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Iconoclastic and Busy Director: An Innovator or a Provocateur?

By MEL GUSSOW

As a director, Anne Bogart resolutely probes behind the words, searching for fabric and context. If the play is a classic, she says, she wants to rediscover its "original energy" and learn "what we can see in it as people in the '90's." Each time out, she asks herself, "Who needs to see this, and also who needs to perform it?" In her process, she pans her eye 360 degrees around a play or a playwright.

Ms. Bogart pays a price for her iconoclasm. She has often been involved in controversy, spitting audiences as well as critics. Depending on the point of view, she is either an innovator or a provocateur assaulting a text.

In one of her boldest accomplishments, "No Plays No Poetry but Philosophical Reflections Practical Instructions Provocative Prescriptions Opinions and Pointers From a Noted Critic and Playwright," she staged the theories and criticisms of Bertolt Brecht, turning them into a playful, walk-through environment of ideas. The Bogart brand of direction has also given a visceral life to new plays like "In the Eye of the Hurricane," an Eduardo Machado exploration of a Cuban family's reaction to radical political change (presented several seasons ago at the Actors Theater of Louisville in Kentucky).

Trilogy Via Collaboration

This season Ms. Bogart has been a whirlwind of activity, moving from play to play in New York and in regional theater. It is a prolific outpouring from a director who less than four years ago found herself out of work when her brief leadership of the Trinity Repertory in Providence, R.I., came to a sudden end.

The current centerpiece of her directing is a trilogy of plays based on American entertainment of the early part of this century. Drawing upon her interest in popular culture and such influences as Martha Graham and Giorgio Strehler, she has created "American Vaudeville," "Marathon Dancing" and "The Birth of a Nation" (about silent-movie acting). "Marathon Dancing," the first of the plays to be staged in New York, will open tomorrow at the Masonic Hall, 71 West 23d Street, Chelsea, under the aegis of En Garde Arts.

The trilogy, Ms. Bogart said, is an attempt to set the American oral and visual tradition against the European literary tradition. Each work comes out of a collaboration with theater artists; in the case of "Marathon Dancing," with Laura Harrington as writer and Christopher Drobný as music arranger.

For Gregory Boyd, the artistic director of the Alley Theater in Houston, which presented the premiere of "American Vaudeville," Ms. Bogart is at her best directing new plays or "inventing something new" like her trilogy, rather than when trying to reinvent a familiar play.

'A Very Angry Play'

In her unconventional take on "The Women," by Clare Boothe Luce, this 1936 comedy leaped from pre-feminism to post-feminist commentary. "What I tried to do was not just treat it as a bitch fest," she said. She says she considers it "a very angry play" by an "exceedingly angry woman."

While Ms. Bogart is often acknowledged for her theatrical ideas, the execution can fall short of the con-



Marilyn K. Yac/The New York Times

Anne Bogart, left, during a rehearsal of "Marathon Dancing," part of a trilogy of plays based on early-20th-century American entertainment.

cept. In his review in The New York Times on Jan. 13, David Richards said the production of "The Women" at Hartford Stage was "frequently surprising, occasionally illuminating and almost never funny." The director, he said, "has such an idiosyncratic vision of the script" that the author's contribution "seems altogether secondary."

This season in New York, Ms. Bogart also directed Regina Taylor's

lived as the opening play in Ms. Bogart's single Trinity Repertory season. It was followed by a disembodied version of Gorky's "Summerfolk" (low on Gorky and even lacking in samovars) and a striking modernist variation on Brecht's "Baal" (directed by Robert Woodruff but bearing the Bogart stamp).

Equivalent of a Resignation

The Providence experience proved to be part of her regretful past. Facing a severe financial crisis, the board asked for a 25 percent reduction in the budget. When Ms. Bogart refused to go along with the suggested cuts, the board accepted her decision as the equivalent of a resignation. John Howland, who was the chairman in 1990, insisted that it was economics, not art, that provoked the collision.

Richard Jenkins, a veteran company actor and director, was named to take Ms. Bogart's place. A search committee recently chose Oskar Eustis, associate artistic director at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, as Mr. Jenkins's successor.

Ms. Bogart's departure from Trinity was especially painful because she had grown up in Rhode Island and was inspired to make theater her career by Adrian Hall's Kabuki-style

Using a 1990's eye to rediscover the classics.

monodrama "Escape From Paradise" at the Circle Repertory Company and will soon take "The Medium" to the New York Theater Workshop.

She conceived and directed the play last summer at the Saratoga, N.Y., international theater institute she founded with Tadaashi Suzuki. A collage of the theories of Marshall McLuhan "about how technology is changing our relationships," it is a kind of a companion piece to her "No Plays No Poetry."

That Brechtian collage was re-

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"Macbeth," which she saw at Trinity as a teen-ager.

From the beginning, Ms. Bogart and Trinity may have been a mismatch, or at least untimely. It was her misfortune to succeed Mr. Hall, the founder of the company and its sole director for 25 years. When Russell Baker assumed his role as host of "Masterpiece Theater," he said he would have preferred to be the man who replaced the man who replaced Alistair Cooke. Ms. Bogart might have found less hostility if she had been similarly distanced from Mr. Hall.

In any case, she says she is reluctant to return to her native state. If she went back, she jokes, she would "be lynched."

In retrospect, she says that she learned under fire and she contends that if she were a man she would have had a second season to use what she had learned. She points to the dismissal of JoAnne Akalaitis at the New York Shakespeare Festival and, recently, Josephine Abady at the Cleveland Playhouse as examples of what she considers to be prejudgment of female artistic directors. "You send the girls in to clean house, and then you get rid of them," she said. When it is mentioned that other women, including Mary Robinson, Tanya Berezin and Lynne Meadow, continue to run major theaters, she responds, "God bless them."

Eight Stanleys, No Brandos

Ms. Bogart made her reputation 10 years ago with a revisionist production of "South Pacific" at New York University, setting the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical in a clinic for emotionally disturbed war veterans. In this context, "There Is Nothin' Like a Dame" became a shellshocked battlefront song about male bonding. Naturally, the Hammerstein estate raised an objection.

On another occasion, she directed a production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" with 8 Stanleys and 12 Blanches, one of whom was a man. Even for Ms. Bogart, that "Street-

car" was extreme, but it helped her confront a crucial question: "If you do 'Streetcar,' do you pretend that Marlon Brando never played Stanley?"

Compared with many of her directorial peers, Ms. Bogart regards herself as a collaborator rather than as an auteur. As Mr. Boyd says, during Ms. Bogart's stay at the Alley Theater, she "galvanized the company, unlocking the actors as clowns and dancers" in a play that was about performing. P. J. Benjamin, who plays the emcee in "Marathon Dancing," adds, "In 22 years, I've never had such a freeing experience; she makes you feel safe to make a fool of yourself," and to bring in ideas, in his case a marionette that he may or may not use in performance. Describing her method, he says, "It's like living on stage."

Homework Assignments

Working with her "everything is made into an event," says Paul Zimet, who played a leading role in "No Plays No Poetry." For the Brecht piece, he said, she would give the actors the equivalent of homework assignments, encouraging them to research and develop their roles, "to create your act and bring it in; then she would be critical and appreciative in helping you to shape it." Lyn Austin, who produced some of Ms. Bogart's earlier work, credits her with fearlessness in tackling risky projects. Such forceful characterizations of her directorial personality are jarring when matched with Ms. Bogart's offstage demeanor, which is both composed and self-critical.

Ms. Bogart doesn't begin a piece with preconceived ideas and images. "It's usually in the crisis of a rehearsal that things become clear," she says, adding that her principal concern is with "the relationship between choreography and psychology." What is seen often seems at odds with what is said. For a model, she points to the scene in "Cabaret" in which "a beautiful blond boy stands up and sings 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me.'" While the audience may be seduced by the beauty of the singer and the song, it understands the horrific political implications of the moment.

Even as she diversifies, she plans to continue to scrutinize plays from America's recent theatrical past. These are, she says, "memory capsules of who we are." Repeatedly, she asks herself how she can capture the original energy of a play, and concludes, "The more cultural baggage a play carries, the more I have to go through the back door."



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