



Big Love: A Primer

By Charles Mee

Director: Gyllian Raby

Scenographer: Karyn McCallum

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Brock University

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Introduction: *The Danaids* and Charles L. Mee

DART's February production, *Big Love*, is American Charles Mee's contemporary update of Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*.ⁱ First performed circa 423 BC, *The Suppliants* is one of the oldest plays in the world and the only play to survive from the trilogy in which it originated. Aeschylus titled the trilogy *The Danaids* after the daughters of Danaïus who are also the protagonists of his play. (A summary of the original play is included below.) *Big Love* is an intellectually and theatrically challenging show recommended to the campus community (and with teacher guidance to students in grade 11 or 12) who are interested in law, philosophy and/or classics. Students can study and discuss *Big Love* (which Mee has posted free online!ⁱⁱ) prior to attending the production. This will enable students to look beyond the pop-culture surface and see the underlying issues that echo yet vary from its classic antecedent.

The Danaids is described by classicists as a play “that confronts the most primary questions about the relations between the sexes” and “an inquiry into the true nature of kratos”—that is, of power. It explores questions that typically entwine



the domestic and the political: “what is authority, the authority of the man over the woman, of the husband over wife, of the head of the State over all his fellow citizens, of the city over the foreigner and the metic (resident alien) of the gods over mortal men?”ⁱⁱⁱ Often cited as the first statement in Western literature to differentiate legalized rape from marriage, *The Danaids* explores the authority of a father in making and breaking family contracts. It contrasts his total authority with the discussion and persuasion model of command in the democratic process.

Scott Cummings, in his book *Remaking Theatre in America*,^{iv} applauds Charles Mee’s adaptations of Greek classics for their wild performative post-modernism. Other critics admire Mee’s ability to explore the meta-issues of humanity where “myth remains the mythos, the primary story and the plot of the action, but it is also coded to speak about the present”.^v Critics remain fascinated by the style of the adaptations because they carry Mee’s message on levels other than intellectual. Cummings describes the plays as combining “the elegance of Noel Coward and the humanity of Shakespeare with the ferocity of Strindberg and the violence of a high-speed car-crash”. He acknowledges that Mee’s work is not for all tastes, “In performance the internal combustion is alienating to some and exhilarating to others—but few would deny that the plays unleash a chaotic, cathartic energy that achieves a precarious but vaguely optimistic harmony in the end”.^{vi}

Big Love took America by storm in 2000 to 2003 precisely because Mee is in tune with his age. It is not just the ideas and the exhilarating physicality within Mee’s plays that caught the attention of America, but also his use of freeware. Posting the script online provided an open invitation for people to re-make the play however they would like. They can cut and paste it, adding found texts, as Mee himself had done. *Big Love* draws on a spectrum of writers: from the German Sociologist Klaus Theweleit, whose book *Männerphantasien* (1979; translated as *Male Fantasies*, 1987), is a study of fascist consciousness and its use of masculine body concepts, to Valerie Solanis, the radical who wrote the SCUM manifesto and tried to shoot Andy Warhol, to University of South California Professor Leo - Buscaglia, author of *Living, Loving and Learning* and other “inspirational” texts. This expansion of ‘the play as discussion’ is a model of vibrant open source culture that Mee would like to see more of. Furthermore, it places the onus on artists who produce the play to fully engage with its ideas.

The Ideas in *Big Love* and Artistic Direction in this production

Focus on Female Autonomy and re-defining love

Big Love removes the role of the father, Danaeus, who in Aeschylus’ play was the catalyst for the brides’ flight. In Mee’s play, filial obedience is cut in favour of a new focus upon female autonomy in the face of the various cultural myths that surround love and arranged marriage. Aeschylus’ brides ask for sanctuary from a



democratic ruler whose decisions exemplify the moral weakness of democracy. In *Big Love*, it is Piero, a wealthy private citizen who must decide whether to give the brides refuge. His negotiation with the intransigent bridegrooms raises thorny questions surrounding refugee status, cultural tradition and family duty. There is also a pitched battle of traditional bio-gendered relations between men and women. This fierce contest is expressed by a First World urban autonomy and the women's language of civil rights - which Aeschylus' brides did not have. Mee's characters speak the assumptions of popular culture that "men are from Mars and women are from Venus," and yet by the end of the play, a deeper project to champion unity in difference becomes apparent.

The battle over arranged marriage provides a forum where the principles of love can be contrasted with the principles of justice. From Plato to Allan Bloom, philosophers have often placed Love in a system separate and inimical to Justice. In *Big Love*, Mee opens up the question of what happens when Love and Justice collide to include broader definitions of sexuality. He redefines the traditional sexual couple through an added character: The Cupid-like Giuliano brings an aesthetic bi-sexuality and an argument for Dionysian self-abandonment. The mystery and the power of the numerous forms of love (which Aristotle understood as *philia*, love of family, *agape*, spiritual awe, and *eros* sexual chemistry) cannot be reduced to a simplistic gender war. Mee follows Aeschylus in creating an Aphrodite character, the earthy old Italian "Nonna", Bella. Like Aphrodite Bella pronounces, "There will be no justice",^{vii} despite the bridegroom murders that have taken place. This terrible yet necessary dictum banishes the notion of love as a superficial or sentimental force that is inferior to justice and demands an awe and respect for love that is seldom accorded by television culture.

Forgiveness and Survival

The insane delirium of love has long been a cultural trope but only recently did Jacques Derrida suggest that forgiveness is similarly a madness. In considering the diplomatic responses to genocides of the 20th century, (such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission) Derrida argues that no victim can understand or agree with the criminal who hurt them, and that the criminal who understands and repents has already changed identity. Thus, "alterity, non-identification, even incomprehension, remain irreducible. Forgiveness is thus mad. It must plunge, but lucidly, into the night of the unintelligible. Call this the unconscious or the non-conscious if you want. As soon as the victim "understands" the criminal, as soon as she exchanges, speaks, agrees with him, the scene of reconciliation has commenced, and with it, this ordinary "forgiveness" which is anything but forgiveness".^{viii} Bella's pronouncement, "There will be no justice"^{ix} recognizes this. She sings a hymn to the dark powers life and death that enable survivors to carry on.

The intensity of the scenario bursts the bounds of rational discourse and must sometimes be danced, sung, howled and fought out. Designer Karyn McCallum has set our production in an installation where Mattel's gendered Ken and Barbie dolls



hang from the lighting grid and punch-bag forms are anchored to the stage floor. Together, they reach for one another in an uneasy balance. Some of the music proposed by Mee will be used in the production but paired with contemporary pieces selected for this version. A deeply passionate movement score with some choreography from Allen Kaeja (of Toronto's independent dance company Kaeja d'dance) moves the play through an exhaustive demonstration of the gender anxieties felt by men and women alike, to a finale that lies beyond justice. The production aims to move seamlessly from pop culture to philosophy to physical extremes. This is in an attempt to convey the chaotic savagery of love, the dark psyche of the survivor and, at the end, the impossibility of justice or forgiveness.

Some critics have called the ending of the play “crowd-pleasing”^x because a penultimate marriage signals a comedy and because the post-modern juxtaposition of high and low art signals a parody. However, Mee’s engagement with more serious topics allows him to transcend parody. He does this by calling for a marriage that is so savagely grotesque that it moves beyond parody and satire into a desperate call for an ethics of mutual care and survival.

Post-modernism has commonly been characterized as parodic and a style that is empty of meaning. Critic Geraldine Harris^{xi} argues, however, that post-modernism is not inherently empty of meaning but is extremely ideological. She points to how post-modernism grew from artists’ critiques of single meaning and teleological narratives, and yet, is frequently taught as nothing but a series of stylistic tropes. Harris has developed a list of “post-modern performance tropes”^{xiii} that have been assimilated from cutting-edge and politically engaged post-modern theatre companies like Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment and Theatre Complicite. Charles Mee’s stage directions in *Big Love* include all of them:

- A) Structures of repetition and interruption and of extreme theatrical self-reflexivity.
- B) Sequences in which the performers act as if becoming increasingly drunk or drugged, repeated onstage costume changes.
- C) Systemic choreography sequences based on natural movement and gesture which often involve the cast in a great deal of falling down and performed to the music of Arvo Part, Michael Nyman, Wim Mertens or Philip Glass. Music used as a “soundtrack”.
- D) Sequences of jumping, falling and being caught in the last possible moment, punishing and exhausting action sections in which the performers seem genuinely to become distressed or exhausted.
- E) Autobiographical material drawn from the performers lives, extreme slow-motion sequences.
- F) “Beautiful” designer sets, costumes set in the forties or fifties, particularly print dresses and heavy trench coats.
- G) Sequences based around suitcases.
- H) “Dance” lighting as opposed to “theatrical” lighting.



In this production we plan to respond to Harris' concern that these stylistic tropes can potentially be emptied of the ideological awareness that Mee repeatedly calls for. In joyfully inhabiting his post-modernism stage directions, we plan to take them to the extreme place of savage grotesque in order to inhabit the meaning behind the devastation in both character psyche and set destruction and to express in some way what it is to survive.

Who is Charles Mee: Excerpts from Interviews

Charles Mee has referred to himself as “an accidental historian” and his texts have a dramatic sensibility for the human drama in politics. He is best known for his “Meeting at Potsdam” where he used diaries and meeting transcripts to set the stage with Churchill, Stalin and Truman, revealing through their conversation how responsibility for the cold war lies primarily with the US. Mee’s history books provide an intellectual commentary on his work that is almost like a Shavian prologue. He says, “Mainstream American theater makes it impossible to understand history as being made up of politics, economics, sociology, and their interaction. Instead it just describes everything in terms of psychological relationships and, once you enter that discourse, you’re limited to its conclusions. So most American plays actually make us stupid about our historical condition”.^{xiii}

In an interview with Tod London, Mee described mainstream American culture as functioning to preserve American innocence. It is “a remarkable historical feat” which he feels is his personal responsibility as an artist to end. “In certain very small and limited ways, my life has been horrific” he explains, “Certainly, the life of our times for many people has been horrific—most of us are unable to go there. Part of the function of my work is to go there. You can’t get civilized until you get there”. London concludes that “Getting civilized” is at the heart of Mee’s historic/theatrical vision”.^{xiv}

Mee has said that “theatre is truer than history” and sees no point in rehearsing history other than to explore the present in a meta-realist “recognition of a context more complex than we had hoped necessary...that also takes into account some values, wishes, beliefs and hopes that are completely unrealistic”.^{xv} He understands his plays as architecture in which he lives vicariously: “Vincent Scully said that architects design buildings as a reflection of the structure of their own bodies. I write plays that way. What feels good to me is a play that’s broken, awkward, raw, unfinished, fucked up, because I had polio and this is how it feels inside my skin. That’s how the world feels to me”.^{xvi}

Mee’s playwriting expresses his world. “My preference is for making unmediated, disappointed plays full of sharp edges and juxtapositions where you’re startled by the suddenness of life”.^{xvii} He told interviewer Scott Cummings that, “any work of art that normalizes the world seems threatening to me. Not only does it feel alien to my experience, it also feels hostile.” He does not consider his task as a writer



to be to please or entertain the audience, “...what would people like? What does the culture want? All those questions undermine you. If you don’t present a vision of the world that nourishes you then you are making the world unsafe for your own existence”.^{xviii}

However, Mee is not merely expressing his inner reality in his plays. He has a goal that he articulates without mincing words, “I want people to see themselves historically. I think our society’s days are numbered. The world is disjointed. A narrative way of seeing life no longer fits—we don’t live in a Newtonian universe... My work bears the same relationship to the late 20th Century as Chekhov’s did to the 19th. My plays are true naturalism”.^{xix}

The Danaids: A Summary of Aeschylus’ play

In *Remaking American Theatre*, Scott Cummings says that, “Just as *The Oresteia* dramatized the mythic origins of a system of justice based on the code of law and trial by jury, *The Danaids* trilogy might have depicted the mythic origins of an institution of marriage based on the code of love and perpetual fidelity”.^{xx} But while some classics scholars view *The Danaids* as dramatically symbolic of the movement beyond endogamy (inter-clan marriage) into a civil (and perhaps spiritual) union mandated by love, others point out that the catalyst of the Suppliant Women’s flight for refuge is their father, Danaïus, whom the Delphic Oracle ordained would be killed by his son-in-law. Danaïus’ daughters are not so horrified by marriage to their cousins as they are bound by their duty to their father not to marry, and it is this bond with her father that is broken by the daughter who refuses to kill her husband.

Danaïus has fifty daughters and his brother Aegyptus has fifty sons. A match between their children was proposed by Aegyptus, but Danaïus was unwilling—although it is not mentioned in the play, Greek audiences would have known that this is because he has been warned by an oracle that he will be killed by his son-in-law. He and his fifty daughters flee to Argos, a democratic country, where they beg refuge from its ruler, Pelageus, even threatening suicide when he seems reluctant. Pelageus persuades his countrymen to give them refuge but the fifty sons of Aegyptus pursue and find them, attempting to kidnap them until the Pelagians intervene. Aeschylus’ first play ends here with the stand-off between the Aegyptians and Danaids’ host. The stories of the second and third plays are told in various versions in Greek accounts of the myth, but we don’t know exactly how Aeschylus would have written it because only fragments of Aphrodite’s “deus ex machina” speech remain.

In the second play, the steadfastness of democracy’s moral purpose is tested and found wanting; the daughters’ obedience to their father is tested further and is found to be almost complete. The Pelagean people decide that the price of war is too high to pay for protecting the Danaids, and agree to allow the marriages to



proceed. However, Danaïus devises a plan to help his daughters escape their unwanted marriages. He pretends that he is willing, but he secretly gives each of his fifty daughters a sharp knife telling them to kill their husbands on their wedding night. All fifty daughters, except one called Hypermnestra, obey their father. She spares her husband Lynceus because he respected her virginity and did not view marriage as contract to be enforced. The second play ends as Danaïus, the Pelageans and Hypermnestra's sister discover her disobedience, and she is arrested by her father.

The third play weighs the different obligations of love and contract against one another and argues that the bond of love is a greater obligation than a legal bond. Aeschylus introduces the "Legal" scene in court, where Aphrodite, the goddess of love, descends to preside as judge over Hypermnestra's trial. Aphrodite determines that the wife's obligation to a love-sanctioned marriage is greater than her obedience to her father. The Danaïds are punished, dispatched to Hades where they are assigned the task of filling up a leaking jar with water carried in a sieve. Hypermnestra, who had spared her husband Lynceus, lived happily with him.

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