

Jane Turner - Patrick Campbell  
A POETICS OF THIRD THEATRE: A SYNOPSIS

*[Al secondo Nordisk Teatr Laboratorium Festival, The Laboratory Spirit, che si è tenuto quest'anno a Holstebro, presso il NTL, Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium-Odin Teatret, dal 29 gennaio al 2 febbraio 2020, erano presenti molti studiosi: Annelis Kuhlmann (DK), Adam Ledger (GB), Tatiana Chemi (DK), Exe Christoffersen (DK), Jane Turner (GB), Patrick Campbell (GB). Hanno commentato il lavoro dei partecipanti, hanno parlato del Terzo Teatro, del teatro laboratorio, delle trasformazioni in corso del Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium: a ottobre lascio la direzione, ma il NTL non finisce per questo, il mio lavoro sarà continuato da Per Kap Bech Jensen. I partecipanti al festival – tutti artisti che lavorano indipendentemente dentro la cornice del NTL – hanno particolarmente apprezzato il discorso a due voci di Jane e Patrick.]*

*In vista di questo Dossier, ho chiesto loro di prepararne per «Teatro e Storia» una versione che desse conto del libro che stanno per pubblicare presso la casa editrice Routledge, A Poetics of Third Theatre. Jane e Patrick sono anche autori del sito [www.thirdtheatrenetwork.com](http://www.thirdtheatrenetwork.com). (Eugenio Barba)]*

The following text offers a brief insight into key critical positions underscoring our forthcoming monograph *A Poetics of Third Theatre: Performer Training, Dramaturgy, Cultural Action*<sup>1</sup>. This book is the fruit of five years of research into the Third Theatre community in Latin America and Europe, tracing a genealogy of this theatrical culture whilst emphasising its contemporary valency<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Jane Turner, Patrick Campbell, *A Poetics of Third Theatre: Performer Training, Dramaturgy, Cultural Action*, Abingdon, Routledge, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on the wider Third Theatre Network project, including artist pages and archive footage of knowledge exchange events, please visit [www.thirdtheatrenetwork.com](http://www.thirdtheatrenetwork.com).

The term Third Theatre was coined in a short text written over 40 years ago by Eugenio Barba, founder of Odin Teatret – the pioneering theatre group established in 1964 and based in Holstebro, Denmark. Barba used the term to describe a generation of theatre groups that had emerged in the 1960s and had become more established by the 1970s. Barba suggests that these groups neither associated themselves with the mainstream (First Theatre) nor the avant-garde (Second Theatre)<sup>3</sup>. Rather, the fundamental characteristics of this nascent Third Theatre community were: marginality, auto-didacticism, the existential and ethical dimensions of the actor's craft and a new social vocation. His brief text quickly assumed the value of a manifesto, becoming a reference point for many practitioners, particularly in Europe and Latin America.

Whilst the Odin may well be the most famous proponents of this particular “small tradition” in Europe, Third Theatre always already transcended Barba and Odin Teatret<sup>4</sup>. Prior to their encounters with the Odin, the many groups that originally comprised this community in the late 1970s possessed distinct identities which they continued to cultivate in numerous ways afterwards. By the same token, the more assured emerging artists, who engaged with the community at a later date, often went on to generate innovative and distinctive models of practice, which have also become deeply rooted.

In our forthcoming publication, we map out a genealogy of Third Theatre, which extended as a culture of practice through transnational Encounters in Europe and Latin America, allowing for a shared ethics and nascent poetics to emerge within this rich theatrical community. Starting with the Scandinavian Seminars, which

<sup>3</sup> Barba's particular articulation of the avant-garde does not quite reflect the many nuanced perspectives on this theatrical movement that have developed subsequently in recent years. See, for example, Richard Schechner, *The Conservative Avant-Garde*, «New Literary History», 41, n. 4, 2010, pp. 895-913; Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre: 1892-1992*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, Routledge, 2004; James Harding, *The Ghosts of Avant Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See Jane Turner, *Eugenio Barba*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018 for further detail on the development of a “small tradition”.

were first organised by Odin Teatret/N<sub>TL</sub> in 1966, the Third Theatre community consolidated itself internationally through a range of knowledge exchange events, including the Third Theatre Encounters, the peripatetic International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), the University of Eurasian Theatre and the Magdalena Project, amongst others. The number of groups that have come in and out of the Third Theatre community over the past fifty years is vast, too many to exhaustively list here. While in the monograph we map out a history of Third Theatre, with reference to many of the groups that have contributed to the development of this heterogeneous theatrical community and culture, for the purposes of this article, we are foregrounding the critical frameworks we have employed to contextualise a poetics of Third Theatre.

We argue that a poetics of Third Theatre is characterized by a manifest laboratory theatre practice comprising performer training, dramaturgy and cultural action, which we have chosen to frame conceptually by drawing on notions of *unconditional hospitality*, *artisanal craft*, and *(re)enchantment*<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, it is out of this braided consideration of the work that the notion of the *interstitial* comes to the fore. Third Theatre is, as Barba has suggested over the years, an attempt to imbue theatre with a new set of *values* and *meanings* – an *ethos*. In this small tradition, the actor and the director's craft become as much a way of being-in-the-world as it is a means of developing scenic prowess and expertise.

### *A Poetics of Third Theatre*

In the formulation of Luís Otávio Burnier, founder of Brazilian Third Theatre group LUME,

<sup>5</sup> Our use of parentheses here recognizes the way in which a western history of disenchantment does not quite apply to the Latin American context, where European, Indigenous and African cultures of enchantment have co-existed with Enlightenment rationality since colonial times, as a form of cultural resistance and affirmation.

The terms ‘poetry’, ‘poetics’ and ‘poet’ come from the Greek *poiêsis*, *poiêtikê*, *poiêtês*, which are etymologically related to the verb *poiéô*, which means ‘to do’, ‘create’. Whilst, from the perspective of the sciences, the priority is the object and intelligence is seen as a source of truth in as much as it adapts to objective reality, in the arts, thought precedes the object, creating it. The knowledge that is implicit to artistic craft is, therefore, a creative, productive force<sup>6</sup>.

Burnier’s recourse here to the Greek etymology of the term *poetics* harks back to a long tradition of theatrical discourse that emphasises the creative role of theatre and its relation to reality. In his *Poetics*<sup>7</sup>, Aristotle rebuked the platonic primacy of the transcendent realm of Ideas and Plato’s dismissal of dramatic poetry as a poor imitation of the material plane of being, by establishing theatre as a fecund plane of active creation that can rearticulate and thus re-engage reality. Hence by mapping out a poetics of Third Theatre, we are recognizing the concrete ways in which the praxes of this transnational community work actively to create space and a place for local re-articulations of reality that allow for the development of a particular ethical way of being in the world, predicated on hospitality, and a vocational approach to artisanal craft that also speaks to folk traditions and myth – even a (re)enchantment of the world.

Importantly, by suggesting that there can be a poetics of Third Theatre, we are not arguing that Third Theatre is either a monolithic entity or a postmodern cacophony of fragmented difference – we recognize that the Third Theatre is a plural, transnational community, but nevertheless one with a shared (often unwittingly) set of values and praxical principles, as well as a number of definable concerns.

Before moving forwards, we shall now unpack the way in which we frame the dynamic values underpinning the Third Theatre community, and then consider their relationship to the practical realms of performer training, dramaturgy and cultural action.

<sup>6</sup> Luís Otávio Burnier, *A Arte de Ator: da técnica à representação*, Campinas, Editora Unicamp, 1994, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated with an introduction and notes by Malcolm Heath, London, Penguin, 1996.

### *Unconditional Hospitality*

Coined by Jacques Derrida in conversation with Anne Duformantelle (2000), the notion of unconditional hospitality refers to an encounter with radical difference, an ethical, creative, even transgressive opening up to the Other, the *foreigner*<sup>8</sup>. More than a theoretical concept, unconditional hospitality is articulated by Derrida and Duformantelle as a *practice*; it is a way of being-in-the-world that encompasses accepting without judgment and allowing for difference rather than its assimilation.

This practice is particularly resonant with much of Barba's writing around Third Theatre and reflects the ways in which Third Theatre artists have maintained a sense of in-betweenness, working across borders, struggling to maintain an egalitarian way of being with others through their work<sup>9</sup>. As we have suggested elsewhere, unconditional hospitality in Third Theatre circles:

...provide(s) potential models for a radical form of democratic intersubjectivity, which is achieved through a difficult, ongoing process of self-negation, predicated on an archi-acceptance of, and commitment to, diversity and otherness<sup>10</sup>.

Far from a utopian dream, this notion of opening up to the Other necessarily manifests in a concrete fashion on all levels of performer training, dramaturgy and strategies for cultural action developed in Third Theatre practice.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Duformantelle, Jacques Derrida, *On Hospitality*, translated by Rachel Balby, edited by Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> For an English-language overview of Barba's writings on Third Theatre, see Eugenio Barba, *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt*. Translated by Judy Barba. Masgrau, Lluís (ed.), Aberystwyth, Black Mountain Press, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Turner and Patrick Campbell, *Radical Care: Performative Generosity and Generativity in Third Theatre*, «Performance Research», v. 23, n. 6, 2018, pp. 61-67: 59.

### *Artisanal Craft*

The terms *artisanal* and *craft* have helped us articulate the ways in which Third Theatre practice has developed and sustained a particular way of working, characterized by an intergenerational process of craft-based kinetic transference which importantly allows for specialization, negotiation and transformation. Moreover, due to the laboratory ethos underpinning Third Theatre practice, learning is life-long and training is ongoing.

If there is one constant we have identified amongst the disparate practitioners and differing strands of the Third Theatre, it is a focus on the body and its resonances: the body of the actor, the kinaesthetic impact of the actor's craft on the director and, ultimately, the spectators. This tacit, non-discursive negotiation is revisited and re-articulated by all practitioners in this domain. Moreover, the centrality of bodily labour in Third Theatre praxis imbues the actor's work on the self as a laboratory space in which emerging values can be located and small traditions founded.

### *(Re)enchantment*

The intensive work on the self in Third Theatre through the deeply embodied practices of training into performance and cultural action, with their concomitant focus on the actor's energy and expanded awareness, can map onto what Weber terms a sense of *enchantment*, a restorative sense of being-in-the-world which lies in conscious opposition to the capitalist order of value. Moreover, as Weber has noted:

[...] the enchanted world is always in the process of being superseded by a calculable world; the defeated world always returns; there is always new raw material for a rationalisation whose work is never done<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber in Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton, University of Princeton Press, 2001, p. 58.

For both Weber and Jane Bennett, rationalisation is an ongoing project and is the result of our experiencing phenomena that elude the calculable; experiences that are ineffable. It has been important for European Third Theatre groups in particular, to experience encounters with a wider sense of self, a post-romanticist (re)enchantment that opposes a fragmented subjectivity, the fruit of the disenchantment of western modernity. For Latin American groups, Third Theatre practice has also importantly given legitimacy to folkloric and popular cultural manifestations that have been traditionally marginalised by Eurocentric hegemonic discourses and colonial theatrical communities.

Third Theatre groups advocate theatre practice as a privileged locus of craft and vocation, a locus which allows for a pragmatic attitude towards – and experience of – (re)enchantment, which evades any of the non-specificity and at times dubious metaphysics underpinning New Age doctrines. For many of the Third Theatre groups, we argue that their training laboratories, approaches to dramaturgy and engagement with cultural action foreground and specifically seek to restore a sense of enchantment.

### *Performer Training and Dramaturgy*

When we are discussing performer training, dramaturgy and cultural action in relation to this community, we are talking about a specific praxical lineage but not a prescribed method. Eugenio Barba's writings on the Third Theatre that have mapped out the praxical heritage of this community, which ranges from the "theatrical reformers" of Europe on the one hand, and Latin American group theatre pioneers on the other, is instructive in this regard<sup>12</sup>.

Approaches to performer training in particular stem from a laboratory tradition of practice informed by such innovators as Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski. The work of the actor on the development of physical and vocal actions is paramount and a re-

<sup>12</sup> See Eugenio Barba, *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, cit.

curing concern in the ongoing training of all of the groups and artists affiliated with Third Theatre. Importantly, however, the Odin's auto-didactic approach to actor training – whereby individual actors are responsible for the paths their work in the training room take – has become a key characteristic of a transnational praxis. This clearly differentiates performer training in Third Theatre circles from the more prescribed curricula of acting conservatoires, for example.

Furthermore, given the prominence of Theatre Anthropology to this community, with its focus on transcultural principles underpinning codified performance forms at a pre-expressive level (understood as the work of the actor prior to aesthetic expression in performance), there has been an opportunity to demystify the acting process and objectively dissect local cultural forms in order to identify useful material for training purposes<sup>13</sup>. Training has thus evolved, particularly in Latin America, which importantly draws on the popular cultural manifestations of the continent that trace their roots back to European, African and Indigenous praise performance forms.

Approaches to dramaturgy amongst Third Theatre practitioners are frequently influenced by Barba's persuasive tripartite model of dramaturgical practice, which encompasses the *organic*, *narrative* and *evocative* levels of scenic organization<sup>14</sup>. As Barba suggests:

This [dramaturgical] practice has gradually made me consider the performance, not as a *mise-en-scène* (of a text, a story, a plot, an idea), but as a *theatrical composition resulting from a plurality of executions*: that of the actor, that of the director and that of the spectator<sup>15</sup>.

In this sense, dramaturgy operates in a non-conventional man-

<sup>13</sup> Theatre Anthropology was a research inquiry initiated by Eugenio Barba into the extra-daily pre-expressivity of codified forms of theatre, dance and performance, culminating in the establishment of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and the publication Eugenio Barba and Nicole Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, London, Routledge, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House*, translated by Judy Barba, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy*, cit., p. 13.



ner, and reflects the needs of groups working within a tradition of devised theatrical practice.

### *Cultural Action*

Within the fields of Theatre, Drama and Performance, the terms performer training and dramaturgy have a more immediate currency. However, the notion of *cultural action* perhaps requires further elaboration. Cultural action emerged as a concept in France in the 1960s, as a post-war response to the need to reconstruct and re-urbanise France by strengthening social connections between the populace. In 1970, Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire importantly adopted and expanded upon the term cultural action<sup>16</sup>.

Rather than a policy of the state linked to the arts, Freire re-appropriates the term, redefining it as a central tenet underscoring a revolutionary educational project aimed at developing conscientization amongst the masses. Freire's radical model of life-long education as a decolonizing, liberational force, whilst historically and geopolitically situated, resonates with the practice and the politics of Third Theatre. Whilst sceptical of the utopian drive underlining the term "revolution", we would nevertheless suggest that on a micro-political level, the cultural actions developed by Third Theatre groups have had an, at times, radical impact on the lives of individuals and local communities.

We would argue, therefore, that the term cultural action can usefully be employed to describe a range of activities carried out within the Third Theatre community, such as knowledge exchange events, pedagogic practices and an extended praxis that disseminates out into, and involves the wider local community. The historical Third Theatre Encounters importantly promoted specific performative models, such as barter and street performances, which could be understood as cultural actions, and that were shared by a number of groups in the 1970s, becoming hallmarks of a poetics of Third Theatre.

<sup>16</sup> Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970.

### *The Interstitial*

Connotatively, *interstices* refer to both the space in-between two physical objects, a gap or break in an otherwise continuous phenomenon, or a temporal hiatus between events. It is this fusion of spatial, phenomenal and temporal difference and inter-relationship that is particularly interesting. By focusing on key Third Theatre groups, our book identifies, contextualises and charts the community's inter/intra-cultural and, what we would call, *interstitial* actor training, dramaturgical practices and approaches to cultural action. The further significance of the term comes out of our analysis, in the monograph, of the Intercultural Debates which fuelled much of the scholarly dismissal of Third Theatre praxis. As we have suggested elsewhere:

The problem with the term intercultural as overarching shorthand for complex theatrical practices is its provenance from the field of the social sciences and the fact that it cannot do justice to the complex play of cultural negotiation that takes place within the microcosm of the actor's body in training and on the stage<sup>17</sup>.

Third Theatre groups, past and present, have consistently had the courage to try and to fail, to take pragmatic risks and reinvent themselves, existing in the interstices as a permanent form of ethical engagement and revolt. This process of reinvention occurs through an interstitial weaving between innovation on the one hand and a sustained praxical engagement with the tenets of laboratory theatre on the other, which allow for the consolidation of a small tradition, a poetics of Third Theatre.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Campbell, Jane Turner, *Odin Teatret's The Tree: performing in the interstices*, «Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença», v. 9, n. 2, 2019, pp 3-4. Available at: <<http://seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>>.