

## THEATER

## Interview

## Bogart that joint

Avant-garde director Anne Bogart is counting on New York audiences for attitude



Quantum leap: Anne Bogart uses physics and poetry in her theatrical pieces.

You may be exhilarated or exasperated, yelling *Eureka!* or scratching your head, but you're bound to have some reaction to the work of Anne Bogart.

Adventurous audiences who trek to Columbia University's Miller Theater, where the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI) is in residence, are on notice to leave complacency behind. "Art is something that should question a lot of your assumptions," declares the fortysomething experimental theater director who founded SITI with the renowned Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992.

SITI is presenting three consecutive challenging productions that showcase Bogart's eclectic tastes and the skill of her company. In *Going, Going, Gone*, the relationship between two couples deteriorates as they drink through the night. It's similar in structure to a classic Albee play, only the banter is about quantum physics and the protagonists parry with complex mathematical ideas. In *The Medium*, the famous '60s pop culture media guru Marshall McLuhan falls, like Alice in Wonderland, through the warps of info-technology; and in *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, five survivors of a catastrophe spout dialogue from five Chekhov plays as they try to reconstruct their worlds.

In that vaguely defined region called the American avant-garde theater, Bogart shares an

undisputed place with such innovators as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, JoAnne Akalaitis and the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte. But she isn't easy to pin down. Over the years, she's directed Paula Vogel's delicate and whimsical *The Baltimore Waltz*; a highly controversial revisionist NYU student production of *South Pacific*; Clare Boothe Luce's *The Women at Hartford Stage*; and Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins* at New York City Opera.

"Theater can be so many things," says Bogart. Nevertheless, she says SITI has become the center of her life. Modeling the group on dance companies, Bogart hopes to establish a repertory of work that will outlive the original creators. At a recent Martha Graham retrospective, she sat in shock as she discovered that nearly 50 years after it was created, the great modern dance pioneer's work was "still almost embarrassingly revelatory of her sensibility."

Trying to describe Bogart's work would stump even her most ardent fans; however, the three pieces in the current SITI season are governed by what she calls an "aesthetic of sampling." *Going, Going, Gone*, for example, "samples" T.S. Elliot, William Blake, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and conversations between physicists downloaded from the Internet. In its genesis may lie a clue to that elusive quality that keeps drawing loyal audiences to Bogart's work.

While reading an article about Stephen Hawking more than a decade ago, Bogart decided to teach herself the basics of quantum mechanics, but whenever she got to the mind-boggling equations, she'd give up. Once, however, during a long car ride, she was listening to a layman's guide on tape and when it got to the brain-teasing parts, she stopped paying attention and started admiring the scenery instead. "All of a sudden, I wanted to shout," Bogart says, "because I suddenly understood the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle." She decided she would create a theater piece in which she would provide the audience with a similar distraction—the boozing and bickering couples of *Going, Going, Gone*—so that an understanding of the Theory of Relativity could sneak up on the audience from behind.

Bogart offers the best description of her work by comparing it to watching a foreign film without subtitles. "You don't understand the language, but then all of a sudden you sort of do understand—you pick up enough of the clues." Despite SITI's success both internationally and in other American cities, Bogart is counting on New York for attitude: "The audience here brings a sense of rigor and event, a little bit of meanness and yet openness, and a certain kind of history that is hard to find in the shopping malls of Southern California," she says. "My hope is that New York audiences will meet the adventure of it and not be soothed by it." —Gerard Raymond Saratoga International Theater Institute Festival is at Columbia University's Miller Theater, now through Jun 7. See *Off-Off Broadway*.



Red dawn: Idle hands are the Devils' playground.

## The Devils

By Elizabeth Eglloff. Dir. Garland Wright. With ensemble cast. New York Theatre Workshop (see *Off Broadway*).

Something is rotten in the state of Czarist Russia. A ragtag group of revolutionaries awaits the return of their exiled god, Nicholas Stavrogin, an aristocrat's son with a short fuse. These workmen see him as the deity of a new Russia struggling to be born. But when Nicholas returns, he's as mad as a rabid dog. Instead of helping to plot the downfall of the corrupt and incompetent Governor Lembke (Michael Arkin), he takes a big, bloody bite out of the old codger's ear. Haunted by his own sins, he can't be bothered by the sins of an ailing nation.

Elizabeth Eglloff's *The Devils* claims to take inspiration from Dostoyevsky's novel, yet its diffuse, plot-heavy structure renders few of the great novelist's demons onstage. Eglloff's devils, such as they are, seem to have been pickled in the

brine of countless American gangster movies: Comic, bumbling fatcats rule the roost, while bad-seed Nicholas haunts the boudoir of his lower-class mistress sulkily saying, "Nobody can save Russia." A conspiracy is afoot to kill the governor and foment a workers' strike, but Nicholas won't lift a hand to help his former disciples (Bill Camp, in this central role, is a study in preening inanity). Searing his conscience are his flashbacks of the rape of a child, represented by a mechanized door that glows tumescent red and is inscribed with the legend, "I killed God." Meanwhile, a morose philosopher, Kirilov (a lacerating performance by James Colby), prepares himself to take the rap for the conspirators, swilling black tea from his samovar as though it were liquid nitrogen.

Eglloff juxtaposes her nihilists against a parade of garish Russian aristocrats, but the social satire feels diluted, reconstituted from the leers of various 19th-century novels. Director Garland Wright has stocked his large cast with fine actors, and set designer Douglas Stein creates a stunning architectural habitat. But Eglloff gives them little flesh and blood to work with. Although her play is as long (three and a half hours) and as complex as a Shakespearean tragedy, Eglloff makes it devilishly difficult to sustain our interest; there's a vacuum at its center. —Pamela Renner

## Suburban Motel: Criminal Genius

By George F. Walker. Dir. Daniel DeRay. With ensemble cast. Theatre Off Park (see *Off Broadway*).

Violence, pathos, humor and tragedy: While there's no denying these strong elements in *Criminal Genius*, George F. Walker's ode to the malcontents of this world, rarely does so much add up to so little.

The second in a series of six plays (the cycle will be completed this fall) all set in the same room of a suburban motel—hence the umbrella title—*Genius* throws five dimwitted sadsacks together in a life-and-death situation.

There's Rolly (Dan Moran) and his son Stevie (Jim Grollman), a couple of bumbling crooks who've just botched their biggest job to date—torching a restaurant—because they "don't do violence." Instead, they've taken the chef (Cheryl Gaysunas) hostage, which turns out to be a problem once Shirley (Carolyn Swift), their gun-wielding boss, shows up and reveals that their human bargaining chip is the daughter of the bigwig they were doing the job for. He's always done everything in his power to make his daughter's life hell and would just as soon see her dead. Of course, this blunder sets the stage for more tiresome, fuck-you-laden dialogue than might be mined from Quentin Tarantino's entire oeuvre.

Throw into the mix an alcoholic hotel manager (Mark Hammer) who innocently gets sucked into plan B, a plot



Bound and gagged: *Geniuses* at work and play.

hatched by the chef (don't ask) to kill her father, and you've certainly got the ingredients of a dark, absurd comedy. So why doesn't it work?

To be sure, *Genius* is fairly brimming with well-observed, madcap moments born out of hysteria, panic, loneliness and other assorted human frailties. But the characters are one-dimensional and Walker's harsh, repetitive script never reconciles the comedy with the drama. Under Daniel DeRay's aggressive direction, the whole affair unfurls like a progressively grating *Who's on First?* What's funny in the beginning grows static by the end. It's unfortunate, because the actors have a wild, firecracker snap to them that gets a little trampled amid all the yelling, screaming and gunfire. Finally browbeaten, one starts to sympathize with Shirley, who seems to delight in commanding everyone to "Shut up!" Let's hope that Van Santvoord's perfectly anonymous motel room set is put to better use as the cycle continues. —Sam Whitehead