

SITI Company and the Actor's Theatre of Louisville

Hotel Cassiopeia

by Mark Russell

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Anne Bogart's SITI Company is an American theater success story. Almost any American theater ensemble would envy their press attention, ability to tour, to teach, and most of all their ability to keep their company paid and together over many years of work. SITI is one of the best representatives of ensemble theater work from our shores and has had great impact on the field.

From the outside SITI makes this look easy. It is due to the tremendous gentle talent of Anne Bogart that they have achieved all their success with such grace. Her wisdom when it comes to finding the core of a play extends to every element of her company's practice. Bogart has created a world where her unique theater training informs the company and informs the work. Her internationally renowned Viewpoints technique opens avenues to creating a lateral not vertical hierarchy; it is about empowering all of her collaborators, actors, designers, and writers, extending as well as to the company's producer and presenter relationships. SITI has a commitment to ensemble in all respects; it is a holistic approach to making theater that does not end at the stage door.

However the SITI Company is facing a crisis that few independent theater companies get the chance to encounter. They have come to a point of maturity and prominence in the field but find themselves, as so many American artists do, still working with the same resources they did shortly after they started. It is a crisis of becoming an institution or being perceived that way, yet not having a consistent artistic home in the city where they live, New York City. It is a crisis of always having to be reactive to the field and not in complete control of their own destiny. It is the crisis of not being able to plan for healthy long-range success, to build on the success they have.

This challenge is compounded by the present economic climate that is affecting the whole of the United States and of course having great impact on the arts. The options for a company like SITI to support their work are limited when engagements, commissions, and funding are drying up. SITI is healthier than most companies, but they are facing enormous challenges.

The Arts Presenters' (ETC Grant that resulted in the creation of *Hotel Cassiopeia* was instrumental in getting the company to look at their long-range plans. The luxury of having their own sizable grant to bring to the producing table gave them a taste of what could be. It is hard to return to life as it was before. In a sense it spurred a spiritual crisis.

The SITI Company

The SITI Company is one of the most respected and successful ensemble theaters in the United States. Led by the visionary director Anne Bogart, the company has existed since 1992. They maintain a roster of seventeen collaborators: actors, designers, and writers. SITI also has a professional support staff of three people. Their current budget is just under a million dollars.

SITI does not have a permanent theater home. Instead they tour and present their work through other organizations, such as Women's Project and the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave

Festival in New York, in addition to The Actor's Theatre of Louisville, The Wexner Center, The Walker Art Center and many others across the U.S. They have also appeared overseas in several international festivals. SITI maintains an office and rehearsal space in New York City, their base of operations.

Anne Bogart began working at the New York University Experimental Theater Wing in 1977. It was there she met choreographer Mary Overlie and developed her own version of Overlie's Six Viewpoints process which Overlie had invented for dance performance. Bogart adapted it for theater.

Bogart's Viewpoints are organized by Time, Space and Shape which are subdivided into the nine Viewpoints: Duration, Tempo, Kinesthetic Response, Repetition, Architecture, Topography, Shape, Spatial Relationship and Gesture. It is a vocabulary, once shared, that allows a group of actors to create and generate work quickly, spontaneously and intuitively. It can be used as a warm-up exercise, an improvisation technique or a way for actors to work in rehearsal. It is a way for individuals and a group to think and act upon movement and gesture and to create a deeper, more layered theatrical composition.

The Viewpoints has had a substantial impact on the creation of theater in the U.S. It is now taught around the country and the world: many companies base their work on its precepts. The Viewpoints has become a prime creative tool for countless directors and ensembles. The SITI Company teaches the Viewpoints year round in classes and workshops in New York City and internationally.

In 1992 Anne and the innovative Japanese theater master Tadashi Suzuki created the SITI Company, an ensemble-based theater company whose three on-going components are the creation of new work, the training of young theater artists, and a commitment to international collaboration. The company has created over twenty-eight productions. Most of those have toured to at least two different sites and received great critical attention. Since 1991 Anne Bogart has been head of the Masters directing program at Columbia University.

Hotel Cassiopeia

The SITI Company received an Arts Presenters ETC grant in 2004 for their show *Hotel Cassiopeia*. Their partner in the project was the Actor's Theatre of Louisville Kentucky. *Hotel Cassiopeia* was developed in a creative laboratory residency in New York by the company in December 2005. It was produced and premiered as a part of the ATL Humana Festival of New American Plays in February of 2006. *Hotel Cassiopeia* is the second production in a project the company calls The American Museum Cycle that will eventually consist of four separate shows.

The SITI Company has had a long relationship with the Actor's Theatre of Louisville. They began their collaboration with *The Medium* in 1995 under Jon Jory, the original artistic director of ATL and the Humana Festival of New American Plays. The company was able to continue the relationship under Marc Masterson, the current Artistic Director. Louisville is a second home of sorts for the company; through their many visits they have developed a loyal following there.

Hotel Cassiopeia was a ground-breaking project for the two entities. For the first time in their long relationship, the SITI Company was able to come to the table with their own resources for the project. ATL helped by writing letters of support but essentially did not raise project money for the production, supporting it from their operating budget. ATL supported the physical production of “Hotel Cassiopeia” and paid the company an artists fee, a fee commensurate with what ATL usually lays out for artist costs for a show in the Jon Jory Theater when they are fully producing the show themselves. In this co-production arrangement, the SITI Company made up for the difference in the fee received from ATL and their own artists costs – their weekly actor salaries are higher than the rates usually paid for productions in the Jon Jory -- with their own funds, including the Arts Presenters Grant

ATL uses this method of payment quite often when working with ensembles. A straight fee goes to the company usually equal to what they would pay for a production that was built from scratch at ATL. The ownership of the project is the same; Marc Masterson, the artistic director of ATL, is not interested in whether he is considered a presenter or producer, he is interested in accumulating the resources to do the project and make it a success, “I don’t care who does the payroll.” All of the shows in the Humana Festival are considered full productions of ATL, whether made by an ensemble or not. They receive the same amount of attention and support.

Masterson considered the production of *Hotel Cassiopeia* “absolutely successful” from ATL’s point of view. It was “personally satisfying” to him since he had worked with the company when he ran the Pittsburgh’s City Theater. He has worked on ten productions with the SITI Company during his career.

Masterson saw ATL’s collaboration with SITI as an extension of the original vision of ATL, which employed an ensemble acting company for over twenty years. Once part of the dream of a regional American theater movement, most of the resident ensemble companies in the U.S have gone away: they are now a rarity. Working with groups like the SITI Company affords ATL and its audiences the chance to participate in productions where the actors perform together over an extended period of time. The richness of such performances is hard to replicate. Several of SITI’s actors have appeared in non-SITI company productions at ATL, furthering their relations with the Louisville audience.

The collaboration also fulfills ATL’s mission to move new American theater into the larger repertory of world theater. Ensembles keep the work of ATL alive on the road, touring to all parts of the country. They are able to keep the productions active in their repertory for long periods of time. Masterson found it especially gratifying to see *Hotel Cassiopeia* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music many months after its premiere at Humana. From one of his smaller spaces the production had grown – not in sets and effects but in breadth and maturity -- to command a much larger stage.

The increased funding due to the Arts Presenters grant allowed SITI to have an extended three-week creative residency in New York, their home city, before going to Louisville and completing the development of the show. This creative residency or creative lab, arranged during Anne Bogart’s holiday break from her responsibilities at Columbia University, allowed the company concentrated time to work in their own rehearsal space with actors paid full salaries. Chuck Mee, author of *Hotel Cassiopeia*, was able to sit in on rehearsals, as were the designers. This was a

research and development time for the project that led to the more structured rehearsal time in Louisville.

The set for *Hotel Cassiopeia* was built to tour even though that added costs to the construction. It was built by ATL for the premiere, an unusual occurrence for most American theater projects; most sets are made to be trashed after the final performance. The set became SITI's property after the initial run of the show.

ATL staff visited the creative residency in New York and dedicated one of their dramaturgs to work with the production from the beginning. The SITI Company was given a four-week rehearsal period leading up to the premiere, two of those weeks on the fully-constructed set, something the company has rarely been afforded when working without this extra funding.

The *Hotel Cassiopeia* premiere at the Humana Festival had a great impact on the future life of the project. The Humana Festival for New American Plays attracts producers and presenters from around the world especially during their VIP weekend programs. At VIP weekends, professionals in the field, producers, presenters and agents, can experience 4-7 shows in three days. This allowed the SITI Company to reach many of their prospective presenting partners and invite them to experience the show in person. A tour was lined up for *Hotel Cassiopeia* over the next two seasons: the Court Theater in Chicago, Arizona State University, and SUNY Purchase, culminating in a high profile New York production at the BAM Next Wave Festival in 2007. Though some of these relationships and interest in the show pre-dated its Louisville run, all of these engagements were confirmed as a result of the appearance at the Humana Festival.

Hotel Cassiopeia was an artistic leap for the company; they call it their "quiet piece." The company had just completed the first part of their American Museum Cycle *bobrauschenbergamerica*, which was a spectacular, raucous investigation of Robert Rauschenberg and pop art. *Hotel Cassiopeia*, which focuses on the work of Joseph Cornell, was very different in tone, much more introspective and cerebral. Finding that delicate balance in the piece required patience and time.

The company discovered the usefulness of a creative lab before going into production rehearsals. The Arts Presenters' grant allowed for this important extra creative time. The company was pleased with the results and is endeavoring to make a creative lab part of every future production when possible, depending, of course, on funding.

Actor's Theatre of Louisville was a full partner in the development of the work, not just a presenter of the final product. ATL, especially with Masterson at the helm, has been at the forefront of regional theaters opening their institutions to devised and ensemble work. This deeper involvement cemented SITI's relationship with the Louisville community and the staff of ATL. SITI has since been invited back to create another chapter in the American Museum Cycle, *Under Construction*, based on the work of Norman Rockwell and written by Charles Mee. *Under Construction* premiered at the 2009 Humana Festival to great acclaim. In the lobby of the theater was a photo exhibit commemorating all of the productions Bogart and the SITI Company had created or shown in Louisville at ATL.

If there were any problems in the collaboration, it was the distribution of costs related to the project. In the past ATL picked up all of the costs related to producing a show with SITI. With *Hotel Cassiopeia* SITI was asked to cover some of the extra costs of the production because they had received the special APAP funds for the project. What they forgot to factor in was their usual administrative overhead costs. The staff of SITI is endeavoring to make clearer distinctions about costs when beginning a project with a producer, especially when they are bringing funds to the table themselves. They have continued to bring their own resources to their work with ATL; *Under Construction* was built in a similar manner as *Hotel Cassiopeia*. The partners in this collaboration continue to work together well.

Comment [TU1]: I'm away from my notes about who got the 'extra funds' --- I didn't think it was SITI..

The experience of producing *Hotel Cassiopeia* with the enhanced funding was a critical moment in the life of the SITI Company. It showed the company the advantages of becoming a partner with institutions by bringing their own financial resources to the table, allowing them advantages such as their home-based creative residency and the construction of a set built from the beginning to tour. It showed them how a strengthened SITI Company could have more say over their own destiny. Shortly after the production the company began to embark on a long-range plan.

The Future

The SITI Company began two years ago to articulate a vision of their future. They are still in the process of developing a strategic plan, putting the pieces together that will give them long-range stability and artistic freedom.

The SITI Company has existed for many years by making at least one piece a year and keeping several pieces in their repertory. Most of their work has been commissioned by producing and presenting partners located around the country. SITI is one of the few companies that have been able to penetrate the glass ceiling of the regional theater, finding residencies and commissions with several major regional producing theaters, one of them the Actor's Theatre of Louisville. They have made those advances based on the excellence of their work and the long-term attention to relationships with the leaders of those theaters.

They are also successful and known in the circles of contemporary presenting institutions, working with institutions like the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Walker Art Center, BAM and Arizona State University to create new pieces in residence usually with commissioning support.

Executive Director Megan Wanlass Szall speaks about the SITI Company as the "glue" and the "conduit" between regional theaters and presenting institutions. SITI does a lot of the matchmaking – getting a presenter such as Charles Helm from the Wexner Center in Ohio to partner with a regional theater such as ATL in order to accumulate enough commissioning funds and residency time to create a piece of work. SITI looks to its regional theater partners to provide set and costume shop resources and to presenters for commissioning funds and creative residencies. Regional theaters can provide longer runs for the projects that are beneficial to the development of the shows. Presenters' production runs are usually much shorter but their access to other resources -- deeper interfaces with the local community, intellectuals and historians, especially by University-based presenters -- can be very helpful to the company.

When there are lulls in their work on productions, the actors in the company are able to take sabbaticals to work with other companies or are supported through the company's teaching wing. The actors are all accomplished teachers of Viewpoints and the Suzuki Method. They host workshops exploring those practices around the country and in New York City. The ability of the company to do workshops is an added attraction for University presenters and has helped build long-term relationships with many communities.

Several of the SITI actors have been with the company since its beginning, long relationships going back before SITI even existed in some cases. The work is strengthened by the true ensemble nature of the company. This is the essence of a great ensemble, the ability for people to work together over a long period of time. The SITI actors know each other's strengths and weaknesses; they can challenge and push each other to new levels of performance. In addition, fans of the company have been able to see actors grow and change over many seasons. The SITI Company is committed to paying a living wage to its actor / collaborators. There is no question where resources should go first: to the people making the work.

The SITI Company is blessed with an Executive Director that has been with the company in some capacity since 1995. Megan Wanlass Szalla is a tenacious administrator who knows the many worlds in which the company moves: regional producing theaters, contemporary presenters, and universities. She is at home at Network of Ensemble Theater, Theater Communications Group and Arts Presenters convenings. She is a passionate and articulate representative for the company in all of their many dealings. There are very few managing directors that have this breadth of experience in all of these diverse sub-cultures of theater. She is an important asset to the company, one that cannot be overlooked. Maintaining these fluid relationships is a complex and daunting business.

The culture of presenting and the culture of producing institutions look very much the same but actually are very different, with different priorities, vocabularies and methods of developing work.

For instance, commissioning in the producing theater field often means that the play will be the property of the theater until they decide not to produce it or their initial option runs out. A commission does not necessarily result in a production. The theater will have first access to producing the play and then participating in its future life. When a play is given the go-ahead for a full showing, all of the institution's resources are focused on that production. Usually the theater expects to financially participate in the success of the show if it goes on from its initial run.

A presenter most often gives a commission along with a commitment to present the work when it is finished, sometimes offering other resources in addition to the initial commissioning funds. The presenter may ask for the premiere, or be satisfied with the first showing in their city. They do not expect to participate in the future of the work, say a move to Broadway or a European tour. A commission from a presenter usually results in a presentation of the project with additional fees paid to the artist for the appearance. However, commissions rarely cover the whole cost of production and the artist is meant to use their own resources, attracting other partners to complete the project.

So when a presenter tells a theater producer that they are commissioning a work, perhaps inviting them to join a partnership, there can be misunderstandings. Presenters and producers come at commissioning from different directions. There are different values and expectations of ownership and oversight, and a slightly different attitude towards the artistic product. Both ideas of commissioning have their advantages and disadvantages. This is just one example of the differences in language between the fields. There are many other shifting definitions and practices, and it takes a manager such as Ms. Wanlass Szalla with an understanding of both fields to negotiate / translate those issues for her company.

To continue to thrive, the SITI Company must constantly tour. Seventy percent of their budget is earned income from engagements on the road, commissions and workshop income; approximately fifty percent is from touring alone. They are dependent on when major presenters or producers decide they want to program the company. Once a keystone engagement (usually a commission) is set, the company builds work around those dates, bringing on other partners or engagements to support the premiere and the tour.

SITI does not have a constant home in New York and several of its pieces have not been seen in their own home city. They would like to address their lack of presence in New York and to get more control over their time in the city, developing a home audience. The Brooklyn Academy of Music, Women's Project and Classic Stage Company have been host to the company's work but it is on a show-by-show basis. Developing their own audience, with their own donor base is a key to the company's future stability; having a consistent home for their work would be a valuable asset. The SITI Company is very pragmatic and not interested in building and owning a theater. They hope to continue their focus on the work. Running a theater is not their dream. Maintaining a consistent presence in their home city, scheduling their tours with more forethought in a less reactive state is their goal. The company is also committed to its teaching practice and wishes to create a more consistent frame for that work. They are also very committed to international exchange and need a base to continue that outreach.

There are possibilities arising for the company to address those issues. Through their planning process they are investigating several relationships that might afford them a consistent home. It is a very exciting time at the SITI offices. Most of these opportunities have not been made concrete as yet. There looks to be great news from the SITI Company in the near future.

What is lurking in the shadows for the SITI Company is fatigue. It is frustrating for a company with such success to be asked to reinvent themselves each year. Each project, every tour, needs its own system of support constructed afresh. The whims of the touring world are especially demanding on a company, making it difficult to plan the employment of actors and designers. Keeping a living wage for the company members is a struggle. In fact Anne Bogart does not accept a fee for her Artistic Director duties, only for her directing of the various productions; the majority of her income is from Columbia University.

The team at SITI is very capable of pulling off miracles, but that takes its toll after a while and an artist or administrator longs for a deeper experience and a chance to plan for the future. Without a base for a more mature and healthier approach to the work and its development, the work itself can suffer, leading to reduced engagements and funding, and difficulty retaining collaborators, etc. A company can find itself in a downward spiral.

SITI Company may avoid that fate. Their commitment to their work has a center and gravity to it that informs all of their decisions. The SITI Company dreams of going from being a reactive company to being a pro-active company. The world of theater would benefit immeasurably from that small shift.

Final Note

Anne Bogart and the SITI Company have created a powerful body of work in their seventeen years together. It is the integrity and excellence of that work that has been the engine of their success. It is also the care and non-hierarchical thinking that has enabled Anne to keep a company of talented actors and collaborators together. That same deep care and respect of all of the collaborators in a theater-making venture is responsible for the company's long relationships with their presenting partners and producers. There are lessons to be learned here.

It is important to note that the SITI Company started as an international collaboration and continues to have a global view of our world. Though they make very "American" work, those works have a definite orientation to the larger world. The SITI Company may make work about obscure artists using found sets and random order script strategies but they are always socially aware of where this art lands. They wrestle with big ideas in simple ways. If they do a costume drama it has something to say to our contemporary world. This international encompassing view of the world keeps their work fresh, alive and relevant.

It helps to have a process that can be applied to the rehearsal room as well as the boardroom, to share viewpoints, if you will. The Viewpoints have guided Anne for many years and shaped her and her company's actions in the world. Whatever one thinks of the Viewpoints as a theatrical technique it has worked for this company on many levels, creating common values in a creative environment, laying out a way of moving forward, and in the process making them the world class artists that they are.

Mark Russell, Director of Under the Radar Festival at the Public Theater, works with the Public Theater in New York City as an Associate Artistic Director. Russell devised and produced the Under the Radar Theater Festival in collaboration with the Association of Performing Arts Presenters premiering at St. Ann's Warehouse in January 2005. The festival moved to the Public Theater in 2006. In 2007 UTR expanded to a two weekend format and continues on as a core part of the Public Theater's season. Russell was the guest Artistic Director for the Portland (Oregon) Institute for Contemporary Art – Time Based Arts Festival for 2006, 2007, and 2008. Russell is currently pursuing writing, teaching and independent curatorial projects as well as his duties at the Public. From 1983-2004, Russell was the Executive Artistic Director of Performance Space 122 (P.S. 122).