



Nando Tavianni. ISTA 12, Wrocław, Poland, 2005. Photo: Francesco Galli

Nando Taviani

Casting the Net

Interview by Claudio Coloberti

Abstract: Interviewed by Claudio Coloberti in 2007 as part of a series dedicated to the “Voices of ISTA”, Nando Taviani reconstructs his relationship with Eugenio Barba since the early 1970s. In this text, here published for the first time in an English translation, Taviani follows his collaboration with Odin Teatret from the barter in Carpignano in 1974 to the first session of ISTA in Bonn in 1980, towards the formulation of theatre anthropology in a hybrid context of practitioners and scholars.

Keywords: Ferdinando Taviani; Barbers; ISTA Bonn 1980

CC How did you meet Eugenio Barba?

NT My relationship with Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret began in the early 1970s, when he came to Rome with the performance *Ferai*. Ferruccio Marotti, who had seen it at the Venice Biennale, had talked about it at length, and all of us from the theatre department of the University of Rome went to see it. It was a huge shock to me, just as the recent shock of Living Theater had been. I didn't think a performance like *Ferai* was possible. I was left with the desire to see it again, an almost nostalgic feeling; but they went back to Denmark, and there was no longer a way to see something like this.

A connection was established through one of my students who wanted to do her thesis about them, and I began supervising her. Slowly the opportunity arose for a book on Odin Teatret (1975), which I saw again with *Min Fars Hus* (My father's house) at the 1972 Venice Biennale. The bond grew closer after I visited them in Holstebro in Denmark. Barba wanted to spend some time in Southern Italy to rehearse a new performance. I was teaching at the University of Lecce. When he told me about it, the actors didn't know this; it was still an unknown project. He asked me if I was interested. In 1974 Odin Teatret moved to the village of Carpignano for five months and thus another type of collaboration developed.

CC How did ISTA come into your developing relationship with Eugenio and with Odin?



NT The relationship had become very close between '73 -'74, after I had invited *Min Fars Hus* to Lecce and after Odin Teatret had discovered and put into practice the “barter” in Carpignano. Then, the book I was writing was also a bridge, for which I collected materials, spoke with Barba, did interviews, and translations.

I participated to all the meetings of group theatres: in Belgrade in 1976 where Barba wrote the Manifesto on the Third Theatre, in Bergamo, in Ayacucho in Peru, and in Spain. These big group theatre meetings were becoming a bit repetitive. Barba was looking for something new.

At one point he had the idea of a tour with a small German equestrian circus that he had met in Munich, during an outdoor festival. The circus performers put on a performance for children every Sunday. A relationship grew up with this tiny family circus. Thus this project, which remained an idea, was mooted: a tour of circus and Odin Teatret. There was this need of his to change. In '79 Hans-Jürgen Nagel, the Director of Culture in Bonn, Germany proposed him to organise a meeting of theatre groups. And there Barba said: “I'll do something else: a length encounter with young directors and actors. I'll invite Eastern and Western artists that I know, and I'll bring together budding professionals, scholars and academics.” He christened this project ISTA, International School of Theatre Anthropology.

CC *So you were already aware of the project before going to Bonn?*

NT Yes. This project, at least as I remember it, had some fixed characteristics: bringing together Western and Asian artists with Latin Americans and Europeans from what Barba had called Third Theatre, that is, young people neither from avant-garde theatre, nor from the prevalent traditional theatre. There was this name: International School of Theatre Anthropology. Theatre anthropology as a discipline, as a theory, did not yet exist. First came the name and then, I would say that as a theory it began to develop in Bonn. I was aware of this project - a quite unheard of situation - being shut up together for a month with strict working rules. At the time Barba was very interested in scientific studies, especially biology, hence the idea of having academics from that discipline and scholars of theatre, people who did theatre and the Asian and Western artists, especially of mime. In Bonn Barba laid the foundations of what later became theatre anthropology as a discipline and as a field of study.

The work in Bonn was very hard. What Barba was doing seemed crazy to me. Days began at 5.30/6 in the morning and ended late in the evening. The hours were exhausting, and after three days people were dead on their feet. They were all young, about fifty participants from different parts of the world, so they wanted to be together, to talk. They stayed up late and then the next morning started very early, so there was enormous fatigue.

Late in the evening Barba went around with his notebook, talking, asking questions, especially of the Asians. They were dead tired, Barba was dead tired, I was there with him fighting off sleep, and he had these questions: “How do you say 'energy' in your working language? In how many ways can you say 'energy' in Japanese? What is the difference between this term and the other?” He demanded a literal translation of working words or expressions. “How do you say improvisation? How do you say rhythm?”

How do you say resistance? What exactly does this mean? What is the etymology of this word?" I was thinking: what use is all this stuff to him, this kind of lexicon? But this very humdrum path was the one that paved the way for finding recurring technical principles.

This was the interest that Barba had at that time and that he has maintained: to identify a kind of technical root uniting the craft of the actor and the dancer. There was still no theory or system defining theatre anthropology, which grew out of this peculiar curiosity of Barba, and from another singular obsession of his. He decided that the teachers, especially the Asian ones - so fascinating with their incredible knowledge - should teach only their first three days of work at the beginning of their careers. When, as children, they first went to their master, what did they do during these first three days? This they had to teach to the ISTA participants. No alluring scenes or dances, but the most elementary things: the first positions, the first steps, how to place the feet, in which posture, where is the balance. They had to teach the alphabet, the ABC. An extraordinary artist like Sanjukta Panigrahi taught these things when she was giving her classes!

Theatre anthropology begins with these two elements: on the one hand, the search for terms and words to define and understand common recurring elements (despite apparent difference in styles), which Barba has called "the principles that return"; on the other hand, this teaching stripped of all its allure.

At ISTA the Asian artists were present as teachers, but they also put on performances. You saw extraordinary things. For me, personally, the revelation of ISTA was Sanjukta Panigrahi, a kind of bomb - you had the impression of being next to Maria Callas. I thought I was facing some kind of prodigy and I never tired of seeing her. I remember, the entire month in Bonn, I always went to Sanjukta's classes - I didn't really want to even miss a thing. In the evening the Asians gave performances and presented their extraordinary dances and plays, and then during the day, they devoted themselves to this teaching, so humble, so down to earth. I remember Barba explaining to the participants: "You didn't come here to learn styles. What you need to learn is to work alone. Here you will find some foundations on which you can then build. You cannot delude yourself that these artists are teaching you something of their art."

CC How did these artists, faced with a method that they had never experienced in their own country, react?

NT Barba knew them personally. He had seen their work in their own countries. He must have understood that they were willing to do this. For the Asian artists it was a completely new situation. They showed a dance, Barba interrupted them and began to question them about a detail: "Where is the balance here? Why do you bend your knees? Why do the arms go to the left and the hips to the right?" All things they had never thought of, because they had learned them since childhood. It's like someone who knows a language well, then you stop him and ask: "Here you use the subjunctive, why? Why don't you use the conditional?" You don't know because you've always used that language without thinking. So the Asians, and we with them, began to see in a total different way physical details and tensions that made their work as actors so effective, so rich.

Almost all of them, in their own countries, had problems passing on their art to pupils. This was a common complaint. People were no longer willing to go to them as children and sacrifice themselves, as they had done to learn. It was very interesting for them to find a way to convey their experience in a non-traditional way. They were really interested in this.

But there was another element: they trusted the guidance of Barba, this strange personality who they might or might not understand, but who gained their trust. This is something that is often not considered: the trust that Barba knew how to inspire in his numerous initiatives with Odin Teatret and even without Odin. In ISTA there was only Barba and one actor, Toni Cots. The whole group joined in much later. ISTA was Barba's personal initiative.

Those who have experienced it don't think about it, but it is very difficult to find a person able to hold together personalities that are so strong and so different, with different experiences and needs. Barba has succeeded in keeping people together who would never have managed it. This is a great gift that is difficult to define and which is typical of Barba. The same thing could be said for Odin Teatret: the fact of keeping people together who have absolutely no reason for staying together. All of ISTA grew up like this, as did everything that came after, like the *Theatrum Mundi* ensemble and performances. The most impressive thing about Barba - beyond his artistic brilliance, his intuitions, his skills of dramaturgy and direction, all things that we knew and could easily perceive - was this gift: being able to amalgamate a group of people that, it seems to you, could never collaborate, each being a kind of leader in his own world.

The same thing happened with the group of scholars and academics, with people who would never collaborate on their own: they had no common language, no mutual sympathies, and no shared interests. The exchange took place because we were in a surprising environment that stimulated.

CC *How did scholars and academics react to these rhythms of work?*

NT There was no problem as I remember. They were all passionate, interested people, and they reacted well. Bonn was a situation that, when you think about it today, would turn your hair white! Not only were the working hours terrible, you had to do all the cleaning, 6-7 people slept in the same room, you had to cook, you had to do everything. The second ISTA in Volterra was even harder because it was longer - two months. The place was not fit for such a meeting. In Bonn we were living and working in a school, in Volterra we were in a boarding school where the bathroom facilities were dreadful. Those who couldn't cook, like me, had to clean the toilets. But there was never a real problem on this, maybe one or two defections in Volterra and Bonn among the participants. The scholars didn't turn a hair, nor did the teachers.

CC *Were there no moments of tension, difficulty, uncertainty?*

NT No. There were times when the fatigue became a real drag, but this I would say occurred more in Volterra, which lasted two months. The Bonn session lasted one month.

In Volterra, Barba himself reviewed the timetable, because the session had started with the same intensity as in Bonn. It was clear that you could not go on for two months with those rhythms, without moments not of rest, but of variation. In fact, Barba changed the entire working schedule. But I would say that the greatest difficulty was the fatigue; the other things were just minimal.

The only real moments of tension were due to jealousy between teachers, if Barba went to see or talk more with one than with another. Especially among the primadonnas, who were the Indian Sanjukta Panigrahi and the Japanese Katsuko Azuma. But this is just gossip. There were moments of difficulty in making oneself understood, but there was a kind of solidarity that was almost taken for granted.

CC Were there also moments of theoretical elaboration of what one saw, observed, and intuited, of what was beginning to be built up?

NT It was as if these moments of encounter with technical exchange and comparison responded to a criterion, to an unspoken law, that sometimes was explicit, too. We were lucky enough to be together for a month, to have set up an organisation and found premises and money to create something before never seen. So we had no time to waste. Everyone did all the reflecting and re-elaborating on their own, at home. At ISTA we had to gather together as much as possible.

If I had to tell you in my own words: ISTA was the time for casting our nets - we weren't concerned whether we caught old shoes, mullet, lobster or inedible fish. This was the time for fishing, and we had to fish. Everyone did the sorting out afterwards, on their own. This was more or less our mindset. In the early days, some felt a need for debate, for a moment of reflection after the work. Then everyone understood that this was not the time. There, you had to observe and then later you reflected. Returning home, theatre workers and scholars alike, each of us reworked things in our own way, alone. The moment of reflection came later. At ISTA you cast your nets, back home you gathered in the catch. So there was no reworking there, it was the time to experience.

In Bonn, there was a moment dedicated to actors, scholars and artists. One of the directors said to Barba: "Is it possible that there isn't a moment for us?" Barba scheduled a daily meeting for directors before starting work: at 5 in the morning. Then he moved it to 6 o'clock. These meetings were tremendously interesting. Barba did not give lessons in directing. He analysed the situation at ISTA: how the work was progressing, how group life was evolving, how the dynamics and moments of togetherness changed, if a crisis was looming, how to avoid it, hasten or block it, which elements could be criticised or were missing. Barba listened to comments and proposals, indicated the negative aspects and their reasons, how to tolerate or modify them, examined the effects of fatigue as well as its usefulness. All this he explained openly and explicitly, using specific examples.

It was as if the directors' meeting was a sort of school for leaders: how to be responsible for a group of people, because if you can't hold them together, you send them to perdition. This, after all, is the condition of a director of an unofficial and unsubsidised theatre. Barba sometimes talked about his artistic choices or the images he followed,

always in a very personal way. He never said, "The director must do this, or that". He imagined the director as someone who leads people, a band of outlaws, a group that is not protected and that can only be safeguarded through internal cohesion and the effectiveness of its results.

In Volterra, there were regular meetings with scholars at the end of the day, late in the evening. It was a situation that today seems crazy. There were university professors, academics, some young people, others who already had their spurs, theatre critics. We had to formulate themes and tasks for the groups preparing an outline for a performance, starting with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Barba commented on how we formulated these themes: "you wrote in an abstract way", "here you use too many words", "an actor's imagination does not begin to fly if you express yourself in this way" "these words are not stimulating", "you must write concise sentences, like a poem", "how should you speak when you give an actor a task". No one ever protested. We all felt we were learning a great deal. We became aware of finding ourselves with people who had quite different needs, a different way of thinking. Suddenly your whole way of speaking, of expressing yourself, of saying things, became sort of shit. It could also be rather hard; in fact it was hard at times. But actually very interesting.

CC *What did ISTA give you - Bonn and then all the following ones, fourteen of them - with respect to your profession as a scholar? How did you make use of this new knowledge that was forming and that was becoming increasingly valuable?*

NT From the outside, everyone told me that I changed a lot. So obviously it gave me a lot. ISTA forced me to realise that there is another way of communicating and relating to the theatre. It brought me slam up against another reality. People who are academics are full of themselves, they always talk to the same type of persons; there are certain topics that are appreciated and you are comfortable on this kind of throne, it is your cradle, your shell.

Suddenly you find yourself catapulted into another world, where people really couldn't care less that you know twenty thousand facts about the history of theatre, because you can't give them anything that stimulates them. So you refashion yourself, you understand that you have some specialities, as everyone has, and that your specialities cannot go outside their small boundary unless you are able to give them another aspect, to find another way. You become aware that certain things that were very important to you are worth nothing. Of course you learn a lot of things, but sometimes it's very unpleasant.

As a scholar, for me ISTA was fundamental because it was a school for looking. You begin to see certain things that before you hadn't the slightest inkling of, and then you realise what questions you can ask of the theatre of the past. If you are a historian, the problem is what questions you ask to the documents. If you haven't the slightest inkling that certain problems exist, you are obviously an incomplete historian.

ISTA obliged one to look, and look again. You slowly understood what is at the basis of the actor's work, at the basis of dramaturgy, what makes it function. Through all the theory you become aware that there are other queries, and you are able to identify and

formulate them. They are not all the same, but the questions are the same, and above all the answers are different. You are able to perceive these queries when you find them in documents, in history, in illustrations and images, in the memoirs and biographies of actors. You begin to see and analyse everything in another way, because you have gone for hours through a filter of monotony or boredom. Sometimes you just didn't know how to set your head in motion, what to think or deduce by watching actors perform exercises for hours, repeating them at different rhythms, repeating how they walked, repeating how they fixed their gaze, how they used their hands or manipulated objects, repeating the same scene as if it were the most usual thing in the world. Then your head starts moving and you begin to distinguish, to notice what it's about. These are elementary, palpable things, but weeks, months pass before you realise it. This was crucial. Here I could use the plural - for us, for a whole group of scholars, it was essential.

CC This new vision of elements that, as you said, already existed, but that were hidden and you didn't see them, I guess it influenced your profession as a teacher. How did you convey this experience to your students?

NT When you go through an experience like this certain things become conditioned reflexes. They seem obvious. It is clear that, when you teach, you know how to explain certain things, and you know how to make yourself understood, because it has taken you months and months to understand that it was, in fact, reinventing the wheel. You ask yourself how it is possible that for years and years you had not realised it. But once you've understood it, you can explain it to others in a few days. There's no doubt about this.

There is a certain way of reading Artaud, a certain way of reading things, which perhaps one has read a dozen times and has always seen in one way. Then you realise that Artaud speaks of material and concrete things, of extraordinary and skilful craftsmanship. You had read these texts ten thousand times and they seemed to you poetry, utopia, metaphors, philosophy, and esotericism. They actually talk about material things. This has become an almost automatic reflex. It is evident that it is no longer so difficult to make a student understand when you explain it to them.

CC In your opinion, has this new knowledge influenced other, perhaps more traditional, theatre people? If so, how?

NT If you ask me if this has influenced "traditional" or "orthodox" theatre, my first answer is no. For one reason, which is not just Italian, but European: at a certain point there has been a kind of loss of contact between different theatre realities. In the early 1960s, these were still close.

When the Living Theater came to Italy in the 1960s, all Italian theatre people went to see it. The same, when Grotowski's *The Constant Prince* came in 1967, or the first Odin performances in the late 1960s. There were many lines of communication, and one felt that it was something also relevant to those who recited Goldoni or Shakespeare at the Teatro Eliseo or the Teatro Lirico. Then there was a split. Those who gathered in groups

to do theatre did not care about “traditional” theatre, and often they did not even know about it. In the eyes of the other “traditional” side, the new group theatres were almost non-existent. So this exchange did not take place.

As a historian, it was interesting for me to go and look at articles, critiques and radio interviews after *The Constant Prince* by Grotowski at the Spoleto Festival, after *Ferai* by Odin Teatret at the Venice Biennale, after the arrival of the Living Theater in Milan with *The Connection*. Rereading them today, one is amazed: you find influential and sensitive people from “traditional” theatre who are saying: “We should do this, we should learn this, we should teach the actors this regardless of the type of performance one wants to do”. All this disappeared for cultural reasons, partly also political, and some public condemnation began to appear. The most important reasons were not political, but the idea that there is a whole theatre world of no interest to theatre with a capital “T”, and apparently of no appeal.

CC *In Barba’s current work, is this research still there or is he following other paths? Is this desire to expand, then, this new knowledge or this new vision of theatre, this aspect of theatre anthropology, still developing, and is it still alive?*

NT The aspect of theatre anthropology that we can rightly call scientific is ended. Theatre anthropology moves on basic elements or principles. Once these basic elements and principles are identified, there is little point in pretending to identify them in other fields.

Sometimes we have tried. I remember brainstorming to find them in dramaturgy, in the mental pre-expressivity, in the voice, but they were plays on words. The strength of theatre anthropology is that it speaks of concrete things: of balance, of energy, of action, of how action moves, of recurring principles and elements. And this is concluded.

The dimension of Eurasian Theatre remains, the unitary vision of codified Western and Asian traditions. The idea of a professional unity still has many points to pursue, especially through detailed comparison based on individual cases. Over and above recurring principles and considering all this as a whole, the idea of a Eurasian Theatre is still very productive and largely to be explored.

In Barba’s way of thinking and acting it is difficult to distinguish the need to understand from the need to transmit. For him, they are almost the same: understanding is like transmitting, transmitting means understanding. In him, the scientific dimension and the dimension of transmission are superimposed for two reasons. One is that of his own imprinting, as his own experience was a self-taught one, where understanding meant transmission. The other is his fundamental political position: supporting and transmitting knowledge, legacy, endowing people who want to do theatre and are marginalised. His tireless relationship with the minimal, unknown and obscure theatres is strange if you think that it has never ceased. When Barba talks about transmitting, he doesn’t use it in the normal sense of the word. He means: delivering to the dispossessed. In this sense the two things are superimposed.

The question is not so much theatre anthropology as a field of study, by now defined and incontrovertible, but how to transmit other things as well. This question continues

for Barba who has concentrated for a long time on dramaturgy, on the way of reading the history of theatre, on the “subterranean history” of the profession, on the creative dynamics of a group as a “collective mind”. For us academics, his questions and his points of view have been crucial in reading the great experiences of the 20th century. Perhaps this relationship with specialist academics was also useful for him. Dialogue takes place because there are complementary needs. He has a whole way of seeing and asking certain questions that enable you to see everything in a different way and also to digest it.

So the field of research increases enormously, but in a restricted sense. What we call theatre anthropology is a field that must continue to be cultivated and explored. It would be foolish to enlarge it and turn it into a metaphor while, as it is today, it is real. Limitation is its strength. ■

Translated by Julia Hamilton Campbell



Nando Tavian and Jerzy Grotowski. ISTA 10, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996. Photo: Fiora Bemporad