

Breathing Common Air

The SITI Company Creates *Cabin Pressure*

Joan Herrington

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 is 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.

—Cabin Pressure (SITI 2000a:45)

In a 1999 *New York Times* article surveying theatre artists on the state of off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway, Mark Russell, executive director of Performance Space 122, examined the changing face of contemporary drama noting: "What we have developed are not playwrights but theater makers" (1999 sec. 2:10). Indeed this generation of "theater makers" is already treading on our stages. Working in lofts and basements, hungry for recognition and funding, they are collaboratively creating a living, breathing theatre that redrafts the formula defined by the playwright-actor-director hierarchy and the old-school rehearsal and performance process. The methodologies employed by these performance ensembles to create theatre vary greatly. But as Ferdinand and Lewis notes in *American Theatre*, the threads that tie the work together are found in the questions that are central to all the work—questions of relationship with the audience, source of inspiration, style, and reconciliation of the individual with the collective (2000:25).

For many of these ensembles, creating theatre that rises from a community both on and off the stage is central to the process. By involving those in the audience and by redefining the long-held designations that divide the work of actors, designers, directors, and writers, these theatre makers are challenging the most deeply traditional models and, in so doing, are reinventing the form.

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Studying Anne Bogart and SITI Company's creation of *Cabin Pressure* affords insight into one working model.

The SITI Company, founded in 1991, strives to reinvestigate the dynamics of traditional theatre, and they do so by working with a variety of raw materials. Approximately half of the SITI Company's work demands the creation of a new text. The remainder of the repertory includes both well-established and new plays, most recently works by Naomi Iizuka (*War of the Worlds*, 2000) and Charles Mee (*bobrauschenbergamerica*, 2001). Much of the SITI Company's work has been groundbreaking in its methodology. What is, perhaps, most remarkable about the Company's process is the unique way in which the entire company creates the staging, a method that redefines the relationship between the stage movement and the text. And a vital part of this process is the integration of sound design as a formative element of the production.

Cabin Pressure, first produced in 1999, is an effective model for the Company's work, both in theory and in practice. Through *Cabin Pressure*, the SITI Company reconsiders the role of the community in terms of creating and presenting theatre as they explore and redefine the audience-actor relationship. Bogart, who conceived and directed the project, has long been interested in this unique interaction:

As a director in the theatre, I am acutely aware of the tension, the exquisite pressure, or the lack thereof, between audience members and actors on the stage. The quality of the dynamics between actor and audience constitutes a relationship. Sometimes the relationship functions and at times it does not. (1999a:12)

The text for *Cabin Pressure* was created collaboratively by Bogart, five actors—Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, and Stephen Webber—and SITI sound designer, Darren West. Bogart wanted the work to engage the following questions:

What is an audience? What is the creative role of the audience? What is the responsibility of the audience to the actor? What is an actor? What is the actor's responsibility to the audience? [...] I wanted us to start with no preconceived notions or assumptions about the answers to those questions but rather to experiment freely and play with possible variations on the theme. The result of these explorations is a production that speaks directly to the people in the room sharing it. (1999a:12)

The name for the show came from Bogart who was searching for an appropriate title to capture what it's like to be in the room with actors and audiences: "I was on a plane and saw the words 'cabin pressure' painted on the side and thought, 'Oh, how appropriate!'" (1999b).

Research and Preparation

Work on *Cabin Pressure* began in 1998 while the SITI Company was rehearsing Noel Coward's *Private Lives* (1930) at the Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL). The cast initially focused their work only on *Private Lives* while Bogart pulled double duty, beginning the extensive preparation for their next show. As with many contemporary performance ensembles, the SITI Company is interested in reconnecting with its audience by inviting them to participate in the creative process. Thus, to begin her research on the audience, Bogart began with the

Notes on Cabin Pressure

Anne Bogart

A friend once described 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 theatre.

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 evaporate and they find themselves without the cushion of definitions that had formerly bounded 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 hyperawareness of the space between people. On the stage, the space between actors and the space between actor and audience must be continually endowed with quality, attention, and potential danger. The tension of the *m'ai* must be respected and tended.

As a director in the theatre, 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 constitutes a creative relationship very different from daily life. The theatre 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 onstage. Without a receiver, there is no experience. The receiver completes the circle with his or her own experience, imagination, and creativity. Sometimes the relationship functions and at times, it does not.

I decided to create a play with the SITI 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 that would address the issues of this "artistic circle." What is the creative role of the audience in the theatre? 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 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 a residency grant from the Pew Charitable Trust. 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 the literary staff at Actors Theatre. We chose 57 Louisville "civilians" from different age groups, different religions, and diverse theatre-going 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 postshow 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 theatre and how going to the theatre affected their lives. I asked if they preferred going to the theatre 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,

(continued)

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 on to 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 theatre-going. We achieved this by dramatizations of the many actor-audience relationships found throughout the history of theatre, 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 very palpable. There were wonderful moments with the sense 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 theatre. In a time when computers, television, film, and mega-malls dominate and mediate our relationship with others, the theatre is a place to strengthen and heighten our direct connection with each other.

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1. SITI writer and director Anne Bogart supervises a rehearsal of *Cabin Pressure*. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

audience, inviting 57 theatre-going audience members to participate in the project. At their first meeting, Bogart prepared them for their work:

I talked to them for a long time. I told them everything I knew about the actor-audience relationship and what I wanted to explore. And they introduced themselves and I asked them questions about what they thought about being in the audience, what they thought their job was. (1999b)

Participants in the research agreed to come to two preliminary rehearsals, one later technical rehearsal, one performance, and several talk-back sessions. They kept journals. Following four performances of *Private Lives*, they met with Bogart and the entire SITI Company and offered their response to what they had seen. Then, each had a private interview with Bogart. All of the material was transcribed and the volumes delivered to the Company along with boxes and boxes of additional materials provided by the ATL dramaturgs who had spent several weeks researching diverse theatrical styles and genres and any mention of the actor-audience relationship throughout theatre history.

The SITI Company's quest to generate a new theatre does not negate their respect for their theatrical past. Indeed, the love affair that Bogart and her company maintain with the theatre is evidenced in the inspiration they personally sought from the masters of 20th-century theatre theory—Herbert Blau, Joseph Chaikin, Jacques Copeau, Martin Esslin, Jerzy Grotowski, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Robert Wilson, Luigi Pirandello—anyone who had anything to say about the actor-audience relationship was "invited" to participate as their words and ideas were assembled and added to the boxes.

Facing a great deluge of material is both energizing and daunting. For the SITI Company, the monumental task of creating a theatre piece from mountains of paper began slowly. Throughout the spring of 1998, all the cast members read—at home and aloud together—some of the material in its entirety and some excerpted by Bogart, all carefully organized in big notebooks of quotes and sample pieces that had been combed from the volumes. The books were divided into chapters, with each chapter headed by a question: Who is the audience? What is the relationship between the actor and the audience? What is the history of the theatre?

Inundated with options, Bogart and the Company began to explore the ideological parameters that would ultimately set a structure—a framework—in which they would create. This road is familiar to the Company, pursuing Bogart's consistent choice to explore freedom within the form, in other words, to set the parameters definitively but set no boundaries on the movement within. Bogart begins with a premise, the shadow of an idea for the construction of a scene. As Ellen Lauren describes, "For Anne, the point is just to get the stroke on the canvas" (2000).

Following a springtime of meetings and discussions, work on *Cabin Pressure* endured its infancy in the early summer of 1998 at the summer training institute run by the SITI Company in Saratoga, New York. Here, the Company chose to expand their source material for this project by culling from compositions created by the 55 actors who come from around the world to study with Bogart and her actors. "Compositions" is a methodology employed by Bogart to explore new material or a selected theme, in this case, the actor-audience relationship. Essentially, a small group of people creates theatre by working within specified parameters, as described by Bogart's colleague, director Tina Landau:

Compositions are assignments [given] to the company to have them create short, specific theatre pieces of limited structure and length. (1999b)

[...] The assignment will usually include an overall intention or structure as well as a substantial list of ingredients which must be included in the piece. This list is the raw material of the theatre language we'll speak in the piece—whether principles that are useful for staging (symmetry versus asymmetry, use of scale and perspective, juxtaposition, etc.) or the ingredients that belong specifically to the play world we are working on. (1995:27–28)

The SITI Company uses these compositions, created by many diverse theatre artists, as inspiration in the creation of their work. These compositions consistently demand the inclusion of a lengthy series of elements as varied as 15 seconds of silence, a staged accident, three different uses of music, the transformation of an object, designated text, a kiss and a slap, or a moment of theatrical magic. The compositions relating to the creation of *Cabin Pressure* also included more complex demands, including that the work be done in a certain theatrical style, or perhaps based on a classical work, or, at other times, experimenting with conventions such as where a play begins and ends. These compositions also included consideration of the actor-audience relationship.

The Company observes the work, noting ideas worthy of further exploration. Those who create the compositions are consulted if their work is ultimately included in the finished show. This period serves as a segue between the "table work" and the early physical work.

Several weeks later, in July, while in residence at ATL, the Company returned to working on the piece themselves, again at the table. To facilitate the deepest collaboration, Bogart's initial ideas are purposefully broad; with *Cabin Pressure* she knew she wanted to present the theoretical considerations of the actor-audience relationship within the context of the history of theatre. Unable to present the entire history, the Company agreed to an annotated version which was to include scenes from different historical periods and genres interlaced with a dramatized version of the talk-back sessions they had held with their live audience in Louisville. After considering their options, they chose a Restoration comedy, a vaudevilian melodrama, a murder mystery, a scene from the Theatre of Images (à la Robert Wilson), and a scene from the classic theatre. Arrival at



Cabin Pressure cast members at the SITI Company Production Cabin Pressure at the Louisville Humana Festival (1999), performing "Classics in Context." From left: Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, Stephen Webber, and Will Bond. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

this rough skeleton ended a long series of table discussions; no other decisions regarding the text were made. Consistently in the SITI Company's work, definitive content is not pursued at this early juncture. The conversations are more global in their perspective, but the form is defined; as Bogart says, "We set the structure but not what would fill the structure. All we knew going in was that we would have the history of the theatre broken up by these little discussions. Essentially then we would just say 'Go'" (1999b).

Early Rehearsals

"Go" for Bogart and the SITI Company means embarking on a series of Viewpoints sessions designed to explore a theme. Bogart first encountered the Viewpoints, an approach to creating theatrical movement, in 1979, while teaching in the Experimental Theatre Wing (ETW) of New York University's Department of Drama. Developed by choreographer Mary Overlie, the Viewpoints were originally conceived as a tool for stage composition and an approach to improvisational exercises. Writing about that first exposure, Bogart remarked, "It was instantly clear that these Viewpoints were applicable to generating viscerally dynamic moments in the theatre" (in Drukman 1998:32). Overlie's original six viewpoints have been expanded by Bogart and her Company into nine: Tempo, Duration, Kinesthetic Response, Repetition, Shape, Gesture, Architecture, Spatial Relationship, and Topography. They are the core of SITI's work. As the Company describes it:

The Viewpoints allows a group of actors to function together spontaneously and intuitively and to generate bold theatrical work quickly. It develops flexibility, articulation, and strength in movement and speaking, and makes ensemble playing really possible. (SITI 2000b)

The physical nature of the Viewpoints facilitates exploration of an idea/event from a nonverbal and visceral perspective. This type of exploration enables the Company to build a "physical structure" or detailed blocking of a scene. Whether it takes one hour or one week, the Company will continue to form this physical structure, prior to the addition of any defined text. Through many physical improvisations, the actors experiment and ultimately set the movement that will define the scene. After the Company members have set the movement, they determine the dialogue.

This unique approach to joining movement and text, which the Company believes adds depth to their work through its defiance of expectations, is a process that has been progressively refined by SITI. The preparation undertaken through weeks of discussion and study of the research material assembled for a project is key to their work. They engage their intellect and consider the material from which the text will eventually be culled. But in order to create the physical structure freely, the Company must put aside the intellectual and proceed from an instinctual point of view. According to Bogart, "to do one's best work, one must essentially stop thinking and just respond" (1999b).

Thus, in early July, their notebooks set aside, the actors of *Cabin Pressure* begin



3. "Classics in Context." From left: Lauren, Maurer, Webber, Bond. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

to Viewpoint following Bogart's directive that the focus be on the talk-back section held in Louisville. On the taped floor where Bogart has set up a series of chairs, the actors come in the door, sit on chairs or among the chairs, exit, enter, interact. They stop, joke, and begin again. Informed by their research, but working instinctively, the actors create life within the theoretical circumstance of an actor-audience session. They make discoveries and define movements. They develop relationships and behavior. Often, they start over.

Bogart, who watches intently, may comment, noting moments she has found intriguing. The Company will also consider the work as it progresses, questioning choices, considering moments. They only discuss what they have done, never what they will do. The work is focused and rigorous, as the Company begins again and again, retaining certain portions, re-creating others. Even after it seems set, the choreography will be repeated six or seven times for specificity. With the physical score complete, they return to the table for the preliminary definition of the text that will accompany the score. They pull out their notebooks and read.

"All you hear in the room is slap, slap, slap, slap," as the Company members wade through the mountain of material for text that is relevant to the broad theoretical construct they developed during their table work and that is appropriate for the physical construct they have just completed (Lauren 2000). Suddenly, someone selects a line. Megan Wanless, the stage manager, notes it and the Company continues. The process is arduous. With *Cabin Pressure*, after the discovery of the first "perfect" line, there was silence. Nothing. Lauren:

Then Barney [O'Hanlon] realized that he must say something because he's the moderator. So he found something in the form of a question. It doesn't necessarily meet the first thing said, but it is a question so it sets the scene up. Then we build the scene. We were quoting the writings of theoreticians of theatre and drama—Herbert Blau and Peter Brook and Grotowski, some of the most intelligent minds out there. And we sat and we built this whole scene which was a talk-back session. (2000)

What is particularly challenging is that there is no attempt at this point to define traditional dramatic structure, to create a scene within a larger dramatic



The "Vaudevillian melodrama" from *Cabin Pressure* (Louisville, 1999). From left: Kelly Maurer, Stephen Webber, and Barney O'Hanlon. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

The SITI Company

In 1991, Tadashi Suzuki, the Japanese experimental theatre director, joined Anne Bogart to form the SITI Company—the Saratoga International Theatre Institute—currently based in New York City. Suzuki's commitment—clearly stated at the outset—was financial, administrative, and artistic support for five years.

Since 1996 there has been a hiatus in creative collaboration between Suzuki and the Company headed by Bogart. However, the current SITI Company, primarily through the work of SITI member Ellen Lauren—who was trained by Suzuki to teach his method of actor training—continues to be the only American group with a direct line to Suzuki's work and his method, which the SITI Company continues to use and teach. Additionally, there remain close personal ties between members of the SITI Company and Suzuki, his company in Japan, and his staff.

The "International" in SITI originated with the Suzuki association. The "International" in SITI primarily to the Company's summer institute, the Annual SITI Summer Intensive, held at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, which attracts many international artists for training in the Viewpoints and Suzuki Method.

In 2001 Suzuki began a renewed artistic association between Suzuki and SITI, including a project for the 2004 season, to be directed by Suzuki. Also, the SITI Company, at some point in the future, will be in residence again at Suzuki's theatre in Toga, Japan. As Lauren notes, "It seems both natural and right that after the 10-year mark, these two companies are once more heading into collaboration and closer contact" (Lauren 2001).

The SITI Company was founded with 12 actors. In its original incarnation, designers were brought in but were not part of the Company. Today the Company consists of Anne Bogart, ten actors, four designers, one technical director, one playwright, one stage/company manager, and one general manager. Four actors from the original company remain: Ellen Lauren, Will Bond (Bondo), Kelly Maurer (all of whom studied with Suzuki), and Tom Nelis.

Members of the Company also work on productions outside SITI. Bogart made a decision several years ago to direct only with the Company, although she does teach and consult.

The Company receives almost 60 percent of its \$600,000 to \$700,000 annual budget from earned income, largely through teaching and commissions. The remainder is made up of grant and foundation support. Megan Wanless is SITI's general manager, but the administration is collaborative, with a triumvirate at its head comprised of Wanless, Bogart, and Lauren.

arc. This is a purposeful choice—as Darren West says: "I think it's dangerous to create with too much of a preconceived notion about where you might be going. We are, after all, in a business of not necessarily telling what it is but indeed asking what it is" (2001).

Thus, the first talk-back was created without knowing what would come before or what was to follow. There was, however, a consensus that, for the overall

construct (or, perhaps, de-construct) to be effective, the piece would start with the end of another play—which play, however, was as yet undetermined. Lauren:

At that point we believed we were going to do the end of a Greek tragedy. There was going to be blood and smoke and *sturm und drang* and there was just going to be this big da-da-da-dum and curtain call, curtain, talk-back. And we were all thinking "Aeschylus." (2000)

Although the process demands tremendous expense of energy and exceptional focus, it is not uncommon for the early work to be unsatisfying. Despite purposeful juxtaposition, there needs to be a symbiotic relationship between the staging and the dialogue. The final pass at the first scene left the Company dry. Lauren: "We felt the text was interesting and the physical life was funny, but it was pretty much dead in the water. It was pretty much just floating there and we weren't sure why" (2000).

The creation of each new work always seems to have its own insurmountable obstacles and barriers. But the strength of any ensemble comes from the long-term commitment to a process as well as a short-term commitment to a product. Thus, the will to continue forward in the face of sometimes sobering disappointment must be ever present. In the end, the Company chose to videotape the talk-back scene and move on.

The choice to document their work on videotape has become a necessity, the result of a scattered schedule engendered by the challenge of supporting a company while a new piece is created over a long period of time. For the SITI Company, the process is buffeted by available sponsorship and often interrupted by other obligations.

Work on the talk-back is followed by preparation of another scene; Bogart says, "OK, now, I want a Restoration scene so let's move all the tables aside and let's just Viewpoint." With nothing more than the theme of "Restoration theatre" the Company builds a choreography in one morning's Viewpoints session. They repeat what they have made, set it in their minds, and then immediately seek an accompanying text. O'Hanlon, again, has the first inspiration. He runs to the table, slaps open his notebook, finds Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*, and takes a piece of the text, which became known as "the mendacity speech":

...we keep giving the theatre another try
we write for the theatre
we perform in the theatre
even though that is the absurdest thing possible
and the most mendacious
How can an actor play the part of a king
when he doesn't have the faintest idea what a king is
how can an actress play the part of a stable lass
when she doesn't have the faintest idea what a stable lass is
Representation is mendacity
and represented mendacity is what we love
that is how we present it
mendacious
and that is how it is received
Mendacious
The writer is mendacious
the actors are mendacious
and the audience is mendacious too
and the sum total is one single absurdity (SITI 2000a:20–21)

The SITI Company Production Chronology

1992	<i>Dionysus</i> , with SCOT Theatre Company, Bernhard Theater, Saratoga Springs, NY
1992	<i>Orestes</i> by Charles L. Mee, Jr., Spa Little Theater, Saratoga Springs, NY
1993	<i>The Medium</i> , the first company-generated script—based on Marshall McLuhan's writing and speaking about the future of art, human relationships, and life vis à vis technology, Toga Festival, Toga, Japan
1993	<i>Waiting for Romeo</i> , with SCOT Theatre Company, Bernhard Theater, Saratoga Springs, NY
1994	<i>Small Lives, Big Dreams</i> , based on the plays of Anton Chekhov, Toga Festival, Toga, Japan
1995	<i>Going Going Gone</i> , based on Quantum physics vs. Isaac Newton's laws using the structure of Edward Albee's <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> , Bernhard Theater, Saratoga Springs, NY
1997	<i>Miss Julie</i> , by August Strindberg, Actors Theater of Louisville, Louisville, KY
1997	<i>Culture of Desire</i> , based on Andy Warhol's prescience about what identifying as a consumer culture means to our lives and Dante's <i>Inferno</i> , City Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA
1998	<i>Private Lives</i> , by Noel Coward, Actors Theater of Louisville, Louisville, KY
1998	<i>BOB</i> , based on Robert Wilson's notions about art and what it means to make art on the world stage, Wexner Center of the Arts, Columbus, OH
1998	<i>Seven Deadly Sins</i> , by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, New York City Opera, New York, NY
1998	<i>Alice's Adventures</i> , based on Lewis Carroll's <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> , The Raw Space, New York, NY
1999	<i>Cabin Pressure</i> , Humana Festival of New American Plays, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2000	<i>War of the Worlds</i> , by Naomi Iizuka based on life and work of Orson Welles, Humana Festival of New American Plays, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2000	<i>War of the Worlds/The Radio Play</i> , by Howard Koch, Joe's Pub, The Public Theater, New York, NY
2001	<i>bobrauschenbergamerica</i> , by Charles Mee Jr., Humana Festival of New American Plays, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2001	<i>Room</i> , based on the life and writings of Virginia Woolf, On the Boards, Seattle, WA
2001	<i>Lilith</i> , New York City Opera, New York, NY
2002	<i>Hayfever</i> , by Noel Coward, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2002	<i>Score</i> , based on Leonard Bernstein, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH. Final play, along with <i>BOB</i> and <i>Room</i> , of a trilogy about the artistic process
2002	<i>Short Stories</i> , Kaleidoskop Theater Company, Copenhagen
forthcoming	<i>Reunion</i> , based on the Group Theatre
forthcoming	<i>La Fête de la Nuit</i> , a collaboration with the band "Rachel"

The cast agrees it is the perfect choice. In fact, they decide then, and maintained, that no other text is required for the entire scene. They coordinate the text with the physical score and videotape the result.

One of the most intriguing qualities of creating a physical score and then adding text is that it negates the assumption that the onstage movement is merely an illustration of the dialogue. The Company shares Bogart's belief that this layering, with its inherent juxtapositions, adds resonance to the audience's experience. Another final layer is added through the input of Darron West, SITI's sound person.

Sound

Those who observe SITI rehearsals sometimes define West's role as that of dramaturg, sometimes even codirector. Certainly he is a key collaborator, responsible not only for the aural layers of the play, but also for input into the text and many ideas on staging. Because sound is such a significant element of SITI productions, West's presence is as powerful as that of the performers. Having participated in all of the early table work, he brings to early staging sessions his own sensibility. Like the actors, he works in these early sessions from instinct informed by, but not ruled by, study. For West, although there is careful analysis of text, there are few preconceived notions:

I will research the work until my fingers bleed and throw it all away when I walk into the rehearsal because I don't like intellectual experiences in the theatre. I love visceral, emotional theatre. So, with that research in my bones I know it is there but it doesn't govern my choices. (2000)

In preparation for any show, West considers hundreds of choices from his library. As a Viewpoints session progresses, he influences and is influenced by the creation of the staging—the actors' bodies in motion. It is a very delicate interaction—one perhaps only possible through years of collaboration. As Bogart notes, "Music is the most compelling thing in the world so it can be a problem because it's so defining. It's an ongoing struggle not to have the music lead but for the music to seem to emanate from the actors' bodies" (1999b).

Watching the actors and testing his choices, West narrows his selection to several options for any given scene. Once the text is added, he chooses several sound cues to try during the next rehearsals. Sometimes he seeks a piece of music that "goes with the picture" (West 2000). Sometimes, a music selection will purposefully create a juxtaposition of elements that are neither "in support of" nor "against" the scene. At other times, West merely ensures that diametrically opposed options have been considered: "A scene that might have gotten morose on the break will find itself after the break being done to the wacky sounds of say the Raymond Scott Orchestra (very cartoon-styled jazz from the '40s)—not so subtle steering I know but you gotta do what you gotta do" (2000). West also aims to score the subtext, and he notes:

I am working with the same intentions of the fellow players on the stage and giving back things to them as if I were standing on the stage with them. So I find my head flipping from one character to another during the staging process so I can take the amalgamation of what they are attempting to say and do and process that into the musicality for the scene. (2000)

VANESSA: Dirty look.

ROZANNE: Dirty look. (*Gong.*)

EDDIE: Enters.

VANESSA: Follows.

ROZANNE: Sits.

YOSHI: More gin.

EDDIE: Exits.

VANESSA/YOSHI/ROZANNE: Uncomfortable pause.

(*Thunder, thunder, thunder.*)

BERT: I'm sorry for the intrusion. My name is Inspector Cedric Eaton-Hogge of Scotland Yard.

VANESSA: Goes for cigarette. Trembling.

YOSHI: Drifts absently.

ROZANNE: No reaction. (SITI 2000a:26–27)

Additional text that ties the scene to the overall construct of *Cabin Pressure* is again culled from the books and boxes of research sitting on the tables. While on the surface, the sheer volume of the available material makes this work daunting, the process is helped by the clarity the actors bring to their search: they know exactly the kind of stuff they are looking for. Lauren:

We all went back to our notebooks and slapped through things and knew exactly how to find what we needed to find. We searched for something playable in the context of a murder mystery. But as an idea, as an intellectual piece, the content needs to stand on its own and ring out as well. So you have to pick a piece of text that has sort of this symphonic dual thing happening. It's not quite as easy as, "I want to say *this*, this is cool," although that comes into it. We all race for the things we know are cool. You love to speak something by Peter Brook; it makes you feel so smart. (2000)

Despite "competition" for the best lines, the work is always built with bits and pieces gathered from all those involved. Even the scene that came to be known as "Theatre of Images," originally envisioned to include only Ellen Lauren, was built collaboratively. After developing the physical score, Lauren chose a section of Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*, which begins as follows:

You represent something. You are someone. You are something. You are no longer someone, you are something. You are a society of sorts. You are an order because of the kind of dress, the position of your bodies. The direction of your glares. You also form an order with the seating arrangement. You are dressed up. With your dress you observe an order. You dress up. You are putting on a masquerade so as to partake in a masquerade. You partake. You watch. You stare. (SITI 2000a:15)

West then begins to make music selections. Prior to beginning his work, he does not discuss the music with Bogart. As West notes, "We converse a lot outside

During the working process, West will frequently stop and start the rehearsals, both responding to the actors' physical work and shaping it with his own sound selections. There is always discussion of the music by the full Company.

Once the music has been chosen, it is carefully coordinated with the physical score, often with significant input from West as he places the text and movement at specific moments within the music. As the text develops, West sees his responsibility as making the overall arc of the show clear:

Anne is looking at microscopic details in the specifics of the scenes while I am generally working on the entire arc of the show, working pages and scenes ahead of where the show is. I think the impetus of all the choices, for me, is making the scene clear and understandable, especially in light of the nature of the deconstruction that we do. So it's all about providing the right amount of hints to the audience as to how to watch the piece and how to participate in the play. (2000)

West is also referred to by the Company as the "POMO," or postmodern police, which means he considers it his responsibility to ensure that the onstage physical work—no matter how afield it gets—provides "the necessary link to the story that they are experiencing" (West 2000). To a certain extent, West sees himself as an intermediary between the actors and the audience—clarifying their work, adding layers that the audience can relate to or bounce off of.

The work in Louisville continues daily for two weeks. Each morning, whenever the Company is together for teaching or rehearsal, work begins with a Viewpoints session to warm up and "get on the same plate" (Lauren 2000). For SITI, the Viewpoints are a way of life. When the Company is working on a project, the Viewpoint sessions are informed by the ideology of the overall piece and the specific direction provided by Bogart. On the fourth day in Louisville, the theme is murder mystery.

As with the Restoration work, the murder mystery comes quickly, in one session. Again, movement preceded any dialogue. It is not long before the theatrically recognizable characters associated with this genre begin to appear: the officious police inspector, the drunken nephew, the divorcée. Then text is explored. In an inspired moment, one actor begins to describe his own actions, to speak his stage directions. This text is retained in the final script:

EDDIE: Scene: The drawing room of Cobblestone Court, the Hailsham-Brown's home in Kent. It is a charming and comfortable room with French windows down right opening onto the garden. Double doors up center lead to the entrance hall where the foot of the staircase can be seen. A door up left gives access to the library. ...It is a stormy evening in March. The family Hailsham is summoned to the drawing room.

VANESSA: Enter Ms. Scarlet Hailsham-Brown, in a cloud of perfume. Recently divorced, late 20s or 40s, irritated at being late for a dinner engagement.

YOSHI: Enter Ned Hailsham-Brown, nephew of the dowager. Bored.

VANESSA/YOSHI: Dismisses.

ROZANNE: Enter Mrs. Hailsham-Brown, grumbling. (*Grumbles*)

VANESSA: Turns.

YOSHI: Turns.

VANESSA: Sits.



5. The Wilson-inspired "Theatre of Images" scene in *Cabin Pressure* (Louisville, 1999). From left: Stephen Webber and Ellen Lauren. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

of the rehearsals but those discussions are always about the piece globally and not aural specific" (2000). So considering the poetry of the text and the proposed style of the Theatre of Images scene, West creates options:

The text is thick and languid which tells me that the line in the music must be repetitive so we hear it but must not necessarily pay attention to it. Minimalism is the way to go—it also needs to evoke "Wilsonesque." So I pour through the music library in my apartment coming up with about seven music ideas. The choice of that seven is determined by playing the music and reading out loud the text that Ellen has chosen.

So when we get to staging, Anne says, "What do you got?" and the scene starts and given [actor] Will Bond's introduction to the scene—which is very dreamlike—I whittle my seven choices down to three. Anne puts Ellen in position and she starts and I play the three choices and we whittle them to one. So now I have the underscore. (2000)

Inspired by Lauren's work, West decides to put a headset mike on her. The Company discusses how to give the scene some "Robert Wilson" layers. Stephen Webber walks in a "Wilsonesque" way upstage behind Lauren. Webber carries a letter—a prop from the murder mystery scene. West suggests that they hear the letter. He and Webber delve into the works of Shakespeare laying on the dramaturgy table. They choose a text from *Macbeth*, record the voice over in the rehearsal hall, and carefully layer it on top of the music, Lauren's monologue, and Webber's walk.

The High Pressure of Making Cabin Pressure

This kind of work is definitively high pressure. Sometimes this leads to inspiring moments and scenes, but it can also be extremely demanding when the work is not satisfying. Lauren:

Either you start off and it's good—with the murder mystery, we went "go" and suddenly everyone had their characters and it was really funny

and really right—or else you start and it's wrong and you have to revisit it. Essentially, you fill yourself up with a lot of information and then you just put the pressure of time on and say go, make a decision now. One always wants to have more time to prepare. (2000)

At the end of the two weeks in Louisville, the structure has been set for nearly half of the show: the first talk-back scene; the murder mystery; the Restoration scene; a vaudeville sketch; Theatre of Images; and a backstage farce that came about when West and stage manager Megan Wanless suggested that work include the backstage point of view. The Company also developed the beginnings of what they were calling the "audience ballet," a textless section that they thought would go near the opening of the piece.

Phase Three

All of this work stopped in July 1998 for nearly six months while the Company performed four different shows in five different countries. This long pause was more of a gestation period than an interruption. In between these other performances—as the Company gathered in bars, at parties, over dinner—they fleshed out *Cabin Pressure* concepts. In January 1999, 10 months after *Cabin Pressure*'s inception, the Company reassembled in New York City to rehearse the piece before heading down to Louisville and the Humana Festival where the show was to premiere.

Because Bogart was occupied at this time, the actors met without her to work on what had been built during the previous summer. They planned to train, review, and create some new choreography. At this juncture, they were going to work only on the physical world, not on text. But, according to Lauren, they immediately began to struggle, burdened by the ambiguity of the overall framework and uncomfortable with some of the original ideas (for example, starting the show with Aeschylus):



The "Backstage Farce" *Cabin Pressure* (Louisville, 1999). Pictured are Ellen Webber and Ellen Tan, dancing in the ground, and Barney Ianlon in the foreground. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

We kept getting into the room and we wouldn't move, we would sit in chairs with our hands in our laps. For 10 minutes at a time no one would speak because we were grappling with the structure: "What is this, what are we doing, where are we going?" And we began to formulate a whole other construction and we went to Anne and said the only play to begin with is *Private Lives* because it's the play that will have a context for this audience [it was during the production of the SITI Company's *Private Lives* that research for *Cabin Pressure* began]. In tone and tenor it's the right thing to do. (2000)

So the Company begins experimenting with the *Private Lives* script, finally selecting a section of the play and repeating it three times as the new opening of *Cabin Pressure*. Other changes in *Cabin Pressure* are also explored. Revising the opening encourages reconsideration of the ordering of all the material. Additionally, the Company seeks to strengthen the threads that bind the individual scenes together, to refine the actor-audience focus, and to begin to compose the ballet.

Ultimately, this work in New York results in the presentation to Bogart of a completely different structure than the one the Company had devised in Louisville. This is not unusual for the Company. While audiences tend to think that the SITI Company's shows are Bogart's conceptions, in point of fact the productions are group products. Bogart's idea is the birthing place. But she presents this starting point to the Company with the expectation that they will open it up, restructure it and re-form it. Such was the case with *Cabin Pressure*. Lauren:

We pretty much wrenched it around in many, many different ways. Anne is sly in her way; we did exactly what she wanted us to do. Then she went, "Oh yes, and this and this and this" [adding definite structure to the scenes]. So you never know whether she knew it all along and let you just find it through this agonizing meeting process when she could have just as easily told you. Or maybe what we do just trips something in her so that everything falls into place. (2000)

Members of the SITI Company consistently remark on the power not only of Bogart's vision but of her ability to change as she gets input from her creative partners. As Lauren says, "She has incredible instinct for the truth and when people are on it. She has the generosity of intelligence and spirit to allow the act of creation to be about that and not about her. It's pretty amazing" (2000).

Finale

Energized by their work in New York, the Company moves their rehearsals to Louisville. When the Company arrives at ATL, the opening of the Humana Festival is three weeks away and *Cabin Pressure* is half finished. While other shows use their final weeks to fine tune and polish their work, the SITI Company reexamines not only the work they had already created, but also the larger conceptual framework of the entire piece. They begin where they began—with the talk-back sessions.

The talk-back/audience interview that had already been established early on had been built with texts from Blau, Grotowski, Brook, and others. But by the time the Company arrives in Louisville, they are concerned that they are "preaching...pontificating" (Lauren 2000). The ideas contained within the texts are ideas the Company wants to support, but the texts are not appropriate for the characters they had created—modest caricatures of audience members reticent to express



7. The triple replay of *Private Lives* incorporated into *Cabin Pressure* (Louisville, 1999). From left: Will Bond, Kelly Maurer, Ellen Lauren, and Stephen Webber. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

an opinion. The characters are too inarticulate to speak the selected texts. The Company's next step is painful for them: they return to the one item on the table they had consistently ignored: the notebooks containing transcriptions of interviews and the journals the audience had kept during the *Private Lives* rehearsal. Lauren remembers the Company's hesitation: "I think in part, as actors, you really don't want to get that close to reading a journal of an audience member watching you. We had been everything from frightened of these journals to dismissive of them" (2000).

But they began to read the journals and interviews. They also read transcriptions of a real talk-back session that Bogart had held after a performance of *Private*

Lives. The record contained every "um" and "ah" transcribed by the ATL staff. What a pleasant surprise when the cast discovered a gold mine in the breadth of the detail. Lauren:

We realized we had found the key. And it's not that we were actually looking for questions and answers that had the tone of "well, um, yeah, us, yeah." We had never found ourselves in the history of SITI looking for this kind of text to actually say on the stage on top of our choreography. We were speaking things from the audience's mouth in the talk-back. We were quoting them, their actual hesitations and verbal hiccups. But we realized this was right and that we had had it all along. (2000)

The SITI Company has a strong barometer for their discovery of "truth." When that happens, there is a rare immediate consensus. And, indeed, the scene they created from this return to the basic materials of the research—the scene that was included in the final script—captures the humor and poignancy, the raw emotion and tremendous discomfort of spectators. The text is profound in its triviality:

EDDIE: Any questions? (*Silence.*) What did you think?

VANESSA: I liked it.

BERT: Mmm...

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

ROZANNE: It was fun.

BERT/VANESSA: Uh... [...]

EDDIE: Were there any moments that made you feel uncomfortable?

YOSHI: I was uncomfortable physically and I felt chilly.

VANESSA: Well, yeah, I, well, yeah, yeah.

EDDIE: Could you elaborate on that?

VANESSA: Oh.

EDDIE: Can you describe a moment or in some way convey what it was? (*Silence.*) What was your favorite part?

ROZANNE/VANESSA: Oh, the the—with the thing, oh yeah, etc.

EDDIE: Why was that satisfying? (*Silence.*) Was there anything that surprised you?

ROZANNE: Yep. Oh, yeah.

EDDIE: Could you describe it?

VANESSA: It was a, it was really shocking initially. Uh, I I didn't think it would be so shocking, but it was.

ROZANNE: ...shocking...

EDDIE: Was there anything that you really hated? (*Silence.*) Was there anything you feel you missed out on?

YOSHI: Well, I spent most of the time concentrating very hard on not coughing. (SITI 2000a:11-13)

The revision of the talk-back sequences clarifies issues of structure and content. The Company feels compelled to include more contemporary material in response to the tone of the new scenes. They decide they need what they term a "scene of violence," a scene drawn from American realism. The Company turned to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

But initial attempts to gain the rights to perform a section of *Virginia Woolf* are so discouraging that the Company decides to create their own version. (This is reminiscent of The Wooster Group's inability to get rights to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* for their *Route 1 and 9* [1981]. In response, Wooster commissioned Michael Kirby to write a text paralleling *The Crucible*, using the same Salem witch trial source material as Miller used.) Lauren:

We rewrote it [Albee's play] one night in our own words. Probably one of the most hilarious nights, full of stress and tears and hilarity, huge laughter, at 2...3...4 in the morning. This company, playing beat the clock, rewriting the great scene from the great play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* So we came in the next morning, bleary eyed, and Anne said, "OK, OK read it to me," and we read it. We couldn't get through it. By this time the hilarity had died down and we said, "Anne we can't do this. This is humiliating, we can't do this scene at all. This isn't the way to go." (2000)

While Bogart continues to pursue the rights to perform *Woolf*, the Company continues creating and rehearsing the remainder of *Cabin Pressure*. They continue to rearrange the piece. Work on the actual talk-back transcripts, and the quality of the language they had ultimately chosen to include, has inspired them to pursue an overall structure that moves clearly from the verbal to the nonverbal. Thus, the textless "audience ballet" now needs to conclude the show.

In order to proceed in spite of their inability either to get rights to *Virginia Woolf* and their unanimous unwillingness to perform their own version, they begin bypassing this "big American realism" scene and try instead to work on the choreography for the ballet. But the strain of the legal battle and the rapidly approaching deadline takes its toll on their creative process. The Company finds



A scene from the "Audience Ballet" in *Cabin Pressure* (Louisville, 1999). From left: Kelly Maurer, Stephen Webber, Barney Hanlon, Will Bond, and Ellen Lauren. (Photo by Richard Trigg)

themselves stifled, unable to choreograph the ballet. Lauren: "We just kept getting up to a certain place in the music and then nothing, none of us, nothing would happen. We would try. Nothing. So we were getting very, very discouraged" (2000).

Things go from bad to worse. On tech day, one day before the first preview, a special "audience" arrives: those who had been in on the initial interview had been invited to watch rehearsal that day. What they see is the cast—still without the rights to the Albee play—sitting on the floor of the theatre, surrounded by stacks and stacks of books of plays. This invited audience sees stillness, fighting, tears; they watch what Lauren describes as "a company stuck, really in trouble. The first part was written and choreographed but the show had no end" (2000). Finally, the cast shoves the books aside and stands up. Lauren:

We started to work on the audience ballet and Darren went "Stop. Oh, my God, for five weeks I have been playing the wrong piece of music. You've been choreographing this to the wrong music." He just got it. It was the day before we opened. He put on a completely new piece of music. We scrapped everything and we Viewpointed to this music and built the audience ballet in 20 minutes. Bang. And it was very emotional. By the end of it we were weeping because it was just this release into the frustration of not being able to do the Albee, the fear of opening. (2000)

At that point they decide not to insert another scene. They would go from the backstage farce directly to the audience ballet. The decision is a shaky one but the Company feels it is the best alternative, given time constraints. Then, at six the next morning comes good news: Bogart announces that they "had the Albee"—the rights had been granted. They rehearse for 12 hours straight, from 6:30 in the morning until 6:30 in the evening. The call for their first curtain is 7:15.

The big finish, the angst-ridden afternoons, and the long nights are all a part of the SITI Company's creative process. Lauren:

Even if we have an opening in the next 24 hours, you can't stress about it. You really have to trust that it's going to happen, that events are going to come together in a very curious, serendipitous way that you understand only a part of, just a part of. The exponential reality of building a piece as a company is something you can never totally know. We never know where we're going to end. (2000)

The space between audiences and artists is narrowing. Older, traditional labels are disappearing.

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