



Anástasis rehearsals at the National Theatre, Budapest, Hungary, 2023. Photo: Rina Skeel

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A Retrospective on *Anástasis* Directed by Eugenio Barba

Abstract: The performance Anástasis (Resurrection) directed by Eugenio Barba, as part of the 9th Madách International Theatre Meeting (MITEM) and the 10th Theatre Olympics, was presented on 20 May 2023 at the National Theatre of Hungary. The production brought together the results of the 17th ISTA session. The text below summarises the event and gives a retrospective through an interview with Julia Varley and Eugenio Barba, and focuses on Anástasis, a Theatrum Mundi performance in dialogue with the main stage of the National Theatre of Hungary. Analysis of the performance leads towards an interpretation of the Third Theatre movement.

Keywords: Third Theatre, Third Space, Hungarian National Theatre, Anástasis, 17th ISTA 2023

17th ISTA in 2023

The 17th ISTA took place from 8 to 20 May 2023 for fifty participants arriving to Hungary from 27 countries. The first part of the programme (8-16 May) was hosted in Pécsvárad Castle, where in four different halls every morning participants attended parallel group sessions and were introduced to the principles of different theatre genres based on movement or vocal practices. During the afternoons, Eugenio Barba gave theatre theory lectures and led the rehearsals of *Anástasis*, involving all the participants in the process. The theatre-dance traditions represented by the masters in this ISTA session were flamenco, kathakali, noh theatre, Balinese dance, Nanguan opera, and baul song and dance. That Hungary could host such an exceptional event of indisputable significance for theatre studies and actor's training seemed like a distant dream just a few years before. The growing interest in Hungary for theatre anthropology was also a consequence of the publication in Hungarian of important books such as *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*¹, and *The Five Continents of the Theatre*² thanks to Zsófia Rideg, János Regős and Nikolett Pintér-Németh. Recently Hungarian theatre experts have even started using key concepts introduced thanks to theatre anthropology research. András Tímár summarises some key ISTA notions in one of his recent articles *The Able Body*:

1. Barba and Savarese 2005.
2. Barba and Savarese 2017.



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At the International School of Theatre Anthropology, established in 1979, researchers [sought to understand] where the energy of the Eastern dancer-actor comes from, what principles give rise to the presence of the stage performer, and how the sacred and ritual movement forms of the East could be integrated into contemporary European theatre. The methods for achieving presence were examined through the concept of what Barba calls the 'decided body', which is shaped by extra-daily body techniques. The richness of these techniques reaches the quality of a body-orchestra in the experience of the spectator, as the various communicative tools of the body (body parts, voice, rhythm) can make an impact simultaneously.³

In addition to the programme of research, an ISTA Festival took place at the Bóbita Puppet Theatre in Pécs presenting performances of each artist as an example of their theatre genre. The ISTA Festival is documented in an official programme booklet.⁴ Sinum Theatre, as one of the organisers, was disappointed by the limited interest of the local spectators and practitioners for the unique repertory that the 17th ISTA could offer to the region, noting that most of the seats were taken by the seventy ISTA participants and staff.

Another disappointment was when a few Hungarian participants left the eight-day programme before its conclusion. 25% of the participants of this ISTA session were Hungarians thanks to a special condition in the selection process requested by the programme's sponsor. Usually, ISTA participants are selected from a list of applications that can be three times the actual capacity, so the chosen participants are aware of spending time in one of the 'acropolises' of the international theatre world. ISTA sessions are characterised by an immersive and process-oriented atmosphere, offering opportunities to the participants and the teachers for an exchange of experiences and informal encounters giving birth to long lasting professional and personal relationships.

At times ISTA sessions have ended by showing an interdisciplinary *Theatrum Mundi* performance, but it has rarely been such a large-scale production as *Anástasis*, involving the participants as well as the ISTA artists in the creative process. The rehearsals were an integrated part of the whole teaching and research process. For most of the participants the experience of performing with international artists on the stage of the National Theatre in front of nearly six hundred spectators was unique, while some participants regretted that the pedagogical priority of the programme had shifted towards the creation of *Anástasis*.

Interview with Julia Varley and Eugenio Barba

GP-N: What were the origins of the *Anástasis* production?

EB: When the director of the National Theatre, Attila Vidnyánszky, decided that there should be a performance in Budapest at the end of the ISTA session, I was suddenly faced with the huge task of deciding what it should be about, since a performance

3. Timár 2022, 11–12.

4. <https://www.sinumtheatre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ISTA-2023-Musorfuzet-Booklet.pdf>

always tells a story. The ISTA artists come from very different backgrounds, and some of them have not taken part in an ISTA session before. I needed a universally recognisable and extremely simple story. Death, birth and love are the three archetypes around which stories have been built all over the world. Looking for a connection between the three led me to the theme of 'resurrection'. Since we no longer believe in resurrection as we did before, it was not an easy theme.

I remembered a scene of a performance by Keiin Yoshimura that portrays the joy of watching cherry trees blossom. This scene evokes the complementarity of nature: the simultaneous presence of death and rebirth. Then I thought of the Brazilian bumba meu boi tradition, familiar to the ISTA artists Juliana Pardo and Alício Amaral, in which a sacred bull dies and is resurrected by the rhythm of drums. I had a resurrection situation from the world of plants, and one from the world of animals. I needed one from human life and I imagined a child who dies and is then resurrected. This meant showing a family: a father, mother and child. The child's death offered many theatrical possibilities: death, burial, despair, mourning and consolation. I could achieve a dramaturgical structure by placing all of this within a layered, simultaneous montage, in which each scene should affect the spectators through its energy – like the Japanese blossoming cherry trees or the Brazilian bumba meu boi. After establishing the associative links, I could begin assembling the individual scenes.

I invited a digital stage designer, Stefano Di Buduo, giving him the task of transforming the whole theatre space into a blossoming cherry orchard. The ISTA participants could be a large chorus entering and supporting or bridging between scenes, for example after the Brazilian bumba meu boi scene, during the carnivalesque celebration of life, or accompanying the child's funeral procession. These were some of the structural elements, which helped me to find a dramaturgical variety and rhythmic alternation in the production.

When I arrived in Pécsvárad, I still didn't know how all this would come together, and I was genuinely concerned about how I would manage this task. I had only eight days in total and, in this time, I also had to deal with the practical lessons concerning pre-expressivity and the principles of theatre anthropology. The essence of ISTA is to pass on the practical experience of pre-expressivity so the participants not only understand it but learn how to build it into an artistic expression.

Leading both the morning lessons and the creative work simultaneously demanded a lot of energy from me. In the end, fortunately, the performance came together and worked. A key factor in the preparation was that Stefano Di Buduo, our light and digital stage designer, and Mirto Baliani, *Anastasis*' soundscape designer, had visited the National Theatre two months before the rehearsals began. I am grateful to the technicians and the leadership of the National Theatre who during the whole process were generously open to fulfil our requests. In similar situations, our experience is that institutional theatres operate according to rigid rules: you're not allowed to stay five minutes longer in a rehearsal space or you need permission from a specific technician just to move an object, while in group theatre we are used to everyone doing all kinds of tasks. These constraints could have created unbearable conditions, working in an unfamiliar terrain for us. But happily it did not happen.

GP-N: How do you look back on *Anástasis* today, after one year?

EB: This production meant a great deal to us, because we unexpectedly realised that we had created a model that could be applied in other contexts as well. Today, we are trying to present it as an intercultural performance, based on a cast of fifty actors from the host country, who work together with performers from all over the world. There was a plan to re-stage *Anástasis* in China with fifty or sixty Chinese actors and with the ISTA ensemble, but finally the organisers cancelled it, saying it was too expensive. In this perspective, Attila Vidnyánszky's attitude was exceptional: he made it possible for the production to happen. Someone has to believe it is a truly special and globally unique production.

JV: It was also important that we were able to apply what we had learned from *Ur-Hamlet* and *The Marriage of Medea*, previous Theatrum Mundi productions for which artists coming from far away were joined by a larger chorus group. Since the ISTA session in 2016, we had gone back to inviting individual artists to represent their theatre genre. Now *Anástasis* offered again the possibility of creating a Theatrum Mundi performance with the participants forming the chorus.

GP-N: My impression was that *Anástasis* represented a synthesis of the 20th century vision of the Third Theatre movement or was it the summary of an entire professional life?

EB: One could say that *Anástasis* embodies the experiences that Julia, the various artist-teachers, and I have accumulated through our work with ISTA. ISTA, primarily through Odin Teatret and me, sparked an interest for Asian theatre traditions all over in Europe, especially amongst Third Theatre groups. It happened from the 1970s, with significant contributions from people like Renzo Vescovi, the founding director of Teatro tascabile di Bergamo. We are talking of about fifty years of accumulated intercultural exchanges and research.

All these ever evolving and reciprocal artistic relationships are still reflected within ISTA today, supporting the emergence of theatre works that differ from what is usually considered theatre. It is still called theatre, but in every aspect – technical, economic, aesthetic, and social – it is different from conventional models. Attila Vidnyánszky made it possible for this kind of miracle to happen in Hungary, understanding that theatre can be something different from other standards around the world. Even now, I encounter people for whom the Hungarian ISTA opened new horizons.

JV: ISTA is built around theatre anthropology and its core principles like the study of pre-expressivity. In Hungary the teaching was also oriented toward the creation of a performance, creating a connection between the pedagogical and creative processes and allowing participants to see Eugenio Barba directing first-hand. The experiences of ISTA and of Odin Teatret converged in this format. There had been previous Theatrum Mundi productions at the end of ISTA sessions, but not in such an integral way that allowed the participants to follow the whole creative process.

Another convergence happened between the younger and older generations of artists. Early ISTA performances were filled with a youthful enthusiastic energy ready to confront the world. That energy was present when I had to embody the character of Mr Peanut, the skull-headed figure in a suit on stilts. Last year I wasn't on stilts, but when I was on stage as Mr Peanut with nearly forty participants behind me in the funeral scene, that same energy surged through me. For me it was a reconnection with something essential.

EB: *Anástasis* was a distillation, a manifestation of something basic.

GP-N: How do you look back on ISTA today?

EB: The Pécsvárad Castle was a beautiful venue. Spaces are significant for me, and the conditions there were exceptional. At the same time, it was bitterly cold when we had to work in a wind-exposed space covered only by tarps, and this had a harmful effect on the quality of the programme.

JV: The presence of István Berecz, representing Hungarian folk dance, who took integral part of the creative process, was unique. I have many beautiful memories of the people we met in Pécsvárad and Pécs. At the same time, there was a noticeable national imbalance among the participants. There were many Hungarians, and some of them did not appear to be particularly motivated. Maybe they came only because of the encouragement of a university department head. If we were in a similar situation again, we should devote more energy to building bridges.

GP-N.: Will there be another ISTA? Is there anything planned?

EB: There are no plans for the moment, but perhaps one day there will be another mad person who believes that an ISTA is a better investment than a tank or other weapons.

Was *Anástasis* a Third Theatre performance?

As it is well known, Eugenio Barba defined as Third Theatre a movement of theatre groups with their autonomous production systems and ethical principles, different from those of traditional and experimental theatres. Odin Teatret's 60th anniversary in 2024 and the Hungarian ISTA session in 2023 were occasions to reflect on the contributions and lessons offered by of this movement.

The concept of Third Theatre, along with its theoretical and historical contexts, was summarised among others by theatre historian Ian Watson.⁵ In the decades following the 1970s, the term was adopted by a great number of theatre groups. Watson identifies the key characteristics of Third Theatre as theatres that are typically independent, though not amateur; theatres that often exist on the periphery; whose members do not tend to come from institutional training; groups that distinguish themselves from both mainstream repertory and avant-garde theatres; that usually define themselves

5. Watson 1993, 18-21.

as collectives in which personal and professional lives are intertwined; and that often cooperate in networks.

Another striking definition of Third Theatre can be found in the synopsis of a recent book by Jane Turner and Patrick Campbell:

...we are not arguing that Third Theatre is either a monolithic entity or a postmodern cacophony of fragmented difference – we recognise that the Third Theatre is a plural, transnational community, but nevertheless one with a shared (often unwittingly) set of values and practical principles, as well as a number of definable concerns.”⁶

Many European and Latin American groups share the principle, intention and often compulsion of experimenting with alternative theatre spaces, for example by making street theatre.

Barba’s work – since the foundation of Odin Teatret – is characterised by a physical and conceptual openness: his productions are often created in non-conventional theatre spaces indoors or outdoors. The creative re-interpretation of the material and symbolic conditions of an institutional theatre space – the main stage of the Hungarian National Theatre – by an ‘outsider’ is a constitutive element of the performance *Anástasis*.

Anástasis was created with the active involvement of all ISTA participants, many of whom belong or used to belong to theatre groups closely related to the Third Theatre movement. Marco De Marinis⁷ underlined that the experience of ISTA is a common source for transgenerational or often autodidactic pedagogical practice for Third Theatre groups.

Anástasis, a result of the 17th ISTA, can be understood as an intercultural montage of different theatre traditions and as an experiment towards enchantment. As Campbell and Turner mention:

For many of the Third Theatre groups, we argue that their training laboratories, approaches to dramaturgy and engagement with cultural action foreground and specifically seek to restore a sense of enchantment.⁸

Seeking enchantment was surely a main driving force of the ISTA participants who stayed until the moment of performing. It was not necessarily seeking a personal enchantment that alters the state of consciousness but serving a ‘collective theatre construction’ resulting in a different kind of (cathartic) encounter between artists and international spectators.

The montage of different traditional forms in *Anástasis* recalls what Turner and Campbell explain about the relation between theatre anthropology and Third Theatre: groups often set out to “objectively dissect local cultural forms”⁹ to gain useful training material or to stage elements in a production. In *Anástasis*, the montage approach of traditional forms was criticised by some Hungarian spectators. The culturally specific

6. Turner and Campbell 2021, 162.

7. Marco De Marinis 2023/2024, 21-32.

8. Turner and Campbell 2021, 163.

9. Ibidem 8



Matheus de Aquino and Rodrigo Lopes dos Reis with chorus in *Anástasis*, Theatre Olympics, National Theatre Budapest, Hungary, 2023. Photo: Francesco Galli

interpretation of aesthetical principles is more dominant in Hungary among theatre makers and theoreticians, as András Tímár underlined in his review of *The Secret Art of the Performer*.¹⁰

This is interesting for the elaboration of the traces that the 17th ISTA left behind in Hungary. I think that the participants did not only receive a technical ‘toolkit’ or a taste of different disciplines but an ability to interact with the sources behind the traditions, what ISTA calls ‘learning to learn’.

The intention of embodied practice of traditional forms is not to dissect the form but to

re-experience [...] the relationship between the object and natural environment [of the sources behind the traditions], enabling a re-connectivity to language as a lived experience through a pre-conceptual observation of the environment. This state of mind has something to do with a childlike approach of discovering the world...¹¹

I reckon that re-experiencing the sources behind the tradition is one of the main goals of ISTA sessions. The early morning rituals, the natural environment and the historical buildings become essential elements of the programme. As a participant of the 15th

10. Tímár 2021, 108.

11. Pintér-Németh 2025, 153.

ISTA in Albino, Italy, I confess that now I can't remember the technical approaches of the various disciplines, but I do recall my state of mind at five in the morning looking at a bird flying above my head in the sky.

During the preparation of *Anástasis*, Eugenio Barba's review of the National Theatre's main stage possibilities – just as for an alternative space – was the natural consequence of an encounter between his artistic biography and the venue. The involvement of different expressive forms, unusual for an institutional theatre, was also part of the process: how some actors entered on stage from the audience; the use of digital images which had an effect on the visual language of the production giving a depth of prospective and making the audience part of the stage; the use of rising platforms to open the vertical possibilities of the set design and evoke a continuous slow or dynamic transformation.

The performance *Anástasis* transformed the Hungarian National Theatre's main stage into the place of an experience centred event, which – drawing on Edward Soja's concept – could be explained as a 'third space'. Soja describes the 'third space' as emerging from the overlapping of the first space (the physical building) and the second space (its conceptual or symbolic interpretation, such as a street name). Therefore, the third space is grounded in personal experience. The origin of this idea is based on Jorge Luis Borges' story, in *The Aleph*, which describes a magical glass sphere that reveals the entire universe when it is viewed from a specific point. As Borges writes: "The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished."¹² The *Anástasis* production can be seen as an attempt to transform the whole main stage of the National Theatre (including the audience), into such an 'Aleph', a third space which also serves as a distillation of a life's work and a convergence of the Third Theatre movement.

Since the performance was not based on a pre-written script or play, its dramaturgy was built on the physical presence of the actors, the communication of the 'body-orchestra' as well as a soundscape from various sources. Following Li Wei,¹³ one might say that *Anástasis* transformed the National Theatre's main stage into a site of a *translanguaging* event, a space where the spectator becomes an active agent of the environment and the theatre experience can transcend the everyday. The performance was an example of Third Theatre, a theatre that proclaims the ideal of a living space, outside of power structures, and an event space ideal for free expression of opinion and human encounters.

Anástasis appears to be a fruit of the Third Theatre movement, a performance that challenges the understanding of conventional theatre spaces, opens associations to establish an impassioned relation with the building hosting it and with the increasingly polarisation of our contemporary global society.

12. Jorge Luis Borges, *Aleph*, available on this link: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/borgesaleph.pdf>

13. Wei 2018, 9-30.

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