

## Interview with Anne Bogart

Anne Bogart is the Artistic Director of SITI Company, which she founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992. She is a Professor at Columbia University where she runs the Graduate Directing Program. SITY repertory includes *American Document*, *Antigone*, *Under Construction*, *Freshwater*, *Who do you Think you Are*, *Radio Macbeth*, *Hotel Cassiopeia*, *Death and the Ploughman*, *La Dispute*, *Score*, *bobraushenbergamerica*, *Room*, *Cabin Pressure*, *War of the Worlds: The Radio Play*, *Alice's Adventures*, *Culture of Desire*, *Bob*, *Going, Going, Gone*, *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, *The Medium*, *Noel Coward's Hay Fever and Private Lives*, *August Strindberg's Miss Julie*, and *Charles Mee's Orestos*. She is the author of three books: *A Director Prepares*, *The Viewpoints Book*, and *And Then, You Act*.

### ***When and how did your career as a theatre director begin?***

I started directing very early. I was 8 years old when I directed with my friends in the basement. We'd make plays, play them out, and our parents would see them. I grew up in a Navy family, so we moved every year, and I was put in a different school. Somewhere in this school was a little group making plays that I would join, and everything I believed in came through this little group, like love, community, and all the things I didn't find as a "dip" kid. I always found the little places in big schools where you fall in love, and you never came back. When I was 15 I had a French teacher in Middletown Road Island who was very enlightened, and she decided to do the *Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco. It was 1967, I was fifteen and the school was very conservative, and would usually do musicals. But to do the *Bald Soprano* in Middletown Road Island in 1967 was crazy. I happened to be the teacher's assistant, which meant I would look for props in the hallway, and not get into trouble for not attending class. A week before the play was about to debut she called me, and told me: "I am sick. You have to take over". Karma! I had to not only figure out what the *Bald Soprano* meant, but I had to direct it, and on top of that I had a crush on the boy playing Mr. Smith. In the play I discovered all the most significant things in life, like love, community, relationships... And at that time in Middletown Road Island we had what was called a "Cafetorium" (I don't know the Bulgarian equivalent), which was a lunch room, that you could turn into a theatre, so the theatre always smelled like lunch. But most importantly, the play was successful, so I thought this was fun, and I could do this. This was the first time I directed a play. And sometimes I wonder at how my directing is exactly the same, it hasn't changed at all, same sense of space and time, of theatre.

### ***You are known for introducing the "Viewpoints" system in Actor Training. How did it emerge? How did you come up with the principles?***

*Viewpoints* was developed by a woman named Mary Overlie. I was 24 when I met her at NYU and worked with her. She had developed the *Viewpoints* method from the Post-modern dance world, and she introduced me to the ideas, which I thought were spectacular, not only for dance, but also for the actors to learn. If you can apply those ideas to theatre you actually start to create a different kind of theatre. Also this makes the actors participants, co-workers: so rather than the actors being told what to do, they just train and they do it.

### ***It is a way of bridging the world of dance and theatre?***

Yes, it creates a new kind of actor – a collaborator, a new kind of vulnerable, receptive, intuitive actor, co-creator.

### ***Does the method change?***

Absolutely! The method changes all the time and I think it should change with anybody who encounters it. Everyone should personalize and explore these elements of theatre.

***How has your collaboration with Tadashi Suzuki impacted you?***

In a very large way, because he originally had the idea for this company. He said to me: "Well I'll help you get it started, but in four years I'll have other things to do. And I thought that besides the creative collaboration we could perhaps tap into some Japanese funding. I ended up going to Japan for four months every summer and he impacted me in a very large way. The way he thought about acting was totally different, and this challenged me to look at each play differently. I had certain assumptions as an American about what the play should look like. And I had to re-examine what I do, and sometimes I would agree with him, other times I would say: No, that's too Japanese. He really offered a strong model from which one can compare. Tadashi is a very strong artist and his whole notion about training made me feel the need of ongoing actor training.

***As I watched your actors perform in Radio Macbeth I noticed a very intuitive approach to acting. What part was structured and what was open?***

What you saw on stage was all set. But our training process usually starts with 20 minutes of the Suzuki method, 15 minutes of Viewpoints, followed by group improvisation. The beginning is fairly traditional and then we start improvising, but we don't improvise endlessly. We build little bits and then slowly whole scenes.

***Is there one theatrical component that you would emphasize over the other, i.e. text, movement, imagery, sound?***

That's an important question, and the answer is "None". If you look at the tradition from where we come from, (I don't know how it is in Bulgaria) text is very important, not just for the psychology, but for the sound, and also for the visuals. A special emphasis is put on the technique of the speech of the actors, but none of the components is more important than the others.

***Your company members have been working together for more than 20 years, and their collaboration feels like a family synergy. Do you believe in the power of ensemble work, in the way Grotowsky or Brook did?***

I believe in ensemble work, and find it very interesting that when I ask young people, what directors they admire, they don't name directors anymore, they name companies. Isn't that amazing! I find it truly interesting. I think there is a huge surge in company work right now. Of course, there are definitely directors involved in this work. A lot of people who train with us go on and make their own companies. That's new, and it shows the power of ensemble work.

***In the post-performance discussion you mentioned that you have staged only two of Shakespeare's plays – a Midsummer Night's Dream, and Macbeth because you were waiting to attain the artistic maturity to interpret Shakespeare. How do you choose your next production? Do you also do devised work?***

We do all different kinds of works. We've done *bobraushenbergmaerica*, we are about to go to LA to work on a new *Trojan Women* by Jocelyn Clerk, but we also devise our work, work that the Company created like *The Medium*. The most recent one is *Who Do You Think You Are* and *Cabin Pressure* based

on neuroscience. But recently we did a production with the *Martha Graham Dance Company*. And we also work with all different kinds of relationships.

***The most important ingredients for a good director?***

Number one: The ability to listen

Number two: The ability to juggle

Number three: The director is the person in the room who can “bear the intolerable un-deciding for the longest.”

But I think ultimately as a director you have to imagine a world in which to live, to describe this world to the actors, and then leave the actors to make it up. Imagine what the laws of that universe are...

***As an educator what is the first thing you want your students to learn about theatre?***

The most important thing is that they do something in front of an audience, it's the only way they can learn. You can theorize whatever you want, but when you have a theatre or an audience, whether you are a director or an actor putting something on stage, the only way to learn is to tolerate the embarrassment of putting something in front of an audience, and bear if it doesn't work, or if it does work. But there are lots of theories, and I love theories, and there is lots of history and technique, but ultimately the act of putting up something for an audience whether its your own friends or anybody, the actor needs to learn how to bring them in, that's the most important lesson...

***What trends do you notice in contemporary theatre? Is something missing?***

I think that the trend is to HIDE, to hide behind technology or hide behind a text. But what I want to see more is the inter-phase when you stop hiding. It's hard to do it, but the most important theatre experiences are literally vibrating, and are not hid behind technology. It is not about not using technology, but to ask yourself, “In service of what? Why are we doing this?”

***How do you respond to the demands of our constantly shifting world through theatre?***

Well, theatre is always about social systems. It asks us: “How can we get along?” Any art form poses this question. And it's about can we get along in the play, or can we get along in the rehearsal, and can the audience get along, and ultimately that is the question: How are we doing together? No other art form does it so bluntly, not even dance, nor painting. Theatre proposes how people might be together. So when you see a play, you see two things, you see the fiction of the play, but you also see how two actors are getting along on stage, and you could feel how they experienced the process, how they rehearsed. So in a way you are proposing a way in which social systems can exist together, you're proposing ultimate societies, and they are societies that might function better than the ones we live in. So your responsibility and one's interest must be of how one gets in a room, how you bring yourself to the other person, so tricky issues, like morals and ethics, and philosophies are important too, but how you speak to another person in a rehearsal is a big deal. The words you choose, the respect you give to them is of great importance. So if you could create a society you believe can change the current society that is no longer functioning by enacting a new alternate society, you have answered the question of theatre. Because any play is ultimately about a social system that's messed up. A play begins with something that goes wrong, so you're seeing that story, but you're also seeing a group of people who are getting along, who are functioning in a way. So you are proposing how that new society might work.

***How do you relate to existing training methods or approaches to theatre like Stanislavsky, Grotowsky, Brook, Michael Chechov?***

I absolutely relate to all these methods. Every person you mentioned is considerable, but none of them stayed the same. If you look at Grotowsky, for example, he started from physical theatre to transcend into para-theatrical research. There is nothing that stayed the same. Brook also explored different realms and cultures all his life, though he's lately gotten a little sedentary, he's probably just tired. But look at Clint Eastwood, for example, he is doing a new film every year, and it's totally different, different in style, in message, in methods. There is a tendency for people to turn methods into a religion, and I think that's the danger, when people become fundamentalists even in theatre.

***What's next on your list?***

It's a New version of *Trojan Women* - a play that humanity cannot seem to forget, although it's an imperfect play because nothing happens in it. It's a bunch of women that are waiting to be carted off, and yet people return to it all the time. So my thinking about it is almost a reaction against the idea of these women just wailing. I actually think they are incredibly sophisticated, well-brought up women, who articulate beautifully. I feel they are more Chechovian, and they are probably sitting in very fine chairs with very fine clothes on, their lives have been blown apart, there is nothing around them, they are about to be carted off, but they are speaking, their acuity is terrific. So I am doing the opposite that's usually done with *Trojan Women*, these extremely cultured, mainly contained women, who are faced with this extremely difficult situation. It is like the *Cherry Orchard* or *Three Sisters*. We are going to work on it this summer. So we'll see where it takes us...

***Is theatre a process of accumulation or stripping away?***

Number two...