

Kirsten Hastrup  
THE MAKING OF THEATRE AND HISTORY  
1999

*[Kirsten Hastrup, antropologa, ha partecipato a diverse sessioni dell'ISTA. Ha partecipato anche, in qualità di personaggio, a uno degli spettacoli dell'Odin, Talabot, 1988-1992. La partecipazione della Hastrup allo spettacolo non è stata passiva: ha collaborato scrivendo per l'Odin, su richiesta di Barba, una serie di episodi della propria vita. Su questa esperienza ha scritto il saggio Out of Anthropology. The anthropologist as an object of dramatic representation, «Cultural Anthropology», vol. 7, n. 3, 1993, pp. 327-345. Il saggio che qui ripubblichiamo è apparso in The performers' village. Times, Techniques and Theories at ISTA, a cura di Kirsten Hastrup, Graasten, Drama, 1999]*

Words move, music moves  
Only in time, but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
Not the stillness of a violin, while the note lasts  
Not that only, but the co-existence,  
Or say that the end precedes the beginning.  
(T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton, Four Quartets*,  
1944)

[...] My argument centres around the world of theatre; I discuss the potential of theatre and drama for creative intervention in the world. This is taken as an exemplary case of cultural creativity in a more general sense, however. The aim is to suggest one possible answer to the question of how newness is produced in the world, and history made from what T.S. Eliot has called the «still point of the turning world».

In this article I am on the edge of words, generally too literal for my purpose. Yet the subject is sufficiently important to seek a balance on this edge, however unstable it might be.

### *Theatrum Mundi*

[...] The 8th session of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) took place in Londrina, a surprisingly calm town in the state of Paraná. Arriving there from an extensive tour of Brazil, I entered a peculiar world, somehow outside history. For some weeks about 120 actors, stage directors, theatre historians, as well as the odd mimier, clown and anthropologist<sup>1</sup> from all over the world worked together, exploring the expressive potentiality for acting within and across theatrical traditions. The event was one in a series of ISTA work sessions under the leadership of Eugenio Barba [...]. It has been my privilege to participate in five of these sessions, of which the Brazilian was the fourth, and in other encounters with Odin<sup>2</sup>.

The world created by ISTA is always special. Not only is it populated by artists and intellectuals from all continents, speaking a multiplicity of languages and being silent in just as many ways, it also frames the space in a peculiar way. It has its own time, in terms of a particular structure of the work day, running from six in the morning until midnight, and comprising hours of silence, of practical work with voice and body, of lectures, performances and so forth. As the days go by, and the intensity in the work increases with the degree of trust and involvement, participants often find themselves in an unprecedented state of extremely productive exhaustion, in which the strange names given to the sessions (*Jaguar and Colibri* referring to the work on con-

<sup>1</sup> [Il riferimento (scherzoso) è a lei stessa e allo studioso americano Ron Jenkins, che si era occupato di teatro comico e aveva anche praticato un po' di tecnica da clown. *N.d.R.*].

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed presentations of Odin Teatret and the International School of Theatre Anthropology, see Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *The Secret Art of the Performer. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, London, Routledge, 1991; Erik Exe Christoffersen, *The Actor's Way*, London, Routledge, 1993; Ian Watson, *Towards a Third Theatre. Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret*, London, Routledge, 1993. My own encounter with Odin Teatret and ISTA has been described for instance in Kirsten Hastrup, *Out of Anthropology. The anthropologist as an object of dramatic representation*, «Cultural Anthropology», vol 7, n. 3, 1993, pp. 327-345 and *The motivated body*, 1993, *Il corpo motivato. «Locus» e «Agency» nella cultura e nel teatro*, «Teatro e Storia», vol. 17, 1995, pp. 11-36, *N.d.R.*].

trastive sources of energy, for instance) no longer seem alien but bursting with sense.

During the work day a session is devoted to the creation of *Theatrum Mundi*. The play is invented and directed by Eugenio Barba, who 'thinks aloud' as he goes along, thus allowing the audience of non-performers to follow the process. *Theatrum Mundi* is a collective performance, in which the different scenic traditions of East and West are combined to form a unified play, which by now has become almost a unitary tradition of ISTA. With groups of performers and dancers from Japan, Bali, India, and Denmark having met and worked together at a number of occasions over the years, and with the Brazilian Candomblé dancer and his drummers as the latest addition, a unique performance is made from the integration of the disparate elements. The integration is not brought about by a mere mixing of everything into one stew, but by the director's unified vision of the play. Said Eugenio Barba at one rehearsal: «I have to work with a thread – which is more often an image, or a drop of water in which I can drown myself... A good director always work with more than one drop of water, of course». These drops frame the performative space.

In practice, the integration of diverse traditions, may look like this:

the songs and the presence of the Odin actors merged with the Balinese Barong, the mythical Japanese lion Shishi and the theatrical fragments of the other Asian artists. Barba fused these scenes into a unitary framework, giving them the rhythm and energy of a homogeneous performance, something carnivalesque, funny and ritualistic<sup>3</sup>.

At the ISTA in Bologna 1990 one drop was the image of a pilgrimage, a group of more or less lost people on their way to the promised land. Participants who were not acting on stage formed a pilgrim's choir. I myself was part of it. And I shall never forget the feeling of abandon and sorrow when it was all over. 'Being part of it' had become literal. And when the last performance had taken place, the pilgrimage was over. We were moved; nothing would ever be the same as before in our worldly exile. The play had displaced our experience, not unlike what happens in anthropological fieldwork. From the displaced position outside our normal histories, we get a new perspective on the world.

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinando Taviani, *Theatrum Mundi*, in *The Tradition of Ista*, Londrina, Filo, 1994, p. 146.

In spite of the distinct scenic traditions contained within it, *Theatrum Mundi* catches the spectator as a unified whole. It is singularly moving by its incorporation of diverse dramatic traditions into one embodied experience of emergent transcultural meaning. The gestures of the Danish actor and the Japanese dancer, normally conveying completely separate imageries, turn into a meaningful dialogue under the director's construction of the sequences. The construction is made according to his dramaturgical vision which is in fact often surprisingly pragmatic and *ad hoc* – if tacitly guided by one coherent subtext. In an interview, Eugenio Barba describes the process like this:

the director builds the sequence according to certain very elementary dramaturgical patterns. Someone begins, another dancer comes, they develop a relation, and then something happens. A new character which does not belong to the same world intervenes and takes them away. Then the spectator creates. You know that in Bali Rangda has these young followers, and then you think that Rangda comes to take these girls and transform them into her pupils. A spectator from Bologna will perhaps think that this Rangda is a man who come to take these beautiful women with him. Everyone will simply project and therefore we all work together in building the 'perfect crystal', the vase, the emptiness which can be filled with the creativity or presuppositions of the spectators<sup>4</sup>.

This is the secret, of course: the director creates a Chinese jar, which may then be filled, and its stillness explored by the audience. If they are moved, they are moved because of the resonance the words and the music have with their own silent world. The meaning of the play is emergent, like all meaning, and in this case the process of emergence is enriched by the various traditions or cultures of the spectators. Whether the director thinks of Hamlet or Rangda is of less moment than his ability to create the empty vase within which words and music may condense into a pattern of stillness, a whole within which the spectator may find himself.

The potentiality, or the creativity, does not stem from the image or 'text' itself but from some degree of resonance in the audience, who may not be aware of the text at all, as indeed may not the actors. Let us listen once again to Eugenio Barba's reflections on *Theatrum Mundi*:

<sup>4</sup> Susanne Vill, *Ein Welttheater der interkulturellen Kommunikation. Eugenio Barbass eurasisches Theatrum Mundi in Bologna 1990*, in Petre Csobádi et al., *Welttheater, Mysterienspiel, Rituelles Theater*, Salzburg, Vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle Editor, 1992, p. 691.

While I am apparently just organizing confusion, I have a very clear idea in my mind – a subtext... I always work with a text, but I don't tell. Because then the actor starts *illustrating* the theme. That is not the point, because then we would not have the sudden jumps out of the water.

(Notes, August 15th, 1994)

The jumps out of the water are those unexpected moments where simple resonance is supplemented by a sensation of newness.

*Theatrum Mundi* resonates with our shared knowledge of manifest cultural encounters in the era of globalization. The encounter creates its own history, its own world, its own *theatrum mundi* played in shifting stages. This world may not be capsized in the old terms of 'culture' as a local and well bounded unit, yet as crystal it both reflects the multiple facets in the encounter and its integration into a pattern, by which a new stillness is achieved. It is a kind of stillness, which is potentiality not petrified emptiness. As Antonin Artaud had it in his critique of traditional theatre: «Our petrified idea of the theatre is connected with our petrified idea of culture without shadows, where, no matter which way it turns, our mind (*esprit*) encounters only emptiness, though space is full»<sup>5</sup>. The theatre is particularly forceful in stirring up shadows, left out by referential language, yet to move the spectators the shadows must connect to their own experience of the unspeakable.

[...]

True theatre thus takes us close to the Romantic idea of imagination as a «creation which reveals, or as a revelation which at the same time defines and completes what it makes manifest»<sup>6</sup>. The brilliance of theatre is that it represents experience and offers conventions of interpretation at the same time; it works, not by replication of experience (*Theatrum Mundi* does not replicate the world theatre), but by condensing it, and adding the larger-than-life quality which redresses reality<sup>7</sup>. As Phyllis Gorfain has it in her analysis of *Hamlet*'s significance for the audience (and for anthropology): «*Hamlet* brings us closer to the chaos from which it protects us, even while it displays the episte-

<sup>5</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, New York, Grove Press, 1958, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 419.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Greg Denning, *The Theatricality of History making*, «Cultural Anthropology», vol. 8, 1993, pp. 73-95, here p. 89.

mological paradox it presses: knowing through not knowing»<sup>8</sup>. So also for *Theatrum Mundi*; it brings the spectator closer to the global chaos, while also protecting us from its manifest dissonance. Framed as play, it makes us experience what we cannot otherwise know: global resonance.

In *Theatrum Mundi*, what is revealed is the sharedness of the world, which is thereby also completed and restored. The ingenuity of the director collating different scenic traditions lies in his making the global manifest. It is part of our common humanity that we are imaginable to one another<sup>9</sup>, yet to make this unity experientially accessible takes a creative effort. As revelation, *Theatrum Mundi* completes and defines a global identity, but only in so far as it resonates with prefigured, if not yet known suppositions.

Performative of poetic imagination may move the world by their driving at the unknown side of things, the so far unspoken reality. [...] This capacity for opening of new ground is owed to the parallax power of poetic language: its ability to transcend fixed meanings by taking us into the dynamic zone of indeterminacy, that is a zone where the emotions and motives of the agents are significantly beyond the scope of exhaustive and accurate verbal description<sup>10</sup>.

Similarly, theatre exploits what I like to call the performative parallax inherent in the displaced experience of the stage. *Theatrum Mundi* exploits the theatricality of global history making and puts it to dramatic effect. The theatrical frame gives 'force' to our experience, too often represented in bland narrative<sup>11</sup>. The force is owed to the fact that *theatre makes us experience an experience*, which we cannot, therefore, narrate away.

### *The Genius of Community*

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Gorfain, *Play and the Problem of Knowing in Hamlet: An Excursion into Interpretive Anthropology*, in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds. *The Anthropology of Experience*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 217.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Richard Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Paul Friedrich, *The Language Parallax. Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Renato Rosaldo, *Ilongot Hunting as Story and Experience*, in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds. *The Anthropology of Experience*, cit., and Greg Denning, *Theatricality of History making*, cit., p. 81.

[...] From my perspective, acting on stage is but a special instance of social action in general. [...] The picture created by theatre, and, indeed, the theatricality of living in general, makes us aware of the possibility of distance between outward signs and internal realities, and liberate us from the trap of literalness and mimicry.

[...] Condensation and displacement are, as we have seen for *Theatrum Mundi*, prominent features of a theatre that moves its audience. In their turn, the audience makes use of imagination as a capacity for understanding the unprecedented experience. Imagination in this sense is part and parcel of any rationality that we might claim. Even innovation is a rule-governed behaviour; «the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere»<sup>12</sup>. It resonates with previous experience.

Like poetry may have its master tropes, so theatre may have its key expressions. In both cases, the limits – of natural language or of ordinary bodily action – are explored and altered. This is true creativity – a creativity that reveals.

Thus, with poets and other artists of creative power we are met with those «gifted individuals who have bent the culture in the direction of their own capacities» of which Ruth Benedict once spoke<sup>13</sup>. This is crucial: creativity is a process that takes place between ‘gifted’ individuals and their culture. The individual gift is wasted if it does not resonate with the community. To be creative is not merely to invent or to innovate but to make a new kind of understanding possible by revealing what is already partly sensed.

[...] In the creative process, the poetic is not separate from the politic: by challenging cultural stereotypes, the gifted individual bends culture his or her way.

[...] The creative genius [...] must be capable of bringing the yet unknown to effect. By way of imaginative power, the genius enlarges the world. [...]

And because it is «principally metaphoric reasoning that makes it possible for us to learn from our experience»<sup>14</sup>, theatre may have an important role to play in the raising of the implicit consciousness of the world to a fuller awareness of one’s own position within it. Awareness

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Life in quest of narrative*, in David Wood, ed. *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Configurations of Culture in North America*, «American Anthropologist», vol 34, 1932, pp. 1-27, here p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 3.

creates new possibilities for social agency. From the centre of the hurricane, the genius of theatre projects potentiality all around. The still point of the turning world is laden with dramatic density for the community to explore.

### *Reflexivity in Play*

In the argument so far, I have moved freely between the world of theatre and the world of culture. I have argued that theatre may be seen as telescoped social drama, expressing moments of heightened vitality in culture, and that theatre, therefore, provides us with an experimental situation. Truly, cultural creativity is condensed in drama, yet the drama also provides a kind of comment upon the culture: the act of dramatization is always selective. Theatre, therefore, 'reflects back' upon culture in a particular way.

[...] I shall suggest two principle kinds of relationship, in the understanding that they are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive: the mimetic and the poetic. As theatrical modalities they provide distinct means of reflecting upon culture.

The mimetic modality takes off in a metonymical relationship between culture and theatre; the latter is part of the former, and the connection is embedded within a larger, shared frame of cultural comprehension. For the sake of simplicity we can see theatre as a text, while culture is the context. Many performances exploit this relationship, taking their point of departure in a particular problem or topic, giving it voice, and thereby raising the awareness of the problem or topic in question. [...]

Theatre in this sense is [...] primarily conservative. The comment it makes may, of course, induce change by raising awareness, but if theatre aims at nothing more than a staging of culture such as it is, it remains – paradoxically, because it is so much part of the selfpresentation of culture – 'other'. While possibly awakening the optical unconscious in culture, it also bounds it off. Poor theatre may be a result.

The 'poverty' is not only a feature of traditional, petrified, theatre, where bourgeois ideals are confirmed, but also of the self-declared 'radical theatre', that sees itself as a kind of cultural intervention<sup>15</sup>. Even if conceived of in terms of opposition to dominant culture, radical theatre works within a pre-established set of counter-cultural expressions, and most often with a precise aim. The pedagogical scope kills

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Baz Kershaw, *Towards a Radical Theatre*, London, Routledge, 1992.



theatre by pre-empting its significance. The actors illustrate a problem, and make it known that they have the solution; as will be recalled from Eugenio Barba's statement above, 'illustration' effectively prevents the jumps out of the water, the unexpected moves.

Thus, the mimetic relationship between theatre and culture easily becomes less than creative. Like Narcissus was caught in love with his own image, so also for the theatre caught exclusively in the mirror of culture. The realism implied by the mirroring makes theatre redundant.

In contrast to the mimetic modality, the poetic modality of theatre is truly creative; it is making not faking<sup>16</sup>. It takes off in a metaphorical relationship between theatre and culture, which can be seen as two separate texts, or even two cultures. As for cultures in general, these two also become conspicuous through exaggeration of difference<sup>17</sup>. Exaggeration in this sense implies a mirroring of the negativities inherent in the culture of contrast: one sees oneself as that which the other is not. Theatre thus exposes what the contrastive ('surrounding') culture is not. It mocks, reverts, makes counter claims, and creates. Art, is not just a sign or a means of communication – communicating, or replicating culture – but a particular mode of thought, expressing what is not otherwise said<sup>18</sup>.

In the words used earlier, the theatrical idiom brings the otherwise 'unknown' to the fore. [...]

The poetic power of language, and of art, marks difference while also overcoming it. In the mimetic modality, an optical illusion of sameness makes no room for synthesis. In contrast, the poetic modality creates a panoptical space, a space within which one may overlook the whole world from a particular position. In our case it is the position of theatre. While mimesis presents self *as* other, and portrays the subject as the sole object of desire, poesis shows self *and* other in their inter-subjective relationship.

Poetic theatre is non-linear; while actions or acts are of course played out in a linear fashion, the power at synthesis inherent in the performance as well as in poetry makes the spectator hold them in the

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Victor W. Turner, *From ritual to theater*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Press, 1982, p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. James Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York, Basic Books, 1983, p. 120.

imagination as a totality<sup>19</sup>. It is the conjunction which makes us 'know' – without necessarily knowing the implications.

One example is provided by Odin Teatret's performance *Talabot*. Here a conjunction between a real life history, world history, and the dramatic mise-en-scène creates a space in which the individual spectator may catch a sudden glimpse of the connections between his or her own life and the larger history. The theatre performance was a restoration of the biography of a woman anthropologist in the environment of the last forty years of world history and global encounters; as such it was of course both singular and unique. Yet, it was also a way of transcending the autobiographical and offering a synthetic space where anybody was free to enter. The actors' restoration of behaviour made the spectators experience the experience of the woman anthropologist in condensed form. This was what made the play potentially resonate with their own experiences without preempting the significant issues. *Talabot* thus was a particularly successful example of making people sense what they already implicitly knew. [...]

The problem in the play world becomes the representation of real problems with knowledge in our world; the fictive problem enables us to contemplate those problems in a specific setting, but independently of any need to make «responsible» interpretive or moral choices. The play becomes a mirror of problems of inquiry, but it does not make an inquiry itself<sup>20</sup>.

This is the point: theatre does not direct the inquiry, nor does it tell us simply what we know. Rather the kind of reflexivity involved points to the problem of *how* we think we know in the first place. Therein lies its force and its dramatic power.

Like it happens in periods of crisis or rapid change, so also in moments of dramatic density: there is a break down in the way in which language itself is understood<sup>21</sup>. The bond of signification is broken; the world becomes momentarily unspeakable. This effective reframing (and the frame is of course part of the event) is what makes the world new. The genius works by reframing, not illustrating, the mundane world.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Paul Friedrich, *The Language Parallax. Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Phyllis Gorfain, *Play and the Problem of Knowing in Hamlet*, cit., p. 216.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Vincent Crapanzano, *Maimed Rites and Wild and Whirling Words, in Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire. On the Epistemology of Interpretation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 289.

*Dramatic Density and Creativity*

By way of concluding this chapter, I shall return to the notion of cultural creativity in relation to the creative process inherent in theatre making.

Obviously, there is a qualitative difference between theatrical and social performances, the one designed to realize presence by way of illusion, the other illuding reality by way of presence. Theatre is a space which consciously reframes human experience. Yet, focussing on the agent allows us to emphasize the profound continuity between acting on stage and living in the world; if nothing else then because of the dialectic between performing and learning identified by Victor Turner «One learns through performing, then performs the understandings so gained»<sup>22</sup>. From the ringside of the theatre, Konstantin Stanislavskij also warned the actor: «Always act in your own person... You can never get away from yourself. The moment you lose yourself on the stage marks the departure from truly living your part and the beginning of exaggerated, false acting»<sup>23</sup>. Even if theatre produces an experience of heightened vitality, this vitality is apprehensible only through a continuity with lived experience in general. *Theatrum Mundi* is an epitome of the world theatre, which it does not express or mirror but which it condensates and makes manifest.

[...] Meaning is always emergent, and each moment contains a surplus of possible successors. Only one next-step can be made, however. In theatre, the vicarious experience of the surplus historicity of any moment, leaves a lasting trace upon the spectator – which words in themselves could not achieve. The experience of experience displaces the individual from his or her life-history. Outside theatre, the dislocation in the economy of relevant expressions may redirect history.

If cultural creativity is about demonstrating the surplus historicity of any historical moment, and thus raise the awareness of potential newness in the course of the world, anthropology also has an important contribution to make – by demonstrating the theatricality of the world – the true *theatrum mundi*.

<sup>22</sup> Victor W. Turner, *From ritual to theater*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> Kostantin Stanislavskij, *An Actor's handbook*, New York, Theater Art Books, 1963, p. 91.