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*Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the
SITI Company.* By Scott T. Cummings

Scott Proudfit

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Theatre Survey

Africa and provide useful brief critical biographies of twelve leading women dramatists, more or less evenly divided among these three countries and France, where a significant number of women dramatists with North African, especially Algerian roots, live and work. The complex postcolonial relationships with France, which give to the drama of these countries a very different texture than that created, for example, in Egypt, is an important subtheme in Box's study.

The final two chapters of the book are devoted to the predominant themes of the work produced by these dramatists and to the strategies of resistance utilized as the works confront the inequity of women, the tensions of a rapidly changing society caught between tradition and modernization, and such social concerns as religious hypocrisy and governmental corruption, inefficiency, and bureaucracy. Even for readers with little interest in the Arabic theatre as such, the discussion of the various strategies employed by these dramatists will be of considerable relevance to anyone interested not only in feminist concerns, but in the broader issues of how the theatre can or should operate as a forum for the expression and discussion of political, social, and cultural concerns.

Finally the book contains a very welcome series of Appendixes listing the plays cited in the study; information on English translations, when available; a "Who's Who" of women in modern and contemporary North African Theatre, including information on many names not actually discussed in this book; and a glossary of terms. This is a most welcome and groundbreaking contribution not only to the still limited number of serious studies of the Arabic theatre, but also to the more developed and familiar areas of theatre by women artists, of postcolonial theatre, and of politically engaged theatre.



Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company. By Scott T. Cummings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; pp. xxi + 318. \$110 cloth.
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Reviewed by Scott Proudfit, Northwestern University

Anne Bogart has insisted that it is not important if audiences recognize all of the references in her theatre company's collagelike plays, most often created in recent years in collaboration with playwright Charles Mee. The texts (and even the choreographed movements) of many SITI Company plays are assembled almost solely from the direct quotation of numerous sources, theatrical and other. Scott Cummings reveals the density of references in his detailed and meticulously researched analysis of the 2001 production *bobrauschenbergamerica* in his book *Remaking American Theater*.

As Cummings explains in his Introduction, this book is primarily a close analysis of a single play, through its development and initial production at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. On a much smaller scale, Joan Herrington

offered a similar analysis in her 2002 *TDR* article “Breathing Common Air: The SITI Company Creates Cabin Pressure” (2.42: 122–44). Cummings focuses on the minutiae of *bobrauschenbergamerica*, from its literary references to the smallest of the performers’ gestures, because they suggest larger artistic movements in America. He describes this production as an important transition for the SITI Company, freeing it from a certain pre-Mee solemnity of tone and formal rigidity. Cummings reads the freedom that SITI’s creative methods had already offered its performers, combined with Mee’s reenergizing template of *bobrauschenbergamerica*, as indicative of liberating trends in American art in general when traced back to the works of the titular artist of the piece, the democratically inclined Rauschenberg, and his affiliation of like-minded artists, from John Cage to Merce Cunningham.

With its roots in various media, Bogart’s work has always demanded an interdisciplinary critical approach. Her textbooks, including 2005’s *The Viewpoints Book* (cowritten with Tina Landau), often rely on metaphors from the visual arts. Moreover, Bogart’s close collaboration—perhaps even codirection—with sound designer Darron L. West recalls the experimental tradition of simultaneous exploration in new music and performance-art forms, such as the association between Philip Glass and Mabou Mines. Most obviously though, SITI’s methodological guides—*Viewpoints* (nine points of awareness for a performer onstage) and *Composition* (a method for creating plays nonhierarchically)—are founded in the postmodern dance practices of Judson Dance Theater and others.

Theatre historians have outlined these histories before. Moreover, Bogart herself is committed to theatricalizing these roots in a series of productions that have focused on individual artists or groups that paved the way for SITI: Andy Warhol, Robert Wilson, Joseph Cornell, the Group Theatre, the stars of American vaudeville, and so on. However, Cummings is the first to trace a number of SITI’s influences at once. He does so in Part I of the book, which alternates chapters on the early independent careers of Mee and Bogart with the production history and methodologies of SITI. Although no single influence, such as *Viewpoints*’ evolution from the practices of choreographer Mary Overlie to its various incarnations in Bogart’s work, receives in-depth treatment—something Cummings acknowledges—the goal and indeed achievement of this section is its simultaneous description of the progression of Mee from his career as a historian to that of playwright, of Bogart from experimenter to company leader, and of SITI from Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki’s vision of an intercultural performance lab to internationally renowned ensemble—all the while linking these interconnected progressions to earlier movements in art, literature, music, and dance. Cummings impressively contextualizes SITI’s work as a continuation of a number of American artistic traditions.

The second half of Cummings’s book follows *bobrauschenbergamerica* from its initial conception, through its development in workshops and rehearsals, to its production at ATL and beyond. Writing about a company as interested in process as product, Cummings appropriately spends most of Part II

telling the story of how the play was made and remade on its way to Louisville. However, he also devotes a long chapter to a close description of the play in performance—not quite a moment-to-moment critical review, but almost. The detailed historical analysis of Part I provides the reader with a thorough context for the analysis in Part II, and enables the reader to challenge Cummings's readings and to draw different conclusions.

Occasionally in Part I, Cummings's history can be too teleological. He seems to offer *bobrauschenbergamerica* as Mee and Bogart's artistic destiny. This is ironic since Mee stopped writing history in part because he felt forced into composing cause-and-effect narratives of great individuals that were untrue to his understanding of the course of actual events. However, if a nonlinear, communally focused historical collage (a SITI show, in other words) might be the most accurate way to tell the story of SITI Company and Mee's ongoing collaboration, it certainly would not have been as useful to historians of recent American performance as Cummings's comprehensive profiles.



Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance. By Peta Tait.
New York: Routledge, 2005; pp. x + 187. 24 illus. \$115.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.
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Reviewed by Beth Kattelman, Ohio State University

Peta Tait's *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* is a thoroughly researched volume that fills a gap in the study of popular culture performance by focusing upon aerial acts. Tait provides a feminist critique of aerial performance by examining the way in which bodies are culturally constructed and gendered within and through aerial artistry, and looks at how various aspects such as costuming, the hierarchy of positions within a certain feat (catching versus being caught), the apparatus used, and so on, contribute to the cultural construction. She also provides a close reading of numerous reviews and eyewitness accounts to show how gendered expectations are codified within the language used to describe aerial performance, and conducts an insightful analysis of the way in which gendered expectations for aerial performance have changed since 1859, when the trapeze was first invented. Throughout she exposes how circus is iconically charged and sexually transgressive.

The book is arranged thematically, with each chapter focusing upon a different topic. Because of the way aerial artistry has evolved, however, this topical arrangement also allows for a general chronological progression from one chapter to the next. The Introduction and first chapter get a bit bogged down by the wealth of information they contain, because here Tait has the difficult task not only of introducing the reader to key figures and major trends in aerial history, but also of defining terminology with which a reader may not be familiar.