



Pei Yan Ling, ISTA 4, Holstebro, Denmark, 1986. Photo: Torben Huss

Eugenio Barba

The Visible and the Invisible in Theatre

Letter to Phillip Zarrilli

Abstract: *This writing is a letter published in The Drama Review 32, 3, 1988 pp. 7-14, through which Eugenio Barba answers to the article "For Whom Is the 'Invisible' Not Visible?", written by Phillip Zarrilli about the 4th ISTA International Session "The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures", published in The Drama Review 32,1, 1988 pp. 95-106.*

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Dear Phillip,

Here are my reactions to your article "For Whom Is the 'Invisible' Not Visible?" (TDR 32, no. 1:95- 106) concerning the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) Congress on "The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures", Hols-tebro, Denmark, 17-22 September 1986.

In our culture, knowledge of the actor has often been blocked by the presumption of knowledge. Critics, teatrologists, theoreticians, and even philosophers such as Hegel and Sartre have interpreted the cultural and aesthetic value of the actor's art by starting from the presumption that they knew what they were talking about. *In reality, they did not know.* They based their writings on conjecture, on vague testimony, on their own impressions as spectators. They tried to make 'science' out of something of which they had no experience.

This form of ignorance, which resembles that of professors who prefer to quote from books rather than to risk looking through Galileo's crude telescope, is also manifest in an indirect and oblique way: the way in which we delegate all authority to science. It consists in the illusion that one is able to understand theatrical behaviour with greater precision if one superimposes upon its paradigms which have shown their utility in other fields of research. For Sainte-Albine and Diderot, it was the mechanics of passion. During the Brechtian period, it was the opposition between rationalism and political irrationalism. Yesterday it was psychoanalysis and sociology, today semiology or cultural anthropology. This scientific "power of attorney" is based on a mental attitude which is profoundly irrational. It causes one to believe that a theoretical paradigm is valid unto itself and therefore is a precise instrument even when it is used out of context.



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Interpretative schemas which are valid in one specific context *can* be applied to other contexts. However, the pertinence of such applications must be proved each time, otherwise one ends up in a Tower of Babel: pseudo-scientific discussion which uses precise terminology in an imprecise way, based on individual free association.

In your article there are many definitions, many quotations, many affirmations of principle. Considered one by one, in isolation, they seem appropriate and interesting. In many cases, however, they are superimposed on the subjects upon which they pretend to be a comment or a criticism.

Let's begin at the end. You conclude your article saying: "How many of us need to hear what Barbara Babcock says of reflexivity?". And you quote:

[...] to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself and to refer to itself. Whether we are discussing things grammatically or cognitively, what is meant is a reflex action or process linking self and other, subject and object.¹

I have no doubt that Babcock's essay, which appeared in the magazine *Semiotica*, is stimulating. But the fragment which you extract and quote is an over-repeated truism. How could you have put this truism at the end of your article, as if one could ever forget it?

You complain two or three times about my "lack of reflexivity". You also complain that my voice "remains single, essential, comprehensive, and authoritarian", or a "solitary universalising voice precluding a dialectical process of investigation". You do not draw attention to these "errors" of mine in a polemical way, but with the sincere concern of someone who seeks to expand theatrical knowledge. I ask myself, however, why is your text supported by arguments which alter the facts?

Among the many possible examples, let's take one apparent detail. In note 3 you say, with respect to the September 1986 session of ISTA:

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.²

I have the impression that you really believe that there exists a "European pedagogical model where one voice is predominant". It may be that in certain books such a model exists. It certainly does not exist in the European reality.

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.

But 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.

1. Babcock 1980, 2

2. Zarrilli 1987, 104.

Our laboratory, Odin Teatret, to which ISTA is connected, is officially recognised as an experimental theatre school. Its principal characteristic is the lack of distinction between teachers and students. According to some, the term “school” (even with the qualification “experimental”) is used here in an ironic way. According to others it is appropriate. This - they say - is exactly what a school ought to be: an open association of individuals who are each other’s students and teachers. ISTA is a school in the same sense: not because it is a pedagogical project or model, but because it is a group of individuals, without registration or divisions of tasks, who from time to time gather together around a working experience.

The original meaning of the word “school” has influenced us: for the Greeks, *scholé* meant the exact opposite of what the word school means today. It was a collection of people, united by reciprocal choice, who dedicated themselves to research without immediate practical goals. *Scholé* was similar to the Latin *otium*: a word which would be better translated as “cultural experimentation” than as leisure.

It was probably an error to call the public session of ISTA in September 1986 a “congress”. Perhaps we were under the illusion of being more known than we actually are. Some of the people participating evidently did not know who the hosts were, and therefore thought that they would be attending a ‘normal’ congress. Looking at the schedule, for example, they asked themselves: “Where is there room for debate?”; “Who is reading papers on the various days?”; “Who is the moderator?”; “How is the expression of various points of view going to be organised?”. What happened, therefore, is exactly what would have happened if, reading “International School”, one asked oneself: “Where are the professors?”; “Where are the students?”; “Where are ... the caretakers?” Or what would have happened if one became angry having read Odin *Theatre* and then realised that one could not reserve a box in order to watch the performance. Misunderstandings arise due to ignorance of the context in which certain words are used.

What seems a mere detail is, however, an essential part of the ecology of the research. How does a normal congress function? With the planning of time and space for the various demands (general meetings, presentation of papers, dispensing of information, setting up of committees, round tables, forums). That which is not foreseen is precisely that which one wants to be absent.

Each time that we have organised international meetings, at Odin Teatret or at ISTA, we have always oriented ourselves in another direction: we have tried to provide the greatest degree of stimulus and the optimum number of possibilities for experience, proposals, and work testimonies, but without preplanning everything. Rather we have sought to support immediately anyone who wanted to organise meetings or other activities by gathering together those who shared their interests.

You say: “The conflict at the 1986 ISTA came from an exclusive focus on the practical to the exclusion of the historical and the processual”.³

This is true. At ISTA the focus is on the “practical exploration” of theatrical work. But it is not done in an exclusive way. Above all, this does not imply any conflict with attention to historical, sociocultural, political, and ideological problematics. Neither does this imply a lack of interest in the “process used to make performance”.⁴

3. Zarrilli 1987, 98.

4. Zarrilli 1987, 98.

In reality there were several forums at the 1986 ISTA organised by one or another of the participants, in addition to those which had been provided for in the program. One of these “spontaneous” forums, attended by approximately half the participants while the others were having a party, lasted almost the entire night. Another such forum took place with the Chinese artists while the majority of the participants in another room were following the work of two Western actresses. In spite of this, some continued to complain about the small amount of time provided for debate. They did not take into consideration what actually took place. Paradoxically, the activities which were freely organised appeared to them to be non-existent.

As far as my “voice” is concerned, I know that some consider it as “solitary” and “authoritarian”. For others it is simply responsible. Most people come to ISTA with the desire to be confronted with the research that I am conducting. It would be both comfortable and incorrect not to allow this confrontation to take place in the most profound way possible, giving as an excuse the necessity of a plurality of voices. It would also be both comfortable and incorrect to seek a compromise. My task consists in assuming to the limit the responsibility of answering those who are interested in my work without blocking the initiatives of those who are more interested in other persons or in other experiences.

It is not only a question of an organisational choice, but also of an instrument of knowledge. It implies meticulous attention to the points of departure and a complete liberty with respect to the ways and the goals. It is obvious that someone looking at this from one side only would find an excess of organisation, and someone looking at it from another side, an excess of anarchy. Probably both these “excesses” are present. This is an example of something in which I believe: the way of opposites. It is an essential balance in the ecology of research.

It has taken more than 20 years to weave the complex relationships within which Odin Teatret and ISTA find their continuity. Throughout these years an environment has been created which continuously undergoes transformations and, at the same time, still conserves its precise identity. It is composed of individuals who live in different theatres, who belong to different cultures, who practice different disciplines, who have different *Weltanschauungen*. One cannot expect that at first glance someone new would be able to grasp the dynamics of this environment in life and be able to decipher it for themselves. But one gives into one’s first impression and reveals a “lack of reflexivity” if one reduces ISTA to the bizarre image of a nonexistent “European pedagogical model” characterised by the authoritarian presence of one voice, which precludes a dialectical process of research, and which expresses itself by avoiding that process “linking self and other, subject and object”.

This is not an isolated case. Throughout your article you waver between incomprehension and involuntary parody, such as when you comment on my text on Mei Lanfang.

If one said, for example, that “the spirit of Brecht continues to glide through the theatre more than 30 years after his death”, and if someone else responded with an argument against ... spiritualism, we would find ourselves faced not with a simple case of incomprehension, but with a radical involuntary parody. With Mei Lanfang something very similar occurs.

The way in which you interpret my words on Mei Lanfang is the following:

The cluster of poetically suggestive terms surrounding the “invisible” reifies Mei’s artistic spirit into an enduring substance which itself becomes the “roots” (which are invisible) of Western (“our”) art. The entire world history of theatre is conflated into a single, generic, universal story with a hidden (“subterranean”) dimension encapsulated in the “presence of Mei” (invisible) represented as an inhering force which “radiates” everywhere. Mei’s “energy” (also invisible) is universal and all manifestations of this “energy” share in the common essential substratum which Mei manifests.⁵

And this is what I wrote and what you quote as the basis of your unwittingly self-parodying interpretation.

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.⁶

How did this extract become transformed into what you would like to make it say? You understand the adjective “invisible” in an almost metaphysical way. You confuse normal metaphors with an extravagant mythology and thus you do not realise what the real problem is. It is not that of reifying Mei. It is the problem of a concrete history of the theatre which does not appear in normal theatre history writing. Not because it has been deliberately ignored or censored, but because the nonrectilinear paths of history are different from the a posteriori idea imposed by those who reconstruct the past. This dialectic between the not always decipherable order of events and the necessarily simplified order of history writing is present in the reflections of anyone who is concerned with history. It must be particularly relevant for we who work in the theatre: an art which leaves few traces, which melts in time so rapidly that it cannot claim its own identity without a robust consciousness of its own “ancestors”.

But which ancestors?

Generalisations prevail in the books which relate the history of theatre: one reads of confluences and confrontations of styles, of genres, of tendencies, of poetics, of cultures and nations. The real protagonists of these books are “French Theatre”, “Spanish Theatre”, “Chinese Theatre”, “Commedia dell’Arte”, “Kathakali”, “Naturalistic Theatre”, “Romantic Theatre”, “Stanislavski Method”, “Brechtianism”, “Grotowskian Theatre” and many similar to these. And finally, the most abstract generalisations of all: “Occidental Theatre”, “Oriental Theatre”.

Is it possible to do without these generalisations? Certainly not. But it is also certain that in this way we risk suffocating the memory of the living, contradictory, irreducible presence of those men and women who, by socialising their needs and their visions, their autobiographical wounds, their loves and hates, their egoism and their solitude, have changed the theatre in which *we* live. These men and women, not the great gener-

5. Zarrilli 1987, 101.

6. Zarrilli 1987, 101.

alisations of current theatre history writing, are *our* real past. When I say “we”, I mean all those who live in the theatre, above all those who make a minority theatre and do not accept the norms of the theatre which Julian Beck called “respectable”.

The influence of Mei Lanfang (returning to our example) penetrates contemporary theatrical 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 craftspersons, different, 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. This is why I have said that they can “subliminally” influence us, not because I believe in the magic transformation of Mei Lanfang into an “enduring substance which itself became the roots of Western art”!

This process of which I am speaking represents the opposite of the idealisation of Oriental theatre as “Other”. This is an example of how there are levels of theatrical work which can be shared beyond differences between cultures and performances.

Reading the term “invisible” in a distorted manner, as if an invisible history was a “history of the Invisible”, you obtain two results: you make it sound as if I am speaking nonsense and you avoid looking beyond the limits of what you already know.

Does the question which gives title to your article (“For Whom Is the ‘Invisible’ Not Visible?”) indicate a real problem or is it the problem itself? Is it not perhaps the result of a misunderstanding?

Of which “invisible” are we speaking?

You claim that I define the actor’s “presence” and “energy” as the theatre’s “invisible”. Once and for all: this is not true. Nothing is further from my way of thinking and from my experience. For me the actor/dancer’s energy is visible, clearly perceptible. It is in fact the material base of pre-expressivity, which is the level of the performer’s work on which I have been conducting my comparative studies for years, collaborating with dancers/actors/actresses from various backgrounds.

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.

With respect to my work at ISTA you pose another question: “Is it possible to understand modes and processes of enactment without examining the historical and sociocultural construction of what is enacted and how we enact it?”⁷

In this case as well the real problem is the misunderstanding which lies behind the question.

The importance of studying the social and cultural contexts of a specific theatre is obvious. But it is also obvious that it is not true that one understands nothing of a theatre if one does not consider it in the light of its sociocultural context. Often, in academic

7. Zarrilli 1987, 98.

style, one uses the expression “this phenomenon cannot be understood if it is not examined in the light of. . . .” “It is a way of speaking, not an indication of method. No object of research automatically carries with it an obligatory context. Each object, in fact, can belong to innumerable, diverse contexts, all equally pertinent. A good method is that in which the context is pertinent to the questions which have been put to the object under examination.

It would be foolish to question oneself about the “meaning” of a specific Indian theatre without considering it in the context of the culture in which it is practiced and in which its past is rooted, without having a well-versed knowledge of the literature, social conflicts, religion, history of which it is a part, and above all without a profound knowledge of the Indian languages. But if one questions the influence of certain Indian theatres on European theatres in the 19th and 20th centuries, the tools and the context which must be activated are very different. Context and tools change yet again if one investigates which elements in the practices of the Indian actor/dancer can be useful for other actor/dancers, or that which is common to both and which therefore can be adapted as a pragmatic principle of orientation for any actor/dancer. To consider the problem in this way does not mean that one claims that the actors/dancers of any time or country are *substantially* equal. It means that one recognises the obvious: actors/dancers individualise themselves through profound differences as well as profound commonalities.

This perspective is not limited just to observation of different theatrical practices. It implies, rather, conducting research of a scientific kind which proposes to individuate the principles which *on the operative plane* make theatrical behaviour efficient in a trans-cultural dimension. ISTA was created with this hypothesis in mind insofar as it is based on a Eurasian vision of the theatre. It is not interested in specific study of Oriental theatres in their sociocultural contexts, nor in their myth in Europe and in the Americas. It is not interested in these matters because it is concerned with something else, not because it denies the value of these interests.

A large part of your article is based on incomprehension of this point, which causes you to attribute an ignorance to me which one should not suppose present even in a beginner:

Nor does Barba acknowledge that even in those traditions where he finds his inspiration there are a great number of performers who fail to achieve the high level of “presencing” with which Barba is so fascinated. Nor is there any attempt to articulate precisely how the native performer perceives what Barba receives as “presence”.⁸

This assertion is just as arbitrary (and just as denigrating) as that which immediately precedes it: “Barba’s vision of the ‘Oriental’ actor is a composite devoid of sociocultural or historical contexts”.

In your article there are dozens of assertions of this kind. These assertions are not based on anything I have written or said. They are all based on the misunderstanding

8. Zarrilli 1987, 102.



Sonja Kehler, ISTA 4.
Photo: Torben Huss

according to which I ignore all that which I am not dealing with *ex professo*. According to this logic you could also accuse me of not knowing that the Sioux Indians are not Hindus!

It disconcerts me to see so many platitudes appearing in your article, since in the past I have often appreciated the precision of your research. You restore what I say with incongruous quotations, making what I said seem bizarre and unreal. When you have then reduced it to an evidently unacceptable discourse, you identify it with the most obvious of erroneous positions, that around which debate has been the most vocal and which has the most extensive bibliography: the reification of the “Other”, the projection of our images, of our nostalgias, of our needs onto an “Other”, rendered ahistorical and transformed into a protagonist of an anthropological novel. This process has been treated critically for several decades by all those concerned with epistemology, cultural anthropology, social sciences, folklore, psychiatry, and the history of religion. I do not deny that the problem continues to be actual. But it has no relationship with ISTA, nor with what I have defined as “Theatre Anthropology”, nor with the reasons for and the means of my collaborations

with dancers/actors/actresses from Japan, Denmark, China, Canada, Bali, Italy, India, Argentina, Germany, and Norway.

I repeat again: I am concerned neither with studying nor with interpreting the various Asiatic theatres (how could I do so since I do not speak any Asiatic language?). I am concerned with something else: I collaborate with certain professionals from different traditions researching certain common principles of theatrical behaviour.

You say: “Barba has yet to reconcile in writing or practical work his particular definition of theatre anthropology with the existing discipline of academic anthropology”.⁹

But why should I do so? What is there to reconcile? Why should two independent lines of research become “reconciled”? 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,

9. Zarrilli 1987, 102.

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.

The many incomprehensions which appear in your article are certainly not caused by private motives, by rivalry or by those jealousies which often spring up between those who are working in contiguous fields. They are not the voluntary incomprehensions of someone who is attempting to hide the weakness of his own method by discrediting the methods of others. They are, rather, incomprehensions which demonstrate how difficult it is to pass from the evaluation of one’s own experience to evaluation of the experience of others. This obliges us to reflect upon the language which we use when we seek to use words to go beyond that which is obviously known about theatre. Precisely that language which to you seems “lyric”, “suggestive”, “emotive”, “intuitive”, and which therefore you reject as an example of “lack of reflexivity”, is at times a language which attempts to escape prefabricated definitions, those verbal networks which are only imitations of the precise language of sciences and which, behind the screen of academic decorum, can increase confusion.

The history of culture, however, shows that every time research is in *statu nascenti*, images, metaphorical and evocative terms, and linguistic inventions abound. The greatest danger does not lie in the necessary approximation or in the unavoidable risk of misunderstandings, but in the appeal to a presumed scientific clarity which exploits that which is already known and spares the researcher making one of the most fertile efforts possible: that of *searching (also) for his own words*.

But this you know as well as I, and your other writings demonstrate it. ■