

Acting up

Theater workshop demands hard labor

by Maryann Teale Snell

Upstairs in Studio A of Skidmore's Bernhard Theater, thirty-six barefoot people—an even split of young men and women—are taking up the entire room with swinging arms, circling legs, handstands, stretches, and pirouettes. Some wear loose shorts and oversized T-shirts, others body-clinging Lycra; most everyone has on something black.

It looks more like an impromptu dance class than an acting workshop.

The giveaway is Anne Bogart, who stands out first in her breezy yellow button-front shirt and then more compellingly when she gently asks the group to gather: they congregate in a matter of seconds, sitting close along one wall, politely attentive.

Bogart directs the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI), which she founded ten years ago with renowned Japanese theater artist Tadashi Suzuki to redefine and revitalize contemporary theater in the United States. The company spends summers at Skidmore, engaging about sixty actors, directors, designers, choreographers, writers, and dancers in an intensive four-week training program that culminates in informal public showings of short works by all participants.

Jon Jory, producing director of Actors Theatre of Louisville, says, "Actors love Anne Bogart, even the most suspicious and hidebound. She puts them back in charge of their own process and constantly defines them as collaborators. They find themselves more creative, less frightened, and still served well by the traditional craft they had honed before she came into their lives."

PHIL HAGGERTY



SITI's avant-garde theater director Anne Bogart holds the rapt attention of actors in her summer workshop.

SITI's summer workshop is advertised as "physically challenging," and participants are expected to arrive in good health and be prepared to work themselves hard. Weekday mornings include Suzuki training—rigorous physical discipline that engages the entire body as a tool of theatrical expression—and Viewpoints, a technique of improvisation that allows a group of actors to function together spontaneously and intuitively. Both classes demand sustained focus and full-throttle energy.

As Bogart told *American Theatre*, "Suzuki is like a barre class for a dancer, and Viewpoints is a way to practice cre-

Who, what, when?

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ating fiction using time and space. One is vertical; the other is horizontal. One is you and God; the other is you and the people around you." In combination, she says, the two techniques develop incredible concentration, strength, flexibility, and the ability to change quickly.

For Suzuki, students wear split-toe *tabi* socks typically worn with Japanese sandals. Some of the forms begin with a balletic stance, heels pressed together. Hands are at the sides with loose fists; the gaze is straight ahead. As a SITI member counts off, the class moves in unison, with precision. "One!" signifies a stomp to the side with the left foot. On "Two!" the right heel again meets the left, with swift exactitude. On "Three!" there is the sound of snapping twigs (knee and ankle joints) as everyone drops to a deep plié. On "Four!" they rise again to a full stand.

Viewpoints—which includes work with spatial relationships, shape, kinesthetic response, tempo, and gesture—deals more with spontaneity and perpetual motion. "I want you to learn with your eyes, your head, and your body," Bogart tells her actors, instructing them at first to position themselves as if they were rocks in a Japanese rock garden. "Let yourself be influenced by other people's shapes," she coaches. It's all about interplay: "Only move as a reaction to others. It doesn't matter what you do, only when you do it." And abandon: "You have to bypass the frontal lobe for this to work. If you think about how to respond, it's too late." And speed or stillness: "Make choices on how fast or slow you're going based on what else is going on around you."

By the end of the morning, the smell of sweat hangs in the air like drapes. But Bogart's hardworking protégés seem more energized than exhausted. After lunch, they'll apply their morning lessons to the afternoon's work of playwriting and composition, working in small groups to stage original compositions at various locations around campus—by Haupt Pond, on the Case Center patio, in the lobby of the Dana Science Center, around the pool table in Falstaff's. They will push themselves physically and emotionally, perhaps reminding themselves of Bogart's assertion that "theater's function is to remind us of the big human issues, to remind us of our terror and our humanity."

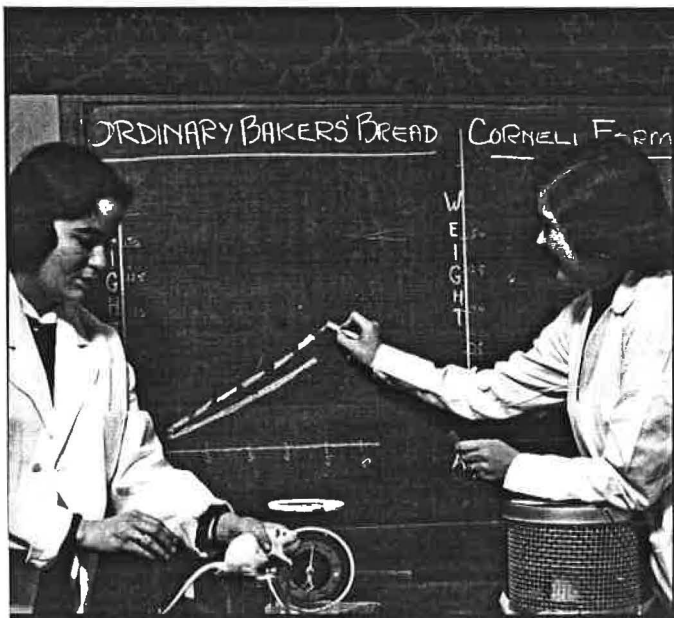
Maryann Teale Snell has preferred to keep her theater experiences in the orchestra pit, serving once-upon-a-time as an accompanist for drama club productions.

Body language

Try this: Standing tall, gaze straight ahead; then balance with your right knee up in the air—or, if you prefer, assume a deep squat, balancing on your toes with your heels touching. Then speak—with clarity and conviction—the first bit of Dante Alighieri's "Inferno":

*Midway on our life's journey, I found
myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard—so tangled
and rough
And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring: death is hardly
more bitter.*

Repeat this several times, in a variety of uncomfortable positions. When you are finished, maintain your steady gaze and show no deficit in energy or attentiveness. Welcome to Suzuki. —MTS



From last time

Rat lab? Barbara Gettens Morrissey '54, pictured with the late Carol "Kiki" Peabody Greenaway '54, explains: "We are weighing the rat to see which food—bread or a special formula—is helping the rat to gain the most weight. We were two of the three home economics majors studying nutrition at that time. This was in the old science building, and we had to feed the rats in the cellar. It was not a pleasant task." But it was the start of something big: Morrissey went on to become a dietitian, earn a master's in nutrition, teach at Skidmore's New York City nursing school and others, and author a book on therapeutic nutrition. She also raised three kids, including John '85 and Sharon '85.