



Simone Noris and Alessandro Rigoletti from Teatro tascabile di Bergamo with Eugenio Barba.
ISTA 15, Favignana, Italy, 2021. Photo: Francesco Galli

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Learning to Teach

Chronicle from the ISTA/NG 2021

Abstract: The article aims to evoke the atmosphere and work environment of the theatre experiences the author encountered as an observer participant of the 16th session of ISTA/NG (International School of Theatre Anthropology/New Generation). Held in Favignana, Sicily, from 1 to 22 October 2021, the session was renamed ISTA/NG, as part of a knowledge sharing project promoted by the Fondazione BarbaVarley established in December 2020. Beside the narration of the events, the article includes questions concerning the pursuit of a language that tries not to betray the complexity of a practical adventure that involves both cognitive and sensorial spheres. Particular attention is given to the presence at ISTA/NG of Kapila Venu, an Indian teacher who found herself working with Eugenio Barba for the first time, having to learn how to teach all over again. Kapila Venu becomes the focus to analyse the material and immaterial dimension of the pedagogical tradition founded by theatre anthropology that concentrates on the first day of work. According to Eugenio Barba, it is in that first moment of learning that the physical and ethical foundation is put for the future theatre profession.

Keywords: *Eugenio Barba; Learning; Origins; Teaching; Kapila Venu*

Draw up a plan of your wish and live this plan within a norm of beauty.
Federico García Lorca, letter to Jorge Salamea, 1928

ISTA New Generation

The last session of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), number 16, added the suffix NG - New Generation - to the acronym according to the wish of its founder Eugenio Barba. It was not a change of nomenclature, but the final stage of a transformation process that has matured over the last few years and which has resulted in a broad project of sharing knowledge on training and the transmission of acting technique promoted by Fondazione Barba Varley.¹

¹ Among the initiatives promoted by the Fondazione as part of the project of sharing knowledge, it is worth pointing out the films *Ten Lessons on Theatre Anthropology. Learning to See*. Realised by Eugenio Barba, Julia Varley and Claudio Coloberti, the films are partially based on the abundant audio-visual and photographic documentation on the ISTA sessions preserved in Odin Teatret Archives in Holstebro, Denmark. For more information visit: <https://fondazionebarbavarley.org>



The first edition of ISTA/NG was held in Favignana from 12 to 22 October 2021 and was entitled: *Presence of the Actor and Perception of the Spectator*.

The roots and the flight

How to give words to hours and hours spent observing? How to give thanks for having been able to attend, for whole days, the work of actors and actresses who, by means of technique and practice, seem to set out in search of beauty? They don't contemplate it for aesthetic purposes, they put it into shape, modelling it into infinite expressions. They investigate its material and 'immaterial' foundations, experience an immense fatigue that at times borders on nonsense and to me, a spectator and scholar, they seem to stubbornly protect the potential enabling their practice to affect reality by generating forms of personal transformation.

How do I make writing become a tool through which to objectify and communicate an experience full of seduction and ambiguity, fuelled by personal questions that have accompanied me for years? What remains of a practical adventure of knowledge that has spoken to my senses? How can I relate it? In what terms? Will the use of evocative language compromise the understanding and transmission of the events I have chosen to narrate? Do I risk distorting the facts and making them non-objective? Who am I telling them to? To those who are approaching theatre studies and practice? Those who are doing research? Those who pass on knowledge and techniques? To a beloved person for whom we write in secret?

What will this experience linked to flight and its roots become, once I let it land on paper?

The spaces of flight and roots

I keep on looking at the photographic report of ISTA/NG days by Francesco Galli. He is a photographer of theatre and architecture and became responsible for the photographic documentation of ISTA since the session in Krzyzowa and Wrocław (Poland 2005), although his collaboration with Odin Teatret dates back to 1998.

I began to think about possible ways to archive this huge iconographic legacy. I fantasized about combinations of non-linear images, free from the canonical logic of the documentation of the working days which are marked by a dense, precise and necessarily repetitive program. The stories and images, the photographer's gaze and my reflections turned out to be the threads with which to start weaving a possible narrative.

The stories I will try to tell have dreamlike substance and power: they continue to dance in front of my eyes and in my mind. Yet, they all belong to an event that really happened and is now history.

We were in Favignana, on the largest of the three islands of the Egadi Archipelago, a butterfly-shaped strip of land in the Sicilian Channel and on whose slopes the profile of the Castle of Santa Caterina stands out.

Barbers, interactions and fusions at the *tonnara*. Photo: Francesco Galli



In 1874 the entire island was bought by a wealthy family of industrialists, the Florios. Having definitively taken possession of an immense building, which they had already used for the slaughter of tuna fish, the Florio family entrusted its renovation to the architect Damiani Almeyda who transformed it into a splendid example of industrial architecture for tuna fishing and conservation.

Its activities ceased around the 1970s due to the decrease in tuna in the Mediterranean. The buildings remained in disuse until 1991 when the Sicily Region acquired and restored them. Reopened in 2009, the former Florio factory has since been a multifunctional cultural and exhibition centre with large open spaces and huge halls.

In October 2021, the Mayor Francesco Forgione opened the doors of the *tonnara* to welcome the ISTA/NG. During ten days, a small transitory community settled on the island and established their own living and working norms, different from the ones that govern daily life. Thus, as is the practice at ISTA, an environment was created that imagined its own way of using the hours of the day and discovered new forms of inhabiting some of the places in Favignana.

Within the *tonnara*, various venues were temporarily destined for new uses or, according to an established tradition of ISTA, took on their own names: a practice that helps to give places a life of their own and trigger the imagination. Thus, a passage room was used as a library, Alexandria; five rooms were dedicated to different aspects of the theatre work - pedagogical training, interactive presentations of artistic creations, exchanges between practical, historical and theoretical knowledge - named after as many cities in which previous ISTA sessions had taken place. The two green areas have been renamed the gardens of Alhambra and Babylon; finally, the huge central court - which hosted group-singing rehearsals, impromptu meetings, small discussion groups, frugal lunches and chance encounters - took the name of the African Kalahari Desert, one of the largest in the world.

Linee Libere and Teatro Proskenion

ISTA/NG is a pioneering experiment in a transcultural dialogue, a tradition of research invented by Barba and kept alive since 1980 by a team of scholars and artists from various theatre and dance traditions. The working methods, the scientific and pedagogical approach and the networks of professional and human relationships during the ISTA sessions have generated a significant interest in theatre anthropology. University courses and the performances by Eugenio Barba with the multicultural ensemble *Theatrum Mundi* at the end of the ISTA sessions, have enthused numerous theatre people and specialists. A huge amount of documents is kept in the Odin Teatret Archives in Holstebro: photos, drawings, diaries, reports, articles, books, essays and monographic journals of notable historical and scientific interest.²

2. The volume by Mirella Schino containing the inventories of the various paper Fonds (Schino 2018) is particularly useful for learning about the wealth of documents kept in Odin Teatret Archives. Selections of documents are contained in an essay by the same author in *Teatro e Storia*, entitled “ISTA-balena. Documenti e riflessioni sull’International School of Theatre Anthropology” (Schino 2016, 207-39).

There have been recurring cycles of didactic and scientific meetings. The most striking examples are the University of the Eurasian Theatre, founded in 1992 by Eugenio Barba and which, after the first two sessions of 1992 in Padua and 1993 in Fara Sabina, was organised between 1996 and 2009 by Teatro Proskenion in Scilla (Italy); the FLIPT, Intercultural Festival Laboratory of Theatre Practice at Teatro Potlach in Fara Sabina from 2007 to the present day; and from 2008 the annual A Arte Secreta do Ator of the Yinspiração Company by Luciana Martuchelli in Brasília.³

In 2016, at the end of the ISTA session in Albino (Italy), Irene Di Lelio, a 26-year-old Italian director, founder of the Roman company Linee Libere, expressed to Eugenio Barba the desire to make accessible to the young generation the knowledge she had experienced. In 2019, this small company on the edge of the official theatre started the realisation of an ISTA session by allying itself with another group, Teatro Proskenion directed by Vincenzo Mercurio, and with the support of the Fondazione Barba Varley. Overcoming obstacles of all kinds - including two earthquakes and a pandemic - they finally landed on the island of Favignana.

Here from 12 to 22 October 2021 Barba, approaching his 85th birthday, pitched his tent. It is here that, alongside his wealth of knowledge, research, myths and, to use his own terminology, superstitions, he welcomed fifty-two participants from twenty-one countries as well as twenty-four collaborators from the pedagogical and organisational staff.

The architecture of time. Learning to learn

In Favignana, activity began at dawn in silence - an ancient tradition dating back to the first sessions of ISTA - broken by a song by the sea of one of the teachers or participants. It went on until late in the evening with performances and then dinner. Between the beginning and the end, a kaleidoscope of activities.

During the first section of the morning, the four groups of participants - named after the late ISTA teachers Sanjukta Panigrahi, Katsuko Azuma, I Made Pasek Tempo and Augusto Omolu - underwent three hours of practical “learning to learn”. They were working in rotation with the members of an artistic team that Eugenio Barba had formed over time in several previous sessions: Julia Varley (Denmark/UK, Odin Teatret, ISTA 1990), I Wayan Bawa (Bali, ISTA 1995), Ana Woolf (Argentina, ISTA 2004), Keiin Yoshimura (Japan, ISTA 2016), Parvathy Baul (India, ISTA 2016), Caterina Scotti and Alessandro Rigoletti (Italy, Teatro tascabile di Bergamo, ISTA 2016), Alício Amaral and Juliana Pardo (Brazil, 2014).⁴

On these occasions Barba explained the reasons for his interest in their first days of work, enabling the performers to become aware of the shared basic principles on which their technical experience was based; he guided them in the search for those

3. For more information, refer to the sites created by the three organisers: <https://www.proskenion.it/teatro-eurasiano>, <https://www.teatropotlach.org/flipt>, <http://aartesecretadoator.com.br>.

4. Founders of the theatre group Mundo Rodá in São Paulo, they participated in the Symposium on theatre anthropology “The Performer’s Embodied Knowledge. A Dialogue between Techniques” directed by Eugenio Barba at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in November 2014.

tools necessary to see through the repetitiveness of the scenic action; he identified the principles enabling the performers to become familiar with the pre-expressive level, to shape their energy and discover the different qualities of their stage presence.

The second part of the morning - called "Origins: memory and discontinuity" - was dedicated to the presentation of the private and artistic biographies of the individual teachers. This was the time in which *the first day* was brought into focus, stressing the importance that the first steps assume for personal awareness and knowledge. In the terminology of theatre anthropology, the origins correspond to the space-time in which an essential core of principles is incorporated and around which the complex system of the performing body will gradually be organised. The return to the land of their professional origins as presented individually corresponds here to a conscious scrutiny of the principles behind the different qualities of energy determining stage presence, and then relating them one to another.

In the afternoon the working section of "Barbers, interactions and fusions" was under the guidance of Ana Woolf. For two hours the participants, in a search for knowledge, had a double possibility: extra time to work with teachers, or an opportunity to exchange their personal wealth of experience.

Then Eugenio Barba took over with "Learning to see. Presence of the actor and perception of the spectator". It was a dialogue 'in action' with the teachers displaying the performer's sensorial effects on the viewers' kinesthetic sense. In this section, three invited external artists presented the roots of their work: Tiziana Barbiero, actress since 1978 with Teatro tascabile di Bergamo, a specialist in Indian odissi dance; Lydia Koniordou, a renowned interpreter and pedagogue of ancient Greek dramas; Kapila Venu, Indian dancer of mohiniyattam and kutiyattam.

The working day ended with a performance from each of the performing traditions practiced throughout the day.

I have followed Eugenio Barba, Odin Teatret and ISTA since 1990, the year I began my university studies at La Sapienza in Rome. In 1996 I moved to Holstebro and spent several months ordering and cataloguing the plentiful materials preserved in the theatre's video archive. In 2004 I started the process which developed into the extraordinary Odin Teatret Archives, OTA. I attended my first ISTA session in Seville in 2004. Today, as a scholar, what did it mean for me to participate in this session in Favignana?

It was an immersive experience even for me who took part as an observer, often plunged into a state of apnea. It was an adventure with each of my senses subjected to an authentic bombardment of stimuli. In this personal and professional journey, I could invent and carve out a path for myself, even though each activity took place within a strongly organised structure.

Caring for the ability to weave a network of relationships and exchanges is fundamental and demanding. The surprise of what could happen during the meetings in free moments - when eating or taking short breaks - gave continuous forays into states of elation. I somewhat lost the sense of belonging to a physical geography, to a linguistic, cultural and anthropological dimension but rooted in the present. Yet the rhythm of the days was marked in such a way as to generate the constant need to return to the time and space of common work in which the programme continued undaunted in all its intensity.

Learning to teach

It is in the interregnum between these two dimensions - physical and metaphysical at the same time - that the figure of Kapila Venu moved. I met an artist in Favignana who, despite her great pedagogical and stage experience, faced an unexpectedly disorienting “first day” of work. It was not only her first collaboration with Eugenio Barba, but also her original encounter, in the field of practice, with the working language of theatre anthropology. This language is made up of research, analysis and transmission of those transcultural principles that govern stage presence and regulate its different temperatures and energy qualities. In the specific context of ISTA, Kapila Venu is a real representative of the New Generation.

Teaching at ISTA means, among other things, learning from scratch. To do what? To be observed by Barba’s surgical eye scrutinising and analysing the work of the teachers. His gaze offers them the opportunity to look at their incorporated pedagogical practice from an estranged point of view and, in the light of this knowledge, re-read, redesign and go through their familiar technique dominated for years. They are again beginners, and become aware of how the body’s inner organs work. Thus, they return to their well-known practice by asking new questions. It also implies the invention of a physical and verbal working language, at times technical, at times more evocative, always aiming at precision and effectiveness in transmitting an individual and personalised knowledge.

Coming from Kerala, a southern Indian state, the cradle of ancestral dance and theatre forms, Kapila Venu embodies two different forms, both inherited from her parents. She was trained by her mother, Nirmala Paniker, a dancer of mohiniyattam who initiated her as a child to this classical dance; and she studied with her father, G. Venu, a great expert of kutiyattam, the oldest living theatre form in the world. She continued her long training under the guidance of recognised artists such as Madhava Chakyar and Ushu Nangiar. Today Kapila is a dancer and a teacher of international renown.

In the frame of the well organised activities in Favignana, Kapila Venu inhabited an anomalous space which makes it a particularly interesting subject for study. Her exceptional presence was explained by Barba himself on presenting her at the opening meeting on 12 October when the teachers had ten minutes available to introduce themselves to the participants.

“I and Julia Varley, responsible for ISTA, received a letter from Ana Woolf who regretted the absence of Kapila in our pedagogical team. My first reaction was: we already have a sufficient number of teachers; we cannot add one more. Keep in mind that I know Kapila even before she was born. I met her through her father, a great researcher of kutiyattam, who visited Odin Teatret in the early 1970s. A few years ago, when I went to visit him in India, he received me with a performance by Kapila who enthralled me. But as I have already told you, after Sanjukta Panigrahi’s death, I could not take any more⁵ ... When Ana wrote to us, I understood that the time of mourning was over and that Kapila

5. An outstanding Indian dancer of odissi style who contributed to its rediscovery and revitalisation. Sanjukta Panigrahi had collaborated with Barba since 1977. She was one of the co-founders of ISTA in 1980 and participated in ten sessions until her death in 1997 at the age of fifty-three. Since then, no Indian-born artist from traditional forms of dance-theatre has taken her place. Only in 2016 Eugenio Barba invited as teacher Parvathy Baul, a singer, painter and storyteller born in West Bengal, self-trained in the living Baul tradition.

should join us in Favignana. There was no space for her in the already fixed programme, so I proposed that she come as an active guest and make her knowledge available in the short fragments of free time. She accepted. Thanks, Kapila and welcome.”

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers

Kapila is given great freedom. She will have to invent a path within which to present her work and transmit that heritage of traditional knowledge she has learned since she was a child. However, there are obstacles to this freedom: she will have to do it within a pedagogical and research context for which she does not know the codes. She will have to deal with Barba who embodies a figure of a teacher completely different from the one she is used to. He does not pass on traditional knowledge and does not observe and then correct her, but he transforms her into a real object of study. He talks to her, solicits her to repeat over and over again a sequence of movements, asks her constant questions, often incomprehensible or absurd - especially if one thinks of the performing tradition from which she comes - but for which Barba still awaits an answer from her.

Kapila's first teaching participation in ISTA exposes her to a large amount of stimuli and indications that move her away from the paths she recognises, disorienting and confronting her with situations and questions that reveal how unarmed she is. Thus arises the need to grasp firmly at her roots and start again from there. This is the pedagogical process in ISTA for teachers who are preparing to undertake a difficult and delicate operation: to return to learning in order to teach according to a new logic made up of results, paths and discoveries that surprise them too.

I imagine that Kapila in Favignana experienced the amazement of often going back in time, and returning to inhabit the land of her professional origins where she took her first steps which, today, are the “mother cell” of her stage life. Following in the footsteps of my memory and photographic chronicle, I have so far tried to outline the experience of that island within an island which the 16th ISTA session was for me. I would like to highlight some of the phases through which I saw Kapila Venu's journey - so personal and so communal - take place. In retracing her steps, I find her essentially present in two work situations I have already mentioned: those established by the programme in which her double artistic profile emerged as interpreter of mohiniyattam and kutiyattam; and those which she herself created, giving life and conquering a pedagogical space of her own in the afternoon section of “Barbers, interactions and fusions”.

In spite of the undoubted differences between these two situations, I believe there is a red thread that links them: a constant and multiform dialogue that Eugenio Barba had woven with her. In the afternoons, while he observed Kapila's classes, he was a vigilant and silent presence. Only at the end did he approach her to ask her about the work she had done or to give some suggestions for the next day in relation to the pedagogical line she had undertaken. On the occasion of the presentation of her artistic biography on the 18th of October, Barba, on the contrary, intervened actively, often interacting with her to make more evident the gradual apprenticeship process through which she had passed. He invited her not to speak, in order to avoid anticipating and verbally explaining what she had to show by acting. In other cases, Barba's language became more abstract and



Eugenio Barba and Kapila Venu. Photo: Francesco Galli.

metaphorical: “Let me hear your mother’s voice”. He wanted simultaneously to see both the learning child and her mother acting as her first teacher.

According to a well-established tradition at ISTA, in weaving his plot with Kapila, Barba went in search of those tools capable of evoking the precision of the given circumstances in which her training process took place. At the same time, he was looking for ways to present principles, forms and senses in her acting which are alive in the memory of her body-mind, despite their distant temporal roots and the fact that the actor had undergone multiple mutations.

We have witnessed a process between pedagogy and creation, the growth of a cognitive awareness in which we acknowledged the difficulties that the absence of a previous shared work can entail. We have been able to realise how unpredictable the number and shape of the paths are in order to overcome them. And how curiosity and willingness to get naked are fundamental in the process of research and knowledge.

Two qualities, in my eyes, characterised Kapila’s attitude in her first ISTA: her embodiment of a physical and ethical stance, and her predetermination to maintain it. In spite of all the difficulties and obstacles, these elements struck me most about her person, more than the undoubted fascination due to her great enactment and deep knowledge behind the formal beauty, the technical refinement and the evocative power of her stage presence. I felt that it was her ability to preserve this particular predisposition that allowed her to ‘use’ the curiosity with which Barba analysed her work as an opportunity to re-read her own practice and technique. Above all, to question from a new point of view the millenary stage culture to which she belongs.

Kapila spoke about all this when answering a question from a participant who asked her what she was feeling in measuring herself for the first time against the investigation implemented through the tools of theatre anthropology. She declared that for someone like her who is completely immersed in the practice of a traditional technique, the encounter with such research is equivalent to the possibility not so much of making it



Kapila Venu repeating the fragment from *Kalyanasaugandhikam* on a chair. Photo: Francesco Galli

survive by passing it on identical to itself from generation to generation, but of revisiting it through a process of regeneration and analysis of the very principles on which it is based.

It is on this fertile ground of exchange and dialogue that I will conclude with a last episode. During Kapila's first classes, organised in the framework of the afternoon

“Barbers, interactions and fusions”, she had chosen to teach the participants various types of walking and some of the basic exercises on which is based, in the traditional forms of Indian dance-theatre, the expressive impact of the eyes (*netra abhinaya*) and the hands (*hasta abhinaya*). At the same time, she introduced the *rasavayu* technique by which emotions can be evoked through a particular alteration in the breathing.

At the end of the class on October 16th, Barba proposed Kapila to enact the next afternoon a short story from her kutiyattam repertoire. She chose a fragment from *Kalyanasaugandhikam* in which Prince Bhima crosses the jungle in search of the divine flower Saugandhika and witnesses this scene: an elephant is attacked on one side by a python who tries to swallow it and on the other by a lion who jumps on its forehead, tears it open and drinks its blood. The elephant succumbs. Bhima, while observing the scene, declares that the jungle is not a place for cowards, but only for brave souls like his.

The afternoon of October 17 we saw Kapila enter the jungle where, without the help of text, make-up, costumes and rhythmic and musical accompaniment, she gradually transformed herself into each of the different characters that populate the story: from Bhima to the elephant, and from the elephant to the python and the lion who kills it with unmatched ferocity, and then returned again to the figure of Bhima who contemplates the agonising and helpless body of the victim.

As soon as this scene ended, Barba approached Kapila and offered her a chair. Almost whispering in her ear so as not to break the charm of her being inside the jungle, he asked her to tell exactly the same story, but seated. Before us, the intensity of the scene grew, condensing itself into the essential frame of the incredibly expressive quality of Kapila’s eyes and face. A power, which despite being still, reverberated throughout the totality of her body. We entered the jungle once again, witnessing an exemplary story of artistic courage.

At the end of the work, Barba got up and, approaching Kapila, he thanked her with these words: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers”.

The stories I watched in Favignana gave me a sensorial understanding of that underground that runs through the pages and voices of those who, over a long period of time, have participated in the adventure of ISTA, both during its foundation and its growth. In an indescribable way, it is an environment whose physical and inner geography is made up of deep landscapes that change together with the pace and gaze of those who cross them.

The photographic report by Francesco Galli reminds us happy few of a truth that cannot be understood, only lived.■

Translated from Italian by Judy Barba

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