

THE BODY IS THE SOURCE

FOUR ACTORS EXPLORE THE RIGORS OF WORKING WITH MASTER TEACHERS
ANNE BOGART AND TADASHI SUZUKI

BY
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When directors Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki founded the Saratoga International Theater Institute in 1992, they sought to create a center for an international fellowship of artists that could flourish in the context of a contemporary global village. The company seemed a logical, almost essential move for the pioneering Japanese and renegade American directors. Bogart—an experimentalist known for large-scale ensemble pieces and deconstructed classics, whose work was so cutting-edge she might be called *post-avant-garde*—had recently resigned after one tumultuous season as artistic director of the venerable Trinity Repertory Theatre in Rhode Island, and was becoming increasingly critical of the current state of America's resident theatre system.

By 1992, Suzuki's influence had been felt in the United States for more than a decade. His method of actor training was a staple of several American training programs, including the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (which introduced the method to the U.S. in 1980), Juilliard, the University of California-San Diego and the University of Delaware. At StageWest in Springfield, Mass., artistic director Eric Hill—a leading Suzuki-trained actor in his own right—built the theatre's resident acting company around the director's theatrical principles. In 1988, Suzuki's *Tale of Lear*—cast with Hill, preeminent Suzuki interpreter Tom Hewitt and 10 other American actors from StageWest, Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage, California's Berkeley Repertory Theatre and the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre—embarked on a U.S. tour.

Both Bogart and Suzuki envisioned SITI as a place for the creation of new work and the advancement of theatre research, essential components of their nascent company's philosophy. They also set as their mission the training and nurturing of young theatre artists. Working with

a core company, Suzuki and Bogart have, over the past three seasons, used SITI as both a laboratory and a stage on which to develop their methods of actor training.

Suzuki's work is predicated upon the body, and specifically upon what he calls the grammar of the feet. At the root of his training method are exercises in which actors stomp their feet in time to rhythmic music for fixed periods of time; the foot-stamping then becomes the basis for a demanding and precise stage vocabulary of stillness and movement. Suzuki's actors may perform while frozen in place, or erupt in a madcap dance while seated in wheelchairs. The physical exercises, reinforced by equally rigorous vocal work, generate total body control for the actor and seek to unify the physical body with the spoken word, so that the actor's intense, guttural speech becomes simply another variety of gesture.

Bogart's training method, which she refers to as the viewpoints, has its roots in a range of sources, most notably postmodern dance. The viewpoints are a philosophy of movement designed to develop a common language shared by the actors, through which they can become the collective choreographers of a play's physical action. They address time (through tempo, duration, kinesthetic response and repetition) and space (through shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship and topography).

Bogart's most recent work for SITI includes *The Medium*, based on the life and work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, and its companion piece, *Small Live/Big Dreams*, a meditation on memory in which five actors each represent one of Chekhov's major plays, using only lines taken from their respective scripts. Both productions were developed with the members of the SITI company who perform in them, based

on patterns that emerged through viewpoint-directed improvisations in rehearsal. (The pair will be remounted at Kentucky's Actors Theatre of Louisville this month as part of its Bogart-themed "Modern Masters" festival.)

SITI opened its inaugural season in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. with *Dionysus*, adapted and directed by Suzuki, and Bogart's production of Charles L. Mee Jr.'s *Orestes*. The following year, the company presented Bogart's *The Medium* and Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear*, as well as the first American performance of his newest work, *Waiting for Romeo*. *Small Lives/*

Big Dreams debuted this past summer. In addition to these productions, SITI's work over the past three seasons has included international touring and company-led intensive actor-training programs in Toga-mura, Japan (where Suzuki maintains a summer base for his own company), Saratoga Springs and New York City.

Suzuki carries on from the top of his mountain in Toga-mura, re-examining his older pieces and developing new ones. Bogart directs frequently at theatres across the country. Hill continues his work at StageWest. And since its founding, SITI has developed a company—an ensemble of actors who work with the two directors both here and internationally, on both SITI and other projects.

Four of those company members have been affiliated with SITI since its inception—Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Tom Nelis. All have extensive experience working with (and now teach) Bogart and Suzuki's training methods. In October, they met to discuss their work with the company, as actors and as teachers of the two training methods, in a moderated conversation. —S.C.



Anne Bogart



Tadashi Suzuki

T. CHARLES BRIDGEMAN

JESSICA KATZ

How has your work with Bogart and Suzuki, and their two training methods, impacted your approach to acting?

KELLY MAURER: There's something I want to say first about Suzuki's training. Oftentimes, his training is thought of as a style, but his training is *training*. He has an aesthetic when he does his plays, but when we coach, we have to address the fact that what people are learning is a diagnostic and a training method, not a style of acting.

TOM NELIS: I've always found the Suzuki training a very individual thing because, as Kelly says, it's diagnostic. I'm always testing my own limits inside of it, trying to refine my concentration, my center, myself. And then when I go to Anne's training, it's something quite different—it's about everybody else. It's about listening with your body to everybody else and responding to everything that's going on. In a sense, Anne's technique is about always getting out of your head, not letting your head be in the lead.

ELLEN LAUREN: When I began to work with Anne, the thing I was known for—my discipline—translated to rigidity. What was giving me so much trouble was that I was responsible not for myself but for the group. With Suzuki's training and diagnostic, as we're saying, you compete with it. You put it against your body like a template to find out where you fall on the graph, to see how high



the other actors. They are the path out—their breath, their bodies. You *become* them in that sense.

You don't necessarily in Suzuki's work become your fellow player. You're all up there struggling to stay alive, but you are completely involved with your whole being in getting through that event yourself and holding up what has been put into your responsibility—that part you are playing. And then these people behind you or to your side are responsible for their parts.

Was it difficult to reconcile this with the more traditional background all of you, to one extent or another, shared—specifically, coming from training methods rooted in psychological realism and isolated scene work?

question with every show—what is possible in the theatre?—they demand that I back it up all the more than a typical show with a fourth wall. The *physical* explorations that both of them are involved in are radically different than anything I had previously connected with psychological realism, yet without an understanding of psychological realism, I think I would be swimming in their work. I wouldn't be able to make it make sense, so I don't think it would make sense for the audience.

LAUREN: In the beginning of my work with them, I think I did regard this training as something that *was* opening up a different universe and realm for me on the stage. But what it was actually doing was feeding the work that I kept on doing in the American regional theatre. I didn't all of a sudden find myself way, way out on the edge of the envelope at StageWest. At some point, everything ceased to be compartmentalized: not only my classical conservatory training—speech and voice and movement and scene work—but my improvisational training. And I've always called upon that, both in Suzuki's work (which astonishes people) and Anne's work.

What I'm finding is that now when I work with Mr. Suzuki and Anne—and I've sort of pressed through to at least a level of confidence where I can use their tools somewhat efficiently, rather than just kind of being hauled around by them—I feel much, much more

SITI company members, from left, Will Bond, Kelly Maurer, Tom Nelis, J. Ed Araiza and Ellen Lauren in *The Medium* at New York Theatre Workshop, conceived and directed by Bogart and developed with the company.

"I've pressed through to a level of confidence where I can use their tools somewhat efficiently, rather than just being hauled around by them."

up you can get on the scale of it.

With Anne, you can't compete with or muscle or wrestle her training, or you really undermine yourself and each other. In the theoretical world you enter when you work with Anne's viewpoints, the most profound moment actually is the moment of failure. In that moment of crisis, you realize that the map that you're given of the possible places to go are

NELIS: Well, psychological realism is necessary for me to do either Suzuki's work or Anne's work. The beautiful sculptures, the physical narratives that they both create need an enormous amount of specific justification. Because neither of them is interested in realism, because both of them are interested in extreme theatricalism and both of them seem to ask the

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grounded psychologically in a real world. I feel now if I do what we would traditionally call a "real play," I'm doing something a little foreign—that is, acting at being real.

MAURER: There's sort of a way you're *supposed* to act in realistic plays—my feeling was always that there is the way I'm supposed to be, and the way I'm supposed to say lines, and the way I'm supposed to stand. And I felt boxed.

So working with Mr. Suzuki and Anne—as Tom was saying, with these two artists who constantly, continually are on the edge and ask the question, "What is theatre?"—then I as the actor can ask the same question about me. How expressive can I be? In how many ways? I felt like it took the straps off me a little bit. Which is kind of odd to say because Mr. Suzuki is very specific about the way he works and what his aesthetic is. But on some level, I felt freer.

NELIS: Both Suzuki and Anne give great attention to context, and they set para-meters, limits. Within those limits anything goes, but they set limits. Whereas realism doesn't do that. It actually says, this is realism, so whatever is real is okay. But that means that there are virtually no limits, and it's much harder to be specific in that kind of situation.

WILL BOND: And it's very ambiguous. You say realism, which means *be real*, when in fact there's *nothing* "real" about being on stage. So you have to kind of personally make up what realism is, and hope that your feelings are universal.

Anne and Suzuki are simply onto something else. I remember Mr.



Kelly Maurer, left, Ellen Lauren (as Agave, with mask) and Japanese actor Hiroko Takahashi in Suzuki's bilingual production of *Dionysus*.

I don't think it's setting that psychological role aside, but just acknowledging that it exists and going on from there.

NELIS: Now Anne won't spend time working on that, but she'll always acknowledge that you have to take care of filling it. You have to take care of justifying that inner life, and she can always point to it when you haven't done it.

LAUREN: Exactly. And she'll bully you. She'll say, no, I'm not buying

more carefully, because it's not getting across.

MAURER: Anne often says that the emotional life is the most important thing, but it's also a very delicate thing, almost an untouchable kind of thing. She doesn't necessarily want to muck around with your emotions. She would prefer to set where your hand goes, what the outside is, and then allow the freedom to happen within the structure itself.

Oftentimes in a rehearsal, an emotion comes out, and the response from the director or whomever is, oh *that*, keep *that*, do *that*. And it's destroyed, Anne feels. So she sets the stuff around it, and the life can still exist within it.

BOND: The scaffolding that is built around being in an Anne Bogart play or a play of Mr. Suzuki's is very intricate, very precise and very demanding. This notion of bringing your whole being to the play *becomes* the point. I'll maybe even take a step further, and say that I feel that when I'm in one of those plays, I'm not playing a character. I'm doing everything I

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Suzuki saying, when asked about a character's emotional inner life: "Well, you have emotions, don't you?" Yes, I'm alive, I have emotions. "Well, that's great. So we don't have to work on those. Let's work on the thing that we're interested in, which is the theatre, the *metaphor* of the theatre." So

this here, there's a problem. And I must say, it's exactly the same with Suzuki. Unless he is seeing it, unless he feels that the objective eye is getting it, he will keep pointing at it, and keep saying, *What is that?* If this is the best possible thing you've come up with in this moment, look at it

can to fulfill the metaphor, as opposed to being "real" and delving into the side of myself that seems to speak about the character that I'm playing. This simply requires everything you have to get through the event. It means artfully attacking very huge obstacles. It's a physical and psychic event.

NELIS: The thing that you're talking about right now is something I learned from Mr. Suzuki. When I worked with him, what it all came down to was getting in touch with my own will power for the first time in my life. It was like he had me under such a microscope, and he *himself* became such an enormous obstacle for me, that the only way to do what he was asking me to do was to actually say by force of will, damn it, I'm going to do this and I'm going to get through it, and whatever he throws at me I'm going to take it.

Once I realized that, I had something that I could take to Anne's work or to any other work: The larger you can make the obstacle, the

more formidable the structure is, the greater you are able to be present within it.

MAURER: It's also interesting what happens to the ensemble. Because you know everybody in the event is experiencing the exact same thing, you immediately are solidified. The responsibility that you feel not only for your own little performance but for making sure that your fellow players are okay, and that the event collectively comes together and works, is really enormous. It immediately becomes a very cohesive organism.

BOND: I don't necessarily feel this going into other plays, but in this work you look at the other person and think, I'll see you on the other side; you're going to be okay, stay close.

LAUREN: While you're doing the work, the thing that gets checked—the thing that you protect, and remove out of you like a being, and go home to at night and let it have cigarettes and feed it—is your ego.



CLEMENS KALISCHER

You sort of take that shield off in the most interesting way.

It's real quick to attack you again the minute you walk out the door or in your dressing room—before you even get the costume off—but in the moment, I find that it's the one thing you do not have time to feed, to fan. That's an extraordinary thing, and I think there must be some amount of fortitude in the people that have muscled through these years and stuck with it. It's definitely not for everybody.

From left, Will Bond, Joseph Haj, Richard Thompson and Ellen Lauren in Bogart's production of *Orestes*.

How do Suzuki's vision and his vocabulary interact with Bogart's vocabulary? Have they influenced each other over the years?

MAURER: The two of them are absolutely insatiable, and on any given day you can love them for that and want to kill them both—absolutely want to strangle them. I remember I was having a devil of a time with a role that I did for Mr. Suzuki, and finally I said, I'm going to take charge of this thing, whether he likes it or not. And I did it, and backstage afterwards I was all set to hear his disapproval, but he came back and he said: "Finally." So there is the sense of will power, and ownership, too.

LAUREN: Their work relies on us—the quality of human beings that we are, and the will and the gifts that we all have. It's being developed in our bodies, and in our spirits, because we're the vessels for what it is they're trying to perpetrate on the theatre. We're out there doing it and laying ourselves down. They are, in both their ways, I think, extremely reverential towards the actor and the critical presence of the actor in the the-



LAUREN: When I go into rehearsal with Suzuki, I try and have a very clear plan about what I have to do. What's ahead in the next five minutes? What do I literally have to do? How many steps here? How am I going to get my breath ready to go? With Anne, I try to make sure that I have no idea what I'm about to do.

Then what happens when I perform is that I really screw myself up with Suzuki if I'm so tightly sticking to my marks that I become metallic and tinny. When I leave myself up to staying open and free in Anne's work, I have to be extremely articulate and ride very close deputy on myself so that I breathe correctly, that I hit very clear marks.

MAURER: Yes. When I do Suzuki's work, which is so structured, I have to find the freedom within the struc-

ture. And with Anne's work, which is based on freer principles, I have the freedom, so I must find the structure. Somehow that seems to be my goal.

NELIS: Suzuki's actors are rabid fans of Anne's work and her training technique. Combining their approach with the viewpoints is allowing Anne to push at the theoretical edge of the envelope. She often works with a group of people from disparate backgrounds, and to great effect. With the Suzuki-trained actors, a clarity is available because they have a certain physical discipline—if they repeat the same movement and phrase a million times, the structure will stay the same. And that clarity allows her to make the work more complex and still supportable. Sometimes, if you don't have that type of discipline, the work doesn't get more complex, it gets complicated, and then the structure can fall in on itself.

LAUREN: Anne doesn't think of the
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last pieces, *Small Lives* and *The Medium*, or of SITI's work in coming months, in terms of being plays, but as essays on the theatre. We are collectively writing these essays—either through the body as a performance, or literally, as a way for Anne to test her theories. It's a really fascinating way for SITI, I think, to start encroaching on this revolution (or whatever thing we're trying to do) in the American theatre.

MAURER: Anne's pieces are always works in progress, which is such a wonderful relief. Oftentimes as actors when you go out to the regions, you've got seven weeks. Three months later you wake up at 3:00 in the morning and go, oh, God, *that* was it. With Anne's pieces we are always creating; they constantly adjust and readjust and grow.

LAUREN: I've been performing the role of Agave in *Dionysus* now for almost four years, meditating on it, worrying it, trying to do it right. It can't be any longer than 15 minutes; it feels like a lifetime.

The opportunity for an actor, certainly for an actor in this country, to have something like that in her life that reflects her as she grows older and matures, is an extraordinary experience. When people click into that or come to an understanding of it they are completely overwhelmed. This idea of doing something on a lifetime basis, of doing a production again and again, is an idea that we have gotten away from. We consume culture and then it's gone.

BOND: For Anne and for Mr. Suzuki, I think, the work actually becomes the measure: They are reflected over the years against the piece of work they made. We measure ourselves against it over years, and find how we grow or don't. And the plays are out there as reflectors of the culture, and vice versa. *The Medium*, for example, is a very clear mirror. Does it work? Or does it not?

How do the training methods affect your work on projects with other directors?

NELIS: I'm dealing right now with an interesting phenomenon. I'm doing *Dancing at Lughnasa* [at Actors Theatre of Louisville], which is basically a memory play, and Mr. Suzuki's plays are always that. So here I am as the narrator, the guy who's remembering, and usually he sits off to the side of the proscenium and steps into the picture on occasion. That's very Suzuki-like, to just remember as the play goes on around you.

I have this interesting tension going on about how I use what I know to focus and ground this character, and keep the concentration the same as in the Suzuki method, but also relax physically so I am not an oddity amongst the other actors. I cannot be doing a stylistic play all of my own, I have to be in the same world, and yet I want to retain some of the things that I know I can use. So I walk a kind of tightrope, and it's not terribly satisfying, but I keep working on it. It's a very curious problem.

What is the nature of your collaboration on texts? Most of your pieces with Bogart now are company-created. What is that like?

NELIS: It's a great joy. She's got to be the ultimate collaborator. She relies on, thrives off, what you bring in every day. I think the thing in Anne that's so brave is that she doesn't come in with a preconceived notion of where this is all going to end up. In fact, she doesn't come in with a preconceived notion of where the *day's* work is going to end up. So it's absolutely fascinating and it's empowering, and you experience great permission as an actor to risk everything.

BOND: I think empowering is an interesting word, because there is great joy for an actor to have that much responsibility, and to be trusted like an adult. I often think of her directing style as that of a conductor. She gives you the score, such as it is that day, and we take off and she conducts it. At the end of the day you keep what works and throw out what doesn't. It's terribly exciting to be on that kind of ride.

Are you able to participate in the creation of any of Suzuki's pieces?

LAUREN: I was in the pretty unique position where he built a show (*Waiting for Romeo*) around me, fitting together different snippets and centuries of Western theatre texts. I had an enormous collaborative part in that, perhaps not in the traditional sense that I would come in waving pages, but in the sense that if I didn't feel a particular way or if a piece wasn't for me, I could make it evident that it wasn't a go. "This isn't a keeper," as Anne would say.

I have also collaborated with Suzuki, although it's not maybe immediately apparent, in the role of Agave—a role that's been in his repertoire for 20-some years. Here I come in, this big, tall Yank, and I'm given this costume that was made eight years ago and sweated in—it can't be washed because the colors will bleed—and I get this prop that every actress has carried, and it looks it. This summer a big thing happened: They made me my own costume. It was sort of a metaphor for what it is I have begun to do with Agave, which is collaborate and address the issues about that role that I think are important and that move me.

I've never felt more responsible as an actor than I do with Tadashi Suzuki. People often think that you just try and measure up to this thing that he gives you, this highly, highly strict thing. I have never been more responsible for absolutely the whole structure than I am with Suzuki. It couldn't be more enormous a task.

MAURER: I have not done as much work with Mr. Suzuki as Ellen has, but I do remember some of the first weeks of rehearsal in the role that I was doing in *Dionysus*. I don't know what I thought; I guess that I was going to go in and he was going to tell me, now go there, and now go there, because his company is so precise and their study is so structured. And he gave me some parameters—I think you ought to be here in your little wheelchair, and I think you ought to be here—but then it was okay, *go*.

BOND: He's really not interested in put your arm here, put your leg there. It's up to you to decide, although if you're not

coming up with it, he'll *tell* you where to put your hand. In the South American tour of *Dionysus*, there were whole scenes sometimes we didn't even rehearse. We'd move from theatre to theatre, and we'd realize, well, this is a totally different theatre, we've moved all this shrubbery—now, where exactly do we enter on the third "Tomorrow and tomorrow" speech? And you realize that in the heat of the creative process that you have to make those decisions responsibly.

But *built* into the work is the idea that it's impossible to do. And it's kind of exhilarating to go after something that's impossible to get, especially when you're surrounded by actors who will strap on the harness and say, let me at it.

NELIS: These are obstacles you *don't* overcome, that are too big to overcome. The most amazing thing I ever saw the Suzuki company do was perform, outside, in a typhoon. It was a stunning thing, and you could see how thrilling it was for them. It wasn't a danger to them, but the experience that they and the audience went through was so vivid—the audience was there in rain slickers watching this performance, the rain was going sideways and the costumes were flying off the actors' backs. And they were nailing it. But in the *face* of the obstacle, not by overcoming the obstacle.

LAUREN: We grow up with that sense that if you have a pain, you take an aspirin, or somehow you get around the thing by moving slightly to the left or numbing yourself against it. Anne and Mr. Suzuki go straight *into* the problem, and the harder the problem becomes, the denser the wall that you're trying to pass through, the straighter the line has to be. You cannot go around it. Of course you *can*, but it's unsatisfying to yourself, and ultimately to them.

MAURER: This is true also with the training. Oftentimes people will say to us, well, doesn't that hurt? Isn't that painful? Well, yeah. But somehow, actors aren't supposed to have pain. Dancers are allowed it, athletes certainly are allowed it. But we've come to believe that actors are supposed to be within their comfort zone. How do you *feel* about that? Are you comfortable with that? We ask this question all the time, and so we operate in this little box, this tiny comfortable box. What Suzuki and Anne will not allow you to do is be in that box.

If you're uncomfortable, they usually jump up and down and say, good. How does that feel? Well, it feels like I'm wearing the wrong size shoes or something.

This conversation makes me think of something Samuel Beckett is supposed to have said to actors he was directing in a production of *Waiting for Godot*: "No matter, try again. Fail again. Fail better." As members of SITI, what do you hope to achieve with the company. Where do you hope it goes?

LAUREN: For the past two or three years of SITI we have sort of been the vessels, and the projects have come down and been organized for us. I think what's happening right now for us is that the company is being born. We're coming up with who we are finally in year three, and we are only now putting ourselves in a place of responsibility.

MAURER: Certainly, it is a given that we want to keep collaborating with both Mr. Suzuki and Anne, and to perform here and internationally. I want to, if at all possible, create a space where artists in this city—and all over—can fail big and fail better. And if that becomes true, if that *continues* to be true, then I know that I will tomorrow hopefully get better.

LAUREN: I think we have a couple of choices. One is to *be* SITI and be fast on our feet and go here and there and teach, and the other is to *become* SITI, and institutionalize and get a building and have roots somewhere. Honestly, I am very, very pulled towards the idea of a place, be it a literal, physical place, or just the agenda of teaching young artists and informing them, and in our way influencing the next generation of actors coming up behind us.

But when you teach, you've got to be the bill of goods, too. You've got to produce, you've got to concentrate on your own legs on the boards. We need places to do that, although whether we do that literally in one place in New York, I don't know.

BOND: I think finally we are actors. That's what we do—we need to make plays. That will finally speak volumes about whether the teaching was worthwhile, or whether the company exists.

NELIS: My hopes are slightly more grounded in my own pragmatic problems, that I can integrate my family life

with an ongoing commitment to SITI, because I find now that it's very difficult. You have to grapple with what you're going to do careerwise, and I just hope I can continue to do the grappling in hand with SITI.

BOND: That is part of the conversation now. What is SITI but a company that exists because we all try to take care of each other's needs? The conversation that Tom's bringing up is a big one now for him, especially with a beautiful new baby, but we all grapple with that.

LAUREN: The company, for now at least, has to be radical only in the sense that it radically breathes, that it's a living organism and breathes with people's lives, as people's lives and opportunities breathe.

NELIS: But we're right at the crux of the problem in American art, because art doesn't make money. And when does the push come to shove? How are we going to deal with that?

LAUREN: You're not a company if you're dying, spiritually or literally. Anne and Mr. Suzuki are very keenly aware of that, and they have been very generous in the past towards SITI as an entire organization.

MAURER: We're trying to be pragmatic about the issues and creative at the same time. We know what we're up against. **AT**