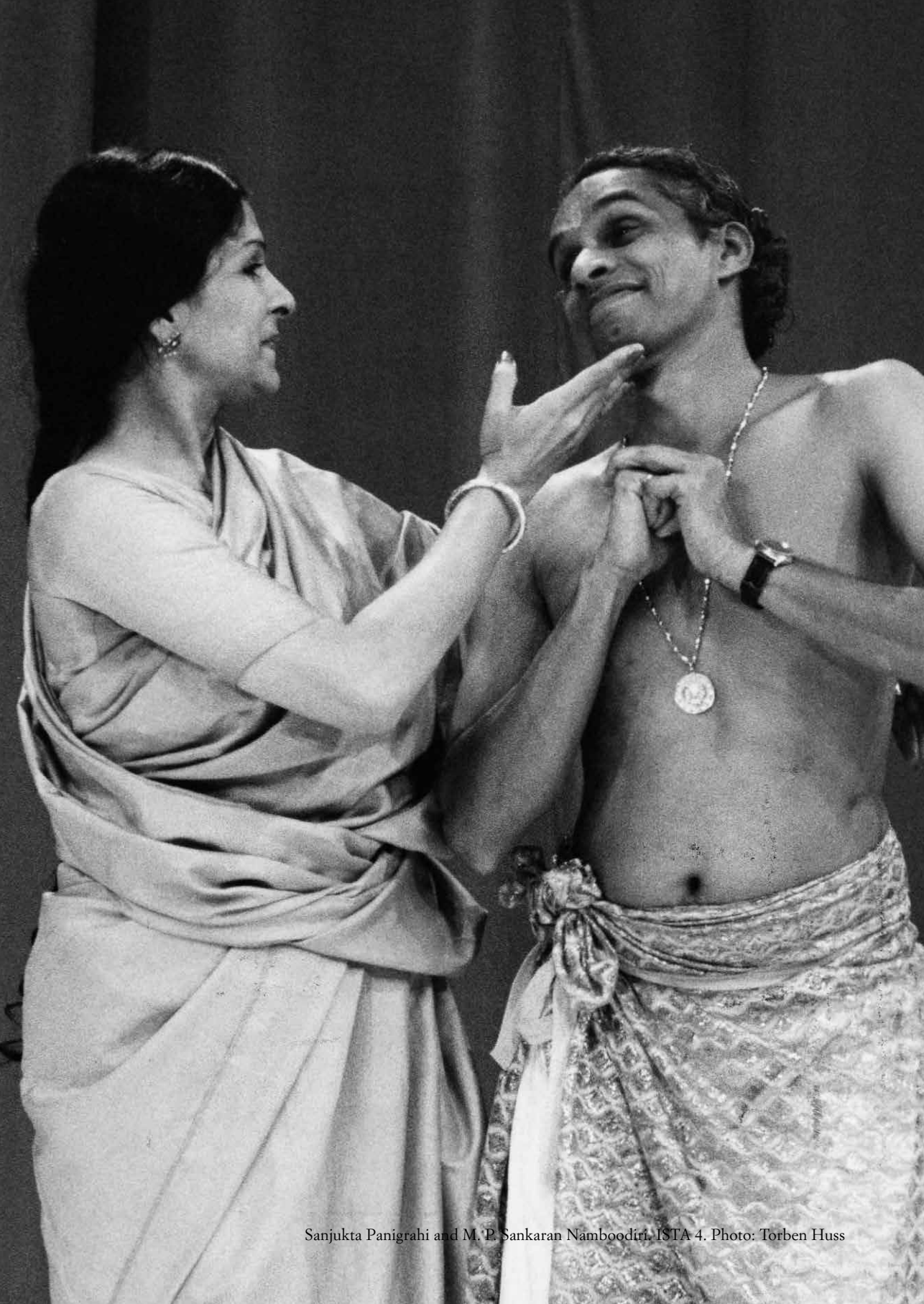




Sanjukta Panigrahi and M. P. Sankaran Namboodiri, ISTA 4. Photo: Torben Huss

Eugenio Barba

Between the Face and the Mask

Abstract: Through this article, first published on the 25th of November 1986 in the American weekly newspaper The Village Voice, Eugenio Barba replied to “Roles and Poles Apart”, Erika Munk’s day-by-day report of the ISTA’s conference The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures, published in the same newspaper two weeks before, on the 11th of November 1986. In her article, the American author accused ISTA director and scientific staff of being sexists and of having neglected the sociological question of gender equality. In his answer, Barba clarified the fundamental principles examined during the conference and the aims of ISTA.

Keywords: Extra-daily technique; Gender stereotypes; Pre-expressive level; Energy; Behaviour

Different individuals see things differently; people from different cultures view things in different ways. This holds true as much for American journalists as it does for Scandinavian theatre directors.

I founded the International School of Theatre Anthropology to help performers regardless of cultural differences. ISTA has centered its work on how their energy potential is manifested at the “pre-expressive” level, by which I mean the muscular and postural dynamics prior to the projection of character or narrative; it is carrying out this fundamental research through a comparative study of Eastern and Western acting techniques, and periodically holds public sessions, where participants observe and contribute. The Congress which Munk attended was the fourth such session. They are designed to see if beyond the differences - even the oppositions - of individual characteristics and cultural backgrounds, it is possible to find a common territory where people can learn from performance techniques not their own.

Over our years of research, we noticed how the use of the body in theatre and dance differs from its “natural” or daily use. Surely, this extra-daily technique contains gender stereotypes, but it also contains principles which may liberate performers from these stereotypes. In all cultures, codified performance genres help us see how a person’s muscular tone and stance are altered to engage her or his energy potential before expressing anything. This is evident in such Western forms as mime, ballet, and modern dance and in such Eastern forms as nô, kathakali, buyo, legong, and Beijing Opera. This refusal to follow the “natural” way of using the body incorporates a refusal to accept how a woman or a man “should” behave, even as these genres create their own gender stereotypes.



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The aim of the conference was to capture a particular process of transition from pre-expressive through to the expressive: our emphasis was on pre-expressive technique because the pre-expressive realm exists before gender is made into oppositions. This was accomplished by focusing on different performers' levels of energy. This energy is not manifested as an opposition between feminine and masculine but as a continuum whose two poles are defined in the performance traditions of India, Japan, Bali, China and Indonesia as strong and supple.

This same continuum may be experienced in the West. Charlie Chaplin is a performer whose supple energy suffuses his performances, while Anna Magnani demonstrates a strong energy quality. Yet Magnani is not "masculine" nor is Chaplin "feminine". Unfortunately, these examples are rare in the West, where gender stereotypes carry over from daily to extra-daily activities. On the other hand, in the East, because from the very first day of training the teacher guides the young apprentice's energy into established pre-expressive behaviour without regard to the performer's gender, young girls will learn how to be strong warriors as well as soft gods and young boys will similarly learn roles that are both soft and strong. Later, the maturing performer may choose which energy is best for her or him to underline - as Pei Yan Ling did, becoming one of China's premier exponents of strong energy. Or as is the case of Sanjukta Panigrahi, a performer can use both kinds of energy. The congress closed with Panigrahi dancing *Ardhan arishwara* - a classical Odissi dance where the divinity manifests itself as the conjunction of supple and strong energy.

In referring to a demonstration of a male general by Pei Yan Ling, Munk said that "the fact that she's playing a male role has little to do with [her] brilliance; the dialectic is between convention and invention, the life is in the space between the mask and the person showing us the mask". Munk perceives the distinction between male and female as an opposition, whereas I am investigating what allows the performer to make that space live - i.e., the preexpressive techniques which are neither male nor female.

There are two specific pieces of misinformation in Munk's article. (1) When ISTA learned just four days before the congress that both Bibi Andersson and Franca Rame could not attend, we phoned *all paying participants*, informed them, and offered a full refund. No one accepted. (2) I made an appointment to speak with Munk on the last day of the congress. Munk did not show up. ■

Erika Munk replied:

Barba's exposition of his ideas strategically ditches his dedication to the notion that men impersonating women are the truest portrayals of female roles, and simply ignores the questions that agitated the ISTA meeting. The conference's title promised an investigation that went beyond technique, and many participants wanted to discuss issues ranging from the social and historical to the erotic. They were prevented from doing so. As for the two facts: an enormous number of press people were invited and should also have been informed; I did meet Barba as arranged, in the lobby after the last performance, and he didn't seem interested in an interview. Perhaps this was a misunderstanding; if so, I'm sorry.