

Thoroughly Modest Master

By John Istel

Anne Bogart knows "masters," and according to her, she's no master. Sitting in the empty board room at the Actors Theatre of Louisville before the keynote speech of a "midcareer" celebration, the first of a new "Modern Masters" series, Bogart jokes that she feels like she's being roasted instead of toasted. "The word *master* terrifies me," she says. "I know a tai chi master who has achieved a tremendous ease but only after years and years and years of work." She tugs at her tweedy brown jacket, "I'm a gawky kid."

In the prime of her midforties, the director may be the most genuinely modest genius working in American theater. But she redefines the G-term—she's more mensch than Mensa. Most of that January weekend in Louisville, for instance, she'd stand at the back, surveying the audience at a panel, workshop, or performance, her hands dug deep in her baggy pants pockets, blushing like a teenager. Too vulnerable to even try to cover up any insecurities, she faces them full front. In fact, the director's famous for beginning rehearsals with a list of what she knows about a project—formal conceits, constraints, outlines—and, usually, a much longer list of questions about all she doesn't know. Every new project makes her feel "like a sham."

Such high anxieties would send most artists packing for law school. Instead, over the last 20 years, Bogart has boldly produced original work that straddles the margins and hyphens of dance-

theater and music-theater, while resuscitating some of the most moribund of modern classics—*Picnic*, *Summerfolk*, *Once in a Lifetime*, *The Women*. And if for nothing else she will always be remembered for staging, in varying degrees of success, the theoretical writings of 20th-century thinkers Bertolt Brecht, Marshall McLuhan, and Erving Goffman.

As the director writes in the recently released collection of essays, *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, "We are born in terror and trembling." She confesses that her gloss of Kierkegaard was subliminal, but in fact she is trying to do for the American theater what the eccentric Danish philosopher was trying to do for Christianity—change it from a faint-hearted, mildly entertaining excuse for socializing into an arduous and challenging leap of faith.

Like Bogart's audiences throughout her career, those attending ATL's symposiums, workshops, and the performances of *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, *The Medium*, and Elmer Rice's 1923 expressionistic allegory, *The Adding Machine*, were divided between acolytes and agnostics. One graduate directing student flew in from San Diego to rediscover the reasons he was still in the theater. "I was ready to drop out when I met her," he confessed.

Few would argue with the fact that Bogart has already played an inspirational role in the evolution of the American actor. Some of her most lauded stagings—her mid-1980s reworkings of *Spring's Awakening*, *South Pacific*, and *Danton's Death*—were, after all, NYU student productions. Now

that she's uptown—she currently holds an associate professorship at Columbia's School of the Arts—graduate students sometimes find themselves trying out material destined for her next project. Most significantly, as co-artistic director, along with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, of the SITI company, over the past three years Bogart has fashioned an ensemble of American actors with the discipline and skill to eventually raise their performance to world-class levels.

Many actors have long suspected that the Method is madness. For them, Bogart's movement philosophy, in which an actor's impulse is keyed to outside stimuli or "viewpoints"—spatial relationships, architecture, and most recently, music and sound—serves as an antidote to American psychological realism's propensity for inner emotional flatulence. Yet Bogart's continual tap-dance around the emotional flame leaves an inner emptiness—the body as pure body—in a theater where audiences crave something more visceral. Bogart dubs her SITI-company pieces "essays," and that detached, formalized objectivity leaves many audiences cold.

Bogart's feeling that "something's missing" in much of her work may be part of the reason she has expanded the five or six "viewpoints" she borrowed from NYU dance professor Mary Overlie into a dozen. The latest have been the vocal viewpoints, including dynamics and tempo. But why stop there? Why not include smell and texture? One acting teacher noticed that the company was all tense across the shoulders, and

that they used a fraction of their facial muscles. Sally Jones, a Toronto-based modern dancer and theater historian, suggested that Bogart's search may result in an American version of the sacred Indian acting text, *The Natyashastra*.

The problem, as evidenced by *The Medium* and *Small Lives*, is two-fold—fragmentary scripts force the performers to be ever more virtuosic in their physicality, but the emphasis on the body without any of what Bogart calls "the violence of interaction" creates the chill. Audiences crave actors who are gymnasts of the soul, and perhaps it's too early in the company's history to learn backflips.

No one knows the rap on Bogart better than Bogart. "I think my strength is my weakness—I have an obsession visually." She quotes a line from her first New York review—by Arthur Sainer in this paper—that keeps her up nights: "a visual intensity without the inner necessity." She nails the central problem with *Small Lives* like a master carpenter: "For me, it's still on the level of ideas."

So what about "emotions"? Could "emotional response" ever be a viewpoint alongside kinesthetic response? Bogart shakes her head. "I think emotions are the most precious thing we have as human beings. Therefore, I think we shouldn't touch them. They're like the fire that flickers. Take a kerosene lamp. The glass should be the form." Ironically, it's Bogart's "sixth actor"—sound designer Darron West—who provides the biggest squeeze of emotional juice to both *Small Lives* and *The Medium*: amid the welter

of musical samples he uses, he inserts a whooshing, thudding heartbeat into both scores.

Luckily, one piece of pure Bogart mastery was on display in Louisville—Rice's expressionist satire of the onslaught of automation, as seen through the travails and squashed hopes of a bureaucratic everyman, Mr. Zero. Ironically, Bogart cast a self-proclaimed Method actor in the lead role. Louisville company regular William McNulty had worked with Bogart on *Picnic*, but he still worked from the inside out. Snarling and snuffing his lines with an accent full of the gee-whiz crescendos of Fred Flintstone and the Queens consonants of Archie Bunker, McNulty's performance centered an exhilarating collaboration between director, designers, and two widely different companies of actors.

No scene symbolized the success so exquisitely as the second act love scene between Zero and his secretary Miss Devore, perfectly played by Ellen Lauren, a founding member of SITI who has worked with Suzuki for over a dozen years. After 25 years of repressed passions, the characters meet in heaven and dance a pas de deux of nervous tics on their way to their first kiss. I swore I saw sparks as I laughed at the Chaplin-esque embrace. Bogart's surprised at how easy the two-and-a-half-hour show was, considering 20 actors play over 50 roles. "Almost every choice we made in the first rehearsal of a scene stuck. It was a totally simple labor." And such "tremendous ease," by Bogart's own definition, is one sign of a true master. ■