

Foreword



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A Spark Called JTA

The Living Archive as a Dockyard of the Present

JTA - Journal of Theatre Anthropology was born in 2021 from the idea of bringing to life and sowing in the present the wealth of information and documents kept in the Odin Teatret archive in Holstebro, Denmark. The profusion of testimonies on the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), on its development and research on pre-expressivity - that is, the level of stage presence at the basis of the study of theatre anthropology - made a deep impression on a young scholar, Leonardo Mancini, formed by a dear friend, the Italian Franco Perrelli, a specialist in Scandinavian theatre.

Julia Varley and I discussed with Leonardo possible ways of actively transposing this wealth of knowledge into the present. The immediate result was the creation of the site www.jta.ista-online.org with the purpose of collecting and arranging the countless information on theatre anthropology and the ISTA sessions. Another immediate consequence was the creation of *JTA, Journal of Theatre Anthropology*, conceived as an annual open access information source. The Fondazione Barba Varley took on the task and burden of creating an editorial team and publishing the first issue of *JTA* "Origins" which came out in 2021, followed in 2022 by *JTA 2* "Learning to see".

We did not imagine that this initiative would trigger a vast process of resurrection of the documents from past experiences that we started calling the living archive: the effort to abolish the past and make it our contemporary. Thus *JTA*, unintentionally, was the spark that unleashed a complex and multifaceted project by the Fondazione Barba Varley entitled "Sharing Knowledge". Central to this project is LAFLIS, Living Archive Floating Islands (www.laflis.org) whose headquarters are in Lecce, in Salento, the region in Italy where I was born and spent my adolescence. In addition to my library of approximately 6,000 volumes, and a copy of the original documents representing the cognitive legacy of Odin Teatret, LAFLIS aims to be a performative visualisation of Odin Teatret's endeavours as a laboratory. In a succession of stagings visitors will be immersed in theatricalised spaces evoking the adventures of the performances, of the





barbers, of the ISTA sessions, of the University of Eurasian Theatre, of the Magdalena Project - network of women in theatre - and of the Third Theatre, the archipelago of the multifaceted parallel culture of theatre groups.

A question emerges: is theatre just a fleeting art?

A few general reflections

The nature of theatre is ephemeral. What conclusions can we draw from this trivially true statement? We can dive into the culture of the ephemeral. We can, on the contrary, resist the unavoidably transient character of the theatre in an attempt to dilate the theatre's boundaries and effects. We can refuse to accept the predetermined role which it assumes in our culture. This opposition leads to the discovery of a new meaning.

Ephemeral can be understood as 'lasting only a day'. But also 'that changes day by day'. The first meaning evokes the idea of death. The second, on the contrary, suggests the shifting flow that characterises being-in-life.

A performance does not last for long. On the contrary, theatre is made up of traditions, conventions, institutions, habits and techniques that remain over time. The weight of their permanence is so strong that they often prevent life from emerging and replace it with routine. Routine is another natural boundary of the theatre.

Fighting against the ephemeral nature of the theatre does not mean protecting what remains - the tradition - or recording performances. 'The electric shadows' (as the Chinese have called cinema) and the contemporary 'electronic shadows' do not threaten the theatre. They risk seducing it.

Cinema and electronics realise what was unthinkable until the beginning of the 20th century: performances that remain practically unchanged over time. Yet they disguise the understanding that the essential dimension of a theatre performance resists time not by becoming fixed in a recording, but by *transforming itself*.

The extreme limit of these transformations is the first stage of the *living archive*: the memories of the individual spectators. This transformation is enhanced by what complements it: the tacit knowledge of actors/dancers, their incorporated know-how, their ability to think with their feet and imagine with their head. The death of an actor/dancer corresponds to the axiom of the Malian anthropologist and writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ, who declared 'in Africa, when an elderly person dies, it is the burning of a library'. Amadou was a great defender of oral literature - *orature* as it was defined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu.

A living memory is a living library, a living museum is a place of metamorphosis.

The past as proof of the impossible that has become possible

We have become who we are because we have come across a book, a painting, a film, a melody. Or we have met a man or a woman who has guided us to open our eyes to another reality. Or because we have not experienced such an encounter. Sometimes the dead lead our way. We think of them as ancestors, not only for their creative power, but above all for their ability to escape their era's power of ideas. For them it was essential to persevere, distilling an ancient essence out of time. We need *the very ancient* to be able to be *amazed* again, but *better*. Being amazed means rediscovering a hidden childhood, starting anew, scrutinising the past with clean eyes.

The *very ancient* is at the roots of the actor/dancer's art. In the concreteness of silence and corporality, actors/dancers begin their creative journey by orienting themselves backwards in their memory. Thus, they escape the Present, which flees and has already become the past.

Actors/dancers embody life and society in rhythms and movements by visualising the passage of time and the two faces of reality: the visible and the invisible. Life in the Present is physical, mental, sensual and wild. A succession of inhalations and exhalations modulate gestures and words, lessening every noise inside us spectators and provoking a fever that is silence and amazement. And it is already a memory.

The past is not behind our backs. It is above us. It is what remains of the vertical dimension. History, the past we know, is the description of the *impossible that has become possible*. It gives us a glimpse of the world and the theatre as they could be. Our discontent with the Present is nurtured by this close dialogue with that which was different. It is this discontent that we call *spiritual life*. The real and different interlocutors are the dead, those who are invisibly present. The past is the only interculturalism that challenges us because it is vertical.

Why do we use the term 'past' only in the singular? Why doesn't the plural exist for this temporal dimension, which enlivens our awareness and influences our choices so much? We imagine possible futures. Can we also speak of possible pasts?

Theatre is a fleeting art that produces pasts. The theatres are dockyards of pasts. In these pasts the technical and transcendent essence of the *very ancient* is hidden, the invisible and intangible value of the craft. The pasts are underground streams in which each generation can quench its thirst in the process of building its Present.

All ages are *our* age. All theatres are *our* theatre in the Present.

'Before being Mona Lisa, a painting is a surface covered with colours distributed in a certain order', the French painter Maurice Denis wisely stated.

Before being a character, an actor is a living body that speaks and moves. This is the pre-expressive basis of the actor's creative process, the level of organisation of stage presence that determines the expressive efficacy that will strike the viewer's senses, memory and imagination. *How* to extract from the pasts of the theatres the multiple senses and the know-how that enabled them to achieve this expressive efficacy? *Where*



can this cognitive patrimony be exploited *today*, guaranteeing that everyone can pursue their own white whale, their own obsession?

Scholars and people of the craft cannot ignore the theatre's material culture: the ways in which actors, in a given period, live, think, produce and construct their creative and social relationships. For such a study, other cognitive, emotional and social premises are needed.

It is necessary to invent a refuge of practical inspiration that is also a springboard for the imagination. We could consider this refuge as a new incarnation of the two first libraries, that of Alexandria and Pergamum. Here, literati and experts in writing - a recent human technique which was also spreading throughout Europe - collaborated by copying and reproducing on papyrus and parchment manuscripts acquired with difficulty in various parts of the known world. It was the first attempt to transpose into the Present and the future a knowledge essentially linked to oral memory. The *living archive* is inspired by this type of environment. We could also say that it is the equivalent of the 'laboratory theatre', such as it was realised in the last century.

As a transformative environment, a sanctuary of an anachronistic Present and recycling dockyard of the past, the *living archive* protects documents and artefacts arousing the silence that is the MEMORY of the *very ancient*. It gives intensified expression to this legacy, and this TRANSMISSION develops relationships, collaborations, publications, films, theoretical meetings, exchanges of experiences, specialistic courses, training and learning. Finally, the *living archive* is TRANSFORMATION, the palingenesis of a cognitive patrimony, a metamorphosis into artistic forms and languages that triggers individual and collective associations and memories. It is a process that emanates as an unexpected sensorial existence from tacit and inert papers and objects.

The *living archive* is an operative space, social and emotional, where archivists, scholars, theatre/dance people and visual arts artists unite in the passion of freeing the past from its cage and letting it fly into the Present. All of them struggle doggedly with a question: can something else be made of the pasts other than what they are, that is, just pasts?

When memory fades, it is not the knowledge of the *very ancient* in the theatre that is eclipsed but the imagination of the future. Jules Michelet expressed it with a sentence whose density is reminiscent of a *haiku*: each epoch dreams of the next one and creates it by dreaming.

Translated by Judy Barba