



Opposite: Nov. 10, 1989: East German border guards try to prevent a crowd climbing onto the Berlin Wall on the morning that the first section was pulled down. (Tom Stoddart/Getty Images)

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED

By Miriam Weisfeld, Production Dramaturg

In *Full Circle*, director Michael Rohd, his frequent collaborator Shannon Scrofano, and their design team use architecture and technology to parallel the roles travel and media played in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Erected to prevent Eastern residents from traveling to the West, the Wall opened when a critical mass of citizens insisted on virtual and physical access to the world beyond.

Twenty years ago this November, East German leader Gunter Schabowski made a casual statement in a televised press conference. He mentioned that East German citizens – who had been forbidden from traveling to the West for twenty-eight years – could cross the border freely. Immediately after the live broadcast, crowds appeared at the Berlin Wall and told the armed guards they were permitted to pass. When citizens explained to the perplexed guards that they'd heard the news on television, the guards allowed them to pass without question.

This peaceful revolution was the culmination of decades of large and small acts of resistance. Since Germany had been divided by the Allies following WWII, citizens in the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic (GDR) had been rehearsing for this moment of physical freedom by covertly accessing Western news. This “intellectual escape” from the GDR via radio and television – which could not be blocked out by a physical wall – encouraged Eastern citizens to question Soviet propaganda, and eventually emboldened escape attempts. Although over 200 people died trying to travel to the West, tens of thousands succeeded.

As early as 1946, the United States used electronic media to circumvent limits on journalistic freedom in the Soviet-controlled sector of postwar Berlin. Radio in the American Sector (RIAS) broadcast news for all Berliners that countered the state-controlled propaganda of Stalin's administration. As Cold War tensions escalated, RIAS

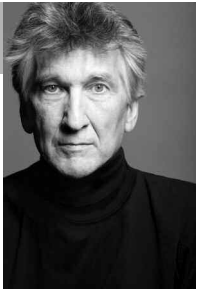
employees received orders from Washington to make alternate perspectives available to the GDR, leaving the East Germans to draw their own political conclusions. They did: in 1953, a riot erupted in East Berlin. Soviet forces killed over 200 protesters, but RIAS broadcasters such as Egon Bahr realized, “The electronic medium is able to change the political situation.”

Over the following decades, television continued to erase the intellectual barrier between East and West. By the mid-1980's, Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* discouraged the Stasi's attempts to police any Eastern television antennae that pointed West. As the *New York Times* reported, citizens of the GDR lived “in socialism by day and in capitalism by night, when they turn on Western television.”

Simultaneously, the increasing physical openness of other Soviet-controlled states began allowing for freer travel by East German refugees. When Hungary dismantled its border with Austria in September

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

CHARLES L. MEE has written *Big Love* (Woolly Mammoth, 2002), *True Love*, and *First Love*, *bobrauschenbergamerica*, *Hotel Cassiopeia*, *Orestes 2.0*, *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, *Summertime*, and *Wintertime*, among other plays – all available online at www.charlesmee.org. His plays have been performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, American Repertory Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, The Public Theater, Lincoln Center, the Humana Festival, Steppenwolf, and other places in the United States, as well as in Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, London, Brussels, Vienna, Istanbul, and elsewhere. Among other awards, Chuck is the recipient of the Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, two Obies, a Laura Pels Award, and the Richard B. Fisher Award. He is the head of the graduate playwriting program at Columbia University's School of the Arts. He is also the author of a number of books of history (*Meeting at Potsdam*, *The Marshall Plan*, *The End of Order*) that have been selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the History Book Club. The former editor-in-chief of *Horizon* magazine, a magazine of history, art, literature, and the fine arts, Chuck is a lifetime trustee of the Washington think tank The Urban Institute. His work is made possible by the support of Jeanne Donovan Fisher and Richard B. Fisher.





Opposite: Barbed wire in front of the Brandenburg Gate, circa 1962. The sign warns that if you pass this point you leave West Berlin. (John Waterman/Fox Photos/Getty Images)

1989, 55,000 former residents of the GDR streamed across. Gorbachev

continued to pressure the Stasi to use restraint, and demonstrations against travel restrictions in Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin occurred without violent retaliation. On November 8, the GDR's entire Politburo resigned. The next day, Schabowski gave the press conference that made escape from the GDR a reality for all who desired it.

As former residents of the GDR discovered, there is never just one side to a story. While travel and media delivered a multiplicity of viewpoints to question Soviet propaganda, travel and media inspired another type of liberation in the American theatre. Many avant-garde directors took cues from the political realities of the twentieth century and responded by celebrating a liberal relationship to architecture and technology in art.

In the 1960's, American theatre famously escaped the proscenium with Richard Schechner's experimental "Happenings" such as *Dionysus '69*, his retelling of *The Bacchae* in a Soho garage. This orgiastic staging encouraged the audience to choose vantage-points above, below, and in the center of a performance space of industrial scaffolding. "The text is a map with many possible routes," Schechner wrote. "You push, pull, explore, exploit. You decide where you want to go."

Schechner's Performance Group evolved into the Wooster Group in 1980, under the leadership of Elizabeth LeCompte. Pushing the architectural and technological boundaries of the theatre further, she introduced film and video in juxtaposition to live performance. LeCompte constantly found political inspiration for her use of technology; her 1984 show *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...)* included microphones modeled on those seen in the televised McCarthy hearings. Other theatre directors such as Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman also helped to bring architectural and technological innovation to twentieth century theatre. By now, travel and media have become common tools of politically and formally inquisitive art.

By staging *Full Circle* outside the confines of the proscenium, Michael Rohd frees the audience to witness alternate sides of the story onscreen, and to move across the space to access it from any perspective they choose. As the characters journey across Germany's rapidly-changing landscape, the audience can see many sides to both socialism and capitalism. And perhaps — twenty years after the Cold War — a third way between two opposing perspectives might emerge.

CREATURES OF OUR HISTORY

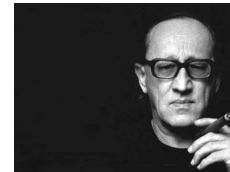
"I don't write 'political plays' in the usual sense of the term; but I write out of the belief that we are creatures of our history and culture and gender and politics... And I think of the characters who speak these texts as characters like the rest of us: people through whom the culture speaks, often without the speakers knowing it." — Charles L. Mee

Full Circle incorporates a number of found texts and many of the characters are collages of real-life personalities; below are some of their inspirations.

Dulle Griet, a figure from Flemish Folklore, was most famously portrayed in Peter Bruegel the Elder's painting, where she fearlessly plunders from the mouth of Hell.



Dulle Griet, by Bruegel



Müller

Heiner Müller, considered the greatest German theatre artist since Brecht, wrote such avant-garde masterpieces as *Hamletmachine*, *Quartet* and *Mauser*. A critic of both capitalism and communism, he led the

Berliner Ensemble in the early 1990's.

Erich Honecker, Head of State of the German Democratic Republic from 1971 to 1989, instituted the "shoot-to-kill" policy on all attempted escapes over the Berlin Wall.

Pamela Harriman, a Washington socialite—who first married Winston Churchill's son, and later, New York Governor Averell Harriman—helped inspire the character of Pamela.



Harriman

Warren Buffet, the "Oracle of Omaha," made billions through his investment company Berkshire Hathaway and is now sought after for his homespun economic philosophy.