Vicki Ann Cremona

Bali and Beyond: Eugenio Barba's *Ur-Hamlet*

In this article Vicki Ann Cremona traces the development of the complex process of montage used by Eugenio Barba for *Ur-Hamlet*, based on the oral tale *Amleth*, which Saxo Grammaticus included in his history of the Danes (*circa* 1216). Besides Odin Teatret, the project involved a large number of actors and musicians from Bali, Brazil, and Japan, and other participants and trainees with whom Barba had worked at the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA). The author here recounts how the work was developed from different cultural perspectives, describing how the actors' physical scores were combined without their cultural specificity being modified in any way. Vicki Ann Cremona is an Associate Professor at the University of Malta, currently serving as Malta's Ambassador to Tunisia. Her co-edited texts include *Costume in Malta: a History of Fabric, Form, and Fashion* (1998) and *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (2004). She updated, revised and edited Nicola Savarese's *Eurasian Theatre: Drama and Performance between East and West from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, translated from the Italian by Richard Fowler (Holstebro, Malta, Wrocław: Icarus Publishing, 2010).

HAMLET SOMMER, in co-operation with Københavns Internationale Teater (KIT), commissioned Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret to produce *Hamlet* at Kronborg Castle in Elsinore in Denmark. Barba decided to create a different version from the conventional, Shakespearean Hamlet story and returned to the older version which the Danish medieval historian Saxo Grammaticus set in the fourth century AD.

I was part of a very small group of observers who watched the rehearsal process as it happened in Bali, and was able to view the actual performance in Elsinore in 2007. I also experienced the play when it was staged in Wrocław, Poland in 2009.

The aim of this article is to outline the working process of a production which featured multiple actors and musicians all hailing from different theatre traditions, and how this is consistent with Barba's pedagogical and intercultural aims.

The Balinese performers, who constituted the core group of the performance, were invited to participate because they belong to one of the oldest of Balinese dance theatre forms, the *gambuh*. The *gambuh* performers were initially under the direction of an Italian dancer-researcher, Cristina Wistari Formaggia, who had given herself the lifelong mission of preserving this form of dance theatre from extinction.[1]

This performance of *Hamlet* also involved a Japanese Noh actor, a *candomblé* Brazilian actor-dancer, a Brazilian percussionist, an Indian flautist, a French mezzo-soprano, and, of course, the actors and musicians of Odin Teatret. The main concern here is to examine how different theatrical forms from different traditions could interconnect and blended into a seemingly coherent ensemble within a given performance directed by Barba.

Having celebrated his company's forty-fifth anniversary in October 2009, Barba's experience in the theatre does not need reiteration. One premise of his recent work lies in what he calls 'Eurasian theatre'. This is not a geographical concept, but one that allows the performer to locate his/her roots in a dimension that rejects ethnocentricity in favour of 'the capacity to place . . . individual or collective tradition in a context that connects it with other, different traditions'.[2]

Barba places his work and that of his Odin actors within this dimension, but specifies that his actors, being autodidactic, had to

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elaborate their own ways and means – i.e., their own 'traditions', in his terms – both through auto-discovery and by exploiting the heritage of past masters as well as the technical principles that underlie other performance traditions.[3]

The Initial Project and Baseline

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has traditionally been played in different locations within its natural setting at Kronborg Castle, situated on the seafront at Elsinore. It was first staged in the castle in 1816 to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death. The cast consisted of soldiers from the castle garrison.

Barba was asked to direct his *Hamlet* in the castle in 2002 by Trevor Davis, the cultural director of KIT. Barba confesses he has always been fascinated by three particular mythical figures: Faust, Hamlet, and Don Juan. In recent years, 'the never accidental accidents of the profession forced me to confront them. I had always avoided them. Now they take revenge and smile.'[4]

The fact that he was working with a theatrical 'archetype' encouraged Barba to visit theatrical traditions that were archaic in themselves. He explains:

> I wanted this performance to be a homage to the autonomous and transcendent reality that is theatre. I longed to recreate the equivalent of an aristocratic performance of the Renaissance, and so wanted the presence of the most ancient and valuable theatre traditions in existence: a full Balinese *gambuh* ensemble, and Noh actors.[5]

Initially, he drew up a very ambitious project, 'The Prince', which was to be based on different versions of *Hamlet*, taken from Saxo Grammaticus, Belleforest, Shakespeare, Jules Laforgue, Heiner Müller, and John Updike. The performance was to revolve around five main threads that were to create a contrast between the way the performance explained the story and how it enacted it. It was to represent 'a play . . . of masks and illusions . . . disguised within a never-ending feast, and besieged by the reality of war'.[6] The performance was to include three Hamlets: Hamlet-the-Child, Hamlet-the-Prince and Hamlet-the-Ghost (a Noh actor). The latter was to speak 'with the words of Niccolò Machiavelli', which Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew well.

Barba acknowledged that his main concern was understanding how to present a play that included a ghost.[7] He thought of creating a performance where the ghost took the form of a trapezist on a bicycle, moving through the space of action and beyond, and highlighted by spotlights and light effects and projections on the castle walls and in the sky; these were to produce changes of scene, space, and perspective: 'Even the space above the spectators will be inhabited. Up above, Ophelia will drown and float, and we will see the Father's Ghost, gliding through the void above our heads.'[8]

The performance space was to be 'enlivened' by gas lighting, creating the effect of a carpet of flames. A large mound of earth was to be situated in a corner of the castle courtyard, with two gravediggers constantly working on it and whose irreverence was to serve as a counterpoint to the Ghost. The performance was to include Asian, European, and Afro-Brazilian performers and musicians, a university professor as commentator, as well as a white horse, 'materializing the presence of armies', and dogs, which would bark threateningly whenever they smelt the presence of Hamlet-the-Ghost.

Although the organizers were interested in staging something other than Shakespeare's work, the initial project proved far too expensive and had to be amended radically. The space was limited to the courtyard. Lighting was brought down to a bare minimum, and the whole idea of the trapezist, as well as many other characters and features, had to be scrapped. Consequently, Barba decided to present a performance without a ghost, and focus, instead, on the theme of the struggle for power.

Given this particular theme, and the location where the story originally took place, as well as his ambition to build a production around ancient forms of theatre, Barba settled on the story that had inspired Shakespeare, recounted in the *Gesta Danorum*

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Augusto Omulú and Roberta Carreri at *Ur-Hamlet* rehearsals, Bali, 2006. Photo: Odin Teatret.

by Saxo Grammaticus (1150–1220), who wrote a sequence of sixteen books on the history of his country. The title of Barba's production, *Ur-Hamlet*, is the name by which scholars refer to a no longer extant play of uncertain authorship, though it has been attributed to various playwrights, notably Thomas Kyd and Shakespeare himself.

Barba's source was the *Vita Amlethi* from *Gesta Danorum* Books III and IV. A translation from Latin into English, revised by Peter Fisher, is reproduced within the programme booklet of *Ur-Hamlet*.[9] Barba's purpose was not simply to present the original story in its original location. His challenge was to stitch together the work of actors coming from different and, for the most part, ancient theatre traditions. In doing so he allows the context of the story to create a polyphonic, intercultural weave of music and colour that blends into a harmonious, well-balanced ensemble.[10]

Barba also intended to use the performance to develop his pedagogical work. Many young actors and directors write to Odin to inquire about courses and seminars. At this time, he selected about forty of them and proposed that they participate in the work that would lead up to the future production. At the end of the process, these actors took part as the 'Foreigners' Chorus'. Barba describes his intentions in this way:

> I started working in Holstebro and Copenhagen with eight of my actors; in Bali, with my actors plus thirty-three *gambuh* performers, the Japanese Noh master Akira Matsui, and Indian, Brazilian, and European singers and musicians. We all met up in Italy with forty-three actors from twenty-two countries who participated in a seminar guided by me and my actors and who were included in *Ur-Hamlet*. In the performance, they were the trespassing immigrants driven by hunger, war, and plague who sought shelter in Hamlet's castle, where the winds of revenge were blowing.[11]

Every performance by Odin Teatret has a different working process. Thus, actors and

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director are not only faced with a new story but, more importantly, with a new context of work. This helps them to avoid repetition and the clichés that inevitably threaten after so many years of working together. In any case, the groundwork for *Ur-Hamlet* had a common basis in the work that Barba has elaborated with his actors in the forty years of the group's existence: it is based on performance dramaturgy.[12]

Take for example *Andersen's Dream*, first performed in 2005 for the centenary of Hans Christian Andersen.[13] The production does not focus on the life episodes of the Danish writer, but takes as its starting point a strange dream that Andersen recounts in his journal. It takes several of Andersen's fairy tales (such as 'The Little Match Girl', 'The Little Tin Soldier', 'The Little Mermaid') and aspects of his life, but it also intertwines the personal stories of the Odin actors, who are becoming older, into its narrative structure.



Julia Varley and Kai Bredholt in a scene from *Andersen's Dream*.Photo: Jan Rüsz.

As in a dream, a composite series of impressions and bits and pieces of stories emerge, conveying an experience that is at once personal and collective.

In the programme of *Andersen's Dream*, Barba describes his approach as a composition that brings together conflicting questions and discordant themes.[14] Very significantly, he calls the nodes of these diverse interests 'black holes'. Just as a black hole is characterized by its powerful gravity, the identified themes pulled other questions, ideas, and stories towards them. Like the dense mass of energy and matter that is not observable in itself, but can only be apprehended through its context, the questions and thoughts coming to the actors and the director were shown through the material that was brought to the rehearsals.

This scenic material was processed in time-space, and rhythms, associations, and ideas emerged in the course of action and reflection. For example, in his dream Andersen saw himself on a slave ship that is carrying black slaves in the hold. The theme of 'deportation' became the 'black hole' of the performance, and the theme of slavery was formed into a tale to be narrated.

Barba's work has given rise to a type of performance where, often, the aim is not to recount a story. In his words:

> Concretely, it means that the actor does not remain yoked to the plot, does not interpret a text, but creates a context, moves around and within the events. At times the actor lets these events carry her, at times she carries them, other times she separates herself from them, comments on them, rises above them, attacks them, refuses them, follows new associations, or leaps to other stories. The linearity of the narrative is shattered by constantly changing the point of view, by anatomizing the known reality and by interweaving objectivity and subjectivity (i.e., expositions of facts and reactions to them). Thus the actor uses the same liberty and the same leaps of thought-in-action, guided by a logic which the spectator cannot immediately recognize.[15]

The director observes all the contexts being created by the actors through their montage of actions. Reacting to the narrative and working in a complementary way, he provides new shape and dimension for the

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actors' and musicians' offerings through his own montage. His role is to extract fragments of sequences presented by this or that actor, and to interweave them with the fragments of other actors in order to create an organic result.

Through montage, Barba modulates consistency, rhythm, and intensity, relying on his personal reaction to what he is watching as well as his craft. Like the actor, the director has to fashion and remodel his tools at every moment of the process. His method of work changes and adapts to the flow of the production. It focuses simultaneously on structure, aesthetics, sound, and meaning, plying the various factors to form a dramatic action that is open to multiple readings which will allow unexpected meanings not encrypted in the actors' original improvisations to emerge.

Montaging the 'Score' of *Ur-Hamlet*

As will be noted, various layers of meaning and interpretation were added to *Ur-Hamlet* as the director placed the ancient text by Saxo in a contemporary paradigm. In order to do this, he had to tackle the challenge of interweaving, into a coherent pattern, the different materials offered by both the masters and the less experienced actors who were integrated into the process.

Ur-Hamlet followed the same ethos and approach as had been developed for the performances known as 'Theatrum Mundi' which were produced at the end of all ISTA sessions, starting from Salento in 1987 – in other words, involving the creation of a performance where all the participants of diverse nationalities and backgrounds were using their own physical score and, without changing its nature, juxtaposing it with the score of the other collaborators. The different actors with their different scores interact accordingly within the action.[16] The actors' work combines with that of musicians, who are also of different nationalities and musical traditions, and who also maintain their own specific musical characteristics.

As Christoffersen affirms: 'In *Ur-Hamlet* the various theatre traditions are not integrated, but remain independent even though they interact within a common context.'[17] The work on scores is a praxis whereby the actors learn the physical score of their improvisations, first in fragments and then as a whole. This allows the director to memorize the actors' scores so that, at a later stage, he can combine them according to the needs of the story, and of the directions he decides it should take. The composition is modulated according to a rhythm and intensity that can be adjusted right up to the end of rehearsals and even afterwards, during public performances. This work is, in a word, a real process of the montage of 'behaviours'.[18]

When, therefore, Barba works with actors coming from different cultures, he can apply the same methods of work to their scores, since their way of working is very similar to that of the Odin. Consequently, the director has no difficulty in memorizing their actions to create a montage. In such an approach, there is no need to create a common language, which would require a great deal of time. Nor does it require performers to understand fully their respective ways of working, which would be an even more complex matter.

Even though history and culture are behind every theatre tradition, it is nevertheless easy to see that the methods of composition and decomposition of the scores of Noh, Balinese dances, or *candomblé* dances have a shared characteristic: they are based on composable or decomposable 'fragments', workable elements that go beyond their specific cultural sources.

This type of process negates the idea of any one dominant culture whereby none has to push or modify its expression to suit the needs of the director or theatre community. All actors, from whatever culture, participate fully and equally in the process of combining their specific work with that of the other participant actors. The director's work is to use the different scores presented to him and, without changing their nature, create a montage that simultaneously throws light on the characteristics of each particular form and uses them fully in the performance. This works overall to enforce the full potential of

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each cultural expression. In the case of *Ur-Hamlet*, Barba assembled several fragments proposed by the various actors in such a way as to have them flow smoothly into the narrative text of Saxo Grammaticus, which was not of course intended for theatre.

Many of the actors and musicians who participated in *Ur-Hamlet* had already met and worked together at various ISTAs. Apart from the members of Barba's company, the Japanese actor and many of the Balinese were acquainted with each other's work and with Barba's approach, and this helped facilitate successful participation.

When I watched the beginning of the process in Bali, it was still very raw. There were various individuals or groups of actors and musicians, who quite evidently had all 'played' with the text by Saxo Grammaticus or, at least, with some of its episodes. The actors and musicians from the Odin Teatret had developed their physical or auditory scores.[19] As noted, the term 'score', or *partitura*, was adopted by Barba as a sequence of physical actions, derived from improvisations, that can be reproduced again and again.

Some characters had begun to emerge during the first phases of this work: the narrator, Saxo Grammaticus (played by Julia Varley), Amleth (Augusto Omulú, a lithe and agile Afro-Brazilian actor-dancer who has worked with *candomblé* ritual forms), Geruth, the mother (Roberta Carreri), and Mia Theil Have, in the role of the young maiden used as a bait to seduce Amleth.

The Work of Cristina Wistari Formaggia

There was also a peripheral figure, played by Torgeir Weithal, who wore a costume reminiscent of Pulcinella, and carried placards on which stage directions were written. This figure worked mostly on the margins of the space.[20] Each actor had clearly spent time and energy working on his/her physical text, and had already had some contact with their director in Denmark. In Bali, they were to combine these raw scores with those of the Balinese actor-dancers who were working separately with Cristina Wistari Formaggia.
This remarkable Italian woman died suddenly on 19 July 2008, soon after accompanying the actors and musicians of the *gambuh* Desa Batuan Ensemble (which she had founded) to Holstebro in order to participate in Barba's *The Marriage of Medea.* Her death left the company and all who knew her stunned with sadness and shock.[21]

Cristina Wistari Formaggia, who lived, worked, and researched in Bali from 1983 to her death, had danced *topeng* and *gambuh*, and was a recognized master of the Panji role. She headed a group of thirty-three actors and musicians from the village of Batuan, and did sterling work in preserving the *gambuh* dance-theatre tradition.[22]

Initially, she had worked on traditions in Northern India and Pakistan, where she researched ceremonial songs and dances that were used during animistic religious festivals. She later studied Kathakali in Kerala. She developed a bookish attraction for Bali after reading the writings of Antonin Artaud on the Balinese performance that he had watched in Paris at the 1931 Exposition Universelle, and this made her decide to go to Bali to learn the dance theatre forms of the country. She arrived in 1983, and worked initially on *baris* and *topeng*, later discovering *gambuh*, the oldest form of dance-drama in Bali, and considered to be the origin of all other forms of Balinese dance theatre.[23]

This dance theatre was reserved for temple festivals in Batuan, Besakih, and other temples, and was in danger of extinction. It was one of the rare forms that had not been corrupted by the tourist trade and, lasting several hours, was still performed in its entirety. However, in one of her letters to Barba in 1994, Cristina stated:

> The Balinese pretend not to notice, but 'Progress', like a voracious demon, is destroying the ancient culture and traditions. Everywhere there is a wealth of opulence, including the ceremonies, but I seem to perceive, behind the veil of appearances, an emptiness that is gradually forming: that of ritual becoming a façade, acts which are performed out of habit, but no longer knowing the reasons and the origins of their existence. The *gambuh* is a clear example of this.[24]

In an attempt to save, preserve, and document the dance, Cristina, together with a

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Cristina Wistari Formaggia's grand entry with the *gambuh* ensemble, Bali, 2006. Photo: Odin Teatret.

group of Balinese scholars and performers, began the *Gambuh* Preservation Project, which received funding from the Ford Foundation. In 1993, committees were formed to study and research the music, movements, literature, and history of *gambuh*. The result of this research was a two-volume publication in Indonesian, which Cristina wished to revise and translate into English, and the founding of a group, which ensured that the form was transmitted to younger generations and maintained by performances in Bali and abroad.[25]

Cristina started collaborating with Barba in 1995 through the ISTA sessions, as well as with the Magdalena Project.[26] Her group was invited to participate in ISTA sessions and in 'Theatrum Mundi' performances, as in the ISTA session in Seville in 2004. Barba eventually invited Cristina and the members of the group to participate in *Ur-Hamlet.*

Cristina's death was a heavy blow to the group and the work they were carrying out under her leadership. However, the group did not die with her. They are continuing the precious work that she started of preserving the dance and training new dancers. Barba and the Odin actors are also helping them to keep the tradition alive, in part by providing financial help.[27]

During the work in Bali, the Balinese actor-dancers, under Cristina's guidance, had also been developing their physical texts for *Ur-Hamlet*, using as their technical basis the principles, actions, and movements of their own theatre tradition. This was the second year that the Odin actors and musicians had been working on the performance with the Balinese.

Cristina spoke to me of the work she was elaborating with the *gambuh* actors, which was based on a comic abridged version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in *topeng* style. She wanted to stage this as a prelude to *Ur-Hamlet*, although it could also be a stand-

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alone piece. She never finished her project, but her actors continued to work on the performance, and with Barba's help they mounted it in Poland in 2009. The actors, using *topeng* masks, presented a hilarious, effervescent piece in which they parodied the clichés associated with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. They used different comic devices, including slapstick, and a few chosen words in English, either stated or written on placards and cloths, which helped to transmit the message conveyed mainly through their comic actions. They also produced an ending with a twist, where the Ghost remains the sole triumphant protagonist after killing everyone, including his newly-wedded bride, Ophelia. The production was a contrasting prelude to *Ur-Hamlet.*

The Role of *Gambuh* and Noh in *Ur-Hamlet*

Gambuh, a semi-secular form of theatre, is said to be inspired by the ideals of the Majapahit courts and the myth of Prince Panji, who is in eternal quest for his beloved, Princess Rangkesari.[28] It represents tales of love and intrigue, and is characterized by archetypal court figures, accompanied by their attendants and warriors, as well as clowns. The latter comic roles are very much part of the Balinese theatre tradition, and can be seen both in *wayang-kulit* (shadow puppetry) as well as in acted plays. They were in complete synchrony with the action developed in the production of *Ur-Hamlet*, so much so that it seemed as if their parts had been purposely created for the piece, which also featured warriors and maidens.

The roles of the Balinese actors were, in fact, entirely in consonance with those of their traditional theatre form, and this facilitated the integration of their traditional physical scores in the story of the Viking court. By integrating their conventional roles with the storyline, Barba was not trying to combine Balinese plots with those of *Hamlet*. Instead his work focused on exploiting the qualities and energy embodied in the actor-dancers' movements.

Roy Jenkins is a professor and artistic director who chose to collaborate with the Balinese dancer Nyoman Catra following their encounters at ISTA sessions. He found that this particular quality of Balinese performance blended perfectly with Shakespearean texts. His description of Catra's work as Caliban in *The Tempest* provides a direct link with Barba's production:

> The physical presence of the Balinese actor, constantly searching for equilibrium in a state of disequilibrium, mirrors the condition of great theatrical situations and texts, where dramatic tension is continually heightened by unresolved conflict. Shakespeare's plays certainly fall into this category, full of language that bristles with action, paradox, and contradiction. What actor is better prepared to embody that text than one who knows the secret of encoding the conflict between equilibrium and disequilibrium into his flesh?[29]

In *Ur-Hamlet,* Barba juxtaposed both the Balinese *gambuh* actors and the group of student actors, the 'Foreigners' Chorus', with Japanese Noh. The celebrated Noh master Akira Matsui who, like the Balinese, had already worked with Barba, particularly during a number of ISTA sessions, impersonated two characters in *Ur-Hamlet.*

He first appeared as the King of Rats, impersonating the plague that had penetrated the castle, according to Saxo's story. Later, he took the role of Hamlet's faithful warrior, who swears allegiance to his master. Matsui's score was based on the physical techniques used in Noh theatre by the actor playing the role of the *shite*, who suddenly changes into a demon, and that of the warrior in the *shura-noh* or battle-plays.

In attributing these roles to the Japanese actor, Barba was not trying to stage Noh. His aim was to use the intense energy of a theatre master versed in these roles to create a physical dynamic between this actor and the other actors, who were using their own scores, either inspired by the *gambuh*, as in the case of the Balinese, or created during the improvisations led by Barba and the Odin actors, as in the case of the 'Chorus'.

Like all Noh actors, Matsui's physical technique included a slow-paced, shuffling gait, produced by bended knees, locked hips, a trunk projected slightly forward, and the feet, which are never lifted off the ground.

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Akira Matsui as the King of Rats. Photo: Odin Teatret.

Anyone who has watched Noh performances knows that the actor's control of his body is such that it produces a powerful, galvanizing presence from the very first moment the actor sets foot on stage. Akira Matsui did not need either costume or mask to impose his presence. The fact that he possessed his bodily skills could be witnessed from the very moment this small, slight man walked across the open space of the Bali rehearsal area wearing a T-shirt and a pair of loose trousers.

In his work for *Ur-Hamlet*, Matsui used sequences of actions from Noh, such as his walk as a spirit, or his work with swords. Barba chose this actor precisely because he could offer these techniques, whose fundamental value does not depend on the cultural context in which they were created and are normally shown, but on the particular way the actor uses his spine in performing his action.

Continuing the Process

In his talk in Wrocław (June 2009) with the participants who made up the 'Foreigners' Chorus' and a small group of guests, Barba stated that one of the important problems he had to face when putting together the different layers of the performance was knowing how to combine the various rhythms produced by the actors with their specific acting styles. He needed to blend the quick rhythms of the Balinese with those of the Noh actor, the *candomblé* dances chosen by Augusto Omolù, and the small, soft, and gentle (also warrior-like) movements of Yalan Lin (the elements of Nankuan and Peking Opera). All of these elements needed integration with

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Akira Matsui in rehearsal as warrior. Photo: Odin Teatret.

the Odin actors and the 'Foreigners' Chorus'. During his integrating process, Barba made sure that each actor maintained his/her specific rhythms and did not feel obliged to adapt or change them in any way. It was the director's primary task to bring together these various actions, styles, and layers into a coherent performance.

The process of montage in the creation of the various scenes of *Ur-Hamlet* was very complex and varied, and it is impossible to describe it step by step. I have therefore selected three specific moments of the process in order to outline the director's work. These serve to present his method of developing energy and of creating harmonized choreographic movement. One also discerns here his movement from one stage to another when processing the improvisations and actions performed by the actors in the course of the different rehearsals.

Particularly striking was the fact that there seemed to be no hard and fast rules. In some cases, the director would allow an actor to develop a whole scene, and then simply take a few fragments of it. Other scenes were gradually developed but suddenly scrapped if they no longer fitted into the framework being progressively elaborated, while others were accepted with very minor adjustments, as they conformed to the director's vision of the integrated whole.

The actors would react to the director's proposals either by offering new material, or by creating variations in the improvisations they had already presented. The process itself was not static or pre-established. Like the actors, the director 'felt' the work, experimented with different viewpoints, explored different possibilities, and at times allowed the organic quality of the work to carry him along. His prime ability, however, lay also in the fact that at no time did he allow the process to get out of hand, always seeming able to control its flow and intensity.

The most complicated part of the process was the one in which the director engaged with Julia Varley, who played Saxo Grammaticus, and so narrates the story in the performance. Varley had come to Bali with a very complex vocal partitura. Her role demanded that she recite the whole Latin

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text by Saxo, learned by heart. Initially, she had developed very demanding vocal work saying the text at different pitches. It seemed that her vocal efforts had become so overwhelming that not only had they robbed her of her 'scenic presence', but they also nullified the actions being performed on stage by other actors.[30]

It was interesting to note Barba's work with her in the first week. At first, Barba allowed the actress to experiment fully with her vocal range, and simply watched her as she presented a series of physical actions that involved a skeleton placed at the centre of the stage, where she seemed to be picking up the different bones and putting them down again haphazardly. Suddenly, he rapped out one instruction: 'Clean them!' Varley's picking up and putting back the bones thus immediately acquired a new sense: Saxo seemed to be polishing the dust of ages off the bones. Varley's actions became meaningful and interesting to watch, and when she eventually finished this action the quality of her work had been transformed.[31]

However, the actress's voice remained predominant. After allowing her physical actions to develop, Barba asked Varley to retain the same quality of energy that she was using to recite Saxo's text, but requested her to modulate her voice between whispers and silence, with sudden sharp rises that were to be used to produce or intensify culminating moments of particular scenes, or to underline the physical work of other actors.

Suddenly, the quality of her presence was transformed. The retained energy that she now exerted created interesting contrasts, as the physical work of producing 'spoken silence' coupled with the abrupt appearance and fading out of her voice, created 'leaps of energy' and placed her character at the focus of the spectators' attention.[32] Her voice, or the lack of it, created a new physical relationship to the other actors in the space – sometimes catapulting her to the forefront of the action, at other times allowing her to recede into the background of other actions. This work rendered her presence 'organic' in the eyes of the spectators, who became constantly aware of her presence (or *bios*) within the stage space. According to Barba, this is 'an essential quality in the performer's actions, the premise for a spectator to react with an unconditional "I believe".'[33]

In contrast, at Elsinore in 2007 Varley no longer cleaned the bones, but simply uncovered the skeleton to the sound of a Balinese ceremony song by Candri, the female Balinese singer. To my mind, Varley's actions and her recourse to a high-pitched recitative pattern were much less effective than the process I had watched in Bali, as they robbed the actions of a purpose, and her voice of the blending and contrasting sound effects that she had built up previously. By the time she performed in Wrocław, the modulations of sound and intensity had once again acquired a strong and meaningful dimension.

A 'Playmate' for Hamlet

Another process developed in Bali was the interaction between Hamlet and another character whom Barba had introduced into the story. This was a child, Hamlet's soul playmate. Here the director played upon a whole series of contrasts. The child was performed by a very young, small Balinese actress-dancer, Ni Wayan Phia Widari Eka Tana, who had received basic training in *baris* movements, and had retained the youthful spontaneity of her lithe actions.[34]

Barba worked with the young Balinese actress on three different scores. At the beginning, she appeared as Garuda, a bird, using the score as in Balinese performance, and, at the end, she performed a *baris* dance. Her action as Hamlet's playmate was based on a series of improvisations which the young girl had elaborated with the director and Omolù, whose quick, highly rhythmic movements were accentuated by drum percussion.

Omolù's seemingly spontaneous, almost childlike, yet controlled dance movements complemented hers. The actor's eyes were covered by his hair, or by strands of string that resembled a thick fringe. Due to this, Omolù had to show that he was looking not only with his head, but by the tension in his spinal column.[35] The physical position of his head obliged the spectator to imagine the

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eyes and the quality of the character's gaze. It must be stated that from one version of *Ur-Hamlet* to another the little girl had grown and changed into a very pretty, quite tall young girl, a physical fact that inevitably transformed the perspective of her relationship with Hamlet.

In Bali and in the performance in Elsinore, the role of Hamlet's lover (also his foster sister) was played by a Danish actress, Mia Theil Have. In Poland the role was taken by a Taiwanese actress, Yalan Lin. Yalan specializes in a form of traditional Chinese opera, Nankuan Opera, which has moved through the ages from Northern China to Taiwan. Obviously, with the arrival of the Chinese actress-dancer, the scenic behaviour of the young lover changed radically. In her movements, Yalin Lin used a technique very different to that of the Danish actress who had preceded her, and the relationship between Hamlet and his young lover transformed from sexual to sensual love.

As Ferdinando Taviani, literary adviser to Odin Teatret, writes in the programme booklet of *Ur-Hamlet*: 'I believe that Barba is not interested in the different stage traditions as "tradition". He is interested in actors who have *incorporated* forms. The professional traditions are one of the situations that promote incorporation.'[36]

The Music

The music in Bali was created by a mixture of instruments and genres. The Balinese musicians provided the traditional strains of their music through the use of the long bamboo *gambuh* flutes (the basis of the *gambuh*), the rebab, a string instrument played with a bow, and the gamelan. The Odin players, using trumpet, euphonium, accordion, electric bass, and guitar, played music that was specifically composed for them. They were accompanied by an Indian flautist and a Brazilian *candomblé* percussionist. Other musical sounds were provided by voices: the contrasting tones of Brigitte Cirla, a French mezzo-soprano, a Danish soprano *leggiero*, and the Balinese female singer Nyoman Candri, who also accompanied Balinese male singers singing a chorus in Kawi, the traditional but obsolete language of Balinese art forms. To this orchestration were later added the voices of the 'Foreigners' Chorus'.

The dialogue developed through different types of music was richly exploited through two means. The composer, Frans Winther, created a musical score underlying the action on stage that was inspired by medieval tonalities. This clearly linked it to the period when the original text by Saxo was written. To do this, he blended European instruments and voices in compositions that used different rhythms and tempos. The words of the sung parts were citations from the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus.

However, the composer wanted to avoid 'historifying' the medieval tonalities, so he introduced a distorted electric guitar to 'add a savage tone to the music'.[37] The guitar sound had the effect of placing the whole musical landscape into a contemporary context, and helped blend together the various narratives being enacted on stage: the story of Hamlet, and the contemporary narratives of the young actors who suddenly appeared.

Winther would at times bring this 'European music' to the fore and introduce Balinese strains as a background. At other times he allowed the Balinese music to dominate, sustaining it at particular moments with European melodies. Occasionally, Winther would have Balinese instruments in his compositions. At very specific moments, the musicians, particularly the Indian flautist, Annada Prasanna Pattanaik, were asked to improvise, and they brought in their own rhythms and harmonies.

Pattanaik produced an underlying melody to a central love scene that will be discussed below. A Japanese drinking song led by Matsui and harmonized by the Indian flute player was used as a basis for an instrumental and melodic piece accompanying the execution of Hamlet's lover. The juxtaposition and alternation of different genres of music created sonorous sequences that provided a commentary, as well as a subtext, for the action.

The work that Barba demanded from the actors, and from himself as the director, was

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Balinese musicians playing the *gambuh*. Photo: Odin Teatret.

extended to the music, which provided another dimension to the performance. He worked in collaboration with Winther to intensify the 'movement score' through sound. The music was also used to break the linearity of the narrative by underlining, shifting, or contrasting the mood of the acted sequences.

The Performance and its Spaces

The open space of the outer temple in Bali, where rehearsals and one work in progress took place, were very different from the courtyard of Elsinore castle in Denmark, and different from that of the Arsenal in Wrocław. The courtyard in Elsinore had an architectural feature that had to be reckoned with – a central well that 'invaded' the central action, which had been a spatial point of focus in Bali. Barba dealt with the problem of this central area by creating scenes that shifted the spectators' attention through simultaneous actions across the whole space, as well as by staging certain scenes that took place either in the immediate vicinity of the well or over it. Here the spot became a focal point of attention.

Other notable aspects for consideration were the official safety regulations that justifiably prevailed in the historic building. Since the Balinese female dancers carried flaming torches, the main source of lighting for the scene, there had to be water on the stage itself to help put out any possible fire. (In Bali, helpers stood at the edge of the space with fire-blankets, following the action carefully.) Eleven bowls of water, shaped like huge fishbowls, were set around the stage, and lighted torches placed behind them, emitting a mysterious amplified, orange light. In Wrocław, where the courtyard was much larger, more effects were produced from electric lighting.

The rhythm and quality of the performance also changed radically between Bali and

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Elsinore. The intensity of the action, where slower scenes alternated with action-packed moments, was transformed by the introduction of forty-three new actors. This group of performers, mostly young, had undergone intense voice and physical preparation with the Odin actors for two months. At times they formed a sort of 'chorus', and at others developed sequences on an individual basis, adding new layers to the action. Such action obliged spectators to create their own individual montage of the performance. Viewers were impelled to decide which action sequences to follow, or simply to take it all in at a glance. The new actors also gave extra texture to the music.

At the beginning of the Danish performance, the group's presence was heard and not seen. In Wrocław, however, the break between the Balinese comic performance and *Ur-Hamlet* was marked by the whole group of actors silently and solemnly crossing the entire space of performance in twos. They then gathered behind the musicians in choir formation, practically out of sight of the spectators. The 'chorus' group sang a piece composed for different voices, which set the tone of the performance. Only afterwards did the multi-ethnic orchestra start playing and the action begin.

The members of the chorus began slowly to appear only when the action was well under way. They were identified from the outset by Saxo-Varley exclaiming: 'Foreigners have invaded the castle!' The 'Foreigners' entered singly or in twos or threes, furtively at first, either darting across the space or crawling into it. Their numbers gradually increased, prompting interaction between two or more of the 'invaders'. As the space filled up with groups of people, there was an increasing impression of invaded space. The groups' appearance was highlighted by a change in the music, with the two soprano voices blending in. Soon the central space was transformed into a wedding supper, with action taking place around and, eventually, on a table, which the actors had carried in. The interaction between the bride and groom was juxtaposed against other manifestations of love occurring at the same time.

The love scene was one of the highlights of this performance. A melody played on reed pipes by the Indian flautist created an aural setting that complemented the action on stage, with three sets of lovers manifesting affection and pleasure at being together: Hamlet and the maiden, the married couple, and the King and his wife, Hamlet's mother. The feeling of love and tenderness that they conveyed was further enhanced by the mirroring effect of the Balinese female dancers, also in couple formations, dancing and interweaving around each other and around the three main couples, providing lightness and a joyous mood.

This harmony was in stark contrast with what follows, when Saxo-Varley announced: 'The Plague comes to the castle.' The Plague, personified by the Noh actor wearing a mask similar to that of the vengeful demon, transformed the scene into a carefully prepared chaos, as music and voices rose up in crescendo. The Foreigners, struck by the plague, were collapsing everywhere, until the performance space was covered by a mass of bodies, crawling in despair, until they came to a sudden halt.

The bodies were later rolled into piles on pallets by four gravediggers dressed as *pulcinellas* and covered with white cloth, eventually to be picked up and carried out of the performance space by forklifts – a modern version of the way in which, in the past, the bodies of plague victims were piled into carts to be carried away and thrown into pits.

Akira Matsui was to make another appearance, this time as a sort of *tsure* (warrior) protecting Hamlet. He threw a spiderweb, made of carefully rolled up very thin strips of light paper, capturing all the *gambuh* warriors, who were then killed. Hamlet's killing of the enemy King provided the climax to this scene. The unexpected killing of the maiden, which was introduced by Barba, was to have even greater effect due to the fact that nothing in the performance prepared the spectator for it. At a time when peace reigns again and the warriors have pledged allegiance to Hamlet, who is now King, the young maiden, who has come to claim his love, is killed at her lover's orders.

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The performance in Elsinore. Photos: Odin Teatret.



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The female dancers plunge the maiden's head into a basin of water and hold it under in spite of her vain struggles to break free. The final scene is that of a family wheeling a pram. They sit down merrily for a picnic in amidst the corpses strewn everywhere.

Leaving Bali

I left Bali thinking that I had watched a process that had developed into a finished performance with a single story line concerning Hamlet and the warriors running through it. I saw it as an interpretation of an ancient tale that has survived through the ages. The performance in Elsinore, where the 'Foreigners' Chorus' had been introduced, surprised me by its multiple storylines, and drove home the fact that in a theatre which is organic, a process can never be 'frozen' into a static unchanging presentation; and that the focus on technique, whatever its origin or form, allows for new developments and interpretations that constantly challenge and shift the boundaries of performance and meaning. The modifications of the performance at later stages, which also involved key scenes, re-emerged or disappeared in the performances that were given in Wrocław.[38]

In Poland, Barba stated that what had led him to agree to direct a production of the Hamlet story was not the power of the text but, rather, the 'language of theatre', as experienced through the body. The 'language' transmitted by the actor's body is made up of underlying physical principles that can take on different forms and intensities in different traditions, but which are related to common specific technical concerns such as balance, rhythm, and intensity.

*Ur-Hamle*t allowed Barba to gather within the framework of a performance 'a professional family', consisting of masters and participants with various levels of physical expertise. They did not have a single specific language, but could meet with others and together 'nourish each other' by sharing and transmitting, through their bodies, the 'embedded knowledge' of the extraordinary craft that each of the different theatre traditions represented.

Ur-Hamlet is the first time that Barba has worked with such a large number of actors, professionals and trainees, numbering close to one hundred. Each and every one of their actions required the close attention that is part of Barba's praxis. In Taviani's words:

> Therefore when we observe the rehearsal carefully, *Ur-Hamlet* is not composed. It surfaces, it is as if in the submerged island of Atlantis a living theatre makes and unmakes itself incessantly. And it appears on the surface in temporary islands which never coincide with the expected images.[39]

Notes and References

1. *Ur-Hamlet* is dedicated to the memory of Cristina Wistari Formaggia, who passed away in July 2008.
2. Eugenio Barba, 'Eurasian Theatre', trans. Judy Barba, in Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the Secret Art of the Performer*, trans. Richard Fowler, rev. Judy Barba (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 102–11.
3. For an examination of the actors' own views of their techniques, see Erik Exe Christoffersen, *The Actor's Way*, trans. Richard Fowler (London; New York: Routledge, 1993); and Roberta Carreri, *Tracce*: *training e storia di un'attrice dell'Odin Teatret* (Milan: Il Principe Costante Edizioni, 2007).
4. Eugenio Barba, 'AngelAnimal: Lost Techniques for the Spectator', speech of thanks on the occasion of the Honorary Doctorate bestowed on Barba by the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts on 7 July 2006. The director worked on the myth of Faust during the ISTA of 1987 and staged a performance on Don Juan at the Ravenna Festival (2006) entitled *Don Giovanni all'inferno*.
5. See Maria Shevtsova's interview with Barba in Maria Shevtsova and Christopher Innes, *Directors/Directing: Conversations on Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 29.
6. For a detailed description of the original project, see Eugenio Barba, 'Materiali di Lavoro', in the section 'Odin Quaranta – dossier', ed. Mirella Schino, *Teatro e Storia*, 25 (2004) p. 243–55. I have taken these quotations and those that follow from an English copy of the project called 'The Prince: a Project by Eugenio Barba for the Castle of Kronborg on the theme of Hamlet', document dated 28 February 2004 in Holstebro, kindly given to me by the director.
7. Eugenio Barba, personal communication, 13 May 2008.
8. Eugenio Barba, 'The Prince', op. cit., p. 2.
9. First published in Hilda Ellis Davidson, ed., *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes, Books I–IX,* trans. Peter Fisher (Woodbridge: 1979).
10. These were: Julia Varley, Roberta Carreri, Torgeir Wethal, Mia Theil Have, Augusto Omolú, Frans Winther, Jan Ferslev, Kai Bredholt; Akira Matsui (Japan); Cristina Wistari Formaggia (Italy); Ni Nyoman Candri, I Wayan Bawa and performers and musicians from the Gambuh Pura Desa Ensemble (Bali); Brigitte Cirla (France); Cleber da Paizão (Brazil); Annada Prasanna Pattanaik (India); Magnus Errboe (Denmark); and the

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Foreigners' Chorus, which included actors from South Korea, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, USA, Canada, Israel, Czech Republic, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, and Switzerland.

11. *Directors/Directing: Conversations on Theatre*, op. cit., p. 31.

12. With regard to the various dramaturgies employed in *Ur-Hamlet*, see Erik Exe Christoffersen, 'Theatrum Mundi: Odin's Ur-Hamlet', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXIV, No. 94 (2008), p. 107–25, in particular p. 109–17.

13. *Andersen's Dream* was shown for the first time in 2004. I first watched this performance in Paris and later in Copenhagen.

14. Eugenio Barba, 'Les Enfants du silence: réflexions pour les quarante ans de l'Odin Teatret' in *Andersens Drøm* (Holstebro: Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, 2005), p. 57; my translation. Other terms used in this paragraph are from this source.

15. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, p. 104.

16. The important issue of score and subscore is developed by Barba in the entry 'Exercises' in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, op. cit., p. 112.

17. Erik Exe Christoffersen, 'Theatrum Mundi: Odin Teatret's *Ur-Hamlet*', op. cit., p. 108.

18. See 'Montage' in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, op. cit., p. 178–84.

19. Not all the Odin actors participate in these particular productions, only those who choose to do so.

20. This latter role is reminiscent of Pierre Verry, who used to hold up cards with the title of Marcel Marceau's pieces. Barba describes this mime's work, saying that the only way he attracted attention was to make the position as strong and alive as possible through 'precarious balance'. See Eugenio Barba, *Beyond the Floating Islands* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), p. 141.

21. See various tributes from members of the Magdalena Project and friends, 21 July, 2008, on <www.themagdalenaproject.org/phpBB2viewtopic.php?p=1028> and Rucina Belinger, 'Cristina Memorial', 3 August 2008 <http://blog.baliwww.com/dance-drama-music/1535> accessed 31 October 2009. I have taken much of my information from these sources, as well as from personal communications with the actress in 2006 and 2007.

22. For an account of her work, see Cristina Wistari Formaggia, 'Il Gambuh, un archetipo delle arti sceniche balinesi', *Teatro e Storia*, 24 (January–February 2004), p. 113–66.

23. Susilo, Emiko, 'Gambuh: a Dance-Drama of the Balinese Courts. Continuity and Change in the Spiritual and Political Power of Balinese Performing Arts', in *Explorations in South-East Asian Studies*, I, No. 2 (Fall 1997) <http://hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs-explore-v1n2-art5.html> accessed 30 October 2009.

24. Letter of 14 May 1994, in the Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies, Odin Teatret, Holstebro, Denmark. This document is still unclassified. My translation from the Italian original.

25. Cristina Wistari Formaggia, ed., *Gambuh: Drama Tari Bali* (Gambuh: a Balinese Dance-Drama), 2 vols and CD (Jakarta: Lontar Press, 2000).

26. The Magdalena Project, founded by a group of women working together since 1986, is 'a dynamic cross-cultural network of women's theatre and performance, facilitating critical discussion, support, and training'. I watched Cristina for the first time at the Transit III festival in 2002, organized by Julia Varley in collaboration with the Madgalena Project, when she brought Topeng Shakti, Bali's first all-female gamelan/dance troupe featuring Ni Nyoman Candri, which she had founded. Candri also participated in *Ur-Hamlet*. For more information about the project, see <www.themagdalenaproject.org/>, and the journal *The Open Page* (Odin Teatrets Forlag in collaboration with the Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies)

27. <www.odinteatret.dk/travel_log/2008/october 2008/letter_from_bali_responses.htm> accessed 30 October 2009.

28. The Majapahit Empire was based in Java from the end of the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Its last remnants – royal members, courtiers, priests, and artisans – moved in the early sixteenth century to Bali, which remained isolated till the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the Dutch military took over the island.

29. Nyoman Catra and Ron Jenkins, 'Finding Equilibrium and Disequilibrium: the Impact of ISTA on its Balinese Participants', in Ian Watson et al., *Negotiating Cultures*: *Eugenio Barba and the Intercultural Debate* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 65.

30. The definition of 'scenic presence' may be found in various parts of *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. See the index, p. 319.

31. But the process did not end there, and from that time to the most recent performance in Poland in June 2009, Saxo's actions have continued to develop.

32. Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 71.

33. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, p. 206.

34. It is known that *baris* is a Balinese warrior dance generally performed by men. It is today also danced by women, but not when it is performed as a ritual.

35. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, p. 128.

36. Ferdinando Taviani, 'After Shakespeare has Left', in updated insert to the programme for *Ur-Hamlet* (Wrocław, 2009), n.p.

37. Frans Winther, personal communication with the author, 20 June 2008.

38. In Wrocław, the attention of the audience entering the performance space was caught by the actions of Augusto Omolù, who played Hamlet, as a *cartonero* – literally, 'cardboard collector' – unfortunately, a known, often homeless figure in the main streets of Buenos Aires and many other large cities in the world, who salvages cardboard, paper, and glass to sell for a few coins to recyclers.

39. Taviani, 'After Shakespeare has Left', op. cit., n.p.

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