

Bogart's 'Cabin Pressure'

a valentine to the theater

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Life's greatest pleasures always come as a surprise. I had experienced one such pleasure last week at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville: *Cabin Pressure*, a theater production by the avant-garde director Anne Bogart and her company of actors, the Saratoga International Theater Institute.

Over the years, I'd come to view the prospect of any new Bogart work with a certain queasy mixture of anticipation and dread.

On the one hand, Bogart, a Columbia University professor and a brilliant, illuminating director of American classics — her expressionistic, intensely physical productions of William Inge's *Picnic* and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* at ATL were startlingly fresh — and her actors are fearless, gifted and almost superhumanly disciplined.

On the other hand, many of the company's original shows, conceived by Bogart and solidified through an exhaustive process of research and improvisation with the actors, struck me as showily clever, deliberately obscure exercises that didn't add up to much and, worse, lacked any sort of emotional core.

These have included *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, an eerie rearrangement of lines from the plays of Anton Chekhov, and *Going, Gone, Gone*, a conflation of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*



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and the jargon of quantum physics.

I left these shows impressed but unmoved and vaguely irritated. I'm all for experimentation in the theater — heaven knows there's far too little of it in the general run of things — but it needs purpose, it needs shape, and it needs to be intelligible to a wide audience. Otherwise it's wasted energy.

But *Cabin Pressure*, the Bogart troupe's new piece about the relationship of stage actors and their audiences — it was commissioned for this year's Humana Festival, which concludes today — made me want to cheer.

This richly textured work, based partly on interviews with theatergoers, investigates its subject with the company's trademark originality, thoroughness and humor. But — and this feels new from Bogart & Co. — it does so accessibly, entertainingly and with genuine feeling.

Cabin Pressure fashions a loving valentine to the theater, even as it punctures its affectations and absurdities with glee. There are delightful critique/tributes to actors and audiences, including an espe-

cially hilarious sendup of pontificating theater critics (!), that anyone who has ever attended, participated in or read about the theater on any level will recognize and appreciate.

Unlike most of the other Bogart creations, which tend to play mainly to New York audiences that might be euphemistically described as "select," *Cabin Pressure* has a shot at much wider distribution. I'm told that Bogart is making plans for a tour of the show on college campuses across the country, and I hope it happens.

It would be a great thing not only for audiences but for the institution of the theater itself, which can use all the champions it can get. *Cabin Pressure* is a celebration of theater as an indispensable form of "active culture" whose vitality depends in part on the audience's direct involvement. The best kind of theater experience — as opposed to the passivity of watching television or even films — is "the art of leaning forward, not leaning back."

It's both an apt description and, in this era of dominant electronic media, an implicit warning that without engaged audiences, the imagined death of the theater that has been proclaimed for so long (and, thus far, so hollowly) will become a real one, no matter how many tickets are sold. ■

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