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'Cabin Pressure' extends to audiences

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CURTAIN CALL BY MARY HOULIHAN

In the business of theater, the audience and all its foibles is something directors and actors deal with every day. It's a symbiotic relationship that will forever be at the core of live theater.

For some time, avant-garde director Anne Bogart has been contemplating this ongoing partnership in fine detail. "As a director, you are acutely aware of the circular pattern of this relationship," Bogart said. "Being in an audience is a creative act. Theater is an active culture you lean into." Bogart investigates this working partnership in her humorous and thoughtful new work, "Cabin Pressure," an exploration of how theater can strengthen our direct connection with each other. (Don't worry, there is no live audience participation.)

The 90-minute piece was brought to town by Performing Arts Chicago, which earlier this year presented Bogart's "Bob," a one-man meditation on the thoughts and theater of visionary visual artist Robert Wilson.

Hailed by playwright-director Tina Landau as "The Mama of Downtown Theater," Bogart is co-founder and artistic director of New York's influential avant-garde Saratoga International Theatre Institute.

"Boring" is one word that awakens the passion in Bogart, whose work definitely steers away from the everyday. For her, theater consists of precise dialogue, inventive movement, unusual sound and daring lighting.

"A performance should wake up the audience," said Bogart, who also serves as director of graduate theater studies at Columbia University. "If an audience knows what to expect before they even get there, why go at all."

In creating her works, Bogart is known for her collaborative efforts with actors. "I gather the material and we work as a team to put it together," she said. "They choose the words."

But in "Cabin Pressure," she also relied upon a collaboration with 57 audience members at the Actors Theater of Louisville, where the piece was developed. Participants sat in on rehearsals and kept a journal. Bogart also interviewed each volunteer.

"Folks of all ages and from all ethnic backgrounds took part," Bogart said. At the first rehearsals, the actors, not used to having an audience sitting in on the development process, "literally freaked out."

"In a rehearsal everything shows, mistakes are made," Bogart said. "The actors had to focus on being responsible to me and not the audience."

"Cabin Pressure" developed into a work that defies conventional theater. It becomes an avant-garde textbook on audience-actor relationships and theatrical history, with bits ranging from Restoration comedy to British murder mysteries to a deconstructed "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

In one humorous segment, the actors seated in a row of folding chairs portray their vision of the audience, complete with the crackling-candy-wrapper person who is a given at all plays.

"I asked the actors to come up with 20 things they see the audience do. It wasn't a hard assignment," said Bogart, laughing.

Bogart creates a form of theater that owes a lot to dance, graphic art and a unique use of space. Movement, choreographed by the company members, is a constant factor in "Cabin Pressure."

"The company excels at highly physical movement," Bogart said. "The piece revolves around it."

Bogart often steps into more traditional territory ("Picnic," "Miss Julie," "A Streetcar Named Desire") and infuses it with her own vision. She begins a project with no set ideas.

"I wait for an interaction with the material. I try to listen to what the play wants to be. I want to discover things I never before experienced or knew." And Bogart hopes the audience feels the same way.

In the end, "theater is a uniquely shared artistic experience," she said.