

Franco Ruffini
Sanjukta Panigrahi
Katsuko Azuma
Tsao Chun-Lin
I Made Pasek Tempo



ISTA 2, Volterra, Italy 1981 - Photo: Nicola Savarese

Franco Ruffini

Interviews with Asian Artists

Abstract: Franco Ruffini speaks with Sanjukta Panigrabi, Katsuko Azuma, I Made Pasek Tempo and Tsao Chun-Lin, the Asian teachers who took part in the first ISTA session in Bonn in 1980. The interviews were published in La scuola degli attori, edited by Franco Ruffini (Firenze 1981). At the end of the Volterra session in 1981, Franco Ruffini asked two questions to the Asian teachers who had also participated at the first session in Bonn. The interviews were published in Bouffonneries 4, 1983.

Keywords: Sanjukta Panigrabi, Katsuko Azuma, I Made Pasek Tempo, Tsao-Chun-Lin



I Made Pasek Tempo, Franco Ruffini, ISTA 6, Bologna, Italy, 1990 - Photo: Tony D'Urso



Bonn 1980

SANJUKTA PANIGRAHI, odissi dance, India



FR *Let us imagine that you must give some general advice to your pupils before the end of this ISTA session. What would you say?*

SP Two things: never show tiredness. When you do your exercises, do them in a dynamic and disciplined way, as if every movement was an example of what this month of work meant to you.

FR *This rule about tiredness is strange for us.*

SP Yes, I know. For me it is strange, for example, to see a European actor who shows tiredness. If my teacher told me that he could see I was tired, I felt humiliated. My teacher said, are you tired? All right, but then go home and go to bed. Your tiredness is your private concern, it is not of interest to the spectators, and its place is not on the stage.

FR *But tiredness can also be something other than a private concern. It can have a strong theatrical value. Iben Nagel Rasmussen, for example, at the end of her work demonstration Moon and Darkness, turns her tiredness into something very dramatic.*

SP It is true. When I saw Iben, at first I was embarrassed, suddenly I felt tired too. Then I understood that tiredness has a precise value, even though it was the opposite of everything I was taught.

FR *Can you give me any more examples like this?*

SP Yes. For example, I was very surprised to see the actors breathing with their mouths open in the course of the work. For us, one of the first rules is never to open our mouth, otherwise you lose strength. I want to discuss this with Barba.

FR *Here in ISTA you have found yourself in special pedagogical situations. For example, in the morning you intervened on the individual training of the actors. Isn't there a risk of indianising their individual training, so to speak?*

SP No, I do not think so. I believe that as a teacher I can intervene in the work of an actor without reducing it to my style. In the individual training the actors built their own exercises themselves. In that case, the function of the teacher consists in helping the actor to make their movements clearer, to project them into space, to give them greater strength. After all, the deepest nature of Indian dance consists in making the movements more beautiful. We speak of *lokidharmi* and *natyadharmi*: the first indicates the way of moving in daily life, the second the way of moving in dance. The second is not entirely different from the first, it is rather an idealisation or its own discipline. And for this, I believe, someone who is expert in Indian dance also knows, sometimes intuitively, the criteria according to which any movement can be disciplined and made more effective, even in the individual training of a European actor. This awareness was one of the discoveries I made in ISTA.

FR *And the others?*

SP In India dance is taught by imitation. The teacher shows something, and the students try to imitate him or her. Therefore the teacher does not always know how to explain why and how he does certain things. Or rather, he does not think about it, because he does not need to explain it. But here if I want to pass on some basic positions of odissi dance to the different groups in a week's course, I must explain all the time how to do it. I became aware of something I knew very well before, but only by doing it. So, I realised there were other possibilities and had to change the pedagogical method to adapt it to the needs of non-Indian students. This change will also affect my way of teaching in India.

FR *What did you try to teach the ISTA participants?*

SP I did not want to teach them dance fragments. For what purpose should they learn Indian dance pieces? What I hope they will remember, however, is where the tensions are in their body, finding the same strength, not letting the body do as it wants.

FR *During the work, to explain to a pupil that his position was wrong, you would say to him: "The way you are doing it is easier."*

SP Yes, because my teacher always told me, while I was learning, that if assuming a posture was not hard, if it did not put tension on the body and cause a little pain, then it meant that the movement was wrong.

FR *So, through your specialisation in odissi dance, you did not teach odissi.*

SP Exactly. ISTA participants will be able to take advantage of what I have taught them

only if they find in their own work the problems of tension, control and balance, which they have experienced with me.

FR *Does this mean that your participation at ISTA is starting to be that of a teacher who can work in a western perspective of theatre pedagogy?*

SP Sure, since I work with western actors.

FR *But does this not mean endangering your specificity, your tradition?*

SP I do not think so. I have always tried to push the limits of my tradition. I began to study dance against my father's will, because in those days it was thought that dance, which is fashionable in the upper classes today, was not an honourable activity for a girl born in a brahmin family. Later, I was the first to create dances to songs written in a language other than that of my region, Orissa. Traditionalists said I betrayed my tradition. Today they realised that I was strengthening what was essential in it. My teacher and I have been accused of introducing non-traditional movements and postures into my dances. Those who said this were connoisseurs who made themselves jealous guardians of tradition. Then my teacher asked them to point out one of the gestures or positions that was outside the tradition. And the connoisseurs who seemed so confident could not point out a single one to him. Now I am part of the ISTA team. I accepted to work with Barba for a while in order to find new possibilities. I do not think this work can threaten my tradition. But if that happens, if it threatens it, then I will back away.

FR *Some have said that ISTA is built on a bizarre contrast: some of the most experienced and professionally recognised artists isolate themselves for a month to teach theatre group actors who are often marginalised and whose professional training is precarious.*

SP I am devoted to the god Jagunath. He is an egalitarian god, the only one in whose temples the untouchables can eat by putting their hands in the same dish as the brahmins.

FR *Did you always teach the same exercises to all four groups which worked with you?*

SP No, depending on the difficulties that arose, I tried to find exercises which, without saying it, could help to solve certain blocks. With one of the groups, who was particularly interested in rhythm, I did not work starting from odissi, but from some folkloric dances.

FR *Barba did some work demonstrations with you. What do you think about that?*

SP It was, perhaps, the best situation. Through Barba's explanations, the spectators could see what lies behind the beauty of the dance, they could understand the different tensions of the body, how the dance is constructed.

FR *That is, the technical background.*

SP The technical starting points. I have had two teachers; the first was Rukmini Devi, she was perfect in technique, she was famous because her students did not have the slightest weakness, no one could find the smallest error in them. But I felt that something was missing. My second teacher, Kelucharan Mahapatra, says that the most important

thing is not technical perfection, the feeling you feel, the emotion you provoke in the spectators, but what comes after. He says that the great artist is the one who manages to transform whoever sees him, and not just please him. The dancer who masters technique in order to forget it.

KATSUKO AZUMA, Buyo Kabuki (Nihon Buyo), Japan



FR *Today you witnessed the studies on Hamlet by the ISTA participants. What is your impression?*

KA Some I liked, others I did not.

FR *Are you interested in modern theatre?*

KA I have not seen much of it. In Japan, modern theatre is really hard to understand. The different theatrical genres are separate: noh on one side, kabuki on the other, and modern theatre even further away. The last time I saw modern theatre was fifteen years ago, when I was a student. And I did not like it. But now, when I go back to Japan, I want to go to see it. During my work in ISTA, many questions have arisen which, when I return to my country, I must try to resolve. I want to start studying the new problems.

FR *Were you not disturbed, during the performances shown by the participants, by their way of using the body without the energy, the “power” that characterises Japanese theatre, that is, without ki ai?*

KA This way of using the body bothers me when I see it during our hours of practice. In performances it does not bother me. When they talk, they begin to breathe well.

FR *What do you mean by breathing well?*

KA In Japanese theatre, breathing must begin in the abdomen. However, many of the ISTA participants tend to breathe with the upper part of the chest. These two different ways of breathing result in two different ways of moving. In the performances we have seen today, when the actors were just doing movements, their breathing was not good. But when they started talking, they also began to find a better way to move.

FR *Can you explain it more specifically?*

KA When they talk, they need more air, and then they start breathing from the abdomen. I was amazed to see how the pupils, in ISTA, could quickly speak with a deep voice. In Japan it can be reached, after a long training, by actors, shamisen and drum players, and by those who practice martial arts. Abdominal breathing is also important for those who practice the art of calligraphy. Only when an actor speaks with his abdominal voice can he move well and overcome obstacles. High tones must also come from the abdomen. If the rhythm of normal breathing is changed, there is a change in the way the body moves. By inhaling and exhaling very slowly, all the rhythms of the movements are changed. The problem is that the actor then must find the rhythms he started from, which had been destroyed by the change in breathing.

While working at ISTA I discovered the difference between Japanese actors on the one hand, and Indians and Balinese on the other. We try to maintain strength; we do not move the upper body. For space is always in front of us and the hips remain fixed. I asked Sanjukta Panigrahi how she breathes, and she replied that she breathes with the upper part of the chest. Then I began to understand: Sanjukta, as well as Iben, move according to a rhythm which is that of the heart. But the Japanese actors try to go against the rhythm of the heart. This is not stated explicitly, but now I realise that it is what all the teachings are aimed at in Japan. My teacher, for example, said that if you lose the right tension while working, then you fall into a repetitive rhythm, and it is this repetitive rhythm that the actor must break. Everything aims at this: a breathing that goes against the rhythm of the heart.

FR *Did you know other theatres from Asia before joining the pedagogical team of ISTA?*

KA No, I had only seen the Peking opera when it came to Japan in 1979. Here in ISTA, both I and the musicians who are with me got tired while watching the Balinese and the Indian performances. The dancers were extraordinary, but the rhythm of their movements was like a “biological pain” for us. It is as if we were using a rhythm that was against the rhythm of the body, because the body, unwittingly, always follows the same rhythm. It is torture for us when we see a performance in which rhythmic patterns are repeated. It is another conception of theatre. In European theatre the actor usually moves without rhythm. The Balinese and Indian actors follow the rhythm of their own body. The Japanese actors hold their breath and oppose this rhythm. After these experiences, I realize that Japan is further away from other Asian theatres than these are far from European ones.

FR *And the Chinese theatre?*

KA We are also distant from the Chinese theatre. There, too, they follow the rhythm of the body and do not oppose it.

FR *How did you judge the individual training that the students did in the morning?*

KA The first impression was of amazement. I still cannot understand how it works. It was interesting to see how people fought for something.

FR *Barba, during the Symposium, spoke about many points that the different Asian theatres have in common.*

KA I disagree. Or rather, I have seen the differences. But when I go back to Japan, I want to study this problem. In Japan we specialise, everyone is deeply involved in his specific field. Now, however, I begin to see my theatre from the outside.

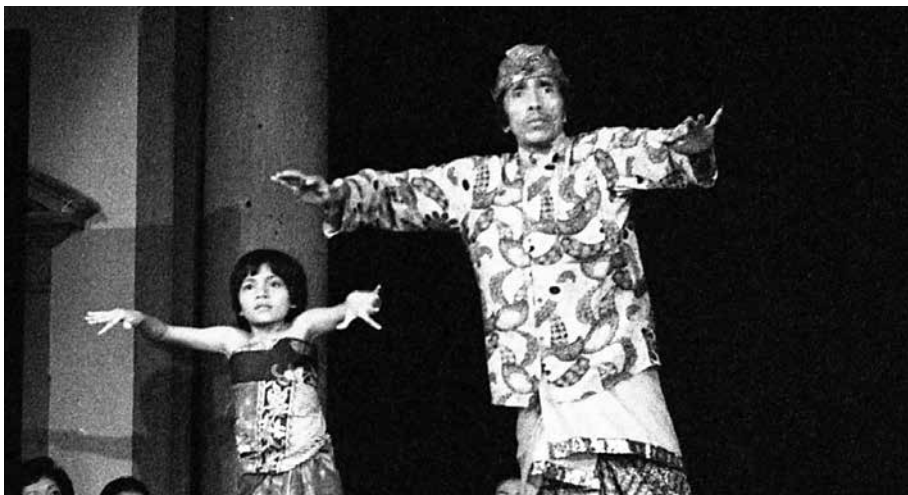
FR *Did you find particular resistance in working with students in ISTA?*

KA They worked a lot. But even with all their willpower, they almost never managed to find true mental energy. But even when I work with Japanese actors, I encounter the same difficulty.

FR *What does this mental energy consist of? What is it actually about?*

KA My teacher used to say that you have to find your strength. This is like a steel ball that is in the centre of an imaginary triangle with its apex in the anus, and its base in the pelvis and the navel. The actor must be able to rest his balance on this strength. If he finds it (but it is difficult, I still cannot always find it today), then all his movements gain strength. But this force does not mean being tense, it is not violence. My teacher used to say that the steel ball is covered with a layer of cotton, and then another layer of cotton, and so on: it is something soft that only in its deep centre hides something hard. Thus, the movement of the actor can be slow and sweet and hide his strength, as the pulp of a fruit hides the stone.

I MADE PASEK TEMPO, Topeng and Baris, Bali



FR *Do you know anything about European theatre?*

PT Yes, I saw ballet, in Paris.

FR *What did you think?*

PT That it would be very difficult for me to dance ballet. I talked to people who are part of ballet: it is a very codified theatre tradition; you must start learning it from an early age. When a child decides to learn ballet, he must stay at school all day. In Bali, on the other hand, those who want to learn to dance go to the teacher for two or three hours a day, then return home.

FR *But did you like ballet?*

PT I liked it, even if I did not understand the movements and the music. I was amazed by the skill of the dancers, especially when they were doing pirouettes.

FR *In ISTA, you were able to see the performances of the Indians, the Japanese, the Chinese. What do you think?*

PT Sanjukta's Indian dances are the closest to Bali. I understand them. The stories they tell come from the same books that the Balinese dance stories come from. Their music is very different from ours, but I understand it. Least of all I understand Japanese dances.

FR *Like the ballet you saw in Paris?*

PT Yes. I was very impressed by the Japanese lion dance, when Katsuko Azuma swung the lion's head with its long mane. But the other dances were very slow, almost motionless. I understood where this character of theirs comes from: it comes from Buddha. Buddha is a very different god from Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu: much less vital than them.

FR *What about the Peking opera?*

PT The Peking opera is also quite understandable for me. It is about warriors. Dancers are always *keras*,¹ even when their movements are slow, their chest centre is always *keras*. Peking opera is *keras* inside and *manis* outside. Japanese dances, on the other hand, are *manis* inside and out. The Balinese and Indian ones are neither *manis* nor *keras*, they are something that always changes, that moves continuously, like living beings. There is a lot of difference between Buddhism and Hinduism. But Hinduism and Buddhism meet in Bali. We do not have the images of our gods, as the Indians do. But people still believe in gods. The Chinese, on the other hand, only believe what they see.

FR *You said that Japanese dances are manis inside and out. Instead, those who dance them are aware that there is a lot of keras.*

PT If there is, you cannot see it. The *keras*, then, will probably be very deep, surrounded by something that is *manis*.

1. *Keras*: vigorous, *manis*, soft. Balinese dancers say that their dances are based on the alternation of *keras* and *manis*, of strong moments and soft moments, as well as on contrast between parts of the body that are in tension and others that are relaxed, between energetic movements and soft movements, etc.

FR *What exactly did you teach at ISTA?*

PT I also learned many things. Seeing other Asians, I experienced new things. It is important that different groups come together and cooperate. In Bali, on the other hand, people tend to collaborate only within their own *benjak*.² My group, however, in my village, in Tampaksiring, is made up of people of different *benjaks*. Twenty-five people are permanently part of my group, but on the occasion of ceremonies and performances we include others, and we arrive at forty-five. For me it is important that people go to different masters, and that masters from different places come together. For me, one of the most interesting things about ISTA was the discipline: the precision of the timetable, for example. I think I will also ask my Balinese students to be disciplined in this regard.

FR *In Bali, you often have students who come from Europe and North America. Is there a big difference between them and the ISTA participants?*

PT Yes, a big difference. They come to Bali to learn dances, such as Baris or Topeng. They do not come to ISTA to learn our dances.

FR *And what do they learn then?*

PT The basis of certain movements. ISTA people know a lot more about energy, about the different central points of the body. They do not want to learn the dances, but they want to understand the technical reasons behind the different dances. Among the ISTA participants there are people of different languages and traditions. It is a good thing that Barba brought teachers from different languages and traditions.

FR *In what does the biggest difference consist between the Balinese and European pupils?*

PT For the Balinese too it is hard to learn dance movements. No less hard than for Europeans. But the Balinese immediately understand what the basic positions consist of, they are used to seeing them from an early age. For Europeans, understanding these movements is much more difficult.

FR *What do you think about the demonstrations Barba did with you? Did you understand what Barba is searching for?*

PT Not exactly. But he certainly knows. It is evident that he always distinguishes precisely the things that may interest him from those that do not interest him. But why are you asking me all these questions?

FR *It is to collect written documentation about the ISTA. Did we bother you?*

PT Guru Kakul, from Batuan, was one of Bali's greatest gurus. Now he is very sick and there is nothing left of his teachings. On the other hand, I can write. Since I was sixteen, I have written in a diary everything I learn and know about dances.

2. The Balinese villages are divided into several *benjaks*, clans or associations of neighbours who have in common ceremonies, meeting places and civil responsibilities. (Ed. note)

TSAO CHUN-LIN, Foo Hsing Opera, Taiwan



FR *Do you want to introduce yourself?*

TC I was born in 1917 in the province of Hu-well, near Beijing. At the age of six, I began my apprenticeship as an actor. At that time there were still no schools, so I was a pupil of several teachers. I studied for 13 years in different cities, Beijing, Tien-Tsin, Shanghai.

FR *At that time, the apprenticeship of children who wanted to become Peking opera actors was very hard. If you compare it to the way future actors train in the theatre school today, for example yours in Taipei, do you see any differences?*

TC Current students are not subjected to the same harsh discipline as in my time. Today I teach at the Foo Hsing School in Taipei. In my time the pupils had to obey blindly. This is no longer the case today.

FR *When pupils do not show willingness or hesitate to obey, what do you do?*

TC I try to repeat the instructions, to speak, explain, convince. I cannot insult them or beat them.

FR *Did this happen when you were a student?*

TC Yes, my teachers were not for the subtle. I considered myself lucky if they only covered me with insults every time I made a mistake or didn't show the right attitude to work. But above all they beat me, here on the thighs and arms, with a bamboo cane.

FR *What do you think of this change in the pedagogical relationship?*

TC I think it would not hurt to hit the students from time to time.

FR *Working here in ISTA, what difference did you see between western actors and your Chinese students?*

TC The biggest difference is that Chinese students are studying all the time to specialise in Peking opera. In ISTA my work was just one of the fields of experience for western actors. They did not just learn “Chinese style”.

FR *Were there other differences as well, such as greater or lesser interest or concentration in work?*

TC Yes, even in this there was a notable difference. When they start at the Peking Opera School, the children are only ten years old. They do not understand what it is, what exactly they are learning, they cannot get a general picture. They imitate one by one the gestures and movements that the master teaches. Only after six or seven years, when they are about to leave school which lasts eight years, then a motivation begins to appear, they begin to understand and know what they want. Therefore, some do not continue as actors at the end of school. But the western actors at ISTA were all adults, all showed great interest and willingness to work, as if they were more motivated. It was easy for me to explain and realise that they understood what I meant.

FR *Is this your first time teaching westerners?*

TC Yes. What struck me was seeing the rigidity of their bodies, their legs seemed almost unable to move. It was as if their body was not prepared or did not know how to work. Perhaps because they were already adults. Or perhaps because the tradition of western theatre is different from the Chinese one, where from the first day we start by teaching the entire technical basis of the actor in a physical way.

FR *Have you seen western theatre before?*

TC Yes, in America where I toured with Foo Hsing opera, and in Japan.

FR *In Taiwan there are groups of young people who do western theatre. What do you think of these young people who do not follow the tradition, but want to apply a style and model that come from outside?*

TC Taiwan is full of films that come from abroad. Theatres from other countries regularly tour there. Everyone has their own style. And in every style, there are good things. Chinese theatre has a very strong tradition that goes back in time. All these influences can very well not only coexist but also merge and agree with our tradition.

FR *Here in ISTA you had the opportunity to follow from the inside and for a long time the work of Balinese, Indian and Japanese actors and dancers. What impressions did you have from this knowledge not only of their performances, but also of the individual ways of working out the technical bases?*

TC I had already seen Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Thai performances. But here in ISTA I realised that Peking opera is not based on dance like Balinese or Indian theatre. We are not dancers; our body does not move according to the principles of dance. I must admit that I was very impressed with Sanjukta’s work and performances. I find that Indian theatrical forms are a lot more elaborate, more refined than the Peking opera. The control of every small part of the body, the coordination of the different movements,

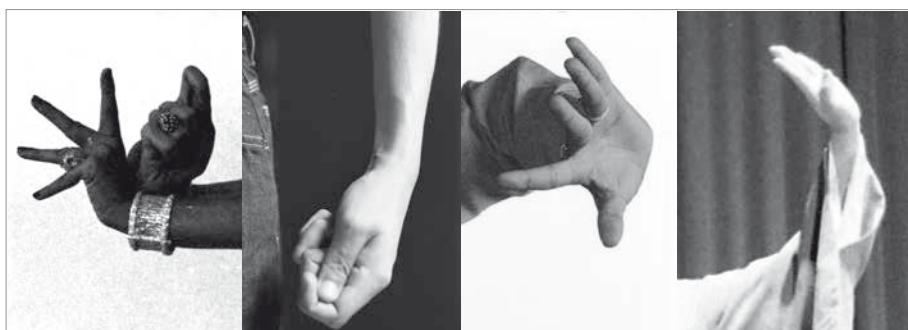
which are often mutually contrasting, and above all the way of using the eyes is truly extraordinary. And the complex play of the individual fingers.

FR *Do you already have an opinion about the possible consequences that the experience of ISTA will have on your work?*

TC The most interesting was having to teach in a completely new situation, with people and students very different from my usual ones. This situation in itself requires a new way of teaching, I would say that it also teaches the teacher. On my return to Taiwan I want to be much stricter, more energetic with my students, they must really apply themselves. In ISTA it was above all the discipline and the will to work, of both students and of the other teachers, which struck me the most.

FR *You left China to move to Taiwan in 1937. Your parents died and, while on tour in Taipei, you decided to stay there. Did you ever see or meet Mei Lan-Fang when you were in China?*

TC I have seen him several times on stage. I only met him once in 1932 in Shanghai. He was an extraordinary actor. I do not think it will be possible to see such actors in China right now. Circumstances have changed profoundly. Students are no longer forced to study hard and to live the hard life of an apprenticeship that lasts many years. It is this hard life that makes an actor excellent. Mei Lan-Fang went through this internship. He was not afraid to devote himself. Today, the relaxation of the discipline results in a lowering of quality. I do not think we will be able to see actors like Mei Lan-Fang again.



Volterra, 1981



At the end of the Volterra session Franco Ruffini asked:

- 1) What is the difference for you between the ISTA session in Bonn and that in Volterra?*
- 2) What was your reaction when Eugenio Barba offered to take part in the ISTA pedagogical team?*

SANJUKTA PANIGRAHI

1. The work of this second session was less hard and much more reasoned than that of Bonn. The fact of collaborating daily with a western teacher (Toni Cots, Odin Teatret actor) and having the same students for two instead of one week, allowed me to maintain a closer relationship and be more effective with the participants. Above all I understood better Eugenio's project. Here in ISTA, we must not only teach, but we must also first and foremost be aware of the different learning methods in order to be able to contribute to the work of the teachers who come from other traditions.

2. When Eugenio invited me to collaborate in ISTA, I was very happy to be able to contribute to the influence and dissemination of the odissi dance to which I have devoted all my life. I now know that by staying true to my tradition, I can also commit to following a road that is common to all those who express themselves through performing. There are laws that are valid for everyone.

KATSUKO AZUMA

1. I noticed a big difference between the two sessions. For me, last year was the first time I went abroad. Secondly, the organisation and even Eugenio, his role and the way he works have changed a lot. In the first session, the two moments, practical and theoretical, were quite distinct. This year, in Volterra, with the daily encounter which was called the “family time”, we could talk more directly with people. For two months we could even trigger conflicts and struggles which are always very useful in a teaching situation.

2. When Eugenio invited me to Bonn, I was interested in his proposal and in the contact with western actors that the school would allow me to establish. In general, Japanese actors and masters do not like to leave their country and tradition and are not interested in confronting other forms of acting. In this regard, I am very different. Already last year, in the first session, I followed with such attention the work of other Asian teachers and Odin actors, to the point that an Odin actor called me the curious child of ISTA. Here in Volterra, I paid close attention to the work of Tage Larsen. Thanks to ISTA, I have become more precise in my body. Those who have seen me dance after Bonn have said that the way I dance has changed. My long apprenticeship in Japan as well as my teaching of Japanese students were based on an automatic physical transmission of dance. In a different context like this, by explaining the technique from a practical point of view, by returning to these sources, I became more aware of my heritage from a theoretical point of view, and more precise in my demonstrations. On my return to Japan, I will take Zeami and the other classical texts on Japanese theatre to reread them, to better understand them and rework them according to the principles and experience I acquired in ISTA.

I MADE PASEK TEMPO

1. This year, Eugenio and the teachers knew better what they wanted, and the work was easier, thanks to the experience. I am more satisfied with the work accomplished at the Volterra session than with that of the Bonn session, because I was simply a theatre man alongside other theatre people. The fact that there is a particular teaching or learning situation is foreign to my culture. During this session in Volterra, I gave a lot of performances and the Italian audience seemed very different from the German one. There are two kinds of extreme reactions: in Italy indifference or enthusiasm, in Germany a more uniform response, but less warm.

2. I am not so much interested in the business of theatre anthropology and the use that Eugenio may have made of my skill. I am still very happy to have been able to work for ISTA, either as a teacher or as an actor. For the first time I felt that others recognised the importance of my personality.■

Translation: Judy Barba

Interviews photos: Nicola Savarese