

the running commentary of the characters. It exercises ideas about the nature of love and what is normal sexual behavior – without providing the closure of classic comedic form (lovers reconciled and united, weddings afoot, and social pariahs chastened or expelled). The murder-suicide at the play's climax ends up being characterized as a garden-variety crime of passion, sensationalist fodder for radio talk shows and Court TV specials. It is a perfunctory resolution for a borrowed plot that Mee uses to create a theater of public discourse that inquires into how men and women define what it is to be human.

### *Big Love*

Near the end of *True Love*, just before Richard takes out a gun and shoots Polly, he says,

I remember  
 when we went to see the Greek play  
 The Danaids  
 in the abandoned marble quarry  
 and I thought:  
 we are connected to this human life  
 and to one another  
 for all eternity.

In the summer of 1996, Romanian director Silviu Purcarete's reconstruction of Aeschylus's *Les Danaïdes* was performed in an abandoned marble quarry at the Avignon Festival. Mee saw the spectacle, with its dual choruses of fifty women in deep blue and fifty saffron-clad men, and a few years later, when the Actors Theatre of Louisville commissioned him to write a play for the 2000 Humana Festival, he undertook his own version of the Danaids story. *The Suppliant Women*, the only surviving play in the Aeschylus trilogy, was thought for many years to be oldest extant play in the western world,<sup>14</sup> and Mee wanted to mark the new millennium by harkening back to the origins of drama itself. The result was *Big Love*, a comedy about rape.

Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Women* tells the story of the daughters of Danaos, fifty in number and descendants of Io, the long-suffering Argive priestess who, enamored by Zeus, was transformed into a cow by the jealous Hera and then chased by a vicious gadfly across the Near East all the way to Egypt. The play begins with the arrival of the Danaids in a sacred grove outside of Argos. They have fled Egypt and forced marriage to their cousins, the fifty sons of Aegyptus, and returned to their Greek homeland

seeking sanctuary from Pelasgos, the Argive king. While Pelasgos consults with the Argive assembly, an Egyptian fleet arrives to reclaim the women, by force if necessary. The play ends with a tense showdown between the Egyptian Herald, who threatens war if the women are not released, and Pelasgos, who rebuffs him and welcomes the Danaids into the city. While the second and third plays of the trilogy – *The Egyptians* and *The Danaids* – have not survived, scholars have delineated a rough, presumptive outline. War breaks out. The Egyptian army defeats the Argive defenses, lays siege to the city, recaptures the unwilling brides, and proceeds with the delayed ceremonies. The Danaid women have no choice but to submit, but under their father's leadership, each one swears an oath to murder her new husband in her wedding bed on the night of the nuptials. The next morning, forty-nine men lay dead, but one of the would-be assassins, Hypermestra, explains that she spared her husband for love. An immediate trial ensues.

The difficulty of executing justice in this matter seems to have provoked the divine intervention of Aphrodite as *deus ex machina*. One of two substantial fragments from *The Danaids* to survive contains part of a speech explaining a verdict which seems to favor Hypermestra. Aphrodite says:

Holy heaven longs to pierce the land,  
and longing for marriage seizes the earth. Rain,  
falling from the liquid sky, impregnates earth,  
and she, to benefit mankind, gives birth  
to grass for the herds and to grain, Demeter's gift  
of life. From the showers of this wedding flow  
the seasons when trees bear their flowers and fruits.  
Of all these things I am also the cause.<sup>15</sup>

Thus does the Goddess of Love, mother of Eros according to some myths, seem to enforce the union of earth and sky, female and male, wife and husband, as essential to the continuation of life itself. And thus do classical scholars regard *The Danaids* as Aeschylus's symbolic enactment of the transformation of endogamy from institutionalized rape into a civil (and perhaps spiritual) union mandated by love. Just as the *Oresteia* dramatized the mythic origins of a system of justice based on the code of law and trial by jury, the Danaid trilogy might have depicted the mythic origins of an institution of marriage based on the code of love and perpetual fidelity. In each case, the cessation of tribal violence and the transition from war to peace and, on a broader level, from barbarism to civilization is at stake. This is precisely the liminal moment that has always fascinated Mee, first as a historian and then as a playwright.

*Big Love* transposes the setting from a sacred grove in Greece to the marbled terrace of a ritzy Mediterranean villa on the coast of present-day Italy. The action begins with the arrival of Lydia, Olympia, and Thyona, three Greek sisters in tattered white satin wedding gowns, wearing sunglasses and lugging suitcases and steamer trunks.<sup>16</sup> Along with their other sisters, fifty of them all told, they have fled the altar and forced marriages to their fifty Greek-American cousins. In the kooky equivalent of the *parados* in Aeschylus, they proclaim their defiance by stepping center stage and singing Leslie Gore's 1964 hit, "You Don't Own Me." In the moment, the proto-feminist lyrics of this old top-40 record mask the play's serious concern with gender and power with a tongue-in-cheek irony. When the sisters meet Piero, the wealthy and influential owner of the villa, they claim international refugee status, seeking protection from kidnapping and rape and insisting on his moral obligation to embrace their plight. Piero goes off to consider the matter and to attend to his weekend houseguests, and while they await his decision, the deafening sounds of a helicopter overhead announce the arrival of the jilted grooms, Nikos, Oed, and Constantine, who enter wearing high-tech flying helmets and jump suits over their wedding tuxedos.

The brothers have come to enforce their ancient contract and reclaim their brides, against their will, if necessary. In an effort to negotiate a peaceful compromise, Piero invites the men in for a cigar, a glass of something, and a man-to-man talk. Before they go in, Constantine, Thyona's would-be groom, advises her to embrace a more realistic view about the workings of power:

You say, you don't want to be taken against your will.  
 People are taken against their will every day.  
 Do you want tomorrow to come?  
 Do you want to live in the future?  
 Never mind. You can't stop the clock.  
 Tomorrow will take today by force  
 whether you like it or not.  
 Time itself is an act of rape.  
 Life is rape.



This is just one of numerous passages in the play that examine the concept of rape in the broader sense of being taken against one's will and subject to the will of a superior force. In a manner similar to *True Love's* airing of ideas about sexual desire, *Big Love* generates its own quirky, troubling symposium that pushes beyond the reflexive presumption that rape is evil

and wrong and prompts consideration of what rape is (and is not) and how it operates on a cultural level.

Giuliano, Piero's debonair and effeminate son, talks to the women at one point about his extensive collection of Barbie and Ken dolls and introduces the paradoxical notion that for some people rape is a choice:

Some people like to be taken forcibly.  
 If that's what they like, then that's okay.  
 And if not, then not.  
 I myself happen to like it.  
 To have somebody grab me.  
 Hold me down.  
 To know they have to have me  
 no matter what.  
 It's not everyone's cup of tea.  
 Everyone should be free to choose for themselves.

Olympia, who likes to be pampered and to "wear skirts that blow up in the wind," extends this idea when she admits:

And I myself enjoy the freedom that submission gives me.  
 I like to be tickled and tortured  
 and I like to scream and scream  
 and feel helpless  
 and be totally controlled  
 and see how good that makes someone else feel.  
 It is for me the most natural high.  
 It is so much better than taking drugs.  
 You can just relax and enjoy yourself  
 and feel alive and free inside.

Thyona, leader of the sisters and a vigilant man-hater, is hard-pressed to persuade them that their situation is not a matter of romantic enchantment or consensual submission to another. As she says, "This is about guys hauling you off to their cave."



The most radical and provocative consideration of sexual force comes at the conclusion of a wild sequence in which the three brothers rend their clothes and hurl themselves to the floor again and again as they vent their rage and frustration about how boys are socialized to take on specific gender roles and then punished for it when they play out those roles as men. Their fury spent, they collapse in exhaustion, and then, in a quiet, simple way, Constantine explains that men want to be "good" and "civilized" just as women do, but "when push comes to shove," when an enemy

invades your country, raping women and killing children, then everyone wants “a man who can defend his home,” “a man who can fuck someone up.” This requires nurturing the capacity for violence, which then, in times of peace, a man is expected to put away somewhere “as though he didn’t have such impulses” or risk being judged abusive, “despicable,” or criminal if he is unable to do so. He goes on to introduce a challenging notion:

and so it may be that when a man turns this violence on a woman  
 in her bedroom  
 or in the midst of war  
 slamming her down, hitting her,  
 he should be esteemed for this  
 for informing her  
 about what it is that civilization really contains  
 the impulse to hurt side by side with the gentleness  
 the use of force as well as tenderness  
 the presence of coercion and necessity  
 because it has just been a luxury for her really  
 not to have to act on this impulse or even feel it  
 to let a man do it for her  
 so that she can stand aside and deplore it  
 whereas in reality  
 it is an inextricable part of the civilization in which she lives  
 on which she depends



Constantine’s long, frighteningly rational monologue concludes with the startling idea that rape “is a gift that a man can give a woman,” a gift that enables her “to know the truth of how it is to live on earth” not as a man or a woman but as a human being.

As the action of the play proceeds, this turns out to be “a gift” that the women choose to give in return. When Piero is unable to negotiate a compromise with the men, plans for a compulsory wedding ceremony gather momentum. The sisters debate whether to submit or resist, until Thyona finally persuades the other two that, without a nation to defend them, they must make their own law and kill their husbands. What begins as a traditional cut-the-cake wedding scene erupts in an orgy of violence when the brides pull knives from their garters and attack the grooms (see figure 4, page 75 above). When the bloody mayhem subsides, Lydia is discovered in the arms of her new husband, Nikos, who she has spared out of love. She is immediately placed on trial for betrayal of her promise and her sisters, with Bella, Piero’s Old World mother, presiding as judge. In

the end, Bella acquits Lydia of all charges, and echoing the Aphrodite fragment from Aeschylus, explains her verdict:

This is why: love trumps all.  
 Love is the highest law.  
 It can be bound by no other.  
 Love of another human being –  
 man or woman –  
 it cannot be wrong.

The play ends promptly with Mendelssohn's wedding march, confetti, flashbulbs, and the tossing of the bridal bouquet. This forced note of canonical harmony swells with irony in contrast with all that has come before and the dead bodies strewn about the stage. Love trumps all, but at a cost, and the happy ending is as imposed as that of any *deus ex machina* in fifth-century Athens. As the honeymoon begins, the uncomfortable question remains how men and women are to live together in a world where civilization is defined as much by war, rape, violence, and the use of blunt force as by the power of love.

In such early, seldom-performed works as *The Constitutional Convention: A Sequel* and *The Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem*, Mee sketched out a theatrical strategy that alternated scenes of spoken dialogue with unscripted performance pieces to be created for the production at hand. Mee's move into remaking Greek tragedy can be seen as a natural next step, since the Greeks originated the structural pattern of alternating rhetorical confrontations between speaking actors with odes that are sung and danced by a chorus. No matter how buried the plot or how chaotic the surface of events in a Mee play, the dialectical rhythm of Greek tragedy remains. Each play has its own choral group – the nurses and patients in *Orestes 2.0*; the women of Troy in part one and Aeneas's men and Dido's women in part two of *The Trojan Women: A Love Story*; Shirley, Bonnie, Jim, Phil, and Red Dicks in *True Love*; and the sister-brides and brother-grooms in *Big Love* – who perform music-and-movement sequences or discursive or lyrical monologues that are the rough equivalent of choral odes. In each case, Mee is explicit in his stage directions in emphasizing that, more than mere interludes, these karaoke numbers, variety acts, dance breaks, fight sequences, pop tunes, performance events, and physical outbursts are equal in importance to the text-based scenes with which they are intermingled. Even though the acts of violence that end these plays function more as musical resolves than resolutions of a narrative conflict, Mee had found his dramaturgical model in the Dionysian spirit and Apollonian form of Greek tragedy.

But, over the course of the 1990s, as Mee went back to the Greeks again and again, aspects of comedy became more and more pronounced. *Orestes 2.0* is all apocalyptic tragedy at heart, an Expressionist Geschrei and a dark portrait of civilization run amok. *The Trojan Women: A Love Story* joins at the hip Euripides's post-war tragedy with a pastoral romance. The vagaries of love and the differences between men and women, staples of comedic discourse, surface in the play's borrowed texts and in the thematic opposition of Troy and Carthage. *True Love* retains the vestiges of tragedy in its use of the Phaedra myth and its catastrophic conclusion, but its implicit arbitration of social norms and sexual behavior belongs more to the world of comedy. And *Big Love* goes one step further with its outright battle-of-the-sexes plot and compulsory happy ending, however ironic it may be. While the shift in tone from dark towards light and in theme from Thanatos towards Eros is far from absolute over the decade, it does anticipate the binge of unapologetically romantic comedies that Mee would write in the years right before and after *bobrauschenbergamerica*. For those who had come to appreciate Mee early on as a kind of theatrical bomb-thrower, an apocalyptic playwright instigating chaotic, dystopic stage events, the eventual change of stripes was disconcerting.

In the mid 1990s, when Mee was still a relative unknown and commercial web browsers had not yet triggered the explosion of the world wide web, he began a practice that became a leading edge of his profile as a playwright. At the time, still dependent on a regular job to support himself and his family, he was editor-in-chief at Rebus, Inc. (now University Health Publishing), a publisher of health newsletters and medical reference books for consumers. With the aid and encouragement of his colleague Tom Damrauer, Mee posted three of his plays on the nascent internet, specifically on a site known as the English Server.<sup>17</sup> By 1996, Damrauer had helped Mee to launch his own website, which posted the complete texts of his plays along with the following invitation:

These pieces for the theatre were taken from the public domain, and they are returned to the public domain here. Browsers are encouraged to take them, print them, perform them, cut them, add to them, re-make them in any way – do freely whatever they want with them.<sup>18</sup>

The website, dubbed “the (re)making project,” represented Mee’s Golden Rule: do unto my writing as I have done unto the writing of others, that is, appropriate material of interest from the culture at large and make something new and personal and pleasing with it.

This was at first less a call to plagiarism than a populist gesture towards utopian visions of a free and democratic internet. “I’m attracted to the idea of things being owned in common,” he said in 1996. “I’m not trying to prescribe. But to me it feels true: the culture is where stuff comes from. I believe in giving it back.”<sup>19</sup> Mee’s giveaway upload came at a time when peer-to-peer file sharing services (such as the infamous Napster), the increased use of sampling in the popular music industry, and the open source movement were raising new, thorny issues regarding intellectual property rights. In an August 17, 2000 profile on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*, Mee was credited with “touching a raw cultural nerve” by making his plays available online for free, although he was quick to point out that for a playwright the financial stakes were puny compared to a rap musician or a software programmer.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, as Mee’s work gained wider appeal and became trendy to produce, some people took the invitation to steal from his work as license to rewrite or, possibly, censor a play and still present it as his, a practice that led him to reiterate his initial offer in more precise terms:

Please feel free to take the plays from this website and use them freely as a resource for your own work: that is to say, don’t just make some cuts or rewrite a few passages or re-arrange them or put in a few texts that you like better, but pillage the plays as I have pillaged the structures and contents of the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of Soap Opera Digest and the evening news and the internet, and build your own, entirely new, piece – and then, please, put your own name to the work that results.

By the time it was ten years old, Mee’s website was receiving more than 100,000 hits a year. While visitors interested in producing the plays as written are encouraged to contact his agent at International Creative Management, Inc. to secure performance rights, Mee’s concern is less proprietary than it is personal. After a decade of experimenting with sticking pieces of found and borrowed text on the scaffold of a classical play, he came to see authorship more and more as a matter of arranging and juxtaposing his chosen materials, often on an affective or intuitive basis. Whatever the mix of old and new, his placement and sequencing of it amounted to his original creation, and for another to rearrange a piece and still call him the author was a misrepresentation. This orientation, while hardly new to Mee at the time of *bobrauschenbergamerica*, became a guiding principle of that piece’s creation.