



STAGE FORWARD — Tom Hewitt leads the cast in a scene from the Saratoga International Theater Institute's production of "Dionysus," which will be staged Friday and Saturday at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs.

Anne Bogart's vision benefits dance institute

By Pat Titterton

Special to The Times Union

SARATOGA SPRINGS — In place of the usual Labor Day lull between area summer and fall theater schedules, Skidmore College is stirring up excitement by hosting the inaugural season of the newly formed Saratoga International Theater Institute. The Saratoga Performing Arts Center is getting into the act by donating the Spa Little Theater for one of the productions.

If all goes as planned, the performances, symposiums and classes presented by the newly formed institute could be the start of something big in Saratoga Springs.

Two visionary directors came up with the idea for the project: Obie award-winning theater artist Anne Bogart and Japan's internationally acclaimed theater director and founder/director of the Suzuki Company of Toga, Tadashi Suzuki.

On the bill for the opening season — which began Saturday and continues Friday through next Sunday — are two contemporary productions of classic Greek plays: Suzuki stages his English-speaking version of "Dionysus" at Skidmore's Janet Kinghorn Bern-

hard Theater; Bogart's "Orestes," a script by Charles L. Mee Jr. based on the play by Euripides, is being performed at the Spa Little Theater.

Education is part of the package. Symposium lectures on "A Theater Towards the 21st Century" are scheduled between the two performances. Speakers include Peter Zeisler, executive director of New York City-based Theater Communications Group, director Robert Woodruff, author/professor Marianne McDonald, playwright/historian Charles L. Mee Jr. and Sara O'Conner, managing director of Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

A series of workshop/classes, taught by Bogart and Suzuki will be held Tuesday through Sunday, Sept. 27.

For Bogart, the Saratoga International Theater Institute is the realization of a lifelong dream. "We have a vision for a new kind of cultural organization that will revitalize the theater from the inside out," she said in a recent phone interview from Saratoga Springs. "The purpose is to foster and develop new work for theater and to be a cultural center where new approaches to theater for the next century can be developed and put into practice."

Future plans include commissioned

SUNDAY TIMES UNION

September 6, 1992

work and input from international artists from countries like Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Bogart hopes audiences will come not only from this area, but from all over. "I hope there will be strong support locally, but I'm not trying to start something that is completely dependent on a partnership with the immediate area."

Financial support will be solicited from international and national foundations and corporations.

Frustration with the current system of theater in the United States motivated Bogart to start the theater center. Regional theaters, which grew out of artists' dreams in the late 1960s, have become administration-heavy and more concerned with survival than with art, she said.

"I think what's killing theater ... is that it's gotten too pedestrian, too day-to-day and not enough about the world and poetry and politics."

One way to make theater more vital is to expand the realistic acting techniques that Bogart believes hamper American performers. Those techniques, rooted in the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Soviet-Russian actor/director/teacher and handed down to American actors through teachers like Lee

Strasberg and Stella Adler, are perfect for television and movies, but deadly for the larger-than-life themes Bogart wants to encourage.

"I'm looking for a larger, more poetic state, a different kind of viscerality that doesn't come out of simply realistic motivations."

Also essential to Bogart's blueprint for change — frequent exchange between American and international artists. "One of the problems with artists in this country and other parts of the world is that they feel isolated. It's in our interest as Americans to embrace the innovations in other countries and integrate them into our own art."

"Orestes" is a showpiece of the way Bogart is thinking. Written by social and political historian Charles L. Mee Jr., the play is set during the Persian Gulf war in a clinic for the war-wounded that has been set up on the White House lawn. References to recent events like the Anita Hill trial and the William Kennedy Smith trial abound, although the play is rooted in the ancient Greek script. "What you will see in 'Orestes' is the story as Euripides told it, but the character of Orestes is much more like a William Kennedy Smith."

Bogart's staging will incorporate dance and music. "I'm interested in the frontier between dance, music and theater ... to me, theater is

always a kind of dance."

Bogart has spent her career as a director and educator producing irreverent, relevant work and challenging the status quo. Educated at Bard College and New York University, she's directed more than 50 productions at theaters and universities in this country and Europe.

One of her best-known works was her iconoclastic, Bessie Award-winning version of "South Pacific," which she set in a ward for emotionally disturbed war veterans who act out the Rodgers and Hammerstein's idealized American musical as a form of rehabilitative therapy.

She is currently artistic director of the Via Theater Company, which she co-founded with Brian Jucha, and she recently directed the New York production of Pamela Vogel's "Baltimore Waltz."

Why Saratoga? Bogart has always loved the town.

Stephen Nisbit, a former guest artist in the theater department at Skidmore, was working with Bogart in New York and helped formulate the idea of starting the company in Saratoga. Carolyn Anderson, Skidmore theater professor and former chair of the theater department, acted as a go-between and presented the idea to the college's theater department, now chaired by Larry Opitz.

The response was an enthusiastic yes. Skidmore is providing housing,

performance and rehearsal space and other in-kind support.

"Having international artists and a nationally known director like Anne Bogart in residence for a period of time gives the students and people from the community a broader notion of what theater can be," said Anderson.

"Bogart is a director who isn't afraid to take risks and our students need to see that and be around someone of her quality. We hope this will become an annual event," Anderson said.

SPAC president Herb Chesbrough has donated the use of the stage at the Spa Little Theater for two weekends. "We wanted to be a part of what I think is a very exciting project," said Chesbrough.

Saratoga International Theater Institute presents: "Dionysus," directed by Tadashi Suzuki, 5 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theater at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs. "Orestes," directed by Anne Bogart, 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 5 p.m. next Sunday at the Spa Little Theater, Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Saratoga Springs.

For general information about the Saratoga Theater Institute programs and classes, call 584-5000, ext. 2347. Ticket information, 584-7100: \$12/\$14.