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Anne Bogart Keeps Walking With *Trojan Women*

by DEBORAH BEHRENS



It takes experienced hands to elevate a 415 B.C. anti-war drama from a scholarly museum theater presentation to a provocative evening of contemporary pathos. Especially when the setting is the Getty Villa's outdoor Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater. No one understands this better than iconic director Anne Bogart, who helms her SITI Company production of *Trojan Women* (after Euripides) with a new Getty-commissioned adaptation by Jocelyn Clarke opening September 7.

"I think one of the big mistakes people make with *Trojan Women* is they immediately think it's a bunch of women in rags screaming,"

laughs Bogart on a late August afternoon prior to rehearsal. "These women were highly cultivated and educated. Troy was known as the Paris of the entire world at that time. The play happens the morning after a party the Trojans were throwing because they thought they had beaten the Greeks. What they didn't know was the Trojan Horse was being slid in through the middle of it and the Greeks were waiting inside to attack."

The women who play the four Trojan women in this new production are Ellen Lauren (Hecuba), Katherine Crockett (Helen), Akiko Aizawa (Kassandra) and Makela Spielmann (Andromache). Male ensemble members include J. Ed Araiza (Menelaus), Gian-Murray Gianino (Odysseus), Leon Ingulsrud (Talthybius), Barney O'Hanlon (Chorus) and Brent Werzner (Poseidon).

"The next morning these women are brought out," Bogart adds. "They're not wearing rags. They're wearing gowns. They were at this fabulous party. They don't scream. I remember being in New York on 9/11. You don't scream. You talk. You try to figure things out. You say how are we going to go forward? Can you believe this has happened? The conversations are acute, highly intelligent and passionate — not

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out-of-control hysterical.”

Euripides' play famously focuses on the plight of Hecuba, Queen of Troy, her daughter Cassandra and daughters-in-law Helen of Troy and Andromache, as they await their fate at the hands of the victorious Greeks who killed their spouses while vanquishing the city. The piece was originally written as a commentary on the Peloponnesian War during which the Athenians slaughtered the male populace of Melos, a neutral Aegean island state, then enslaved its women and children. It has fascinated audiences for centuries but often repelled critics and scholars. Many see it as a story about a group of devastated women waiting to be carted away during which nothing of significance happens.

Convincing modern-day neophyte or even veteran theatergoers to bear witness to a live re-enactment of the Trojan women's horrific plight can resemble a PBS pledge drive plea. To some, attending an ancient Greek play is on par with taking prescription medicine – you know it's good for you but sometimes it's hard to swallow. Bogart realizes she's got a tall order ahead of her with those making their annual pilgrimage to the Getty grounds.

“You need to create a journey for the audience and every journey needs a call to adventure, as Joseph Campbell would say,” she explains. “So to create a journey through *Trojan Women* for example, where all the scholars say nothing happens, what is that? What is the call to adventure for the audience? At which point do we say, okay the audience has come. They want to be at the Getty. It's their one Greek play. It's their medicine. But what catches them? And then once you've got their attention, where do you take them? If you miss that moment, you've lost them forever and they're just there for the scenery. It's a big responsibility.”

And it's a responsibility the acclaimed acting and directing theorist has never shied away from as she nears the 20th anniversary of the company she co-founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992. Bogart currently serves as artistic director of SITI Company, short for Saratoga International Theatre Institute, and she is also a professor at Columbia University where she runs the graduate directing program. Recent works with SITI include *Antigone*, *Under Construction*, *Freshwater*, *Who Do You Think You Are*, *Radio Macbeth*, *Hotel Cassiopeia* and *Death and the Ploughman*. Highly regarded internationally, SITI is also known for such past noted productions as company member Charles L. Mee's *bobrauschenbergamerica*, which premiered at the Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays in March of 2001, and has subsequently appeared in various forms in the 10 years hence.

Bogart is also the recipient of two Obie Awards for directing Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* (1990) and *No Plays No Poetry But Philosophical Reflections Practical Instruction Provocative Opinions and Pointers from a Noted Critic and Playwright* (1988) plus the Bessie Award for choreographing and creating her version of *South*

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Pacific (1984). She was a 2000-2001 Guggenheim Fellow and won a National Endowment for the Arts Artistic Associate Grant in 1986-87. She is the author of three books: *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theater*, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (with Tina Landau) and *And Then You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*.

Bogart feels completely at home at the Getty Villa. She had her first taste of ancient Greek theater during a 1970 sophomore college year abroad in Greece. Noted classical scholars like H.D.F. Kitto and A.R. Burn had retired there to teach, and a military junta ran the country. On her second night, she attended an Aristophanes play at the 5,000-seat Odeon of Herodes Atticus, located at the base of the Parthenon. She recalls not understanding the local audience's wildly enthusiastic reaction.

"I learned later that theater is the place where references could be made through ancient plays that had to do with the oppression of the particular moment we were living in," she explains. "So they were highly politicized. People were allowed to respond without getting into trouble, because it was metaphorical and it was all through the guise of ancient Greek theater. So that was an amazing thing and it was a full house! I remember very vividly sitting in the audience and being swept up by the atmosphere."

Bogart admits one of the challenges she faces in staging *Trojan Woman* in Pacific Palisades is getting local audiences to imagine their own response if a similar politically motivated situation were to occur here.

"What would happen if my city were devastated?" Bogart wants attendees to ponder. "What would happen if my husband was killed and my children and I'm left? Would I go on? How would I go on? How do we go on? What does it mean to go on? It's huge. But as you said, it's also about reaching those people who say I'm here for my medicine or a slice of PBS at the beautiful Getty. One would hope for much more. I've seen productions of Greek plays that have changed my life personally. They are, as Aristotle would call it, cathartic. The catharsis is throwing light in dark places."

Reinventing a Classic

Trojan Women is cited as one of the greatest anti-war plays ever written says Bogart, with 20th century productions drawing comparisons to events ranging from Bosnia to Northern Ireland, the Iraq war to the Holocaust. What made her interested in investigating the piece at this juncture has more to do with theatrical history than simply politics.

"I just did *Carmen* this summer at Glimmerglass [Festival] and I'm a big believer right now at this age in not missing any of the great chestnuts," she explains. "And I

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think plays are in the canon for good reasons – they ask great questions. The question at the heart of *Trojan Women*, which is one I think I share with a lot of people, especially [Samuel] Beckett, is as I said before, how do we go on? In a way, Hecuba is actually like Winnie in [Beckett's] *Happy Days*. It's the character stuck in a pile of dirt that gets higher and higher while she says well, I still have my toothbrush. I still have my gun. Everything's fine."

To Bogart, Hecuba responds to her situation in Troy the same way. "She says, well everything's gone but I have to stand up. I have to keep my chin up. Things will get better. And things get worse and worse and worse. But she continues. It's that indomitable spirit and that impossible hope many of us as human beings – except those who get depressed and kill themselves – embody. Why do we go on in the midst of such misery? This play asks that question. I think it's a big question and I think that's why it's endured."

Jocelyn Clarke's highly modernized adaptation is by no means a first for SITI Company or the Getty. The Irish dramaturge and writer has written five plays for Bogart's Manhattan-based group including an adaptation of *Antigone*, which was commissioned for the Villa Theater Lab in 2009. Norman Frisch, manager of the Villa theater program, had approached longtime friend Bogart with the idea of programming a comedy for the 2011 fall production. Bogart returned with the idea of imbuing Euripides' *Trojan Women* with 21st century souls. Frisch ultimately gave way to the artistic vision she championed for the piece.

"I originally asked Chuck Mee, who is a company member and who has written a *Trojan Women*," she explains. "I said would you consider doing another one with me. The thing about Chuck that I love is he's always completely honest. He thought about it, called back and said, I don't think so. I haven't got another *Trojan Women* in me. So then I immediately called Jocelyn. I knew the product from both Chuck and Jocelyn would be very, very different."

In Clarke's version, gone is the large chorus of Trojan women, replaced with a single eunuch priest. The Dublin-based playwright further tightened the play's focus to the four remaining Trojan royal women, eliminating the crowd of other widows waiting for transport traditionally found in Euripides' original text. Given Bogart's legacy as an avid instigator of theatrical re-invention, including infamously setting *South Pacific* in a mental institution or staging *Macbeth* as a 1940s radio play, this approach follows both her bent and that of her Greek playwright.

"It reflects not only how I would approach something but how Euripides would," she acknowledges. "Euripides was known as the iconoclast of the Greek classical era. He took stories that were sent through Homer through his fellow colleagues, ripped them apart and put them back together. He was a great deconstructionist and a great re-inventor, so I think you can't do Euripides in his spirit without thinking that

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way.”

Clarke embraces a similar tradition, she points out. “He asks of the piece, what does it mean now and how do I take this story forward? Every time a play is done it carries the baggage of its previous productions. For example, Jocelyn’s added a character. Odysseus had never been in *Trojan Women* as far as I know, but he is spoken about. Now the scene with Odysseus is one of the most fantastic scenes, and it couldn’t have happened without Euripides intimating it first.”

Bogart made an early name for herself doing site-specific pieces in New York beginning in the mid-1970s. For *Trojan Women*, her plans are to leave the Getty intact. “Rather than building a set in front of this amazing museum site, we are featuring this space. The doors to the museum are the doors to the museum and are also the doors to the citadel of Troy, so it is a site-specific production in a sense. It’s really an interesting paradox because the play is about a city in ruins that’s been pillaged and burns down at the end. Yet we’re looking at this gorgeous pristine façade. So I hope the paradox allows for the empathy that the audience actually needs.”

Most of the *Trojan Women* ensemble are SITI Company members, with a few additions Bogart dubs “SITI family” because of their participation in other company productions. She is quite excited about Katherine Crockett, a principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company, who plays Helen of Troy. Crockett has danced as Cate Blanchett’s double in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and with Mikhail Baryshnikov in *The Show – Achilles Heels*. She has also been a soloist dancer for Robert Wilson, Vanessa Redgrave, Susan Stroman and Alexander McQueen.

SITI Company collaborated with the Martha Graham Company last year to reconstruct a 1938 Martha Graham work called *American Document* that included Crockett. “Katherine’s about six foot ninety,” laughs Bogart. “I don’t know, she’s probably six feet tall. She’s drop-dead gorgeous and she wanted to speak. She has this beautiful voice and danced around the world, but as an actress this is new for her. It was Ellen Lauren’s idea [who plays Hecuba]. When Katherine walks on the stage, you don’t need to do anything else. My question is how to feature her as an actress and let her have that world of Martha Graham.”

Bogart feels the life throb of the ages flowing through *Trojan Women*. “With Euripides you feel like you’re going through the Greeks to Shakespeare to Chekhov to Beckett. You feel that line just shooting through it. There are moments you feel the history of theater in it. You see that Beckett couldn’t have happened without Euripides. So we are all connected.”

Keep Walking

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In a 2009 American Theatre Wing interview, Bogart said, “Making theater is always violent. The courage it takes to make a mistake makes you embarrassed or comes out of the fear of unknowing. To work with courage and strength as if you know what you’re doing is the paradox we live in. We live in complete flux.”

When asked about this, Bogart admits, “Sometimes I think the only way I’ve had a career is not by making big plans. But the image I have is my feet walking to rehearsal. In spite of all the uncertainties and worries, my feet just keep going. I wear sneakers a lot so my sneakers are going forward. That’s basically what gets you from one project to the next – just keep walking. That’s the last sentiment of *Trojan Women*: just walk. Keep going.”

With her shoulder-length mane of gray hair and sans make-up style, Bogart initially evokes a Colleen Dewhurst force-of-nature gravitas. But upon further discussion, her warmth and self-deprecating wit quickly emerge. “If I go work with a group of people I don’t know, I’m highly entertaining to everyone. They think everything I say is genius. With my [SITI] gang, they just roll their eyes. They say you can’t tell that joke again or you’ve done that idea before.”

Before *Antigone*, the last time Los Angeles audiences saw SITI Company was in 2008, when it presented the 1401 German play *Death and the Ploughman* at California State University Los Angeles. Prior to that was Bogart’s 2003 Los Angeles Opera directorial debut with the widely panned *Nicholas and Alexandra*, starring Plácido Domingo as Rasputin.

“I did the most hated opera on the planet ever at LA Opera,” she admits, having helmed several others including *Lilith and Seven Deadly Sins* for New York City Opera. “I’d love to go back, but they just won’t invite me because it was such a disaster. It was a new opera and people said you shouldn’t spend that money on new operas, but that was tough.”

Bogart says her company loves coming to Los Angeles. “We never come as much as we want to. I love spending mounds of times here. My family is all on the West Coast. We come more because of our [Viewpoints and Suzuki Method] training programs and productions. We have a lot of actors in LA who train with us regularly, but we’d always like to be here more because of a performance.”

During one of her famous *Conversations with Anne* held at the 2009 Theatre Communications Group (TCG) Conference with acclaimed choreographer and dancer Bill T. Jones, Bogart labeled both of them as deconstructionists and declared an end to postmodernism. “We’ve come to a place where we’ve deconstructed everything and we can’t deconstruct anymore.” She has also admitted in a separate American Theatre Wing interview that SITI has a reputation for doing “kooky devised work” when in fact “we do a lot of classics.” How is the process different from one to the other?

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“Part of the reason to have a company is to keep from doing the same thing,” she offers. “That said, it always feels the same. You study, you study, you study, whether it’s a devised work or a new play by Chuck Mee or the rewriting of Euripides. You study, you study, you study. You think, you think, you think. You prepare, you make plans and all of that gives you the right to walk into rehearsal the first day. It doesn’t give you any other right to do anything else. It gives you the right to be there. And then you have to listen.”

Bogart emphasizes that contrary to some perceptions based upon its popular training programs, SITI Company doesn’t improvise in rehearsal or on stage.

“We improvise in training but once we start it’s step by step. It’s how do you get to B from A? How to you get to C? You rework and you rework it, go back to A and get to B again. So in that sense, the process does stay the same and one hopes that the product of that or the flower of that bud is as different as can possibly be. But what feels the same to me whether it’s a new piece or devised work or site-specific or an opera, is that horrible feeling of dread when you feel like you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Next Generation Theater Artists

At TCG’s 50th anniversary conference held last June in Los Angeles, a running topic was the millennial generation’s distrust of authority or experts outside their own socially networked peers, disregard for context or history when creating/presenting new work and demand for participation at every level of the theatrical process. As a former president of the TCG Board (1991-1993) and head of Columbia’s graduate directing program, what does Bogart see in the students she works with in regard to these issues?

“The young people I’m in contact with have a voracious interest in where they come from and what the roots of their field are,” she explains. “I don’t find in general young theater artists to be shallow or uninterested. I find them to be very passionate and unsatisfied with A, the acting technique they’ve received and B, with the corporate ladder mentality of the theater. They completely reject the regional theater as it is today and don’t want to work in it. They are starting companies and don’t have much to lose, so they’re actually taking bigger risks. I’m really jazzed by what young theater people are doing.”

She cites LA’s Poor Dog Group and NYC’s Elevator Repair Service as examples of such risk-takers. “These are cultural shifts that look back and move forward at the same time. I think for there to be any great kernel of presence in the theater there’s going to be a lot of chaff and a lot of noise, but look to the strengths. Sometimes I find those TCG talks to be a little masturbatory.”

As to the clamor for originality, Bogart believes “the notion is misguided and it’s

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fairly recent. The best essay ever written about that subject is by T.S. Eliot and it's called *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. He essentially says it's only recently that audiences think – what is this person doing that's new? I've said this before. If theater were a verb it would be to remember, and I mean it like 're-member' – to put things back together again. So it's a contradiction to have the theater concentrate on innovation. It's all about receiving."

Giving Back at 60

Bogart reaches a new milestone in late September by turning 60. She seems genuinely surprised an outsider has figured this out. "I can't believe you know that! Who does the math?" she laughs. When asked what piques her interest at this stage or whether she has a "bucket list" of theatrical projects yet to accomplish, Bogart replies that her focus now has more to do with substance than subject.

"It's still 'one foot in front of the other' but I also won't do anything that doesn't seem to have consequence," she explains. "I'm working on a couple of things that are really rich. One of them is actually with Bill T. Jones. We're directing a show together based on the hundredth anniversary of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. We both got a commission from the University of North Carolina and said let's do it together with our two companies. Now that's a fascinating project – studying *The Rite of Spring* in order to understand what happened the night people rioted the first time they heard Stravinsky's music and saw what Nijinsky was doing."

She says future projects must possess a certain "magnitude" or "depth of qualitative adventure."

"Do you know what I mean? I might have done something when I was much younger just because it's another experience or I'll learn something from it. I guess I'm more choosy now in what I do, and not just for selfish reasons. If you have a limited amount of time to give back to the world that has supported you in your life, it becomes important what you contribute."

***Trojan Women (after Euripides)*, presented by J. Paul Getty Museum, opens Sept. 8; plays Thur.-Sat., 8 pm; through Oct. 1. Tickets: \$38-\$42. Getty Villa's Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, 17985 Pacific Coast Hwy, Pacific Palisades; 310-440-7300 or Getty.edu.**

<http://www.lastagetimes.com/2011/09/anne-bogart-keeps-walking-with-trojan-women/>