

VARIETY

In Kentucky, A Director's Derby

By [Karen Fricker](#)

Is Anne Bogart a theatrical pioneer, or an avant-garde flash in the pan?

That was the provocative subtext to a mainly celebratory look at the director's career during the annual winter theater fest here, the Classics in Context: Modern Masters Festival.

Held Jan. 27-29 at the Actors Theater of Louisville, the fest was devoted to Bogart's work, and most of the 250 people attending were there to praise her. The New York Times' Mel Gussow mentioned Bogart in the same breath as Peter Brook, Peter Stein, Giorgio Strehler and Robert Wilson. Actors Theater artistic director Jon Jory, who widened the focus of the festival to include living artists expressly to honor Bogart, has called her "the most important acting and directing theorist since Brecht."

Ask most New York critics about Bogart, though, and you'll get quite a different story. Her work – dense layerings of text, movement and sound – has never been easy to comprehend, and her recent New York productions, "Marathon Dancing" and Brecht's "In the Jungle of Cities," earned some of the most savage notices in recent memory.

Bogart's misadventures in regional theater are also well-documented: She was forced out of her position as a.d. of Providence's Trinity Repertory Company in 1990 after just one season of unconventional programming that alienated her board of directors and local audiences.

The Louisville weekend included three Bogart-directed productions, lectures and demonstrations of her theories and techniques, and colloquia and audience discussions. The vision that emerged was nothing if not ambitious. Bogart wants to revitalize American theater by offering up an alternative to Stanislavski-based acting. Clinging to naturalism, she insists, will only guarantee the extinction of the genre.

Though Bogart may not yet be in the league of Brook or her hero, Ariane Mnouchkine, the work showcased in Louisville represented some of the most provocative and exciting theater on any American stage today. And one left suspecting that, as Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, co-founder with Bogart of the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI), has said, and Gussow echoed over the weekend, "The best of Bogart is still to come."

Fascinated with the human body, Bogart has developed a movement training technique for actors called the Viewpoints, which provides the physical vocabulary on which she builds her work. But she is far from techno-shy. A hallmark of her productions is their sophisticated technical design – her “Adding Machine” required more lighting instruments than any production in Actors Theater history – and one of the weekend’s unexpected stars was Bogart’s young sound designer Darron West, whose gorgeous soundscapes become as intrinsic to the productions as the actors themselves. Technology has become both medium and message for Bogart.

She has said that all of her work asks the same question: “Why do we need theater?” In this “wired” age, that line of inquiry inevitably leads to a confrontation with the electronic media that are fast making live human interchange obsolete.

Bogart’s brilliant “The Medium” brings that confrontation to life. Created through what she calls “the esthetic of sampling,” “The Medium” combines passages from the writings of the granddaddy of all media theorists, Marshall McLuhan, with quotations from magazines, books and ad copy about the ways in which media are transforming our lives.

As the production’s actors – J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Stephen Webber – speak the text, their bodies act out various clichéd television scenarios: a cowboy movie, “The Dating Game,” a cooking show. The juxtaposition of actors’ physical and emotional immediacy with McLuhan’s prophecies of dehumanization creates a spectacle that is by turns exhilarating, mesmerizing, eerie and tragic.

Given her preoccupations, it’s little wonder that Bogart, when searching for a work to direct on Actors Theater’s mainstage, gravitated to Elmer Rice’s 1923 play “The Adding Machine,” a grim little exercise in Expressionism that recounts the unfortunate adventures of one Mr. Zero, a bookkeeper who, after 25 years of yeoman service, loses his job to a machine. Rice’s simple, bizarre story provides Bogart with ample opportunity for directorial virtuosity. Her production featured complex choreographic passages and nicely jarring contemporary touches amid the 1920s decor. Its major flaw was its slow, grueling pace.

Bogart conceived “Small Lives/Big Dreams,” an examination of the past, as a companion piece to the forward-looking “Medium.” Though its text is culled from five Chekhov plays, the work itself has a Beckettian flavor: After an unnamed apocalypse, five actors carrying the detritus of their lives – a trunk, a picnic basket, an umbrella, a photograph – muse aloud on the slipperiness of memory.

On the road

Similar to “The Medium” in its fractured quality, the physical and emotional intensity of its performances and its complex, layered construction, “Small Lives/Big Dreams” is still a work in progress: It lacks spiritual and emotional punch. (“Small Lives” is running

at New York's P.S. 122 through Feb. 12; "The Medium" will be presented at San Francisco's Theater Artaud from April 24- May7.)

Seeing three Bogart productions in quick succession raises a caveat. Though she insists that the Viewpoints are a technique, not a style, there is a marked similarity in tone and feel to the works she creates through them. One left the weekend longing for a few lighter notes amid the harshness. Nevertheless, Jory looked positively brave in bringing Bogart and company to Louisville, for there is hardly any welcoming place in America's theatrical mainstream for her rigorous vision.

And yet she has always found a way to get her work done. Bogart heads the directing program at Columbia University and supervises the SITI company as it travels between Saratoga Springs, New York City and Suzuki's headquarters in Toga, Japan. The company will make its first European tour later this year. One suspects that her work will find a more welcoming context over there.