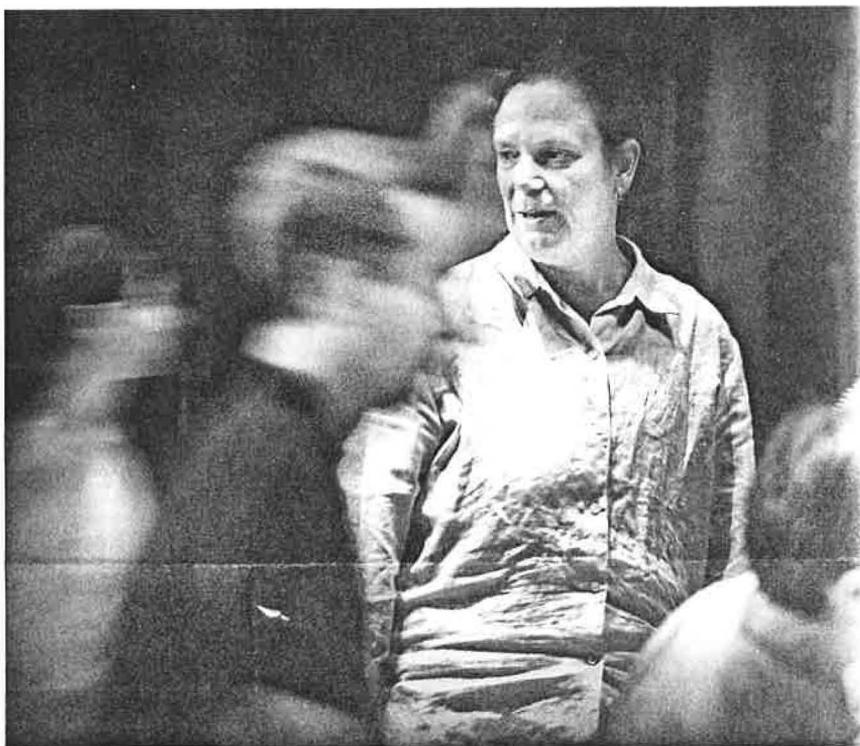


THEATRE

# Search for the shock of the new



LEARNING CURVE: Anne Bogart takes a workshop at The Hub, the home of the Edinburgh International Festival

PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

Let's get physical: Neil Cooper enters a pioneering world of creative exploration with Anne Bogart

THE smell of tiger balm hangs heavy in the grand hall of The Hub, the home of Edinburgh International Festival. It's only the third day of the 10-day teach-in for seasoned performers by Anne Bogart and members of New York's SITI (Saratoga International Theatre Institute) company, but already limbs are seizing up. For the physical disciplines involved in the Suzuki and Viewpoints methods (but not Method, more of which anon) of training are rigorous, and a far cry indeed from any "shake up your body, let's be a tree" notions of freiform expression that give acting workshops such a bad name.

There's an air of silent concentration as the dozen participants warm up 10 minutes before the session's due to kick off. And kick off it will, for when SITI say they'll start on time, it is so. Most rehearsal rooms at this stage are awash with gossipy chi-chat, one more fag, and a final fix of coffee. Yet all of these elements are absent here, a feat achieved by Bogart and her team without recourse to schoolmarmish priggishness. Even so, two of the participants haven't showed, and Bogart is anxious about the consequences of them missing two important steps in the training.

Bogart sits back as the group are led through a series of Suzuki exercises that introduce a formality and a restraint to a means of creative expression that must focus all its energies on the bigger picture. Developing a "physical vocabulary" is how they put it, a series of techniques first developed in Japan.

These elements stuck out a mile during last

year's Festival, when the company presented three works, *Cabin Pressure*, *War Of The Worlds*, and, for one night, *War Of The Worlds - The Radio Play*. *Cabin Pressure* was set among a group of actors gathered in a rehearsal room such as that described above. *War Of The Worlds* presented a creative biography of Orson Welles that utilised the form and structure of the great actor/director's masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*. The final work took another of Welles's most famous works, and recreated the historic broadcast note for note.

"I think the best theatre is the combination of two extremes," says Bogart, attempting to shed light on her own processes. "One is the extreme artificial, and the opposite is the thing you can't fake, the animal energy of the people onstage. So, rather than a livingroom set, we see the stage as an arena where human combat happens."

"The first play I ever saw when I was 15," she recalls, "I didn't understand three-quarters of, and I don't think everything in a play should be understandable. I think it should ask you to go and look things up sometimes. I want to do that in my life, so I can't make plays that don't do that."

In today's cash-strapped era of burns-on-seals dumbing-down culture, this sounds like heresy, but Bogart and SITI's world is one of creative exploration, and of leaving oneself open to possibilities for change.

Theatre has always had its gurus, from Stanislavsky and Brecht right through to some of today's more didactic practitioners.

Their teachings are misappropriated and seemingly set in stone by the enthusiastic but creatively inferior, and can end up stifling any original thought.

"I think it's an issue, but it's human to misappropriate in that way," Bogart concedes. "We try as much as possible with our two teachings to keep them living, growing things, but there is the human tendency to think that that's it, and something will help solve all our problems as artists. So it's a daily struggle. But out of that, too, some new things are created, while others are bastardised."

Bogart and SITI's roots are clearly defined by New York's sixties counter-cultural avant-garde (The Viewpoint is taken directly from post-modern dance of that era), but they are at odds with the prevailing macho historicisms of Lee Strasberg's ideas of the Method, which have entered the mainstream and been fetishised by the role-call of bullish Hollywood leads who've bought into them.

"Our country," she points out, "is based on a complete misunderstanding of Stanislavsky, and an obsession with affected memory, which Stanislavsky completely reversed his opinion about. Yet Strasberg's obsession has wreaked havoc on the theatre, in that actors can throw chairs around or whatever in the notion that if they feel it, the audience will feel it, which is the biggest misunderstanding of how theatre works. There's the notion, too, that the audience are looking at the actors instead of their bodies. These are two parts of the same disease, and I feel fairly radical in opposing that

sort of theatre, because it creates a kind of solipsism, which I don't believe in, whereby you're thinking about yourself and not others. I won't abide it."

Even so, Bogart concedes that "it's important for actors to have a background in psychological realism before they come to these techniques, otherwise you're just left with visually interesting shapes but with no connection with reality". The results of this week's workshops can be seen in a *Public Jam Session*, this Saturday, essentially a show-and-tell informal performance, while tomorrow night Bogart will present a public lecture at The Hub, provocatively titled *Six Things I Know For Certain About Directing For The Theatre*. Contrary to how it sounds, though, Bogart doesn't yet know what those six things will be.

"I think the greatest enemy for us as artists is assumptions that we know everything," she says, reserving the right to change her mind from day to day, scaring herself into defining and sharpening up her beliefs. "I have to have a very necessary crisis a few days before a lecture, just to focus on what I believe that particular day."

Bogart will admit to learning via her own gurus, like Orson Welles, and, through this, creating something that's recognisably, uniquely, a product of SITI. Previous works have concentrated on artists Robert Rauchenberg and Andy Warhol, while forthcoming is a work based on composer Leonard Bernstein. This is part fantasy wish-fulfilment for a company who can only know their forbears' legacy, and

part teach-in. "Doing this is a way of learning discipline," she says. "What most conventional theatre was attracted by people to be instantly defined, so I think, I don't understand it in it, rather than a theatre looked really of seem to keep up with the other arts and

"When I do a play, why we should do a how it functions in the room as well as

Back in The Hub, finding the basics of Viewpoints around notions of spatially a physical call and form of human pivots out of control

"Mistrust the end ready to respond you're ready"

It's not perfect. It's so much theatre, it's through the motions.

● Six Things I Know For Certain About Directing For The Theatre, The Hub, Edinburgh

● Public Jam Session Saturday, 2pm-4pm