

# Anne Bogart and Maria Shevtsova

## Covid Conversations 2: Anne Bogart

Maintaining and nurturing an ensemble theatre have been Anne Bogart's foremost concerns in these past near-thirty years since she and Tadashi Suzuki founded the Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI) in 1992. Suzuki had established the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) in 1976, making a secluded mountainous landscape of Japan its home to this day. Bogart's venture in the United States, although inspired by Suzuki's model of a production-based troupe of high artistic standards that, at the same time, developed its unique training methods, by no means merely duplicates its predecessor. In this Covid Conversation, Bogart briefly maps a segment of SITI's history, reflecting on the company's inter-arts endeavours with differing dance idioms and its engagement with Greek tragedy. She discusses the effects of the Covid pandemic on her troupe, also interrupting its performances of *The Bacchae* at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Her most recent opera production, *Tristan and Isolde*, was closed for the same reason at the Croatian National Theatre – a key work in her portfolio of nineteenth-century grand opera as well as contemporary avant-garde opera. An acclaimed theatre director, Anne Bogart runs and teaches the Graduate Directing Programme at Columbia University in New York. At the SITI summer school in Saratoga, she and the company have workshopped the Viewpoints method that she has elaborated from Mary Overlie's six principles for theatre and dance training. Bogart's international workshops have further developed her method. She is the author of *A Director Prepares* (Routledge, 2001) and of many influential books that include (with Tina Landau) *The Viewpoints Book* (Theatre Communications Group, 2004). *The Art of Resonance* is forthcoming (2021, Bloomsbury). Maria Shevtsova is the Editor of *New Theatre Quarterly* whose most recent book is *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). The following conversation took place on 27 August 2020, was transcribed by Kunsang Kelden, and was edited by Maria Shevtsova. It is followed by a short coda announcing the transition of SITI into a resource centre.

**Key terms:** SITI, Suzuki, ensemble theatre, actor training, Greek tragedy, Getty Villa, opera.

**Maria Shevtsova** *Given that you are an ensemble director, how does it feel for you to be in lockdown and 'stuck' in London, when your company SITI (the Saratoga International Theatre Institute) is in New York and where, in the summer, you would normally have been at Saratoga Springs?*

**Anne Bogart** A slightly roundabout way to answer your question would be to say this. We had just opened our *Bacchae* at the Guthrie [in Minneapolis] in March of this year and I was looking at the SITI company, which was to have a six-week run at the Guthrie – a great theatre. Then they were to go without me – for part of the time – to Singapore to do a *Three Sisters* with a company there, and then we had Saratoga. A day or two after we opened *The Bacchae*, we shut down. So not only did the actors not have six weeks of work and health insurance, but also the following six weeks in

Singapore, and then the four weeks in Saratoga after that were gone too. I worry about health insurance more than anything, not to mention the pay for actors.

I'm going to get around to your question, but first I have to give credit to our amazing executive director Michelle Preston, who figured out a way of taking advantage of the funding that is available, and various other things that I won't go into, in order to keep the actors employed. They've been on a salary ever since, and they're still on a salary right now for creating our archives, gathering our resources – something they are actually being paid to do. What we did was to have six weeks of Zoom workshops on plays that we want to do and on ways of training. At first it was depressing for all of us, because how do you train looking at little square boxes? I mean, one of the things that kept SITI



*The Bacchae* at the Guthrie Theatre (2020). Photo courtesy of the photographer Dan Norman. SITI cast: left to right Roshni Shukla, J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, Stephen Duff Webber, Samuel Stricklen, Donnell E. Smith, Leon Ingulsrud, Barney O'Hanlon, Akiko Aizawa.

Company together – and we're almost thirty years old – is training.

Our training is really important. When I was in Dublin – you and I met in Dublin a while back, one time before then – we were doing one of our devised plays and I was walking with my dear friend Jocelyn Clarke, who is a dramaturg and has written a lot of plays for us; we were performing two different plays at the festival in Dublin. The following week we opened at BAM, a third play, and the week after that we opened another play in Los Angeles. So it was four plays in three weeks.

*Yes, that's a lot. By the way, what were you showing at BAM?*

It was *Hotel Cassiopeia* [by Charles L. Mee, premiered 2006 and at BAM 2007] and *War of the Worlds* [based on the novel by H. G. Wells].

I was walking in Dublin with Jocelyn, and I said, 'How are we able to pull this off? I don't understand, it's impossible,' and he said, 'The answer is very simple. It's the training.' Because we trained together – something happened, and we managed. One of the things the actors decided thirty years ago, when they thought about what it meant to be a SITI actor, was: training.

So their being on Zoom was horrendous, but the actors tried to figure out a way to train on Zoom because, when we're not in rehearsal or performing, a lot of their livelihood depends on their teaching the training, like Saratoga. We have a fall and a spring studio, so the actors are always on salary. We thought that the only way we can ever figure out how to teach it is to do it ourselves.

With this Covid – we went through the most awkward series of weeks where, literally, the actors would break down and cry, saying, 'This feels ridiculous. I'm in my living

room and there's a rug, and where are you'? It was very painful, and even reading plays or doing table work was painful and embarrassing – humiliating. But we kept going, and what I want to say, to really answer your question directly, is that I feel that social distancing is a misnomer. We are not social-distancing. As a matter of fact, I have been more engaged with people socially over Zoom than I normally am – going to meetings, and things like that. What we are is physically distant. We are not socially distanced.

Somehow SITI Company has managed to stay close – if not closer – through the difficulty, through the restrictions through which we have to meet. Now, it's not unusual to have restrictions, and restrictions are, as you know very well, what make productions happen, based, in a sense, on what you're pushing against. So we have not been socially distanced. We have been unhappy and we've been frustrated, but there is more warmth, because you have to give more, because it's so hard to receive it. What I'm *not* interested in is the endless self-exposé that's happening over the internet among theatre people – the endless readings and Corona dances. So I find the misnomer to be wrong.

I've been thinking a lot about prisoners of war. In, like, Vietnam or during the Second World War – I know this happened with American soldiers (and it probably happened with others) – imprisoned American soldiers, when they were purposely isolated from each other to keep them from having any sort of alliances, and not only to keep them down, found an elaborate way to knock on walls or on the pipes in their cells. They created a language through tapping to say, 'How are you? Pass this on,' and it not only kept them alive, in terms of information, but it also kept them communicating with each other which, as you know, because you're involved in sociology, is what keeps people together.

We say the training keeps the actors together because they're in the same room, they're doing things that are about sweating and are very difficult to do, and they make a connection, an interconnection. With the circumstance we are in now . . . I am not interested in endless readings; we're going to do a

show on the internet. I'm interested in that sense of tapping that we do to each other. I'm in a lot of Zoom situations with my union because I'm on the executive board of SDC [the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society]. Right now, there are fifteen hundred unemployed directors in the United States, and we're on Zoom twice a week trying to figure out how to help them: that's a kind of tapping – you know? – or the tapping that we do as a company, saying, 'I'm trying this, this is very frustrating, but why don't you try this?'

So it's been challenging – this double whammy of the coronavirus and the physical distancing, along with the huge changes that are happening in the United States right now vis-à-vis Black Lives Matters: many institutions are going to have to change leadership. The structural racism that has been discovered and exposed is significant. I always thought that I was a liberal, perfectly interested in diversity, but I realized the depths of the structural racism in theatres that I traffic in. So many things are going to change, although we have no idea what is going to happen. But it turns out that human beings never have an idea of what is going to happen. That has been shown by neuroscience. We [only] think we know what is going to happen.

Social distancing has been very difficult, but it has also strengthened connections. And the one last thing I'd say is that, because my company performs a lot in arts centres around the United States and in the world, I have been having conversations with the directors of various arts centres, usually located in universities – you know, the Wexner [connected to Ohio State University], the Walker [in Minneapolis, Minnesota], the Hancher [Iowa City, connected to the University of Iowa], and all those other big theatres where we usually take our shows – this is our bread and butter.

The people who run these organizations are extraordinary people. Kristy Edmunds, who is an extraordinary human being – I call her the k.d. lang of arts presenters – runs the CAP [Centre for the Art of Performance] at the University of California Los Angeles, which is a big performance venue. She said she has lost her local audience, but has gained international relations: people from around the world

are now seeing lots of things that she is putting online. She finds herself on Zoom with many more people from around the world than she had before.

There's something interesting happening here: we are losing our local audiences in respect of how I have often defined theatre – as 'breathing common air', which, now, seems like the worst thing, because you don't want to breathe common air. There's a change afoot and the only thing to do, as you have said, is to do things together because things don't happen just through you, yourself. Yes, it's in concert with other people that things start to happen. This is a long way of answering your opening question! The situation has been very, very frustrating, but it has heightened rather than lessened the social aspect. I would say . . . the opposite of distance would be closeness.

*I like the way you distinguished between social and physical distance, but my question to you on this very point is: We are missing a physical connection, but this other connection that you are talking about – doesn't it look very much like a networking system? We are more networked than we were ever before, but I wonder what sort of being together this actually is. What sort of 'closeness' are we talking about in a network?*

Well, yeah, but I'm gonna jump right in there, because what we've learned from, say, Tahrir Square in Egypt, or the Spring Uprisings that happened in the last decade, is that networking or electronic media gets people together. But, once they're together, the problem is that they haven't figured out what the future is, which is why those revolutions have failed. In a sense, the tent poles haven't been placed in. So it behooves us to say we have to use such examples because they do a lot. There's a certain place where not being together doesn't work.

*Ah, you've just played into my hand! Have you considered that this networking is a very different way of being? I'm sure you have considered this question, but I'd like to hear your commentary. The togetherness you were talking about earlier – the togetherness you have with SITI – was, after all, founded on a notion of togetherness that prompted you to form an ensemble company. It wasn't just*

*fortuitous that you met Tadashi Suzuki, who guided you in some ways into forming SITI and supported you consistently. You saw ensemble work in Suzuki's work, and ensemble playing is a particular kind of practice. Take also Ariane Mnouchkine, our great mutual friend, who is key to the theatre of the twentieth century and – I personally think – not valued enough, but that's another thought for another conversation. I remember reading somewhere, where you said that she had asked you how you could possibly do what you needed to do without an ensemble.*

*Networking is not quite the same, is it? An ensemble is more than physical connection. It is more than the psychological connection that we can have by talking over Zoom . . . or is that a different kind – and form – of psychological connection? There are other forms of connection that are vital to an actor, and they are the emotional and the spiritual, and the invisible and the unsaid – what we feel by looking at the person's body that we see/hear near us. You can always see a person's heart by how they are looking at you with their eyes. This kind of connection, I think, is a bigger phenomenon than communication. It is a very deep-seated connection because it digs so deeply into our subliminal, intuitive – instinctive – cells, if you like. And that surely is missing in the network of the internet.*

Which is why we're so miserable. Which is why people are having breakdowns, and saying, 'It's ridiculous to be in my living room. Why are we even doing this?'

*And, 'Why am I crying alone, when I can be crying with you?'*

Exactly. You know, lately, I've been reading a philosopher – she's a very strange feminist. She studied quantum physics and is now doing some kind of sociology. Her name is Karen Barad, and she has a theory that she calls 'intra-action'. It's called 'agentialism'. Anyway, she's a very, very odd philosopher, and her theory is not interaction but *intra*-action. She says that physics proves that we do not exist as a person. We only exist . . . we *begin* to exist in *intra*-actions: I become who I am because I'm with you – a different person than I am anywhere else, and, in between times, there is no person. It's very bizarre.

Well, of course, from a humanistic point of view, there is a person, but that person constantly grows through intra-action. It's pure Bakhtin; it might be physics for Barad but, for me, it's Bakhtin – it's the I-You relation. Anyway, science and the humanities are not altogether separate – as you, of all people, know.

What I find helpful is that Karen Barad takes from science, but she helped me to understand how to have a rehearsal. My intra-action with her writing is rather difficult, but it is actually transformative. I'd say you are absolutely right about how you can only go a certain distance online. I think that people are living in fiction when they think, 'Oh, we can just keep going in this way.' No. It *does* go back to breathing common air . . . It's about revolutions in small rooms; that is the title of a book that I love and use all the time [*Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of the Theatre*, by Bert O. States]. We have to be in these small rooms to create a revolution, which then seeps out into the world. That's what happens.

*I would have thought, given how much the whole idea of ensemble has mattered to you, that, in some ways, you're going against the cultural grain, aren't you? You're a North American steeped in the culture where you live, as we all do in our respective cultures. And in this culture is to be found a very profound individualism; it's there in the prominent North American thinkers of the nineteenth century. When I was much younger, I used to think – until I re-read Thoreau and re-read his Walden – that this book was a statement about community, rural community, at least. But, when I was researching archive material for my Rediscovering Stanislavsky and re-reading a lot of Tolstoy for my detailed discussion of ensemble theatre – this theme runs right through my book – I realized how wrong I had been: Thoreau's Walden is actually a statement about individualism, about me and the woods, but, really, always 'me'. It's not 'we' – at least that's how it struck me in recent years, as I re-read it.*

When thinking about the question of ensemble in relation to you and SITI, I thought I'd have to ask you about this 'I-in-the-woods' aspect, and whether you thought it was part of a kind of

*American Dream of harmony. It seems, to me that it might be a kind of American utopia, a variant of the idea of wellbeing. I talk about utopias in my book, and this might be an American utopia – very different from the Russian utopias twenty or thirty years later. Was your idea of ensemble a different angle on this American utopia – your holy grail for establishing communal interaction?*

It's actually a resistance to the American Dream – to the cowboy in the middle of the prairie, to that rich couple who came out with their guns to shoot at the Black Lives Matter protesters, who were just invited to speak at the Republican campaign [the Republican National Convention in the run-up to the Presidential elections of 3 November 2020]. It's that notion of 'Me and my gun against the world', and that is one of the tenets of the American culture. The fact that my primary core value is collaboration is an act of resistance against that.

In other words, I will not do a production unless there is a potential for collaboration for it. The potential is there in doing opera too, in making it an ensemble of actors from singers, which is what I love doing. I love the transition that happens. And so you have to find a way to resist what you don't believe in; and, certainly, working with an ensemble and having a company is an insane act – a demonstration of an ultimate way of being in the world and, therefore, a demonstration of a model society that I believe in, as opposed to the ones that I do not believe in, which exist around me.

*Nicely put. Is it, though, a little bit more than a resistance, which is a little bit passive? Does it have something to do with . . . What's the word I want?*

It's a 'resistance plus'.

*Have you found difficulties with this?*

Obviously, because it is not part of the American Dream. Whenever you say you're a theatre director, they say, 'What have you done on Broadway?' Now, Broadway is anathema to what I actually believe in. Although, you know, you were mentioning *Complicite* and

Simon McBurney before we began, and, of course, he's done work on Broadway, and other people who are doing work there, but, ultimately, the values of Broadway are not something I believe in. Consequently, yes, it goes against the grain.

With that said, I've had a tremendous amount of support and a lot from Foundations, who understand and who financed my company – people who are happy to see a resistance in the world, a 'resistance plus'. I can't say that I just fight dragons, because that is not true. I'm fighting a phantom, which is a weird dream that doesn't work. But I have a tremendous amount of support and warmth from people who are glad that there is some example in the world of something other than what we have been fed from childhood in the United States.

*It's good to hear this. You said earlier that we can't predict what will happen after the Covid-19 crisis, nor can we know how long it is going to last or what its long-term consequences will be for humanity; and I don't just mean economics, although many people are hungry, and many are without jobs. You talked about how you are involved online with 1,500 directors without jobs – this is a very concrete, actually a devastating, economic aspect of this virus. Do you think that maybe, through this newly awoken kind of networking that you are experiencing, people in the profession are beginning to yearn for face-to-face interaction; that our aberrant situation right now might provide some kind of conditions for big changes in the future, which will go more towards ensemble theatre, to co-relational theatre, rather than to less of it? What would be your bet on that one?*

Because I'm an optimist, I would say, 'Absolutely!' Again, I have no clue, but I'm a big believer in talking things into existence. So I will be doing just that, and it is usually against all odds. This said, I have no interest in going to the theatre right now. The idea of going into a theatre where there are three empty seats between the next person and me is anathema to the theatre. When you go to see a movie and the movie theatre is empty, you think, 'Fantastic! I can sit back, eat my popcorn.' If you go into a theatre and it's half empty, your heart

sinks because this is the opposite of success; it's a kind of failure. The idea of going into a theatre where you get the hand stuff and all the things that will keep you apart is of no interest to me whatsoever. I feel like part of going to the theatre is . . . David Mamet said that 'an audience learns from one another how to watch a play'.

So, to answer your question, I think that the circumstances are going to have to change. The conditions, as you say, are going to have to change. But we have to reinvent something. Perhaps we have to reinvent the architecture of our theatres. Of course, who knows if there's a vaccine. Maybe we'll just go back again, although I think that would be a big shame because people are getting in touch with the most basic parts of what their needs are, as opposed to what they're told to need through the media.

What do you need in your life? I need the warmth of other people. I need exposure to new ideas. I need to see other models of how to be together, which is what I think theatre ultimately is. I sense that the form it will take is going to change – and also the stories it tells: whose stories we are telling, who is telling them, and how we are telling them.

I think those things were already starting to change before Covid. I think the new understandings of structural racism and the way we've been living is starting to show that capitalism and global economy are not, perhaps, leading towards human flourishing. I think we're starting to see that. The worst thing that could happen would be to get a vaccine but see everything go back to exactly what it was. If I'm back on a plane every two weeks . . . something is wrong. I don't know what form [any of it] will take, and I do not know when I will want to go into the theatre again. Right now, I have no interest – and I'm an avid theatregoer!

*From my side of the fence, it looks as if part of the effect of Covid-19 is our dehumanization, or, perhaps, that Covid is exposing to view more of a process that was already in train for some time: we are beginning to lose our sense of community, whereas theatre binds us together in all sorts of ways. It's not that we all think in the same way,*

*nor are we all from the same social groups in theatre audiences. You know so very well as a director that, in the theatre, an extraordinary connection can happen between the stage, the performers, the audience space, and spectators. Sometimes it is like a celebration – perhaps of how and why we live on this earth. I would hate this to be lost.*

Beautifully put – and I think what you are referring to is one of the reasons that I resist so much what is happening online, with people, you know, doing ‘Corona dances’. The misunderstanding about the theatre, especially in the United States, is that it is about self-expression and your signature. So what we’re getting is a lot of self-expression, which is the opposite of knocking on the wall [I mentioned earlier]. I don’t care about people’s self-expression. What I mean is that I belong much more to the school of John Cage, who had suffered in his young years, struggling with his homosexuality and the lack of respect for him. He was having trouble with the idea of self-expression in music – he just found it obscene – and it was only when he studied Buddhism that he discovered the idea that the job of art was to set up the conditions in which space can be shared; and it was then that he understood and felt that he could write music again.

I belong more to that camp. Can we create the conditions in which grace can occur? In which this chemical thing happens when people come together in a certain frame of mind? I think that’s why people go to church. I don’t go to church but, theoretically, I would say there’s a certain exchange that happens. What is it that Elias Canetti said: ‘Why do people go to church? Not to pray to God but to stand, sit, and kneel simultaneously.’

*I think there’s a lot of truth in the idea that the theatre is a sacred place – upheld by Stanislavsky – and your reference to Canetti leads me to ask about your emphasis on collaborative work. One wonderful example, from my point of view, of your commitment to collaboration is your work called A Rite (2013), where SITI and a dance company [the Bill T. Jones Dance Company] combine forces and work together.*

*There are drawbacks to this kind of collaboration, but let us look at its benefits. Did your actors take dance classes with the Bill T. Jones Company? Did they actually stand and work at the barre and also do the requisite leaping and jumping? Did they try to acquire some of the enormous physicality of dance? Not that SITI actors don’t develop their physicality – you teach Viewpoints after all, from which you get the title of your book, and this is about physical movement. It’s about . . . I suppose it would be best called ‘improvisatory movement’. It develops a capacity for responding quickly, to have quick mental, emotional, and physical reflexes. Your actors are already in their bodies, so to speak. Even so, there’s a nuance between an actor in his/her/their body and a dancer in-the-body, because that dancer has virtuosic technique and leans towards a very specific kind of body training. Now, did your actors suddenly find themselves face to face with this particular mode, and feel that they had to be capable of articulating the sensation – that they had to have the same kind of bodily ‘language’?*

The answer is yes. But I’m going to take that apart more: the actors not only trained with the Bill T. Jones Company, but the Bill T. Jones Company trained with the SITI Company. The first thing Bill said to me was, ‘My dancers can’t speak,’ and I said, ‘But they’re gonna.’

*Ah, that’s exactly what I wanted to ask – whether they started working with the word.*

They did. Now I’m going go back a few steps. I think it comes out of a certain impulse, which is this: at a certain point, when the SITI Company became . . . I don’t know, fifteen years old, or something, I said to myself, ‘OK, this is a company of actors, and they don’t leave – partly because they’re very dedicated, and partly because we paid them decently.’

I started the company saying it – ‘Actors have to be paid decently.’ We lost a lot of work early on but, anyway, now people don’t call us unless they can pay for it, but that’s another story. After about fifteen years or so ago, I started asking myself, ‘In service of what?’ I have this incredibly beautifully trained company, they’re essentially classical actors. They all have another kind of training – they came

to SITI Company already trained in incredible kinds of classical work and now they're physically very able to do whatever [is necessary]. I kept thinking . . . 'In the service of *what?*' Just to do another play – but what does that mean?

I had always known that what we are producing is not only a play, it is also a demonstration of how to be together. You and I were talking about that before. So, when an audience goes to see us at a theatre, they're seeing two plays: they're seeing the play, and they're seeing how this company is acting and working together. I thought: 'So why do I just keep doing plays? Like, what's the point?' And that's when I came up with the idea that theatre is about communities. I asked whether what we have is this incredible model society, and unless they [the company members] meet another model society, there is no reason for me to go on.

I started a series of works, of which the work with Bill T. Jones is one. The first one was with the Martha Graham Dance Company. We did a piece called *American Document* (2010), which was on a 1938 Martha Graham choreography. Again, actors danced and the dancers acted. As a matter of fact, one of the lead Martha Graham dancers – she's, like, six feet tall, gorgeous – ended up playing Helen of Troy in our *Trojan Women*. She just wanted to speak, and she's this incredible dancer – gorgeous, drop-dead gorgeous, tall, girl. Then, after that, we worked, of course, with Bill T. Jones, and, a year ago, we worked with Streb, who do action work. They fly through glass and do impossible feats. The company is called Streb Extreme Action. You'd be interested. They actually did something in London on the Millennium Bridge.

*Oh, I remember. LIFT [London International Festival of Theatre] had invited them in 2012, at the time of the Olympics in London, but I was out of town and so could not see their events.*

We did a piece with them a year ago [2019] called *Falling & Loving*. In that same spirit we had done a piece called *Steel Hammer* [2015] with the Bang on a Can All-Stars. I said, 'OK, musicians, dancers, and actors . . . How about

musicians go on the stage with the actors?' And then we did a piece with Ann Hamilton, who is a visual artist. So [we combined] actors and visual artists. This is part of a larger work.

Now, to answer your original question. In all of these cases, the actors looked at me and said, 'We can't do it!' – 'I can't dance. I'm not a dancer!' Certainly, with Bill, they were terrified. And, even worse, the dancers were terrified to speak. It turned out to be more of a love story with Streb and company because these are extreme-action people who go up high flights and jump off buildings. There's a movie called *Born to Fly*, which is about Elizabeth Streb. You should check it out. I think you can get it on Netflix, and it's really amazing. But the actors said, 'I can't do it!' – especially when Elizabeth came up with the idea of a gunk machine, where stuff would continually come down on their body.

The actors say it's impossible. I take a deep breath and don't tell them that I'm as nervous as they are, but I'm not going to let them know. 'No,' I say, 'we're doing it. We're going in there. We're going in. You can do it.' At first, the actor is saying, 'Only if I wear a hazmat suit': 'OK, we'll get hazmat suits' – and then, of course, the time comes, that moment in rehearsal when they say, 'We're taking those hazmat suits . . . if those dancers are doing that.' So, to answer your question, the actors do the dance classes with the dancers, and the dancers figure out how to speak, although they're terrified and they speak really badly, at first.

*And that's why you're there.*

And Bill would say, 'They can't speak,' and, 'Don't let them speak.'

*But you had them speaking.*

Absolutely. As you said, 'resistance' is too polite a word. With Bill I wasn't going to say, 'No, they're going to speak.' I just said, 'Mhmm.' I just have to show you a picture. [Takes out her mobile phone.] This is the actors and the dancers together in this gunk coming in, flying down. Isn't it gorgeous? These are two actors, Ellen and Bondo, who were covered with gunk, and this is the gunk machine





*Falling & Loving* (2019). SITI Company with Streb Extreme Action. Photo courtesy of the photographer Anne Bogart.

up in the air. This was last September, 2019. I'm glad you asked that question about *A Rite*, because it really is a part of a series of works.

*It's part of a long-term process, which is, in fact, what a great director does, in my experience of them. You need to spend the time, and you need the follow-up. You need the continuity. You need the time for a work to develop and grow.*

*I'm glad that you've already mentioned The Trojan Woman, because that was my next step. As I was mapping out your working biography, I was intrigued to see that you directed The Trojan Women in 2011 and, before that, in 2009, you staged Antigone. At some point you worked with Charles Mee on Orestes, and then there was a gap. Then – bang! – you've got The Persians in 2014 and The Bacchae, which premiered in 2018 and continued until 2020, when performances were stopped at the Guthrie theatre because of Covid.*

*My question is a bit tricky, but what brought you back to the Greeks, and specifically to The Trojan Women, which is an iconic Suzuki work? Was it a dialogue of sorts with Suzuki's production, which he first staged in 1974, touring it for years across the globe? Was it a response to Suzuki? Was it a rethinking of his production? In other words, why The Trojan Women in 2011?*

You're absolutely right to notice that there was a gap. There was. I've always been drawn to Greek theatre but terrified of it. In the year of *Antigone*, the Getty Centre, the [Getty] Villa in California, invited us to stage a play in their outdoor theatre. We did a residency there for a couple of weeks and that's when we came up with an indoor *Antigone*. And here's the amazing thing – it went well and we got along very well with the people at the Getty Villa on Malibu. They had reconstructed it and they re-opened shortly before then, and they have a



*The Bacchae* at the Guthrie Theatre (2020). Photo courtesy of the photographer Dan Norman. Left to right: Leon Ingulsrud, Will Bond, J. Ed Araiza, Akiko Aizawa, Roshni Shukla, Samuel Stricklen, Barney O'Hanlon.

Greek-Roman outdoor theatre right outside the building that is their museum. It's a gorgeous spot to do a play.

I'll come back to *The Trojan Women* because we performed *The Trojan Women* there and I'll talk about Suzuki in relation to it, but what's important is that we had done *Antigone* inside, in their small theatre, and we did *The Trojan Women* in their big outdoor theatre. They only do one show a year. And then – this being the Getty and they have a lot of money – they said they wanted to bring the whole company out; and so we had five weeks of rehearsal, which is unknown in the States. It's wonderful to work in Malibu, and they treat us really well.

Then they said, 'Well, what do you want to do next?' and I said, 'You know I'm struggling with that, I'm not sure.' They said, 'Why don't you bring the company out from New York for ten days and just read plays?' I said, 'You have got to be kidding me, you just want us to come and read plays?' This doesn't happen in the United States. Right? And they said, 'You

can decide on what play you want to do next, but we have ideas about what we'd like to do, too. So we're going to hook you up with some of our archaeologists and our classicists.' Which was great, and it's because of the Getty Villa that I've done so many Greek plays.

Directors who have worked there before say, 'Don't work there, they're not a theatre. They don't know how to do it. They can't build sets.' And I think that these directors are out of their mind. They are a museum that knows more about Greek history and archaeology than anyone. So we'd be in rehearsal, say for *The Trojan Women*, and we are struggling with a scene, and one of the archaeologists who is sitting there says, 'Come with me.' The museum is closed. They take us into the museum and find the vase on which the scene we're struggling with is depicted. Now this is a dream come true.

So we go for ten days of reading to the Getty Villa to figure out what to do after *The Trojan Women*, and they say, 'Listen, we'd like

you to think about *Ion*, nobody does *Ion*. We'd like you to think about *The Persians* and we'd like to think about *The Bacchae*.' So for ten days we read, and we were taken into the museum and the archaeologists helped us with translations and pronunciations. Fantastic. I mean, when do you get a chance like this? I struck a deal with them. I said, 'Look, I still feel like I'm new to Greek theatre. I'm attracted to *The Persians* because it's the first extant Greek play and so it's like the Big Bang of theatre. That really interests me, but I don't want to miss out on doing *The Bacchae* because I'm a showman, you know. *The Bacchae* is like the biggest showman play ever.'

So I struck a deal with them. I said I'd come and do *The Persians* but they had to guarantee that we could do *The Bacchae* afterwards because I wanted to find out about the Big Bang – like, what happened? You go from animals being sacrificed to a human being portraying someone who is symbolically sacrificed. You go from dithyrambs and choral odes, and, suddenly, they say, 'Well, why

don't we have an audience out there?' And you suddenly go from that: somebody's stepping out of the chorus and becoming a person. That sort of thing is absolutely fascinating.

The long answer to your question about *The Trojan Women* is that the timing was because of the Getty Villa. They gave me access not just to doing the plays but also to having a deep relationship to Greek history, to Greek archaeology. [They gave me] the time to study, you know, to soak in what it means to do a Greek play, what it means to do it today, and what it means for an audience from Malibu to come and see it. So that's that part of the answer [concerning] *The Trojan Women*. *The Bacchae* – because Suzuki did a production called *Dionysus*. The company had a lot of discussion about our doing these two: they are the leitmotifs of the Suzuki company; these are their great productions. How could we have a relationship with them? How could we possibly do *The Trojan Women*? *The Bacchae*? Ellen Lauren, who played Dionysus in our production, played Agave in Suzuki's production.



*The Bacchae* at the Guthrie Theatre (2020). Photo courtesy of the photographer Dan Norman. Left to right: Akiko Aizawa, J. Ed Araiza, Leon Ingulsrud.

As you pointed out when we first sat down, which made me very happy: you said our version of the *Trojan Women* has nothing to do with Suzuki's version. The worst thing we could do was an imitative production. I have no interest in that, although a lot of people do; they study Suzuki and suddenly all of their plays . . . [seem like imitation Suzuki], which is ridiculous.

To answer your question: these are two of the greatest plays ever written. *The Trojan Woman* is the greatest elegy ever to a child that had died. I mean, there's nothing else. *The Bacchae* is the greatest celebration of theatre that's ever been done. So Suzuki is not crazy to have done those two productions. I am not going to say, 'We're not going to do the two greatest Greek plays in the world because he did them,' but every choice we make has to be ours; it's too easy to default.

I was very interested in how Suzuki portrayed the killing of Pentheus, which was done there on the stage. I remember sitting next to Theo[doros] Terzopoulos, watching this at Suzuki's outdoor theatre in Japan, and Terzopoulos turned to me and said, 'We Greeks, we could never do this. We'd be shot if we ever showed Pentheus being killed.' But it's an amazing moment because it's a circle that circles around Bacchus that circles around Pentheus, and they have their swords. We just had to make our own version. And it's all because the Getty Villa believed in us, and they loved the company and they knew how much we appreciated their knowledge, whereas a lot of people who go to do shows there are threatened by the fact that the archaeologists would come by and say, 'Uh, that's not really it.' We're so lucky to have had that.

*I should imagine that directing both The Trojan Women and The Bacchae would have prompted questions about whether and why they were of our time. You would not have been sitting there thinking they were museum pieces. So what in them was of our time?*

Well, I think great plays last because they ask great questions, and I think the question all

Greek plays that have survived are asking is about hubris. We are living, and especially under the Trump regime, with the biggest pile of hubris you could possibly imagine. So to do a play about Pentheus' hubris – not that we would turn Pentheus into Trump, which would be completely uninteresting – is to ask a question that still needs to be addressed. The Greeks are great because they ask the real, big, fundamental questions. They were inventing democracy, as it happened!

*Hmm . . . women not included, slaves not included, but as a beginning, burgeoning model, yes – we could say yes.*

Touché.

*I'm just wondering whether you have chosen The Bacchae and The Trojan Women as two examples of the greatest plays we know in western civilization. The back of my head is thinking of The Bacchae in relation to The Persians because it seems to me that the important link between them is the role of the chorus. We could almost argue that these are chorus works. I would have thought that such chorus works are a fantastic gift for an ensemble director?*

Absolutely. You actually have to ask the question every single day: 'What is it for?' And you never have an answer.

*And there's another question: Are you going to have the chorus all speak together? Or is it a chorus that has this voice, and that voice, and that voice, and that voice, and another voice – a musical structure of different voices, even if they are 'bass', 'soprano', and so on, that creates the ensemble?*

Well, certainly. One thing that I learned from Suzuki and completely agree with is that unison is not the point: I didn't know this until I learned it from him through his work with choruses. The point is that, if you could have a group of people speak together, each of whom has a different opinion, that is amazing and it has a completely different musicality. I think the mistake people make with a group chorus is to say, 'Oh, we are in harmony.' It's the idea of a pluralistic

society, which is what I believe in: everybody has a different opinion and they stand behind it, but they are speaking together. So, diversity with unity is the question. It's a very interesting question to have to deal with, and there's never a solution.

*But see, Anne, why can't we think of it like an orchestra? Strings, cellos, woodwinds, drums, timpani – they're all different voices, all having their own say, but they're all working in harmony. It's just that we have fallen into the habit of thinking that harmony is always sameness, but it's not sameness. The more we think that harmony is really about very different peoples coming together in harmony, the more we might be able to solve problems like those that generated Black Lives Matter.*

Yes, and that's what we have to look at when we re-establish the tenets of our next social system, which is diversity in unison.

*We have to wait and see, and we have to contribute to it to make it happen.*

It's interesting you say that because, before Covid, I had a class called 'Visiting Artists'. They talked to the students and I did a Q&A, and for three or four weeks everybody I brought in was an artistic director – like Jim Nicola from New York Theatre Workshop, for instance. They'd all end up by saying, 'It's broken. You guys have to fix it.' The students got really upset and so I thought, and I've said it quite often out aloud to the students, 'Yes, we have to fix it together, we have to fix it together.'

*We all have to fix this broken society we live in. It doesn't just mean that you guys have to fix it, but that I have to roll up my sleeves and fix it with you. Yeah, we agree totally. Ah, almost time to go, so I'm going to speed our conversation up. Opera! Opera is really the principle of musicality par excellence, isn't it? Its not just an orchestra; there are singers, and . . .*

And a big-ass chorus!

*Exactly, and it might be why, you know – Greek chorus, singing chorus – choruses are really a*

*binding thread. Often the problem with opera for directors is not knowing what to do with the chorus. When they don't know what to do with all those singers, they kind of plonk them to the sides or at the back.*

Well that's the cliché that they bring out in opera about hiring theatre directors: theatre directors come in and suddenly there are seventy people looking at them asking, 'What do we do?' And the directors have no idea what to do with them.

*So what took you to opera? Was it something about choruses?*

Well, I've always loved music and the first opera I ever did was in 1984. The Houston Grand Opera called me and told me that they were doing a small festival of new one-act operas and asked if I would like to direct four of them – short ones. I said, 'Yes, sure.' I'd never been into the opera world that much. I'd seen some operas, but I went and realized that they had given me the four that were the weirdest. One was based on a Beckett piece. They were impossible little operas, but I had a great time. I was a young director then, but, for a long time, I kept getting operas that were new, experimental operas while I secretly wanted to do chestnuts. I wanted to do the big old ones. I'm very happy that, in the last twenty years or so, I've been staging a lot of chestnuts that I really love.

The last thing I did before Covid was *Tristan and Isolde* in Croatia (February 2020), which was amazing, and it was my first Wagner. But what you say about a director facing a chorus is absolutely true. What's even more interesting is that, in most opera houses that I've experienced, the chorus has been mistreated and so the chorus comes in hating directors. The chorus expects to be beaten up. If you ever say to them, 'What do you think?' they go, 'You're the director, just tell us what to do.' I learned very early on in working with choruses that alchemy could happen, if you take a little time.

And it happens with the principal singers as well, the ones who say, 'I don't turn left



*Tristan and Isolde* at the Croatian National Theatre, Rijeka (2020). Ivana Sribljan as Brangäne. Photo: Dražen Šokčević, courtesy of the Croatian National Theatre.

on a high C.' They are a delightful challenge. This is what happens: I'll go up to a chorus early on and I'll say, 'Do you guys think it would be funnier to tip the chairs on bar eighty-two or bar seventy-six?' And they look at you, like, 'You're the director, tell us what to do.' Me: 'Yeah, but you guys have lived with the music longer – eighty-two or seventy six?' And they look really nervous, and then they look around at each other, and then one of them will say, 'Actually it would be funnier if you turn it on bar ninety-eight – that's when we tip our chairs.' OK, we're all going to tip our chairs on bar ninety-eight. Then on the next day, they start coming up: 'We think . . . the chorus thinks this, the chorus thinks that,' and then they start telling you stories and the room changes.

To use Grotowski's notion of active culture: it goes from a very passive culture to a reactive culture, and this is very gratifying. The same thing happens with the lead, the principal singers, when they see that you are actually treating them as if you were playing the ouija

board: you know the ouija board, where you place your fingers and say, 'Where does it want to go?' It's not that I haven't prepared: I spend a lot of time preparing. I've got the whole thing mapped out because, if you don't, you're screwed. But that [the ouija-board approach] gives me the permission to take a little bit of time and follow what is actually happening because I have a back-up plan. I can't just go in and do what I do with the SITI Company [which is to let it develop]. I do a lot of preparation [for SITI work], but I don't stage it in my head or on paper. With opera, I do. I stage it. I know who's coming from where; I know where the chorus lives. I study the music a lot. It's one of the reasons why I love music – opera: you study, you study, you study.

*You read scores.*

I read very painfully. I use them along with the music. I can't hear it in my head, but I can read it. I remember once doing an opera at the Los Angeles Opera and there was this

production manager who was known for being the meanest person imaginable. She was terrifying. I was scared of her. She came up to me at the dress rehearsal and said, 'I have to talk to you. Come with me.' So we go backstage and are back in this dark corner near the proscenium on-stage and she goes, 'I have to tell you. You've reminded me why I got into this business,' and she started crying. There's something in that. You have to face impossible union rules, where the orchestra has different unions, and the singers are in different unions . . . Then you have this stage management crew waiting for every decision you make – all these different pressures.

It's so much fun because it's impossible. You have to be so prepared, and you have to work at the top of your abilities. And it makes me in the theatre feel lazy because I'm like, well, what would happen if . . . ? So I love doing opera. I get scared because it's so fast and so big, but I also have to say, being in the room with the music and being

in the room with the singers – the rehearsal hall, that size of sound. I love doing opera. My body vibrates and I'm not an individual – something else is happening and it's so thrilling.

*Ah, that's the power of music, isn't it? One last question. You just mentioned Tristan and Isolde. It seems to me that the hero of that opera is a heroine – Isolde.*

One would say. She's got a bigger singing role too, I will say, and she ends it.

*And she ends it. I'm looking down my list here and you've got Carmen (2011), Norma (2013), Alcina (2017), and then, of course, we hit The Handmaid's Tale in 2019 with the Boston Lyric Opera. [This opera is by the Danish composer Poul Ruders after Margaret Atwood's eponymous novel.]*

And *Macbeth*, don't forget.



*Tristan and Isolde* at the Croatian National Theatre, Rijeka (2020). Maida Hundeling as Isolde and Lars Cleveman as Tristan. Photo: Dražen Šokčević, courtesy of the Croatian National Theatre.

*Ah, yes, which has Lady Macbeth. That opera is not performed enough, in my view, and yet it really is a remarkable work. So you staged it in 2013, like Norma, which, like Tristan and Isolde, is tremendously demanding for the female singer in the title role. Was Norma random? Did someone ask you to come and stage that particular opera – also one not performed enough? I'm looking down my list, and, yes, the hero is a heroine.*

Well, a lot of my opera work actually comes from Francesca Zambello, who is Artistic Director of both the Washington National Opera and Glimmerglass [the Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown in New York State, which includes opera]. I never get to choose the operas.

*Generally directors don't, but I wondered whether, in your case, it was different.*

*The Handmaid's Tale* wasn't Francesca, but *Carmen*, *Norma*, *Macbeth* certainly are. I have to say a lot of my opera work is thanks to her. She's been very good, she's a good friend of mine, and she's also an amazing Artistic Director.

*She has a distinguished career in opera herself. I wanted to ask you because the emergence of women directors in opera has been far from easy; it's even more difficult than that of women directors in spoken theatre. Then, too, women as opera protagonists are very problematical creatures.*

I did kind of chose *Tristan and Isolde* with the National Theatre in Croatia. I mean, they kept throwing names of operas, and when they said *Tristan and Isolde*, I said 'Yes!' Why? I think I said it subconsciously because of what you just said – the female aspect of it: I'd like to think that's true.

*That's a nice note to end on, Anne. Thank you very much for your time and care.*

## Coda

In response to Maria Shevtsova's subsequent email asking about developments regarding SITI's collection of its archives (mentioned only briefly in the above conversation), Anne Bogart referred to her blog of 16 November 2020 in the SITI Newsletter. She indicated that the excerpt from her blog below answers this question, giving kind permission to *NTQ* to reproduce it:

I would like to thank you [all friends and followers of SITI] for your warmth and support regarding SITI Company's recent announcement outlining our upcoming transition. In two years time, during the 2022–23 season, we will reach our thirtieth year together. Currently we are hard at work preparing our archives and planning for a big celebratory final SITI season. Executive Director Michelle Preston, Producer Megan Carter, and the SITI Company Board are guiding the path with great care and attention. Their consideration for the individual members of the company, this band of collaborators, many who have been together for thirty years, is monumental. As with most of SITI Company's key decisions, the idea about making a transition from a production company to a resource centre was a collective consideration, made over the course of hundreds of conversations and always with much feeling. The question ultimately came down to this: Are we an institution or are we a group of like-minded collaborators who joined together nearly thirty years ago to make plays? We decided that we are, in fact, a group of people who have journeyed together over the theatrical landscape, and for that reason, we chose not to continue on indefinitely.

That said, we do want SITI to become a resource centre for individual artists and for young companies, and to remain a lighthouse for the art of *ensemble*. The idea of Ensemble Theatre did not always exist; rather, it came into being through the individuals who decided that collaboration and shared artistic innovation are worthy enterprises.

Anne Bogart wishes to acknowledge that her definition of ensemble theatre, which follows the above excerpt of her blog, takes salient points from Maria Shevtsova's discussion of this subject in *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 7–21.