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Anne Bogart

Theatre Should Explore More and Explain Less

by Susan Marrash-Minnerly
and David Wohl

Drawing on an ancient Sanskrit saying, Distinguished Career Award winner Anne Bogart told an SETC keynote audience, "Theatre should simultaneously entertain the drunk, tell us how to live, and question the universe!"

Offering her alternative perspectives on theatre, Bogart challenged theatre artists to rethink their goals and re-envision their creative techniques. In an earlier interview and during her Saturday address at the SETC Convention, this theatrical pioneer also talked about her approach to directing and offered insights into Viewpoints, her popular and often controversial method of actor training and rehearsal methodology.

Talking openly about the joys and struggles of directing during her 30-plus years in the theatre, Bogart said that when she takes on a directing gig she often wonders "when are they going to hire a **real** director?" She takes a different view of the director's role than many involved in theatre. The job of the director, she believes, is to describe the world of the play, not to solve all the mysteries for the actor.

"In theatre, there is the question of, 'Who makes the first brushstroke on the canvas?'" Bogart said. "In most theatre, it seems to me that it is the director. But in my work, it is the actor. Actors are responsible for making choices. Not, 'Where do I go?' I don't tell an actor what to do. The actor is painting a canvas using space and time."

Space and time are the key elements of



Terry Newby

Anne Bogart Distinguished Career Award Winner

Co-founder, SITI Company
Recipient, Guggenheim Fellowship
Winner, 2 Obie Awards
Recipient, Elliott Norton Award for
Outstanding Direction
Author, *A Director Prepares:
Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*
Co-Author, *The Viewpoints Book:
A Practical Guide to Viewpoints
and Composition*

Bogart's Viewpoints theory, which she sees as part of "compositional training" – a kind of shorthand vocabulary for rehearsal and staging.

"Viewpoints is a technique of improvisation that grew out of the post-modern dance world," Bogart said. "It was first articulated by choreographer Mary Overlie, who broke down the two dominant issues performers deal with – time and space – into specific categories." (See sidebar, Page 19)

Viewpoints has become an important component of standard actor training in the United States and abroad and is

now regularly included in graduate and undergraduate acting classes alongside the more traditional acting methodologies of Stanislavsky, LeCoq, Linklater and Grotowski.

Bogart is careful to point out that she feels a "direct lineage to Stanislavsky, *late* Stanislavsky." However, like many theatre scholars, Bogart believes that many of Stanislavsky's ideas were misunderstood by American acting teachers in the 1930s and 1940s. Talking about her theories over breakfast, she insisted that "realism isn't psychological. If you find the *precise* gesture, the audience believes it is real.



David Hawkins

Anne Bogart urges SETC members to explore the dark places of the world through theatre.

Executing the precise gesture provides the freedom for the actor to experience genuine emotion. Emotional memory is the antithesis to what happens on stage. It's very good for film, but deadly for theatre."

Bogart spends much of her time working as the artistic director of the New York City-based SITI Company, which she co-founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992. At SITI, she works with an established company of talented actors who know her methods and style of directing. She described a productive rehearsal as "almost a mythic experience. There is a kind of exquisite pressure that has built up. A story unfolds, a door opens and we all move through it at the same time. And there is grace in the room. It's not logical. When we are in the room, we find freedom together."

Her keynote address, delivered to a capacity audience in Orlando, focused on the meaning of theatre and its contemporary context. Theatre, according to Bogart, should do seven things:

1 Theatre should create intensity.

She cited Leonard Bernstein, who once said, "An artist's response to violence is to make the music more intense." Tracing the etymology of the word "enthusiasm," she found that the root means "to be filled with God." This is consistent with her belief that theatre is the spiritual, nonrational side of life. "Making theatre," Bogart said "is a utopian experience."

2 Theatre should remember.

It should remember and remind us of those things that make us human. Theatre is a form of oral history and can exert influence if done purposefully, Bogart said. Theatre is not about absolute answers. "Truth in art," Bogart said, "is the space between two opposites. Theatre should be a living paradox."

3 Theatre should resist certainty

"Any certainty taken to an extreme leads to violence – look at Iraq," she said, noting that an unfortunate effect of 9/11 is that we tend not to question certainty. "We have become a fearful nation and have become much less tolerant," Bogart said. "In a culture where the most radical thing you can do is to complete your sentences, theatre must ask the questions, pose the dilemmas and provide the freedom so that sentences can be completed." Theatre, she said, should explore more and explain less.

4 Theatre should be articulate in the face of uncertainty.

Words are powerful tools, and theatre should use them to articulate the dreams of human society. How we talk to people influences the process and changes the equation. "Audiences today are more impatient and less willing to tolerate ambiguity," Bogart said. "But it doesn't mean we should change what we do. We just need to recognize the challenge."

5 Theatre should produce catharsis.

Bogart defined catharsis as the act of "spreading light in dark places." Describing theatre as "a gym for the soul," she challenged theatre artists to explore the dark spaces of contemporary society.

6 Theatre should expand the definition of what it means to be human.

Theatre is the only art form, according to Bogart, that is about those people actually sitting in the room. "We should be engaged in the content," she said. "Real artists make you listen to the song, not to the singer."

7 Theatre should bring attention where needed.

The notion of being useful is, in fact, radical, according to Bogart. Choices are

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THE VIEWPOINTS

(Adapted from *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*, by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, Theatre Communications Group, NY: 2005)

Viewpoints of Time

TEMPO: The rate of speed at which a movement occurs; how fast or slow something happens onstage.

DURATION: How long something lasts; how long a person or a group stays with a particular movement, tempo, gesture, etc., before it changes.

KINESTHETIC RESPONSE: A spontaneous reaction to a motion that occurs *outside* you. An instinctive response to an external stimulus.

REPETITION: The repeating of something onstage – a) *internal:* repeating a movement *within* your own body; b) *external:* repeating something that's happening *outside* your own body.

Viewpoints of Space

SHAPE: The contour or outline the body makes in space. All Shape can be broken down into either a) lines; b) curves; c) a combination of lines and curves. In addition, Shape can be either stationary or in motion.

GESTURE: A movement involving a part or parts of the body: a) *behavioral gesture* (realistic gesture belonging to the physical world as we observe it everyday); b) *expressive gesture* (expresses an inner state or emotion, not intended as a public or "realistic" gesture).

ARCHITECTURE: The physical environment, the space, and whatever belongs to it or constitutes it, including permanent and non-permanent features. Includes solid mass, texture, light, color, and sound.

SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS: The distance between things on stage; one body in relation to another, to a group, or to the architecture.

TOPOGRAPHY: The landscape, the floor pattern, the design we create in movement through space.

"Man, you were on that stage!" After getting the completed script for Davis's show, Rose had some fun with him by declaring, "Man, you wrote that play!"

Actually the play became remarkably successful for both of them. *Purlie Victorious* opened in 1961 and had a respectable run of 261 performances on Broadway with Davis in the lead, and the musical version *Purlie* opened in 1970 and ran for nearly 700 performances with Cleavon Little and Melba Moore starring.

While Rose has entertained many audiences in his life, his greatest achievement is the role he played in helping bring about progress through his dedication to producing socially relevant theatre. With Rose, the envelope was not only pushed, it was signed, sealed and delivered. ■

Jim Stacy is an associate professor of theatre at Louisiana State University in Alexandria and a member of *Southern Theatre's* Editorial Board.

Bogart

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extremely important for theatre artists, she said. What play do you produce? When do you produce it? Where do you produce it? What is the context?

Projects that Bogart has in the works include a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* exploring what happens to Blanche after she is taken to the sanitarium. Another piece Bogart is working on is an adaptation of *Reunion*, a 1976 book about the Group Theatre by Helen Chinoy. The play will take place in the characters' later years when they are all "crusty and mad," according to Bogart. "I'm playing with the idea of what would happen if Adler, Clurman and Strasberg come to this reunion and in the beginning they barely exchange a word. Slowly, however, they begin to re-channel their lives and end up creating a Clifford Odets play!"

Well known for her persistent exploration of performance, Bogart continues to stretch



David Hawkins

Anne Bogart talks with audience members after her keynote address at the convention.

the boundaries of what we recognize as theatre. Her plays are visual and visceral; her methodologies, rigorous and precise. As Bogart explained in the preface to her 2001 book, *A Director Prepares*, she sees theatre as both spiritual and transformative: "We create journeys for others to receive in the spirit of a gift." ■

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