



At LAMAMA UMBRIA,

SPACE AND

directors learn to draw from
their surroundings—and
from chance

BY REBECCA ENGLE

WHEN PRODUCER-DIRECTOR ELLEN STEWART WON THE MacArthur “genius” award in the early ’90s, she invested the prize money in an abandoned monastery near Spoleto, Italy. Ten years later, she has transformed the ruined buildings into a commodious artists’ retreat surrounded by gardens and groves. Last July I spent two and a half weeks there, one of 26 participants in the second annual LaMama Umbria/International Symposium for Directors. Mostly mid-career directors, and mostly American, our group was nevertheless eclectic: a clown, a choreographer, a doctor-playwright and some wildly talented undergrads enlivened the mix. We came—from cities around the U.S., as well as from Turkey, Mexico and New Zealand—to sharpen our craft as directors.

During the symposium, we sought challenge, perspective and creative renewal from the world-class guest artists who swept through in waves. In eight hours of master classes daily, we learned Swahili songs and Sufi poetry, improvised scenes based on *Endgame* and *Oedipus*, staged the *Odyssey* with shadow puppets and turned personal memory into documentary theatre. We even revisited the old chestnuts of actor training—partner massage, the mirror, the blindfolded trust walk.

For the first week, at least, we critiqued these diverse pedagogies like frustrated dramaturgs: Where was the *throughline*? Was opening our closets to the scrutiny of our classmates (an Ong Keng Sen assignment) making us better directors? Was being towed across an open field by an imaginary goldfish? Some thought not. But in the face of so much activity, so much landscape and so much good company, our professional agendas eventually unraveled, leaving us to confront deeper questions: about the raw materials of theatre, about what we bring to the table as individual artists.

For me these deeper meanings (something about time and silence and sacred space) came into focus on a remarkable day near the end of the symposium. Here are my journal entries from that day.

is an approximation, we agreed; so is “event.” A *jo ha kyu* is a three-part something an actor can do on stage—perhaps spoken or sung, perhaps with an object. Anne calls it simply a “What.”

WITH NO IDEA HOW WE’LL BE PRESENTING THESE “WHATS” during classtime, Annie and I decide to create a joint *jo ha kyu*. Whispering, necks craning, we analyze the moment of the angel’s arrival, of Mary’s revelation, spinning it into beats—slow in-breath, head turn, offered flower, head turn back, moment of realization, exhalation. Annie practices the graceful angle of Mary’s head, the line of her gaze, the placement—odd and precise—of her tapering fingers. I kneel in the silent chapel, playing the angel. Then we head off for a quick coffee, feeling quite pleased with ourselves—only four more “Whats” to go!

Although Jean-Guy Lecat and his wife, artist Laurence Lecat, have been at LaMama Umbria for a couple of days, this morning is our first session with him. By the time the final load of symposium directors arrives, we are all wide awake and full of chatter. Suddenly Jean-Guy steps into the center of the group and hushes us: “If you don’t care about the space, you will learn nothing from it,” he reprimands. For 25 years a close collaborator of Peter Brook, Jean-Guy is the man responsible for designing those famously empty spaces—not a set designer in the conventional sense, but a subtle manipulator of proportions, seating, color and texture—the artist behind the look and feel of a Brook production. Now we are about to tour several theatre spaces with him, beginning with Spoleto’s still-used Roman theatre.

For Jean-Guy, the first seconds of contact with a new space are critical: What do we hear, where do we look? How does this space make us feel? Now silent and alert, our group fans out into the Roman theatre from backstage. Jean-Guy, vivid in his blue peasant shirt and white straw hat, moves immediately down center.

SYNCHRONICITY

THURSDAY, JULY 26TH: AT 9 A.M. I CATCH THE FIRST RIDE into Spoleto for our morning session with Jean-Guy Lecat. While the van makes two more trips back to LaMama Umbria, we early-birds scatter in the quiet streets. Some head for an Internet cafe or a working *bancomat*. I have no plans—only a free hour, a camera and the impulse to wander. Fellow director Annie Ruth, head of New Zealand’s largest theatre conservatory, joins me.

In the open-air *mercato*, we photograph housewives leaning over carts piled with produce. Then we step into the Duomo, the town’s most opulent cathedral, where a priest is saying mass for a handful of dark-clad women. In an empty side chapel, Annie and I discover a fresco cycle by Fra Filippo Lippi, depicting scenes from the life of Mary. The Annunciation panel is especially lovely. Suddenly we realize that we’ve had the same thought: Here is raw material for a *jo ha kyu*, the assignment for our composition class with Anne Bogart, later today.

When Anne had asked us yesterday to develop five *jo ha kyus* apiece for our second session with her, the group had struggled to understand this 15th-century Japanese theatre term. “Action”

(He later jokes that the “center of gravity” in any room may be found wherever he is standing.) First he moves around onstage as we watch intently; next he invites us to view the stage from different parts of the house. When a workman hammers on a metal railing, Jean-Guy shushes him. After absorbing the proportions, acoustics and history of this ancient space, we move on to an indoor theatre across town.

In architecture, Jean-Guy reads our most ancient human impulses. Doorways require a decision; lobbies and *loggias* also interest him, and each time we cross a threshold he pauses to comment on the transition we are making. The column, he explains, is an architectural gesture linking earth and sky, human and divine. And a row of columns recreates what he believes is our deepest experience of the sacred: the pattern of sunlight slanting through deep woods.

In the ornate lobby of the Caio Melisso theatre, he talks to us about the audience. He is deeply concerned with the primal layers of the human being who comes to the theatre—above all, his need to feel safe. For years Jean-Guy has studied the way crowds



Work instinctively: symposium coordinator David Diamond and Anne Bogart.



Care about the space: Jean-Guy Lecat leads a master class in Spoleto's Roman theatre.

gather and disperse, stand in lines, and select seats in an empty theatre. To feel safe, a human must feel contained, Jean-Guy asserts. It is the job of the physical space to nourish the audience's sense of safety and comfort. "Notice where your eye goes as you enter the space," our teacher suggests, and as I walk into the oval jewel box, I feel my focus dart to the chandelier and then settle on the cavernous black stage space directly ahead. For Jean-Guy, this 18th-century theatre is problematic: He demonstrates how the side walls curve towards the stage, meeting—in the mind's eye—at a point just a few feet upstage of the footlights. When an actor steps outside this imaginary oval, he is no longer totally connected to the audience. This theatre creates two worlds—one for the audience, another for the performer.

Next we move around the corner to a larger theatre space, remodeled in the 19th century. Onstage, a strike is underway for one of the operas presented during the recent Spoleto Festival. As we talk, a boisterous stage crew takes apart the set and hauls it out a small door upstage. For Jean-Guy, the urge to hang onto the past for its own sake is a problem, and he approaches these architectural relics without reverence. But when someone challenges him, "Okay, so why would you stage anything here besides a 19th-century Italian opera?" Jean-Guy calmly ticks off the advantages of any indoor theatre: so that you can have quiet, control the lighting, sell tickets to an audience. We may have to use less-than-ideal theatre spaces, but the question to ask is, "How can we help the space in the right direction?"

A MEDITERRANEAN SUMMER DAY IS LIKE GETTING TWO FOR the price of one. After a languorous three-hour interlude in Spoleto, the light at 4 p.m. is still strong, promising hours of daylight ahead. Feeling suddenly energized, I complete my *jo ha kyu* assignment, then head downstairs to join the others in the LaMama studio.

Yesterday, in her first session with us, Anne Bogart had us put our notebooks aside. ("If you want to be a director, learn to listen.") Now, asking us to get out paper and pens, she quickly dictates a list of 26 compositional elements—including a dance interlude, a sustained moment of stillness, a single gesture repeated 15 times, a reference to the Italian painter Giotto, a moment of staged violence, a passionate kiss and at least 10 "Whats," to be selected from the five apiece we've prepared. Using these varied elements, Anne explains, we are to compose an eight-minute theatrical event, its four acts titled "meeting," "something hap-

pens," "loss" and "reunion." After dividing us into teams, she tells each group to appoint a director and choose a site on the LaMama property. "Pay particular attention to the quality of space," she urges. She's budgeted just 30 minutes for planning, after which we must start staging—"No matter what! Work instinctively!"

My own group rushes to a grove of young trees on the edge of a field. It's a favorite spot for one of our team members, who has hung her hammock there. Seated in the sliver of shade, we brainstorm, listening to each other's "Whats," debating which fit where. Individual tendencies percolate like yeast—there's a lot of insisting, a lot of negating, a fair amount of talking at once. One member of our group proposes an elaborate narrative involving an insane priest. "How will people know you're a priest?" someone objects.

Minutes tick by. As our allotted planning time runs out, our director decides to step down, and the group asks me to take over the job. I agree and move down the slope to the area where our audience will stand, just below the grove of slender trees. The sun is brutal here, I quickly discover. With Jean-Guy's lesson about audience comfort in mind, I grab a team member and together we scout the surrounding area. We decide to move the audience to a nearby hillside halfway through the piece—over a mowed area and up a shaded pathway, with its expansive view of the field below. While scouting, I find a mysterious scrap of metal pipe in the long grass—an oversized twisted hairpin. When we return to the group under the trees, I know how to begin.

I quickly cast and stage my "Annunciation" *jo ha kyu* under the trees, using the found-object hairpin as the angel's wings. Upended, the same object will become an archway through which our audience can pass on their way across the field. Now we decide that "Mary's baby" will be born by tumbling out of the hammock, wearing a clown suit. Naturally, the hammock breaks, and we must stop to fix it. Then Ellen Stewart yells for one of our actors, at precisely the moment he's perched high in a tree ready for his first entrance. When "Mama" needs him he has to go; he apologizes and slides down the tree, promising that if he's not back in five minutes we can perform without him. It feels, in short, as though six weeks' worth of rehearsal setbacks have been telescoped into 60 minutes. But when a messenger appears to warn us that our 90 minutes are nearly up, we've managed to sketch in a sequence of actions—barely. No time for a runthrough. We cruise back down the hill, and I glance at the list of 26 elements, wondering how

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many we've actually managed to use.

"If you do what I ask as you watch these performances, you'll learn," Anne promises. "If you don't, you'll miss out." Her first directive is for us as audience members: "Imagine," she says, "that everything we see has been staged by God." Her voice underlines the final word, making it clear that *His* directorial chops are impeccable. Next she speaks to the directors, reminding us that every director works with two ensembles: the actors and the audience. We five directors are to take care of our second ensemble, the audience; playing conductor, we are to move the group from site to site as gracefully as possible, aiming for a sense of seamless continuity. Finally, knowing the adrenalized air we've all been breathing, she warns the actors to slow down time. She elaborates: In the moment of performance, it's the actor's command of his

own timing—what she calls the "When"—that gives vitality to even the most precise choreography.

LAMAMA UMBRIA IS A DREAM LOCATION for site-specific theatre, and although woven from the same list of instructions, the five pieces are as vividly different as their settings. We crowd into a brick cellar, group beneath a massive vaulted entryway, peer down into a verdant expanse of garden. As I watch one composition after another, I have the sudden conviction that I am witnessing a collective release; we 26 actors and directors seem inspired to huge gestures by the landscape itself—by the stone buildings, the olive groves, as well by the frescos, the food, even the romance of filmed and fictional Italia—in fact by everything we've seen and tasted and touched in the last 14 days. Shutters bang open and a red-

headed woman shouts "Buon giorno!" as she heaves a bucket of water from a third-story window. A young man paints his toenails with lipstick, then dangles like a crucified saint from a massive iron grate. A bare-shouldered girl pops up between the rows of vegetables in the garden, kisses the gardener, then watches as he hurls tomato after tomato against a stone wall.

God's timing, too, is exquisite. Pigeons flap and coo overhead as a couple make love under a plastic tarp. Dogs bark on cue. At the far end of the garden plot, a neighbor in a *paisano* T-shirt, hat and baggy pants appears and picks up a hose; in the foreground, a performer, by coincidence dressed identically, picks up a hose at the same second. And best of all, at least for me, when I lead the audience up the path to the field for the fifth and final act of our collective opus, the first thing we see is the seated figure of Laurence, wife of Jean-Guy Lecat—composed and elegant, sketching alone in a field at sunset. It's a perfect "light's up" moment.

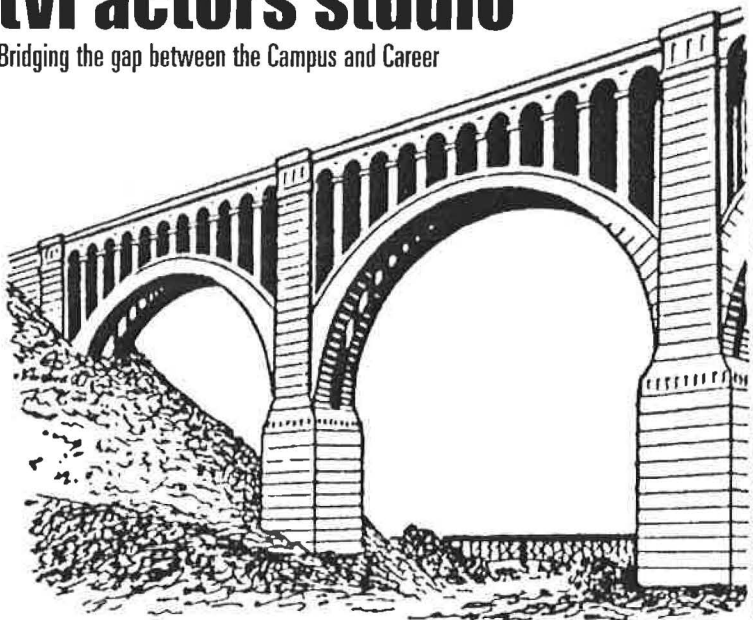
As we pass Laurence, who never looks up, and move toward the waiting actors, my racing pulse suddenly calms. Now we can see Karen, lying along the branch of a distant tree, and Saria, seated in the shade beneath her, already singing. I imagine Sven hiding in the branches overhead and Stephanie in her clown suit, a bulge in the hammock ready to tumble out, and Christopher about to step into the picture with his metal wings, and I feel a tingle of pleasure at more surprises ahead. In this moment I remember what I already know and always forget, that all directors are only A.D.s to the divine choreographer.

Later Anne asks me if Laurence's guest appearance was planned. No, I admit, Laurence wasn't there when we rehearsed. "Well keep it," she says. And I have. **AT**

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