**Big Love by Charles Mee: A Bit of Background**

About ‘the (re)making project’

All of Chuck Mee’s plays are available online, for free, and in the spirit of his collage style of playwriting, he welcomes artists borrow from, steal and transform his scripts into new projects. He also encourages, possibly even requires, the artists working on his scripts to become creators themselves, completing the work he has laid out with their own performance and interpretation.

“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 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

The Love Trilogy

*Big Love* is the third play in a thematic trilogy of plays by Charles Mee. While the plots of the plays do not connect, the subject, themes and elements of the plays intersect. The Love Trilogy was written during Mee’s love affair with Laurie Williams that “burst suddenly into flame and then, a few years later, was just as suddenly doused.”

**First Love**

Two people in their seventies fall in love—for the first time in their lives. And, as they work their way toward one another through the accumulated baggage of their lives, they move in fits and starts toward sabotaging the last chance for love they'll ever have.

**True Love**

Based on Euripides' Hippolytus and Racine's Phaedra—but placed in America's trailer trash world, in which Phaedra does not restrain herself from sleeping with her fourteen year old stepson, and all the townspeople sit around the gas station talking about the extraordinary relationships they have had or known of, living in their normal world—each of them as true a love as human beings are capable of.

**Big Love**

Fifty brides flee their fifty grooms and seek refuge in a villa on the coast of Italy in this modern re-making of one of the western world's oldest plays, The Danaids by Aeschylus. And, in this villa on the Italian coast, the fifty grooms catch up with the brides, and mayhem ensues: the grooms arriving by helicopter in their flight suits, women throwing themselves over and over again to the ground, pop songs and romantic dances, and, finally, unable to escape their forced marriages, 49 of the brides murder 49 of the grooms-and one bride falls in love. About the same odds as today.

“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.”

~Chuck Mee
what I like
My own work begins with the belief that human beings are, as Aristotle said, social creatures—that we are the product not just of psychology, but also of history and of culture, that we often express our histories and cultures in ways even we are not conscious of, that the culture speaks through us, grabs us and throws us to the ground, tries out, silences us.

I don't write "political plays" in the usual sense of the term; but I write out of the belief that we are creatures of our history and culture and gender and politics—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.

So I try in my work to get past traditional forms of psychological realism, to bring into the frame of the plays material from history, philosophy, insanity, inattention, distractedness, judicial theory, sudden violent passion, lyricism, the National Enquirer, nostalgia, longing, aspiration, literary criticism, anguish, confusion, inability.

I like plays that are not too neat, too finished, too presentable. My plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me. It feels like my life. It feels like the world.

And then I like to put this—with some sense of struggle remaining—into a classical form, a Greek form, or a beautiful dance theatre piece, or some other effort at civilization.

~Chuck Mee

The Danaid Trilogy by Aeschylus

The Danaids (the 50 daughters of Danaus) form the chorus and serve as the protagonists. They flee a forced marriage to their Egyptian cousins. When the Danaids reach Argos, they entreat King Pelasgus to protect them. He refuses pending the decision of the Argive people, who decide in the favor of the Danaids. Danaus rejoices the outcome, and the Danaids praise the Greek gods. Almost immediately, a herald of the Egyptians comes to attempt to force the Danaids to return to their cousins for marriage. Pelasgus arrives, threatens the herald, and urges the Danaids to remain within the walls of Argos. The Suppliants ends with the Danaids retreating into the Argive walls, protected.

The remaining plays of the tetralogy have been mostly lost. As the plot of the remaining plays has been generally reconstructed, following a war with the Aegyptids in which Pelasgus has been killed, Danaus becomes tyrant of Argos. The marriage is forced upon his daughters, but Danaus instructs them to murder their husbands on their wedding night. All do except for Hypermnestra, whose husband, Lynceus, flees. Danaus imprisons or threatens to kill Hypermnestra for her disobedience, but Lynceus reappears and kills Danaus; Lynceus becomes the new king of Argos, with Hypermnestra as his queen. Opinions differ as to the ending, although certainly Aphrodite was involved in the denouement. One opinion is that Lyneeus now must decide how to punish the forty-nine homicidal Danaids, when Aphrodite appears in the Aias (Ajax) fashion and absolves them of the murders, as they were obeying their father; she then persuades them to abandon their celibate ways, and the trilogy closes with their marriages to forty-nine local Argive men. An alternative opinion is that Hypermnestra is put on trial for disobeying her father and Aphrodite successfully defends her similarly to Apollo's defense of Orestes in Orestes. The trilogy was followed by the satyr play Amyntor, which comically portrayed one of the Danaids' seduction by Poseidon.

Big Love: Inspired By/Takes Work From

Chuck Mee credits the following authors for their inspiration of Big Love. Some of their texts find their way directly and indirectly into the play.

Aeschylus - The story of Big Love is inspired by The Suppliant Women, bt Aeschylus. It is believed to be the oldest surviving extant play of the western world.


Leo Buscaglia - Also known as 'Dr. Love.' A motivational speaker and author. Loving Each Other (1984), Living Loving Learning (1985), Personhood (1986), Bus 9 to Paradise (1987), The Way of the Bull (1973), Love (1972)

Gerald G. Jampolsky M.D. - Speaker, writer and doctor with expertise in the fields of psychiatry, health, business, and education. Love is Letting Go of Fear (1974)

Valerie Solanus - American radical feminist writer, best known for her attempted murder of Andy Warhol in 1968. SCUM Manifesto (1967)


Lisa St Aubin de Teran - An English novelist, writer of autobiographical fictions, and memoirist. A Valley in Italy, 1995

Sei Shonagon - A Japanese author and a court lady who served the Empress Teishi (Sadako) around the year 1000 during the middle Heian period. The Pillow Book (17th Century)

Eleanor Clark - An American writer and travel essayist. Rome and a Villa (1950)


Kate Simon - A memoirist and travel writer. Italy: The Places In Between (1970)

Laurie Williams - Charles Mee’s lover. Their relationship, both its abrupt beginning and ending, inspired The Love Trilogy.

Any questions, interests or thoughts – feel free to contact your handy dramaturg, Sarah Johnson! Sarah-Johnson-3@uiowa.edu or let someone in Stage Management know you want to include a question for the dramaturg in the rehearsal report.

Texts mentioned above are available. Check out the Online Callboard in the Dramaturgy page for more information!

Great information and all of his plays can be found at Chuck Mee’s website - charlesmee.org