
Currents

Collaboration and Cultural Clashing

Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki's Saratoga
International Theatre Institute

Eelka Lampe

Ed. Note: Here is a followup on the work of director Anne Bogart. See Eelka Lampe's "From the Battle to the Gift: The Directing of Anne Bogart" in TDR 36, no. 1 (T133), Spring 1992.

SARATOGA SPRINGS, August–September 1992 – Anne Bogart stands firmly rooted—note pad in her left hand, energy focused in her right—in the green room of the Spa Little Theatre, Saratoga Springs. The actors and I, the visitor, form a loose circle around her as Bogart gives notes after the first run through of *Orestes* by Charles L. Mee, Jr., “The only reason I’m in the theatre is because of what Tom Nelis did tonight. He went all the way with it. Pursuing an idea is so brave and so vulnerable,” she says passionately.¹ Her comment refers to Tom’s experiment with an old-fashioned gas mask. The gadget had popped up in the green room that day and he used it for his entire speech, a serial killer’s testimony, taking everybody by surprise.

“Brave” and “vulnerable” also perfectly describe Bogart’s enterprising venture with Japanese avantgarde director Tadashi Suzuki—the formation of Saratoga International Theatre Institute in Saratoga Springs, New York. The vision is grand, the preparation for their inaugural season, brief. Much needs to be worked out but what I witnessed in Saratoga from 26 August through 13 September 1992 is promising.

It all started in 1988 when Bogart was invited to speak at Suzuki’s International Festival in Toga-mura, Japan. Peter Zeisler, executive director of Theatre Communication Group, formally introduced the two directors, planting the seeds for their joint endeavor. In sharing ideas the two artists found that their concerns about the state of the theatre worldwide were excitingly similar. Both believe in a physical approach to the art of acting as theatre’s cornerstone, both want to battle the corrupt state of the arts under capitalism, and both endorse theatre’s responsibility in larger cultural and political matters. The dialog continued and their desire to change the function and impact of theatre on an international scale finally inspired them to launch the current project.

The Drama Review 37, no. 1 (T137), 1993

from Towards a New International
Theater Center

Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki

This is an exciting time in the theater because of a crisis now facing its artists. The point has been reached where new and better ideas concerning the future of the art form are desperately needed. A watershed has been reached, and now we must move forward in a new direction. [...]

We need a place which will develop the artist for the theater of today and insure that development into the next century. We propose the formation of a cultural center that is both locally and internationally connected, where the art of acting for the theater is celebrated, investigated, and encouraged. The purpose of this international theater institute is to foster and develop new work for the theater and to be a cultural center where new approaches to theater for the next century are developed and put into practice. [...]

This institute should be connected with other similarly minded organizations around the globe. International interconnectedness is vital to the creation of new approaches to acting. It is fundamental to the larger way in which we in the theater need to think. It is essential to financing and to the development of new audiences. [...] This institution would be designed to transcend cultural barriers. [...]

This Institute should reflect world culture by integrating traditions and innovations from other cultures. [...] Exciting theater can be created not only from great European literature but from adaptations of material from other cultures, including Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as from investigations into the roots of American culture including the American Musical, Jazz, and Vaudeville. [...]

[...] The steering committee of this cultural institution should be made up of internationally affiliated artists from all disciplines. The financing should be made possible by international and national interests. This company would create two new pieces a year which would open at the local home of the institute and then tour nationally and internationally. [...]

Each summer, while the two productions of the home company are performing in repertory, international visitors would come to create work and meet other artists and participate in an exchange. A training program would be in place. Other international companies would be in residence. These companies would form part of a worldwide network. The exchanges would be artistic, economic, and spiritual.

This cultural center should be dedicated not only to creating a body of work but to a constant articulation of values. A continuous active dialogue about the role and function of theater in our lives and times is vital. This will be accomplished through symposiums, discussions, and audience participatory events. At the heart, is a company of gifted, committed artists. [...] The artists will be able to continue the study of their art through rigorous workshops and classes in disciplines found around the world: operatic vocal techniques, Asian movement forms, European dramaturgy, and other contemporary influences in performances. [...]

From the Saratoga International Theatre Institute program, inaugural season, 5-13 September 1992.

Suzuki left it up to Bogart to choose a location in the United States. Saratoga Springs happens to be a very personal choice. It is here that Bogart walked horses at the race tracks many summers ago and where she adapted *The Seagull* into *Out of Sync* (1980) for one of her early New York City productions. In addition, Saratoga has a lively Performing Arts Center and as a spa has a tradition of healing, a notion Bogart likes to connect to theatre. Little did Bogart know when she decided on the future home for the new cultural center that "sara toga" means the "new toga" in Japanese. Word games aside, what "should have taken two years of careful planning," as Bogart admitted, they pulled off in a matter of months after their ideas crystallized last fall. "Since both of us are directors," she explained, "we decided to start off each directing a play and take it from there." Bogart picked Mee's *Orestes*, an adaptation of Euripides' *Orestes* collaged with contemporary references including the Persian Gulf war, the Robert Chambers murder trial, the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, the William Kennedy-Smith trial; Suzuki reworked his production of *Dionysus*, a personal adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, sprinkled with *Macbeth* and a radio play by Beckett.

Bogart's *Orestes* was a brilliant and excruciating tapestry of the political and spiritual state of the States. Written largely during the Persian Gulf war, it showed us our reality gone nuts, using Greek myths, *Vogue* magazine, philosophy, court TV, hospitals and asylums, Washington spectacles, pop-astrology—all oscillating around the stage and auditorium. This is the second mise-en-scene Bogart has created from Charles L. Mee, Jr.'s writing and demonstrated how Bogart's aesthetic of disruption intelligently serves Mee's images of a disjointed reality.

In contrast, Suzuki's bilingual *Dionysus* hit me in the guts from a point of stillness. The focused and exulted deliveries left behind battlefields of spit. The spare, orchestrated movements became grand gestures against the meditative tableaux. As Suzuki traced core principles in Western literature from the Greeks through Shakespeare to Beckett, he zoomed in on changing manifestations of individual and group identity, and embraced a postmodern "good-bye" to the concepts of story and history as they have been operating under modernity. However, the "crying out" of the individualized characters (played by Americans only!), whether it was Agave after she realized that she had killed her own son or the Beckett characters reciting Shakespeare in their wheelchairs, had a very existential, and thus modern feel to it. Likewise the ritualized combat between Pentheus and the Dionysian priests, played by one American against six Japanese, evoked a traditional West versus East conflict, as well as a battle between the male and the female principle throughout history.

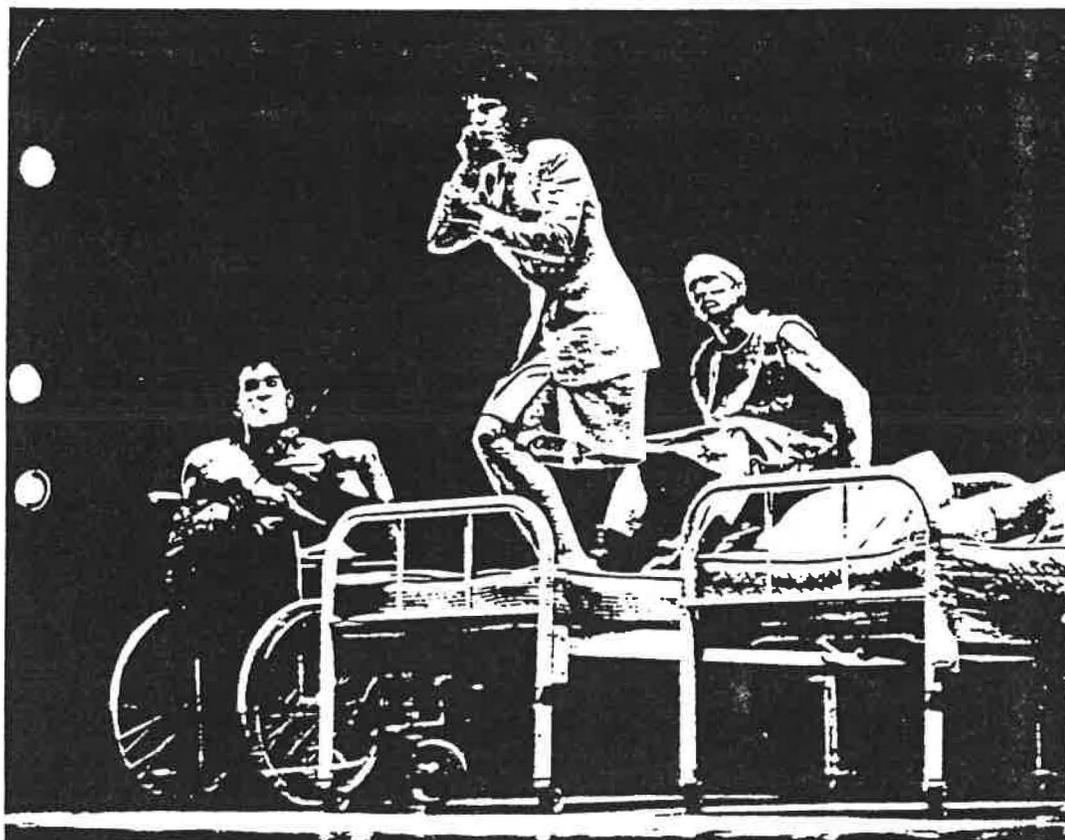
Suzuki deliberately clashes Western classics with a Japanese artistic sensibility that is informed by traditional Japanese theatre aesthetics, and furthermore juxtaposes American and Japanese idiosyncracies within a performance. Bogart excavates typical expressions of American culture in her search for the visual and aural roots of Americanness, while passionately rejecting the Americanization of Stanislavski's teachings, i.e., psychological realism.

Bogart and the American actors spent six weeks during July and August in the Japanese mountain village of Toga-mura with the SCOT company (Suzuki Company of Toga), rehearsing both plays. Nine of the seventeen American performers had trained in the Suzuki method before (at the University of Milwaukee, WI; Stage West, MA; UC-San Diego, CA; and in Toga-mura itself), and five of them had previously performed in Suzuki's bilingual productions, such as *Clytemnestra*, *The Tale of Lear*, *The Chronicle*

1. Electra consults her pop-astrologer Farley with the question: "What if I had Jupiter in my natal conjunction. You know, would that mean something about my mother?" Observing her are Orestes' fellow patients and war veterans Tapemouth Man (Joseph Haj) and William (Will Bond). (Photo by Clemens Kalischer)

of *MacBeth*, and *Dionysus*. Whereas Suzuki worked with seven of the American actors (who also performed in Bogart's piece), Bogart kept an all-American cast: "Because the play is so American." After a few open-air performances in Toga-mura against a backdrop of mountains, a forest, and a big lake, they brought the two productions to the U.S., performing over Labor Day weekend and the following weekend at the Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theatre, Skidmore College, and the Spa Little Theatre. Funding came primarily from the Japanese government and was supplemented by the donation of theatre space and housing by Skidmore College and the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

The vision for the future is to establish a resident company at Saratoga Springs which will work together for several months a year to create two productions to be performed in repertory and subsequently tour nationally and internationally. During these months artists from around the world can come to Saratoga to exchange ideas and ideally to also show their work. Ultimately, "the steering committee of this cultural institution should be made up of internationally affiliated artists from all disciplines," the manifesto says. Workshops in different training techniques, from Western operatic singing to Asian performing techniques, as well as symposia and discussions are planned. The 1992 season included a three-week workshop in the Suzuki method of actor training and a two-weekend workshop in Bogart's composition work. Planned for 1993 is a six-week training session in May/June after which Bogart will direct her long-envisioned Marathon



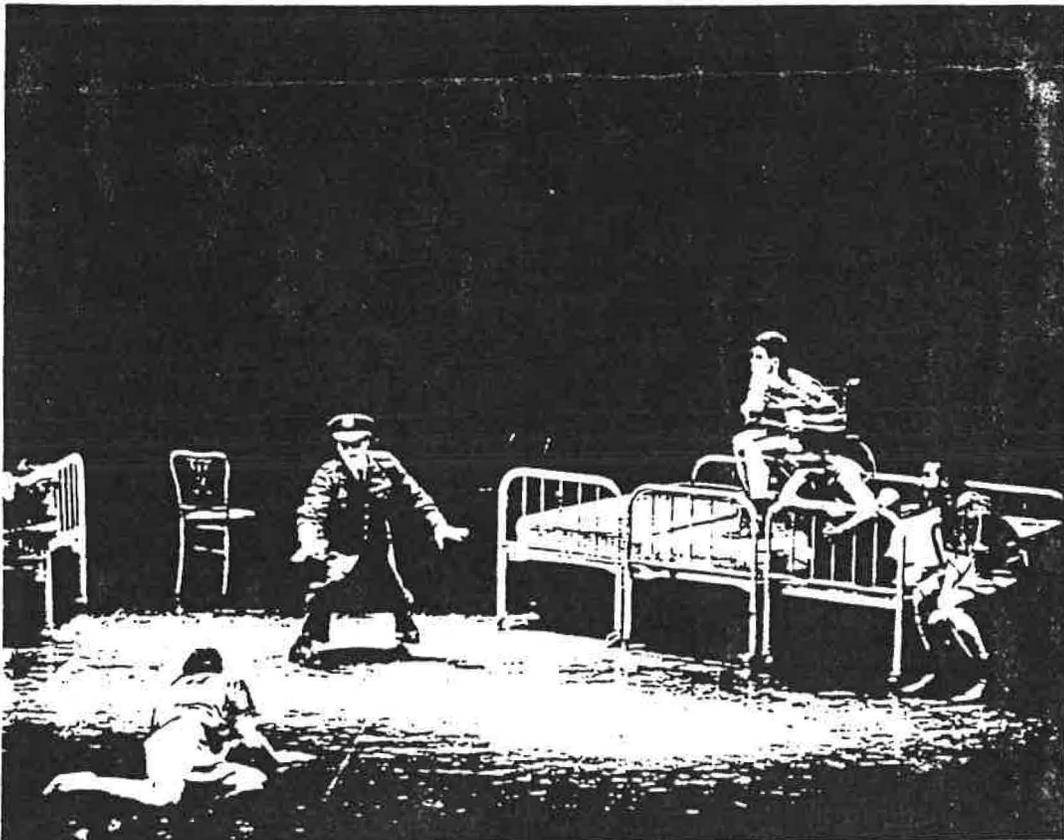
Dance piece. The Americans will then go to Japan to present this work and rehearse Suzuki's remake of *The Tale of Lear*, this time probably including actresses from Australia in the formerly all-male production. In September both productions will be shown in Saratoga Springs and workshops will be held again.

This year the opening of *Dionysus* was followed by a symposium called "A Theatre for the 21st Century." Bogart moderated a panel featuring Sara O'Connor, the Managing Director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre; director Robert Woodruff; author and professor at UC-San Diego, Mary Ann McDonald; Charles L. Mee, Jr.; Peter Zeisler; and Tadashi Suzuki. The themes that emerged were: a multilingual theatre; theatre as a last repository of truth in the face of mass-media fabrications; celebrating theatre as the specific live medium that it is, in contrast to the electronic media.

In Suzuki's (translated) words: "There is probably no such thing as a universal theatre but there is a possibility for theatre artists to address universal problems." According to Suzuki the collaboration on such matters is essential because:

In the past it was possible for artists as individuals to fight their own aesthetic battles. But that is no longer possible. Instead we are engaged in a battle with the system. I am here in the hopes that this "nation of potential" can provide a battlefield for this battle that must be fought, a place where we can generate data for artists in Japan, or

2. Menelaus (Eric Hill), after a triumphant return from the Trojan war (with clear references to the Persian Gulf war), consoles his nephew Orestes (Richard Thompson), promising his support against the judgmental public. Cheering him on are wounded soldiers William, Tapenouth Man, John (Tom Nelis), and Nod (Tom Hewitt). (Photo by Clemens Kalischer)





3. *The six Priests of Dionysus* (Uchihiro Fueda, Akihide Nakajima, Yoichi Takemori, Takahisa Nishikiibe, Toshihiro Sakato, Michitomo Shiohara) ritualistically kill Pentheus (Tom Hevitt) with a final, joint blow. In the background Cadmus (Old Man in Wheelchair) (Eric Hill), Pentheus' grandfather, lives in his own "fictional space" (one of Suzuki's favorite concepts) while the murder takes place. (Photo by Clemens Kahscher)

Europe, or particularly artists right now who are working in the former Soviet Union.

Suzuki spoke of the current "move towards an economic borderless globe," with the arts fitting "into a commercial niche" and all of us heading towards an "increased homogeneity in which theatre will become more and more similar."

O'Connor strongly objected to Suzuki's suggestion that America play a leading role in this endeavor but conceded to some kind of leadership in self-criticism. In picking up the issue of increased homogeneity she proposed that "multilingual wit can be used to sharpen and clarify cultural differences." Along those lines, when Suzuki was asked by a spectator about the "great oneness between the actors" in *Dionysus* and whether he could explain something about their process, he referred to his training method saying that it is not a particularly Japanese training method but a training for actors. But because everybody executes the same physical routines "what emerges is individuality, differences amongst people. One can see certain patterns due to their different cultural backgrounds or in the individual itself." He explained that he wanted

to take those differences and bounce them off of each other and create a tension between them to almost accentuate the differences in

order to create a stronger whole. It's the same concept as harmony that you take two things that are different and thus create a stronger one out of the two differences.

For me an as yet unspoken tension simmered beneath the happy surface of pioneer spirit: the tension between common goals and clashing cultures. The shared desire for an innovative artistic, economic, and spiritual collaboration is at odds with the reality of distinctly different personal and cultural value systems—despite the rhetoric of the “global village.” I do not question the importance and potential of this venture but wish only to draw attention to the essential difference between the Bogart/Suzuki vision and, let's say, what Peter Brook or Eugenio Barba have tried—and accomplished—as solo undertakings on an international level.

While I was in Saratoga I was constantly looking for the common goals, the similarities, the points of contact between these two artists. I found that they share quite a bit, but I experienced striking differences in their methods of working with actors, which affect their respective mise-en-scenes. Tom Hewitt, who has worked with Suzuki for 12 years and now twice with Bogart, is strongly committed to both directors at this point but feels each is creating a distinctly different “danger zone” during rehearsal: Suzuki creates a dangerous space where the actor has to give up his ego and Bogart creates a safe space where the actor can try out dangerous things.

4. With grand gestures a chorus of Maenads (Bacchantes) (Akiko Arizawa, Minori Toqawa, Tomoko Onodera, Rieko Yonekawa, Kenta Mishima) dances across the stage against the tableau of the seated Priests of Dionysus and Cadmus. (Photo by Clemens Kalischer)



Kameron Steele, who moved to Japan last year to train and work with Suzuki, explained: "When he is getting angry, he's working for you. He's letting you know the truth." In contrast Ellen Lauren, who has worked with Suzuki since 1984 and with Bogart for the first time this year, compared their different ways of working as follows:

She has a profound ability to find "truth," not her own truth but she senses when actors are truthful to themselves. If they are, it doesn't matter how it looks. She is such a humanist. He is concerned with the affect of an actor on the audience. He wants you to find the most difficult place physically, to create obstacles for yourself. Anne is not asking for obstacles but ultimately is pushing you toward obstacles, too, because she is looking for truth.

Anne deals with the ensemble as a whole. She gives an overall objective for the day. Suzuki deals succinctly one on one, it can be excruciating. He does not "see feelingly," which she does. But if you go to the utmost physically in his work you transcend the body and it becomes a spiritual flight.

5. Anne Bogart responds to students' composition work during her SITI weekend workshop at Saratoga Springs in September 1992. (Photo by Clemens Kalischer)

After the first run through Bogart said to Tom Nelis: "With the mask there is something in it. Shall I just leave it at that and you'll try something again?" I heard Suzuki critique Tom Hewitt during a work through of *Dionysus*: "Tom, you are used to being bent. Put your hand on your hip as





6. Tadashi Suzuki critically observes 1992 SITI students executing his training method which has different ways of stomping ("the grammar of the feet") at its base. (Photo by Ciemens Kulischer)

a restriction. We need to see you as warrior. That's the philosophy of acting: create the area where you are not free then the will to get free there becomes stronger."

The extreme devotion that Suzuki demands from his actors, the militaristic discipline, the sacrifice of a private life when one is working with him in Toga-mura, all point to Japanese cultural characteristics. What puzzles me the most is the gossip and the observation that Suzuki has been successfully preventing any real mingling of his Japanese actors with the Americans, in Toga as well as in Saratoga. I cannot quite fathom how this policy can ethically coexist with the credo in Suzuki's and Bogart's joint manifesto: "to transcend cultural barriers." On the other hand, I want to whole-heartedly express my admiration for this courageous beginning, which perhaps is more honest than the washing over of differences in certain contemporary discourses of multiculturalism. Bogart's comment to me illustrates the process: "I am not interested in imitating other cultures. I am interested in them changing the way I think. So working in Japan for six weeks has changed certain ways I think, which is right. But in terms of source, I really have to look for an American source." Bogart and Suzuki

plainly accept and respect their differences; they do not attempt to artificially merge their culturally and individually acquired styles and ethics, but have allowed themselves to take a risk and open up to a creative coexistence and learning experience based on the platform that for the theatre of the future artists have to come first.

As Suzuki put it during the Symposium:

The question that's on the table for the world is: are there rules, are there unifying principles that can allow us to bring our differences together in a positive way. This needs to happen on many many levels. It needs to happen on a political level, on a spiritual level. And artists are being asked to reevaluate their philosophies on how they perceive similarities and differences. And the question is not choosing one or the other, the question is what is the philosophy that emerges out of looking at both simultaneously.

Note

1. All quotes in this article are from notes I took during rehearsals and the symposium and from personal interviews.

Elka Lampe is a New York-based writer who has also collaborated as a dramaturg and director in Germany, France, and the United States. She is an adjunct at New York University and is currently writing a book about Anne Bogart.