



# **Transforming the Past into Presence: in Dialogue with Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley**

-- **Eugenio Barba** (ODIN TEATRET)

-- **Julia Varley** (ODIN TEATRET)

-- **Adriana La Selva** (GHENT UNIVERSITY)

-- **Patrick Campbell** (MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY)

In this dialogical article, Patrick Campbell and Adriana La Selva of international research platform Cross Pollination interview Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley of Odin Teatret, with a focus on the activities of the recently inaugurated NGO Fondazione Barba Varley. Having left their institutional base, Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, in December 2022 after 56 years of being rooted to a concrete theatrical space, Odin Teatret now work nomadically, developing new projects both within Denmark and beyond. The Fondazione Barba Varley extends and builds on the legacy of Odin Teatret, with a specific agenda to support and promote the 'nameless' – theater groups and independent artists working silently on the borders between theater and activism. Derrida's writings around the politics of friendship (Derrida 2005) serve as a loose critical framework for articulating the potential dialogical avenues available once one abandons the

appropriative drive on institutionalization. The conversation follows an organic flow, with a focus on dialogue and communication, the embodied dialogical tactics of the theater laboratory practitioner, and the current activities of the Fondazione, such as the Constellation of the Nameless, ISTA New Generation, The Journal of Theater Anthropology (JTA) and the Living Archive: Floating Islands. Theatrical legacy and its transmission are articulated as relational and interpersonal, grounded on a deeply personal process of 'creating signs': the generation of poetic forms that translate a pragmatic know-how forged over a lifetime dedicated to art as activism.

Keywords: Theater Laboratory, theater and activism, Odin Teatret, Cross Pollination, ethos, dialogue

## **Introduction**

This dialogical article is the fruit of a conversation that took place in January 2023 between Eugenio Barba, Artistic Director of renowned Theater Laboratory group Odin Teatret<sup>1</sup> and founder of ISTA, the International School of Theater Anthropology<sup>2</sup>; Julia Varley, Odin Teatret actress and core member of the Magdalena Project<sup>3</sup>; and Adriana La Selva and Patrick Campbell, members of Cross Pollination, a nomadic laboratory for the dialogue in/between practices.<sup>4</sup>

Barba and Varley's contribution to contemporary theatrical practice has been immense; Barba was fundamental in promoting the work of his friend, colleague and theatrical master Jerzy Grotowski, and went on to form Odin Teatret, the first group theater in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Alongside Odin Teatret, Barba revolutionized approaches to actor training and theatrical montage, developing an expanded laboratory practice that transcended the stage, activating communities across the world through street theater performances and barbers.<sup>6</sup> His work at ISTA brought together artists from different continents to

explore the tacit knowledge underpinning the actor's craft, resulting in a range of performances with the intercultural *Theatrum Mundi* ensemble.<sup>7</sup> He has published widely on his work, contributing in a significant way to studies within the fields of theater, drama and performance.<sup>8</sup> Julia Varley has been a key member of *Odin Teatret* since 1976 and has developed a unique approach to actor training, with a focus on the organic dramaturgy of the actor. She is a master teacher and director, playing a significant role in supporting emerging artists and networking with group theaters across the globe. She has also published extensively on her own work, imbuing her writing with the praxical knowledge of the seasoned theater laboratory artist.<sup>9</sup>

For Campbell and La Selva, entering into dialogue with Barba and Varley is always a privilege and a pleasure. *Cross Pollination* – founded by La Selva and Nie in 2017 – emerged from the 2016 ISTA session in Bergamo (Italy) as a response to Barba's project grounded in the specific experiences of the contemporary freelance artist. Whilst ISTA focuses on the pre-expressive level of the actor's craft – a transcultural level of principles instilling *scenic bios* or presence in the body of the performer (Barba 1995) – *Cross Pollination's* research focused on the possibility for dialogue between independent practitioners steeped in different performance crafts, ranging from tap dancing to theater, dance, somatic practices, music and martial arts. A platform rather than a group, *Cross Pollination's* members live in four different countries and gather on a regular basis to research, teach and produce work together. The platform's laboratory inquiries have generated a range of dialogical tactics, including the *Parliament of Practices*, the specific thematic concern of this present Special Edition.

The conversation presented below took place at a historic moment of rupture and rebirth for *Odin Teatret*: the group had just parted ways with their former umbrella organization, *Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (NTL)*, located in Holstebro (Denmark), and Barba and Varley had recently inaugurated the *Fondazione Barba Varley*, a non-profit organization based in Lecce (Italy), which aims to support and promote the “nameless” – theater groups and independent artists working silently and often anonymously on the borders between theater and activism across the globe. For many groups, the loss of an institutional base would provoke entropy and chaos,

yet for Barba and Varley, it seems to have served as a catalyst for new adventures and creative collaborations.

In *The Politics of Friendship* (2005), Derrida reflects on the ramifications of the concept of property through a deconstructive embrace with Nietzsche's oeuvre. He suggests that the very notion of property is tied to love and possession, and that beyond the appropriative drive to possess lies ruin; a loss of that which was constructed before, a repetition of longing. But, according to Derrida, it is precisely in this 'empty place' beyond ownership that true friendship can emerge (65). If one can hold fast to the aporia, and let go of a lust for power, the "friendship that deserves its name" may emerge (66). And perhaps this empty place of friendship, devoid of longing, might be a space for dialogue to appear in a more egalitarian fashion. It is precisely these friendships, grounded in the international network of contacts established by Barba and Varley over the years, that are blossoming in unexpected ways after their departure from NTL, offering new, nomadic pathways for creative experimentation and action: new dialogues emerging with old friends and new companions.

The Fondazione Barba Varley, for example, has a range of different thematic concerns and nascent projects, which include ISTA New Generation: a reconfigured version of the International School of Theater Anthropology that foregrounds the practices of a new generation of theater/dance artists from different cultures whilst integrating teaching methods with digital technologies; and Living Archive Floating Islands (LAFLIS), an interactive and participatory archive housed at the Biblioteca Bernardini in Lecce, which will immerse visitors in the practices and historical ventures of Eugenio Barba, Odin Teatret and the Third Theater.<sup>10</sup> The Fondazione offers scholarships and awards for artists, groups and activists and also serves as a publishing house for books and the annual *Journal of Theater Anthropology* (JTA). During the pandemic, Barba and Varley also carried out an array of interviews with artists, activists and scholars entitled *Constellation of the Nameless* and produced a series of videos – *10 Lessons on Theater Anthropology* – that draw on archival footage to articulate the major findings of Barba's research at ISTA.

The work of Odin Teatret continues, and the group are currently working on new projects without a fixed base. In many ways, Barba, Varley and the Odin have embraced a nomadic existence over recent

months, similar to the one that has constituted Cross Pollination since its inception. This convergence of tactics is significant and speaks to the current period of economic instability and precarity: in order to survive, theater laboratories are “putting structures upside-down,” as Varley suggests below: turning to innovative models that enable them to carry out their ongoing research, embracing the unknown as a source of futurity. The conversation below reflects on these issues, as Barba and Varley discuss notions of dialogue and embodiment; genealogy and legacy; border-crossing and marginality; ethos and craft. A renewed vision of a theater laboratory freed from both the comforts and constraints of a fixed institutional base begins to emerge, one that should speak to a new generation of practitioners facing similar economic and political challenges across the globe.

**ADRIANA LA SELVA:** We would suggest that there is an innate dialogical bedrock to the historical practices of Odin Teatret. And we are aware that the etymology of the word “dialogue” means “through words” and that *logos* refers to words, reason, and discourse. However, your poetics have always been characterized by an embracing of the (il)logic of the body and of the disruption and insight that the tacit knowledge of theater brings. Given this complexity, how do you see the role of dialogue in your work, both at Odin Teatret and beyond?

**EUGENIO BARBA:** Dialogue implies communication. And of course, communication can happen in different ways, even through silence and total immobility. When two human beings are in front of one another, even if they don’t communicate, in spite of themselves, they are reacting to each other – so do animals or any living organism. We can see that a conscious or unconscious dialogue always happens anytime two living beings simply become aware of each other.

Those who communicate most are people in love; they do not use many words. Love produces reactions; perceptible physical signs, which have a completely different nature than vocal communication, this air that becomes sounds and meanings. Words are sounds that were written originally on stones, then on skin, on papyrus, and finally on paper. In writing, the possibility of establishing an immediate dialogue died: there is no human being there. Nevertheless, there



is a feeling in the science of communication, a sort of presence. And then we should discuss what presence is.

Dialogue for me can take place in different modes, as you were mentioning before. One thing is sure: the more we are aware of the dialogue, the more we try to be concise in expressing or formulating what we want to say, the more we restrict our range of imagination and the misunderstanding of the other person. So, when we speak about dialogue, we have to be aware on what level it takes place.

**JULIA VARLEY:** My first reaction has to do with the dialogue between the actors, the dialogue between the actor and the director, and the dialogue with the spectators, which are very different, especially at Odin Teatret. They happen in quite different ways. Now, the dialogue between the actors happens on stage through actions. Maybe it becomes clearer with the *Theatrum Mundi* experience: we are on stage, as actors of different traditions, who do not speak the same language (in the sense of Italian, Greek, English), but still, we manage to have a dialogue which is through the physical actions, the impulses, the way we behave on stage. So, it is as if you can establish a dialogue by going forwards, by going backwards, by expanding, by contracting, by accelerating the rhythm, by de-accelerating the rhythm. So, all these impulses create a dialogue, and the dialogue exists because it is not just somebody making an action: rather, all the time you are transforming your actions into reactions. So, the dialogue is how you establish a chain of reactions.

If I think of the dialogue between actor and director at Odin Teatret, of myself as an actress and Eugenio Barba as a director, then I know that the dialogue is established if I, as an actor, manage to propose or to show something that gives associations to the director. So, it is not just what I establish in the dialogue, but what I manage to awaken in the mind of the director in the sense of associations, which many times has nothing to do directly with what I am doing. So, it is as if my words – if we want to employ this term – mean something for me, but something totally different to the director.

Figure 1. Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley at the latest ISTA/ng session in Hungary, 2023. © Francesco Galli



Still, this creates a dialogue, because then Eugenio, as a director, will move on his associations and then give back to me tasks or reactions which will elaborate on what I have created. Then the dialogue becomes very, very complex, because it is the performance itself that starts speaking to both me as an actor and Eugenio as a director. It is as if the dialogue passes through a third entity, which is the work, the piece that we are creating. And there, Eugenio often will talk about how he transitions from protecting the actor and the way the actor is working to protecting the spectator, their logic and what they receive.

Then the next dialogue, as an actor and a director, is with the spectators. In this case, what we know is that what we do on stage is interpreted in very different ways by each spectator. And that is in a way what we try to establish, so that the (il)logic that you mentioned before is important, because the spectator will receive what we are saying at these different levels. At an emotional level, which has to do with the physical impulses, with the intonation of the voice, with the relationship with space, if we are close or far away. It also has to do with meaning, storytelling and narration. It has to do with how the spectator comes to the performance, where they are sitting, if they understand the language or not.

Then, the dialogue for us also happens afterwards. After the spectator has seen the performance. How do they react through time? And spectators, many years later, can tell us, “Your performance changed my life.” Or they can say “it was interesting.” Or they can say “it made me angry because I didn’t understand, but still it moved me and that made me angry.”

And then in the performance *Min Fars Hus*, for instance, all the letters that we received from the spectators, established a dialogue with us over the years, because we then presented these letters to other spectators, decades later.<sup>11</sup> It is something that continues through time. It is not something which only belongs to the moment in which we perform. Eugenio was speaking before about this, taking the past and making it into the present, and that has a lot to do with the dialogue that we establish with spectators, because it has to do with the memory that they retain and how you can then transform this memory. Over time, through the next dialogue, or with dialogues which happen afterwards.

**EB:** We are talking about dialogue, but we use this term without making concrete in which situation it takes place. A dialogue between the owner or the director of a factory with one of the workers has completely different rules than a dialogue between a teacher explaining poems to a class and asking for students' questions. The more deferential or provocative the students' answers, the more the teacher will feel gratified. But if the worker disregards good manners or politeness whilst speaking with the director, the situation changes. So, dialogue functions according to certain premises, which depend on the situation and the people involved.

**PATRICK CAMPBELL:** What is interesting for me, when you both speak, is that again, you are speaking from your practice: both in terms of the particular kind of multi-layered way that the aesthetic works and the dialogues that the aesthetic allows for. So, it goes beyond a poetics and begins to become political as well as affective, because you are reaching out and touching people across time and across geographical locations. This also makes me think about the development of your work from Odin Teatret to the Fondazione, which is the focus of our second question.

We are very interested in the recent work of the Fondazione Barba Varley, which seems to have a dialogical focus through actions such as the Constellation of the Nameless, ISTA New Generation and the very mission statement of the organization, which seeks to reach out to marginalised communities both within and beyond the theater.

So how do you see the evolution of your dialogical tactics within this new context? Could one argue that dialogue is a meta-practice that emerges out of your work, through different ways of dialoguing with different people?

**EB:** I don't think in terms of dialogue, but in terms of relations. You bring people together and then they find their own way of relating to each other out of their needs and expectations. A fruitful dialogue begins when the partners' diversity is taken into consideration and, through a concrete, practical, cognitive process (for example, making a performance together), it transforms a condition of subalternity into one of mutually inspiring revindication. What I consider most

important is to be aware of the existence of a lot of people and groups who are isolated – and who are extremely interesting in spite of their anonymity. They are nameless, as we all are ...

Of course, I am not an anonymous person, but when I meet these people, they fascinate me in terms of what they are doing in their particular contexts. Is it possible to establish bonds of mutual cooperation with others who are in a similar situation? It is not accidental that, thinking of the growing heterogeneity of theater groups and even of short-term projects, the image I was presented with was that of the *floating islands*.<sup>12</sup>

Yes, these people are isolated, yet responding to their needs. But, if someone from outside comes and says “oh, I know that you are here and every day you fight to be coherent with your dreams and illusions,” suddenly their awareness of themselves changes completely. This is what Odin Teatret tried to do: bringing together people from different fields. For me, an enriching experience was to meet people from academia with their knowledge, which is complementary to that of practitioners. The ISTA, the International School of Theater Anthropology, very early on, was an earthquake in the way of thinking and imagining theater for the scholars who participated in that very active situation. It was the same during the Holstebro Festive Week, the *Festuge* – in which our small town’s different sub-cultures, that prosper in isolation, suddenly come together, creating a friendly collaborative frame with a shared feeling of belonging to the same place in spite of deep differences in terms of life vision and technical expertise.<sup>13</sup>

This, for me, is the core of a dialogue: the main purpose of Odin Teatret’s work with diversity. The primary factor is diversity: you dialogue through diversity and, in order to do this, you have to establish contact, respond and share. The Festive Week was intended as a celebration of our town’s diversity. So, everyone can say “I am a part of this place, because I am doing this and I am doing it this way.” The same holds for the encounters with ISTA. So, for me, the Fondazione Barba Varley is politics by other means, and by politics I mean a longing for change.

Open access to knowledge is important. The internet and Wikipedia make learning easy, but it is just information; knowledge is something

different because you have to incorporate it. You let it pass through your mental, personal and biographical metabolism so that you have new possibilities to offer people. Therefore, we have to invent new ways of transmitting our accumulated knowledge in the present.

Theater is a fleeting art that produces pasts. The theaters are storehouses of pasts. In these pasts the technical and transcendent essence and value of our craft is hidden. The pasts are underground streams in which each generation can quench its thirst in the process of building its present with all the necessary changes. All ages are *our age*. All theaters are *our theater* in the present.

How can we make the experience of the past be part of our present life? What does it mean practically to say that what our ancestors did may be worth also for us? It is a question of our own identity, integrity and entirety. Until the end of our life, we should be aware that we have received and that we should transmit, i.e. give back.

Of course, I cannot say this to journalists, politicians and spectators; they would laugh; it sounds moralistic and rhetorical. They expect facts, not words. I must transform my thoughts in actions, inject this attitude with an artistic coherence, through my performances, my theater group's dynamic, my daily choices and pragmatic decisions. It is a dialogue in the form of resistance to the fashions of the epoch and to the trends of the spirit of time. But this dialogue is rooted in know-how and expertise, often in a condition of solitude within the fragmented cultural and social situation in which I myself, Odin Teatret and the Fondazione are immersed. But this is what we are attempting to break, through our different and dispersed activities.

**JV:** To answer, I would go back to when I lived in Milan as a teenager, and I was making political theater. When I arrived at Odin Teatret, what I realized was that my political being was all based on ideology – ideas that had no capacity of actually being active, really doing something. And then I spent a lot of time at Odin learning how to do an action; how to be really present, here and now. And I think that this is one of the reasons why I defend so strongly my need to be an actress.

I have got a quantity of work which is absurd and, of course, I could go on just creating projects or directing other people. I try to defend the fact of being an actress because it is the base on which I stand and it is the base of the action, which is so different from saying words. We can say that we treasure diversity, yes, but one thing is to say it and another thing is to really live in it, to act in it and to communicate it through the practice.

And for me, this is what I want to take from Odin Teatret into the Fondazione. Because when one starts talking about social inclusion, integration, communication, political vision, the tendency is to go towards the words and the ideas. It is like a battle of values, because then the problem is also how one very quickly gets into a conflict of what one really means with the words and what one really means with the values that one is trying to establish. And then the communication breaks down, because if one just tries to defend the words, what we think we mean by the words, it is very easy to get into a conflict that does not result in anything. And for me, the strength of theater is that it can go beyond these words, and it can go beyond narration, in the sense of what we want to say with the words or the ideology.

**EB:** Julia, what you are saying, regarding the tension between actions and words is fundamental to our profession. Due to its ephemeral nature, duration is important in theater: creating something which lasts. Therefore, our need to operate through the Fondazione is also a way of persisting in our work in spite of the fact that we are no longer within the old, known framework of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium – this huge, complex organism of diversity with many active initiatives and groups. Now I want to work at my own pace, in accordance with my age and the energy I have and, most of all, in response to the following question: what does it mean to have enough time?

**JV:** The fact of trying to bring the experience of Odin Teatret into the Fondazione based on actions rather than words means that I insist a lot on the activities that we do and how the activity will have a result. It has always been the case that, at Odin, we do something and then we try to explain it and understand it. And to do this within

the Fondazione is not so easy, because people in institutions are much more used to the fact that you have a premise; you say this is what I want to achieve and then you do it. But we do it the other way around. We started the Living Archive without having any idea of what it was and now we are slowly coming to understand what it means. So, it has very much to do with how you put structures upside down, which of course is something that you in Cross Pollination are insisting on so much.

It has to do with sharing knowledge, with the prize that we give. It has to do with the fact of managing to go on tour with performances because, although Eugenio has now accepted Zoom communication, we know that actually showing live performances, being live, being present, has a completely different effect on people and that it is important to be able to go to those places that cannot afford what Odin Teatret would cost. We went to Guatemala and to Bolivia last year, and it was very important, not only because we came into contact with the reality there, where for instance a theater has to have a parking place because otherwise spectators do not come, because they are too afraid of the violence. In Bolivia we saw a theater group that based their training on a ritual from a small village, and you suddenly understand that theater is responsible for keeping alive rituals which are disappearing from their social contexts. And so, these travels also give us a completely different point of view, which we manage to then communicate and transform within our work at the Fondazione.

But another thing which I think is fundamental for Eugenio and I in the Fondazione is that, with Odin Teatret and Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium before, we created an enormous network of contacts, because we have always insisted that it is the personal relationship that makes it possible for us to survive if we sell performances. We have kept this going now for 60 years next year – Eugenio for some years before – which means that we have a knowledge which has to do with people.

We were sitting in a car in Bari once with Luca Ruzza talking about the archives and what we should do when we were talking about all these contacts.<sup>14</sup> He said that we had to share this knowledge that we have, as people. And so, from there we get ideas of how we can contact the different theater groups, journals or people and try and create these connections, these knots of knowledge. Because

it is when two people get together with their completely different points of views and experiences that something else, something new, happens. It is not because you decide beforehand you want to do something new; it is just because you create the context for this to happen, and this is what we try to do very much with the Fondazione as well as with Odin Teatret.

**ALS:** That's wonderful. In fact, you responded to the next question that we had, which has to do with the archive. As you know, I am also working on a part of this archive which one day, soon I hope, I will speak again with you about.<sup>15</sup> But one question that I am very curious about is what are the concrete actions that are in place right now in order to construct this Living Archive and how are you visualising or envisioning this space?

**EB:** I gave my library and my artistic legacy to the region of Puglia, in Italy, on the condition that they build the Living Archive Floating Islands (LAFLIS). This is a place dedicated to Eugenio Barba, to Odin Teatret and to the Third Theater. The place where this will happen is Biblioteca Bernardini in Lecce. There will be a traditional archive – you can go there and find all the documents about my and Odin Teatret's activities, our international networks and projects. specialized archivists will take care of students and researchers, but in this *living archive* there are two more sections concerning transmission and transformation of the past into present.

Transmission implies the publication of JTA, the *Journal of Theater Anthropology*, the production of films, interdisciplinary meetings, didactic seminars, theoretical-practical encounters. The ISTA sessions belong to this section because they gather stage artists from various continents and create the frame for a personal experience, enabling young generations of performers to test the technical principles from various acting traditions, adapting them to the present.

LAFLIS' third section is dedicated to transformation. How to give an artistic and sensorial life to this cognitive capital, which consists of documents, letters, programmes, posters, cuttings, films, photos? They do not say much! The issue is how to transform all of these elements into an artistic, sensual, auditive-visual language.

It is possible to make installations, which today, thanks to technology, can become interactive. Imagine all the profusion of experiences from Third Theater ... There are seven big rooms in the space in Lecce. I imagine a huge forest of wild flowers – orchids. Each one of these small orchids represents a group: you touch it and then suddenly somebody's voice starts singing, explaining, as their history and life is projected on the walls. It is a question of transforming this archival material into a bodily/emotional experience, a concrete way of coming into contact with the people involved.

**JV:** Eugenio's office and my changing room have been taken down to Lecce and they are going to become an installation. It should be so that one goes in and touches one of the items and then we tell the story of that object, or that painting, or that poster. But for the moment, we are just trying to put the things up and make the rooms exactly the same as they were in Holstebro.

And then we are going to put on an exhibition or installation. Something about Odin Teatret in Puglia, which is the region where we have done all the experience of Carpignano with the barbers and also one session of ISTA in 1987.<sup>16</sup> So those should be the first things. And one of the ideas we have had is to do a kind of 'Woodstock' of Third Theater. But first we need to get through all these bureaucratic hurdles with the *regione di Puglia*, and then we can continue to dream up more ideas.

**PC:** So, the next question builds on the idea of the archive. Whilst theatrical exercises and performances can be documented using a variety of media, how can one transmit the subterranean knowledge of being together as a collective, united by practice and shared goals? How can the spirit behind the laboratory exist in an archive, possibly beyond the bodies of those who made of this a life's work?

**EB:** Of course, the spirit cannot be stored in an archive. What characterises Odin Teatret is a certain mentality that is rooted in routine and daily tasks. You may call it our working ethics. Simply do your job well. What does this mean? There is an imprinting in terms of relationships, which is fundamental. We spoke about it at the begin-



ning of our conversation. If someone asks: “how did Eugenio Barba lead Odin Teatret?”, it could be answered: “like Napoleon, and like a sergeant of the Marines: he was all the time *decided* and beside his actors.” (*Laughs*) This has been my way of building a group dynamic, a working culture, a reference point. Sometimes I had an idea, but most of the time, I just cared for the details, day-by-day, reacting to small happenings in our environment and outside it, exploiting and developing them from the possible to the impossible.

No archive will reconstruct this network of relationships, trust, knowledge and diversity which corresponded to Odin Teatret or to any other group; it is impossible. However, an archive can become a very stimulating environment exploring the past and bringing it back to new life. In order to ensure that visitors keep the freedom of their own visions, you have to work with a sort of theatricality. In an archive, live presence and relationships are different entities. The central question is: will we be able to create an environment that is not identical, but equivalent to the live relationships between actor and spectator?

Will we succeed? I think so, if we have time, patience and a group of motivated people. Let’s take an example from the past. In 1960, no one could imagine a theater which did not show performances every evening. But then I started a theater laboratory and defined it as a place which did not perform daily. Today I can say that a laboratory is an incubator and a catalyst, and even politicians would understand it, because they can refer to the history of Odin Teatret and all its initiatives, which no other theater was or is developing. Just think of the groups which have been inspired in our region. Take the Greenlandic theater Tukkaq. The group was founded by a former actor of Odin Teatret and the National Theater of Greenland emerged from the group’s aspirations. Think of Teatret Om, which worked at our venue for years, and which today is a strong autonomous example of a group that has found its way.<sup>17</sup> And all the others, as well.

The Living Archive Floating Islands obliges me to reimagine my own practice. I am aware of its fragility. When I disappear, the whole thing risks becoming a dusty tradition. Entropy is the destiny that threatens us all.

**JV:** At Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, there was a lot of talk about how the DNA of Odin Teatret should be passed on. With a workshop, for example, you can maybe pass on a few techniques, or you can give a vision of what it means to work and to continue to work. But it is impossible to pass on something that you feel is essential, which takes a much longer time and most of all involves the possibility of seeing the contradictions. It is this and then it is the opposite, and then it is the opposite of the opposite and then it is something else and it develops.

So, first of all, it is as if the essence has got something to do with the individual. Because, for each individual, it is different. And then it has got to do with long-term relationships, which last through time. With the archive, what we have insisted on a lot is that we need to create an environment of people: people that are actually there, so that you do not go to an archive and come across a computer which says where you can find documents. Rather, you find a person that will ask you what are you interested in and what are you trying to work on, and then they will say: "OK, there are these documents, but there are also these other people that you should meet and talk with." And so, the environment becomes essential.

How we create the environment within a kind of organization that is institutional, is something that we are fighting with, at the moment. It did not work in terms of the relationship between Odin Teatret and Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, because we thought, in the beginning, that Odin Teatret could remain within the institution. It has turned out that this does not work. So, with the archive, it has mostly to do with the people that you managed to involve, with those who feel motivated, with those who really want to go in and get into a relationship with the documents, or the objects, or the films and take it forwards on to something else. So, the essence will change, but we hope it will be stimulating and creative.

**ALS:** Speaking of institutions, we are aware that you are in conversation with UNESCO, in terms of establishing Third Theater as an intangible cultural heritage – correct me please if I'm wrong. So, what is important about this shared theatrical ethos and practice? How is this process going and how has dialogue helped shape and form this heterogeneous array of theatrical floating islands?

**EB:** The notion of Third Theater, or group theater, is a recent addition to theater history: it did not exist before the mid-twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Before this, we only had two complementary environments: professional theater and amateur theater, which continue to exist significantly in Europe. But neither form is very active on a broader social level; Third Theater, in contrast, is.

After 1968, young rebel people started creating theater groups all over the planet. They were not contracted by a director of a building; their way of approaching the profession had other motivations than would-be actors aiming at working in an institutionalized theater.

Theater groups do not only have an original way of establishing a relationship with different sectors of spectators; they are substantially an innovative system of production. Their creative processes have a different nature and dynamic than the institutionalized criteria. And most of their apprenticeship is autodidactic, outside official theater schools.

When I think of Third Theater's heterogenous and often magmatic reality, I can clearly notice that it was the consequence of a generation longing for changes in their personal life and in their society. It is not accidental that Artaud and Brecht were the main reference points. In any form of theater, there are three key elements: one is *technique-knowledge*, how to do it; the other is the *aesthetic quality*, the efficiency of the results; and the third one is the *ethical dimension*. Third Theater has embodied, willingly or unwittingly, this turn towards ethics within our craft.

**JV:** If you think of the movement that started in May 1968 in Paris, you have a very specific time in which this happens. It provoked changes that still resonate today. I mean, of course, there were other factors, but the social revolution, the sexual revolution, feminism, all of this happened at that time. Third Theater also arises from that period. The historian's way of seeing it is that, "okay, it happened then, and now it is finished." Well, we know that it has not finished. It is not something that you can put a date to, something that happened during a given timespan and then stopped. It has a value which continues to the present day and the contribution it has given to how one sees and works with theater is enormous.

Now, one of the problems is that critics or historians tend to equate Third Theater with bad artistic quality. Because they are not capable of putting the performance into the context in which it is being shown. So, the aesthetic question is not only valid in relation to what it represents in official theaters or festivals; it really changes the communities in which it exists, where the artistic quality is determined by something which is completely different. So, how can one give a value to the aesthetics of Third Theater, but within the context in which it is presented and not just as a kind of absolute? This is something that is strong within the Third Theater: for example, when Parvathy Baul does her Magdalena Festival in India, where she has on one side the Third Theater from Europe or Latin America and on the other side the very potent ancient traditions from Asia.<sup>19</sup> And you can really see that they belong to the same family, that they have the same quality, that which Eugenio calls 'ethic', the same way of working. But in Europe and in America, one does not recognize this, because scholars and programmers there do not have the capacity of seeing beyond their own geographical and intellectual limits. Which is also why you are doing this interview, I think, to open these limits, which are so engraved in academic research and putting you into trouble.

**ALS:** We both have been transformed and inspired in a myriad of ways by the legacy you have created. We have also tried to carry on this legacy as practitioner-researchers. We are connected to Third Theater practices in different ways, through the activities of the Bridge of Winds,<sup>20</sup> the research projects that we carry out in academia, our work with Cross Pollination and the new MA Performance: Laboratory Theater pathway at Manchester Metropolitan University, which started in 2023.<sup>21</sup> However, younger generations naturally have new sets of desires and needs, and expectations regarding theatrical practices. So, how do you see your most recent endeavours touching a younger generation of practitioners and scholars, inspiring them to carry on this legacy in their own ways?

**JV:** The question of transmission is a very difficult one. I find myself often in a workshop, saying "don't do Odin Teatret training, please, just walk normally! Don't make variations and changes!" It is as if we have started a tradition where at times it is difficult for people

not to fix themselves on forms and to really go beyond the form and find the principle and remember the 'why': why are we doing this and not just the 'how'? Which of course is difficult.

I have found in my teaching that the most important aspect for me has been to direct, because then the pupils that stay with me for many years ... I am really able to get them to the point where the performance has a rigour that the pedagogical work does not have. Because when you are just teaching, you have to be democratic; you have to give space to everyone, you have to give the possibility for everyone to explore. But that puts you into a false confidence that everything is possible – it is not. When you get to the moment of creating a performance that has to be presented to the spectators, then a lot of the things which we have been teaching or passing on do not count. You have to use other parameters. And, so, the passing on, of course, has different levels: giving a workshop, working for a whole year with the same person, or working for 50-60 years with a group.

And this has a completely different result, in the roots that this tradition, even the small tradition that they got enchanted with, has in the people and their capacity of changing. Because those who stay closer to the forms that they have learnt are those who have studied less time. Those who have followed us for really a long time have transformed and have found completely new ways and then, for us, it becomes interesting. And within Odin Teatret itself, you can see – each of the actors is very different in the way of teaching or in the way of being actors on stage. So, what we pass on is also different. And, for me, the relationship remains what will really determine how the younger generations take what is given to them and transform it. Because the value does not come from the exercises or even from the work that you have done; it comes much more from the relationships that you establish between the person who is transmitting and the person who is wanting to learn. And there it is a mutual choice, which again cannot happen in universities, because in universities you have to teach in rows. This mutual choice, I think, changes how one perceives the experience.

It is a bit like anthropologists, when they go and study a culture which is far away from their home. Their point of view will change what they write about or what they tell. And so, the point of view of

the individuals that are involved really changes the legacy and how it will appear to be in the future.

**EB:** There are two driving forces in what I do. I start something, because I wish to: I like the idea, the challenge, the possible results, the surprises of the process. It is very selfish. The second force springs from my experience. It has led me to understand that I own the action, but not the result. I do not know how the action will develop, how far and for how long. I must concentrate on the action, and something will happen.

One cannot speak in abstract terms about the next generation. The only thing that I can do is to interfere in the lives of a few people. That which I do is for these people. I show that the impossible is possible to those who are motivated and stimulated to continue something which has nothing to do with me. I continue the tradition of the impossible, the shared endurance and dignity of theater men and women before me who inspired me. You can ask me now, "Eugenio, you are eighty-six years old, it is time to rest?" I would answer: "You are right concerning my age, but I have no time to rest: I have such a short time left that I have to run!"

I only need a few motivated people. I am interested in the younger generation, but I cannot do anything for them: they have to solve their problems for themselves. Now, I am shaping my last signs. For a few people, these represent a light and an encouragement. This is my task.

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## Notes

- 1 Odin Teatret is one of the most prominent theater groups internationally, and key representative of theatrical innovation from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Founded in Norway in 1964, the group moved to Holstebro, Denmark in 1966, changing its name to Odin Teatret/Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium. In December 2022, Odin Teatret left Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium and continues to operate autonomously in Holstebro and beyond. To date, Odin Teatret have produced 81 performances, performed in 65 different countries, and have generated an array of performative tactics for cultural engagement and social activation. The group was responsible for establishing autonomous actor training as a keystone of the performing arts, and developed an innovative, expanded approach to pedagogy and knowledge exchange, initiating the theater workshop culture of the late twentieth century whilst pioneering imbrications between the performing arts and scholarship. A range of academics have written about the Odin and its practices; examples include Andraesen and Kuhlmann, 2000; Chemi, 2017; Christoffersen, 1993; Ledger, 2012; Turner, 2018; Watson, 1993.
- 2 The International School of Theater Anthropology - ISTA was founded by Eugenio Barba in 1979. Conceived as an "itinerant university", it consists of a multicultural network of performers and scholars with a shared interest in Theater Anthropology, a new field of study that focuses on the human being in organised performance situations. Theater Anthropology maps out the performer's pre-expressive scenic behaviour, which is grounded in extra-daily embodied principles that induce different energetic qualities and states, attracting the spectator's attention on a kinaesthetic, pre-linguistic level. According to Barba, the pre-expressive layer thus constitutes the elementary level of organization in theater, and is transcultural in terms of its reach and implications.
- 3 The Magdalena Project is a network of women working within contemporary theater and performance. Founded in 1986, the Project had its administrative base in Cardiff, Wales, under the artistic directorship of Jill Greenhalgh. Hundreds of independent women theater artists from 5 continents have participated in meetings and encounters over the years, sharing their performances and working methods. The Project has developed a unique horizontal structure which has enabled it to function and proliferate internationally, and for the name and history of the Magdalena Project to be adopted and augmented by women across the world.
- 4 Cross Pollination is an expanded, nomadic theater laboratory for the dialogue in-between practices, both scholarly and performance-based. From 2017-2022, it was a resident group at the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium in Denmark, under the auspices of Odin Teatret. The actions of the collective have taken place in different settings across Europe and Latin America, and the group have published articles on their work and practices (La Selva, Maciel, Nie and Campbell 2021a, 2021b and 2021c).
- 5 Jerzy Grotowski was one of the most prominent theatrical directors of the twentieth century, and the founder of the laboratory theater tradition. He developed systematic processes of actor training and a unique approach to scenic montage, and carried out continuous praxical research into theater, ritual and performative forms that fundamentally broke with western



- paradigms of theatricality. See Grotowski, 1968 and Schechner and Wolford, 2001.
- 6 Barter is a specific form of performative exchange developed by Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret, in which the Odin share their group culture, founded on their laboratory practice, with the local cultures in the places they travel to. Barter is an instrument for creating human relations through art, and has been a mainstay of the Odin's practice since the 1970s.
  - 7 *Theatrum Mundi* is a theatrical *mise-en-scène* resulting from *ISTA Encounters*, featuring guest artists from Asia, Europe and the Americas and participants. *Theatrum Mundi* productions are events with 45-50 performers and musicians from diverse genres and traditions, under Eugenio Barba's direction, frequently based on dramatic texts from the western canon, radically reinterpreted in light of the intercultural performers' array of codified and non-codified acting techniques, which are juxtaposed and foregrounded in Barba's montage.
  - 8 Barba is a prolific writer, producing texts reflecting both on his own work and the history of theater as a whole. Selected outputs include Barba, 1986; 1995; 1999; 2010 and Barba and Savarese 1991; 2018.
  - 9 Varley has published three books (Varley, 1997; 2011; 2016), co-authored a further three monographs (Adams, Aniksdal, Gale & Varley, 2017; Cremona, Galli & Varley, 2017; Barba, Galli & Varley, 2020) and penned an array of scholarly articles focusing on her own work, theater laboratory practices and the presence of women in contemporary theater. She is a member of the Editorial Board of *Open Page*, a journal dedicated to writing by and about women working within contemporary theater.
  - 10 "Third Theater" was a term coined by Eugenio Barba in 1976 to describe an international network of group theater practitioners with a shared laboratory ethos who saw theater as a vocation, a way of life. Barba differentiated these artists' approach to their craft from that of the First Theater (the mainstream theater of production houses) and Second Theater (the avant-garde, driven by aesthetic tendencies and trends). For more information on Third Theater, see Barba, 1999 and Turner and Campbell, 2021.
  - 11 *Min Fars Hus* (My Father's house, 1972) was a performance by Odin Teatret, directed by Eugenio Barba, based on the work of Dostoyevski.
  - 12 Eugenio Barba published two books, *The Floating Islands: Reflections with Odin Teatret* (1979) and *Beyond the Floating Islands* (1986) which focused on the work of Odin Teatret. The term "floating islands" was employed by Barba in these publications as a metaphor to describe the Third Theater.
  - 13 Initiated in 1989, the Holstebro Festuge was traditionally directed by Eugenio Barba and organised by Odin Teatret. It involves the participation of local residents, regional organisations, and international artists, who gather together to take part and share in performances, screenings, art exhibits, and barbers over a nine day period in Holstebro and the surrounding region.
  - 14 Lucca Ruzza teaches Virtual Scenography at Sapienza University of Rome. In the 1980s he founded the Open Lab Company, a production center for performance and theater architecture.
  - 15 La Selva is referring here to POTA – Practising Odin Teatret's Archive, a research project at the University of Ghent (Belgium) funded by the Government of Flanders, on which she is lead

- researcher. The aim of POTA is to develop a virtual training space by digitally capturing the training of Odin Teatret actress Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Roberta Carreri and Julia Varley, along with the embodied practices of their students. La Selva has published scholarly articles on this project, see La Selva 2023 Marouda et al 2023).
- 16 The phenomenon of barter emerged in Carpignano in 1974 through interactions between the Odin (who were working there at that point) and the local population.
- 17 Teatro di Sfera Om was founded in 1989 by Sandra Pasini and Antonella Diana in Rome, Italy. In 1994, the artists received subsidies to study in Holstebro at Odin Teatret, moving permanently to Denmark in 1996. The group changed its name to Teatret OM in 1997. In 2006, the group established a permanent base in Ringkøbing, becoming a regional theater for the municipality of Ringkøbing-Skjern. The group's aesthetics and ethos resonate with those of the wider Third Theater, and their work focuses on site-specific, sensory theater grounded in the reality of West Jutland. Several members of the group are also core members of the Bridge of Winds.
- 18 For an overview of the development of group theater in the twentieth Century, see Barba, Eugenio and Savarese, Nicola. *The Five Continents of Theater: Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor: 1*. Brill/Sense: Leiden, 2018.
- 19 Parvathy Baul s a practitioner, performer and teacher of the Baul tradition from Bengal, India. She is also an instrumentalist, storyteller and painter, and has maintained a long-term professional relationship with Odin Teatret. She joined the ensemble for the performance *The Tree* (2016), directed by Eugenio Barba.
- 20 The international research group Bridge of Winds was founded by Iben Nagel Rasmussen in 1989. The group consists of artists from Latin America and Europe, who meet every year in different parts of the world to carry out daily training, develop studio and outdoor performances and conduct barbers with local communities. Over the past 34 years, the group's unique training practice has proliferated amongst the Third Theater community thanks to the group's pedagogical practices and outreach projects.
- 21 In 2022, Manchester Metropolitan University initiated a specific Laboratory Theater pathway on its MA Performance Programme, which includes a placement at Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, Holstebro, Denmark.