

Eugenio Barba's Theatre Anthropology



Sanjukta Panigrahi and Eugenio Barba. ISTA 4, Holstebro, Denmark, 1986. Photo: Torben Huss

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Barba, the Third Theatre and the Discovery of Theatre Anthropology

Abstract: This is the text of a lecture which was given by Marco De Marinis at the 3rd International Conference on Theatre Anthropology, "Odin Teatret and Theatre Anthropology in Greece", 17 and 18 March 2023. The conference was organised by: Theatre Laboratory of Drama and Speech Department of Theatre Studies; Co-organisers: Centre of Theatre Anthropology, Heraklion-Crete, Fondazione Barba Varley, University of Patras, Science and Technology Museum. De Marinis's speech highlights parallels and complementarities between the notion of Third Theatre, Theatre Anthropology and the genesis of ISTA, establishing that Barba's writings relating to Third Theatre address the issues of "why" and "for whom" theatre is done, while those relating to theatre anthropology question the "how", and therefore the techniques. Furthermore, the Italian scholar defines theatre anthropology as a discovery deriving from the work carried out by directors-pedagogues during the 20th century and from the work of actors who, at a pre-expressive level, do not learn to interpret or act but build their stage presence. Finally, after having defined the extra-daily techniques as those that the actor applies to put in practice the pre-expressive principles, De Marinis outlines three lessons that he learned by participating over twenty years in several ISTA sessions.

Keywords: *Third Theatre, Theatre Anthropology, ISTA, Extra-daily technique, Pre-expressive principles*

Foreword

What is the *object* of Theatre Anthropology (henceforth T.A.)? The study of the human being in a situation of organised representation. "In an organised performance, the performer's physical and mental presence is modelled according to principles which are different from those of daily life."¹

It is at one and the same time a field of study, a theory and a method of analysis. There are two key bibliographical references:

- *The Paper Canoe. A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (1995), by Eugenio Barba;
- *The Secret Art of the Performer. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (1991; last revised edition *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (2006), by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese.

Of course, much has been written and published in over forty years all over the world. The main works have been produced by scholars gravitating around ISTA - International School of Theatre Anthropology, founded by Eugenio Barba in 1979. From 2021 the *Journal of Theatre Anthropology* has been published, animated by two young scholars, Leonardo Mancini and Simone Dragone, under the supervision of Barba and Julia Varley and of the Fondazione Barba Varley.

1. Barba 1993, 9.



First point to clarify: *the relationship between T.A. and ISTA*.

Barba's paper *Theatre Anthropology: First Hypothesis* is the transcript of a conference held in Warsaw in May 1980 published in his *Beyond the Floating Islands*.² Here he proposed for the first time the hypothesis that "transcultural principles are the basis of every performance technique".³ The first session of ISTA was held in Bonn in October 1980.

There is therefore an almost perfect contemporaneity, all the more so since, as we shall see, the inaugural event in Bonn represented the transformation of a proposal made to Barba from Germany more than a year earlier, in the spring of 1979.⁴

In any case it can be said with certainty that the fundamental theory of T.A. did not depend on ISTA but, on the contrary, that ISTA was created as a place, among other things, for testing those first hypotheses. However, the sessions of the 1980s and early 1990s (no fewer than seven) certainly contributed to changing or at least clarifying a theory already well outlined but not yet fully defined. The result of these influences is found in the 1993 book, *The Paper Canoe*, a text on which, not surprisingly, the author never felt he had to make substantial changes or additions. Somehow, a definitive text.

What ISTA is/what ISTA was

ISTA was founded on *two fundamental ideas*:

- to supply the conditions for *a concrete encounter between theory and practice of theatre*, through the challenge of an exchange of roles: pushing the "bookish people" (scholars, critics, operators) to confront the dimension of practical doing, from exercises to dramaturgy; and vice versa asking the actors, and more broadly the "stage people", to confront the dimension of theoretical discussion and analysis of their practical doing;
- the second idea, no less important than the first, was that of *getting East and West to meet*, inviting non-Western actors from various Asian traditions (Japan, China, India, Bali, Korea), to meet Western actors, mainly but not only those of Odin Teatret. This encounter culminated in the sessions' final performances, which soon assumed the generic title of *Theatrum Mundi*, performances created by Barba together with all the participating artists. It is worth noting that from 1994 (session in Londrina, Brazil) the fixed pedagogical ensembles of the School also began to include Afro-Brazilian dancer Augusto Omolu and a group of musicians linked, like Omolu himself, to the world of candomblé (unfortunately he died tragically in 2013).

Regarding the influence exerted by ISTA on the theory of T.A., one cannot help but notice how, in the latter, the East/West opposition on which it was based in the 1980s declined in *The Paper Canoe* in favour of a North Pole/South Pole diametric. Barba had noted that in the East, too, there are non-coded performance modes and that, conversely, the West also has codified performance traditions, such as classical dance and the mime of Decroux:

2. Barba 1986a.

3. Barba 1996, 24.

4. Barba 1996, 24.

Let's consider, to begin with, two different categories of actors, which are commonly identified as 'Oriental Theatre' and 'Western Theatre'. To avoid false associations with actual cultural and geographical areas we will overturn the compass and use it in an imaginary way, talking about a North Pole and a South Pole.

The North Pole actor is apparently the less free. He models his scenic behaviour according to a well-tested network of rules that define a coded style or genre. This code of physical or vocal action, fixed in a peculiar and detailed artificiality (be it ballet or one of the classical Asian theatres, modern dance, opera or mime), is susceptible to evolution and innovation.

The South Pole actor does not belong to a performance genre characterised by a detailed stylistic code. He has not been given a repertoire of mandatory rules to obey. He himself must construct the rules on which to rely.⁵

Another and perhaps even more certain influence of ISTA can be traced to the fact that the theory of T.A. quickly sheds its original hard-science dimension, referencing biologists, physiologists, neurophysiologists and experimental psychologists (invited to the first sessions of ISTA).⁶ These citations would vanish from *The Paper Canoe*, but in reality they disappeared much earlier, in the second version of the founding essay, *Theatre Anthropology*, 1981.⁷

On Barba's passion for science in the founding years of T.A. we have the authoritative testimony of, among others, Ferdinando Taviani, who recalled that, at the time of the foundation of ISTA, Barba "read a lot on Niels Bohr, immersed himself in books on biology and discussions with men of science".⁸

But, in this regard, above all see the recent contribution of Leonardo Mancini.⁹ Mancini has consulted the ISTA Archive and Barba's library to obtain a broad idea of the director's interdisciplinary scientific reading in the second half of the 1970s: texts by physiologists, neuroscientists, biologists, anthropologists such as Ernesto De Martino, concerning yoga, posturology, effort, balance, non-ordinary states of consciousness etc.¹⁰ In particular, the importance is confirmed by the dialogue with a scientist such as biologist Henry Laborit, facilitated by co-founder of ISTA Jean-Marie Pradier. Among other things, the latter organised the Karpasz symposium in Poland in September 1979, attended, as well as by Laborit and Barba, by Jerzy Grotowski. Mancini argues that a key notion for T.A. such as 'levels of organisation' was inspired by that of the 'three levels of bio-systemic theory' developed by Laborit.¹¹ More generally, he emphasises how T.A. confronted itself with "the study of the complexity of the development of life at different

5. Barba 1993, 13.

6. See Barba 1986b (on the second session of ISTA, in Volterra) and above all (on the Bonn session) Ruffini 1981.

7. De Marinis 2011, 44 and 46.

8. Taviani 1994.

9. Mancini 2021.

10. Mancini 2021, 26-35.

11. Mancini 2021, 37-38.

levels of behaviour", practiced by biology. The pilot discipline, as is well known, in the contemporary sciences of complex systems.¹²

Genesis of Theatre Anthropology

T.A. was created almost simultaneously with the theory of the Third Theatre and is complementary to it. The two founding texts of Third Theatre were produced by Barba between 1976 (the homonymous Belgrade manifesto) and 1979 (the essay *Theatre-culture*). But since then Barba has been ceaselessly attentive to the phenomenon valorised and defined by him (and therefore also, to some extent, by him *created*), as shown by the articles in a section of the volume *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt* (first published in 1996 and constantly expanded in subsequent editions).¹³ Throughout the 1980s the discussion on T.A. and that on Third Theatre took place in parallel, even if they eventually separated and were no longer published together, as they had been in the early years.

It happens for example that, in the inaugural volume of T.A. published by Feltrinelli in 1981, *La corsa dei contrari. Antropologia Teatrale* (The Way of Opposites. Theatre Anthropology), the essay *Antropologia Teatrale*, revision and development of the Polish conference of the previous year, coexists with two texts that do not yet refer to it explicitly, such as the above-mentioned *Teatro-cultura*, written between 1978 and 1979, and *La corsa dei contrari*, which was written as an answer to two questions posed by the CNRS in 1979 concerning the significance of the actor today and his training, and released in France for Ed. du CNRS in 1981.

Actually *La corsa dei contrari*, although not yet openly referring to T.A., anticipates many of its points. It already talks about *bios* of the actor and 'energy' is already a keyword. In reference to Asian actors, it speaks of 'general rules' that serve 'to model energy', according to a 'logic' which is that of 'oppositions', starting from the first one,

the basic opposition that regulates our biological presence: the opposition between our weight that brings us downwards and the backbone that pushes us upwards and keeps us erect.¹⁴

Immediately after, Barba observes how

as soon as [the actor] begins to shift his balance, to make it precarious, a whole series of other oppositions arises from the opposition between weight and spine: different oppositions between different parts of the body transform his mass of energy, and make the body alive.¹⁵

In short, the pre-expressive principles are already clearly stated, without having been given a name yet and without explicit reference to the natural sciences.

12. Mancini 2021, 38.

13. Barba 1999.

14. Barba 1986, 86.

15. Barba 1986, 99.

Conversely, at the beginning the early writings on T.A. were hosted in the volumes in which Barba gradually collected all his theoretical work, such as the above-mentioned *Beyond the Floating Islands*, without meriting a special section. This would no longer happen in the 1990s. And in fact they are missing from *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, eleven years later. By now T.A. had assumed a theoretical substance in its own right and, after *The Paper Canoe*, it was the *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* that hosted subsequent interventions by Barba and others on the subject.

There is not only theoretical but factual evidence of the quasi-osmotic *contiguity* existing at the origins between Third Theatre and T.A. The first session of ISTA, that of Bonn, was intended by German promoter and organiser, Hans-Jürgen Nagel, as a theatre event similar to encounters on Third Theatre directed by Barba, at the request of UNESCO, in Belgrade in 1976, in Bergamo, Italy, in 1977 and in Leiketio and Madrid in Spain in 1979. Nagel, head of the Bonn Kulturstadtamt, had read about them in the UNESCO magazine and made the suggestion to Barba, who in that year packed with negotiations and preparations transformed the event from a Third Theatre gathering into the first session of ISTA.¹⁶

Returning to the texts, beyond the substantial contemporaneity between those on Third Theatre and those on T.A., what is striking is also and above all - as I have already mentioned - their evident *complementarity*. The writings on Third Theatre address the question of *why* and *for whom* theatre is done, from a substantially socio-political perspective, while the writings on T.A. return to the question of *how*, that is, of *technique*. And I say 'return' because this issue was known to be at the origins of Barba and Odin Teatret's theatre journey.

Also, the recipient seems to change: there, the group, here, the individual actor, or rather "the actor as such". But the real interlocutor (though not the only one) in reality always remains the same: the young people of group theatre, those for whom Barba coined the name of Third Theatre.

The (double) knight's move

With the 1976 manifesto Barba had created a movement, or rather had organised into a movement a vast, heterogeneous theatrical reality that already existed or was emerging.

Now this movement expected from him an aesthetic, or in any case an imitable, reproducible theatre model. (Let's not forget that for many, in fact, Odin Teatret was the model.) Many perhaps expected an actual *school*, since almost all the actors of the groups were self-taught.

Barba surprised them with an authentic *knight's move* (already anticipated, as we have seen, in *The Way of Opposites*, which answered the question of actors' training). It was actually the second time he did this. In the 1976 manifesto on Third Theatre, too, he had not given an aesthetic guide but only, and quite differently, ethical-political indications: the group as a 'floating island', the value of 'asociality', the possibility of transforming one's own discontent and one's own needs into shared theatrical action.

But this time the surprise was even greater - indeed not everyone, inside and outside of the movement, understood. Barba addressed the question of *how*, that is, of

16. Barba 1996, 24.

technique, not to elaborate and put forward his (own) acting method but on the contrary to investigate *pre-acting*, the under-explored foundations of the actor's art.

In other words, he asked himself how to pass on experiences lived and fundamental knowledge acquired to young people in the groups without conditioning them too much artistically, that is - in his words -

how to convey to them an understanding of certain essential facts without dazzling them with our results, without them being tempted to repeat what we have had to do.

These words are from the Polish conference of 1980, at its conclusion. They were followed by this clarification:

It took me many years to solve this problem and one of the reasons for my interest in Theatre Anthropology was the need to find and make possible another way of transmitting one's own experiences. ISTA is the realisation of the dream of a different form of pedagogy. On the one hand, the challenge of using the instruments of the natural sciences, on the other, the search for a new pedagogical practice, especially for groups of the Third Theatre.¹⁷

The very term 'school' is used in a paradoxical and provocative way. Because ISTA is rather a *non-school*. As he explained in 1990:

ISTA was not and will not be organised into courses, lessons and subjects. Rather, it is the result of continuous changes of groups that join and divide, of programmes that are created almost day by day, week by week, and that can be overturned and passed over just as fast as they were conceived. There are no classes, but almost ephemeral families gathered round the experience of theatre masters from different countries of the East and the West.

Only because the dis-order is conscious and constant can one perceive how deep is the order: not the mechanical delivery of a study course, but organic development of the individual paths of each participant.¹⁸

Theatre Anthropology's new thinking

For almost three centuries theoretical studies of the actor have focussed on techniques of expression. Or rather, on the relationship between expression and reality and that between expression and feeling.

From the 18th century onwards the key question for this second relationship was: should the actor feel what he expresses (as a character, usually) or not? As is known, the answers were positioned along a very wide spectrum between opposite poles: feeling vs. not feeling, that is, identification vs. non-identification.

17. Barba 1986a, 122.

18. Barba 1981, 7.

With the hypotheses of T.A. Barba shifted the attention to what lies *before* and *below* expression, to *pre-expressivity*, and makes it the foundation, usually not visible, of the art of the actors and their stage performances. This has certain important consequences:

- He does not elaborate a method but rather a pre-method, i.e., going back to the etymology of the word, a *way* along which everyone can construct *their own* effective method, perhaps very different from others. In Barba's words, in T.A. the actor does not learn techniques but 'learns to learn':

In general, the profession of actor begins with the assimilation of a technical baggage that is then personalised. Knowledge of the principles governing the stage bios allows something more: learning to learn. This is of enormous importance to those who choose to push the boundaries of a specialised technique or who are forced to do so. Actually learning to learn is essential for everyone. It is the condition for dominating one's technical knowledge, and not being dominated by it.¹⁹

- T.A. does not provide a ready-made, turnkey acting technique, much less a method or system of acting. On the contrary, going deep into the pre-expression dimension, it indicates *conditions of efficacy* for various possible techniques, methods and aesthetics, often very different from each other.
- By defining comparatively the transcultural principles that govern the 'pre-expressive basis' of acting performance, T.A. not only identifies a possible unitary foundation of aesthetics, or of different acting styles (Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Copeau, Brecht...). It also highlights a foundation common to acting traditions from different theatrical and dancing cultures and civilisations, distant in space but also in time. These are the famous "principles-that-return", whose use has proved fruitful even in historical research, for example in the study of the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte.²⁰

The pre-expressive basis constitutes the elementary level of organisation of the theatre. The different levels of organisation of performance are inseparable and indistinguishable for spectators. They can be separated only by abstraction in a situation of analytical research, or by technical means, in the work of composition of the actor. The ability to concentrate on the pre-expressive level enables an expansion of knowledge with consequences both on a practical and on a critical and historical level.²¹

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the notion of "levels of organisation". Thanks to it, for the first time, acting performance is described as a complex organism, made up of a multiplicity of interconnected dimensions.

19. Barba 1993, 9.

20. I refer to my study De Marinis 2008. But, on the Commedia dell'Arte, see also Taviani 1986. And then see the collective volume Guccini-Valenti 1992.

21. Barba 1993, 23.

Archaeology of T.A. and of the pre-expressive

Was it an invention or a discovery? As in the case of Third Theatre, Barba invents the *name* (pre-expressive) but certainly not the *thing*, which already existed. At least for those, myself included, who believe in the objective validity of pre-expressivity. But it goes without saying that in this field, as in many others, the invention of the name, with the profound redefinition of the thing that it obviously entails, is almost everything. In short, it is an authentic scientific discovery. Of course theatre science functions differently from the so-called hard sciences, such as physics or biology, and therefore it cannot contain either refutations or demonstrations in the strict sense of the terms.

Appropriately, already at ISTA in Bonn, Grotowski spoke of 'pragmatic laws' and Taviani, in 1990, proposed the definition of 'empirical study of the comparisons between theatrical behaviours'.²² Barba himself had immediately moved in the same direction. In the above-mentioned preface to his book on ISTA Bonn, in February 1981, he wrote:

In October 1980, in Bonn, we sometimes had the impression that we were searching for acting laws as clear and definitive as the laws governing physics and biology. Today we know that the humility of science is not granted us, and that we must accept the ambition of identifying knowledge useful to the practice of the actor. This does not involve seeking laws, but studying rules of conduct.²³

A few months later, in the foundational essay of 1981, with the second session of ISTA behind him, he further clarified:

Theatre anthropology does not seek universally true principles, but useful indications. It has not the humility of a science, but the ambition to identify knowledge useful to the action of the actor. It does not want to discover 'laws', but to study rules of behaviour. [...] The 'principles-that-return' are not proof of the existence of a 'science of theatre', or of any universal laws; they are particularly good advice, indications that have a strong probability of being useful to theatrical practice.²⁴

Once confirmed that with T.A. we are facing a discovery and not an invention, we must immediately add that in reality even the discovery is not entirely attributable to Barba alone, because before him many had already worked on it, but without explicitly focussing on it, without adequately thematising it. To whom am I referring? Of course to the leading directors, and more precisely to the pedagogical directors, founders of studios and ateliers in the first half of the 20th century. And then of course to Grotowski, founder of the first theatre-laboratory and Barba's teacher.

The exercises, the training in the laboratory, even the improvisations under certain aspects, are nothing more than the work of the actor on a pre-expressive level: composition

22. Taviani 1990, 180.

23. Barba 1981, 8.

24. Barba 1991, 8.

work without content, that is, made of *pure forms*. A work through which the actor does not learn to express, to represent or act, but learns to build his own *presence*. Perhaps Etienne Decroux, creator of corporeal mime, came closest on a theoretical level, in his book *Paroles sur le mime* where he speaks of 'presences that do not represent'.

Pre-expressive principles and extra-daily techniques

The pre-expressive principles are basically three (although sometimes Barba has been discordant about numbering and naming):

- principle of *alteration of balance* (Decroux's *déséquilibre, imbalance*);
- principle of *opposition*: every movement must start on the opposite side to the one where it is directed (Decroux, Meyerhold's *otkaz*); but it also concerns the opposition between different types of energy: (hard/soft, *animus/anima, keras/manis*);
- principle of *simplification*: "omission of some elements to highlight others, which thus appear essential"²⁵ (*isolation* in modern dance, *diegetic ellipse-raccourci* in mime).

Actually from the start Barba has also spoken of another principle, that of 'coherent incoherence', which disappears at a certain point to re-emerge in his 1993 essay.²⁶ Personally, I prefer to consider this a *meta-principle*, superordinate to the other three and somehow a summary of them; like that of 'waste of energy', which constitutes their common foundation.

Too often, especially on the part of T.A.'s detractors, pre-expressive principles and extra-daily techniques have been confused. Instead, they are two completely different entities.

Extra-daily techniques are those techniques of the body and voice by which the actor, within different cultures and performance traditions, applies and puts into practice the *pre-expressive principles*:

Our body is used substantially differently in everyday life and in situations of representation. In the daily context, the technique of the body is conditioned by culture, social status and occupation. But in a situation of representation there is a different body technique. A daily technique can therefore be distinguished from an extra-daily technique.²⁷

Principles are not obviously visible, techniques are, although not always with the naked eye. And so we deduce the pre-expressive principles from the extra-daily techniques. This is a delicate point. In any case it must be clear that it is the pre-expressive principles, and only they, that are *transcultural*, not the extra-daily techniques. For example, the transcultural principle of alteration of balance translates into very different and culturally codified extra-daily techniques, in Asia as in the West: in *noh*, in *kathakali*, in Balinese dance-theatre, in Beijing opera; in classical dance and in corporeal mime.

This confusion has produced many misunderstandings and many unfair criticisms.

25. Barba 1991, 9.

26. Barba 1993, 25.

27. Barba 1993, 30.

Conclusion: the three lessons of ISTA

In the opening text of T.A., Barba clearly indicated the two *original objectives*:

- 1 - 'The challenge of using the tools of the natural sciences';
- 2 - 'The search for a new pedagogical practice'.²⁸

Although the initial focus on science quickly lessened, as we have seen, the theoretical ambition has never disappeared, although it has been redimensioned.

In reality, the coexistence between these two different instances has never been easy. The idea, developed immediately after Bonn, and perhaps also thanks to Bonn, that T.A. consisted 'only' of 'good advice' for actors has never completely annulled the other, much more ambitious idea that T.A. could enable one to point to authentic 'laws' of behaviour of the human being on stage, therefore of each actor as such, and that these laws could also exert their influence on other levels of theatre organisation.

The Paper Canoe, a very ambitious essay right from its subtitle, tried to bring together these two instances, one pragmatic and the other theoretical, in a fascinating unitary framework, strongly nourished by historical references. Nevertheless, the text gives the impression that two very different theatrical anthropologies coexist in it.²⁹ But this is not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps that is why *The Paper Canoe* has never had a sequel, while *The Secret Art of the Performer*, which was quickly renamed *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, has been constantly updated.

I would like to close by briefly mentioning the *three great lessons* that I learned in twenty years of attending ISTA sessions:

- the lesson of *displacement* (or rather of *disorientation*), with the questioning of false safeguards and deceptive protections of role (as I mentioned at the beginning, at ISTA the theorists were urged to personally confront themselves with practical work, training and creation, and vice versa);
- the lesson of *direct practical experience*: experimenting directly with your own body and mind, or rather with your own *body-mind*, what happens when you try to perform an exercise or improvisation is fundamental to the work of a professional spectator (or, in my case, a scholar, a historian);
- last but certainly not least, the lesson of *indirect practical experience*. Indirect practical experience is that acquired at ISTA following for whole days, and often for several days without interruption, the demonstrations of actors or performance rehearsals. Very long and often very boring days, spent watching seated for hours and hours, struggling with the desire to go elsewhere or with the need to sleep. Yet, during these endless sessions, where it seems that nothing ever happens and everything repeats itself relentlessly, something *passes* of the actor's work and its technical details: it passes *through* your eyes (and ears), and without the spectator always being aware of it, *something*

28. Barba 1986a, 122.

29. For an in-depth analysis on this subject, please refer to De Marinis 2011. Initially this essay appeared as a postface to the collective volume De Marinis 1997, 225-93.

decisive, which profoundly changes your vision, your way of being a spectator, of being in the theatre, of talking about it and writing about it. Something that, in any case, cannot be acquired in any other way.

I am convinced that my way of studying theatre and writing about it was greatly influenced by the encounter with T.A. in the early 1980s, and by my long attendance at this anomalous, fascinating non-school that was, and still is, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, and the extraordinary 'tribe' of its participants.

Translated by Julia Campbell Hamilton

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