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Frank Camilleri

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## Hospitality and the Ethics of Improvisation in the Work of Ingemar Lindh

Ingemar Lindh's work on the principles of collective improvisation has crucial implications for the history of twentieth-century laboratory theatre. His early work with Étienne Decroux and Jerzy Grotowski contributed to the development of a unique practice that resists directorial montage, fixed scores, and choreography; and the ethical dimension that accompanies Lindh's research on collective improvisation is illuminating for a more holistic understanding of the technical and aesthetic considerations in theatre. In this article, Frank Camilleri discusses some of the key aspects of this dimension, notably the dynamics of hospitality and encounter that inform Lindh's approach and the question of responsibility in the actor's work. Frank Camilleri is Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Kent. From 2004 to 2008 he was Academic Coordinator of Theatre Studies at the University of Malta. He is also Artistic Director of Icarus Performance Project – an ongoing research laboratory that investigates the intermediary space between training and performance processes. Camilleri's work with Lindh in the mid-1990s was instrumental for the development of this research practice.

*It would be possible to talk about all of this in a more technical way, more appropriate to the actor, as a precise task in relation to craft.*

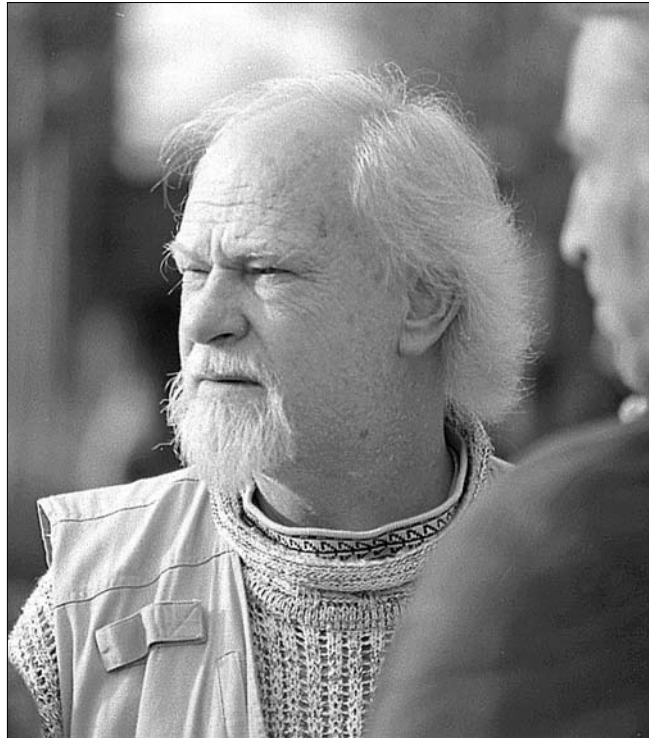
*However, I always try to talk about these things on a more general level in order to highlight the essence in the actor's and the director's work, and to question my responsibility as a human being in this particular context. Since it is possible, in the concrete situation of daily praxis, to take one path just as well as another . . . I try to take the discourse beyond questions of technique, style, or other specific artistic choices and come down to the level of human choices.*

Ingemar Lindh<sup>1</sup>

THE PRACTICE of the Swedish theatre-maker Ingemar Lindh (1945–1997) is often associated with his apprenticeship and work with Étienne Decroux in the late 1960s. But corporeal mime constituted only the initial phase of Lindh's involvement in theatre. In 1971, following a series of work encounters with Jerzy Grotowski and the setting up of Studio II with Yves Lebreton at Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Lindh founded his own laboratory theatre in

Sweden: the Institutet för Scenkonst (Institute for Scenic Art). After five years of intense formative work and research in northern Sweden (1971–76), the Institute underwent a period without a permanent base (1976–83). The origins of the Institute's research on the principles of collective improvisation can be traced to this 'nomadic period', which was also very rich in performances and other research work. In 1984, the Institute found a home in the Teatro della Rosa (Theatre of the Rose) in Pontremoli, Italy, where they remained until 1997. Lindh's death in Malta from a cardiac arrest at the age of fifty-two coincided with the Institute's departure from Pontremoli; though the two events were not directly related, the latter weighed heavily on his peace of mind.

Lindh's work on collective improvisation has crucial implications for the history of twentieth-century laboratory theatre in providing a unique contribution to the study of the performer and performance process. The ethical dimension that accompanies a practice of collective improvisation is also illuminating for a more holistic understanding of



Ingemar Lindh in Porsgrunn (Norway), 1996. Photo: Stefano Lanzardo

the technical and aesthetic considerations in theatre. In view of this objective, I shall discuss some of the key aspects in Lindh's practice as they are informed by the dynamics of hospitality and encounter. I shall also consider the question of responsibility in the actor's work in an improvisatory context that resists predetermined structures such as directorial montage and choreography. It is hoped that this discussion will contribute to the discourse of performance ethics by means of a unique case study that is rooted in the history and practice of twentieth-century European research theatre.

### Lindh's Biographical Visibility

Although the work of Lindh is known in theatre and academic circles in Sweden and Italy, it is mostly unknown in the English-speaking world. Apart from certain references in publications by Eugenio Barba, including three sets of photographs in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, in which Lindh illustrates exercises derived from Decroux, very little has been published in English about him.<sup>2</sup> The only other 'major'

reference that a discerning reader can detect is in the back pages of the Black Mountain Press series dedicated to European Contemporary Classics/Theatre, which have been announcing since 1999 that Lindh's book, *Stepping Stones*, is 'already in the process of translation and production'.<sup>3</sup>

The status of Lindh's bibliographical visibility is in part due to the low profile that the Institute kept throughout its history in order to maintain its research focus on the pedagogy and creativity of the actor's work.<sup>4</sup> In part it is also due to Lindh's death in 1997, which occurred at a point when transcripts of his conference speeches began to appear in various publications. Of particular interest to *New Theatre Quarterly* readers is Lindh's only publication in English, 'Gathering Around the Word Theatre . . .', which includes an exchange between the late Clive Barker and Lindh, both of whom were keynote speakers at a Helsinki symposium in 1994.<sup>5</sup>

The diffusion of knowledge about Lindh's work in the mid-1990s stalled with his death and with the Institute's subsequent move to Sweden. *Pietre di Guado* was published post-

humously in Italy in 1998 and a Swedish edition appeared in 2003. An English version of the book is due to appear in 2010, edited and introduced by the author of this article.

Lindh's adoption of improvisation as a principle of organization in performance has proved his major contribution to twentieth-century theatre practice. Although improvisation in training and in compositional processes is not new (Lindh himself had been exposed to it in Wrocław and Holstebro), no one within the frame of laboratory theatre has conducted such a rigorous and long-term exploration of collective improvisation as a principle of organization *in the performance event itself*. Lindh's formation under Decroux had given him the technical precision and knowledge that other theatre-makers in the second half of the century aspired to achieve in their investigation of training processes and physical scores for the actor. Lindh's interest in improvisation was in turn sparked by the possibilities that lie beyond the mastery of technique:

Because I happened to end up in the cave of Decroux, precision was given to me as a gift. And I never felt the need to search for it any longer, it was just there. And that, in a way, eliminated my fear of chaos, and I started to be more and more curious about the perfection or the organic organization of chaos. Because chaos is only our lack of capacity of perceiving.<sup>6</sup>

The quality of perception and the capacity to react to what the context as a whole suggests in the here-and-now of occurrence lie at the heart of Lindh's investigation of collective improvisation.

The psychophysical awareness that a practitioner cultivates by means of a long-term practice is underlined by Lindh's use of the term 'to listen' in the context of the improvising actor's capacity to perceive and (re)act. This kind of sensitivity marks 'a state of vigilance' that is crucial to the Institute's research on the mechanisms and dynamics of encounter that serve to organize the performative event.<sup>7</sup> As I argue extensively elsewhere, Lindh's innovation lies in identifying the irreducible here-and-now aspect of 'listening' as the primary facilitator of encounter

within a *compositional process* that is also an *aesthetic* and a *poetics*.<sup>8</sup>

In this article I shall suggest that Lindh's pursuit of collective improvisation as a performance practice is also indicative of an *ethics* that seeks to inhabit the instant of occurrence via a sensitized consideration of context. Since human beings are constantly called upon to make choices and take decisions, the improvising actor's refined capacity to do so in the context of theatre means that, potentially, the actor is working on the same mechanism that is in operation in an ethics of responsibility.

### The House Project

The dynamics of hospitality that inform the Institute's 'House Project' will serve as the main point of reference for a discussion on the ethical dimension of Lindh's work. The concept of hospitality involved in this was 'fundamental' for Lindh (*Pietre di Guado*, p. 116). This concept permeated the theatre practice of the Institute as well as the way in which its members ran their community within a social context.

In the Institute's history, the so-called 'House Project' refers to the endeavours during its nomadic period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Lindh and his performers were looking for a place to serve as a base for their practice. A similar project was again underway in the late 1990s when the Institute was forced to leave Pontremoli after twelve years of residency in the Teatro della Rosa. Lindh's death in 1997 occurred at the juncture when the Institute was searching for a new home that fulfilled the needs of their practice. His closest collaborators, and the current leaders of the Institute, Magdalena Pietruska and Roger Rolin, proceeded in their quest until they eventually relocated to Sweden where they set up 'house' in Nygård.

The objective of stability that the quest for a house implied for the Institute was not so much a geographical or a research necessity as a practical need related to the housing of their pedagogical work with students. The choice of terminology to describe this need ('house' rather than 'theatre', 'space' or

'centre') is indicative of the nature of their practice that sought to investigate the mechanisms of everyday life in the work of the actor. These mechanisms were principally concerned with ways of exploring encounter as a vital aspect of their pedagogical practice and collective improvisation. Lindh's account of the inception of the House Project in the late 1970s makes clear the link that existed between their theatre practice and the need for a 'House' – a link that has remained a constant throughout the Institute's history:

Through an ongoing discussion, the outlines of the House Project became ever clearer; what we were looking for was an affordable building with adequate working spaces and living quarters for ourselves and our students. This was our sole reference point as we were vagabonds not tied economically to, or dependent on, any country. Our only bond was with our work which we took with us wherever we went. . . . We no longer needed to move around to be nomads. The important thing was to remain mentally mobile. Physically we could also settle down somewhere to protect the continuity of the work. It was not important in which country. We had always been strangers and will always remain strangers. (Pietre, p. 86)

The gypsy-like existence of the Institute's first decade and the ability its members had developed in making a 'home' out of the little provided by everywhere is reflective of an inner stability they were intent on cultivating and protecting as practitioners of a 'poor theatre' based on the work upon oneself. Lindh observes that:

The house is not different from all the other things that make up the life of the Institutet för Scenkonst; everything is always based on *the trust we have in one's lot*, which means to accept its consequences. . . . Of course, if someone is truly searching one has the possibility to get what one wants. . . . Such a search has to be part of a wider aspiration, that is, of the work, and of what we want to get from the work on a human level. Obviously, all our energy, *our entire aspiration tends towards that for which we are searching*. One day we will find it. And also then it will be linked to our way of working. (Pietre, p. 116–17; my italics)

Typically of his holistic approach, Lindh here links a number of issues that can only be separated on a theoretical level. These include a

world view that forms the basis of an ethics and a central tenet in his practice, namely, the mental act marked by intention as a 'tending towards' the performance of action. Before discussing the matter of intention, I shall expand on Lindh's outlook as underscored by the 'trust' and 'acceptance' of 'one's lot' since this has important implications for an understanding of the ethics embedded in his practice.

### Trust and Acceptance

Lindh's 'trust in one's lot' marks a crucial intersection in highlighting an ethos that pervades both the *modus vivendi* and the *modus operandi* of the Institute. The problematics of translation that concern the word 'lot' shed light on the attitude that animates Lindh's practice. The Italian word *sorte* that Lindh employs in *Pietre di Guado*, whose meaning overlaps with 'fate' and 'destiny', is only an indicative equivalent of Lindh's original Swedish word *slump*, which again problematically translates as 'chance' and 'luck'. But Lindh's reference to *slump* and *sorte* does not imply a passive acceptance that predetermined 'fate' and 'destiny', or capricious 'luck' and 'chance', entail. When Pietruska was working on the English translation it was not possible to render Lindh's formulation as 'trust in one's luck'. The neutral status of 'lot' was considered to fit better within the frame of Lindh's philosophy.<sup>9</sup> 'Lot' is a neutral word that refers to one's condition on earth, a situation that is neither sought nor anticipated, but whose potential can be exposed and fulfilled by one's actions.

It is precisely the awareness of the possibilities and limits of 'one's lot' that sustains Lindh's practice in life and in the theatre. In fact, one of Lindh's key terms in the Institute's research on collective improvisation is 'social situation' which refers to 'all that is outside of the actor' in training and performance contexts, including colleagues, the space, objects, sounds, textures, costumes, music, and text (Pietre, p. 68). The trust in one's condition that characterized the Institute's quest for a House thus finds resonance in Lindh's investigation of collective impro-

visitation by way of attention to the social situation.

The actor's ability to 'listen' to what is happening within and around oneself can be described as a form of psychophysical awareness that makes it possible to inhabit the event in the here-and-now of occurrence by way of considering the various components present within a context. It is this consideration, which is not found in the predetermined mechanisms of either fixed scores or choreography, that makes space for the unpredictable and unaccountable to occur during improvisation. The possibility of contingency that exists in life and which Lindh sought to explore in performance can be identified as a condition of the improvising actor's capacity to be adequate to a given situation:

We never abandoned ourselves to our lot. . . . On the contrary, every human creative process necessarily has to be active. During the work, for

instance, we refer to listening as the most important element. Often we talk of active passivity, or passive activity, which is something so difficult to obtain, even in a small gesture [since] any gesture must always tend towards something and must give space for one's aspirations to flow freely. So, it is not a matter of abandoning oneself to one's lot, but rather a matter of not negating the lot.  
(*Pietre*, p. 118)

The active-passivity/passive-activity phenomenon invoked here is reminiscent of the Institute's work on 'mobile immobility' that Lindh had received from Decroux.<sup>10</sup> This kind of immobility refers to a technical and physiological condition in which the practitioner performs an action even if there is a lack of movement. Decroux's approach was to execute the smallest possible movements until one is able to master even the tiniest one in its most minute detail, until immobility becomes the ultimate consequence of minimization in space and time. The nature of this kind of immobility is dynamic and active.



Ingemar Lindh in the mime study *L'Oiseau et Le Chasseur*, at Teatro Laboratorio del G.A.S. (La Spezia, Italy), 1984. Photo: Stefano Lanzardo

The implications of this form of taking action, which constituted one of the fundamental aspects of Lindh's work with Eugenio Barba's ISTA, will be discussed later in this article.<sup>11</sup>

### Intention and 'Mental Precision'

The other aspect that Lindh's prioritizing of 'trust in one's lot' brings to the fore is the question of intention or the role played by the mind in the implementation of action. 'Mental precision' is a phrase that occupies a specific place in the Institute's jargon on the phenomenon of intention: it indicates the movement in the mind that precedes the physical manifestation of action.

It is important to qualify that mental precision in the Institute's context *does not in any way* imply a preponderance of mind over body. The status of action-in-the-mind that is implied by 'mental precision' and 'intention' is indeed that of physical action. This phenomenon will be discussed in greater detail in the context of the Institute's work on the 'disinterested act', but for now it will be sufficient to observe the terminological space that it shares with Lindh's concept of 'trust in one's lot'.

We have already seen how Lindh considers the quest announced by the House Project as 'not different from all the other things' that make up the life of the Institute. Further:

Such a search has to be part of a *wider aspiration*, that is, of the work, and of what we want to get from the work on a human level. Obviously, all our energy, *our entire aspiration tends towards that for which we are searching*. One day we will find it. And also then it will be linked to our way of working. (Pietre, p. 116–17, my italics)

Lindh's account of the Institute's 'entire aspiration' is reminiscent of the terminological dynamics that characterize intention in his work. Pietruska observes that 'intention' combines two meanings in the Institute's work: 'to tend forward' and 'tension'. The first meaning relates to a mental inclination to do something, the second to its physical manifestation as the mobilization of one's energy in a specific direction.<sup>12</sup>

The 'tending towards' dynamics of the Institute's 'entire aspiration' thus overlaps with the first meaning indicated by Pietruska since both terms look forward to something yet to be achieved and the first step to achieve this is an inclination to do it. The second meaning Pietruska enumerates (that is, intention as the mobilization of one's energy) highlights the physical quality of the inclination, whether it is an action in performance or the acquisition of a house in life.

The two meanings that permeate the Institute's use of 'intention' have far-reaching implications for a political and ethical discourse *vis-à-vis* decision and action. If the Institute's inclination for action is based on an acceptance of their situation that involves an understanding of their condition as a point of departure, and if their way of operation is not to force predetermined judgments (fixed scores or choreography) but to 'listen' and to adapt to the here-and-now of occurrence, then the political and ethical dimension of their research practice assumes wider implications.

The rest of this article will endeavour to explicate these implications by way of a sensitized appreciation of the Other, since the practice of 'listening' and accepting one's lot is always already informed by a special relationship with the Other. The role played by the Other in the Institute's *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* is manifested in Lindh's practice of encounter, which is once again evident in the House Project.

### Hospitality, Encounter, and the Other

Besides adequate working spaces, 'a corner for an office', and living quarters for the members of the Institute, an essential requirement of the House Project included accommodation space for students and guests (Pietre, p. 117). The Institute's guests were (and still are) usually fellow artists and researchers.<sup>13</sup> Lindh's views on the hosting of guests entail a practice of encounter which has a number of cultural and ethical considerations:

We always try to encounter the foundations of our culture. If you go to a monastery, there will

always be a place to sleep, even if you do not have a penny. We search . . . not an ideology, because we have never searched for, or practised, an ideology; instead we look for a possibility to see each other, to encounter the others, to encounter the world, to encounter the working space, to encounter. As I have said before, the prime condition for working in a group is to have the capacity of being on your own – so as not to become a burden on the others. This is the principle of collaboration on the ‘floor’ during improvisations; it is also *the basic principle of hospitality* with regard to both guests and students. It must be a reciprocal attitude, for otherwise one ends up imposing on, rather than encountering, the other. (Pietre, p. 123, my italics)

Lindh’s reference to ‘the basic principle of hospitality’ in the collaborative context of collective improvisation occupies an important place in a discussion of the ethical dimension of the Institute’s work. Hospitality is a recurrent theme in Paolo Martini’s interview with Lindh in *Pietre di Guado* (p. 115–55) and this quotation serves to establish the principal co-ordinates it occupies in Lindh’s practice.

The mechanics of encounter and the sensitivity to the Other that permeate hospitality are manifested in various aspects of the Institute’s *raison d’être*, including: the performer’s work upon oneself; the relationship with space and text; the role of the spectator; and the discipline of the work. In the following paragraphs and sections I will discuss these aspects in a context suggested by Lindh himself – the resistance to ideology. I will argue that the Institute’s resistance to ideology adopts the dynamics of an ethics in pursuing a *modus operandi* that seeks to inhabit and negotiate the exigencies of the here-and-now by means of the capacity to listen to the Other and to act upon that basis.

The always already-in-progress status of a practice that resists predetermined formulae renders it an ‘impossible’ ethics in that it has to be formulated at each and every moment and for each and every occasion. The point of reference that enables such an ethics is not so much a discipline or a technique as a capacity for and a way of inhabiting that discipline. This is reminiscent of the ‘impossible’ dynamics of active-passivity as well as of the Institute’s stable geographical location while

at the same time remaining nomadic in spirit and ‘mentally mobile’ (Pietre, p. 86).

The ‘basic principle of hospitality’ to which Lindh alludes is primarily a way of life. Allowing for the Althusserian consideration that we are always already *within* ideology, hospitality for the Institute is not an ideological pursuit in that it eschews a practice predetermined by a set of concepts. It is, rather, a practice of encounter that gives birth to what can be described as an ethics that is always ‘in progress’ in being alert to context. The practice of encounter pervades the very fibre of the Institute’s way of life and doing, at the heart of which is the actor’s work.

### Space as an ‘Other’

In the studio space, the actor’s capacity for being on one’s own during collective improvisation is tantamount to encountering oneself as Other. The codified and empirical types of training processes that the Institute developed in the course of its history are representative of the actor’s capacity to work upon oneself as Other, which Lindh identifies as essential for collective improvisation.<sup>14</sup> During collective improvisation, the ability to listen to the Other in the here-and-now of a ‘social situation’ comes to the fore in marking the prime condition of encounter. The ‘collective’ element in an improvisation indeed refers to the negotiation of encounters that occurs at the possibilities suggested by listening.

The practice of encounter is also evident in Lindh’s outlook on space. The House Project itself, with its spaces reserved for students and guests, is one living manifestation of a practice geared towards encountering others. Closer to the core of theatrical practice is the way the Institute’s practitioners deal with the studio space as an ‘other’ with its own specific characteristics:

First you conceive a performance at home in your working space, and bit by bit the space becomes nearly ideal and ends up married to the work. When you go on tour, of course, you never find a space which is similar, let alone identical. So, you have to adapt yourself. One alternative is to . . . recreate conditions which come as close as pos-



sible to those of the working space you left behind at home; but in this case you run the risk of going against the new space. The other alternative is to accept that which the new space can give you and to try to encounter it in the shortest time possible, adapting the performance to that space. This is especially important when the space, or the house in question, already has a distinct character, a life. (Pietre, p. 119–20)

The adjustment to the architectural properties of a space here described amounts to an endeavour to encounter that is not based on preconceived formulations but, rather, on a process of familiarization and mutual information. The same can be said of the manner in which text is approached:

There you are like David in front of Goliath, thinking: 'I am so small and insignificant, how can I encounter this monster of a text as an equal?' And you begin to construct your 'armour', in the fundamental sense of 'encounter', just like in martial arts. How can I construct an instrument, a tool, to read the dynamic of the other?<sup>15</sup>

Although this attitude towards space and text is not uniquely the Institute's and is applicable to most performing arts practices, the place that it occupies in Lindh's framework of encounter bestows upon it an ethical quality that is only rarely to be found.

### Witness-as-Guest

The ethical status of the Institute's practice of hospitality is also discernible in Lindh's views on the role of the audience. In addition to students, fellow artists, and researchers, Lindh includes spectators in the spectrum of encounter as 'guests [who] come to see what you are doing, to participate' (Pietre, p. 124). Lindh's vision of the spectator as 'witness' is reminiscent of Grotowski – but the emphasis on the *witness-as-guest* is, I believe, his own.<sup>16</sup>

Lindh's work exchanges with the Polish master at the turn of the 1970s and the subsequent knowledge of Grotowski's work must have left a mark, as is evident in enunciations such as this:

You do not ask the audience to consume a performance, but you ask them to actively participate in it through the role of witness. The main thing is

that the roles are clearly defined: as an actor, I have a task to carry out, as the audience, you have another one, and everyone has to carry out their task with all their creativity and all the means at their disposal. For the spectator it is a matter of actively observing and listening. (Pietre, p. 124)

Lindh's specific take on this position is, significantly, the underlining of 'listening' and the active/passive axis implicit in 'actively observing'. His conception of the spectator is also in line with his belief in the acceptance of one's lot.

While Lindh asserts that the roles of the actor and the spectator are 'clearly defined' and separate, the ethical dimension of his insistence on listening can be more radical than that of a theatre, where the line between actor and spectator is blurred at the expense of commitment, engagement, and responsibility. Revealingly, it is in the context of the spectator-as-guest that Lindh locates 'the political act of our theatre', which is 'to ask a human being, a citizen, to be responsible for one's choices, one's tasks, and their fulfilment; all of that, of course, in the performance space and during the performance' (Pietre, p. 152). Forcing spectators to do something that is against their inclinations, or trying to push a 'message' regardless of the context, does not fall within the practice of the Institute, otherwise:

It would be a speculation on the guest; that is, you would have already started to go down the path of indoctrinating the other person, and so, imposing your understanding of the world, in which case you are into demagogy instead of a performance. The spectator must maintain the highest possible degree of freedom in order to be capable of perceiving what is taking place. (Pietre, p. 125)

This attitude also informs the hospitality that frames the actual performance event since for the Institute the spectator is not simply 'viewed' as a guest but 'treated' as one:

We welcome the people, we are with them before or after the performance, and we offer some things – a coffee, a glass of wine, something to eat. The important thing is not to force guests, if they do not feel like it, to speak of what they have seen. So, it is just a matter of being with guests. (Pietre, p. 152)

In this context, the Institute's ethical dimension informs the aesthetics of their performances in the process of shaping the encounter between performer and spectator.

### Discipline

Lindh's reference to the monastic practice of hospitality (*Pietre*, p. 123) sheds further light on the ethics at work in the Institute. Though the Institute is a secular entity, it is possible to trace affinities with monasticism in terms of practice and organization. Emmanuel Levinas's description of the original ethical relationship as 'religious' in constituting a 'face-to-face' with the absolute Other finds resonance in Lindh's views on encounter and hospitality.<sup>17</sup> The isolation of medieval monasteries was aimed at engendering the capacity to listen to God as Other by means of a disciplined life of work and prayer. And a similar paradigm can be found in the House Project of the Institute and in other twentieth-century laboratories such as Jacques Copeau's Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier and Jerzy Grotowski's last phase in Pontedera.

The crucial difference between Lindh and other theatremakers is the question of hospitality: the Institute's capacity for housing guests was, like a monastery's, an integral part of the praxis, and reflective of the inclination to encounter others in the hosting of students, colleagues, and visitors. In a draft essay originally intended as an introduction to *Pietre di Guado*, Fabrizio Cruciani juxtaposes (and thereby locates by association) Lindh's practice with the research endeavour that characterized twentieth-century theatre masters such as 'Appia or Craig, Stanislavski or Copeau, Meyerhold or Dullin, Brecht or Artaud, Grotowski or Barba'.<sup>18</sup>

Within this context, Cruciani comments on the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of these practices: 'The history of twentieth-century theatre is the history of people [*uomini*] who find their fulfilment in the setting up of groups, of micro-societies which live the utopia of an ethical project in the arts'.<sup>19</sup> Cruciani's use of the term 'utopia' marks a vision as well as a practice aimed at the holistic formation of the actor as a human

being. Lindh's views on hospitality in the House Project are testimony to the phenomenon marked by Cruciani.

The ascetic poverty of monastic practice is, moreover, reminiscent of the minimalism of the 'poor theatre' that characterized most twentieth-century laboratories whose interest in pursuing the irreducible elements of theatre often led to an inner journey of self-discovery. In this context the practice of a 'poor theatre' can be seen as an ethics as much as an aesthetics. The discipline that characterized the research on the fundamental principles of these theatre laboratories was not a prescribed formula, but a path that made possible a structured exploration aimed at better fulfilling the potential of being human by the overcoming of psychophysical blocks. Lindh's choice of metaphor in this regard is revealing when he resorts to another religious source:

A discipline cannot be something automatic. Like the Mother Superior says in the *Dialogues des Carmélites* by G. Bernanos: 'It is not the rule that protects us; it is we who protect the rule,' otherwise it would stop being a rule and would turn into regulations. (*Pietre*, p. 127)

The knowledge embedded in a rule or a technique is not expected to be absolute in a way that fosters passive acceptance. The groundbreaking practice of Lindh and of other theatre-makers in the twentieth century, in part due to their pioneering role, bears witness to this attitude. For one common danger faced by most contemporary research practices is to transform a specific technique into a neatly packaged system that places one in a position of already knowing where the point of arrival lies before one actually departs. In such cases it is possible to argue that the practice is in the grips of an *ideological* mechanism as distinct from an *ethical* framework, where the end result is prescribed rather than open to the exigencies of research and discovery.

Most of today's theatre practices have undisputed technical mastery due to the knowledge accrued from a century of laboratory practice, and so can focus on what is 'known'. But this sophisticated technique is rarely

accompanied by a cultivated ethical dimension which includes the inclination to move beyond the strictures of the known that had initially given birth to a particular technique in an isolated and 'poor' laboratory. Neatly packaged in drama school curricula, university modules, and short-term workshops, it is now possible to study biomechanics, Grotowski-based work, yoga, and so on. The fundamental lack inherent in such a commodified approach is that of an ethical *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*. In this context it is very difficult to make a choice and be responsible for that action because all decisions have already been made for you.

### Responsibility

The picture that emerges from this discussion corroborates the claim that an ethical dimension informs the practice of the Institute under Lindh's guidance. The space that this ethics shares with the research on the principles of collective improvisation predicates an 'impossible' situation where each and every aspect of context is potentially capable of influencing the initiation, nature, and outcome of encountering the Other.

The ethical implications of such a practice contribute to a state where the performer's actions are determined by a capacity to listen to and inhabit the event according to its constituent elements. In this scenario, the performer as decision-taker and action-doer is called upon to be accountable on the basis of an ethics that impossibly seeks to be (re)created in the here-and-now of occurrence. Previous contexts, prior decisions, and past actions do not function as predetermined rules, but rather serve to sensitize the performer's capacity to listen, in the process contributing towards a fuller realization of the human being's potential. The 'impossible' ethical accountability that epitomizes Lindh's conception of the improvising performer is reflected in his discourse on the responsibility of action.

Responsibility is a major issue in Lindh's perspective on theatre, which for him is an integral reflection of life. As human beings, we are constantly called upon to make choices

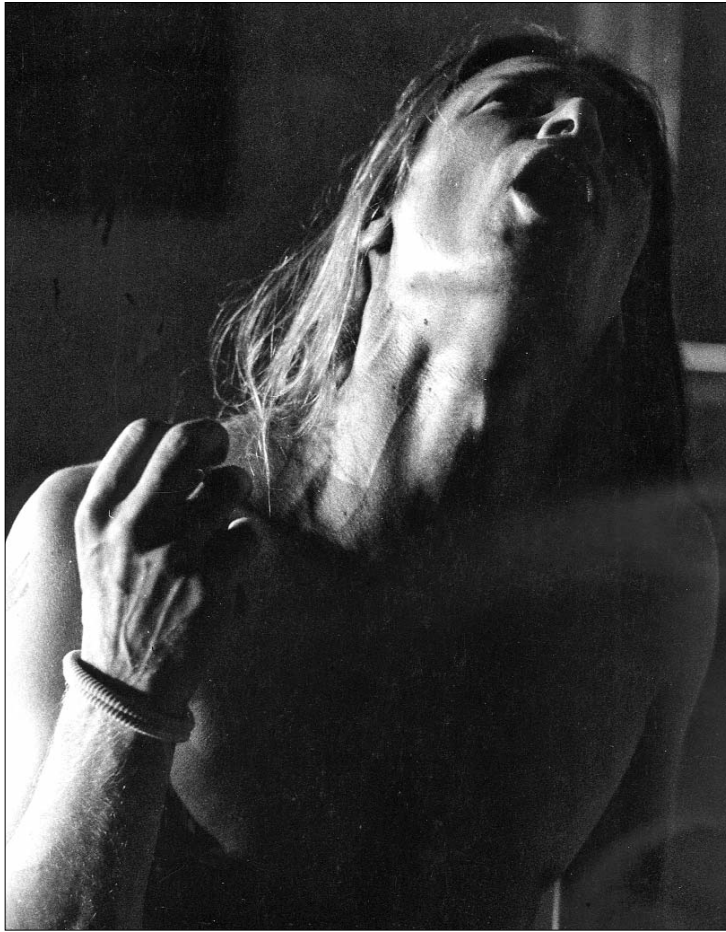
and the decisions that we take are the actions we perform. In this sense the actor is in a privileged position to reflect our being human precisely because of the imperative to act. In Lindh's view, the actor's capacity to take action engenders the capacity to decide and make choices, which means that, potentially, the actor is working on the same mechanism that is in operation in an ethics of responsibility. Of course, responsibility for one's actions is not specific to the actor, and the privileged position Lindh confers on the actor is set within a wider ethical discourse. Responsibility for one's actions

is something specific to the actor only in as much as he or she is privileged. Since the actor has the possibility to create one's own laboratory, as evidenced by one's personal daily work and the creation of performances, the art of the actor is not subjected to moral laws. I think that the choice of becoming an actor, just like any other choice, is already and always a moral question. But once that choice has been made, and once its consequences have been taken, there is something amoral, not immoral, which is conceded to art. This choice does not directly involve our ethical conscience because it is not a social act which knowingly risks hurting someone else. Apart from that, I think that moral responsibility is included in all choices, and it should be equally binding for all human beings. But art is the exception as it is a manifestation only of itself, and even more so the art of the actor which is a human being expressing a human being through a human being. It is the only art which has these characteristics.

(Pietre, p. 136)

The impossible quality of Lindh's practice once again comes to the fore and implies a challenging process that is always at the limits of one's abilities and capacity; as such, it also marks the initial impulse of 'avant-garde' and 'cutting edge' which is always at the forefront, negotiating the possible on the verge of the impossible.

The moral dimension of the actor's laboratory work as envisaged by Lindh is impossible because it marks an 'ethics' that is not an ethics in being 'amoral'. Although the act of becoming an actor is always a moral issue (in as much as all choices are invested with responsibility), the passage that this decision entails for Lindh is to a dimension (that is, theatre) whose self-reflective dynamics and



Left and opposite page:  
Roger Rolin in *Popolo*, at  
Teatro della Rosa (Pontremoli,  
Italy), 1992.  
Photos: Stefano Lanzardo

mechanisms liberate the actor from an ethics that applies in everyday life.

The impossible status of this liberated ethics and morality can be called 'originary' or 'in progress' in that the actor is called upon to decide and act in the here-and-now of occurrence, where precedents do not exist or are not binding (as they might be in a court of law); no prescribed set of rules can be adequate enough because every situation is impossibly originary in never being an exact replica of another. Lindh's vision of art and theatre is filtered through his research on the improvising actor whose reference points are not directorial montage or choreography but the ability to construct paths of action according to what one 'listens' to in a situation.

For Lindh, it is vital that the artist takes on the responsibility of his or her work. In this case, responsibility is not so much concerned

with the status of what or how something is presented but with the nature of the commitment that characterizes the process and presentation of that endeavour. The nature of this commitment has to be total on *all* levels, including the matter of content, about which Lindh argues there are two available options:

You [as artist] can consider the message as something superficial, something manufactured for the use and consumption of others, or you can consider it as something you have created for yourself and for which you assume the responsibility. I think that this [latter] act has to shine through a work of art. I believe that when we . . . feel something repulsive or not convincing in a so-called 'work of art', this is because we feel the absence of responsibility. But if the artist totally takes on what he or she presents, this act of responsibility is also part of the message. (Pietre, p. 137)

The ethical dimension of Lindh's theatre practice involves a scenario where human beings,



irrespective of their role or function, are called upon to be decisive, take action, and be responsible in a context of encounter that is open to the Other.

### The Disinterested Act

The specific status that marks the Institute's practice and ethics is crystallized in one of Lindh's major research endeavours before his death. His work with actor Roger Rolin on 'the disinterested act' during the process that led to the solo performance *Popolo* was part of the Institute's ongoing research on intention. The 'disinterested act' purports to push the limits of the work on mental precision by attempting to accomplish action (which is always an act of responsibility) irrespective of the psychological need for it. The objective of this technical aspiration is to tap into a form of awareness that is perceptible only on a more profound level than that filtered by psychological mechanisms. The nature of that perception is as much the

responsibility of the theatre-maker as it is of the witness.

The ethical implications of a practice that strives to accomplish an act despite the doer are far-reaching. It is necessary to quote Lindh in full on the matter:

Responsibility is inherent in the moment of choosing to do something, and so, there is also responsibility in every detail of theatrical creation. . . . The disinterested act has no connotations of irresponsibility. I proposed this term because in the creative process the passage from spirit [*anima*] to action occurs via the psyche that receives signals to which we react. It is very difficult for us in the twentieth century to consider the psyche without considering also psychology, which is probably concerned both with (1) the subjective interpretation of the psyche and (2) its pathological side. I have proposed the 'disinterested act' in order to eliminate the difference between, on one hand, a *psychological interpretation* and, on the other, the *act of listening to the psyche* itself. In this case you do not start from a psychological need, a desire, in order to accomplish an act, but you reach the will [*volontà*] in avoidance of wanting, and like that an act is accomplished despite yourself. Therefore

you search for a sort of trust, or rather, you trust in the fact that . . . it is possible to wrestle something more profound from your awareness, which goes so far as to touch your consciousness. . . . This requires a commitment of the actor's entire organism and it requires one to be absolutely 'open' [*disposto*]; therefore one is responsible and through the act, by taking action, one succeeds to give space to something which is not known to him or her, but is recognizable because of its authenticity. (*Pietre*, p. 153–4; my italics)

The circumvention of psychological mechanisms (such as desire, need, and motivation) that the 'disinterested act' aspires to fulfil in the performance of action indicates an impossible ethics of 'pure' or 'extreme' selflessness where choices are made and responsibility assumed irrespective of oneself.<sup>20</sup>

The conditions of possibility that Lindh mentions in the context of the disinterested act are all marked by an active engagement of one's human capacities, including: 'trust' (an extension of the trust in one's lot), 'total commitment' (a result of the precision and the dedication implied by long-term disciplined practice), and 'openness' (a state of readiness to receive and react to any aspect of a social situation). The ethical position implied by the concession of space to 'something which is not known' marks allegiance to the here-and-now dynamics of occurrence that resists predetermined judgement. The 'not known' is always 'not determined' and, as such, necessitates a form of encounter and an ethics that is not based on regulations but on a capacity to listen (to 'something more profound' than 'personal needs'). The 'authenticity' required by Lindh refers to the committed quality and the status of something as much as to the conditions that brought that something about. And it is this authenticity, this total engagement with one's task, which provides a work with its ethical content.

A useful way to describe the basis of the disinterested act would be the active-passivity/passive-activity coordinates marked by the tension inherent in 'active immobility'. That is, just as the disinterested act seeks to effect action without a psychological mechanism that obfuscates its path and flow, active immobility seeks (internal) motion irrespective of (external) movement.

In Rolin's performances of *Popolo* in Malta in 1995 and 1996, I was struck by a specific aspect which I came to associate with the work on the disinterested act. This specific element of the actor's performance was perceptible on an organic level and can only be described in terms of dynamics and textures. I am referring to the way the actor 'inhabited' his actions. Rolin's performance was made up of sequences of actions, all linked by a constant flow of energy, but the actions themselves were characterized by what I can only term a sense of 'an action that is withheld'. The actor was performing a 'holding back' or a 'keeping back' that was, paradoxically ('despite himself') propelling him forward.

It was as if Rolin's source of energy derived from the retention of that same energy. The nature of that retention demanded a focused organization of energy that the actor seemed to be channelling into the material that constituted *Popolo*. Technically speaking, it is possible to trace the genealogy of this phenomenon to the Institute's work on Decroux's mime, Tai Chi, and the empirical modes of training, but the concept marked by the 'disinterested act' and its manifestation in performance is unique to the research of the Institute.

## Conclusion

An analysis of Ingemar Lindh's investigation of collective improvisation leads to a recognition that it is indivisible from an ethics of hospitality and encounter. The manner of engagement evinced by the Institute's practice of encountering otherness creates a challenging rapport that demands to be developed according to the here-and-now exigencies of occurrence. Since no two occurrences are ever the same and since the layers of relating to an event are potentially infinite, the co-ordinates that allow Lindh's vision and practice of improvisation are processual and experiential.

It is, then, the status of the performer's capacity to inhabit the event as the locus of difference and otherness that recalls outlooks associated with ethics. In the case of the Insti-

tute, therefore, it is not accurate to speak of a 'practice' and an 'ethics' as if these were distinct things – not even as two sides of the same coin, because of the permeation that characterizes the two. It is better to refer to 'dimensions of practice' that include the technique and craft associated with laboratory theatre, the social aspect announced by the House Project, and, finally, the way of doing or *ethics* that mutually informs the other dimensions of the Institute's practice.

## Notes and References

1. Ingemar Lindh, *Pietre di Guado* (Pontedera: Bandedchi and Vivaldi, 1998), p. 142. All quotations from *Pietre di Guado* (*Stepping Stones*) are based on the unpublished English translation by Benno Plassmann, Marlene Schranz, and Lindh's close collaborator Magdalena Pietruska. Page references to this book are given in the text. All other translations from Italian sources into English are by the present author.
2. Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the Secret Art of the Performer*, second ed., trans. Richard Fowler (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 94–5, 204–5.
3. For example, Eugenio Barba, *Land of Ashes and Diamonds* (Aberystwyth: Black Mountain Press, 1999) and Krzysztof Plesniarowicz, *The Dead Memory Machine: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death* (Aberystwyth: Black Mountain Press, 2004).
4. Marco De Marinis's book on mime and theatre in the twentieth century, *Mimo e Teatro nel Novecento* (Florence: La Casa Usher, 1993), provides some insight into Lindh's relative lack of bibliographical exposure when he distinguishes between the intentional isolation of Lindh's 'pedagogical and creative project' and Yves Lebreton's 'sense of the public' and ability to promote his work (p. 298). In this book De Marinis includes various references to Lindh as a source on Decroux.
5. Ingemar Lindh, 'Gathering Around the Word Theatre . . .', in Pentti Paavolainen and Anu Ala-Korpela, ed., *Knowledge is a Matter of Doing* (Helsinki: Acta Scenica, 1995), p. 58–80.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
7. Cf. Lindh, *Pietre di Guado*, op. cit., p. 57–8.
8. Frank Camilleri, 'Collective Improvisation: the Practice and Vision of Ingemar Lindh', *The Drama Review*, forthcoming, Winter 2008.
9. Magdalena Pietruska, in correspondence with the author, 2008.
10. Cf. De Marinis, *Mimo e Teatro*, op. cit., p. 167–8.
11. Cf. Barba and Savarese, *The Secret Art*, op. cit., p. 93.
12. Pietruska, in correspondence with the author (2007), elaborates: 'Intention in our work terminology indicates this small movement of mind that is at the beginning of every act and indicates an act's mental direction. In life we are always acting out of intention. Intention can be conscious or not, and it does not need to be manifested through the movement of the body in space.' I discuss this aspect in greater detail in 'The Practice and Vision of Ingemar Lindh', op. cit.
13. The requisite condition of guest space in the House Project is also indicative of the Institute's pedagogical ethos. The months-long residences that the Institute organized, coupled with the fact that members worked on performance structures with and alongside their students, present a rare instance that links pedagogy with the core research endeavour of a high-calibre laboratory practice.
14. The distinction between the Institute's forms of training is not so much the type of training *per se* as the way of relating to the work. 'Academic' training refers to codified techniques that are already set and prescribed (for example, corporeal mime and Kung Fu); 'empirical' training is aimed at *what to do* rather than *how to do* (for example, the isometric-based tasks developed by Lindh and his performers). For a detailed account of the Institute's various training processes, see Frank Camilleri, "'To Push the Actor-Training to Its Extreme": Training Process in Ingemar Lindh's Practice of Collective Improvisation', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, forthcoming, November 2008.
15. Ingemar Lindh, 'Incontrare lo Sconosciuto', in Vito Minoia, ed., *Se All'Università si Sperimenta il Teatro* (Pesaro: Magma, 1998), p. 57.
16. The links and differences between the practices of Lindh and Grotowski will be discussed in a separate article currently in preparation.
17. See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 80–1.
18. Fabrizio Cruciani, *Registi Pedagoghi e Comunità Teatrali nel Novecento*, revised ed. (Rome: Editori and Associati, 1995), p. 236.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
20. Lindh acknowledges that, on a deeper level, there is always a personal motivation in whatever we do, even in disinterested acts, but he argues that 'most of the time, we act without being aware of the personal motivation' ('Gathering Around the Word Theatre', op. cit., p. 77).