

# Notes on *Cabin Pressure*

by Anne Bogart

A friend once described to me an incident in a crowded bus in San Francisco. She noticed two distinctly disparate individuals pushed up against one another on a narrow seat across from her: one, an outwardly fragile elderly lady, and the second, a flashy transvestite.

Suddenly the bus lurched and the elderly lady's hair-net caught onto a ring on the transvestite's hand.

When I heard this story I jumped. The story embodies an unmistakable lesson about what is possible between actors on stage and between actors and audience in a theater.

The moment the elderly lady's hair-net caught onto the transvestite's ring, the two were caught up in an exquisite mutual crisis outside of their day-to-day lives. Forced by circumstances to deal with one another, the boundaries that normally defined and separated them dissolved instantly. Suddenly the potential for something new and fresh sprang into being. Perhaps one might express outrage, or possibly they would both burst out laughing. The boundaries evaporated and they found themselves without the cushion of definitions that had formerly sufficed to keep them separate.

The Japanese have a word to describe the quality of space between two people: *m'ai*. In the martial arts, the *m'ai* is vital because of the peril of weaponry and attack. The danger invokes hyper-awareness of the space between people. On the stage, the space between actors and the space between actor and audience must continually be endowed with quality, attention and potential danger. The tension of the *m'ai* must be respected and tended.

As a director in the theater, I am acutely aware of the tension, the exquisite pressure, or the lack of pressure, this *m'ai*, between the audience and actors on the stage. The dynamics between an actor and audience constitute a creative relationship very different from daily life. The theater is what happens in the space between spectator and actor. It is an art form completely dependent upon the creative potential of each audience member in relation to the events on stage. Without a receiver, there is no experience. The receiver completes the

circle with his/her own experience, imagination, and creativity. Sometimes the relationship functions and, at times, it does not.

I decided to create a play with the SIT Company about this vital relationship. The title of the play, *Cabin Pressure*, is a metaphor for our investigation.

*The public sometimes thinks an artist is a television set—something comes out, nothing goes back. They don't realize that if they can hear me, then I can hear them—their coughs, the electronic beeps from their wristwatches, the squeaking of their shoes.*

These words were spoken during an interview with the great pianist Alfred Brendel. He continues,

*The art of performance depends on the relationship between the musician and the audience. In the concert hall, each motionless listener is part of the performance. The concentration of the player charges the electric tension in the auditorium and returns to him magnified.... The audience grows together and becomes a group. There's the impression of a journey undertaken together and a goal achieved.*

Occasionally, in preparation for a concert, Alfred Brendel invited his neighbor and friend A. Alvarez to his home in London to listen. The first time Alvarez accepted the invitation, he worried that Brendel expected criticism or feedback but soon he understood the invitation. Alvarez would arrive in Brendel's home to find a chair sitting next to the piano. "What I assume," writes Alvarez, "is that he wants a sympathetic and attentive presence in the room, simply to complete the artistic circle."

With *Cabin Pressure* I wanted to create a new play which would address the issues of this "artistic circle." What is the creative role of the audience in the theater? What is the audience's responsibility to the actor? What is the actor's responsibility to the audience? What is an audience? What is an actor doing?

These are some of the issues I presented to the SITI Company actors in early rehearsal for this new collaboratively-created play. I wanted us to start with no preconceived notions or assumptions about the answers to these questions, but rather to experiment freely and play with possible variations on the theme. The result of these explorations is *Cabin Pressure*, which premiered at the Humana Festival of New American Plays.

In any production, once the director, the playwright and the designers have gone, the actor is left with a very particular daily dilemma: How to adjust to each new audience. A performance has a fluid rhythm that changes with each audience it touches. An actor can feel an audience no less palpably than the audience can feel the actors. The actor stands backstage and listens to the audience before making an entrance. The reception is palpable. Listening to the listening, the actor adjusts the speed of an entrance, the intensity of the first line spoken or the length of a pause. An actor learns when to hold back and when to open up based on the agility and responsiveness of the audience.

The realization of *Cabin Pressure* was a two-year process made possible by the National Theatre Artist Residency Program, administered by Theatre Communications Group and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Over the course of two years I worked closely with the staff of Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL) and the SITI Company in intensive collaboration with Michael Dixon and Adrien-Alice Hansel at Actors Theatre. We chose forty-seven Louisville "civilians" from different age groups, different religions and diverse theatergoing experiences to take part in the first stages of what we called the Audience Project.

The first year encompassed work on Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, which I directed at ATL with members of the SITI Company. During this period of development and performance of *Private Lives*, each of the Audience Project participants agreed to attend a minimum of two rehearsals, one technical rehearsal, one performance and to take part in post-show discussions, from the stage, with the audiences for *Private Lives*. During first year of the residency, I took as much opportunity as time allowed to conduct ongoing discussions with the members of the Audience Project. It was important to fully describe the project and share my thoughts and questions about the creative role of the

audience. I wanted to familiarize everyone with the terrain, pose the central questions of the project, and make clear what was expected. These sessions were always taped and transcribed for future use.

At first it was disorienting to have the Audience Project in the room with us in rehearsal as we struggled to find our way through *Private Lives*. Early on, the actors complained about the discomfort of the situation. They took me aside and pointed out that a rehearsal, for them, is a vulnerable period and they felt that they should be able to make mistakes freely without civilians watching. They asked what their responsibility to the visitors was supposed to be and wondered how they should relate to them. This, for me, was the first insight into the relationship between audience and actor: the director is the very first audience and the only person that the actors should have a relationship with until the production is ready. In order to continue with this project, I told the actors that they were responsible only to the line between them and me. They had absolutely no responsibility to the visitors. At a certain point, the director can turn the actors over to a wider audience.

During the run of *Private Lives*, certain performances featured post-show discussions with members of the Audience Project and me, from the stage, for audiences who had just seen the show. These sessions were also taped and transcribed for use in the development of *Cabin Pressure*.

At the end of the *Private Lives* phase of the project, I conducted individual interviews with all Audience Project participants. Each interview lasted about a half hour and was also taped and transcribed.

In the interviews, I asked the Audience Project members about their experiences in rehearsal. I wanted to know what had intrigued them and how being in rehearsal had changed their experience of the production in front of a regular audience. I asked them other questions about what they remembered most vividly from the rehearsal process. I asked them to formulate questions they would have wanted to ask the actors. I asked why they went to the theater and how going to the theater affected their lives. I asked if they preferred going to the theater alone or with other people.

Some of the text from these interviews as well as transcriptions of the talk-back sessions eventually became dialogue in our new play *Cabin Pressure*.

The rest of the text in *Cabin Pressure* was sampled freely from various theoretical writings about the actor/audience relationship as well as excerpts from existing plays, including *Private Lives* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

All of the actors in *Cabin Pressure*—SITI Company members Ellen Lauren, Kelley Maurer, Stephen Webber, Barney O'Hanlon and Will Bond—had performed extensively on the ATL stages and were well known to Louisville audiences. They read all of the interviews and the collected theoretical writings and plays culled by the literary staff at ATL, and from this material we fashioned a play. The process of writing the play was one of intense collaboration among the actors, sound designer Darron West, stage manager Megan Wanlass, and myself. In any moment we were willing to follow the lead of whoever in the room was onto something. We never knew ahead of time what would develop or who would lead. We tried to listen to one another and to the work that was manifesting itself.

Within the structure of *Cabin Pressure*, we explored the different qualities of *m'ai* found in the history of theatergoing. We achieved this by dramatizations of the many actor/audience relationships found throughout the history of theater, such as: spectacle, ritual, confession, participation and the "fourth wall."

Perhaps because we had no idea what we were hatching, the performances of *Cabin Pressure* at the Humana Festival were revelatory. Suddenly we were performing a play about the people in the room and the response of those very people was palpable. There were wonderful moments when we sensed that the audience was aware of themselves in the room, aware of their participation in the creation of an event. We were all together, breathing common air.

I hope that *Cabin Pressure* will continue in forthcoming performances to be a celebration of the potential humanity of the audience/actor relationship in the theater. In a time when computers, television, film and mega-malls dominate and mediate our relationships with others, the theater is a place to strengthen and heighten our direct connection with one another.

## Excerpts from the Text

*Some of this material has been sampled from published sources, which are noted. The remaining material is drawn from statements made by Anne Bogart and members of the Actors Theatre of Louisville Audience Project.*

### Q and A II

YOSHI: [I can say] "manipulation." "Style." With a capital "S." Um—"acrobatics." Uh—silence, whistling, sighing, faster pulse, heavier breathing, tension in the pit of the stomach, sexual arousal, and—I guess misguided passion.

ROZANNE: It's—it's just pretty.

EDDIE: What did you think?

VANESSA: I liked it.

BERT: Hmmm....

EDDIE: Did you learn anything? (*Silence.*) What was your experience?

ROZANNE: It was fun.

BERT/VANESSA: Uh....

BERT: I was very embarrassed most of the time.

VANESSA: I was uncomfortable.

EDDIE: What is it that makes an actor interesting?

ROZANNE: Teeth. Like her front teeth look like her smile went back to her ears. And her front teeth were like this big and I really liked it. And uh—um—she—her eyes looked really huge and like they were pointing upwards. Her role reminded me of a Dr. Seuss character. Because the way she smiled and like her teeth were really huge and I'm nearsighted and so um—I think that helps my creativity, I guess. Because, uh, otherwise, everything is so—you know.

EDDIE: Where were you sitting?

ROZANNE: In the balcony.

YOSHI: I was so far away I couldn't hear anything that was going on except for an occasional line. And I wanted to get up and come over just to listen, you know. Uh—so I missed that a lot. And I was uncomfortable physically. I was chilly and the—the chair got harder and harder. And I was desperate for a cup of coffee.

VANESSA: I really do like sitting down front. On the stage if you let me. The closer the better. I wanna feel the vibes. I wanna feel the heat off the

actors. It's like being close to the drums. You know how—when you can feel the vibe. You can feel that off an actor.

EDDIE: What were your expectations? (*Silence.*) Was there anything you really liked?

BERT: I love the magic. It's just magic because it's—it's lights and it's—it's movement and it's—it's—in another time and space than I am. I mean I'm there but—you know, it's sort of watching fantasy ge[t]—happen in front of your eyes or—or unfold—um—and the bigger—I mean, the bigger the show, the bolder the show, the brighter the show, the more I love it. Um—cause, I just—I like everything really big.

EDDIE: Who is the audience? (*Silence.*) What do you feel when you are sitting in an audience?

ROZANNE: You're in—number one, you're—it's a live performance. Number two, in a room full of people. And three, you don't know half of them. Most of them. So—you know, you're already in clothes you might not like, wear on a normal basis. Might feel constricted. It's the end of the day. It was the end of the d[ay]—a long day for me. I had my husband with me so I had to entertain his—whatever—was going on with him. And the cigarette smoke was the last thing I could handle.

EDDIE: What is the actor doing? (*Silence.*) If you could ask an actor anything, what would it be?

YOSHI: Well, do—do they mi[nd]—do they mind doing the—you know, over and over again?

BERT: Well, do—do they mi[nd]—do they mind doing the—you know, over and over again?

VANESSA: Well, do—do they mi[nd]—do they mind doing the—you know, over and over again?

ROZANNE: Well, do—do they mi[nd]—do they mind doing the—you know, over and over again?

EDDIE: Who is the actor secretly addressing? Audiences clearly play a role but what kind of role? And what kind of audience?<sup>21</sup> Is the audience a group of individual specters each dreaming the action in a dark room? Is the audience a number of people who are each potential rescuers to the drowning of a civilization? Or is the audience a group of people wanting the relaxation of an entertainment—to be comfortably purged, fascinated, amused? Must the audience, like the actor, be an active participant in the performance? The baffling question for the actor is "who is the audience?" To whom does the actor personally dedicate his or her performance?<sup>22</sup> Who is the actor secretly addressing?<sup>23</sup>

## Q and A IV

EDDIE: Which brings me to my next question. When does it begin?

YOSHI: Yeah, it's like a snowball. Is that, you know, all of us know that what we have to is, you know, you can start with anything. You put something on the stage—you start with an idea. But then you start to intensify it. Like...storing chemicals or something. Something starts to happen in the room. The wonderful thing is it's about the presence "in the room." And the play doesn't make sense unless it's actually happening. There's something happening. All the good ideas in the world, uh, don't, don't mean anything unless there's something, some quality, that's generated. And I have a theory that's never been proved but I think you cannot disguise the rehearsal process, uh, from the performance. What I mean is: something that one feels in performance; the politics in the room; the values; how, how people are, uh, interacting; the quality of relationships; the quality of attention in the room, uh, is evident on the stage in performance. You can't hide behind any, you can't hide behind a bad rehearsal process. So that in a way, everybody's responsibility comes to create a, a, a beautiful quality of concentration and, dare I use the word, artfulness, in the room. And I think one thing that I learned by being in the room is that it was very important that I contributed as well and that my presence was, was felt. Immensely. Um.

EDDIE: What is the actor doing?

## Q and A VII: The Confession

EDDIE: I've become extremely interested in the relationship between the audience and the actors on the stage. You can look at it historically, the history of audiences in the history of the world, you can look at it in terms of this country: what is the role of the audience in this country at the turn of this century?

I believe theater is a form of active culture. That participating in the theater is an act of leaning forward as opposed to leaning back. For me, the most thrilling experiences in the theater have always been ones where I've felt like I've had a role to play in this room, where something is asked of me as an audience member and I have to meet the actors halfway. Because it's about that, being in the room together, this notion

of breathing common air, and that the relationship between the audience and the actor is a circular one.

Theater is not a descriptive art form, it is a poetic medium where you do the least on stage so that the imagination is released in the audience. So just hints are given and what that does is that asks something of an audience; it asks you to participate emotionally, intellectually, spiritually in every way.

So that every beeper that goes off, or every cough or shuffling, every, uh, anything becomes part of the experience, and the generosity of the audience will allow the actors to do more.

And that, the vital link between the actor and the audience is something which is now, in our culture, suffering. So I decided to create a project in which we really together investigated this vital and creative link in an attempt to strengthen the lifeblood between the actors and the audience, starting with the notion that being an audience is a creative act...

## The Interview

EDDIE: Why do you go?

VANESSA: I go to the theater because for me, it's the sense that anything can happen. Anything can happen.

ROZANNE: I've been going to the theater alone since I was a little girl. My family didn't like the theater. But they always made sure I had a ticket.

YOSHI: I believe theater is another way to exist.

BERT: I go because life is unbearable.

EDDIE: I go because it's otherworldly and it's festive and I like the way people smell, and I like what they wear and it's a lot better than seeing a play on television.

VANESSA: Just the being still or the, or the quiet movement or whatever or just the listening of the audience not knowing exactly what was going to happen, and you're sitting there, because it's so real.

YOSHI: So, theater is, uh, I go, really, to be entertained to, uh, lose what I do the rest of my time and to smile, or to gasp, or uh, to kind of vicariously live a different life.

ROZANNE: As I've gotten older—I look at life a lot differently and maybe it's a little more fragile now. So I look for the touch of emotion. I don't want to go to the theater and have it be heavy. I don't want to be transcended

into deep thought. I basically want to be entertained. I want to sit there and eat the icing off the cake. But I don't really want the cake.

BERT: Oh, that's almost intangible—that's again, something deep in me that it answers. I think probably I like getting away from reality. A little. I grew up Bohemian and reading and getting away, being a loner, which I've always been. I think maybe I gravitated to the theater as a way of getting out of myself.

EDDIE: I've always liked the mystery. I was one of the fortunate ones. Now most theaters don't have curtains. But when we went fifty years ago, they all had curtains, so you never knew what was behind until the curtain went up. So you really got a feeling of mystery.

VANESSA: My parents gave us a subscription. My wife really likes the theater and it's a planned entertainment. It's not an off-the-cuff thing to do. It's nice.

ROZANNE: The art of theater is an art of feeling. The subject matter of the theater is the beating of the human heart. And the human heart is very old.<sup>1</sup>

BERT: Think of this moment. All that has ever been is in this moment; all that will ever be is in this moment. This is drama; this is theater—to be aware of the Now.<sup>2</sup>

YOSHI: It's always been important to go on the stage. The stage is something special. The way you behave must be different. Theater is not a private place, it's a special place and it's a forum. What's important once in this forum is to ask a question.<sup>3</sup>

EDDIE: But as I see it, our theater is in a rut, it's so damn conventional. The modern stage is nothing but an old prejudice, nothing but a sad and dreary routine.<sup>4</sup>

VANESSA: The theater remains the form most dependent upon, fascinated with, drawn, quartered by and fixated upon the body, its vulnerabilities, pain and disappearance.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chaikin, Joseph. *The Presence of the Actor*.

<sup>2</sup> Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences*.

<sup>3</sup> Mamet, David. *True and False*.

<sup>4</sup> Chaikin, Joseph. *The Presence of the Actor*.

<sup>5</sup> Edmond Jones, Robert. *Towards a New Theatre*.

<sup>6</sup> Edmond Jones, Robert. *Towards a New Theatre*.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Robert. *Interviews*.

<sup>8</sup> Chekhov, Anton. *The Seagull*.

<sup>9</sup> Blau, Herbert. *Distance in Theatre*.