



Saratoga International Theater Institute stages the world premiere of Charles L. Mee's "Orestes" Saturday in the Spa Little Theater. SITI co-founder Anne Bogart directs.



Ellen Lauren, lead actress in the Saratoga International Theater Institute's production of "Dionysus," shown in a scene from the play. Tadashi Suzuki directs the production, based on the 5th Century B.C. tragedy. It opens Saturday at Skidmore College's Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theater.

Toward a world theater

Bogart, Suzuki open SITI's inaugural season with Greek tragedy 'about our country right now'

By MAE G. BANNER

Special to The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Actors say Anne Bogart directs like a choreographer. Dancers admire her for creating dramatic contexts. She herself calls her method "composition."

With more than 50 productions to her credit since 1976, Bogart has always broken boundaries — not only national boundaries, but the artificial lines between dance, drama and music.

"I'm really interested in the frontier between dance and theater," Bogart said, describing her production of "Orestes," now in rehearsal at the Spa Little Theater, Saratoga State Park, where it will open at 9 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 5, for a two-weekend run.

"Orestes," in English and in modern dress, is coupled with Tadashi Suzuki's multilingual, Japanese-dress adaptation of "Dionysus," which opens at 5 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 5, at the Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theater, Skidmore College. The two classics, just back from a run at the International Theater Festival in Toga, Japan, are being presented by The Saratoga International Theater Institute, a collaboration led by Bogart and Suzuki.

The partners hope to make Saratoga Springs their base for annual productions, as well as a center for studying theater disciplines and training actors.

"Suzuki and I decided we would just begin by beginning, and structure the organization around the art," Bogart said.

"Orestes," written by Charles L. Mee, Jr., includes references to the Persian Gulf War, Vietnam, the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings and other immediate events. "It's very much about our country right now," the director said. Still, "You could think of 'Orestes' as a dance-theater piece. It has lots of movement, but it's quotidian movement, not dance movement."

Such everyday movement — a simple walk, a routine gesture — was the stuff of Trisha Brown and other dance rebels of the 1960s in Greenwich Village. Known as the Judson Dance Theater, they presented their unadorned work in

New York City streets, parks and warehouses. "I'm a decade after the Judson group," said Bogart, "but their innovations had a definite effect on me. Also, I've been influenced by Asian movement forms."

In both "Orestes" and "Dionysus," audiences will see how Bogart grounds a drama in the physical rather than the psychological realm. She encourages her actors to begin creating a character from movement rather than motivation. She believes this process, common outside European traditions, will revive today's weakened theater.

"Film and TV are killing the theater. The event of the theater is poetic, large-scale, and involved in big world events. TV has become about you and me and our apartment," she said.

"Also, the Stanislavsky method of acting, concentrating on a character's inner life and motivations is strangling the theater," Bogart said. "It's more appropriate for film and television plots."

"What makes theater unique among the arts is the relation between the stage and the audience," Bogart said. She sought to understand the roots of that relation in her original production, "American Vaudeville," presented this year at the Alley Theater in Houston, Texas.

"Vaudeville was made at a time when we were a country full of immigrants who spoke different languages. That's why it's full of horrible stereotypes of minstrels and comics in many languages. It was our attempt to deal with all these neighborhoods," she said.

"But every comic was heard. They were all out there working to make a buck. And the only criterion was 'Did it go over? Did you win the audience?'"

Bogart often breaks a boundary between actors and audience by framing her plays within new contexts, turning them into plays within plays. Her 1984 production of "South Pacific," winner of the dance world's Bessie Award for choreography/creation, is an example. Bogart set the action in a rehabilitation clinic for "young war-damaged victims" who reenacted the familiar musical as therapy. The effect of such

framing is to distance the audience and actors from the play and thus to heighten its layers of meaning.

Similarly, she said, "Orestes" is set on the White House lawn after some war. The lawn is a clinic for the war-damaged."

Today, with the arts under attack from the political right, Bogart said theater can combine popular entertainment with political concerns and raise issues without offending the audience. "Our material is challenging, but sensitively presented. We are reverently critical," she said.

A frequent visitor to Saratoga Springs since 1974, Bogart said she loves the Little Theater because "It gives itself forth to the audience," and that she chose this city for SITI because "Saratoga is very beautiful, classy, near New York City, and because of the ballet, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the track, and other things. Saratoga is a combination of culture and not."

The first year of SITI is being financed by the Japan Performing Arts Center, a private organization chaired by Suzuki that is partly supported by the Japanese government. Both Skidmore and the Saratoga Performing Arts Center are contributing their theaters, rent-free.

Future funding, Bogart said, must be international. "It's important not to depend on subscribers or a local audience only. I'm trying to create an alternative to regional theater. If it were local funding, we'd have to start doing musicals. My dream is that people from around the world will come here because of what we're doing in Saratoga."

"There's already a lot of interest in the critical world and the foundation world," she said. "Foundations in this country have gotten more politicized and more forward-thinking." She mentioned the Dana Charitable Trust and the Reader's Digest, which, she said, "are now run by powerful women."

Bogart's hope for SITI is to revitalize the theater from the inside out. "I'm a Brechtian. Brecht thought people should live in the theater and eat there. We should lean forward in the theater, in the movies, you learn backward."

Details:

What: "Orestes" and "Dionysus," two classic dramas presented by the Saratoga International Theater Institute

Where: Spa Little Theater, Saratoga State Park ("Orestes") and Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theater, Skidmore College ("Dionysus")

When: 9 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 5 and Friday and Saturday, Sept. 11 and 12, and 5 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 13 ("Orestes"); 5 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 5, Friday and Saturday, Sept. 11 and 12 ("Dionysus")

Tickets: \$15, \$12.50 adults, \$7 students and elder citizens in the \$10-\$12 sections only. These prices apply to each play. The plays are not recommended for children.

Phone: SPAC Box Office at 584-9330 for both plays

Saratoga International Theater Institute events

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As part of its inaugural season in Saratoga Springs, The Saratoga International Theater Institute will present a symposium and two workshop classes. Details follow:

■ Symposium on "A Theater Towards the 21st Century," — immediately following the opening night performance of "Dionysus," Saturday, Sept. 5, in the Bernhard Theater. Speakers: Anne Bogart, Tadashi Suzuki, directors. Guest lecturers: Peter Zeisler, executive director of Theater Communications Group; Robert Woodruff, director; Marianne McDonald, author and professor; Charles L. Mee, Jr. playwright (author of "Orestes") and historian; Sara O'Connor, managing director of

Milwaukee Repertory Theater and SITI advisor

■ Workshop class, Suzuki Actor Training Method — taught by Tadashi Suzuki and members of the Suzuki company of Toga, Japan. Dates: Sept. 8 through Sept. 27. Location: Swyer Studios, National Museum of Dance. Enrollment: open to actors only. Send photo and resume to M. Suzuki, care of Skidmore Theater Department. Fee: \$400.

■ Workshop class, Composition — taught by Anne Bogart. Dates: Sept. 19, 20, 25, and 26. Location: Swyer Studios, National Museum of Dance. Enrollment: open to anyone. Fee: \$75.

For time of class meetings or other information about SITI, its programs and classes, phone 584-5000, ext. 2347.