

Silents Are Golden

By Catherine Sheehy

The first thing you notice about Anne Bogart's *American Silents* is the noise, noise, noise, noise. In the good-sized rehearsal hall she's working in at New York's Raw Space, Bogart has created a Mnouchkine-esque carnival-style pre-show, a six- or seven-ring circus for the audience to wander through at its own pace.

Above the scraping whine of instruments being set and scenery being shifted, above the hue and cry of tantalizingly anonymous lovers' spats and violent dis-

piece, like her other offerings, is a hybrid of theatre, dance, musical revue and cultural allusion.

American Silents is the third part of a Bogart trilogy, the other two members of which are *American Vaudeville* and *Marathon Dancing*. As the titles and director's note in the program suggest, Bogart means to glean something about us as a society by examining our entertainments. Sound archaeology.

"Silent film is as full as emotion and yet as mute as Mother Courage's famous moment of agony."

cussions of creative differences, above the tinny din of standards being banged out on a beaten-up upright, a who's-who of names drops with lovely clarity into the cacophony and resonates: D.W., Buster, Lillian, Clara, Mabel (and Mack). It all has rather the feeling of an acting exercise gone horribly right.

It seems apropos that the first impression of a play about silent movies should be noise. Naturally, it must have been

***American Silents*, conceived and directed by Anne Bogart.
Raw Space, New York City. Closed.**

***The First Picture Show*, written and directed by Ain Gordon and David Gordon.
Playhouse at St. Clement's, New York City,
Oct. 2-5.**

loud on the set. Only on celluloid is the sound of 20 Keystone Cops thundering around and banging into a wall a bright ragtime tune and a slide whistle. Think of the racket Charlie Chaplin must have made every time he hit the deck, the expletives that must have escaped his lips if he didn't get it just right. And what exactly is the sound of one cream pie flying? Not to mention the directors, technicians and other hangers-on plying their trade with ropes and pulleys or just chattering away behind the scenes.

Eventually the bustle of activity begins to still, we all take our places on the bleachers and the play proper begins. Yet, as fans of Anne Bogart's work will know, it isn't likely to be a proper play. This

This time around, her students in Columbia University's theatre program are her dig-mates. Although conceived and directed by Bogart, the piece is company created, and almost all of the text seems to have been found or improvised. The strengths of this approach include a Cagney synchronicity that the most carefully plotted and heavily researched docu-theatre rarely enjoys. Slogging through the flatter, somewhat boggier terrain, you come suddenly to *le mot* (or *moment*) *juste*—terra firma, quite by accident.

If this sounds like a backhanded compliment, it isn't. It's a fond criticism, because what *American Silents* needs more than anything is a playwright, an artist from outside the director-actor relationship who can shape the play to say with the words something like what Bogart has managed to say with the thoroughly effective and affecting visual text. This piece could yield not just enlightening sociology but terrific entertainment. Here is a time of the American vernacular at its most muscular and colorful; here is a nascent mass medium that has come down to us as full of emotion and yet as mute as Mother Courage's famous moment of agony. We are desperate for the soundtrack that is lost—but the one offered in this incarnation of *American Silents* is garbled.

Still, *American Silents* has much to say about the very palpable place that the film industry has in the formation, as well as the documentation, of our national character. Issues of race, socio-economics and

gender politics are shot through the evening, catching the light in new and interesting ways. The play examines the making of *Birth of a Nation*, an undeniably racist work by one of film's great innovators and most-lauded directors, D.W. Griffith. At the same time, it introduces most of us to Oscar Micheaux, the first African American to head his own studio and who now languishes in obscurity. It looks frankly at Mabel Normand's drug addiction, Fairbanks' alcoholism, Thalberg's raging ambition and, indeed, at the nearly constant dull ache of despair that plagued all these artists.

Another new play takes the burgeoning silent film industry as its subject but concentrates on the fleeting nature of fame for those outside the established social order (read white patriarchy). David and Ain Gordon's new piece, *The First Picture Show*, had a two-day workshop in early May at California's Mark Taper Forum and will have its next incarnation at the Playhouse at St. Clement's in New York this month.

The idea of creating a piece about the fledgling movie industry presented itself to this Obie-winning father-and-son team,



Sound archaeology: Scott Nankivel as Buster Keaton in Anne Bogart's *American Silents*.

who share artistic leadership of the Pick Up Performance Company, as a way of examining and shedding light on some of the issues artists face today. The role of the director in a new medium, the effects of torrential technological innovation and the emergence of a hand-in-glove relationship with censorship seemed to David and Ain to parallel the more recent techno-explosion of computers into every corner of our lives. They are also aware that another head of that hydra, censorship, is waking from its very light doze. The movies had Will Hays, the Internet has Congressional legislation.

The piece also focuses on the participation of women in the making of hun-

dreds of now-lost movies. For example, Ain tells of how his research uncovered the fact that Frenchwoman Alice Guy Blache made as many films as D.W. Griffith—around 500—yet none of her work is extant, and so she is virtually unknown to all but the most avid of buffs.

"At the beginning of our research, we set out to find some books on censorship in silent films—not so easy as it might sound," he says. "There are some, but they're very dry. But in the middle of all this I came across a book called *Early Women Directors*, and I said, 'What women? There were no women.'" Ah, but there were. Because the great maw of the new medium was never satisfied, there

were opportunities for anyone who was willing to offer himself—or herself—up as fodder. It is, however, how history has treated the women and minorities on whom the Leviathan had stoked itself that is the most telling part of the story.

Ain and David created the character of Ann First as a kind of lightning rod for all such forgotten artists. Set in a retirement home for aging film artists, the play focuses on Ann's niece, a documentary filmmaker who sets out to tell her aunt's story. The Gordons have split the character of Ann First between two actors not only to allow for reflection across time but to express theatrically the conflict of the artist, who must make the work and then is being asked forever and forever to talk about it. So it's about them-then—but it's also about us-now. **AT**

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