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Ellen Lauren, "Cafe Variations" and puny shoulders that carry the comedy

By Alicia Anstead



Anne Bogart's newest work "[Cafe Variations](#)" is a theatrical and dance meditation on texts by playwright Charles Mee. The work is essentially about romantic relationships, how they blossom, fracture, repair or perish. Although "Café" is an ensemble work, combining Bogart's [SITI Company](#) actors and Emerson College students, Ellen Lauren, a longtime member of SITI, has one of the primary roles, if not one of the most demanding

theatrical roles. She plays "Edith A," the type of character who could have sprung from the minds of Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett and Lily Tomlin. But this one is pure Lauren. Opposite Leon Ingulsrud, Lauren is brassy, bossy, bitchy and ultimately very sympathetic. She is surrounded by a "Mad Men" elegance with the young actresses onstage and yet her elegance - the elegance of comedy - is writ large. "Directing Ellen is like driving a Rolls Royce," said Bogart. "She has smooth gears and can do things that most others cannot. Working with her is a constant lesson in what acting for the stage can encompass. ArtsEmerson presented the world premiere of "Cafe" last week at the Cutler Majestic in Boston, where it continues through Sunday, April 22. The following is an edited and condensed interview with Lauren about developing a character, telling stories onstage and being funny.

How do you know in your body when a movement is a funny movement?

It's a combination of experience, my own personal taste and intuition. I tend to work very intuitively when I develop a role. I made a decision with "Cafe Variations" to work very quickly and not agonize. I knew from bits of information in the text that I could jump on and highlight. I immediately got an image of somebody. It came very quickly to me. I did not have an image of the physical broadness of the performance until I got inside this character and got to play around.

Can you feel it in your body physically when you slunk your shoulders or sit aggressively in your dress that you're being funny?

Those are little revelations of my own inner insecurities or my looking at myself and highlighting and amplifying a quality. If that goes south, you feel like crap about yourself. If I have puny shoulders and I blow that up into a cartoon, I'm not putting out something funny. I'm putting out something that makes me feel incredibly self-conscious. And how can I compete with the pretty girls on the stage? I'm not going to. I'm going to say to the audience: "This is how I feel up here next to a gorgeous sophomore." And what fun? What fun to be able to use my own resources and insecurities that way. I think that's what people are generally drawing on when they are funny.

What happens inside of you to see your character's qualities?

It's a rhythm thing. I read the text, and I can see it immediately on the page. The sentences are short. The words are one syllable. They're demonstrative. They're active. This is a real alpha person. A lot of the sentences begin as verbs. She tends to play it as it lays. She's bossy. Doesn't brook any shit from anyone. This came off the page very quickly to me. That's what I didn't second guess. I pick up a scent, and I try not to worry. Often to my detriment. But when you make work quickly, you learn to go with the thing.

How did you learn to do that?

Being in the theater, you have to work very quickly. Partly that's just a straight up, practical economic reality. Once you're out of the luxury of academics, you have three weeks to get it together. The designers come in the first day, and they're picking up signals and have to make decisions just as quickly. They're so keyed in to the information I'm putting out. So I have to be a little ahead. I have to do that for them. And I have to do that for Anne.

For Anne?

Yes. That's what my job is. It's a dance between a director and actor. She has the initial idea, you follow her into the cave, and then she turns around and gives you the flashlight and says: "Now you have to lead the way." Tell me about your character's story. I really was lucky because I have a pretty classic Aristotelian narrative to play. The audience comes to know me through a relationship with another guy. We meet. We fall in love. We have a big fight. We reconcile. That's as yummy and as classic as it gets. I thought: "Yee ha! Now I can make that story as squirrely as all hell because I don't have to make up the story." That's the most freeing for me: when I can sit down into a narrative line. Depending on the universe in which that narrative line will play itself out, I quickly and intuitively make a decision about how to tell the story physically.

It's almost as if you're talking about working psychically.

It is. It's almost like you have to get out your divining stick and just go. And the divining stick doesn't work unless you really, really believe in it. I don't think you can make work in theater unless you believe there's an exponential thing that can happen to you through the process, and enjoy the process and have the courage of not having any idea where you're going to end up.

Are you saying you had no idea where your character was going to end up?

I certainly did not begin with knowing. I had an image of someone who was a retired women's studies professor from Smith. Really smart. A little too much time on her hands. A little stiller. I knew I'd be working with 19- and 20-year olds, and I thought: Oh, I'll be the older person, and I'll be still because they're going to have all this wild energy. But I'm also a little bit of a 19th-century actor. This project is up my alley in terms of what I love. I love the theatricality and the artificiality of theater that can still be as real as the human being standing in front of you but do things one can only do in theater.

You say it's not something we can see any place else, but I think the reason it resonates with audiences is because we can imagine it. And you are the conduit to opening up the imaginations of everyone in that room.

Thank you. That is the point, isn't it?

PHOTO: Ellen Lauren and Leon Ingulsrud fall in love, have a fight and make up in "Cafe Variations," Anne Bogart's meditation on romantic love and Charles Mee's texts. PHOTO by PAUL MAROTTA

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