



Ingemar Lindh and Katsuko Azuma, ISTA 2, Volterra, Italy 1981 - Photo: Nicola Savarese

Clive Barker

Developing a New Language

Abstract: Originally published in Théâtre International (1, 1981. 19-22) by the English actor, director and scholar Clive Barker (Rose Bruford College, UK). In the article, Barker welcomes the new proposal of theatre anthropology launched by Barba and offers historical and theoretical keys of reflection inspired by the work conducted at ISTA. Barker also addresses the possibility of coexistence between practical research and its theoretical output.

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Dear Eugenio Barba,

I welcome the inauguration of the International School of Theatre Anthropology. Nothing but good can come of it. The laboratory work led by yourself, Grotowski, and Brook during the last twenty years has materially enriched the resources of the theatre and many have been stimulated to pursue similar lines of research. Now that some way will exist for exchanging ideas and participating jointly in laboratory work in a practical situation rather than passing on information through the printed word, an opportunity will exist for rich cross-fertilization. I am particularly enthusiastic about the participation of theatre scholars in the school as a further step towards bridging the gap between practice and the critical understanding of it. I look forward to following the future work of the school and to participating in it.

In the meantime, there are a number of comments I would like to make on your paper, which I found very stimulating and educative when it draws my attention to the oriental theatre, but which contains certain features which I find difficult to accept. I offer these comments in a contributory spirit and not as negative criticism.

1. I do not know how easily the oriental masters can make their experience available to us, but I am concerned about making the results of the research available without the direct help of those artists. Expressive stage movement, or performance movement of any sort, must move beyond the 'everyday', but I am not sure that for us it can achieve that except through the coordinated awareness of the 'everyday'.

Perhaps your research will convince me, and I will learn new approaches, but at this stage I worry about approaching high-level skills without removing the habitual mal-coordinations and resulting tensions in the individual. In this I follow people like Alexander and Feldenkrais in seeing the first necessity as establishing the harmonic and hygienic use of the connections between head, spine, and pelvis before moving on to higher levels of



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movement. Laban used oppositional and contrasted movements in different parts of the body, but only after neutralizing habitual usage in the body and 'centering' it.

You quite rightly point to the difficulties of taking over oriental techniques into occidental theatre. The oriental actor, and the classical ballet dancer, are trained in a particular technique, which may simply be too rigid for us to absorb. Some years ago, a choreographer here put eight ballet dancers into hospital on one production by asking them to do things which their training didn't account for. I have always worked on the principle that one has to release movement in space before beginning to subject it to discipline: one moves from anarchy to control. Otherwise the individual puts tension-stops along the path of the movement.

Crucial to your thesis is the ability to fall over before one puts the body in states of disequilibrium. The actor has to be able to cope with the problems that result from losing balance before he or she can find the confidence to go to extremes of balance. Otherwise, in my experience, the actor takes out 'insurance policies' against falling over, which manifest themselves as destructive and inhibiting tension-stops along the path of the movement. You get your oppositions, but they aren't necessarily the ones you are looking for.

2. I think certain questions arise when you couple oriental theatre and classical ballet. The comparisons you make are interesting but there are crucial differences. Classical ballet has built into the technique the "raised pelvis". The *plié* is not achieved by the same means as the bent legs in the Japanese theatre. The Japanese, and Balinese, must make extensive use of the muscle groups just above and inside the knee. Classical ballet dancers do not develop these muscles very strongly.

I wonder whether it might not be more profitable to take note of modern dance work, which does utilize the dropped pelvis and is based not so much on the total maintenance of equilibrium as on disturbance and recovery of equilibrium, as a means of approaching oriental theatre - there are stylistic connections through Denis-Shaun to Graham taken from oriental dance techniques.

3. Overall, what it seems to me you are seeking is kinetic energy. Potential energy which does not find its total outward expression. In my own work, I've always gone for giving the movement full range so that the actor experiences it, and then trying to get the actor to maintain the impulse towards the full range whilst making the restrained gesture.

You illuminate Japanese acting for me. What I have always seen was a group of people who must have trained to be able to perform the most extraordinary physical feats of strength and agility but who only use the ability on almost minimal movements. I regret my ignorance of their training methods, which being master/apprentice-taught have never been adequately set down. A good reason for pursuing the work you set out.

F. Mathias Alexander has a series of exercises and practices which might help. To correct habitual mal-coordinations, Alexander worked on isolating actions and then running through all the chain-of-command short of making a movement. The patient/student then chose on what occasion the movement was to be fully followed through to completion. The practices were mainly designed to coordinate mind and body and to give control over specific actions whilst inhibiting inessential or contradictory movements, but the kinetic processes might be built upon.

4. The terminology of “When we walk normally, our hips follow the movement of our legs” distresses me. All movement should be initiated at the base of the spine. We don’t have to bend our knees at all to create a fixed axis within our body. There is a naturally fixed axis if we wish to use it. If we take a vertical passing through the ear to the anterior of the ankle joint and a horizontal forward from the point where the spinal column enters the pelvic cradle, we arrive at the natural centre of gravity of the human body. This is best experienced for me by taking a line backwards halfway between the top of the pubic hair and the navel as the centre of the body, from which the upper torso and lower limbs articulate.

No doubt your research will find this out, but I’ve always felt that the Japanese drop this slightly and use as a centre the absolute tip of the spine, just to the rear of the rectum, whilst certain Chinese positions in the women, and Indian dancers, raise it slightly. There is no doubt in my mind that the Chinese men are working from bang on it. They would have grave difficulties in doing their movements any other way. In this they are close to certain western clowns.

5. The law of opposition is there in Meyerhold. All actions have a preparation, an action, and a recovery (which is usually the preparation for the next action). In the western mime the action is often made clear by stressing the preparation - which I think is what the Chinese are also doing, but in a different stylized manner. A lot of this has to do with the way the impulse is released from the preparation, and how the recovery is controlled. Western theatre movement constantly inhibits the strength of both the preparation and the recovery, and the action itself is consequently weak - often, one would say, weaker than a corresponding action in ‘everyday’ life.

6. I have a feeling that everything you are looking for is there in another source, which is much more accessible to occidental cultures. Most of what you seem to be looking for, beyond the examination of oriental theatre forms (which is valuable for its own sake and may be valuable for ours), is there in Buster Keaton. And Keaton, in his hey-day, could obviously turn it on and off like a tap.

Keaton gets the kinetic energy and spatial economy from concentrating his work in the immediate present. There is no reflection - what we get is the present process of reflection, but the actor does not reflect on the past. There is no intending into the future in the actor - what we see is the physical representation of intending, both in time and space. But the actor remains in a heightened present tense. And that is what gives him the kinetic energy charge.

All of what I have written may be relevant to the projects you set out in your paper, or not. Indeed, all you set out in your paper may be of the greatest possible importance, or illusory. The only way we will find out is by testing it in practice, and practice will push us to develop the language through which to define concepts and activities more clearly in our theoretical writings. ■