Merton’s was a life lived both in quiet meditation and the noise of the world, and Mee’s play adopts a structure that reflects those dualities, beginning in silence and evolving toward cacophonous celebration. It unfolds as a series of toasts that erupt into a raucous party. The giver of each toast is eager to claim Merton for his own school of thought. Was Merton primarily a Catholic, as his vows indicate? A Zen Buddhist, where his spiritual interests led him later in life? A pacifist whose anti-war advocacy was well known? A Communist? A mystic, bohemian, or adventurer? “I was writing—thrown into the middle of a birthday party, imagining what these people would say—and it just happened,” says Mee of the play’s dialectical flow. But its multifaceted perspectives on Merton also speak to the seeming contradictions of a man who valued solitude and social activism, whose thinking was too expansive to fit into a linear, easily-explained story. “I think, fundamentally, that our lives are more complicated than that,” Mee muses. “It’s not A causes B causes C causes D. It’s really like this: A causes B causes C causes 236 causes purple causes everybody to dance. At least, that’s more how my life has been.”

Speaking of dance, The Glory of the World’s action spans the extremes from quiet listening to exuberant physical spectacle. Waters credits Mee with encouraging his own interest in “things that go from absolute stillness to noise and chaos,” and in the electricity that results from juxtaposing contrasting elements.

Mee explains his own instinct thus: “I love everything that can happen in the theatre—music and dance and movement and text and everything else.” Accordingly, this is a play and production that tangles with big philosophical quandaries through a vibrant and constantly changing visual world. Without spoiling too many surprises, let’s just say that there’s some drinking, some dancing (choreographed by SITI Company’s Barney O’Hanlon), singing and more, as the perspectives on Merton tumble forth and his birthday party rages on.

The piece’s progression also allows Mee to pose some of the biggest questions of existence that Merton grappled with, through ruminations on the necessity of love, the quest for happiness, and seeking a kind of heaven on earth. “I threw myself into the material in the way that I imagine Merton threw himself into his wandering meditations,” the playwright says of his journey through various sources to create the play’s shifting arguments. At one point, the play posits the act of writing itself as a kind of life everlasting, a way for a consciousness to permanently live on. Through the accumulation of all these hopes, The Glory of the World is a truly joyful, rollicking party of a play that considers how we can live fully in all our contradictions, and leap into the unknown.

—Amy Wegener