"HOW DO YOU MEASURE THE FORCE OF A GLANCE OR THE WEIGHT OF A SMILE?"

The actors move with darkening precision through concentric circles of dis-integration, accompanied by the crossing signals of a razor-dissonant violin. They seem to be searching for a link, a scrap of logic, a connection the mind meant to make. Wanted to make. Tried to make. Failed to make.

Darron L. West's sound design courses through the room, floating the performers on a deep lexicon of wheedling audio irritants as they speak. The moorings are lost. Insecurity takes hold. Non sequiturs rain down. And what might have become a shower curtain in Hitchcock's hands is turning, on West's mixing board, into an itchy dance of shimmering veils that barely hides the stabbing emergency of communication crashing.

"Do you know who you are?" Ellen Lauren flips the question across the room as West's murmur of a dial tone cranks to a blare.

"What is the last thing you remember?" Akiko Aizawa peers ahead, alarmed, and an impatient busy signal opens up a new headache.

"But am I here or am I there?" J. Ed Araiza's wonderment finally drops the floor of all reason out from under a set of personalities who, minutes before, were going through the dissolute paces of the young working-class characters of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1969 film *Katzelmacher*.

Now they're all guest workers in a baffling country suddenly stripped of its landmarks. This is amnesia. It's the "bad infinity," to borrow Mac Wellman's resonant phrase. Anne Bogart's new production *Who Do You Think You Are* (coincidentally dovetailing with curator Paola Antonelli's current exhibition, "Design and the Elastic Mind," at New York City's Museum of Modern Art) explores "neuroplasticity"—can your mind, Bogart wants to know, study itself as time, space, memory and certitude are all stretched out of shape?
"Who do you think you are?" Barney O'Hanlon lays out the titular question. The accusation makes an eerie echo to West's sound score with its metaphoric put-down: "We're sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed."

And the Saratoga International Theater Institute's mission cannot be completed as planned.

Now, don't misunderstand. The artists of Anne Bogart's 15-year-old performance and training collective would like you to be quickly assured that they're nowhere near the harrowing brain-science breakdown explored in Who Do You Think You Are. The piece gets its March 1 premiere at Arizona State University in Tempe and is expected to be seen at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs in June and at Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts after that (ASU and the Wexner have co-commissioned the piece).

"But personally, I'm faced with a dilemma," says Bogart, seated in the rented New York office she shares with SITI Company's managing director and associate managing director, Megan Wanlass Szalla and Brad Carlin. She credits these two impossibly upbeat souls with the organizational savvy that has secured SITI's studio space. It was carefully situated by Szalla above a wardrobe storage area so that no one below will have to endure the wall-shaking unison stomping exercises with which the company's meticulously trained bodies, now aged 27 to 69, resynchronize the synapses of their collaboration at the start of every rehearsal.

The dilemma? Not enough stomping: This conclave of master performers convenes much too rarely. To make ends meet and spread their highly prized way of working, they're constantly on the road in teaching stints of two to four weeks, in the U.S. and offshore.

"Because SITI Company has become very popular, everybody is stretched to the max," Bogart says. "Every major university wants us there. Just in the New York area, we send out actors to Juilliard, NYU and Columbia"—that's where Professor Bogart heads the graduate directing program, her other full-time job. "We're in Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, you name it."

This diaspora is undermining the theory and practice it's meant to support. The collaborators can't collaborate. SITI does well to get just one new work on its feet each year. Major achievements of the past can't be revived and kept in repertory, notably The Medium, a work that seems particularly necessary in today's BlackBerry patch. SITI's 1993 evocation of Marshall McLuhan's observations predicted with devastating compassion many of the most isolating, distracting and nerve-sanding
aspects of today's teched-out tumble through the global village. And yet the show is nowhere to be seen.

The time has come for SITI to plant a flag, stake out some turf, find a court to hold. Where this SITIstate may be built might well depend on, well, who reads this article.

Are you at a college or university that could use a full-blown, world-class, certified auteur and her 17 formidably dedicated, credentialed, mid-career teacher-artists as a ready-made conservatory? (Could someone get a copy of this story to the folks at Bard College?)

How about a performing arts center? Are you reading this in an executive director's office, the walls of which have at times heard you mutter about how much easier it would be if you had an honest-to-God, drop-dead professional, one-of-a-kind company of your own? You'd save on all that loading-dock wear and tear when the buses and trucks pull in. (Note: SITI does not do Cats, although producer Cameron Mackintosh would purr for SITI's brand of genius.)

Think even more broadly. Where's a retreat that could crown its nurturance of visiting artists with the permanent residence of this proven powerhouse? (Speaking of Saratoga Springs, there's the tireless Elaina Richardson, president of the artists' colony Yaddo. This is a big year for Yaddo. Its garden pergola of Ionic columns is being restored. And in October, an unprecedented archival exhibition from Yaddo opens at the New York Public Library. Coincidentally, the companion book on that exhibition is being published by the press at Columbia University, where Bogart teaches.)

Slightly more broadly: Where could a retreat that could crown its nurturance of visiting artists with the permanent residence of this proven powerhouse? (Speaking of Saratoga Springs, there's the tireless Elaina Richardson, president of the artists' colony Yaddo. This is a big year for Yaddo. Its garden pergola of Ionic columns is being restored. And in October, an unprecedented archival exhibition from Yaddo opens at the New York Public Library. Coincidentally, the companion book on that exhibition is being published by the press at Columbia University, where Bogart teaches.)

Think even more broadly: Which of our greatest museums is secure enough in its own position to seize on a chance to adopt the theatrical confab behind *bobrauschenbergamerica,* Hotel Cassiopeia (written by Charles Mee about artist Joseph Cornell) and two still upcoming works in Bogart's visual-arts cycle? One of those pieces, *Under Construction,* is rooted in the Americana influence of such figures as Norman Rockwell. The other, *Soot and Spit,* considers the outsider artist James Castle. (Did someone mention MoMA?)

One word of caution to any who might be thinking seriously about the proposal now on the table before us: Autonomy. More about that in a bit.

"SITI COMPANY NEEDS A HOME." BOGART, SHE OF THE HOGARTHIAN visage, has never looked more serene than she does as she broaches this subject. She's sure. She knows what she's talking about.

"I need to concentrate my life into one unified, yet diversified, effort. I have a particular need to bring this group together to magnify the force inwards, and to have people come to us instead of us going to them. We need a theatre to perform in. We need to bring back pieces that were made 15 years ago. We need to have a living repertory, a place people can come to see pieces we made a while back, to look at our archives, a place to house our library. And we need a place where we train for more than two weeks or six weeks, a place where we can take people through a training program in which they've probably performed with us before they're done. Then they leave carrying forward something radical and vital in the world of theatre art.

"We're talking about full immersion year-round."
From left, Stephen Webber, Ellen Lauren and Will Bond in SITI's Death and the Ploughman.

"The strongest program we have now is our four weeks in Saratoga [at Skidmore College], where we're all together. People move through that crucible for four weeks and they come out altered. And it's just because we're all together—not a matter of just sending out a couple of people to teach at Brandeis.

"This is about making a center where all of our energies can be concentrated so that we make a bigger impact in the world. And, by the way, this is not a new idea."

Where she's going with that last comment won't surprise those who know Bogart's writings. In fact, they may be struck when they see Who Do You Think You Are by its repeated listings of the four main areas of the brain—the occipital, parietal, temporal and frontal lobes. Never far, it seems, from her sense of kinship to the career of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Bogart nodded to the master's 1936 An Actor Prepares in the title of her own 2001 book from Routledge, A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art in Theatre.

"During his life," she writes, "Stanislavsky found systems to engage the frontal lobe of the actor's brain" in order to get the artist's consciousness-of-performance to step aside and let characterization reign. "Greatly influenced by Pavlov's theories of conditioned reflexes and certain discoveries in the enticing, new frontier of the unconscious," she comments in another section, "Stanislavsky had developed methods of actor training that resulted in an arresting psychological realism and a remarkable acting ensemble able to portray human behavior ultra-realistically."

Bogart's own technique might well have fascinated the Russian she writes about, but with the sympathy of a colleague in the mirror. Racing toward Stanislavsky from the other end of the spectrum, she has cinched an unmistakable stylization for her company, barefoot-grounded to the floor by the severe movement discipline of Tadashi Suzuki. The SITI actors do all that gorgeous Suzuki-steeped stomping to music by West that sounds like what you'd hear if Bertolt Brecht picked you up for a ride in his rickshaw.

That frontal lobe is still being distracted, but in Bogart's "system," muscle has become the medium of the mind—and so integral to stage interpretation is the brain-body link that her company can deliver a line from today's mall-mindless vernacular with the force of something out of Sophocles. Listen when Ellen Lauren in Who Do You Think You Are whirls into a languid Comédie-Française-class bravura, declaims like a good Racine-ry chewer: "We all look for an explanation of why things happen to us, and 'shit just happens' is not an adequate explanation!"

One long era away from Stanislavsky, Bogart believes in ditching delusions. "I've learned that when the Moscow Art Theatre came to the United States in 1923, it wasn't an acting technique that people were blown away by. They thought it was. But at this birth of Modernism, people had never seen other people relate in the ways that were happening on stage in Stanislavsky's work, in this company that had been together so long. They were moved by seeing a society—a society that was proposing a new way to be in the world.

"What I'm finding is that what we're making is not one play after the next, but that the plays are an expression of ways that we've learned to be together, radical new ways of being humans. And what the theatre can do is propose alternate ways of peeling back the barriers, of melting away the assumptions and the constrictions that this particular social moment puts on us. Those restrictions are very, very tight, and the temporal aspect, the time aspect, is tight, in particular."

Bogart feels the tightness of time in the pressure to anchor her ensemble. But she agrees that finding the home SITI needs means getting to the right place, not just any place.

And that gets us back to that term "autonomy."
THE SEARCH FOR A SITISTATE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

The solution that comes most readily to mind in terms of a home for SITI, of course, is an educational setting in which the company can teach—probably a university, perhaps a school with a proud undergraduate theatre program but no graduate MFA component.

IN TALKING TO A COUPLE OF LONG-EXPERIENCED VETERANS...
and sexuality. These young people are post-AIDS, remember, and the romance is gone.

"I've talked with them about it and found out that it's also tied to a loss of free play in their lives as children. You don't just go out for an afternoon and play, then come in for dinner. Everything now seems to be much more regimented—kids are into activities that are goal- and performance-oriented. A playful relationship to your body, in that case, doesn't come naturally from being out in the environment anymore.

"So this kind of training could be very valuable," O'Neal says. "But any organization thinking about taking on the company has to consider that it's putting all their training and sexuality, These young people are out that it's also tied to a loss of free play. They're having to do to make the complicated 'seasons' of their own lives work out."

Bogart's production of Sarah Ruhl's Dead Man's Cell Phone, for instance, runs through March 23 at Playwrights Horizons. "At times, we can't even get a company meeting together because everybody is..."

"...spread out." Bogart checks her watch. She has made a point of announcing earlier in the conversation that so precious are her chances to work with her artists that she will be on her stool in-studio, composed and Martha Graham—intent, ready to whisper her to assistants, precisely at noon. "Not at 12:01. At 12 o'clock. Not one stomping foot will fall without her.

And she readily grasps the cautionary encouragement of Zeder and O'Neal. "We do require autonomy," she says. "We can't be sucked into an academic policy of 'this is the way we've always done it.' Our organization is run in a very unconventional way, but it also is an expression of what's happening on stage. It's not hierarchical up to a certain point, and yet there is a hierarchy. It's collaborative, and yet there are decisions made. It's a very unusual situation but it's also a new paradigm.

"Here we are working on this piece about the brain, Who Do You Think You Are. I was doing a workshop last year at the University of North Carolina and I invited an eminent neurophysiologist named R. Grant Steen [The Evolving Brain: The Known and the Unknown, Prometheus, 2007] to a final showing of a Viewpoints workshop. Afterward he said, 'What I was just watching on stage is how neurons in the brain function.' And I was knocked out. Having studied neurons and how synaptic pathways function, I get it. What the Viewpoints system does proposes a different way of being—as in the old days with the theory of relativity, Cubism and the explosion of Modernism in 1915 or thereabouts. Right now in the turn of this century, another paradigm is happening. I think it's visible. I think it's sharable. And I think that audiences can learn it by being in the room with it. It takes a little getting used
to. But I keep thinking about what happened in Louisville over the years.”

SITI has made successive Humana Festival appearances at Actors Theatre of Louisville—six in all between 1996 and 2006. “The first year I went there, people said, ‘What?’ The second year, they said, ‘Hm.’ The third year, they started rolling up their sleeves and getting into what we were doing,” says Bogart. “It takes a certain immersion in time to realize that you’re being asked to participate in a profound way, either as an actor in the collaborative process, or as an audience in a collaborative process—which is about the audience, ultimately, because actors are the extension of the audience: They’re acting for the audience. Audiences are, in fact, ‘mirror neurons,’ exercising the same neuronal and muscular activity the actors are, by watching.”

“Cogito ergo sum.” That’s Will Bond, called Bondo, a veteran of work with Mee, Suzuki and Robert Wilson and one of these committed SITI artists who is searching his own mind for the key to the turning point his company has reached. He’s in the studio calling the rehearsal cacophony to a shuddering stillness with his lines from Who Do You Think You Are.

“If you know nothing else,” says Bondo, “it’s that you are here, experiencing this. Time passes and sensations come and go. But we remain....”

With what tender hope he trails off! What should have been a statement isn’t. Not yet. He’s waiting. The artists of SITI are waiting for the “mirror neurons” of the wider community to respond to their call for help.

More than a decade ago, I was asked to write an article for one of many Actors Theatre of Louisville presentations of Bogart and SITI. More than a decade later, the proposition that article contained remains unanswered. So I’ll put it to you again. And wait, finally, with these artists, to hear your response:

I’d like to think that the dwindling number of Americans who still distinguish serious theatre from entertainment might gather around Bogart to form a protectorate for her work. As Peter Brook has his Bouffes du Nord and International Center of Theatre Research in Paris, as Mnouchkine has her Cartoucherie as home to her Théâtre du Soleil, as Suzuki has his mountainside development and performance center at Toga, Bogart needs a sanctuary. She needs something central to the remaining American theatre audience. She needs something with a lease as long as the Joseph Papp Public Theater has, with pockets as deep as Lincoln Center has, with an agenda as determined as Actors Theatre has. I hope for Bogart the sanctuary she deserves, a place to make that “pocket of memory” she knows theatre can be.

Porter Anderson is senior producer with CNN.com/Live, a service of the Time Warner CNN News Group, offering anchored real-time streaming news in up to four simultaneous feeds to your computer. He is based at CNN Center in Atlanta.