

Wrestling Monster Intellect and Footwork:

BY KENN WATT

ACTORS WILL BOND AND ELLEN LAUREN ARE PERFORMERS WHO are working at the very peak of the craft. For audiences who see them this month at the Magic Theatre, where they will be performing in *Bob* (on the life and work of Robert Wilson) and *Room* (on Virginia Woolf), an experience awaits of what director Anne Bogart likes to call “monster acting.” We might define monster acting as the current high-water mark of the art form, which Bogart’s Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI) has done perhaps more than any other group in the United States.

To be a monster actor, one must possess a modern dancer’s contact-improvisation responsiveness, an uncanny strength in stillness, an over-arching critical intelligence brought to bear on the written word, a vocal instrument equal to the body’s strength and *no fear*. In both of these bravura solo turns, as well as in the work of the company generally, these attributes are on full display under the aegis of Bogart’s trademark approach to the stage: generous, large-spirited and oriented toward the act of gift-giving. For her, that is ultimately the nature of the theatrical exchange between performer and audience.

Bob is neither an autobiography nor a critical essay on Wilson nor a paean to his work. In a sense it is all of the above, enacted through a spiritual and artistic inhabiting of Wilson’s sensibility. As actor Bond moves through the simply delineated set and is jostled by harsh lights and ear-shattering sound cues, he maintains the oddly detached quality of a joker’s humor. As he manipulates one or two small props with an intense urgency, usually reserved for weightier matters, we see his Wilson become absorbed into his famously precise painterly aesthetic. The piece is homage and good-humored send-up of the idea of artistic perfection. It’s an airing of the conflict between the artist as message bearer and the artist as divine child, responsible only to the landscape of private visions.

The text is composed of fragments of quotations taken from Wilson’s interviews. Bogart spoke about the creative process, which was similar for *Room*, adapted from Virginia Woolf’s own writings. “I’ll do tons of research and send Jocelyn [Clarke, the company’s Irish collaborator] about 150 pages of text, and he’ll send back a 30-page script, which I’ll hand to Will or Ellen. Their job is to come into the first rehearsal with it memorized.”



A. J. ZAREK/WEINER CENTER

Ellen Lauren in *Room*.

What ensues for the actors is a process of discovering the theatrical world of the piece on their feet from day one, in a supremely instinctual “negotiation”—Bogart’s word for how she works with the artists she has shared her vision with for many years. “I rarely say ‘No,’ or ‘Don’t do that,’” she says of her reliance on the company to trust themselves and the process in the rehearsal hall. More than any other director I’ve had the opportunity to observe, Bogart has an

almost telepathic communication with her performers; each knows what the other is looking for at a deep level. The task is to discover it in the present moment. In fact, the investigative nature of a SITI rehearsal bears a quality of recalling or rediscovering the right choices as much as finding them for the first time—undoubtedly because the focus on the actor’s body and the freeing of intellect locates the moment of discovery in a primal place. Truths are physical manifestations of cognitive preparation, so they must be arrived at through the body. Thus, unlike ephemeral emotions, these corporeal truths are repeatable for the actor, performance after performance. The SITI company, to an extent probably unparalleled in the U.S., relies on the freedom and focus of a unique shared language and the possibilities for unfettered rehearsal discovery that a common dramaturgical approach affords them. It was the dream of working in this way that led Bogart to create this community of artists.

Bogart’s first community was at Trinity Repertory in Rhode Island, where she spent a single season as artistic director before a much-publicized leave-taking. “It didn’t work mainly because it wasn’t my company, so I started a company from scratch.” Something more personal and flexible was called for, and she began to search out like-minded practitioners who might share the goal of working in a manner outside the commercial and regional theatre models.

She found a willing co-conspirator in acclaimed Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, who was also interested in creating an international theatre exchange. The influence of his unique method of actor training had been felt in the U.S. for many years. He shared his home base in Toga-mura, Japan, they collected a group of favorite performers; and the Saratoga International Theatre Institute was born. Suzuki had told Bogart that Saratoga actually meant “new toga.” It seemed a good omen, and an auspicious one.

Anne Bogart's SITI Company Takes on Wilson and Woolf

The core group of actors assembled was trained both in Suzuki work and in Viewpoints, as Bogart's training method is called. The company opened its inaugural season with *Dionysus*, adapted and directed by Suzuki, and Bogart's production of Charles Mee's *Orestes*. The next season, the company presented Bogart's *The Medium*, inspired by the life and work of Marshall McLuhan (which played to packed houses at Theater Artaud in 1995). Since then, the company's repertoire encompasses new work, reinterpretations of classics and "theatrical essays" that probe the life, thought and iconography of famous people, such as Orson Welles in *War of the Worlds*, Andy Warhol in *Culture of Desire* and Robert Rauschenberg in

Bogart's decision to found a company rather than pursue another tenure at the head of a regional theatre was not an unexpected turn of events. For Bogart it became an opportunity to have what she describes as a "spiritual home, even though we don't really have a home." Bogart had already carved a niche for herself as a leading experimental force on the American theatre scene by working in opposition to much of what the regional theatre circuit represents. Included within this self-positioning is a reevaluation of what defines theatre in this country, from training actors to programming seasons to engaging in a thoroughgoing investigation into the nature of collaboration and company itself.

training is accomplished throughout the year at SITI's home base in New York City and through its annual summer intensive at Skidmore College, as well as through teaching residencies of company members at universities around the country. The fact that most members travel individually to train as well as perform has allowed the company to maintain a year-round employment schedule, contributing to its cohesive development of a signature style and integrating SITI into other existing organizations in the U.S. and abroad.

What audiences experience at a SITI performance is a unique physical theatre of intelligence, rigor, poetry and grace. Its approach to staging is collective and evinces an uncanny sense of spatial and

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Robert Rauschenberg in America. It is no accident that most of the work (with the obvious exception of *Room*) reflects an interest in the lives of Americans who have both made unique cultural contributions and represented aspects of the culture excluded from mainstream notions of what it means to be an American. Since her early career sojourn in Germany, pursuing an interest in the work of leading European directors such as Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine and others, Bogart has investigated what "Americanness" means.

"I'm an American artist. My roots are back in vaudeville...Oddly enough, the way I get closest to my American roots...is by going away." This need for cultural collision, this sense that the best art is made out of contradiction, has defined her work with the SITI company and infused her stagings and training ethos.

Bogart says, "I looked around and I didn't think the regional theatre was particularly ground-breaking or reaching in new directions. The subscriber mentality, an entrenched mentality, doesn't really interest me, so I thought maybe what was needed was a new kind of theatre enterprise. And I thought dance companies and art houses were on to something. So I thought what would happen if I modeled the company after the Kronos Quartet, the Kronos Quartet of theatre? So we perform not only in regional theatres, which we enjoy very much, but in museums and art houses, and that was the framework I wanted to live inside of. So we have the opportunity to meet more diverse audiences."

The SITI company mission is three-fold: to foster international theatre exchange and research, to create a body of original company-created work and to train young theatre artists. The

gestural innovation. Bogart rediscovered the roots of American performance by looking back to forms like circus, vaudeville and the expressionist experiments of the 1920s for inspiration. She revisited the influence of Stanislavski and his American interpreters to find a means of grounding theatre in the body, following the Russian master's later work, largely ignored in this country. The Method, as Stanislavski's teachings have come to be known in the United States, generally reflects a narrow approach to actor training that stresses the search for psychological truth and realism. This has led most later practitioners to a rehearsal process in which the actor and director seek to set the internal life of a character or scene, creating the difficulty of repeating the unrepeatable. In her work with the company and students, Bogart concentrates on the physical form of the

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frame it, reiterate it, but never contradict it. Quite simply, if I do the job of a play director then I don't have to worry about the playwright confusing actors.

Of course, actors often have problems with this. And then again, plays are not always perfect. So it's a good idea to discuss the rehearsal's ground rules ahead of time. Cuts and rewrites are often necessary, as well. Most good writers know this. The best writers aren't afraid to cut. I find that I rarely have to ask for cuts and rewrites if the lines of communication are open. I'm usually asked to give my ideas. The most important thing to remember is that patience is a virtue. Solutions present themselves to directors, and often the director's struggles work out the details of a moment will dictate to the writer what's not working. This is why I never shut a writer out of the rehearsal room. The writer/director contract demands good faith. You must struggle to work out the writer's vision of a moment, not your own.

It's worth noting that many successful directors have built their reputations on their own writing. Bertolt Brecht, Robert LePage, Heiner Müller and Richard Foreman are all writers. When working on new plays, Peter Dinklage, Anne Bogart and Robert Wilson collaborate with writers who are writing specifically for their ideas. They are not writing a play and then choosing to direct it in their own style, ignoring the intellectual work of the writer. This is crucial to understanding why I think text-centered directing is not a good way to act, but an interpretive one. As my friend in the Mission District bar argues otherwise...there are a lot of writers who won't work with a director that very reason. But damn, her work looks good! ☐☐

Nicholson is the director of new plays at TheatreWorks, and recently directed Adam Bock's *Five Flights for the Theatre Company*.

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work, leaving the emotional life in the actor's hands and allowing a greater flexibility in the all-important necessity to generate a reliable score.

The SITI company engages in two complementary methods of training. Suzuki's method is based on the lower body, specifically what he refers to as the grammar of the feet. The work involves stomping the feet rhythmically to music for extended periods, which becomes the basis for an evolving language of movement and stillness. Coordinated with similarly focused vocal exercises, the result, over time, is an enormous physical control for the actor, marrying the body to the spoken word and creating an intensive rigor in performance. The work is exhausting, a discipline as precise and punishing as ballet or a martial art. Eric Hill, a noted teacher of the Suzuki method, has compared the function of the actor within this kind of work to that of the classical Greek performer standing in the center of the Theatre of Dionysus, connected horizontally to the audience and vertically to the gods above. For audiences who have witnessed the raw intensity of Suzuki's company, this comparison will not seem like an exaggeration.

Bogart's Viewpoints have become as common in actor-training programs in San Francisco and throughout the country as the exercises of Uta Hagen. The Viewpoints are a philosophy of movement designed to develop a common performance language for actors, through which they can become the collective choreographers of a play's physical action. Adapted by Bogart from the seminal work of Mary Overlie, Viewpoints explore the performer's two preoccupations: space and time. Viewpoints of space include shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship and topography (or floor pattern). Viewpoints of time are tempo, duration, kinesthetic response and repetition. More recently, Bogart has expanded the use of Viewpoints to include vocal work

through a similar kind of categorization. The training emphasizes a highly intuitive responsiveness to the entire stage environment and a focus on working within an ensemble.

The challenge for SITI company members working together with Bogart and a loyal team of designers has been to find a unique way to utilize both disciplines and to personalize the work for themselves. The company's emphasis on collaboration extends beyond the actors to include the work of designers, including Darron West (sound), James Schuette (costumes) and Neil Patel (sets). The design team is involved from the earliest stages of the creation of a new piece, which allows for an extension of the performance language and an unusual degree of interdependence among all the elements of an original work. Finally, the company has turned again and again to certain writers whose particular interests blend with its mission. Charles Mee and Naomi Iizuka (who wrote *War of the Worlds*) are regulars, as well as the aforementioned Jocelyn Clarke, with whom Bogart collaborates on "theatrical essays." Clarke is working again with the company on a new piece about Leonard Bernstein entitled *Score*, starring Tom Nelis.

This year the SITI company celebrates its 10th anniversary. The company's success is a hopeful sign in an American theatre scene too often earmarked by cookie-cutter sameness and a lack of vision. Raising the banner of collaboration, belief in themselves and the transformative power of theatre with fierce originality and breathtaking scope, the SITI company charges ahead into their next decade of ground-breaking work.

The Magic Theatre presents Room from March 6 through 17 and Bob from March 20 through 31. Call (415) 441-8822. ☐☐

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