



At the front: I Made Pasek Tempo, Vicente Revuelta,
Santiago García, Masao Yamaguchi.
ISTA 6, Bologna, Italy, 1990 - Photo: Tony D'Urso

Eugenio Barba

How ISTA Came Into Being

Abstract: In this text, Eugenio Barba traces back the origins of ISTA and its first steps. After having directed several international encounters of group theatres in the second half of the 1970s (Belgrade, Bergamo, Madrid and Leiketio), in 1980 Barba was invited to organise a new encounter in Germany by Hans-Jürgen Nagel, head of the Kulturstadt in Bonn. This proposition offered to Barba the opportunity to conceive the first ISTA session in October 1980, just preceded by the lecture in Warsaw where Barba presented his definition of theatre anthropology as a new transcultural field of studies. The article was originally published in The Tradition of ISTA, edited by Rina Skeel (Londrina 1994, 19-20), and in The Performers' Village, edited by Kirsten Hastrup (Drama, Graasten 1996, 24-25).

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In 1976, in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, I had directed an international encounter of group theatres (Third Theatre) organised by BITEF-Theatre of the Nations and patronised by UNESCO. As a result of this, UNESCO asked me to direct two other encounters, one in Bergamo, Italy, organised by the Teatro Tascabile in 1977, and the other in Madrid and Leiketio, Spain, organised by Odin Teatret in 1978.

Hans-Jürgen Nagel, head of the Kulturstadt in Bonn, Germany, read about these encounters in the UNESCO magazine.

In the spring of 1979 he contacted me in Holstebro suggesting a similar initiative in his town. I made a counter-proposition: a situation of comparative research with highly skilled masters from different cultures where fifty actors and directors from group theatres could participate. In spite of the huge cost and the closed character of the event, Hans-Jürgen Nagel accepted.

My desire to scrutinise simultaneously different acting techniques stemmed from my frequent contacts with classical Asian performers. I had perceived in their behaviour on stage striking similarities with the scenic behaviour of Odin Teatret's actors. I was curious to inquire into the validity of this coincidence and to find out if there was a common ground on which every performer built his/her personal or genre-determined technique.

In May 1980 I gave my first public lecture in Warsaw, Poland, about theatre anthropology. My hypothesis was that transcultural principles are at the base of each performative technique.

Yet another factor pushed me towards this investigation.

Since 1973, when I first visited Latin America, every encounter between its actors and directors and the performances of Odin Teatret provoked intense discussions. It was a period when theatre people on that continent were often deeply committed ideologically and socially. The work of Odin Teatret was considered formalistic and alien to the conditions of their reality, an attempt to impose foreign models, an example of cultural imperialism.



Nevertheless in 1978, in Ayacucho, Peru, Mario Delgado and his group Cuatrotablas had organised a “Meeting of group theatres”. He set up the framework for a ‘barter’ of techniques in which Latin American participants did exchanges with Odin Teatret as a professional counterpart.

I was aware that Odin Teatret was the result of particular biographies and specific circumstances. But I was convinced that a professional territory existed where a dialogue with our Latin American colleagues was possible. The necessity to trace this territory where we could interact and reciprocally widen the horizon of our knowledge and experience was the second essential factor which inspired me to create ISTA.

I coined the name of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) on a train in Japan in June 1980 on my way to visit Tadashi Suzuki in his remote village of Noga Mura. At that time, everybody was creating laboratories and workshops and spoke of research and experimentation. I felt the need for a name which was simple - a school - to recall the basic apprenticeship of the craft.

At the end of September 1980 I was in Bonn ready to start the first ISTA. With me I had Toni Cots from Odin Teatret together with Sanjukta Panigrahi (India), Kat-suko Azuma (Japan), I Made Pasek Tempo (Bali) and Tsao Chun-Lin (Taiwan) who, with openness, dedication and courage trusted and followed me in this unpredictable and still faltering initiative. My invaluable supporters, and at the same time rigorous devil’s advocates, were the Italian university professors Fabrizio Cruciani, Franco Ruffini, Nicola Savarese, Nando Tavian and Ugo Volli as well as the French professor Jean-Marie Pradier. With pride and gratitude I consider all of them, artists and scholars alike, as the founders of the ISTA tradition. ■

Translation: Judy Barba



Kanichi Hanayagi, ISTA 9, Umeaa, Sweden, 1995 - Photo: Bernd Uhlig