

Big Bugs

"I'm only refining what I do best, which is to act as a facilitator and a sieve."

In 1998, during a speech she gave at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, Anne Bogart said three things bug her most about American theater: "1. The lack of daily, rigorous training by a majority of American actors; 2. The 'Americanization' of the Stanislavsky system; 3. The idea of 'want.'"

PROFILE
JEFF SMITH

Jon Jory, creator of the Humana Festival, calls Bogart "the most exciting acting and directing theorist since Brecht." In the late 1980s and early '90s, she directed three shows at UCSD and *The Women* at the San Diego Rep. Because her influential theories have already become disputed, I've asked people who worked with her in San Diego to elaborate on what "bugs" Bogart.

1. LACK OF DAILY, RIGOROUS TRAINING BY A MAJORITY OF AMERICAN ACTORS

Katie Rodda, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Bogart and Tina Landau: "Actors don't train enough. Musicians practice everyday: scales, technique, études. Ballerinas spend hours at the barre. But many actors go months without working on their craft. They have a tendency, once they graduate from a university program, not to do consistent physical or vocal training, other than the occasional workshop. That's what's now accepted."

"Sadly, that's true," says Karenjune Sanchez (UCSD/MFA, 1992), who was a member of Bogart's Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI) for many years. "Most don't even train during a show. Usually actors arrive in time to rehearse their scenes and leave when they're done. It boggles my mind that, with the exception of the first reading, sometimes a cast won't be in the same room until tech! How is a company supposed to find a sense of itself?"

"With SITI I trained every day, at least 45 minutes before each rehearsal. It not only affected my individual work, it created a true ensemble for the company. We grew together in a way you can't in conventional American rehearsals."

"Also, the thing with Anne: the actor is responsible for the larger picture, not just learning lines. She encouraged us to participate as theater artists, not as 'actorbots' carrying out her will."

Bogart's company works out like professional

athletes. Her physiological approach encourages performers to keep in constant touch with theatrical immediacy. To this end she employs Viewpoints, nine subsets of stage geography. Tina Landau: "Viewpoints function much as scales do for a pianist, a structure for practice, for keeping specific 'muscles' in shape."

SITI members also do Suzuki training, rigorous feats of strength and concentration that would test the elasticity, and conditioning, of the San Diego Chargers.

Tom Nelis, who studied with Bogart at UCSD (MFA, 1990), is a member of SITI (and will perform in *Wintertime* at the La Jolla Playhouse this summer): "Anne's technique is about getting out of your head. SITI actors sharpen their awareness of what's actually there, on the stage around them, and hear it speak on its terms, not theirs. The objective is not to learn where to go but to learn how to go."

A fourth thing that "bugs" Bogart, maybe more than the three she named, is premeditated theater. Viewpoints and Suzuki force actors into the present. Jefferson Mays, who worked with Bogart at UCSD (MFA, 1991), is a former member of SITI and currently plays the title role in the La Jolla Playhouse's *Tartuffe*, found that the 45 minutes of training "gets you out of your own way. Like being hung over, it wears out your inhibitions."

Bogart insists she doesn't want Anne Bogart "clones." And though an incisive theorist, she's wary of theories. "I'm not envisioning any way a director should be. I'm only refining what I do best, which is to act as a facilitator and a sieve." When people refer to "Anne's vision," she balks. "I don't have a vision. I have values, maybe."

This is even true of Viewpoints. Joan Schirle, who performed in *The Women* and recently directed the San Diego Rep's circus version of *A Christmas Carol*, asked Bogart if she favored any particular training system for actors. "She said no; it could be anything that was everyday, that was difficult, and that caused the actor some discomfort."

2. THE "AMERICANIZATION" OF THE STANISLAVSKY SYSTEM



Karenjune Sanchez



Tom Nelis

When Lee Strasberg took over the Group Theatre in 1928, he adopted the "Method" of Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky, but with a change. Stanislavsky advocated the "magic if": how would your character feel in the given circumstances of the play? Strasberg shifted the emphasis from the character's emotions to the actor's: Circumstances prompt a character to behave a particular way. What would motivate you, the actor, to behave that way?

Rodda: "Strasberg made a huge contribution, but he changed Stanislavsky's original ideas. His emphasis on actors' internal motivations made them self-referential and, in many cases, self-indulgent. It's very seductive to cry onstage, especially when you can say, 'I'm not crying; it's my character.' But it often becomes 'I can cry but can't say my lines because I'm too overcome with emotion.' Well, then what's the point of saying the lines?"

Nelis: "Strasberg's psychological theories became a fantastic vehicle for acting in films. It's still THE technique for film, in fact, but because of that it became THE American technique."

Sanchez: "I think the intentions are right: to ground the actor emotionally, and in an honest, 'natural' way. Sometimes we can move so far into aesthetics we lose sight of the human experience at the core. Where I think people get lost is believing that his was the only way. Or that there's only one way to tell a story."

Bogart: "Stanislavsky's system, watered down

to a 'method,' created a stranglehold of emotional indulgence in the theater. Rehearsals often become about eliciting strong emotions and then fixing those emotions. I believe the great tragedy of the American stage is the actor who assumes, thanks to our gross misunderstanding of Stanislavsky, 'If I feel it, the audience will feel it.'"

Strasberg gave one aspect of Stanislavsky's method a capital M and ignored the rest. But after stressing affective memory, emotional recall, and the psychological basis of character, Stanislavsky moved on. In his later years, and later books, he became much more interested in the body, in plasticity, and in what he called the "psycho-physical unity of experience."

Bogart: "Late in life, he rejected his earlier psychological techniques, calling them 'misguided.'" By then it was too late, however. American actors adopted a restricted aspect of his system and turned it into a religion. "The Americanization, or miniaturization, of the Stanislavsky system has become the air we breathe, and like the air we breathe, we are rarely aware of its omnipresence."

Comparisons between Stanislavsky's and Bogart's influences abound (he wrote a book called *An Actor Prepares*; the title of her first book, *A Director Prepares*, plays with that association). Yet even though she refuses to call her work a "method," or even a style, many do, using pseudo-Bogartian techniques.

Sanchez: "Just like Stanislavsky, Anne's work



Jefferson Mays (as "Tartuffe")

has been bastardized. Many of her detractors have opinions about her productions but've never seen any. What they saw was maybe a student or former collaborator they think is working in her style. People say, 'Oh, I saw a Viewpoints production of *Macbeth*, which doesn't make sense. Anne never suggested that hers is A method of acting, let alone THE method. Viewpoints are just tools for theater artists. They serve the event, not vice versa.'

3. THE IDEA OF "WANT"

Bogart: "Plays should awaken rich associations that you can't really control. A young director wants to say, 'This is what I think, this is what I know.' As I get older, I'm more interested in complexity, in opening something up rather than closing it down. A sure thing does not arouse us emotionally. In order to be touched, we have to be willing not to know what the touch will feel like."

Like Gertrude Stein, whom she adores, Bogart takes nothing for granted. "The enemy of art is assumption—the instant you make an assumption about who the audience is or what the moment is, that moment will be asleep." Given Bogart's openness, the worst thing an actor can ask in rehearsal is "What do you want me to do?"

"The question paralyzes her," says Jefferson Mays, "calcifies her spine. She's the antithesis of that. It's not about what she wants. It's what you want, your desire, which is why she cast you."

Nelis: "That's Anne's gift as a collaborator. She gives the actors an enormous investment in creating the piece. She learns from what you're doing, points out what works and what doesn't. And that's what makes her a great director. For my money now, directors distinguish themselves by the quality of attention they give the work, what's onstage, not their ideas or concepts. It's an honor to be seen by Anne Bogart. When she watches you, you are clarified by it."

Sanchez (who now acts and directs theater in New York): "Anne taught me how important it is to listen and watch—truly listen and watch. She once said that you do all your homework, and do a LOT of it, you

come up with a plan. In rehearsal, you throw all that aside and you watch and listen."

And find out what the play wants, which means abandoning what Bogart calls the "cushion" of definitions: "We are living in the space between mythologies. Things aren't pure anymore. It is a very creative moment. I crave an arena that embraces the exquisite tension of opposing and attracting forces: I am drawn towards them, not in their familiarity but in their unfamiliarity."

Bogart creates "shock spaces" onstage, where oppositions clash and "insight might occur." In rehearsal, she encourages *auseinandersetzen*—"positive argumentation," in which people pull apart from each other in order to create. "The weakness in American artists is that we agree too much. Americans, in fact, are plagued with the disease of agreement. In the theater we often presume that collaboration means agreement. I believe that too much creates productions with no vitality, no dialectic, no truth. Unreflected agreement deadens the energy in a rehearsal."

"An actor will say to me, 'What do you want?' You know? Then there's nothing there. There's no tension." Bogart says she loves when actors scream at her from the stage. "It makes me happy because then I feel we can work. It's true. There's nothing worse than a blank okay."

Bogart also doesn't like it, says Tom Nelis, "when things line up." She prefers imbalance to stability and distrusts cohering devices, including continuity. "Actually," she says, "the expectation of continuity is a glorious fiction."

"I find immediate accessibility easily forgettable. I'm only interested in directing things that give the audience room to participate, to be alive because of the disagreement. More than anything I want an audience to have to deal with whatever they're facing—for it to stop them in their tracks, so they don't look at it and go, 'Okay, next?' Being in the theater ought to be an incredible, unmediated event. In this day and age, that's a remarkable option." ■