THEATRE ON THE WEB: What's Out There, and What Difference Does It Make?

AMERICAN THEATRE

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APPROACHES TO THEATRE TRAINING 2001

Bogart & Linklater Debate:
What Makes an American Actor?

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Kristin Linklater, left, and Anne Bogart on the campus of Columbia University

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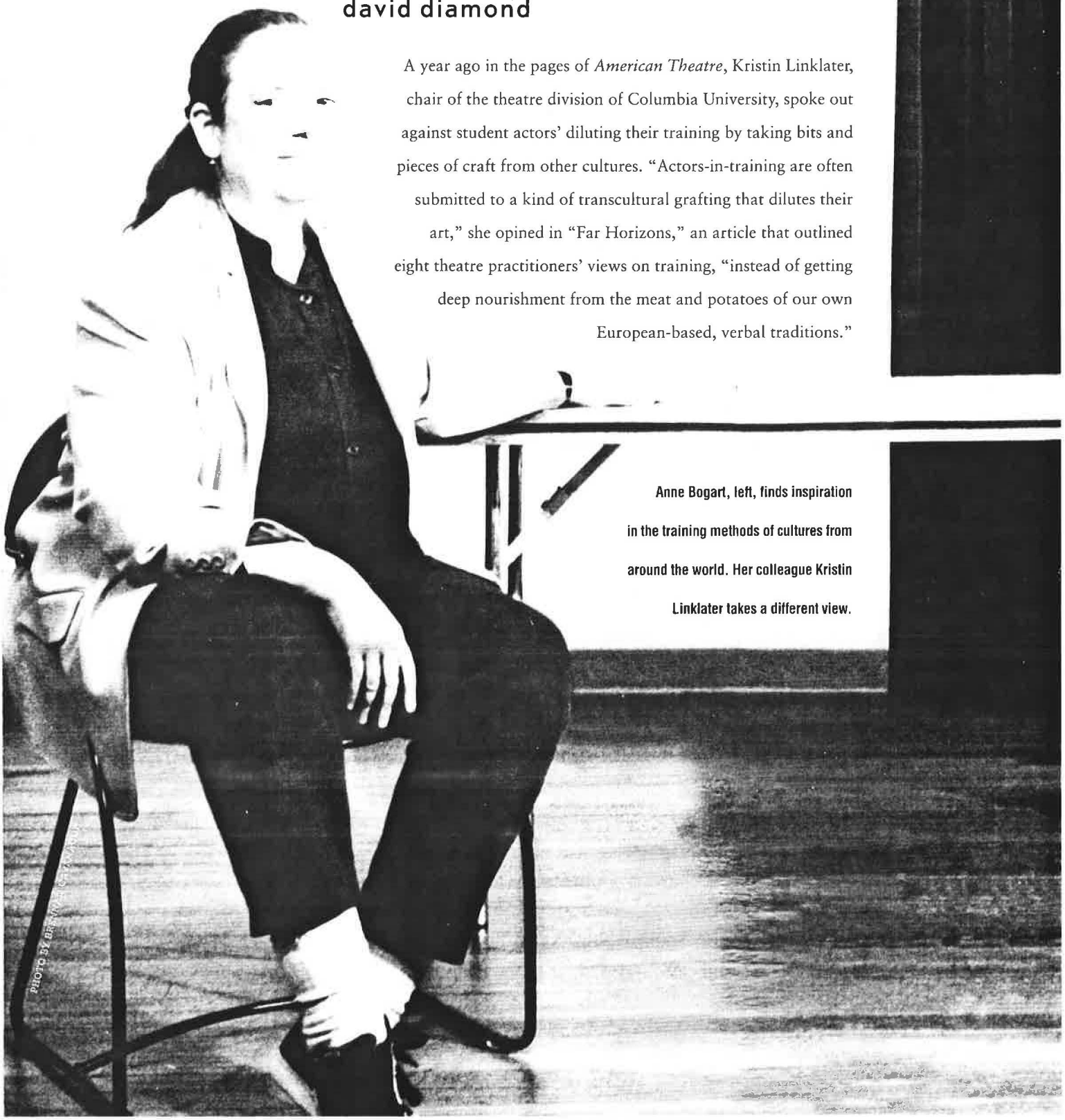
Balancing

anne bogart and **kristin linklater** debate the current trends in American actor-training

MODERATED BY
david diamond

A year ago in the pages of *American Theatre*, Kristin Linklater, chair of the theatre division of Columbia University, spoke out against student actors' diluting their training by taking bits and pieces of craft from other cultures. "Actors-in-training are often submitted to a kind of transcultural grafting that dilutes their art," she opined in "Far Horizons," an article that outlined eight theatre practitioners' views on training, "instead of getting deep nourishment from the meat and potatoes of our own European-based, verbal traditions."



Anne Bogart, left, finds inspiration in the training methods of cultures from around the world. Her colleague Kristin Linklater takes a different view.

acts

The iconoclastic teacher of voice, text and Shakespeare went on to say that, while good actors can pick up ideas from many sources, "they should be wary of becoming whores with low self-esteem. They and their teachers sell themselves short when they bow down to foreign gods."

Linklater's colleague Anne Bogart, who heads the directing program at Columbia's theatre division and is also the renowned artistic director of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute company, took exception to Linklater's remarks. In a letter to the editor that ran in the April 2000 issue of *American Theatre*, Bogart and the SITI company wrote that Linklater's suggestions "are as uninformed as they are destructive." Stressing the fact that the work of SITI "is enriched by contact with other cultures," the letter went on to say that Linklater's remarks "demonize the possibility of cross-cultural exchange. This creates a reactionary conservatism that does not belong in the arts."

In that same issue of the magazine, Linklater responded to the Bogart/SITI letter by saying that, "I certainly don't have the power (or the inclination) to demonize cross-cultural exchange." She went on to object to Bogart's characterization of her as "xenophobic, exclusionary and borderline racist."

With the aim of allowing Linklater and Bogart the opportunity to explain their positions more fully, we invited them to a face-to-face debate at the *American Theatre* offices. We also asked a dozen directors to listen to the exchange and join in the discussion. During the course of the afternoon, we discovered that, while Linklater and Bogart may radically disagree on methodology, their opinions about the discipline and goals of training are much closer than their original statements might have led one to expect. —*David Diamond*

KRISTIN LINKLATER: On many occasions, I've heard the suggestion that the American theatre and American-theatre training were inferior to those of other cultures. Now I have taught in many parts of the world, and I'm always struck by the fact that wherever I am, there are workshops in American actor-training going on—the basic stuff, the Americanized version of Stanislavsky, what came out of the Actors' Studio and dominated the actor-training studio scene in New York for many, many years. Now, the fact that our actor-training is so sought after, all over the world, it seems to me, is something we should be proud of. American artists don't have to look elsewhere for their roots. We have very deep roots.

ANNE BOGART: I actually don't care for most American actor-training. I think that Stanislavsky was strangled, mostly by Lee Strasberg. I'm very frustrated with what a rehearsal is for most American actors. It seems a little bit small. As a director, when I hear an actor say, "Is that what you want?" I think, "Is a rehearsal about doing what the director wants?" And that worries me. So, my entire life I've gone elsewhere for inspiration. I went to Germany to work as a young director, and I suddenly had an epiphany: that I'm an *American* artist. My roots are back in vaudeville. I have an American sense of rhythm, an American sense of humor, an American sense of structure. Oddly enough, the way I get closest to my American roots—and most of the work I've done in the last 15 years is about American culture or American artists—is by going away. When I go to Japan and work with Tadashi Suzuki, for example, I'm thrown against a wall of my own assumptions. I have to *choose* what I want to own.

I formed a company based on a celebration of this issue. We meet people of different cultures who do things differently, and that act challenges us to grow—to become, oddly enough, more American. So, as the years go by I feel more and more militantly against the Americanized, misunderstood version of Stanislavsky we seem to suffer under. The biggest issue I have is with the actor's thinking, "If I feel it, the audience feels it."


Konstantin Stanislavsky

Training influences: clockwise from top, director and theorist Konstantin Stanislavsky, precursor of the "Method"; Anne Bogart's SITI company performing Suzuki-based exercises; the dance drama *Acrobats of God*, featuring Martha Graham, who bequeathed her own training techniques; Lee Strasberg, who interpreted Stanislavsky for American consumption; the SITI company in rehearsal.

DAVID DIAMOND: Kristin, what is wrong with different cultural influences bearing on American actor training?

LINKLATER: There is nothing wrong with it, once students have acquired roots in the Western theatre tradition. Those roots are deep; they go back to the Greeks, grow through Shakespeare and on to the 20th-century American classics. The tradition is densely *verbal*. It's based in the revelation of the human being through the human psyche, the human emotions, the intellect, the imagination—as shaped by a particular culture.

I think if you get your roots deep enough into this tradition you have earned the right to meet other, international ones. The depth and discipline of those traditions are extraordinary. If we come to them as if we're going to

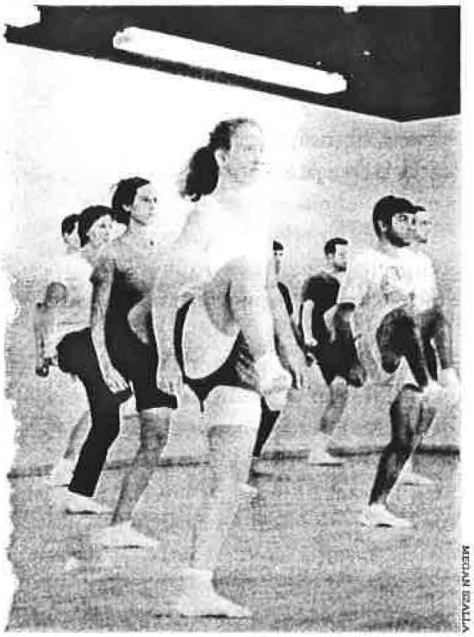

Lee Strasberg

the street fair—to see what we can pick up to decorate our living rooms—then we're in trouble.

Anne, don't you think that there's a wildness and an excitement—an extension of the human expression—that comes from very deep inside the good American actors? The good American actors can blow the English actors off the stage, for a start. And there's also an excitement here, which has to be admired and respected. The frightening alternative to, "If I feel it, the audience is going to feel it," often seems to be, "I'll just tell the audience about it." And that's where a lot of theatre training and directing is going—"Don't be emotional, whatever you do. Just say the words."

I just love the fact that the Actors' Studio happened, and that it totally bastardized Stanislavsky, and Strasberg took people down into those depths of the neurotic self, to the point where nobody could hear a word for 25 years afterwards. The fact that he went so far in that direction and that we then started coming back, I think, is enormously valuable.

BOGART: This business of contacting an emotional memory and using that in relationship to a text causes a sort of narcissism that I find unbearable. I think that emotional recall is particularly dangerous because it works beautifully on film and television, where you want to be photogenic and spontaneous. After the moment happens, you never create it again. The technique doesn't work in the theatre, where it's not about being photogenic. Of course, the theatre *is* about being spontaneous, but in a way you can repeat. So the search in a rehearsal is to find a vehicle in which the emotions can change all the time.



MEDEA BZALLA

MARTHA SWOPE

My problem is this: The emotions are such powerful tools that a lot of rehearsals become about generating an emotion and then the director saying, "Keep that." Now, for me the emotions are the most precious things we experience—I don't even want to use the word "have," because they're not a commodity. Therefore, I believe that the emotions should be left alone in a rehearsal. What you're looking for in rehearsal is an action or a shape or a form in which the emotions can *always be different.* Because the minute you pin down an emotion, you cheapen it.

So I prefer to look at the body, at placement, at arrangement. I'm interested in the emotions, but I don't want to strangle them. I think that the work of the Actors' Studio, especially, while fantastic on film or television, is deadly in the way it separates actors from each other. That's because the emphasis is, to a large extent, on trying to generate feeling, instead of on being present in the room.

The type of work that you do in rehearsal–what tradition does that come from, if it doesn't come from a Western tradition?

BOGART: Oh, I think it comes from a very Western tradition—it comes from vaudeville, from postmodern dance, especially of the Judson Church era. My influences are both international and American, and my company does two separate kinds of training—Suzuki training and Viewpoints. The Suzuki is like a barre class for a dancer, and the Viewpoints is a way to practice creating fiction using time and space. One is vertical; the other is horizontal. One is you and God; the other is you and the people around you.

[*to Linklater*] How does that jibe with the training in deep traditions that you were talking about?

LINKLATER: I have benefited both from the British version and the American version of those deep traditions. In London I was trained by people from the Old Vic Theatre School created by Michel St. Denis, who had come out of Jacques Copeau's Company. Jacques Copeau did in France what Stanislavsky did in Russia—he looked at conventional acting and said, "Where is the humanity?"

Then when I came to New York and started teaching at NYU, I encountered a holy madman of the theatre: Peter Kass, whose whole point was that there is no limit to what the actor can do, what the actor knows—the actor is always bigger than the character. I found that my voice work fitted extraordinarily well with that approach because my voice work involves freeing the human being from the constraints that our culture puts on us as we grow up. The actor's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to have a free and open body without tensions and a voice that can express the full gamut of human emotions and an intellect that will channel those emotions. And the balance between voice, body, emotions and intellect has to be exact; otherwise, you're going to get a skewed communication. The training I'm talking about, which is aimed toward that balance, comes out of everything I've learned since coming to this country about psychology and the self and the deep value of the imagination and individual creative spirit—and that's not the same as narcissism.

This training, for me, is the equivalent of your "barre class." When I worked with Shakespeare and Company [of Lenox, Mass.] and then with my own company, the Company of Women, our barre was a 45-minute or hour-long warm-up before every

Bogart: "Actors need to do something that's almost impossible."

single rehearsal and performance—an inventory of our bodies and our voices, but also our emotional selves that day. And sometimes it was a mess. Everybody would have to cry for 20 minutes before they could get on with anything. To treat one's own emotions as part of one's technique, I think, is really important. And it's very different, by the way, from the emotional memory stuff that leads you down memory lane into some dark place. That has to do with neurosis, not free emotion.

So I believe basic training frees an actor from the constraints of habit, which is always a diminishing, reductive force. I could not train young actors in voice work if they were doing equal amounts of time in Suzuki. Suzuki involves building muscular control, and the work I do involves *giving up* external muscular controls. Lots of other kinds of training are incompatible with my kind of voice work, too—modern dance is *hope*less; ballet absolutely undermines every inch of the training. If an actor's psycho-physical system is constantly being thrown in one direction and then another, it won't learn as fast.

BOGART: For me, interesting acting training is just the opposite. I think that actors are not asked to do difficult enough things. I think on a daily basis actors need to do something that's almost impossible. I think they should study opera and ballet—three or four techniques that are next to impossible—and then try to do them as a professional. Try to walk into the room as ballet dancers, even though they're actors. Of course, I'm not an actor, but I actually think it opens them up.

LINKLATER: Do something that's nearly impossible...I spent an hour and a half this morning with my first-year students at Columbia, and they were convinced that I was asking for the impossible—that was to open up their throats and stretch their tongues out of their throats while their throats remained open. This was as hard as doing three *pliés* and a *pas de deux*.

I think actors come up against things that are impossible all the time. An actor might say, "You want me to speak while I remember the dreadful thing that my father did to me when I was six?" The answer is: Yes! Otherwise, how will you learn to open your throat while you're playing Iphigenia? Often in my classes a memory of something horrific comes up, and a student just wants to leave the room. I say, "You've got to stay in the room. *Now* is when you have to talk. Because that's when you're going to restore the relationship between your brain and your feelings so that you can be eloquent with your emotion."

BOGART: When I do actor-training, I do a lot of physically exhausting things—running and jumping and stuff. At a certain point people get really exhausted. And what I say is, "You're in the fifth act of *Hamlet*. You can't say, 'I'm tired,' and shut down!"

Is there any danger of dilution when an actor tries to get a little bit of Suzuki here, a little bit of Grotowski there...

BOGART: This is where I really agree with Kristin—"boutiquing" is dangerous. In a way, I think, it doesn't really matter what you choose to study, but you have to stick with it. The word I look for in actor training is *rigor*.

LINKLATER: Absolutely. Any art that's achieved a high level has gone very, very deep into its disciplines. I think there are parts of the brain that get engaged when you go long and slow and demandingly. When I do my Shakespeare training, we spend five weeks leading up to one sonnet, first trying to get the voice to move the body from inside-out, then going to the color work, and then vowels and consonants, and so on.

I want to go back, Anne, to something you talked about earlier—the relationship of emotion to physical movement, especially as rehearsal moves into performance. How do you get the actor to the right emotional place?

BOGART: I don't get actors to emotional places. I try to create an environment in which many-colored emotions might occur. I find that if I try to *make* emotions happen, the environment is cheapened. So I try to create the circumstances in which emotions can be free.

Now what I find is, in rehearsal, if you concentrate on detail, things start happening. The trick is to keep working on *something*. And eventually the emotions that need to happen—the arc of the scene—emerges, not because you're trying to make it happen, but because you're taking care of things around it.

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PHOTOS BY BRENDAN CAVANAUGH

Linklater: "American artists have very deep roots."

MARCY ARLIN [Immigrants' Theatre Project / Lincoln Center Theater Directors' Lab]: How do you keep a wonderful, spontaneous, magic moment that happens in rehearsal and translate it into the performance?

BOGART: When I was a young director and had no pay and no theatres to work in, and did work on street corners and rooftops, and worked with young inexperienced actors who didn't mind not being paid, I choreographed everything. I set moments of imbalance—sometimes it was just something that was really hard to do, like, "Can you get your elbow over here on this word and make sure you're looking behind you?" So that the actor then was actually straining *against* something and that made the juices go. When you watch artists work, you watch them throw themselves off balance and then fight for balance. And that is a heroic act. After all, great plays start when something goes wrong, so that the characters have to scramble to recreate harmony inside an imbalanced state.

The most important thing to do as a director is to *see* the person you're in the room with—what their hair's like, how tall they are, how heavy their body is. *That's* what you're working with and not something in your head.

LINKLATER: I'd like to pitch in on that one, too, because I think that's really at the heart of good acting. It sounds terribly simple, and it's very hard: To be really in the moment. To be here *now*. My job as the actor is to be open to the play, to let the play *play* me from beginning to end.

I think it boils down to the rhythm of your breathing. After the outgoing breath, there's a moment of nothing, and that's the moment of imbalance, as far as I can tell. And then breath comes back in again. You can train yourself to consciously say, "What a surprise! The breath came back in." I think training involves training oneself to be surprised.

NATALIA DE CAMPOS [LCT Directors' Lab]: Kristin, you mentioned the balance of the four aspects of actor's training-voice, body, emotions and intellect. Do you really think American training can fulfill those four aspects?

LINKLATER: I think American training is getting better and better. For a long time, stage movement for actors was not very well looked after here, but now we're into the second generation of Lecoq-trained teachers, and I think that's fantastic training for actors. And—God, it sounds a little immodest to say so—but in the 30-odd years that I've been here, voice training has become a serious part of actor training. Before, it was not an essential part of actor-training programs in all these universities. Now it is. And then there's the discipline of scene-study work, which has always been part of American training but was not part of British training until very recently. I think there's some very good training happening in this country. To the young American actor, I always say, "Don't go to London for your basic training. Stay here!"

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE: I'm wondering if the differences in your approaches might have something to do with a difference in the way you relate to your audiences.

BOGART: I'm interested in the creative role of the audience. My frustration with a lot of theatre is that all the answers are given and there's no room for the audience—and I think that comes, again, from film and television. There are two ways of thinking about the audience. The first is to want everybody in the room to feel the same thing. I tend to think of that as what Spielberg did in *E.T.* You cry at all the right places, but everybody else is crying at those places, too, and at the end you feel like a manipulated rag. It's actually easy to make a whole audience feel one thing. It's also called fascism.

The second way is to create a moment onstage that triggers *different* associations in everybody in the audience. It's ▶

much harder to do that. I try to set up contradictions on the stage. In between those contradictions lives something very bright. I try to think of the audience as detectives; I'm leaving clues for them. The older I get, the more I try to do the least I possibly can onstage, so that the most happens in the audience's head.

LINKLATER: I would say I'm really old-fashioned, and I still believe in catharsis. If there is an emotional moment on the stage that triggers an emotion in an individual in the audience, then that emotion sheds light on the condition of that individual. And it's highly unlikely that you'll get everyone crying at the same moment. Of course, the kind of plays that I'm working on are mostly very verbal. The voice can, and should, have a powerful emotive effect on the audience. It actually moves sound waves physically through the air and hits bodies.

Two things that I see coming onto the live stage from film upset me very much. One is that actors are being trained in what I call the Mametian style, in which the voice is purely outward signage and is not meant to carry the story or carry the imaginative transformation from within the actor to the audience member. The age of irony has undermined the emotive power of the voice on the stage.

The second thing is this idea of soundscapes on stage. I have heard music onstage that *tells* the audience what it's meant to feel. That happens instead of the actor's voice, with its own intrinsic musicality and power, arousing an emotional response from the audience. Now that is a serious evisceration of the art.

MONIKA GROSS [LCT Directors' Lab & Women's Project Directors' Forum]: **I'm an Alexander instructor. I wanted to go back to something that Kristin touched on earlier about modern dance. If we're looking for American psycho-physical traditions, early development of modern dance in America seems to be somewhat of a model for training.**
LINKLATER: Martha Graham was one of the great, great American artists of the last century, there's no question about that. But Graham's technique is deadly for actors. Because if you contract in there [*indicating the diaphragm*] you can't breathe.

GROSS: With Graham, the emphasis is a lot on contraction, yes, but it's also on release.
LINKLATER: But it's for a different art.

BOGART: It's not a different art! I think Martha Graham is the most important theatre person of the century. I think she really got it in terms of character. I play a game in my head sometimes: "What would have happened if the Moscow Art Theatre never came to the U.S. in 1922 and '23?" I think, "Maybe Graham would have been our entire theatre!"

Anne, actors in your company spend a lot of time working around Suzuki. What does Suzuki training give an actor?
BOGART: The results I see are incredible concentration, focus, strength and the ability to change quickly. And I've found that when actors do Suzuki in conjunction with the Viewpoints—which deals with spontaneity and flexibility and being in the moment—it's a magic, chemical combination.

AINNA MANAPAT [*American Theatre* intern]: **You were saying that you don't think American actors should go to England for their training, and I know that, among a lot of young actors right now, the buzz is that American schools are just not as good as RADA or BADA or whatever....**
LINKLATER: It's very colonial thinking. The BADA programs I think are terrific for young folk who have not been exposed to any serious training at all. But the dreadful, awful thing is that in this country there are so many undergraduate actor-training programs turning out people who think they are actors—it's drowning the profession in mediocrity. Some of them will get jobs anyway because those programs also train people how to sell themselves. And if they're aiming for the American professional theatre, these actors have to have an ear cocked to the marketplace. And if they go over to England, they will tend to come back with an English accent. English people coming here tend not to pick up the American accent in the same way—I don't know ▶

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why that is. There are also certain emphases in the English training which may not be all that helpful for the serious, professionally directed young American actor.

SHEELA KANGAL [TCG staff]: I feel that the goal of so many training programs is to strip the student, leave him or her naked and exhausted, saying, "I don't know what I'm doing"–and then somehow, at that point, then they can start again. I just don't see the justification in that. If I go into a kind of training, I don't want to be called to a place that's unsafe.

LINKLATER: An actor who wants to stay safe is a boring actor. One of the things you have to learn as an actor is how to go into dangerous places. And you don't do that by being confirmed in what you already know. If somebody comes to me for training, I'm assuming they want to change, dig deeper or go further, get more dangerous, tap into their own individual creativity. Creativity is not a comfortable land to live in.

BOGART: All the really great actors I work with are willing to throw away everything they've done a night before opening and change it. And I think that's a quality of a great artist, and it takes a lot of bravery. Training should develop that bravery.

LINKLATER: Some thinker has said that the greatest spiritual level is insecurity.

BOGART: Heisenberg proved that. Mathematically.

LINKLATER: There you are. **AT**

David Diamond is executive director of the New York–based Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation.