

May 28 '97

THEATER

Interview

Bogart that joint

Avant-garde director Anne Bogart is counting on New York audiences for attitude



Quantum leap: Anne Bogart uses physics and poetry in her theatrical pieces.

You may be exhilarated or exasperated, yelling *Eureka!* or scratching your head, but you're bound to have some reaction to the work of Anne Bogart. Adventurous audiences who trek to Columbia University's Miller Theater, where the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI) is in residence, are on notice to leave complacency behind. "Art is something that should question a lot of your assumptions," declares the fortysomething experimental theater director who founded SITI with the renowned Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992.

SITI is presenting three consecutive challenging productions that showcase Bogart's eclectic tastes and the skill of her company. In *Going, Going, Gone*, the relationship between two couples deteriorates as they drink through the night. It's similar in structure to a classic Albee play, only the banter is about quantum physics and the protagonists parry with complex mathematical ideas. In *The Medium*, the famous '60s pop culture media guru Marshall McLuhan falls, like Alice in Wonderland, through the warps of info-technology; and in *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, five survivors of a catastrophe spout dialogue from five Chekhov plays as they try to reconstruct their worlds.

In that vaguely defined region called the American avant-garde theater, Bogart shares an

undisputed place with such innovators as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, JoAnne Akalaitis and the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte. But she isn't easy to pin down. Over the years, she's directed Paula Vogel's delicate and whimsical *The Baltimore Waltz*; a highly controversial revisionist NYU student production of *South Pacific*; Clare Boothe Luce's *The Women at Hartford Stage*; and Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins* at New York City Opera.

"Theater can be so many things," says Bogart. Nevertheless, she says SITI has become the center of her life. Modeling the group on dance companies, Bogart hopes to establish a repertory of work that will outlive the original creators. At a recent Martha Graham retrospective, she sat in shock as she discovered that nearly 50 years after it was created, the great modern dance pioneer's work was "still almost embarrassingly revelatory of her sensibility."

Trying to describe Bogart's work would stump even her most ardent fans; however, the three pieces in the current SITI season are governed by what she calls an "aesthetic of sampling." *Going, Going, Gone*, for example, "samples" T.S. Eliot, William Blake, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and conversations between physicists downloaded from the Internet. In its genesis may lie a clue to that elusive quality that keeps drawing loyal audiences to Bogart's work.

While reading an article about Stephen Hawking more than a decade ago, Bogart decided to teach herself the basics of quantum mechanics, but whenever she got to the mind-boggling equations, she'd give up. Once, however, during a long car ride, she was listening to a layman's guide on tape and when it got to the brain-teasing parts, she stopped paying attention and started admiring the scenery instead. "All of a sudden, I wanted to shout," Bogart says, "because I suddenly understood the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle." She decided she would create a theater piece in which she would provide the audience with a similar distraction—the booing and bickering couples of *Going, Going, Gone*—so that an understanding of the Theory of Relativity could sneak up on the audience from behind.

Bogart offers the best description of her work by comparing it to watching a foreign film without subtitles. "You don't understand the language, but then all of a sudden you sort of do understand—you pick up enough of the clues." Despite SITI's success both internationally and in other American cities, Bogart is counting on New York for attitude: "The audience here brings a sense of rigor and event, a little bit of meanness and yet openness, and a certain kind of history that is hard to find in the shopping malls of Southern California," she says. "My hope is that New York audiences will meet the adventure of it and not be soothed by it."—Gerard Raymond Saratoga International Theater Institute Festival is at Columbia University's Miller Theater, now through Jun 7. See Off-Off Broadway.