

Foreword



Eugenio Barba

Dancing Questions

Am I too old to found a journal of theatre anthropology? I'm 84, 22 books and hundreds of articles behind me. Do I still have something to say? Don't I risk repeating what my experience has made me put on paper so many times in so many different ways?

Yet some questions keep dancing in my head. They are the same ones I asked myself when I embarked on my theatre journey in the early 60s of the last century. Their simplicity fed my insecurity: *what* is the essence of theatre? *Why* do I want to do theatre? *How* can I appropriate theatrical knowledge? They prodded me to look for people who could help me unravel these questions thanks to their familiarity with the history of the profession or their technical knowledge.

I speak of people in plural because, looking back in time, I realise that I have always sought energy from a mosaic of relationships, from the collective discipline of a humble craftsmanship, whose consistency can transcend into a complex experience. My whole theatre biography is made up of questions and the need for answers, partly satisfied thanks to the sharing of thought and action with men and women who are exceptional in my eyes. They constituted particular environments: a team of craftsmen, a collective creative mind of actors, a gathering of master performers from different traditions, an association of inquisitive scholars, capable of discovering what they were not looking for and of knowingly intervening in the reality of ideas and practice.

Eigil Winje's workshop in Oslo where I learned rigorous precision by welding a profusion of metal pieces into a portable heater to warm Norwegian soldiers in Lapland; the crew of *Talabot*, a merchant ship; the unknown *Teatr 13 Rzędów* in Opole, Poland, with Jerzy Grotowski, Ludwik Flaszen, Jerzy Gurawski and their actors; the unrivaled group of actors from *Odin Teatret*; the amazing team of "performer-masters" of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA); the lasting partnership with some scholars, and among them those of the Italian journal *Teatro e Storia* and those of the Institute of Dramaturgy at the University of Århus: my questions have danced with the people of these constellations and nourished my professional and intellectual roots.

It is understandable that today I resume one of these questions that my *daimon* keeps whispering in my mind: *what does the tacit knowledge, the technique, the incorporated know-how of the actor consist of?* And that I face this question together with a group of people who are willing to climb this crystal mountain with me.

Thus, JTA was born, a *Journal of Theatre Anthropology*. From the desire to confront this question once again and scrutinise it also through the gaze, experience and interest of a couple of young scholars - Simone Dragone and Leonardo Mancini - who are on the editorial board together with Rina Skeel and Julia Varley. But I also wished to gather around me the scholarly friends who in the past took my questions seriously. They make up the scientific committee of JTA, inveterate veterans who let themselves be tempted by this new adventure.



So here we are, retracing the stages of the birth of theatre anthropology and reflecting upon this operative science: the scenic anatomy of the actor/dancer.

The first time

Simone Dragone, who presides over OTA, the Odin Teatret Archives, tells me that I used the term theatre anthropology for the first time at the international conference “Theatre Research and Cultural Diversity” organised in Trappeto by Beno Mazzone and his Teatro Libero in collaboration with the Faculty of Philosophy and Languages of the University of Palermo. The title of my speech was “Knowing or Understanding” and it took place on 11 May 1980.¹

There are two possibilities in human life to know and to learn. One through a logical, analytical, linear, intellectual process; the other through experience. They are two equally important ways of coming into contact, of absorbing, transforming and distilling what we live into knowledge. These two ways are so complementary that they cannot be translated into each other's language.

For me, theatre is experience. It is not linear rational knowledge, but simultaneity. It is a dialectic between a series of elements that coexist in the space and time of the theatre performance and make it different from other expressive means requiring linearity: film, writing and verbal language. (...) I began to study oriental theatres and the techniques of their actors. I viewed these theatres as a codified repertoire of styles and conventions, just as western theatre artists had done who had dealt with them before me.

About three years ago, in 1978, a situation arose that shook this imprinting with all the misunderstandings it generates. Some of my actors had gone to Asia and on their return to Odin Teatret they showed their travel experiences. (...) Unexpectedly I saw them perform Balinese dances and kathakali scenes. This surprised me for two reasons: I doubted the usefulness for a western actor of learning codified theatrical forms and reproducing them faithfully; I couldn't imagine how they could be used in practice. They were ornaments, no doubt refined, with which the actors adorn themselves. But if they do not result in a form of understanding that stimulates their personal development rooted in the training of their theatre and their specific historical situation, the forms they had learned were useless.

Seeing my actors' work with Asian styles - implying a different way of using their body - questions began to arise. And these questions have become one of the main themes of my research: theatre anthropology.

The term anthropology, as it was defined at the beginning of the 20th century, is the study of man (*sic*) at a biological and socio-cultural level. Theatre anthropology means the study of man in a performing situation on a biological and socio-cultural level. Is such a science possible?

My lecture ended by introducing my project for a school where teachers teach nothing. It was ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology which took place in Bonn, Germany, during the entire month of October 1980 and continued in November with three one-week sessions in Holstebro (Denmark), Porsgrunn (Norway) and Stockholm (Sweden).

1. Barba 1983, 26-7

Twenty-five oriental actors are the teaching masters of this school in which we do *not learn to know but learn to understand*. The difficulty is to find pedagogues who do not teach anything so it is impossible to imitate them. Hence my choice of oriental actors. It would be absurd to learn oriental techniques for a short time. What would they do with them afterwards? Oriental actors allow us to understand with the body. We must be able to see not the conventions and styles, but the laws that guide their stage presence, and apply these in our European bodies. Starting from there, one can individually build a new pedagogy that is based on this understanding of certain processes in one's own body.²

In this lecture I also explained that what I called laws were hypotheses. In fact, a week later, on May 19, 1980 in Warsaw, at the 2nd International Theatre Meeting of Akademia Ruchu, I entitled my speech "Theatre Anthropology: First Hypotheses".³

A short recapitulation

I tested and developed my first hypotheses in the ISTA sessions in an uninterrupted dialogue with artists and scholars involved in this laboratory of pure research on stage presence of the actor/dancer. In 1986, together with Nicola Savarese, I published *Anatomy of the Actor* in French and Spanish thanks to the courage of Patrick Pezin in France and Edgar Ceballos in Mexico who did not hesitate to spread this new field of study. In 1991, a revised and increased edition - *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer*, was published in English by Richard Gough and his Centre for Performance Research. He had to fight at length to overcome the scepticism of Routledge Publishing House about the unheard neologism "theatre anthropology" and the use of the term "dictionary" for such an eccentric publication based on the visual effectiveness of hundreds of illustrations. I dealt with the recurring principles in the actor/dancer's craft in *The Paper Canoe. A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (1995) analysing them in the light of western theatre reformers' practice - from Stanislavski to Grotowski - and of various Asian acting traditions. In 2008, I summarised what I knew in the preface of a book edited by Clelia Falletti in Italy.

I explained that in addition to cultural anthropology, which today is often referred to simply as "anthropology", there are many other "anthropologies": criminal anthropology, philosophical anthropology, physical anthropology, paleoanthropic anthropology. In each ISTA session it is emphasised and repeated that the term anthropology is not used in the sense of cultural anthropology, but is a new field of investigation applied to the human being in an organised performance situation.

The only affinity with cultural anthropology lies in the questioning of what is evident: one's own tradition. This implies the movement, the journey, the strategy of a detour that allows us to understand more accurately our own culture. Through the comparison with what appears foreign, our gaze is trained to become both involved and detached.

No misunderstandings must be possible: theatre anthropology does not deal with those levels of organisation that consent the paradigms of cultural anthropology to be applied to theatre and dance. It is not the study of performative phenomena in those

3. Barba 1981, 94-100.

cultures that are traditionally the object of study by anthropologists. Nor should theatre anthropology be confused with the anthropology of performance.

Once again: theatre anthropology is the study of the behaviour of human beings who use their physical/mental presence (body/mind) according to principles different from those of everyday life in a situation of organised representation. This extra-daily use of the body is what we call technique. A cross-cultural analysis shows that the actor/dancer's work is the result of the fusion of three aspects that refer to three distinct levels of organisation:

1. The actors/dancers' personality, their sensitivity, artistic intelligence, social persona: those characteristics that make them unique and uncopiable.
2. The particularity of the traditions and the historical-cultural context through which the actors/dancers' unrepeatable personality manifests itself.
3. The use of the body/mind according to extra daily body techniques based on recurrent and transcultural principles. These recurring principles constitute what theatre anthropology defines as the field of pre-expressivity.

The first aspect is individual. The second is common to all who belong to the same performance genre. Only the third concerns all the actors/dancers of all times and cultures: it can be called the "biological" level of theatre and dance. The first two aspects determine the passage from pre-expressivity to expression. The third is the constant *idem*, that which does not vary and underlies under the individual, stylistic and cultural differences.

The recurring principles at the "biological" level of theatre allow the different techniques of the actors/dancers, that is, the particular use of their stage presence and dynamic composition.

Applied to some physiological factors (weight, balance, position of the spine, direction of the gaze) these principles produce pre-expressive organic tensions. These new tensions generate a different quality of energy and make the body theatrically "decided" and "alive". They manifest the actors/dancers' "presence", their scenic *bios*, attracting the viewer's attention *before* any personal interpretation takes over.

Obviously, this is a logical *before*, not a chronological one. The different levels of organisation are, for the spectator and in the performance, inseparable. They can only be separated by way of abstraction, in a situation of analytical investigation and in the course of technical composition by the actor during the process of creation.

The field of work of the ISTA is the study of the principles of the extra-daily use of the body and of their application to the creative work of the actor/dancer. The result is an expansion of knowledge that has immediate consequences on a practical level. Generally, the transmission of experience begins with the assimilation of technical knowledge: the actor learns and personalises. The knowledge of the principles that govern the scenic *bios* can allow not to learn a technique, but *to learn to learn*. This is of paramount importance to all those who choose or are forced to cross the boundaries of a specialised technique.

A time of shared experience

Western theatreology has generally privileged theories and utopias, neglecting the empirical approach to the actors' material culture and creative processes. ISTA focuses on this empirical territory with a view to overcoming disciplinary, technical and aesthetic specialisations. It is a question of understanding not the technique, but the "secrets" of the technique, which one must embody in order to overcome its mechanical aspects.

Among the different forms of ethnocentrism that veil our eyes there is one that does not concern geographical and cultural areas. It depends on the roles that the theatrical relationship creates. It is an ethnocentrism that considers theatre only from the viewer's point of view, neglecting the complex situation of the ensemble of the actors: the network of their relationships, embodied knowledge, know-how and ways of thinking of which the performance is the fruit.

From all this emerges the importance of a time of shared experience. During this time, while preserving the specificities of the different skills, artists who embody different traditions can dialogue with scholars who set themselves the task of sharpening the tools to understand the multifaceted and multi-layered reality of the theatres and their actors.

In such a confrontation, hypotheses, doubts and questions can intertwine in a common research, discussion and collaboration where the distinction between practical and theoretical specialisation is temporarily suspended. This time of shared experience does not have the task of achieving immediate and unitary results. It offers new starting points and stimuli for subsequent individual research both by those who give life to the performing reality, and by those who are committed to passing on the memory.

It is this tradition of shared experience that *Journal of Theatre Anthropology* wants to extend to the field of reflection and studies. A publication that collects facts, technical experiences, historical reflections and above all questions. Whatever the rhythm - tango, rock'n'roll, legong, waltz, mai, can-can, rumba, cha-cha-cha - dancing questions are welcome. ■

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