

# Trans-Pacific Partnership

Japan's Tadashi Suzuki revisits SITI,  
the U.S. company he helped found 25 years ago  
BY SCOTT T. CUMMINGS

Suzuki (center) with Kameron Steele and Anne Bogart in June at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

**IN THE SPRING OF 1978, SANFORD ROBBINS,** then head of a new actor-training program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), went to Japan on a fellowship to study Kabuki, Noh, and Bunraku. As Robbins tells it, he had to ply his Japanese host with sake in order to get an introduction to any contemporary theatre artists. One of them was an avant-garde director making waves at a warehouse in Waseda. His name was Tadashi Suzuki.

Robbins's response to what he saw in Waseda—"Sometimes you find something that you didn't know you were searching for," he declared this past June—triggered a chain of events that led to American actors traveling to Japan, Suzuki touring his visually impressive productions to the United States, the creation of what became the renowned SITI Company, and innovations in professional actor training in the U.S. that continue to the present day.

That rich and complicated history was celebrated in late May and early June at "Transformation Through Training," a four-day symposium on the Suzuki Method of Actor Training that was part reunion, part tent meeting, part refresher course, and part oral history lesson.

The gathering took place on the upstate New York campus of Skidmore College, summer home of the New York City-based SITI Company since 1992. More than 75 participants from around the U.S. and as far away as Colombia, Finland, Singapore, and Australia made the pilgrimage to Saratoga Springs for a series of panel discussions, master classes, film screenings, a lecture on Japanese theatre, and a highly anticipated public conversation between SITI's founding co-artistic directors, Suzuki and Anne Bogart.

The event's full-circle centerpiece was the performance of *The Trojan Women* by the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) on the very same stage where they performed *Dionysus* 25 years earlier, launching—in tandem with Bogart's production of Charles Mee's *Orestes*—what was initially called the Saratoga International Theatre Institute.

Before 1980, Suzuki's work was not widely known in the U.S. Over the course of the '80s, that gradually changed, thanks to the efforts of Robbins and Jewel Walker at UWM, John Dillon and Sarah O'Connor at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and, crucially, Peter Zeisler, executive director of Theatre Communications Group (TCG) and a champion of the resident regional theatre.

Acting students from UWM and a few other schools began to travel to Japan to train with SCOT in the summers. Suzuki brought his *Bacchae* to NYC's La MaMa in 1982 and *The Trojan Women* to the Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles in 1984. In 1988, four resident theatres—Milwaukee Rep, Berkeley Rep, Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage, and Stage West in Springfield, Mass.—teamed up to coproduce Suzuki's first (and only) all-American production, an all-male version of his *The Tale of Lear*. That same year Anne Bogart was invited by Zeisler to join a small delegation of U.S. directors on a goodwill trip to see Suzuki's expanding theatre compound near the isolated mountain village of Toga in Japan's Toyama Prefecture.

A few years later, following her rocky season as artistic director of Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, R.I., Bogart met Suzuki again, this time in the Mayflower Hotel in New York, to hammer out the details of a joint venture

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dedicated, as their manifesto stated, to “the growth of individual artists and the development of a new approach to world theatre.” By design, Suzuki’s direct involvement in the project would taper off after a few years, and SITI would later focus on the creation of original devised work, international collaboration, and theatre training, with the latter component integrating the Suzuki Method of Actor Training and Bogart’s own revision of the Viewpoints, first outlined by Mary Overlie.

Fast-forward 25 years: The Suzuki Method is ubiquitous in training programs and theatre departments around the U.S., and SITI Company continues to train a new generation of theatre artists and to create new work, including their recent *Chess Match No. 5*, an unconventional two-hander based on the writings of John Cage, and the upcoming *Hanjo*, a 1956 play by Yukio Mishima inspired by classical Noh.

**“TRANSFORMATION THROUGH TRAINING”** was the brainchild of Ellen Lauren, founding member and current co-artistic director of SITI Company. Lauren is also Suzuki’s principal American protégé and a longtime associate artist and master teacher with SCOT. She was a company member at Milwaukee Rep and “an all-engine, not-a-lot-of-brakes 26-year-old American actress,” by her own account, when she first traveled to Toga in the mid-1980s and found herself “knocked out” by the work and by the ethos of the creative community there. Lauren later toured the world off and on for 18 years as Agave in the SCOT production of *Dionysus*, and in recent years she has taken over the role of Clytemnestra in Suzuki’s production of *Electra*.

With a lump in her throat, Lauren welcomed “Transformation” participants to “the crossroads of my two families” and invoked the historic nature of the symposium when she reminded them that “there was at one time a small group of people who went up into the mountains, and through sheer force of will and talent, leadership and inspiration, luck and a ferocity that we rarely see, they created a global force, which is what has brought us together for these few days.”

That global force came to light in the West at a moment when the orthodoxies of Method acting and psychological realism were already being challenged by American

innovators (the Living Theatre, the Open Theater, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson) and European influences (Grotowski, Brook, Barba). In one symposium session, former UWM/MFA actor Tom Hewitt described his first impression of the Suzuki training as “weird character walks to Japanese elevator music”—but when he saw the SCOT actors in performance, he knew he “wanted what they had.”

Hewitt became one of Suzuki’s favorite American actors, working with him for more than a decade before becoming a Broadway leading man. He came to appreciate Suzuki’s insistence that acting is not an imitation of everyday life but a matter of creating a fiction onstage, and he recalled his uncertainty about the translation when on one occasion he was instructed, “Okay, Tom, as you rise, please stop the rotation of the earth.”

In another panel discussion, Mark Corkins, another UWM actor who went to Toga, described how the training lifted “the conspiracy of silence around the whole issue of how to exist onstage. It was taken for granted that you knew how to breathe, how to enter, how to exit. What the Suzuki training did for me was open all that up as an area of inquiry. That was the perfect thing for me at the time.”

The symposium included three master classes in which members of SITI Company put participants through the demanding paces of the Suzuki exercises. Some who trained years ago were surprised to learn that the master has redefined and codified the six core exercises that constitute the foundation of his training. In a panel focused on training, Lauren outlined the guiding principles behind the physical rigor: “Control of your center of gravity, control of an excessive amount of energy, and control of your breathing. Those three criteria, which are necessary to function in daily life, are also necessary for expressive purposes on the stage. In daily life, you cannot think about those three things or you’ll go bonkers. On the stage, we have to train ourselves to bring them to the forefront so that they become instinctual.”

For many symposium participants, the performance of SCOT’s *The Trojan Women* was the highlight of the gathering. First staged in 1974 as a comment on the U.S. occupation of Japan after World War II, Suzuki’s signature adaptation has seen changes over

the decades, but as long as the evening news is filled with the atrocities of war, it will remain urgent in its relevance. The configuration of the Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theater was altered to accommodate the SCOT production, and cushions for spectators were added on the stage floor, making the production’s eerie, dynamic stillness all the more spellbinding. Isolated in individual pockets of light, the characters took on the spectral presence of spirit figures out of time or place. And the precision of the actors gave even the slightest gesture—a shift of weight, the opening and closing of a hand, a downward glance—a profound eloquence.

The heart and soul of the production was the powerful performance of Maki Saito as Hecuba, a role made famous early on by Suzuki’s legendary leading actor Kayoko Shiraishi. Sitting nearly motionless on the floor, Saito spoke with a voice that seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth and etch her words in stone. The whole play, and in a sense the war itself, played out on her rugged face. The defiant stoicism with which she challenged the boorish Greeks made her suffering all the more noble and heroic.

And in the few brief moments when Hecuba’s pain became unbearable, Saito’s resistance, release of feeling, and then reassertion of control provided a demonstration of the Suzuki Method at work. For many in the audience, this was the first SCOT performance they had ever seen, and as such it provided an emotional affirmation of the potential of the training and the hard physical work that goes into it.

**FOR MUCH OF THE SYMPOSIUM**, Suzuki himself was isolated in rehearsals, fine-tuning *The Trojan Women* with his actors. But on Saturday, at the final session, he joined Bogart in an interview, translated by Kameron Steele, a SCOT member for many years who has made Suzuki’s collected writings available to English-language readers in a volume called *Culture Is the Body* (published by TCG Books). Bogart began by acknowledging that her early encounters with Suzuki “changed the way I walk into a rehearsal room and the way that I look at the actor onstage.”

Suzuki recalled the contempt he felt for Japanese theatre, culture, and society growing up in postwar Japan, and described how his interest in Greek tragedy and French and



Russian literature became a lens through which he could look back at his own culture and interrogate the status quo. Suzuki said that while working with Mstislav Rostropovich, he studied the great conductor's breathing, looking for ideas about how to work with actors. He talked about his current work in China and his fascination with the unusual experiment with state capitalism going on there.

Throughout the conversation, Suzuki revealed a delightful sense of humor about what Bogart called his "very particular way of working with actors." Setting the record straight regarding his reputation as a tyrant in rehearsal, he explained with a twinkle in his eye, "I'm not really yelling at the actors. I am making demands with passion." Inspired by Russian director Yuri Lyubimov's practice of using a flashlight to communicate with actors in rehearsal and sometimes in performance, he demonstrated how he developed a series of different coughs as a kind of secret code that he could use to signal to an actor in mid-performance, for example, "You're overdoing it a little." And Suzuki

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drew laughs when he pulled translator Steele over to him and jostled shoulders and thighs to act out an elaborate metaphor comparing actors to the sticky rice used to make sushi and his "grammar of the feet" to the seaweed wrap (nori) that gives the sushi roll a nice, aesthetic shape.

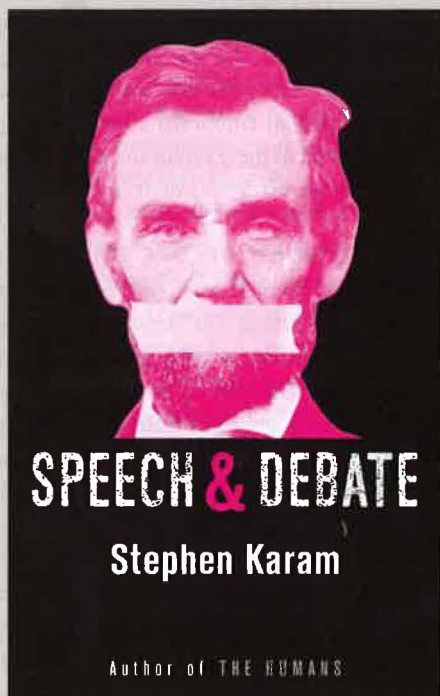
*The Trojan Women* at Skidmore was SCOT's first U.S. appearance since 2001. It was, in effect, a long detour on the company's way to an engagement at the National Theatre of China in Beijing. More than once during his weeklong stay, Suzuki drew attention to his age—he would turn 78 less than three weeks after the June symposium—and the likelihood that this would be his last visit to the United States. He also offered the opinion, only half in jest, that when he

is dead and gone his work will be forgotten in Japan but live on in the U.S. thanks to the perpetuation of his training by SITI Company and other devoted teachers.

Suzuki's visit came at a time of uncertainty for SITI, and it was received by company members as a rejuvenating gift in recognition of their dogged commitment to each other and the ideals of company and collaboration that have kept them together for 25 years. In his remarks, Robbins hailed that longevity as "one of the extraordinary accomplishments of the American theatre." And in his emotional welcome to the symposium, SITI co-artistic director Leon Ingulsrud put it plainly: "This is not an accident. This is what we intended. We did this on purpose." ■

**Scott T. Cummings, who teaches and directs plays in the Theatre Department of Boston College, is the author of *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* and other writings about contemporary U.S. theatre.**

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