Interviews with the Authors

Ryan McKittrick of the A.R.T. talks with Stephen Greenblatt and Charles Mee about the play.

Ryan McKittrick: How did this collaboration begin?

SG: It began on the shores of Lake Como in 1999, when Chuck and I had overlapping residencies at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center. Three years later I received a grant from the Mellon Foundation that gave me the opportunity to do something that I had never done before. So I called Chuck. I told him that I'd been studying plays all my life but that I'd never actually been close to the creation of one, and that I would love to watch the evolution of a play from its conception through the writing and performance of it. I offered him an enormous sum of money from the Mellon Foundation. And Chuck said no! He turned down my magnificent offer because he didn't like the idea of being watched and wasn't particularly interested in money.

CM: But what I also said was that it would be really fun to write something together. And then one of us said that there must be a lost play by Shakespeare we could work on. So we decided we'd do what Shakespeare himself did – steal somebody else's idea and write our own play.

RM: Chuck, you've adapted plays from so many different time periods – Greek plays, Chinese dramas, plays by Brecht. Why has adaptation been such an important aspect of your work as a playwright?

CM: For years people have said to me that the Western world's greatest playwrights are the Greeks and Shakespeare. So I've tried to do what they did, which was to never ever, not once in their entire lives, ever write an original play. They stole somebody else's play or story and made their own play out of it. It's not really adaptation – or else you'd have to call all of Shakespeare's plays adaptations. It's really stealing from a common treasury and running it through your own psyche, feeling no particular obligation to being faithful to the person you ripped off. And feeling free to steal not only the idea or the theme or the story or the characters, but also the guy's best dramaturgical tricks. While we were working on Cardenio, Stephen actually taught a course at Harvard on how Shakespeare took material and transformed it into his own plays.

SG: I called it "Shakespearean Playwriting." Chuck came to the course and gave some lectures, and he also suggested that we have the students write down ten things that Shakespeare really likes to do – ten tricks. We had a lot of students, so we had more than a thousand suggestions.

RM: Did any of those stand out for you and make it into Cardenio?

CM: We had a terrific student who wrote that most playwrights start with the exposition of a stable world into which a destabilizing element is introduced, but Shakespeare begins his plays with a destabilizing element. And that the beginning scenes in Shakespeare's plays are short, the middle scenes are long, and the ending scenes are short. For me, as a playwright, working with the world's greatest Shakespeare scholar on this course and on our play was like having my own personal graduate seminar in how Shakespeare wrote plays. I spent most of my last sixty-nine years worshipping Shakespeare as a genius. And now in the last few years I actually see how he

wrote plays and what I can steal and use. Now I'm constantly thinking about Shakespeare's ten best tricks. So I think I was smart to turn down the money and suggest we write something together. It was an amazing experience.

SG: It was also marvelously liberating for me to understand that as a playwright you don't start off with a blank page and torment yourself with the dream that a muse is going to come down and strike you. You actually beg, borrow, and steal. Chuck announced to the class that if anyone came up with anything good we would steal it. And Chuck himself posts all of his work on the Web without copyright restrictions, so that people can adapt and transform his plays as they wish as long as they acknowledge where they got them. It was liberating for me to see that this process wasn't about a magical ray coming down from the heavens onto one isolated individual, but rather about the recycling and circulation of materials. Although looking back, I'm not sure that's entirely true, because I think a ray did come down and hit my collaborator on the head.

RM: How did you start writing the play?

CM: Stephen used some of his grant to rent a gorgeous farmhouse on the top of a hill in Umbria – a setting that looks a lot like the countryside where Shakespeare set many of his romantic comedies. We went there with my daughter and with Stephen's wife and son. We'd spend the day working on the play, discussing what we wanted to do with the source materials and with the notes from Stephen's course. And at some point we'd take a break and drive around the Italian countryside and go see art.

RM: Did some of those experiences make it into your play, which is set in Umbria?

SG: A lot of it made it into the play. There was a very funny moment for me in this process when I realized how much had actually made it in. My wife speaks Italian reasonably well and I speak stumblingly well. But Chuck wasn't saying much of anything in Italian while we were in Umbria, and I really wasn't sure if he understood the language at all. One day our Sardinian chef, Melchiore, was blabbering on in Italian about all of the pastas he was making, while Chuck, I thought, was just sitting off to the side daydreaming. But then everything Melchiore had said showed up in the play, almost verbatim. It was as if Chuck had tape-recorded it.

RM: What happened to the play after you left Italy?

SG: Chuck did an enormous amount of the actual heavy lifting and writing. If we had taken another ten years I might still be limping along producing some text. But when Chuck gets going he is unbelievably productive.

CM: We came back from Italy with a complete outline of the play, and then I wrote a draft of it and sent it to Stephen. Then the script went back and forth between us. Stephen would send notes and I would rewrite, but in the end we both ended up giving each other notes and writing dialogue. To tell you the truth, it's hard for me to go back through the piece and see who wrote what.

SG: A generous account, but even when I did write some small sections what usually happened was that Chuck would break up my lines and make them sound much better. So I experienced a sweet and comical reverse version of Monsieur Jourdain's realization in Molière's The Bourgeois Gentleman that he's been speaking prose his whole life!

RM: The A.R.T. production of Cardenio will be the play's world premiere. But there have already been other productions around the world of plays inspired by your collaboration.

SG: That's right. For me this whole process has been about the idea of cultural mobility – what happens when materials are moved. One of the things that thrilled me when I first started reading Chuck's work was that I realized he's the cultural mobility meister. His work is all about what happens when you move material from one place to another. Since Chuck left me with a lot of unspent grant money, I'm using the funding to provide theatre companies around the world with translations of our play and translations of the source materials we used [Theobald's The Double Falsehood, which is the 18th-century adaptation of Shakespeare's lost play, and Cervantes' Don Quixote]. I tell the companies that they can't perform our play because I want to see what happens when they adapt and transform the materials to their own theatrical and national cultures. I'm going to have all these plays translated back into English, so we'll have a sophisticated version of the old elementary school telephone game in which you see what happens when a message is passed around. There has already been a production in Japanese in Yokohama and one in Bengali in Calcutta. And there's one coming up in Croatian in Zagreb and one in Spanish in Alcalá, which is rather touching because that's the city of Cervantes' birth.

RM: What has your reaction been to the productions you've seen?

SG: I've been fascinated by all of them. Having read Roland Barthes' Empire of Signs and having spent some time in Japan visiting Zen gardens and seeing Noh, Kyogen, and Kabuki plays, I expected at least some lacquered fans and chopsticks in the Japanese production. But instead I saw something called Motorcycle Don Quixote, which took place in a motorcycle shop in Yokohama and completely reversed what Chuck and I had done with the story. The Bengali production was about the tensions and complexities of the world of arranged marriages. It was marvelous and wildly exuberant, and actually much closer to the Cardenio story as Shakespeare had told it.

RM: Do you have any thoughts or hopes as we're preparing to go into rehearsals for the A.R.T.'s production of your play?

CM: I hope it will be great!

SG: Exactly! Beautiful, marvelous, and giddily entertaining!

Sarah Ollove, a student at the A.R.T. Institute for Advanced Theatre Training, talks with Stephen Greenblatt about playwriting.

Sarah Ollove: What made you want to work with Chuck Mee on a play?

SG: I met Chuck at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Italy, and I admired his work greatly on that occasion. Working on a play with Chuck was perfect for me because I am interested in cultural mobility. That is, I am interested in what happens when materials get recycled – what happens when things are moved from one place to another, from one culture to another, or from one mind to another. Chuck happens to be a genius at that kind of recycling.

SO: What about the idea of cultural mobility fascinates you?

SG: It interests me because of its strong links to my lifelong pursuits as a Shakespearean. Shakespeare was perfectly capable of inventing stories. He did it, for example, in A Midsummer Night's Dream and in The Tempest. But most of the time he preferred to rip somebody else off. Whether he was working from an ancient source or a contemporary source, he clearly loved moving texts into his own sphere and seeing what he could do with them. I'm a scholar of the Renaissance, a word that means rebirth. That's another way of saying cultural mobility.

SO: Did anything surprise you in the playwriting process?

SG: I would say there were two things I found particularly striking, if not surprising. One was the delicious sense of freedom in writing plays that you don't have in studying them. You're making it up. And you can have it come out the way you want. If the story that you've received has a miserably unhappy ending, as indeed the story from Cervantes that we borrowed does, you can give it a happy ending. So one thing was the intense pleasure of agency in the act of making. And the other is exactly the opposite – there are certain things you can't make happen, even if you want to make them happen. We tried at various moments to push the play in a slightly different direction from the one it was taking, but we found it resisted. So as a playwright you're free but not completely free.

SO: Has the creative process changed the way that you teach Shakespeare or the kinds of assignments that you give?

SG: This project changed my teaching before the play was actually written. When Chuck and I began talking about writing something together, I decided to teach an undergraduate course here at Harvard called Shakespearean Playwriting in which I tried to focus on Shakespeare's work as a practicing playwright – to identify, for example, theatrical devices of which he was especially fond or track carefully the ways he handles entrances and exits. I asked the students to write Shakespearean scenes, and Chuck and I began to play the game ourselves.

SO: What's been your favorite part of this process so far?

SG: The sheer joy of knowing and working with my collaborator, Chuck, who is a remarkably interesting and engaging and joyous human being with an extraordinary set of talents. It's been a

revelation and a huge pleasure for me to watch and join in the writing of this play with such a person.