

# Franco Ruffini, Moriaki Watanabe

## A Dialogue Between East and West

*Abstract: This article presents an English translation of an interview by Franco Ruffini to the Japanese scholar Moriaki Watanabe during the first session of ISTA in 1980, originally published in the French journal Bouffonneries 4, 1982 (57-61). Starting from research and pedagogy in the framework of ISTA, Ruffini and Watanabe discuss about their respective traditions of studies and performing cultures.*

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**FR** *There are two complementary aspects in ISTA, research and pedagogy. Could we talk about the research part, trying to better understand what is its aim and purpose?*

**MW** We must refer to the reasons that led me to come to ISTA, accepting the invitation of Eugenio Barba. I met him last year, in Tokyo, and I was struck by his different way of taking an interest in Asian theatre. I have met many western theatre directors who took an interest in the traditional forms of the Far East and Japan; there is a long list, starting with Claudel passing through Artaud to Jean-Louis Barrault and Peter Brook. I also studied some of these. I found that the fascinations of these men of theatre were sincere, but they risked remaining mere fascinations. They wanted to form their visions starting from these completely instinctive fascinations without looking farther.

Claudel, for example, was a very instinctive, a less theoretical theatre man if you compare him with Jean-Louis Barrault, yet he had immediately noticed that dance in the East, and in particular in Japan, starts from the hips. It is a remarkable way of seeing and understanding precisely because it was formulated by a westerner, since a westerner imagines dance, exactly like Paul Valery (*Les fusées*), as an upward aspiration (dance in the west is always jumping), while on the other hand in all experiences of the Far East, dance is a sort of rootedness to the ground. Some celestial power descends to earth and remains there for a moment, and whose energy men want to capture.

It is not a simple problem of technique: theatre people, for their practical concerns, too often reject theoretical reflections in favour of techniques. They think that here we are dealing only with problems of techniques, whereas in reality what is called technique must involve at the same time the totality of the individual body and the totality of the



culture in which this individual body is inserted. Both factors and their relationship must be thoroughly understood. But it is a discourse that would take us too far.

When I met Barba, he said he wanted to “learn to understand”. He didn’t want to simply learn the technique, but learn to understand what it consisted of, in what cultural context it was formed, what it corresponded to. Above all, he wanted to know what this transformation of energy consists of, as he himself says, in the bodies of the actors.

I too, as a historian of ancient theatre, but also as a contemporary director (when I was studying I also acted), I know the technical problems. I am concerned on a theoretical, critical and practical level, to delimit these intermediate areas, very difficult to conceptualise but which certainly exist, between the daily body and the body integrated in a given fiction - the body of the character. Modern western theatre is based on the identification of the daily individual body and the fictional body of the character. It is thought, or at least it was thought, that only these two levels exist. In most traditional forms of Japanese theatre, however, one easily notices an intermediate level between the actor’s daily body and the imaginary body, so to speak, of the character.

Let’s take a simple example. When a noh actor leaves the scene, because the performance in the proper sense of the term is finished, he has a strange practice: he goes out very slowly, as if this exit were an integral part of the performance. But he is no longer the character, because the character’s action is already over, however the actor is not yet in his reality and in his daily status. It’s exactly something between the two, and this state can last a minute. In some way, the actor enacts his own absence; but absence counts as a performance and therefore is a present absence. It sounds like a paradox; but in practical reality it is evident. Even in kabuki it happens, the actors must not cancel themselves, but rather show themselves and keep themselves in a *fictive* state.

These examples and others, and my experience as an actor and director, found correspondence in what Barba was looking for from the first time I met him: the enigma of the actor’s presence. There is no Japanese term that matches it; we know the phenomenon, but we express it with the French word *présence*. As a man of modern theatre I experienced the actor’s *présence* on the stage, and as a spectator I reflected on the practice of noh and kabuki and the other arts. I thought there must be an area between the actor’s everyday body and the character’s body. In an arbitrary way, because I could not find more precise words, I spoke of *fictive* body: not dramatic fiction, but the body that engages in a certain fictive area, a *fictive* body that pretends not a given fiction but a sort of transformation of the everyday body, at a pre-expressive level. *Corps en fiction* is the title I gave to my writings on theatre, and the French expression *corps fictif* has been successful. It is exactly, I think, the same thing that Barba calls the pre-expressive state of the body.

**FR** *This notion of a fictive body offers the possibility of many reflections and allows us to return to the question of ISTA as a research centre. It can be hypothesised that the object of research is precisely this intermediate state between the everyday and the theatrical fiction of the character, what we must unfortunately limit ourselves to calling présence, since not even in Japanese there is a more exact word.*

*How the actor can have a présence, how to attract the attention of the spectators? How*

*can the actor be looked at not as one looks at the man on the street, without seeing him, but as if the gaze were forced to go towards him? When I saw the exercises of the oriental pedagogues here, I saw, with my western eyes, a kind of gymnastics, perhaps a little strange gymnastics, but gymnastics nonetheless. Yet my gaze was drawn to those bodies.*

*This is the research field of ISTA. What then, in your opinion, are the means used in oriental theatres, and in particular in Japanese theatre, to obtain this presence? And furthermore: how can westerners, in such a short time, possibly use these techniques to obtain, by their own means, their style, their culture, this presence?*

**MW** It's a big question mark for me too. The Asians begin to learn these techniques very young and train for a long time every day, until death. Here at the ISTA you learn some rudiments of these body techniques and moreover you pass from a Japanese to the Balinese, to an Indian, to the Chinese... Furthermore, if Sanjutka's demonstrations seem strange to you westerners, for us Japanese there are many things in Sanjutka's acting that are closer to western art, starting with the way of codifying the acting, which is closest for us to your ballet. In the four traditions of oriental theatre present at the ISTA, there are common points, but also of course great differences. That Indian dance is closer to western ballet is shown, for example, by the excellent use of certain Indian techniques (*tribhanga*, for example) in certain BÉjart's ballets, such as *Le sacre du printemps*. But when BÉjart imitates Japanese dance it is catastrophic.

But this concerns the level of expression. The question on which Barba focuses is instead the pre-expressive state. At this level there is a whole process that consists in a certain utilisation of the body not very different in all traditional oriental stage arts. On this, I agree, and this is why I immediately sympathised with Barba, since up to now westerners - as well as the Japanese - have limited themselves to being fascinated by the level of expression. Then the finished product was imitated, the finished forms, without deepening the research. In this Barba is right.

The notion of body and pre-expressive state must engage us in a reflection on the notion of character. In the West, at least from the time of Shakespeare, there are only characters on the stage, people on stage are just characters. No machines are seen, no prompter is seen, etc. It is different with us. This is why I spoke of an intermediate state. The actor who is on the stage is not necessarily a character. In Barba's conception, the pre-expressive body is linked to the actor's work, work that is not necessarily seen on the stage, and even before expression, although it is the necessary condition for expression.

The starting point of this research can have many consequences, not only on the work of the actor but, for example, also on the dramaturgy. I tried to make it happen when staging Genet's *The Maids*. I tried to keep the actors in this intermediate, potential zone, so to speak. It is through this potentiality and virtuality that I have sought the *fictive* body. It is not the fiction that matters, it is this virtuality.

**FR** *Your staging of The Maids - about which you have extensively told us - shows a possible deep level of the relationship between eastern and western performing arts concerning the pre-expressive level and the multiple consequences it entails. Consequences on the staging but also on the dramaturgy, understood not only as a text but also in the broadest sense of*

*the word. It is a problem of great interest, starting from the conviction that only through the actor's expressive presence (a necessary but not sufficient condition) it is possible to reach dramaturgical depth in a performance. What repercussions can such research have on the pre-expressive field for dramaturgy? Staging and dramaturgy, both written and performed, as well as the acting of the actors, can receive impulses and clarifications if the pre-expressive state can introduce an intermediate state in the daily person/character duality.*

**MW** It is the same thing, both for the dramaturgy and for the actor's work. These are different levels. In the dramaturgy and scenic aesthetics of our theatre, there is a kind of discontinuity at the level of the signifier. For example, in Indian music and Balinese music there is a continuity. There are breaks, of course, but they are precisely breaks; in practice the code can be constituted starting from the sound produced, which is the rule of the codification of music.

But if you apply this rule to noh, what do you get? You have sounds produced in a completely discontinuous, even different way: the written music does not represent the musical tempo of the noh. With other music, the sound produced counts, but here the production of the sound involves a whole body work. It is not only the voice that utters the cry, not just the finger that strikes, but a kind of integral bodily tension that is engaged in producing the sound, and it is precisely this tension that matters and that translates into the sound produced and into a kind of a break. It is like in zen painting: you have a huge white picture, which has value as "white", and signs that are traced on it - mountains, trees, etc. But it is not the drawn lines and forms that count, it is the use of the large white surface that is the aim of the painting. In the noh, there is not only an aesthetic sense, but also rather an ethical sense: it is the artist's improvement that is in question, and this is the origin of this discontinuity of the signifier. The work in noh and kabuki consists of a kind of concentration of integral body energy. A comparison can be made with contemporary music, with Cage, for example, who understood that it is the musician's work that matters, not the result.

I have called this work the "intermediate stage". Even in Barba's performances you can experience it, when the actors remain 'present' on stage without carrying on the action, yet having a meaning. For them we can speak, somewhat metaphorically, of a kind of empty-fullness. Theatre is clearly lagging behind other contemporary arts, music, painting, etc., which know this sort of neutrality. At the level of the actor, of the actor's body, the problem is precise: it is necessary to create a kind of availability of the actor so that he can do everything, choose anything.

For this purpose, the relationship with the East becomes useful. In Japan, for example, the code is not, as in the West, at the level of expression. For this reason, the presence of Asian teachers at ISTA is quite right for western actors who are looking for a work on their body. I myself had some doubts before. Then I saw Barba rehearsing with Madame Katsuko Azuma and noticed that she really taught something fundamental in the extra-daily practice of her body, from breathing to hip position.

I agree with Barba when he explains that there is a dramatic tension in the use of the body. Eastern theatre cannot be analysed on the basis of certain western historical categories, such as the psychological conflict which belongs to the bourgeois drama. As

a spectator of the kabuki theatre, I know that the dramatic moment lies in this kind of sudden stop of a river of energy; if this is not understood, kabuki is not dramatic. Kabuki cannot be conceptualised according to a western terminology, which is not universal and moreover is conditioned by a certain conception of European theatre determined by an era. I myself was unable to use any other conceptualisations than western ones. However, after the 1960s, there has been a deep change, and we understand each other better.■



1. Katsuko Azuma, I Ketut Jas Tempo, Ingemar Lindh, ISTA 2, Volterra, Italy 1981 - Photo: Nicola Savarese
2. Eugenio Barba, Moriaki Watanabe, Tadashi Suzuki. Symposium on noh theatre at Hosei University, 1980, Tokyo, Japan - Photo: OTA