

'Private' rehearsals went public

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China Snardon, a social worker who has attended ATL productions since she was a girl, signed on because "it seemed like a fun thing to do. I love theater. It's the cheapest way I know to experience everything. It opens a window into other people's lives."

Andy Perry, executive director of Artswatch, wanted to work with Bogart because "I thought her ATL production of 'Picnic' was a work of genius."

James Wantland, a member of ATL's maintenance staff, was asked to sign up because he had never before attended a theatrical performance.

"But don't ask me how I feel," he said after an early rehearsal. "I don't know yet."

Alexandra Crume, a former antiques dealer, found Bogart and her rehearsals "totally fascinating. I always wanted to see a production from the inside out, so I jumped at this chance."

All participants were involved in attending rehearsals and gathered in groups to talk with Bogart about their experiences. This weekend they are joining Bogart in post-performance discussions with audiences who have just seen "Private Lives."

Bogart then will interview all 43 participants privately. From these taped interviews, she will create a theatrical piece that will have its premiere at ATL's 1999 Humana Festival of New American Plays.

During one of the first sessions with the study group, Bogart talked about theater being a "circular" experience. Creative juices, she said, flow in an continuous curved line between performers and listeners.

"You don't know it, perhaps, but actors get many of their cues from you in the audience. How you laugh, or even if you laugh, affects the way they shape a performance onstage." Early in rehearsals, however, both Bogart's actors and her 43 volunteers seemed unsure of where the director was leading them. The actors were especially apprehensive.

Karenjune Sanchez, playing Sibyl in "Private Lives," wondered if she could work with strangers gawking at her.

"Acting," Sanchez said, "is like learning tricks with which to amaze an audience. And you fail a lot as you practice. I don't like having people see me fail. I'm afraid it will shake my confidence."

Other cast members wondered how they should receive the study-group visitors. Should they ignore them? Should they invite them into their confidence?

Members of the study group had different concerns. Should they try to stay as invisible as possible? Should they laugh or have other audible responses during rehearsals? Could they leave to get a drink of water if they got thirsty?

Bogart set up some rudimentary rules after fielding such questions. Study participants were asked to arrive at the beginning of a rehearsal and required not to leave until a rehearsal break. Arriving or departing in the middle was deemed too disruptive to a performer's concentration.

More surprisingly, participants were asked not to laugh. Actors, Bogart told them, were sensitive to such responses and might begin "playing for the laughs" too early in the rehearsal process. Her actors were told they didn't have to treat the study group as guests but to accept them as part of the creative process.

While Jory hopes that Bogart's current explorations may find methods to increase an audience's joy in going to the theater, he denies that he is participating out of a need to create new audiences.

"We're doing this because I want to throw a party that may help to break down our isolation from the people who support our work. It's like going down in a diving bell. You aren't going to see the entire ocean, but you sure are going to discover some interesting things."

Bogart and a group from her project will conduct discussions after performances of "Private Lives" today at 2:30 and 7:30 p.m.