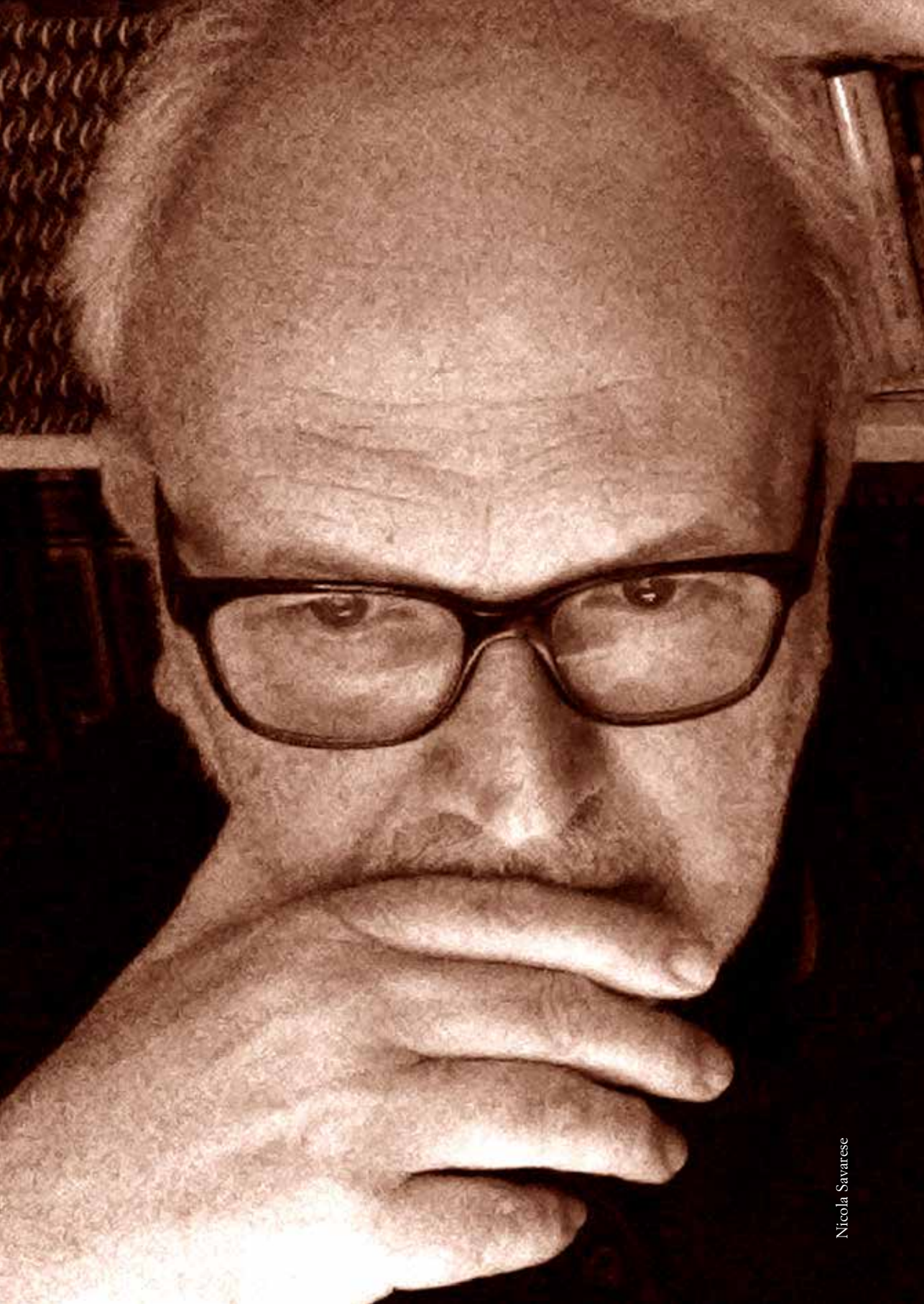




Nicola Savarese

The Practice of Seeing

Interview by Claudio Coloberti

Abstract: Film director Claudio Coloberti interviewed theatre history scholar Nicola Savarese on his 'reporter' experience when he documented the first session of ISTA in Bonn in October 1980 with photographs, recordings of the dialogues and cultural exchanges between the different protagonists. The many difficulties confronted by Savarese due to the absolute novelty of the situation that involved students and teachers from all over the world, and particularly from Asia, made him aware that ISTA was a school that taught to see technical and psycho-physical analogies in the actor's work in different theatre cultures by a continuous interweaving of practice and theory. After following the ISTA in Volterra in 1981, the 'reporter's work' gave way to the elaboration with Eugenio Barba of the successful book A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology.

Keywords: ISTA as a school to learn to see; Technical and psycho-physical analogies of the actor's work; Daily structure of ISTA activities; Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology

CC *How did you meet Eugenio Barba?*

NS My relationship with Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret began in 1974, when the group came to the Teatro Ateneo in Rome with *Min Fars Hus* (My father's house). I was a researcher at the university and I was in charge of organising performances in this theatre that had still not received the official permissions, and I had invented solutions so it did not seem like a public performance.

I was a young scholar, a bookworm, coming from philology, from history and from reading archival documents. The encounter with Odin Teatret made me grasp answers to my questions about theatre that I had not found in books or previous experiences. In 1974 an exchange began with Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret. I wanted not only to see the finished product, but also to follow the work process. I wanted to learn about the dynamics that enabled one to understand how the finished product was the result of various interconnections, and not, as it seems when you go to the theatre, an indivisible whole.

This materialised in two directions: on the one hand, I followed all the practical work done by Barba and Odin Teatret for months in Carpignano in Southern Italy and in Ollolai in Sardinia; on the other hand, I founded a small theatre group, Arcoiris, which



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I directed together with a Panamanian girl, Adriana Molinar. These were young people who had gravitated around Odin Teatret and Grotowski and had done seminars with them. I was their director and dramatist, and I immersed myself in a reality that, as a scholar of theatre, I had never experienced: entering the creative process and dynamics of the practical work.

These two situations, following the activity of Odin Teatret and founding a theatre group, had some consequences. In 1980 Eugenio invited me to join an Odin Teatret tour in Japan. Here, for the first time, Eugenio spoke to me about theatre anthropology. I remember perfectly that Eugenio and theatre critic Ugo Volli went to visit Tadashi Suzuki who had just moved to Soga, a mountain village, with his theatre founded in Tokyo. When Eugenio returned he asked me: "What do you think of a field of work called theatre anthropology, where East and West confront each other?" Apparently he thought up the name on the train. This field of study also included my interests, as at that time I was developing an interest in Asian theatre.

This was how the name of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) came about, and it became reality in October 1980 in Bonn. Then, a year later, Eugenio managed to carry out a second session in Volterra. In the beginning, the conditions were very strange. To begin with, this first session lasted a month. This meant being 'on duty' with participants, professors and masters for quite a long time. Secondly, the working conditions were rather uncertain, because no one knew "how it should be done". In Bonn we all lived in a school with its classrooms, its chemistry labs, its gyms. We slept on the same campus, which had beds and mattresses, but no kitchens. Each group had to cook for itself. So I set up a small kitchen in a chemistry laboratory to prepare, once a day at least, a hot meal. Just to tell you about the difficulties of this first ISTA, whose working conditions no one knew in advance.

Eugenio was keen to have in Bonn people and masters who were truly interested in his search for the technical origins of the actor's preparation in different cultures. He had invited people from Bali, Japan, India and China. Working on Asian theatre I was of course extremely interested. But Eugenio explained to me that I could not take part because I was not yet a professor. However, he sent me a letter proposing an exchange. He downgraded me from Eisenstein, that is, from amateur video, as I sometimes liked to do, to Cartier Bresson, photographer. I had, however, to follow him from six in the morning to eleven in the evening and photograph the activities of ISTA. And what is more, with a tape recorder to memorise everything he said and was told.

I was not an expert photographer, but I could get by. And given my interest in theatre, I didn't think twice about it. Bonn offered me extraordinary possibilities. I photographed performances for the press, work sessions, including the morning training with participants and the encounters where the masters compared their technical procedures. I acquired lots more photos at subsequent ISTAs and these became a key part of a book: *Anatomia del teatro. Un dizionario di antropologia teatrale*¹ was the consequence of my

1. Nicola Savarese. 1983. *Anatomia del teatro. Un dizionario di antropologia teatrale*. La Casa Usher, Florence. This book was reworked several times and twenty years later came to its final version: Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese: 2005. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer*. Routledge: Abingdon.

entering ISTA through a somewhat special door, which was neither that of participant, nor of professor, nor professional photographer.

At ISTA in Bonn, each of us had to do some practical work. I took it upon myself to prepare food for the scholars. I had to do the shopping, go to the supermarket, have the photographs developed and many other practical tasks. Above all, I had to follow the classes of the Indians, the Japanese, the Balinese, the Chinese, the singing and music lessons and Eugenio's morning training sessions with participants. This kaleidoscope, fortunately, lasted a month. If it had lasted a week I wouldn't have gathered anything. But I experienced the discomfort that anyone who works with images knows well: when taking a picture, there are always windows, chairs, heaters in the background, all things that 'spoil' the image. This was a big problem. The school was not a photographic studio.

But there was an even greater one: following the activities without knowing in which direction they were going. In fact, the teachers had to work on what Eugenio has always prioritised - on the experience of their first day, when a pupil introduces himself to the teacher and takes his first steps. These first steps, in Eugenio's vision, represent an imprinting. They contain that *bios*, that DNA which marks the actors, their presence or luminescence throughout their entire life. So, on the one hand, I had to learn to be aware of all this in this initial phase of teaching; on the other hand, first steps always involve some tumbles and you have to be ready to note those too. It is really difficult if you see it for the first time. I have attended all the ISTAs and only after many sessions have I begun to understand, to *see* how all this works.

How did Eugenio behave in all this? In the same way as at all ISTAs, and which is the foundation of his relationship with the teachers and other theatrical realities. Eugenio talked with the teachers after work, in the evening after dinner, stealing time from both his and from the teachers' sleep. He collected what later became key words in the language of theatre anthropology. How did you say "energy" in Balinese? And in Japanese, in Indian, in Chinese... Thus he tried to understand those nodes, those pivots through which the work of an actor is articulated. The master sets them as rules; for a student starting out they are transitions and he must know how to solve a certain problem.

All this is based on the practice of seeing. Hence ISTA as *school to learn to see*, but also of understanding terminology, because there are indications and know-how that are not transmitted by example only, but also with words. Eugenio collected words. He went around with his notebook piling up these foreign words, reworking them and when he spoke to the participants, he tried to bridge the gap between teachers and pupils, bringing these words back to the terminology of the history and techniques of Western theatre, to his experiences with Odin Teatret, to his readings, to Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Eisenstein. It was such an ocean of information, and shipwreck was the most beautiful thing you could ever experience, losing yourself in this ocean that for the first time came towards you like a small river. Confronting an ocean, you can only drown. But if the ocean comes through rivers that slowly make it grow, you let yourself go to the dynamics of water, you lose the dimension of geography and you begin to see the drop-lets. You go under a magnifying glass that for the first time reveals to you that life which the normal gaze cannot perceive. This was the most surprising discovery.

At the first ISTA I understood nothing. I remember some very heated discussions, but then everyone went off and drew the conclusions they wanted. It's not that I didn't understand anything. I understood in my own way. I had to elaborate an immense mass of information and experiences, ways of speaking and acting. Subsequent ISTAs were crucial.

This school of seeing made me understand why many people want to return to ISTA. It's like walking into a laboratory every day and putting yourself under the microscope. By dint of dissecting a worm you get to know it and discover more and more about it. This worm lies there, hardly moves, is tiny. But if you are patient, it allows you to trace back to the life hidden behind a routine that apparently seems to have no life: repetition, boredom, everything involved in observing for hours and hours without understanding, for days, and days, and days. You lose the dimension of time, you lose the dimension of work and therefore you lose the dimension full stop. If the flower does not appear, if this life is not seen, it is evident that you think it is a wrong path, as many thought at the time. When at that time there was talk of training, of physical-mental preparation exercises for the actor, many who looked superficially at this central dimension of group theatres, said "it is a waste of time, what use is it?" Others thought it was a secret, that somersaults or walking offstage in a handstand were enough. But this too was the wrong path.

The key to the actor's preparation is this constant drip-drip that begins on the first day and continues throughout life. At eighty you still persist with your practices to elaborate what is no longer there, youth, beauty, the prime of your younger years, when you are simply old.

At first there was uncertainty. Eugenio thought he would develop this research in scientific terms deriving from biology, physiology and physical anthropology. How life is created, how it evolves, how it transforms. He soon realised that this was not the way, because the actor's life is an artificial one. This artificiality is based on rules that the very earliest actors called *techné*, art, technique. They do not constitute an exact science, but a series of assumptions, defined in subsequent ISTAs as "returning principles". They are not laws embodied in fixed legislation, but pragmatic laws, as Grotowski defined them. After the first session, the challenge arose to tackle a different theme each time, because clearly the actor's universe cannot be examined as a single whole. You choose a theme, a point of view, a specific situation that allows you to study and analyse a specific field in depth. This was what Barba, thanks to biology and his encounters with Henri Laborit, defined as levels of organisation, which allow us to study the different elements and layers that make up a complex whole.

At the Bonn ISTA a very strong bond was established, not only between Eugenio and the teachers, particularly with Indian dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi, but also between us academics. One thing struck us: we, interested in theory, asked the Asian masters. "Have you read Zeami (founder of nô theatre)? Have you read the *Natya Shastra* (treatise on Indian dance of the 4th century AD)?" The artists responded in a strange way; it seemed that they did not know these foundations of their profession, while they knew everything about their teacher, about the person who had handed the tradition down to them. It was a discovery that opened our eyes since we start from totems, from written books, essential points of reference, starting with Aristotle.

The perspective being outlined at ISTA contained the awareness that it was not necessary to generalise on the basis of a theory, books or hypotheses; it was important to study the actor as a person, as a human being, a craftsperson and a treasure chest of experiences. People who don't know each other have barriers that need to be broken down to make contact and establish an exchange. Much of the effort was devoted to learning and trying to make these artists respond. Our curiosity was unusual, almost forbidden for them, because they would never ask their teacher the questions we were asking. At the same time, when these artists listened to our questions, they themselves became curious. They opened their eyes wide because they discovered that there were people who thought completely differently about their work. So they were interested in this reflection, so different from their own tradition that, at least until a while ago, had been age-old and monumental.

A real exchange was created generated by mutual curiosity. They too asked "How do you do it in your country? How does all this work?" The exchange took place on a basis of practical anatomy, of facts that could be seen, of feet that moved, of legs that stretched, of backs that bent, of spines that took completely different shapes. For the first time you saw the actor's body in its separate parts. You had always seen it in totality, on stage, in costume, with make-up, with the lights, with the music, all the trappings that hide the physical knowledge. For the first time you noticed the real driving force of theatre, powered at times by a few degrees of curve of a spine, on a tension that could be strong, soft, moderate, that was in any case managed by the actor and was not left at all to chance. These discoveries for me remained fixed points, stout moorings. They helped me to understand and enter the theatre by a completely different route. It did not open up theoretical visions to me, but it brought me to see the work process, not from the aesthetic result, which is truly the last datum and is useless when you want to analyse the essence of the actor's art or craftsmanship.

So, human treasure, scientific treasure, worlds that meet and interact. What more do you want?

CC *Do you think Eugenio's strategy of working on the "invisible part" of theatre was already clear to him when he put this group of people together or did it develop in subsequent sessions? Or was he exploring blindly?*

NS Look, and this was the amusing thing, we were all living in unexplored darkest Africa every day. We encountered this unknown world every day and the further you went, the more you recognised this territory. Like all explorers, Eugenio had compasses. What were they? His apprenticeship in Poland and with Grotowski, his stay in India and his encounter with kathakali, when he discovered a theatre where ten-year-old children woke up at dawn and practised by stamping their feet and moving their eyes - a whole universe that did not exist in Europe. Eugenio's long text on kathakali is the first Western revelation of this form of Indian theatre, with a description of the finer details of the actor's training. In addition, himself self-taught, he had prepared his Odin Teatret actors who had dedicated themselves to him body and soul and who had therefore allowed him experiments, flights, returns, which had become a capital of experience; they invented

trainings, new fields of action for the actor. Eugenio came with very practical compasses. But if he had not had this curiosity that has always distinguished him as a scholar - the other side of his moon - there would have been no such path. He was someone who did theatre and at the same time studied it.

This was the reality of ISTA, an intertwining of practice and theory in which two oxen, technical and historical knowledge, pulled the plough. All this was refined in subsequent ISTAs. Bonn was the revelation that this was the way to follow if you wanted to penetrate the curtain of the visible to enter the invisible.

CC *In your opinion, what was the influence on the Asian masters who, coming from completely different realities, found themselves sharing this unusual situation with you? What was the influence of this ISTA as the beginning, and then everything that followed in the various studies and in the various theatre practices?*

NS I continue with great surprise to discover through their students that these expert Asian artists - and even Westerners such as Ingemar Lindh or Tom Leabhart of the Decroux mime tradition - considered their experience at ISTA to be fundamental. In Asia, they do not ask many questions. I took a Japanese dance class in Kyoto with a teacher because I wanted to understand from her how one learns. At the end of the lesson I asked for some clarification. She replied: "Our students never ask questions of teachers, and the teachers don't answer, because these are things that everyone has to keep inside". When the Asian teachers discovered that inside their work there was a labyrinth, a knowledge that came from different directions and that could be elaborated, it was a discovery for them too. One of the characteristics of ISTA was reciprocity, this exchange between such different people. I repeat: between people - not between organisations, institutions, schools or worldviews. But people who wake up at six in the morning, and accept common rules: silence, do not disturb, walk on tiptoe past the classrooms. This life in common that everyone had to respect seemed to them a dead end, just as it seemed to us. At a certain point you no longer ask yourself questions. The situation itself provides the answers.

There is no doubt that the Asian artists were interested. During the sessions in which I photographed them, not only did they help me by offering new positions, but they also came later with books to explain them to me better. They understood the spirit of ISTA. As if you were with Nureyev who brings you a book on ballet to illustrate his poses. On the one hand, you can only get on your knees and thank the gods for having had such an opportunity; on the other, you open your eyes wide and learn in three hours what you would learn in three months. This energy is so contagious, so evident, that you take giant steps. In one sense, there was a moment of long monotonous navigation; in another, you had *satori*, illuminations, visions that enabled these 'links', these synapses to discover things that you would never have imagined. This is what happened.

CC *This working method is based on accepting the uncertainty of paths of which one can perhaps guess the direction, but not the destination. It consists of putting one's own prestige on the line and agreeing, as a teacher, to put oneself at a common level of experimen-*

tation. This is an attitude characteristic of Odin Teatret's story, of the relationship between Eugenio and his actors. How much has this method influenced "traditional theatre" which is based on certainties? What have been the consequences of the genre of theatre anthropology that considers theatre from a point of view never before applied?

NS I could answer this question on three levels: the influence on traditional theatre, the influence on the theatre that searches without being satisfied with certainties, and the influence on academics and many actors, especially in group theatres.

All this would not have been possible if this communal life at ISTA had not had very particular rules that everyone respected. For example, the rule of silence during the first hour of the morning. The second thing, which did not happen in the first ISTA, but in subsequent sessions, was the constant coming and going between what you see and recognise, and what you do not recognise and do not know. Mindfulness and an effort to take notes were required every day to return home with a full catch.

I haven't the least idea what ISTA has given to traditional theatre. Many actors and directors came from traditional theatre and left with elephant-loads of stuff. In any case, what you took away was pure gold, whether on an industrial scale or as a small ring representing your next move towards the things you wanted to do.

Personally, after taking hundreds of photographs and seeing thousands of poses, I began to think according to my own terms. I am a great enthusiast of images and scraps. I cut them out of newspapers, I copy them from books, I buy prints and reproductions. From my ISTA photos and my collection of images and illustrations, a rather special book matured, which I mentioned earlier: *Anatomia del teatro. Un dizionario di antropologia teatrale*. It was immediately supported by Eugenio, and not at all by other academics who tried to dissuade me of the usefulness of a book on theatre packed full of illustrations. Nothing like it had ever been seen before! This book was my conquest, a work that led me to a personal result. As it was for me, I imagine it was for other people, each at his own level, according to his own questions and interests.

Everyone took something home: Westerners, Easterners and participants. Even those who only came for a short visit, two days, then left. But they signed up for the next ISTA because they realised that those two days weren't enough. You have to go through the fire of experience and burn yourself. There is no other possibility.■