

Anne Bogart Resistance¹

Finally, in the heat of the
writing deadline,
I realised that utopia has
nothing to do with the future.
Utopia is now.
The act of making theatre is
already utopian because art is
an act of resistance against
circumstances.
If you are making theatre now,
you have already successfully
achieved utopia.

To write a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious
difficulty. Everything is against the likelihood that
it will come from the writer's mind whole and entire.
Generally material circumstances are against it.
Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made;
health will break down. Further, accentuating all these
difficulties and making them harder to bear, is the world's
notorious indifference. It does not ask people to write poems and
novels and histories; it does not need them.
Virginia Woolf

Every act generates resistance to that act. To sit down to
write almost always requires a personal struggle against the
resistance to write. Entropy and inertia are the norm. To
meet and overcome resistance is a heroic act that requires
courage and a connection to a reason for the action. [...] The
action of pushing against resistance is a daily act and
can also be considered a necessary ingredient in the
creative process - an ally. How we measure ourselves
against the natural resistances we encounter every day
determines the quality of what we accomplish.

I arrived in New York City after finishing undergraduate
school with a commitment to direct plays. But no theatre
in town was willing to take a risk on a young untested
woman director. Faced with this immediate resistance,
the task was obvious. I had to create the circumstances
for myself in which I might direct. I had to produce
as well as direct. This was a terrifying obstacle and it
called upon all my strength and imagination. Faced with
this explicit resistance and armed with determination,
I scoped out the territory. I asked a friend how one
would find actors to work with. He suggested I put an
ad in the weekly newspaper *Backstage*. I did. It read:
"Actors interested in an investigation of assassination
and murder using

1. This article is an extract from a chapter originally published in Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares*, London, Routledge Press. By permission of the author.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, please call..." In the ad I neglected to mention that I had no money to pay and no organisation to produce. But the phone started ringing and then it didn't stop. It felt like opening Pandora's Box and looking into the indisputable daily plight of the New York City actor. Due to the volume of calls, to this day I am shy of the telephone. It was overwhelming. When I nervously mentioned the lack of money on the phone, many hung up. But about two hundred actors wanted to audition anyway. Because I was too frightened to conduct conventional auditions, I invited each actor to come for an interview and then to read aloud from a Sylvia Plath poem. I sat behind a makeshift table in my home, holding tightly onto it so that no one would notice that I was shaking with fear and anxiety. I vividly remember one actor, twice my age, handing me a résumé which listed his extensive experience on Broadway, off Broadway, film, television and commercials. His breath smelled faintly of alcohol and he started to weep as he implored me to engage him; "I just want to do something meaningful," he said.

In those early years in New York I did create dozens of shows with actors who were willing to work for the love of it. I learned how to make theatre happen under difficult circumstances. We staged plays on rooftops, in storefront windows, in basements, in clubs, wherever we could find a place to perform. I learned how to use architecture as the set design and how to work with many different kinds of actors, each with a distinct need. I met people who were as determined as I to make theatre happen and who took on huge responsibilities to help to accomplish my projects. I believe that if I have a career in the theatre today it is because I managed to use the obstacles and resistances that life offered in those early years. I learned to use the given circum-

stances, whatever they might be.

These experiences taught me to appreciate the resistances that life offers and to recognise them as an ally. There will always be resistances and obstacles no matter what the situation. Whether at a huge subsidised theatre or a tiny community theatre, in a city or in the countryside, something or someone will always present resistance. The question becomes: how can you use the difficulties and obstacles to help rather than discourage expression?

If resistances are a daily given and a necessary ingredient to the flow of creativity and life, what is the best way to work with them? Here are a few ideas: first, recognise that the resistances that present themselves will immediately intensify your commitment and generate energy in the endeavour. Resistance demands thought, provokes curiosity and mindful alertness, and, when overcome and utilised, eventuates in elation. Ultimately the quality of any work is reflected in the size of obstacles encountered. If one's attitude is right, joy, vigour and break-throughs will be the results of resistance met rather than avoided. [...]

As a young director, I began every new project by inviting the actors and everyone involved with a project to brainstorm ideas together. Inspired by Edward De Bono's writing on the subject, we called these sessions "lateral thinking". Freely associating off one another's ideas, we engendered a collective image of the world of the play and imagined together what could happen in that arena. We always dreamed up elaborate plans and wonderful imagery that, in fact, we had no way of paying for. The constraints of a non-existent budget and severely condensed rehearsal times never allowed for the sixteen motorcycles we envisioned crossing the stage at a particular moment in the production. Instead, we

would end up with one bicycle because that is what we could find for free. Because we usually did not even have a real theatre at our disposal we would perform on a deserted construction site or in a community centre. Because we all had to work day jobs, we were forced by circumstances to compress our rehearsals into late-night hours in loaned rooms. Despite these restrictions, we did achieve theatre with presence and energy so, after a while, I was invited to direct in real theatres with real budgets.

When I did start getting real budgets and when the opportunities for design elements and technical support became available to me, I found that I had to be very careful because, if things came too easily, the results were not always best for the play. If there are not enough obstacles in a given process, the result can lack rigour and depth.

Resistance heightens and magnifies the effort. Meeting a resistance, confronting an obstacle, or overcoming a difficulty always demands creativity and intuition. In the heat of the conflict, you have to call on new reserves of energy and imagination. You develop your muscles in the act of overcoming resistance - your artist muscles. Like a dancer, you have to practise regularly to keep up muscularity. The magnitude of the resistances you choose to engage determines the progression and depth of your work. The larger the obstacles, the more you will transform in the effort.

Art is expression. It requires creativity, imagination, intuition, energy and thought to take the random feelings of uneasiness and dissatisfaction and compress them into useful expression. An artist learns to concentrate rather than get rid of the daily discord and restlessness. It is possible to turn the irritating mass of daily frustrations into fuel for beautiful expression. [...]

There is no expression without excitement, without turmoil. In the rapture of an emotion or in the discomfort of irritation, I am confronted with a choice: I can either immediately discharge the feelings or I can concentrate them, cook them and, in the appropriate moment, use them to express something.

But in the moments of discord and discomfort, in the instant that we feel challenged by the circumstances, our natural inclination is to stop. Don't stop. Try to allow for the necessary discomfort generated by the struggle with the present circumstances. Use this discomfort as a stimulus for expression by concentrating it.

Discharge is uncompressed. It erupts from the body without any filtering. It is not artful. It is random complaint. An inner agitation that is immediately discharged without compression, like a laugh or cry or random violence, disappears as it is invoked. The discharge may bring relief and self-exposure, but it is only a spewing forth. Nothing will have been wrought.

Compression makes expression possible. Without compression there is no expression. Expression happens only after compression. Expression is the result of containing, shaping and embodying the excitement that boils up inside of you. The Japanese word *tameru* in Noh drama defines the action of holding back, of retaining.

When you feel ten in your heart, express seven.

Zeami

A rehearsal is always about relationships, about being in the room together with other people, working towards something. The circumstances of a rehearsal inevitably conjure up difficult and contrary emotions in me. So, naturally, my emotions can become interpersonal, and interpersonal means personal. If I allow myself impulsively

or randomly to discharge these emotions as they occur, the discharge can ruin the quality of the relationships and can interrupt the necessary channelling of a play. In every moment in rehearsal I am confronted with a choice: I can splatter my feelings around the room, or I can concentrate them and let them cook until the appropriate moment in which I might express an opinion or sentiment that is backed by this concentration of thought and feeling. This concentration and then the resulting expression is creative and supports the actors' efforts.

An actor is faced with a similar dilemma

- the choice to discharge or concentrate experience. It is easy to discharge. You just let it go, spill it, whenever you feel overcome. But I believe that a good actor understands the necessity to concentrate the irritations, the random feelings, the difficulties, the infatuations, everything that occurs from moment to moment, and compress them, let them cook and find the appropriate moments for clear and articulate expression. [...]

It is actually more challenging to find the necessary resistance for an "easy" task than a difficult task. But it is just as necessary.



Anne Bogart. Photo: Richard Feldman

Sitting in a chair, for example, might be considered easy. How do you create resistance, or something physical, unbeknownst to the audience, to push against while sitting in a chair? Actors know that pushing against a wall sometimes can help make speaking a text clearer, more urgent. Can you figure out how to create the same obstacle or resistance and urgency while simply standing onstage or sitting in a chair while speaking the text? The actor has to build a sense of conflict or resistance in the body.

Actors can also use one another to generate necessary creative resistance. Just the force of another person's presence offers something to push against. And the outward-directed energy between performers engenders good resilient tautness. [...]

The compression into restricted space and the patience demanded for this containment actually intensifies the life which is revealed in a minimum of activity. Try to develop an ability to keep energy in, to concentrate an action into limited space.

Laziness, impatience and distraction are three constant resistances that we face in almost every moment of our waking life. How we handle these three real enemies determines the clarity and force of our achievements.

Distraction is an *external* enemy. The temptation to be diverted by outside stimulus is an obstacle to be found everywhere. We live in a culture that surrounds us with invitations to distraction and a lot of people get rich from our desire for diversion. We are encouraged to switch channels, shop, cruise by, surf, call someone up or take a break. [...]

Laziness and impatience are constant *internal* resistances and they are very personal. We are all lazy. We are all impatient. Neither are evil qualities; rather, they

are issues that we learn to handle properly and act on at the right moments. We navigate them in our aim towards expression.

Attitude is key. Naming something a problem engenders the wrong relationship to it. It predetermines a pessimistic, already-defeated attitude. Try not to think of anything as a problem. Start with a forgiving relationship to laziness and impatience and cultivate a sense of humour about them both. And then trick them. Start a task or an activity *before* you are ready or after you are "not ready". For example, if you don't want to sit down and write, start to write before you can begin talking yourself out of it. Or, when impatient, slow down and speed up simultaneously. One foot presses the accelerator while, simultaneously, the other foot steps on the brakes.

The encounters with resistance and the compression of emotion generate one of the most crucial conditions for the theatre: energy. Energy is generated by the act of stepping up to bat; facing down the obstacle. An actor is only as successful as the quality of interaction with the emergent resistance of circumstance. The opposition between a force pushing towards action and another force holding back is translated into visible and feelable energy in space and time. This personal struggle with the obstacle in turn induces discord and imbalance. The attempt to restore harmony from this agitated state generates yet more energy. This battle is, in itself, the creative act.

It is natural and human to seek union and restore balance from the imbalance of engagement with discord. Recite an entire Shakespeare soliloquy from a physical state of imbalance. In the attempt to maintain equilibrium and not topple over while you speak, every part of your being reaches out for balance, harmony and union. This

struggle is positive and productive. Suddenly the body speaks with astonishing clarity and necessity. The struggle requires precision and articulation.

In 1991 I spent ten days as a guest of the Palestinians in Israel. As part of a small group of American theatre artists invited to look into the situation of Palestinian playwrights, actors and directors we spent many, many hours talking with people in refugee camps and towns inside the Occupied Territories. It was exhausting. But I learned a great deal about resistance in the context of an entirely different political canvas.

In Israel and the Occupied Territories the problem is relatively clear: both sides want to live on the same piece of land. The repercussions of this existential fact devastate the daily lives of so many. In light of the ongoing adversity and degradation, I would have expected to see a population of Palestinians sitting in doorways with vacant eyes and lifeless shapes. But this was not the case at all. The awakeness and articulateness of the people we met and observed were astonishing to me. Their daily circumstances were so full of hardship and difficulty that I wondered what it was that prevented the Palestinians from giving up, capitulating in the face of the immense obstacles. I would have expected artistic expression to be a luxury. But in my travels in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and in Israel itself, I met so many passionate and productive artists who bristled and expanded in the face of enormous impossibilities.

The Arabic word *Intifada*, which is the rubric for the Palestinian effort, is most often translated as "resistance" but more accurate is "shrugging off". The word is an expression of a people rising up and shaking off the stigma under which they live. Even in the refugee camps I witnessed people

who managed to become more awake and articulate under oppression rather than more numbed. I was impressed by the dignity and the political savvy of so many individuals in the refugee camps and towns. Despite the strict restrictions on renovation of housing, their modest living quarters were remarkably clean and well tended. Despite the restrictions on meeting anywhere in numbers that exceeded ten, people travelled from far and wide to see theatre hidden in basements.

This journey aroused in me my own responsibility to remain awake and articulate inside a very different political system at home. The parameters and rules are less visible and seemingly more benign than in the Middle East, but, in fact, are omnipresent and insidious in their capacity to generate numbness and collapse. We are the constant targets of huge commercial enterprises who have a great stake in our receptivity and co-operation.

Theatre is the act of resistance against all odds. Art is a defiance of death. There will never be enough encouragement and support and we are all going to die. So why bother? Why put so much effort into a liminal activity? Why should we struggle so hard with a business that is at its heart only artifice?

Yale's *Theater Quarterly* asked me to contribute an article to an issue about utopia. At first I found it very difficult to think about the notion of utopia in relation to the theatre. I resisted thinking about utopia as some perfect, highly subsidised theatre palace of the future. I didn't want to consider how technology and theatre would intersect and become a new environment. Finally, in the heat of the writing deadline, I realised that utopia has nothing to do with the future. Utopia is now. The act of making theatre is already utopian because

art is an act of resistance against circumstances. If you are making theatre now, you have already successfully achieved utopia.

Everything we do alters who we are. A great play offers the finest resistance to the theatre artist because it asks big questions and addresses critical human issues. Why choose a small play with minor themes? Why choose material you feel you can handle? Why not choose a play that is just beyond your reach? The reach is what changes you and gives your work energy and vitality.

I overheard a young director in technical rehearsals repeatedly ask an actor if he was comfortable. I finally had to ask him, "Is the point of a rehearsal to be comfortable?" A good actor gets in the director's way. A good director gets in the actor's way. They set up purposeful resistances between them because differing perspectives serve to clarify the work at hand. Each has their own corresponding point of view: from the outside and from the inside; from the audience's experience and from the experience on the stage. The intention is to find flow and freedom through the mutual agreement to dissent.

And here is yet another paradox: you cultivate resistance in order to free your path of resistance. You welcome obstacles in order to find a way to annihilate them. The object is freedom. [...] Naturally we want freedom, flow and harmony in our work. These are qualities that give it eloquence. But we cannot find this flow by avoiding the obstacles that arise upon starting out. We welcome the resistances and then apply our God-given ammunition - our imagination, energy and will - and finally watch the obstacles dissolve. Only then can we enjoy the new-found freedom and flow until the next obstacle appears.

And the struggle begins anew. And hence, the paradox: we cultivate resistance in order to free our path of resistance. Real power is the removal of resistance from your path. [...]

Allow me to propose a few suggestions about how to handle the natural resistances that your circumstances might offer. Do not assume that you have to have some prescribed conditions to do your best work. Do not wait. Do not wait for enough time or money to accomplish what you think you have in mind. Work with what you have *right now*. Work with the people around you *right now*. Work with the architecture you see around you *right now*. Do not wait for what you assume is the appropriate, stress-free environment in which to generate expression. Do not wait for maturity or insight or wisdom. Do not wait till you are sure that you know what you are doing. Do not wait until you have enough technique. What you do *now*, what you make of your present circumstances will determine the quality and scope of your future endeavours.

And, at the same time, be patient.

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