

PROFILE

Patient Pioneer

In turning theatrical conventions and assumptions upside down, director Anne Bogart's goal is to forge new bonds, not break with the past.

by Scott Proudfit

Anne Bogart is a reasonable revolutionary. As co-artistic director of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI), Bogart, along with Tadashi Suzuki, has formulated a new approach to creating theatre which is decidedly physical, as opposed to psychological, and puts the weight of the rehearsal and production-shaping process into the hands of the actors.

The Viewpoints, as this philosophy of movement translated into technique is called, are nine points of awareness that a performer/creator has at his disposal while working in rehearsal: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition, shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography. The Viewpoints are applied to radically different types of projects. Sometimes Bogart and company stick closely to a text, as with William Inge's *Picnic*. Other times, they create their own text, derived from a play or plays, like the Chekhov-based *Small Lives/Big Dreams*. Still other times, they create a piece that embodies an idea or exemplifies a life, like the quantum-vs.-Newtonian-physics-inspired *Going Going Gone* or the Robert Wilson bio *The Medium*.

Regardless of the text, the physical life of these pieces is often in counterpoint to the words, allowing the actors a certain freedom. As director Tina Landau, a longtime collaborator of Bogart's, put it, "The staging becomes the vessel for what goes on in the interior life. The piece begins operating on multiple 'tracks.' The movement has been freed from the text so that each is informed by and related to the other without it being the same as the other."

If this all sounds vaguely Brechtian, Bogart has often been compared to this master of differentiated theatre. The main difference between the two is that Bogart does not typically create pieces that are overtly political, nor is she clearly avant-garde in her opinions about Western culture and tradition. Indeed, unlike artists who consider themselves "avant-garde," Bogart is not particularly adversarial to tradition, nor has she called for a universal rejection of the status quo. Rather, she strives in her work to re-connect audiences—with their culture, with their history, with the actors, with each other. Rather than offering big solutions to the world's big problems, her group hopes to locate small local truths more honest and applicable in a world of communities. Some academics would call this postmodern.

Something Wonderful?

Bogart is currently in the midst of her first Los Angeles visit as a teacher, offering two weeks of intensive workshops in Suzuki training (a physical training style complementary to her work), Viewpoints training, and Composition. Hosted by Oasis Theatre Company, the series is called Framework '98, and culminates with performances/demonstrations at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and the Getty Center next weekend.



Anne Bogart.

Meanwhile, Bogart, who is also an associate professor at Columbia University, and SITI have a number of projects planned for the coming year: *Culture of Desire*, a play that looks at Andy Warhol and American consumerism, begins previews on Aug. 28 at New York Theatre Workshop (a place Bogart would like to become SITI's NY homebase). Then, on Sept. 12, the company's production of Brecht and Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins* opens at New York City Opera. Next up is a two-person piece based on *Alice's Adventures Underground*, opening on Nov. 5 in Columbus, Ohio, at the Wexner Center, and a new play about the audience/actor relationship called *Cabin Pressure*, at the Humana Festival for New American Plays. Other projects in the works include an opera with Laurie Anderson called *Moby Dick and Other Stories*, and a piece about Orson Welles and William Randolph Hearst called *War of the Worlds*, which Paula Vogel is working on. It's a busy time for the director.

Because a definitive text outlining the Viewpoints approach is still in the works, the exercises have disseminated by word of mouth throughout the theatre communities in America and beyond. Not surprisingly, Bogart and her Viewpoints work have developed an air of mystery about them. Many have heard it's something new and something wonderful, but few know what exactly it is.

A recent article on the technique in *American Theatre* did little to dispel the mystery, glossing over specifics to fill pages with testimonials. But in speaking with Bogart, it is always apparent that this air of mystery is not something she has fostered. Unlike certain affected artists who cling to a heightened vernacular to hide their shortcomings, Bogart is straightforward, honest, and reasonable. It's the issues she brings up, not the way she presents them, that are revolutionary.

Back Stage West/Drama-Logue: Unlike certain revolutionary theatre makers who have become reluctant expatriates, you

seem dedicated to exploring American culture, and to working in America, despite your excursions and connections beyond our borders. Why the loyalty?

Anne Bogart: When I was a young director, I thought that American culture was superficial. I was really jealous of European culture. German culture was particularly fascinating to me. So I went over and started directing in Germany, and I decided at that time that I was going to be German—I was not going to speak English, etc. And the results were disastrous. I was doing really stifled, bad productions.

Through the really painful experience of doing bad work, I suddenly had a revelation, really an epiphany, that I am American, that my sense of humor's American, that my references are American. I suddenly became grateful for people like Martha Graham, whose lineage goes back to Meredith Monk, or someone like Bob Wilson, who's ahead of me, or for the revolutions in the early part of the century in theatre in this country. I realized that my rhythms were American. And I realized that, actually, to be in exile would be completely tragic.

And so I turned it around and became fascinated with American culture, and realized that we actually have an extraordinarily complex and interesting culture, it's just that we have amnesia—as Gore Vidal calls us, the United States of Amnesia. If we could remember where we come from, it would give us endless possibilities for our work in the theatre.

BSW/D-L: In your essay "Terror, Disorientation, and Difficulty," you talk about the key to success being "the artist's courageousness in the light of her own terror." Do you see the main drawback of psychological, text-shackled theatre as the fact that relying on only the script is too safe a program for an actor?

Bogart: No. I think that a play is one of the most glorious things to work on, particularly a good play that asks good questions. The problem comes when we assume that we can handle it, when we pretend we are facile with European literature, when in fact we are an aural and visual culture. We're not a literary culture, but we just sort of pretend—"Yeah, I can put up Ibsen."

I do a lot of classics work and I'm very interested in texts, but I also love to generate my own work. I also love to do opera. I love to do a lot of things. However, I do think that the sort of Strasbergian notion of reducing everything to something I can understand or experience with my dog is a problem. I like to think of a play as something much bigger than anything I have ever experienced, and I'm like a little girl standing in front of a huge canvas: How do I even address that? So I want to keep these things big, and not reduce them to something I can understand.

BSW/D-L: Are you concerned that your theatre productions in America are primarily reaching—and perhaps are most appreciated by—a certain educated or at least highly cultured portion of society?

Bogart: I used to be worried about that. I used to get angry with audiences—second preview audiences in particular. For some reason, second preview audiences are lazy audiences—and I used to think, What's wrong with me? Am I an elitist? I would get mad at myself and think, I'm going to Saratoga and people will have to make pilgrimages to see my work.

But what I've discovered is, you don't have an audience—essentially anybody is your audience. What you do is speak to a particular part of every person. Our work is actually seen by all kinds of different audiences wherever we're working. I'm always happiest when it's opening up to new audiences. We did something at En Garde Arts up at 106th Street, and our audience was a Harlem audience, and it was fantastic. And with us, when an individual comes in contact with the work, they know instantly that they're being asked to work a little bit, too. Like going to the gym—the emotional gym or the spiritual gym or the intellectual gym. So it's not instantly accessible, but no great art I've ever experienced is instantly accessible. It takes a little giveback from the audience.

BSW/D-L: But can a piece like *Small Lives/Big Dreams* be appreciated without a serious familiarity with Chekhov's plays?

Bogart: Yes. In fact, I think too much familiarity gets in the way, because then you're sitting there thinking, "Oh, that comes from *Uncle Vanya*. That comes from *Seagull*." I think actually the less you know, the richer the experience will be. That's a problematic piece. I think that piece, of all the pieces I've done with the company, is the one we've changed the most, worked hardest on, been the most frustrated with. It either works like a dream or it's really self-conscious and a little affected. It's been a problem

piece, and just for the reason you mentioned. It's been the most painful piece to work on, but we keep bringing it back and working and reworking it.

BSW/D-L: The process of using the Viewpoints and the individual rehearsal exercises has mostly been disseminated by those who have worked with you branching out and teaching others. Have you thought of writing a comprehensive text that clearly lays out your approach to the rehearsal process and illuminates for directors a new way of working with texts, perhaps even categorizing exercises?

Bogart: the problem is scheduling. There are two books that I have to find time to write. One is actually 60 percent finished. It's not a book like you're describing, it's actually six or seven chapters. "Terror, Disorientation, and Difficulty" is one of the chapters. It's about the partners you have as an artist. Terror is one. Stereotype is one. Memory is one. Interest is one. Eroticism is one. Violence is one. It's 60 percent written because I had three weeks last summer to actually sit down and do it.

The other book, which is exactly as you described, I'm writing with Tina Landau. We had scheduled to write it in June, and then we both got busy. I think it is important, and I want to do it. If somebody would just give me a deadline. I work best with deadlines. I do a lot of articles, and people say, "Anne, you have to have this done by next week," and I do it.

BSW/D-L: You have sought to restore a certain power to the American actor in the creative process. Yet as the one who coins the language, can you avoid a sort of Master Artist role, handing down knowledge?

Bogart: What worries me the most—and actually, it happens with anyone who tries to come out with a language to describe working—is that it becomes codified. I didn't invent the Viewpoints; Mary Overlie invented them. I took it and bastardized it. She's a purer artist than I am. She's in Montana. And I always think of her as a much purer spirit that I've sort of commodified. What worries me, though, is what happens with every person who has tried to articulate a method, an approach, or a language, is that it becomes "the method," as opposed to a way of looking at things, a process that's changing.

I know that Stanislavski, at the end of his life, got furious with, I think it was Josh Logan, who asked him about the Method. And he said, "What method? I don't know what you're talking about." And finally he lashed out at him and said, "There is no method, I'm constantly changing." He was infuriated. Now, I don't mean in any way to compare myself with Stanislavski, but I do fear when it becomes the Viewpoint Method to staging plays. You do this work to grow and to learn to be more differentiated in your work on plays. The codification and rigidity—"This is the way it's done"—is what worries me, instead of using whatever is around you to continue to learn and grow, to become more articulate.

BSW/D-L: Like that of any theatre maker, your process is always evolving. Describe one of the revelations you've had in the past year.

Bogart: Something I learned two weeks ago—actually it's stolen from Helene Cixous. She wrote that as human beings, we have three enemies that we live with, and you deal with them daily; one is external and two are internal. The external one is distraction. Particularly in this culture, we're dealing with distraction all the time. The two internal ones are laziness and impatience. I think that's brilliant. I think we have to deal with that in every moment. You have to be patient. This we would be a bad interview if either of us was impatient. Same thing if either of us was lazy. And if we were distracted, it certainly wouldn't go very well.

I find that life is a lesson, and that I learn things that affect the work constantly. I think things are constantly telling you things around you. The way the chair is placed at this table is telling something. Everything is a lesson. I like to look at life that way.

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So then there is constant evolution.

BSW/D-L: What was the first theatre you ever participated in?

Bogart: I've been doing it since I was a little girl. I always did theatre. The first real play I directed that was legitimate was when I was 15. I had always been a student director, because you could get out of class and go out in the hallway, or get a slip and go collect props. And I was backstage for *Brigadoon* and *Charley's Aunt* and all those things. But I had a really radical French teacher who in Middletown, Rhode Island, decided in 1967, when I was 15, to do *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco, which was a radical idea. And I was the student director for it—which didn't mean anything except that I worked backstage. And this classic *All About Eve* sort of thing happened, which is she called in and said she was sick a week and a half before it went up (it went up, by the way, in the school lunch room, which had a stage at one end). So I had to take over this production and direct it, an absurdist play by Ionesco. The most important thing was that it was successful, which gave me courage to go on.

The other thing that's interesting is that in some ways I'm still directing the same way I did when I was 15—the same rhythm, the same kind of interest in staging. Some things have never changed, which I find interesting, despite all one's attempts to grow.

BSW/D-L: What is the best training for a performer who wants to work in the theatre?

Bogart: I think it is to choose something that's next to impossible to do, and practice it as if you could be a virtuoso—in other words, in the way a dancer takes a ballet barre. Ballet barre is very difficult to do properly. This is why we do Suzuki and Viewpoints training in my company. They are two things that you will never get right—particularly Suzuki, which just puts you in a position where you will never ever be comfortable. You just try to regain balance in an unbalanced situation. I think the

problem in theatre training is that it's not demanding enough and doesn't ask you to be a virtuoso.

I think what kills one's perception of acting is film and television, because it's a completely different process. In television acting—which takes a particular skill for an actor—the objective of the director is to catch something which is, No. 1, photogenic, and No. 2, spontaneous. Doing something in the theatre is completely different: to create a vehicle in which you can live passionately over and over and over again. So the search is very different. What you're doing is very different. To create a structure in which you can live, you need to learn to be articulate physically and vocally. You need to become aware of what's going on around you and to be able to listen to other people, and to the violence of articulation—to be violently awake, in a sense. So whatever the discipline is, it should be something very difficult.

BSW/D-L: What is the biggest problem with the majority of the theatrical productions available to the public today?

Bogart: They're boring. They don't challenge the audience enough. I think the most important question to ask right now is, What is the creative goal of the audience? What is the audience's job? What are they doing? How do they relate to the stage? What are they bringing to the stage, and what is the actor bringing to them? I think that that question has been misplaced somewhere. I think the line has been cut between the audience and the actor, and that line for me is the most precious thing. And if it's cut, it's boring, because the audience doesn't know why it's there.

BSW/D-L: What is the biggest threat to the theatre?

Bogart: Assumption. That you assume you know how to do it, or you assume you know what an audience is. Or you assume you know what a play is. Or you assume you know what a rehearsal is. And that's usually out of fear. You do that because you're afraid that you'll look stupid if you don't know what a rehearsal is or what acting is, or speaking or walking is. As soon as something is assumed, it's asleep, and then it's boring.

BSW/D-L: What is the point of doing theatre today?

Bogart: I think there's nothing more important, because the notion of being in the same room with other people, dreaming together, and feeling the flesh, the animal energy of it, is the most important thing that can happen in a world that's saturated by media. An unmediated event is radical at this moment. It used to be the other way around—it was radical to see a film or to listen to a record. At this point, the radical thing to do is create in the present moment, which is what we do in the theatre. The audience is creating based on the sketching that the actors are doing. That's an extraordinary thing.

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