

The Chicago Tribune

'CABIN' PUTS THE PRESSURE ON ACTORS, AUDIENCE

By Richard Christiansen

Tribune Chief Critic

December 12, 1999

Did you like it? Did you learn anything from it? What part did you enjoy the most?

These are questions often asked of a theater audience; and now, in the lively performance piece "Cabin Pressure," they are being answered in a particularly theatrical way.

The 90-minute program is the product of much literary research and pragmatic study by director Anne Bogart, who created this artful entertainment through a combination of workshops with her actors and a prolonged series of one-on-one interviews with members of a theater audience.

The goal was to define, or at least suggest, the nature of the crucial relationship between actors on a stage and customers in the audience.

In "Cabin Pressure," the small but technically complex touring production that Performing Arts Chicago is presenting this weekend in the Ruth Page Theater, Bogart and the five actors of her Saratoga International Theatre Institute employ several methods of approaching the issue.

Throughout, there are quotes on actor-audience relationships from a variety of literary sources, ranging from Shakespeare ("We are such stuff as dreams are made of . . .") to contemporary critics and artists.

Woven into the evening also are onstage and backstage views of scenes from plays by Noel Coward, Edward Albee and Agatha Christie, each chosen to illustrate a point about the art of playing make-believe before an audience. The segment from a Christie mystery, for example, has the actors speaking out loud the play's elaborate stage directions and dialogue.

Finally, and most important, the piece incorporates and uses as a framework the real-life reactions, profound and trivial, that audience members gave

Bogart in their discussions about how and why they go to the theater.

Not all of this works. Though mostly ingenious, some of it, including a spoof of a 19th Century melodrama, is too precious.

At the end of the program, however, the questions and issues that have been introduced during the evening come together in one graceful and moving experience.

The actors, seated on metal folding chairs, give voice to many of the reasons people have for their enjoyment of performance. "I go to the theater to escape from myself," says one person, while another adds that she doesn't want to see anything too heavy.

As they express themselves, the actors move their chairs in a precisely measured pattern around the square open space in which they've been performing. At the end, in silence, they line up their chairs so that they are looking ahead to the stage -- a great white, blank space where anything can happen.

It's a lovely moment.

"Cabin Pressure" gives its final Chicago performance at 3 p.m. Sunday in the Ruth Page Theater, 1016 N. Dearborn St. 773-772-5463.