

# Back in the Kane gang

Once Anne Bogart was embarrassed by all things American. Then she remembered about Orson Welles. Jackie McGlone meets the US director as she brings three plays to the festival

**A**NNE Bogart never wanted to be an American. She thought her fellow countrymen superficial and too fast-moving. "I felt really embarrassed about everything American," says the woman who is one of the most innovative directors working in theatre today.

The youthful Bogart – no relation to Humphrey – was hooked on German theatre and directed several plays there. She vowed she would speak no English and direct like a German. Unfortunately, "the results were disastrous".

"It was an extremely painful experience," says the 49-year-old, "but I had discovered that deep down inside me I am American, that I have an American sense of humour and as a director I have an American sense of structure."

Bogart points out that Gore Vidal christened her home country the United States of Amnesia. "We pretend we have no history, we say that gives us an excuse to do anything, but in fact we have an extraordinary history."

She also recognised that the American artists she revered – such as Robert Wilson, the imagist theatre maker, and Orson Welles – should be celebrated.

The work she does now with her eight-year-old, New York-based SITI company (Saratoga International Theatre Institute), which comes to the Edinburgh International Festival with three superb productions, *Cabin Pressure*, *War of the Worlds* and *Radio Play*, is invariably an exploration of America's history and culture.

It is the morning after they staged a free workshop performance of *War of the Worlds*, a thrilling deconstruction of the life and work of Welles, on the leafy campus at Skidmore College in New York state. Over brunch in downtown Saratoga Springs, Bogart unpacks her cultural trunk. A woman who makes no concessions to fashion in her functional check shirt and jeans, with her long hennaed hair tied uncompromisingly back from her face, she speaks of a body of work that is widely acclaimed and garlanded with awards, although she would be the last to tell you so.

She has made plays about vaudeville, the Thirties' phenomenon of marathon dancing, silent movies, musicals and jazz. There has also been a series of works devoted to American artists like the one-man play, *Bob*, about Robert Wilson. Now it is the turn of Orson Welles.

In *War of the Worlds*, Welles – Stephen Webber – asks an audience "to become a child again, to see with the eyes of a child". This is also exactly what Bogart and her gloriously talented company ask of us in *Cabin Pressure* – "If you close your eyes, what will you remember?". This is theatre as the stuff of dreams. *War of the Worlds* is both tragic and funny, an uplifting, generous-spirited piece of theatre that is an alarm call for the senses. We smell the smoke from Welles's cigars and hear the whirr of an old-fashioned movie projector and the insistent ticking of a clock.

"It is like watching a surreal painting come alive or seeing Orson Welles's films morph into live theatre," noted one critic. Staged within a silver frame and costumed in black, white and grey, like an old black and white movie, it is like film noir made into theatre.

But why make a stage play about a film director, even one who arguably made the greatest movie of all time in *Citizen Kane*?

The daughter of a naval family, Bogart was living in France when she happened upon a screenplay of *Citizen Kane*, which she had seen and loved, then there was a documentary about him on television. "In America he was remembered as this fat man on talk shows who advertised wine, but everyone in Europe seemed to be thrilled by him and I really started looking at his work. Suddenly, I was very, very proud that he was an American. I wanted to live with him, to make a play about this remarkable storyteller and entertainer."

SITI was formed by Bogart and distinguished Japanese theatre director Tadashi Suzuki to emphasise international cultural exchange and collaboration, and was originally planned as a summer institute in Saratoga Springs, but it quickly became a year-round company revitalising American theatre. Training is intensive and incorporates styles stolen from modern dance. The result is incredibly physical, text-based theatre and Bogart is now recognised as one of America's most avant garde and gifted directors. SITI also has an impressive teaching and touring programme.

*Cabin Pressure*, described by one critic as "a work of heart-stopping imagination and grace" is a play for the theatre about theatre. For one late-night performance only, *Radio Play* will also be performed. This is a dramatic staging of 23-year-old Welles's infamous 1938

**'I was very proud Welles was an American. I wanted to make a play about this entertainer'**

radio broadcast of HG Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which sent thousands of Americans into a mass panic attack, convinced they had been invaded from Mars, and made Welles a household name overnight.

The company did *Radio Play* as an experiment. "I wanted Stephen Webber to have the opportunity to play Welles as a very young man just to figure out what he was like then, but it was really a kind of lark. We did it in a little theatre in New York on Hallowe'en, which is when the 1938 broadcast went out. It's set in the radio studio, but suddenly you are in the middle of the story."

"What got me so excited, which I didn't know was going to happen, but our audiences feel this, too, is we would also have believed in an alien invasion in 1938. You totally understand what it was like to hear that broadcast; it's such a great story."

The play has been so successful, the company is now invited to perform it everywhere. "But the really exciting thing is that only Edinburgh will see both *War of the Worlds* and *Radio Play*. Personally, I can't wait to see the two together."

For Bogart, it will be another shared experience. Such events are the stuff of her theatrical life. "I am interested in asking what is the creative role of the



audience. What is their job? There is such a misunderstanding of what theatre is for audiences, because of film. Don't get me wrong. I love to go to the movies, but when I do I sit back and I eat popcorn. In the theatre, it's the opposite. I want to do this ..." and she sits forward, perched on the edge of her seat, her face alive with interest.

"It's what happens in the space between audience and actors that interests me more than anything – the exquisite pressure of being together in a darkened room, breathing the same air." *Cabin Pressure*, 7.30pm until Tuesday (also 2.30pm today and Tuesday); *War of the Worlds*, 7.30pm, Thursday to August 27 (also 2.30pm Saturday and August 27); *Radio Play*, Friday, 11pm. All at Royal Lyceum Theatre, Grindlay Street (0131-473 2000)

**Radio days:** Orson Welles during his famous 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Anne Bogart's celebration of his life will include a reading of the play which sent America into a panic