

# Editorial



Kyogen actor Kosuke Nomura wearing a noh mask during a work demonstration, ISTA 2, Volterra, Italy, 1981.

Photo: Nicola Savarese

Julia Varley

# The Country of Our Craft

‘Breaking the rules’ is the overall theme for this 5<sup>th</sup> issue of *JTA*. The theme was chosen before presidents of powerful countries started blatantly breaking international laws without any attempt to justify their actions beyond economic gain and power conservation. In our world of theatre, art, culture and education, ‘breaking the rules’ is understood as a way to focus on intellectual habits, artistic criteria and professional limits as well as on relationships of empathy, humanity and justice. Transformation is to keep tradition and experience alive through development and change. We would never have expected to have to clarify the meaning the theme has for *JTA*, taking distance from unthinkable behaviour of those responsible for the future of human society.

In 1979, the generalised idea of what theatre was still mostly referred to written texts and buildings in which plays were interpreted. Thinking back to the same year when the first definitions of theatre anthropology were made, I would say that this comparative research was born out of a need to consider theatre from a different point of view, breaking the habitual way of thinking. From the start, theatre anthropology put the body-mind of the performer at the centre; ‘bringing heaven down from the sky and planting it in the earth, in the actor’s living body’, as Eugenio Barba writes in his **Foreword**, *Breaking the Rules*. The anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup writes the same in her article included in **Facts and Tales**, when she says “Whether a fisherman hunting his prey on the North Atlantic, an anthropologist doing fieldwork, or an actor staging a particular character, I would contend that in the beginning was the body. Not the biological body - but the body-in-life.”

The first hypothesis of theatre anthropology did not focus on finding a method or on choosing a particular aesthetic, but it tried to indicate underlying principles for the stage presence of actors and dancers. These principles could be recognised across different forms, countries, cultures, genres and styles. Denying fixed rules came from concentrating on the process that is always subject to change. The curiosity of understanding the motives that guided the individual masters of classical and recent experimental traditions led to a territory that broke the habits of common conceptions of theatre. The ‘pre-expressive level’, a term now generally accepted by theatre historians, had to confront many criticisms before being acknowledged.

This issue of *JTA* has fewer academic contributions. Most of the articles, even if written by university lecturers, refer to concrete practical experiences, to the long journeys from apprenticeship to teaching, to the contradictory attempts to explain emotional, complementary and complex processes that defy classification. *JTA* is proud



to be a stimulus for practitioners to leave behind traces of their work, with the resonance of international diversity.

In this 5<sup>th</sup> issue, the section called **Beyond Theatre Anthropology** includes some of these articles. 'Beyond' is an indication of experiences that set out from theatre anthropology as a reference and example to discover local original festive manifestations and dances. Theatre anthropology introduces a terminology that allows theatre groups to be considered as a contemporary tradition with a particular technique and form of apprenticeship. Theatre anthropology builds a bridge between political and social positioning and the demands of the craft. Alice Guimarães, Ralf Räuker, and Ricardo Gomes and Priscilla Duarte present their personal expeditions from the first years in search of a technique until taking responsibility for passing on their discoveries to younger generations.

The geographical territory they move in has no borders: one Brazilian sets roots in Bolivia, other Brazilians discover their origins by learning Indian Odissi dance or Italian Commedia dell'Arte, a Peruvian theatre director finds confirmation of his ambitions through the research of an Afro-Brazilian dancer, a German emigrated to Australia seeks help from Russian biomechanics during a meeting in Sweden and from Balinese dance-drama taught by an Italian. In this issue it is evident that the rules of national geography have no place in theatre anthropology.

As with the last issue, where the division between theatre anthropology, anthropological theatre, Third Theatre, social community theatre and artistic theatre was not so clear, also *JTA 5* is breaking its own rule of only presenting direct experiences of theatre anthropology. Once again, connections are made to contemporary theatre experiences and descriptions of specific theatre productions, which result from a movement of social change as well as from specific technical references. Alice Guimarães had been invited to write about the ISTA session in Londrina, and Ralf Räuker about the ISTA session in Umeå, but both broke out of the original task to leave a testimony of their experience that touches on theatre anthropology but moves beyond.

When I saw a training session by Alice Guimarães' group, the Bolivian Teatro de Los Andes, inspired by a ritual of a village up the valley from their theatre, I understood how theatre groups can keep alive old rituals by transforming them. The same could be said of another theatre group, Yuyachkani, from Peru, and it is what is happening with various groups in Brazil. Ricardo Gomes and Priscilla Duarte refer various times to an article by Yuyachkani's director Miguel Rubio Zapata when taking up the question of decolonisation and how to deal with roots coming from indigenous populations and the African people who arrived to Latin America as slaves.

Mundu Rodá is a Brazilian theatre group teaching at ISTA sessions since 2021. Also quoted by Ricardo Gomes and Priscilla Duarte, it is one of the groups that has been learning local dance forms to then transform the steps and movements for their contemporary productions. Theatre anthropology has supported them in understanding which were the underlying essential principles to keep without having to maintain the complete forms.

We are happy to have included an example of how one of the oldest forms of theatre breaks the rules. Diego Pellecchia writes about *Ran noh*, performances in which the most traditional performers do all what is not permitted, when actors play music and musicians

perform the intricate scores of century old scenes. When I heard his lecture at Roma 3 University in December 2025, I broke all editorial rules as well just to include this example in this issue. The example could only be in its own section of **Breaking the Rules**.

Valentina Venturini writes about Nicola Savarese for **Reflections and Discussions**. For all of us who have met and worked with Nicola it is evident that his way forwards was that of breaking all expectations. He seemed to move in the direction of making a university career but started a theatre group and invented performative lectures accompanied by a sophisticated montage of photographs and videos. When working on a book, he searched for images to convey what words left hidden. When contacting a publisher, he would propose a series of books, on the most diverse themes from his grandfather's biography to dwarf throwing. Valentina Venturini writes: "The path is always that of going beyond... Nicola called it 'plausible fantasy', and it was the very essence of his approach to theatre history: always *imagining* the material side of phenomena."

In this issue **Recurring Principles** is dedicated to the Japanese butoh performer Natsu Nakajima who died on March 3, 2024, in Mexico City. Nourit Masson Sékiné and Eugenio Barba bring her back to life through their memories together with her own words taken from an interview. Natsu worked with both Hijikata Tatsumi and Kazuo Ohno, the two founders of butoh, a dance born from the attempt to reject formalism. At the ISTA session in Bologna in 1990, Natsu Nakajima gave a demonstration of the different energies by imagining she moved in stone, water or air. The resistance provoked by the different matter still inspires some of my own exercises today.

The **News** section of the 5<sup>th</sup> issue of *JTA* reports on activities and publications that happened in 2025, and announcements of plans for 2026 that also mark Eugenio Barba's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.



Natsu Nakajima, ISTA 10, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996. Photo: Fiora Bemporad



Matheus De Aquino and Alessandro Rigoletti in Theatrum Mundi's *Anástasis*, Theatre Olympics, National Theatre Budapest, Hungary, 2023. Photo: Francesco Galli

Since 2004, the participants of different ISTA sessions have been introduced to Eugenio Barba's way of directing and creating a dramaturgical structure on the base of the actors' stage presence. The passage from the principles of theatre anthropology, from what is called the pre-expressive level, to the creation of theatre scenes is the theme of the two articles in the **Theatrum Mundi** section. One article looks at the multiple elements of the process which lead to the result through a comparison of the rehearsals of different Theatrum Mundi productions. The other article concentrates specifically on *Anástasis*, the Theatrum Mundi performance presented at the end of the ISTA session in Budapest in 2023. Theatrum Mundi is a fascinating unique situation because performers coming from all corners of the world are on stage together. Communication and collaboration are possible despite language, genre, tradition, habits, stories. It seems like a miracle each time, thanks to one rule that is not broken, that of building a dialogue of physical and vocal impulses, without giving priority to meaning.

Reading again the lecture *Incorporated Knowledge* that Kirsten Hastrup gave at the ISTA session in Londrina in 1994, I am struck by all the similarities between the examples she makes as an anthropologist and the experience of Theatrum Mundi: "to establish a true relationship the parties must be present in the same space." "Meaning emerges in the process." "There is no knowledge without a knower, an incarnate subject." "The tenacity of the Cartesian dualism is owed to the fact that it echoes important aspects of human experience. While it is true that human experience is incorporated, it is also true the body tends to disappear."

Reaching the 5<sup>th</sup> issue, the necessity of leaving a mark concerning the different sessions of ISTA has become a professed obligation. In the section **Facts and Tales**, this issue remembers the 8<sup>th</sup> ISTA session in Londrina, Brazil, in 1994, and the 9<sup>th</sup> ISTA session in Lövanger and Umeå, Sweden, in 1995. Reaching the mid-nineties, history does not seem so far away as when presenting the documentation of the origins in 1980, but looking at the photographs and films today, I realise how young we still were during all those adventures. This time **Facts and Tales** includes documents that present the process of preparation and organisation of an ISTA, not just the results. From these examples the essential elements in the preparation are not given by theories, but by the contact between Eugenio Barba and the scholars, the distribution of the participants in working groups and dormitories, the meetings with the organisers, the choice of places where all artists and participants share the same conditions of lodging, meals and work.

The article by Chris Torch brings to life all the thoughts and visions that were shared before, then all the contradictions and difficulties that arose during, and finally all the questions that remain after an ISTA session has finished. Chris Torch is writing about the ISTA in Lövanger and Umeå, but he could be writing of all other sessions if one just changes the names. His questions on multiculturalism, interculturalism and enculturation are shared by various other authors in this issue, from Kirsten Hastrup to Ricardo Gomes and Priscilla Duarte, but not only. If we belong to the country of our craft, what does interculturalism mean for theatre anthropology? This could be a theme for a next issue of *JTA*.