



Thomas Bredsdorff
Jean-Jacques Daetwyler
Nicole Revel-Macdonald
Raymonde Temkine

Sanjukta Panigrahi and
Katsuko Azuma as Mephisto
and Faust. ISTA 5, Salento,
Italy 1987
Photo: Tony D'Urso

Letters after the First ISTA Symposium

Abstract: *For the Symposium organised during the first session of ISTA (Bonn 1980), Eugenio Barba asked the guests to write their comments on what they had seen. The letters by Thomas Bredsdorff, Jean-Jacques Daetwyler, Nicole Revel-Macdonald and Raymonde Temkine, presented here in an English translation, were originally published in La scuola degli attori, edited by Franco Ruffini (Firenze 1981).*

Keywords: *Thomas Bredsdorff, Jean-Jacques Daetwyler, Nicole Revel-Macdonald, Raymonde Temkine.*

THOMAS BREDSORFF

The Theatrical Theory of Gravity

A comment on theatre anthropology

Dear Eugenio,

As you know, I have followed your work over the years with keen interest, sincere respect and some reservations. We have very different points of departure. But as the times change, so do differences. I take your present venture into what you have chosen to call theatre anthropology and your invitation to comment upon it as a welcome opportunity to reformulate our differences as I see them today, at the beginning of the '80s.

In one of the papers introducing your new project you have defined the science you wish to found, as follows: "It is the study of human behaviour on a *biological* and socio-cultural level in a situation of representation." I have italicised the term to which I want to pay particular attention.

"Anthropology" is a hospitable and all-embracing concept which lends itself to many uses. Not only the sociologists and the ethnographers use it. Also the theologians, the philosophers, and the historians of ideas have adapted it in a variety of contexts, whose only common ground is "knowledge about man". So there is no reason why it should not also be used by students of the theatre.

You have, however, something much more specific in mind when introducing the term "anthropology", so far unknown in histrionic studies. Your emphasis, as far as I was able to detect from your writing, your talks, and your demonstrations with the four groups from Japan, China, India, and Bali, is on the biological or quasi-biological basis for theatrical representation. In what follows I shall concentrate on that particular emphasis.

We all have a body, actors and spectators alike. The human body is essential in the theatre. Non-corporal theatre is nonsense. You can accept, or actively search for, many kinds of poverty in the theatre. But you cannot conceive of a theatre without the human body or (as in puppet theatre) its representative.



The body has a number of basic needs. It must eat, sleep, drink, shit. It also needs various kinds of support in order not to collapse. By manipulating this latter need, the actor can create wonders.

The meeting of the basic needs, apparently, obeys certain natural laws. The obvious corollary is that the secondary needs - those in effect during corporal representation - must also obey certain laws. The actor who holds our attention does so in accordance with certain biological laws. Your theatre anthropology sets out to decipher and codify such laws.

The endeavour among artists and scholars to pin down universal principles of art can be traced back at least to the fabulous success of the natural sciences in Post-Renaissance times. Mechanical laws of insurmountable beauty and simplicity were shown to govern both the terrestrial bodies and the planets in the sky. The falling apple and the revolving moon both followed the principle of gravity as gradually revealed by Copernicus, Kepler, Galilei, Brahe, and finally expressed by Newton.

The success of the scientists was beyond dispute and became the object of a never ceasing inferiority complex on the part of the scholars. The rift between the “two cultures” gave rise to two lines in post 17th century scholarship and thinking about the arts: one line emphasised the incompatibility between the humane branches of knowledge and the natural sciences; the other one tried to emulate the sciences by imitating their reductionism and search for simple universal categories. I need only remind you of the title of the work of Charles Batteux to illustrate briefly what I have in mind. He called his product of many years of research *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746), which indicates his attempt to do to the arts what Newton had done to the motions of physical bodies.

The principles to which the arts have been reduced have varied over the years from that of Batteux (which was a mimetic one) to that of A. J. Greimas in his *Sémantique structurale* (1966) (which is one of universal contradictions), but the search for universal constants regardless of ideological and cultural meaning has remained with us ever since at least the 18th century and has been productive in the thinking of creative artists from time to time as well, notably with the late 19th century naturalists.

Le roman expérimental by Zola is a manifest not simply about new and hitherto unseen art forms (as the much-misused term “experimental” has come to mean in modern journalese), but about artistic work modelled on the scientific laboratory experiments with their carefully controlled conditions. Zola and his co-naturalists wanted to demonstrate scientifically and non-subjectively how human beings behave when exposed to the dual set of objective social conditions and *les fatalités de leur chair* (preface to *Thérèse Raquin*, 1868).

The contrast, however, between the success of the natural sciences and the very limited success of the scientifically minded humanities is striking.

When a Newton is outmoded by an Einstein, it is not in the sense that the older findings are discarded. They still apply to the kind of observations on which they were founded, but new evidence is introduced and older theories are modified and enlarged upon so as to cover evidence that was experimentally inaccessible in older times.

When a Batteux is outmoded by a Zola, and a Zola by a Greimas, something totally different happens. What to one age and one social class appeared to be the nature of art,

is done away with as unconscious ideology by the next. This is not to say that everything is equally true in artistic matters, but rather that art and artistic theory is a seemingly ceaseless demasking by one generation or social class of what appeared to be nature by the previous one.

Hence most attempts at pinpointing the nature of this or that in the history of the humanities have failed. Hence so many definitions of the nature of art have proved, in hindsight, to be little more than historically determined experience ballooned into universal law.

Your attempt to detect the biological Laws of representation seems to me to carry much resemblance to such predecessors. Provided that there is some truth in this observation, you are subject to some of the same risks.

“Man has no nature, he has a history,” said Ortega Y Gasset. Of course man has a nature. Nevertheless his statement is, I think, a sound one.

The body needs eating. But it can do without - or with unhealthy and ‘wrong’ nutrition - for an incredible length of time. The same is true of any of the other basic needs. How much more true, then, is not this modification of so-called natural laws concerning human beings when we get to such secondary natural laws as those governing theatrical representation. Man is the only unspecified animal, who has proven himself adaptable to the most unbelievable conditions anywhere on the planet - end even outside of it.

What you are detecting (and most skilfully demonstrating) in your Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Balinese actors, then, is not, as I see it, basic biological conditions of representation, but artistic principles which you in your work have found productive, notably the principle of withheld energy, the principle of reduced support of the body, and the principle of contrast or discrepancy between the various elements of representation.

“Anthropology”, then, to my understanding of your present project, may be a misleading term. It has little or nothing to do with laws of human nature which everybody - and every body - has to obey now and forever. Rather it is a useful shortcut to a textbook of the Odin Experience, i. e. a way of making your own insights and achievements understandable and accessible to a new generation of theatre-makers and theatre-watchers.

Theatre can be made the way these four groups do it. It can be made the way Odin Teatret has done it. There are striking resemblances between some of the principles in their acting and in that of your actors, though much else can be detected in the way your guests act. But the similarities and the way you demonstrate them are eye-opening.

Seen in this light, I think your project is a sound one. It is important that a teacher who has something very important to teach should make himself as lucid as possible, in order that his students can know as clearly as possible what they can either learn from or depart from. You have said so yourself, in one of our conversations, and I could not agree more. Every pedagogue who has reached the age that you and I have reached, ought to do so. It is not an act of imposing oneself on one's students. It is much rather an act of liberating the students, of setting them free to choose for themselves, because it enables them to know exactly what they can obtain from this particular teacher.

Provided, that is, that the terms are quite clear. I have written this letter in an attempt to clarify the terms as I see them, and particularly because the concept of “anthropology”,

with its added aura of universals and biological necessity, seems to obscure the terms a little.

Perhaps Odinology would be a more appropriate term.

All the best, Thomas

• • •

JEAN-JACQUES DAETWYLER

Dear Eugenio,

You have asked us to react to what we have seen and understood at the Bonn Symposium. I respond to this invitation, not so much out of a sense of duty, but motivated in distilling all that struck me during those days, treasuring strong memories, like when I was in Carpignano, Belgrade and Bergamo.

But I will not dwell on everything I have learned during this exciting and stimulating meeting. Rather through this letter, I send you a disorderly mass of questions and doubts.

1. Laboratory work

Studying the work of actors in 'chemically pure' states, undoubtedly constitutes the condition for rigorous, scientific analysis. But this way of proceeding also involves risks:

- If you focus on certain aspects, you forget the context. This criticism was made several times during the Symposium. In fact, this is a challenge for all science since the fate of the scientist is to limit the field of investigation so as to grasp it with sufficient clarity and not get lost in a general blur. But you must pay the price. The ecological disaster is a consequence of this way of proceeding: focusing on the details has made us lose sight of the whole; and too many essential links and cycles have been ignored. From this point of view, theatre anthropology, as I understood it in Bonn, does not seem to me to be very 'ecological'. But the interdisciplinary character of the encounter was certainly a way of attenuating the division into compartments, and ensure attention to the multiple aspects of the context. The difficulty will perhaps lie in making this multidisciplinary structure work.

- Highlighting fundamental laws in performing can significantly increase the effectiveness of the actor's training. But perhaps this also involves the risk of a theatre centred on performance, as in the case of competitive sport, which is also based on scientific acquisitions. I know very well that this danger is completely absent at Odin Teatret. But discoveries mostly escape who makes them - as the latter is not responsible for the use that others make of them.

- The danger of reductivism should also be underlined: the temptation of placing theatre phenomena under the laws that concern the 'mechanics' of the performing body.

2. Energy

Do the actor's extra-daily techniques imply a greater expenditure of energy than common techniques? An objective answer would require measuring and quantifying this

energy, in a calorimetric room like for example the one used by Professor E. Jécquier in Lausanne. But as you rightly said, what counts is *how* the energy is put into form, and at times *how* the energy is distributed in different parts of the body. Training means acquiring the ability to mobilise one's energy and develop the in-formation processes of the body. Henri Laborit arrives at this idea with the metaphor of the car (the tank is full of petrol, but to start the car you need to insert the key and give this small element of energy that contains information).

3. Teaching without breaking the personality

Yes, seeing the very different moods of Iben Nagel Rasmussen's and Toni Cots' presentations at the Symposium, really makes me believe that this is achieved at Odin Teatret.

4. Dynamic balance of odissi dance postures

The painters and plastic arts experts, absent in Bonn, might have had something interesting to say. Analysing the refined compositions that Sanjukta Panigrahi achieved with her body, you made a good parallel with cubism. For my part, I could not help thinking of the concepts that Paul Klee develops in *Das Bildnerische Denken*.

5. The laws of extra-daily use of the body

Having identified these laws is an important achievement for science and a very useful contribution to theatre pedagogy. But I ask myself two kinds of questions:

- a) Spectators can be fascinated by an oriental performance, even if they are alien to the culture the performance belongs to and do not understand anything of what is being represented. Are your laws enough to explain this fascination? Hasn't the question just shifted? Why does the implementation of these laws create a feeling of fascination? What clicks in the spectators when they unconsciously 'see' that these laws are respected? Is the universal character (the same laws in different traditions) a sufficient explanation? Being fascinated implies an identification with the object of fascination, that in some way there is a phenomenon of 'resonance' between the actor performing and the spectator watching. But to speak of resonance means using a metaphor, a 'trap' word, a notion that has a very precise meaning for physicists in an analogical sense. What is the true nature of this 'resonance'? What process does this intense communication establish? Henri Laborit attempted an answer by developing the theme of narcissism. But even this is not entirely satisfactory, because then what is the place of the three laws in theatre anthropology in this psychoanalytic model? How do these laws which you have pointed out work in this context?
- b) Are we sure that these three laws are comprehensive? Aren't there others? As a physicist, I am surprised, for example, by the absence of the notion of space (apart from the specific expressions of 'energy in time' and 'energy in space'). Can we conclude that, for the actors, space is something too obvious to talk about, or that it is simply a 'container' they do not think they can grasp. From the point of view of physics, this would be considered as an illusion since different theories refer to different kinds of spaces. Is this problematic entirely foreign to the domain of

theatre? Doesn't the actor's performance create space or at least make it exist? And do the actors create an extra-daily space through the extra-daily use of their body? And what characterises it?

Another notion was absent: that of weight. This is certainly linked to the notion of space, but it implies the idea of inevitable constraint. How does one react to this constraint according to the extra-daily use of the body? Does the change of balance law fully answer this question?

Here are the observations I wanted to make. They are often inspired by a physicist's point of view: they are, perhaps, 'narcissistic', or I could say 'imperialist'. It is the risk of interdisciplinarity. But perhaps also its strength: by underlining the contrasts, real or illusory, we define sensitive areas, the delicate passages on which bridges need to be built.

All the best
Jean-Jacques

• • •

NICOLE REVEL-MACDONALD

Dear Eugenio Barba,

I told you that I was stunned by Sanjukta Panigrahi's perfection, wisdom, and beauty, after watching the four hours of her marvellous demonstration. I felt equally stunned at the end of Iben Nagel Rasmussen's demonstration. However, each of them acted on me in a totally different way.

Sanjukta made me perceive the harmony emanating from the fusion with Nature in its material and spiritual totality, and this through a technique, a terminology, and a deeply precise and coherent representation of the world. Nevertheless, everything was overcome by what, in the West, we have the habit of calling 'inspiration', and which is rather an element that refracts the truth. In the oriental Buddhist traditions, pupils should rid themselves of intentions and individuality to become a master in their art.

But it is precisely an intention that characterises Iben's practice. It is an extremely acute and moving projection of the self that Iben performed, with powerful and vigorous gestures which she developed and which she elaborated observing the body techniques of masters from different Asian cultures.

It seems to me that, in the arts, body techniques have no other purpose than to be forgotten to allow the passage to a supreme and transcendental state.

Sanjukta is capable of giving her ceremonial dance something of her own inner life, but in so doing she seems to me in some way to be transported by her dance and therefore reveal all the theatrical, philosophical and religious tradition of her culture.

With her interpretation of Brecht's Kattrin and the South American shaman's drum dance, Iben is capable of giving a powerful expression of her inner life with each of her gestures, and her acts of interpretation seem to be experienced as a release of emotions

and impulses in full consciousness. But in doing so Iben manifests an entirely different cultural orientation, inherent to western behaviour and deeply self-centred. During her demonstration I wondered about the emotions and sensations that the Asian masters might feel while looking at her. Because, beyond herself, she was revealing a whole culture to them. A culture which I feel is that of anguish, violence, revolt, and despair.

Sanjukta's is the dance of the smile, Iben's is the dance of the scream, and the trait that unites them - beyond certain body techniques - is the intensity of truth.

I would now like to address another aspect of what these two days of demonstrations and your talks have allowed me to see: the law of opposition.

I think you touch a fundamental point there, not only concerning body techniques, but also for a way of thinking; a law that the humanistic sciences have discovered and explored since the beginning of the century. I will start from my fields: linguistics and anthropology.

Ferdinand de Saussure, who possessed the exceptional art of clarity and of concise metaphorical formulation, said while teaching: "In language there are only differences" and "what is important is the game of linguistic oppositions". In choosing the term "game", he was thinking of chess and consequently of combinatorics.

After Saussure, the Prague school with Nikolaj Trubetskoy, Roman Jakobson and many others discovered that the structural principle supporting and organising the sounds of languages is based on the law of oppositions, and that the fundamental tool for highlighting phonemes is a game of phonic changes in units endowed with meaning.

Later the linguists extended the method to all levels of the language oppositions, not only to morphosyntax, but also to semantics.

The essential contribution of Levi-Strauss lies, I think, in the transfer of the analytical methods of structural linguistics to the institutions and creations of human societies (the system of kinship, rituals, myths...), given that the opposition is a keystone in human logical activity. It is not surprising that eastern wisdom and sciences have equally discovered, expressed and implemented opposition in the arts. I am thinking of dance, but also of martial arts (archery, swordsmanship), calligraphy, floral composition, and the art of gardens.

I remember my surprise when I visited the famous gardens of Su-Zhou. I noticed with amazement that there were never straight lines in the avenues. One side was lined with walls covered with quotations and poems that favoured reflection and meditation, while the other was lined with light, almost transparent walls, with stucco lacework, which revealed the landscape behind as a succession of paintings where the eyes of those who walked there could rest, according to their pace and mood.

I asked our Chinese hosts: "Why the broken lines?" One of them replied: "The broken line relaxes the spirit while the straight line tires it". This answer seems to indicate a whole psycho-physiological dimension of the law of oppositions, like what you tried to show us through the gestural aesthetics of the theatre artists you gathered at the ISTA session in Bonn (I think you used the term conflict).

I would like to add that I have noticed elsewhere in Asia - in animistic societies in The Philippines that do not emphasise representation arts - that a similar process is happening in oral art and, in particular, in the rhetoric of customary law. You pointed

out: “To jump I have to bend down; to point towards the right the movement originates on the left; to hit I withdraw to give shape to the blow”, etc. And you showed the very rigorous application in Peking opera of what, according to Grotowski, you called the “Chinese principle”.

I notice a similar procedure in the art of the formal wording, in the rhetoric of customary law. All the figures of speech that Fontanier refers to in the 18th century in France, and which are designated as ‘word flowers’ in the oral tradition societies that I study, seem to me subject to analogous laws: the law of opposition, the law of tension. And when I heard you speak of upward and downward positions, of diagonals, as gestural expressions of drama, I had the intuition of a correspondence at the level of the formal wording which only specialists manipulate with skill to highlight and try to resolve the conflicts that oppose people in their life in society.

An example: in Palawan society, when a village chief needs to reproach a respectful group of fellow citizens, he begins a calm monologue accusing himself. He absolutely avoids attack. With this expedient or inversion, he allows the people to become aware of their guilt without humiliating them, and his self-accusation triggers a recognition of their own mistakes. I have many other examples.

This perhaps will allow you to demonstrate in another register what you present at the level of the logic of the *bios* and that I cannot demonstrate because I still know very little about biology. Because of my ethnolinguistic orientation until today, I mostly research the cultural specificity of the societies I know and that I am responsible for describing.

One of my favourite exercises when travelling on foot or by bus is to try to identify the socio-cultural background of the people I meet. In the multi-ethnic small streets of Palawan, I can identify the Jama Mapum Islamic group living on the coast, the original Christian inhabitants, the immigrants and the indigenous *palawalls* who are animists from the mountains, by looking at the silhouettes, ways of walking or clothes. I recently became aware of repeating what Marcel Mauss taught me in his article “Techniques of the body”. Without having been a direct pupil of Mauss, I think that his teaching, with the notion of “total social fact”, has shaped the entire French school of anthropology for two generations.

So, as an anthropologist, I felt troubled and surprised by your attempt to create a school of theatre anthropology. In this attempt of transplantation an essential element was missing: language as a guide to social reality. This point of view was defended by Sapir in the USA. Without the whole authentic context, the dances lose their social and philosophical function.

But, as an anthropologist, I think that the observations you have triggered and which you will develop in the future, as well as the problems you have raised in my conscience, are fundamental and deserve all our attention and analytical efforts.

Linguists and anthropologists aim to describe and analyse exemplary societies. This first phase of their work leads them to a monography. However, their thinking opens up after accumulating observations, experiences and knowledge while searching for universal values. I think the “pre-expressive level” that plagues you and that is still so difficult to express in our languages, is part of this type of research.

I still cannot find an answer to many problems: energy, localisation, movements,

relations with the universe... However, the two days in Bonn were full of light and joy. I returned to Paris invigorated, and for this I thank you.

Nicole

• • •

RAYMONDE TEMKINE

Dear Eugenio,

The exchange or 'barter' is also practiced by the guests and participants at the Bonn Symposium. Let's make a barter, then.

We saw Odin Teatret (with Toni Cots and Iben Nagel Rasmussen), and the *how* and *why* of their work, like a specialist looking at a machine to understand how it works, and we saw the theatre practice of performers from Bali, China, Japan and India.

Comparing eastern and western theatre practices made me wonder what each form demands from the other. On reflecting on what the Chinese performers, and then Iben, showed us on the same day, I concluded that no barter is possible between these two theatrical expressions; one can benefit the other, but reciprocity is not true.

The young Chinese girl was in the hands of her teacher, who literally shaped her *perinde ac cadaver*, as if she were a corpse (this was even more evident in the film about the dance training of the Balinese children). It will take many years for her body to accumulate, store, and embody the techniques that will be the basis of perfect acting, equalling that of her teacher, who in turn learned from a teacher. And one day she too will have pupils (who will later have pupils) to whom she will pass on this precious and immutable heritage. Which of our western techniques could she use, that hasn't already been codified by Chinese theatre: a new way of advancing by sliding on the floor, a new way to roll the eyes?

On the contrary, the western actors aim at originality and being oneself, rather than perfection. If they are proud of having had teachers, it is because they have freed themselves from them. They don't try to reproduce given signs, but to invent new ones; teachers stimulate, rather than proposing or imposing models. So, the technique wisely elaborated from generation to generation in the East has a lot to teach the western actors, enriching their means or, even better, showing them how to master their body and make use of its possibilities.

In these two tendencies - the eastern and western - we can see two sides that are as dissimilar as, for example, Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholics are faithful to the teaching based on the Holy Scriptures and on tradition; every modification is heretic; the received load must be transmitted intact. Protestants interpret the Bible in their own way. Calvin can separate himself from Luther, and each can form his own model, his 'reading', just like the western artists who 'read' the received tradition in their own way, interpreting and adapting it.

Another surprise: the similarity between certain typical traditional characters in Bali and in the Commedia dell'Arte: the *capitano*, the arrogant, etc.

How did these contaminations occur? Or through which archetypes? We leave these questions to the specialists.

Raymonde

Translation: Julia Varley



Augusto Omolu in *Orô de Otelô*, ISTA 11, Montemor-O-Novo, Portugal 1988
Photo: Fiora Bemporad