

Bogart and Suzuki Look to a New Theatre Co. and the 21st Century

By Amy Hersh

Revolution is a word that's been associated with Saratoga, NY, ever since the colonials fought for independence. And now, a quiet revolution in the arts is going on there, through the Saratoga International Theater Institute, a new company founded by acclaimed directors Tadashi Suzuki and Anne Bogart.

"The Institute is a new kind of cultural organization proposed to revitalize the theatre from the inside out," says Bogart, who is co-artistic director. "The purpose of this international institute is to foster and develop new work for the theatre, and to be a cultural center where new approaches to theatre for the next century are developed and put into practice."

A training institute for actors, along with performances of two Greek tragedies and a symposium, are all part of the Institute's inaugural activities. Its first performances are an English-language version of "Dionysus," directed by Suzuki, on Sept. 11 & 12 at 5 pm at the Bernhard Theatre at Skidmore College, and a rendition of "Orestes," adapted by Charles L. Mee, Jr., and directed by Bogart, at the Spa Little Theater of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Sept. 11 & 12 at 9 pm, and Sept. 13 at 5 pm.

Immediately following performances of "Dionysus," a symposium titled "A Theater Towards the 21st Century" will include Bogart, Suzuki, and Mee, along with Peter Zeisler, executive director of Theatre Communications Group; director Robert

Woodruff; author Marianne McDonald; and Sara O'Connor, managing director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre.

During September, the Institute will offer the Suzuki Actor Training Method, taught by Suzuki and members of the Suzuki Company of Toga, Japan, and Bogart will teach her Composition Workshop Sept. 19-20 and Sept. 25-26. Students are coming from as far away

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as Australia and Europe for the workshops, she notes. (For information on performances and classes, call the Institute's offices at Skidmore College: 518-584-5000, ext. 2347.)

In addition to their work in Saratoga, Suzuki and Bogart will participate in "Theater: The Challenge of the 21st Century," a symposium at the Japan Society in New York City, 333 E. 47th St., at 6:30 pm, on Thurs., Oct. 1. Information: (212) 752-3015.

"We have to think of a new way of creating theatre institutions," says Bogart, an Obie and Bessie Award-winning director. "I don't

think we have much of a choice, because the regional theatre scene is so dim, and is shrinking in terms of its art and its aspirations."

Bogart says that her credo when she directs is "one, two, three, go," and she took the same approach in starting the theatre company this year. "If I were a smart businesswoman, I probably would have taken a first year to plan this," notes Bogart, "but because I'm a director, and Suzuki is a director, we decided to start with the art. Out of this work, the structure of the institution will emerge."

Artistic Oasis

Saratoga is "a kind of oasis where actors can come and be challenged again," and so can writers and directors, she adds. "When I first started talking to Suzuki [about the company], I suggested Saratoga. It's very beautiful, it's not too far from New York City, there's an ambiance about it already—it's a very awake town." It's also a culturally active city; at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, there are summer performances by the New York City Ballet, as well as a variety of classical, pop, and rock concerts. Saratoga's famed mineral baths also draw many visitors to the area, as does its horse racing.

The town has been extremely cordial to the new institution, with greetings from the mayor and many others. "Skidmore College has opened its arms to our existence and is very interested in a long-term relationship," Bogart says. The Saratoga Performing Arts Center is also interested in the performance aspect and the training and educational opportunities offered by the Institute, and is allowing the company to use its 500-seat theatre for its first performances.

Bogart has decided to devote her time to fund-raising and "getting this thing off the ground," and won't be taking any outside directing assignments for a little while. She's already had positive reactions from American foundations as well as international foundations that support cultural exchange.

"We're hoping that each season it will expand, but we're not in a big

hurry," Bogart says. The company will start work in Saratoga in May, with a long training session and the first part of rehearsals for a show, and will take the production to Japan in July and August before bringing it back to Saratoga in the fall for more shows and training work. Bogart says she'll find actors for the company primarily through workshops. The training program for actors, which would be an essential part of the Institute, would include workshops in multicultural disciplines, such as operatic vocal technique, Asian movement forms, European dramaturgy, and other areas.

In the future, Bogart and Suzuki would like to have international artists and companies come to create work and meet other artists as part of a worldwide network; networking with artists from Greece, Poland, Austria, Australia, and other countries has already begun. In addition, the new cultural center will sponsor symposia, discussions, and audience participatory events.

A Need for Poetry

For theatre to grow in the 21st century, it needs more poetry, Bogart says. "Theatre is about big issues and big individuals who are strong and generous on stage. For theatre on stage, actors have to be, in a sense, heroic. Plays aren't asking that of the actors, and directors aren't, and actors are out of the habit of asking themselves." To fill that void of heroism, Bogart chose a Greek play for the company's inaugural season, she explains.

Her reasons for creating this theatre company are "very personal," she notes. "I think that the art of acting in this country is shrinking to the size of the television screen; and that we're so imbued with the Americanization of the Stanislavski system, we can't see that there's anything else possible; and that writers for the theatres are really writing for film and television—that's where their money comes from. The poetry and largesse of the theatre is rare to find."

American theatre artists shy away

from the idea of "the actor's state," Bogart observes. "We think being in a state is a negative thing. We think the actor should be natural. But acting in a state is a huge and more operative way of thinking. Opera singers act in a state."

To open up the field of acting for the theatre, Bogart says, she has "to look at other cultures, both within our country and without. My association with Suzuki has opened my thinking in terms of movement and actors' states on the stage. My exposure to Suzuki's work doesn't make me want to imitate training or form, but changes the way I think about acting on the stage, which then changes the way I think about writing for the stage, and how music works, and how the imagination works for the audience. This opens me up as an artist."