

THE COURIER-JOURNAL
SUNDAY,
JANUARY 1, 1995

A MODERN MASTER

ATL festival honors director Anne Bogart

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Anne Bogart, seen at Actors Theatre, is considered "perhaps the most imaginative director now working in American theater" by ATL's Jon Jory.

STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL LUSTER (ABOVE) AND PAM SPAULDING

ELMER RICE'S "The Adding Machine," acclaimed as a landmark in the history of American drama at its Broadway premiere in 1923, hasn't fared well since then. Dismissed by many historians as a relic of Broadway's short-lived flirtation with German Expressionism, it has pretty much been ignored by America's resident theater companies.

But suggest to Anne Bogart that "The Adding Machine" is a dramatic corpse that deserved its early burial, and she firmly comes to its defense.

"Oddly enough, 'The Adding Machine' is done often in Europe," Bogart said recently. "There it is considered one of the great American plays."

Bogart is directing a rare American revival of "The Adding Machine" for Actors Theatre of Louisville, where it opens this week in the Pamela Brown Auditorium.

"The play for me explodes off the page," Bogart said. "Europe's respect for it is well-founded. I'm shocked that it is not done here more often. I learned recently that Rice wrote it in a fever of inspiration over a period of 17 days. For me, that creative energy is in the play."

Bogart's production of "The Adding Machine" will be the centerpiece of Actors' monthlong salute to Bogart's career, which is being billed as a Modern Masters Festival. It is another "first" for Actors and its producing director, Jon Jory. No other resident theater has ever turned over a month of its schedule to investigate the work of an innovative, although controversial, theater artist like Bogart.

Bogart is familiar to ATL audiences for directing a stunning revival of William Inge's "Picnic" in 1993 and for the premiere of Eduardo Machado's "In the Eye of the Hurricane," a highlight of ATL's 1991 Humana Festival of New American Plays.

She is known for her innovative revivals of older American classics such as Claire Booth Luce's "The Women" and Rodgers and Hammerstein's "South Pacific," as well as for the pre-

mières of important new plays such as Paula Vogel's "The Baltimore Waltz." She has won several New York theater awards and is an associate professor, in charge of the graduate directing program, at Columbia University in New York City.

Jory chose Bogart to be honored by ATL's first Modern Masters Festival because, "quite simply, she is perhaps the most imaginative director now working in American theater. In a theater where we've wrung every drop

from naturalism, Anne's work takes us into new territory. Objects and furniture find new use, space becomes a character and cliché a methodology for revelation. (Her work) is rife with visual composition. It's dance done by actors in the service of dramaturgy."

Despite the honors that have come her way, Bogart was disbelieving when Jory first approached her about his idea for a Modern Masters salute.

"I have never heard of such a

thing," Bogart said. "When Jon first brought the subject up, I thought he had gone mad. He told me to think of it as a midcareer checkup. (She is 43.) I was flattered, but I told him I thought he should check it out with his board of directors before he went any further, because I thought he was absolutely insane."

Now that the festival is upon her, with a weekend of seminars focusing on her career scheduled for Jan. 27-29, Bogart said her emotions are a mixture of pride

and embarrassment.

"I come from a very WASPy, Protestant-type family where you are not supposed to call attention to yourself. As a director, I don't have to. I'm always backstage. That's the way I like. Still, I'm flattered by all this attention, if also a bit apprehensive."

A characteristic of Bogart's career is her constant search for older American plays that can still

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speak to contemporary audiences. Part of her life's work, she said, is to celebrate the American tradition. She insists that a great play reminds us of certain issues that are still important in our social structure, and that's why she was attracted to "The Adding Machine." It tells the story of Mr. Zero, an accountant who, after spending 25 years as an office clerk, is replaced by an adding machine and fired. In a fit of desperation, he kills his boss and is subsequently sentenced to be executed. Rice examines Zero's life and afterlife in a series of eight scenes that reflect on the plight of ordinary men trapped in inhumane circumstances.

Part of the American neglect of "The Adding Machine," Bogart is convinced, is that it has been drowned by academics.

"But once you rescue it from the classroom and put it onstage, it is spectacular," Bogart said. "And incredibly prophetic. It's about computers, about what happens to human beings once we live in the age of cyberspace. It's written in a slangy, American idiom that is still very fresh. The problem is how we can all be in the same room with this play and bring it into harmony with our times. In rehearsal, we are now in the process of giving it that strange necessity that will make it vivid for today's audiences."

In addition to "The Adding Machine," the Modern Masters Festival will feature two productions by the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, of which Bogart is founder and artistic director. They are "The Medium," inspired by the writings of Marshall McLuhan, the communications theorist who was concerned with the impact of media

on culture, and "Small Lives/Big Dreams" with a text derived from the five major plays of Anton Chekhov.

"The Medium" developed from Bogart's concern about new technologies such as computers, the Internet and virtual reality, which she feels are swiftly altering the world we live in. How, she wondered, are these astonishing inventions changing our thinking, our relationships, who we are. She searched for a way to approach these questions in dramatic terms and decided to use as an anchor McLuhan's writings about the way the electronic media were changing our perceptions.

"To me, a great play asked a great question. 'The Adding Machine' asks about how machines are affecting us. 'The Medium' asks about who we are becoming under the spell of these machines."

"Small Lives/Big Dreams" is a companion piece to "The Medium." It, too, asks a series of questions: What is the role of memory in our lives? How does memory work? What happens when you don't have a memory?

"The playwright who, in my mind, deals with this question most vividly and uses the word 'memory' in almost every other sentence is Chekhov. When he wrote, he was teetering on the end of the 19th century, and now we are teetering at the end of the 20th. But the questions are the same."

"Small Lives/Big Dreams" involves five characters, each of them representing one of Chekhov's five major plays. Their dialogue is entirely derived from the five plays, as they travel a road in search of their past.

"When we were working on it, I thought this might be the most abstract of my works, the one demanding the most imagination from an audience. But audiences have loved it. I hesitate to say this, because it sounds off-putting. But it's a poem, a theater poem."

FOCUS WEEKEND

IN CELEBRATION of Anne Bogart's work and the American avant-garde theater, Actors Theatre of Louisville has scheduled a Focus Weekend for Jan. 27-29.

In addition to tickets for "The Adding Machine," "Small Lives/Big Dreams" and "The Medium," the weekend will include admission to:

■ The discussion "Under the Influence: Anne Bogart's Impact on Collaborators and Critics" with panelists Mel Gussow, a longtime drama critic of The New York Times, playwright Paula Vogel and director Robert Woodruff.

■ A lecture-demonstration by Bogart called "The Viewpoints: A Movement Philosophy for the Stage."

■ A lecture by theater columnist Porter Anderson called "The Meat of the Medium: Anne Bogart and the American Avant-Garde."

■ A symposium, providing a discussion among Bogart, the Saratoga International Theatre Institute performers and the audience.

For reservations and the price of ticket packages, call the box office at (502) 584-1205.

IF YOU GO

"THE Adding Machine" opens Thursday and plays in the Pamela Brown Auditorium through Jan. 28; tickets range from \$9 to \$21. "Small Lives/Big Dreams" plays in the Bingham Theatre Jan. 17-28; tickets range from \$12 to \$21. "The Medium" plays in the Victor Jory Theatre Jan. 26-29; tickets are \$19.

For information, call the ATL box office at (502) 584-1205.