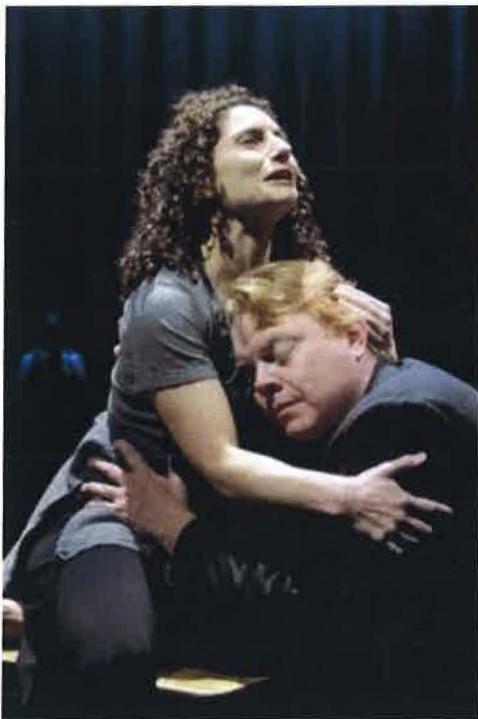




10/26/2009

Interview with Director Anne Bogart

By: *David Singer*



The name Anne Bogart and the world of experimental theater have been linked since the early 1980's. Labeled as one of "the leading lights of the American theater", Bogart has been lauded for her groundbreaking work as a director/choreographer, remounting such classics as her Bessie award-winning "South Pacific" (set in a mental hospital with war vets), "Picnic" and "Miss Julie". She's also premiered a string of new plays, including Paula Vogel's "The Baltimore Waltz" and Eduardo Machado's "In the Eye of the Hurricane."

These days Bogart is especially busy, heading Columbia's graduate directing program, and serving as artistic director of SITI (pronounced "city"), the international theater company which she co-founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki. The company is newly based in Manhattan this year and will present a full season of offerings, beginning with Jocelyn Clarke's adaptation of Sophocles' "Antigone", running this week at Dance Theater Workshop.

I met with Anne Bogart late last week, after watching part of a rehearsal at the company's space

in the West 30's. The strong collaborative connection among company members was palpable, as was Bogart's warm intensity as we chatted about her insights on the production and SITI Company.

DS: Your artistic vision includes your own perspective on the country's culture. Can you elaborate on that?

AB: A lot of my work is related to U.S. culture, and I've gotten a lot of insight through going away. Living in other countries like France, Japan, Canada and realizing how deeply proud I am. We have a rich culture here that we pretend doesn't exist-- minstrel shows, jazz, detective novels, etc. Much of what I think about is what it all means now. Like what is a nation? It seems like nationhood is an old concept, and that the new technologies have made it next to obsolete. Perhaps we need to find new ways of defining that old idea. Cultures are certainly differentiated, but nations...are suspect.

DS: You company SITI certainly has an international essence. Can you describe the company and how it came about?

AB: We began 17 years ago, when I co-founded it with Tadashi Suzuki. We came up with the idea of having a double site for the company, both here and in Japan, for artists to come together. In the beginning, we performed in Saratoga, so we called it Saratoga International Theatre Institute. But almost everyone lived in New York, so the first name didn't really make sense. We've spent 17 years on the road, coming here occasionally, but never regularly. This is the first time we're based here, and it's expensive, but we're investing in having a real presence. We're 19 in the group made up of actors, designers and administrators. The company has also trained thousands of artists as part of our mission.

DS: How are SITI members chosen, and what are your training methods?

AB: We find new members mostly through the workshops that we teach. Everyone in the acting company has to have extensive training in both Suzuki and Viewpoints training. The Suzuki method involves a lot of physical bodywork to uncover the actor's innate expressive ability. The Viewpoints is a technique of improvisation that I translated from the work of choreographer Mary Overlie. I'm interested in breaking down boundaries, so the audience will ask what the actors are actually doing on stage. Are they walking or dancing? It's not clear which art form they're in.

DS: What specific elements make up your new adaptation of "Antigone"?

AB: What the audience will see is a group of people coming to a table on stage to engage in conversation. They will be dressed something like on the Bill Maher show (maybe someone with a shirt and tie). Very contemporary, no togas! There will be moments when the performers are either dancing or acting. There will be recorded music and a live musician on stage with them. The story is so rich. It's an extraordinary journey, so we don't want to get in the way a lot.

DS: How is this production a relevant, up-to-date piece?

AB: It's frighteningly in the moment! I chose to do this play because all the smartest people I know say "Antigone" is the greatest play ever written. After considering this for quite a while, I now trust it must be true. My dear friend Jocelyn Clarke wrote this adaptation, which is like a razor—clear and sharp. It's about the individual and community and the individual in relation to family. I think it's such a great play because it combines the ambiguities of what we're living.

What's my part, my responsibility to government, to my family, to the dead, to the memories of them? These are very deep questions to think about.

DS: What would you hope that the audience would take away from this experience?

AB: There's something that happens when actors approach a play. The play is always a question that one encounters. Hopefully, there is a human transformation that occurs with the chemistry of the moment, here unlocked by the ancient story. And of course, there are questions within the play, within its characters. Creon is not right, but he is also not wrong, and perhaps one could say the same about Antigone. I hope that the audience reacts to one of the greatest stories ever told, by shared imagination and breath. Although the stage is bare, they are all—actors and audience—confronting and moving through space together. The super present actors are put together with a super present audience and form a democratic society.

DS: After this run, you're doing 5 public presentations with SITI in November. What are they all about?

AB: These are interactive events to share our process, hopes and dreams, and to find community in New York. Each event will feature an aspect of our work. There's one on musicians, one about our training, one on our current relationship with the Martha Graham Company, one about our connection with playwright Charles Mee and one on our devised work that we create from nothing.

DS: And what do you envision for SITI in the near future?

AB: What we want is to have not only a performance home, but also a home for training. And we'd love to develop an MFA program as well. So that we can become a thought center with a New York season, a training program and a cross-discipline international exchange. In terms of our productions, beginning with "Antigone", we're keeping ticket prices low, so this is different from a product-oriented mentality that is so much present in New York and outside today. What I'd like most is for people to bring their curiosity, so that this is a wonderful meeting between artist and observer. If there's not that in the world of theater, then there's no point at all.

Antigone

Written by Jocelyn Clarke

Directed by Anne Bogart

Performed by SITI Company

Oct 28 – Nov 1 at 7:30pm, Oct 31 & Nov 1 at 3pm

Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues, New York

Box Office Phone: (212) 924-0077, or buy online at siti.org

\$25/ \$20 students