

8.4 **Odin theatre: third theatre and resistance**

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× **Abstract**

Odin Teatret is a theatre company based on Denmark since 1964. It was founded by the director Eugenio Barba, who is also the creator of Theatre Anthropology. Along the years the group has developed strategies of survival, both economic and artistic that made it become part of Theatre History. We will present some of these strategies, such as theatrical research, artistic and intellectual meetings, work demonstrations, and publishing practices; discussing how they have influenced the artistic work the company presents and, specially, Latin American theatre pedagogy. We will also talk about what Eugenio Barba calls a Third Theatre (Watson, 1995) and its influence on the developing of Latin American Theatre groups.

Keywords: Odin teatret, third theatre, theatre anthropology.

In 1964, the Italian Eugenio Barba arrived in Norway, back from his experience with Jerzy Grotowski in Poland, where he was an assistant director. Barba was studying theatre at the university in Poland and met Jerzy Grotowski in a bar. Barba was amazed by his ideas and theatrical vision. Grotowski invited him to be his assistant director in the small theatre he worked as an artistic director in Opole, the Theatre of the 13 Rows. Grotowski's way of making theatre that was completely unusual for that time, he was in search of a so called 'sacrifice' on stage, a sacred act, and in order to perform that act, his performers train to achieve a technical precision in their actions, both vocal and physical, the performed according to a partition that they created under Grotowski's supervision. Since it was precise, the director could edit the partition to create the narrative, the interactions and all the performance's dynamics. The performers should give away vanity, search for honest self-exposure and silence (silence was obligatory from one hour before any performance). In 1962, the term Laboratory was added to the Theatre of the 13 Rows, meaning that this was a place of research, of experimentation and not only a place that produced performances, creating repertoire.

Barba wanted to create his own company, to be a director, but he was just an unknown immigrant, how could he direct a theatre company? He decided to invite aspiring actors that had failed the conservatory entrance aptitude tests. And thus, Barba started working with the rejected ones. They rehearsed after hours in empty school classrooms and in an empty bomb shelter, experimenting a very physical way of making theatre that he had observed in Grotowski's theatre laboratory.

What is a theatre laboratory?

What do actors search?

In 1905, Konstantin Stanislavski, who was the artistic director of The Moscow Art Theatre reserved a place in his theatre for experimentation, he called it 'étude' and gave its direction to Meyerhold. Stanislavsky was not on a director but a pedagogue, but the étude was a place for experimentation, not for teaching nor rehearsing. After Meyerhold, many Stanislavski's collaborators had their space in those études, such as Leopold Soulerjitski, Mikhaïl Tchekhov, Richard Boleslavski, Evgueni Vakhtangov. (Warnet, 2014)

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Theatrical research and training

Grotowski (1992) said that theatre is an encounter, a human authentic encounter between actor and spectator, between actors and themselves. How do we open and prepare ourselves to this great encounter? Grotowski experimented hard physical training to get to know ourselves, beyond our usual selves, beyond our thoughts and conceptions about ourselves; In that way we search our reactions, our limits, our memory in our bodies. It is not a psychoanalytical kind of knowledge, but a very physical, down to earth kind of knowledge that reflects on the performers' actions and reactions on stage. Of course, Grotowski's training had an aesthetical result on stage, the performer behavior and actions were very different from quotidian actions, they were very intense and strange.

When the young Eugenio Barba got in touch with this way of making theatre, it opened to him a new world of possibilities, so working with the actors and actresses that have not been accepted in Oslo's Conservatoire was not a challenge per se, because the skills he need from this people were very different from those requested by the conservatoire, he needed performers who would be available to work very hard and take a leap into the unknown. Those brave young man and women were the founders of Odin Teatret.

Else Marie Laukvik

Here we open parenthesis for a narrative about one of Odin Teatret's actresses: Else Marie Laukvik: the last actress to join this original group in Norway; and the last one remaining from this original group (she is still in the group).

Laukvik tells us². that when she joined the company, she knew who Barba was, she had seen him before at the university, in the elevator, but he had not noticed her. He didn't remember her. She asked to join the group. All the other actors started to develop their bodies (for their work was very physical) except her. Barba asked her to do typing jobs, she didn't get any role in the performance they were rehearsing. Since there was no pressure, she could observe and study the play. One of the actresses left, she already knew the role and she was able to replace her. More than fifty years later, a wiser Barba comments on the episode³:

“Actors are not like trees, they don't follow the seasons, for some, it might take a week, while for others it might take years...”

After all these years he could say that “Else Marie has taught all the actresses in Odin Teatret.”. Here we quote another comment he made during the Cohabitation Artistic Residence of february 2020 at Odin Teatret:

“What I see in an actor are the limits and not the skills.”

And he didn't mean it as a negative comment, but more in the sense that we, human beings, struggle to surpass ourselves. And that struggle is drama, all drama has a force that prevents the course of the action. That struggle is the basis of theatre.

2. From personal notes taken in collective and individual conversations with Barba and Laukvik during the artistic residence Cohabitation 2020, at Odin Teatret, Denmark.

3. Notes from the same residence, 2020.

Practical issues

In 1966, Eugenio Barba and his performers were invited by the mayor of Holstebro, they were offered a minimum wage and a farm. And they went... But they needed to make their living. Performances presentations for such a small population plus one salary was not enough to support them. They promoted festivals and gatherings, they invited Jerzy Grotowski, Barba edited and published a book with his texts and interviews: *Towards a poor theatre*, that became a hit. Barba also wrote many books and articles about theatre. He created Theatre Anthropology.

Theatre Anthropology is the study of the performer's pre-expressive scenic behaviour which constitutes the basis of different genres, roles and personal or collective traditions. ... The pre-expressive layer constitutes the elementary level of organization in theatre. (Barba, 1994)

Theatre as barter

In 1974, Odin teatret moved to Carpignano, a small village in Italy. There they started training at 9 am, but the local peasants started working before sunrise, so they adapted their schedule to the villagers'. Barba tells that one day, a villager stopped to watch them training, the next day he brought a friend, then a chair, two chairs... that's how they created work demonstration. But in that case, the population didn't have money to pay, so they asked for them to sing and dance their traditional songs in return for the work demonstrations and street performances. It became a very important practice at Odin's: theatre as barter.

Third Theatre

*"Production does not only produce merchandise, but also relationships between people. This is also true for theater: it does not only produce performances, cultural products." (Barba, 1979, p. 149)

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There is a theatre that most people understand as theatre, that happens in a building, with a text, there is a 'second' theatre that is the *avant garde* theatre, also based on a text. Third Theater is a kind of theatre made by groups that create their own tradition, their main goal is to exist, resist, not trying to belong to the established theatre. Their own existence is resistance. They might work with ritual, politics, in alternative spaces like schools or prisons. This idea has deeply influenced theatre groups in Latin America, young groups trying to resist economic issues, political issues that included persecutions and censorship, young groups trying to voice generations since the 1960's. Some of those groups attained longevity, following Odin Teatret's example, such as Teatro de la Candelaria in Colombia, both more than 50 years old, both deeply connected with the community, having individual values and looking for this human encounter that Grotowski preconized, all of them are real exponents of DIY in theatre.

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