

Eugenio Barba

## Creating Earthquakes

Eugenio Barba has honoured NTQ by entrusting to its pages his very personal introduction to his most recent book, *Le Mie vite nel terzo teatro: Diffrenza, mestiere, rivolta* (*My Lives in the Third Theatre: Difference, Craft, Revolt*), which has here been specially translated into English by Judy Barba, the co-dedicattee, along with Julia Varley and Vera Gaeta, of his book: the 'origins and accomplices of my journey to the archipelago of floating islands'. NTQ received this translation, here prepared by the journal's editor, Maria Shevtsova, ahead of the book's launch on 5 October 2023 at the Biblioteca Bernardini in Lecce in Puglia. On a grander scale, a few days later, the occasion also saw the opening in Barba's honour of his and the Odin Teatret archives under the banner of LAF LIS (Living Archive Floating Islands), located in a wing of the three-dimensional immersive museum of the Bernardini. LAF LIS's rich collection includes written material, film and video documentaries, recordings of performances, and such artefacts and equipment as instruments, masks, and costumes gathered during Third Theatre work. The latter is neither established-classical nor avant-garde theatre but 'other' – small-group, sometimes unofficial, and often self-taught theatre. LAF LIS is not exclusively intended for researchers and scholars, but is open as well to interested members of the general public. Barba's introduction to *My Lives in the Third Theatre* is here published in full, clearly signposting, together with the author's succinct commentary, the itinerary of his life's multifarious work, which involved, and still involves, a wide range of participants and collaborators in different times, places, and languages, and in differing forms and patterns of creativity.

Barba's account begins with his departure from Italy to Norway (1954), and his apprenticeship as a welder, and then a mariner, before tracing his move to Poland (1961), where he meets and works with Grotowski, his return to Oslo, where he founds Odin Teatret (1964), and then his emigration to Denmark (1966), where Odin Teatret establishes its niche within the larger framework that Barba named the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium. Barba's journey continued, encompassing numerous theatre endeavours, including the development of the idea of a Third Theatre (the 'floating islands' alluded to above); the seminal ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology, 1979); and, although quite clearly not at journey's end, the Fondazione Barba Varley established in 2020.

Eugenio Barba is a major figure in the development and expansion of theatre practices and theatre studies that materialized significantly in the 1960s and extended noticeably into the 1970s, while continuing actively beyond these fertile decades. Barba has been a long-term dedicated friend and supporter of NTQ, publishing eighteen articles in the journal, as a member of its advisory board, since its inaugural issue in 1985, when it became the successor to *Theatre Quarterly* (1971–81). Barba's numerous books and articles are so well known internationally that it suffices here to cite his foundational vision of small-group theatre in his 1979 *The Floating Islands* and his magisterial *The Five Continents of Theatre*, written with Nicola Savarese (Italian edition 2017; English translation 2019). NTQ warmly thanks Eugenio Barba for his gift to this journal, and Judy Barba for her kind and generous response to the editor's request, and her reply with such an excellent translation.

**Key terms:** Odin Teatret, ISTA, theatre groups, working environment, autodidacticism, apprenticeship, training, union, tradition.

### **Sats and Earthquakes**

Suddenly the earth shakes beneath my feet and I fall to my knees. It is a position that changes the perspective of the world: an earthquake.

I have just returned from a trip to Thiva. It is the modern name of Thebes, the city of the Sphinx, which unleashed the plague. Here Oedipus pierced his eyes because the truth dazzles: his sons-brothers slaughtered each

other in a fratricidal war, and their sister Antigone was punished for having disowned the law of the community. For my new performance, I let Thebes be the model of the world I live in.

The Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020 petrified our lives, and for more than two years altered the rhythm and activities of the entire planet. Theatres everywhere closed and the actors were segregated in their homes, suspended in a months-long wait.

We at Odin Teatret also had to close our theatre (Figures 1 and 2). Isolated in our small provincial town of Holstebro in Denmark, we tried to keep the sense of our day and our work alive. Some emptied a room and transformed it into a place of daily solitary practice. Others tried to keep in touch with their spectators and colleagues through a digital screen.

In those moments, I didn't have a message to send, nor could I find words of encouragement. I let this gestation prepare the future that would demand all our imprudence, which

Federico García Lorca called the 'poet's grain of madness'. I do not forget the strength of the actors who, for centuries, were able to resist persecution and the abuse of power, discrimination and poverty, wars and epidemics.

I have one certainty: the future of theatre is not in technology, but in the encounter between two wounded, solitary, rebellious individuals, the embrace of an active and a reactive energy.

What do all actors in the world have in common, even if they don't speak the same language and don't share the same values? The *sats*, the impulse of tensions in the instant before acting, the personal determination that combines motivation and organicity. Greatness in our craft is reduced to the ability to persist in a constant state of *sats*.

If I don't move, I am not aware of my chains. Our theatre work is not defined by material limitations, but by our ingenuity in ignoring them. Industriousness and the ability to exploit coincidences. Being cunning, efficient, and turning circumstances around.



**Figure 1.** The Særkær Farm in Holstebro, 1966. Photograph courtesy of Odin Teatret.



**Figure 2.** The Særkær Farm, metamorphosed into the Odin Teatret, 2020. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.

Competence is important, but even more so is imagination. Professional commitment is essential, but what is decisive is the vision of the blind horse galloping stubbornly on the edge of a precipice within us and making our thoughts race. In this *movement* called theatre, persistence is the compass of we who travel in the Country of Speed.

I study the photograph of a tent encampment after an earthquake in Iran: the children play football, splash around in puddles, chase each other like cops and robbers. Life leaps and laughs, defends itself, refuses to perish. I am thinking of Magritte's painting *The Act of Faith*: a barred door in front of us, broken down by an inner vision and the need not to get used to the surrounding indifference. In this present that believes it has no ancestors, I am optimistic: I contemplate the future with a

gaze inspired by men and women from the past.

### **The Blind Horse and the Floating Islands**

There have been times in my life when I made a decision within seconds, then just acted on it. I was seventeen, and during a holiday in Scandinavia I fell in love with Miriam, a Swedish girl. I returned with her to Italy. It was December 1954. I lived with my mother in my grandfather's house in Rome. She explained to me: 'Eugenio, if you really love her and want to be with her, you cannot live in this house unless you are married. Your grandfather won't accept it.' 'All right,' I replied. The next day I left for Norway with Miriam. The trust of Vera, my mother, facilitated my decision.

This impulsive reaching forward, regardless of the consequences, is a mystery to me. Over time, I have become aware that an archaic part of me lives in exile in my stomach, and in my head, and determines my choices, beyond any thoughtful reflection. Over time, I dared to trust this part of myself. I call it 'the blind horse galloping on the edge of a precipice'. It has guided me, and still does.

Every generation has always been able to find its own solutions. For more than half a century, I have defended a refuge that I have called Odin Teatret. I focused on working relationships so that our performances and choices made sense to each of us and to a handful of spectators who needed us. I developed this environment in a corner, wishing to address other corners, and transforming my environment into a particular system of production and way of working that I called a 'laboratory'. We constitute a micro-culture of artisans with explicit work standards and tacit values, but we are also a caravanserai that welcomes those on the move. We are a theatre group whose members have motivations that are often incomprehensible to themselves and incommunicable to others. Each of us stubbornly seeks his or her path and a personal sense in the collective craft of the theatre.

The following circumstances have shaped the culture of this shelter/laboratory and of those who have kept it alive: not having been accepted for a long time; having accepted that others did not consider our work necessary; the need to change ourselves without wanting to change others; the need to invent our theatrical knowledge, starting from the condition of being autodidactic; the need for a discipline that would make us free; the desire to remain foreign; the impulse to travel far from the territories in which the theatre operates; meeting other emigrants; the belief that theatre can only be revolt; the search for a way to convey the sense of our revolt without being overwhelmed; the discovery of a bond with people and groups who live in conditions similar to ours; the discovery of technical foundations that we share with artists distant in time and space; the awareness that theatre craft stems from an existential attitude in a single trans-cultural country: the Third Theatre (Figure 3).

This country is for me an archipelago of countless floating islands. It is inhabited by men and women who abandoned the safety of the mainland to lead a precarious life cultivating swaying floating gardens. To remain faithful to their needs, they built attractive villages or poor dwellings with a handful of earth for gardens, where it seemed impossible to build and cultivate anything on water and in the currents. They were individuals who, out of personal desire or compulsion, managed to create other models of being social. The floating island is the uncertain ground that can give way underfoot, but which can overcome personal limits and enable encounters.

The floating island is a metaphor for the theatre group, but it is also a concrete working condition. The metaphor is the poetic vehicle helping me to explain the contrasting confluence of the humble – tangible and undefinable – aspects of my craft. What other metaphor can evoke the symbiosis of me as an individual with the work I have chosen?

### To Marry a Mask

When a youngster begins to learn Balinese *topeng*, a form of theatre in which the actor is masked, it is said that he/she 'marries a mask': *kawin dengan topeng*.

The mask (*topeng*) is an inanimate object, yet the actor treats it as a living partner. Marriage is a personal, constant, intimate relationship in which feelings and corporality alternate with separation and union. The *topeng* actors seek this experience – unity with the mask – and they manage to embody it when they overcome the dance and *make the mask live* beyond learned movements, postures, and rhythms.

Anyone can learn to dance. Anyone can know and repeat gestures and movements. The carnal and mystical union of marriage happens when, as an actor, you master the art of making the mask breathe, quiver, and come alive. So say the old masters.

The image of marriage is a suggestive and sensory metaphor that transcends the relationship with the craft. I wonder: what blood ties exist between me and my craft? What materially, emotionally, and sensorially embodies my craft?



**Figure 3.** Odin Teatret and the Cuatrotablas Group during their meeting in Lima, 1988. Photograph: Tony D'Urso. Courtesy of Tony D'Urso and Odin Teatret.

The *work environment* represents the partner with whom I am married: the single individuals who share and guarantee the continuity of my action through theatre. This *environment-in-life* is, for me, the equivalent of the mask for a *topeng* actor.

A marriage unfurls a tension and a duration which vary through different degrees of intensity: moments of closeness and distance, laconic periods, and others of talkativeness and total exchange – occasions for shared harmony, misunderstandings, and clashes. It

is the growth of an intimacy that is constantly challenged and revitalized.

How has this intimacy affected my work? How have I revived this tension over the years, despite the predictable uniformity of the craft? How did I manage to keep the flame alive in me and in my work environment: *my mask*?

### Two Types of Environment

Two totally different types of working environment are the alternative for anyone who does theatre.



**Figure 4.** The oldest available photograph of Odin Teatret training. Torgeir Wethal and Else Marie Laukvik in Oslo, December 1964. Photograph: Terje Lund. Courtesy of Terje Lund and Odin Teatret.

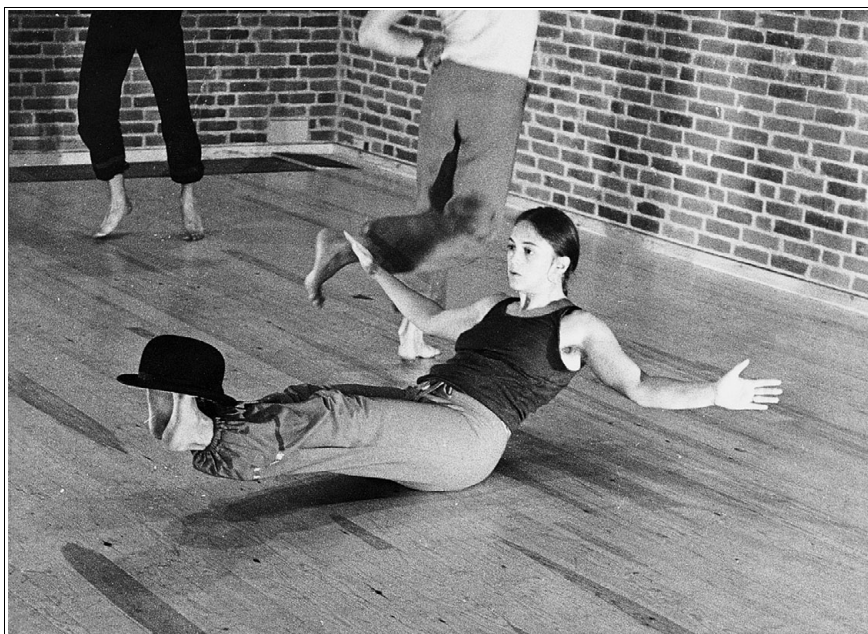
A mechanically aggregated working environment is the most widespread in all times and cultures, and it characterizes the professional theatre of all genres, aesthetics, and trends, experimental, traditional, artistic, or commercial. Actors sign up for one production at a time, complying with the rules of casting. If it is a permanent company or institution, the components – actors, technicians, directors, dramaturgs – are organized on the basis of a rigid division of work and functions, aiming at the quality of the product. ‘Mechanical aggregation’ is not a negative definition. It means that the professional experience of the individual people in the team is the necessary prerequisite for a given presumed ‘good’ result. Their development as human beings or citizens may be a consequence, but it is not the main objective.

There is another working environment, that of a group theatre, which I have defined as the Third Theatre. Odin Teatret began to

develop such an environment in 1964. This type of aggregation became widespread in the 1970s, with a fundamental characteristic that distinguishes it from the mechanically aggregated working environment: *the apprenticeship takes place within the group. Marriage with the mask* – the relationship with the craft and with a limited number of people – does not occur according to the formal programme of a theatre school, divided into different subjects and with many teachers, with the hope then of being engaged by a theatre.

The founding experience of all Third Theatre groups that I know consists of physical and vocal training (Figure 4). The characteristic of the exercises is to oblige the young person to engage the whole body and not to give up, in spite of tiredness and monotony (Figure 5). Training teaches how to think kinaesthetically – that is, through action – to overcome obstacles and inhibitions, to acquire physical and mental availability, and to free oneself from private conditioning. It is a rare practice in our society, where conceptual proficiency, the relationship cause-effect, and the usefulness of the results have become basic factors in any apprenticeship. Training – this work on oneself, as Stanislavsky called it – is a lasting process that determines the way actors in theatre groups think and act.

Duration is rooted in repetition. This runs the risk of becoming entropy if there are no interferences, obstacles, interruptions, or shocks, which cause changes of energy and revitalize personal motivations and initiatives within the dynamics of the group. The changes are often due to internal conflicts, to sudden divisions of one or more components, to couples that split up. The working environment may continue by inertia or complacency, but eventually it suffocates or falls apart. We know it: theatre groups have a short life, like that of a dog. At most ten years, then people leave. Their theatre is not a building or an institution. *Theatre is them, their individualities, the relationships they have established, the decisions they have been able to make.* These relationships, nourished by silent motivations, are the *soul* of a group. In a working environment mechanically aggregated to produce a result of a certain standard, people can leave at the



**Figure 5.** Julia Varley training in 1983. Photograph: Christoph Falke. Courtesy of Christoph Falke and Odin Teatret.

end of the contract, and the institution will carry on. For a theatre group, separation implies the end.

### The Secret of Durability

I have often been asked: What is Odin Teatret's secret over half a century with the same core of actors? Our longevity is no exception.

The history of the last seventy years shows many groups that have resisted with a core of actors from their foundation. Think of the Galpón Theatre in Uruguay, founded in 1950. The charismatic personality of Atahualpa del Cioppo led his group during his exile in Mexico at the time of his country's military dictatorship, and stimulated one generation after another with a working environment that made it independent. They work during the day to earn their daily bread and get together in the evening to rehearse and put on performances. Their example is the undeniable proof that this is possible. I visited them in December 2021. They were oozing with vitality.

I know other theatre groups whose vitality has manifested itself over thirty, forty, and fifty years. La Candelaria in Colombia, Yuyachkani in Peru, Tribo de Atuadores Ói Nóis Aqui Traveiz and LUME in Brazil, Teatro

Buendía in Cuba, Teatro Atalaya and Teatro del Norte in Spain, Grenland Friteater in Norway, Teatro delle Radici in Switzerland, Antagon TheaterAKTion in Germany, DAH Teatar in Serbia, and many in Italy: Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, Teatro Potlach, Teatro Nucleo, Teatro Due Mondi, Teatro delle Albe, Teatro Ridotto, Proskenion, Koreja.

The examples are more numerous. I mention these groups because I know them, and they show that this vulnerable creative environment can last for a long time. It depends on the people who compose it, on their self-discipline, on their energy, on their know-how, on their flexibility, and therefore on the *soul* that permeates their relationships, their silent revolt, and their embodied values.

I would like to ask each of them: how have you protected the continuity, and at the same time absorbed the transformations that have regenerated your experience, your bonds and trust in your work? Their answers would reveal the upheavals that have befallen the hidden part of their personal biographies.

The secret of the durability of my working environment can only be sensed through the earthquakes I experienced in my life before founding Odin Teatret and those that I myself provoked.

## Children Must See Their Father Die

There are realities that our mind fails to embrace. The word 'infinite' or the word 'death'. It's hard to imagine what it is like not to be alive. Death becomes a physical enlightenment when we witness the end of a loved one. We discover a truth that will accompany us like a shadow: you have, and a second later you have not.

I lost my father when I was nine years old. His was a generous gift. In 1943 he returned from the war in Africa with severe chronic nephritis. He mostly lay in bed. My mother was almost twenty years younger than him, slender, delicate. I watched this couple – the man barely moving, holding on to a woman with bright strength in her eyes. The image of the complementarity of life.

It was about midnight when the doctor whispered to my mother to remove my brother and me from the room where my father's agony was expected to be long and vehement. My mother hissed: 'The sons must see their father die.' My father gasped indifferently, and my brother and I listened fearfully to this dialogue while our mother gently pushed us towards the bed.

I remember the contractions of the face, the spaced panting of the gasps, the measured gestures of the doctor. The ice melted on my father's forehead and ran down his cheeks like tears. My mother dried them with a caress. Time, on tiptoe, had stopped. My legs ached, I felt tired, and wished my father would die quickly so I could go to bed. My mother rushed to the window and opened it to let his soul fly out, then she closed his eyes.

This experience generated in me the habit of building a mental theatre. I improvised different scenarios: what my father's life would have been like if he had lived on; what my life would have been like if his strictness had controlled my adolescence; how he would have reacted to the freedom that my mother has always generously granted me. For five years I went almost every day to the cemetery, until in 1951, at fourteen years old, I left for the Nunziatella military college in Naples. I would sit on a step beside my father's grave, talk to him, and he would answer me in

silence. As a director, I brought with me the habit of conversing with the dead.

My father's death was the first earthquake in my life.

## Knowledge Derived from Stupidity

I was not yet eighteen when I left Italy to emigrate to Norway. I had fallen in love with Miriam, a Jewish girl I had met during my summer holidays in Sweden, where I earned some money as a dishwasher and by picking strawberries and potatoes on farms. Her family didn't look kindly on me: I was a *goy*, I didn't belong to the 'chosen' people. Nor could we stay in Italy with my mother, who lived with her father, an admiral: he would not have allowed this, since we were not married. Miriam and I decided to take refuge in Norway, where, away from our families, we could safeguard our economic independence and our feelings.

I had just finished high school at the Nunziatella military college in Naples. The discipline was severe but the studies were exciting, thanks to exceptional teachers of philosophy, history of art, and Greek and Latin language and literature. I was able to translate a dialogue by Plato and Catullus's love poems from the original languages. Only my undisciplined behaviour prevented me from following a military career.

So here I am in Oslo, in love and without knowing a single foreign language. December 1954: I sink into the snow and into an abyss of incomprehensibility. I move in a universe of indecipherable sounds and struggle with all my senses to find my bearings in this culture so different from mine. I try my hardest to grasp what people are saying because my daily bread is at stake. I got a job in a tinsmith workshop, and the owner, Eigil Winje, taught me how to weld.

'Hand me the hammer,' he said to me. I didn't understand and, interpreting the direction of his gaze, I gave him a screwdriver. He looked at me amazed, repeating: 'Hammer, hammer.' Finally, he grabbed the tool himself. I felt stupid and, despite the friendly atmosphere in the workshop, my teammates treated me as such. Days, weeks, and months



of similar situations sharpened my perception of people's behaviour and social relationships, and I developed a tendency to decipher voice intonations and body impulses. I scrutinized the smallest details: the way of sitting, the postures, the type of tension in the fingers, the directions of the gaze, the inflections of the voice, the folds of the mouth – was it an encouraging smile or an ironic grimace? For months I used all my energy to exorcize the trauma of rootlessness and incommunicability, until my progress in the Norwegian language allowed me to rely on verbal comprehension.

I had become aware, however, that the human animal owns three vehicles of communication: words and their meanings; the intonation of the voice, which is the way of singing the emotional charge of communication; finally, the physical tensions and the tonic changes in gesticulation and mimicry that do not 'mean' but 'say'.

This initiation into deciphering incomprehensibility was a fundamental training for the theatre work I undertook ten years later. When the actors and I left Norway and moved with Odin Teatret to Denmark, we went through the same experience of losing our common language, Norwegian. We were forced to create performances amputated from one of the foundations of the bond between actors and spectators: a shared language.

The meeting with Miriam had torn me away from my geographical roots. In the new indecipherable world that every expatriate experiences, our passion was a wall sheltering us from questions about the future. Miriam had found work as a waitress in a restaurant. Six months later our love had withered. She returned to Sweden, I stayed in Oslo waiting for the future to decide for me.

### **The Model of a Leader**

There were six of us workers in Eigil Winje's workshop, and he was already there waiting for us when we arrived at seven in the morning. We left at half past four in the afternoon, but he continued in the office doing administration and accounts.

The respect we all paid him did not depend on the fact that he was the owner, but on his professional competence. He shared our working conditions. He spent hours and days teaching me to weld, without complaining about my mistakes, slowness, and inability to be practical. As if time didn't matter. When I had a problem, Eigil was right by my side and he helped me solve it. 'Is this the best you can do?' he would ask me with a smile when he was dissatisfied with my results. So I learned the pride in refining every little detail to avoid his smiling question.

On Saturdays we finished at three in the afternoon. After the lunch break, we all together arranged the tools in their places, swept the workshop, tidied it up, cleaned it thoroughly, so that Monday would welcome us as if it were brand new. Eigil swept and mopped with us. There were pieces of metal everywhere on the floor; he would bend over and pick them up.

Eigil Winje is there, on the wall of my office in the theatre, a photo in my own little cemetery. He never talked about politics. He was a regular reader of an ultra-conservative newspaper, but during the Second World War he had participated in the resistance against the Germans and had spent three years in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany. At that time, I was politically involved and close to communist ideology. As an owner, Eigil was a 'class enemy' but seemed to poke fun at my political beliefs, running his shop with the utmost egalitarianism. He always chose me – the least experienced – as a workmate when in winter we climbed onto the icy roofs to sweep the snow away or repair some faults. Up there, I placed myself in a safe position and secured Eigil with a rope as he leaned over the roof to fix a tile or mend a gutter. We worked in silence, Eigil and I, a few feet apart, my hands sweating as I held the rope taut. I felt his presence as if we were next to each other. His slightest tension reverberated throughout my body.

Eigil taught me how to lead a group of craftsmen. To protect those who seem less able, make them grow at their own pace, teach by example. Don't explain, act as if every day were my last, and at the same time take care of

my work as if I had eternity ahead of me. Apply elementary justice. It was Eigil who imbued my nervous system with the ethic of a job well done.

### The Two Faces of Otherness

The cultural shock occurred on the Austrian border, at the Brenner Pass, when, hitchhiking to Sweden, I left Italy for the first time and lost my mother tongue. June 1953. The people who picked me up in their cars were curious, chatted with me, were friendly and often generous. In Germany, the rubble of the bombing from the Second World War was still visible. The drivers told me about their experiences as soldiers. I imagined them in Nazi uniforms, but they all treated me kindly.

In Norway I experienced the two faces of Otherness. People immediately noticed that I was from Southern Europe, I looked like a Turk or an Arab. I opened my mouth and distorted their language with wrong intonations and mistakes. Sometimes my diversity intrigued and stimulated them. I was adopted by the family of Fridtjov and Sonia Lehne, a young communist couple, and their newborn daughter, Elisabeth, became my little sister. The painter Willi Midelfart, for whom I modelled twice a week for years, shared his knowledge of painting and the arts with me, as well as tales of his adventures in Paris and Moscow in the 1930s. Friends opened up new fields of knowledge for me in politics, in Norwegian folk traditions, in the audacity of imagining – Ole Daniel Bruun, Dag Halvorsen, Hans Jacob Mørdre, Guri Vesaas, Ingvil Isachsen, Erling Læg Reid, Tone Tveterås, Jens Bjørneboe. Eigil Winje had given me the keys to the workshop, now that I worked piecework as a welder deciding my own hours, even at night and on Sundays, thus guaranteeing myself economic independence.

I had enrolled at the University of Oslo and got into the habit of reading books on cultural anthropology and the history of religions. I was trying to find an explanation for the diversity in the ways of reacting by *homo sapiens*. What did the behaviour and reactions of the people I met depend on? Why could their energy be luminous, and warm me, or ice-

cold, like a piece of ice on flesh? I reflected on the effect of my presence when they first met me: interest and empathy in some, contempt and aggression in others. My university studies ended in 1964 with a degree in French and Norwegian literature and the history of religions. But the diploma didn't change people's behaviour.

In the university library, in the autumn of 1955, I read two biographies that Romain Rolland had dedicated to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. I fantasized about visiting Ramakrishna's house/temple in Kolkata: getting there, crossing the threshold, and then returning to the warmth of Fridtjov and Sonia's house in the freezing Nordic winter. How could I realize this fantasy in an era when tourism and air travel were non-existent?

The painter Willi Midelfart knew the ship-owner Wilhelm Wilhelmsen personally, whose fleet sailed in the East. He put in a good word for me, and in January 1956 I embarked as engine boy on the *Talabot*, a 16,000-ton vessel en route to Asia. I visited India and China, Japan and the Philippines, and learned the English that is spoken in ports and bars, among prostitutes and sailors from a hundred other ships, ready to offer you a drink or start a fight. I visited Ramakrishna's home in Kolkata and the Ramakrishna Missions which Vivekananda had established in Madras, Singapore, and Palembang. But I collided with absolute evil: racism. The fact of my black hair and dark skin legitimized outrage and bullying.

On board I faced the intolerance of the Scandinavian sailors towards the Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, or Chinese in the crew. They took particular pleasure in humiliating us. It was the moment of truth: accept or refuse. I learned to punch and be punched back even more. The experience of racism on my body was more than an earthquake. It became a chronic wound that still reopens today at the slightest reaction, even innocent, of the people I meet.

Today I am inclined to think that my travels and my decisions followed the call of a *nowhere*, the 'theatre'. Here a sense of belonging to a craft would constitute my identity and help me to exorcize the absolute evil of discrimination.

## The Mask

The only way not to be ethnically identified was to put on a mask. Which one should I choose? The artist's mask wasn't bad. An artist is not judged on the basis of ethnic features, but on aesthetic criteria. I didn't have the talent to be a writer or a poet, I didn't know how to paint or sculpt. But I could become a theatre director. Seated, with a cigarette between my fingers, I would give directions to the actors who would hasten to execute them. Such an artistic identity suited my abilities, or lack of them.

I didn't choose theatre out of vocation, of a need to express myself, out of creative urgency or originality. Theatre was an alibi, a refuge to live my condition of stranger in a world that often denied me the right to be a foreigner and remain so. I justified my sudden decision with rational arguments and with political beliefs: theatre could change society. At the time I believed it deeply. It was the moment in which Bertolt Brecht's artistic and ideological impact was beginning to shake the European theatre system.

I was finishing university and my friends assumed that I would choose to teach in a high school in Oslo. My unexpected decision to study theatre in Poland baffled them. It was incomprehensible that I wanted to go back to studying for four years in a communist regime, without economic resources and with no knowledge of the language.

For Vera, my mother, nothing was impossible for her son. I sent her certificates from the University of Oslo and letters of recommendation from my professors. She achieved the impossible. I obtained a scholarship for Poland from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She probably knew the people who could decide.

I left Norway in June 1960, when the nights exude light. I hitchhiked across Europe and in Brindisi, southern Italy, boarded a ship bound for Haifa, Israel. I wanted to stay on a kibbutz until the official decision of the Italian Ministry. It arrived six months later, at the end of December. I had received a scholarship from the University of Warsaw to study the influence of Stanislaw Przybyszewski – husband of

the Norwegian pianist Dagny Juel – on the Scandinavian artists in Berlin, including Edward Munch and August Strindberg. At twenty-four, I began a new life as an apprentice artist. I dreamed of digging into the sadness of the world to extract from it a practice of freedom, once again starting from a situation of stupidity: I didn't know a single word of Polish, the language which would help me to gain knowledge.

## On My Knees

The Amazonian jungle does not say, 'I exist and grow because I believe in communism and in the victory of the proletariat,' or 'Do not covet your neighbour's wife, and you will go to Heaven.' The jungle uses all its energies to grow and not perish. A theatre performance must also contain this imperious will to aimless existence and the need to *be-in-life*. I learned this in Poland.

I arrived there in January 1961. The country was firmly controlled by the Soviet Union, and Russian was the only foreign language studied at school. French was sometimes known among the older generation since it had been the intellectual's language before the Soviet occupation in 1945. With French and a few words of Russian that my communist zeal had taught me, I spent the first two months changing the terms of my visa. I had to get accepted at the State Theatre School, even though my scholarship was for the philology department of the University of Warsaw, where my professor was the well-known critic Jan Kott.

The entrance exam to the theatre school was held in the autumn and it was now January. I managed to convince Bohdan Korzeniewski, the Dean of the Directing Department, who spoke perfect French, to let me pass the exam as an *externist*. In two weeks, I prepared my project of *mise en scène*: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

I slipped into the compact greyness of everyday life in a communist regime: queues in front of shops and lengthy bureaucracy. But theatre performances were erupting volcanoes, the student cabarets an irruption of double meanings and fantasy, and films by

young directors were conquering the screens of the world – Wajda, Kawalerowicz, the young Polanski. Poets and writers gathered in clubs and restaurants, discussing – in cryptic terms – themselves and their great alter ego: motherland Poland. As a foreigner, a rare animal, I was welcomed everywhere. Mumbling *prze, szczy, ści*, I set about gathering information for an issue on Polish theatre for the Italian journal *Sipario*. My irregular attendance at the theatre school was tolerated. My scholarship had been renewed for another year.

Unfortunately, the blind horse galloping inside me believed in justice, and encountered everywhere corruption, narrow-minded bureaucracy, arrogance, and censorship. I felt ashamed to discover that the people I met were forced into hypocrisy, with a sense of apprehension and suspicion among informers and secret police. Was this the communist society with its *new* men and women I had believed in? The flying carpet of my political ideals lost altitude and crashed to the ground like a rag. Once again on my knees, I observed the world from this perspective.

I decided to quit the theatre school, to break up with Lilka, my Polish girlfriend, and get away from my friends in Warsaw. I retired to Opole, a Silesian town of 60,000 inhabitants, to the unknown and tiny Teatr 13 Rzędów, directed by Jerzy Grotowski and Ludwik Flaszen. Together with the young architect Jerzy Gurawski – all of them not yet thirty – and an ensemble of professional actors, it was one of two theatres supported by the authorities. For three years, constantly questioning the reasons for my decision and its meaning for my life, I witnessed the way Jerzy Grotowski materialized the Theatre's New Testament. In that small space, without us being aware of it, one of the most radical revolutions of the century was taking place. His performances broke down the separation between stage and audience, mixing actors and spectators in a single ensemble, distilling archetypal situations from the classic Polish texts by Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Wyspiański and grafting them onto the experiences of contemporary history.

The 200 pages of my book *Land of Ashes and Diamonds* recount the earthquake I experienced

in Poland, the loss of my political beliefs, and the awareness that injustice – like racism – is the sleepless night in which the dreams we have during the blinding light of day are hopelessly shattered. How can one believe in a regime that denies a passport to its citizens? Many years later I was able to formulate the consequences of my fall to my knees in Poland and the loss of my political ideals: theatre is politics by other means – those of Beauty. What is Beauty?

At that time Beauty was two performances, both directed by Grotowski. I had watched them grow day by day as an assistant director: *Akropolis* by Wyspiański, and *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Marlowe. I experienced on my body that Beauty – truth that burns like a fleeting flame – can be one of the theatre's possibilities. This is the reason why I fought with all my might to protect Grotowski and his theatre from the threat of closure that hung over them. Thanks to my Italian passport, I was able to travel abroad spreading information, publishing articles, telling theatre people, artists, and university teachers and students about Teatr 13 Rzędów ('Thirteen Rows'), and meeting personalities who could write a letter of support for the tiny and unknown theatre in Opole.

Grotowski's performances did not attract many spectators. This was the argument of the Communist Party secretary in Opole, who was hostile to him. The workers were not interested in his formal experiments. My desire to defend Grotowski, Flaszen, and their actors arose from my need for elementary justice. Even in my nothingness, I wanted to do my best. In 1963, I finished a book on Grotowski in French that I passed around in typescript among the people I met in Europe. The title was an appeal pointing a path: *In Search of a Lost Theatre: A Proposal by the Polish Avant-Garde*. It was published in 1965 in Hungary and Italy.

Poland taught me to experience theatre as a defence of the islet of freedom that we are capable of building for ourselves. Under this strict communist regime, with censorship and self-censorship, restrictions, and closed borders, the example of many artists and the daily action of Jerzy Grotowski, Ludwik Flaszen, and their actors taught me thousands of

subterfuges and unimaginable tricks to defend this islet of freedom. I became aware that in our craft there exists a super-ego, a dimension that transcends fear, insecurity – a financial interest and survival instinct. Theatre is physicality that can hide or disclose invisible thought, body/mind that dances, sweat and drool, engaged tensions, stifled cries and shrieked whispers, somatic empathy, aesthetic commotion. Theatre is corporeal and mental symbiosis. But without *metaphysics*, without a vision that goes beyond the performance and its immediate effects, and without a fierce need for inner freedom, theatre has no wings to fly.

For all this I am grateful to Jerzy Grotowski and his actors. Thanks to him, this very theatre's double reality took up residence in my organism. I am grateful to him for showing me that a director without loyal actors has no wings; that a director grows and soars with his ensemble through the choice of difficult action and repetition; that in our craft there is a primordial pact with the spectators, whom we are obliged to challenge. The most important lesson I learned from Grotowski was when he decided not to direct any more performances. He was thirty-seven. He never revealed the real reason: he just severed his ties with his actors. I discovered the reasons by chance after his death.

My years shared with Jerzy Grotowski as an unknown would-be director awakened in me energies I was unaware of. Grotowski's anonymous years, the success that suddenly fell upon him like a cross, the loss of his actors, his wandering in solitary exile, and the way he managed the fame he had acquired were essential warnings regarding my decisions to safeguard the vitality of Odin Teatret. I never stopped loving him as a skilled older brother and as a vulnerable friend to be protected. I feel immense gratitude towards him because he vaccinated me against the temptation to leave heirs (Figure 6).

In the spring of 1964, I was expelled from Poland as *persona non grata*. Norway had shaped me politically and culturally by extending the horizon of my inner geography. Poland added other values which became reflexes of the mind and action. Unwittingly,

I had developed a professional identity as a Polish director rooted in a history of commitment, exile, and uninterrupted resistance against any form of oppression. This Polish professional identity was foreign to the political and aesthetic models, mentality, and tendencies of European theatre of the time. It combined with my ethnic difference, about which friends who loved me – and above all the Norwegian sailors – had made me aware.

### A Wound that Unites

'At that time, I was wandering, hungry, in Christiania, that strange city that no one leaves without bearing its marks.' Like the protagonist of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, I remember, with an ache in my stomach, the first months of my return to Oslo in 1964. I had only one thought in my mind: to do theatre. I decided not to go back to Eigil Winje's workshop. I had to find a solution to my need to become a director. I was living at Fridtjov and Sonia Lehne's house. Their family had increased by twins and their financial conditions were not good. I would leave home early in the morning and wander the streets or take refuge at the University Library. Without money and with a permanent hunger.

There weren't many theatres in Oslo. I visited them one after another to ask for work and soon found myself outside their buildings after a brief conversation with their directors. What was my *curriculum vitae*? It consisted of one year at the theatre school in Warsaw, interrupted in order to assist a totally unknown young director with an unpronounceable name in a Polish provincial town. With good reason, no theatre director took me into consideration.

During the four years in Poland, under a regime denying freedom of expression, with censorship and Communist Party strictures to respect specific aesthetic criteria, I had never heard Grotowski or the other artists complain about their economic situation. Wages were secured and also sufficient grants for stage designers, choreographers, composers, programmes, and posters (which, graphically, were works of art in themselves).



**Figure 6.** Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba at Odin Teatret's thirtieth anniversary in Holstebro, 1994. Photograph: Fiora Bemporad. Courtesy of Fiora Bemporad and Odin Teatret.

In Norway, economics was the first barrier to be overcome. Theatre history had taught me that our craft has two cultures. On the one hand, the professional theatre, where actors could achieve economic independence thanks to private patrons, state subsidies, or the sale of tickets to an anonymous audience. On the other, the complementary culture of amateurs, where people pay from their own pockets, ensuring the continuity and autonomy of their need for theatre.

Stanislavsky had started out as an amateur. Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Sulzerzhitsky, and Michael Chekhov had filled their Studios with young people who started

out not thinking to become professionals. Craig, Yeats, Brecht, García Lorca, ostracized by the professional theatre, were able to be active thanks to the amateurs.

I contacted the many amateur companies in Oslo. No one was interested in welcoming me as a director.

Hunger and uncertainty induce divergent thinking. If others didn't want me in their theatres, I had to create one myself and dispose of it freely. What did I need? Money? A building? A text? No, I needed people in my same condition, eager to do theatre and excluded from doing so. Who were they? Those rejected by the State Theatre School.

Theatre is the men and women who do it.

I obtained a list with the addresses of the aspiring actors who had failed the entrance exam for the school. I rang each of them, made an appointment in a trendy café and introduced myself: a foreign director wanting to open an experimental theatre. Did they want to participate in this adventure?

Thus Odin Teatret was born in Oslo in early October 1964. I was a twenty-eight-year-old Italian-Norwegian-Pole, the young people around me all Norwegians under twenty. A shared wound united us: the experience of exclusion and a still unexpressed solidarity, guided by an emotional logic of survival rather than by artistic visions, intellectual constructions, or technical research.

### Hungry for Knowledge

Fifteen young people had agreed to follow me, but after a couple of weeks of work we were only five. We considered ourselves a small amateur group, we earned our living during the day and we met every evening from 5 to 10 p.m. in a schoolroom that a teacher friend of mine lent us. On Sunday we were free. We paid a small weekly amount towards our few expenses and took the luxury of using the time we needed to prepare our first performance. For eight months we rehearsed *Ornitofilene* ('The Friends of the Birds'), a play by Jens Bjørneboe, a well-known contemporary Norwegian author. It had fourteen characters, so I was obliged to adapt the text for the five actors at my disposal.

Just before the opening, one of the actresses took the State Theatre School exam and passed. We found ourselves among the rubble of many months of work. The four actors (Torgeir Wethal, Else Marie Laukvik, Tor Sannum, Anne Trine Grimnes) and I radically transformed and restructured what was left of the performance, imperturbably respecting the daily training routine. We lived as if it were our last day and as if we were eternal.

We knew two things: that we knew nothing, and that we couldn't count on anyone's help. Autodidacticism is a form of self-discipline – and also the freedom to choose one's teachers. Some of our teachers were

dead (Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Eisenstein, Dullin), some alive (in particular Grotowski and his actors); and then there was our stubbornness. Unwittingly, we pioneered an apprenticeship based essentially on doing, on action, on exercises inspired by books and sports, from what I had seen at the Warsaw theatre school and at Grotowski's theatre. We called it training. A few years later, in the early 1970s, we became a point of reference for theatre groups that I defined as 'Third Theatre': neither traditional nor avant-garde.

We passed on what we knew to each other. Else Marie Laukvik had danced classical ballet as a child and became its instructor. Tor Sannum, who was good at gymnastics, found himself in charge of acrobatics, or 'biomechanics', as I called it. Torgeir Wethal led a chain of physical exercises, many of which were taken from Grotowski's training. I took on the task of developing 'vocal fantasy' (the use of resonators I knew from theatre school and Grotowski's actors). I applied the descriptions of improvisation from the books by Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov, and the rhythmic and plastic exercises from the Warsaw theatre school. The three to four hours of daily exercises were done in silence, and we all alternated in the roles of learner and teacher. We managed to pass this didactic process to each new generation of Odin Teatret, although it was unusual for the time – more common to sports people and dancers than to future actors.

Theatre is a two-faced Janus: the artistic result visible to the spectators, and the creative process that is the actors' invisible universe. Training, understood as a learning practice through actions, is a concrete and dreamlike territory enabling us to meet ourselves and escape our limits, be blind to what surrounds us, and focus for days and days on a detail – to waver, fall, find unexpected strength to carry on, unsteady yet determined. In the time/space of training, body intelligence is put to the test and resistance to fatigue is forged, uncovering unexpected bursts of energy in exhaustion, detecting unexpected openings for imagination and following them without question. A continuous process lets the kin-aesthetic awareness transform the repetition of a limited number of formal/dynamic

patterns – the exercises – into improvisation-variation-invention. We are together, yet each actor follows this path alone. They discover their wings or stay on the ground. Simultaneously separated and connected.

All this happens without theories, explanations, or arguments to convince. Experimenting with each exercise in one's own body and pointing it out to others in silence is one of the many threads that has bound us for years. Thus grew Odin Teatret's work culture, whose roots lie in Eigil Winje's workshop in Oslo.

At that time, in 1964, there was only one model of theatre: a building in which professional actors, after finishing theatre school, interpreted texts. We didn't have a theatre building, so we presented our performance of *Ornitofilene* in gymnasiums, schools, museums, and libraries, sometimes in a church or in a factory hall. This was unusual in 1965–66 and was considered experimentalism. Our total lack of stage design was attributed to artistic originality and allowed us to tour throughout Scandinavia with barely a suitcase, thanks to friends who hosted us.

### Imagining Earthquakes

If they don't destroy you, difficulties test who you are, your intentions, your fears and strengths. I had experienced the dispossession of my mother tongue, the failure of my first love for which I had left my country, the disintegration of my political faith and the illusion of changing society, the loss of everything I possessed – the books and records and some clothes – when I was thrown out of Poland overnight, and above all there was the defeat of not finding work as a director in Norwegian theatres.

At the age of twenty-eight I wondered if, unconsciously or intuitively, I was not myself the cause of these upheavals in which I seemed to get lost and find myself with something unexpected. A particular way of imagining a drastic decision to trigger an event with unpredictable consequences was emerging in me. The earthquake was not a catastrophe if I could guess the meanings and possibilities of the demolishing force in the dancing ground.

It obliged me to go in sudden directions that revitalized my experience. The earthquake could become a growth strategy if I myself was the author, driven by the need to start from scratch, exploiting and renewing the wealth of my knowledge.

I made an apparently senseless choice: I abandoned Oslo, my close friends, the network of affective bonds and acquaintances that gave meaning to my life, my daily language – Norwegian – and the certainty of earning my bread as a high school teacher. I moved Odin Teatret to a foreign country, Denmark. Of my four actors, three left their families and safe daily life to follow me (Else Marie Laukvik, Anne Trine Grimnes, and Torgeir Wethal), together with the young administrator Agnete Strøm. We lost *Ornitofilene*, the performance we had built over the course of two years. I was learning the art of provoking unimaginable situations and collaborating with Chance.

### Birth of a Theatre Laboratory

Inger Landsted, a nurse who led a company of amateurs in Holstebro, was the main architect of the relocation of Odin Teatret from Norway to Denmark. We arrived there in June 1966 and a month later our theatre opened its doors in a school empty of students on holiday, not with a performance, but with a strange initiative that had not existed until then: a practical 'seminar' for actors and directors from all over Scandinavia lasting fourteen days. The very young actors of Odin Teatret and I held it, together with the unknown Polish director Jerzy Grotowski and his actor Ryszard Cieślak, the Polish mime Stanisław Brzozowski, and the Swiss opera singer Jolanda Rodio.

Holstebro had no theatre tradition. It was a town of 16,000 inhabitants, 350 kilometres from Copenhagen, the commercial centre of an agricultural region with serious development problems due to its peripheral position. Its most important workplace, a tobacco factory that fed more than 150 families, had just closed. There was not yet a high school, and the young people left to study and look for a job. This region, with an excessive number of elderly people and unskilled and unemployed



workers, did not attract experts or specialists – or, above all, investments and business. Mayor Kai K. Nielsen, a postman, and the municipal secretary Jens Johansen had the original idea that culture could draw doctors, teachers, and perhaps entrepreneurs to this remote part of Denmark. Advised by Poul Vad, a well-known writer and art expert from Copenhagen, they bought a statue by Giacometti, which, while waiting for a museum to be built, was placed outside the main church. The whole of Denmark giggled, and Holstebro became the laughing stock of the capital's press.

Inger Landsted had seen our *Ornitofilene* in a room at the Viborg museum, about fifty kilometres from Holstebro. It was during a tour of Odin Teatret organized by Christian Ludvigsen, a teacher at the University of Aarhus, who later became a literary advisor to our theatre. Back home, Inger picked up the phone, called the Mayor, whom she didn't know, and told him about her theatre experience. She underlined one detail: in one of my interviews, I had expressed a wish to leave Oslo and move to the provinces. Wouldn't it be a good idea to invite my theatre and me to Holstebro, which was interested in a cultural policy?

The unimaginable happened. The Mayor contacted me and suggested I bring the theatre to Holstebro. I accepted on the condition that I could take my actors with me.

I had to find a solution to the impossibility of presenting a performance immediately, and also to the long time needed to prepare a new one. I found it thanks to an unusual definition: ours was a 'theatre-laboratory'. When the Mayor asked me what this meant, I replied: 'A theatre that doesn't perform every evening.'

But if it doesn't do performances every day, what does this theatre do? I would struggle to find an active answer to this question over the years to come.

Odin Teatret as a laboratory had nothing to do with the 'laboratories' of the past, nor could it draw inspiration from them. The Studios founded by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, then the American Laboratory Theater of Richard Boleslavski and Maria Uspenskaya (who

were the first officially to use this term [outside Russia]), were theatre schools in which teachers taught students how to act in a different way from the theatres of their epoch. They were alternative schools.

When, in October 1962, Grotowski affirmed that his Teatr 13 Rzędów was a 'laboratory', he had actors trained in theatre schools and experimented with texts by playwrights such as Ionesco, Mayakovsky, Cocteau, and Kalidasa. Odin Teatret presumptuously defined itself as a laboratory with aspiring actors rejected from a theatre school. A laboratory brings together experts whose experience is the premise for research and improvement in a specific field. This was certainly not what my actors and I could guarantee, since we were just starting out. Ignorance, the hunger for knowledge, and the obstinacy not to give in were the substance of our laboratory.

This starting point determined an autodidactic way of preparing our actors through an exercise-based physical and vocal apprenticeship, a training that was a dynamic and active kinaesthetic process. Learning by doing. This type of apprenticeship became a model a few years later with the flourishing of theatre groups, which often called themselves laboratories, workshops, or open or free theatres.

Once again, the Danish capital's press scoffed at the foolish provincial people in Holstebro who had let themselves be duped by foreigners. As in Andersen's fairy tale, they had been sold an invisible theatre: a laboratory that didn't produce performances.

### **A Theatre Laboratory: A New System of Production**

With no available theatre building in town, the municipality of Holstebro offered Odin Teatret a disused farm about one and a half kilometres from the centre. Inspired by the Russian psycholinguist Alexander Luria's research on memory and perception, I turned the cowshed into a room painted entirely black, ceiling and floor included. In such a space, actors and spectators had difficulty orienting themselves. I believe it was the first

'black box', which became commonplace a decade later.

Migration had disrupted the lives of everyone at Odin Teatret. My three actors and I had detached ourselves from family and friends, from the language we spoke, from the familiar cultural environment of the capital of Norway. Now we had to survive in an unknown country, with a different culture and with no possibility of making ourselves understood by the spectators of a small provincial town. This was, apparently, a situation of creative unfeasibility. We were foreigners, and we had to integrate, thanks to our foreign characteristics. This was the problem I tried to solve through a series of activities totally unrelated to the theatre, whose main purpose was the evening performance.

At that time in Denmark, people discussed the possibility of establishing a Scandinavian Union, as opposed to the emerging European Community. I thought of developing Odin Teatret as a laboratory with actors from all the Nordic countries, thus converting my handicapped situation into a political-cultural proposal. Young aspiring actors from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark arrived at our theatre. Now, in addition to not being understood by the spectators, we didn't even have a common language.

From this amputation of language, which implies the impossibility of communicating an intelligible text, the artistic identity of Odin Teatret developed. For years, for a few hours each day, in training and rehearsals, our actors concentrated on distilling and intensifying the other languages of human communication. On the one hand, the sonority of the voice, the musicality, the inflection, the cadences of speaking, and the enchantment of the acoustic variations; on the other, the tensions of physical postures, the dynamisms, the changes of rhythm – a conscious physical-dynamic composition that provoked sensory effects and kinaesthetic empathy in the viewers. The actors learned to develop an ability to compose physical and sound signs, which, by formalizing and estranging their behaviour, evoked associations, ideas, and sensations in the spectators. Although the latter did not understand the actors' words, the performance aroused a

resonance in their inner world, in their sensory and biographical memory.

Odin Teatret's professional identity was not only linked to the fact that actors from different Scandinavian countries enacted performances without a common language between them or with the spectators. More decisive was the way of conceiving our economic survival by developing a system of production that was not limited exclusively to creating and selling performances.

I began to start initiatives that did not belong to the obvious purpose of a theatre: the representation of a text. I published a journal, *Teatrets Teori og Teknikk*; one of the issues was a book: *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski and other writers [translated by Judy Barba]. I promoted sociological surveys on spectators, opened a film club, and began to involve different institutions and organizations in 'cultural weeks'. One initiative that had profound consequences was the realization of 'seminars': practical courses for graduated actors engaged in professional theatres.

In 1966 there were no such courses (later called 'workshops'). Nor was it easy to convince well-known actors to pass on their 'secrets' and methods to other professionals, especially in an unknown provincial Danish theatre. This was due to a sort of sceptical modesty, but also personal insecurity in showing what one of these actors called 'personal tricks'. Many refused. Between 1966 and 1970, those who accepted were opera singers, pantomime experts such as Stanisław Brzozowski, or outsiders such as Étienne Decroux, Jacques Lecoq, Joe Chaikin and Ellen Stewart, La Mama, as well as Grotowski with his actor Ryszard Cieślak, then Dario Fo and the brothers Carlo and Romano Colombaioni, young clowns who became famous in the following years thanks to a film by Fellini.

### Dissolution of Odin Teatret

We rehearsed our second performance, *Kaspariana*, in our 'black room' in Holstebro for eight months. I had adapted a long poem by the Danish writer Ole Sarvig about Kaspar Hauser, the 'wild boy' who appeared in Nuremberg in 1820 and was mysteriously

murdered a few years later. We presented it about sixty times all over Scandinavia, and were invited to the Venice Biennale in 1967. I had the feeling that Odin Teatret, despite its hybrid and multilingual identity, was consolidating its foundations in an anonymous provincial town.

The third performance, *Ferai*, was also prepared for eight months and premiered in 1969. *Ferai* intertwined the Greek myth of Alcestis, who sacrificed herself for her husband Admetos, with the biography of the mythically inflexible Viking king Frode Fredegod. The play was by the Danish writer Peter Seeberg, but all the dramaturgical structure was the result of a close collaboration between Christian Ludvigsen, the literary advisor of Odin Teatret, and me. Christian had been, and continued to be, the prime mover in helping Odin Teatret to take root in the theatrical and artistic environment in Denmark.

*Ferai* was invited to Paris at the Théâtre des Nations and attained an enormous success that found me unprepared. Many festivals invited Odin Teatret and for a year and a half we toured Europe amidst the political and social repercussions of 1968, aesthetic upheavals and tensions, an explosion of new theatrical forms, and a kaleidoscopic flowering of group theatres. A whole generation seemed to choose theatre as a vehicle for changing society or themselves. The points of reference were Brecht and Dario Fo for the 'revolutionaries', Artaud and Grotowski for the 'mystics'.

I was worried. My actors were young and had few years of experience. My ideal was the traditional Asian actor who commits his whole life to reach the essence: immobility, which is a volcanic implosion of energy. How would my actors react to popularity? Would they become big-headed? Success and power change people, rarely for the better.

I had a distressing example before me. That of the person who had helped me to find my theatrical path: Jerzy Grotowski. When Grotowski achieved success in 1966, his theatre became a worldwide reference, but also began to fall apart. In 1970, after only ten years as a director, Grotowski decided not to direct performances any more and

separated from his actors. He brought together some young people and began a journey that distanced him more and more from theatre and spectators.

I was scared that my actors would be influenced by success and lose the attitude that made me appreciate and love them: self-sacrifice, humility, and a discipline that led to creative autonomy. I was not interested in 'research', but in strengthening my precarious 'floating island' made up of actors with different languages. I dreamed of gaining knowledge and creative freedom for each of us and for the whole group. Above all, I wanted to find ways to safeguard our economic independence, not only through performances, but also by promoting initiatives that could justify the label 'laboratory theatre'.

So I dissolved Odin Teatret at the end of 1970. I explained that I wanted to continue, but with totally different and more rigorous working conditions. Five actors left; three accepted: Else Marie Laukvik, Torgeir Wethal, and Iben Nagel Rasmussen. Together with them, I refounded Odin Teatret, recruiting young people and reshaping the apprenticeship process.

This second birth, or earthquake, regenerated Odin Teatret: veterans and newcomers were all beginners. I was striving to find again a level of ignorance by trying to forget what I knew in order to detect other ways of preparing actors in the training and in the composition of a performance.

### **What is an Actor without a Performance?**

Entropy is always lurking, the slow suffocation, the self-satisfied habit. All human beings have this tendency. It belongs to our nature, to our nervous system, to our brain.

I caused the third earthquake in 1974. Odin Teatret had once again been successful with *My Father's House* and, over eighteen months, we performed it 322 times throughout Europe.

I was aware of the need for a shock to all of us in the group, to our habits, practices, and certainties. We had to rekindle our *mask marriage*, not just for each of us, but between us and our work environment, practically reflecting on an individual level how to implement

the continuity and repetition that open the door to the unexpected.

I decided to prepare the new performance in a village in southern Italy, not far from the place where I had spent my childhood. I imagined that the different living conditions, the climate, the colours, the food, and, above all, the fact that we could no longer feel protected by the workroom, which was our fortress, would have consequences.

In May 1974 the entire Odin Teatret moved from Holstebro to Carpignano in Apulia. It was my intention to stay five months and finish a performance about the Spanish Conquistadors' search for Eldorado. We lived in a rented palace in the middle of the town. We trained in the courtyard and the rehearsals took place in a large room with deafening acoustics. The villagers came with chairs, and stayed for hours watching us, especially the elderly and children. In the morning at dawn we went to the fields for voice training. The peasants on their way to work asked: 'Who are you, what are you doing? Ah, you are actors . . . so you are going to show us something.' But we had no performance to show them.

What are actors without a performance? Do they have an identity? A consistency? Can they say and demonstrate that 'We are actors'? How?

I decided to interrupt rehearsals and confront this question: Does the actor have a professional identity even without a performance? I thought about what I considered the culture of a theatre group: our training. I took some exercises, assembled them into a succession of scenes, and called it *The Book of Dances*, accompanied by improvisations and songs. This performance – with no story, but full of dynamism, vitality, and presence – was proof that a theatre group has a technical identity and a professional culture. This culture was embodied by the actors, who knew how to manifest it and structure it into an expression that seduces the viewers.

In Carpignano, a village of 2,000 inhabitants, the people were poor. Half of the men had emigrated to find work. I didn't want any money from the people, but nor did I want to work for free. So I came up with the idea of

'barter', of a fair exchange: we could exchange culture (Figure 7). Odin Teatret introduced itself through its theatre group culture, our training. The local inhabitants responded with songs, dances, episodes from their lives, and simulacra of celebrations (Figures 8 and 9).

The earthquake of the displacement of our group to another context to stimulate our rehearsals slipped into another dimension. It forced us to rethink who we were, what our relationship was to the *mask*, to our craft and working environment, and to the people who cared about us – the spectators. There, in 1974, Odin Teatret began something unimaginable that I would never have been able to premeditate: street theatre, parades, clown shows.

It was one of the most subversive moments in our group's history, in a rapid simultaneity of disintegration and refoundation. My actors were technically prepared to present a performance rehearsed for months and intended for a limited number of spectators in an enclosed and protected space. Now they were also able to improvise in squares, streets – public spaces in a village or a city where people go to the post office, to a restaurant, or to visit a friend in hospital. Passers-by do not consider themselves spectators; it is the way of acting by the actors that transforms them into spectators. How can one attract their attention and interest them enough to stop and observe? How can one develop an 'attraction' in a few minutes, sometimes in a few seconds, so that the passers-by linger momentarily and then continue on their way?

Thus Odin Teatret developed the co-existence of two different techniques and possibilities of relationships: indoors with spectators who have consciously come to see us, offering their time and money; and in the open air with casual passers-by whom the actor induces to become spectators (Figure 10).

### Walling up the Door of the Theatre

Once again, the time came to cut down the tree and replant it. In 1978 I gathered the actors together and said: 'You cannot come to the



**Figure 7.** Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Jan Torp in a barter in Carpignano, 1974. Photograph: Tony D'Urso. Courtesy of Tony D'Urso and Odin Teatret.

theatre for three months. You will receive your salary, you can do whatever you wish, except what you are used to doing – working in this building.'

Almost all of them left for distant countries – Brazil, India, Bali, Haiti – and learned traditional theatre forms: Balinese *topeng*, Indian *kathakali*, Afro-Brazilian *capoeira*.

I never wanted my actors to practise traditional forms from other cultures. They had the training they themselves had developed, building a professional identity through a

personal process. A stay of two or three months to study traditional forms of distant theatres was something that, in my eyes, offended the dignity of the craft. I knew how many years it takes an Asian actor to reach the highest level of *marriage with the mask*, bringing it to life.

Hesitantly, I let the actors perform their exercises from our theatre in their daily training, but also sequences from the scores learned on their travels. Paradoxically, I began to glimpse similarities. It was my first



**Figure 8.** Barter in Peru, 1978. Photograph: Peter Bysted. Courtesy of Peter Bysted and Odin Teatret.



**Figure 9.** *Anabasis* in Ayacucho, Peru, 1978. Photograph: Tony D'Urso. Courtesy of Tony D'Urso and Odin Teatret.

intuition of what a couple of years later I called 'Theatre Anthropology': a comparative study of different styles of the actor and dancer, concentrating on the common technical



**Figure 10.** Barter in Cuba, 2002. Photograph courtesy of Odin Teatret.

principles that determine their variety and difference.

This was the earthquake when I walled up the door of the theatre used by the actors. When they came back, they found a new entrance. Every stratagem was good to upset old habits.

### Elimination of Odin Teatret's Centrality

Over the years, any theatre group begins to bleed. The founding director or the veteran actors leave. The stimuli that the group itself produces are not strong enough to satisfy the need for new challenges and inspirations. If a revitalization of stimuli does not take place within the group itself, people look for it elsewhere.

Iben Nagel Rasmussen belonged to the second generation of Odin Teatret actors after the exodus from Norway to Denmark in 1966. During her seminars, she had met a few interesting young actors and wanted to start a group with them. Iben had broken new ground in training, performances, and barter. Odin Teatret had grown thanks to her growth. Now, in order to follow her personal development, she would lose the small garden we had cultivated together. I found it unfair.

I proposed to Iben that she create her own group in Holstebro but independent of Odin Teatret. She could use the space in our theatre, and she herself would receive half a salary. She was free to follow the path she wanted with whomever she chose. She would have

been part of the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium and no longer of Odin Teatret.

It should be remembered that Odin Teatret, as an institution receiving grants from the municipality and the state, had a subtitle: Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, or 'Scandinavian Laboratory Theatre'.

The earthquake consisted of transforming the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium – the subtitle – into a legal institution, dissolving Odin Teatret within it as one of many activities. In addition to Odin Teatret, the autonomous nuclei were Farfa (Iben's group), Basho (with Toni Cots), Canada Project (with Richard Fowler), the film production company headed by Torgeir Wethal, and the publishing house of which I was in charge. Later, the Holstebro Festuge (Odin's triennial festival week), the ISTA, and the Odin Teatret Archive were added.

This earthquake destroyed the centrality of Odin Teatret and produced a constellation of autonomous and diverse planets and satellites within an institution called Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, of which I was the director.

The immediate consequence was the growth of an unexpected extroverted and introverted dynamic. Since 1980 the Odin actors have carried out individual autonomous projects in which they propelled their individualisms and interests, which diverged from those of the work with me in Odin Teatret. It was a centrifugal and personalized explosion that corresponded to a centripetal movement back to the collective environment for a new performance, for tours, or for vast joint projects such as the Festuge, the festival week in Holstebro (Figures 11 and 12). The continuity of our *marriage with the mask* alternated periods of the actors' individual projects under their own name, with periods of shared activity with Odin Teatret. During this new stable structure, interspersed with interruptions, my personal project of ISTA (the International School of Theatre Anthropology) took off, assisted by the Catalan actor Toni Cots.

### Disappearing for Twelve Months

A sudden earthquake paradoxically consolidated this multiplicity and these kaleidoscopic dynamics, in which individual

collaboration between different activities required constant adjustments and solutions. It took place in 1982 and the reasons were once again personal.

In our theatre, work was going well, couples thrived, and children were born. Now some of them were separating and had found other partners within the group. This is normal in a theatre group. This time, however, I felt uncomfortable. I was not able to explain why. It wasn't due to any less intensity in commitment or a moralizing attitude. Mine was an irrational reaction.

One day, returning from a journey, the plane lost altitude and began to fall. 'It's the end,' I thought; instead it was just turbulence. As soon as I put my feet on the ground, an idea assailed me: to get away from Odin Teatret for a year. I gathered the actors together and told them of my decision. I encouraged the youngest of them to revolt and sweep away old routines. I wanted to be surprised on my return. I disappeared for twelve months.

On my return, many changes had occurred. There were conflicts between generations and couples, some so incurable that some actors had left the theatre. It was, above all, painful to resolve the question: Who are Odin Teatret? While I was away, Else Marie Laukvik, actress and founder of our theatre in Oslo, had staged a play with three young actors – Silvia Ricciar-delli, Ulrik Skeel and Julia Varley – and presented it on tour as Odin Teatret.

In the eyes of the spectators, is any performance by the actors an Odin performance? Or is it just the performance that the director Eugenio Barba creates together with his actors? I meant that the latter was the correct answer. Any of the actors could put on a play, but with his or her name, so that the spectators would have no doubts.

Once again there was a proliferation of initiatives. Today, every Odin Teatret actor has his or her own group with recurring initiatives, and directs performances, always with his or her personal name within the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium.

In 1963, I described Jerzy Grotowski's and Ludwik Flaszen's Teatr 13 Rzędów in my book *In Search of a Lost Theatre*:



**Figure 11.** Odin Teatret actors encourage the Danish group Akadenwa climbing Holstebro's Town Hall during the Holstebro Festuge, 1991. Photograph: Torben Huss. Courtesy of Torben Huss and Odin Teatret.





**Figure 12.** The Holstebro Festuge barter parade going to Borbjerg, 1998. Photograph: Fiora Bemporad. Courtesy of Fiora Bemporad and Odin Teatret.

Theatre can be compared to an anthropological expedition. It leaves the civilized regions to enter the heart of the virgin forest; it renounces the clearly defined values of reason to face the darkness of the collective imagination. It is in this darkness that our culture, our language, and our imagination sink their roots.

In a theatre group, reality is more prosaic. The alternation of daily tasks, and the repetition of effective solutions in order to survive materially and artistically, collide with external circumstances. Obligations, obstacles, and unforeseen events open up unexpected opportunities and unusual ways of *learning to learn*, thus revitalizing the *sense* of the journey and the justifications and superstitions that accompany it. Acclimatization to difficult but familiar and repeated solutions slowly atrophy a theatre group. Hence the vital force of an earthquake's destabilizing effect.

Earthquake is not a recipe. It is an individual need. It can be a challenge to oneself, the attitude of being on the offensive so as not to

stagnate at the same level, a provocation towards others, a rejection of the status quo. Each theatre group should be able to create its own earthquakes to keep alive its *marriage with the mask*, with its work environment, and with the personal sense of his or her choice to do theatre.

I return to the Balinese actor of *topeng* and the metaphor of *marrying a mask*. Marriage involves the continuity of a dialogue, the growth of trust, and a kind of love that is admiration and gratitude, the ability to resolve conflicts and offences and to overcome discouragement. It weaves a professional bond impregnated with an emotional, intellectual, and physical commitment in which reciprocity is sometimes experienced as a profound union, at other times as irritation and a desire to distance oneself.

This is what makes me accept theatre groups – the islands of the Third Theatre's archipelago. In their history, in their professional metabolism, in their passion for infusing life and value into theatre, I find Odin

Teatret's *soul*: the emotional and technical culture that has defined my life and that of my actors.

Goethe said that 'the actor's career develops in public, but his art develops in private'. In reality, in the intimacy of a marriage. But as García Lorca, in *El Público*, warns us: '*Yo vi una vez a un hombre devorado por la máscara* [I once saw a man devoured by his mask].'

### **Losing Sense is to Lose the Soul**

Theatre groups may also die from loss of sense. The intimate reasons that keep people together are hit by a virus that destroys the sense, the trust, the condition of being in love with the work and companions, the illusion that nothing is impossible. 'The impossible is the possible that requires more time and preparation,' Fridtjov Nansen used to say.

How did I keep my sense alive in theatre for more than sixty years?

My sense remained alive because it changed. Sometimes several contradictory senses co-existed. Sense had an implicit purpose that I was unable to justify according to criteria of utility and logic. Sense was a reason that belonged to me alone; it convinced me, and gave me a pleasure that I had never experienced before. The objective of my sense, like 'falling in love', changed. But the commitment to fight, the desire not to give in to the arrogance of life and humans, and the admiration for the humility in the work of my actors, remained the same.

I decided to do theatre because for me the sense was to change society and to reject discrimination.

In Poland, the sense became the defence of a particular theatre, that of Grotowski, which I considered an island of freedom.

When I founded Odin Teatret the sense was revolt; I didn't want to accept what others imposed on me: 'You can't work in theatre because you don't have the ability.'

Then the sense became how to learn to teach, how to guide young people to conquer knowledge, technique, and their and my wholeness and difference as individuals.

Then the sense became how to turn my theatre into a Trojan horse, with politicians

giving me grants to make culture, while I did politics by other means.

Then the sense became how to create alliances between theatre groups, safeguard our differences and find common points of interest, invent projects with interferences, colours, and imagination, and how to be able to acquire strength, impact, and prestige beyond individual possibilities. It was the awareness of the multifaceted reality of the Third Theatre, the recognition of an ethos, apprenticeship processes, and purposes totally distinct from traditional and experimental theatre.

Then I found the sense in the comparative study of the common technical principles, which are the roots of the different acting styles. It was the new field of Theatre Anthropology and the creation of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (Figures 13 and 14).

Then the sense became how to leave a legacy: the concrete proof that it is possible to act even if you have the feeling of operating in isolation and under anonymous and peripheral conditions. The legacy to be left consisted of the history of Odin Teatret, not for its originality or method, but because a few excluded people, working tirelessly and never losing their sense, had gained respect and imposed their difference. We had demonstrated that there exists a 'tradition of the impossible' whose ancestors were, for me, Stanislavsky and Isadora Duncan.

Then the sense became my refusal to have direct heirs. I strove to transform my theatre into a plurality of divergent visions and practices which shared a spirit of adventure, a connection to the town of Holstebro, and my favourite saying: seven times on the floor, eight times on your feet.

I have always kept in mind the advice of the Vietnamese General Giáp, the first to defeat the army of the most powerful nation in the world, the United States: 'Never move from attack to defence: it is the beginning of defeat.' Peter Brook says it in more sober words: 'Staying at the same level means declining.'

### **Origins**

The decision to do theatre is murky. Its roots sink into a particular intimacy. We cannot



**Figure 13.** The Odissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi and Eugenio Barba with the participants of the Bologna ISTA, 1990. Photograph: Tony D'Urso. Courtesy of Tony D'Urso and Odin Teatret.

separate this choice from the consciousness of our body. We pretend that our motives begin in an autonomous sphere, in the mind, even in the spirit. We embellish our rationalizations and alibis with social, philosophical, political, or artistic justifications.

The origin of our theatre journey lies in a certain type of perception of ourselves, in the way we see ourselves with our eyes closed, how we imagine we appear in the eyes of others, and how we want others and the world to slide or break into our intimacy (Figures 15 and 16).

Our decision to do theatre is linked to the way our parents, brothers and sisters, schoolmates, teachers, women and men we have desired or admired, have embraced or *not* embraced us. How accepted we felt and how

much we accepted others, if we have experienced our humiliations and our diversity as inferiority or as a challenge. Whether we consider our body a friend or an enemy.

It is our personal wounds that give wings to the theatre and transcend its usual function of entertainment, didacticism, or aesthetic research. It is the awareness of our marked body – exposed to others or hidden away in the recesses of our inner selves – that makes us aware of our *being-in-life*. It is not a display of difference and of feeling foreign, nor a tactic of accusation or compassion. It is the moment of union. Theatre transforms you into an *individual* – not divided.

In its highest degree of energy exchange, the decision to make theatre coincides with two complementary types of relationship



**Figure 14.** The Brazilian actor-dancer Augusto Omolu and Eugenio Barba during an ISTA work demonstration in Londrina, Brazil, 1994. Photograph: Bernd Uhlig. Courtesy of Bernd Uhlig and Odin Teatret.

between actor-director and actor-spectator. This exchange overcomes identity and egocentrism, and becomes intensified presence: *I am, you are.*

Does my decision to do theatre depend on the fact that, as an emigrant, I have lost my mother tongue? Or did I unknowingly want to realize the dream of uprooting myself and inheriting all the cultures on the planet?

I will ask Azrael, the angel of death. He will hand me a mirror, and I will recognize in my actions and thoughts the energies, silences, voices, and gestures of presences that are a part of me: Sonia and Fridtjov Lehne, the communist family who adopted me in Norway; Eigil Winje, who taught me the ethic of a job well done; Christian Ludvigsen and Nando Tavian, my wise and much loved advisors; the dedication of my actors, the affection of Odin Teatret's 'secret people', the coherence of the inhabitants of the islands of the Third Theatre. And three women with the firmness of a mountain who are also a part of me.

I met Judy Jones in Warsaw in 1963 during a UNESCO congress where she was a secretary and translator. She was English with a shy and reserved personality, ready to accompany me in my rash decisions. So we drove to India, and together we shared the amazement of the discovery of *kathakali*. We got married, and in Oslo we founded together Odin Teatret in 1964, gathering would-be actors. She gave me the freedom to pursue my obsessions and fulfil them without worrying about money – which she earned as a secretary and interpreter, taking care of our children while I was away on long tours and stays abroad. She has worked at home to this day for Odin Teatret, without ever receiving a fee or recognition. Judy was the hidden architect of Grotowski's entry into theatre history, when in 1967 she translated into English the texts of the journal *Teatrets Teori og Teknikk*, No. 7, which I published as a book titled *Towards a Poor Theatre*. She typed while she was pregnant, retching from morning



**Figure 15.** Odin Teatret visits Pablo Neruda's house in Isla Negra, Chile, 1988. Photograph: Tony D'Urso. Courtesy of Tony D'Urso and Odin Teatret.

sickness. It was she who prompted me to mortgage our house in order to get a loan from the bank and build the venue for the Odin Teatret Archive. She convinced me by saying, 'You started with nothing, and now you hesitate when you own a house?'

Julia Varley, not very talkative, but efficient and industrious, was of English origins, an actress in a Milan group, the Teatro del Drago. She arrived at Odin Teatret in 1976. She became an actress-director, set up one initiative after another, participated in the take-off of the Magdalena Project, an international network of women in theatre, and took care of the new generations. Over the years, by my side, she shouldered the burden and responsibility of holding together the web of the dynamic environment of the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium/Odin Teatret, strengthening and protecting each of the threads, veterans and novices alike. We are united by work,

projects, budget estimates, attention to detail, and the Barba Varley Foundation, the programmes of the performances to be written, corrected, and printed, and the regular contacts with the extensive network of scholars, organizers, and the numerous 'secret people' of Odin Teatret, the creation of the *Journal of Theatre Anthropology*, the making of films on Theatre Anthropology, and the performances that for me, as a director, live during the rehearsals, and for her, as an actress, in front of the spectators.

Finally, Vera Gaeta, my mother, a war widow at the age of thirty-three, whose good humour and irony illuminated the loneliness and poverty into which our family had fallen. June 1952: the school holidays had begun. I was fifteen. I wanted to hitchhike abroad, but I was too young to have a passport. I asked my mother's permission to travel in Italy. I explained to her that I didn't need any money.



**Figure 16.** Latin American friends celebrate Odin Teatret's thirtieth anniversary in Holstebro, 1994. *From left:* Paulo Dourado, Santiago Garcia, Luis Otavio Burnier, Miguel Rubio, Mario Delgado, Julia Varley, Raquel Carrió, Eugenio Barba, Guadalupe Dominguez, Nitis Jacón, Fernando de Ita, Raúl Osorio, and Rebeca Ghigliotto. Photograph: Fiora Bemporad. Courtesy of Fiora Bemporad and Odin Teatret.

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My mother granted my wish and gave me an envelope: inside it were 30,000 lire. 'It's not much, but my blessing goes with you,' she told me with a mischievous smile. There were still no motorways in Italy, a country humiliated by war, but old trucks and small Fiat cars

stopped when I raised my arm at the side of the road. People offered me food and money to buy a drink. They were my first lessons in human generosity.

I handed the envelope back unopened to Vera, my first teacher of the impossible.