



Eating an apple according to the kyogen tradition. Kosuke Nomura,
ISTA 2, Volterra, Italy, 1981 - Photo: Nicola Savarese

Franco Ruffini

Theatre Anthropology: 40 Years On

Abstract: For the first issue of the Journal of Theatre Anthropology, which appears forty years after the first session of ISTA in Bonn, Ruffini recalls the original research conducted in the field of theatre anthropology and its professional and ethical implications still valid today.

Keywords: Dynamic of opposites, ISTA, Historiography

1. Theatre anthropology, or pre-expressive level

The pre-expressive level is not an invention, nor is it really a discovery. Rather, it is the simple acknowledgment of something evident. In the case of an action - such as drinking a glass of water - an ordinary person performs it, while “a person in a performance situation” must, in addition, show that s/he is doing it, attracting the spectator's attention to it. The action performed by the actor costs more, in terms of energy, than the same action performed by the an ordinary person. The actor must use a surplus of energy to signal the action s/he is carrying out. It is evident.

But if this surplus of energy is used for the signal - drinking in a strange way, pulling faces and suchlike - the effect obtained is opposite to that intended. The spectator's attention is attracted by the signal, and therefore distracted from the signalled action. To be effective, the surplus of energy must be invested in the action itself. So the action becomes “inconsistent” with respect to the logic of an ordinary person, but vice versa becomes “consistent” with respect to another logic, in which the action is perceived as the re-action to a contrary force. An ordinary person stands, the actor balances, said Meyerhold; and consequently an ordinary person follows a path, while the actor keeps to a path. As if reacting to a force that tends to make her/him topple or stray from the path.

In actual fact, this “dynamic of opposites” exists in the action of the ordinary man, too. It is a law of *bios*. But it is invisible. The principle of minimum effort, which governs ordinary life, acts towards neutralising those forces that unbalance or throw off track. These pressures, naturally, cannot be cancelled out, as *bios* does not allow it. They can only be concealed, in return for a loss of precision. The action of the ordinary person is generic, virtually corresponding to every here and now; this makes it indifferent, insensitive, to the actual here and now. Absorbed in the action, the counter-actions - which nevertheless remain operative - become invisible.

For the actor it is the opposite. His/her action must be commensurate only with the actual here and now, since the effect of attraction consists precisely in the perception of the “dynamic of opposites”. The surplus of energy must be invested in precision, and this reveals itself in the body but does not originate only from the body.



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2. Incandescent filament

The pre-expressive level is something evident, like a light. You just need eyes trained to see. The merit of Eugenio Barba lies in having had this ability to see.

But, once the light has been seen, there is nothing other to be discovered. The same three principles - luxury balance, dynamic of opposites and consistent inconsistency - are nothing 'other'. Rather as the incandescent filament is nothing other than the lighted bulb that contains it. Once the evident nature of light has revealed itself with its principles, it only serves to illuminate what is 'other' than itself.

Hence, as it were, the ecumenical vocation of theatre anthropology. The pre-expressive level sheds light on Asian traditions, as it does on training, on Decroux mime and on *Commedia dell'Arte*, on the masters of the 20th century - Stanislavski or Meyerhold or Craig - but also on the company actor of the 19th century. More than a new discipline, from the beginning, theatre anthropology has stood as a call to arms to the most diverse of scholars, so that they might look afresh at their respective fields of research in the light of the pre-expressive level. For this call to be effective it was, of course, necessary to create an environment in which to gather those called. Being a far-sighted strategist, Barba knew this. And he invented ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology.

Without ISTA, the evidence of the pre-expressive level ran the risk of having to rely on chance, of an encounter with eyes capable of seeing it, and of looking at the 'other' in its light. ISTA is an environment. The scholars, the teachers and - for the first two sessions - the students should not simply feel called to meet up, as in any residential conference, but truly called to arms. Or even initiated into arms. Hence the operating strategies of ISTA, such as the group runs before dawn, the delivery of silence, and more: in the face of which the alternative to refusal could only be that exercise of freedom and creativity consisting in making one's own will the will of another. And, importantly, Barba was seen as the spokesperson of this other, not as the original initiator.

3. Scholars

The writings of the scholars who revisited their fields in the light of the pre-expressive level testify to the acquisitions made. However, these cannot be considered as contributions of theatre anthropology.

Their value cannot be measured in proportion to a greater or lesser understanding of the discipline. Rather, this value comes from a new attitude towards academic professional ethics, in which knowledge is associated with experience, and the work of the mind with that of the body-mind.

Whatever the words "experience" and "body-mind" might mean in a general dictionary, in the personal dictionary of certain scholars they became the new keywords of their work. ■