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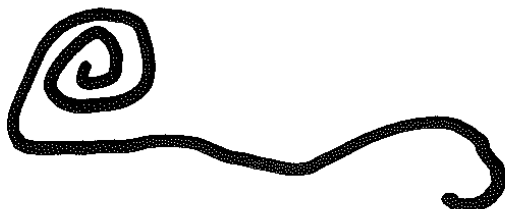
FESTIVAL
INTERNACIONAL
DE LONDRINA



Otelo

(BRASIL)

Augusto Omolú
e Ensemble



Julia Varley

Augusto Omolú

A letter to remember

Abstract: Augusto Omolú joined the artistic staff of ISTA for the Londrina session in 1994 and was present at all ISTA sessions after that until the Bielefeld session in 2000. In 2013, Augusto Omolú was killed in his home in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. This article presents his contribution to theatre anthropology, ISTA, Theatrum Mundi and Odin Teatret with the Afro-Brazilian dance of the orixás from the Candomblé rituals. With Odin Teatret, Augusto Omolú performed in Andersen's Dream, Great Cities Under the Moon, Ode to Progress and in the demonstration created after the ISTA session in Copenhagen in 1996, The Whispering Winds.

Keywords: Augusto Omolú, Orixá dance, Candomblé, Orô de Otelô, Theatre and ritual

Augusto Omolú and theatre anthropology

The first time Afro-Brazilian Augusto Omolú and his musicians were invited as part of the ISTA artistic staff, to teach the participants, give demonstrations and present a performance was in 1994 for the ISTA session in Londrina, Brazil. His contribution gave a new perspective to theatre anthropology. Until then comparative research in theatre anthropology had mostly been based on artists coming from Asian and European theatre and dance genres and traditions. Augusto, being trained as a classical and modern dancer, had the capacity of repeating, fixing and thinking with his body-mind as a whole, besides possessing an embodied knowledge originating from African diaspora rituals based on dance and drum rhythms. He was able to recognise the technical knowledge intrinsic in the dance movements he had learned since he was a child. His experience widened the horizons of theatre anthropology, giving an awareness that also concerned other Latin American forms to be found in many village feasts. Traditional folkloric dances, songs and rhythms that are passed on from generation to generation through a practice in the community are a reference for principles that enhance the performer's presence as studied in other theatre genres. This realisation has had a great influence on group theatre all over the world. When Augusto was killed in 2013, I wrote a letter to



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him, wanting to remember not only his personality and artistic power and beauty, but also his ambition of transforming the dance of the *orixá* – the gods of the Candomblé religion – into a codified form. This ambition was born within ISTA sessions when Augusto experienced artists like Sanjukta Panigrahi, I Made Djimat, Kanichi Hanayagi, Akira Matsui performing and giving demonstrations of the apprenticeship for ancient forms of odissi, gambuh, kabuki and noh. The letter has been published in Brazilian, Italian and Spanish. Here it is published for the first time in English.

The letter

July 2013

Dear Augusto,

You had told me that only after completing your artistic mission, you would assume the responsibility of becoming a *pai de santo* in the Candomblé, the religion in which you were born. When age would prevent you from dancing in theatres, you would return to live permanently in Brazil and assume the role indicated to you before he died by the old *pai de santo* of your *terreiro*, the Candomblé ceremonial house in your neighbourhood in Salvador. I always believed this would happen. But...

There are moments when I get angry with you because you allowed the unthinkable to happen to you, something we couldn't accept or believe when we heard the news, something that perhaps wasn't even consciously desired by the person or people who drew a murderous knife against you. So, from one day to the next, we can only speak to you through our many disorderly memories. Will someone take up your legacy? Will someone be able to bring to life the essence of your work, your joyful rigour, your dance, your *axé*? Will someone express on stage the same desire to live and offer what burned in your eyes? Will someone take care of all the children and young people who had chosen you as their mentor?

Your experience was written in your body. You knew how to speak and explain well, but you didn't put words on paper. You have worked as an actor in theatre; you have created many choreographies as a classical and modern dancer; you have taught the dance of the *orixás*, the deities who manifest themselves in nature's forces, in Salvador and around the world. One of your ambitions was to enhance the value to your Afro-Brazilian culture. How could you establish a tradition that was both new and ancient, and that would endure over time beyond your embodied technique? You should have conveyed the wholeness of yourself and your knowledge: that which was imbued in your noble posture, in your very black skin, in your generous and sometimes ruthless smile, in your braided or short hair that sprinkled water far away when you twirled because you wet it before going on stage, in the sinuous movements of your bare shoulders, in the wise rhythm of your feet, in the memory inherited from your ancestors who arrived in Brazil in chains from various African nations, each with its own dignity of rhythms, songs, languages, and dances.

When you were born, your godmother was possessed by Omolú, the *orixá* who takes care of the cemeteries and the dead, covered with a long cape and skirt of straw that even hides his face. We took inspiration from this costume for the character of Guga,

with which you performed in Odin Teatret's street performances. Guga wore a mask sculpted in leather by Fabio Butera. You named him with the nickname your friends used to call you. When you explained to me that my *orixá* was Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea, the mother, you said that your real *orixá* was half Ogum and half Oxalá, half warrior and half wise old man. This was to clarify that Omolú was merely your artistic name, which had stuck with you from when you danced that *orixá* at the beginning of your career in folkloric performances in Bahia. You showed the sick parts of the body, pointing at the ears, eyes, mouth, hands, and then a shiver ran through your arms, which lifted behind your back as you knelt, bending forward to pound your fists on the ground before jumping upward. How many times have I seen this sequence of actions when Othello killed Desdemona in your performance *Orô de Otelo*? In the pantheon of the *orixás*, Omolú's rhythm was the one that seemed simplest to me, with its repetition gradually increasing in speed.

You had many brothers and sisters from different fathers. Your mother was the centre of the family. You were very close to her, and thinking of her moved you during an event during the Holstebro Festuge (Festive Week). We had visited the cemetery with the Ageless group, the actors from the workshop we led together with Deborah Hunt, who created large masks with the participants. We had been allowed to enter the cemetery with only one mask during one of the night performances. The actress placed a flower on a grave and then released a white balloon. Outside, we all waited in silence. Under the masks, some were crying. You were standing aside, also silent. Your mother had died recently. We had visited her one day with Odin Teatret, and you had proudly introduced her to us.

You were also proud to welcome us in Salvador to the bar in a room on the third floor of a house of yours where you didn't live. At the airport in Rome, you bought some colourful Murano glasses for that bar, which I thought were extremely kitsch but which you considered to be wonderful. You always brought gifts from abroad and took care of the homes of your family, your children, but also sisters-in-law, daughters-in-law, cousins, uncles, godfathers, godmothers, nieces, nephews and neighbours. You were young when you had your first son, Gustavo, who had studied computer science and had already made you a grandfather twice when we met. Your second daughter, Luana, lived in Jericoacoara, the tourist paradise south of Fortaleza in Brazil, with Andrea, the Argentine mother you were madly in love with when you first arrived at Odin Teatret. Your salary disappeared in telephone calls. Little Alina, meanwhile, was living in Paris with Lisa Ginzburg, your last wife. You had seen her forty days before dying. You loved playing with her. You showed us her photograph: Alina has your dark complexion, and on the street it's hard to believe that the slender, ivory-skinned Italian woman is her mother. Around you, in addition to your family, a large circle of students has gathered, some Latin Americans, many Italians, others from the rest of the world. You were sorry that there were so few Brazilians.

It was January 13, 1993, when we met you. Eugenio Barba and I were travelling in Brazil to prepare the ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) session, which would take place in August 1994. Nitis Jacon, the director of FILO (Londrina International Festival), was absolutely determined to present a Brazilian tradition alongside

those from Japan, India, Bali, and Europe. We were doubtful that among Brazil's popular performances, a structured and repeatable form comparable to the codified Asian forms could be found. We were sceptical about the possibility of finding an exponent of such a tradition capable of verbally explaining and technically demonstrating, without any difficulty, the various layers of his or her embodied knowledge, which in artistic practice is a unity, separating the form from its ritual or festive context.

We had seen *bumba meu boi* in Brasília, São Luis, and Fortaleza. In Salvador, accompanied by our filmmaker friend Paulo Dourado, we attended rehearsals and classes with various Afro-Brazilian dancers, as well as many Candomblé and Caboclo ceremonies. Early one morning, Paulo led us into a large room where about seventy dancers were sweating to the pounding beat of the drums. You were introducing them to the dances of the different *orixás*. You showed Oxóssi, the hunter, with his double leaping step, the horseman's whip, the middle finger like an arrow aiming, the rope tightened around his grip, the strong body, and the victorious expression on his face. Then you moved on to Oxum, the goddess of fresh water, vanity, love, and beauty, who looks at herself in the mirror, combs her long hair, and adorns herself with jewellery. Suddenly, your expression changed from determined, masculine and vigorous, to soft, feminine and seductive. You weren't effeminate, nor artificial. You were filled with an inexplicable energy that had completely transformed you before our eyes. Eugenio and I looked at each other. We knew what we were both thinking: only by watching the dances of Sanjukta Panigrahi, the unforgettable Indian Odissi dancer and founder of ISTA, had we seen a similar transformation. For Eugenio and me, it was love at first sight, like what happened to many of your students.

Paulo Dourado introduced us at the end of class at the bar where you gathered to drink beer with students, friends and musicians. It was near the Teatro Castro Alves, where you worked as a principal dancer in the contemporary dance company. *Geladinha* is a word that comes to mind when I think of Brazil: the beer must be cold, and if it isn't, you order another. There were many bottles and glasses on the table. Paulo tried to explain who we were. During Odin Teatret demonstrations, you have often said you thought then you were dealing with curious tourists who would quickly lose interest in your dance. Between one beer and another, we managed to convince you to take us to your *terreiro*.

Back then, we still didn't speak Portuguese, but Spanish, and Paulo translated. You forced us to learn Portuguese, the only language you knew. Years later, Eugenio told you that to stay at Odin Teatret, if not Danish, at least English was mandatory. Lilicherie McGregor, the New Zealand director who was an assistant rehearsal assistant for *Andersen's Dream*, tried to teach you with infinite patience: one, chwo, three... (I wonder why in Brazil the t becomes c...) You managed to count to eight, the beats needed to convey the rhythm of the dance you taught. Then, when you married Lisa Ginzburg and lived in Rome for a while, the Italian words you liked began to creep into your explanations. Even though your great intelligence was revealed in your body language, you always had some intellectual urges, like, deep down, many actors at Odin Teatret.

That day at the *terreiro*, we talked about energy, about the meaning of the word



Ory Sacramento and Augusto Omolú in *Orô de Otelô*, ISTA 8, Londrina, Brazil, 1994. Photo: Emidio Luisi

axé, about codified and improvised movements, dance, theatre, ritual and religion. You showed us the stones that Candomblé devotees plant in vases to mark their initiation into the cult. These stones are like seeds and they grow, you explained. You pointed at the offerings, the houses of the various *orixás* with their objects, the kitchen, the paintings on the walls, the chairs that belonged to the *mãe de santo* and the *ogan*, the ceremonial assistant, the ceremonial drums protected by a white cloth. You too were an *ogan*, and like the drummers, you didn't fall into trance like other followers. You mentioned the *fundamento*, the sacred elements of Candomblé, which were not to be communicated externally and could not be part of an artistic expression disconnected from the ritual. Religion had a secret part with a rigorous discipline that required isolation from the outside world, and a public part. You called the open ceremony a 'feast', which included dances, music, and food shared with everyone present, even non-affiliates. The *orixás* would descend during the dances and 'ride' their devotees.

Toward the end of our visit to the *terreiro*, we sat on white plastic chairs. Eugenio asked you if you were able to dance while sitting. You nodded, smiling. Eugenio asked us to improvise a dialogue between strong and soft energies: you should use the *orixás'* dances, a codification passed down to you by tradition, and I would use my personal codification as an Odin Teatret actress, with elements I had invented myself. We had never done something like this together before, but it wasn't difficult. Even though I still had no idea what your movements meant, and you couldn't interpret mine, we had a common language. Our energy modelled precise forms that, alternating, rhythmically intersected, merged and reacted to each other. They seemed to be telling us something.

Paulo was amused and started to laugh. He enjoyed watching actors at work, he commented. That afternoon, Eugenio decided to invite you to participate in the ISTA session. You did not know what ISTA and theatre anthropology were, but you accepted and it was the beginning of a long process of mutual learning.

When you died, Francesca Romana Rietti, the scholar who at the time worked at the OTA-Odin Teatret Archives, wrote to Eugenio:

From: francesca

Sent: June 3, 2013 10:30 PM

To: gegge

Subject: Re: No Subject

Dear Eugenio,

Yesterday I tried a thousand times to reply to you by email, but I couldn't; the email always bounced back. So, this evening I am writing only to you to tell you that Augusto's departure has left me frozen in my chair, stunned, incredulous at the senseless pain and a death devoid of grace and dignity. Then, before my soul's eyes, so many images of so many years with Augusto flashed one after another, from those at university to the last, always beautiful, conversations we had when he returned to the North, with the promise – today broken – to visit him in his native Babia. And one of the most beautiful images, one of the many for which I will be grateful for ever, was the one tied to the dancing joy in your eyes as you watched him work and dance. Then the engine ignited by that joy in your eyes would slide down your spine, you would jump up from your chair and begin a beautiful dialogue with him because he followed you, giving shape to the dance of your thoughts. You were so beautiful together. I want to remember Augusto like this. I want to remember him for the joy he gave.

Hugs, Francesca

When Eugenio shared Francesca's letter with all of us at Odin Teatret, he said to me 'it is true, it was exactly like that'.

You died when we were in the middle of the women's Transit Festival at Odin Teatret. In those frenetic days, we had no time to grieve; it wouldn't have been fair to our guests. I could only dedicate my opening speech to you, in which I also spoke about the violence that surrounds us, the kind that strikes women in particular, but not only.

Eugenio confessed to me that he considered you to be our son, because we followed your development together. To me, however, you were a brother. One of those with whom you share a good amount of history, whom you love, and who sometimes make you burst with rage, like when you arrived five minutes before closing time at the Serbian embassy to collect the visa we had managed to get you issued urgently. We had been waiting for you at the BITEF Festival in Belgrade to perform *Andersen's Dream*, and you didn't even have ten euros in your pocket to pay for it; or when, without warning, you arrived two days late for the three-week tour at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

There was a lot to do to introduce you to ISTA on an equal footing with the other teachers. All of them had been trained by Eugenio with long periods of observation and

collaboration, they had learned to give demonstrations, and above all, they presented a performance of their tradition. It was important that the ISTA participants should forget the hours spent poring over technical details and comparing terminology when faced with the persuasive and magnificent evocative power of a performance. You had neither a demonstration nor a performance. You really needed to create them to participate in ISTA as a representative of the *orixás'* dance tradition. You showed us various parts of the choreographies you knew as a ballet dancer and a sequence of *orixá* dances. You seemed to have different identities that depended on the music that accompanied you. By watching you, I began to learn the names of the dances of each *orixá*. This knowledge proved essential in assisting Eugenio when it came to creating the performance *Orô de Otelô* (Ceremony for Othello). You had never thought of the *orixás* as characters that could establish a dialogue with each other.

Pierre Verger had collected many testimonies, photographs, and drawings from the world of Candomblé. We looked through his book, searching for inspiration for our work with you. We asked you for stories. You told us one about Iansã. She had a relationship with two men: Xangô, her husband, and Ogum, her lover. They were jealous of each other. This story was the first step towards your performance: a scene of seduction, amorous encounter, and violent confrontation. It took time. It was one thing to have you move from one *orixá* to the next without interruption, quite another to convince the musicians accompanying you to do the same. The greatest difficulty, however, was to convey to you the experience that simply performing a succession of different elements is not enough to create an effect of their relationship.

We invited you to Holstebro in Denmark to work with the Indian dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi and her musicians. It was an opportunity to explore the possibilities of your knowledge through another tradition. Sanjukta didn't speak Portuguese, you didn't speak English. Eugenio left you alone in the Black Room with the task of creating a scene together. The only way to communicate was through stage language. Sanjukta began to improvise, moving from the representation of an elephant to a peacock, from Radha to Krishna, from a serpent to a demon. You followed her, responding to her transformations with your own: from Oxumarê to Nanã, from Iemanjá to Ossaim, from Iansã to Ogum... To mark the change, Sanjukta used a pirouette. Together, we imagined you could use a similar procedure with a *baixavento*, the slight loss of balance with a backward fall that marks the taking possession of the devotee by an *orixá*. When you changed *orixá* it was as if the *baixavento* infused a new energy into your body.

We were worried that your professional familiarity with Sanjukta would create problems. You touched her and held her in your arms, following Brazilian customs and Western dance conventions. This behaviour was taboo in traditional Indian dance, especially for a Brahmin like Sanjukta. She reassured us with a mischievous smile. It seemed she deeply enjoyed your affectionate irreverence. Her musicians found your dances unrefined and compared them to indigenous or folk dances. After a few days, you won them over with the power of your dance. You had the self-confidence and cheerfulness that allows Brazilians to use words like negro and popular without inhibition, and to call presidents of the republic by their first names instead of their surnames.

That week in Holstebro, you also worked with Odin Teatret's actors. We were in our White Room. Oxalá, the old man, with his back increasingly bent with age, destroyed our legs. Despite this, we became very fond of you. The same happened with your students: the more you challenged them, the more they sweated and struggled, and the more they were willing to do anything to follow and be close to you. In Holstebro, you also gave your first demonstration. We asked you to present all the dances you knew and narrate your artistic autobiography. You stormed our collections to make the costumes of the various *orixás*. You still didn't believe in the effectiveness of naked action, and you wanted to impress us. We heard you talk about your first teachers: Mestre King of the Ballet Folklorico in the 1970s, and Emília Biancardi, who directed the Viva Bahia group.

Your eyes had to learn to create what isn't there. Creating a relationship through a way of looking is an obvious technique for an actor, but not for dancers who focus on the pattern of their movements and not on the image that might be produced in the spectator's mind. When we worked on the scene between Iansã and Ogum and Xangô, I moved in the space so you could see clearly where Iansã was when you were dancing Ogum or Xangô, and where Ogum and Xangô were when you were dancing Iansã. You understood it with your body by thinking of the distribution of positions in space: Ogum watched from afar and then ran to separate the other couple; then you were Iansã on the right, lifting her skirts in the wind toward Xangô, and when you became Xangô, you slid to the opposite side, keeping your fists clenched.

Then you learned to project and fix your gaze into space to indicate how Iansã, while dancing, invited Xangô, seduced him, drew him toward her, and sent him away. Ogum, dancing on the same spot, spied Iansã and Xangô as they danced together, his gaze from underneath like an animal ready for battle. Your Ogum would hold the sword and shield, showing first the palm and then the back of his hand in rapid succession. Your Xangô would become entangled in Iansã's skirts not only with a back-and-forth movement of his arms, but also with his eyes, which attempted to master the wild and stormy nature of the woman in front of him.

I don't remember exactly when Eugenio decided to work with you on the story of Othello. Perhaps it was the jealousy between Ogum and Xangô that inspired him to develop this theme. As a director, Eugenio needed a personal starting point. While you used elements of your culture – the dance of the *orixás* – he tried to meet you halfway with the baggage of his own culture: the opera arias played by music bands in the squares of southern Italian towns during the celebrations of their patron saints. Othello, a black man, was a character who fitted you perfectly and whom audiences across the globe could recognise.

We worked again together in Salvador, in your Bahia, on what would become the performance *Orô de Otelô*. You were alone on stage, telling the story of Othello through dance, accompanied by the rhythm of the three drums played by three musicians, interspersed with recorded fragments of Verdi's opera. Eugenio was the director, and I was his assistant director. It would be more accurate to call me the dancer's assistant, or more simply, the translator of the director's intentions, which are often not easy to understand, even for his actors.

The performance premiered at ISTA in Londrina in 1994 and last performed in Holstebro during the Odin Week Festival in 2012. With it you have toured many countries. To make you more independent and facilitate its dissemination, we recorded the music for a version of the show entirely by yourself. But whenever possible, the three musicians accompanied you. How can we forget the time in Florence when, cheerfully disobeying my instructions, the four of you returned to the stage, raising your arms together like victorious football players, to the applause of 400 enthusiastic spectators? Or the performance during the ISTA session in Portugal in 1998 in the deconsecrated church of Montemor-O-Novo with a huge crucifix towering over the stage?

In Salvador, rehearsals had been difficult. You didn't understand what Eugenio was asking of you, and he didn't have a sufficient understanding of what you could offer. Eugenio didn't understand Portuguese, and his Spanish wasn't always clear to you and the musicians. The initial idea was a performance constructed entirely around *orixá* dances: their manifestations, with their inherent modulations of tension and qualities of energy, would express the passions of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona. For us, it was important to preserve the logic of your tradition, without introducing contemporary dance or theatre elements foreign to your practice. I often repeated: don't do what Eugenio asks of you, but what he wants to see. You lacked the experience that we actors at Odin Teatret have in following our own path, guessing the direction to take from the tasks assigned by the director, who doesn't anticipate the outcome. Lately, you had humorously talked about your misunderstandings during these first rehearsals.

All the ISTA artists were familiar with the process we at Odin Teatret call of 'reduction', that is, how an action can be performed by showing only its impulses. It



Augusto Omolú and Tjokorda Istri Putra Padmini, ISTA 8, Londrina, Brazil, 1994. Photo: Emidio Luisi

was the most obvious way to erase the aesthetics tied to the form of the spectacular genre and emphasise the essence of the tensions that give rise to the action. The external form is compressed so as not to fully erupt into the space, and at the same time the muscular tensions, with their oppositions, resistances, directions, and restrained signs, are maintained or strengthened.

In the first scene of the performance, accompanied by the love dialogue between Othello and Desdemona from Verdi's opera, you entered elegantly dressed in white. You were immersed in reading a book: Shakespeare's *Othello*. The audience saw a simple walk, with a few interruptions and changes in direction. It seemed as if the reading stirred something inside you, that you responded to the written words with thoughtful pauses, and glances that wandered into space and quickly returned to the written words. Instead, what underlay and determined the dynamics of your steps and every minimal dynamic shift was the dance sequence of Ogum, in which you sharpened your swords with decisive steps to the right and then to the left. The reduction of the form forced you to concentrate on the action, thus avoiding 'playing'.

In the transition from dance to theatre, your first temptation was to interpret emotions and represent them with your face. Then you would lose the expressive power of the *orixá* dances, rooted in action as you began to flaunt imaginary states of mind. You thought that when Eugenio asked you for more gentleness, you had to exhibit it. Classical music also made you lose your roots, the sense of weight in your body and the connection with the earth that you immediately rediscovered when the rhythm of the drums brought you back to your dance of the *orixás*. Years later, in demonstrations where we explained together the process of creating the performance, you were able to immediately demonstrate the difference in the way of walking that I helped you become aware of in those early days: with Verdi's music, you straightened your ankle and knees and touched the ground with the tip of your foot like a ballet dancer, with the rhythms of Candomblé your whole foot-sole was on the ground; with the opera music, you elevated and your centre of gravity shifted to your chest; with the rhythms of Candomblé, your base was in your pelvis and firmly rooted to the earth. It wasn't just your strength or lightness that changed, it was as if the culture and expressiveness of your body changed. To use our working language, you were more organic when you danced the *orixás*. With the help of the drums and by becoming aware of how your body automatically reacted to the music, we gradually managed to ground you even when Verdi's music accompanied you.

The reduction was also useful for other scenes: you took off your jacket, shirt, and shoes with the sequence of actions that indicated the writing of Xangô's laws; Oxumarê's snakelike attacks expressed Iago's rage and defiance of God; with Nanã's raised arms, you invoked the memories of Desdemona's handmaiden; Omolú's shaking of the hands served to drop the handkerchief you picked up with the movement of the fish shimmering in Iemanjá's sea. But for the scene in which Desdemona prepares for bed and, unaware, waits for Othello, we needed more variation and nuance. For the first time, in the ballet rehearsal room of the Teatro Castro Alves, you improvised inspired by Oxum. You didn't have to stick to known forms, but rather invent positions, ways of walking, kneeling, lying down and running, always with the same quality of energy. You later repeated this process many times in your workshops. You explained that it

wasn't so much that the students repeated the shapes you had shown, but that they felt the pleasure of getting wet with water, the sensuality, the softness, the desire to beautify themselves and to seduce.

It rained every day in Salvador, and rehearsals lasted from early morning until late at night. Despite your efforts, Eugenio was dissatisfied. He felt he couldn't guide you towards the door beyond which the world changes. He became impatient and irritable. When he had to leave, he decided I would stay in Salvador to work with you. To finance the extension of my stay, I gave one workshop in the afternoon and two in the evening at the Castro Alves Theatre. I rehearsed with you in the morning. You were often late; a couple of times you didn't show up. It was July, and the rain persisted, falling monotonously. The people of Salvador don't use umbrellas because rain is hot. I waited. It was my summer vacation. The World Cup was raging, and Brazil was in the final. Discipline and concentration weren't the order of the day. I was about to surrender, but you convinced me not to give up. I didn't understand what you were thinking, whether the work interested you, what your intentions were.

Once in the studio, we worked well together and made progress. The dancer's mannerisms began to disappear. By better understanding the possible variations of the different *orixás*, I was able to help you enrich your score with detail while you let the music carry you. One day we also worked on the voice and the different sounds that characterise the *orixás*. Enthusiastic, I imagined that just as Sanjukta Panigrahi had re-established the classical dance of odissi in India, you too could codify in a vast vocabulary the movements of the hands, eyes, feet, and even the voices of each *orixá*. You would complete the dances with infinite detail to achieve a richness of expression like other performance genres. But perhaps it was more important to attract street children with the sound of drums and make them dance to give them a sense of belonging, as you did with your Ilé de Omolú, the school you managed to get financed by a friend who lived in São Paulo and others who believed in your project.

We worked extensively on the dialogue in which Othello accuses Desdemona of betrayal. It seemed impossible for you to follow the rapid exchange of lines sung in the opera by Luciano Pavarotti and Tiri Te Kanawa, with the alternating male and female *orixás*. I constantly stopped the music that dictated the rhythm by pausing the small tape recorder we used in the ballet rehearsal room at the Teatro Castro Alves. We had fixed every reaction, but you needed time to incorporate and remember without hesitation. As soon as you were distracted for a second, the music continued undeterred, and you found yourself leaping like Ogum while Desdemona sighed, or carefully combing your hair like Oxum while Othello screamed. Over time, this became the most impressive scene in the performance, and you also performed it in public demonstrations.

You have always had the tendency to think that the spectators were more interested in seeing you dance to classical music than in listening to the rhythms of the drums and watching the dance of the *orixás*. We laughed together whenever we remembered the pirouettes and leaps you performed on the large floating stage on Holstebro lake during a Festuge (Festive Week) instead of performing Ogum's dance as scheduled; or when we thought about the scenes of a couple in love you performed with Carolina Pizarro in 2011 when, always as a classical dancer, you chased each other through the trees until

you splashed and rolled in the muddy water of the Holstebro park pond during the last Festuge you participated in.

The *orixás' xiré* in *Orô de Otelo* exhausted you, especially when you didn't have the support of the drums, while the energy needed for the two sword strokes that marked the killing of Desdemona always burst forth, followed by Omolú's sign of the cross and the slow descent to the ground with the last tremor of the hands. In the *xiré*, starting with Ogum, you introduced all the *orixás*, in multiple versions and with the different rhythms of Keto, Angola, and Jeje. After Desdemona's killing, you rose for the *avanía*, the closing of the Candomblé ceremony, in which the *orixás* bid farewell before retiring. After the deafening beat of the drums, the silence was punctuated by your panting. You slowly backed away and nonchalantly gathered up the fateful handkerchief and your clothes scattered around the space, while the musicians joined you for the final *baixavento*. A relaxed collective smile marked the end of the performance. They continued to burn candles before the drums, illuminating the leaves that, like Ossaim, you had rubbed on parts of your body before throwing them into the air and scattering them on the floor where you would soon crawl like Oxumarê.

In Iansã's scene with Xangô and Ogum, the three *orixás* were performed accompanied by different rhythms with and without drumsticks. This also helped the audience understand the change of character. The transition from one rhythm to the other was very fast. It was difficult to synchronise this change during rehearsals in Salvador with



Sanjukta Panigrahi and Augusto Omolú in *Theatrum Mundi*, ISTA 9, Umeå, Sweden, 1995. Photo: Bernd Uhlig

the three musicians. Then, when only one musician accompanied you on tour, the transitions seemed impossible. Ory Sacramento, Jorge Paim, and Bira Monteiro were the first musicians to follow or lead you, because the drums decide the dance. During the ISTA session in Portugal, Ory demonstrated that a single musician could do the work of three. To save time accompanying your movements, he put the drumsticks in his mouth, held the base of the rhythm on the smaller drum, and marked the accents on the larger one. He sang, whispered, muttered, and made the most incredible faces from fatigue and concentration, but he was having fun at the same time. The following year Ory was replaced with the same skill by the younger Cleber Conceção da Paixão, who made all the Balinese girls in the performance *Ur-Hamlet* fall in love with his enthusiasm and openness.

For ten years, you were one of the artistic staff teachers at the ISTA sessions: in Londrina in 1994, in Umeå in 1995, in Copenhagen in 1996, in Montemor-O-Novo and Lisbon in 1998, in Bielefeld in 2000. You had asked me many times how to join Odin Teatret. Eugenio had tried in every way to discourage you, but you were certain: you wanted to grow artistically and remain in an environment that would allow you to do so. You were tired of asking permission to leave the *corps de ballet* every time you had to travel. ISTA had made you aware of the principles embedded in your dance. You claimed that you had not previously been aware of the value of your *orixá* dance, even though you belonged completely to that culture. The ISTA comparative study had revealed to you the dynamic logic of your steps and the movements of your arms, shoulders, head, and hands. The dances of the *orixás* were dictated by a reason: how a warrior attacks and defends himself with his sword; how a healer strips leaves from trees, grinds them, and drinks them; how a serpent attacks its prey; how the waves of the sea lap the shore; how an old man holds his stick; how a legislator writes and displays laws. Hidden principles filled these dances and imbued them with *axé*, power and life.

‘How will you survive in the Danish cold?’, Eugenio asked, ‘without knowing the language, without friends, without family?’. The different discipline of an actor, the reserved nature of the people, the isolation in a small Nordic town... At ISTA you were treated with the respect of a master, yet upon entering the Odin Teatret you would have to start from scratch, you would become a beginner with duties and responsibilities. But you insisted.

In the winter of 2002, at the Portuguesa Festival in Venezuela, there was a meeting about Eugenio Barba’s influence in Latin America. Eugenio decided to present *Oró de Otelo* along with my solo performance *Doña Musica’s Butterflies*. On the way back from the Festival, among the clouds, flying together towards Brazil, you and Eugenio whispered to each other the whole night. The dice had been cast: you would participate as an actor in the next Odin Teatret performance. You arrived in Denmark in early January 2003. You had to face the cold winter, the rehearsals, Eugenio’s demands, the incomprehensibility and incomprehension of a new country. How many times did we find ourselves talking about the way you were welcomed, the problems you encountered, the difficulty of feeling accepted?

Rehearsals were beginning for the performance that would become *Andersen’s Dream*. One of the themes was the slave trade and the cultures that arose from the

African diaspora. Eugenio had also told us the story of a black man who believes himself to be the Saviour, who is killed by a group of elderly people in a nursing home, placed in a coffin, and who was then resurrected with a torch in his hand. Your persona could fit these themes well. But your entry into Odin Teatret was also useful for shaking up the dynamics of an established group: our automatic behaviours had to adapt to your different experience. Eugenio had left us alone in January. We had a month at our disposal: each of us had to prepare an hour of materials and stage an Andersen fairy tale of our choice with the other actors. In February, we would resume rehearsals together.

You arrived a few days late, and in the directors' turns we had drawn by lot, it was your time to stage an Andersen's tale. You chose to stage several characters from the fairy tales that had fascinated you. Drawing on your experience as a choreographer, you had us perform a ballet: definitively a new experience for us! Then, in the scene prepared by Kai Bredholt, to represent the story of the tin soldier and the ballerina who throws herself into the fire, you wore a real tutu and danced an imaginary *pas de deux*. This scene remained in the final montage of *Andersen's Dream*. The lighting was low, slightly tinted blue. Scheherazade, a puppet, spied on you from a corner, sitting on my lap. With her small hands, I followed the impulses of your pirouettes on the fake snow and as you disappeared in a final blaze. You wore a mask with Andersen's face that limited your vision, but you still managed to maintain the lightness and balance of your ballerina leaps. When Jan Ferslev came to Salvador to pay you our last respects, he placed Andersen's mask in your coffin. Thus, something of that performance that united our lives for ten years will remain with you forever.

In *Andersen's Dream*, you had a dialogue with Tage Larsen, the fairest and blondest of us. You were opposites, like the swan and the ugly duckling in the first scene, or like the man and his shadow when, toward the end, the shadow in Andersen's fairy tale takes power and hangs its master. Together with Tage, swinging on a swing that broke up the space, you enjoyed teasing Roberta Carreri in her striptease scene; you were happy to take Iben Nagel Rasmussen in your arms and literally fly with her, to let yourself be manipulated like a puppet by Torgeir Wethal, hidden behind a red Ku Klux Klan-style hood, and to sweetly sing a Brazilian song while crossing the stage in a military uniform with the corpse of a woman in a wedding dress on your shoulder. Halfway through the performance, in a group scene, the actors gathered for a barbecue party. We ate sausages, drank beer, and told jokes. Then you came in dressed as a soldier and pulled a growling dog out of a sack. "I was born in Denmark," you said, "Denmark is my home." And we, along with the audience, burst out laughing. Your Danish accent was incredible; you truly were the essence of a foreigner, as all of us at Odin Teatret ultimately are.

That's why we enthusiastically attended the dinners you hosted at the theatre. You would prepare a *moqueca de camarão* and invite everyone. We regularly sat down to dinner two or three hours late, but we didn't complain because you filled the time with *caipirinhas*. You always had the music playing while you cooked: you loved dancing *forró* while waiting for the rice water to boil. At Odin Teatret, you brought a piece of Brazil also outside the theatre where you worked and lived. In the middle of winter, we went to the Struer Fjord for a ceremony for Iemanjá. We were all dressed in white: instead of the lace dresses of the Bahia women, we were bundled up in sweaters, wind jackets,

coats, long johns under our pants, and boots. You managed to find a white padded jumpsuit and wearing it, you waded into the icy water of the fjord to scatter the flowers and candles you carried in your basket. There was snow on the beach and it was real, not like the one in the performance.

In *Andersen's Dream* we had dialogues. In one, you spoke Brazilian and I spoke English. To find the text that no one would understand except us, we improvised a dialogue between Othello and Desdemona and then the story of the princess and the flying dog from Andersen's tale of the lighter. The actions were extracted from the scene we called our *fundamento*, the sequence we created at the ISTA session in Bielefeld in 2000. Eugenio was busy rehearsing a Japanese buyo-style performance with Kanichi Hanayagi and Sae Nanaogi, and he asked us to work together alone to prepare a scene. We took inspiration from some painting books, reproducing the images with positions and actions. From a Botticelli painting, we derived a series of poses that we repeated, helping ourselves by numbering up to seven; from Delacroix, figures of horses and waving flags. We used these titles to remind each other of the sequence. We advanced slowly, first transforming the position into action and then immediately connecting it between ourselves. Sometimes I would grab you like making bread, other times you would spin me on your back with the technique of a dancer. The shapes were determined by the paintings, but ours was a dialogue of rhythms and impulses.

I had the feeling that in our *fundamento* scene, our bodies were uniting to create an Oxumarê, an *orixá* who has always fascinated me. You said he was half woman and half man. When you danced it, you transformed into a serpent by joining your arms above your head. In this position, you lowered yourself until you lay on the ground, opening and closing your body so that your feet touched your hands at regular intervals. In the Oxumarê dance, you always stained your white trousers. From human, you became an animal. In our scene, we managed to create a single being, similar to an animal, man and woman together. When we presented it for the first time at the rehearsals for *Andersen's Dream*, accompanied by Frans Winther on the violin, we had dressed and made ourselves up in half black and half white. You had covered half your face with white make-up; I had covered half mine with black.

Your colour worried us when you travelled: today's Europe is not the most welcoming place for a black person. Plus, you didn't speak any languages. You almost always managed to reach your destination, often just before it was too late. You had a knack for seducing the flight attendants so you wouldn't pay extra and still change your flight schedule. Once, this didn't work: they stopped you at the Danish border because your hair cream contained a product that dogs recognised as cocaine. The customs officials were convinced that your frequent trips to Billund Airport were those of a drug mule and held you for hours without letting you make a telephone call. We were horrified that something like this could happen in democratic Denmark. You were shocked too. We lodged a formal protest and received an apology. For a long time, you didn't forgive the Danes. It was the first time I heard you say you were going to leave Odin Teatret. But you stayed, and in Holstebro, you choreographed children too young to walk.

For a regional festival called *Vinden* (The Wind), we travelled with the Cuban group Teatro Buendía through the villages of Jutland. Together, we improvised local activities,



Augusto Omolú. Photo: Carlos Sato

small spectacular performances, parades, and short courses in schools. One day, you discovered that the students you were supposed to be preparing a parade with to visit a retirement home were still in their cradles. 'What? Me? An internationally recognised choreographer working with babies?'. Once the initial shock wore off, you lined them all up with ribbons between their fingers imitating Iemanjá's hand movements, the teachers pushing the prams, and the slightly older children following behind. I brought up the rear with the Mr Peanut, the Death character whose face is a skull.

But the greatest shock for you was seeing the state of the bodies of the young people who attended the courses with the ambition of becoming theatre artists. They had no sense of rhythm, they got confused by the simplest steps, they were incapable of repeating what you showed them over and over again, they lacked strength. You were sincerely concerned for this humanity that was growing up under the illusion of knowing only through the intellect, seemingly interested in the religiousness of your dances, yet without understanding that the energy of nature manifests itself in actions rather than emotions. So you learned to explain not only how to put one foot in front of the other, how to raise one arm in one direction and the other in the opposite, how to jump at the same time as you strike a blow, but also how to transform movements into actions. Behind every step was a reason, and precision was provided by rhythm.

When you participated in the Odin Teatret demonstration *The Whispering Winds* on the relationship between theatre and dance, in which each had made the journey from theatre to dance, you started from the opposite. You were born in a *terreiro*, you became a dancer, you encountered theatre anthropology. Classical and modern dance gave you discipline, cultural background and motivation; theatre anthropology developed your capacity for analysis and transformation. In the demonstration, you took a score and

performed it first as a dance and then as a sequence of theatre actions. You changed the accents, inserted pauses in the flow, increased the strength of the impulse, made small variations in rhythm. You focused on the effect of what you were doing outside yourself, rather than on the form of your body's movement.

You were also proud to be the only one who remembered the entire sequence of the perfect exercise that Eugenio had requested for the ISTA session in Portugal. We called it Tre-tre (Three-three): Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Roberta Carreri, and I each proposed three exercises that were sequenced. At that ISTA, all the masters from the various traditions learned the exercise and transformed it according to their own rules. For the first time, instead of identifying common principles by comparing different forms, we focused on the same form to introduce different principles determined by the performative genre. You worked hard on your breathing, establishing inhalations and exhalations for each action. You were as enthusiastic about teaching that exercise as you were about dancing in the performance *Ode to Progress*, in which you were dressed as a woman. You wore a mask made by Klaus Tams that hid your beard; you had a wig, a red dress, and lots of necklaces. Mr Peanut caught you with a large butterfly net in which you placed your doll, which appeared white, but when you turned it, it turned into black. That was a simple performance for you, all based on a dialogue of actions and reactions.

Instead, the work on your Hamlet character was painful. I watched from outside the scene in *Ur-Hamlet* where you fought the Balinese I Wayan Bawa, in which the uncle was killed by his nephew, who established the law of the strongest. You were both invaded by demonic forces that you seemed incapable of controlling. My character, the old chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, accompanied your fight with shrill cries, the orchestra played at full blast. Every evening I was tormented by the fear that you would not control the blows you were exchanging, that you would thrust the sword too deeply into I Wayan Bawa's mouth, or that you would be wounded by the Balinese *keris*. Yet you knew the limit beyond which you could not go.

You chose to tie yourself with white ropes. You used them to whip Hamlet's mother, and they were the same ones the innocent Balinese girl used to leash you with, the same one you transformed into a warrior in the final scene. You had to feign madness, and French singer Brigitte Cirila had taught you how to crouch.

For the second version of *Ur-Hamlet*, while the Balinese ensemble presented a comic version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, you wandered around the stage dressed as a tramp, dragging cardboard boxes tied with thick white ropes. Perhaps with that opening, you had finally discovered the strength of your character, which couldn't be fuelled solely by the sound of drums, but had to embrace the complexity and inevitability of power that erases even the tenderness of love. We were supposed to present the performance in China, but...

I was preparing the performance *Ave Maria* to present that evening when Paulo Dourado called from Salvador to tell me the news he didn't have the courage to tell Eugenio directly. I called Eugenio. Then I thought about how to tell Jan Ferslev, your friend you called *jacaré* (alligator). But he had already heard everything from Patricia Alves in São Paulo. Meanwhile, the news was spreading on Facebook, and many were incredulous and in tears. Eugenio wrote in English to the people at Odin: "Paulo

Dourado called and said that Augusto was killed in his home in Salvador. The police assume it was thieves. We're meeting today at 11 p.m. at Sanjukta's *varde*. Those of you who are far away will be with us." That night, around the mound of stones shipped from all over the world by people who had met Sanjukta at ISTA, we lit many candles, sang in Brazilian, drank, and told stories. We need to tell stories to remember. Your life ended in your house in Barquinho, near the sea. You had returned to Salvador with your head full of plans; work was an absolute necessity for you. Now you were dancing with Sanjukta somewhere in the darkness.

Among the thousands of messages of condolence we have received, I want to end with this one, which defines you as the person capable of making foreigners feel at home and of representing Odin Teatret with your generosity.

Queridos do Odin,

É com grande tristeza que recebemos hoje a notícia do falecimento do Augusto Omulú, na sua chácara na Bahia. Imaginamos a tristeza de vocês e oferecemos nossas condolências.

Foi por intermédio do Odin que tivemos a oportunidade de conhecer Augusto, que mesmo sendo nosso conterrâneo tivemos que atravessar o mar para encontrá-lo. Na semana que estivemos com vocês em 2011, quando tudo era tão estranho à nós brasileiras, o clima, as pessoas, a língua e as linguagens, Augusto foi a porta aberta do Odin, que nos recebeu no primeiro dia como se fôssemos velho amigos se reencontrando. E talvez essa seja a verdade.

Sem palavras para descrever a tristeza que nos assaltou nesta manhã, resolvemos nos juntar em solidariedade com o grupo que o acolheu e o norteou para o desenvolvimento da sua pesquisa, tão rica as artes cênicas do Brasil e, acreditamos, do teatro contemporâneo mundial.

Grande abraço,

Tatiana e Juliana (Cia. Pessoal de Teatro)

Dear Odin People

It is with great sadness that we received the news of the passing of Augusto Omulú today, at his home in Bahia. We imagine your sadness and offer our condolences.

It was through Odin that we had the opportunity to meet Augusto, who, despite being our compatriot, we had to cross the sea to find. During the week we were with you in 2011, when everything was strange for us Brazilians – the climate, the people, the language, and the languages – Augusto was the open door to Odin, who welcomed us on our first day as if we were old friends meeting again. And perhaps this is the truth.

With no words to describe the sadness that overwhelmed us this morning, we have decided to gather in solidarity with the group that welcomed him and gave him a point of reference for the development of his research, so enriching for the performing arts of Brazil and, we believe, for contemporary theatre worldwide.

A big hug,

Tatiana and Juliana, Cia. Pessoal de Teatro

Sometimes when you danced, it seemed you wanted to reveal to us the strength of life and simultaneously mock us, as in the final scene of the performance *Great Cities Under the Moon*. The performance presented bombings, ruins, exile, and you appeared in the final scene wearing a red bowler hat, carefree, brisk, a burst of insolence. You danced, cheerfully throwing fistfuls of ash into the air as you pulled out the blade hidden in your cane and loaded us all onto a Chinese junk that was taking us away. In a scene just before, we had sung these verses by Li Po while in the darkness we glimpsed the face of Torgeir, our comrade who died three years ago. Dear Augusto, you listened to these verses from outside, as you prepared. You were there, beside us, ready.

And if you ask how I regret that parting:
It is like the flowers falling at spring's end
What is the use of talking, and there is no end of talking,
There is no end of things in the heart.
I call in the boy
Have him sit here on his knees
To seal this letter
And send it a thousand miles, thinking.



Augusto Omolú. Photo: Carlos Sato