

ANNE BOGART

Unbalancing Act

On Dec. 13, 1995 Anne Bogart was interviewed by Arthur Bartow at ArtsConnection.

ANNE BOGART: All art springs out of terror—the terror of being human, the terror of what you don't know. I do not believe that creative acts happen in a state of balance. I think they happen in a state of imbalance. That means that as a director, I need to unbalance myself, and the room I'm working in. I hope the others I'm working with are also in a state of imbalance. We spend great parts of our lives training physically, mentally, and in other ways to achieve balance, in order to reverse that in the rehearsal hall and work in a state of imbalance.

My secret to directing goes like this: If I'm completely lost and have absolutely no notion of what to do, I'll stand up and start walking toward the stage—and somewhere between here and the stage something has to happen. It feels terrifying. It feels like falling into a hole.

Unfortunately, the greatest innovation for myself, and for people I work with, is the fact that when you get to the point where you *don't know*, you are in a state of imbalance. You work impulsively, instinctively, and then something starts to happen. That's terrifying, isn't it? Out of that terror, sometimes something happens. As much as I hate it, it seems to be an essential part of the creative act.

I should preface this by saying that I know I'm not in a majority, particularly in our field, because I believe in the theatre as an art form—which means I have to ask

questions about what it means to be an artist, how that means I have to live my life, what that means in terms of choice of material, in terms of how I work. I look a lot at musicians, composers, and painters to understand that activity.

ARTHUR BARTOW: How has that affected your choices?

BOGART: Well, the first choice I made when I was about twenty-two was probably the most important choice, although I didn't realize how profound it was. I decided never to take a job for money, never to make a choice based on money. That determined a lot. Oddly enough, I haven't really had a financial problem since then. I think that's because I made the choice to base my projects rather than on money, on that ephemeral tool (which is probably the only tool we have), interest.

Interest is a very delicate thing, and I have had to really take care

of my interests. As each one of us walks down the street, we're interested in different things. Do you look at the ground? Do you look at people's faces? Do you look at shopkeepers? Do you look at the signs? Do you look at the sky? Interest alone will indicate a lot of choices you have to make, and from there, one works. What interests you in the rehearsal room? Can you trust that? Can you pursue it? Can you enter it?



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BARTOW: People are terribly interested in your Viewpoints, which seem to be concrete guideposts that can be followed.

BOGART: They're not actually my Viewpoints—I stole them. I worked in the early 80's with a wonderful choreographer, Mary Overlie, who was an extraordinary post-modern thinker. She developed something called "The Six Viewpoints," which I have stolen, mutilated, and changed, and now there are twelve, to her chagrin and amusement.

Essentially the Viewpoints are a philosophy of movement for the stage. Mary asked very basic questions: "What are your tools on the stage? What are your tools in time and space? How can you possibly handle time and space?" She broke it down into sub-sets such as spacial relationship, shape, gesture, kinesthetic response. How I speak is also determined by time and space—they are oral activities, vocal activities. I have forgotten exactly what her original six are, but I use spacial relationship, gesture, kinesthetic response, architecture, repetition, dynamic, tempo.

It goes essentially like this: If you go into a rehearsal, what is your job as a director? Is it to say, "Walk downstage, turn left, sit down, pick up the cup"? Is the actor's job to say, "What do you want?" If I can share a vocabulary with actors about how we handle time and space, there's a shorthand that can help us to the sort of deeper things that we don't want to talk about, like trust. I find if I work with actors who have trained in the formal notions of space and time, the actor naturally goes downstage

and turns left when there is something going on upstage right—it's a logical thing to do. I don't spend my time working with actors saying, "Go downstage, turn left." We talk about *how* it's done. I'm looking for ways of working with actors collaboratively, in which I can say, "You know your spacial relationship really sucks." They say, "Oh, okay," and make an adjustment. So I never have to say, "Walk downstage, turn left, sit down."

I believe in an intensive amount of preparation and intensive, rigorous thought. But there comes a time when the door shuts and you start to work, when you have to let all of that go.

BARTOW: In other words, you are training them to be co-directors. When they understand your language, or shorthand, you can easily speak the same language, and get so much more done that way.

BOGART: Exactly. I find that actors, unlike dancers, singers and musicians, do not train on a daily basis. Musicians do their scales. Dancers work through technique. But when actors graduate from school, they may say, "Okay, now I'm ready." But any actor knows that there's something missing, some sort of daily scales. The Viewpoints are a way of actors practicing together, to play with the notion of creating fiction through space and time every day. I think that a lot of my attraction to the Viewpoints is that I can't stand improvisation. I don't do that. This is a very rigorous physical and vocal improvisation. It seems much more to the point.

BARTOW: It really exercises the actor's mind, imagination, and body.

BOGART: Actors should do all of that.

BARTOW: Are your Viewpoints useful in any kind of theatre—traditional, realistic, naturalistic, musicals?



Cast members in the Circle Repertory Theatre production of *The Baltimore Waltz*, directed by Anne Bogart.



Cast members in the Trinity Repertory Company production of *Summerfolk*.

with most successfully are incredibly, physically rigorous, but have also had some training in Stanislavsky. What I call the "Americanization of the Stanislavsky system" is so prevalent it's like the air we breathe. We don't know that there is anything else. For me, the point of working in different cultures—which I believe in heartily, and love to do—is mainly because it forces me to make choices that aren't just ingrained. In other words, when working in Japan, I am confronted—like running into a brick wall—with my own assumptions. Suddenly, I'm seeing a completely different notion of what acting is, what a play is, what an audience is, what the theatrical event is, and I have to come to terms with my own notions about all those things.

BOGART: They are not a technique. They are a way of working, and it scares me that people learn from them and start companies like one in Chicago called the Viewpoints Ensemble. They're a great group of people, well-meaning, but that's not quite the point. The point is a way of learning to speak together, not an end product.

In a way, yes, they are helpful for doing any kind of play, because you are always dealing with the same notions that are found in music theory, in painting theory. As I think Spinoza said, "All art aspires to music." You can apply music theory to the theatre. Of course, because the theatre is much more gross, it takes on far grosser, flesh-and-blood forms.

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BARTOW: Acting technique for the last thirty or forty years has come out of an interior response. It seems to me that what you're talking about is a physical awareness that each actor would have of herself or himself. Might this work *against* the interior response?

BOGART: I've found that the actors who I've worked

I am interested in the emotional life. But I'm not going to concentrate on the emotional life. As a matter of fact, I believe that each time an actor performs something, it should be radically different. There should be very few line-reading settings. The way one attacks something should change depending on the kinesthetic relationship to the other actors on the stage.

What should stay the same, in my book, is the body, because the body's cheaper—the emotions are the most precious things we have as human beings; they're very delicate, they change. So I spend a lot of time focused on the body—on setting the body, not telling the actor what to do, but having them set it. We concentrate on when the elbow hits the table, how it seems to be the vehicle that reads the most from the audience. But the actor knows that it's not about setting everything, it's about setting in order for the deeper work to occur. If you look at the late Stanislavsky writings, which were repressed until the recent end of the Soviet Republic, you can see how he moved on to a more physical emphasis. I find myself much more drawn to the late-late Stanislavsky.

BARTOW: You made the point that the Viewpoints are for actors, but composition is a director's art. How does composition differ from the Viewpoints?

BOGART: In approaching a great big classical play, there are many levels of work. Part of the work is text analysis; part of it is source work—which is to find the original questions that are lying dormant in the material, and to find a way that they can be contagious, and live inside all of the people working on the play. Another part of the work is composition, which is sketching. It's not just a directorial task. I actually ask the actors to come up with solutions. For example, I know if I'm doing a play in which there's a big fire, I'll say, "Okay, I think it should be really exciting to see the fire." I'll write down a list of things that I'd like to be in the scene with the fire. I'll say, "Make a four-minute scene that has fire, bells ringing, uses text in some way, six people fall down." Then I divide the actors into groups. I'll say, "You have twenty minutes to solve that."

When I did this exercise, one of the groups came back and they all had flashlights. They created the most amazing fire scene you've ever seen—they would all aim the flashlights at one person up on the rafters screaming, then they would move the flashlights to another person. I never would have dreamt of that solution. It's a way of sketching, like you do for a painting, I imagine, although I don't paint, so I don't know. It's a way to start generating material with the actors—not necessarily staging the play, but coming up with ideas. The other thing

that happens is that the actors start taking incredible ownership of the material.

Somebody's going to ask me this question: "How do you do that in regional theatre?" I do the Viewpoints training as if I'm working with a company from another theatre, or actors who were brought in for a particular show. I'll spend a lot of time at the table. Then I'll spend two sessions on Viewpoints, and one session on composition. It seems like a waste of time in our American show system, but it actually saves time. Once you have laid this groundwork, the following three weeks you just work, and everyone knows what you're talking about.

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BARTOW: [Playwright] Charles Mee says that you work with absolutely no pre-existing rules—that you approach every project as though it were entirely different, and that you go in with no preconceived notion of how to work with a play. But you've just told us about



Richard Trigg

L. to R. Ellen Lauren, Will Bond in the Actors Theatre of Louisville production of *The Medium*.

this wonderful, pragmatic approach to working with actors. Is Chuck mistaken?

BOGART: Yes and no. Truth is created in contradiction. I believe in an intensive amount of preparation and intensive, rigorous thought. But there comes a time when the door shuts and you start to work, when you have to let all of that go. An actor knows that. Actors can't do their homework on a stage. A director can't either. The directorial disease is that we're brought up to think that what an actor wants is for us to know what we're doing. But, in fact, creation is one-hundred percent intuitive.

What Chuck is feeling is the fact that I'm completely open to wherever the rehearsal goes once we start. I do preparation with the actors, and without them. But once we get on the floor, once we're starting to work staging—"blocking" is a terrible word, isn't it, "choreography" is even worse—you have to be open to what's actually happening in the room, and trust that something will or will not come.



L. to R. William McNulty, Karenjune Sanchez in the Actors Theatre of Louisville production of *Picnic*.

Richard Trigg

BARTOW: I know that sometimes you work with a combination of actors and non-actors. How do you create a piece simply based on the people that you have chosen? I'm thinking of the piece that you did for Anne Hamburger at En Garde Arts.

BOGART: That was Chuck Mee's *Another Person Is a Foreign Country*. He was interested in the notion of human beings as "other," meaning the normally disenfranchised, people with disabilities, people who are not "normal." His notion is that the history of art is the history of inclusion. It's an extraordinary thought. In the beginning art was about gods; then it became about royalty; then it became about aristocrats; then it became about the common person. His notion of art is that it's always expanding out and becoming more inclusive.

He wanted to do a play about people who were not included in society's power structure. We spent a lot of time casting—he wanted a little person, and he also wanted a blind chorus.

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BARTOW: Where did you find these talents?

BOGART: We worked with a casting director. A lot of these folks had not worked in the theatre before, and they really felt that it changed their lives in a great way. They loved coming every night to the theatre. They would get there hours early.

BARTOW: When working on a new piece such as this, where do you start?

BOGART: The beginning motivation is interest: Do I want to go to that place? From there you have to look at what the tools are, very specifically: the space, the theatre, the people, the text that's written or not written



Richard Trigg

L. to R. Ellen Lauren, Tom Nells in the Actors Theatre of Louisville production of *Going, Going, Gone*.

yet, the run, the producers. The answers are all in the specifics. When I first moved to New York as a very young director, I went around and asked if I could direct in all these theatres, and everybody laughed at me. I was fresh out of college, and of course nobody would give me a theatre, so I had to start making theatre. I made theatre on street corners, or on rooftops. I would work with whoever would work with me because I had to do it. I learned about set design by staging something in front of the Bell Systems Towers. I learned about everything from working with nothing. You know, "What does it mean to have one light bulb?" It was a great training ground.

I do not think that there is such a thing as an unemployed director—it's a contradiction in terms. Twenty-five percent of the director's work is the initiation of projects. So, if you're initiating it, you have some contact with the raw materials of what you're making. That determines a lot. To actually deal with the substance of what's in front of you is important.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: How did you get involved with Tadashi Suzuki and his company?

BOGART: In 1988, I was invited along with Mark Lamos and Robert Falls—who couldn't go—to Toga,

Japan, which is where Mr. Suzuki has his theatre festival every summer. He invites people from around the world to come. It was a great deal—I got to stay in Japan for two weeks, all expenses paid. I didn't realize that Suzuki was looking for a partner, but in fact, he was sort of auditioning American directors. We got along pretty well, and a year-and-a-half later we met in New York when he was doing something here. He said he was interested in working with somebody to start a center for international theatre fellowship in the United States, and he asked me if I would be into doing this. I said, "Absolutely, I would."

At the time I was very interested in international exchange. Because we're both directors, I said, "How are we going to do this?" He said, "I've got a farm, let's put on a play." So, we went to Toga in the first summer and he put together a play with a company of American actors. We started the cycle of performing it in Toga and then in Saratoga Springs, New York. Now, Saratoga is our summer home. This company of actors has become the most important thing in my life. We're working on our fourth piece right now.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: Will you elaborate on the connection between the physical, emotional, and character building with the actors?



Richard Trigg

Cast members of *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, based on the major plays of Chekhov, at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

BOGART: I would ask an actor to do what I do in rehearsal—which is to let go of all the pain. In other words, as an actor you must work with whatever you can stand on, whatever you come from, whatever anybody's told you, whether the idea came from the greatest acting teacher in the world, or the lady who's sitting on the park bench next to you. It seems that any technique that forces an actor to question or doubt their choices will bring greater depth.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: How do you think about your audience?

BOGART: The first thing you do is you ask what the audience's goal, or part, is in this play: Is the audience a peeping Tom, celebrants at a graduation ceremony, witnesses, or jury members?

I find as I get a little older that I'm interested in the *least* thing you can do on stage in order for the audience to do the *most* imagining. What is the slightest bit of movement that will then continue inside the audience's imagination? You're essentially asking an audience to participate in a journey. The question is how you invite them up. It's the call to adventure, the entrance into the belly of the whale. I don't think it's something you think of at the end—you think of it at the very beginning. What is the actor's relationship physically to the audience? I'm really obsessed with that now, because I think that's our salvation.

Anne Bogart is the co-artistic director of the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI), founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992. She is the recipient of two Obie awards and a Bessie award, and is an associate professor at Columbia University. She has directed in theatres and universities throughout the United States and Europe. Recent productions are *Going, Going, Gone* (SITI); *Small Lives/Big Dreams* (SITI); *The Medium* (SITI); *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice (Actors Theatre of Louisville); *Hot N' Throbbing* by Paula Vogel (American Repertory Theatre); *Marathon Dancing* by Laura Harrington (En Garde Arts); *Escape from Paradise* by Regina Taylor (Circle Repertory Company); *The Women* by Clare Booth Luce (Hartford Stage); *Picnic* by William Inge (Actors Theatre of Louisville); and *The Baltimore Waltz* by Paula Vogel (Circle Repertory Company).

Arthur Bartow is the artistic director of undergraduate drama at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Formerly, he was associate director of Theatre Communications Group, artistic director at the Theatre of the Riverside Church, and artistic director of Washington, D.C.'s New Playwright's Theatre. As an actor, he has appeared on Broadway, Off Broadway, in Las Vegas and in regional theatres. His book *The Director's Voice* (Theatre Communications Group) is in its fourth printing. He serves on the board of trustees of the SDC Foundation.