

ANNE BOGART

INTERVIEWED<sup>1</sup> BY CLAUDIA MELE, BETH LOPES  
AND MATTEO BONFITTO

Anne Bogart

(SITI Company and Columbia University, USA)

Transcription by Isabel Tornaghi

### Abstract

In this interview, Anne Bogart presents different aspects of her work with the SITI Company. The role of composition within the creative process is discussed and the function of interculturalism and interdisciplinarity in the work of the company is described. Anne Bogart talks of the close relationship that exists between her teaching and her artistic creation, and concludes the interview situating her work in a historical context.

**Keywords** | Anne Bogart | improvisation | composition | interdisciplinarity | interculturalism



Image 1: Anne Bogart. Photo: Michael Brosilow.

Matteo Bonfitto: At what level composition is explored during the rehearsals of the shows directed by you?

Anne Bogart: Oh, in the beginning. In other words, it's the way to start. Because when you start you have some ideas, [...] you imagine what the world of the play is. I come in the beginning of the rehearsal process with tons of research, as everyone does. And then I speak every idea that I ever thought of, every notion, every stupid or good idea – I basically "talk it out". After that, the composition work is a way for the actors, and sometimes for the designers too, to make their work for the play, not necessarily "in order", but to take the ideas and start to create a world using time and space - so it's early on, and primarily early on. It's a kind of source work. It's a way of saying; here's a lot of intellectual ideas but how do we transform them into theatrical, poetic ideas? So... it's a very practical use.

MB: Ok. What kinds of materials do you use in this compositional process?

AB: It depends on the project. For example, I was just working on the photos from *Hotel Cassiopeia* which is about the American artist Joseph Cornell. I don't know if you know his work, he did things in little boxes. You literally take the objects that he would work with, or props, or pieces of text that maybe you're thinking of using... Or maybe I say: - "How do you fall without hitting the ground? Go, figure that out in a composition." Or: - "What are 22 things a ladder can be used for?". Or... "How can you move backwards in time?" You know,

those kinds of ideas. And then [you] see what the actors come up with as a solution to the intellectual ideas, then again becoming heartfelt physical ideas.

Claudia Mele: Is there any room for improvisation in your shows?

AB: We don't like to, but when we work with playwright Charles Mee – he is a company member – he always wants us to do Viewpoints in [his plays]. He always writes: - "And here is where you *Viewpoint*, here's where you improvise". And we always say no, no, no! Because we are all control freaks, we don't like to improvise in front of an audience and we like to have everything [set]. But once we did it for him, in the same play I was talking about, *Hotel Cassiopeia*, the one about Joseph Cornell. We had a section that was improvised. But other than that, everything is very, very, very, very set. Because the idea is that if you set things carefully, then you have to find the *inner* improvisation. So you say: - "always at this moment, my hand is here", but - a time can change, so [improvisation] is always [about] what stays the same and what is different.

MB: So it's a kind of hidden level of improvisation?

AB: Exactly that. So interpretation [varies] - for example: emotionality is always different; the time is always different. But the *what*, the body, will be the same, although the attack will be very different – so it's exactly that.

MB: You know the starting point and the ending point, and then the journey can be a kind of [improvisation]...

AB: Which could be: the starting point [is] here, and [the] ending point there. So in between here and there, there is a lot of variations. But if an audience looks they will always say: - "oh it's the same play - [...] it feels different, but they are not doing anything different; but it is different".

MB: After reading your books and reflecting about your shows and training, it's possible to perceive that interculturalism permeates your work on three levels: your company; in the process explored by you, for example the association between Suzuki technique and Viewpoints; and through the presence of actors from different cultures in your workshops and in the workshops led by your actors. So, based on that, how do you see interculturalism in your work?

AB: Well, recently I read that the only way not get old is to constantly be confronted with things that don't make any sense. And I'm interested in that since I'm getting older. In other words, the human being tends towards assumptions and definitions - so being intercultural is an act of survival as an artist. This means that every play should have something that is not known, whether it's a person, an idea, or a language that has been

incorporated. To me, it becomes more and more important as a conscious choice to work interculturally. And that can be manifested in many ways, it can mean interculturally as in a different countries, but it can also be [as] in different kinds of professions, so that a quantum physicist gets involved in a piece... or that the thematic is something that you disagree with - that's a different kind of interculturalism. This becomes central to the approach, in order not to get old, I think.

MB: Actually your work is very much interdisciplinary as well, can you talk about that a little bit?

AB: That too, yes. I'm interested in the theater that exists in a moment where you say; "wait a minute - that's not theater, that's opera", or "that's not theater, that's dance", or "that's not theater that's music", and where... It always seems to me that in the borders where two disciplines meet is a shaky area that's very alive. The wonderful thing about theater is that it can be so many things, it can be so many different kinds of relationships to the audience. So, I think it's always important with each project to, either [...] work with someone from a different discipline, or work with a subject matter that is interdisciplinary.

MB: I have read in your blog that you're interested also in neuroscience [...]. Is it important for you, that kind of relationship between art and science, as well?

AB: Very much so. Mainly because I think artists and scientists are working, in some ways, on the same issues. If you look at it historically, in say...1915, which is a big important moment, you have simultaneously [...] the discovery of the Uncertainty Principle, by Werner Heisenberg, [and the publication of] the General theory of Relativity [by Einstein], but then you also have Picasso's Cubism - suddenly the way you think about art and the experience [changed]. Then, in theater you also have some [discoveries]... I think that one of the reasons why Viewpoints is interesting, and why people are interested in it, is because it actually is a reflection of a new way of creating, and a new way of living, that is non-hierarchical much like a computer, or hyper text, is non-hierarchical. So it's a reflection of certain cultural changes that are happening - that the scientists are identifying, and the artists are finding forms for those things.

MB: Very interesting.

Beth Lopes: So what's your perception of the dissemination of your practices through SITI Company's international workshops?

AB: Well it's a two way street. Because every time we work internationally we change, because we learn something. So it's a bit selfish... in order to develop as artists we need international relationships, and to be challenged about our own ideas. I think every time you bring what you are used to in [your] training, for example, to an environment where it means something different then it allows us to look [at it] differently. I mean, I always find that when I'm in this country, I don't know who I am because that's all there is, but if I go to Japan I can really see what it means to be from this country. Similarly if I take my work, or training, into a different context: [for example] two weeks ago I did work with teenagers, and I had never done that before, and it was fantastic, and I learned more than they did. They are like a different culture, and I was very fed by that circumstance. So that's why the notion of international exchange is central to our mission, what we're doing.

BL: Is there any connection between your work as a director and your work as a professor?

AB: Absolutely. Yes. As I understand it, say, until the end of communism, in Russia, you could have two years to rehearse something, right? Now it's maybe two months, but here we have three weeks, that's it! So you can't do research inside of a rehearsal. Ideally if we had two years to work on one production, I wouldn't need to be a professor – meaning: I wouldn't need to put the research here and the rehearsal there. So, because our rehearsal period is so short - [...] for financial reasons - I need equally a time to do research. The work as a professor is what allows me to do time with the students in that kind of research. [...] And I also thought - there is a balance - which [...] comes from a notion that medical surgeons have, they say: one-third study, one-third practice, one-third teaching. And when I heard that I thought: - Oh! That's what I need too! I need one third of the time to study, one third of my time to practice, one third of my time to teach. If that gets messed up, if that ratio is too much directing [and] not enough teaching, I'm not so healthy. To keep enough time to study, enough time to direct [and] enough time to teach [is important] - they have to stay in balance with each other...

MB: Can you situate your work within contemporary theater? I know it's a very big question.

AB: When I went to graduate school I studied what's now called performance studies, at NYU [New York University] - then it was just called theater criticism or something [like that]. But I've always been interested in the relationship between where theater comes from and where it's going, not only historically but anthropologically and sociologically. My work has been to think about the past in a way that makes me understand how the forms are changing. So my mission in life is to alter the DNA of theater, to change it somehow, to

contribute to that development. That's where a lot of our work is, which is why sometimes you'd say that SITI Company is a company that does work for other theater people, that it gives them encouragement. But that's ok, it's meant to be, we think about that area where theater is going culturally...

MB: In terms of research on theater language or experimentation, do you think that you, with your company, try to do a research on hybridization, on hybrid languages as well?

AB: Do you mean literal, speaking, languages?

MB: No, in terms of theatrical codes.

AB: Yes, the answer is yes. And that's through a relationship to anthropology, sociology and the traditional forms in which theater is communicated and how those forms are morphing. [I am referring to] the way perception right now is changing because of the technology and what that means in terms of theater.

MB: Are you interested in breaking bounds as well because, for example, this experience with Martha Graham's Company [...] Are you interested in breaking bounds, [to] not define what is theater, what is dance, what is [...] other kinds of genres, theatrical genres?

AB: Yes!

MB: Ok, so last question: are you aware of the resonance produced in Brazil by your approach to Viewpoints, and would you be willing to lead a workshop in Brazil?

AB: No and yes. [Laughter] – No, Roberta Pereira tells me, right, that people pay attention in Brazil. I have no idea but I'd love to, yes.

MB: No, because Viewpoints [...], Suzuki also, but mainly Viewpoints has a huge resonance in Brazil.

AB: Well, it's so great that a lot of Brazilians come and train with us, which is fantastic, so I do know that. I'm happy to hear that, so, thank you for the report!

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Interview with director Anne Bogart made by Claudia Mele, Beth Lopes and Matteo Bonfitto at the office of SITI Company in New York on february 11, 2010. The interview was realized during the winter workshop in the Suzuki and Viewpoints methods that was taught by some of the actors of the company.

ANNE BOGART earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bard College (1974), and a Master of Arts degree from New York University's (1977). She is a Professor at Columbia University. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship; two Obie Awards; the New York Dance and Performance Award (the Bessie Award); the Villager Award; and a National Endowment for the Arts Artistic Associate Grant. She has worked as artistic director of the Trinity Repertory Theater and co-artistic director of Via Theater. In 1992, Anne founded the SITI Company together with the japanese director Tadashi Suzuki. Her works for SITI Company include: *Radio Macbeth*; *Hotel Cassiopeia*; *Death and the Ploughman*; *La Dispute*; *Score*; *bobrauschenbergamerica*; *Room*; *War of the Worlds*; *Cabin Pressure*; *The Radio Play*; *Alice's Adventures*; *Culture of Desire*; *Bob*; *Going, Going, Gone*; *Small Lives/Big Dreams*; *The Medium*; *Hay Fever* and *Private Lives*; *Miss Julie*; and *Orestes*. She is the author of several books concerning the actor's craftmanship: *A Director Prepares*; *And Then, You Act* and *The Viewpoints Book* among others.