

## 2. INFLUENCES OF THE ORIENT IN THE EUROPEAN THEATRE

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**Abstract:** *Without ever depleting its abundance of image, the Orient's world represented a clear and refreshing spring, a definitive experience, beneficial for the artists from European zone. From the cultural view – but not only, the theatre had only gains from the multi-facets dialogue with the Hindu, Arabian or Egyptian traditions. The results were to be seen in directing, in theatrical pedagogy, because the direct or indirect interaction with the Levant had been refreshing the visions of scene's people, it made possible approaching and discovery of the tangential points. The opinions and conceptions of some personalities as Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba or Peter Brook have interested us in the analyze of the process by which Oriental elements are discovered, adopted and inserted into the Occidental scene.*

**Key words:** *influences, inter-culturality, theatrical anthropology, theatrical pedagogy, directing.*

The fact that Europe was fascinated by the Orient in various historical periods is not a matter of novelty anymore. Interesting is how the collective mentality treats this far-away-from-frontiers encounter, because the image of the Oriental transcends the map of Europe, having different coloraturas and directions. If we would turn back to the myths' universe, we could clearly observe the connection of the two areas, even looking just to the story of Europe, the beautiful daughter of Agenor, the Phoenician king. Loved by Zeus, she is kidnapped by the master of Olympus, transformed into a bright white bull, bringing her to the island of Crete, where, after consuming their love, he will leave her. Stranger wandering in an unknown realm, with her origins in Levant, she will unite with Asterion. Those who study the mythology find here the approach of the Orient and Occident, in the very mythical root of our continent. Also in the legend of the fifty Danaids maidens we partially find the kindred of Orient and Occident. Fleeing at exhortation of their father, Danaos, from their cousins that desired to mingle with them, the maidens request asylum on the lands of the future Hellas, a realm by the sea, ruled by Pelasgos. The sons of Egyptos – the legendary father of Egypt, as the name itself indicates – invade the shore where they were sheltered; but on the “wedding night”, the maidens prepare the men's slaughter. Only one of them does not sacrifice her cousin, Hipermnestra and Linceus uniting the East and the West, saving an ancestry through love. In tragedy, Aeschylus raises a hymn to goddess Aphrodite, but the denotements go further than that. Fear and attraction, flee and enchantment, departure and forthcoming, these are the duets having under their sign the relationship of Orient and Occident, in the ancient greeks *telos*. The stranger – often coming from the East – inflicts a perpetual curiosity in western human's mind. The shades of manifested curiosity are different, and if we would think about the way that Medea's story shapes, we might notice how the Oriental one

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is seen on Greek realm. Coming from Caucasus, from the today borders of Turkey, her figure is inwrought with a halo of witchcraft, considering the fact that she practices the tradition of some places unknown to Greeks. Therefore, what is alien is seen with suspicion and, the more it goes into evidence, the more it could be a peril. Medea becomes stigmatized, hence being generated her reactions: disobedience, fury, defense. And her complex exceeds the natural limits and she gets to the fatal gesture of negating the flesh from her own flesh, killing her children. The final act, a devastating one, makes her to leave, having the Corinth left behind, she turns to her homeland, in a conciliation with the divine. Hellas perceives, as it seems, the alterity as an intruding element. The Orient, as any other sign of geographical difference, awakes in ancient human curiosity a partial conjuncture.

Throughout the centuries, the history of arts and thinking takes shape in new tendencies and, by this course, the Orient's perception changes, unhackneyed sentiments and approaches marking the evolution this way. Along with the technological effervescence, doubled by the ideological backwash of the junction of XIX and XX centuries, the reception of the Orient, in artistic perspective, becomes an important part of new artistic poetics. The name of Antonin Artaud is a landmark in theatrical avant-garde, and his importance grows as long as his theories served the decades of 60s and 80s, namely the experiment and re-inventing the scenic techniques. For Artaud, the encounter with Oriental theatre is a chance of revelation. In 1931, amidst his surrealistic career, the actor and poet assists on a show at Balinese Theatre, by the occasion of a colonial Exhibition in Paris, and he got deeply impressed, without any hesitation in manifesting, orally or in writings, his enthusiasm. The exoticism is the space where the visionary Artaud can manifest in his plenitude. Therefore, his image about "a theatre of light, image, movement and shouts" figures out following his journey in Mexico, in 1936. The man of theatre and actor of cinema will become "the father" of multi-cultural theatre and of experimentalism of the 70s, when in America his theories are rejuvenated by The Living Theatre. In *Theatre And Its Double*, in an attenuate address, and partially redundant, having a language abounding in senses and metaphors, the theoretician expressly says, even using an accusatory parlance, that Occidental theatre is nothing but a psychologizing one, dominated by word. Artaud prophetically predicts its alienation, being himself the prey of images that cross his sight, real or fantastic ones: "In the Oriental theatre of metaphysical tendency, in contradiction with that of the Occident, with psychological tendencies, all this compact sum of gestures, signs, attitudes, sonorities, that constitute the language of directing and scene, this language develops all the physical and poetic consequences, on every level of consciousness and in every direction, and necessarily involves the idea that real attitudes must be hold to sustain what could be called the metaphysics in activity."<sup>116</sup> [our translation]. Artaud's destiny was not to put in practice the theory that sometimes lacks in

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<sup>116</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 64

brevity, partially cluttered, which he collects between the bindings of *Theatre And Its Double*. But certainly here is the legacy explored by the directors belonging to the half of XX century, leaving behind the vehemence, rampancy and fervor of the author. Beyond the subtle formula of his expressing, the friend and rival of Charles Dullin or Roger Vitrac has the vision of a very modern theatre, where the word is abolished, non-verbal signs dominating the scene. A theatre in which the actor has to ancestrally communicate with the invisible, and not to explain in front of public, by an endless and implausible monologue, his entire life. These are terms that would be taken over by European artists, they will research and accept them, each one of them in his or her own manner, only after a few decades, in a continuous quest for novelty and, simultaneously, maybe for some origins lost in immemorial eras.

The Occidental theatre has found in exercises and interactions with the Orient a genuine source of inspiration and refreshment. There are many who come back, after a time spent in that zone, seeing their work manner in a different light. This is the case of Ariane Mnouchkine, which in 1963 goes in a journey for more than a year in Japan, then in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Israel and Turkey. The necessity of meeting the Other had been entailed in the artist's existence. "I have needed a breach. I have needed, for the searching for myself, for discovering myself, to go away, to go on the time line, on the course of river, of space, to leave for adventure"<sup>117</sup> – she states. Here the director, still having a very young age, sees and acknowledges the theatre Nō, Kabuki, Kathakali; here she discovers places, people and a time different from those Europeans. She confesses that this chapter of her life was a definitive one, it fulfilled her and determined her to see the theatre also from this view – now experienced, as well – of an expressing mode that stands for more than two thousand years. Returned in Paris, in 1964 she establishes Théâtre du Soleil, the renowned company from Cartoucherie, where she will put on stage the spectacles that subscribed in the history of scenic art: *L'Âge d'or* (1975), *Les Atrides* (four parts accomplished between 1990 and 1992), *Tambours sur la digue* (1999), *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (2003), *Les Éphémères* (2006). Mnouchkine's tone regarding the reference to the Orient is certain: „We, the westerners, have created nothing but realistic forms. I mean, we did not create “forms” in a true meaning of term.”<sup>118</sup> And equally, following the paths opened by Artaud, Brecht, Copeau or Dullin, the director of Théâtre du Soleil continues by considering a special importance about this sphere, as long as in her opinion “Orient is the cradle of theatre. Therefore, there should be the endeavor for theatre. [...] I would say that the actor searches for everything in Orient. In the same measure the myth and reality, the interiority and exteriority, that famous autopsy of heart by the means of body. And there must be searched, as well, the

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<sup>117</sup> Ariane Mnouchkine, *Arta prezentului (The Art Of Present)*, translation by Diana Dimiu, Bucharest, Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu”, 2010, p. 32

<sup>118</sup> Josette Féral, *Întâlniri cu Ariane Mnouchkine (Apointments With Ariane Mnouchkine)*, translation by Raluca Vida, Oradea, Artspect, 2009, p.19

non-realism and theatricality.”<sup>119</sup> With actors she works on the same principles by which Zeami or Kathakali theatre artists have conceived the scenic experience. For Mnouchkine, the basic ideas, constructed on lectures and on direct contact with capital studies and with the Japanese or Hindu world, have an overwhelming simplicity. First of all, the actor must exercise and develop the muscle of imagination, must learn not to act for exterior, but to live the present, in present, in other terms – to be a presence. As long as the Stanislavskian system is developed on psychological and analysis side, the French director proposes candidness, the actor building with the self, and not adapting to a character. The actor does not describe, does not collect multiple postures simultaneously, but builds from his or her self, gradually, without preparing the incoming moment. Only thus they can get close to the technique which allows the Oriental actors to give birth to scenic metaphors, and not realism, neither imitation. It is a need for honesty, not originality, a need for acting and creativity. To imply the actors as much as possible in the process of self discovery, Mnouchkine uses the Balinese masks, closing the actors to them not expository, but with inner acknowledgment; she writes the sceneries together with the actors, and the costumes are created, at first work step, by themselves, actors expressing in this manner the way they perceive their character.

The results are significant and determine the uniqueness of conception of people from Théâtre de Soleil. *Agamemnon* is a relevant example for what means the encounter of different traditions. Aeschylian tragedy offers to French director the possibility to bring together the hieratic recitation, the Oriental dance and costume, the make-up of Nō theatre, all in perfect cohesion and having sense in this togetherness. The minimalist backdrop may belong to any continent, making room for the development of choreography. Overall effect is that of the spectacles from ancient amphitheatres, just as they were done, but now having also the quality of dynamism. *Indiada* (1987), having a script done by Hélène Cixous, is a story in Shakespearian key, taking place in the Orient. The protagonists Nehru, Gandhi and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, being of course, into a suggestive simplicity décor, are dreamers in their ideology, philosophy or politics. Each one is living his dream until the end, sketching an example. The spectator is yet surprised by the multitude of similarities with Shakespeare’s tragedies, and allegorical approach makes the similarities more obvious.

If for Mnouchkine the journey to Orient was a definitive event regarding her conception in the subsequent years, for Peter Brook, which also starts from the Artaudian and Brechtian theories, this world comes again in various enactments, in small but significant quantities. It is very true, in the same time, that the answer for the leader of The International Centre for Theatre Research was not the Orient, after all, but Africa. The ideal actor, the simple forms sustains their origins in Africa, in this case. Nevertheless, the episodes named *Orghast* (1971-1972) and *Mahabharata* (1985) remained as landmarks in scenic art. Enacted at

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<sup>119</sup> Josette Féral, *Întâlniri cu Ariane Mnouchkine (Apointments With Ariane Mnouchkine)*, translation by Raluca Vida, Oradea, Artspect, 2009, p.19

Shiraz-Persepolis and at Naqsh-e Rostam, *Orghast* was the dream that became reality, where Brook collected – and this turned into tradition – actors from many continents in one show, with a single language, incarnation of Esperanto. A story about creation of the world, and about man and destruction, just as the great European or Oriental thoughts had shown in their mythologies, is contouring in the landscape of Iranian ruins. Looking to reveal new possibilities of theatre, Brook has chosen the myth not as a turning back in the past, but as a recall of it in the spectator of the present moment. Constituted in two parts (first having place on August 28<sup>th</sup>, in front of Artaxerxes the IIIrd tomb, and second on August 29<sup>th</sup>, enacted in town of Naqsh-i-Rostam), this enactment was a sum of depictions where were incarnated the characters from the ancient tragedy, situated under the sign of life and sun: the particle *org* meaning life, and *ghast* meaning *fire* or *solar light*. Starting from Prometheus, for Brook - a symbol of power and civilization that throws the fire among people just as an fireball, it comes to the second part at Greeks war against Persians, following somehow on an imaginary map shaped by Hesiod's poems, the ages of mankind's decay – a humanity always searching for freedom, living under the solar globe that gives birth to illusions. Straight light. Deceiving light. The symbols that define Prometheus perpetuates along the entire spectacle, being fulfilled by other significations. Chains, knives, torches, sunshine of the sun that rises<sup>120</sup> are signs of life, of evolution, but also signs of collapse, profane and death. From his solitude, Prometheus sends the burning ball to man (The Man Below). But the man does not know how to use it and he gets into loneliness in the fading light: king Krogon (played by Katsuhira Oida) is afraid to be dethroned by his progenies, and kills his sons or throws them in prison (Ted Hugues makes an inter-text with the play of Calderón, *Life Is Dream*). Finally, Krogon decimates his family during a feast, like Heracles - blinded by the light of Lyssa - took out his own eyes, as unfortunate Oedip did. Beyond the study of sound, with a major importance in Brook's concerns, beyond the main idea of *mise-en-scène*, the director has shown on his theatrical concept background the diverse faces of loneliness: that of god, that of man. That of actor or of the spectator linked together, but left behind in a self-destructive cosmos.

*Mahabharata* was not achieved in Oriental geography, but it has remade on scene (and it would become a film as well, in 1989) the Hindu writing of major size and significances. A spectacle of nine hours that got shown worldwide, being on tour for five years. The central symbol, namely the water, sends towards the primordial meanings, and a critic like George Banu decoded this symbol in a critique dedicated to the multitude of those meanings: "In the end of the show, the big river unites with the splash. At first, all people gather around

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<sup>120</sup> Part I of the spectacle *Orghast* had begun at sundown, and action took place while the dark grown. The critic Ernest Wendt described the nature effects over the theatrical construction: "In darkness part I took place, bawls, sharp voices, - almost sing, cries that melt down from the rocks. The darkness begins to become music. After a few minutes above the actors and public a fire ball emblazes, falling slowly from the rocks wall." (Ernest Wendt, apud. Ileana Berlogea, *Teatrul și societatea contemporană (The Theatre and The Contemporary Society)*, Bucharest, Editura Meridiane, 1985, p.186). Part II took place at sunrise to noon, the victory of Greeks over Persians being imaged as an open field, full of victims on which the hot sunshine of the sun fall.

the big river, making thus a living image of India. One fraternal and communitarian vision. Then actors and musicians walk together to us, the spectators, the child (...) goes even more, to deploy on the plash a little cup with a candle inside. Alone, as he was in the beginning, when he cooled up here his cheeks, the child brings the last homage to water.”<sup>121</sup> The great Hindu poem it is an occasion for the director from Bouffe du Nord to show again that the myth is universal, it transcends spaces and aeons, it can be found again – partially or on its whole – in our century, he shows that the archetypes rule us and they are so recognizable in the main structures on which the mankind operates. Thus, the Orient represented a phase of Brookian creation that has demonstrated once again that, as Sarah Dunn assessed,<sup>122</sup> the artist is not to be perceived as director, but as an explorer, a researcher of senses and bridges between civilizations, an idealist, an humanist and anthropologist, more than anything else.

On a different path, from the view of evolution, but having the same guidance, starts in the same decade of the 60s Eugenio Barba, when he travels to India. For refreshment of his experience, he comes back often in places like Taiwan, Bali, Sri Lanka or Japan. “For a long time I have incarnated one typical character of our inter-cultural planet: the man that walks on the furthest zones and on streets in the neighborhood, as well, carrying a pouch on his back, wearing glasses on his nose and a notebook in his hand. Those rumpled notebooks that, after the sweat of the Orient and of Mediterranean summers, got shrunk inside the denim pockets.”<sup>123</sup> But earlier as well, in 1958, the director of Odin Teatret while being in Epidaur, in a trip in Greece and Turkey, has acknowledged a crucial moment for his evolution. He relates in *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt*: “One morning, a couple of young Englishmen picked me up in their long motor car, where they use to sleep at night. They were going to visit the ancient monuments, too. When the night fell down, they stopped in some uninhabited zone. (...) The birds clutter woke me up; I looked around, in that dizziness of the moments when sleep goes away and I saw the rocks dreaming. There was a solitude populated by gentle forces, a space of harmony and beauty, a world of endless stone and at the same time intimate: the sight got far, but I saw every detail like I could touch it. Everything was made on the scale of human being, as it could be done for a more righteous world. At the time, the theatre in Epidaur was not yet closed by the archeological protection services, and I entered it to sleep, without knowing that. I never felt again the wish to return there as tourist or man of theatre, in those places where I’ve experienced an enlightenment.”<sup>124</sup> Episode with mystical influences, the

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<sup>121</sup> George Banu, *Peter Brook. Spre teatrul formelor simple (To The Theatre Of The Simple Forms)*, translation by Delia Voicu, Iași, Unitext, 2005, p. 230

<sup>122</sup> Sarah Dunn, *Cross Cultural Productions: Peter Brook and The Mahabharata în About Performance*, Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, nr. 2, 1996

<sup>123</sup> Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie (A Paper Canoe)*, translation and foreword by Liliana Alexandrescu, București, Editura Unitext, 2003, pp. 13-14

<sup>124</sup> Eugenio Barba, *Singurătate, meșteșug, revoltă (Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt)* translation by Doina Condrea Derer, București, Nemira, 2010, pp. 21-22

Epidaur moment is decisive for the future director of Odin Teatret, the author of theatrical anthropology book *A Paper Canoe*, on those pages he confessing that to see the theatre and actor in its origin context, in the tropical or desert climate and landscape, it is something without any comparison degree, having an overwhelming importance for an artist. And here is the connection on professional level: Mnouchkine, Brook, Barba recognize the capital status of the Oriental experience.

Eugenio Barba has been given by the Orient a model for body work, for understanding above all, for concentration, rhythmicity and, not to miss out, for communication with the invisible. In 1980, having in sight the female dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi, which excels in a virtuosity demonstration in the ISTA<sup>125</sup> session, Barba comes to form the theory saying “the way you move in space manifests a way of thinking. It is a revealed motion of thinking.”<sup>126</sup> And also from her experience, shared in time near her, the director concludes: “Sanjukta is not an “Indian” woman: she is just Sanjukta and that’s all. After all these years of working together, I could barely remember that she is “an Indian”. Just the same way she rarely, almost suddenly, remembers that I am “European”. What is this? Interculturalism? Humanism? Work’s culture? No! It is just the love for the other one. It is the need to know myself.”<sup>127</sup> The borders are annihilated, but the sense is double: in alterity is the retrieval, but there is the departure, too. Thus is created the dialogue between continents; a perpetual re-acknowledgment and analyze of each other. Eugenio Barba even came to a parallel on spiritual level between the two areas and the modality they mutually influence. He concluded as it follows: “On Orient and Occident encounter, the seduction, imitation and exchanges are mutual. We often did envy the Orientals for a theatrical knowledge that delivers from a generation to another the living art of actor; they did envy the capacity of our theatre to always confront new themes, as times changes, varying the traditional texts by the means of personal interpretations (...). On the one hand, a theatre that lives by *logos*. On the other hand, a theatre that is especially *bios*.”<sup>128</sup> The artist, doubled by the researcher, finds in this very difference the reason for the Orient is situated on a mental, social, artistic level in immediate vicinity with the Occident. That difference comes from the directions took by the “roots” of the two defined conceptions about the theatrical art, of the two great traditions. And this, explained Barba to himself, is due to the human need for defining related with the many traditions among it gets a place.

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<sup>125</sup> International School of Theatre Anthropology is established in 1979 inside the Odin Teatret and aims to follow the multi-cultural studies encounter, applied for the actors’ techniques. About ISTA its author stated, also doing a program for this centre: „ISTA allowed me to sum together masters of Oriental and Occidental theatre, to confront the furthest work methods and to enter a technical domain which forms the common substrate for us all, no matter if we do theatre in Occident or Orient, regardless of our affiliation on so-called “research theatre” or on “traditional theatre”, in mythical representation in ballet or modern dance.” (Eugenio Barba, *Singurătate, meșteșug, revoltă (Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt)*, ed. cit., p. 362.

<sup>126</sup> Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie (A Paper Canoe)*, ed.cit., p. 153

<sup>127</sup> Eugenio Barba, *Singurătate, meșteșug, revoltă (Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt)*, ed. cit., p. 230

<sup>128</sup> Idem, p. 360

Therefore, if we passed through the visions of a few great directors and pedagogues of modern and contemporary theatre, we did it to demonstrate, having as much relevance as possible, how the Oriental practices had an echo on conceptions and forms that European theatre has shown and shows itself today, too. However, in theatre nothing is immovable, no truth can be singular, no way can be terminative. A renowned critic, fine observer of relationship of Orient and Occident on his entire career, George Banu stated, as if he was to contradict a generalized belief, from a strictly personal perspective: “The Oriental actor has become a phantom that follows me, ceasing to be the dream I’ve been searching for. Pure and far away this actor will remain, from now on, on the other shore, while I will stay close to the European actor, disobeying and disarmed.”<sup>129</sup> Closed and alienated, the two traditions retrieve and alienate each other, as naturally is, the Oriental theatre techniques helping the Occident, vibrating strongly in minds of the true artists, searching and yearning for new experiments. From the same block, the treetop evolves in its abundance – and the same do the paths or art, nurtured by a common sap, but outspread abroad.

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<sup>129</sup> George Banu, *Modelul oriental: de la fascinație la îndepărtare(The Oriental Model: From Fascination To Departure)* in the magazine „Yorick”, issue no. 77