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Bree Hadley

Review – Anne Bogart, *And then, you act: making art in an unpredictable world* (Routledge 2007)

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Noted for her work with the Viewpoints, a set of physical training techniques she offers to counter the obsession with psychological motivations characteristic of so-called 'Stanislavskian' training systems in the United States, Anne Bogart has become a touchstone for many theatre-makers over the past decade or two. In her latest book, Bogart deliberately transcends the physical work described in *The Viewpoints Book* (2005), and the preparatory work described in *A Director Prepares* (2001), to develop possibilities for meaningful action through theatre 'during times of difficulty'(1). Bogart argues that technique, though critical, can only truly be useful when understood in the context of the drive, the necessity, that compels a theatre-maker to act in and through their chosen medium. It is this compulsion, and strategies for capturing and directing this compulsion, that forms the axis around which this book's provocations unfold.

Written in the anecdotal style familiar from *A Director Prepares*, this book in many ways functions as a call to action to American theatre-makers. According to Bogart, '[t]he United States is, at present, culturally starved' (113). It is a society of spectacle, swept up in an overwhelming onslaught of mass-media images and market propaganda that tells its citizens what to think (82, 116-117). This means many Americans have been 'sidetracked by the attractions of fame, success, and individuality' (5). They have, to Bogart's dismay, been discouraged from digging below the surface of things, developing connections with others, or drawing conclusions based on anything beyond their own media filtered point of view (120). The thirst for 'significant and substantive unmediated public conversation' (117) about the things that matter has dissipated. Not least, the nation's theatre-making has been limited by an emphasis on form (107) at the expense of work with motivation, content and context that might provide a way of creating new meanings in a complex, unpredictable world. With this condemnation of 'the myriad opiates of self-centered satisfaction' (4) that surround her as a starting point, Bogart challenges theatre-makers to find, articulate and amplify the forces that drive them to act. She agitates for a theatre that has the power to remedy America's famine of the spirit (43), to do something meaningful in aesthetic, social and political spheres.

In this context, it is not surprising that Bogart begins with September 11, 2001, the biggest paradigm shift the United States has witnessed in decades, in order to open up a discussion of the power significant socio-political events hold to shift the lens through which we see our world (3). She speaks of the *Betronffenheit*, the shocked, silent moment in the aftermath of world-changing events as an uncertain, liminal space. 'In this gap,' she says, 'definitions

disappear and certainty vanishes. Anything is possible – any response, any action’ (2). The ground against which we understand our world is stripped away, things are ‘up for grabs’ (3), including the chance to challenge conventional signifiatory systems. It is in this moment, Bogart suggests, the we can use symbolic action to start imagining new meanings, new worlds, providing we do not rush to fill the gap the way Americans filled the gap following September 11, 2001 with patriotism (3). Whilst it is easy to become impotent and inarticulate in the wake of such events, Bogart brings readers back to the Wittgensteinian imperative to at least point to what matters most (20-21) – to make a measured response that recontextualises the fiction to suit the current circumstances, signal the new concerns, and speak back to them.

From this point, Bogart structures the book as a series of frames through which theatre-makers might conceive their intervention into the status quo, including chapters on context, articulation, intention, attention, magnetism, attitude, content and time. The titles are reminiscent of, if more attitudinal than, the themes Bogart used to structure *A Director Prepares* (violence, eroticism, terror, etc.), and, indeed, this book recalls some of the same examples. The book’s anecdotal basis means I am limited to giving the broad brushstrokes of some of those frames here. The emphasis throughout the book is, as the titles suggest, on what you do, for whom, when, why and how. Theatre-makers must, Bogart says (35), consider the intentions that motivate them to act, identifying them, intensifying them, and framing the act so that it will carry specific meanings, created by specific juxtapositions, in specific social contexts. It is this framing that makes the act art (38). These intentions are, in Bogart’s estimation, best identified by an attentive response to the changing configurations of the world around us – the same sort of responsiveness that comes with being ‘wildly alive and present’ (55) in the rehearsal room. This attentiveness is, she says, ‘about going beyond self-interest, but at the same time remaining intensely in tune and responsive from within’ (54). By actively taking up an attitude, a stance toward the world, we can start to form a response (99, 105). Articulation, accessing the combination of language, image and context that will unlock the new possibilities we are looking for, remains a challenge (18). But Bogart suggests theatre-makers channel the frustrations into their art (19-20). Theatre makers should, she says, strive for articulacy from a changing, uncertain, unbalanced place – be it a stage, or a social space. This articulacy is what provides the compelling, contextually relevant, images of the human capacity for change Bogart believes spectators respond to (89). It provides the alchemical catalyst for the transformations that make theatre magnetic. A magnetism that is, Bogart claims, as much about affect, and about power, as about meaning, and is achieved through ‘empathy, entertainment, ritual, participation, spectacle, education, and alchemy’ (64). American theatre needs to recapture this affect, Bogart says, to regain a power that is aesthetic rather than anaesthetic (114). As she works through these frames for action, though, Bogart (as in *The Viewpoints Book*) stresses the need to ‘make haste slowly’ – to present action clearly, without destroying the complexity (105), or denying the spectator their imaginative work (77). She says

‘You cannot force things to happen at a particular time, but you can prepare and pave the way for the eventuality of expression in the same way that you pave the way for

visits of inspiration in your daily life: you create the proper conditions and circumstances. And then, you act' (139).

Reading this book, I found the force of Bogart's desire to do something compelling. In this respect, she did succeed in pulling me into her passion, her faith, and her fervent belief in art's social potential. But I also found myself wondering whether Bogart's faith in theatre as a distinctive form of social action (123) was taken too far at points, producing totalising declarations about its social and political efficacy (perhaps partly as a result of the personal, anecdotal, at times nearly aphoristic tone). It is important, it seems to me, not to let our desire for a theatre that does something in the social sphere distract from the possibility that the effect may not be unique to theatre, or from the ephemeral, contingent nature of the effect – a concern Bogart herself raises toward the end of the book (127). Important, also, not to let it conceal the cultural contingency of this effect. In summarising this book's contribution, I suggested it functions as a call to action to American theatre-makers, and I do think the national designation is important. During the contextualising discussion of the way in which September 11, 2001 changed the lens by which Americans view themselves, and their isolation from or imbrication in a broader world (3), I was distinctly aware of my own distance from Bogart's social milieu. Bogart does later emphasise a need for Americans to explore the possibility that the world might look different from another perspective (120), if not the idea that there might be more than one 'world', but the idea is not always applied back into her discussion of the lenses through which theatre-makers approach their work as fully as it might be.

But this may be too much to ask of a book that is, at its core, a personal statement of artistic mission designed to inspire others interested in art, politics and the possibility of social change. Approached in these terms, the book gives a strong sense of the urgency with which one of the world's foremost theatre-makers meets the task of making transformative work that will leave the audience alive and energised by the encounter (111). Most worth reading in those moments when the frustrations of making the work make you question its potential for meaningful impact, perhaps.