



I Made Pasek Tempo and Desak Putu Puspawati, ISTA 1, Bonn, Germany, 1980 - Photo: Nicola Savarese

Jean-Marie Pradier

The First Session of ISTA

Abstract: Written in 1981 by Jean-Marie Pradier, one of the founding members of the International School of Theatre Anthropology, the article offers a report of the first session held in Bonn between 1-31 October 1980. In the report, Pradier highlights the different composition of the groups who took part in the ISTA directed by Eugenio Barba: on one side about 20 masters of Asian performance traditions who gave demonstrations, classes, workshops and performances; and on the other the scholars joined by guests like Jerzy Grotowski and Henri Laborit. Pradier reflects on the several possibilities opened by theatre anthropology as a new transcultural and interdisciplinary field of studies.

Keywords: ISTA 1980, Bonn, Theatre anthropology

At a time when the crucial question of the training of actors is being posed in new terms, when group theatre is proliferating, and, with only a few exceptions, universities are at a standstill in the field of theatre studies, a German initiative could well provide an original solution.

A year ago (1980), the Kulturstadt der Stadt Bonn asked Eugenio Barba - director of Odin Teatret, inter Scandinavian theatre laboratory in Holstebro, Denmark - to undertake some action in favour of young theatre troupes. Eugenio Barba then came up with a project whose limits soon reached beyond those of a simple one-time event to become something that could ensure the continuation and development of the action undertaken: thus the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) came into being.

Eugenio Barba's past experience led him to try to avoid the dangers that threaten this kind of undertaking: it seemed essential to him not only to offer the participants one type of teaching, founded on models of European acting, but to utilize recent developments in the scientific disciplines which can facilitate the analysis and comprehension of the biological and psychosociological processes underlying expression and communication behaviour. He therefore constituted two teams who work in close collaboration with him.

The task of one of the teams, composed of about twenty oriental masters, is to demonstrate the specific characteristics of their art and to initiate the actors to the basic techniques. The very high level of these teachers acted as a catalyst, with the participants



giving rise to a very productive exchange of views. Five workshops were organised: techniques of the Peking opera with Tsao Chun-Lin and Lin Chun Hui; techniques of the Indian odissi dances with Sanjukta Panigrahi; techniques of Balinese danced theatre with I Made Pasek Tempo; techniques of kabuki with Katsuko Azuma; and techniques of Odin Teatret with Eugenio Barba, Toni Cots and Iben Nagel Rasmussen.

A second team made up of academics - teachers and researchers - formed a scientific committee around Eugenio Barba and was joined by Jerzy Grotowski. If this initiative, although rare, is not new in the history of theatre, it is well worth mentioning because of the customary separation existing between arts and sciences, which is harmful to both parties. Peter Elsass, a Danish neuropsychologist, Henri Laborit, a French biologist, Jean-Marie Pradier, a French psycholinguist, Franco Ruffini, an Italian semiologist, and Nando Tavian, an Italian theatre sociologist, participated in the project and were all involved in its realization.

First of all, a selection of the candidates was made. Often the young people who rush to the doors of conservatories and drama schools are full of an initial enthusiasm that does not always resist the constraints of the learning process. Moreover, expecting a confrontation of mentalities and experiences to take place, while responding to the aspirations of the most motivated actors and directors, Barba, in agreement with the host administration, gave ISTA a truly international character. Thus, 54 actors from 22 different countries found themselves in the huge premises of a modern educational establishment put entirely at their disposal by the city of Bonn, to live together through a hard but fascinating adventure from 1 to 31 October 1980.

Situated in a calm wooded neighbourhood of the federal capital, the Hauptschule an der Dune, where the members of the teaching and scientific teams were housed, was the ideal place for working. The spartan housing conditions were not the least of the paradoxes which contributed to the quality of human relationships.

Up at dawn, the participants started the day with keep-fit training in the neighbouring woods. This was followed by a session of individual training in a large indoor hall under the direction of Eugenio Barba and Toni Cots. Then the participants went, in small groups, to the workshops directed by the oriental teachers to follow the basic physical training of danced theatre. After a two-hour pause, work started again: a meeting in which the evolution of the groups and the problems they met with were evaluated. Demonstrations with commentaries. Improvisation and direction in workshops.

Apart from these daily activities special work sessions were held:

- . presentation of Odin Teatret and the Wrocław Theatre laboratory's teaching films;
- . projections of films on the different theatrical forms;
- . meetings with one of the specialists of the scientific team on a specific theme: pre-verbal and verbal communication, behaviour biology, acoustics, comparative history of theatre performance, sociology of the actor. Documents provided by the French Office of Scientific Research in Film made it possible to conceive an adaptable teaching method, so that the problems tackled were approached with precision and seriousness, without academic formalism. Upon the request of the

participants, written documents and specialised bibliographies were distributed. Personal research and experimentation were also encouraged.

Obviously, such a pace, kept up for a month, six days a week - Monday being a day of rest - was not sustained by everyone: however the rare defections, which usually occurred during the first days, testified to the well-founded principle, even if the first session of ISTA was a small-scale model of what will have to be enlarged upon in the future. In a domain where the criteria of quality are often ambiguous, the acceptance of effort succeeds in creating a community of spirit without which nothing profound can be achieved.

At the same time as its ordinary activities, ISTA organised public sessions at the Bonn Kultur Forum and in various German cities. The most significant event was, however, the symposium held on 24, 25, and 26 October. Entitled "The Look that Can See", this event brought together 45 theatrologues, critics, dramaturgs, and scientists from fourteen countries who were asked to transmit their thoughts in writing later.

At a time when the organisers of the fifth International Symposium of Theatre Critics and Theatrologues in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, have chosen as the theme for their meeting in May 1981, "The Theatrical Performance and Language of the Critic", Eugenio Barba's words seem of particular significance.

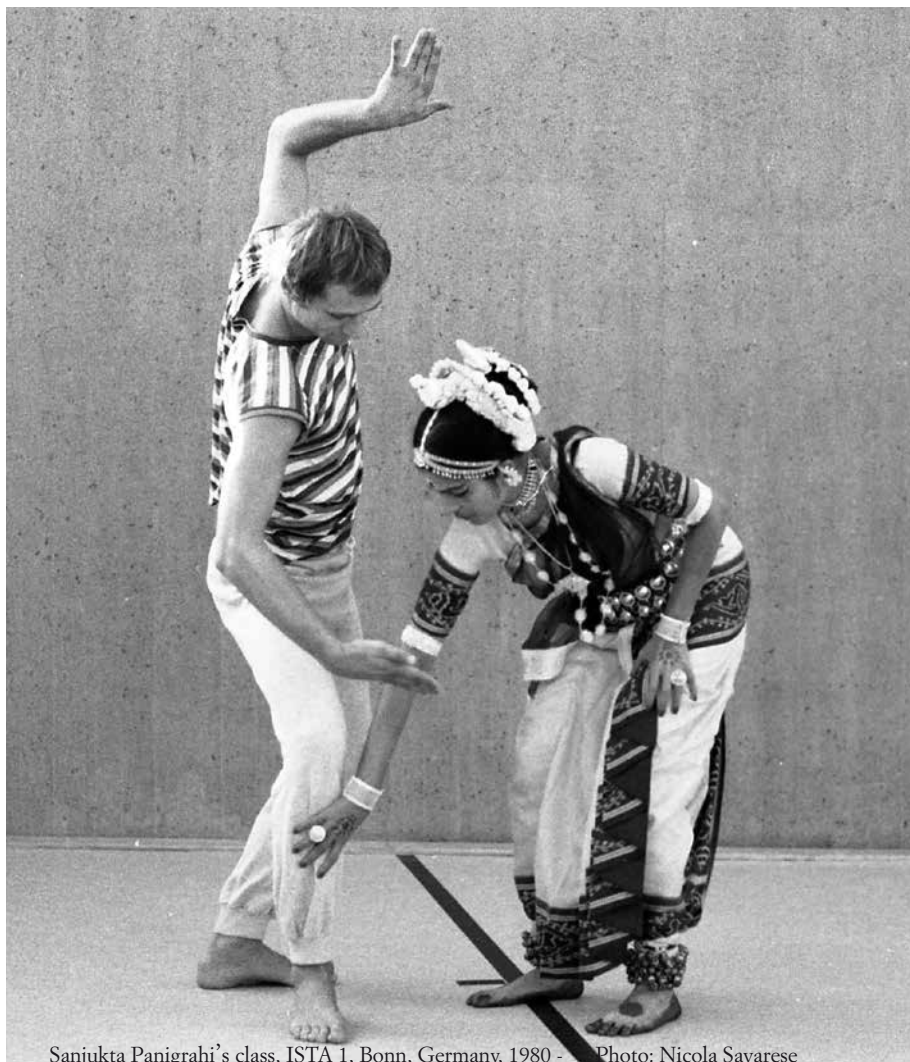
We are all theatre gastronomists and we sometimes deplore that there no longer exists anyone who can cook properly. And even then, the good cooks would need someone who knows how to eat.

This is what the guests in Bonn could read in the introduction to the symposium. Indeed, we often suffer from a kind of cultural blindness which prevents us from seeing and appreciating whatever does not correspond to the usual forms that make up our environment: unconscious blindness, partly determined by biological mechanisms that we can and should master, if we do not want to impoverish our range of consciousness.

The dazzling demonstrations of the Balinese, Chinese, Danish, Indian, and Japanese artists were illuminated by the director of the Odin. He referred to his own personal research and asked for the opinion of the various specialists - who for the most part was caught unawares, so unusual was his emphasis, even today, in approaching the theatrical phenomenon. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it cannot really be grasped without preliminary anthropological investigation, as Dr. Henri Laborit remarked in his address.

The first session of ISTA was financed by the Kulturamt der Stadt Bonn, the Sekretariat für Gemeinsame Kulturarbeit Wuppertal, the FRG National Commission for UNESCO, the FRG, French and Italian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Danish Ministry of Culture, and the Japan Foundation. Already those responsible for cultural affairs in Tuscany, Italy, and the Centro per la sperimentazione e la ricerca teatrale in Pontedera are examining the ways and means of organising a second session of ISTA in Italy.

The facts we have referred to - the proliferation of group theatre, the inadaptability of traditional training methods, the fact that theatrical studies in universities are lagging behind - all call for an appraisal of the real value of an event which has the merit of responding to pressing and urgent needs. International and inter-disciplinary, the result of an effective collaboration between theatre practitioners and theorists, between oriental teachers and western teachers, ISTA emerges as a flexible instrument capable not only of bringing a solution to local training problems but also of developing the basis of international co-operation, providing the elements of fresh thinking on theatre, on the most concrete level of its realization: the actor. ■



Sanjukta Panigrahi's class, ISTA 1, Bonn, Germany, 1980 - Photo: Nicola Savarese