



Ralf Räuker

Ways of Transmission

ISTA experiences and their impact on my artistic work and teaching

Abstract: Ralf Räuker shares his apprenticeship journey from meeting Jerzy Grotowski's collaborator and actor Zygmunt Molik, participating in ISTA sessions in 1986 and 1995 and 1996, studying Meyerhold's biomechanics with Gennadi Bogdanov, getting to know Odin Teatret's actor training, and visiting Cristina Wistari in Bali. He shares the consequences of this journey in his work as a director in Berlin and a lecturer in Australia dealing with questions of multicultural societies.

Keywords: Biomechanics, Multicultural societies, Balinese dance theatre, Female impersonators

Northern Sweden, May 1995: after a heavy snowfall overnight, we're walking through a fluffy, Nordic landscape that feels like a childhood dream. People from the northern and southern hemispheres, wearing all kinds of shoes, are gathering for an ISTA session. Some have bare feet in slippers, while others wear closed shoes, hiding and protecting what's inside. When we arrive at our meeting place, a warm wooden floor welcomes the bare feet from around the world.

During my first ISTA experience in Holstebro in 1986, I was impressed that Eugenio Barba often appeared barefoot during work demonstrations. It looked natural when he moved in the same space as Indian and Balinese dancers who didn't train or perform with shoes. His groundedness allowed him to explore 'pre-expressivity' with performers, no matter their footwear, cultural backgrounds, or beliefs. Some of his questions and research ideas sounded strange at first and could make a performer feel momentarily uncomfortable on stage. But he never lost connection, and challenging our comfort zones would ultimately lead to new discoveries.

Barba's centre of gravity danced with his thoughts and vice versa. His mental and physical presence mesmerised me. After four years of eclectic acting studies at the University of Arts in Berlin, I appreciated his clear methodology and never-ending curiosity, always focused on his research questions. As I tended to overthink things, Barba's balance between being pragmatic and poetic helped me to ground myself as a young actor and theatre artist.

Although my performing arts academy's curriculum included various physical trainings, aikido, acrobatics, Feldenkrais, fencing, stick-fighting, tai-chi, and ballroom



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Gennadi Bogdanov and Ralf Räuker, ISTA 10, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996. Photo: Fiora Bemporad

dance, most of the acting work was text-based, and character development began with a psychological character analysis.

The first time my class practised a holistic psycho-physical approach was with Zygmunt Molik in 1982. He had worked with Jerzy Grotowski from the beginning in Opole and later at the Teatr Laboratorium in Wrocław. Training and rehearsing with Molik, we experienced a whole new way of creating theatre. I felt inspired, but it also scared me to enter this unknown space of possibilities. My confusion only disappeared once I had found the movement score for my role in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Clearly, I needed some structure to free myself from overthinking and become fully present.

In 1985, I travelled to the Sierra Tarahumara in the north of Mexico following Antonin Artaud's footsteps in 1936, when he searched for the Tarahumaras, an indigenous tribe. The diary of my 'field trip' became my thesis and the material for creating a solo performance for my acting degree. I knew that Grotowski was in Irvine, California, busy with his latest research project, Theatre of Sources. In Mexico City, I found out that he was giving a speech at Museo de Bellas Artes and went there with a letter, asking for the possibility to take part in his research. A few months later, I participated in Grotowski's work in Botinaccio, Italy. This was a time of transition for him, as he moved from California back to Europe and from Theatre of Sources to Art as Vehicle. Although I had no clear concept of the connection between theatre, performance, and anthropology, I was involved in this profound research by a groundbreaking master. Back in Berlin, I tried to incorporate my learnings into my work but felt very lost trying to follow Grotowski without Grotowski.

Meeting Eugenio Barba and taking part in the 1986 ISTA gave me new energy and brought back my fascination with theatre and dance. The incredible playfulness and skill presented made Barba's research question plausible: what are the unifying principles in this captivating diversity?

Transmission impossible

In 1987, Barba had an even stronger impact on my professional development when he suggested research on Meyerhold's biomechanics actor's training. I was part of a group of young theatre makers visiting Odin Teatret when Barba handed out photocopies from a 1970s *TDR* journal showing photos of a man demonstrating a biomechanics etude.¹ 'Take a close look at this,' Barba said and left the room.

Now, as I write my contribution for a *JTA* chapter on the ISTA in Umeå in 1995, I won't go too deeply into the details of this *transmission impossible*² that Barba had sent me on in '87. However, because my ISTA experience in Umeå is directly connected to this journey, it's worth providing some background.

At one of the sessions in Umeå, we were discussing the Western history of acting methodology/training, and Stanislavski was the key focus. When Meyerhold's name

1. Gordon, M. (1995) 'Meyerhold's Biomechanics', in *Acting (Re)Considered*, Zarrilli, P. (ed.), London: Routledge.

2. Räuker, R. (2024) 'Transmission Impossible', in *The Routledge Companion to Vsevolod Meyerhold*, Jonathan Pitches, Stefan Aquilina (ed.), London: Routledge.



Participants and staff, ISTA 9, Umeå, Sweden, 1995. Photo: Bernd Uhlig

came up, there was an acknowledgment of his groundbreaking artistic work, but his psycho-physical acting method, biomechanics, wasn't well known. In this situation, Barba asked me to demonstrate the biomechanical etude, *Throwing the stone*. He knew I had taken his advice and had a 'closer look' at those photocopies he handed out seven years earlier in Holstebro. Since then, I had received a two-year scholarship to research biomechanics, and in 1991, I met my teacher, Gennadi Bogdanov, from Moscow. He had been a student of Nikolai Kustov, an actor and instructor of biomechanics at the Meyerhold Theatre in the 1930s. Kustov was the man in the *TDR* photos I got from Barba and had used to start my research.

Those pictures gave the impression that an étude is a step-by-step change from one posture to another. But what about the flow and the movement principles that energise the form? I could only incorporate and understand these once I trained with Bogdanov. After Meyerhold's brutal murder by the Stalinist terror regime in 1940, his name and work were suppressed. It took decades until the transmission of biomechanics became possible. During the Cold War era of the 1970s and '80s, it was difficult to reconnect with the practical side of Meyerhold's biomechanics. There was no one in the West who was teaching first-hand experience how to execute an etude. When the USSR fell apart in the early 1990s, it became easier to travel, do research, and exchange ideas with theatre colleagues in Moscow, allowing to piece the puzzle together. It was a time of hope. Meeting Bogdanov in 1991 closed the gap. The lineage Meyerhold-Kustov-Bogdanov made biomechanics a living thing again. I doubt that Barba had thought for a second about this possibility in 1987. However, his way of inspiring people and sending them on a mission is like throwing out the seeds, and he knows not all seeds will grow to the point that they can be harvested - but some will.

My ISTA experience in 1995 was about inclusion. I could contribute to the process of building knowledge and making connections between cultures. It seemed that Meyerhold's biomechanics had not been considered as a method, simply because there was no line of transmission that could have been looked at. For me, it was very touching to hear Barba's words of appreciation for the 'lifeline' I could provide. Time was allocated in which I introduced some of the basic principles and how they are incorporated in the etudes. This task came as a surprise, as well as people's interest in practising. Another surprise was the suggestion to demonstrate the partner etude *Slap in the face* together with Chris Torch who had been a member of the Living Theater. The group worked on a reconstruction/reinvention of Meyerhold's biomechanics in the 1970s, based on the same publication by Mel Gordon which Barba had given to me. When I met Gordon in 1989 in New York, he told me that after *Meyerhold's Biomechanics* appeared in *The Drama Review* in 1974, he heard about a public presentation of the same subject. Soon after, he witnessed the Living Theater presenting 'a chain of misunderstandings' following his publication. They met and Gordon could clarify a few things, but in fact, both sides were lacking the physical transmission process with someone who knew biomechanics firsthand. They only had those photos and some text material to work with. Consequently, both sides came up with different interpretations, also because



Ralf Räuker and Chris Torch demonstrating biomechanic exercises, ISTA 9, Umeå, Sweden, 1995.
Photo: Bernd Uhlig

they had different goals. The Living Theater used biomechanics in two productions to visualise their political message against oppression, underlining the mechanical aspect of the stage movements. For Gordon, reconstructing the actor's training went together with the aim to reconstruct one of Meyerhold's constructivist productions, where the human body in biomechanics was described as a machine and the actor as the machinist.

My study grant with which I started researching biomechanics in the late 1980s had the title 'Myth of the Machine'. The Machine- or Industrial age was already over, and the Information Age had kicked in. However, we still lived in a machine-based society and had already seen its catastrophic effects on our environment, our mind, soul and body. Nevertheless using the machine image in popular artistic expression was still happening. The robotic element in breakdance had a parallel with Charlie Chaplin's mastery in *Modern Times*. Like the tramp, the poor and oppressed youth from the Bronx trained their bodies as their only triumph and ownership. In their dance, they struggled with a money-driven and robotic economic system, but their vital rebellious energy shined through. This was surely true in the 1970s but like many rebellious movements, the original gist gets watered down with time.

In the 1980s, I was confronted with the Iron Curtain that was separating Europe for decades. 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, and the Cold War ended. I lived in West-Berlin and had all my life experienced the freedom to travel. In West-Germany, the freedom of speech was guaranteed, and a feeling of oppression was a complex mix of inner and outer pressure - collective guilt, personal trauma, and the fight for survival in a money-driven society. As a young actor and theatre artist, I was keen to learn some skills to manage my professional and personal life. When I studied biomechanics with Bogdanov he was the perfect actor-dancer-acrobat, and he said it in simple words: "It's biomechanics not car mechanics." The machine image was not dominating his teaching at all. But it clearly was something that still echoed from the past. Meyerhold saw biomechanics as a tool for becoming a New Man in a society that had overcome the oppressive capitalist class system. Taking over the machines, the means of production, was an act of liberation. But Socialist Realism and Stalinist ideology had no time for utopian fantasies. 'The revolution eats its children'. Meyerhold was executed by oppressors who called themselves liberators. It took more than thirty years until Bogdanov, and other young acting colleagues got the chance to learn biomechanics, in secret, behind closed doors. Only when the USSR collapsed, the doors started to open again.

For Grotowski the machine-image in a machine-based society was obsolete. He valued Meyerhold's work as a director but saw Stanislavski and the method of Physical Actions, which he further developed, as his path in working with actors. I experienced his training for the stage with Zygmunt Molik and briefly took part in *Art as Vehicle*, Grotowski's last research project in search for organicity. I was strongly drawn to this monastery withdrawal from the world of theatre production and felt alienated at the same time. It took me a long time to accept that this was not my way. The ISTA, Barba and the Odin Teatret actors, showed me the path back to the actor's stage, allowing me to ask questions about the craft, and experience my body as this fictional instrument making first steps again.

My first steps

Before meeting Gennadi Bogdanov, my biomechanics teacher, I had workshop experiences with Odin Teatret actors and Barba. Here I was introduced to the idea that the body can be described as an instrument or vehicle. Barba called this a productive fiction which allows an actor to train the body with greater efficiency. How do I know it's fictional? I can step in and out of my car, but my body doesn't allow that. Or like the image of a musical instrument, from which you can step away after rehearsing or performing, while the body can only be ignored. Another term that helped me to define myself as a performer, was 'extra-daily balance' or 'equilibrium deluxe'. But before these headlines could be written, there was a visceral experience which I would call truly foundational.

It was during a workshop in Holstebro. Barba and Odin Teatret actress Roberta Carreri made us conscious of the first drama that our body and in a way our whole existence is involved in. What are the two opposite forces that we must balance from the first time we stand up and with every step we take? I'm shifting my weight slowly from one foot to the other - to the point when all my body weight is resting on one foot. I realise in that moment that the heel of the other foot that does not carry any weight wants to lift from the floor. I let it happen and get ready for the wonder of moving into space. All my weight is on one foot. A balancing act that challenges my core and of course the one leg that supports me, together with the one foot on which I stand. The imagery and the sensory experience of this 'first step' and the landing on a new standpoint were a wonder to me. When I was standing on two feet before, it felt 'as if' I was a tree. I could imagine that from the soles of my feet roots were growing down and all branches and leaves stretching upwards. From here to my first step, it was not far. No reason to rush. The centre of gravity holds everything in balance while transiting the weight to a new standpoint. And then something groundbreaking happens. Do it again, 'as if' it was the first step. Keeping the sensation of wonder and letting yourself go - standing-stepping-walking-running-jumping-standing, and again and again, but never the same. Engaging in a constant balancing act. Always aware of the two opposite forces. For me this was the beginning - my first steps in theatre and dance.

First steps at ISTA

At the ISTA, the first lesson and the initial steps of your training are of great importance. How did your teacher, or guru, introduce you to the work? Was it by showing, explaining, or both? This is what all the artists and pedagogues at ISTA had to demonstrate and if they couldn't remember exactly, a fictional scenario of their first day would be fine. It is not always enjoyable for the performers to be the focus of attention in such an unusual situation. They have to leave their professional comfort zone and become a beginner again. This might also be a new way of thinking for artists from traditions where asking questions in the training is uncommon.

In Umeå, I had my first experience learning the foundational steps from all the pedagogues who were invited. Those from India, Bali and Japan used a codified form of communication with the audience, which most ISTA participants do not understand. It

was like learning new languages and the time limit made it feel like the first lesson might also be the last. Fortunately, I was able to organise a longer Odissi dance workshop and performances by Sanjukta Panigrahi in Berlin during the 1990s. This gave me the chance to go deeper into exploring a dance form that was very different from my cultural background. Her traditional teaching method was through demonstration and correction, but her ISTA experiences also allowed her to communicate with students from other traditions in a very helpful way.

At the ISTA session in 1986 at Odin Teatret in Holstebro, I had the fascinating experience of seeing Sanjukta Panigrahi with her guru, Kelucharan Mohapatra, which was both touching and beautiful. The balance of 'vigour and sweetness' in their physical and facial expression was something I had never seen before. It was my first ISTA, and I naively remarked in the post-performance talk that I was missing this delicious sweetness in Western theatre, while our addiction to sugar and chocolate was constantly growing. The audience laughed, but Eugenio Barba looked very serious and called for more focus. Perhaps I was not yet familiar with the academic rigour that sometimes took over at ISTA. Having just graduated from acting school, I felt like I was in a wonderland. When the Chinese Pei Yan-Ling performed a male warrior role during her demonstration, her enormous energy leaped into the audience, and we were blown away by this actress in a male role. It was wonderful to experience these moments of pure joy and excitement at the ISTA session titled, *The female role as represented on the stage in various cultures*.

Also at the same ISTA session in 1986, I saw Mei Lan-Fang's son, Mei Bao-Jiu, perform female roles like his father. I already knew about the great impression Mei Lan-Fang had made on Bertolt Brecht fifty years earlier and discovered that this had happened to several other theatre artists in Europe around the same time. For my directorial debut, just a few months after the 1995 ISTA, I had chosen a reflection on this early example of theatre anthropology.

Consequences of ISTA: directorial debuts and theatrical explorations

The Sorcerer's Apprentices, by Swedish writer Lars Kleberg, premiered at the festival Berliner Festspiele - Berlin-Moscow 1995. Originally a radio play, I adapted it for the stage with an ensemble of three Russian and four German actors. The plot was inspired by a pivotal 1935 Moscow performance by the legendary Chinese opera actor Mei Lan-Fang, who impersonated female roles. The play imagined a debate among some of the most influential figures in early 20th-century theatre: Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Erwin Piscator, and Konstantin Stanislavski. Although a work of fiction, one could easily imagine this situation becoming a battle of words. These famous artists, each claiming to best understand the highly stylised traditions of Peking opera and how to apply them to their own theories and practices. In my production, all the apprentices to Mei Lan-Fang's profound and ancient art were seated at a long classroom table. Kleberg had written monologues based on what the different characters had said or written at the time, with only a few lines of dialogue.



Two scenes from *The Sorcerer's Apprentices*. Left: Stanislavski has a coughing fit and Meyerhold, Piscator, Tairov and others try to assist. Right: Eisenstein performing surgery on the old 'system'. *The Sorcerer's Apprentices* imagined a debate among some of the most influential figures in early 20th century avant-garde theatre: Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Erwin Piscator, and Konstantin Stanislavski. The plot was inspired by a pivotal 1935 performance in Moscow by the legendary Chinese opera actor Mei Lan-Fang.
Photo: Archive Ralf Räuker

To bring action to the stage, I involved the entire ensemble in each monologue, and they moved 'over tables and benches,' which in German means 'causing chaos and trouble'. Three of the actors had been trained in biomechanics by Bogdanov, and the whole ensemble did physical training together throughout the production process.

J.W. Goethe's poem *Der Zauberlehrling* (The Sorcerer's Apprentice), tells the story of a single apprentice. While his master is away, the apprentice, tired of fetching water by hand, uses magic to order a broom to do the work. Because he is inexperienced, he loses control, and an army of brooms creates an unstoppable flood. One of Goethe's lines, *Die ich rief, die Geister, / Werd' ich nun nicht los* (The spirits that I summoned / I now cannot rid myself of again), is often used to describe someone who summons help or allies they cannot control, especially in politics. *The Sorcerer's Apprentices*, is about theatre magic and also politics under Stalin. People had hoped for change and called for help, but instead, a Stalinist army of 'iron brooms' began a ruthless cleanup. Anything and anyone Stalin disliked was no longer safe. When the play ends, Mei Lan-Fang had already left the conference, and the embarrassed apprentices wish him well in his absence. The final speech is delivered by a Stalinist official, bringing a cold shiver into the room, and some of the apprentices receive a clear warning. For all of them, it is a time of darkness because the 'great teacher Stalin' had no mercy.

The performance began with a recording of Max Reinhardt's voice, an original recording about theatre's magic and our playfulness on stage, like children. The stage at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin had an unusual design and could be opened on two sides. There was a large audience space and a smaller studio on the other side, where our performance took place. People were seated, listening to Max Reinhardt's voice, as the curtain at the back of the stage opened, revealing the large audience space with the actors sitting in different rows, in dimmed light. At the end of the recording, they came onto the stage and dressed as fairytale magicians with large, cone-shaped hats. It could have been a children's dress-up party, but there were red stars on the hats, and all the tablecloths were fiery red. Then, the music from Walt Disney's *The*

Sorcerer's Apprentice played, and a wild dance with brooms and red tablecloths began, ending with a big crescendo and all the apprentices sitting down at the long school table with embarrassed red faces. The curtain at the back then closed, and after this prologue, the play began.

Aquarians and Female Impersonators was presented at the Workshop of Cultures in Berlin in 1998. It featured a Chinese Peking opera actress performing a man who impersonates female roles on stage. This production was inspired by a mix of two plays by Lars Kleberg, *The Sorcerer's Apprentices* and *The Aquarians*, where Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein argues with Bertolt Brecht about art. Both plays are from Kleberg's *Starfall: A Triptych*. However, this time I used his texts only as inspiration and developed all scenes through a devising process with designer Merit Fakler, Peking opera actress Shi Hong Mei, and my friend Fang Yu. Fang Yu had helped me with my research on biomechanics, with a parallel tai-chi class, and he also brought Shi Hong Mei to Germany, which was a complicated bureaucratic process at the time.

After my 1995 ISTA experience and my directorial debut with *The Sorcerer's Apprentices*, the production *Aquarians and Female Impersonators*, went to a new level of challenge because I directed it and was working with a Peking opera actress on stage. I played Eisenstein and Brecht, and briefly, the writer Sergej Tretjakov as he commented on a demonstration by Mei Lan-Fang, who was wearing a men's suit instead of a Peking opera costume. The project revisited the fascination that Eisenstein and Brecht had with Chinese theatre. It also wove in the theme of their heart problems and their deaths from heart attacks in their fifties. The fact that they were both aquarians played an undercurrent role in their disputes about rationality and the subconscious. Mei Lan-Fang, a man and female impersonator fascinated Eisenstein and Brecht, not only as a research subject. The Peking opera actress, Shi Hong Mei, performing a man who impersonates female roles on stage was a double travesty, a playful way of deliberately creating confusion about sexual identity. The interest that Mei Lan-Fang had sparked in Western theatre came from men who dominated the art form. We explored how



Aquarians and Female Impersonators, Workshop of Cultures, Berlin, 1998. A woman performing a man who impersonates female roles on stage. The project revisited the ideas of Sergei Eisenstein and Bertolt Brecht, particularly their fascination with Chinese acting and Mei Lan-Fang. Left: Eisenstein taking notes. Right: Tretjakov observing and explaining Mei Lan-Fang's art.

Photo: Archive Ralf Räuher

Western artists viewed Eastern traditions with an outside eye and what happens when this look turns inward.

Shi Hong Mei did neither speak German nor English and was outside of China for the first time. I had never been there and did not speak Chinese. Sometimes Fang Yu would help with translating, but often she did her work, and I did mine. We could not engage in long discussions, which also had advantages. However, there was a tension between my fascination for Peking opera tradition and the lack of personal contact with the Chinese actress Shi Hong Mei in 1998. Our last musical piece on stage was a contemporary Chinese pop song, and we reenacted our first encounter at the airport in Berlin. The pop song helped us to relax and look at each other with fresh eyes. We both welcomed that moment.

Destination Paradise premiered at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in November 2001. The title came from a quote by Heinrich von Kleist in his essay *On the Marionet Theatre* published in 1810. A classical dancer and a storyteller have a conversation about marionette theatre, how the human body deals with gravity on stage and the loss of innocence or natural grace. Kleist makes clear that the lost paradise can't be reached by going backwards. 'We have to make the journey around the world and see if there is perhaps an opening again somewhere at the rear.' The other text that inspired the production was by Antonin Artaud *On the Balinese Theatre*. In 1931 Artaud saw a



Cristina Wistari helping during a rehearsal of *Destination Paradise*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2001.
Photo: Archive Ralf Räuker

Balinese dance troupe performance at the Paris Colonial Exhibition and saw in it all he was missing in the theatre of the time and in Western culture in general. Like Kleist he was searching for ways of heightening awareness to expanded consciousness. Both their essays closely look at the human body on stage. While Kleist sees dancers and marionettes meeting at a spiritual crossroad, Artaud describes the Balinese theatre as a cosmic marionet dance. For both authors their essays become screens for their metaphysical projections.

The idea for the Kleist-Artaud project was already on my mind at the ISTA in Umeå and I began talking to Cristina Wistari, a member of the Balinese dance ensemble from Ubud, about my ideas. These conversations led to me visiting Bali in 1998 and 1999 and collaborating with her on the 2001 production in Berlin. It was the most ambitious project I had done so far. On stage with Cristina were Tony de Maeyer, who had a background in biomechanics, and Steffen Findeisen, who had learned corporeal mime in Paris/Berlin and was studying Balinese dance at the time. In Berlin, three live musicians joined us on stage, with percussion and a grand piano on which transposed Gamelan and European classical music were played. A grand piano in German is also called a *Flügel*, which means 'wing' and music was an important element for our 'take off' *Destination Paradise*. Set designer, Merit Fakler, also an excellent video artist, used very sparse moments of projected light reflections from water surfaces as part of her design, a subtle hint that Kleist ended his life at a lake in Berlin in 1811, just a year after *On the Marionet Theatre* got published.

The play started with a waiting situation at an airport. A man and a woman were sitting on two separate benches when they heard the call for boarding. They both got up in the same moment but were stuck to the ground and could not move from the spot. They reached out for each other but could not get close enough to even touch. A cleaner who worked at the airport turned out to be their saviour. All three took off together on a journey to learn about gravity, one of the central themes in Kleist's essay.

Before we started rehearsals in October, terrorists had flown two planes into the World Trade Centre in New York. The whole world saw shocking images of death, destruction, and hatred. 9/11 challenged our production in a way we could never have imagined. Berlin was on alert, as the whole world was. Would there be any events, performances, any normality again, whatever that meant? Cristina arrived at the Berlin airport some weeks later. We devised, rehearsed, and finally performed at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. We had not found the back entrance to paradise, nor had we found an answer to 9/11. We took off and landed safely, but even that was somehow disturbing. The texts by Artaud and Kleist were a big challenge in their complexity. We were not an existing ensemble which clearly made the first phase of exploration more difficult. And we had limited time to create scenic material for the stage. The actors didn't speak a word of those famous essays on stage because I wanted us to find the physicality, musicality and the imagery that would connect an audience with the depth of the two essays by Kleist and Artaud. Maybe I should have worked more with the difficult situation we were in, instead of trying to create a homogeneous play.

But commenting directly on 9/11 so close to the tragedy, would have been a big risk. The title *Destination Paradise* could already be seen as a reference to the fact that Muslim terrorists fulfilled their murderous mission believing in the promise that they would go to paradise right away, surrounded by heavenly virgins. Starting a theatre play at an airport, at any other time would have not raised an eyebrow. But in October/November 2001 any step further into commenting on the huge conflict, the fear and anger that was in the air, could have caused a cancellation of the project. It was hard to forgive myself that we only could present moments of the performance I wanted to see.

However, working with *On the Marionet Theatre* brought me so much closer to a deeper understanding of Meyerhold's biomechanics. The marionet player must project him/herself into the centre of gravity of the mechanical puppet with heart and soul. The actors need to connect any movement on stage with their centre of gravity to become present and graceful. Consciousness should never be in the way of growth and creative expansion. Paradise now, means acting in the moment, without any judgement.

Artaud called out for a Theatre of Cruelty to liberate his inner scream. When I read his essay *On the Balinese Theatre* I felt as if I were hallucinating. But when we stage a piece we must rely on other skills, non-hallucinatory in nature. Artaud couldn't realise his Theatre of Cruelty and performed it on himself instead, becoming a martyr. Someone who burned and made signs like hieroglyphs on the pyre. When I'm a coward or just lazy, when I suppress my own scream and kill the fire, he reminds me of the sickness I ignore. And while there is not much assistance in a practical way from his side, he never stops to question me 'Why? Why, theatre?'

The path to teaching

Just a year after *Destination Paradise*, I signed my contract as a full-time lecturer in Theatre Arts at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in Perth. I became a teacher, and instead of workshops, I had to develop a curriculum. Instead of independent performance-making, I devised with my students. Half around the world I found my second home Down Under. Since 2003 I make a yearly journey back, to where I come from in Germany/Europe. For several years I did stopovers and gave workshops in Nepal, India, China, Singapore. I had already been to Japan, working with Otha Shogo and his ensemble on the performance *Suna no Eki* and taught drama for a year as a senior lecturer in Malaysia in 2016. The region and its performance cultures that ISTA's research focuses on became my neighbourhood.

Teaching in Australia meant dealing with a multicultural society. Around forty percent of the population was not born on this continent, which meant that people experience a lack of common ground. The very old Australia of the indigenous people was invaded by colonisers. How can a modern Australian culture be built on this history? And what do all the different cultures have in common that live here together. First, they want to make a living and find their community and feel at home. They might hold on to traditions and values of the land or island they came from, but this is a simulation of being at home.

A minority really connects with the unique land they are walking on and being outdoor means mostly doing sports or having BBQs. Arriving in Perth, Western Australia in 2002 this was the status quo. Down Under, a continent far away from Europe, was only half-way round the world.

Biomechanics was my specialty in Australia but working with Grotowski and Barba came before I met Gennadi Bogdanov. Having these different influences is enriching, and I find it inspiring for myself and the students in my teaching. The question is not whether we should work from the 'outside in' or the 'inside out,' but how we can make the connection between 'the inner' and 'the outer' more fluent, as if they were never separate.

Biomechanics was never intended to establish a specific style, but to teach basic principles of acting. These were used in Meyerhold's stage productions with a specific terminology and got refined in his artistic work as a director. The biomechanical etudes are mini-dramas, short pieces to practise basic principles. Like a Chopin etude for piano, they should prepare the trainee for more complex tasks. The etude are physical actions with a simple plot: e.g., *Slap in the face*, *Stab with a dagger*, *Throwing the stone*. Although the etudes do not represent a specific style, the composer, choreographer, or director leaves a recognisable fingerprint on this form of exercise when developing it. The biomechanical etudes are included in this and there are no dogmas that forbid to develop contemporary etudes, with fresh fingerprints on them. In any case I would recommend exploring the movement principles first freely and allow emotional response but not push it. The etudes should not be at the very beginning of one's training. The focus could easily be on the precise execution of the complex physical form, while Meyerhold also intended to help his students stimulate their emotional response through physicality, because movement triggers emotion.

Working with my students was rewarding. They were thirsty for theatre and performance training that was different to what they had seen and experienced so far. I enjoyed teaching them through devising and the most rewarding was to see when they got out there and did it their way. They started their own companies and became the new generation of theatre and performance makers in Western Australia.

In 2019 I staged *The Himalayan Peer Gynt* with MA theatre students at the university of Hyderabad in India. The adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* with Indian performers had been my dream for almost ten years. The young ensemble was very motivated to do physical training, and I was lucky that one of their lecturers had been at the Grotowski Institute in Wroclaw, in Poland as part of his studies. Thirty-six years after my first Grotowski-acting-experience on *Peer Gynt* with Zygmunt Molik the collaboration with Riken Nagomle in India was another experience of coming full circle. I only got 'half-way round the world' on my geographical life-journey. However, these 'full circle inner experiences' were like coming back to the beginning without having gone backwards. *The Himalayan Peer Gynt* was my last university project.

Living near Fremantle, a small harbour city on the Indian Ocean, my chances to do public performances depend on yearly grant applications. Parallel to devising theatre I've developed Balancing Act Workshops. This is a psycho-physical performance

training I offer to different groups with different needs in the community. In my last stage production in May 2025, I collaborated with the Japanese Musician Sanshi commemorating the end of World War 2 in Europe 80 years ago. It was my first solo performance since 1999. Currently I'm involved in a project with the Japanese community and performers from different cultural background in researching and reinventing an event that happened in Western Australia 100 years ago. *A week in Tokyo* was an oriental carnival Western Australians celebrated in 1925. The event involved all the cultural clichés one could imagine. There is some theatre anthropological work to do, and I really enjoy that it is community driven and not academic research. I obviously haven't lost my enthusiasm for performance research, but my focus today is on personal growth and inner connections when it comes to meeting other people and cultures. And as every year, I do my journey half-way round the world to Germany and Europe, where I come from.

Personal reflections

At my first ISTA experience in 1986, I had an enjoyable, naive idea about theatre anthropology. For me, it meant bringing people from around the globe together and having a powerful and entertaining experience, meeting and exchanging with diversely trained artists on stage. However, the human thirst for knowledge drives us to analyse the entire experience. We want to understand the whole by sometimes obsessively analysing its smallest details. Barba brought the discipline and obsession needed to create an International School of Theatre Anthropology. More than once, I saw the Promethean drama unfolding on his face, while his feet always moved with the elegance of a great cat, keeping him balanced and close to the gods. He chose a close connection with a selected group of people, always looking for the right chemistry or 'elective affinity'. Trust is important.

The ISTA in Umeå 1995 gave me an experience of inclusion when I was asked to present Meyerhold's biomechanics and felt that there was serious interest and appreciation for my research. It was also the first ISTA for me where we worked practically with all the pedagogues and had a lively exchange with the academics. This could sometimes feel like a boot camp, with an almost military discipline and every minute of the day scheduled.

However, it was still a very enjoyable frenzy, with all our senses on high alert. It was fertile ground on which we walked, often with naked feet. And there was time for poetry and rituals of love and laughter. Barba moved through this density like a warrior who had changed his mission. He knew how to fight for his cause and that seeds do not grow on a battlefield. "Better to be a warrior in a garden, than a gardener in a war", as Bruce Lee said.

Theatre anthropology has an eclectic tradition, and Meyerhold was one of the first artists to begin methodically investigating the basic principles of stage performance, drawing inspiration from different cultures and traditions. In 1996 in Copenhagen, Barba invited my teacher Gennadi Bogdanov to present biomechanics. My *Mission Impossible* on biomechanics came full circle when I demonstrated a partner etude together with Bogdanov. And for the final session in Copenhagen Barba brought me to



Biomechanics demonstration with Gennadi Bogdanov and Ralf Räüker, ISTA 10, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996.
Photos: 1, 2 (on top) Torben Huss. 3, 4, 5 (below) Fiora Bemporad

my seat, which was next to Grotowski. For me it was a symbolic moment. Having met these two living legends had created a tension in me. I would always look up to them, while I had to find my own way.

Introducing biomechanics, a year earlier in Umeå and being on stage with my teacher Bogdanov in Copenhagen was like my tribute to ISTA. The boy in me felt proud of having made a step towards independence. Grotowski's project *Art as Vehicle*, which I had encountered ten years earlier, was on a totally different trajectory. It was unlikely that I could impress him with efforts reviving Meyerhold's biomechanics. But that didn't matter in that moment. There were the two men who had a huge influence on me. One had left theatre production behind and the other was working with an ensemble of actors, touring performances around the globe. I had chosen to become a theatre maker and the three productions described earlier are clearly connected to Barba and the ISTA, especially *Destination Paradise*. Bringing Balinese dance to the stage in November 2001, I tried to create my own *Theatrum Mundi* as a next step towards independence and learned a few hard lessons about directing and devising.

I've been to Bali only once since *Destination Paradise* to meet Barba when he did some preparations for *Ur-Hamlet*. I watched him rehearsing in a small village with a Balinese ensemble member. He wanted the dancer to bring up the energy level in a fighting scene and become like a predator. Barba provoked him physically, by showing him 'his teeth'. This didn't work straight away and became hard work, but there was no doubt that pleasure and excitement was driving the effort. Barba wants to feel the performer's teeth and claws. "Because if your performer doesn't hurt you as a director, then what you have been creating is without teeth - toothless," he said with a smile in a film-interview on *Ur-Hamlet* in 2006. In the same interview he talks about "how human animals had been inventing different ways of expressing themselves." Those two 'human animals' I saw rehearsing a fighting scene, had an impact on my nervous system, when they showed me their teeth. I remember it as a 'pas-de-deux' of a director and a dancer, on life and death in Bali.

Balinese dance may also be viewed as a montage of successive movements. I visualise a flip book, where the rapid changing of pages produces a short film clip in the eye of the beholder - an illusion of continuous flow. Grotowski discussed this very idea, which he related to the search for organicity, in his talk on *Art as Vehicle* at the ISTA in Copenhagen in 1996. I imagine the endless hours that he was watching and listening to the 'Performer with a capital P' in Pontedera/Italy. He was witnessing a transformation through song-dance, seeing and hearing in a state of total awareness. From my own limited experience, I imagine that he would interfere rarely and talking about the work would happen later in a different place.

Of course, there are other approaches to theatre anthropology than Grotowski's and Barba's. I've referred mostly to them, as they were my first and most important influences. Reading Richard Schechner's contribution to *JTA 3-4, Ethology and Theatre* where he examines 'the convergences between human and animal behaviours', opened another exciting perspective for me. I also got reminded about my early amateur study of animal behaviour, which was far from scientific research.

However, this naive way of connecting with nature was the foundation for accepting myself as a 'human animal'.

My grandson is four years old and he's expecting a little brother in a few months. We were looking at a book for kids that shows the different stages of development from conception to being born. He was totally alienated by the image of the embryo having a clearly visible tail. That was certainly not his brother! A tail? I did not tell him that the image before showed an embryo with gill slits, like a fish. Evolution takes time, but it is also already all there, in our DNA. I hope I'll get the chance to defamiliarise my grandsons from the idea that what we see in the mirror is all we are.

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