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THEATER

THEATER; Falling In, Falling Out: Love's Cycle Of Rebirth

IT was relatively late in life that Charles L. Mee, 62, became a playwright. He had already had two careers -- magazine editor and historian -- when he began writing plays that share little with his books except a passion for politics.

His first play to receive a major production in New York, 13 years ago, was directed by Erin B. Mee, his daughter, who was 24 at the time and making her directorial debut. Entitled "The Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem," it is part of a series of Mr. Mee's surreal, fragmented political plays that include "The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador" and take the United States to task for its foreign policy.

This season, Mr. Mee is once again working with his daughter Erin, who is directing "First Love," one of three related plays about love by Mr. Mee that will be presented in New York before the end of the year.

Some things have changed since their first collaboration. For one, Charles Mee, the playwright, has become better known. Ten productions of his plays are being produced throughout the country this year. For another, Erin Mee is now an established director who has worked, among other places, with the experimental Mabou Mines company in New York (whose productions her father introduced her to when she was a child), the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and in India; she also teaches theater at Bard College.

From the beginning, Mr. Mee's scripts have sometimes taken the form of collages. He put together a combination of old and new texts for Martha Clarke's "Vienna: Lusthaus" in 1986, for example, and he has used excerpts in his plays from material as diverse as "Soap Opera Digest" and the writings of Hannah Arendt. In later years, he has turned to the Greeks, as he describes in his 1999 memoir, "A Nearly Normal Life" (Little, Brown): "Recently, I have come again and again to take the text of a classic Greek play, smash it to ruins, and then, atop its ruined structure of plot and character, write a new play, with all-new language, characters of today speaking like people of today, set in the America of my time -- so that America today lies, as it were, in a bed of ancient ruins."

On a recent afternoon, Jonathan Mandell, a former theater critic, talked with Charles Mee and

Erin Mee between rehearsals at New York Theater Workshop, where "First Love" opens on Sept. 9. Here are excerpts from the conversation.

JONATHAN MANDELL -- Three plays with love in the title: "First Love," "True Love" and "Big Love." Why all this love?

CHARLES MEE -- "First Love" is about two people in their 70's who fall in love for the first time in their lives and almost wreck it. "True Love" is the story of a woman who falls in love with her stepson, and as the news of that love comes out in this community of folks hanging around a gas station in Utica, N.Y., they all start talking about their idiosyncratic, bizarre, unacceptable relationships, which turn out to be even stranger than this one. And "Big Love" is about 50 brides who are pursued by 50 grooms who want to marry them. Nobody will save them from this forced marriage, so the brides agree among themselves to murder their husbands on their wedding night. **Forty-nine of the brides murder their husbands and one falls in love, which is pretty good odds.**

The three plays come from my life with Laurie Williams, who is an actress with whom I lived for the past five years. So all these thoughts, relationships and strange and beautiful and painful things are from the life we had together. I think she was my first love in life, in spite of my advanced age when I fell in love with her, which was 57. She was certainly my true love. It happened suddenly, in a millisecond. And it ended just as suddenly about six months ago. I think the plays have in them the reasons we found each other and the reasons we broke apart.

Laurie has the lead in "True Love," which will be in a theater being built called the Zipper, because it's a former zipper factory.

MANDELL -- A man could feel very uncomfortable casting his ex-lover in such a role.

CHARLES MEE -- I wrote it for her to act in before we broke up. And it's hers; it belongs to her. I hope she has a wonderful time. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to go. I'm not sure I can bear to see it.

MANDELL -- Some people may look at the fact that you have had three marriages and wonder how you can say that your first love occurred after those marriages.

CHARLES MEE -- People can fall in love for the first time when they're 8 years old or when they're 16 or 30 or 77. It's just what they were capable of at that point in their lives. I'm afraid I wasn't capable of it until I was 57. I don't think my heart was open enough.

MANDELL -- Is it a coincidence that all three plays are coming out this season in three different theaters?

CHARLES MEE -- No. We hoped to make that happen.

MANDELL -- Do you consider them a trilogy?

CHARLES MEE -- They are not a trilogy in the sense of being a continuous narrative or an evolution from one to the other. But thematically they are three related pieces.

MANDELL -- Erin, your father has written that he keeps on his desk a note you wrote him when you were small: "Dear Dad, I love you. Oh, dear, oh, dear, I love love love you. Love from Erin." Were you therefore the obvious choice to direct "First Love"?

ERIN MEE -- (Laughs) "First Love" was written for me to direct and for Ruth Maleczech and Fred Neumann of Mabou Mines to perform.

CHARLES MEE -- Erin knows about all the relationships I've had in my life. She understands me and my passions and my sense of humor. I feel comfortable having this play in her hands.

ERIN MEE -- There are many speeches in the play that I recognize from my father's life -- about my mother, my stepmother, about things I've heard my father say in other ways. Some of the dramaturgical research I would do as a director has been done over the course of the last 37 years, and has been done very thoroughly. I haven't just read about it; I've lived it.

But I don't think "First Love" is an autobiographical play. It is about a specific couple on the stage, Harold and Edith. In many ways those two people stand for other couples in love for the first time. There are iconic moments: the first meeting, the first date, first sex, the fight, the reconciliation, the wedding that goes south right as it reaches the altar. Those moments, I think, are absolutely recognizable to anyone who has been in love or been saturated with images of love and romance in movies, magazines and television. What I love about "First Love" is that my father plays with those images. It's first love, but these are not a couple of dippy young kids; they are two mature, sophisticated, well-read, dysfunctional adults.

CHARLES MEE -- Who are still able to behave sometimes like dippy kids.

ERIN MEE -- Right.

CHARLES MEE -- Everybody writes a story called "First Love." Turgenev wrote a wonderful novel called "First Love" and Shakespeare wrote "Romeo and Juliet." A literary source for my play, in a way, was Samuel Beckett's story "First Love," which I read years ago, or I should say I misread. They were young people who fell in love, and I thought it was about two old people.

But I thought it would be wonderful to imagine that the two people didn't fall in love for the first time until they were in their 70's. The truth is, I don't think that's uncommon. Many people go through life without ever truly giving themselves over to another person, which is what I think true love is, really opening your heart enough to be completely vulnerable.

ERIN MEE -- You have been talking about this story for as long as I can remember. And somewhere along the line -- I think now that I made this up -- I thought you had talked about seeing a production of "Romeo and Juliet," where the two actors were in their 60's or 70's.

CHARLES MEE -- You made that up.

ERIN MEE -- O.K., I made it up. But that would be a great way to do "Romeo and Juliet." And there's a speech about "Romeo and Juliet" in the play. So these things have kind of circled around.

MANDELL -- I was going to ask you about that speech. Edith says she saw "Romeo and Juliet" and thought how young they were, how they didn't know there was more than one pebble on the beach. But now she knows there is only one pebble on the beach, sometimes not even one. Is that your personal philosophy?

CHARLES MEE -- Absolutely.

MANDELL -- Is that yours as well?

ERIN MEE -- Definitely. I was lucky enough to meet my pebble on the beach about 10 years ago. But I was really lucky. I think it's very rare.

MANDELL -- Could there be some beaches where there is more than one pebble?

ERIN MEE -- I don't know. Not this beach.

MANDELL -- In your memoir, "A Nearly Normal Life," where you write about your childhood experience with polio, you say that you do not want your writing to feel intact, that "intact people should write intact books."

CHARLES MEE -- Right.

MANDELL -- There are some lines you write about your plays: "My own plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, clinging to each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me, it feels like my life." But you were a historian who wrote a dozen books, one of which, "Meeting at Potsdam," was a best seller that was made into a television movie. None of those books, nor your memoir, take the sudden jagged turns of your plays. What is it about the theater that makes you want to write in a way that is less "intact" than the other writing you have done?

CHARLES MEE -- Theater really feels like me. One of the reasons I stopped writing history was that I felt trapped in a form of discourse that seemed false to me. The form of history, I thought, required me to frame rational, dispassionate statements about the world that were meant to contain the truth, but they were statements about a world that made you want to weep and shriek and cry out. And that content wasn't allowed. Somehow, the theater allows me to use both my mind and my heart. That's why it feels good to me.

ERIN MEE -- One of the theatrical conventions that I think my father destroys is that there are transitions from one thing to another. That's false; it's not the way we experience the world. We're having a conversation, we walk out the door, somebody else is going to say something to us about

something on a completely different subject and we're not going to have a transition.

MANDELL -- Isn't there a difference between real life and art? And isn't that difference what makes art art, makes it coherent?

CHARLES MEE -- You don't need to falsify life in order to make art. The truth of life is we make it up as we go along. We don't all conform to a set of norms. There is a certain tradition of theater that everything human beings do can be understood fundamentally by reference to the rules of psychology. If, by the end of the play, everybody understands their lives according to those rules and adjusts to those rules and embraces them, that's a comedy. And if they don't, that's a tragedy. So the fundamental assumption is that there is a set of norms. Well, I don't conform to the norm, but I'm entitled to a life, too.

MANDELL -- How do you not conform to the norm?

CHARLES MEE -- I had polio. I walk with crutches. So that's not a form of walking for which the physical conveniences of the city have been designed. That's obvious. It's also true that I was born into a world of psychological and social norms handed down to me by my parents that I was asked to live within and find comfortable. And none of us do anymore. That world was not designed for us to feel comfortable in and we don't. I think that if you make paintings and poetry and plays, they should embrace this life in which I feel comfortable and alive.

MANDELL -- Is anyone writing plays now that you consider well made and that you like?

CHARLES MEE -- I'd rather say the work I'm crazy about and love deeply is the work of Pina Bausch, Alain Platel in Belgium, Jan Lauwers in Belgium, Sasha Waltz in Berlin at the Schaubühne, Anne Bogart in the United States. I'm crazy about the directors Robert Woodruff, Les Waters, Daniel Fish, Tina Landau and my daughter -- all of whom I've worked with -- and the kind of work that opens up the world rather than closing it down.

MANDELL -- The artists you mention are all considered avant-garde, and, though not everybody agrees about what that means, most see the birth of the avant-garde as happening at about the same time that theater became less of a popular medium. Is that a coincidence or cause and effect? Is the kind of theater that matters the kind of theater that has to exclude a popular audience because it either won't appeal to them or will not be clear to them?

CHARLES MEE -- The exact opposite is the case. The decline of theater as an essential art form in America coincides with the triumph of naturalism and the well-made play -- which is boring people crazy out of their minds. The great hope for the theater is that it returns to the immense energies that were in Greek theater and Shakespeare, theater that includes not just text and interpersonal relationships but also spectacle, music, dance, physical performance, color, noise, fabulous events happening. The stuff of musical comedy -- such a popular form -- should always have been the stuff of all theater.

What happened was that the work of Ibsen -- which in its time was wonderful, innovative, avant-garde, rule-breaking theater -- became a standard of reduced, reductionist, drawing room, interpersonal relationships best suited for small television sets, not for large theatrical spaces. People who thrive on that kind of theater are well served by television and movies. I'm talking about a whole tradition of brilliant, genius, masterful, great playwrights whose time is over.

People who love theater as it has been for 5,000 years, with the exception of this small, unusual period in theatrical history, welcome the return of a more highly theatrical form. And that's the tradition out of which, I think, I work, out of which a lot of work is being done in Europe today and out of which a lot of downtown avant-garde work is being done.

A Bow for the Ancients

Greek myth is a factor in two of Charles L. Mee's three plays about love being presented in New York this season.

'FIRST LOVE' -- Now in previews at New York Theater Workshop, the play is about an elderly couple, portrayed by Ruth Malaczech and Frederick Neumann, who fall in love for the first time.

'TRUE LOVE' -- Based on Euripides' "Hippolytus" and Racine's "Phèdre," the plot involves a woman who falls in love with her stepson, with added text from Andy Warhol, the Jerry Springer show and the trial of the Menendez brothers. Directed by Daniel Fish, it begins performances on Nov. 15 at a new theater, the Zipper, on West 37th Street.

'BIG LOVE' -- This Goodman Theater production from Chicago opens on Nov. 30 at the Harvey Theater as part of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Directed by Les Waters it was inspired by "The Suppliant Women" by Aeschylus.

Photos: Frederick Neumann and Ruth Malaczech rehearse Charles L. Mee's play "First Love" at New York Theater Workshop. (Ruby Washington/The New York Times)(pg. 10); Charles L. Mee, and his daughter Erin B. Mee, at New York Theater Workshop, where his play "First Love" opens next Sunday. Ms. Mee is the director. (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)(pg. 3)