



Franco Ruffini. ISTA 12, Wrocław, Poland, 2005. Photo: Tomasz Hotod

Franco Ruffini

# Opening a Mental Horizon

## Interview by Claudio Coloberti

*Abstract: Interviewed by Claudio Coloberti in 2007, the Italian scholar Franco Ruffini narrates his collaboration with Barba and his participation in the first sessions of ISTA (Bonn 1980, Volterra 1981, Salento 1987). In a fertile context of scientific and artistic investigation, Ruffini developed his interests in theatre through a variety of disciplines, in contact with different interlocutors, both scholars and practitioners. ISTA sessions made possible a broader investigation on acting techniques and were the context to explore a living learning process, exercising attention, observation and dialectical reflection.*

*Keywords: ISTA Bonn 1980; ISTA Volterra 1981; ISTA Salento 1987*

### CC How did you meet Eugenio Barba and ISTA?

**FR** I had known Eugenio and Odin Teatret for about ten years, from when he brought *Ferai* to Rome in 1970, and I followed all his initiatives closely. Obviously it didn't even remotely occur to me to turn down the invitation to participate in ISTA in Bonn. Apart from these biographical, emotional and even sentimental aspects, the hypothesis of ISTA was extremely fascinating to me. I have a scientific background and I had much more scientific knowledge than the other participants thanks to my degree in physics, even if in 1980 fifteen years had already passed since I graduated.

According to Eugenio, ISTA wanted to explore the principles of theatre anthropology accompanied by various scientific contributions: from biology to physics, to neurology. There was a whole science background that helped to increase my motivation. None of us knew exactly what was going to happen. We knew that we would meet masters of Asian theatre, that Grotowski would be there, and that some Italian scholars made up Eugenio's 'task force'. For all these reasons, not only did it not even remotely occur to me to say no, but indeed I accepted enthusiastically.

I was curious to see how the principles of theatre anthropology, which we knew through discussions with Eugenio and through the few articles he had written on the subject, would translate into an actual school. At the Bonn ISTA, in addition to the Asian teachers, actors and directors from many countries participated as students. We were interested in discovering how the principles of theatre anthropology - which are



69

indisputable from a theoretical and historiographical point of view - might find concrete application for participants.

So, on the one hand, affection, on the other, scientific skills, even if they proved to be largely useless, and again, the scientific curiosity to see how theatre anthropology could become an effective practice for actors and directors, for doing theatre as well as thinking about it and studying it.

*CC Do you remember your impressions of the first days?*

**FR** The first days were something terrifying. I don't remember the exact timetable of ISTA Bonn, but we started very early in the morning with a forty-minute run in which we scholars also had to take part. A series of activities followed lasting well into the evening, sometimes even throughout the night. Furthermore, for us - the group of Italian, French, Danish and other international academics - when the collective commitments ended, we met with Eugenio to plan the programme for the following day, to exchange opinions, advice and impressions.

I remember these first days for the smell of the iodine tincture I used to massage the bruises I got while running and training, which was extremely tiring for the actors who did it, but also for those few of us, me included, who tried to follow them.

Our life was collective. We slept in communal dormitories and there was no possibility of rest, of that kind of break normal for scholars: retreating behind your desk, into your own little room with books to think. The commitment was intense, to the point of causing a kind of physical and mental exhaustion. I must say that the Bonn ISTA lasted a month and after the first days when stress prevailed over all other reactions, each of us was truly able to experience that the 'second wind' is not a figment of imagination. It exists. If one manages to overcome a limit of fatigue that you think you cannot overcome, you find another quality of energy, another *souplesse*. So the days that followed were less tiring than the first ones.

The relationship with the teachers of centuries-old Asian traditions was also rather tiring. At the Bonn ISTA these artists taught the basics of their traditions. It was very hard physical work, not only for the directors and actors who did it, but also for the scholars, who wanted to experience the effects and difficulty of this type of practice on their own bodies.

I take this opportunity to remember with affection Ugo Volli, who was the scholar to follow the students' programme from A to Z. As a privilege, he had received a private room, if that kind of cubbyhole might be so-called. I remember him covered in bruises too, completely exhausted by the fatigue and difficulty of facing a physical commitment inexistent in the practice of Western theatre.

*CC When did it become clear to you that Eugenio Barba was tracing the map of a new pragmatic subject that he called theatre anthropology?*

**FR** From the programming point of view, this was clear to myself and other academics from the start. In fact, ISTA, as the name itself implies, aimed to be a school for studying the implementation of the principles of theatre anthropology.

At the Bonn ISTA, however, everything was very confusing, and not just for me. Certainly for me it was very confusing, since these principles of theatre anthropology, so recently formulated, appeared with what is the flaw of almost all principles: rigid, with rules that were difficult to trace in the various ways of putting them into practice. I must admit that in Bonn it was not clear to me that a map of a pragmatic knowledge of theatre was being drawn, based on the principles of theatre anthropology. I knew the principles of theatre anthropology as Barba had formulated them in his article<sup>1</sup> "Theatre Anthropology". I knew all the implications that came from in-depth analyses and discussions with Eugenio before the start of ISTA. But these principles, at least to me, but also to many others, appeared convincing at a theoretical level, but extremely nebulous in relation to their possibility of practical application.

I must point out a fact that became clear to me much later, at the 1987 ISTA in Salento. Theatre anthropology rediscovers a foundation of theatre-making that is transcultural and transnational, and that concerns - with different forms, but based on the same principles - all the work of the actor and also of theatrical work. For us scholars, the value of theatre anthropology was fully revealed when we decided to tackle how theatre anthropology could be useful for our historical studies. Useful, that is, to rediscover aspects that were not clear to us before: for example, the work and the 'theoretical' pronouncements of the great masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution: Stanislavski, Copeau, Meyerhold, and then on to Grotowski.

We began to study, and often to re-study, historiographical problems that we had previously faced, but with the awareness that theatre anthropology did not invent anything, but clarified and revealed pre-expressive principles underlying any type of work, in any historical and socially relevant context of theatre. These are principles that underlie the actor's work and which are then formulated and oriented according to different poetics, tastes and aesthetic objectives. Until this was evident to us, until we got back to our books, our papers, I don't think the enormous scope of theatre anthropology was clear to us academics. At least for me. I must say that the scope of theatre anthropology, not only for those who apply its principles to their own artistic work, but also for those who study theatre, became clear to me when I started studying Stanislavski again, with this portfolio of knowledge.

**CC** *Why did you continue to attend subsequent ISTA sessions?*

**FR** Our great and productive, human and affectionate relationship continued, and I continued to appreciate the artistic quality of Odin Teatret and of Eugenio's knowledge as managing and artistic director. Eugenio maintained - I must say, with great generosity - an intense personal relationship with the scholars collaborating with him, especially the Italians. Whenever there was an ISTA session, Eugenio asked me to participate, and the idea of saying no never crossed my mind. A thought that I perceive better now in retrospect was already maturing: "I don't do theatre on stage, I do theatre on books", according to the well-known distinction made by Nando Tavian: *Uomini di scena. Uomini di libro*. The idea became increasingly clear that everything I studied and was

1. Eugenio Barba, "First Hypothesis", *Dialog* 16, 1 (January, 1981): 94-100.

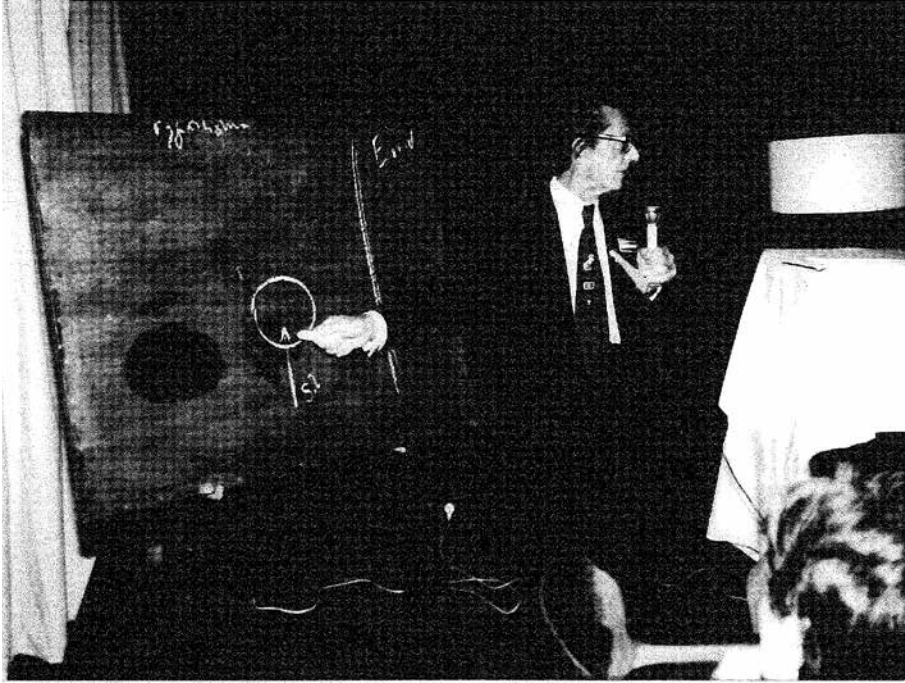
able to verify in the work of the masters and students at ISTA sessions in some way concerned and was also important for my work as an academic of theatre.

All this became evident to me in a conclusive and pragmatic way and, from the 1987 ISTA session, I began studying and writing about the artists who most interested me: Stanislavski and Artaud in particular. There was, therefore, a feeling that slowly, from the enormous effort of ISTA, beyond immediate gratifications (watching Sanjukta Panigrahi or following Eugenio's rehearsals in Bonn and above all in Volterra), I could haul in a net containing fish that were specifically interesting for my own work. This aspect was there, but obscure and hazy.

The Bonn and Volterra sessions were pervaded by Eugenio's scientific passion. One of the stars of the Volterra ISTA in 1981 was Henri Laborit, a famous French biologist who had introduced Eugenio to the principle of the various levels of organisation of living organisms. This principle, that there are different levels of organisation - a cellular level, a level of organs, a level of the complex of organs, up to the global level of the whole organism - is fundamental for those who do theatre and are able to work, isolating one level at a time. When Eugenio works on a performance, he works at the cellular level, at the level of actions and reactions, stimuli and counter-stimuli, of the various parts of the actor's body on the other parts of the body, of each actor on the other actors and spectators, and so on. Then there is the level of interactions and intertwining. Then again, a higher dramaturgical level, of associative meanings and orientations. Knowledge of the levels of organisation is clearly of great importance.

But let me go back to your question: beyond personal motivations and curiosity to see where this story was going. Let's not forget that ISTA was a great adventure. It was a chance to change world for a certain period of time: leaving universities, studying, libraries and entering another planet with a whole different discipline. From a personal and anthropological point of view it was a great experience. Living a collective life never degenerated into a pleasure trip. One sensed that discipline, often based on incomprehensible rules - for example, silence until a certain time - was an essential foundation for effectively undergoing that type of experience. But the real common thread of my motivation was to go beyond the particular ways in which these principles were applied in the different theatrical traditions and to discover how they could function in my field of work. I was looking for a way to use these principles to study history, to understand in depth, to better penetrate a subterranean level of theatrical knowledge which, traditionally, is always studied in the light of theories and various -isms: naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, Stanislavski's psychologism. I had the opportunity to see what "credible body" meant for Stanislavski, what he reacted to when he said his famous "I believe it" or "I don't believe it". Theatre anthropology could be of great help in illuminating this problem. For me at the beginning it was only a notion or, if you want, a hope that pushed me to continue to dig deeper, until all this was finally clarified at the Salento ISTA in 1987.

**CC** *As a historian and academic, what were the consequences for you of participating in ISTA and learning about theatre anthropology?*



Henri Laborit. Colloquium at Jelenia Góra, 1979. Photo: Archive Jean-Marie Pradier

**FR** From the various sessions of ISTA and from learning more of theatre anthropology I gained the ability to approach the study of history from a different perspective, with a broader mental horizon than previously. But there is another consequence that I owe specifically to ISTA: the work of looking, the effort of concentration. The academics' role was to be present as observer-participants. For hours and hours the scholars watched. They watched the artists of other traditions at work, they watched the ISTA participants who followed the indications of these artists, they watched the performances of the other traditions that these artists brought to ISTA, they watched Eugenio Barba at work with teachers and participants, but also creating outlines for performances which later became the *Theatrum Mundi*. Watching for hours and hours and hours... This is a specific teaching that I owe to ISTA. Looking is not just an activity of the eyes. Gradually one discovers how this activity, which starts from the eyes, ends up in the mind, in the attention, in the ability to be focused on what you are looking at, even if you often do not understand what you are looking at. One mustn't get distracted by questions and the desire to always have a ready answer. To look passively, but at the same time actively. To look, letting what you look at trigger journeys of the mind, without these becoming digressions that remove you completely from the subject of your gaze: so, the ability to return to the gaze.

This school of learning to see is a lesson in humility for the scholar, especially for someone like me. Of the qualities necessary for studying theatre I tend to privilege

intelligence, in the literal sense of the word, *intelligere*, to understand. For me it is fundamental, even if, in retrospect, I realise that it is wrong. For me the fundamental question is: what does it signify? What does it mean? And the answer to this question.

Of course, when we look at something that is far from our sphere of knowledge, from our competences as spectators, as people who exercise looking, the question of understanding concerns the strangest things. I remember, for example, the Japanese teacher who did not want to pull up her costume to show the tension of the calf muscles because this contravened her concept of decorum, of dignity of the person. All this also flags up the ironic and rather Eurocentric reaction of us Western academics.

So often, what one sees, one does not understand, and you have to nip the question “what does it mean?” in the bud. Without the tools to understand, we inevitably provide answers, because the perverse pleasure of asking ourselves questions is to enjoy how good we are at giving answers. There is this lesson of humility - that to look effectively one must also block questions. Look, look, look and look, until this exercise of looking, with all the related activities I mentioned earlier - including digressions and journeys - gives rise to, I would not say an answer, but a chance to contextualise what one has seen. So create links and bonds that lead one to remember, for example, in the way the Japanese teacher holds her spine, the impression I had watching Eduardo De Filippo in a scene of *Gli esami non finiscono mai* - just to mention something that happened to me personally.

If your question is “what did I get out of ISTA”, I can answer you from the point of view of studies. The opening up of my mental horizon. The idea that this pre-expressive, underground level of theatre not only concerns the practice of Western theatre today and the various Asian traditions, but includes in an almost always unconscious way all the masters of any theatre. So when you are studying these artists, having this mental equipment is a great help.

This was the great achievement of theatre anthropology and of attending ISTA for my work as a scholar. It is an awareness that I owe to the long, very tiring days at ISTA, in which the events to which, as academics, we are invited - conferences, lectures, conversations, participation in working groups - are excluded. Most of the time we looked, and we looked at things that were far from our knowledge, from our experience, from our traditions, from our habit of “watchers”, that is, of theatre spectators. This exercise of the gaze also involves mental discipline, not allowing your mind to blind you with its agility. Because the mind is agile, it asks questions, it formulates answers, it imagines, it is weightless. By contrast, watching is hard going, because one gets bored, gets distracted, falls asleep. Then the mind prevails, to immediately gratify all this effort: “Ah, yes, I understand!” “Ah, yes, this is the question” and immediately after “Ah, here’s the answer”.

The ability to block, to have the patience to experience, albeit in transposed ways, the fatigue of the actor’s work. The body learns slowly, then it doesn’t forget. But it learns slowly. I think that time and the ability not to look for shortcuts is one of the fundamental principles of the actor’s work strategy. As a scholar I rediscovered ‘physical’ work: this long time without looking for shortcuts. This good advice, applied to the work of looking, is a debt I owe to the two most gruelling sessions of ISTA, in particular the first

one, that of Bonn, and then the next one in Volterra. The other sessions seemed much less tiring, both in terms of duration and also in terms of effort required of academics.

**CC** *Would you like to make a different conclusion?*

**FR** ISTA has reached its 14th session.<sup>2</sup> I have attended every session, except the one in France in Blois-Malakoff in 1985 and the other in Portugal in Montemor-O-Novo in 1998.

I look at them from 1980 to 2007, 27 years on, with the risk of nostalgia, sentimentality and fatigue, of knowing that it is unlikely a new session of ISTA will be able to bring surprises or provide methodological and practical conquests of similar importance to past sessions. However, I can say that ISTA has its own structure. The various sessions differ in length, for the geographical and cultural environment in which they take place, for fortuitous reasons. But the structure of ISTA is a mirror of the difficulty and the fascination of studying 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre.

The theatre of this century has redesigned the territory of theatre, separating some areas that are within its overall territory. 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre has drawn the boundaries of a territory where the actor is undoubtedly protagonist; a territory where the director is the leader; and a territory of the teacher-master, which does not necessarily coincide with the director. In studying 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre, the mistake has sometimes been made - and I myself have made it - of believing that these different territories were fighting each other for dominion, one over the other. This was particularly so for the actor's territory. There is no doubt that 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre has constructed a new autonomy for the actor. This autonomy has often manifested itself in studios and laboratory theatres and in the practice of exercises and training, thanks to which actors have found completeness, gratification and a long-lasting strategy for their work, even outside the moment in which their work becomes performance. The actor's work, for some actors and also for some scholars - myself for sure - has become an autonomous territory of the theatre, while this territory then borders on and mixes with the other territory, which is that of the director, where it is not working for the performance that decides, but working *in* the performance.

At ISTA, one experiences these territories separately: a territory of the actor that is expressed through the work participating actors carry out with the various teachers; a director's territory that manifests itself through the performance and through the director's work of Eugenio Barba; and finally a third territory that mixes them both: the territory of the teacher, of one who is neither specifically actor nor specifically director, but who safeguards the value, the transcendence of theatrical work. Participating in ISTA was for me a full immersion, an *in vitro* experience of the theatre to which I dedicate most of my studies: the theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.■

Translated by Julia Hamilton Campbell

2. The 15<sup>th</sup> session of ISTA was held in Albino, Italy, in the period 7-17 April 2016. The 16<sup>th</sup> session of ISTA - New Generation was held in the island of Favignana, Italy, in the period 12-22 October 2021.