

## ODIN TEATRET: PHASES OF A THEATRICAL ENCLAVE

*By Ferdinando Taviani*

In order to avoid confusion, I will use the term 'theatrical enclave' instead of 'laboratory'. Are they the same thing?

The life of the Odin Teatret as a theatrical enclave can schematically be depicted through the complementarity and alternation of introvert and extrovert activities. Among the introvert ones we find Barba's work with the actors, the actors' work on themselves (the training, the autonomous elaboration of materials for a production) and the rehearsals. The extrovert activities include Odin's own productions presented on site and on tour in Denmark and abroad; 'barbers' with various milieus in Holstebro and elsewhere; the organization of encounters for theatre groups; hosting other theatre groups and ensembles; seminars in Denmark and in the countries where the Odin brings its productions; the annual Odin Week; the publication of magazines and books; the production of didactic films and videos; sessions of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA); the collaboration with the CTLS, Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies of the University of Århus; the *Festuge*, (Festive Week) in Holstebro; the triennial festival *Transit* devoted to women in theatre; children's performances, exhibitions, concerts, round tables, cultural initiatives, etc. in Holstebro and the surrounding region.

There is no rigid separation between the above two spheres of activity. They are planned and realized by the same people and often overlap, decanting energies and stimuli from one field to another. The life of the Odin enclave depends on the precarious equilibrium between these two different dynamic dimensions.

In reality the dimensions are three: the third one consists of books. With the years Eugenio Barba has shaped an autonomous profile as a writer, independently from his renown as a director, yet indissolubly linked to his experience in the 'earth of the theatre'.

### *1964-1965*

Odin Teatret was established on 1st October 1964 in Oslo, Norway. Three of its five founders - Eugenio Barba and the actors Else Marie Laukvik and Torgeir Wethal - are still today (2004) a part of it. For the first two years, in the absence of grants, the

economy of the group was guaranteed by its members who worked half time to afford their need for theatre. While concentrating on its professional apprenticeship, the Odin published 'Teatrets Teori og Teknikk', a quarterly magazine which until 1974 appeared with 23 monographic issues and books. Odin Teatret organized in Oslo the first tour abroad of Grotowski's Teatr-laboratorium with *The Constant Prince*. Odin Teatret's first production and Eugenio Barba's first direction was *Ornitofilene* (The Birdlovers, November 1965), an unpublished text by Jens Bjørneboe. The performance toured in Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Altogether, it was presented 51 times.

### *1966-1968*

In June 1966 Odin Teatret found its permanent home in Holstebro, Denmark. Its second production, *Kaspariana* (1967), written specially for the Odin by Ole Sarvig, included actors from several Scandinavian countries, among them Danish Iben Nagel Rasmussen. Odin Teatret received its first grant to promote cultural activities, which helped to finance its productions. Eugenio Barba edited *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski ('Teatrets Teori og Teknikk' No 7, June 1968). From June 1966 until 1976 the Odin organized seminars twice a year for professional Scandinavian theatre people. Among the teachers were Jerzy Grotowski, Ryszard Cieslak, Dario Fo, Etienne Decroux, Jacques Lecoq, the Colombaioni brothers, Charles Marowitz, Otomar Krejca, Joseph Chaikin, Julian Beck, Judith Malina, the Javanese choreographer Sardono, the Balinese masters I Made Djimat and I Made Pasek Tempo, the Japanese Nô masters Hisao and Hideo Kanze, the masters from Indian classical forms Shanta Rao, Krishna Nambudiri, Uma Sharma, Rangunath Panigrahi and Sanjukta Panigrahi. The latter is among the co-founders of ISTA in 1979.

### *1969-1973*

Barba's third production, *Ferai* (1969), from a text specially written for the Odin by Peter Seeberg, gave international acknowledgement to Odin Teatret and its director. The following production, *Min Fars Hus* (My Father's House, 1972), confirmed their prestige and at the same time put them in contact (particularly in Denmark, Italy and France) with a young theatre milieu which was extraneous to the official theatre and to the elitarian avant-garde. Alternative cultural associations, universities and theatre groups active in small centres approached the Odin not only to perform, but also to give lectures, working demonstrations and workshops. Step by step, the character of the tours changed. More and more often the Odin Teatret expounded, in addition to

its performances, the whole range of its culture as a theatrical enclave. In 1971 it began to produce didactic films on the actor's training, directed by Torgeir Wethal.

### *1974-1975*

After *Min Fars Hus*, Odin Teatret moved to Carpignano, a village in southern Italy, where it worked for 5 months between the spring and autumn of 1974. The following year, the Odin went once again to Carpignano for 3 months, and then to Ollolai, a village in the mountains of Sardinia. The Odin began to create open air performances for many spectators, itinerant shows and parades. These performances were put together by assembling material belonging to the repertoire of the individual actors or of the whole group (theatricalised exercises from the training, clown gags, etc). The actors made masks, stilts, showy accessories for themselves as well as costumes in vivid colours which made an exotic impression. The practice of the 'barter' began in the autumn of 1974: instead of selling its own performances, the Odin enclave exchanged them with cultural and performative manifestations by the hosting milieu (cultural associations, villages, neighbourhoods, schools, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, etc). The practice of barter through theatre was to characterize Odin's social action until the present day.

The Odin enclave now introduced itself to the outside with a double face: performances for few spectators, in sheltered environments; and crowded and grotesque open air performances. The first required long periods of preparation, with the director and actors starting afresh every time. The others derived from a rapid structuring of already existing material. For the sake of convention, we will call the first ones 'new productions' and the second ones 'assembled productions'. This double productive line typifies Odin's following years. The enclave now possessed a vast repertoire.

Between 1976 and 2004, the 'new productions' are: *Come! And the Day will be Ours* (1976); *Ashes of Brecht* (1980); *The Gospel according to Oxyrhincus* (1985); *Talabot* (1988); *Kaosmos* (1993); *Mythos* (1997); *Andersen's Dream* (2004).

The 'assembled productions' are: *The Book of Dances* (1974); *Johan Sebastian Bach* (clown numbers, 1974); *Anabasis* (an itinerant performance, 1977); *The Million* (1978); *Ode to Progress* (1997); *Great Cities under the Moon* (2004).

An exception to this distinction between 'new productions' and 'assembled productions' was *Inside the Skeleton of the Whale* (1997). It also derived from another performance (*Kaosmos*), but instead of shaping its existing scenes with a view to a

larger audience and a grotesque style, it pushed them in the direction of a rituality presented as 'secret performance' or 'empty ritual'.

Since 1980, the Odin widened its repertoire with a series of a new type of performance: work demonstrations. And since 1984 it started creating productions with one to three actors (we will call them 'Kammerspiele').

### *1976-1980*

During April and May 1976, Odin Teatret participated in the Festival of Caracas with *Come! And the Day will be Ours*. Outside the Festival's framework, it was active with exchanges and encounters with other groups, barbers, parades and open air performances. The Odin bartered with a Yanomami tribe after a lengthy journey to their territory in Amazonia. It was the beginning of lasting ties between the Odin's enclave and numerous Latin American theatre enclaves. Some of these were present the following autumn in Belgrade, where Eugenio Barba led the International Encounter of Group Theatre within the BITEF Festival/Theatre of the Nations. On this occasion, Barba published the manifesto on the Third Theatre. Other International Encounters of Group Theatre, with Barba as a point of reference, were held in Bergamo (Italy, 1977), Ayacucho (Peru, 1978) and Madrid-Lekeitio (Spain, 1979).

Each Odin member was engaged in local initiatives and in an intense continuity of tours, creation of material, rehearsals and seminars. But new independent activities emerged within the Odin involving individual actors or only Barba with one of the actors. This also applied to ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in its first years. Barba established ISTA in 1979 and its first session took place in Bonn 1-31 October 1980 and continued in Porsgrunn (Norway), Stockholm (Sweden) and Holstebro (Denmark) during the whole month of November.

### *ISTA*

The ISTA is not a rigid institution, but an environment or a nebula. It assumes a defined form only during its public sessions. The rest of the time it is an interlacement of changing relationships. It gathers together people who *do theatre* from the most different specializations and traditions. Some *do theatre*, narrating its history and analyzing its procedures; others - the most numerous - practice its art and pass on its techniques and ethos. What makes the meeting possible is a discordant way of

thinking and a common desire to question the actor-dancer's behaviour. It is within this milieu that Barba has confronted the Odin enclave's experiences with other performative genres, elaborating a new field of study: theatre anthropology – the study of scenic behaviour in an organized situation of representation.

Between 1980 and 2000, 12 sessions of ISTA were held: in Germany (Bonn, 1980), Italy (Volterra 1981), France (Blois - Malakoff 1985), Denmark (Holstebro 1986), Italy (Salento 1987), again Italy (Bologna 1990), Great Britain (Brecon - Cardiff 1992), Brazil (Londrina 1994), Sweden (Umeå 1995), Denmark (Copenhagen 1996); Portugal (Montemor-o-Novo - Lisbon 1998); Germany (Bielefeld 2000). In October 2004 the 13<sup>th</sup> session will take place in Seville - La Rinconada (Spain) and in April 2005, a new session is planned in Wrocław (Poland).

An ISTA session is centered on a theme or a question which is placed under investigation (improvisation, organic effect, founders of traditions, form and information, etc.). It includes 5 or 6 masters from different traditions and their ensembles, 60-80 participants and a group of about 10 scholars/researchers. It usually lasts for 15-20 days although the longest session, Volterra 1981, went on for 2 months. In addition to the international public sessions, always accompanied by a two-day symposium and the performances from the masters' ensembles, ISTA has developed another activity: *The University of the Eurasian Theatre*. Devoted to specific historiographical/ practical subjects, it is articulated as a restricted intensive course of a few days, usually held in Italy: in Padua in 1992, Fara Sabina in 1993, and since 1996 every year in Scilla or Caulonia, organized by Teatro Proskenion.

Session after session, since 1990, an ensemble under the name of *Theatrum Mundi* has grown out of the public demonstrations given by the ISTA masters. The *Theatrum Mundi* productions are events with 45-50 performers and musicians from diverse genres and traditions, under Eugenio Barba's direction.

The *Theatrum Mundi's* ensemble is stable and intermittent. It is stable, because the participating artists have collaborated with Eugenio Barba for many years within ISTA. It is intermittent, because the ensemble's various masters gather once or twice a year, and for the rest of the time devote themselves to their own professional field in the country and the tradition to which they belong. The way in which Barba collaborates with performers from different traditions is characterized by two opposite aspects. On the one hand he practices a scrupulous respect for the original styles; on the other, he interweaves the heterogeneous pieces belonging to the personal repertoire of each artist into a unitary whole in which, in the end, no sign of syncretism can be detected. This particular solution unifies without conforming, and allows every actor-

dancer to remain rooted in his/her own professional identity. The *Theatrum Mundi*'s ensemble embodies one facet of the empirical research on the performer's pre-expressive level within Theatre Anthropology.

After 1990, Barba began to amalgamate ISTA with the Odin milieu. A dilated enclave took form whose nucleus was the Odin, now surrounded by theatre and dance artists as well as scholars from many countries. Sometimes it is difficult to trace precise delimitations.

### *1980-2004*

As mentioned, since 1980 the dynamics within Odin Teatret assumed two further dimensions. Individual lines of research were created in addition to the collective work. Parallel with her presence in Odin Teatret, Iben Nagel Rasmussen founded the group *Farfa*. Then, in 1989, she started *The Bridge of Winds*, an international assembly of actors and directors usually active in their own country, yet periodically gathering around Iben Nagel Rasmussen for a few weeks to concentrate on their personal professional work. The actor Toni Cots - Barba's closest collaborator in planning the encounters of theatre groups and the first ISTA sessions - developed with *Basho* a self-directed activity of pedagogy and performances still in concomitance with his tasks inside the Odin. Julia Varley participated in the *Magdalena Project*, a network of women in contemporary theatre (that she helped to found in 1986), co-edited its annual journal 'The Open Page' and, in the same perspective, organized since 1992 the triennial festival *Transit*. Each Odin actor, in a more continuous and formalized way, shaped autonomous fields of action and intervention.

At times, it is difficult to maintain an equilibrium between extrovert and introvert activities, as well as that between activities involving the whole group and those concerning the individual actors. The Odin compactness, that appears unassailable from the outside, is experienced internally as a problem that requires a continuous state of alert. In this article, we are observing the Odin from the outside.

One of the consequences of these inner dynamics has been the flourishing of 'small' productions, often with an intensity equal to that of the whole group's 'new productions'. The following Kammerspiele, always directed by Eugenio Barba, were added to Odin's 'new productions': *Marriage with God* (with César Brie and Iben Nagel Rasmussen, 1984); *The Story of Oedipus* (with Toni Cots, 1984); *Judith* (with Roberta Carreri, 1987); *Memoria* (with Else-Marie Laukvik and the musician-actor Frans Winther, 1990); *The Castle of Holstebro* (with Julia Varley, 1990); *Itsi-Bitsi* (1991, with Iben Nagel Rasmussen and the musician-actors Jan Ferslev and Kai

Bredholt); *Doña Musica's Butterflies* (with Julia Varley, 1997); *Salt* (with Roberta Carreri and the musician-actor Jan Ferslev, 2002).

Unlike the 'new productions' that play for 3-4 years and are then eliminated, the Kammerspiele remain in the repertoire for a long time (for instance *Judith* is 17 years old in 2004). They belong to the actor even if s/he leaves the Odin (as was the case with Toni Cots).

The working demonstrations also remain in the repertoire for a long time. The first one was *Moon and Darkness* by Iben Nagel Rasmussen in 1980. The actress presented the various phases of her training and the elements with which she built some of her characters. Other demonstrations followed: *Traces in the Snow* by Roberta Carreri; *The Echo of Silence* and *The Dead Brother* by Julia Varley; *The Paths of Thought* by Torgeir Wethal. Iben Nagel Rasmussen's *White as Jasmine* has a particular quality. In the space of one square meter she makes a long journey and recalls her own experiences through her characters' songs and words.

Seen as a whole, the working demonstrations indicate clearly that the Odin enclave is not characterized by a uniform vision, but by a mosaic of methods and individual perspectives which compose a 'small tradition' with a manifold face. The most obvious proof of this is the performance-demonstration *Whispering Winds in Theatre and Dance* with Roberta Carreri, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Julia Varley, Torgeir Wethal and the musicians Kai Bredholt, Jan Ferslev and Frans Winther. Created on the occasion of the ISTA session in 1996, the four actors used the disguise of one or more characters to show ironically and wittily the manner in which each of them experienced and reflected upon the difference and the identity between theatre and dance.

The Odin enclave alternates in an ever more obvious way periods of concentration with periods of opening up.

Since 1989, the Odin has organized an intensely eventful 'Festive Week' (*Festuge*) every three years in Holstebro, hosting foreign theatre groups and artists, but above all collaborating with over a hundred local associations and institutions. Theatre, music, dance, figurative art, lectures and debates are interwoven with the daily activities of schools, churches, barracks, old people's homes, the train station, buses, shops, cultural institutions and discriminated spaces. The *Festuge* pervades the whole town, day and night for an entire week, with a grotesque and disturbing spectacularity, from impressive performances for the crowd to 'barbers', from actors' visits to private birthday parties to incursions into administrative offices.

Since the 1980'ies, another recurrent annual activity, is the *Odin Week*. It provides an opportunity for 30-50 people from different countries to be introduced to the multiple-sided structure and life of the Odin enclave. They train with the actors, get acquainted with their personal working methods, with the management and the organization of the theatre, watch the many performances and working demonstrations and have a daily theoretical/practical meeting with Eugenio Barba.

### *Repertoire and finances*

In 2004, Odin Teatret's repertoire is constituted by: A) the ensemble productions: *Mythos, Inside the Skeleton of the Whale, Ode to Progress, Great Cities under the Moon, Andersen's Dream*; B) scenes and small acts to be used in barter and itinerant open air performances; C) the Kammerspiele: *Judith, Itsi-Bitsi, The Castle of Holstebro, Doña Musica's Butterflies, Salt*; D) the working demonstrations: *White as Jasmine, Traces in the Snow, The Echo of Silence, The Dead Brother, The Paths of Thought, Whispering Winds in Theatre and Dance*.

Two more working demonstrations have recently been added: *Dialogue between two actors*, with Roberta Carreri and Torgeir Wethal, deals with the interpretation of the last scene from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*; *Text, Action and Relationships*, with Tage Larsen and Julia Varley, shows the process of interpreting a scene from Shakespeare's *Othello*.

The Odin tours have a tendency to turn into prolonged residencies with an ample variety of pedagogical, theatrical and cultural manifestations. The encounter with and the expressions of a *different* culture has replaced the traditional forms of the tour or presence in festivals. Eugenio Barba often speaks of *difference* as a goal, a 'condition to be conquered'.

Odin Teatret's turn-over (2003) is about 13-14 million Danish kroner (Euro 1,800,000). The earnings from the various activities of the Odin enclave oscillate between 35% and 50% with respect to the grants received from the Danish Ministry of Culture and the municipality of Holstebro.

*Translation: Judy Barba*

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