

Nando Taviani

The Energy of the Actor

Abstract: In this article of 1987, the Italian scholar Nando Taviani offers a view of the actor's "energy" as a "premise" for artistic and theoretical research. Elaborating the fundamentals of theatre anthropology and replying to common objections, Taviani defines theatre anthropology as a "hand-made theory". Ian Watson later considered this definition as one of the most successful. Taviani also discusses the relationship of theatre anthropology with science and the complementarity of energy as animus and anima according to Barba. The article was originally published in French in the journal Bouffonneries (15-16, L'énergie de l'acteur. Anthropologie Théâtrale 2, 1987, 23-32).

Keywords: Actor's energy, Theatre anthropology, Hand-made theory

- 1. When we ask ourselves about the energy of the actor we immediately encounter two objections:
- a) how is it possible to carry out objective research into such a delicate phenomenon, in such a vague field?
 - b) *cui prodest?* and if research is possible, for what purpose?

A third objection is not formulated in words, but results, rather, in an attitude of disparagement. When the researcher is an artist, that is, someone who has experience in the field of phenomena s/he is investigating, the reaction of some is to consider it pointless to discuss the objective value of his or her findings. They seem to say: "The artists' words interest us solely as an expression of their individual theory of art, as a demonstration of their inner world. Let's stop at this and let's not bother going beyond."

This is an attitude typical of those who work in the theatre as historians, critics, or journalists. They often fall into the trap of giving more credit to a theoretical framework that neatly mirrors other theoretical frameworks (semiology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc.) than to a theory born with its own language from reflection on a wide field of experiences.

2. The first objection derives largely from the fact that "energy" is one of the terms commonly used to indicate a certain 'something' pertaining to actors, the heart of their art and of their charm. It is a question of words. The actor's "energy" is nothing inexpressible or secret. The word is often used rather vaguely to indicate a phenomenon that is difficult to analyse conceptually. An actor or actress is said to have "extraordinary energy" in the same way that they are said to have charm, seductiveness, or genius. When discussing a good actor, one soon reaches the barrier of that 'something' difficult or impossible to define, clear to experience, but obscure when one tries to put it into words.



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This 'something' escapes analysis, not because it transcends physical reality, but simply because it transcends the plane of analysis. Like any other art, that of the actor too cannot be - even mentally - dismantled and reassembled. Its results are organic, not mechanical units: the synthesis of the various elements composes a new element. Theatrical action, like the images analysed by Roland Barthes, can possess a "third sense", which escapes the critical meta-language and even renders it sterile. But this is not what we mean, when we ask ourselves, in a scientific way, about the energy of the actor.

The actor's energy is something precise, recognisable by all: it is his or her muscular and nervous strength. It is not the pure and simple existence of this force that interests us - by definition it exists in every living body. We are interested in how it is modelled. And we are interested in a very particular perspective: at every moment of our life - whether conscious or not we model our force. In the theatre there is, however, something more: not to move, act, be present and intervene in the surrounding world, but to act, move and be present in a theatrically effective way. Studying the actor's energy means, therefore, asking questions about the underlying principles on which actors model their muscular and nervous force, in a way that is different from what happens in everyday life. The various constellations of these principles form the basis of different techniques: of Decroux or of kabuki; of noh or classical ballet, of Delsarte or kathakali. Or different individual techniques: of Buster Keaton and Dario Fo, of Totò or Marcel Marceau, of Ryszard Cieslak or Iben Nagel Rasmussen.

Underlying all these differences are there any constant factors?

Eugenio Barba asked himself this question. He created the conditions in which to physically compare actors from different traditions. He set up, as in any good laboratory, experimental situations. And he succeeded in identifying a transcultural dimension of the actor's work: the pre-expressive level. This dimension does not underestimate the importance of expressive differences and different codes, nor does it ignore the profound variety of cultures, societies and histories. It does not affirm a concept of actor in the singular, whose essence would always be identical in any country or era. The transcultural dimension of the actor concerns the pre-expressive level.

We must, indeed, become accustomed to considering the actor's work as a complex organism, in which different levels of organisation can be discerned. The pre-expressive level of organisation is the one that enables the actor to capture and direct the attention of spectators through his own stage presence, even before expressing or performing anything. "Even before" must be understood in a logical, not chronological sense, because it does not necessarily indicate a moment that can be isolated in time.

There are many examples of an actor-spectator relationship based on the pure pre-expressive level. Think of certain situations where the actor fascinates even the spectator who knows nothing about what s/he is representing, who does not know the story, nor the language, nor the conventions the actor is using. Or think of some examples of pure dance, where it is not the music, but the physical score of the actor-dancer that charms the imagination of the observer and launches it on a particular voyage. In the light of these considerations, our answer to the first of the two objections mentioned should be sufficiently clear: the phenomenon is perhaps delicate, but it is certainly not imprecise.

3. Occasionally someone asks: "But is the transcultural dimension of the actor's work more or less important than the heritage of this or that civilisation, doctrine, convention or artistic personality?

This is a very fallacious way of reasoning. Historical and personal distinctions are the most important from the point of view of result. They make it exist in the sense that they individualise it, they determine its value and its expressive force. General and transcultural principles governing the energy of the actor at a pre-expressive level are, on the other hand, the most important from the point of view of process, in the sense that they are its seed: the identical seed of various individualities and lineages. We can study how and why this happens. This does not mean ignoring the many other things happening in the theatre, between the actor and the spectator. No research ever aims to diminish the value of what it is not researching.

I have heard some actors and some enthusiastic spectators say, about this kind of research: "Yes, but that's not the most important thing!". It's true. Rain is the most important thing for those who are thirsty, not the water tank. And this is also true: many water tanks carefully built to last remain dry and empty. On the other hand, without channels and water tanks, the water - if it comes - is dispersed.

4. The second objection - *cui prodest?* for what purpose? - relies on the separation (frequently seen) between the theories and the practice of theatrical work. Hence the disinterest, uneasiness or suspicion around questions that seem too intellectual and abstract. "What is the point - the objection goes - of asking what the actor's energy consists of, given that the results will be subtle, abstract knowledge, a 'philosophy' suitable for book-learning, but which will not give the actor any practical hints, or concrete working method?" Some people wonder: "Why does a master like Eugenio Barba let himself be caught up by abstraction and pure research, instead of continuing to dedicate himself to intensive and personalised pedagogical activity?"

The history of 20th century performance contains at least one other similar case: that of Eisenstein and his writings on the theories of "non-indifferent nature" and montage. Although everyone recognises their importance, these writings are still received today with a certain unease and continue to be undervalued in the imaginary order of bibliographies. They do not simply enunciate the artist's personal visions; they do not reconstruct his system (as in the case of Decroux's *Paroles* on mime or Bresson's "notes" on cinema); but neither do they use the language and structure of the scientific treatise. They are not based, in fact, on an objective, geometrically ordered structure, or on a general theory, but on the narrative of actual, and therefore personal, experience. But neither are they "how-to" manuals that transmit techniques. They speak first and foremost to the artists, but to drown them, paradoxically, with waves of disparate examples, to persuade them of the existence of certain fundamental rules, which return in different forms in different artistic contexts: Eisenstein jumps from cinema to architecture, from architecture to figurative art, from figurative art to the novel.

The term "hand-made theories" has been given to this kind of approach, perhaps because, like an artisanal product, it bears the mark of the craftsman, and because it establishes a dialogue with the reader based on hints, suggestions, fractures.



"Hand-made theories" do not provide global interpretations, but constellations of principles, systems of orientation, which, as such, transcend the various technical paths and individual experiences.

Abstract principles but practical ones, as they derive from practical experiences: they filter the broad learning hidden in sectorial knowledge. Techniques transmit an aggregation of innumerable experiences - the *map* of an explored country. Defining systems of orientation transmits the tools for opening a *path* through different, unknown territories.

The former teach already acquired knowledge; the latter teach how to learn. This, in short, is their usefulness.

It therefore follows that orientation systems are principles of transformation. And every transformation, to succeed, needs a pivotal centre, something that remains constant throughout changes - otherwise it would mean wandering about aimlessly.

The research that Eugenio Barba conducts through ISTA on the pre-expressive level of actors/dancers and on the various aspects of their energy, leads to results that have all the characteristics of a "hand-made theory". The oriental masters who have been part of the ISTA team for six years testify to the importance of the discovery of a transcultural orientation system for their professional identity. It is the bridge across which they can open up to experiences different from their tradition, without straying even an inch from their own artistic orthodoxy. It allows them to pass on to others, especially to westerners, not the rudiments of a tradition that practically no one would manage to master, but the translatable core of a knowledge that can become common.

Anyone with experience of the misunderstandings arising from contact (albeit unavoidable) between theatre people from the East and the West, will not underestimate the importance of similar principles of conjunction and transformation. Nor will it be underestimated by those who know the price of the rigidity that the custodians of traditions are often obliged to pay, though their profound wisdom arouses the admiration and envy of those who look at them from afar.

The western tradition, marked by the schism between theatre and dance and by the emphasis on the actor's originality and individuality, often exaggerates, by contrast, the importance of techniques, pedagogical methodologies and artistic doctrines.

Aspiring actors, forced to teach themselves even when attending schools, often vacillate between a naïve exaltation of talent and of 'inspired' liberty, and the equally naïve consolation of faithfully performed psychophysical exercises.

From this point of view, the utility of simple, clear systems of orientation, capable of supporting the actor/dancers' way of thinking, even before their way of behaving, is even more evident. It is an objective guide for their personal path. It is in this sense that the term "science", applied to theatre anthropology, shows at the same time its general and specific validity. General validity, because theatre anthropology is *scientia* (knowledge) as indeed, above anything else, are all the "sciences". Specific validity, because this general *scientia* serves, pragmatically, to construct individual paths.

5. A feature common to all "hand-made theories", whether of Arthur Koestler, Eisenstein or Barba, consists in defining the principles by applying them in passing from



1. The Indian odissi dance female impersonator Kelucharan Mahapatra. 2. Laksmi Desak Made Suarti in a vigourous *keras* position (Bali). 3-4. Kanichi Hanayagi, buyo kabuki, as *onnagata* and samurai. ISTA 4, Holstebro, 1986, Denmark - Photos: Torben Huss

one level of experience to another. In his essay "The Dilated Body", ¹ Barba applies to dramaturgical composition the principles he identified as the bases of the pre-expressive work of actors from different cultures. In other words, he takes them from the physical to the mental plane.

The research then enters a border zone. The physical equivalent of the modelling of energies, its mental counterpart, resembles what the Greeks called *rythmós*, which characterises life, distinguishes it, and gives it an individual imprint.

Another procedure typical of "hand-made theories" consists in unexpectedly combining artisan elements and mental perspectives. These juxtapositions go against academic *bon ton* and sometimes arouse reactions of rejection from those who distrust any contact between the physical and the metaphysical, even though these 'rough' combinations often create valuable working tools.

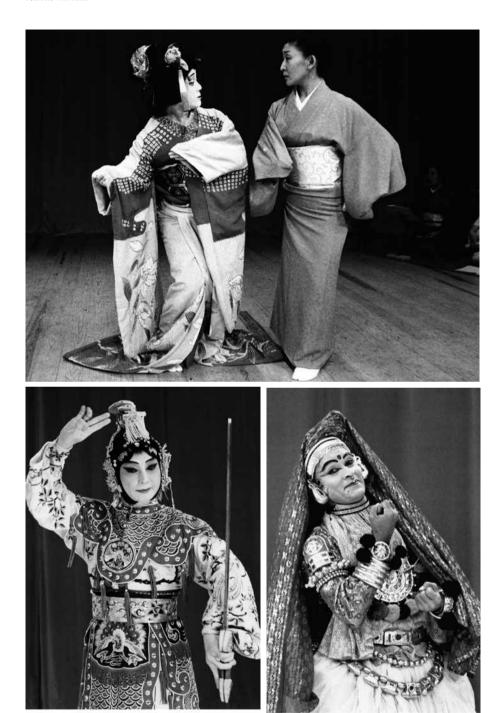
The rigorous division between the sphere of craft and technique and that of the imaginary (an activity which is itself also a technique) is not a requirement imposed by work or rational justification. This division is imposed by convention, by timidity of thought and by the fear that a scientifically defined principle will lose its strength when it comes into contact with an analogy based on intuition. The actor's energy, if one follows it in its transformations, reveals certain characteristics and polarities of its own that can serve as a starting point for new orientations.

In his pedagogical practice and in his theoretical writings, Eugenio Barba constantly warns against the error of identifying energy with muscular tension or nervous contraction, with a show of vigour or rapidity of action. In some demonstrations, Barba indicates how energy can be 'absorbed': the inner mobilisation of an internal force remains the same although it is manifested in increasingly intense actions and in actions increasingly confined in space.

Many masters, in particular Etienne Decroux and the actors of the various Japanese theatre traditions, underline the importance for the actor/dancer of this mobilisation of energy which serves, not to create movement, but to resist another force, real or imaginary. Underlying the principles that govern the actor's pre-expressive work there is, therefore, an implicit polarity between forces of movement and forces of resistance. If we look closely at this polarity, we will see that it suggests at its two poles two different 'colours' of the same ever-changing energy. The transition from one of these two 'colours' to the other, through the entire range of shades in between, is what Barba calls the "dance of energy".

Two other poles, two other qualities of the actor's energy, much more difficult to define, manifest themselves in the discrepancy between gender and temperament. They can be glimpsed, but they do not identify with this discrepancy any more than they determine it. Barba speaks of an *animus* quality and an *anima* quality of the actor's energy. For him the difference and the fundamental identity between these two aspects, or these two 'colours', could be compared to what in the classical period and in the Middle Ages was defined as the difference and the fundamental identity between two aspects of the same vital principle. The distinction between two facets of strength, one 'vigorous',

^{1.} Eugenio Barba, Nicola Savarese, A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer, Rouledge, London and New York, 2006, 52-61. (Ed. note)



1. Kanichi Hanayagi in a female role and Katsuko Azuma in a male role. 2. Mei Lan-Fang's son, Mei Bao-Jin, in a *dan* female role. 3. K.N. Vijaya, kathakali, in a female role, ISTA 4, Holstebro, 1986, Denmark - Photos: Torben Huss

the other 'soft' (very close to the distinction between an *animus* energy and an *anima* energy) illustrates a technical principle specific to various theatre traditions. It is part of the vocabulary used by actors/dancers to distinguish the various elements of their work without identifying with a male/female distinction, neither regarding the gender of the actor, nor that of the character.

When we talk about polarity for the actor's energy, we are talking about cultural and unnatural phenomena. The research is not about what an actor's energy is, but what it can be when it is artificially modelled. Being able to name the various faces of energy and therefore differentiate them is an essential prerequisite if we want to be able to consciously shape and control them. When Barba talks about the "dance of energies" he is not using a metaphor, as if he were talking about the dance of a ray of light on water. He is speaking literally of an actor or actress who gives form, rhythm, and variety to their own energy flow and then dances, even at the level of the pure and simple use of their forces. Certain actors and actresses, helped by circumstances, by so-called 'talent' or 'instinct', or even guided by long professional experience, know how to enhance their stage presence - the pre-expressive level - without resorting to a system of conscious differentiations. But in most cases it is necessary to know how to distinguish in order to control one's behaviour, to artificially reconstruct it until it again becomes alive, organic and thus theatrically effective.

Certain moments and certain episodes in the history of the theatre allow us to understand logically this delicate work of the actor, which consists in the analysis of his own stage energy in order to be able to interpret it and enrich it with variations. In many cases, behind the discrepancy between the gender of the actor-actress and the gender of the character lies - more or less explicitly - the technical (but not only technical) need to broaden the field of the persona. This need can be seen in a context of social conditioning, theatrical conventions, mentality and culture, in different countries and at different times. But it can also be considered in the context of the elements that remain constant as actors, traditions and theatres change. Similarly, the way in which the role of women is defined in the most diverse theatres can be seen as an index of customs, social and cultural codes but also as a result of the play between 'soft' energy and 'vigorous' energy, between *anima* and *animus*.

This latter perspective is certainly not the only correct one. Yet it is probably one of the most useful and stimulating, if only because it is less used than the other. It is in any case situated on the level of objectivity, that is, of dialogue and comparison and is not an expression of a personal artistic vision. It can therefore be tested, both through practical experimentation, through theoretical analysis, and through historical research. Historical phenomena so far apart as the Commedia dell'Arte and kabuki can reveal one thing in common: the concern of the artist to distinguish and put on stage the two poles of energy.

Translation: Julia Campbell Hamilton