

Piergiorgio Giacchè

Once Upon a Time

Once Upon a Time There Was Theatre and Once Upon a Time There Was Anthropology

Abstract: This is a lecture by Piergiorgio Giacchè 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. In his speech, Giacchè traces a history of the relationship between theatre and anthropology, calling into question, in addition to those of Barba, the theoretical contributions of important scholars such as Goffman, Turner and Schechner.

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1.

Theatre Anthropology, an invention or a discovery? It can be said - in my opinion - that it was an invention of Theatre and a discovery for Anthropology.

At the end of the 1970s, even before theories of this new and at the same time ancient 'science of theatre' were published, Eugenio Barba had the merit of being the first to discern and propose a confluence between the two disciplines of Theatre and Anthropology¹ that went on for decades, in various ways, to fertilise each other.

It is often underestimated how important and enlightening the simple enunciation of this close relationship (between anthropology and theatre) was just for anthropological science. To others, however - Victor Turner and afterwards Richard Schechner² - was then left the task and merit of a socio-anthropological systematisation that gave us valuable concepts and schemes (from Social Drama to Performance Theory). Meanwhile, for theatre, Barba's theories and principles were jealously confined within the boundary of the acting profession and behind the dogma of theatre autonomy.

However, on closer inspection, the very centrality of the actor and the theatre's claim for autonomy were precisely the new factor that 'revolutionised' the relationship between the two disciplines and their research directions, producing a dialogue and interchange 'on an equal footing'. It highlighted and enhanced a constant exchange and overlapping



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1. 'Theatre can be compared to an anthropological expedition. It leaves civilised territories to enter the heart of the virgin forest; it renounces the clearly defined values of reason to face the darkness of the collective imagination. [...] It is in this darkness that our culture, our language and our imagination sink their roots.' Barba 1965, 5.

2. Barba 1981.

Venezuelan Amazonia, 1976: barter between the Yanomani and Odin Teatret. Photo: Tony D'Urso

between the social sciences and theatre culture of an entire century.³ We certainly do not want to ignore the indisputable distance between the scopes and methods and aims of anthropology and theatre. But we must not neglect or underestimate (or worse 'excommunicate') the common and indeed 'confused' ground of research and reflection on art and performance. Since the 1980s, research and anthropological reflection on contemporary theatre has multiplied and intersected, while theatre has discovered a dimension and an anthropological direction for its studies and research, or even just curiosities or interests.

In reality, the relationship between theatre and anthropology has stimulated not only great theoretical ideas and logical practical methods, but also attitudes and orientations that are apparently more superficial. From the anthropological point of view, however, we cannot underestimate in particular a phenomenon and a theatre movement that called themselves Anthropological Theatre.⁴ It overlapped undoubtedly with many other better-known denominations (basic theatre, group theatre, research theatre, Third Theatre), but it expressed better its interest in anthropology, also as a simple but widespread cultural 'fashion'. *Once upon a time there was theatre, and once upon a time there was anthropology* might be said just for good luck, but above all to delimit that period and that world when cultural anthropology and the theatre of research were fashionable,⁵ that is, they had value and came to drive relations and exchanges between the two disciplinary areas, and even between the two professions of actor and anthropologist.

2.

"Theatre and Anthropology are the same thing, but we must be careful not to confuse them." I often quote this quip stolen from the Prologue of a theatre performance by Raúl Ruiz⁶. It inspired me and finally authorised me to formulate the hypothesis of a provocative 'Equation' between Anthropology and Theatre,⁷ listing the similarities or coincidences between an art of science (anthropology) and a science of art (theatrical studies).

In short: a) anthropology and theatre both study - or better, interpret - human beings and their culture; b) they are founded and function as a 'relationship between subjects' that divides the roles of the actor and the spectator, but in the same circle as a practice of 'participant observation'; c) they conduct *research* and produce *works* that are valid for the present time and yet constitute a 'repertoire' of knowledge and methods (both of theatre and anthropology); and finally they are 'practices awaiting theory' (and not vice versa) that are *very* different but *almost* parallel, to the extent of one becoming metaphor for the other (and vice versa).

These are 'recurring principles', but not always as clearly and effectively as in past decades, when theatre chose its own way and anthropology became fashionable.

3. It is indispensable to remember Turner 1982 and Schechner 1993.

4. 'Anthropological Theatre' is another indication and definition by Eugenio Barba, introduced during an encounter of theatre groups in Bahía Blanca (Encuentro Internacional de Teatro Antropológico, April 6-12, 1987). See Aguirre 2015, 195-223 and Barba 1987, 6.

5. Cultural anthropology adds to and contaminates all the humanities and social sciences (sociology, semiology, history, philosophy) which resume and reorient their studies and research on theatre and performance.

6. Chilean film director, see Ruiz 1990.

7. Giacchè 2004.

It was the era in which *theatre experimented using the means of fiction for the end of achieving more intense and intimate authenticity*.⁸ It challenged and ultimately opposed the obligatory 'acting of social roles' of *Everyday Life as a Play* which, after Goffmann,⁹ went from sociological theory to the social practice of all of us 'characters and interpreters' in the performance society.

It was also the time when 'Western' science and anthropological research had exhausted its interest in the exotic and its ethnological motivation. After many trips to distant lands and other cultures, it had shifted its focus and horizon towards its own society and culture, inaugurating (in Italy before elsewhere) an anthropology of complex societies, beginning to consider the Anthropology of Ourselves, based on the close connection - almost a short circuit - between identity and otherness.

Thus, taking together the two directions and research ambitions, to a Theatre discovering the necessity and at the same time the possibility of 'its own' anthropology corresponded an Anthropology successful in imposing its correct definition of Culture, no longer limiting the field of research or the meaning of its reflections (even on itself). Small wonder, then, that these two parallel itineraries met in the study and appreciation of Otherness. They helped to liberate and relativise all the world's cultures, cancelling out the separation that emphasised High Culture and affirming that every culture - even one's own - is Other.

At that time, lastly, the concept of culture - 'the set of socially elaborated and shared mental representations'¹⁰ - came out from its academic and scientific limits. In some way cultural anthropology itself has functioned as 'replacement ideology', influencing both the historical moment and the political movement of younger generations within which the first groups of new theatre were also formed. A different theatre, a Third Theatre but, it was remarked (often by Eugenio Barba) an anthropological theatre.

3.

Thus it was possible and even common for the *Actor* of this new theatre to adopt the methods and sometimes even the *habitus* of the anthropologist, to explore all the theatres of the world but then also the world understood as theatre. It was not only a question of creating a 'market'¹¹ and 'treasure' out of the knowledge and techniques of the performing arts of all peoples and countries, but also of encountering and then sharing - in theatre - the problems of diversity and the valuable mine of otherness offered by society. And vice versa, the *Anthropologist* was minded to see himself or

8. *Intimate or essential otherness* is - according to Marc Augé - the deepest level of a scale of 'otherness' that includes the Exotic, the Ethnic, the Social: Augé 1993. 'This is the paradox of Third Theatre: to submerge oneself, as a group, in the universe of fiction in order to find the courage not to pretend': Barba 1999, 170.

9. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is the title and subject of Erwin Goffmann's famous 1959 essay introducing the use of theatre as a metaphor in sociological research. See Goffmann 1959.

10. The anthropological definitions are much too numerous, however - not only for their assonance with theatre - we should note the set of mental representations, which in themselves include all the *cognitive, evaluative and behavioural* models.

11. Worth remembering is the 'barter', first tried in Italy by Odin Teatret, which later became a means of cultural encounter and exchange with the various spectator communities and was used by many other theatre groups, and even by some anthropologists. See Bovin 1988.

herself as an actor who has his part on stage (or 'in the field'), no longer a spectator of indigenous peoples - within the framework of anthropological research that becomes 'an encounter between two subjects' - no longer a confrontation of scientific objectivity with unconscious subjectivity.

So it may be said that Anthropological Theatre can claim 'common ground', albeit used by different individuals, by those who make theatre and those who do anthropology, if - for both - Eugenio Barba's early definition holds good: "Anthropological Theatre is where the actor addresses his or her own historical-biographical identity to address the encounter with otherness, with the diverse."¹² Whether there was a true confluence or simply a chance coincidence does not detract from the 'fortune' and 'fertility' of the relationship between Theatre and Anthropology. This encounter was part of a historical moment in which - for everyone involved in culture, not just in theatre - the need for an autonomous sense (of science or art) was not yet in contradiction with the usefulness of a Social or Political Function of their research and activities.

Yes, there was a historical (and even political) moment when the 'floating islands' moving on the sea of other cultures and then landing on the shores of their own society were not only the new groups of research theatre but also the latest explorers and interpreters of critical thinking and social criticism.

4.

Once upon a time can and must be said of many other phenomena and areas connected with a worldwide 'mutation' that has affected all societies and cultures (you could say: *it is the advance of history... as if it were destiny!*). However, if we remain within the limits of the theatre *stage* and in the *field* of anthropology, their mutation - and that of their relationship - has its own specificity and yet again they end by meeting.

One can in fact observe how it was precisely the success - indeed the extraordinary, decades-long 'state of health' of both Theatre and Anthropology - that caused openings and contaminations, derivations and specialisations of all kinds. There is no denying, for example, that the vast new fields of *performing arts* and *cultural studies* have been stimulated by the theatre culture and anthropological research that existed 'once upon a time'. This was perhaps the last concomitance in the history of meetings between Theatre and Anthropology, if it is true that - once relocated within the new, undefined boundaries of performative acts and studies of fashions - the traditions and crafts, the rigorous methods and the ambitious aims of research (both theatrical and anthropological) eventually risked loss of vigour and finally, once again, marginalisation.

Indeed, it is so, if we think so. The Theatre, having become part of the vast continent and the vague concept of *performance*, has certainly expanded its performance potential, but often by reducing its critical capacity and aspiration towards a High and Other Sense. In other words, the challenge of authenticity is no longer the soul of the art of fiction and, from Artaud's pairing of Art and Life, we have swiftly returned to a functional relationship between Theatre and Society.

Anthropology, on the other hand, has been immersed and partly submerged by that field of study - self-created - into all kinds of cultural fashions, while - on a more strictly

12. Barba 1987, 6.

academic level - it has proliferated far too many sectors and specialisations, ending up by producing more critical literature than field research.

In this 'practice aim' the Theatre - it must be said - does not follow it or resemble it. An *actor* cannot refrain from the production of plays and the process of rehearsals. An *anthropologist*, on the other hand, can withdraw into teaching his or her discipline by recounting its history, or delving into its philosophy. So s/he no longer does research in any field that is not an archive - given that contracts and benefits push anthropologists to 'retire to the convent' (i.e. museum) and to occupy themselves with Cultural Heritage. In other words, to be converted to advertising, even to marketing Identity and to renounce the adventure towards Otherness.

5.

In short: the islands of theatre are still there, just as the Trobriand Islands of Malinowski are still in their place. No surprise or scandal if the passage of history has changed them; no scandal if many islands of theatre have been washed up and no longer float. Barba himself, at the foot of a short text entitled *Anthropological Theatre*, praises this disorientation and wishes for continued crisis "so that theatre, respecting the law of life, may flow and change continuously."¹³

The real *Once upon a time* is not about history, but somehow about geography: what is missing is the Archipelago, that circle bringing together the islands, that continuous journey of exchanges and gifts, of contacts and conflicts giving life and value to the islands.

This was the story of both theatre and anthropology. Once upon a time there was *kula* in the Trobriand Islands and maybe there still is. But it is no longer the rite or theatre of the 'meaning of life' or even that 'total social fact' anthropologists were looking for, when they were called Argonauts.

Translated by Julia Campbell Hamilton

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13. Barba 1987, 6.