



“theater is a blank page” brings together Ann Hamilton and SITI Company for theatre



Photos by Meghan Ralston

Ann Hamilton

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By Jesse Tigges

From the April 16, 2015 edition

When “theater is a blank page” premieres at the Wexner Center for the Arts on Thursday, April 23, it will be the culmination of a collaboration between internationally renowned visual artist Ann Hamilton and the SITI (Saratoga International Theater Institute) Company, an experimental theater company lauded for its innovation. What will take place during the three-hour performance of “theater is a blank page” is still being finalized during a residency awarded to SITI Company and Hamilton, because it’s a sight-specific collaboration that blends elements of theater, visual art, literature and more.

“There really is a lot of collaboration between performing arts companies and visual artists. What that usually means is the visual artist designs the set, décor or costumes and the performers do their thing in that environment. People may assume that is what’s happening with this. ‘Oh, Ann Hamilton is going to create some magical, visual installation and SITI Company is going to play within this.’ That’s definitely not what’s happening,” said Wexner Center’s director of performing arts Chuck Helm during a recent phone interview. “They are collaborating on every single element of this. Ann has as much to say about what’s being spoken by the actors and SITI Company has as much to say about what the visuals of things are. They’re creating a joint language out of a common concept for what is a unique performance.”

It’s wholly appropriate the Wexner Center is presenting and supporting this collaboration—



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April 23-26

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the cap to the Wexner Center's 25th anniversary celebration— as both Hamilton and SITI Company have had long, fruitful relationships with the art institution dating back to its earliest days in the 1990s.

Hamilton was one of the first artists to exhibit work at the Wexner Center, participating in the series "New Works for New Spaces" (1990-91). It was a seminal experience for Hamilton, one that presented her an opportunity to return home to Columbus from San Francisco, where she'd been living and working, because of the numerous contemporary programs the center was dedicated to supporting.

"I started to think, 'Oh, I could live here.' Very soon after that I did decide to move. So the consequence of making that project was a real turning point. For me to have a life of art in Columbus has been possible because of the Wexner Center, and the conversations that have grown from meeting all the people that have passed through the programs here and been supported by it," Hamilton said during an interview backstage at the Mershon Auditorium (with Bogart and SITI co-artistic director Leon Ingulsrud) during the first few days of rehearsal for "theater is a blank page."

For SITI Company, which was co-founded in 1992 by current co-artistic director Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki — both widely regarded as visionaries in the theater community — the Wexner Center has been an integral part of its development. Besides "theater is a blank page," the local institute has presented eight SITI Company productions — a number of which were world premieres — and has awarded the company four artist residencies. SITI Company has become an acclaimed experimental theater company over the last two-plus decades, and its members recognize the importance of institutions like the Wexner Center in that success.

"It's just always about a relationship, and Chuck has always been 'Uncle Chuck.' He was the person who brought us here initially with 'The Medium,'" Bogart said. "The residencies came about because the chemistry was good, not only with Chuck, but also the Columbus community and the university. And because a lot of what we do is not just perform. We also have workshops with students. I think Chuck saw we were a good match. What the Wexner Center does [with their programming] is make a commitment to artists. That makes a huge difference."

While the relationships Helm and the Wexner Center have fostered with artists over the years are central to its governing mission (and one of the reasons Hamilton felt she could build her art career in Columbus), it was a necessity for SITI Company.

"SITI Company, unlike some companies, [doesn't] have its own venue. So the model of how we've operated as a company from the very beginning has been based on having relationships with institutions like the Wexner Center. It's not a nice thing — it's absolutely vital for us. It's not at all an exaggeration to say this work wouldn't happen without [those institutions]. It's very much a symbiotic relationship because of the strength of the support, and the freedom they're offering ... has allowed us to remain relatively nimble in our work and the thinking about developing our work," Ingulsrud, said.

What's possibly the most surprising aspect of this collaboration is that it didn't happen sooner, not that two titans in their field are working together, as collaboration has been a practice for both Hamilton and SITI Company for years. Bogart and Hamilton met after SITI performed "The Medium" at the Wexner Center in 1996, and immediately hit it off.

"After I moved here, it was almost immediately I came to see that performance. It was like, (Hamilton grabs the arms of her chair vigorously, and juts forward with her eyes peeled). That began my exposure to Anne [Bogart] and SITI Company's work. One of the threads is that my long interest in the relationship between bodily knowledge and the voice, text and material, is something that is a very particular practice of SITI. That just immediately resonated with me, even though I don't think I could've articulated that at the time," Hamilton said.

This began a relationship between Hamilton, Bogart and SITI Company that was about appreciating and revering each other's work. But they didn't work together on a project until "the event of the thread," an immersive installation at New York City's Park Avenue Armory in late 2012. "The event of the thread" blended together readings, sound and live elements (involving SITI Company members) within a field of swings for visitors to participate and connect to the action of each other and the work itself.

"This is good timing to work with Ann [Hamilton], both at the Armory and here, because we're at a point as a company where we've been together a long time and the idea of working with other artists from other fields is really close to us. We've been doing that for the last few years and Ann is part of that, seeing how it works. We're a strong ensemble, so let's see how it works when we start crossing boundaries," Bogart said.

After the completion of a project, SITI Company members and the artist(s) they collaborate with have an informal dinner together. At the most recent dinner, "theater is a blank page" was conceived.

Hamilton and Bogart then began workshoping ideas for the project and realized Virginia Woolf's groundbreaking novel "To the Lighthouse" needed to be involved. They spent a week in upstate New York working with SITI Company members on how to approach the text.

"We all met upstate at my farm house — it's actually a village where a bunch of company members have houses — and we were together ... brainstorming and reading the uncut version of 'To the Lighthouse' in its entirety. We were all together listening—it was a bucolic time and a lot of the

ideas bubbled. Then I remember when everybody left, Ann [Hamilton] and I sat down and said, 'OK, we really went into 'To the Lighthouse.' Now let's take 'To the Lighthouse' off the table and say what are the materials?' Going deeply into [the novel] was just one strain of it. What is the rest of the experience," Bogart said.

Hamilton and Bogart then spent the next few weeks thinking about all the different viewpoints and conversations that took place in upstate New York while in Captiva Islands, Florida as part of a residency from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. They left with an outline for "theater is a blank page" that would be finalized in another residency at the Wexner Center. That process began April 2 and will continue until every aspect is finalized within the space of the Mershon.

The reason "theater is a blank page" was only partially completed before coming to the Wexner Center is because it's designed to transform the theater experience into something specific to the Mershon Auditorium. "Theater is a blank page" will take the audience on an adventure that will expose unconventional aspects of the space.

"Number one, from the top, there is a sense of adventure. There are many theaters that would never allow you to do something like this. Because [the Wexner Center] has a sense of adventure and a good nature, it's possible to do things no one is ever allowed to do — bring the audience on stage, [expose] the machinery and use the machinery [as part of the performance]," Bogart said.

Those attending "theater is a blank page" will experience something that combines and simultaneously deconstructs the Mershon space, theatrical elements of SITI Company and the visual artistry of Hamilton, all around the text of "To the Lighthouse." But "theater is a blank page" is not an adaptation of "To the Lighthouse"; instead it's more of a contemplation of this revolutionary text and lyrical prose.

"The novel might have been the birth of modernism. And the way it was written is internal. In other words, there's hardly any real dialog. So we wanted to create an internal space, a place of spaciousness for the notion of internal thoughts and images," Bogart said. "I was also looking for something that could be read linearly as well as horizontally. In other words, linearly it has a story and characters, but the text is so rich and so evocative that you can just listen to it on a horizontal plane, meaning just with blips of fragments and images without following the story."

For Hamilton, the words in the novel aren't just inspiration for the visual components, they *are* the visuals.

"Part of it is to just live inside the beauty of this language, aside from any narrative or conceptual thread that goes through it. It's such beautiful writing, and so even if you only get fragments of that, they're each very satisfying," Hamilton said. "It's not that we're representing it. We're actually reading it. A lot of the visual elements in this are based on the language. Think about the act of reading and also listening [as] material processes, and those have visual corollaries. The visuals are coming from that materialization of aspects of the text and the act of reading, as well as all the vocabulary of being in a theater and what the objects and materials of the theater are."

So what should one expect from "theater is a blank page"? That's a tough question to answer. I could explain that audience members will be given "edited" versions of "To the Lighthouse" to follow along with readers by multiple SITI performers (sometimes all at once), in a completely transformed theater space. But the best way I can attempt to do so is by explaining my experience of sitting in on rehearsals.

As I watched a rehearsal on Friday, April 10, I was struggling with how I was going to convey what this project would be in completion. "An experience," was a term used repeatedly by the creators, but having only seen a glimpse of that experience, how could I fully explain it?

Then SITI Company actors started spreading shredded bits of the pages from "To the Lighthouse" on the surface of the stage, while Woolf's words echoed throughout the house. Audience chairs surrounded this wistfully slow performance, and when the shredded pages eventually filled the entirety of the spaces between seats, a piece landed on my knee. I picked it up, and one side read "been quiet," and the other "be disruptive."

I realized I couldn't describe "theater is a blank page" because that description would never do it justice. It's about a feeling. And in that moment I felt it — a sense of reflection, meditation, confusion and anticipation for what's next. I've sat in on rehearsals that will result in only a miniscule portion of "theater is a blank page," but I have felt a comprehensive experience created by those four words floating down upon me.