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By McKenzie Merriman: merriman.64@osu.edu April 21, 2015 0



Anne Bogart (left) and Ann Hamilton
Credit: Courtesy of Katie Spengler

One by one, nine performers enter the stage of Mershon Auditorium, independently performing various acts, including monologues and pantomimes. Ultimately, they come together, and through constant, fluid movement, unravel a long, thin sheet of cloth. They read aloud an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness novel "To the Lighthouse." The group recites the lines from the sheet, at times their voices rising together as a group, and then at times speaking independently.

After the scene came to an end, the actors gathered, breathing heavily from the intense rehearsal.

Anne Bogart, one of the co-artistic directors of SITI, addressed the performers.

"That was stunning," Bogart said. "That was the piece in a different shape."

From there, members of the group discussed how they think the rehearsal went.

Starting Thursday, Mershon Auditorium will house a sold-out run of "the theater is a blank page" through Sunday.

"Everyone has a voice," SITI co-artistic director Leon Ingulsrud said of the project.

"We're all artists and we all have specific feelings and opinions about almost every detail, but what we work towards is a shared vision that isn't the least common denominator of all the thoughts in the room — or the result of whoever is loudest."

SITI Theater Company is ensemble-based, and has brought artistic collaborations to the Wexner Center for the Arts since 1996.

"Theater is a blank page" is also a collaboration between SITI and Ann Hamilton, an installation artist and a distinguished university professor in Ohio State's Department of Art. The combined efforts and expertise of Hamilton and Bogart began in 2012 with Hamilton's piece "the event of a thread," which incorporated SITI performers into a room-sized installation piece.

Together, Hamilton and SITI have put together "the theater is a blank page," which blends and bends theater and visual art.

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An example of how the text is incorporated into the performance.
Credit: Courtesy of SITI Company

The title of the work comes from the intent to illuminate contrasting qualities that co-exist in both literature and theater. In Hamilton's view, both media are united in their ability to suspend the belief of the audience, which simultaneously remains aware of the work's duplicity.

Though Hamilton has had performance elements in her installation work in the past, this is the closest she's drifted to pure theater.

"Although the architecture of the theater and the relationship of the auditorium to the stage are different conditions than those found in a museum gallery, in many ways my approach is the same," Hamilton said of her experience as a visual artist working on a theater piece.

"I am responding to the volume, the objects and systems in the space and the unique opportunities ... The time structure of a theater production is a major difference between the gallery and the theater. The nuance of the arc of shaping time is something I am learning in the collaborative conversation with everyone on the project."

The audience at each performance will walk throughout Mershon Auditorium during the piece, its journey led by OSU MFA students, eventually entering the stage and actually traveling into the production.

As the audience becomes more immersed in the performance, SITI and the performers hope to encourage a shift in perspective for those experiencing the piece.

"I think the deep theme of a work like this is that there is a simple joy and profound beauty in the world all around us," Ingulsrud said. "All day, every day, we walk past things, which if we stop and look at them, or change our viewpoint just a little bit, they are full of wonder and life and beauty."

In many ways, the piece orbits around the act of reading, specifically Woolf's "To The Lighthouse." The cast and audience members — who will receive some of the text beforehand — engage in the text together, exploring how reading text connects and affects people in a group.

"The act of reading always threads the near-at-hand of the book with the far away that is contained in the book itself," Hamilton said. "We spend so much of our time in solitary and silent reading, we hope the project offers this as a shared experience."

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