylus has chosen to present in a way that abstracts personality: this is a universal, human conflict. Don't think for a moment it doesn't apply to you.

Fifty sisters flee marriage with their fifty Egyptian cousins, and seek sanctuary in Greece. The most likely reconstruction of the rest of the trilogy is, probably, as follows. The second play, now lost, was called *Egyptian Men*: the daughters of Danaus are raped—forced into marriage, and on their wedding night they each slay their husbands. Except one: Hypermestra spares her husband Lynceus. The final tragedy, *The Daughters of Danaus*, put Hypermes-

Aeschylus and the Foundation of Mee's Big Love

C.W. Marshall





tra on trial for her unforgivable crimes: she lost her virginity, she betrayed her sisters, she loved her husband. Out of the mass forces that shifted like waves in the first play, an individual, tragic heroine emerges by the end of the trilogy.

Charles Mee has taken the whole myth, and re-presented it for today. The conflict is still there, but the tone is changed. How can a myth, certainly a myth that operates on such a scale as this, be made immediate? Mee has found much inspiration from Greek tragedy. By using the source play as a template, he provides his own interpretation of what he sees in the ancient text. With *Big Love*, the ancient story no longer exists: we know the trilogy existed (there

would also have been a satyr play, raunchy and risqué, that was an essential part of tragic experience in fifth-century Athens) but so much of it remains a mystery. And into the cracks of the papyrus fragments, Mee has the opportunity to fill out the story in his unique way, keeping the myth alive, and infusing with his own distinct personality, in exactly the way Aeschylus had done almost twenty-five centuries before.

C.W. Marshall teaches Greek and Latin at The University of British Columbia.

A foot on the gas, a foot on the brake: Driving with Mee

Joanna Garfinkel,
Director

IN AN ESSAY AND INTERVIEW with her playwright father, Erin B. Mee writes that Charles Mee's plays "require the director and the performers to cowrite the event." This is an intimidating privilege, and a joy for me. Mee leaves an unusually large space for this collaboration, stating that *Big Love* is placed in "more an installation than a set," and writing evocative, but not literally plausible stage directions meant to inspire creation—such as this from the wedding:

Not these things necessarily, but things like these, things as extreme as these: one groom lying across two chairs—his head on one, his feet on the other, dropping bowling balls on his stomach and letting them roll onto the floor.

Mee often describes a feeling or sensation, and then leaves it up to the director to articulate it as she chooses. He builds skeletons of physical scenes of wild abandon, a "whoosh of freedom as characters break the rules of etiquette, of propriety, of the well-made play." He takes the implied conversation between writer and director, and makes it explicit. I feel as if I've been given permission to rise to the daunting challenge of *Big Love*, using all the elemental tools in the theatrical arsenal—music, spectacle and heartbreaking text.

This dovetails nicely with the way I like to create—in active collaboration

with text, company and designers; hoping to contribute to a new language of performance, which *Big Love* specifically leaves much room for. While Mee leaves great spaces in his plays for director's collaboration, his expectations are profoundly high. One of my favourite descriptions of great rock music is "one foot on the gas and one on the brake." The drastic turns that music often can negotiate are echoed in Mee's writing, and in *Big Love* to an exhilarating degree. Mee's plays demand that actors swiftly progress from pop songs to heightened physicality to incredibly earnest sentiment. I am drawn to his unironic embrace of the most populist traditions of theatre—songs, dances, gags and violence—while this former historian also mines the rich, dense classical cannon. Nothing pleases me more than to rise to the challenge Mee poses.

I am fortunate, then, to have a company of artists on this production who are up to the collaborative demands of this text: an ensemble of actors unafraid of jumping into the unknown, and contributing to a complex physical score; designers keen to approach a non-naturalistic text with incredible flexibility. Much of this production (particularly the movement-based scenes) began in collaborative compositions with the company. We created a vocabulary of elements I wanted to include in the production—working from real and idiosyncratic wedding events as well



as from the heightened universe *Big Love* embraces; sharpened them, and then wove them within the framework that Mee provides. The demands on this young company, as actors, singers and dancers, but also as co-creators of the event, meant that they have worked and trained for hours beyond traditional expectations. I appreciate their inspiration.

Patrick Pennefather attended many rehearsals and likewise incorporated and changed sound compositions in the room alongside us. Developing a production in temporal tandem with a composer is a rare and vital experience. Similarly, Ron Fedoruk worked from the text, but also from a mutual desire to shape the space of the

production from the peculiarities of the Telus and from our choreography. With a text like *Big Love* I have incredibly high expectations of my collaborators and myself, and it is a genuine thrill when they are fulfilled.

Joanna Garfinkel is an MFA Candidate in Directing at The University of British Columbia

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN ORIGINAL play.

None of the classical Greek plays were original: they were all based on earlier plays or poems or myths. And none of Shakespeare's plays are original: they are all taken from earlier work. *As You Like It* is taken from a novel by Thomas Lodge published just 10 years before Shakespeare put on his play without attribution or acknowledgment. Chunks of *Antony and Cleopatra* are taken verbatim, and, to be sure, without apology, from a contemporary translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is taken from a play by Klabund, on which Brecht served as dramaturg in 1926; and Klabund had taken his play from an early Chinese play.

Sometimes playwrights steal stories and conversations and dreams and intimate revelations from their friends and lovers and call this original.

And sometimes some of us write about our own innermost lives, believing that, then, we have written something truly original and unique. But, of course, the culture writes us first, and then we write our stories. When we look at a painting of the virgin and child by Botticelli, we recognize at once that it is a Renaissance painting—that it is a product of its time and place. We may not know or recognize at once that it was painted by Botticelli, but we do see that it is a Renaissance painting. We see that it has been derived from, and

authored by, the culture that produced it.

And yet we recognize, too, that this painting of the virgin and child is not identical to one by Raphael or Ghirlandaio or Leonardo. So, clearly, while the culture creates much of Botticelli, it is also true that Botticelli creates the culture—that he took the culture into himself and transformed it in his own unique way.

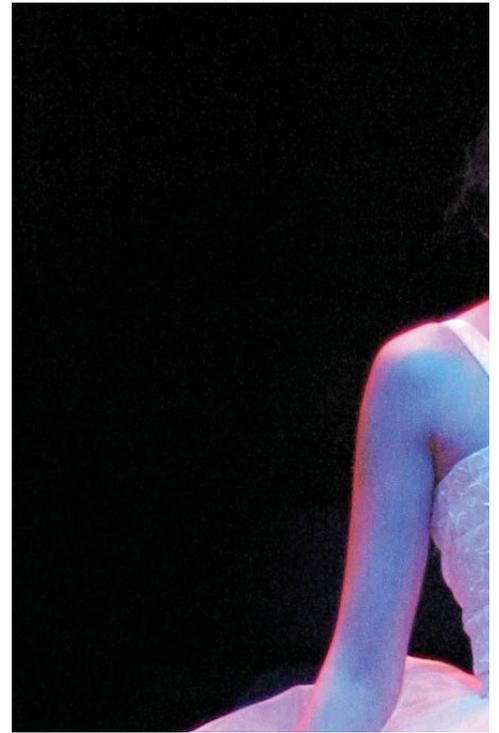
And so, whether we mean to or not, the work we do is both received and created, both an adaptation and an original, at the same time. We re-make things as we go.

The plays on this website [*the (re) making project*, www.charlesmee.org/index.html] were mostly composed in the way that Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces toward the end of World War I: texts have often been taken from, or inspired by, other texts. Among the sources for these pieces are the classical plays of Euripides as well as texts from the contemporary world.

I think of these appropriated texts as historical documents—as evidence of who and how we are and what we do. And I think of the characters who speak these texts as characters like the rest of us: people through whom the culture speaks, often without the speakers knowing it.

And I hope those who read the plays published here will feel free to treat the texts I've made in the same way I've treated the texts of others.

— Chuck Mee



“There is no such thing as an original play.”

Charles L. Mee



Suggested Further Reading

C.W. Marshall

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P. Burian, *Aeschylus: The Suppliants*
(Princeton, 1991).

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*Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval
Societies* (Washington, D.C., 1993) 17-38.

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P. E. Easterling, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*
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