Eugenio Barba
in conversation with Maria Shevtsova

Reinventing Theatre

Eugenio Barba here discusses the desires and ideas driving his early years as a practitioner, some of the creative, social, and ethical principles underlying the work of the Odin Teatret, which he founded in 1964, and the group's most recent, new-style 'barter' events with and within local communities. His public dialogue with NTQ co-editor Maria Shevtsova and members of the audience provides fresh insight into the workings of one of the most influential figures, and one of the most widely known non-official theatre collectives, of the late twentieth century. The conversation took place on 31 October 2005 at Goldsmiths College, University of London, during the Odin's UK tour (as documented in the 'Reports and Announcements' section of NTQ 86), and included questions from the audience and concluding words from Odin performer Iben Nagel Rasmussen, who had performed *White as Jasmin* earlier in the evening. The transcript of this conversation, inaugurating a series of such public conversations at the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths, was edited for publication with the full and warm collaboration of Eugenio Barba.

Maria Shevtsova *Let me start by referring to* Land of Ashes and Diamonds [*Aberystwyth: Black Mountain Press, 1999*], *which is close to my heart. You speak, here, of your work with Jerzy Grotowski in Poland between 1961 and 1964. I think you were one of the first major theatre practitioners to go to India in the early 1960s and to discover the importance of Kathakali. In fact, Kathakali has played a significant role in the development of your work. Am I wrong in suggesting that you may have pointed Grotowski towards India, that you may have inspired him?*

Eugenio Barba Grotowski was attracted by Hinduism, by certain schools of Hindu philosophy. So was I, and this common interest had been the point of contact between us since our first meeting. Grotowski was only two and a half years older than me. When I met him he was twenty-eight years old and I was twenty-five. He had just finished theatre school, where he had first studied as an actor and then as a director. He got the offer to become the artistic leader of a tiny provincial theatre in Opole with only seven actors, a couple of technicians, an administrator, and an outstanding literary adviser, one of the best in Poland, Ludwik Flaszen. Although small, it functioned like a legitimate theatre, which, in then-socialist countries, were fully financed by the state. So Grotowski had no excessive economic problems, although he had to be careful about the censorship that existed and with which he had to comply. He had to present five or six new productions every year.

In the beginning, it was our shared interest in Hindu philosophies that created a bond between us, to the point that I decided to leave the theatre school where I was studying in Warsaw and to follow his work. A couple of years later I travelled to India, where I discovered Kathakali by chance. When I went back to Grotowski in Poland, I told him about this performance form, at that time virtually unknown in the West. I also introduced some Kathakali exercises to his company, but they did not remain for a long time. It was impossible to adapt such exercises to the sort of training that Grotowski was developing.

I am talking of a situation of about fifty years ago, in the early 1960s, and you have to envisage a theatre culture that is totally different from today's. At that time, theatre was only buildings and texts. The buildings had a director and, in a few places, also a permanent

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company. Otherwise, they engaged actors from one production to another. The theatre was the interpretation of a text, and even if there existed something called the avant garde, this also consisted of texts, of audacious and perplexing plays like those of Beckett, Ionesco, or Adamov. This was the theatrical age in which I grew up and in which Grotowski was working.

You have also to remember the scandal and the sarcasm produced by the questions Grotowski was raising at that time: what was the deep, personal meaning of theatre for the actor and the director? What was the intimate, secret necessity that made a person become an actor? Even more outrage was aroused by the fact that Grotowski obliged his actors, who had finished theatre school and were fully trained, to execute exercises which apparently had nothing to do with the actor's artistic profession. These exercises were not aiming at the interpretation of a text, or at the rhythm and clarity of diction; they simply looked more like gymnastic movements.

There is a remarkable film by the Welsh filmmaker Michael Elster, *Letter from Opole*, which is the first document about Grotowski's training in 1963. When you watch it, you can't understand what Grotowski was doing. Today we have all been exposed to such a wealth and variety of information, knowledge, and experience, that Grotowski's first steps into training, which are the origins of the western theatre's variegated further development in this field, seem ridiculous. These were the theatrical Middle Ages, so what Grotowski was doing with his exercises was to let an atomic bomb explode in the professional environment, upsetting the mental habits and the practice of all theatre people. And from Grotowski's disconcerting questions and awkward exercises, we were all born into a multiplicity of artistic subversion and inventiveness.

You have recorded in a number of your writings, as have scholars of your work, that you formed the Odin Teatret in Oslo in 1964 with 'rejects' – that is, with people who had been rejected from the traditional acting schools. You have noted more than once that you were not able to be a director in Norway because you were a foreigner, you were an outsider, and the image of 'outsideness' returns in your work, but we'll come back to that later. My question to you now is: when you formed the Odin Teatret with 'rejects', did you do this out of necessity, even pragmatism, or was it a kind of act of provocation towards the official theatre and the official culture in general?

Odin Teatret's creation was not at all an act of provocation. I would have preferred to be accepted by a traditional theatre, to work as a director, and have a salary. But I couldn't. The variety of today's theatrical ecosystem didn't exist then. Today we have not only heavily subsidized institutions – the Comédie Française, the Royal Shakespeare Company, national and municipal theatres – but also an alternative or parallel theatre culture which, even in its penury of means, is nevertheless recognized for its artistic, innovative, or socio-cultural efficacy. In the early 1960s, you had only buildings in which texts were interpreted, nothing else. Diversity in scenic expression was unthinkable, and subsidies for anomalous, experimental, or fringe theatre did not exist. The question for me was whether I would accept what others decided for me, or not. I was aware that theatre was my personal need, and therefore I had to pay out of my own pocket. I had the freedom to choose it. So I chose: 'I want to do theatre, nobody can stop me.'

Theatre history came to my help. I was a voracious reader and I knew that the mutation of European theatre at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries was the consequence of the efforts of outsiders, mostly amateurs: people like Stanislavski, who was an amateur, or Meyerhold, who wanted to be a violinist and for years directed amateurs in the provinces. Vakhtangov was active only with amateurs. Garcia Lorca worked with them, so did Brecht when in exile. I understood that all those people whom textbooks described as pioneers and audacious artists were all *individuals* who came from outside the theatre. They had a completely different mentality from the theatre people of the establishment

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of their time; and they erupted in the field of performance because of specific personal obsessions and intimate wounds.

I started looking for amateurs and found more than sixty groups in Oslo, which was a rather sleepy provincial capital of 400,000 inhabitants. Sixty groups! But none of them had the ambition to become professional. There is a substantial difference between amateurs and professionals: amateurs act for their own gratification, while professionals must do it for the spectators' gratification. No one felt tempted by my arguments to work to the rigour of Grotowski's practice, which I had been absorbing in Poland. What is the most important thing when making theatre? One actor and one spectator. So I looked for those actors among the traditional theatre's young actors who used to complain how uninspiring the artistic challenges were in their institutions. I contacted them and proposed we start a company together, an experimental theatre. Of course, they were sensible people and politely declined.

I had to find people who were in the same situation as me, boys and girls who were hopelessly longing to do theatre, but were not allowed to do it. Thus I came upon this idea of people rejected from theatre schools. But I had to train them, although I had no experience. I had to become a teacher, a person who assumes a responsibility, and I felt enormously insecure. I started sharing these feelings of insecurity and responsibility with four youngsters between seventeen and nineteen who joined me.

Each of them became responsible for a specific field. One had been good at gymnastics at school, so I said, 'You are going to be the instructor of biomechanics.' We had very little information about biomechanics at the time. Only now do we know much more because the Russian archives have been opened. I tried to explain to him that biomechanics was 'immediate reactions to a stimulus', just like acrobatics. This was what I had understood by reading the few texts I had access to. A girl had studied classical ballet, so she directed our ballet lessons.

Both I and my four students/actors started sharing a double role: learning and teaching at the same time. We experienced at once the difficulty in making another person understand our intentions through words, so we tried to avoid them; we used our presence and the whole body to communicate and lead through physical allusions and impulses. This sort of 'passing on' is somewhat different from one based on verbal explanations. Technique is never neutral, it is impregnated with mental and judging standards. The environment, the relationships, the norms and conditions in which we take our first professional steps, help us to incorporate specific values. By values I mean a chosen horizon of orientations, ideals and taboos, reference points and models.

For instance, when we began our training session, we took off our watches and went on for several hours without a pause. This became a habit which I justified by telling my young actors: 'Theatre is something that *you* need. Nobody has knocked on your door and asked you to be an actor. The Prime Minister did not send a telegram to your house begging you to become an artist. *You* need theatre. Society doesn't need you as an actor.' I still believe this.

I know this is a sort of blasphemy, because I am glad to receive subsidies for my theatrical endeavours. But money is not the first necessity. What is necessary are two individuals with particular needs: an actor and a spectator. This is the extraordinary lesson which we can distil from theatre history. The biography of Brecht is extraordinary. The biography of Grotowski is extraordinary. The biographies of Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, and Stanislavski are extraordinary. They were a sort of lay saint, peaceful Caesar or Genghis Khan, tenaciously attached to their ideas and obsessions, industrious, unafraid of solitude and lack of consensus. Just read their biographies and you will see how the stubbornness of these individuals and their capacity to resist the spirit of their time has determined another conception and practice of theatre.

You were saying that the difference between amateur and professional lies in how the professional works for the gratification of the audience. That's not altogether true, though, because

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you are a professional group, and one would hardly say that the Odin works for the gratification of the audience. You wouldn't call yourselves an amateur troupe today, would you?

Of course not. A professional group is one that is able to live from its theatrical work. An amateur group would not be able to do that. There is a double trend or a complementary tradition in twentieth-century theatre. One is *result-focused*, which means that the performance is the core and all efforts aim at the artistic result and its social impact. Then there is another tradition which is *process-focused*, although in the end it entails a result: the performance. The Odin belongs to the second trend where the process is essential, also because this process helps to build a specific human and professional environment with its own norms, beliefs, and superstitions.

Stanislavski marked out a direction, showing that theatre was not just a few people gathering together to prepare a performance, play it, and then go away to another similar situation. For me, theatre means an autonomous and dissident environment. This makes the difference. Stanislavski called it art theatre. Brecht called it ensemble. I have called it a laboratory, but it is an environment which includes not only actors, directors, technicians, organizers, and administrators, but also an ongoing interaction with their complementary equivalents: a core of loyal spectators, scholars, historians, intellectuals, professionals from different generations and theatre genres as well as artists from other fields.

When we study the first generation of great reformers such as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Copeau, or later Brecht, we see clearly that their innovative practice and thinking were also the consequences of an environment they had managed to bring to life. Such an environment guaranteed not just a technical and artistic development, but also a personal growth, what Jung call individuation. As an actor, you can belong to this artistic environment and grow in your intimate human self while, at the same time, you evolve through a professional relationship with colleagues.

The theatre reformers I've been mentioning contributed deeply to the mutation of the thinking and the practice of European scenic culture such as it had crystallized since its birth in the sixteenth century. In their effort to bestow an artistic dignity to the often cliché-ridden craft of the actor, they created something that had previously been a rarity: theatre schools. They claimed that young people should not learn according to the criteria used until then, which were those of any artisan, and which consisted in observing, imitating, and then personalizing the stock characters in which they specialized. The reformers wanted a *new* theatre in which the actors were artists who, in each new production, accomplished an act of creation from zero, starting anew.

Reinventing theatre is one aspect of the legacy they have left to us. Before, you could learn the actor's craft exactly as a ballet dancer did – that is, automatically, by repeating certain patterns or clichés. There existed a technical patrimony that a young actor incorporated which did not consist of a few clichés but of hundreds, almost a consistent formalized system. But technique also has values. Technique is tacit knowledge which is assimilated through material processes, a tangible discipline, a hierarchic order, models and examples to be respected and emulated.

You have referred to Grotowski. Grotowski revealed *my* values to me, he did not impose *his* values. It is a stroke of luck to meet someone who makes you aware that you have hidden possibilities within you, and helps you to bring them to life through demands and trials. Then you discover the nucleus of your 'self', of your identity which is rooted in your biography. Yes, I found out that I was more courageous than I thought, that it didn't matter that I was an immigrant and people might treat me patronizingly or even in a racist way. You *can* find other solutions, other ways to express and give form to your weakness and strength.

These are the values I am talking about. Sometimes I call them superstitions. Yes, you have to be superstitious, believe blindly in certain things. These may appear odd to others, but they whisper to you the next step to take and infuse in you a conviction that makes people follow you to the bitter end.

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I am speaking now of Odin Teatret, how we have been able to stay together for more than forty years, despite the theatre's law of nature which states that a group must dismantle after five, seven, or a maximum of ten years. 'Must', because relationships become worn out, leaving only vapid reciprocal inspiration. I found pleasure in challenging this 'law'. We constantly conceived new obstacles and challenges to revitalize our working situations and group dynamics.

On the one hand I consider the Odin's endurance and longevity to be obscene, almost against nature, like a dog with six legs. On the other, it has become a fact, a reference for future theatre people who feel the need to build an environment which is not based on the ephemeral duration of the performance, but on a lasting growth of personal needs and artistic questioning.

You talk a great deal about individuation and personalization as well as what has been passed down to you from your 'ancestors', as you call them. And in your writings, as here, you have named some of them: Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vahktangov, Brecht, Grotowski, of course, and Artaud. So, in order to individuate, to personalize and create the values or superstitions that are integral to technique, you had to absorb the craft of the theatre handed down to you. But individuation is not only a matter of assimilating and integrating what you can. It requires freedom.

Individuation has become a characteristic of Odin work. How do you contribute to this process, and how much do you interfere in it? How much guidance do you give? How many restraints do you impose on the performance in the reciprocal relationship of learning and teaching which, at the Odin, is supposed to happen simultaneously? You have described yourself frequently as the leader of the group. This suggests that there are restraints, that members in the company do not have absolute freedom to personalize the technique-values you have been talking about.

I am usually very strict at the beginning. The new pupil has to give up what is his/her so-called personality, that bunch of mental and behavioural conditioned reflexes which are often considered as 'spontaneity'. A severe technical discipline helps him/her to acquire a paradoxical way of thinking and behaving in order to be able to shape the performance's fictive dimension into a reality which impacts the spectator's senses and memory. This work on changing the mental perspective as well as the concrete process of expressing and structuring what an actor is articulating/narrating (we could call this 'the actor's dramaturgy') has to do with the realm of 'tacit knowledge', a know-how which cannot be assimilated through verbal explanations, theories, or ideologies, but only through concrete practice. A surgeon does not learn to operate on an eye, or a pilot to fly, just reading theoretical books. When you want to build an house, you start in the opposite direction, by digging the foundations.

It is a similar process I put my pupils through: in order to find the core of their personality they have to set aside the superficial layers, tendencies, and tics. Today, those who want to join Odin Teatret have seen our performances and wish to be able to achieve the results they have witnessed in the Odin actors. Therefore they are strongly motivated to submit to the discipline which everybody in our group accepts by their own will.

You sound like a ballet dancer. Out with your personality! Work!

No: ballet people have to acquire a codified, formalized behaviour. We don't have a codified behaviour at the Odin. Each actor has to develop and master his/her own individual formal process. You have to form yourself, find your own artistic style, which is also a style of life.

This specific teaching/learning situation has more to do with the difference between a master and a teacher. In any school, a teacher must be democratic, she or he cannot send away a pupil if this latter is not giving the maximum. A master doesn't need to be democratic. She or he is chosen by people who are deeply motivated to study with him/her. So, I impose my rules. People are not obliged to remain with me, they come because they believe that I might teach them something special. I used to say, 'Maybe I

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can, but I want you to remain with me for four years and work according to the way that I think is good for you.'

This was in the past. I don't train actors any more and am no longer interested in doing so. But some of my actors have pupils. They have their own way of creating particular relationships with younger people, special learning/teaching ties, and it is interesting to see how these vary from actor to actor. In spite of their different technical perspectives, I recognize the core of what each of my actors is instilling in their pupils. It could be expressed like this: 'Don't give up. Discover another nuance, a new variation. Memorize and keep the precision of the actions you have created. You are tired, but you must not stop the process. You are exhausted, but you have to work a little more to go beyond the limits of what you know.'

Yes, the fundamental thing is the capacity to resist, not to surrender, because the future has only obstacles, delusions, and restraints. At the Odin we appear to teach an acting technique, but we do something else: we create the conditions to let people become aware of their own strength and determination, so they can think with their own head and use their own feet, theatrically speaking, to move in the direction where their needs point them.

It's great rigour that you demand, then, isn't it?

From the outside it can look like rigour, but it is a test of one's own intentions. Anybody may come and express plans, purposes, visions, an endless 'blah-blah-blah', whereas I want to see their work. Show me how you work, demonstrate your determination and smartness, your naivety and cynicism, but through vocal and physical actions which 'say' something to me. At times their work is opaque and insignificant, but that's not the point. Poignant results take time, and they have to cross monotonous and familiar landscapes. Routine and habits have to be established in order to surpass them. They have to do practical work, real action, although you cannot say to them, 'You must do it like this or like that.' Each person is different. You can be very severe with some people and milder with others, but you have to be demanding, especially in the beginning. This is the way the individual professional super-ego grows.

Why are you not interested in training actors any more?

Because if I trained actors I would not be able to be here and speak with you today. I trained the first generation of my actors, I guided them several hours a day, almost seven days a week, for many years. We were like Siamese twins, I would not part from them. The reason I cannot train actors today is simple: I would be obliged to follow the new beginner daily for several hours for two to three years, and I would not have time for all the other activities within the Odin: the rehearsals, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, the University of Eurasian Theatre, touring, the production with the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble, the planning of the Holstebro Festive Week, our many new projects, taking care of the CTLS – the Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies – which our theatre has opened in collaboration with Århus University. Not to mention administration, official meetings, and budgets. But I am still deeply interested in training. During the last thirty years I have not ceased to explore interculturally the actors' technical principles and characteristics. And theatre anthropology is the result of this.

But your actors keep training themselves, don't they?

What you call 'training' is no longer a matter of exercises. After a few years they don't need to do exercises. They have to find other ways to fight what they have learned. There's a sort of paradox here. We all discover at a certain point that we are prisoners of what we know, of what we have assimilated; we long, then, to become uncontaminated by our experience, be ignorant again. The question is: how to start the rehearsals for a new production without repeating patterns and procedures which we know already? How to find the material conditions, the concrete

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working circumstances, as if for the first time? Peter Brook speaks about the art of the beginner, this faculty of facing a new task with a mind as if it was the first day. In other words, how to renew oneself in a profession which implies routine.

The same things were affirmed by Grotowski and Stanislavski. Actors and directors fight for years to absorb a know-how whose artistic results may function both subjectively – have meaning for themselves – and objectively, that is, have a pragmatic value for others: their fellow actors and the spectators. They then feel that this knowledge limits them, and they long to wipe it away and start afresh. This happens also within the Odin. When a group of people stays together for more than forty years, they get to know each other extremely well. It would be a nightmare to come into the rehearsals and not be able to surprise each other. There would be no feedback.

Therefore training is still important at the Odin, but it has become a time/space for developing one's autonomy, for escaping the group's collective demands and the necessary tasks set by the director. In this 'room of one's own', each actor can do what she or he wants, follow childish or obsessive guidelines and ideas, do gymnastics, or prepare a performance which will never be presented. It is in this personal 'laboratory' that the many working demonstrations of our actors have been elaborated.

It is difficult to speak of you as a director, given the way the Odin works. Yet when we look at the programme of your productions, we see your name as the director of the mise en scène. *How do you see the role of director? More importantly, how do you* do *this role?*

There is a difference between a theatre company and a group. In established theatre companies, the director is at the top of the hierarchy. In a group, there is no hierarchy; there is competence – that which each individual member knows. Actors remain with me not because they have signed a contract, but because they feel that I'm still able to give them something. They stay at the Odin because they feel that their colleagues, artistically speaking, still inspire them. The moment one feels that someone is not trying to go beyond their limits, accepting the level already attained and not generating new sparks of life, that person has become a burden. Our nervous system is attracted by what is alive, not what is inert. There is nothing worse than working together with people who are creatively 'lifeless'. My role as a director is to remain 'alive' and make my group react to the manifestations of this 'life'. This life consists in being unpredictable, astonishing, challenging, heading towards a bizarre or even dull aim, changing the demands, assigning new and unprecedented tasks.

All this provokes reactions in my actors, and their sparks nourish our common working dynamics. Concretely, when I begin a production, I have first to startle myself. I must have a point of departure – certain stories, space solutions, or technical problems – that I don't know how to handle, that confuses me and makes me feel insecure. It is an ambiguous process. On the one hand, I know, 'We have fought so many battles, this battle will also be won.' But on the other hand, I state, 'Now we will walk across the ocean.' And my actors think, 'But we can't walk on water.' Yet they try, go into the water, are submerged by it and use all their cleverness to face the consequences of this totally uncontrollable situation. This is the way I go forward, and my actors know it.

It is an agonizing process for the actors, as it is for me, because it demands an excess of work in an atmosphere of uncertainty. They have to improvise or compose one scene after another without knowing whether they will be used. At times I give them tasks and themes; at others I ask them to prepare one hour of material – rhythmic or structured sequences of actions, scenes, songs, or texts that they have to collect.

All this heterogeneous material provides the compost in which the seeds of the new production grow. But it's up to the actors to research, invent, and structure what they have found. They can come with an hour, an hour and a half of material, and I might select only five minutes of it. Perhaps I'll just

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take a few minutes of what they had been preparing for one year, even two years. In the case of *Andersen's Dream* they worked for two and a half years, and had hours of material. I picked up just a few minutes from each actor. It is a great privilege to have actors who still, at an advanced age, accept these sorts of demand. But a director cannot expect actors to behave in this way. You have to educate them to think and act like this.

I would like to ask you about what I could call the 'social investment' of your work. You stressed the individual at the beginning of our discussion, yet I don't think you see your work as only individual. Take, for example, the 'barters', which have been a very important component of your work as a theatre group – I sometimes think an underestimated aspect of your work. Sometimes the barters are taken to be just another part of it, one aspect, whereas I tend to see them feeding into everything you do. There's a kind of dialectic between the barters and the productions – the working process, the long sessions of improvisation, the preparations for the productions, and so on. You did very intense barter work in the South American countries in the 1980s. The idea was to meet other groups who were interested in the craft of the theatre. You gave the name of 'third theatre' to those who were neither in the so-called established theatre nor in the avant garde, which I think you saw as being the opposite of the mainstream, but nevertheless still within the given institutional structures. It's putting it simply, but one could say that, for the moment?

Er . . . well. Yes, one could say it like this.

So you started meeting with other groups and you created barters, exchanges with groups, as first happened in southern Italy. I am not forgetting the importance of craft for you when I ask whether you saw this barter work as having strong sociopolitical dimensions. Did you see it as a way of doing politics as well as theatre?

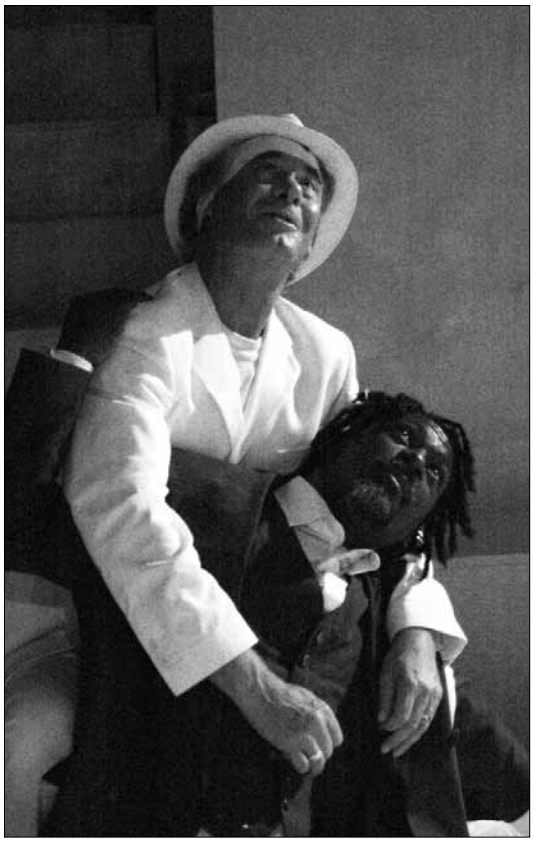
I think that it is impossible to grasp a theatre artist by limiting oneself to his theories and their results. His or her biography is crucial. I came to theatre because I was an Italian immigrant in Norway in the early 1950s. There were very few foreigners at that time in Norway, and Spaniards, Portuguese, and Italians were called 'dagos' or 'wops', and often treated accordingly. I felt on my own skin the price of difference. You could call it xenophobia, even racism, but this would be to simplify the situation. I also met people who were fascinated by my 'exoticism', and who opened their houses, treated me with generosity, gave me their love. At the age of seventeen, diversity became my existential condition.

When I was a sailor in the Norwegian merchant fleet, I discovered that class struggle existed, and I became a Marxist. I'm not blind today, I can see the many injustices of this world. But I gave up doing active politics in Poland. There I discovered how even the noblest ideals and longings are embodied by human beings who, at the same time, can be unjust and corrupt. I had a deep need to defy injustice, but I didn't know what weapons to use. Today I would say that I chose the weapon of disarmament. What is more disarming than theatre? It is just fiction, a symbolic act. Yet it has far-reaching consequences.

Therefore, for me, Antigone is the embodiment of theatre. She could have joined her brothers in the mountains against Creon and the rules of the city. Instead, she performs a symbolic act, a simple gesture. She lets some earth fall on the corpse of her brother. She does not follow the law of the city, nor does she accept the ways of those who are against the city. She invents her own rules: her ethos, which is empathy, compassion.

This is what I believe the theatre's masters have been doing, from Stanislavski to Grotowski. They have built an environment which was called theatre where people could follow their own ethos. Their choices and consistency, their practice and words, have left deep and lasting traces. Just think about Grotowski's theatre with seven actors in a small and remote industrial town in Polish Silesia. Very often they didn't perform because there were no spectators. Few were interested in his 'eccentric' performances. But look at the anonymous and unwitting traces his obstinacy has left in our way of thinking

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From Eugenio Barba's most recent production, *Andersen's Dream* (2005). Photos: Jan Rüsz.

about theatre, in your and my way of reflecting upon and making our professions.

So, for me, theatre has become a way of transforming diversity into an armistice, a sort of ceasefire, where an assortment of people congregate and become motivated towards a shared aim. This happens during the rehearsals, where discrepancies in temperament and views constitute the vital factors in creating a many-faceted and many-layered performance. But barter becomes more challenging when the performance and its related creative processes like improvisation, songs, training exercises become objects of exchange with a specific social reality: a neighbourhood, a prison, a mental hospital, a barrack, a kindergarten.

In a situation of barter, we all accept to be disarmed. The cultural manifestations of our diversity are accepted as the foundations and the features of our recognized presence as well as of our separateness. A barter involves a great deal of preparation. You have to find the people who are motivated to convince their own environment to perform in front of a group of strangers who have 'invaded' their territory. Therefore, it is good to use theatre – it seems innocuous and harmless; you just say that you are interested in their dances and songs.

I don't believe that I change history, nor do I want to change history. I want to contest those who enclose me in their definitions, imposing on me their categories and norms. In my youth, I went to a military school and was fed up with my officers telling me about the honour of the fatherland or the glorious past of Rome and the Renaissance. I just wanted to use my own head and read other books than those they wanted me to read. I wanted to find out which of them distorted certain facts, and which tried to dig deeper and throw light on the ambiguous nature of undiscussed or evident events. Each of us

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has an ambiguous nature. I can say, 'Yes, I want to react against injustice.' At the same time, I know that many of my decisions are selfish and don't take others into consideration. Theatre allows this too: to face the other within myself, my illusions and my pusillanimity.

When I say 'pusillanimity', I mean that I am not courageous. Yet I do not run away from what I call the fight of the 'little soldier'. I don't want to accept passively what others have decided for me. Theatre may give you this sort of freedom and be at same time counter-information. You are not going to have a huge audience sharing your performance. But one spectator is enough, just one. This was proved to me in Chile, where one of the most extraordinary examples of political theatre took place. In the 1970s and 1980s actors and directors could not overtly oppose General Pinochet's dictatorship, they could not make performances against the military junta. If they tried, the police would come, put them in prison, in concentration camps; they could be tortured, disappear. They invented another way of gathering together since the regime had prohibited any form of assembling: three people together were considered a demonstration – a crime. You can't imagine how many marriages and burials were raided by the police because they thought it was a political meeting! Pinochet wrapped the whole country in a mantle of fear, each person separated from his neighbour, without ties, with no bonds.

What did they invent, the Chilean theatre people, against fear? A new way to let people come together and speak openly among themselves. They did it in the churches, inventing new forms of 'liturgy', processions that stepped outside the church and, when the police appeared, retired into the sacred building where the police didn't dare to enter. A well-known actress was giving classes on diction to women whose men had been arrested. This was an opportunity for them to gather and share their situation with people in a similar condition. Theatre people established an unusual collaboration with the Catholic clergy, a sort of alliance and 'barter', if you like. When Odin Teatret went to Chile in 1988, we entered as 'tourists', living as guests in the homes of Chilean colleagues; and we performed in a church in spite of the military dictatorship.

Well, you have said it. The groups in the context of Pinochet's Chile performed a political act as well as a theatrical one. You said you're still doing a lot of barter now, but that it is different. How is it different?

The variety and complexity of a barter has no limits, since it depends on our wishes and imagination. I will just mention one recent example. Every three years, Odin Teatret organizes a *Festuge*, a Festive Week in Holstebro. It's a large and complex network activity involving over a hundred of our town's institutions and associations in joint events: the army, the conscientious objectors, firemen, churches, commercial malls, schools, sport clubs, museums, and so on. In 2004 our actor Kai Bredholt, together with other performers and musicians, led a three-day barter in a school outside our city. In exchange, the children's parents had to find and place in the school's courtyard seven caravans where the performers could sleep. They had also to prepare food for them and provide several hundred bales of straw. These conditions seemed dictated by a madman, but there was method in this madness.

It was not the simple type of barter – we perform for you and then you perform for us – but a more complicated one which we call 'transformance'. Its purpose is to revitalize an environment and the relationships between the people within it. They have to take unusual initiatives and collaborate in atypical ways because they have a common aim: to let their children be 'animated' by actors whom they know and trust. Although the actors come from outside, they are specialists in discovering new relational possibilities in their small community. The lessons stopped for three days. The teachers and pupils waited in the school courtyard to help the farmers unload several hundred bales of straw.

The barter, in this case, aims to introduce disorder into schedules and routine. This is also one of the functions of art, of theatre: to

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subvert, to inject disorder into order – not chaos, but an eruption of energy that will wipe away worn-out relationships and conventions, throwing people into new constellations, tasks, collaborative activities, and a collective atmosphere of festive commitment.

So, there were all these huge straw stacks in the school's courtyard. Kai, the actor in charge of the barter, put children and teachers to work. In all the classrooms, which by now looked like stables, everybody was busy making masks, costumes, and statues out of straw according to an easily learnt technique. You can't imagine how messy the school looked after half an hour! The musicians were playing modern rhythms and children and adults learned the rumba and the cha-cha-cha. Dressed in their straw costumes, in a long procession with music and dance, a hundred of them occupied the town. They visited the mayor, the old people's home and other schools. Adults and children, different ages and social groups, specialized milieux and institutions, mixed together.





Further moments from Eugenio Barba's production of *Andersen's Dream* (2005). Photos: Jan Rüsz.

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The first evening a concert/barter was arranged in the church. The church choir, ethnic minorities, children, folk musicians – each was contributing in a mosaic of mixture and multiplicity. The last evening, during a huge ball, people shared and ate together the food they had prepared at home. Later, children and parents cleaned the school, and the schoolmaster admitted that it was tidier than when the Odin group arrived.

Such barter leaves deep traces in a community. But to prepare such a barter Kai was busy for more than a year. He had to convince the priest to give the church over to the community and get him to accept that people from other religions could sing in it. He had to persuade the farmers to give the straw and the schoolmaster to let the school be invaded by it and spread throughout the classrooms. Kai had to induce in everybody a feeling that it was possible to create an 'impossible' situation. Such an experience makes evident one of the various uses of the actor's technique: the capacity to establish contacts and bonds outside the usual stage–audience relationships, and intermingle them into a sixty-hour performance that transforms daily life.

Thank you, Eugenio. It's a nice note to pause on: straw, disorder turned into order, and order into disorder. Let us open the floor to questions.

Audience Member *What, for you, was the importance of Etienne Decroux and corporeal mime?*

I discovered Decroux when I had finished my study period with Grotowski. I had just settled in Holstebro in 1966, two years after I started Odin Teatret, and Ingemar Lindh came to visit us. He was Swedish and had studied with Decroux for four years. I had never heard of Decroux before. I was fascinated by what Ingemar told me, and asked him whether he thought Decroux would be interested in participating in a seminar that Odin Teatret was organizing for professional theatre people. Decroux accepted and was with us together with Jacques Lecoq and Dario Fo.

This took place in 1968, and it was the first time Dario Fo went abroad with his wife, Franca Rame, and their company. Decroux had an extraordinary personality. He totally ignored Lecoq and Dario Fo. He did some astonishing demonstrations in spite of his age, accompanying them with comments on the stylish taste of the aristocrats, and adding that 'the common people stank'. You should have seen the faces of the participants! It was 1968, with all its tumult and student revolts. I have great admiration for him: he was a consistent artist and a masterly teacher. All his pupils I have met are unique – half-anarchists like their master and, at the same time, rigorous in their creative work. Decroux has been one of the special gifts that my profession has given me.

Two of Decroux's pupils had seen a Grotowski performance in Paris, and had been kicked out of the school since their master didn't allow his students to see other artists or study with them. These two young mimes, Ingemar Lindh and Yves Lebreton, wanted to create a company, and I suggested they come to Holstebro and share our venues. So they moved to Odin Teatret together with two more colleagues and created Studio 2, a group which was active for a few years and then disbanded, going in different directions. Thanks to them, too, I learned more about Decroux.

Audience Member *You were talking about theatre as a spatial environment, and you mentioned Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov. What is the role of the director today?*

We should first define what a director is today, when many different theatre forms exist, with a variety of performance genres, acting styles, technical approaches, and even when they have their own particular spectators. One thing is to be director on Broadway or at the Comédie Française, and another is to assume responsibility for a group or a so-called project. Nevertheless, in general, I would define a director as the person who has the last word in the rehearsals and is the first spectator.

I chose theatre not because I felt I had anything in particular to say or wanted to express myself. I opted for theatre because it was a valid alibi for keeping my diversity

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in the context in which I was living. Before, when I did something, people commented: 'It is typically Italian.' Now they see me as an 'artist' and may say: 'What he is doing is bizarre, interesting, boring or *dejà vu*.' Theatre creates a filter for my behaviour and obliges others to judge what I say and do according to 'artistic' or 'aesthetic' criteria and not ethnic or cultural 'identity'.

Anyone who wants to be a director comes to the profession with hidden and unconscious motivations. For me, today, a director is someone able to create an environment. This environment consists of performers and people with a know-how permitting the creation and 'sale' (or 'social placing') of performances. But there must exist another and more enduring factor in this environment: the ability to pass on the embodied knowledge of its components and formulate its visions, thus building the premises to last throughout the years, and establishing a 'small tradition'. This environment should also include the theatre's complementary side – the scholars. One of the beneficial features of my theatre practice has been the stimulating dialogue with a core of scholars who share my questions and idiosyncrasies.

Audience Member *In the context of what theatre was when you began and what you've seen in your lifetime, what would be your greatest hope for the theatre of the future and your greatest fear?*

If I stress the past so much it is because I want you to consider me a dinosaur, a relic from another age. The person speaking to you now cannot be of any practical use to you. You have to find your own solutions. You are the future. In ten years' time, I will be at a banquet like the one of which Hamlet speaks – I will not be eating there, but be eaten. You all know that you represent hope, so find and live out *your* answers. It would be stultifying if I affirmed that the future should be like this or that.

What I can tell you for sure is that the theatre will exist, because I believe that the human animal has theatre within its genetic programme. From their very beginnings, human beings have reflected upon their own existential condition and used performative behaviour to face different situations in their individual and collective life. You don't need anything to make theatre – a small carpet, a musical instrument, a drum, but primarily a living person, and then another living person who is interested in what the first one is doing. This is the strength of theatre. You don't need any technology, only a deep personal motivation that technical discipline can transform into persuasive forms, evocative sounds and actions.

Audience Member *You talked about environment, but I guess we could agree to call it a context, or a matter of creating contexts. The people you mentioned were people who allowed this context to live through them, to be expressed through them. Therefore, we don't perceive them as separate unities detached from an historical, emotional, psychological process, a constant process of becoming. They are totally intertwined in a context that is always around them. I don't believe that contexts can be created. They are always there, somehow. They can be recognized and expressed.*

Let me use a historical example to clarify what I mean by 'context' and individual contributions to transforming it. By June 1940, Hitler's armies had occupied most of Europe. This was the context. It seemed unchangeable. A few individuals decided not to accept it. The resistance movements in various countries began, sparse at first, and yet, in the end, they were a decisive factor in defeating Nazism. By following their own convictions and opposing the occupation, individuals organized themselves and altered the conditions of a context that seemed unchangeable.

Audience Member *You started Odin Teatret with the rejected. How, through the years, has your position changed in the way you choose your collaborators? And to follow up: do you feel you've left a legacy to the theatre field?*

I don't choose any more. I am in the privileged situation of having a core of actors with whom I have shared many years of collaboration. Somebody might be foolish and decide

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to choose me. I say 'foolish', because such a choice goes against any form of sensible judgement. I have just accepted a young person who worked with one of my actors for three years in Spartan conditions. She had established one of these particular pedagogical relationships that I have already mentioned. After three years, I felt that this person had so much courage that she should be admitted into the group. She impressed me, and although I knew she would give me extra work and responsibility, she conquered my admiration. I have to admire people in order to be committed to them.

Legacy? I don't think that a father should give a legacy to his children, although it is nice when our parents do this because we can then give it to Amnesty International or squander it in a casino. More than a legacy, I would like to leave a sort of legend. Very ambitious, eh?

Audience Member *You mentioned Lecoq. Did you meet him in Denmark or in Paris? What opinion do you have of his methods?*

I met him in Paris in 1967. I invited him to a seminar in Holstebro in 1968 and after that we kept in touch. We used to meet when Odin Teatret performed in Paris, and he would come to see us. I respected him as a teacher. He was strong and demanding. The knowledge that Lecoq has been able to spread thanks to his pupils is remarkable. His is one of the teaching traditions that I have most appreciated in the varied landscape that characterizes today's theatre culture.

Audience Member *You earlier said that technique was not neutral in terms of value. I come from a dance background and will focus the question on dance. Does a work have an interiority? If the technique is not value-neutral, can interiority be value-neutral? You used the word 'diversity'. Does someone have to believe in the Hindu gods to be able to do Hindu dances? Can you still have interiority without believing in the Hindu gods?*

I think the question of interiority should be answered by an actor and I will ask Iben to do it. I imagine that what you call 'interiority' involves personal superstitions, or beliefs, or values: an emotional nebula which prompts a meaning to our life and actions. Defeats and wounds are also a part of our innermost interiority.

When I started Odin Teatret I was burdened by an inferiority complex since I had been rejected and I didn't know the craft well enough. I didn't disguise this inferiority complex in the form of moral superiority, as very often happens when young people say, 'Ah yes, but we are not commercial,' which is nonsense, since every theatre has to establish a form of commerce with its spectators. You should live by the work you are doing and earn your daily bread from it. Interiority is important for our integrity, so we can look back at what we have done without feeling that something essential in us has been amputated. I'm sure that, even if my actors feel that they have spent a hard life with me, they don't regret it, and have the sensation of having chosen a meaningful destiny.

There is no doubt that you can start a working process from interiority. But you have also the opposite, where the first steps consist of seemingly empty patterns or just rhythmic forms into which you slowly infuse justifications, sensible or paradoxical reasons, longings: your inner world. It depends very much on the actor's/dancer's personality and professional imprint. You can start from the inner point or the other way around. Sometimes you can switch from one to another. My experience shows me that each actor finds the most convenient road to stimulate him/herself. It is just a matter of temperament and of the professional path she or he has followed.

But we have to be cautious when we speak of values or interiority connected to a culture. 'European' culture has generated democracy and the Sistine Chapel, but also Auschwitz and the bombing of Dresden. Personally, I have a need not shared by many people – to escape from my culture, to widen my country's horizons to the point of annihilating them. I often say that my motherland is in the sky. My roots are up there. Or, if you prefer, my values. But values are worth

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From *Andersen's Dream* (2005). Photo: Jan Rüsz.

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nothing if they are not embodied by men and women. Some of these people are still alive, some are dead, but they were able to incarnate what I long for, admire, and am inspired to emulate.

Let me give an example. Mandela is part of my 'roots in the sky' or my landless country. But also Antonio Célico, whom you probably don't know, who is a director in Buenos Aires, in Argentina, and has gone through all the difficulties of the dictatorship – being arrested, and so on. He works with his group in the suburbs. He is part of my motherland. This is the way I understand 'diversity', or difference. I don't want to stress my Italian culture. There are many things I am deeply attached to, but they are not of primary importance.

I often feel very embarrassed when I see the 'diverse', because it becomes folklore. Odin Teatret was in Poland in April 2005 for an ISTA session organized by the Grotowski Centre. Their directors gave us a beautiful gift. They said: 'You have given us so much and we want to offer you something during three days where you will be our guests.' They gathered groups from former socialist countries – Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, the Czech Republic, Byelorusse, Ukraine. It was interesting, for instance, to see how the Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan groups, which grew up with so-called socialist-realist theatre, now fell back on a sort of idealized and reconstructed 'tradition' which was pure folklore.

When you explain this to them, they feel wounded because you appear to be patronizing and showing some kind of superiority towards them. It's a touchy subject, and I think an Indian or a Jamaican needs a lot of determination and motivation to say: 'I want to be myself, and not just a Jamaican.' Each of us starts growing in the moment when we experience the other. This is the first step towards escaping from the limits of our own culture. Only if this escape succeeds can we stride into what we considered distant cultures, but which have now become a close and nourishing part of our interiority.

Iben, would you like to pick up the question about interiority from the actor's viewpoint?

Iben Nagel Rasmussen Well I think it's a very difficult and a very long question, and I prefer to answer it in my work rather than talk about it. When Eugenio speaks, I always disagree with some of his points. Sometimes we even start to quarrel, but I'm not going to do that here. Eugenio was insecure at the beginning and our training was strict, but he relied on this strictness and hardness to provide something living. I think that after this beginning we were not looking for mechanical exercises, but for exercises that had an inner glow, even if it was only training. We had a freedom that the later Odin generations perhaps did not have, and this was working with improvisations.

We had a path in our daily work. We searched so much for the life inside us, for how to attain this life in our actions as actors. It was a fantastic liberty, I think, and it was the opposite of what we are doing now, which consists in creating one and a half hours of so-called material for Eugenio from which he extracts five minutes. In the beginning, everything that we did was taken by him and integrated into the performance. If I made an improvisation fifteen minutes long, he would use all of it. This is probably because he was more afraid of hurting this inside, this inner life burning in the physical scores that we created during the improvisations. So we were, in a certain sense, much freer in the beginning than we are today.

I find it hard to watch classical ballet because the technique is so hard and so developed that you have to be a Nijinsky to be able to burn through the resistance that such technique involves.

We have developed different 'techniques' at the Odin, as Eugenio said, and we don't want to be specialized. I think that the moment you choose a certain way of working which then determines the results, it will foul up whatever you are doing. It is important to try to develop different tracks, different forms, rather than stay on one. But I know that it's much more complex than what I am saying.

Thank you very much, Iben and Eugenio.

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