

AN EYE ON THE AUDIENCE

Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Live theater requires at least two people: someone performing onstage and someone watching elsewhere.

The SITI company explores the complex, subtle and powerful relationship between actors and audience members in *Cabin Pressure*, opening Thursday at the Wexner Center for the Arts.

"It's very audience-dependent," director Anne Bogart said. "It's a play about the people who are in the room with you -- which is the audience. . . . Every time we perform the play, it's about the people in that room."

Cabin Pressure premiered to acclaim in March at the 23rd Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Ky.

"We tried to use a little snippet from many theater styles, including some plays we did in Louisville," Bogart said from New York.

During a six-month residency last year at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, her troupe staged a revival of *Private Lives* that was seen by 57 audience members from early rehearsals to the opening.

"A rehearsal hall is sacred territory when you're preparing a piece," said Ellen Lauren, a SITI co-founder who appeared in *Private Lives*. "The nuts and bolts of building a show is nobody's business. It's about getting up and falling down many times, until you figure out the one way that doesn't fall down."

"So all four of us (the *Private Lives* cast) were uncomfortable. But Anne just kept saying, 'Don't pander to them; don't be embarrassed by them.'"

After a while, the actors and the Louisville audience set up a "mutual truce" during rehearsals: The actors didn't speak to the observers and vice versa; instead, the observers wrote about their reactions in journals that the actors read later.

"We were frightened of what we were going to read, of what they would say about us," Lauren said. "We were blown away by how closely they had watched, how little they knew when they went in about what we do and how much they learned."

In researching *Cabin Pressure*, the troupe drew on many sources -- including great scenes from Western dramas and dozens of classic texts about theater. Yet it kept returning to the journals.

"All audiences learn from each other in any play," Bogart said. "They learn how to listen and respond to one another. That's even more true in this case: *Cabin Pressure* gives the audience permission to respond."

Responding in turn to the initial Louisville audience, Bogart opted to begin *Cabin Pressure* where most other plays end: As theatergoers take their seats, the actors repeat the final scene of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* in a seemingly endless loop.

"I wanted to take all the conventions that are known in theater history about the relationship of the audience to the stage and twist them," she said.

The 90-minute piece incorporates excerpts from Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* -- which Bogart used as the basis for *Going, Going, Gone*, a SITI production at the 1996 Humana Festival. The work also "samples" Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a Restoration comedy, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Agatha Christie's *Spider's Web* and a Bob Wilson-style work.

Bogart laughed about the evolution. "The audience favorite turned out to be a panel-discussion scene in which the actors stand and talk with funny microphones about dangling signifiers -- as if a bunch of intellectuals tried to talk about the audience but couldn't speak at all."

The Wexner Center, which last year presented the world premieres of the SITI productions *Bob and Alice's Adventures*, represents the first stop of a national tour.

Cabin Pressure also will be performed in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami and other U.S. cities, and in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Since staging *Cabin Pressure*, Bogart has directed *Short Stories* in Salzburg, Austria; and staged *Gertrude and Alice* and co-directed Laurie Anderson's *Moby Dick* in New York.

Whatever the play or style, Bogart remains "obsessed" with the powerful interaction involved. "The key to the theater is the audience's creative state and energy."