

Cool Medium

Anne Bogart and the Choreography of Fear

Daniel Mufson

In *Anne Bogart—Viewpoints*, a monograph published on the occasion of her recent “mid-career celebration” at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, Bogart writes, “We are born in terror and trembling.” As humans learn to suppress those feelings, “The artist’s responsibility is to bring the potential, the mystery and terror, the trembling, back.” The ATL festival this past January provided an opportunity for critics, theater students, teachers, and local residents to see how Bogart fulfills this responsibility.

Three of her recent pieces were performed: Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* and two “Theater Essays”—*The Medium*, adapted from the works of Marshall McLuhan, and *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, adapted from the plays of Chekhov. Between performances, ATL presented lectures, question-and-answer sessions, demonstrations, and workshops. Collaborators such as Paula Vogel and Robert Woodruff and critics such as Mel Gussow and Porter Anderson explained, and sometimes defended, the work to an audience that had a substantial number of Louisville residents. There was an abundance of talk. In a sense, the exploration of terror continued outside the performances; the ATL showed more than a little fear that its audience wouldn’t accept an unconventional director—one who doesn’t think audiences should come away from a performance feeling as though they “got it”—as part of a festival that in prior years celebrated the more familiar work of Molière, Pirandello, and the French Romantics. During the ten-day run of *Small Lives*, ATL had post-play discussions after every performance, some of which ran longer than the piece itself.

For her part, Bogart resurrects fear not only through the texts she chooses, but in a distinct method of movement training and rehearsal, called the Viewpoints, which are part of Bogart’s attempt “to undefine, to present the moment, the word, the gesture as new and full of uncontrolled potential.” In this pursuit, she operates in marked contrast to avant-garde directors such as Robert Wilson or Richard Foreman by demanding a tremendous amount of creative input from her actors and by shunning notions of the director as *auteur* and of the actor as puppet. Most important, the Viewpoints help create anxiety in an audience by unsettling the way it watches theatrical movement. Bogart explores terror, but lyrically; the fear in her work can be an ecstatic dance, balancing vulnerability with a frenetic excitement that verges on, and sometimes spills over into, fear’s inverse—hope.

The sessions the festival devoted to the Viewpoints training were, on occasion, indistinguishable from performance. When Bogart’s company demonstrated the Viewpoints, they improvised movements to various pieces of music and ambient sounds for about 20 minutes with such assurance and grace that they could’ve passed the whole thing off as a choreographed work. It was the equivalent of watching Jackson Pollock paint—motion relying on instinct, not always coming out the way one would plan it, but integrating “errors” into the energy of the piece.

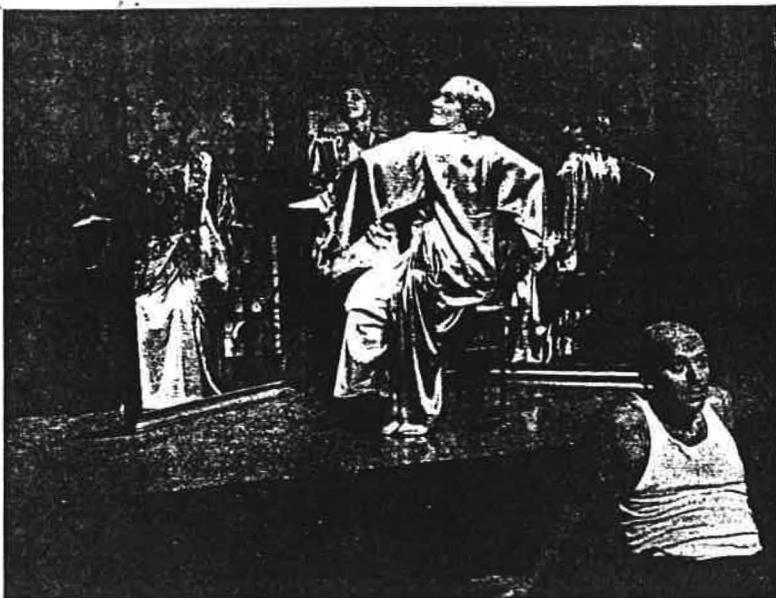
The Viewpoints constitute a list of factors that actors must learn to address instinctively as they create moving pictures on stage. Four of them are “Viewpoints of Time”: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition. The remaining five—shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography—are “Viewpoints of Space.” They have areas of overlap, and most of the Viewpoints are, in a glib sense, self-explanatory: in the festival’s monograph, collaborator Tina Landau describes repetition as the “repeating of something on stage,” either a movement “within your own body” or the movement of something “outside your own body.” Shape refers to the “contour or outline the body (or bodies) make in space.” The architectural Viewpoint requires the actor “to be in dialogue” with the physical environment and to create “spatial metaphors”—“up against a wall” or “on the threshold.”

The festival was valuable because, among other reasons, it’s necessary to see the Viewpoints in action to appreciate them. The written descriptions can sound like recipes for literalist choreography, clichéd movement, or pretentious rephrasings of concerns that would be addressed by any competent actor or director using any method of performance. Bogart and the Viewpoints stress the importance of working as an ensemble—a fine, if overworn idea. But Bogart’s implementation of the ensemble ethos is different. The actors do more than merely support one another, they coalesce with the precision of a machine that moves with precarious speed. At its best, the tightness of the ensemble amplifies the terror of a script, as the actors themselves have a unified, quivering endurance, like Rilke’s image of the arrow that “endures the bowstring’s tension, so that gathered in the snap of release it can be more than itself.” Each performer’s tautness stems not from playing a Stanislavskian action, but from anticipating the need to release and be greater than she is—by interacting with the architecture, with the music, with the text, with the patterns that another actor just made on the floor.

At a journalists’ roundtable on the last day of the festival, Bogart recalled one of the first criticisms she received in the New York press, which “haunts me to this day.” In *The Village Voice*, Arthur Sainer described Bogart’s work as having “a visual intensity without the inner necessity.” “I thought he put his finger on it,” Bogart said, “and I think about it all the time.” Finding an inner necessity for the performers compromises the abstraction of her work, which is also tempered by Bogart’s predilection for using stereotypical gestures grounded in specific cultural contexts. “I’m interested in embracing stereotype,” she said, “not in inventing new shapes, but in waking up the ones that exist by turning them slightly.”

Making the familiar strange is hardly new, and Bogart is the first to insist that none of her ideas is original. She claims that the Viewpoints come from the work of a dance teacher at NYU named Mary Overlie, and that most of her thoughts about composing for the theater were learned from Aileen Passloff, who taught a course at Bard when Bogart was an undergraduate. And yet, while one can identify familiar cards, the hand Bogart deals is a fresh combination. One can locate the postmodern in her work—in the “sampling” by which she created *The Medium* and *Small Lives*, each an “original” work relying on found materials, and in her antipathy for art that directs its audience towards a single interpretation or master narrative. But she does not deconstruct a text so much as reconstruct it, regardless of whether she is staging someone else’s play or assembling samples to form one of her own “Theater Essays.”

Rice’s *The Adding Machine* was not absent from Bogart’s staging; there were no disorientation or distraction tactics à la the Wooster Group. But Bogart’s fundamental respect for Rice’s play—or for Kaufman and Hart’s *Once in a Lifetime*, which she directed at the A.R.T. in 1990—meant that the end result was not altogether surprising. Judging from descriptions, there have been instances where Bogart’s re-staging of an established text did show off a more drastic and



Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, directed by Anne Bogart. All photos by Richard Trigg.

exciting reinterpretation. Her 1984 production of *South Pacific*, for example, set the action in a post-trauma clinic for veterans who reenacted the play as a form of therapy. *The Medium* and *Small Lives* refrain from undermining their source material, but both have a freshness, a specificity urgent to our time, that neither *The Adding Machine* nor *Once in a Lifetime* attained.

Bogart figures that 60 percent of *The Medium* is taken from McLuhan's essays; the rest comes from Jean Baudrillard, AT&T ads, and magazines such as *Mondo 2000* or *Wired*. And yet it all feels like McLuhan, even though vocabulary such as "internet" and "virtual reality" entered the language after McLuhan's death in 1980. This lends an air of prophecy to McLuhan's works, but more important is the sense of being in a society swept away by huge, scarcely controllable and barely comprehensible forces. The character representing McLuhan insists there is no inevitability—"I want to study change in order to gain power over it," he says. A nameless character cites a well-known experiment that found that if you put a frog in water at room temperature and heat it to a boil, the frog won't have the sense to leap out. The character then says, "Is it just me or is it getting warm in here... Moral: WAKE UP!!!" But one of the many terrifying things about the piece is the way change is portrayed as utterly overwhelming.

The Medium's action takes place in McLuhan's mind as he suffers a stroke. We hear McLuhanesque ideas spouted repeatedly, frantically—"You don't like those ideas? I've got others"—via a variety of stereotypical entertainment genres. Talk shows, televangelists, westerns, the evening news: a series of often humorous, but always haunting icons from the "hot" medium McLuhan deplored parade across the stage, leaving the professor, who had been our loquacious guide, finally speechless, gagging on his tongue.

In a section of *Understanding Media* not cited by *The Medium*, McLuhan writes,

The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.

The passage underlines why McLuhan is an ideal choice for Bogart to explore. Both have a primary interest in configuration. McLuhan believed that configurations and pattern recognition were the keys to organizing knowledge in an electronic age. Similarly, they figure into Bogart's Viewpoints—the interest in tempo and duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition patterns applies to the

organization of a large number of rapidly moving variables that could potentially yield to the “information overload” referred to by McLuhan. By welcoming unconventional approaches to finding patterns, Bogart never lets the stage’s variables appear chaotic. Compare this to the Wooster Group, which integrates the electronic media into its performances, but usually does so in a way that creates a sense of overload and fragmentation, as though they were caught in the friction of moving from one age to another. Bogart shuns the use of video, but integrates the electronic age’s patterning of perception—at least, as McLuhan might have envisioned it. *The Medium* fears electronic media but embraces their “message,” in McLuhan’s sense of the word, while the Wooster Group embraces the electronic media but does not explore the implicit ways in which they configure information.

Small Lives, Bogart’s most recent work, is another instance of fragmentation followed by reconstruction. Five actors each speak lines from a different one of Chekhov’s five major dramas. Chekhov’s conventional notion of character has been torn down; in its place arises the sense that works of art themselves have character. The plays are personified as victims of a trauma, suffering from varying degrees of aphasia and amnesia. The stage directions suggest they survived an earthquake, but in performance the devastation is more ambiguous—perhaps they survived an air raid or war, perhaps a riot of some kind. Bogart fills the stage with disparate images of turmoil that avoid any clear connotation: wounded people are aided off stage, while a man drags by the feet a small, resisting woman, whose head he proceeds to pound repeatedly into the floor.

After the introductory choreography, the character representing *The Seagull* comes out with his head bandaged, carrying an empty bird cage and a cane. The bandage immediately evokes not only Treplev, but a casualty of some greater cataclysm. *The Cherry Orchard* character, whose graceful Victorian dress is countered by the rings under her eyes and an overall sense of imminent collapse, carries a basket of banged-up china. *The Three Sisters* is embodied by a male actor in a green skirt, who nevertheless captures the martial spirit of the original play. As portrayed by Will Bond, *The Three Sisters* is an unshaven man, alternately numb and anxious, a veteran whose sunken brown eyes stare out into space; his expression reminiscent of a Bill Mauldin “dogface.” On his back he carries a trunk—a disturbing, pathetic image of drift—and as he enters and exits he pounds his feet rhythmically while he walks, which again evokes a martial air, or slaps a stick against the floor.

Small Lives is difficult. I missed it completely when I saw it at Louisville, getting bogged down, for much of the show, in trying to recall the original contexts of the quoted lines. Upon second viewing at P.S. 122, numerous layers emerged. On one level, *Small Lives* functions as commentary on the plays themselves. At the end of the performance, each personified play resolves at last to move forward or back; *Ivanov* alone moves backward, choosing death as that play’s hero does. *The Seagull*, labeled by Chekhov a comedy, is seen as a more affirmative play in spite of Treplev’s suicide, and the emblem of the work leads the other play/characters, forward into new life.

Personifying Chekhov’s dramas not only works as an experiment in exploring the “character” of each play, but begins to paint an interior landscape of the playwright. What were the cataclysms, sociopolitical or personal, that influenced Chekhov’s creations? And then: how have our own cataclysms led to these re-creations? Structurally, the piece has four movements, as the plays had four acts. The use of the word “movements” in the script for *Small Lives* is a deliberate evocation of musical structure; my far-more musically literate friend who accompanied me to P.S. 122 spent much time after the show trying to explain to me its fugue-like characteristics.

The piece also leads back to Sainer’s comment about visual intensity without inner necessity. Kelly Maurer, the actress playing *The Cherry Orchard*, and Will Bond both distinguished themselves from the rest of the ensemble by filling their abstract gestures and fragmented speech with a rich and

connected inner life, a true compulsion to say and do each word and movement. Both have a vulnerability, in the conventional sense of psychological realism, that did not merely aid their Viewpoints work—it seemed prerequisite, or at least post-requisite, to the movement. The other performers were more than competent; one of the most disturbing and memorable moments of the piece happens when Karenjune Sánchez, as *Uncle Vanya*, puts a gun in her mouth, pulls the trigger, and, heartbroken, says “missed.” On occasion, though, the other actors show that it is possible to “indicate” even when doing performance that tends to abstraction. The consistency with which the actors fuse the more objective principles of shape with a subjective sense of emotional need is what ultimately allows the ideas of *The Medium* and *Small Lives* to come across with vigor.

I recently spoke with Anne Bogart about her process in general and with specific reference to *The Medium* and *Small Lives*.

MUFSON A critic at ATL pointed out that every time he had seen *The Medium*, he discerned a progressively stronger point of view, a feeling of a statement that the piece was making against technology. This struck him as a contrast to what you, and also Paula Vogel, had said about the multiplicity of meanings that ought to be available in viewing a piece. Is there a contradiction?

BOGART There were two things that kept that piece from having a clear message. First, I have ambivalent feelings about technology. I’m on e-mail, and I’m into computers, and I’m interested in innovations and technology. It was not my intention to say technology is bad, or that we shouldn’t embrace technology. Second, the piece was put together pluralistically, meaning that the text is not only from McLuhan—all over his work—but also from pop magazines and writings on the effect of technology on people.

But over the two years since we made *The Medium*, the subject has come into the popular consciousness. What we’re saying becomes more important because people are recognizing the message more. I’ve always felt proud to be saying those things—not to say technology is bad, but that, as McLuhan would say, there is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening. And something that a theater piece like that can do is to contemplate and say, “This is happening to us, look at what is happening to us.” That’s what I get a thrill out of saying. And I don’t think that’s the same as saying, “This is what you have to think.”

MUFSON You’ve mentioned elsewhere that it wasn’t just you putting together *The Medium*. You’ve often talked about the group process, and

I’m wondering what you think makes your work a single vision?

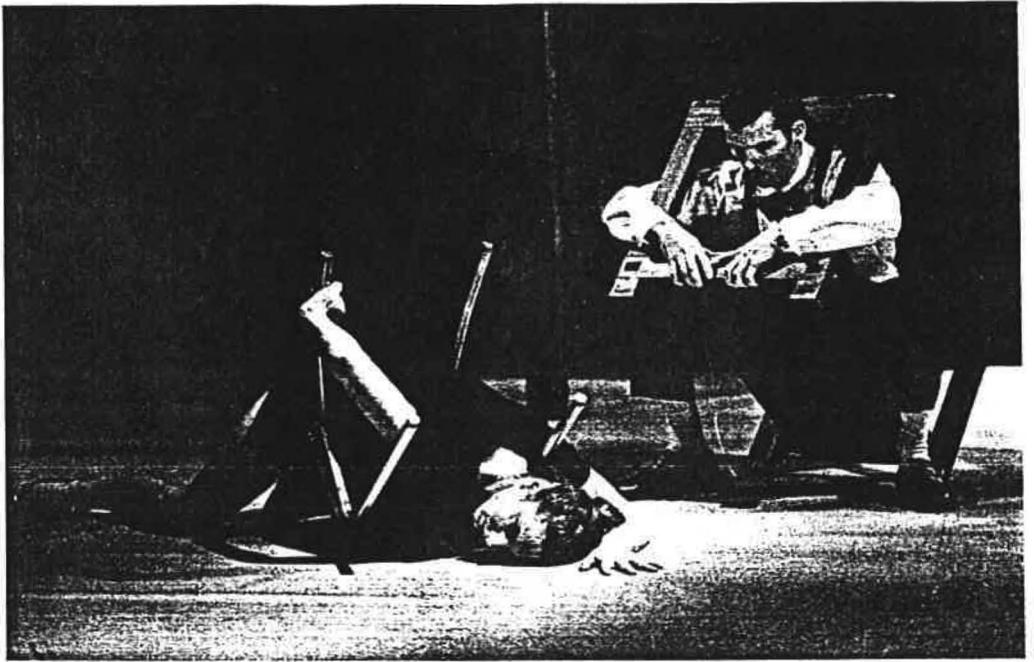
BOGART I really don’t think it is. I’m often told that there is a vision. I don’t have visions and I don’t have pictures in my head, or ways that something has to be. I think all of those three pieces [at Louisville] and everything I’ve ever done is a highly, highly collective vision. I think there is a company vision that is emerging from the SITE company, because we’ve worked together for a while. But what I’ve tried to do is always work with people who aren’t afraid of giving huge amounts of input.

MUFSON So are you reenvisioning the director as a sort of facilitator?

BOGART I’m not envisioning any way a director *should* be, I’m only refining what I can do best—which is, to act as a facilitator and as a sieve. If I have a talent, it’s that I am able to focus other people’s visions. Anybody who’s worked with me will tell you that I don’t tell anybody what to do; I create an arena or a ballpark. And then I always hear, “Oh, Anne’s vision.” I don’t have a vision. I have values, maybe.

MUFSON Is that what you mean when you say you haven’t really changed much from the first piece you directed in high school?

BOGART I’m referring to a sense of timing and a sense of humor, a kinesthetic sense on stage. I don’t know if one is born with that, but it develops early. Those things have somehow oddly stayed the same—which is why I always wonder if you can teach directing, because you either have that sense or not. In the same way that I think a musician or a composer works; it has to



The Medium, inspired by the writings of Marshall McLuhan.

do with how time is spent, how time is organized.

MUFSON Are you moving away from itinerant stagings, or was that just a constraint placed on you at Actors Theatre?

BOGART No. I'm a big fan of Max Reinhardt's career, where one play would be a tiny little chamber piece, and the next one would be a pageant outdoors in Salzburg, and the next one would be a George Bernard Shaw play of large scale, and the next one would be Kleist. I'm a big fan of the expansiveness of the theater; I'm interested in all the different relationships an audience can have to an event. Right now, what I'm exploring with the *SITI* company are what I like to think of as little essays that are about theater, but that are also about other things—like *The Medium* and *Small Lives*. They're essentially "Essay Theater."

MUFSON Could you clarify what you mean by Essay Theater?

BOGART Rather than doing a play in an Aristotelian sense of a character going through a catharsis—although McLuhan sort of does that in *The Medium*—it's the idea of taking a

theory or theories about a certain aspect of life and expanding on them in a theatrical form. Like the one I'm working on now, *Going, Going, Gone*, which is about quantum mechanics. It's finding theater metaphors that encompass certain innovations in theoretical thinking.

MUFSON Was the first Essay Theater that you did *No Plays No Poetry*?

BOGART I guess so.

MUFSON When did you start conceiving of this as a distinct form?

BOGART After doing *The Medium*, I discovered I had about 15 "Essays" I wanted to write. And I've only done a couple of them, so I have a lot of Essays in me.

MUFSON What else are you thinking about?

BOGART Things that deal with sociology. I started working with Erving Goffman's theories on how people interrelate, and I'd like to expand on that. And Goffman's notions that there are 17 forms of human interaction possible—that's interesting to me, because in the theater we only usually do two or three.

I want to do a piece about consumerism, about what it means to be a consumer as opposed to a citizen, which is a notion that Bill Moyers actually talked about recently in discussing why people should support public broadcasting. He said that public broadcasting is one of the few media that treats its audience as citizens as opposed to consumers.

MUFSON A couple of things came to mind when I saw your most recent Theater Essay, *Small Lives*. First, you've spoken about being a distinctly American artist, and I'm wondering how that ties in to a piece in which the text comes from Chekhov and the movement seems to be so influenced by Asian performance.

BOGART It's very important to understand that, if I say I'm interested in my American roots and American culture, I do not mean to pursue it by only doing American work. I have become more American through my confrontations with other cultures. If I go to Japan, I am confronted by my Americanness because everything is so foreign. If I am working in the proximity, say, of a Tadashi Suzuki, who has a completely different notion of what an actor or rehearsal or audience is, I am confronted with my own notions, and therefore I will drop whatever notions I have inherited and don't necessarily believe upon inspection. Conversely, I'll tune in to the ones that I do believe in.

I intend to engage in content and in texts that are non-American—that's very important to me. That's the basis for the founding of the Saratoga International Theater Institute: it is about a fellowship of artists from different cultures. The odd and unexpected by-product of that is, I become more American the more I engage in other cultures. If movement looks Asian and the text is from Chekhov, that is a response, I'm sure, to an interest in other cultures. But I would hope that there is, or I think that there is, a great deal that is American in it.

MUFSON What do you think is specifically American about *Small Lives*?

BOGART I agree with Gore Vidal, who calls America the "United States of Amnesia." I think we are unbelievably optimistic—which is our greatest strength and our greatest weak-

ness. For me, a group of people who walk along a road, having no idea where they come from or where they're going, but who are kind of oddly hopeful, is quintessentially American. I think it's American in spirit.

MUFSON You've acknowledged that *Small Lives* is a dense play, and Paula Vogel talked about your *No Plays* as an experience that had to be reexperienced and remembered by the spectator in order to be resolved. How necessary do you think it is to see plays like *Small Lives* more than once, and is that a limitation of the piece? Or is first-glance accessibility an unreasonable and debilitating demand on theater?

BOGART I do not think that what makes strong theater is accessibility at first instant, mainly because my first experiences in theater were not simple—I didn't understand it. But I did sense that there was something there. I find immediate accessibility easily forgettable. All the great theater experiences I've had have either been too long, or too difficult, or I've had to reach. That doesn't necessarily mean I think audiences have to come to see it more than once. I have had the experience, and of course I'm a theater person, where I remember going to see 20 times Richard Schechner's *Mother Courage* in 1974 or 1975. That was his greatest work, it was an unbelievable production. I didn't understand it. But there was something about it that brought me back. I don't necessarily think that the sign of a good work is where you have to come back to understand it; I don't understand most of my work. I have to look at it and constantly redefine what it is. If I did understand it, it probably would not be as volatile. I don't think that understanding is necessarily the best thing in art.

MUFSON What is?

BOGART Aliveness. In the theater, certainly a sense of event. A sense of human beings reaching towards something, a sense of inspiration. As in great music: you are taken to a place where you are not in familiar territory, where one encounters new landscapes. That's what I want in the theater. I want the audience to be in new territory, I want myself to be in new territory. I mean, I am the audience, ultimately.

MUFSON Although it doesn't seem as if you move completely away from giving the audience at least some trace of a narrative.

BOGART No. Because I think any good person in the theater also has a strong streak of show biz and a sensitivity to the level of entertainment and story. No matter how rigorous, there's a sense of showmanship; there should be, I think, in the theater.

MUFSON People asked you at the festival how you choose the plays you do. You said, in regards to classics, you often go on the recommendation of people you respect. How do you decide which contemporary plays and playwrights you want to stage?

BOGART It usually, oddly enough, does not come through reading the script. It's by having a relationship with the playwright. The playwrights I've worked with, I can count them on one hand. There's Eduardo Machado, Paula Vogel, Chuck Mee, Mac Wellman. Every single one of them, I actually met them before I worked with them. Similarly, people I respected would say their work is important. I don't know that I can recognize great work on paper. There are people whom I respect and I really listen to them, and they do know how to read a play. I can read a play once I'm working on it, but to choose a play, I get very insecure, because I can't tell. Often I think a play is hard to see on the page. Or, it takes a huge investment, and sometimes I'm unwilling to give that investment because I'd rather be reading history, or psychology. That doesn't erase the fact that, once I've started working on it, once I've made the decision, it's an incredible experience—one's relationship to a script is incredible.

MUFSON How do you mean?

BOGART When I started working on plays like *Danton's Death*, I realized that when I would do research, I would go to a library and sit there and try to study the French Revolution, but what would happen is that I would wander over to the magazine section. And I used to feel guilty about that, as if I weren't really dealing with the material. But then I found out that, because *Danton's Death* is in my mind, all of the

detours are part of the research. For example, with *Danton's Death*, I picked up a magazine about the club scene, and I ended up setting *Danton's Death* in a club with "celebutantes," which had a correlation to the fashions and the notion of fashion after the French Revolution, and the air of brutality. I think you can hyper-text off of plays. Plays should awaken rich associations that you can't really control, and the older I get the less I'm interested in controlling the associations. As a young director, one wants to say: This is what I think, and this is what I know. As I get older I'm more interested in complexity, in opening something up rather than closing it down.

MUFSON One of the interesting things about *The Medium* was the degree to which the intellectual and the emotional were absolutely fused. That's something you don't see too often. It wasn't just about presenting art with a political slant, but about intellectual ideas having an emotional import. Do you see that in the other pieces you're working on?

BOGART *Going, Going, Gone* is about quantum mechanics, using the structure of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, of two couples spending an evening together.

I never understood science or math in high school, but recently I started listening to physics tapes because I couldn't read the books. I listened to them when I was driving between Saratoga and New York. When I would have closed the book because of not having understood, the tape would keep talking. It would be Stephen Hawking's or *The Tao of Physics* or something, and I would be driving, and suddenly I would get it. I would stop trying to understand, and suddenly I would say, oh my fucking God, I think I just understood the Heisenberg Theory or the Theory of Relativity or something. And that started changing the way I think about the world and about movement on stage and about relationships. I want to create a piece that gives the audience the same experience I had in the car: they're involved in one story (I was looking at the landscape)—in this case they'd be involved in these two couples passing the evening. But what they're hearing, what they're saying, are these

extraordinary theories from quantum mechanics. In some pieces, that's how it should work.

MUFSON And do you explore what's terrifying about quantum mechanics?

BOGART I'm learning that the more I study quantum mechanics, the more I'm questioning the whole notion of living. I suddenly think that I might be the only person in the whole universe, and that you're a figment of my imagination. And that I'm creating you—therefore I question every moment of my life. That's what I want and that's what I'm scared of, too.

MUFSON It sounds like you're making an association between quantum mechanics and solipsism.

BOGART Oddly enough, solipsism came up recently in something I was reading—that you can actually take quantum mechanics to be about solipsism. But I'm still in the middle of it, so I can't really draw any conclusions.

MUFSON But it's taking you into philosophy of science texts?

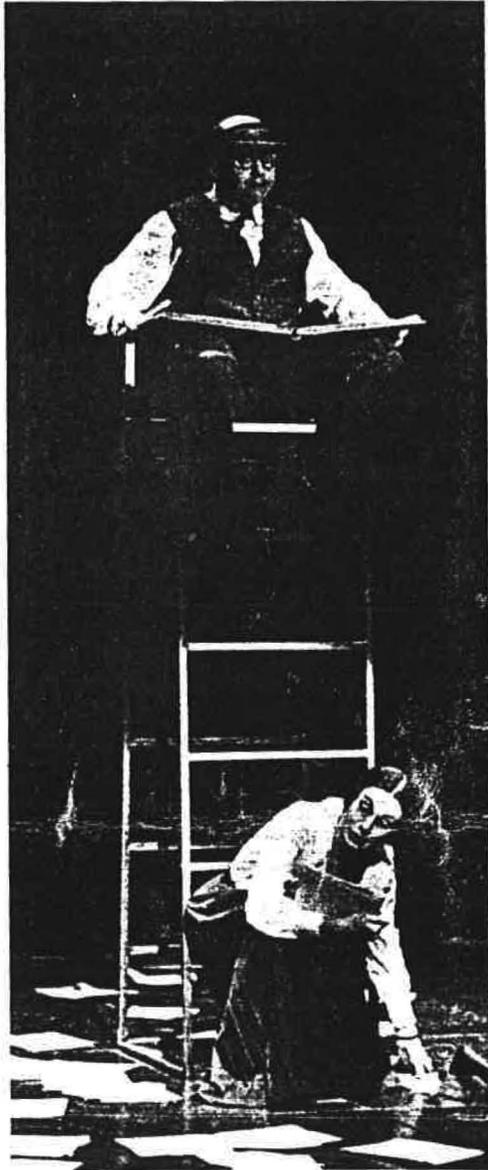
BOGART Deeply. And religion, oddly enough, and the notion of religion.

MUFSON To me, the actual content of McLuhan's writing made *The Medium* terrifying and powerful, because these were intellectual ideas, and yet, I turned around when it was finished and the woman behind me was weeping. And that seemed like a perfectly understandable—yet surprising—reaction. I wonder if a piece on quantum mechanics...

BOGART I don't know. We'll see. I didn't know in starting *The Medium* that it was an emotional piece, either.

MUFSON But you must have some instinct about it, if you choose that topic.

BOGART I just know that quantum mechanics, or the study of it, is changing my life profoundly. So I want to do a play about it so I get to spend more time with it and share it with an audience.



Rice's *The Adding Machine*, directed by Bogart at Actors Theatre of Louisville.