Eugenio Barba

First Hypothesis

Abstract*: Transcription of a lecture by Eugenio Barba in Warsaw in May 1980, originally published in Polish in the journal* Dialog *(26, 1, 94-100), and soon after in English in the first issue of the journal* Théâtre International *(1981). Here, for the first time, Barba defines theatre anthropology as the study of the human being in an organised performance situation. He points out three technical principles as 'laws' which determine the various acting styles in different traditions.*

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Originally the word anthropology was understood as referring to the study of human behaviour not only on a socio-cultural level, but also on a biological level. What, then, is theatre anthropology? It is the study of human behaviour on a biological and socio cultural level in a situation of representation.

My research began because of my interest in oriental theatre. I couldn't understand how oriental actors, even during a cold, technical demonstration, nevertheless retain a very striking quality of presence which inevitably captures one's attention. In such a situation the actor is not interpreting or expressing anything. Yet he seems to radiate from a kernel of energy - evocative, knowledgeable, and yet unpremeditated - capturing our attention and magnetizing our senses. For years I thought it was a question of technique, understood as skill. But in trying to enlarge this habitual definition I realised that what we call technique is in fact a particular use of the body.

We use our body in substantially different ways in daily life than in situations of representation. In everyday life we have a technique of the body which has been conditioned by our culture, our social status, and our profession. But in a situation of representation the utilization of the body is entirely different. Thus, we can distinguish between a daily technique and an extra-daily technique.

This distinction appears clearly in all forms of codified theatre, especially those of the Orient. It is less apparent in the Occident since, as Brecht asserts, the art of the actor doesn't exist: there are modes and conventions, but anything arbitrary is possible under the domain of subjectivity, individualism, and lack of technical nomenclature and precise units of judgement. The only exception is classical ballet, whose rules, nomenclature, and codification of acquired results can permit a child of eight to learn and to memorise with his body the entire 'science' of ballet, the experience of tens of generations before him.

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The scientific method of investigation consists in choosing a field where the repetition of certain phenomena permits the disclosure of certain constants or 'laws'. If we choose oriental theatre as our field of investigation and analyse the oriental actor's utilization of his body, we will immediately discover three 'laws'.

The first is the law of alteration of equilibrium. In Japanese noh theatre, the actor walks by sliding his feet on the ground without lifting them. If one tries this, one will discover that one's centre of gravity, and thereby equilibrium, changes. If one wants to walk like a noh actor, the knees have to be slightly bent. This implies a slight downwards pressure from the vertebral column, and therefore from the whole body. It is exactly the position assumed when ready to jump or spring in any possible direction.

In kabuki theatre, also from Japan, there are two different styles, *aragoto* and *wagoto.* In *aragoto,* the exaggerated style, there is the law of diagonals: the actor's head must always mark one end of a sharp diagonal line of which the other end is the feet. The entire body, in an altered and dynamic equilibrium, is supported on one leg. This position is the opposite of that of the occidental actor who tries to save energy by assuming a static equilibrium requiring the least possible effort.

The *wagoto* style is the so-called realistic style in kabuki. Here the actor moves in a way which is similar to the *tribhangi* of classical Indian dance. *Tribhangi* means 'three arches'.

In Indian odissi, the dancer's body is shaped as if the letter S was passing through the hips, shoulders, and head. In all classical Indian statues, the sinuosity of *tribhangi* appears clearly. In kabuki's *wagoto* form, the actor moves his body in a lateral, wave-like motion. This movement implies a continuous action of the vertebral column which is constantly changing the actor's equilibrium, thereby changing the relationship between body weight and his base, the feet.

In Balinese theatre, the actor-dancer pushes on the soles of his feet, while at the same time lifting his toes, thus reducing his contact with the ground almost by one half. To avoid falling he has to spread his legs and bend his knees. The Indian kathakali actor pushes on the sides of his feet, but the consequences are the same. This new base results in a profound change of equilibrium, the actor standing with his legs spread and his knees bent.

The rules for the only form of European codified theatre, classical ballet, seem deliberately to force the dancer to move within a framework of precarious equilibrium. This begins right away with the basic positions and the whole schema of movements such as *arabesques* and *attitudes,* where the weight of the whole body is supported by one leg, and even on the tips of the toes of one foot. One of the most important movements, the *plié,* consists in dancing with the knees bent, the best starting position for a pirouette or jump.

Why, then, do all the codified forms of representation in the Orient and the Occident contain this constant, this 'law' - deformation of the daily technique of walking, moving through space, and keeping the body immobile? This deformation of the daily body technique, this extra-daily technique, is essentially based on an alteration of equilibrium. By rejecting 'natural equilibrium', the oriental actor affects his environment by means of a 'de-luxe equilibrium', uselessly complex, seemingly superfluous, and costing excess energy.

It could be said that this 'de-luxe equilibrium' leads to stylization and aesthetic suggestively. This phraseology is generally accepted without taking into consideration

the motives which have determined the choice of physical positions which destroy our 'natural being' and our way of using our body in daily life.

What is happening?

We can say that equilibrium - the human capacity for maintaining oneself erect and moving through space - is the result of a series of muscular relationships and tensions within our organism. The more our movements become complex - by taking steps longer than usual or by holding our head more forwards or backwards than usual - the more our equilibrium is threatened. A whole series of tensions is set in action just to keep from falling.

One tradition in European mime uses just this *déséquilibre* not as an expressive means, but as a means of intensification of certain organic processes and aspects of the body's life. A change of equilibrium results in a series of organic tensions which engage and underline the corporal presence, but at a stage which precedes intentional individualized expression.

In noh and kabuki theatre it is said that an actor who has presence, a special quality of energy, has *ko-shi. Ko-shi* is Japanese for "hips". When we walk normally, our hips follow the movement of our legs. But if we want to reduce the movement of our hips - that is, create a fixed axis within our body - we have to bend our knees and move our trunk as one piece. In blocking the hips and keeping them from following the movements of the legs, two different levels of tension are created in the body: in the lower part (the legs which must move), and in the upper part (the trunk, and the vertebral column which is engaged by pushing on the hips).

This creation of two opposing levels within the body forces us to adopt a special position of equilibrium involving the head and the muscles of the neck, trunk, pelvis, and legs. The entire muscular tonic of the actor is changed. He utilizes much more energy and must make a greater effort than when walking according to his daily technique.

The word energy is a trap. It is generally associated with an excess of vitality which reveals itself as movement, a muscular activity through space. But...

[*long pause*]

now, for example, I was not speaking, trying to think of how to confront the problem I want to explain. This was a form of energy: mental energy. My entire body was visibly engaged, even though I was not moving. It is important to understand that the word energy does not correspond uniquely to action and movement through space. Energy is a difference of potential which the different levels of our organism can attain, from the single cell to our organism as a whole.

This specific quality of energy of the different levels of our organism has been perfectly understood by Japanese theatre. In noh theatre one speaks of 'energy through space' and 'energy through time'.

I can engage my energy through space like this: I move my arm, and my hand grasps the bottle which is on the table in front of me. But I can also do this by using my energy through time, rather than through space: my entire body is engaged, I am ready, prepared to act in a precise way, to grasp the bottle. My postural muscles are activated, and there is a slight displacement of my body which, although almost imperceptible, mobilises the same energies which would be necessary for the real action. I am executing an

action, not through space, but through time - that is, I am engaging my postural muscles, but not those displacement muscles which would move my arm, nor the manipulation muscles which would permit my fingers to seize the bottle.

There is a rule in noh theatre which says that three-tenths of each action should happen through space, and seven-tenths through time. Usually if I want to take this bottle, I engage just that energy which is necessary to carry out the action. But in noh, seven parts more energy is engaged, not to carry out the action through space, but to hold it within the actor and retain it (energy through time). This means that the noh actor uses more than twice as much energy as is necessary for the action through space alone. On the one hand the actor projects a quantity of energy through space, and on the other he retains more than twice as much within himself.

This brings us to the second 'law', the law of opposition.

If we want to understand what dialectics are at the material level of theatre, we have to study oriental actors. The principle of opposition is the base on which the actor constructs and develops his action. Once more, I want to take the bottle from the table. I engage my energy through space, moving my arm and using my fingers to seize the bottle. But by using the principle of energy through time and retaining energy within me, I create opposition: on the one hand I push my arm forward, and on the other hand I hold my arm back.

Normally, when I use my extensor muscles, the flexors remain passive, and vice-versa. All forms of muscular activity imply a bio-electrical discharge. In an action through space - for example, the movement of my arm and hand towards the bottle on the table - the bio-electrical discharge corresponds to that produced by the extensors alone. But if I also at the same time use my flexors to restrain this movement and thereby use energy through time, I double the quantity of bio-electrical discharge.

Grotowski went to China at the beginning of the 1960s. When he came back, he told me that the Chinese actor, before carrying out an action, always began with its opposite. For example, in order to look at a person who is seated on his right, an occidental actor would use a direct, linear movement of his neck. But the Chinese actor, and most other oriental actors, would begin as if he wanted to look in the opposite direction. Suddenly he would change direction and lead his eyes to the chosen person. The oriental actor always begins an action in the direction opposite its final destination. According to this principle, if one wants to go to the left one begins by going to the right, then suddenly turns and goes towards the left. If one wants to crouch down one begins by rising on tip-toe and then crouching down. When Grotowski told me this, I thought that it was a question of scenic conventions permitting the Chinese actor to enlarge and amplify his actions, rendering them more perceptible while creating an effect of surprise. This is undoubtedly true. But I now know that this is not merely a Chinese theatre convention, but a rule which can be found throughout the Orient. In oriental theatre, the straight line doesn't exist, or it is used in a very particular way, as for instance in noh.

If you watch a Balinese dancer, a noh actor (even when carrying out the simple gesture of carrying his fan before his face), a kabuki actor of *aragoto* or *wagoto* style, a classical Indian or Thai khon dancer, you will notice that the movements never proceed in

straight lines, but always in round and sinuous lines. The trunk, the arms, and the hands underline this roundness. In the Occident one dances with the legs, and in the Orient one dances with the arms.

One could again talk of scenic conventions and aesthetic rules. But what do these terms conceal?

Let us return to man's biological structure. All muscular activity with its accompanying bio electrical discharge is effectuated through the joints. If I then want to indicate a person on my left, I extend my arm and point my index finger towards him. I execute a movement where the only moving joint is the elbow. But an oriental actor would never move in this way. His hand would start in a curved trajectory in the opposite direction, using three joints: his wrist, elbow, and shoulder. With a sudden diversion, necessitating precise and varying actions from all three joints, he would finish his movement by pointing at the person on the left.

Opposition is thus the second 'law', the first being the law of alteration of equilibrium.

The third 'law' could be defined as the law of 'coherent incoherence'.

It is, for example, totally incoherent, from the point of view of an action, its goals, and economy, for the oriental actor or the European classical ballet dancer to assume positions which seem to hamper his freedom of movement, and to remove himself from the daily technique of the body in order to utilize one which is characterized by its strenuous artificiality and waste of energy. But it is just this extra-daily technique which permits him to attain a different potentiality of his energies. In addition, the actor can transform this incoherence into a new culture of the body through practice and training and by a process of enervation and the development of new neuro-muscular reflexes. The extra-daily technique thus created become extremely coherent. One of the noh actor's most surprising effects is when, while walking with his characteristic sliding motion, he suddenly starts running, still sliding his feet. It is like an impressive flash of lightning, like a snake, like an arrow curving through the air. Even if the actor chooses a starting point which seems incoherent in relation to the daily technique of the body, he can arrive through long training at such a mastery of this extra-daily technique that we view it as spontaneous.

These three 'laws' explain how the actor can attain a different potential of his energies by use of biological processes. Their application leads to a strengthening of physical presence at a pre-expressive stage, before the actor's intention of expressing a personal reaction sets in.

The role of biological processes in the distillation of different qualities or energies shows itself in other ways, such as our manner of looking. We normally look straight ahead and about 30 degrees down. If we raise our view 30 degrees, our head will remain in the same position while a muscular tension will be created in our neck and trunk, in turn creating repercussions by altering our equilibrium.

The kathakali actor follows his hands' *mudras* with his eyes, slightly above his normal field of vision. The Balinese actor-dancer looks upwards. In all of the Peking opera's *shan-toeng* (actor's positions) the eyes look upwards. The noh actors tell of how they lose all sense of space, and how they have difficulties keeping their body in equilibrium because of the tiny holes in their masks. From this stems their explanation for their

special sliding gait, without lifting their feet from the floor - a bit like blind men who slide as if to orientate themselves, but all the time ready to stop in case of unforeseen obstacles.

All of these actors change their field of vision from the habitual in daily life. Their whole physical attitude is changed: the muscular tonic of the torso, the body's equilibrium, and pressure on the feet. A change in the normal way of looking brings about a qualitative change of energy. By one simple change in the daily techniques of looking, these actors are capable of giving impetus to a whole new level of energy which, by biological determination, we are all capable of attaining.

But our occidental civilization seems to neglect and often deliberately to hinder every departure from the 'normal', reacting defensively as if these new energies could become a threat to our comfortably established relationships. Other cultures have understood the different biological possibilities inherent in each individual and have socialised these possibilities.

This extra-daily technique of the body can be found not only in situations of representation, but also in other situations of behaviour - for instance, the martial arts.

The martial arts are not techniques of combat: this is a misinterpretation given to them nowadays, fostered by many films and publications. The origins and development of the martial arts are connected to Buddhist spirituality. The story has it that Bodhidarma, while at the Shaolin Temple in China during the 6th century BC, noticed that his monks frequently fell asleep while trying to meditate. They could not retain the particular state of energy necessary for this state of consciousness different from sleep and wakefulness, and so fell back into their daily consciousness, thereafter, falling asleep. Bodhidarma created a series of exercises whose physical actions were designed to break the automatisms of daily life and stimulate a certain energy whose quality was similar to that of meditation.

All these are very concrete, physical processes, even if often rejected and defined as mystic. Not only can we measure these processes and explain them with the aid of the natural sciences, but we can also begin using them in a new pedagogical praxis. This praxis would learn to understand our organism's processes, and through this understanding permit us to set these processes in motion, discipline them, and direct them towards a given situation. This can be done in the framework of theatre, school, or whatever social activity.

What are these objective laws which permit the individual to engage his energies organically in the different levels of his organism? Can we use the methods and results of the natural sciences to extend our understanding of the processes which the actor works with? These are some of the questions I asked myself when I began working with theatre anthropology.

This interest has led to the creation of ISTA - the International School of Theatre Anthropology - whose first session in Bonn in October 1980 gathered together a group of scientists from different disciplines and actors from different cultures. Yet ISTA is also a true pedagogical school, where about 50 actors and directors from various countries meet to be confronted with a pedagogical praxis different from the habitual. The goal is to 'learn to understand'.

To this end, the oriental actors working at ISTA, are precisely those masters who are necessary. They can teach very little, for there would be no sense in teaching an occidental actor the kabuki styles or the odissi dance. But these oriental actors can help us to understand how the laws mentioned above are applied in oriental theatre, and how they determine the quality of the energy in our actions and our thoughts. The challenge that remains to men of occidental theatre is for each to learn how to apply these laws within the framework of his own scenic tradition and creative imperatives.■

Translation: Richard Fowler

Katsuko Azuma's class, ISTA 2, Volterra, Italy, 1981 - Photo: Nicola Savarese