The SITI Company’s *Christmas Carol* began as a joke and ended as a swan song.

Over the past three decades and more than 40 productions, the venerable New York per-
formance group has created dazzling theatre, ranging from grand spectacles to solo shows. A significant portion of it has been based on collages of texts by and about important 20th-century artists, from Virginia Woolf to John Cage. They have also spent serious time with the Greeks, collaborated on multiple projects with playwright Charles Mee and dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke, and even dabbled in Shakespeare, Marivaux, and Noël Coward.

Despite this variety, few familiar with their body of work would guess that their final production would be an adaptation of the Dickens classic, a beloved holiday tradition for some and theatrical wallpaper for others. Leave it to SITI to be surprising all the way to the end.

Yes, the end: **The SITI Company** is closing up shop. After three performances of *A Christmas Carol* at Bard College’s Fisher Center (Dec. 16-18), the company will cease to operate as a theatre group or a center for performance training.

The end has been a long time coming, in a few different senses. In the late summer of 1992, a couple dozen theatre artists from the U.S. and Japan gathered on the campus of Skidmore College to imagine a bold new experiment in international theatre. Over the next couple years, what began as the Saratoga International Theater Institute morphed into the SITI Company, co-founded by Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki and American director Anne Bogart and dedicated to international collaboration, advanced theatre training, and ensemble-driven performance experiments. Nobody knew, let alone planned for, how long it would last. Bogart had half a dozen or so theatrical “essays” in mind. Suzuki made it clear that his involvement and support would end after a certain number of years. But something took hold for a core group of actors in those first five years, an invigorating (if often exhausting) spirit of collaboration, a we’re-onto-something sense of possibility, and a fierce commitment to find out together just what they could do.

In the first decade or so, **Actors Theatre of Louisville** hosted Bogart and company on numerous occasions; other development partners emerged: **City Theatre** in Pittsburgh, the **Wexner Center for the Arts** at Ohio State, and later **the Getty Villa** in Los Angeles. They forged a longstanding relationship with playwright (and eventual company member)
Charles Mee. The interest in collaboration eventually led them to team up on projects with other groups, such as Martha Graham Dance Company (American Document), Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (A Rite), Bang on a Can and composer Julia Wolfe (Steel Hammer), visual artist Ann Hamilton (the theatre is a blank page), and STREB Extreme Action (Falling & Loving).

“We didn’t just do theatre,” observed company member Barney O’Hanlon recently. “We were an acting ensemble that could fluidly and organically cross over into other disciplines. We did opera, dance, music, visual art, and theatre.”

Barney O’Hanlon, Stephen Duff Webber, Kelly Maurer, and company in “American Document,” a SITI production in conjunction with the Martha Graham Dance Company in 2010. (Photo by Costas)

Through ups and downs, some changes in personnel in the early years, and a continuing effort to gain wider recognition and support, the troupe stuck together and created more than 40 productions, most of them bold original new works conceived and directed by Bogart and collectively created by the company through a series of workshop rehearsals.
Over time, their performances and the company itself came to be marked by exactitude, physical and intellectual rigor, and a steely tenacity.

For Ellen Lauren, founding member, associate artistic director, and co-artistic director since 2013, “The history of the company is the history of our relationship to the written word. Our first three devised pieces—The Medium, Small Lives/Big Dreams, and Going, Going, Gone—each demanded our youth, our ferocity, and a specific strategy in relation to the written word.”

Making these pieces is how the company’s DNA was formed, and it’s a double helix based on two radically different strains of actor training: the precisely structured physical forms pioneered by Tadashi Suzuki in Japan on the one hand, and the more open and improvisational orientation of the Viewpoints, Bogart’s revision of a practice first articulated by Mary Overlie, on the other. The symbiosis of Suzuki and Viewpoints proved fruitful. It generated a foundation and an evolving, highly plastic vocabulary that served their work on collage plays based on sampled texts, open-ended scripts such as Mee’s bobrauschenbergamerica and Hotel Cassiopeia, and classic texts such as A Midsummer Night’s Dream or Three Sisters.

It also provided the basis of a performance pedagogy they taught to others in various formats and settings, short-term workshops while out on tour, university residencies, a conservatory program they ran out of their New York studio in recent years, and, most essentially, an annual month-long summer intensive conducted on the campus of Skidmore College from the beginning in 1992 until the pandemic forced them to figure out how to conduct training in a virtual environment. Their deep and singular commitment to training and the synergy of the Suzuki and Viewpoints work came to define their identity, mission, and aesthetic, as well as providing a measure of organizational stability over the years as projects of different shapes and sizes came and went.

By the time COVID shut down all theatre in March 2020, plans were already under way to sunset the company as a performance group and training center, the result of a painstaking and difficult process that began around the time of their 25th anniversary in 2017. By
then, the funding climate had become less and less hospitable. The long-term effort to find an institutional host to provide a more secure base of operations found only intermittent success. Touring was more and more problematic. In a company predicated on an athletic form of acting, nobody was getting any younger. Some company members had competing priorities, including Bogart, who made it known that she planned to step away from her role in the next few years.

All these factors made it clear that the company needed a new organizational model in order to continue. A gamut of possibilities were considered. As executive director Michelle Preston described it, “We looked at merging with other companies with their own pedagogies to create a center for American theatre training. We looked at moving out of New York City. We looked at launching a capital campaign to raise money for a building. What became clear is that becoming an institution with a capital ‘I’ would de-prioritize the artists of the ensemble.”

The soul-searching was gut-wrenching, and not without disagreement along the way. Various company members favored different scenarios at different times. But given a decision of this magnitude, consensus was essential. Said founding member Kelly Maurer, “Every time we had a difficult discussion around, ‘Why don’t we try this? Maybe we’ll do it this way,’ nothing felt authentic. We are such an organic entity that if you take out one piece, it changes the whole.”

As the deliberative process stretched into a second year, more and more company members came to recognize that, as Preston put it, “SITI Company was this specific group of individual artists who came together to create work in a particular way, and it couldn’t be SITI Company without that group of artists. Once we got to that point the idea that we could operate in perpetuity was no longer on the table.” So in the fall of 2020, a legacy plan was formally announced, in which the operation would move forward through a final 30th anniversary season in 2022, then take a bow and make an exit.

Since that announcement, Michelle Preston and producing director Megan E. Carter have coordinated a meticulous and ambitious effort to preserve the company’s history and per-
petuate its legacy.

“This is not a failure,” said Preston. “This is not a matter of financial mismanagement. The company’s decision to go out on their own terms is a noble and courageous act.”

In June, at a plenary session of the TCG conference titled “The Medium is the Message: A Legacy Conversation with SITI Company,” SITI board chair Jessica Hanna introduced the group with this assessment: “I have watched them change the ecosystem of the American theatre. One does not need to have seen their work to have been changed by them. The effect of what they do and what they make reverberates throughout the world.”

Indeed, by any measure, the achievement of the SITI Company has been radical—in terms of the originality of their productions, the influence of their teaching, and their sheer longevity as an experimental ensemble. The key to their survival, said Maurer, comes down to one word.

“Company—you make choices for the company. That has always been a red ribbon that runs through the choices that we make and how we do what we do. First and foremost, you take care of the company, artistically, spiritually, when you can, financially. Company first—that’s the promise this group of people made to each other.”

That promise has required plenty of sacrifice along the way. As co-artistic director Leon
Ingulsrud said during that TCG plenary, “Having a company like ours, a group like this staying together for 30 years, is hard. It’s not normal. Systems are not set up to support this. We’ve had to fight against a lot to do it.”

They have learned lessons along the way that are worth sharing. To facilitate that sharing, a vestige of the company will continue to exist as SITI, Inc., a small organization to be headed up by Brad Carlin, SITI’s former associate managing director. SITI, Inc. will serve as a clearinghouse of information about the company and its history, future Suzuki and Viewpoints training opportunities, and networking for some of the hundreds of SITI alumni who want to stay in touch.

“We have a core alumni group of 200-plus people who have been influenced by SITI and are committed to the work and determined to keep moving it forward,” Bogart told me. “That is our true legacy.”

Members of the company also contributed writing to a retrospective volume titled The SITI Company: This Is Not A Handbook, a commemorative collection of anecdotes, memories, and reflections edited by Carter and aimed at capturing the individual voices of the group.

Artists and scholars who wish to study the company’s work in the future will have access to two archives. SITI, Inc. will maintain an online digital archive of production photographs, video excerpts, playbills, scripts, and ephemera. A more extensive physical archive of production books, organizational records, and other materials will be housed at the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University, also home to the Wexner Center for the Arts, where a number of SITI productions were incubated. Another important part of the legacy plan is the awarding of $180,000 in transition grants to members of the company and staff to facilitate their shift into the next stage of their careers.
The centerpiece of the final year has been a flurry of productions, most of them revivals of earlier SITI pieces and one brand new creation. To celebrate the long trajectory of their body of work, they reached all the way back to their roots and 1993 to revive their first devised piece, *The Medium*, a theatrical meditation on how technology mediates reality, based on the thinking and writing of Marshall McLuhan. The piece enjoyed an extensive tour over the course of 2022, including stops at some of the performing arts centers that had been mainstays of past tours (City Theatre in Pittsburgh, the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth, BAM in Brooklyn, and the Krannert Center at University of Illinois). There were plans to revisit and revise their work on Mee's *Under Construction* at La MaMa in the fall, but scheduling problems put the kibosh on that, so they made a hasty pivot and returned
to two well-honed, previous projects based on Orson Welles radio plays, *Radio Macbeth* and *War of the Worlds: The Radio Play*.

In 1999-2000, the company collaborated with playwright Naomi Iizuka on an epic play about Orson Welles, but ended up having more success with a side project conceived by long-term company sound designer Darron West and first directed by him and Bogart in 1999 as part of a fundraising event in at the West Bank Café in New York. Using only Howard Koch’s adaptation of the famous H.G. Wells novel, SITI’s *War of the Worlds: The Radio Play* depicted Welles and his Mercury Theatre on the Air on a 1938 soundstage performing what famously proved to be a terrifying Halloween hoax. The tight vest-pocket production became one of SITI’s most frequently revived and widely traveled shows. In another full-circle moment, the show’s last stand took place as part of their 30th anniversary gala, right back at the West Bank where it began.

The SITI Company’s final production, however, will be one that’s never been seen before. *A Christmas Carol* is the brainchild of West, who traces the project’s origins back to green-room conversations at Williams College when company members joked about how odd it would be for SITI to stage the ubiquitous holiday classic. “A few years later,” West recalled, “we started getting serious about it.” After looking at various versions, including Orson Welles’s 1938 one-hour radio adaptation, West stepped forward to create a new *Carol*. He knew the story inside and out from the many regional theatre versions he had designed, and from his personal tradition of reading the book every year at Christmas.

“I wanted to make a *Christmas Carol* that didn’t have Tiny Tim at the end saying, ‘God bless us, everyone,’” West said. “I wanted it to be about what Dickens was writing about: workhouses, poor children living on the streets as urchins, social injustice. What happens if you do not help fellow human beings in need? That’s what always really got to me about the book.”

Gideon Lester, artistic director of the Fisher Center at Bard, committed to the project before the script was even finished, perhaps knowing what a full-circle moment it would represent for at least one company member. Anne Bogart began directing plays as an under-
graduate at Bard in the 1970s, doing Grotowski exercises and mash-ups of Ionesco with her pals. Now she is back in the Hudson River Valley co-directing the SITI *Christmas Carol* with West. But it won’t be your grandfather’s *Carol*. “What everyone agreed on,” Bogart told me, “is that we wanted to feature Dickens’s beautiful language, and not spend the whole time dragging figgy puddings and plastic turkeys on and off the stage. Darron’s adaptation makes that possible.”

In the role of Scrooge, founding company member Will Bond leads a cast of 10 that includes seven other company members and two associates. “It is a profound story of redemption,” said West, who is also providing sound design. “I wish it could really happen. The idea of this man late in life repenting and seeing his life anew is something that I would wish to be able to do myself.”

No doubt, the three performances of *A Christmas Carol* at Bard will be imbued with a sense of finality, most especially for members of the company, many of whom face uncertain futures, and, less overtly, for a community of former students, associates, board members, and supporters who have followed their work with admiration over the years.

The end has been a long time coming. All this year, but especially the summer and fall, have been an emotional gauntlet of “last times.” One of those came in October, when the company gathered in their studio at 520 Eighth Ave. for a final run-through of the revived Radio Macbeth before going into tech for their short run at NYU’s Skirball Center.

As they always do, they trained before rehearsing the play, and by the time they got to the open Viewpoints improvisation that usually ends these sessions, everybody present was aware that this was the last time they would work as a company in this studio, the incubator of so many projects, the floor on which they stomped for years, their working home for more than half of the company’s existence. Anne Bogart sat on a tall stool off to the side giving attention as only she can. Darron West cued up some music. The actors began to move about the room, stopping and starting, speeding up and slowing down, tracking each other with the uncanny sixth sense that comes from decades of being together.
Eventually, one spoke a line from a past production, and other actors followed suit, speaking other lines from many, many other plays they had created over the years. It was part elegy, part testament to a remarkable body of work, and to the commitment to company that had made the work possible. When the music stopped and West called, “And scene,” the actors stood still. No one could speak. There were sobs but mostly silence. “Somehow all of our work together was evoked by this one Viewpoints session,” Bogart recalled. “It was a profound moment. Sacred, really.”

The stillness lasted for a long time, and then, before things could get maudlin or self-indulgent, stage manager Ellen Lavaia said, “Let’s take a nice, long break.” They did, and then they came back and got on with the work of the day. For the SITI Company, there has always been more work to do.


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