

#### 4. THE INNER MECHANISM OF THE ACTOR IN THE VISION OF EUGENIO BARBA

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**Abstract:** *The discoveries he makes in his journey around the world, the admiration for the way Grotowski thinks and for Brecht's theories, but also the history of the years 1960-1978 stir up Eugenio Barba, causing him to look for new meanings related to this art. After going through a period of disorientation and hearing around him from many people the question: what is the meaning of doing theater today?, he finds the answer: "theatre is an empty and ineffective ritual that we fill with our own why, with our personal necessity". Barba praises the modesty and strength of the actor who considers himself the servant of the stage and not the "navel of the crowd" that surrounds him. The concepts of yoga lead him to write about the "body-spirit" and how essential it is for a performer to exercise his spirit.*

**Key words:** *Barba, energy, power, impulse, actors*

### 1. Introduction

As he notes in the preface, Eugenio Barba wrote *The Paper Canoe* starting from the problems that troubled him: "What does the actor's presence mean? Why is one actor credible and another is not if they are performing the same actions? Is talent a technique, as well? Can a motionless actor keep the attention of the audience? What is energy in theater? Does pre-expressive<sup>79</sup> work exist?" He found the answers to some extent during many rehearsals with his Odin theater company and many travels, attending performances and meeting theater companies from various continents.

A rebellious spirit, Barba feels the need to escape, not to take root, and so he decides to emigrate from Italy to Norway. This reveals his purpose. Abroad, he leaves behind his mother tongue and is forced to follow the attitudes and reactions of those around him, in "a physical and sound labyrinth" from which to guess acceptance or refusal, as he says, on "pre-expressive" grounds. This is how he developed the reflexes of the director's job and with them he learned to detect the inner mechanism of an actor and how he should be guided. Another experience that marks Eugenio Barba: Jerzy Grotowski's rehearsals. In Opole, Poland, he is experiencing "an authentic moment of transition".

### 2. Discussions

After the establishment of the Odin theater in 1964, he traveled a lot in Asia. Here, after watching many performances, he found a "strange coincidence": the Asian actors played and danced with their knees bent exactly like those at the Odin Teatret. It was the so-called "sats", the basic posture that allowed one to be ready for a reaction. The actors from Odin Teatret, in search of stimuli that would help them not get into certain patterns, spread to all corners of the world for three months, where they experienced various exotic styles. We note the importance of

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<sup>79</sup> Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie (The Paper Canoe)*, translation and preface by Liliana Alexandrescu, Unitext Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p.16

experimental workshops, in which, the more studied the distant traditions from the known ones, the more the participants increase and diversify their knowledge. Their ability to move from one technique to another gave birth to thoughts in Eugenio Barba that led him to the establishment of the International School of Theatrical Anthropology – ISTA.

He seeks to trace a path among the various specialized disciplines, among the various ways of looking at the scene. He draws attention to the fact that the artist must not remain closed within the narrow boundaries of his profession, believing that he is in contact with the true and unique reality of the art to which he dedicated himself. Just as the theatrical historian neglects the logic of the creative process in his comments, not understanding the empirical thinking of the performers. It is necessary to take into account both tradition and practice, in order to offer the theater a place of cultural, aesthetic and human dignity. The risk of translating the experiences lived in a theater into elaborate phrases is “to petrify into impenetrable pages”. But at the same time there is a great need to leave an imprint of the ineffable. Eugenio Barba also shows how theatrical anthropology can help the actor. It becomes useful when it allows the exegete to feel the process of creation and when, during this process, it increases the freedom of the one who is going to evolve in the limelight.

Theatrical anthropology deals with the similar principles that meet beyond language, traditions, different countries and principles specific to each individual performer. Its first task is to spot those returning principles and to study them in favor of the artist everywhere. Barba makes a distinction between everyday, extra-daily and other techniques. The first is a characteristic of the culture we are part of, all people use it more or less consciously and it aims at communication, the second is that of the interpreter, it targets information and shapes the body, making it artificial/artistic but credible, the last is that of the acrobat or the virtuoso and causes astonishment.

There are clear differences between the three types of techniques that the performer must be aware of in order to be able to discover his “stage bios” reflexes. Eugenio Barba also introduces us to the fascinating world of Nô theater, Kabuki and Kyogen, where the silhouettes of those on the podium enter into action at a pre-expressive level. The Asians say that Nô is “a walking dance” and that the life of the stage artist is given by this alteration of the balance. Analyzing the Kabuki theater, the Balinese and the Indian, as well as the European ones, we come to the conclusion that this constant is found in all of them: a deformation of the everyday technique of walking, of the movement in space of the position of the motionless body. And this is based on a shaking of the natural balance and finding a permanently unstable one that triggers energy along with itself.

Here also appears the idea that the actor transposes mental images into physical impulses. The way you step on stage is very important. “The feet are the center of expressiveness and communicate their reactions to the whole body” – argues Grotowski. Also, Stanislavski and Meyerhold propose various exercises on this topic, placing great value on the way one walks on stage. New postures and new dynamism of the performers are developing. At Odin Teatret, the way to step, to move and to stop is a field of work to which the performer always returns during

individual training, regardless of the passing of the years. “Stanislavski used to say that every five years, at any career age, we should go back to school with our backpacks on.

And he was listened to by all the established actors of the MHAT, who, temporarily giving up acting, retired to the workshops to refresh their means.”<sup>80</sup> Barba refers to the antagonistic tensions in the stage artist’s being, which are analyzed from several perspectives. It is concluded that the dance of oppositions characterizes its expression at different levels. The rigid distinction between theater and dance is a deep break that makes the performer have an inexpressive body, pushing the dancer towards virtuosity, instead. An internal control system that allows the actor to observe himself while acting is discomfort. The artist lives from opposites, contradictions and constraints, hence his main characteristic – the power of resistance (the ability not to give in).

To the question: even if “theatre is the art of the present” are we also responsible for the future spectators? are we part of a legacy? it is also answered with a question: “Can fame and anonymity coincide?”<sup>81</sup>. In the history of theater, generalizations predominate, crystallized in formulas such as: *Commedia dell’Arte*, Romantic Theatre, Naturalist Theatre, and the examples can go on. Under these formulas there are actually hidden the anonymous personalities who created the meaning of this art. What Appia, Craig, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht, and the list can go on, passed us on as legacy can help us only after we have our own experiences that we have not yet found all the meanings of. Eugenio Barba sees theatrical anthropology as research that identifies the means that the stage artist must set in motion in order to succeed in catch the look, the hearing, the thought of the spectator through what he does on stage. His job is to detect such principles and to constantly explore their practical possibilities.

### 3. Results

Theatrical ethics follows how and for what purpose the performer will use these principles. If we analyze the books of some theorists who wrote about theater, we realize that they do nothing but express their inner, imaginary world, their reverie, the obsessive metaphors that support their spiritual biography and art. That is why we cannot speak of a theater science. One must start from the idea of employing not what “is known”, but what “one knows”. When we talk about the art of the stage, we must make the effort to search our words, because otherwise we can fall into prefabricated phrases, into verbal systems that are nothing more than a parasitic imitation of the precise language of other sciences and other fields of knowledge. Barba, for instance, summarizes his method from *Odin Teatret* in two words: “kraft-force, power and sats-elan, impulse”<sup>82</sup>. These two words guided his work with dramatic artists.

Many theater scholars tried to judge the evolution of stage performers starting from the idea that they know what they are talking about, but unfortunately they were based on misleading impressions of the spectators. They did not know the

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<sup>80</sup> *Cercuri în apă: un atelier cu Andrei Șerban, povestit de Tania Radu (Circles in the Water: A Workshop with Andrei Șerban, Told by Tania Radu)*, ECUMEST, Bucharest, 2005, p. 56

<sup>81</sup> Eugenio Barba, *op.cit.*, p. 67

<sup>82</sup> *Idem*, p.72

secret logic of the process. One of the aspects of this logic is that actors acting in an organized performance situation show as many profound differences as common points. The need for order and self-discipline in the job we do here is essential. The living water of an actor (the native talent) can become a swamp if it is not properly nurtured and cared for by the actor himself, through the “facility called discipline”<sup>83</sup>. The relationship between thought and action is essential. The inner force needs to be able to become manipulated, “shaped, polished, projected in space, absorbed and forced to dance inside the actor’s body”<sup>84</sup>. Here there is a trap caused by the word – which I have often invoked – “energy”, that can be misunderstood. The actor is meant to arouse the audience’s attention through subtlety, false attacks and counter-attacks, to deploy all his power and harness all his potential, tirelessly tire the one who follows him. Having energy, a performer must know how to shape it and play with it. His intelligence is his vitality, his dynamism, a feeling that lives and provokes in him, to a certain degree, through a certain habit, a deep look, a condensation of his sensibility, a self-consciousness.

Barba gives us many examples of Stanislavski’s, Meyerhold’s, Craig’s, Brecht’s way of working with actors, who share the idea that “when what is visible outside (the body) does not move, the invisible, the inside (the mind) must be in motion [...]. Static is a movement at a level that does not touch the bodies of the spectators, but only their minds”<sup>85</sup>. Another observation that all actors should take into account is to learn to restrain their intention, that is: “if, in the smallest action, the movement is more restricted than the emotion or the mental scheme that lies behind it, the latter will become the substance and the movement of the body its manifestation, which will increase the interest of the spectators”<sup>86</sup>.

Barba also explains what “sats” means: it is the point where we decided to take action; a nervous muscular and mental engagement directed towards a goal, the spring ready to trigger. Sats is the impulse and the counter-impulse. In Meyerhold’s language, the “sats” is the foreplay. And the sharp cut that suspends the previous movement and prepares the next movement, signaling to the partner that he is ready to move to the next phase, is called “otkaz”. This movement is also found in Grotowski and Decroux, only under different titles. The actor, in order to give life to these “sats”, must play with the spectator’s cenesthetic sense and prevent him from foreseeing the action, which must surprise him.

The spectator wants to immerse himself in such expectations. But this does not mean that the actor must strive to amaze, because then he is false, ostentatious. He “knows what he is getting ready to do, but he does not have to anticipate”<sup>87</sup>. Paraphrasing Barba, the character and value of a “sats”, formulated in a sentence, are: the movement can be blocked, but inside it does not stop. Barba defines energy in the theater as a “how”, but for an actor it is useful to think of it as a “what”. In so doing, he will not lie to himself about the nature of biological processes and invent his own stage biology. On an immediately perceptible level, the actor seems to be working with his body and voice. In reality, he works with something invisible –

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<sup>83</sup>Eugenio Barba, *op.cit.*, p. 82

<sup>84</sup> *Idem*, p. 84

<sup>85</sup> *Idem*, p. 89

<sup>86</sup> *Idem*, p. 90

<sup>87</sup> *Idem*, p.94

energy.

In order to understand the criteria that can help us consciously orchestrate energy, it is important to insist on some polarities such as “animus” and “anima”. But, in order to translate these criteria into artistic practice, we must work not on the extremes, but on the range of nuances that are in between. If not, instead of artificially composing the energy necessary to reconstruct the organicity of a living body, we produce only the image of artificiality. On this idea, Barba gives examples of games from the Nô theater, in which the two contrasts combine harmoniously resulting in the sensation of truth.

The plea continues with the explanation of the Japanese criterion “jo-ha-kyu”, which regulates the course of the arts. There are three moments: “jo – the initial phase, ha – the transition phase and kyu – the speed phase”. Only the physical manifestation of the actor is taken into consideration, even if this principle applies to all levels of Nô theater. The final moment of the phase in which the actor stops is a “sats”, the starting point of a new “jo”. So, “jo-ha-kyu” is cyclical and becomes the rhythm of thought. Analyzing the bios of the actor in more detail, we find that what we call energy are, in reality, leaps of energy. These leaps are called physical actions, movement drawing, score, etc. It is important for the actor to know how to segment and recompose a precise path that allows the energy to leap (dance).

#### 4. Conclusions

Barba rehabilitates the image of Gordon Craig, who was misunderstood when he stated that he would replace the actor with the super-puppet: “The actor Craig is talking about is not the man or woman in a natural and spontaneous state. It is he or she who incarnates an architecture in motion: a Form. [...] This is not about the form of an inanimate matter incapable of metamorphosis; it is about the shape of a living but reinvented body, a behavior that has moved away from everyday behavior, a naturalness that is the fruit of artifice.”<sup>88</sup> Also, he rightly believes that the theater that matters was not and is not a building, it is the sound of the voice, the expression of the face, the movements of the body, of the person – that is, of the actor.

How were the laboratories, theater workshops born and for what purpose? If, at the beginning, solutions to professional problems were sought, over time the exercises within them became the very heart of the theater, a synthesis of the values that concern the actor. Barba also gives us a piece of advice: “Use your disorientation to discover your face hidden under the mask of dance. Don’t forget: your work and your presence must make another person *fall in love*”<sup>89</sup>. Remember this!

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<sup>88</sup>Eugenio Barba, op.cit., 157-158

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