

A Place to Create and Contemplate

Bogart and Suzuki join forces in Saratoga Springs

By Steven Oxman

No one can claim that the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, the new joint venture of directors Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki, lacks ambition. The printed program created for SITI's opening season begins with a "manifesto," an immediate signal that the institute's founders consider themselves to be on a mission, hoping to do no less than "revitalize the theatre from the inside out." This past September, besides conducting acting workshops and a symposium entitled "A Theatre Towards the 21st Century," the directors presented contrasting productions both based on Euripidean originals: Suzuki directed *Dionysus* (his own adaptation of *The Bacchae*) and Bogart chose Charles L. Mee Jr.'s version of *Orestes*.

Bogart and Suzuki met about four years ago in Toga, Japan, where Suzuki has established his own company and international festival. According to Bogart, the two quickly developed a strong

relationship, based on mutual respect and formed by a shared concern with the current state of the art. Both talk of the other's "will," of a compulsion to make things happen, to create as well as contemplate. Although they had discussed the possibility of joining forces for a couple of years, it was only this past January," according to Bogart, that they decided, "Now is the time to start."

Saratoga Springs was Bogart's suggestion. She first spent time at the historic upstate New York resort in the mid-'70s, and found its variety appealing; of the town's two museums, for example, one is devoted to the history of dance, the other to horse racing. The city has been extremely receptive to the project; SITI has benefited in particular from the generosity of two local institutions, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center (the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York City Ballet) and Skidmore College. "There were two great coincidences surrounding this whole plan," says Bogart. "First is the fact that Saratoga, in Japanese, means 'New Toga,' which I didn't know until months after I suggested it; the other coincidence is that, completely on our own, we both decided to start with plays based on Euripides."

Although the two productions share an ensemble company, they couldn't be more divergent in stylistic approach. Although Suzuki's *Dionysus* includes contemporary images—characters in wheelchairs, for example—its tone remains classically concentrated and intense. Actors remain motionless for long stretches of time, never diverting attention from the central conflict. They speak mostly in voices that reach for chthonian depth. Every speech is bounded by its physicality, as actors stand their ground, their faces so frozen that they sometimes seem like classical masks. When Agave discovers she has killed Pentheus, her own son, she cradles his decapitated head in her arms without looking at it and, almost in slow motion, sinks to the ground as if she were melting.



Ellen Lauren as Agave, with the head of her son Pentheus, in Suzuki's *Dionysus*.

In Bogart's *Orestes*, actors rarely stand still and, following the lead of Mee's text, images from today's mass culture abound. The play is set on the White House lawn following the Persian Gulf War, and is peppered with references to the Thomas/Hill hearings, the William Kennedy Smith trial and other chapters from what Bogart describes as "our society's malfunction."

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The director adds visual and aural eclecticism as well: Helen of Troy, played by Tina Shepard, enters at one point carrying a Coca-Cola can and wearing a tight yellow dress, speaking in a tone that seems more appropriate for prime time than Greek tragedy. At another point, a man dons a gas mask

and relates, in a voice devoid of emotion, how he murdered his sister.

"These two directors bring to each other a great deal of contrast," says actor Eric Hill, who with only a two-hour break went from playing Cadmus in Suzuki's *Dionysus* to Menelaus in Bogart's *Orestes*. "They are philosophically linked in their desire to change the status quo, but their artistic sensibilities are quite distinct,



A scene from Anne Bogart's *Orestes*: visual and aural eclecticism.

which I think is valuable. They attack problems from very different angles."

The opportunity for actors to explore an array of styles is essential to SITI's goal. Both Suzuki and Bogart focus their critiques of contemporary theatre on the limited scope of naturalistic acting. "The real kernel at the heart of this whole endeavor," says Bogart, "is acting." Suzuki argues that today's fascination with "facsimile acting" has reduced the potential of theatre: "There's nothing inherently bad about that kind of acting, it just sets a very low goal. I'm not sure that theatre arising from such a style will have any importance in the next century."

Suzuki's training method has become so well-known that actors came from as far away as Australia and Denmark to participate in his rigorous three-week workshop in Saratoga. Bogart and Suzuki hope to expand this kind of global participation, both for artists and audiences, and in doing so they hope to take advantage of the cultural opportunities that have arisen following the cold war. Their manifesto is filled with such enthusiastic idealism: "The shrinking planet can potentially enlarge human understanding. Securing the world for peace can also secure world culture for peace and cooperation."

Next year, SITI plans to spend four months in residence at Saratoga, beginning with a workshop led by Bogart. She is developing a new piece on American marathon dancing, and Suzuki will be directing his version of *King Lear* with American actors as well as bringing his Toga company here in a production of *Macbeth*. Plans also include inviting another company, perhaps from Africa or Eastern Europe, and touring the performances in the U.S. and abroad following their run in Saratoga.

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