

Krannert play focuses on audience

By JULIE KISTLER
For The News-Gazette

We all love stars — actors, singers, dancers, athletes — but we never think much about what it takes to make one.

By that, I don't mean training or talent or even luck. I mean hooking and holding an audience.

Audience. The real silent majority.

Even if nobody bothers about them much unless they have cell phones ringing or they're unwrapping candy, the people who sit and watch are an impor-

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tant part of any theatrical experience.

It seems obvious — no matter how fabulous the actors are, they can't create electricity in a vacuum.

Anne Bogart, the artistic director of the fresh and edgy SITI Company, investigates the nature of the audience up close and personal in "Cabin Pressure," a play developed by Bogart and the SITI Company from an audience interview project.

I saw "Cabin Pressure" when it was originally performed a year ago at the Humana Festival in Louisville, and I thought then that it was creative, entertaining and highly theatrical. In short, I loved it.

As it riffed on genres, classics, actors and scholars, as it

CABIN PRESSURE

Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart. Written and created by the SITI Company (www.siti.org). Cast: Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, Stephen Webber. Set designer: Neil Patel. Costume designer: James Schuette. Lighting designer: Mimi Jordan Sherin. Sound designer: Darron L. West. Wig designer: Walt Spangler. Dramaturgy by Adrien-Alice Hensel and Kee Kroger. A Merquee Performance.

Saturday, Colwell Playhouse, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, Urbana.

combined fluid elements of dance and movement with aggressive lighting and sound, "Cabin Pressure" created real magic for me.

It also seemed like a natural for Humana Festival audiences, who are heavily theatrical themselves.

"Cabin Pressure" was presented in a small, black box theater then, a perfect setting for such an intimate show.

For its current tour, the show is apparently leaving the black boxes and a three-sided audience for bigger venues like the proscenium space at Krannert Center's Colwell Playhouse. As a result, "Cabin Pressure" loses some of its impact as it loses intimacy.

Still, the show is a marvel of creativity in performance, and it does manage to catch its audience eventually. It takes a little longer this way to snare them, to get over the "What the heck is going on?" stage, but the show does eventually make its points.

Clearly, it still preaches best

to the choir — or plays best to the people who already love theater.

It also runs the risk of creating a monster in the very audience it seeks to illuminate.

In Saturday's performance, the audience ran the gamut from loud, raucous howlers and clappers (who apparently wanted desperately to be part of the show) to a couple of small children (who didn't have a clue what was going on). Because this show is all about audience, the distractions made for an uncomfortable experience, especially in the early going.

But somehow, the talented performers on stage found a way to make it work. As an ensemble, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Barney O'Hanlon, Stephen Webber and especially Kelly Maurer put it all out there, making everything from a gothic mystery spoof to a brutal piece of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" connect with this difficult audience.

They were aided by intense sound effects from "Soundscape" artist Darron L. West as well as Mimi Jordan Sherin's brilliant lighting design.

And when it all pushed toward the end, where the company performs a sort of spiraling folding-chair ballet ... well, they brought all of us in the audience into their moment, which is exactly the idea.

"Cabin Pressure" moves next to Los Angeles, to the Freud Playhouse at UCLA.