

Daniel Von Barga,
Jeremy Geidt,
and Tom Hewitt in *Life
is a Dream*.

Richard Feldman

Anne Bogart's *Life Is a Dream*

From Berlin to SoHo to Omaha, high-flying director Anne Bogart lands in Cambridge, Massachusetts to produce Calderon's classic at the American Repertory Theater.

by Michael Kantor

Director Anne Bogart is fond of an old Chinese saying, "do *the not to do*." In Bogart's case, she has made a career out of it. Recently named Artistic Director of the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, she is planning to settle down (which for Bogart is 'to do

the not to do') but not before directing Calderon's *Life is a Dream* at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. Bogart's work as a freelance director has kept her constantly on the move—workshopping productions in Paris, staging a site-specific work in Berlin where the audience traveled by

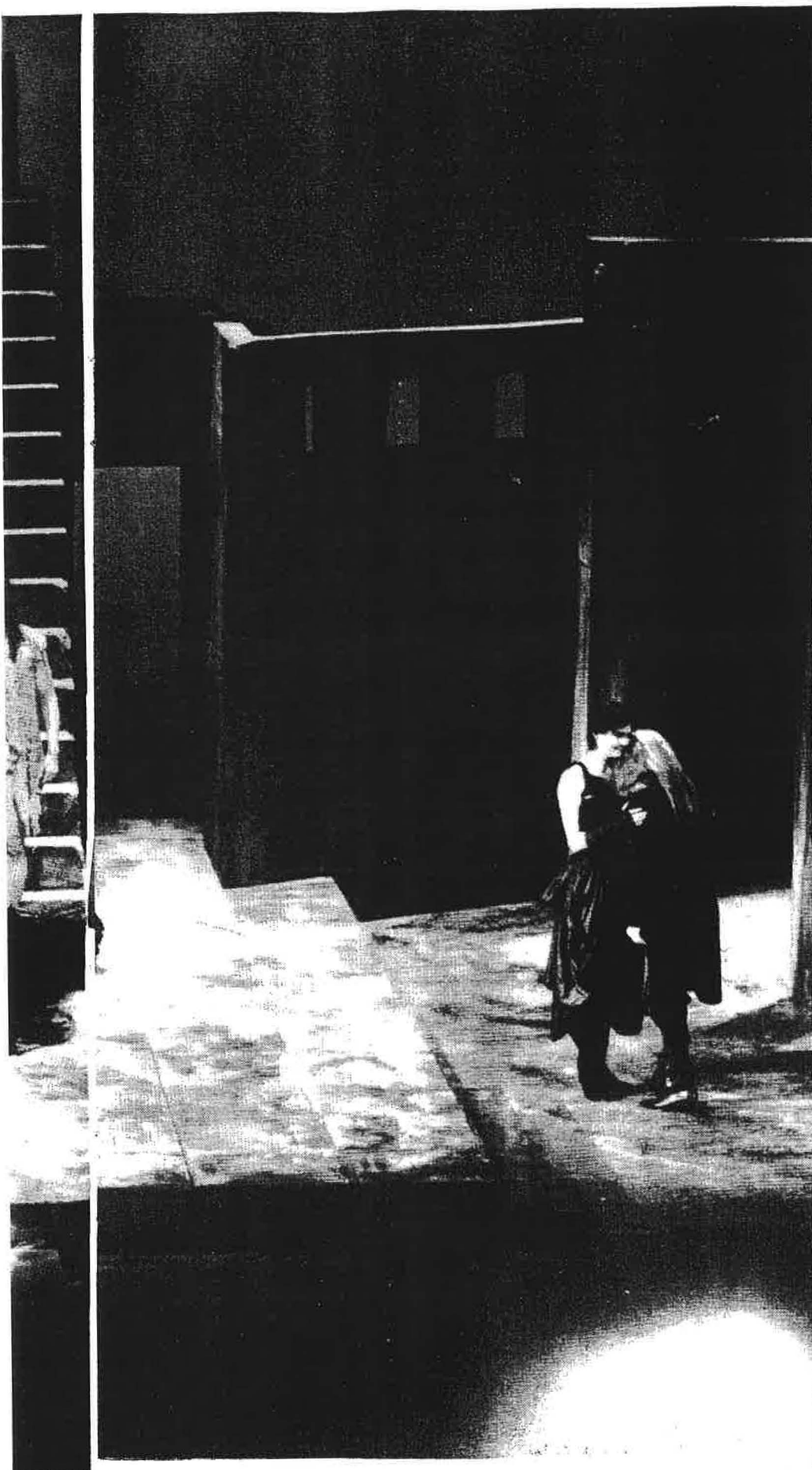
bus, mounting an opera in Omaha, Nebraska, and directing last year's Obie-award winning New York production of *No Plays, No Poetry*—based on the theoretical writings of Bertolt Brecht.

Bogart doesn't simply stage a play, she creates an evening of theater, usually highly provocative theater. She com-

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Anne Bogart's *Life is a Dream* at the A.R.T.



binés great literature with kinetic choreography, old music with new, and gives text a wild theatricality. Best of all, she is an actor's dream of a director—risky in the extreme, intellectual but not overbearing, and dedicated to the idea of ensemble work. Her productions always feel brand new, even if they are based on ancient plays or myths.

Life is a Dream may not seem like a topical play. It was written 350 years ago by Pedro Calderon de la Barca, whose 300 plays dominated the stage during the latter part of Spain's Golden Age. Appointed by King Philip IV as director of the court theater at the age of 37 (which is Bogart's current age), Calderon was a profoundly spiritual man who wrote many *autos sacramentales*, the Catholic mystery plays that were popular at the time. When his mistress died in childbirth in 1651, Calderon became a priest.

"Somehow it's a play that seems right for 1989," explains Bogart. "Calderon wrote the play in 1635, but he is much more modern than most modern playwrights. You can translate a lot of the religious ecstasy and the forms created out of that into post-modern abstraction. You look at this play in 1989 and say, 'I get it.'" As the title suggests, *Life is a Dream* is a play with many interpretations, but although Bogart has worked to clarify the play, she doesn't simplify it.

The story takes place in Poland where Prince Segismundo has been imprisoned in a cave since birth. His father, King Basilio, ordered such treatment because he fears a fate foretold in the stars that Segismundo will kill both his mother and father. When Segismundo's mother died in childbirth, Basilio had him imprisoned. Now feeling guilty for denying his son his freedom, Basilio sends for him on his twenty-first birthday, and has Segismundo drugged and brought to the palace for a day-long test of his character. When Segismundo vents his suppressed anger by attacking people and killing a man by throwing him out a window, he is returned to the cave and left to fathom his day of freedom as a dream. Ultimately soldiers free him from his cell and lead him to the throne, forcing him to consider moral questions anew.

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Cherry Jones, Tom
Hewitt (standing),
and Derek Smith
(foreground) in *Life
is a Dream*.



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***Seventeenth-century court society meets
Bela Lugosi and George Lucas.***

"I could say it's a play about waking up in your life," Bogart suggests, "but if you peel that away, it's a play about what is morally right and how you make choices."

Mixed with subplots concerning the question of identity and the loss of honor, *Life is a Dream* is a classical masterpiece, yet it is rarely performed in the United States. As a deeply philosophical play, it is easier to experience than it is to explain. "I could say it's a play about waking up in your life," Bogart suggests, "but that's not all. You peel that away, and it's a play about what is morally right and how you make choices about what you do, and when you peel that away you see it's about the process of becoming a leader in society. When you research it, you realize that's not all, but that it's a complete metaphor for Plato's cave metaphor from Book Seven of *The Republic*. It's a metaphor for a metaphor of a great thinker's theory of politics. Then it becomes extremely personal, and relates to the experience of suddenly, at some point in your life saying, 'Oh.'"

Perhaps this kind of epiphany struck actor Tom Hewitt when he accepted the role of Segismundo. Hewitt had been performing with a Japanese company directed by Tadashi Suzuki, whose stylized theater is based on physically rigorous, almost military-like training. Hewitt's roles with the Suzuki company, including Orestes in *Clytemnestra*, Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, and the title role in the recent *Tale of Lear* have prepared him well for the challenge of Segismundo, who ponders the state of the world with Hamlet-like profundity. His intensity is riveting, and by making clear, simple choices his acting forces you to listen carefully to Calderon's incredibly long speeches.

"People look at Calderon's writing" says Bogart, "and ask 'how can you do it, it's so static, it's all long monologues,' when actually it's deceptively theatrical. Calderon himself would direct huge spectacles on lagoons with rowboats and thousands of candles. Once there was a storm that knocked over all the boats, put out the candles, and even the spectators were swimming." In her staging,

Bogart created a chorus for the piece. The idea for the chorus suggests the theater as a cave, not unlike Plato's cave, full of echoes from the past. With stylized costumes and movements, the murmuring of chorus echoes the consciousness of both the characters and the audience.

At their first rehearsal Bogart sat down with the cast and asked them to "listen" to the play, and that is what she wants the audience to do. "When I suggest listening I don't mean only hearing the play," says Bogart, "but listening in the most profound sense, with the soul, the eyes, the skin." Edwin Honig's translation was chosen for the production because "it's understandable," but listening to this *Life is a Dream* is not a passive activity. The musical score and sound design, composed by Mathias Gohl and engineered by Stephen Santomenna, ranks with a Laurie Anderson concert in terms of its technical sophistication, ingenuity and visceral impact. Gohl is a native of Switzerland, and has been experimenting with jazz, fusion, and various electronic music for the past ten years. With this show, however, he returned to his musical roots by imbuing the production with a kind of musical flavor akin to the German Romantic style of nineteenth century.

"We listened to a lot of Spanish music, but frankly I couldn't do anything with it," said Gohl. "It didn't click. There was an early concept to use the musical history of the piece from old to modern but we abandoned that. What we ended up with is like a heart convulsing with a lot of emotion: it just keeps building until you think it will burst. The Romantic sound complements the fact that the music is synthesized—it's the opposite, and that's interesting."

Everything in the score, including choir voices, woodwinds, french horns and trumpets was synthesized by Gohl,

and despite that fact that it is on tape, it works brilliantly. Though he wanted to use a string quartet, and at one point a harpsichord, Gohl's work with Santomenna on their elaborate sound design has succeeded in making the audience listen. "With a dense play like this, instead of trimming the play and making it lighter, we have made it equally dense from a sound point of view," explains Gohl. "The text is spoken both on tape and live, and certain lines are sampled live, so we are using digital delays to make lines reverberate, and then double and triple. It's a sound collage."

Bogart's production of *Life is a Dream* washes over you aurally, imaginatively, and philosophically. The design elements are aggressive, formal and striking, from steep stairways and torch-lit action to pointy-cone hair and boldly artificial make-up. "Seventeenth-century court society meets Bela Lugosi and George Lucas" is the way a designer described the impact of the imagery. The women's chorus wear velvet "paniers," (which can be described as a European court version of a hoop skirt), the male chorus sports leather, while Segismundo the Prince is suggestively Christ-like in appearance. With a stark, monochromatic bluish set and highly specific lighting, the images linger and the murmurs echo long afterward.

Playing at the American Repertory Theater until July 2nd, the work of a very talented acting company is brought to bear upon this masterwork of the Spanish Golden Age. "What makes *Life is a Dream* such a great play," explains Bogart, "is that upon every reading, every contact, it unravels different questions. With most mediocre plays you can say, it's about X, but this play is highly philosophical, extremely theatrical, and very difficult to do right." Along with talented collaborators, Anne Bogart is 'doing the not to do' as it must be done. □