

Exploration Through Imagery: *Gregory Gunter Talks about Working with Anne Bogart*

by Gregory Gunter

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I've been fortunate to work as dramaturg and imagist with Anne on a number of projects. We met while I was dramaturging Tina Landau's production of Charles L. Mee Jr.'s *Orestes* at the American Repertory Theatre Institute. Tina had asked me to find some images for the play, so I spent about four days scouring the recesses of the Harvard libraries for books of photographs that related to it. I literally covered a thirty-five-foot section of wall with a collage of pictures using an occupational therapy technique I learned during my unfortunate incarceration in a loony bin in Texas. As an actor and playwright I'd used images to storyboard a play, a technique I also incorporated into the mural.

This visual interpretation of the text, if you will, told the story of the House of Atreus at various points throughout history. Scenes from the girlhood of Clytemnestra and Helen of Troy were juxtaposed with broken Greek statues representing the death of Agamemnon. I also attempted to find a lighter side to some of the tragic family members. For instance "Menelaus' hairy backside" was enlarged from a picture of a wealthy older man in a very small and unflattering bathing suit. The idea, then, was to create a past, present, and future for each of the characters, with each relationship and each major action explored through images. The photocopied images were used for educational purposes only and were to be displayed only in rehearsal to protect against copyright infringement. They provided the actors access into the characters in a way that hadn't before seemed possible.

Anne, having seen this visual imagery project, asked to use it in Japan. So I gathered all of the images and compiled them in a book in the same style as

from Gregory Gunter, "Exploration Through Imagery: Gregory Gunter Talks about Working with Anne Bogart" from *Dramaturgy in American Theater – A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, Michael Lupu, Pp. 176-179.

the mural. Her own production of *Orestes* would inaugurate her new theater company, the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, which she formed with Tadashi Suzuki. Her production would be radically different from Tina's but could still use the "historical material" provided by my research. Actors in Toga, Japan, were invited to look at the book at the beginning of rehearsal and were encouraged to peruse it throughout. Anne had the actors re-create certain poses of the real-life characters in the photographs as a way of entering a "state" on the stage. Ellen Lauren, who was acting in Suzuki's *Bacchae* at the time, told me the actors treated it as a bible for the production and that the images allowed them to discover a world they could not find in the mountains of Toga. Soon after, Anne asked me to work on another play she was developing based on the life and writings of Marshall McLuhan.

At a meeting regarding this new play, Anne gave me a list of things she knew and didn't know about the piece. The "Things I know" list for *The Medium* included the following (although this is from my recollection and not an actual list):

- The play is about Marshall McLuhan;
- McLuhan is one of the characters in the play;
- All of the others characters are dead or part of his memory;
- The play takes place during the moment of his stroke.

From this, I compiled a list of images to locate. Regarding the first point, "The play is about Marshall McLuhan," I asked myself some of the same questions that Anne asked: "Who is McLuhan?" "What does he look like?" "What was his home life like?" I then found images of McLuhan, his family, his workplaces, his hometown. The second point only made the need for physical images of McLuhan stronger. And though Tom Nellis, who was playing McLuhan, created his own unique character, the images at least provided the company with some of the physical states of the man. The third point, "All of the other characters are dead . . ." led me to images of death and memory, and images of people who appear "dead" even though they're walking, interacting, and so on. Some of these images were of people who'd suffered strokes. It's important for Anne, I've found, to follow every impulse—that's part of what keeps her work so vital and alive. I never knew until she or her company of actors really delved into the material what would strike them. Following intuition and my growing knowledge of Anne's needs as a director, I found images that enabled them to get a handle on a scene or a character.

The "Things I don't know" list was more complex, because I knew she'd discover those points of confusion while working with the actors. This list included:

- Is Marshall McLuhan the only one who's had a stroke?
- What physical manifestations of stroke do the other characters have?

- Are the other characters dead all the time?
- What is the world of the other characters when they're not in "television land"?

From this list, I began to get ideas about what Anne was searching for. The first question was hard for me to work with, so I moved on to the next and found examples of physical manifestations of strokes. I went to the Aphasia Institute, interviewed a doctor there and found information on stroke victims, such as what specifically happens to them during the stroke and after. I searched for other avenues that might lead me to answers for the cast. I called stroke networks for material and dropped by the American Heart Association for pamphlets.

The third question, "Are all the other characters dead all the time?" was answered by the fourth. They, like McLuhan, were hurled into this technoworld of pop philosophy primarily through McLuhan's exploration of television. They became characters. Because Anne never watched television as a child and had no references for the sitcoms, westerns, and detective stories she wanted to use to tell the story, I found images of "television land" for her. And finally, for the question "When they're not in television land, where are they?" I looked at the blank screen of my own television and imagination. I found images of broken sets, blank sets, blurry screens, and "snow." The actors constructed from these images the place of the characters in between scenes.

As imagist, I usually riff on an idea until it's completely spent. So images of memory—a hard thing to find, let me tell you—could be classic Americana, "the good old days," a 1960s issue of *McCall's*, or such obvious images as a picture of a man who appears to be thinking juxtaposed with an image of a young woman holding her finger to her chin as if perplexed. I use my imagination to find connections and dichotomies where perhaps they didn't exist before. I try to ask myself what I would need as an actor or what would excite me about this research. Anne uses the work to stimulate her actors to stretch their imagination beyond literal exploration. She asks a lot of her actors. She asks them to create a wholly different physical life for the play than the one most of them are comfortable using as a way to heighten reality, sometimes to an exhausting point. The images, then, are a springboard for her company members to begin from. They move beyond it quickly, because each actor brings with herself or himself a great wealth of imagination and experience. But there will always be one image to refer back to, one body position to recreate to achieve a state of being unlike any other, and that's rewarding.

When I dramaturg for Anne Bogart I try to think of myself as a member of the ensemble. I know that she considers every idea from every person in the room, from actor to production assistant as part of the whole process of discovery. When I am working on a visual imagery project, somewhere miles away from where the actual rehearsal will occur (which is usually the case), I first immerse myself in the play. Then, much as Anne does before a produc-

tion, I ask myself hundreds of questions. I think about each character's past, present, and future; each relationship, no matter how trivial, is represented and explored in my work—particularly as imagist for the play. I know that Anne's sense of heightened reality (pardon that boorish term) produces connections where a director with a more realistic style might find none. Through Anne's techniques of questioning each moment, of collaborating with each participant, and of exploring the life of the play, my work is going to have an impact on the style of the piece, or the movement of the actors, or the life of the play.