



Ory Sacramento, Eberto García  
Abreu, Nitis Jacon looking at  
Augusto Omolu,  
ISTA 7, Londrina, Brazil, 1994.  
Photo: Emidio Luisi

# Julia Varley

## The Times of ISTA

*Abstract: This article recalls the importance of the organisers and schedules for the development of theatre anthropology during the ISTA sessions, and presents the different generations of teachers.*

*Keywords: Hans Jürgen Nagel; Nitis Jacon; Roberto Bacci*

The evolution of theatre anthropology as a field of study instigated by Eugenio Barba was determined by many factors: the constant succession of ISTA sessions, how they came into being, their flexible structure, the personality of the invited artists/teachers, the organisers - institutions, theatre groups or individuals - who managed to find the financial support, and the participants. Such factors, as well as hundreds of small circumstances, have contributed to what theatre anthropology is today. Similar to a creative process for a theatre performance, simultaneity, contiguity, serendipity, chance, constraints, necessities, interests, obsessions and above all relationships and commitment of scholars, artists and participants have played a fundamental role during the searching process to uncover and delineate the principles of pre-expressivity which are at the basis of theatre anthropology.

In the appendix of *Thinking with the Feet* (2017), a book about the 16<sup>th</sup> ISTA session in Albino, Italy, in 2016, there is exhaustive information about the shaping of the particular environment for each session: the daily programme, the description of the session's theme, the names of organisers, artists, scholars and participants as well as those given to the different spaces and the various times of day. These names change for each session, following references which may be geographical, mythical, historical or biographical. Time and space must change within the ISTA island of research for unexpected breakthroughs to appear. The extra-daily behaviour and way of thinking is not only a technical tool for the actor/dancer's stage presence; it is a premise for discovery.



229

### The organisers

For me, learning to see also means understanding the consequences of the persistence of Jean-Marie Pradier (organiser of an encounter between theatre practitioners and scientists

in Jelena Góra, Poland, in 1979), of the trust of Hans Jürgen Nagel (organiser of the 1<sup>st</sup> ISTA session in Bonn, Germany, in 1980) or of the dedication of Nitis Jacon (organiser of the 8<sup>th</sup> ISTA session in Londrina, Brazil, in 1994). They affected the future of theatre anthropology. Jean-Marie Pradier, Hans Jürgen Nagel and Nitis Jacon were not aware beforehand of the magnitude of their choices, but their endurance made it possible for the unforeseen to happen. Does learning to see mean foreseeing the unforeseeable?

At Jelena Góra, during a meal, the biologist Henri Laborit explained to Eugenio Barba that it was impossible to discuss with theatre practitioners since they incessantly jumped from one level of organisation to another: they spoke of the need for a new actor, then of a renewed social function of theatre, and soon after of the necessity for original playwrights. Eugenio Barba couldn't understand what he meant by level of organisation. Henri Laborit went on to explain that any complex organism, for example the human body, is subdivided into different levels of organisation: of the cells, organs, systems and social relationships... One must know on what level one is concentrating!

Was it sitting at a table and eating Polish pierogi that the idea of the pre-expressive level was born in Eugenio Barba's head? Probably not. It was the combination of this new knowledge together with years of looking at the training of Odin Teatret actors, his fascination of Asian traditional theatre forms, and his wish to find a way to communicate with Latin American theatre groups that accused Odin Teatret of cultural imperialism, and much more. There is no order of time nor consistent logic to follow, only an unending preparation, learning often for learning's sake, as a law of life or a need to remain alive - and letting concrete circumstances provoke reactions, so that motivation and knowledge decide and not abstract theories.

Hans Jürgen Nagel wanted an international meeting of theatre groups to happen in Bonn like those which had taken place in Belgrade in 1976, Bergamo in 1977 and Madrid-Lekeitio in 1979. Hans Jürgen Nagel was an expert in classical music and in charge of the cultural activity in Bonn. He had read of these meetings in the UNESCO journal. He contacted Eugenio Barba proposing such an event in his town. But Eugenio was not particularly motivated, he thanked and told Hans Jürgen that he was involved in another huge project which obliged him to concentrate on finding financial backing. Hans Jürgen asked how much this project would cost. Eugenio answered 200 million Italian Lire (about 488.000 euros today). "I can find this money", Hans Jürgen replied. What is your project? Thus Barba imagined an international school which did not teach a method, but gathered friends and other people who had inspired him and would certainly inspire the fifty directors from the Third Theatre groups whom he intended to invite. This story has been told many times and belongs to the ISTA mythology. But the motivations and facts hidden behind it are not often revealed. I would like to ask Hans Jürgen Nagel how he managed to find the funds and which arguments he used to convince politicians to support a project he knew nothing about. Why did he trust Barba, to him a totally unknown person? Was it a time when individuals and their personalities and imaginative energy counted more than sustainable budgets, imposing cultural plans and well-formulated projects?

I would like to ask Roberto Bacci the same questions. He was the director of Piccolo Teatro di Pontedera and of the Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale in Italy. Which strong motivation pushed him and his small theatre group to cover the

expenses of a 60-day session of ISTA in Volterra in 1981? He found 400 million Lire corresponding to double the cost of the ISTA in Bonn! For two whole months Roberto Bacci hosted 45 artists and scholars and 64 participants from all over the world to do research in theatre, without any promise of results or a public outcome. It was not easy to get money for such projects. The proof is that for three years no other institution or individual was interested in a new ISTA session, until another audacious outsider, Patrick Pezin, Eugenio Barba's publisher-actor, helped realise a session in France.

What were the reasons that pushed individuals with few means to confront obstacles and the apparent impossibility by organising an ISTA? Insurmountable hurdles to finding the necessary funds and the material conditions had to be faced by Patrick Pezin and Nicholas Peskine in 1985, by Odin Teatret in 1986, by *Mediterranea Teatro Laboratorio* and Nicola Savarese in 1987, by Pietro Valenti and Renzo Filippetti of *Teatro Ridotto* in 1990, by Richard Gough and Judie Christie of *Centre for Performance Research* in 1992, by Nitis Jacon in 1994, by Sven Sahlström and Chris Torch in 1995, by Trevor Davies, Lene Thiesen and Kirsten Hastrup in 1996, by Marco Abbondanza in 1998, by Siegmund Schröder and Theaterlabor in 2000, by Ricardo Iniesta and *Atalaya Teatro* in 2004, by Jarosław Fret and Grzegorz Ziółkowski of the *Grotowski Institute* in 2005, by Alessandra Pozzi and Fabrizio Persico of *Associazione Diaforà* in 2016, by Irene Di Lelio of *Linee Libere* and Vincenzo Mercurio of *Teatro Proskenion* in 2021.

All these people did not belong to centres of power, but to the periphery, where Third Theatre groups flourished accompanied by a few scholars who were seduced by the energy of their alternative activity. Often the driving force was a former ISTA participant who wanted to share this experience with her or his own context. It was the same ripple effect that happened with *The Magdalena Project*, the network of women in contemporary theatre. These individuals had to contact politicians and make alliances with sensible and sensitive civil servants working in institutions and government offices who didn't know much about theatre anthropology. The decision of realising an ISTA session was the result of an excess of passion, an obsession which possessed the organisers. They spent hours, days and months convincing officials that this initiative, which was not a festival but a closed research event, was a realistic project and would reap a future harvest and a viable outcome. To sow technical seeds of knowledge was not a dream, but an investment in the potentiality of each participant.

Economic conditions influence any form of research. If the participants are invited as guests or if they pay gives them different expectations and commitment. If we sleep in shared rooms in an empty downtrodden building or in a hotel with individual rooms and bathrooms affects relationships and the intensity of their experience. If a simultaneous translation is made by an official interpreter in a box or by a simple volunteer, this alters the sensorial dimension of the communication. If the artists come with their own musicians or have to perform accompanied by recorded music, our experience is modified. If we eat tasty or boring food, this increases or decreases our well-being and energy. If there is time to dance and sing together more lasting friendships arise. The last session in Favignana in 2021 remains emblematic because it was the first time we could share the space with other performers after two years of pandemic restrictions. The pleasure of being close together enhanced the energy during all classes and demonstrations.

Nitis Jacon accomplished the feat of organising the first ISTA session in Latin America in 1994. Before this the participants were invited and did not pay. For the session in Brazil, we asked participants to give 100 US dollars to cover the travel of those who could not afford it. Nitis insisted that a Brazilian performing tradition should be represented at the ISTA session in Londrina. Although Brazil is rich in dance and theatre expressions, only an artist who possessed the power of seducing spectators, the humility of teaching the first steps, the capacity of repeating fixed scores, the enthusiasm of participating in a group experience and adapting to uncomfortable conditions, could become a teacher at ISTA. It was not a question of being Brazilian or of representing a particular genre; it was the personality and the motivation that made each ISTA teacher irreplaceable. Eugenio established a personal and professional relationship with each of them.

Nitis urged Eugenio to travel to many places in Brazil to see performances, rituals, celebrations and dances. We were lucky and thanks to our friend the director Paulo Dourado we met Augusto Omolu in Bahia. He was trained in classical ballet and modern dance and had absorbed the essence of the orixá dance from the Candomblé culture to which he belonged. Eugenio and I were mesmerized when we saw his class where he shifted suddenly from the soft energy of Oxum to the vigorous energy of Ogum which reminded us of what only Sanjukta had made us experience before.

## The artists

ISTA has had different generations of teachers. They marked the ISTA sessions with their temperament. Each one of them has contributed to changing the course of events. The first generation included Sanjukta Panigrahi, Katsuko Azuma and I Made Pasek Tempo. Theirs was the time of nobility. Then came Kanichi Hanayagi, I Made Djimat with I Wayan Bawa, Tom Leabhart and Augusto Omolu. Theirs was the time of passion. Then came Ana Woolf, Cristina Wistari and Ileana Citaristi. Theirs was the time of the foreigners. Then came Parvathy Baul and Keiin Yoshimura. Theirs was the time of women. Alício Amaral and Juliana Pardo of Mundu Rodá, and Alessandro Rigoletti, Caterina Scotti and Tiziana Barbiero of Teatro tascabile di Bergamo mark the time of theatre groups. Last is Kapila Venu and hers is perhaps the time of the future.

I have not mentioned Odin Teatret actors in this list because their presence came late. The first ISTAs were Eugenio's independent project and only Toni Cots from Odin Teatret accompanied him. Some of our actors - Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Tage Larsen and Roberta Carreri - spent a few days of the symposia or longer periods for a particular kind of teaching or learning. Some ISTA participants and collaborators became Odin actors: Richard Fowler, Gustavo Riondet and Augusto Omolu. When Toni Cots left Odin Teatret in 1987 a consistent number of Odin actors participated for the first time in the ISTA session in Salento. The whole group was in Bologna in 1990 when the *Theatrum Mundi* - ISTA's final performance - became more structured with scenes that would develop over time in future sessions.

In Bologna, Torgeir Wethal created a love scene with Kanichi Hanayagi. I first worked on a grotesque love scene with Tjokorda Raku Tisnu and developed it later with I Made

Djimat. Roberta Carreri improvised a clown sequence with Shogo Fujima and a love scene with I Nyoman Budi Artha. In the most recent ISTA sessions, Odin Teatret's solo and ensemble performances have been part of the programme. At first, we Odin actors felt young and small in comparison to the Asian artists. Later we became the experienced generation that was even able to inspire the Asian artists. With time and the death of the first generation of ISTA 'masters', the position of the Odin Teatret actors within ISTA was reversed.

## The structure

Eugenio tends to resist fixed schedules because he enjoys the freedom to pursue what emerges from the work. Yet time schedules have been necessary since the beginning to solve practical questions like meals and rest periods, the sharing of information and the exchange of personal professional experience.

Since the first ISTA session in Bonn Eugenio had to be careful to pay equal attention to Sanjukta Panigrahi and Katsuko Azuma to avoid jealousy. Planning demonstrations and symposia, he was attentive to give space and time to every teacher.

During the second session in Volterra the participants and teachers were divided into families, and since then groups have been organised for the practical work to happen with smaller numbers of participants. Only when the ISTA sessions had more than one hundred participants, as in Holstebro in 1986 and in Copenhagen in 1996, did all the work happen in plenary sessions through demonstrations. When the participants are 50-60, the daily programme begins in silence at dawn broken by a song as the sun rises, followed by breakfast, practical work in smaller groups, demonstrations and professional biographies, lunch, rest, exchanges among the participants, comparative seances on technical principles with Eugenio, supper, and performances. The local eating habits, the time of sunrise and sunset, if performances were open to public or not, and if they took place within the closed ISTA venue or outside, if the session was accompanied by a symposium or not, if the participants rehearsed to be on stage for a *Theatrum Mundi* performance - all of this influenced the rhythm of the ISTA sessions' daily programme.

Every time on the schedule has a name, often in reference to the session's theme, as do the groups and the spaces. Part of the process of preparation consists in transforming the venues and adapting them to work necessities favouring intimacy, focus, meetings and individual concentration.

Many remember particularly the time and the zone of silence. One reason to expect people to be quiet when they sleep together is practical, so as not to disturb the others. But demanding silence is also a way of inducing communication through behaviour instead of words and placing everyone in the same position. When silence is broken by a song, this introduces everyone to an emotional atmosphere of work with extra-daily conditions and values. A special rhythm is built through punctuality, making sure that nobody comes late to classes, by sharing the cleaning jobs, by offering a space to exhibit personal work documentation, by retiring into a room where books brought by every participant have built a shared ISTA library.

## Anecdotes

Each ISTA session leaves its own memories.

In Umeå it was the snow. It was May 1995, and we were sleeping in a village of small huts built originally for Sami gatherings for church services and market days. We woke up with the whole village covered in snow. The Brazilians, Indians and Balinese had never seen snow before and were convinced that work would be cancelled. They could not imagine walking through the forest to reach the working space. We made them change their mind by organising a snowball fight. Snow was also used by Eugenio in his closing speech: he gave a fistful of snow to each participant as a token of the knowledge they had received and which would melt in their hands.

At the ISTA session in Salento, scholars learned to draw an elephant. They had to count their impulses while tracing the line, becoming aware of each time they lifted their pencil. It was a way to explain the segmentation process and the sats. There, for the first time I Made Bandem fell into a trance during a barter dancing on broken glass. His bare feet started bleeding.

In Montemor-o-Novo it was the convent we lived and worked in; a beautiful building, but with no doors, no toilets, no showers, no kitchen, no theatre. Arriving there in advance to prepare it for the session, I remember thinking the only solution was to call the firemen. I ended up sleeping in an attic, sharing it with bats. In Montemor-o-Novo all the teachers worked on the same exercise called Tre-Tre. It had been invented by three Odin Teatret actresses and it was re-shaped according to the different traditions. It was the first ISTA session without Sanjukta. A cancer had taken her away a few months before. The final *Theatrum Mundi* performance, *Four Poems for Sanjukta*, was dedicated to her.

In Bologna Nitis Jacon arrived late and had to climb over the high metal fence to enter the Villa Guastavillani where we all worked and slept. Part of the time was concentrated on voice, trying to understand if one could apply the same principles of the pre-expressive level to vocal expression. The *Theatrum Mundi* performance in Bologna ended with fireworks thrown out by a dancing Pupa puppet from Abruzzo creating a fountain of sparks. Mr Peanut, Odin Teatret's Death character, still has holes burnt in his coat.

In Londrina, the Japanese ensemble led by Kanichi Hanayagi wanted to impress everyone. For their astonishing kabuki performance, they had brought with them stunning costumes, props and wigs at great expense. The explosion of the spider's web of red or white threads became a fixed scene of the *Theatrum Mundi* that in Londrina was performed on a floating stage on a lake built by Fernando Jacon.

In Sevilla, the flamenco demonstration introduced a new genre to the ISTA research. Four years had passed since the ISTA in Bielefeld in 2000, and a new generation of teachers came to the session in Spain. Some of them had chosen to specialise in a genre far from the country where they were born. This provoked discussions on culture and authenticity which I tried to answer with a letter to the participants of ISTA in Wroclaw in 2005 and published later in *Thinking with the Feet*.

From the ISTA in Copenhagen, my memory of improvising with Carolyn Carlson is as strong as the impression at seeing I Made Djimat's baris and his way of teaching his

daughter Ketut through an infusion of energy from body to body.

From Holstebro in 1986 I remember assisting Pei Yan-Ling with her performance. She was warming up stretching a leg on top of a table. She told me how her teacher would stay with her in the room as she kept each leg in that position for half an hour. It made me think that if teachers could dedicate time to their pupils to such a point, the results would be different. Pei Yan-Ling's performance of the male character of a general totally fulfilled the expectations generated by Eugenio telling us of his emotion seeing her in Beijing. She seemed so strong on stage and so vulnerable in her loneliness.

In Favignana it was the sea, rough or calm, welcoming us early in the morning and letting itself be heard during the performances in the evening. Even if nobody had the time to swim.

## Themes

The first ISTA sessions were a time of discovery. Eugenio and all the artists and scholars tried to understand what theatre anthropology was for themselves, before explaining it to others. The term pre-expressivity was applied for the first time, provoking discussions, scepticism and controversies. Then came the time to demonstrate all that had been discovered by explaining the concepts and showing the results of the comparative analysis of the "first day" of apprenticeship in the different performing traditions.

The themes changed from general research on the principles of scenic presence to specific questions on the craft. In Holstebro it was the modulation of energy, in Copenhagen the relationship between theatre and dance, in Montemor-o-Novo the organic effect, in Bielefeld dramaturgical techniques, in Brecon the subscore (taking up the theme of mental pre-expressivity first talked about in Salento), in Seville the flow, in Krzyzowa improvisation. Ten years later, in Albino, it was time to go back to the beginning so that a new generation of participants could experience the first general principles of stage presence explained once again. Only those who had never before participated in an ISTA session were admitted.

Each session required its time of preparation. Eugenio spent months visiting the artists in their different countries, looking and learning to see, and asking questions which he would repeat again and again during ISTA sessions when he visited them in their sleeping and rehearsal quarters. The questions were apparently simple, even petty, expressed time after time to go deeper until reaching the essential. During these meetings Eugenio prepared the artists for a special way of teaching their "first day" to participants coming from different parts of the world, who did not share their terminology or sense of music, rhythm and movement.

At ISTA it was never a question of talent, but always one of know-how, of technical principles that could help everyone in any theatre or dance form. It was a time for sowing the seeds of personal knowledge which would accompany the growth of each of us - actor, dancer, director or scholar. ■