

Violently Awake

"We revere the cowboy riding out alone across the prairie [who] is no threat to the government."

Fifty years ago, actors debated what Constantin Stanislavsky meant by his "method" of acting. The Actor's Studio swore he stressed a character's psychology. Naysayers, then and today, argue that he had a broader, much deeper aesthetic.

Fifty years from now, theater people will haggle over what Anne Bogart meant by this or that "viewpoint" or "embarassment" or "the idea of want." Fed up with naturalistic acting, which performs "from the neck up," Bogart crusades against "the stale influence of a watered-down version of the Stanislavsky system." Her alternative, corporeal performance, on display at UCSD and the San Diego Rep in the late '80s-early '90s, is having a profound impact on American theater.

Bogart: "With most theater in this country, you just say, 'Hmmm, that's nice, next!'" Bogart calls it "E.T. art." She saw the movie at a multiplex, "dutifully cried at the moments I was supposed to cry, and exited feeling insignificant and used." As cars full of "Spielberg audiences" filed out of the parking lot, it began to rain.

"Watching this spectacle through batting windshield wipers, I had the appalling sensation that each of us, isolated in our separate cars, were feeling the same thing. The film had made us smaller. We had been treated as mass consumers. We had been

manipulated."

E.T. art has no mystery, requires no effort. The emotions evoked are as stale and stock as the methods used to tweak them. "That's dangerous," says Bogart. "Audiences love to be challenged. They love being asked to crawl over a snow bank." In the theater that Bogart envisions, each spectator feels something different.

Bogart prefers "open" to "closed" texts. In closed texts there is only one possible reading — you either "get it" or you don't — and closure is final. An "open" text permits multiple interpretations. "It is not difficult to trigger the same emotion in everyone. What is difficult is to trigger complex associations so that everyone has a different experience."

Or conflicting experiences in the same person. In 1988, Bogart staged *Strindberg Sonata* at UCSD. The set was a seven-room, three-level house, each room a compartment in Strindberg's mind. In Act One, a character did chemistry experiments (Strindberg wanted the Nobel Prize not for literature but for his findings as a chemist); in another, Strindberg took photographs. In Act Two, people paraded through each other's rooms. Strindberg underwent meltdown.

The cast sang songs, uttered phrases from Strindberg's opus, and moved in striking ways. In fact, gesture and choreography were as

much a part of the work's "meaning" as the words. *Strindberg Sonata*, one of my all-time favorite shows, was so complex, category-warping, and plural, I couldn't review it. I wasn't ready to be that definite. Instead I wrote a "preview" about Strindberg's life and times and urged people to see the show, knowing each would have a unique experience.

Bogart's other local productions — *The Dispute* (1987) and *1951* at UCSD; *The Women* (1992) at the San Diego Rep — had similar "open text" qualities. *1951*, the year she was born, offers clues to one source of her art.

1951 explored the Army/McCarthy hearings and the virus of reactionary censorship that infected America. Typical of Bogart, *1951* wasn't a one-sided tirade. "Tail-Gunner" Joe McCarthy never appeared. And many actors were double-cast in antithetical roles (one played Lillian Hellman and Ayn Rand; another was a serene Walt Disney and a harassed Lee J. Cobb). The play also suggested that what changed the course of American art, in 1951, continues today.

Interviewed by San Diegan Katie Rodda, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Bogart and Tina Landau, Bogart said, "The McCarthy Era knocked out the idea that art has a continuity, a history...it made a rift in our development." In "Stepping Out of Inertia," Bogart continues the thought: "I am a child of the '50s, brought up believing that art and politics don't mix. The government machinery of the late '40s and '50s in America, with its anti-communistic paranoia, was far more successful in taking control of artistic directions than most of us have ever imagined. Not only did it destroy or re-channel the work of our best artists, it wiped out the notion for following generations that art has a function of



Anne Bogart

social and political criticism."

"Everybody looked inward," Bogart writes in *A Director Prepares*. "Playwrights bore the brunt of the new charge to avoid political engagement. Plays became increasingly about 'you, me, our apartment, and our problems.' The scope kept narrowing."

"In our culture, collective action is suspect. We have been discouraged to think that innovation can be a collaborative act. There has to be a star. Group effort is a sign of weakness. It is no accident that we have this lonesome cowboy complex. We revere the cowboy riding out alone across the prairie [who] is no threat

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to the government."

Bogart is one of the most influential, inventive practitioners of contemporary theater, yet her work is obsessed with the past. "I resent being called avant-garde, because I spend most of my time thinking about American history, tradition, and culture...to find an alternate route into the future." She's studied vaudeville, music hall, minstrel shows, and silent films — pre-McCarthy entertainments unafraid, she says, to be large, boisterous, and intense; unafraid, in other words, "to walk into the room bravely without knowing who or what is there."

Bogart sums up her search in *A Director Prepares*: "The journeys through the past encouraged me to develop new productions about our history...to new ways of thinking about acting, playwrighting, and design. I recognized that there is such a thing as an American sense of structure, an American sense of humor.... I might even find some ancestral ways to move."

Imagine a director coming to the first rehearsal with every inch of the production planned in advance. Bogart's the opposite. She advocates a collaborative approach that regards cast and crew as creative equals. She also treats the elements of theater — physical space, time, the full palette of an actor — democratically. Each communicates, but especially the body.

In 1999 Katie Rodda attended a Bogart workshop in Los Angeles. The first night they ran in a circle for hours.



Katie Rodda

"I'm in okay shape," Rodda recalls, "but've never been so exhausted in my life." Bogart combines her techniques with those of Tadashi Suzuki, whose "grammar of the feet" ranks as the world's most rigorous theatrical training. Performers stomp to music, or verbal commands, for fixed periods of time. Many call the exercises an "actor's boot camp." Rodda: "The Suzuki killed me — very authoritarian. It's so arduous on the muscles, particularly the quads, when you go from a standing position to a squatting position on a slow count of 20 and back up again. Actors who train in Suzuki have the most responsive bodies I've ever seen."

Bogart says American acting is becoming reduced, more and more, to "an imitation of television acting." To find nonnaturalistic ways of doing theater, Bogart borrowed choreographer Mary Overlie's "Viewpoints." These are movements through time and space that give actors a common language. Overlie had six. Bogart had nine at

last count. Four concern time: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition. Five concern space: shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and floor patterns. Each is so integral to the others it's hard to isolate one (for extended definitions, see *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, Smith and Kraus, 1995).

Scott Zigler, director of actor training, American Repertory Theatre: "Young American actors are not good at using their bodies. They have a 'shoulders and up' method. So Viewpoints expand their physical vocabulary. They become more apt to react physically, rather than intellectually."

Among other things, Viewpoints force actors to recognize the geography, seen or just sensed, of the stage. One example, kinesthetic response: when Rodda ran in a circle at the workshop, the group would suddenly stop — or jump, or change direction — together. "There was no leader. You just sensed when to change. [The exercise] took the star out of the picture.



Linda Libby

"Actors are notorious for planning what they'll do. In Viewpoints that's impossible. You become aware of everything outside of you. Patterns change, you react. It takes your brain out of it."

Bogart's company, Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI), begins each rehearsal with 45 minutes of Viewpoints and/or Suzuki exercises. These have nothing to do with style, she insists, nor are they ends in themselves. They are methods for training actors. Tina Landau, who has collaborated with Bogart, says they provide "a structure for the artist so she can forget about structure."

Jon Jory, founder of the Humana Festival, sees Bogart's "dance done by actors in the service of dramaturgy" as a necessary corrective for American theater. "Historically, where you stand onstage has generally been related to where you'll fix the highball."

When they auditioned for *The Women* at the San Diego Rep, in 1992, Linda Castro and Linda Libby had never worked with Bogart. At the first rehearsal, Bogart stunned them when she confessed, "I

have no idea how we'll do the play." Then she ran the cast in a circle. If someone changed something, or simply clapped hands, the rest had to follow suit. Libby: "After a while you got so used to each other's rhythm you would change simultaneously. But getting there took three days of running — never been so sore in my life!"

"I had to chuck every preconceived notion about rehearsing. We did scads of table work, answered questions (one was 'What would the blurb in *TV Guide* say about the show?'). I thought, 'God, I'm back in college! We even had homework.'"

Bogart calls it "source work," a sleuthing of facts, notions, and impressions about a character or situation — at least 5 each, preferably 20. A favorite question: "Is It Vice?" A guy worked for the *Miami Vice* TV show. His job: visit various Florida locations, check out clothes, cars, walls, and identify those with a *Miami Vice* look. In their source work, the cast had to find out what was, and wasn't, *The Women*. The final aim of source work isn't answers, however, it's to sharpen the question the play asks.

Linda Castro: "You had to learn a new skin. Everything you brought to rehearsal had to be shed, each day, and you had to be better and better the next. It was all about freeing the body — not your emotional or psychological response. Those came more easily because your body's so much freer."

They discovered that Bogart isn't anti-psychology; she assumes actors study a character's psyche as part of the process. Where Bogart differs from others: she directs from the outside in, choreographing movements

in minute detail. At one point she lowered Castro's hand two inches. "I was here," said Castro, raising it back. "No, you were here," replied Bogart. Castro: "It's like the technique of a dancer. You do it until you no longer think about it. You forget the technique. Because of that specificity, your emotional reaction's alive in you every time."

Libby: "We were choreographed to the nth! She gave us the structure, and then we were allowed to bubble off it. Also, I sensed she needed my input. I have never felt more integral to a show. And everybody got used to seeing her, big blue shirt and black knit leggings, wade onto the stage like a kid joining a playground."

They never heard Bogart say she didn't like X or Y, or that she'd imagined a moment differently. Often, when an actor or the group does something well, rehearsals stop. Not with Bogart, who'd yell, "Keep going! Find what's on the other side!"

In *Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin writes about the unseen connections among all things. Bogart's cast discovered the invisible lines of the stage. Castro: "You learned to feel above and behind you. You can actually sense when something happened that you can't see onstage. You become intensely aware of your surroundings and each other: Anne calls it being 'violently awake.'"

Libby: "It's not acting forehead to forehead; it's gut to gut. This keeps you absolutely in the moment. If you can incorporate those ideas into your body, then it starts to happen for you, even if you never work for another Viewpoint director in your life."

Bogart says she doesn't

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want "Anne Bogart clones" and tries not to "create a signature" in her productions. But imitators and wannabes claiming Bogartian expertise (even though many have never had contact with Bogart or SITI) have begun to sprout. Jon Jory: "Just like Stanislavsky's acolytes, many will misinterpret it, do it badly, and give it a bad name."

Castro and Libby agree that acting in *The Women*, and learning Viewpoints, changed their lives—but created new difficulties. Castro: "Working with Bogart's one thing. Getting directed in a play by someone else claiming to know Viewpoints can be a whole different ballgame."

Libby: "It's like having a really great band saw but no wood. I don't remember any other rehearsal process the way I do that one. Ten years later, I still hold it dear."

Bogart is intuitive and decisive. In rehearsals, she stands as foremost among equals and requires her cast to lead rather than follow. Many actors balk at the burden ("You either love her or hate her," one confessed; "there's no gray"). Castro and Libby miss the freedom and responsibility they enjoyed with her.

Shortly after *The Women*, Castro underwent reentry shock. Asked to replace an actor in a local show, she came to rehearsal early and, unannounced, watched in the dark. Like a martinet, the director told an actor, "On this line, I want you to...on this line..."

Castro left. "I respected what they were doing but wasn't ready to leave Anne's

influence just then. I wanted to digest and preserve her ideas, make them a strong part of me, so I could always call on them in my work, even if I'd be alone in using them."

Next week: The three things that "bug" Anne Bogart most about American theater.