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25 Years Again and Again

On Repetition, Time and Articulated Knowledge at The Bridge of Winds group

Adriana La Selva

It is a very simple step, present in many different cultures, based on the count of three, like the waltz. Jump, right foot landing smoothly on the ground, toes first. No sound. Left foot joining the right one closely and, for a moment, pulling the body towards a vertical impulse. Right foot first, then the left one lands, already pointing to the next direction of the body. Exhaling, knees bending deeper, grounding our energy, receiving the power to restart.

We will take this step as a microcosm.

‘The wind dance’, developed thoroughly for more than 25 years by Odin Teatret’s actress Iben Nagel Rasmussen and the members of The Bridge of Winds group, contains in a count of three the whole relation with theatre, with the work of the performer and his/her ethos.

This article explores a very peculiar relation between repetition, creation and the performer’s ethos, through the lenses of the long-term work of The Bridge of Winds, from a Deleuzian approach to the notions of repetition and difference within his ontology.

Since January 2015, I have been participating in The Bridge of Wing’s activities, working closely with Rasmussen and the members of the group. These writings will therefore be based on my empirical experience of their exercises, as well as on a series of interviews with many members of the group. I will provide an introduction to the group’s working structure and their practice. Jacques Rancière’s emancipatory approach to the politics of knowledge bridges Gilles Deleuze’s ontology of difference and the theatre practice. Within this framework, I suggest repetition as a key principle to engage with an alternative working

model that rearticulates contemporary paradigms of the creative process and the performer's ethos.

Building up a Bridge

The Bridge of Winds is an international independent theatre group, incorporated into the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium in Denmark, which is also the home of the Odin Teatret.

Rasmussen's artistic emancipation started when she felt the need to find her own path within the pre-expressive work the Odin Teatret was developing. After four years of complete dedication to the techniques that Odin's director Eugenio Barba was investigating with the group, Rasmussen began to question their efficiency. She recounts how tired she would get from the practices and how hard it was to find this *continuous flow* that was so clear in the other performers. She refers specifically to the work of the actors Richard Cieslak, Jerzy Grotowski's legendary Teatr Laboratorium and of Else Marie Laukvik and Torgeir Wethal, founding members of Odin Teatret's company. This *continuous flow* is what Rasmussen understands by the *transparent body*: a body that, through its physicality, becomes transparent, in order to "let something else appear" (Rasmussen, *The Transparent Body*). At this point, Rasmussen begins to wonder what could work for her. What is a dramatic action for her? Through these questions, she becomes convinced of the importance of transforming, of adapting and recreating one's own training in order to reach autonomy over one's own creative work. This became a key aspect in defining her relation with Eugenio Barba. As Virginie Magnat observes:

Not only is Rasmussen's perspective on the performer-director collaboration necessarily more fruitful from a creative standpoint, but it also means that when the performer becomes the owner of the modes of production, so to speak, her labor of embodiment constitutes an investment in her own self, leading to an accumulation of cultural capital, or expertise, that sets her free from the wants, whims, and woes of her colleagues, critics, and public. (Magnat 105)

She then gathered a group of students she had met during previous workshops all over the world and began to rethink and reconsider her pre-expressive work. Under her leadership, they created a group of approximately twenty people that has since been meeting each year for a session of three to four weeks.

The most publicly visible parts of the group's work are their performances and barbers, a sort of artistic community exchange created by Eugenio Barba in the early 90's.¹ However, attending their meetings, it became apparent to me that the group's most remarkable activity is its very specific voice and body training that gives birth to their particular forms of expression. Their discipline, their will to engage in the training every morning for the duration of the meeting, the peaceful repetition of a constant structure of exercises, the will to overcome the exhaustion that their not-so-young bodies have to endure... All of this constitutes a pre-expressive/technical work resulting in one of the most powerful performances I have ever seen.

Their structure is simple, respected and never contested. Rasmussen is the indisputable master figure with many members or pupils gathered around him, who have been working long enough to assume the position of masters themselves. They meet daily and punctually to start the training, without any command needed to be given. They work the entire morning without interruption, on a devised structure of exercises they all know by heart, accompanied by songs coming from the different cultures of each of the members.² Rasmussen merely observes, making a few notes and, towards the

¹ Eugenio Barba defines a barber as "a particular performance situation based on cultural exchange" (www.odinteatret.dk) where the actors show the community their work and are paid back with cultural demonstrations of any kind (songs, dances, food, etc.) by the audience. This working format has allowed the Odin Teatret to build a special relation not only with the so-called regular theatre audience but also with whole communities, be it a Syrian refugee camp, an indigenous area in the middle of the Amazon, or rural areas lost in the emptiness of Denmark. The Bridge of Winds follows this tradition providing barbers ever time they meet, which happens in a different location every year.

² For a full account of their training structure, please visit <http://livestream.com/OdinTeatretLiveStreaming/thebridgeofwinds>. The link provides

end, providing feedback regarding their precision, energy and performance during the training. Nevertheless, when I asked her what she was looking for in the training she briefly replied: “connection”. Afternoons are dedicated to the creation of a new piece, to performances, concerts and barbers in the region where they reside.

Watching them work, many questions came to my mind. Today, we live in a neoliberal sociopolitical context, pressed by market laws and the constant demand for immediate results, which makes this genre of commitment almost impossible to reach. Yet they found a gap in this system, a way out, which made me understand their work as a site of political resistance against the struggles theatre is facing today. What is the key for establishing this kind of long-term collaboration between such different people? And, most importantly, why do the group members meet for more than twenty-five years to do the same work over and over again? What is at the core of this training community, which makes them time and again long for the next meeting?

The Simple Rules (“Everything is in Everything”)

The Bridge of Winds’ tools can nowadays be resumed in five different kinds of exercises. As Mika Juusela, one of the members, explains:

These energetic exercises may have simple external form, but they are rather difficult to master. They are very precise and structured in a sequence that does not change much. It is a training that asks for great amount of alertness, sensitivity and willingness to overcome one's physical comfort. (Juusela in an interview with Mika Juusela)

Therefore, the work of the group is sustained by this fascinating idea that one could find much of the tools needed to awaken the so-called extra-daily body in very few exercises. Each of these five exercises was chosen and devised in order to

access to an open session of their last meeting, giving also a good overview of the exercises I will describe in this article.

reach a specific working energy. But they are still only five. We could find many explanations for this structure: their reduced time frame together, the ageing of the actors or the need to invest more time into the creation of a new piece. Nevertheless, it generated a certain training style that one could only devise through a (very) long-term experience.

At this point, it feels inevitable to look back at Jacques Rancière's book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). His most challenging hypothesis throughout the book affirms that "everything is in everything": "[...] to learn something and to relate to it all the rest [...]" (18). Based on Jacotot's experience with the book *Telemachus*, which guided his students on discoveries in many branches of knowledge according to their own will, Rancière thinks a way out of the imposed hierarchical structures in pedagogical systems.

This is what everything is in everything means: the tautology of power. All the power of language is in the totality of a book. All knowledge of oneself as an intelligence in the mastery of a book, a sentence, a word. Everything is in everything and everything is in *Telemachus*. (Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 26)

That is precisely the principle that guides The Bridge of Wind's current practice. The exercises evoke specific corporeal states from which the performers learn to withdraw their own theatrical presence and creative sources. The exercises carry peculiar names: 1. 'the wind dance' (described at the beginning of this article, a dance step that is repeated for a long period of time and unfolds into many variations connected to simple daily actions); 2. 'green' (an exercise where the performers practice moving against a given resistance located in specific parts of their bodies); 3. 'slow motion' (although a more obvious name, it is a rather difficult way of moving, which works, as opposed to the 'green' exercise, with no resistance whatsoever, aiming at a continuous flow); 4. 'out of balance' (the body is brought out of balance and just before it falls, it moves in the opposite direction, so that the energy that was supposed to end up in a collision with the floor is thrown back into the space); 5. 'samurai' (drawn from Japanese Noh

techniques, it is the combination and variations on essentially three different steps, based on the attitude of a samurai).

This description illustrates an important aspect of the exercises. Although their outlines are fixed, they do not have a rigid temporal and spatial structure, providing a great deal of freedom to the practitioners to investigate the relations they can build between them, between them and the space or between them and the exercises.

It is also important to mention that they have been on a long journey of learning and discovering numerous exercises before arriving at this training format. Besides, even though the exercises are fixed and have very specific forms, Rasmussen each time emphasizes the importance of having the members deconstructing these exercises once they are back in their home countries and artistic routines. So when they meet again, they have the chance to rediscover, to re-territorialize the sources of their own poetics and practices. The rigidity of this current structure felt like a place they can always come back to, a necessary home where they re-encounter once a year the sources of their own poetics.

Rancière makes it clear that what interests him in the whole philosophy on the Ignorant Schoolmaster does not have as much to do with pedagogy (or art) as it has with the “pedagogical mode as such”, which determines a way of understanding domination in society “as a matter of knowledge and ignorance” (Power 78). Society may be a broad notion, but it is possible to make the bridge to the notion of a theatrical community The Bridge of Winds created. Starting from the presupposition that everyone is equal, the group managed to create a shared knowledge in a community with no imposed hierarchies. In a rather organic way, Rasmussen was endowed with the title of master by her members, thus generating an alternative model for artistic leadership. A master who “does not transmit their knowledge and also is not the guide that takes the student on track, but a master which is pure will, which tells another will (pupil) to get his way and find his own path, and therefore, to exercise alone his intelligence on the pursuit for this path” (Rancière, Interview 188). This is for Rancière (and the

group) the kind of master that discloses an emancipatory process within an investigative environment.

Repetition – Excess – Becoming

In observing the group's working model, it struck me that *repetition* features as a principle that encircles the performers' training ethos. Ethos, as Eugenio Barba sees it, is both "a scenic behavior, that is, physical and mental technique" and a "work ethic, that is, a mentality modeled by the environment and the human setting, where the apprenticeship develops" (Barba 278). The few exercises I have described, exhausted through repetition, steer the group in their creative processes, towards a theatre where forms, figures, characters, relations and encounters are constantly being actualized. Presence, then, is what becomes enhanced.

Theatre scholar Josette Féral notes that "all great theatre masters of the past century have tried to devise appropriate exercises to give the actor a formation of both body and spirit" (23). This training boom of the past century provided the actors/students from all over the world with a wide variety of exercises to choose from, depending on one's own personal and aesthetic choices. "However", she says, "what is at stake in the end is the fact that the choice of what exercise to practice doesn't really matter, when the exercise is taken to its limits" (ibidem).

Jori Snell, another member of the group, defines the forms they work with as "the carriers". The process of discovering what lies inside these forms is one that demands time and maturity. A process that might seem even pointless at times – as repetition does not succeed on exceeding itself without a great risk of getting bored or feeling empty along the way. To pull yourself out of this risk demands a great deal of faith and patience. It has to become a sort of meditative practice, she says, on the "cultivation of presence" (Snell).

Guillermo Angelelli, one of the founding members of the group, describes this repetition process as a "sort of ritual and a work of faith"; a faith that in the end

you will find yourself and your own expression behind any form you are working with, as long as you face and accept the discipline of repetition.

When you know a form, then you don't have to worry about this anymore and you can look further. This is for me the very importance of repeating. [...] Repetition is the way of going deeper and deeper... To dig on you and bring new things. It is not about having new forms to change, but you are adding new meanings to them. [...] And I think that the secret is – this is just a speculation – but that in the very end of all these meanings, there lies the big mystery. This is a way to get nearer and nearer to this mystery. (Angelelli)

Theatre scholar Piotr Woycicki reminds us that scientists affirm to have found a neurological 'metronome' in the brainstem. This metronome is responsible for the stimulation of corporeal synchronic and automatic movements, while mapping and inscribing these motion commands within our personal cultural habits. When the body engages in continuous repetitive movements, this metronome is vulnerable to the generation of 'failures' within the commands executed, a process that is commonly the result of both physical and mental exhaustion. I argue that these 'failures' are one of the most legitimate sources of creativity in theatre. Furthermore, looking back at my practical experience with the training of *The Bridge of Winds*, I consider these 'failures' as the most concrete bridge between pre-expressivity and expressivity, a place in-between where technique meets creation. Woycicki defines these 'failures' as "performance excess" by which he means the unexpected; "an offset against the initial structure" (81). That is to say, the very difference within repetition.

Gilles Deleuze's ontology of difference provides us with an extremely rich proposition of an anti-representational notion of movement in theatre; a theatre based on the power of becoming, developed through operations of repetition.

The theatre of repetition is opposed to the theatre of representation, just as movement is opposed to the concept and to representation, which

refers it back to the concept. In the theatre of repetition, we experience pure forces, dynamic lines in space which act without intermediary upon the spirit, and link it directly with nature and history, with a language which speaks before words, with gestures which develop before organised bodies, with masks before faces, with spectres and phantoms before characters – the whole apparatus of repetition as a ‘terrible power’. (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 10)

The “whole apparatus of repetition” is considered here as a way to create difference, to create ‘failures’, to create.

Deleuze’s notion of a theatre of repetition deals with an operation that happens within the expressive moment itself, the *mise en scène* and the spectator’s experience. He has in mind “[...] the theatrical space, the emptiness of that space, and the manner it is filled and determined by the signs and masks [...]” (Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* 10). However, one could argue that this operating machine demands a perhaps even more powerful pre-expressive machine, in order to allow this “terrible power” to emerge from the repetition apparatus. This “terrible power” might be described as the mystery, as the origins of “performance excesses”, as a generic force behind one’s own poetics.

Deleuze is known for his non-systematic thinking, based on improvised concepts “which are not always meant to be clear”, as if a concept should not be the definition of something, “but a certain way of articulating complexities, as if to avoid closure or resolution” (Bruns 703). In order to grasp this repetition apparatus and to return to *The Bridge of Winds*, it is important to gain a broader understanding of Deleuze’s thinking.

Deleuze argues that the individuation of an organism is determined by its potentialities, by its capacity to go through relations and transitions. “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do” (Deleuze and Guattari 284). A fascinating aspect that lingers throughout Deleuze’s work is his constant insistence on the fact that his ontology is meant to be experienced in the body. For this reason, Deleuze’s work is considered a very important reference for contemporary performing arts. What emerges from this ontology is an intrinsic

connection to movement patterns. Furthermore, Deleuze's ontology is that of a process, which considers organisms in terms of relationships between them, their movements and their capacity to affect and be affected (instead of as solo creatures, as stratified living beings). The actualization of an organism happens through a simultaneous and intrinsic set of 'complex relations', unreel on what Deleuze calls a *plane of immanence*.

The *plane of immanence* works as a set of *latitudes* and *longitudes*, which, finally, are a determined set of *speeds* and *affects* that create specific energies. This configuration constitutes a particular notion of a body: a body without organs, a body in potential. The (virtual) potentialities of the body actualized are called *becomings*. As events, they do not sustain themselves; therefore, they do not stratify. They happen by means of opening up the body to relationships, to creating *alliances* with other bodies. These *alliances* produce intensities called *affects*. *Becomings* are *affects*. Our bodies then, "cease to be subjects to become events" (Deleuze and Guattari 262).

An important tool to actualize the body and to produce becomings is the process of repetition. According to Slavoj Žižek, the main idea in Deleuze's concept of repetition lies in the difference between mechanical and machinic repetition. While the first produces events of "linear causality", the latter (a "proper" instance of repetition) instigates an event to be "[...] re-created in a radical sense: it (re)emerges every time as New [...]" (Žižek 15).

With these ideas in mind, I return to the subject matter investigated in this article. I suggest exploring the work of The Bridge of Winds, both in terms of the theatre practice and in terms of the performer's training ethos that encircles the practice, as a specific plane of immanence designed to promote encounters, affects, and becomings through the apparatus of repetition. By engaging with The Bridge of Winds' exercises through exhaustive repetition and by observing the group at work, I felt I could come very close to unknotting this place, using key notions of Deleuze's ontology. Affect, becoming, encounter, difference, lines of flight, ... become aspects in describing the craft of the actor. Thinking this

theatre practice with Deleuze unleashes a certain attitude in my own profession as a performer that felt very liberating.

The Macrocsm

I would like to conclude, therefore, with a subtle provocation. The 'slow' training tempo and the particular performer's ethos in The Bridge of Winds group seems at odds with the theatre 'market' today. The theatrical production machine and the market laws do not allow us to 'spend' the required time that is necessary to construct such a legacy. In what sense do these long-term training processes become sites of resistance for the ongoing imperative of instant result and artistic innovation in contemporary performance practices? In this sense, where does legitimacy reside?

Pedagogically speaking, one could observe a growing demand for individualized research in the arts, leading to an ever-growing production of new acting methods, techniques and shows. These individual practices hardly relate to an interconnected tradition of embodied and tacit knowledge.

Contemporary performance and, most importantly, contemporary performers have criticised the repetitive aspect of training related to craft and to the way institutions deal with it. And this is not without reason. Within many pedagogical and process-based approaches to theatre, one must note that it often emphasizes the "theatre of representation" that Deleuze opposes to the theatre of repetition. As Woycicky notes:

Such approaches often see this disciplining of the production of the sign through training as something limiting and anti-innovative – greatly compromising the agency of the performer/artist, merely recapitulating dominant conventions and standards in art (Woycicky 80)

However, looking back at the way The Bridge of Winds tackles this issue, training has become a way out of the disciplining of signs. Training provided them with significant freedom to look for their own theatrical poetics. Besides,

instead of having to compromise my own agency as a performer, experiencing their practices actually provided me with a specific ethical, political and performative potentiality, which also points at the imperative nature of the regimes of individuation in the contemporary performing arts. The Bridge of Winds's work with repetitions, their yearly meetings, going through the same training, same exercises, structures and so on, forces us to conceive of a practice moving beyond the (economic) structure of theatre itself. It connects with the notion of a theatrical community. It encompasses a way of understanding what the role of the performer in today's society is, a way of living together, of being generous and expanding the borders of a shared knowledge, also independently of individual aesthetic choices. It takes years of long-lasting repetition, more than a lifetime, to erase the borders between private life and theatre practice, as it is all part of an interconnected plane of immanence. After all, the exercises that Rasmussen developed with the group are also for her, being seventy years old today, still a way to "remain in contact with the creative sources of her own work" (Magnat 110), a way to dialogue with the passage of time. Repetition, in the end, entails the emancipation of the performer.

One exercise, one action, and the world in it.

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