

**>>> 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 3, like the waltz. Jump, right foot lands smoothly on the ground, toes first. No sound. Left foot joins the right one closely and for a moment, it pulls the body towards a vertical impulse. Right foot first, then left one lands, already pointing the next direction of the body. Exhaling, knees bend deeper, grounding our energy, receiving the power to restart.

We will take this step as a microcosm.

Named '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's group, it contains in a count of three the whole of a relation with theatre, with the work of the actor and his ethos. With the whole of *A Theatre*.

This article wants to look at a very special relation between repetition, creation and the ethos of the performer, through the lenses of the long-term work of the Bridge of Winds, in relation to a Deleuzian approach to the notions of repetition and difference within his ontology.

Since January 2015, I have been participating in their activities, working closely with Rasmussen and the members of the group. These writings will be therefore(,) based on an empirical experience with their exercises, as well as on a series of interviews with many members of the group. I will provide an introduction about the group's working structure as well as to their practice. Jacques Rancière's emancipatory approach to Politics of Knowledge will make a bridge to reach the practice again through Gilles Deleuze's ontology of difference. Within this framework, I will suggest repetition as a key principle to engage into an alternative working model that could possibly re-articulate contemporary paradigms of the creative process and of 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 began to feel the need to find her own path within the pre-expressive work the Odin Teatret was developing. After four years of total dedication to the techniques that Odin's director Eugenio Barba was investigating with the group, Rasmussen began to question the efficiency of them for her. 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 speaks to me specifically of the work of the actors Richard Cieslak, from Jerzy Grotowski's legendary Teatr Laboratorium, and of Else Marie Laukvik and Torgeir Wethal, founder members of Odin Teatret's company. This *continuous flow* is what Rasmussen understands as the *transparent body*: a body that, through its physicality, becomes transparent, in order to "let something else appear" (Rasmussen, 2000). At this point, Rasmussen begins to ask what could work for her. What is for her a dramatic action. Through this questioning, she becomes convinced

of the importance of transforming, adapting and recreating one's own training in order to reach autonomy over one's own creative work. This became a key aspect defining the relation has built 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, Grotowski, Woman and Contemporary Performance: Meetings with Remarkable Woman¹⁰⁵)

She then gathered a group of students she had met during previous workshops all around the world and began to re-think and reconsider her pre-expressive work. Under her leadership, they created a group of approximately 20 people that has been since then meeting every year for a session of 3 to 4 weeks.

The most visible parts of the group's work to the audience are their performances and barter, a sort of community artistic exchange created by Eugenio Barba in the early 90's¹. However, when following their previous meeting, it came to me that the most remarkable activity of the group is indeed the practice of a very specific voice and body training that gives birth to their 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 bodies -not that young anymore- endure...all of this constitutes a pre-expressive/technical work which has paradoxically become one of the most powerful performances I have ever seen.

Their structure is simple, respected and never contested: it has undoubtedly a master figure – Rasmussen, and many members / pupils, that have been working long enough to assume the position of masters themselves. They meet daily and punctually to start the training, without any command being needed to be given. The whole morning they work without being interrupted on a devised structure of exercises they all know by heart, accompanied by songs coming from the different cultures of each of the members². Rasmussen only watches, makes a few notes and by the end of it, provides small feedbacks regarding their precision, their energy and their own performance within the training. Nevertheless, when I asked her what was she looking for in the training she shortly replied: “connection”. Afternoons are dedicated to the creation of a new piece, performances, concerts and barter throughout the region they set residence.

Watching they work, many questions began to appear. We live nowadays in a neo-liberal social-political context, pressed by market laws and the constant demand for immediate results, which makes this sort of commitment almost impossible to achieve. And yet, they found a gap in this system, a way out, which made me

¹ Eugenio Barba defines a barter 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 area lost in the emptiness of Denmark. The Bridge of Winds follows this tradition providing barter every 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/OdinTeatret/LiveStreaming/thebridgeofwinds>. The link provides with an open session of their last meeting, giving also a good overview of the exercises I will describe in this article.

understand their work as a site of political resistance towards the struggles theatre is facing nowadays. What is the key for establishing this kind of long-term cooperation between such different people? And, most importantly, why do the members meet for more than 25 years to do always the same work? What is at the core of this training community which makes them desire for the next meeting again and again?

> the simple rules (“everything is in everything”)

Their tools can nowadays be resumed in 5 different kinds of exercises. As Mika Juusela, one of the members, explains it:

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

At this point, it feels inevitable to look back at The Ignorant Schoolmaster's (1991) theory of Jacques Rancière. 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 practice nowadays. The exercises evoke specific corporeal states from which the performers learn to withdraw their theatrical presence, the sources to create. The exercises, which have very peculiar names, are called: 1 ‘the wind dance’ (described at the beginning of this article, a dance step that is repeated for a long period of time and that unfolds into many variations connected to simple daily actions); 2 ‘green’ (an exercise where they practice moving against a given resistance located in specific parts of their bodies); 3 ‘slow motion’ (although a more obvious name, a rather difficult way of moving, which works, in opposition to the ‘green’ exercise, with no resistance whatsoever, where a continuous flow becomes the aim); 4 ‘out of balance’ (the body is brought out of balance and just before it falls, it moves to an opposite direction, so the energy that was supposed to end up in a collision with the floor, is thrown back into the space); and 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).

With this description I tried to make clear an important aspect of the exercises: even though their outer forms are fixed, they do not have a rigid temporal and spatial structure, which provides a great deal of freedom to the practitioners to investigate the relations they can build between them and between them and the space, between them and the exercises.

It is also important to mention they have been through a long road of learning and discovering many exercises before arriving at this training format. Besides, even though the exercises are fixed and have very specific forms, Rasmussen emphasizes every time the importance of having the members deconstructing these exercises once they are back to 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 pedagogical systems as with the consequences of this structure within the socio-political realm (Power 78). Society is a too large term right now, but it is possible to make a bridge with 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, where the notion of a 'master' was gained, given to Rasmussen by the members, turning hierarchic systems upside down, as this one is constructed from the bottom, not only creating a subversion of her own position, but also providing an alternative model for artistic leadership. A master which "does not transmits his/hers knowledge neither is a guide that shows the student the 'good way', but a master who is purely will, who says to the other will in front of him/her to go and find your own path, and therefore, to exercise your own intelligence on the search 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

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

The 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" (Féral 23). This training boom created last century provided the actors/students from all over the world with a wide variety of exercises to choose from, according to 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" (idem).

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 it 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 founder members of the group, describes this repetition process as a “sort of ritual and a work of faith” (Angelelli). 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, Interview with Guillermo Angelelli).

Now, 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, at the same time it maps and inscribe 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 want to argue that these ‘failures’ are one of the most legitimate sources of creativity in theatre. Furthermore, when looking at my practical experience with the training of the Bridge of Winds, I have come to find on these ‘failures’ 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 means, the unexpected, “an offset against the initial structure” (Woycicki 81). That is to say the very difference within repetition.

Now, Gilles Deleuze’s ontology of difference provides us with a very rich proposition towards an anti-representational notion of movement in theatre. A theatre based on the ‘power of becomings’, 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, Repetition and Difference 10).

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

Deleuze’s notion of a theatre of repetition speaks of an operation that happens within the expressive moment itself, the mise-en-scene 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 10). However, one could argue that this operating machine he sees in expression 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' as the mystery, as the origins of "performance excesses" and these 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). To approach this repetition apparatus and return to the Bridge of Winds though, it is imperative to have a broader understanding of his thinking structure.

He sees the individuation of an organism as 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 revolves Deleuze's work is his constant insistence that his ontology is meant to be experienced in the body, something that has clearly made out of his work a very important reference for contemporary performing arts.

What becomes clear 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 movement 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 *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 his 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 the body to relationships, to creating *alliances* with another 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 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, we return to the subject investigation of this article. I would like to suggest looking at the work of the Bridge of Winds, both in practice and in terms of the ethos that encircles the practice, as a specific plane of immanence, designed to promote encounters, affects, becomings through the apparatus of repetition. By engaging in the Bridge of Winds' exercises through exhaustive repetition and by watching the group working, I felt I could come very close to unknotting this place where it seems many key notions Deleuze used to map his ontology meet. Affect, becoming, encounter, difference, lines of escape...have become all aspects of the path which consists of the craft of the actor. What it came to me is that experimenting within this practice and thinking assemblage constructed so far, unleashes a certain attitude towards my profession that felt very liberating.

> the macrocosm

I would like to conclude, therefore, by opening up a subtle provocation. This is a work that nowadays is an absolute exception, as the theatrical production machine and the market laws do not allow us this time demand in order to construct such a legacy anymore.

In what sense do these long-term training processes become sites of resistance for the ongoing imperative for novelties in contemporary performance practices? In this sense, where does legitimacy reside?

Pedagogically speaking, one could see a growing demand for more and more individualized researches in the arts, leading to an ever-growing production of new material, new techniques, and new shows. One could see the practices related to any tradition becoming slowly archives and documents, instead of embodied and tacit knowledge.

Contemporary performance and most important contemporary performers have brought a great deal of criticism to this repetitive aspect of training related to craft, and to the way institutions deal with it. And not without a reason. Within many pedagogical and processual approaches to theatre, one must note that it often emphasizes the “theatre of representation” 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, *repetition and the Birth of Language* 80)

However, looking back at the way the Bridge of Winds tackled this issue, training has become a way out of the disciplining of signs, it provided them with a significant freedom to look for their own theatrical poetics. Besides, instead of facing a compromising of my own agency as a performer, experiencing their practices, actually provided me with a specific ethical, political and performative discourse, which questions regimes of individuation enlightened by contemporary methodologies. The Bridge of Winds’ very objective work with repetitions, meeting every year, going through the same training, same exercises, same structures on and on forces us to think of a practice related to something greater than theatre itself. Something closer to the building of a theatrical community, a way of understanding what the role of the performer in society is, of living together, of being generous, on expanding the borders of a shared knowledge from which everybody can benefit, independently of one’s own aesthetic choices. Years of long lasting repetition, a lifetime to achieve the erasure of the border between private life and theatre practice, as it is all part of the same whole.

Moreover, these exercises Rasmussen developed with the group are, still now, being 70 years old, 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 short, as a path to the emancipation of the performer. One exercise, one action and the world in it.

> works cited

Angelelli, Guillermo. "Interview with Guillermo Angelelli." Eds. La Selva, Adriana and Turosik, Marek. Unpublished, 2015.

Barba, Eugenio. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Bruns, Gerald L. "Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)." *New Literary History* 38 1 (2007): 703-20.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Repetition and Difference*. Trans. Patton, Paul. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Feliz Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Massumi, Brian. London: Continuum, 1980.

Féral, Josette. "Did You Say 'Training'?" *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 14 2 (2009): 16-25.

Galli, Francesco. *The Bridge of Winds. An Experience of Theatrical Pedagogy with Iben Nagel Rasmussen*. To be released.

Juusela, Mika. "Interview with Mika Juusela." Ed. La Selva, Adriana: unpublished, 2015.

Magnat, Virginie. *Grotowski, Woman and Contemporary Performance: Meetings with Remarkable Woman*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Power, Nina. "Interview with Jacques Ranciere." *ephemera* 10.1 (2010): 77-81 pp.

Ranciere, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Ranciere, Jacques. "Atualidade De O Mestre Ignorante." ("Interview: The timeliness of the Ignorant Schoolmaster") the *Educação Social*. Eds. Vermeren;, Patrice, Laurence Cornu; and Andrea Benvenuto. Campinas: Unicamp, 2003. 185-202. Vol. 24.

Rasmussen, Iben Nagel. "The Transparent Body." Ed. Barba, Eugenio. www.odinteatretarchives.dk, 2000.

Rasmussen, Iben Nagel. "Interview with Iben Nagel Rasmussen." Eds. Adriana La Selva and Marek Turosik. unpublished, 2015.

Snell, Jori. "Interview with Jori Snell." Ed. Selva, Adriana La. unpublished 2015.

Woycicki, Piotr. "Repetition and the Birth of Language." *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 14 2 (2009): 80-84.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. London: Routledge, 2004.