



Mei Lanfang, Poster ISTA 4

Simone Dragone

Feminism and Misunderstandings

Reactions after the 4th ISTA in Holstebro

Abstract: The 4th ISTA session, held in Holstebro in 1986, provoked controversies and discussions. In particular, the American scholar Erika Munk and the American professor Phillip Zarrilli argued against Eugenio Barba. The first accused the Italian director of not taking into consideration socio-cultural aspects concerning the representation of women on stage, the second found a lack of reflexivity in Barba's research. Analysing writings and essays published after the session, this article presents the confrontation between the scholars and Barba, underlining how such discussions opened up reflections on subjects hitherto neglected.

Keywords: 4thISTA; Gender; Feminism; Pre-expressivity; Actor's energy

The 4th ISTA session was organised in Odin Teatret's venue in Holstebro and lasted only six days from 17 to 22 September 1986. It consisted of demonstrations and performances by several Asian artists, Iben Nagel Rasmussen from Odin Teatret and Sonja Kehler, a German performer specialising in Brechtian roles. The largest space available in the Odin house, the Red Room, was set up to accommodate 154 participants. In December 1985, the Municipality of Holstebro had decided to finance the event with 250,000 Danish crowns (about 34,000 euros).

The theme of the session was "The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures".¹ Jean-Marie Pradier, member of the scientific staff, highlighted in his final Report the two specific questions which this ISTA session intended to deal with: « *Comment représenter les personnages féminins et les personnages masculins ? Comment interpréter - pour un même personnage - les deux aspects fondamentaux de sa réalité : masculin/féminin, ou - selon certaines traditions orientales - le fort/doux ?* ».² In the programme for this session, Barba specified that:

Interest in actors who play female roles and actresses who play male roles is periodically rekindled. At such times, one might almost suspect that behind these disguises or these contrasts between reality and fiction, lie hidden one of the theatre's secret potentialities.³

1. Fowler 1986.

2. Pradier 1986, 3. How to represent female and male characters? How to represent - in the same character - the two main aspects of his or her reality: male/female according to certain performing traditions in the East or strong/soft?

3. Barba in Fowler 1986, 3. Barba's article "Male/Female vs Animus/Anima. The Actor's Energy", was published for the first time in the program of the 4th ISTA Session *The Female Role as*



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According to Mirella Schino, the presence of Asian traditions was of fundamental importance, since the performer's "natural gender rarely matches the stage representation - something that in the West appears 'natural'".⁴ As Julia Varley remembers: "In 1986, we welcomed the participants and artists of the ISTA session, where American feminists argued animatedly with male Asian actors who personified traditional female figures".⁵

To understand the type of passionate discussions following the work demonstrations, it is interesting to read an article by Carol Martin. The American scholar, although she was not present at that ISTA, tried to reconstruct the quarrel between the Canadian performer Pol Pelletier and the odissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi through the video and audio tapes recorded during the session.⁶ Pol Pelletier argued that "when the Asian women at the congress performed female roles they were not free in the way they used space".⁷ In her article, Carol Martin specified that "Panigrahi and other Indian performers, men and women, perform both male and female roles and perform them equally well."

There is an assumption that both men and women can perform male and female roles. An individual may become better at one or the other and this is based upon each individual's ability to produce the appropriate movement quality, not physical appearance or gender. This attitude assumes both sexual dimorphism and the constructed nature of representation.⁸

Furthermore, the American scholar points out that Kelucharan Mohapatra, teacher of Sanjukta Panigrahi, belonged to the gotipua tradition. The tradition in question is represented by pre-adolescent boys who, dressed as women, perform acrobatic dances inspired by the life of Radha and Krishna. So "the female roles Panigrahi plays are male constructions of femaleness."⁹ In conclusion, Carol Martin seems to affirm that behind these assumptions there is no political or social intention, but that "the portrayal of gender roles as opposite or complementary qualities of the same thing does not negate oppression of women and men, but neither does it exclusively signal dominance and submission."¹⁰

In the article in the programme Barba had specified the subject of this ISTA session, freeing it from psychological issues and interests of a political or socio-cultural nature.

It is useful to concentrate on psychological questions, Shakespearean labyrinths, the vicissitudes of repression and emancipation as historical and social problems, but not

Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures, edited by Richard Fowler. Then, one year later, with the title inverted, "The Actor's Energy: Male/Female Versus Animus/Anima", the article appeared also in the journal *New Theatre Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (See Barba 1987, 237).

4. Schino 2018, 122.

5. Varley 2020, 184.

6. Both the audio and the video recordings of the 4th ISTA session are kept at Odin Teatret Archives in Holstebro. (See Odin Teatret Archives 1986 and 1986a)

7. Martin 1988, 35.

8. Martin 1988, 38.

9. Martin 1988, 38.

10. Martin 1988, 38.

when comparing an elementary professional problem: the double-edged nature of the actor's energy, the existence of an *Anima*-energy and an *Animus*-energy.¹¹

The director of the ISTA focused on the study of the performer's energy "examining the principles which performers can use to model their muscular and nervous power according to non-daily modalities".¹² The goal of the session was to observe the shaping of the performer's energy, which could be male or female, strong or soft, and which did not depend on the gender of the actor/dancer. For Barba the male/female contrast or *Animus/Anima* represents "the necessity to define, by means of an opposition, the double nature of the energy which actors use: that is, the energy which animates their technique from the inside".¹³

Many American scholars present at Holstebro's ISTA considered female roles only *Anima*, but this observation was incorrect. The poles *Animus* and *Anima* "do not refer to women and men or to masculine or feminine qualities, but to vigour and softness as flavours of energy".¹⁴ In an e-mail exchange with Julia Varley, it emerged that "Sanjukta, the Balinese and the Japanese presented *Animus* and *Anima* energy for male and female roles: that is, there are male roles enacted according to *Anima*-energy and female roles enacted according to *Animus*-energy in their traditions".¹⁵ The affirmation of the Odin actress is strengthened by what Barba had written:

It is easy to perceive clearly the alternation between *Animus*-energy and *Anima*-energy when one sees Indian, Balinese, or Japanese actors and actresses telling and dancing stories with many characters; or if one sees Western actors or dancers who have been formed by a training which does not take differences of gender into account.¹⁶

In an article published in the *Canadian Theatre Review*, Ian Watson clarified Barba's actual intentions. Although many scholars have disagreed with respect to the approach of the Italian/Danish director to the theme of the session "The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures", it must be said that Barba's intention "was to discover if there is anything common to the range of performance genres, independent of their cultural context that form the basis of how the female is portrayed on stage."¹⁷ Not surprisingly, among the Asian performers there were male actors/dancers specialised in the representation of female roles such as the onnagata Kanichi Hanayagi for the Nihon buyo, the Indian dancer Kelucharan Mohapatra of the gotipua tradition, and Mei Bao Jiu, son of Mei Lanfang who, like his father, was a tan actor in the Peking Opera.

The reactions of the American feminists present at the session were outlined by Susan Bassnett who, in her article, quoted Barba's speech on gender and pre-expressivity:

11. Barba in Fowler 1986, 3. Also in Barba 1987, 237.

12. Taviani in Barba and Savarese 2006, 72.

13. Barba in Fowler 1986, 6. Also in Barba 1987, 239.

14. Barba in Fowler 1986, 6. Also in Barba 1987, 239.

15. Julia Varley, mail message to the author, January 13, 2022.

16. Barba in Fowler 1986, 6. Also in Barba 1987, 239.

17. Barba in Fowler 1986, 6. Also in Barba 1987, 239.

On the final level, that of results and of the performance (the expressive level), the actor's or actress's presence takes form in a scenic figure, a character, and masculine or feminine characterisation is inevitable and necessary. It is however both unnecessary and damaging when this masculine or feminine characterisation is also dominant on a level to which it does not belong: the pre-expressive level.¹⁸

Susan Bassnett had just participated in the Magdalena '86, First International Festival of Women in Contemporary Theatre¹⁹ held in Cardiff in August 1986. On that occasion the artists and scholars "wrestled with problems of structure and working methods from a starting point of common sexuality".²⁰ The Magdalena Project, "a dynamic cross-cultural network providing a platform for women's performance work, a forum for critical discussion and a source of support, inspiration and performance training"²¹ originated in that Festival. Unlike The Magdalena Project, which is oriented towards the "search for an autonomous theatre language of women,"²² the 4th session of ISTA "threw into the melting-pot men and women, scholars and performers, East and West, conventionalised theatre and improvisation."²³

Given the theme of the session, the American scholars concerned with theories about gender expected a discourse on the gender of the performer and on the actual representation of women on stage. At ISTA they faced a pre-expressive analysis in relation to the energy of the actor which, according to Barba, is not directly related to gender. Susan Bassnett objected to the Italian director's statement, arguing that she could not deny the fact that she was a woman.

I cannot see how masculine/feminine characterisation can fail to exist on any level. It seems to me that as a woman, with my biological functions intrinsically different to those of men, my menstrual time-clock built into my hormonal system, my lighter weight and stronger heart, my smaller hands and larger pelvis, even without (and I cannot see that such a "without" is possible) the socially-constructed ideas of masculine and feminine, I can never ever be in a position of pre-femininity.²⁴

It was the American scholar Erika Munk who opened a bitter discussion against Barba and the ISTA. Returning to the United States, she published a critical article in the *New*

18. Barba in Bassnett 1988, 236.

19. The Magdalena Project, "Archive 1983-89."

20. Bassnett 1988, 236

21. "The Magdalena Project is a dynamic cross-cultural network of women's theatre and performance, facilitating critical discussion, support and training. It is a nexus for diverse performance groups and individuals whose common interest lies in a commitment to ensuring the visibility of women's artistic endeavour. The branches of The Magdalena Project extend far and wide: over international borders and across generations. Groups meet in real time and place as well as online to share, engender and promulgate work and ideas. Largely surviving on the goodwill of its members and sponsors, it is a testimony to what we can achieve together in spirit of community and unity. (See The Magdalena Project, "The Magdalena Project. International network of women in contemporary theatre.")

22. Julia Varley, mail message to the author, January 13, 2022.

23. Bassnett 1988, 236.

24. Bassnett 1988, 236.

York weekly *The Village Voice*. Already from the second day, following a work demonstration by Odin Teatret's Iben Nagel Rasmussen

a number of Americans, academic-theatrical feminists, are starting to kvetch quietly: did they come all this way for a conference that doesn't seem to be confronting its subject? The set-up leaves no space for questions, for thought".²⁵

American scholars contested the fact that the demonstrations and speeches they witnessed did not question the social and political role of women in the history of theatre. Erika Munk made other allegations against Barba, mostly concerning socio-cultural issues, complaining finally:

We hadn't talked about the issues; we'd heard only random sentences from people who should have been addressing us seriously; we had seen fear of feminism, of homosexuality, of modernity itself, keep the whole conference from critically addressing its subject.²⁶

Barba replied to Erika Munk two weeks later with an article in *The Village Voice* of November 25, 1986. He emphasised once again the purpose of the ISTA session:

The aim of the conference was to capture a particular process of transition from the pre-expressive to the expressive. Our emphasis was on pre-expressive technique because the pre-expressive realm exists before gender is made into oppositions.²⁷

With this statement, Barba suggested framing the binomial man/woman not as an opposition, but as an energetic polarity enabling the actor to enliven the performing space and to amplify it through pre-expressive techniques. Referring to a demonstration by actress Pei Yan-Ling, impersonator of male roles for the Peking Opera at the Hebei Theatre, Erika Munk had written:

The fact that she's playing a male role has little to do with this brilliance; the dialectic is between convention and invention, life is in the space between the mask and the person showing us the mask.²⁸

In response to this assumption, Barba once again reasserted the principle investigated by the 4th session of ISTA:

Munk perceives the distinction between male and female as an opposition, whereas I am investigating what enables the performer to make the space alive, i.e., the pre-expressive techniques which are neither male nor female.²⁹

The controversy raised by Erika Munk did not stop here. In another article in *Performing Arts Journal*, once again she focused on political and socio-cultural aspects and concluded:

25. Munk 1986, 89.

26. Munk 1986, 90.

27. Barba 1986, 96.

28. Munk 1986, 90.

29. Barba 1986, 98.

What lesson can be drawn from all this? Many obvious ones. That when men are securely in power, they will play women's roles, create the very idea of womanhood, and snugly tap into feminine energy while refusing to allow women to use it.³⁰

With respect to this article, various participants and scholars who had known Barba and Odin Teatret for years intervened in their defence. Among the many reactions, it is worth noting the response of the Danish scholar Janne Risum who, in an article addressed to the *Performing Arts Journal* (which was never published), claims:

With the experience of having worked in the field of women and theatre, I agree with the importance of the questions raised. But in my opinion the proposers failed to consider that women from other cultures might give the technical focus of the conference a higher priority than they did themselves. Women demonstrating an equilibristic control of their craft are remarkable in their own right.³¹

For Janne Risum it was correct that the ISTA session and its demonstrations dealt with technical aspects. The political-social aspects of the role of women, supported by Erika Munk according to a Western vision, would only cause discrepancies in a confrontation between East and West. The objective of the comparison was "an intercultural communication on equal terms, and not just an airing of Western views."³²

Another reaction deserves to be mentioned. It is a letter to the editorial staff of the *Performing Arts Journal* from the Norwegian film maker and theatre director Elsa Kvamme, who had been an actress at Odin Teatret from 1973 to 1975. She had participated in Holstebro's ISTA and she dissociated herself from the controversy sparked by the American scholars.

I was astonished by the way Americans quickly turn such assemblies into a local event, using the same arguments and language as they would have done in New York, quickly attaining a verbal dominance where their points of view, resolutions and manifestations become the main event of the congress.³³

Furthermore, Elsa Kvamme admitted to being embarrassed

[...] by the way Erika Munk ignores and reduces the knowledge and force of the female Asiatic artists present at ISTA. How can that be reduced into "purely technique"? The enemy must be fought, but who is the enemy? Eugenio Barba, inviting to an international symposium upon the female role?³⁴

Male scholars too expressed doubts about this session. One of them was the American Professor Phillip Zarrilli, who conveyed them in an article in *TDR - The Drama Review*. Unlike Erika Munk, the criticisms of Zarrilli concerned some theoretical assumptions introduced by Barba, disapproving the way the debates were conducted during the ISTA. Zarrilli noted a "lack of reflexivity" and reproached Barba for belonging to the

30. Munk 1987, 42.

31. Risum 1987, 3.

32. Risum 1987, 3.

33. Kvamme 1987, 1.

34. Kvamme 1987, 1.

“European pedagogical model” and expounding his ideas in a solitary and authoritarian way.

There were also differing assumptions about what an international congress could/should be. Many American scholars and practitioners assumed there would be forums where various points of view would be expressed. However, ISTA is structured on the European pedagogical model where one voice is predominant.³⁵

The Holstebro ISTA was dedicated to Mei Lanfang, an actor of the Peking Opera belonging to the tan tradition with male actors specialised in female roles. In the programme Barba had written of the repercussions of Mei Lanfang ‘s tours in the US and later in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Traces of his influence were evident in many of the main western theatre reformers of the time.

There is the “visible” evident history of theatre, and there is the “invisible” subterranean history of theatre. The latter contains the roots which nourish and, in the long run, change our art. In the subterranean history of theatre, the presence of Mei Lanfang radiates in all directions. The inspiring energy of this female impersonator has had an intercultural impact which still today subliminally influences our craft and our visions.³⁶

Zarrilli attacked Barba on this front, pointing at the improper use of the terms “visible” and “invisible”.

What troubles me is not Barba’s poetic turn of phrase *per se*, but the degree to which the lack of reflexivity in his writing mystifies what may be for some Asian performers a “fact” of practice. Using the generic term “invisible” to represent a pan-cultural “energy” suggests that what is specifically indexed within all cultures by Barba’s “invisible” is not visible to native informants. What Barba calls “invisible” may be “invisible” only in the sense that the “energy” it refers to is simply an assumption of practice - a commonplace, what one does.³⁷

From the beginning Barba identified theatre anthropology as “the study of the behaviour of human beings when they use their physical and mental presence in an organised performance situation according to principles that are different from those of daily life”.³⁸ Therefore, theatre anthropology constitutes an independent field of study, whose only affinity with cultural anthropology “is the questioning of the obvious (one’s own tradition).”³⁹

In his article Zarrilli had written:

Barba has yet to reconcile in writing or practical work his particular definition of theatre anthropology with the existing discipline of academic anthropology. Although he has probed Asian genres for years, he says he has never been interested in trying to “fully

35. Zarrilli 1988, 104.

36. Barba in Fowler 1986, 1.

37. Zarrilli 1988, 102.

38. Barba and Savarese 2006, 5.

39. Barba and Savarese 2006, 5.

understand” either the “meaning” or the “execution” of the Asian performers with whom he works, as they are understood by the native performer - tasks appropriate to performance ethnology.⁴⁰

In response to Zarrilli’s assertions, Barba wrote an article published as a letter in *The Drama Review* 32, 3.⁴¹ He began by taking up the reproach of a solitary and authoritative conduct of the ISTA session, according to a “European pedagogical model”.

A “European pedagogical model” has not existed for several centuries. On the contrary, there are a variety of European models which differ from each other both in theory and in practice. To define the “European pedagogical model” as that in which only one single voice is predominant can only make a person smile: one need only look around to see what is happening in Europe. ISTA could not be “structured on the European pedagogical model where one voice is predominant” for the simple fact that it is not structured according to a pedagogical model at all.⁴²

Then Barba went on expounding what he meant with “invisible subterranean history of the theatre”. Zarrilli had understood the adjective “invisible” in a metaphysical way, identifying it with a “revivification” of Mei Lanfang. However, with “invisible” Barba referred to the “invisible history of the theatre”. This includes encounters, situations, friendships and coincidences which are not taken into account in manuals and books yet have influenced theories and practices of the theatre reformers of the 20th century. Barba affirmed:

The influence of Mei Lanfang (returning to our example) penetrates contemporary theatre thought and practice through Stanislavski, Tairov, Tretjakov, Eisenstein, Meyerhold, Dullin, Brecht. It does so not as an influence of that generalisation which is “Chinese Theatre” or the genre “Peking Opera”, not as the confrontation between two cultures, West and East, but as a meeting between craftpersons who are different and distant from each other, but who consider themselves - and are - colleagues.

In this sense the history of Mei Lanfang is a subterranean, invisible history which radiates in all directions. Fragments of Mei Lanfang’s professional insight reach us having lost every “Chinese” characteristic through the way in which they have been translated into professional practice by other theatre people.⁴³

Still on the subject of the term “invisible”, Zarrilli had written:

Barba’s primary concern has become the performer’s “presence” or “energy”, what he often calls the “invisible” as opposed to the “visible” dimension of performance [...] ⁴⁴

However, Barba had never said that the actor’s energy is “invisible”.

You claim that I define the actor’s “presence” and “energy” as the theatre’s “invisible”.

40. Zarrilli 1988, 102.

41. Barba 1988.

42. Barba 1988, 8.

43. Barba 1988, 11.

44. Zarrilli 1988, 101.

Once and for all, this is not true. [...] When I claim that theatrical work consists fundamentally in rendering the invisible visible, I am speaking of something completely different. I am investigating that process by means of which mental energy (invisible) becomes somatic energy (visible). It is useless to repeat that the “invisible history of the theatre” is something else yet again.⁴⁵

Barba clarifies explicitly what he meant by “invisible”. It is mental energy that, through the actor’s behaviour, becomes “visible”. ISTA investigated the process that makes the actor’s energy perceptible, which has nothing to do with the “subterranean history of the theatre”.

Furthermore, Phillip Zarrilli believed that a reconciliation between theatre anthropology and “academic anthropologies” was necessary since, according to what he wrote, this division of fields constituted a scientific problem. Barba once again stressed the irreconcilability of these fields which, although analogous, implemented their research through different perspectives, thus reaffirming the independence of that area of study he had called theatre anthropology.

All researchers are used to partial homonyms and do not confuse them with analogies. Among the various disciplines, in addition to cultural anthropology, there is also criminal anthropology, philosophical anthropology, medical anthropology, physical anthropology... In each presentation of ISTA it is underlined that the term “anthropology” is not used in the sense of cultural anthropology but in the common sense of “the study of man in a theatrical situation”. There should be no misunderstandings: theatre anthropology has nothing to do either with the application of paradigms from cultural anthropology to theatre, nor with the study of performative phenomena from those cultures which are normally the object of study by cultural anthropologists and ethnologists. The problem of reconciling theatre anthropology “with the existing discipline of academic anthropology” is certainly not a scientific problem. It is, if you like, a problem for universities organising their courses.⁴⁶

There were academics and scholars who acknowledged the reasons why Barba had not introduced psychological, social or political problems in the context of this ISTA session. The American scholar Peggy Phelan wrote:

The congress, hosted and organized by Eugenio Barba, was not at all concerned with the politics of representation. Issues of cultural hegemony, as well as issues of gender and sexual dominance/submission were ignored [...] the reasons Barba chose not to pursue these issues are extremely important as an indication of where the European “Third Theater” is (and is not) locating itself. It is unfair to criticize the conference for not doing what it never intended to do. The focus of the conference was on what Barba calls “the actor’s energy”.⁴⁷

Phelan compared feminist psychoanalytic theories with those of Barba, and she found a commonality between the pre-expressive level, i.e. “a basic level common to all

45. Barba 1988, 12.

46. Barba 1988, 14.

47. Phelan 1988, 108.

performers”⁴⁸ for which “sex is of little import. Typical male energy and typical female energy do not exist. There exists only an energy specific to a given individual,”⁴⁹ and the concept of “pre-Oedipal” identified by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey, according to which “the pre-Oedipal, [...], is in transition to articulated language: its gestures, signs, and symbols have meaning but do not transcend into the full sense of language”.⁵⁰ For Peggy Phelan, in both theories “that which precedes ‘full sense’ - or full expression - is important because it is in the pre-formed gesture/sound that one can perhaps find a way to rejuvenate and manipulate the rigid coding of performed expression and spoken language.”⁵¹

The debates emphasised a characteristic of the ISTA sessions: the encounter between practice and theory, between performers, directors and scholars. As Ian Watson stated: “The calibre of the participants working, eating, and sharing living quarters together bred a hothouse atmosphere which at the very least identified areas for further research”.⁵² For example, on the last day of the session, Sonja Kehler presented a demonstration of her work by offering a sort of caricature of the nightclub singer inspired by the great Marlene Dietrich. Although some participants judged the demonstration sexist, the German actress pointed out that “[...] the only way she could sing at that time of day was in high heels, because the effect of the heels was to throw her body column out of line, altering the position of the diaphragm and allowing her, vocally, not less freedom but more”. In Sonja Kehler’s demonstration and related a posteriori intervention, Susan Bassnett identified the essence between theatre and feminism:

The image, read through the sign system of 20th century European cinema, turned out to be at odds with the physical needs of the performer: the woman apparently appearing in the garb of the sex symbol declared herself to be a performer consciously aware of her body’s own needs. And in that gap, between what is happening inside and what is perceived through the context in which it is displayed, lies the essence of both theatre and feminism.⁵³

Jill Greenhalgh, founder of The Magdalena Project network was present in Holstebro and, after observing the work demonstrations and performances, she sensed that:

‘male’ actors were not credible in female roles while ‘female’ actors were extremely credible in male roles. The question is whether this credibility is determined by the quality of presence (pre-expressive level) or by the aesthetic form given to the cloying and submissive female roles determined by traditions (expressive or result level in the show).⁵⁴

48. Barba and Savarese 2006, 218.

49. Barba and Savarese 2006, 78.

50. Mulvey 1986 in Phelan 1988, 109.

51. Phelan 1988, 109.

52. Watson 1987, 85.

53. Bassnett 1987, 236.

54. Julia Varley, mail message to author, January 13, 2022.

Although the session was marked by controversy and critical debates, the Holstebro ISTA was an important event. Peggy Phelan's capacity to find a link between pre-expressivity and "pre-Oedipal", the observation of Susan Bassnett who in the demonstration by Sonja Kehler found the synthesis between theatre and feminism, and the reactions of Jill Greenhalgh, show a new way of seeing and analysing a situation of comparative technique. The discussions of the 4th ISTA constituted an incentive to investigate problems about the representation of women on stage hitherto largely ignored.■

Translated by Judy Barba

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