



Eugenio Barba, Julia Varley, *Theatrum Mundi* rehearsal.
ISTA 6, Bologna, Italy, 1990. Photo: Fiora Bemporad

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A Candle Lit Among the Pages of Books

Abstract: This article is a chronicle on ISTA Bologna 1990 touching on different aspects of the session. It was first published in 1992 in English in Women and Theatre - Occasional Papers (Warwick University); in Spanish in Máscara, a. II, n. 9-10; and in Italian in Teatro Eurasiano, n. 2. In 1994 and 1996 the article was included in the anthologies about ISTA, The Tradition of ISTA (FILO-ISTA, Londrina 1994), and in The Performers Village (Drama, Copenhagen).

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I am bent over inside the costume of Mr Peanut, the 'death' character on stilts.

After the fireworks and the circle dance of all the characters from the performance *Theatrum Mundi* in Bologna, I, like all the others, have fallen to the ground. I have taken off my stilts and I am ready for the last transformation, which will reveal me as a European woman, holding the baby death in her arms.

I am ready, but listening to the Indian music which has not yet reached its final meditative Om, I can hear that I am early. So I remain still, bent over in my costume and listen to Sanjukta Panigrahi who is dancing above me.

During previous meetings with Sanjukta I have often heard her explanation of the introductory prayer-dance, in which she asks the earth to pardon her as she will stamp on it, while her feet follow, underline and dialogue with the rhythm of the drum.

Sanjukta was dancing on the terrace directly above the stage on which I had fallen. I heard the rhythm of her bells; I remembered the beauty of her dancing and I felt like the earth beneath her feet. We were performing together.

At the end, in front of the spectators, waiting for the moment when we could pack, get changed and travel away in our different directions, we were one world, the *Theatrum Mundi*: Europeans, Balinese, Indians, Japanese, Americans. The two weeks of work of



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the 6th session of ISTA had reached their conclusion. A session I had arrived at curious to meet with different Oriental masters in the solution of concrete scenic tasks.

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The characters who fell to the ground at the end of *Theatrum Mundi* were monsters: enormous, exceptional, proud.

It happened that while I was putting on my stilts, the chair I was sitting on slipped and I fell over backwards into a bush with my legs and stilts in the air. The Japanese Kabuki lion (Kanichi Hanayagi), who was having a quick cigarette, and the Balinese Rangda and Barong (I Nyoman Catra and Tjokorda Raka Tisnu) ran to my rescue.

They were afraid, surprised, worried and wanted to help. But their large costumes, masks, hair, long nails and fur made their hands useless. Inside my costume I could but laugh as the crazed monsters tried in vain to pull me out of the bush so we could go up to the stage where the orchestras were waiting for us.

Inside these costumes, behind these masks, the ability to see, to hear and to move is so reduced that one is obliged to activate a sixth sense in order to communicate.

In the love scene between Mr Peanut and the Balinese witch Rangda, in which neither I nor Tjokorda could see each other, the attraction which guided the rhythm and course of our meeting was extraordinary.

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The same kind of communication united Kanho Azuma from Japan, Tjokorda Istri Putra Padmini from Bali, Sanjukta from India and me, from Europe, around a candle and some sheets of paper during *The Crossing*, the work that took place every morning and during which all the participants of the 6th session of ISTA staged a performance.

We looked out across the valley of Bologna and passed along the candle. There was no need for us to signal to each other. Each of us was responsible and grabbed the timing from the air. We had no shared language with which to communicate, we were guided by the experience which was revealed in our capacity to act together.

In the group of four we improvised a dance around a candle and some sheets of paper which were thrown, carried, burnt and read.

I met Kanho with the direction of my whole body, I met Padmini and Sanjukta with the play of tensions between my hands, face and legs.

Because of the bright sun I could not keep my eyes open. Kanho also had her eyes half shut, whereas Padmini and Sanjukta acted with their eyes to meet and signal to each other, as if their eyes were hands or a back-bone. Our rhythms affected those of the others. I felt myself to be the most easily influenced (or open to influence), especially by the slow, restrained and smooth Japanese rhythm that I had experienced during a long improvised dialogue with Kanho on the first day.

The space, the centre, the leaving, the returning, the turning, finding oneself in pairs or isolated, passing the object - the candle - and the variety of relationships to the object, were all basic elements that each of us used to keep the group 'in motion'.

It was not a great challenge. At times we got bored, as if we felt a lot less different than our outer appearances suggested.

This dance of energies, this movement around each other, was not the centre of our attention: most important was to protect the candle, to keep it alight, but we never managed this throughout an entire *Crossing*. Sitting in the background we all held our breath as during the 'doctors' scene Catra and Kanichi fought near the candle and trod on it. I had hidden a lighter in my costume.

Later we waited in the big hall. I lit another candle to replace the one Sanjukta had had to put out by fanning it as taboo did not allow her to blow it out. Kanho helped me decorate the candle again.

I remember these silent moments, the preparations, more than the dance everyone watched.

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In the same way I remember how Sanjukta Panigrahi, Suzanne Vill and Kirsten Hastrup spoke during ISTA (is it a coincidence that women are the bearers of new words?).

Sanjukta responded to Eugenio Barba's request to speak about the five most fundamental experiences in her development as an artist by treating the question as a scenic task and so transforming it into an equivalent: she spoke of the five 'masters' she had had.

With the same inquisitive and cheeky smile with which she usually answers Eugenio Barba's questions, that smile which instantly reveals her beauty and her intelligence, Sanjukta spoke also of emotions on stage (why are academics always so insistent on asking about this point?). She spoke of how emotions are expressed through attention to detail and in the minute variations made to a single theme through a personal dramaturgy or subtext, which she calls 'dialogue'. Emotions are expressed in the moment in which technique is surpassed because then one is free to play with it.

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In "The Room of the Sirens", one of the working spaces we had the use of at Villa Guastavillani, the 6th ISTA session's venue, the question "is there a pre-expressive level of the voice?" was in the air.

If the breath and the diaphragm are the base on which the actor or singer leans to make vocal sounds, the different breathing techniques could be thought of as the different extra-daily changes of balance; supporting the voice in different parts of the body and face or the use of the resonators could correspond to the principle of opposites; the play of volume and intensity with voice, to the amplitude and resistance of actions; the change of tone, of timbre and of colour, to the variation of the muscular tone that makes an action alive.

However, what appears obvious in the physical demonstrations of actors or dancers, becomes much more difficult to distinguish in vocal demonstrations. The complexity of details that influence our aural sensitivity and the close connection to the perception of

sound also as music, make recurring principles difficult to find, not least because of a lack of terminology.

Suzanne Vill spoke at length of different vocal techniques with an openness and understanding in a field where complexity often leads to exclusive and contrasting opinions and the incapacity to see beyond the specific technique one uses. It is a field where often words describe not that which physically really happens, but the sensation that allows it to happen, which can in fact be its opposite.

In the same way in which the Japanese, Indian and Balinese performances are examined at ISTA, to try to understand what renders them fascinating, besides the cultural context that has determined them, Suzanne spoke of vocal techniques in an attempt to pinpoint that which characterises them before considering the concepts of aesthetic beauty which have determined them.

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The theme of the 6th session of ISTA was "Historiography and Performance Techniques". Parallel to this theme Kirsten Hastrup described the relation between context and text in her experience as an anthropologist. I was translating and therefore part of the context: unfortunately what I remember of the text is limited, but I know it was important.

It dealt with questions that are close to my own: how to communicate through words the reality of actions and experience; how to change actions into words; how to transform experience into poetry; how to invent new words for a new history, also of theatre; how to give an appropriate place in theatre history not only to the 'ideas' and the men who have conceived, written and realised them, but also to the 'actions' and to the men and women who have carried them out, perceived and understood them. If the performances, the actions, the facts, belong to the part of the memory that remembers through all the senses, while the directors' reforms, the 'ideas' belong to theatre history which influences our present, how is it possible to invent a new sense for theatre history with a present that creates its own memory?

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At the international symposium entitled "Historiography and Performance Techniques" Franco Ruffini spoke of the difficulty he had in extracting fully comprehensive indications from Stanislavski's volumes on the work of the actor and of his search for a new reading of the texts.

Scholars, researchers, professors and critics learn to see beyond appearances, through the costumes, the effects and the aesthetical values and so also to see the actions in the pages of history and to understand the past in a different way.

Franco Ruffini spoke of an actor who moves a chair. The very fact that this simple action was an important reference of his new reading of Stanislavski is extraordinary, as is Kirsten Hastrup's courage in declaring herself seduced by beings that belong to the mythology of the place she is studying. In the book it remains the actor who pushes the chair, but this actor who is carrying out the action of pushing the chair is actually shifting



Eugenio Barba, Kirsten Hastrup and Julia Varley. ISTA 6, Bologna, Italy, 1990. Photo: Fiora Bemporad

his/her weight backwards and downwards, towards the floor, doing the opposite. This opposite of reality still has no place in books, just as actors have no place in the history of the ideas of theatre and just as it is the directors of the theatre laboratories who are remembered, as though it were the ideas and not the actions that create. As an *actress*, I would like to be able to 'enter into history'. So I write, and when I write I tell of what has happened. It immediately becomes biographical, almost gossip, not history. And so I persist and insist with the professors and academics in an attempt to communicate my dissatisfaction. But that which is important to me, the memories, the sensations, the experiences, the events, are not necessarily interesting to others. And so I ask: "What would you like to know from my article on ISTA?"

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We were in the Gobi Desert, the open-air space where we worked on *The Crossing*. Eugenio sent me, together with Kanho, Sanjukta and Padmini, behind a wall to find out how we could appear above the bushes that covered it. We found chairs, ladders, tables, we climbed the wall, we wriggled between the branches and finally we managed



Sanjukta Panigrahi and Eugenio Barba at the front of *The Crossing* participants. In the first row the 'elders': Ivan Hansen, I Made Pasek Tempo, Vicente Revuelta, Santiago García, Masao Yamaguchi. ISTA 6, Bologna, Italy, 1990. Photo: Fiora Bemporad

to appear. Eugenio shouted furiously: "Get down! Get down! You've ruined the end!" Suddenly the colleagues with whom we were rehearsing *The Crossing* had become the spectators to surprise during the final performance. This element of surprise helps the spectators 'believe' in what the actors are doing. The experience of 'believing' is necessary in order to be able to be 'scientific', to 'understand', to 'explain'.

Then one starts studying, working, concentrating on details, repeating and repeating in order to find something new in what is old and known. In the same way that Sanjukta goes beyond technique by playing with details, the scholars go to the microscope, reading and re-reading the same documents, looking and looking again at the same processes or results of work, for days, months, years, to discover that which always existed but which they were not able to see.

The 'being in love' that is the gift given by the extraordinary beauty of Sanjukta, by the charm of the Asian performances, by the staging of time and of space, by that which surprises, by that which functions, by that which Eugenio's attention is focused on, allows us to open our eyes anew, for our curious eyes to bring together our stomach and our mind.

This being 'in love', which many have resisted and that is criticised because it is seen as a closed family circle with an acritical perspective, has in fact permitted a qualitative jump forward and a really special critical collaboration: the historical vision of theatre gets closer to the creative process.

The writing of history becomes an art with the same rules applied as in the making of a performance. The theoreticians and the practitioners of theatre come together, while keeping their fields of work defined.

In the same way as during the creative process we don't seek the result, but it is allowed to evolve, so the critic does not try to understand, but allows for the possibility of being understood.

The proof that 'god exists' - Sanjukta dancing - allows for this new approach to the history of theatre; it results in a different historiography.

For this reason when I see the ISTA scholars, and the Italians in particular, each on their own, closed in their studies, with their books, reading, writing, linked by an invisible thread (or an audible one - the telephone!) and then I see them out and about at the festivals, in the rehearsal rooms, amongst the theatre groups, at the conferences which are increasingly structured according to the rules of a live theatrical presence, they seem to belong to a unique event, which should go down in history.

I imagine the mythical artistic environments, I imagine Paris with Cocteau, Salmon, Picasso, Rodin, Apollinaire, Satie, Modigliani, Braque and Stravinski who meet and clash, who study and ignore each other, and it is as if the ferment of the cafés and the attics of Montparnasse is recreated in certain privileged Italian universities.

And so I would like to become a historian of the historians of theatre. So the scholars become natives, the subject of observation, and, as in the Odin Teatret performance *Talabot*, which takes the biography of a living anthropologist as its theme, the roles are turned upside down. The path of opposites is achieved and for once one could affirm that an actress has made history...