

THE TREE

Dedicated to Inger Landsted

Actors: Luis Alonso, Parvathy Baul, I Wayan Bawa, Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Elena Floris, Donald Kitt, Carolina Pizarro, Fausto Pro, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Julia Varley - **Scenic space:** Luca Ruzza, Odin Teatret - **Lighting designer:** Luca Ruzza, OpenLab Company - **Lighting adviser:** Jesper Kongshaug - **Tree conception and realisation:** Giovanna Amoroso and Istvan Zimmermann, Plastikart - **Software programming:** Massimo Zomparelli - **Costumes and props:** Odin Teatret - **Poster:** Barbara Kaczmarek - **Musical director:** Elena Floris - **Technical director:** Fausto Pro - **Puppets:** Niels Kristian Brinth, Fabio Butera, Samir Muhamad, I Gusti Made Lod - **Dolls' heads:** Signe Herlevsen - **Photos:** Rina Skeel - **Dramaturg:** Thomas Bredsdorff - **Literary adviser:** Nando Tavian - **Text:** Odin Teatret - **Director's assistants:** Elena Floris, Julia Varley - **Director:** Eugenio Barba.

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Odin Teatret: Luis Alonso, Eugenio Barba, Kai Bredholt, N. K. Brinth, Roberta Carreri, Claudio Coloberti, Chiara Crupi, Jan Ferslev, Elena Floris, Pelle Henningsen, Anna Marie Houe, Lene Højmark, Nathalie Jabalé, Per Kap Bech Jensen, Donald Kitt, Søren Kjems, Tage Larsen, Else Marie Laukvik, Sabrina Martello, Annelise Mølgaard Pedersen, Carolina Pizarro, Fausto Pro, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Francesca Romana Rietti, Anne Savage, Pushparajah Sinnathamby, Rina Skeel, Ulrik Skeel, Peter Stenz Egestad, Nando Tavian, Julia Varley, Frans Winther.

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First performance: 19 September 2016 in Holstebro.

About the performance

Characters

Yazidi monks: Luis Alonso, Donald Kitt, Julia Varley

European warlord: Kai Bredholt

African warlord: I Wayan Bawa

Igbo woman: Roberta Carreri

A poet's daughter: Iben Nagel Rasmussen

A poet's daughter as a young girl: Carolina Pizarro

Storytellers: Parvathy Baul, Elena Floris

Deus ex machina: Fausto Pro

The tree of History grows vigorously and dead. Around it, child-soldiers and praying monks dance together with warlords, a wrathful mother, and the daughter of a poet who, as a child, dreamed of flying away with her father.

Two story-tellers introduce and comment upon characters and events: in the Syrian desert two Yazidi monks plant a pear tree to call back the birds that have disappeared; in Nigeria a mother rests under the shadow of the tree of forgetfulness holding in her arms the head of her daughter hidden in a gourd; a European warlord explains the necessity for ethnic cleansing to an African warlord who performs a human sacrifice to make his army of child soldiers invulnerable before leading them into battle; a girl plays with her dolls around the tree her father planted when she was born, wondering how birds see the earth from the air.

The tree of History finally bends under the weight of fruit and offers a home to the birds that are flying over the heads of the spectators. But what kind of birds are they?

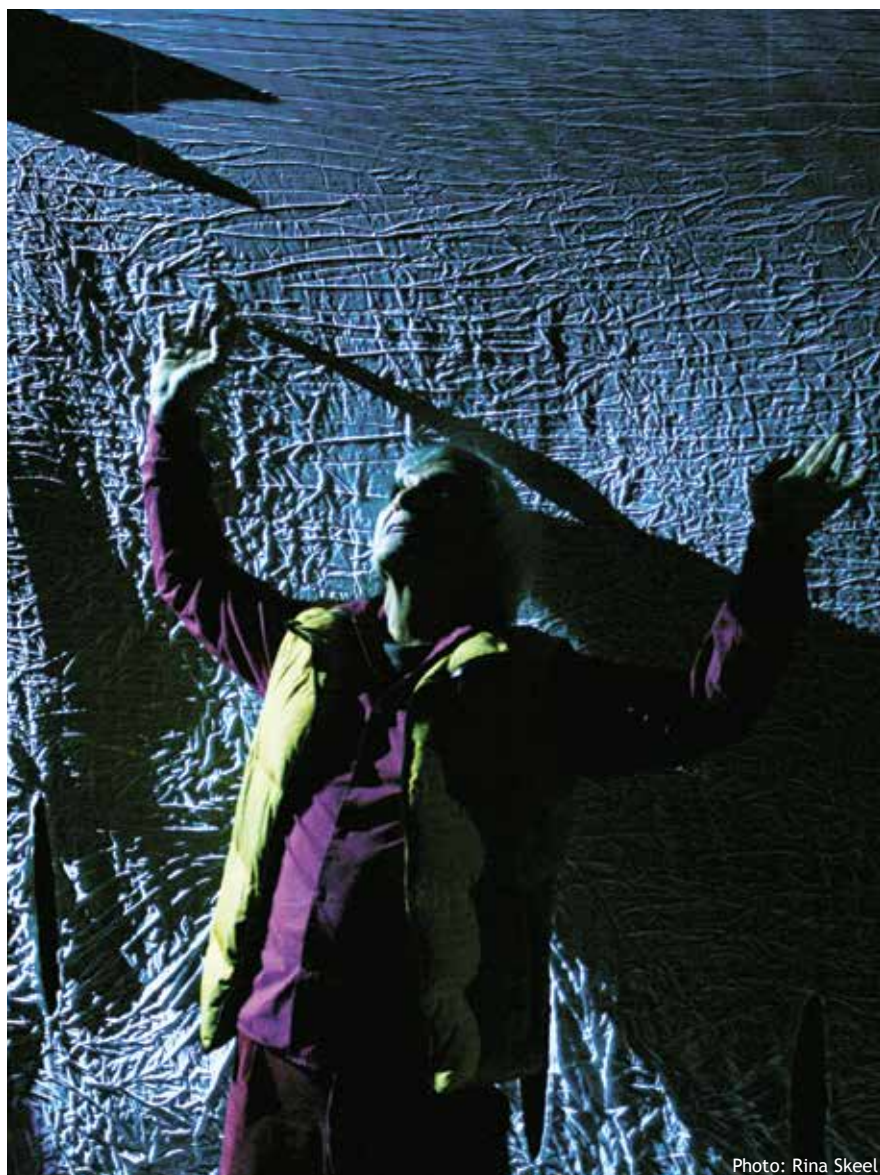




Photo: Rina Skeel


Eugenio Barba in rehearsal

The Tree and Its Roots

A performance that grows while reading newspapers

 How should we represent a human sacrifice in theatre? Why should we do it at all? To exorcise our anguish? To show our indignation? As a kind of professional challenge? Because it is a fact defying our comprehension? A man immolates coldly another man, a woman, a child: I want to make a performance which deals with this situation we read daily in the newspapers. “Flying” is the first word that passed through my mind as temporary working title. It opens up new ways of thinking as well as fresh images that might inspire actors and director in the first phase of rehearsals. The title of a performance is its premise. It should also be a promise and an invitation to flutter high up.


 Theatre allows us to leave what we have and are familiar with for what we wish and what we ignore we know. It is a technique that helps us run away from home, and this fleeing builds a new home. One would imagine that the performance is the home, transient and capable of being moved to different places. And yet this is only the mirage of a home, an illusion like love or fame. The home of which I speak has flexuous foundations: the working relationships that ripen and evolve, regardless of time. The home is built with bursts of passion for the living and the dead. The passing of the years and experience transform these passions into confidence, tenderness and a feeling of belonging. It is a nomadism of bonds that time calcifies.


 Judy had put aside an article by Jonathan Stock, published in *Der Spiegel* and later in the Danish daily, *Politiken*, in November 2013: “A cannibal and war criminal believes in God’s salvation.” Joshua Milton Blahyi, born in 1971 and dubbed General Butt Naked, commanded a small army of child soldiers during the civil war in Liberia in the 1990s. Noted for his brutal and eccentric ways, he led the attack of his young troops while totally nude, wearing only a pair of shoes. He sacrificed a human victim before going into combat, usually a child,

whose blood would appease the spirits and render both himself and his young warriors invulnerable.

Blahyi took time to reflect when the nine members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission inquired as to the number of his victims. “About twenty thousand,” he answered at last. Then he added: “I recruited children from nine to ten years of age. I instilled violence in them by explaining that what they were doing was a game. Whenever I wounded or killed an enemy, I opened his chest and devoured his still beating heart. I left the rest of the corpse to my child soldiers who would then cut it to pieces so as to become insensitive towards the enemy.” His child soldiers would wager as to whether the child of a pregnant woman would be a boy or a girl. They would then slash open the belly to see who was right.

After the civil war, Blahyi converted to Christianity and became an evangelical minister. He is currently the president of Endtime Evangelical Ministries Inc. in Liberia. He is married to Pastor Mrs. Josie and has four children.

 Stephen Ellis, in his book *The Mask of Anarchy. The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, writes about the inter-tribal war in Liberia, 1989-2003: 250,000 deaths, a million persons fleeing the country, 20,000 child soldiers cover their faces with Halloween masks and women’s wigs, devouring the hearts of their victims and decorating the crossroads with bones of the dead. The generals of the various factions take their names from the world of film, newspapers and religion: General Rambo, General Bin Laden, General Satan. The writer describes the central role religion plays in rituals encouraging the intensification of brutality in this war: “The spiritual preparation of the recruits was at least as important as their military training. Part of their preparation consisted of rituals reminiscent of traditional ceremonies of initiation. The young warriors got tattoos on their foreheads or slashes on their cheeks so as to make themselves invulnerable. Sometimes they were shot at with blanks they thought were real, to convince them of the efficacy of this form of protection.

 Nando Taviani, our literary adviser, tells me the story of a farmer who has a pear tree that no longer bears fruit. He fells the tree and constructs, from its wood, a crucifix with the Saviour upon it. His son becomes gravely ill. The farmer kneels before the cross and implores Christ to save his sick son. The son dies. The farmer rails: “When you were a pear tree, you gave no fruit. Now,

you bear the Son of God, and yet you don't make miracles." The farmer goes away. The crucifix flowers and is covered with pears.

First narrative sketch: A farmer believes he is Christ and plants a pear tree. The tree grows although it is dead. The farmer makes a cross out of its wood and crucifies himself. The mother of a child soldier carries her dead son and begs him to revive him. Blahyi, the warlord of the Liberian war, arrives. Like Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, he sends her away. The tree/crucifix flourishes and is covered with pears.

Another possibility: The farmer, hanging on the cross, suggests to the mother holding the corpse of her son in her arms: "Bury your dead and let him be born again as flowers and fruit." The tree is a living sculpture. It grows before the eyes of the spectators, like a standing corpse. A girl climbs among its branches, playing, dreaming, gazing towards the horizon, speaking to the birds. The tree is felled by an ax. A broken branch, somewhat askew, like a cross lying in wait for the first innocent who might come along. The tree groans when it is struck. It bleeds: white blood, thick and slimy like pus. A child soldier appears. He oozes white blood. He embraces the tree. The tree flourishes.

It could be the tree of goodness. A good little boy is chained to it like a dog. He dreams of what a wicked child does. The good child is the voice of hope. He barks: "This leafless tree will nourish humanity". A little girl in the tree plays with her dolls, telling them fairy tales and singing a lullaby to make them fall asleep.




The tree in Japan. Three haikai by Basho:

*Weary
in search of a place to lay my head
I find myself beneath the blossoms of a tree.*

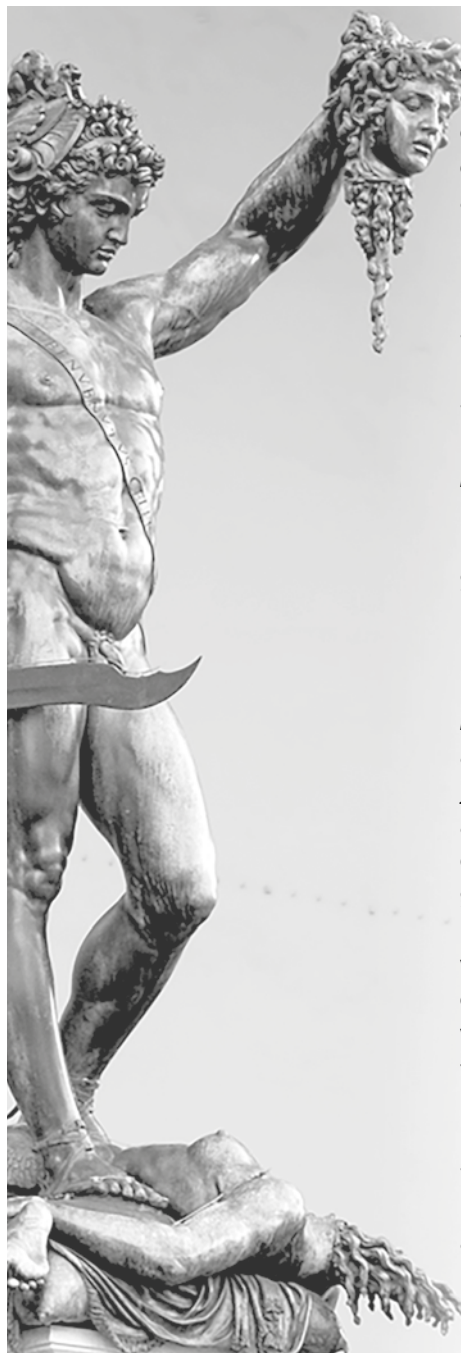
*Beneath the tree
everything is covered by cherry petals
even the soup and the pickled fish.*

*The spring has gone
weeping of birds in the trees
and tears in the fishes' eyes.*

 I have found the second character of *Flying*: a European warlord. The Serbian Željko Ražnatović (1952-2000), known as Arkan, the tiger. During the 1970s and 1980s, he was the most wanted criminal on Interpol's list, owing to his numerous bank robberies and murders in various European countries. A killer for the secret police in the former Yugoslavia, his job was to liquidate exiled enemies of the regime living abroad. During the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 90s, he created a para-military force of young men, known as Arkan's Tigers, who carried out the first massacres of ethnic cleansing and participated in many other atrocities together with the Serbian army. Arkan was regarded as the most ruthless and powerful of all the Balkan warlords. The United Nations accused him of crimes against humanity. He was assassinated in 2000. Over 200,000 civilians were killed in Bosnia and Croatia. Tens of thousands of women were raped, some more than a hundred times, while their husbands and sons were beaten and tortured in the concentration camps of Omarska and Manjaca. Millions abandoned their homes during the course of the ethnic cleansing.

The massacre of Srebrenica was the worst example of ethnic cleansing since World War II. The massacre began on July 6, 1995, when Serbian troops, under the orders of General Ratko Mladic and Arkan's Tigers, initiated an offensive against the predominantly Muslim town of Srebrenica. The men were separated from the women and, during the single day of July 11, over 8,000 males were summarily executed. According to numerous international organisations, the number of male deaths probably exceeded ten thousand.


Srebrenica was the world's first United Nations "Safe Zone". The Dutch troops (Dutchbat), stationed there to protect local civilians, handed over, at the request of Serbian troops, some 300 Muslim refugees who were subsequently massacred. According to witnesses, the Dutch battalion assisted the Serbians in separating women, children and the elderly from the men who were murdered. During the 1990s, the Dutch press brought a number of heated accusations against Dutch troops stationed in Bosnia. Many soldiers suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome upon their return to the Netherlands. On December 5, 2006, the Dutch Minister of Defense awarded some 500 medals to peace-keeping troops whose task it had been to protect the civilians of Srebrenica. On July 16, 2014, a court in the Netherlands ruled that the Dutch battalion of blue helmets, deployed to protect the Muslim enclave, failed to adequately protect civilians. The Dutch state could therefore be held responsible for the ensuing deaths.





✚ A bit of philosophy. The role Aristotle assigns to theatre: to confront the spectators with the compassion and horror of the human condition. He almost seems to be a contemporary of Brecht. Or do I perhaps misread something?


✚ Decapitations. My whole culture is full of heads that have been cut off. I have admired them as works of art in museums that are the pride of the European capitals. Perseus and the Medusa, Judith and Holofernes, the beheadings by Achilles, Agamemnon, Diomedes, Patroclus (in the *Iliad*), Salome and John the Baptist, Cicero (also his hands were cut off), St. Paul, Anne Boleyn, Thomas More (the ingenious inventor of *Utopia*), Mary Stuart, André Chenier, Danton and Robespierre (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*). Considered both speedy and without disgrace, in ancient Rome decapitation was a form of execution granted only to Roman citizens. For slaves, thieves and foreigners was reserved the punishment of crucifixion. In Europe, decapitation was considered as an “honourable” form of execution up to the early 19th century, something only for the nobility, while the bourgeoisie and the poor were punished with more painful methods such as being drawn and quartered.


Benvenuto Cellini's statue of Perseus holding Medusa's head (Florence)

 *Le Monde*, August 3, 2014. In northern Iraq soldiers of IS, Islamic State, have attacked and occupied the city of Jabal Sinjar, whose inhabitants are predominantly Yazidi. The soldiers of IS are burying alive women and children, slaughtering men and the elderly in a massacre that is called genocide. About 200,000 people seek refuge in the mountains, with no food or water. In the village of Kojo, the population has been given an ultimatum by the jihadists to either convert or to die. Many elderly citizens refuse and are shot. Thousands of women and children are kidnapped, given as war booty to jihadist soldiers or sold as slaves. The women are often raped; they are checked by doctors to determine whether they are virgins or pregnant. Who are these Yazidi? A religious minority from the districts of Mosul (Iraq), Diyarbakir (Turkey), Aleppo (Syria), Armenia, the Caucasus and Iran. Their religion combines Zoroastrian, Manichean, Hebraic, Christian and Islamic elements (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

 Two more characters of *Flying*. Two Yazidi monks, who live in a hermitage in the Syrian desert, discover that the birds have flown away. To entice them to return, they plant a tree that will give both nourishment and shade. They water it, fertilise it and pray for it. The tree grows, mighty and majestic. But it is a dry tree without life. The two monks busy themselves with the task of bringing the tree back to life so that it will flourish and bear fruit. They chant, do penance, build nests and dedicate themselves to archaic rituals of magic. Around them, feats of war and shameful barbarity unfold imperturbably.

 The Danish daily, *Politiken*, January 21, 2015. Demonstrations against France in Pakistan, Iran, Chechnya and in various African countries caused by the drawings of Muhammed in *Charlie Hebdo*. In Gaza, the French flag is burned in the streets. In Niger, Catholic churches are burnt and Christians killed in the streets.

 First rehearsals of *Flying* (Colombia, February). I watch my actors as they approach their roles. They move cautiously, almost self-effacingly, around the dead tree of the Yazidi monks. This is the pledge of a performance which should insert a thorn into our certainties. It was the Mapuche or the Haida who said: Trees are the pillars of the world. When the last tree is cut down, the sky will fall upon us.


 The poets say: Forests came before people. Deserts followed people (François-René Chateaubriand). The sleeping tree pronounces green oracles (Octavio Paz). The fruit is blind. The tree sees. (René Char).

✚ We watch the performance and the performance watches us. This twofold vision - this awareness barely intuited - generates a light and disturbs. To recognise, associate, understand and organise data and occurrences which the senses have registered and memory has stored - the human brain never ceases to work in this way. It is a natural reflex for the spectator to try to grasp the general idea of a performance, to know what it is about, who is telling the story, who is this character, why she is saying something and what is she doing. This cognitive process provides security and gratification. And yet that which transcends this process of comprehension and makes a theatre performance *the experience of an experience*, is the *organic animal* property of the actors. It is their ability to give life to a dense fabric of sensory details that strike the reptilian and limbic part of the brain of each spectator. Apparently incoherent gestures within the context of a given situation, movements that are enigmatic or only faintly recognisable, bewildering rhythms and particular forms and colours, the orchestration of words, sounds, assonances and intonations, the score of actions-reactions as a discontinuous musical line, simultaneity and succession of images, concepts, events, silence and immobility, the plurality of rhythmic contrasts - all this creates a flow which prevents the spectators from fully grasping what is taking place, and pushes them to scrutinise a particular detail for a long time while awakening the reflex to be on their guard. This jungle of details generates the true vision of the performance, *a disjointed vision* that cannot be tamed by way of conceptual explanations. This vision belongs to the solitary dialogue which each spectator has with himself or herself during and after the performance. The spectator, much like an entomologist, has a dialogue with the colours, the patterns and the beatings of the wings of the butterflies which his small net managed to capture.

✚ Experts write of Velázquez that he was able *to paint the air*. In his paintings, the Spanish artist created a *void* around the figures and material things that appeared to be suspended in the air, while the background was neutralised thanks to a refined blending of elusive colours. In theatre, how can we create a similar effect of a *void* around the essential?

✚ An actor does physical and vocal training every day. But what is the training of a director? I answer: I read a lot of all kinds of things. Thus, by chance or by destiny, a novel arrived in my hands: *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Fourth Estate, London, 2014). The action takes place during


the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) following the secession of the ethnic Igbos who themselves proclaimed the Republic of Biafra. The subsequent measures taken by the central government of Nigeria brought about a condition of famine that decimated the population of entire regions. The non-governmental organisation, Doctors Without Borders, was founded in 1971 by Bernard Kouchner and a number of French doctors, as a consequence of their experiences in Biafra.

 A new character of *Flying* appears from a page of Chiminanda Ngozi Adichie's novel: "Olanna sat on the floor of the train with her knees drawn up to her chest and the warm, sweaty pressure of bodies around her, among crying, shouting, and praying people. The train was a mass of loosely held metal and each time it jolted, Olanna was thrown against the woman next to her, against something on the woman's lap, a big bowl, a calabash. The woman was silent, caressing the covered calabash on her lap in a gentle rhythm. Her wrapper was dotted with splotchy stains that looked like blood. A young man in front of her screamed and placed his hands on his head. The train swerved and Olanna bumped against the calabash again. The woman with the calabash nudged her, then motioned to some other people close by. 'Come', she said. 'Come and take a look.' She opened the calabash.

Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ash-grey skin, the scruffy plaits, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth like a small surprised O. She stared at it, somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. 'You know', she said, 'it took me so long to plait this hair. She had such thick hair.'

After he writes this, he mentions the German women who, after the allied bombings in 1944, fled Hamburg with the charred bodies of their children stuffed in suitcases, the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled babies. But he is careful not to draw parallels." (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Fourth Estate, London, 2014).

This anonymous Igbo mother has slipped in among the characters of *Flying*. Her name is Fury. She is a Christian Igbo who is fleeing a massacre carried out by Hausa Muslims. She is looking for a place of refuge for herself and her daughter's head. She can only snarl: "There is no death in this world, only forgetfulness."

 Trees in China. A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest (Lao Tzu). The best time to plant a tree is now (Confucius).

✚ Africa: trees and rituals. “A dramatist by profession, I am most partial to rituals. There is, however, one I would rather the world had never known. This ritual took place on the coast of the ancient city of Ouidah, in the present-day Republic of Benin, and its centrepiece was a tree named the Tree of Forgetfulness.


The function was this: when slaves were brought from the inland towns and settlements of West Africa, usually victims of wars and raids instigated for that very purpose, they were placed in stockades, forts and castle dungeons. Then before embarkation, they were subjected to a ritual process which included moving in circles around the infamous tree. The purpose was to make them forget their land, their homes, their kinfolk, and even the very occupations they once knew. In short, to forget their former existence, wipe their minds clean of the past and be receptive to the stamp of strange places. These flesh merchants of their own kind understood that their act constituted a profound transgression, and they moved to thwart anticipated reprisals through the ritual process.

Never was optimism more misplaced. As a ritual, it was a complete failure. Those slaves never forgot. How many of such trees exist, even symbolically, all over the landscape of other peoples, other races and nations?” (Wole Soyinka, *Of Africa*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012).

✚ It's impossible to unlearn. I have spent half my life trying to learn, and the other half struggling to go beyond what I have learned. Reflections, thoughts, methods and solutions return constantly in my work with a recognisable taste. I feel that it is part of the human condition to belong to the family of the trees which change their leaves and retain their roots. I try to modify my ideas, express them in a different form, rhythm and manners, to use my knowledge in a paradoxical way. But the roots sink firmly into the depth of my being.

✚ Picasso was fond of saying that every act of creation takes place through a succession of destructions. The word *destruction* is dramatic and evokes ruin and death. Yet it is undeniable that an irrepressible alternation of erosions and distillations - a process of transmutation - accompanies the rehearsals of a performance. On the one hand, we sense growth, depth and complexity; on the other we witness a freeing up of perspectives and correspondences that upset (destroy: i.e. recreate differently) the results of previous phases. In the beliefs of ancient Egypt, Greece and medieval Europe, there were three basic

stages in the transmutation of matter: *nigredo*, or blackening, by which matter is dissolved and putrefied; *albedo*, or whitening, by which the substance is purified and sublimated; *rubedo*, or reddening, a stage in which the elements are fixed, assuming a re-composition whose nature is unrecognisable. There is a strange analogy between the principles of an actor's work and that of an alchemist. I admit it, now that I am in the twilight of my career, since I have always smiled, somewhat condescendingly, at Artaud's ideas. The essential aspects of theatrical processes take place within a secret zone that is absolutely impenetrable even to the understanding of the author, the director or the actor. This is a mute zone. Notwithstanding our intuitions and certainties, there is no way to speak of it because there is no verifiable proof for those who have not undergone the same experience.

 Child soldiers and cannibalism. A couple of pages from Jakob Ejersbo's novel: "Francis is a little inebriated now. Enough so that he wants to hear about his father's work.

'In Africa,' Francis says, 'did you meet any child soldiers?'

'Yes, there are always child soldiers,' his father says.

'Why is that?'

'The younger they are the better. Young men can't imagine they can die.

And there is a mixture of ignorance and religion thrown in.'

'But... did you fight against children. Did you shoot at them?'

'What's the choice when twenty twelve-year-olds come towards you with machetes and AK47s? Would you call UNICEF? The boys think that my bullets won't hurt them. That is what the witch doctor tells them. And he is a man of great authority.'

'But they see their comrades die.'

'Yes, but they also know that they will be killed by their own officers if they don't carry out the attack,' the father says.

'They are also on drugs,' Alison says.

'Yes, that's true. Drunk and fucked up. I mean, Francis, you see these boys as boys who play with toy trains. Basically good kids. But these boys have seen their families murdered. They have been encouraged to rape the grown women they kidnap from their own villages. They have been forced into cannibalism. They are no longer boys.'

'Cannibalism?'

'Yes. In Central Africa, after everything has broken down, cannibalism

starts. You eat the flesh of the enemy you have killed to absorb his power. If you try to imagine their reality, it makes some kind of sense. I have seen it.'

'What did you do?'

'Shot them.'

'But isn't every human life precious?' Francis asks. His father laughs:

'Some more than others', he says and points over to the guard making his rounds in the garden. 'Your life is worth more than that guard's. Don't kid yourself that you think otherwise.'

'But why do the conflicts in Africa get so crazy. Why are they so barbaric, so cruel?'

'They are no more cruel there than in other places,' says his father.

'Child soldiers, rape, cannibalism. It is so... inhuman', Francis says.

'No', his father says, 'It is very human. You don't think white men could do such things?'

'It is just so hard to understand,' Francis says.

'Try to imagine how you would be here in Tanzania. You are a young man, healthy and full of life. You don't have any money to live on; less than a dollar a day. You can neither read nor write. You don't know anyone in a position of power. You have no chance of getting a job. All you do is hang out on street corners and gaze with envy at every automobile and every pair of fine shoes that passes by. Then some authority figure comes along and he points at the enemy who is responsible for your situation. He orders you to murder and he tells you that the first thing you must do is to rape, and then you can take the property of the ones you murder. What would you do? Rape and murder, of course!'


'But why don't we, in the West, do anything to help?' Francis asks.

'This is realpolitik. Africa is infested with corruption and nepotism. They have raw materials that we want and we take them whenever we feel like it. We, as westerners, are at a party, and the thing about parties is you don't think about anyone who isn't invited. We are totally indifferent to the lives of the average negro, as long as we have our fig leaf in the guise of a little assistance here and there. It is more a question of what we steal with the other hand. We have them by the balls.'


'But it still seems more bestial. I mean here, when there is war,' Francis says.


‘It is no more bestial to kill with a machete than it is to kill with a rifle. It is just closer, more of a mess.’

Francis gets up from his chair without saying a word. He staggers towards the door. His father yells after him: ‘The world is logical. It makes sense. The Soviet Union needs foreign currency; military transport planes are leased to western relief organisations for emergency aid; the pilots take Russian weapons they can sell to the rebels. What rebels? There are always rebels of some kind’. (Jakob Ejersbo, *Eksil*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 2009, pp.209-210).


 A haiku by Basho:


*Summer grasses
what remains of the dreams
of so many warriors.*


 September 2015. The borders have been torn down by thousands of refugees from Syria, the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa. Thousands and thousands of migrants break down the Hungarian borders, disembarking on the Greek isles, the Italian Lampedusa. They cross Europe on foot in order to reach the two countries willing to accept them, Germany and Sweden. Women dragging suitcases, fathers with infants in their arms, old men and women, frail in the final exertion of their physical powers, children who should be playing in kindergartens. We see them on television, read about them in the newspapers and follow them in the social media. They fill the highways and small country tracks. This is the moment of truth. Will we behave like Creon or Antigone? Will we follow our own conscience or the laws of the state? A photograph published in most newspapers shows the body of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian child, his small corpse beaten by waves on the Turkish beach of Bodrum. The image touches the heart of Europe. The political consequences are stupefying.


 Wrocław, October. We resume rehearsals of *Flying*. I am surrounded by a “collective mind” which, in addition to my own actors, consists of thirty or so invited directors and actors. They follow the rehearsal throughout the day and then they all meet with me in the evening to comment, ask questions, make suggestions. The following day, I try out some of their proposals. In theatre, we can speak of a collective mind when an ensemble of motivated people is engaged in a creative process which doesn’t aim at realising an already clearly

defined project. A collective mind integrates different specialisations, various degrees of experience and diverse responsibilities in an assembling process similar to what happens in the individual mind in a process of invention: sudden changes of direction, detours, exploitation of serendipitous effects, leaps from one level of organisation to another (from the pre-expressive organic level, to the narrative one, shaping of the space, of the sound/musical universe, etc.). The collective mind operates with the same amount of energy in programming as in knowing how to creatively demolish its own programmes.


 Batuan, Bali, January-February 2016. Rehearsals of *Flying*. I wake up in the early morning to the gamelan music of the neighbouring temple and to the voice of a praying Brahmin. I begin the rehearsals, dazed by the humid fragrance of life that nature spreads about during the rainy season. This island is so beautiful. I would like to insert a sliver of its beauty into our performance. Sometimes I can't bear to read newspaper articles with the chronicles of our times, and to pour these into the performance. *I write about a subject everybody dislikes. Even I. There are subjects nobody likes.* (Li Po). My solace has been the little girl who dreams of flying and fighting the Red Baron. Also the two monks helped me as well, with their naïve heroism of small acts.


 I notice a photograph, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, of the fifty-year-old Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, in the exact same position, as the Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, this time on a beach on the island of Lesbos. Weiwei is preparing a series of projects throughout Europe about refugees. He has just withdrawn one of his works from Aros museum in Århus, in protest against the new laws approved by the Danish parliament, restricting the rights of asylum seekers.


 Warsaw May, 2016. The final title for the performance is to be: *The Tree*. I somehow knew this all along. And yet, the alternative title, *Flying*, has been generous and has contributed immeasurably to all of our rehearsals.


 Lange Margrethe. Ingrid Hvass, a storyteller from Holstebro, read my interview in *Holstebro Dagbladet*. There, I spoke about the different characters in the new performance. One of them, Joshua Milton Blahyi, sacrificed children and devoured one of their hearts before a battle. Ingrid sent me a story that took place in Jutland, Denmark, in the late 19th century. On the heaths around Holstebro, there lived a woman who went by the name of Lange Margrethe. She

led a band of lawless thugs. Among her accomplishments was the fact of having eaten the hearts of nine pregnant women, since she believed that this would render her invulnerable as well as invisible. She was captured by the police and died in prison.

 It is written in the Genesis: And the Lord God put man in the Garden of Eden, so that he might cultivate it and look after it. The Lord God gave this command to him: “Of every tree in the garden you may eat freely. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it. For on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die.” (Old Testament).

 In the Nordic mythology, Yggdrasil is the cosmic tree of life to which Odin (the god, not the theatre of Holstebro) hung for nine days and nine nights in search of higher wisdom. The name means “horse of Yggr”, where horse is a metaphor for gallows, while Yggr is one of the many names of Odin. The immense Yggdrasil’s roots went down into the lower realms, while its branches supported the entire sky. On its top stands the golden rooster Vidopnir whose song will announce Ragnarok, the end of the world.

 A friend asks me whether *The Tree* will be my last performance. I shake my head; I am thinking of another one. In any case, I have a title: *Seeing Red*. A young man one morning wakes up and sees red as though rubies were set in his eyes or as though he were within the shelter of a luxurious enclosed pavilion of purple. Is it anger against the world that makes him see red? Is he drowning in a sea of blood? Or is he simply going blind?

 The two earthquakes of the performance: when I begin to dream of it, and when I let go of it because the spectators take possession of it.

November 2013 - September 2016

Translation: Gordon Walmsley



Photo: Rina Skeel

A poet's daughter as a young girl (Carolina Pizarro)





3



4

1. A poet's daughter (Iben Nagel Rasmussen)
2. Yazidi monk (Julia Varley)
3. An Igbo woman (Roberta Carreri)
4. Two storytellers (Elena Floris, Parvathy Baul)



1. European warlord, Deus ex machina (Kai Bredholt, Fausto Pro)
2. African warlord (I Wayan Bawa)
3. Yazidi monk, African warlord (Julia Varley, I Wayan Bawa)



4



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6

- 4. Yazidi monk (Donald Kitt)
- 5. African warlord, European warlord (I Wayan Bawa, Kai Bredholt)
- 6. Yazidi monk (Julia Varley)

Caught in the Fangs of Chronos

November 2014

The reasons why things happen remain a mystery, but to create a chronology gives me the illusion that I can control Chronos, the god of time who devours his children.

During a tour in China, Eugenio summoned us to his hotel room in Wuzhen. The moment Eugenio tells us the theme of a new performance is always a very emotional one for me. But not this time. I wonder if the silence I feel inside me is the consequence of exhaustion or if it has other roots.

The reason Eugenio gives us to embark, yet again, on the creation of a new performance, after having just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the group, is decidedly prosaic: Odin Teatret needs money and producing a new performance enables us to apply for funds. For me, it is a case of “life must go on” and the theatre is Eugenio’s way of raising a threatening fist at the sky.

Sitting in an armchair, Eugenio smilingly tells us that the creation process will be short: he already knows the story and our characters. The theme of the performance: child soldiers. The title: Flying. The structure will be that of *Triolerne*, the concert which Iben, Parvathy, and Elena presented during the Holstebro Festuge in June 2014. Only the poetry and beauty of Elena’s music and of Parvathy’s and Iben’s songs can tackle such a harsh topic, Eugenio tells us.

Once again Eugenio addresses the issue of Evil. Does Absolute Evil exist? When you seek out the roots of evil, they often appear in the light of their excruciating banality.

Eugenio tells us the name of our characters: Kai, a Serbian warlord; Bawa, an African warlord; Donald, the Little Prince; I, Snow White; Julia, Cinderella. To Julia and me, Eugenio hands out DVDs of Walt Disney’s films, telling us to watch them and to create material from them. He tells me that my Snow White,



An Igbo woman (Roberta Carreri)

unlike Walt Disney's, is desperately searching for her dwarfs. He sees her move very slowly, like a sleepwalker. Her search occurs within herself. She talks in her sleep. Eugenio's words fall slowly into the crater of my extinguished volcano.

Some weeks earlier, Eugenio had called me into his office to see if I wanted to participate in the new performance. It had never happened before. It went without saying that every actor of the group took part in a new performance. Not this time, because Tage and Jan were not going to be involved, while Bawa and Parvathy had already accepted to participate. A new ensemble, without two of the historical companions. A new start, half a century after the beginning.

February 2015

I retreat to the black room to prepare material for the performance. It is like coming home. The silence embraces me. Everything is possible here. It is enough to take the first step. I took with me Mozart's *Requiem*. From the Walt Disney film, it was only Snow White's escape through the brambles, chased by birds, which captivated me. I work on this image, alternating it with images of other types of escapes: by the sea or by land. The theme of sleepwalking evokes in me the image of Pina Bausch in Wim Wenders' film, *Pina*. I search for other images and clips of Bausch on Youtube with the aim of creating a choreography starting from them. I have never done this before.

I imagined a long costume, falling down to the feet and with long sleeves, just like the 'water sleeves' of Chinese theatre, to hide hands deformed by arthritis. I think about how to hide my face and I paint it with childlike handprints. The shell of the character is there. Now I have to create the heart.

Before Christmas, Eugenio had told me to read *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Adichie Chimamanda. He told me that my character was in this book.

In February, on his return from Mexico, he gave me a calabash. "It will accompany you during the entire performance," he said. It is beautiful and round, its colour warm and earthy.

My Snow White has become an African woman who flees with her daughter's head hidden in a calabash.

March 2015

The first working meeting with the new ensemble occurs in Villa de Leyva. It is a romantic place on the Colombian Andes, with white houses adorned with bougainvillea. We get there crammed into a small bus full of accessories, costumes, and sets. We all live in the same house with a large kitchen, where Erika, Kai's wife, prepares the meals with little Maria, who has only just learned to walk, by her side.

We work in La Maloca, the space of the Teatro Itinerante del Sol, as guests of Beatriz Camargo. The round space is surrounded by a forest that Beatriz has planted many years ago and which is now inhabited by birdsong.

It is morning and the sun is shining in a perfect circle on the earthen floor. We are all standing around its circumference when Eugenio puts a bottle of wine in the centre and on it an upturned glass. Then he opens the bottle and fills the glass, "with a sound that we know from our other performances", as



Photo: Rina Skeel

Roberta Carreri: "My Snow White has become an African woman who flees with her daughter's head hidden in a calabash".

he himself comments and hands to the most senior actress, Iben, who takes a sip and passes it on to the next oldest person. I take my glass, I look at each companion in the eye and then I raise my glass. Through the hole that pierces the Maloca ceiling, my eyes meet blue sky and suddenly the silence in my heart explodes and turns into a huge pain. We are missing a person who has always been present at times like this. For the first time in the history of Odin Teatret, Torgeir, who had founded Odin Teatret with Eugenio, is absent at the launch of a performance. I swallow my tears with the wine and pass the cup to Julia. One by one, they all bring their lips to the glass: Kai, Donald, Bawa (who drains it at once) and then Parvathy, Elena, and Eugenio who drink straight from the bottle.

We start with Elena who teaches us a song. It is a nice touch that the youngest of the group inaugurates the work, teaching us what to sing. We then present the result of our individual work. To create my material I have used Mozart's *Requiem* and a music piece by Dead Can Dance. When I see the result of my companions' work I am not surprised to find that they too have chosen religious music.

I think that, given my age, it would be more appropriate for my character to be a grandmother who escapes with the head of her granddaughter. I tell this to Eugenio who replies: "All right, you're a grandmother, but in the programme I'll write that you are a mother". That's the end of that matter. In the morning we work individually, on our own or with Eugenio. In the afternoon, Eugenio puts the material together in a montage.

I feel like a ship abandoned by its crew. I float. I know that the work is my lifesaver.

At the end of the ten-day retreat in the Andes, we have forty-five minutes of material that we share with our guests.

September 2015

The second stage, only a week long, takes place in Holstebro, without Bawa and Parvathy. Eugenio asks me to walk more slowly and to reduce my actions. He tells me that he has a precise idea of my character: it should not give information, it does not develop in the course of the performance, it does not react. Your face must be beaming, and it must smile like a benevolent princess and like Medusa, the woman-monster of Greek mythology who petrifies those who see her face. Do not give way to the fear of doing nothing. This work is a form of farewell to technique. We have to find technically how to abandon technique.

Years of work have led me to the conclusion that for an actor to be present on stage, she or he must always act, also in immobility. Even surrender is an action. Now I find myself having to do exactly the opposite of what I preach to my students. I try to follow Eugenio's directions, but inside of me I need to find something to hold on to and continue to act. After a rehearsal he tells me: I understand what is not working in your first entry, even if you move slowly, maintaining a fixed position, your eyes move, they see, they do actions. If you start to look you become character. You do not need to look. You are invisible, like a ghost. A ghost is recognised because it is pure presence. You only communicate your presence. Do not be dismayed

because you feel that you are not doing any actions. *Doing nothing* is the hardest action.

This helps me. It is a perspective which I find fascinating. It takes me back to the roots of the Japanese theatre that I love so much. Now I know what to work on.

In those few days of work, Eugenio opens the doors to a group of university students from Aarhus. They are accompanied by Annelis Kuhlmann, who asks me about my character after seeing a rehearsal. I am invisible, I say. Annelis appears to be fascinated with the possibility that an actor can be invisible and present at the same time.

Eugenio concludes the period of work in Holstebro with the announcement that Carolina Pizarro, who joined Odin to replace Sofia Monsalve in the group performances, will be taking part in *Flying*. Another young person will be flying with us.

October 2015

A few days later we depart for Wrocław, where Bawa and Parvathy join us for a “Collective Mind” session. For the duration of a week, we train and rehearse in the presence of forty observers. Eugenio has chosen not to have assistant directors, but uses the reactions and comments of the participants and often tests their proposals. I feel like a guinea pig. I miss the intimacy of rehearsing without external eyes, without fear of losing face. More than ever we need to resort to our professionalism. On a group dynamic level, this situation certainly helps, obliging us to avoid old patterns, but I do not see how it can be creatively fertile at this stage of the work. I try to move in space as Eugenio asks of me. He notes the minimum tension in my toes and tells me to remove it. The result is a very slow and continuous walk, which I do brushing against the viewers.

“The woman who flees” moves solemnly and slowly in space, like a drone. I like the process of “stripping the flesh off” my character by reducing it to pure presence. For the first time, I work without sweating.

Eugenio’s directions change daily. They are precise. I try to enact them, but not always successfully.

The actor is like water that takes the shape of its container: the character. Eugenio changes the container: Snow White - The Sleepwalker - The African woman who flees with her daughter’s head in a calabash; maybe they are just different aspects of the same person, the same mask. I adapt,

but inside I resist. Why? Maybe because I have not yet found the heart of the character. I do not feel she is mine yet.

I wonder if this is what Eugenio wants. The most fertile moments of the work were a meeting of proposals that reciprocally stimulated one another. This time I feel it is not the case. Eugenio wants me to do what he says. My character is his. I try to do what he asks of me, in the best possible way. These are not my material or improvisations: they are his proposals, and I do not regret it. I am not wounded. Just a little frustrated. I am comforted by the feeling of having found the character dynamics, a refugee in eternal flight.

February 2016

After a break of four months, we meet in the village of Batuan in Bali to work under a very high roof in a space without walls surrounded by slender palm trees. The silence is broken only by birdsong and the sound of rushing water. It is the rainy season.

I had made a big effort to remember with precision the montage of Wrocław. But already in the first day Eugenio destroys my clay giant. He wants the woman who flees to be fierce. An angry bitch who curses Heaven. I must speak snarling, kicking, screaming. Exactly the opposite of what we had worked on for months. Eugenio says: "Suffer! Shout your rage! Curse Heaven!" I can hardly remember the text that I know by heart when I have to utter it with an emotional force that requires me to look into the darkest recesses of my being. The instant I hide behind the use of a throat resonator, to protect the voice and think about what to do and say, Eugenio points out that the voice has become technical. Something changes every day and changes must be remembered with a part of the brain that interferes with another that has to remember the words. Everything becomes inaccurate, insecure, inefficient. And Eugenio continues to change.

Once again I hear him say that he recognizes in my work the characters from previous performances. Even the way I run when I flee makes him think of Roberta in *Come! And the Day Will Be Ours*, a performance of forty years ago.

I wonder why Eugenio's observations and advice again puts me on the defensive. I know he is right, but I feel provoked. I bite the bullet and continue to work, trying to fulfil the tasks that the director gives me. My blood boils in frustration.

I observe Eugenio's work with Julia, Donald, Parvathy, and Fausto in the

scene of the construction of the tree. The phrase “remove the difficult from the difficult” becomes concrete, clear, tangible. And it works.

I observe Eugenio’s work with Kai and I see him dismantle, reconstruct, and resurrect his character, giving it a new depth.

I observe Eugenio’s work with Iben, whose initial resistance in the first few months has now given way to his flow of inspiration. Even of her Eugenio asks the impossible: to do something simple, almost two-dimensional. But this leaves a big impact because it is Iben who does it.

I observe Eugenio’s work with Carolina, who takes her first steps in the new montage. It works.

Eugenio’s instructions to me are always accurate - they leave no doubt. Like when he repeats my line in an irascible voice (because that’s the way he wants me to say it or because he is really irritated for not saying it that way?). Then he says: “This performance will only work if we touch all the excesses, in the voice and in the body, just as Kai and Bawa do with their characters.”

Eugenio asks me to work with extreme voices: shouts, roars, alternating with harmonics. Voices break in Batuan. After nine days of uninterrupted hard work, from dawn until late at night, we are exhausted, nerves are on edge, and the costumes stink. Eugenio is bursting with energy. Once again I find myself trudging behind him.

It is the last day of work in Batuan. Eugenio gathers us together in a circle to tell us that he felt like doing a clown show with this ensemble and gives us a red nose each. He asks us to do the last rehearsal wearing them.

I think that nobody had imagined their character as a clown. Certainly not me. The red noses are still a part of the performance, further proof that we are ready to follow Eugenio at all cost. We are all either too old or too young to resist him. We are all too vulnerable, actors and director alike, to entertain reactions that would break this fragile balance in continuous flux. We know that this, more than any other, it is likely to be our last performance. Our last sentence.

March 2016

A week after returning to Denmark, we continue the work on *Flying*. Eugenio announces that Luis Alonso will join the ensemble for the performance. He will be the third monk.

It seems impossible after more than fifty years of work, but the creation of this performance has been - yet again - different from any previous ones. At

the moment there are still two weeks of rehearsals left before the first public performances in September. We are not quite sure how it will end. However it ends, it will open the doors to the future. The last theatrical image may be pessimistic, but, in reality, it ends with the arrival of two new members at Odin Teatret, a young Chilean couple.

The end is a happy one.

June 2016

An email from Eugenio informs us that *Flying* has become *The Tree*.

Translation: Frank Camilleri

A Chirp from a Dry Branch

Being fooled

"The performance will be so easy for you," he assured me. "Just do exactly the same thing you did in *Triolerne* (a performance/concert I had done with Parvathy Baul and Elena Floris for the Holstebro Festive Week, 2014). Sing some songs, recite some poems."

"And the costume?"

"Yes, yes, exactly the same. Just relax."

I have worked with the same director for fifty years. I know that the only way to preserve a modicum of independence is to prepare some suggestions for staging the piece, physical and vocal scores, songs and texts. But this time should apparently be different. *He himself had said so*. I was supposed to adhere to a performance that already existed.

My director's name is Eugenio Barba.

Imagine that I let myself be fooled.

In the rehearsal room

"Take it easy!" she says to herself. "Think of Chaplin. Just think of all the scenes and miles of film he through away before he was satisfied."

Actress: "The costume?"

Director: "No, it simply doesn't work. I mean, it's white, and we are going to spread a white cloth on the floor."

Actress: "But, it's just like *Triolerne*."

Director: "No good."

Actress: "What about this bordeaux coloured dress with the feather boa?"

Director: "Well, it's nice but - you don't need to have it on during rehearsals."

Actress: "Take a look at this jacket. I have coloured it in various shades, and Brinth, our tailor, has helped me with the back emblem of an owl in flight."

Director: "Good, it's good - but not the petticoat. The petticoat is no good."

Actress: “Take a look at this, Brinth has sewn a new tutu covered by a patterned skirt.”

Director: “Good. No, no good.”

Actress: “Flowery dress in strong colours?”

Director: “*Might* be good.”

Actress: “Shoes? No shoes, as in *Triolerne*?”

Director: No, of course not. You should be an ageing actress. *With* high heels.”

Actress: “What about these blue sandals with heels?”

Director: “Good. For now. But you also have to be a girl who leaps about and talks with her father. And you will crawl around in the branches of this tree.” (Points at the dry tree in the middle of the stage)

Actress: “What about the tennis shoes?”

Director: “Good. For now.”

Actress: “Or these smart, high top sneakers?”

Director: “Good. No, wait a minute. Give them to the violinist. You are supposed to be an ageing actress.”

Actress: “I see.”

(Shows him some short boots with tiny heels.)

Director: “Good, for now.”

Actress: “Hair? What do you think about this teased hairdo?”

Director: “No good.”

Actress: “Flyer helmet?”

Director: “No good.”

Actress: “Flyer goggles?”

Director: “Good. No, no good.”

Actress: “Ponytail?”

Director: “No good.”

Actress: “Wig with grey curls?”

Director: “Good!”

(But the others in the [group](#) don’t think so. Nor does the costume specialist called in from Copenhagen.)



Photo: N. K. Brinth

Iben Nagel Rasmussen showing
off her tutu

Actress: “Wig with long grey hair?”

Director: “Good, for now.”

Actress: “Two songs from *Triolerne*?”

Director: “No good, no good.”

Actress: “Nine poems from *Triolerne*?”

Director: “No good at all.”

Actress: “Eight new compositions with eight new texts?”

Director: “Let’s wait on that. I’ll listen to them another day.”

Director: “You have to be an ageing actress. But you also have to be a little girl.”

Actress: “I’m having a hard time finding out exactly who I am.”

Director: “You pitch your voice too low. Try using a head resonator. Your bird sounds are OK, but you chirp too loud. The intonation reminds me of your Trickster figure.”

Actress: “Do you really think so?”

Director: “The intonation reminds me of the way you say the text in the performance *Itsi Bitsi*.”

Actress: “But?”



Photo: Rina Skeel

Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Eugenio Barba in rehearsal

Actress: “The physical actions I have joined to the text?”

Director: “Good. No, no good.”

Actress “Aha!”

Director: “Try to perform actions that fit the text.”

Actress: “Alright.”

Director: “Just stand, don’t move.”

Actress: “Well, but...”

Director: “Try jumping on him and shaking him.”

Actress: “Alright.”

Director: “Good, yes, I think it’s good. Good. For now.”

Bird’s eye view

What can I say about a performance I had almost no part in creating? I was supposed to have repeated scenes from *Triolerne*: love songs and poems. But the new piece began like so many of Odin Teatret’s former performances to be about the horrors of war.

What is she doing here? The ageing actress, who is cut off from the actual drama of the performance? She waits.

Sitting on a bench (the horrible inflatable sausage that makes up the audience’s seating) or hidden behind the yellow curtain, I had ample opportunity to follow both my colleagues and my director as they struggled with the structure of the performance. Groping forward at first, then more and more confident as they treaded the byways that opened up to them. Paths that had once seemed accessible, withered away like dead branches of a tree. Only then did the first loose threads - the director’s ideas and the individual scenes of the actors - begin to consolidate into a tightly woven texture.

I myself witnessed this Sisyphus-like work, the struggle to avoid the clichés of previous performances by both the actors and the director himself. It seemed to me that the attempt did not succeed at all. On the contrary, old themes, formerly used props and universes of sound popped up like mushrooms from a drenched forest floor.

Yes, I know it very well, I thought, as I sat on my inflated sausage: Chagall was always Chagall. He could not paint like Kandinsky, nor did he wish to paint like him. Nor did Louis Armstrong suddenly change his style and begin to sing like Maria Callas. Nevertheless, I was surprised to see the director repeat the same worn out mistakes, only to spend oceans of time, afterwards, in correcting them.

I experienced my colleagues' solidarity with their ageing director who stubbornly stuck to his insane ideas, which often enough proved, in the end, to be brilliant.

I stared as the violinist verged on the brink of a nervous breakdown, heroically wielding her sword in an attempt to hold both music and voices to an acceptable musical level. I saw how a scene could begin to clog up under the weight of the noise or stench of a petrol-driven chainsaw.

And I was moved when a particular phonetic picture of chaos, screams and violence was replaced by a moment of reconciliation, a silence that was bolstered by the barely audible voice of the actor.

I watched as our Indian singer and Balinese actor stood with their mouths agape, perplexed by the clipping technique that amputated their integrated dances and songs, inserting them into what for them was a peculiar context that imparted to their efforts a completely new meaning. I witnessed the director going berserk over a technical detail, observing how he slogged on for days, never yielding until he had got it right. I experienced surprise when he suddenly discovered an unexpected connection among the free-floating fragments and how that discovery quite naturally assumed its place in the performance, somehow augmenting it. "Think that he has the guts to let go of the reins," I thought, "so that they lie loosely in his hands for a very long time, before making the cut at just the right moment, so that the hidden meaning is able to emerge as something crystal clear and logical."

This is something I knew of course before. But from my position on the bench I managed not to be distracted by my own fury when things didn't work out or by my impatience when the action of the performance had to be coordinated and endlessly repeated. These frustrations emerged of course, later on in the process, when I had found my proper place.

Noses

The actors put them on, hop about, laugh oafishly. They act in an infantile way and are seldom funny. I hate them! The red noses. Good clowns are rare and *good* clowns with red noses are even rarer.

Odin Teatret held a seminar in 1968, in which actor and mime artist Jacques Lecoq taught a course. After demonstrating a variety of masks himself, he encouraged the participants to try different exercises so that they might experience how the use of a particular mask might affect their way of acting. There were also exercises by means of which the actors were to imagine

themselves as water or as fire. The result was a number of highly dramatic improvisations.

Finally, Lecoq took out a red nose and asked if there was anyone who would like to try it. The idea was not to do anything at all, just stand there. Total silence. “But you perhaps, Monsieur Barba?” he asked our puzzled director. But Monsieur Barba shook his head decisively. He had no intention of trying. Once again, silence reigned. Until my mother, who had followed the seminar, stepped forward. Thin and grey-haired, she stood there with her red nose on utterly serious. Someone giggled. It was, indeed, difficult to tell whether she was amusing or tragic. Something doleful shone through her “non-expression”, despite her nose. When we got home that evening, she said that she had been surprised that though the actors had been willing to try on the terrifying masks and had permitted themselves to be consumed by fire and water, none of them had actually dared to wear the red nose.

When on the final day of rehearsals for *The Tree* on Bali, in the beginning of February 2016, the director produced from a plastic bag ten red noses which he solemnly handed to each actor. I thought: “Oh no! How horrible. I will not put that on, I simply will not put it on.”

But when, one by one, my colleagues stepped forward into the acting space and repeated their actions, songs and texts, something fell into place. It could not have been otherwise. War, ethnic cleansing, crucifixions and decapitations appeared with an unexpectedly disarming remoteness. For, in the midst of these depredations, the depicted figures gave the impression of being almost unbearably guileless.

I, the “ageing actress”, put on the red nose as well. I still don’t find it amusing. And I don’t think it will make the audience laugh.

A chirp from the dry branch

As a forty-year-old actress, I felt a bit ridiculous during our street performances. I was still rushing about on housetops or balconies, clad in a white costume, a weeping mask and a drum bound to my waist, while I shouted at the other actors, who responded in turn from steeples or fifth storey windows.

As a sixty-year-old, I asked myself how old Helene Weigel must have been when she thought herself too old to play the mute Katrin in Bertolt Brecht’s *Mutter Courage*. For I myself play that role, even now. Now I am slightly over seventy and I sit here and ponder whether *The Tree* belongs to Odin Teatret’s more durable performances and whether, as an eighty-year-old, I will still sit

on the branch of a withered tree and chirp away with a red nose on.

For then I will surely be fooled!

Seen through kinder eyes

My director writes: “What happened to the childhood poetry and the lyrical ambivalence of youth and experience, whose scent had begun to infuse your figure? You don’t mention it in your article.”

It is most certainly there, I would say, despite the branch’s disagreeable bark, despite the long period of waiting, despite everything that was no good. And despite myself. Despite all that, there is, when all is said and done, a vibrant shoot that breaks through the asphalt. But it can be difficult to catch sight of it when you work in the bowels of the actor’s basement workshop, so far from the bird’s eye view.

Translation: Gordon Walmsley



Photo: Rina Skeel

Two Birds on a Tree

Trivandrum, 15th July 2016

Dear Sri Eugenio,

When you called me to be part of Odin's new work, I was very happy and I had a sensation of taking on a great responsibility. I sensed this work came in a perfect moment of my life. I have known you and your Master Grotowski's work since the beginning of my work as a Baul practitioner. Especially because of Grotowski's travel to the Baul world and your connection to the deep rooted traditions of India.

When I started to work with Odin Teatret, it was completely different to everything I have worked with so far. I was being introduced to a working process which is absolutely new for me. I was to work with great people whom I have adored most of my life. First I had to come out of this circle of thoughts, to enter the work as a worker along with the other actors in the space (though my adoration remains unchanged somewhere deep within me).

I am mostly a solo performer and this was my first experience to build a performance together with a dedicated group. I have taken part in collaborations before, but Odin's nature of work is entirely different to anything I have experienced so far. Due to a long history of work, in Odin everyone has a rich embodied repertoire that enriches the space with great energy. The unmatched dedication and humanity is a great strength in Odin Teatret. A long term work with the same group of colleagues results in a great benefit as each person has a deep experience of the other actors' possibilities and limitations. It is a group very closely woven but at the same time always open to explore new possibilities.

I come from a deep rooted tradition of Baul, with very specific rules and discipline which also sets a clear boundary to the performance work. When you acknowledged this aspect, I felt embraced and felt that my path was seamlessly integrated by you.



Photo: Rina Skeel

Storyteller with drum (Parvathy Baul)

There is a sloka in *Mundaka Upanishad*

*samāne vrkṣe puruṣo nimagno
'nīśayā śocati muhyamānah
justam yadā paśyaty anyam īśam
asya mahimānam iti vīta-śokah*

There is a tree, and
two birds sit on it.
There is fruit on this tree.
One of the birds eats, the other watches.

When I work with you on *The Tree* I feel like the birds: the doer and the observer. As an observer I experience being like a child who is taken on a journey through the continuous changing landscapes of creation, preservation and destruction; an introduction to life itself. Always ending to begin anew, the

observer creates her own story from her own experience of life and knowledge. Therefore, the spectator is guided, yet free to discover her own story.

As a doer I am part of no story, just a continuous flow of energy, it is like being taken over by the rhythm of every actor's dance. In the current and force of this dance-river the only thing that remains is to do, like a boat in the waves, like a ritual. All the movement happening in the space creates an energy Mandala painting, and we are like lines and colours of different intensity that complete one image.

With love

Joyguru Parvathy

The Essential

Birth

I am the same age as Odin Teatret. We were born at the beginning of October in 1964. Perhaps we will see each other's lives out. I have laboured long in hope of creating something which entices people

My desire to work in this tradition began some thirty years ago. I was at a loss of what I should do as an actor. I had studied theatre at university in Canada and had a steady career as an actor afterwards. But I felt parched. I desired a new well to drink from. I had decided to search for a master after being inspired by Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*. It offered me the possibility to ask questions about what I really desired as an actor. Then I saw a young group at theatre school guided by an actor of Odin Teatret at that time. I saw in this work a beacon of life for which I was searching. I travelled to Odin Teatret for the first time in 1988 to observe the work and was immersed into a world where I would finally find my theatre language. I returned to my work in Canada and eventually to Italy.

I began to work with Odin Teatret in 2006 and Eugenio began to assign roles to me in several performances. First I performed the Dandy (a character created by Tage Larsen) on stilts and now, as well, I continue the stilt role created by Else Marie Laukvik known as Androgyne. In 2006 I entered *Andersen's Dream*, and then *The Great Cities Under the Moon* in 2007. In 2011 I had a small role in *The Chronic Life* and in 2012 became a part of the performance *Inside the Skeleton of the Whale* and *Ode to Progress*. I had begun teaching workshops and with this I felt that I have a role in the group after ten years' apprenticeship. But even from the very first days with Odin, I felt as if I had a childlike presence, and was a novice. Eugenio would work with me as if it was my very first time encountering theatre. This has alleviated any sense that I am "good". I am still a beginner. Learning. Like looking out into the starry night sky for the first time.

The tree

I have always had a creative desire in my performances to have some sign of the character the Little Prince, from the famous book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

It is a well-known and admired character for people all over the world. I tend to mask my inspiration amongst the material I have created for a performance. So, it was as though my inner smile lit my whole self - as if the sun came to shine on me - when Eugenio presented me with the Little Prince as inspiration for my character at our first meeting. It was in Wuzhen, China, when he gathered the actors in his hotel room and assigned different roles to them. My first thought was: "How will they all meet?" For some time, I read and reread the book, pondering what I could do with the Little Prince role. The seed was planted. I was worried it could be an imitation and the costume would be instantly recognised. But time alone would tell.



The Little Prince: original water-colour by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

White Stones

One of the first images that came to my mind when Eugenio wrote me and proposed to make a research on birds (behaviours, sounds, etc.) was that of pecking at seeds or bread from the ground. But the size of seeds was not theatrical enough for me and bread had been used in the last performance. I tend to collect material; images I like, that are stimulating, and save them in my notebooks. One such image was that of white stones. At first it was as if leaving a secret path of white stones like in the fairy-tale of *Hansel and Gretel* which later become breadcrumbs which the birds eat up. They follow a white bird to a large cottage made of gingerbread. I couldn't do a pantomime bird and begin pecking the floor. Instead, I collected hundreds of white stones from the beach in Thorsminde on the west coast of Denmark. I had them in the working room and began inventing ways of moving them, the sounds they make, packaging them, and offering them another life. The image of this path kept on resounding inside me. I thought of each stone being a country or a small village.

Then I thought they were tribes, and then that these tribes were represented with the name of bird groups (a murder of crows). As I researched more I had to decide on the number of bird groups because there were so many. I came back to the Little Prince when he tells the man of the forty-four sunsets

he watched in one day, and the man answers: “Were you so sad, then, on the day of the forty-four sunsets?” That seemed like just the right number. I kept the bird list alphabetically, like a child learning. I hadn’t tried to memorise them, but wrote the title on each stone as it was very special.

This brought back a vision from a visit to Lima (Peru) where I saw a path of memorial stones with the names of murdered and missing people placed at the monument *El Ojo que Lloro* (The Eye that Cries). White stones have an abundance of powerful meanings, I discovered. How the stones could be held, placed, and bowed to, all deriving from the images I came upon. One delves into an amazing amount of things, but in the end only a small but intense sense of that work remains. I shared my work with Eugenio during a week in Holstebro before travelling to Colombia. He was rather silent after. Maybe my excitement wasn’t shared by him? We then discussed and I showed it again, now with a crew filming. But he turned from the door as he was about to go, looked me in the eyes and said: “Protect this work.”



Photo: Donald Kitt

El ojo que llora (The eye that cries) monument in Lima

Mud floor

Sometimes I find myself just doing, being “concerned with matters of consequence”. I heed the time to understand, as Eugenio guides us in rehearsals, in the details, in the walks, in all the work which develops the character and story. “The essential, most often, has no weight.” In Colombia, in the small theatre of Teatro Itinerante del Sol above the village of Villa de Leyva, rehearsals began with Eugenio, Iben, Roberta, Julia, Kai, Elena, Parvarthy, Bawa and myself.

We hunch down through a small doorway and enter a space from ancient times. We find a little corner to place our things and Eugenio makes a toast to the space and each other, like launching a ship to sail. But instead

of water we had a mud floor; natural earth, with a circular hole, centred, a metre in diameter, where rain would fall from a hole made in the cone roof. We could cover both, so rain would not enter and we would not fall into the hole. As we have very precise set pieces, we had a difficult time enjoying the natural setting. More care and precision had to be adhered to during rehearsals. After rehearsals we would wet down the earth making it soft or of course rain would enter and the slippery mud would add to the material. The stones had little room because of the reduced space and sometimes would be kicked or dug into the earth. At that moment they weren't part of the story, although Eugenio would insist we find a way.

Before travelling to Colombia, there was a week of rehearsals in Holstebro. At that time Eugenio had made the decision I was a monk, in a desert in Syria. "I have always loved the desert. One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams..." but the Little Prince still remains at my side. Songs were worked on, material shared, and a structure began to materialise.



Photo: Donald Kitt

Teatro Itinerante del Sol: a space from ancient time

Like-minded spies

In September 2015 we travel to Wroclaw, Poland. People from the Grotowski Institute, our like-minded spies, have always welcomed us and we feel very much like family. We begin our encounter called the Collective Mind, a week of rehearsals during which thirty participants observe our rehearsals and work process. They will spy on us and eventually speak together with Eugenio many times during the week. I am acutely aware of my mistakes when there are observers. The text itself seems to get stuck in my throat. I am searching for the sound, the rhythm.

I continue diligently to discover an "in" for this performance. This "in" is something that I can focus on or that may open doors to the character. It may

be an object or some material that speaks truthfully to what I am creating. “If you succeed in judging yourself rightly, then you are indeed a man of true wisdom.” I like to go and listen to the participants at the end-of-day meetings, where they share their opinions and thoughts. I am curious of what they have to say. Maybe it will offer me an “in”.

One such meeting I couldn’t attend due to work, but I understood later that my cap for the character had been changed because of a comment of one of the participants and then eventually a note from Eugenio. Even though Eugenio is aware of the necessity of these difficult decisions, he knows it is not so easy to receive. I imagine that everyone has a strong negative view of my choice of the cap and that my creative impulse has been tarnished. The cap was something which kept me physically connected to the Little Prince. I had even found the cap in Wroclaw, so I felt it gave it an even stronger connection. The twists and vicissitudes of life.

In the jungle

I love to watch nature grow. Especially the smallest of plants. Hoping they will make it through whatever obstacle they will be confronted with. In the lush greenery of Batuan, Bali, we enjoy a thatched-roof outdoor space surrounded by palm trees and rice fields. We begin at 6 o’clock in the morning. It is the end of January but the warm humid air wraps our skin at this early hour. I studied



Photo: Donald Kitt

The rehearsal space in Bali

Topeng in Bali in 1996 and found it an endearing place. Returning had been on my mind, but as always I needed a reason.

We are asked by Eugenio to lead a small training/warm-up session before we begin work on “Night Flight”, our time to develop and explore material. I find a place in an amphitheatre below the rehearsal space. I am surrounded by nature. During this period, I search for new things. Eugenio offers some guidance with themes for material. Where is my “in”? The rehearsal space has a wooden floor, which is easily scratched and dented. Now I must place my stones delicately, almost caressing the floor. The stones themselves have transformed due to changes. They resemble bones as well. With Eugenio’s guidance, I added stones less rounded and bigger, of all distorted shapes. But the number of white stones are greatly reduced. During these rehearsals I was constantly amazed we could manage two run-throughs each day, even though it seemed time was against us.

I had brought a secret from Denmark which Eugenio had requested to get for all my colleagues. For the last run-through he reveals the secret: red clown noses. We should attempt a final run-through without ever having used them before. It seems to have been a bewildering decision, and it seems, for now, it will remain in the performance.

Invisible to the eye

After a week we meet back in Holstebro. The scenography has changed colours and the floor is a grey sea. The white room seems such an enclosed space compared to the places we have been encountering along this journey. The next time we meet will be in September 2016 for some weeks of rehearsals and the opening of the performance. Now the white stones are finding their role and a connection with other characters throughout the performance. And I find myself between the Little Prince and the Yazidi monk. A stone in each hand.

During these rehearsals, Parvarthy’s first master had died and she had to fly back to India that day. We continued without her, but the silence without her presence somehow adds to the rhythmical struggle. We were missing a life force in the performance. I wanted to explain this to the observers at the last run-through. There’s not an empty void.

What is essential is invisible to the eye.

Kai Bredholt (in collaboration with Erika Sánchez)

War Has a Face

Simplicity within Complexity

I am running in a park in a rich neighbourhood of Bogotá, in Colombia. Around me pensioners are doing their morning gymnastics and young mothers are playing in the grass with their children. Through my earphones I am listening repeatedly to Vivaldi's *Spring*.

It is impossible to describe in words, to those who do not know, what civil war is like. War has a face, and you must make a friend of war. War and terror are your friends. If they are not, then they become enemies to be feared.

Over the music, I am rehearsing a text that I want to show Eugenio and my colleagues next week, when we all have to present our material. I want the music to keep hold of the text, so I can say it without feelings, without melody, just words in a row. Everything is in the text already and there are more than enough feelings in Vivaldi's music.

The enemy had come and hacked off every vaccinated arm. There they were, in a pile: a pile of little arms.

Eugenio had given me a book as inspiration for my new character: a biography full of violence; a meaningless violence in my eyes. The book had left me empty, angry and without inspiration. In a few words, with nothing much to build a character on.

Eugenio has suggested that I could use a character I had made for another performance as starting point. A nice soldier suffering from war trauma. I knew



European warlord (Kai Bredholt)

Photo: Rina Skeel

his way of thinking, and I could not understand how this soldier could turn into a thoughtless, nasty assassin in our new performance.

I am an actor; I have to believe in what I do.

You must have men who are able to use their primordial instinct to kill without feelings, without passion, without judgement.

I had to find something that could give a meaning to my new character. I wondered if I had seen something before where violence had left an impression on me in one way or another and not just a feeling of emptiness. Kurosawa, Lars von Trier, Francis Coppola, Josef Conrad.

I remembered parts of a text that Marlon Brando said in the film *Apocalypse Now*. I had heard it, but not understood it. I looked for it again and suddenly it gave meaning and substance for my work. It was just what I needed for my character.

You have a right to kill me, but you have no right to judge me.

That was my new character's way of thinking. I read the whole text, also Josef Conrad's original version. Finally, I could start building a character that had depth, where violence was not only something grotesque and banal. I could find songs, poems, melodies and the most difficult: the voice that should give credibility to my character and to the horrors he told about.

This was what took most time. Again I searched among all the voices that had left a mark on me. I learned them all, and with Eugenio we finally chose a warm and calm radio voice that talks about gourmet food.

We must exterminate them, annihilate them, pig by pig, cow by cow, house by house, village by village.

The book that Eugenio had given me was about the life of Arkan, a Serbian warlord. But only now was I able to use his story as a kind of red thread in my material: the church bells, the bomb sounds, Elvis Presley, an Orthodox song.

To my great joy, Eugenio used almost all the material I had prepared. I am an actor, and for an actor, especially at Odin Teatret, this is almost a miracle. Once again Eugenio had succeeded in challenging me and making me search in foreign places where I didn't belong. Once again theatre had a meaning: to walk alongside my colleagues along a long, long road and find simplicity in complexity.

Performing a Prayer

I have been working with Eugenio Barba for twenty-one years, ever since I participated in the session of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in Umeå, in Sweden, in 1995. I was happy when Eugenio asked me to be an actor in Odin Teatret's new performance. It would give me the opportunity to have a new theatre experience and compare and understand the different ways of working in Asian and Western theatre.

I love to work with Odin Teatret. I was curious to know about the new production and how it would be created. The way of working is different from what I knew from the performances made by Eugenio with the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble with the actors and musicians participating in the ISTA, which had more to do with know-how, exploration and research. I perceived Theatrum Mundi performances to be more romantic, sad, spiritual and magic. Behind *The Tree* I perceive horror. It is more heroic.

The work with *The Tree* is quite difficult: I need to understand the English text, the movement, rhythm, principles and feeling of the performance. I have to learn more about action and reaction in theatre work. I like the work, although I don't like myself when I cannot follow what the director wants from me. I need many more rehearsals before I can perform to full satisfaction.

I enjoyed the rehearsals in Bali, because the spirit and the taste of food was my own. The open place was good for vocal training. In Colombia, on the hill with a lot of vegetation, the atmosphere was healthy and we could accept the power and energy coming directly from the trees. While in Poland, rehearsing in front of spectators gave concentration, expression and evaluation.

My character, Joshua Milton Blahyi, is strong and powerful. To portray him I mostly use the body movement, rhythm and feeling of the Gambuh King, because for me the two characters are similar. There is also a correspondence between the principles of Balinese dance-drama and the dramaturgy at Odin Teatret, only that one is traditional and the other contemporary.

As an actor I am always praying during a performance. I pray for good welfare and blessing, to be able to concentrate on the work in the hope of

being successful (*sida karya*). As the character Joshua Milton Blahyi, I pray during the performance with a different meaning. It is a preparation for a human sacrifice before leading an army of child soldiers into battle (according the text) and to become powerful in battle.



Photo: Rina Skeel

Two warlords in conversation (Kai Bredholt, I Wayan Bawa)

The Architecture of the Birds

In the Mato Grosso I saw a nest hanging from the branch of a tree. It was shaped as an elongated balloon. A flock of small green parrots was making a devilish noise under the nest. They were flying around chasing each other. They seemed to be playing. Perhaps they were intent on judging the shape of the nest or exchanging information about the tastiest insects in the area. The sound of their cheeping was similar to their name in French, also used in Brazil: *perroquet*. If I repeat this word quickly, making the consonants vibrate in between high-pitched vowels, I feel the same excitement, urgency and fun.

Countless small dry branches of different sizes, pieces of grass, flowers, dead leaves, seeds, and perhaps some capybara or tapir hairs, along with saliva and wind have helped to create this dangling shelter - that looks like a work of high architectural engineering - under which the parrots were flying. How does one build a nest, something so simple and yet so complex at the same time? I unwittingly think of the creation of a performance. After decades of work as an actress, I feel that the construction technique is similar. It consists of allowing oneself to be guided by intuition and experience, by a knowledge deposited in the cells, as if it were something else that decides, and not us who are involved in the process.

Sticks, leaves, hair, saliva and wind: many different and often hidden materials participate in forming a performance and shaping a character - the actor's nest and shelter. Some materials show themselves only in a gesture of an improvisation, in the position of the foot while walking, in a way of looking. Others solidify into scenes, texts, songs. But most of the materials defy the spectators' awareness, they remain undetectable because they are not visible



Photo: Julia Varley

Hanging bird nests

on the surface. In addition to the research connected to the theme of the performance, to the context in which the characters move, to the creation of the stage and lighting design, to the logic of the music, to the montage of the text, my inner universe and my imagination are also part of a performance's baggage of information. Hundreds of experiences, memories, wishes and meetings populate my actress's subconscious and give depth to my presence on stage.

The episodes that follow belong to my personal genesis of *The Tree*. They are the references that have stimulated the life of my character, a Yazidi monk who plants a tree in the desert to bring back the birds. Unlike the process for past performances, this time, after forty years as an actress, the inspiration comes from a simple room filled with furniture and from travel recollections, from the sounds and images of natural phenomena and animal life. They are experiences that communicate from afar with the theme of the performance, that do not need to be explained. They are the source of images that nourish my actions as an actress. They take me back home: to the working room where I put together materials and prepare for the future performance - a nest hanging in the void.

Ararat and Komitas

I climb the stairs to the entrance of the Matenadaran, the museum of ancient manuscripts in Yerevan, Armenia, and just before crossing the threshold of the

gate I turn towards the parking lot. It is sunny and I want to feel the warmth before entering the massive building that preserves documents in Armenian, Persian, Arabic, Hebrew, Russian and Japanese. On the horizon beyond the city, covered with snow just like on postcards, Mount Ararat appears clear and stately. I leave the vision and enter the Matenadaran where for the first time I hear of Komitas, the musician priest considered to be the father of modern Armenian music. He died in a psychiatric clinic in Paris after experiencing the massacres of the Armenian genocide and the destruction of most of his years-long work of collecting and reassembling the musical tradition of his country.

On a mountain road with an endless view of the surrounding valleys, the guide stops the car next to what looks like a triumphal arch in the middle of nowhere. When the sky is clear, it serves as a grey concrete frame to photograph the Ararat, the mountain which is a symbol of Armenia now rising in Turkey. Today it is drizzling. Under the arch there are two women and two men. Seeing me come they place themselves in a corner which has a particular acoustics and they begin to sing. All their attention is on their vocal harmonies that touch, leave, penetrate, contrast, accompany and abandon each other. The basis of their music is simple, but the variations in rhythm, the vocal ornaments, how they reach and leave a note, creates a feeling of intense emotional complexity. I convince them to sing again and eventually buy one of their CDs. It contains recordings of melodies by Komitas, but not only this. I am accompanied by the incessant sound of the rain, but the day has suddenly become bright. I will learn some of the songs.

The guide is very proud that foreigners appreciate the landscape, culture, history, food and music of her country. In a monastery she gets cross with an Orthodox priest who stages a fake ceremony to get money, in another she suddenly begins to sing. Her voice is sweet, thin and high. Komitas reappears. In the library of the cathedral I finally buy some CDs with the recorded voice of the famous composer priest. I also buy handbags and belts with geometric patterns and colours that I like, and many hats of different sizes. While choosing, I remember that my purchases should not give the impression of belonging to a particular country if one day I should use them for a performance.

Among the sacred relics of the cathedral I look for a long time at what is described in the caption as a piece of wood of Noah's Ark. I imagine all the pairs of animals taking refuge in the boat stranded on Mount Ararat after the

Flood. I think of the vessel that welcomed the animals, of their dialogues and bickering, of the small space they shared and of the tempest of water. I buy a postcard to remember the stories contained in that piece of wood.

Cinderella

For a week I live and work in a beautiful house with a garden in a residential district of São Paulo. There I decide to watch Walt Disney's film *Cinderella*. The husband of my host, Rossana, a yoga teacher, enters the room and asks me what I am doing. He is intrigued by the music and deformed dialogues coming out of my laptop. I find it difficult to assert that I am working for Odin Teatret's new performance. How can I explain that I have been given the role of Cinderella by Eugenio Barba, the theatre director famous for his commitment and seriousness? The songs of the film don't seem interesting to me, nor do the movements of the cartoon figures, the story even less so. I could find a glass shoe and work with it. For a while, I will search for one in various shops around the world, but I am not convinced. Maybe it is Cinderella's name that contains a clue to follow. I cannot use ashes that already appear in another of our performances, but I think of all the grey clothes I own. When I get back to Holstebro, I will pull them all out and they will be one of my starting points for *The Tree*. Meanwhile the director will probably have forgotten Cinderella and the reason for his choice. He had only felt the need to say something to the actors before starting the common flight.

The shower

There is a shower on the beach. It is very hot and there is no one around. A bird jumps on the pipe above the outlet of the shower to make a few drops of water fall. It is a delicate dance accompanied by a ticking sound. The bird becomes still, stretches its neck, leans over, lowers its beak and drinks. With patient intelligence, the bird repeats the hops several times, and each time is rewarded by a few sips that quench its thirst.

Corners

Leading a training session, Verónica Falconí of Contraelviento Teatro describes the baroque statues of the churches in Quito, in Ecuador. Following her images, I put the accent on my knees, shoulders, elbows and wrists. I let my movements be guided by the articulations, emphasising corners and contrasts. A different body is revealed to me while I break the continuity of the lines to which I am accustomed.

Patagonia

We wait impatiently on the rubber dinghy. The driver announces: “It’s coming up!” The back of a whale appears just beside us, so close that I could touch it with my hand. An American tourist near me emits squeals that sound like the soundtrack of an orgasm in a pornographic film. The whale’s skin is covered with strange white and grey lumps: parasite crustaceans that live on its back. I see the spray of water that accompanies its breathing. The whale sinks again. A baby whale tries to come close to the dinghy. It is a curious youngster. The mother intervenes to keep it away. I wait for the moment when the famous whale tail blow will show itself and I see one in the distance. But what strikes me most is the feeling of my own smallness in the middle of the sea while mysterious beings that communicate by singing are swimming underneath, ready to rise to the surface to breathe and surprise me.

Along the coast of the promontory I see many seals and sea lions, stretched out on the rocks, motionless as if they were dead. A small seal plays in a pool in front of me. It looks at me with inquisitive eyes. It disappears and reappears. It plays hide and seek with my attention, while I avoid to wave away the flies from my face so as not to frighten it. The seal has an opposite rhythm to the pieces of ice that I saw in the mountains gliding on the lake after having detached themselves from the vast glacier that creaks. Each piece of intense blue had the shape of an animal, a snail or a bird, but it didn’t have eyes.



Photo: Julia Varley

A whale in Patagonia



Penguin nest

The coast is dotted with holes and there is a strong smell of fish. At each hole, a penguin stands guard. It protects the eggs or the hatchlings at the entrance of the nest. Other penguins walk in line and then dive into the waves. It is a motorway with hundreds of these birds that walk clumsily and then swim with confidence and speed in search of food. They stop for a moment to check the way, and turn their heads and beaks in unison towards the wind. From close up, with feathers looking like fish-scales, they seem less elegant. I could watch them for hours, studying their funny footsteps, their hops, the way they slip into the water, how they lower their head to avoid the biggest waves, how they take off and fly, how they feed their chicks and monitor anyone approaching. Some take a running start, the beak pushed forward, the wings pulled back and the small legs trotting in search of the necessary speed. Others sway gently as they approach the point where the waves break on the beach. Nothing distracts them from their activities, not even the impressively dark red sunset announcing a rapid nightfall. An armadillo crosses the endless stretch of penguin nests. Its haste seems to whisper to me that it is time to go home.

Michael Vetter

I went to visit the musician Michael Vetter in Germany. I wanted to continue learning improvisation and harmonic singing techniques from him. He told me that we would create a concert together. My grandmother died during this period. At times I cried, mainly because of the frustration of not being able to follow calmly the sound of his tambura. In those days I also began to transform the musicality of a spoken sentence into singing, supporting and stretching the notes. One morning Michael Vetter showed me a book of photographs and asked me to be smoke, clouds and a tree. "Slower, much slower," he repeated. "The tree grows in an invisible way and moves imperceptibly." Outside the window I could see majestic pine-trees. Attempting to understand the slow, continuous and full rhythm of the tree transformed my body.

The room

It is a room with a view of the sea. Sometimes a mountain appears on the horizon, amid the mist. The landscape is surrounded by trees that need to be pruned and by the wild greenery of the surrounding hills. Every morning grey birds land on the branches for a second. They launch a chirping warning and fly away, revealing dazzling yellow feathers under their wings. It is a room I know well. It is not big, but the view gives a sense of space, especially when the sun is shining.

During a meeting entitled "Energy is a journey for few" at Teatro Potlach in Fara Sabina in Italy, Eugenio gave me the task of working with time. He had asked me to improvise *navigating time*. The task seemed abstract, but it was fascinating. It allowed me to transform thoughts and feelings into concrete behaviour following a totally personal logic. It moved me away from the usual movements provoked by images and stories, and the result surprised me. Later the director also asked me to *navigate space*.

I decide to complete the task in the room with the view of the sea. With different parts of my body I react to the shapes, lines and directions of the room, to the perception of rhythm and volume given to me by everything that surrounds me. I register the extension, amplitude, distance, corners, surfaces, colours, contrasts, consistency and frequency of the walls, doors, furniture, lights, objects and paintings.

The longest wall extends all the way to the glass door that opens on to a terrace. I raise my arm lightly to touch it and then change direction

with a decided movement to mark its entire length. Leaning on the wall is a cabinet with several drawers in which I hide papers, electric cables and a coloured plastic bracelet. On top of the cabinet is a television that I never turn on and a mirror. I move along the wall interrupted by the table and chair where I write at the computer. I look at the floor and slowly make a pirouette in the area free from furniture. The air surrounding me is round and turns with me. The ceiling is of a normal height. The floor tiles are large and clear.

Fast impulses from the arms and hands underline the smallness of the space, as if I lean on the ceiling and floor, on the wall in front of me and behind. On the opposite side of the window overlooking the sea there is an archway that opens on to the bathroom where frangipani flowers are placed beside the sink. Five steps take me to the archway and three back again. I look from one side of the room to the other. With light kicks I stress the diagonal line that leads to a glass division separating the bed from a wooden sofa with coloured pillows where I always put my little red suitcase. The stripes that divide the tiles under my feet are thin. On tiptoe I stretch my arms to the ceiling. The floor is soft and fresh, like the tropical air that caresses me. Two light white curtains dance imperceptibly with the morning breeze. I sway with them. I stop. Without touching the curtains, from a distance, my arms gently smooth the fabric.

The mosquito net over the bed sinks into a circular shape that contrasts the straight lines of the sofa and picture-frame. A chair with a rounded backrest and another with crossed legs are placed beside a low table with a glass surface. A lamp with five cube-shaped paper shades hangs in the corner of the room, between the wall and the window. The cubes are placed one beneath the other, and their volume becomes smaller as they go down. The bedsheets draw irregular lines that end beside two pillows.

With the positions of my body I verify the arrangement, the style and the many shapes of the room. I measure, weigh, wear, draw. I react with my whole body and then repeat the sequence separately only with my head, eyes, feet, knees, and then with my elbows, wrists and fingers. I insert bird sounds, extreme positions of the eyes, finger variations, and smiles. This room always reappears in all its details during the rehearsals of *The Tree* and the repetition of my performer's material. Every time I smell the scent of the frangipani and listen to the urgent message brought by the morning birds.

The seeds

I am in Bangalore, India, at the second Tantidhatri Festival directed by Parvathy Baul in collaboration with The Magdalena Project, a network of women in contemporary theatre. One morning Parvathy gathers some extraordinary women for a meeting: A. Revathi, Kamla Bashin, Khushi Kabir and Vandana Shiva. They are historical feminists, activists, transgender. Vandana fights obstinately against multinational corporations that aspire to control the agriculture market through sterile seeds, fertilizers and pesticide chemicals. She is dedicated to defending the peasants who collect and preserve seeds for their community. She is an example of a woman who works in small settings in a world dominated by giants. While listening to her I think of the dead tree of our new performance and of all our efforts to make flowers and fruit sprout from it. Within myself I decide that I will dedicate my work in the performance to her.

Palestinian embroidery

Behind the big mosque in Damascus, in Syria, a woman with loose hair wearing a miniskirt and make-up is walking beside a veiled woman covered from head to toe. They are talking together. I imagine that they are telling each other something about their studies or work, or about a boyfriend, completely unaware of their outer differences. I am heading to the Danish Culture Institute, a house with three courtyards, an oasis of tranquillity and beauty, adorned by fountains and painted carved wood. The house is hidden behind a small door that opens on to the main market street. In an instant one passes from a chaos, full of dust and spicy perfumes, to a stillness accompanied only by the sound of the water in the fountains. Getting lost in the streets leading from the mosque to the bazaar, I am attracted by a shop-window. The natural colours of the shawls shown there captivate me. It is a shop that sells hand-embroidered camel wool clothes, cloaks and shawls made by Palestinian women. Despite the high price, I leave the shop with two embroidered cloaks, one in grey and the other cream-coloured, and two orange and brown shawls. The shape of the cloaks I have bought is slender, with elongated pointed sleeves adorned with coloured pendants. The embroideries reveal a quality of artisan dedication hard to find nowadays. The cloaks will have to wait many years before being used as robes for the Yazidi monks in *The Tree*. Every time I have looked at the embroideries, I have wondered if the shop near the bazaar still exists, if the Culture Institute still has its inlaid roof, if Damascus is still beautiful, and if the children of the

two women have fled abroad or are fighting each other among the ruins of the city in a war that nobody can stop.

The Pantanal

Wild animals in the Brazilian Mato Grosso Pantanal are not afraid of human beings. For generations they have passed on the information to each other that men are harmless. Hunting has been prohibited in this region for many years. This does not mean that I am not be afraid of the scorpions and spiders that often end up close to my feet. When at night I find myself sitting on the roof of the jeep, armed with a torch to catch wild animals in the beam of light, every time I hear a *jacaré* (alligator) bark, I jump in the opposite direction, as if a few centimetres could save me. It is a mysterious, hoarse and loud sound. That night I saw a white tapir, and the moon resting on the branch of a dead tree beside the black shadows of two birds with a long curved beak.

At dawn I look at the blue macaws perched on the trees near the house. I listen to the parrot couples kissing each other on the neck behind their heads. The sounds they emit are full of love and attention. Every now and then they fly off to change position on the branches. They go back to kissing by crossing their beaks while they are attentive to the other animals approaching. They have their own alphabet. I understand that my bird language should be enriched by consonants and lower tones. A new vocal perspective opens up to me to compete with the concerts of the frogs and crickets singing at the sides of a long bridge over a stretch of water covered in pink flowers.

The capybaras are among the animals I prefer. I love to watch them running and bouncing around. They always have a playful, optimistic air, as if they were smiling amicably. Along a path I see a group of capybara families with their cubs. They are resting in the shade of a tree, not far from the *jacaré* (alligators) that are instead taking advantage of the sun in the middle of the road. I learn to distinguish the eyes of the *jacaré* submerged in the pond nearby from twigs or wisps of grass.

I focus my attention to catch sight of some examples of the incredible variety of birds around me. They say that there are seven hundred different species in the Pantanal. I am happy to see the tuiús again, with their white bodies, vermilion red necks and black heads. I study them as they walk alone in the undergrowth and as a couple standing high in the trees on their giant nest. Their rhythm is so different from that of the Cardinal birds that circle the puddles of water in the morning. From a canoe I see the hawks that have



Photo: Julia Varley

Night in the Pantanal

learned to dive to catch the fish thrown by the guide with his camera ready. I discover a nest with two chicks - not really all that small - with feathers the same colour as the branches, stretching their body, neck and beak completely

still so as not to attract attention, waiting for the mother - or perhaps the father - to come and feed them. They provide a good image of a motionless dynamic impulse. I am fascinated by all the different shapes of birds and nests. I think of a book of bird architecture and I begin to take photographs myself.

Dogs

The main square of Villa de Leyva in Colombia seems immense, surrounded by white houses with red tile roofs. The colonial architecture is open and bright. Big dogs chase each other on the square. They do not see me as they bark and bite each other. One of them runs into me with such force that I fall. Someone hurries to help me. Thanks to the dogs that did not even notice me, I will do the last rehearsals in Colombia with a bandage on my wrist. It was our day off. That day also Iben fell backward from her chair at the table and hit her head. Sometimes it is not good to stop working.

The Festuge

In small village churches around Holstebro, Parvathy Baul, Elena Floris and Iben Nagel Rasmussen present their concert under the name of *Triolerne*. They have chosen Danish love poems and songs combining them with Indian music and texts from the Baul tradition, with pieces of Italian tarantella and classical music. We are all involved in the Holstebro Festuge (Festive Week) called “Faces of the Future”, and in Odin Teatret’s 50th anniversary celebrations. As the Mercurial Family, Carolina Pizarro and I with Deborah Hunt have worked with the puppet children of *The Marriage of Medea*, sculpted by Fabio Butera. Wearing masks and Tyrolean clothes, we put the future on sale, pointing at the two children put on show.

Eugenio Barba runs from one part of the region to the other dedicating himself to the final performance, but he also manages to see our different interventions. He is satisfied. One day he proclaims that he already has the basic structure for our new performance, that for a long time we will call *Flying*. *Triolerne*’s concert will be the frame within which we can move. Parvathy, Elena and Iben are like three angels, he explains to me while buying three embroidered stoles in Mexico that he will later try to give Donald and me for the Yazidi monks. They will carry messages from the birds. But the theme we work with are child soldiers. We still don’t know that the puppet children that in *The Marriage of Medea* were dressed in Balinese sarongs and during the Festuge with Tyrolean shorts and dresses, soon will

wear military uniforms. Recycling has become a part of our "ecological" theatre technique!

I believe in the intentions of the director and each day a recording of Parvathy, Elena and Iben's concert accompanies my work in the rehearsal space. I dance, improvise steps and ways of looking, stretch my arms like a tree, I sing and speak, following or opposing their music. I am not alone in the room.

More birds

In the salt desert in the north of Chile, pink flamingos stand out like a splash of colour on a painter's still white canvas. The legs are slender and long - they could break as twigs in the wind. When one leg rests, the other supports the large body of feathers. The neck rises to look far away, the breeze passes between the feathers, the birds remain still and impassive. They are spots of motionless life in the middle of nowhere.

In the middle of Chamula's market in Mexico, I see a crucified dead bird. The head hangs to the side and its wide-open wings are nailed to wood just like a Christ. I have no idea why they sell a similar figure. I am impressed by the image that does not leave me as I stop at a stall of containers made of dried, empty pumpkins. The noise of the feast in the square, and the murmur from the church I have just visited, echo in my ears. I choose two small gourds and buy ten kilos of corn. I have been thinking for some time that I should feed birds with grains of corn. Perhaps to avoid them being crucified.

In China

In Wuzhen - frightened by the traffic, celebrity adoration, pursuit of profit, neon lights that colour the skyscrapers along the shore - in the world of theatre I am impressed by the small steps of a traditional female character in a suggestive night performance directed by Stan Lai. The steps follow each other rapidly, one just in front of the other, almost as if they should slide backwards instead of moving forward, as if escaping into a past that will never return.

A few days later, during a work demonstration in a theatre made of an ancient tea-house, I make an improvisation. I dive into the sea, I go back and forth like the waves, I become the back of a whale, I emit the spray of water and air that is interrupted to return on itself like two birds pecking at each other, I bite as fast as a moray eel, I rock like a seahorse, I fly like a flock of swallows, I float floppily like an octopus.

Outside red flags wave with no taste of socialism. I recall the tragic book about the Chinese adopted girls, I buy jade objects, eat with chopsticks, listen to the intonation of a language I don't understand and look with amazement at the theatres that have been built in just one year to host a new theatre festival. I know that there are incredible landscapes in China, I have been told about mountains, forests and animals, but I can only see them in paintings, in sets and in my imagination. In Wuzhen one evening Eugenio gathers the actors in his room to tell us about the new performance. He calls it *Flying*. The actors, like birds, are ready to take off and fly far away. They are already thinking of the materials with which to build their nests.



Photo: Fabiano Oliveira

Bird nest by the river

The Last Performance

It was the winter of 1983, and it was snowing hard (towards the end of the past century, it really snowed a lot in Denmark!): Eugenio Barba told me he wanted to make his “last performance”, based on the fragments of apocryphal gospels which, even though they existed and even were widely published, had never been acknowledged by the Catholic Church. I participated in this metaphysical adventure as a novice set designer and the performance was finally presented in 1985. Twenty years later, I worked for another of Odin Teatret’s “last performances”, called *Andersen’s Dream*. And last year (ten years later), I began yet another “last performance”, *The Tree*. In between each performance lives, loves and deaths take place. Then we meet in a rehearsal room in Holstebro. Always for the “last performance”. Why is it constantly marked in such a way as if it was a secret?

It is a physical, emotional and psychic state of mind. An extraordinary concentration, like that of a samurai warrior. Defying the laws of physics and the resistance of matter. As for the samurai whose path is death, the full realisation of the self passes through its real or figurative annihilation for two reasons. The first is that the fundamental duty of a samurai is to “serve” in the full sense of the term: **his lifetime “serves”**, it has no value in itself, but only in function of a service. A doctrine which might appear to be scandalous to a Western perspective, because in Western history progress has been strongly linked to the affirmation of individuals’ rights and freedoms (but not in the construction of a performance here at Odin Teatret). To this day, individualism is one of the central characteristics of Western culture, but it probably comes at a price: **the fear of death**. Conversely - and this is part of the second reason - samurais are educated according to the doctrines of Zen Buddhism, to **not fear death at all**; to never keep it from their thoughts as a taboo, but rather to always remember

it: "The Way of the Samurai means to be possessed by the thought of death". To work for an Odin performance, and always work for Odin's "last performance", means abandoning your own prospects. Listening to all the voices. Intercept signals that can help you reach land or drown you. This performance, which was supposed to tell three stories of warlords who are still alive and free, in its infinite mutations ended up telling, in my eyes, the life of a tree that witnesses a series of broken lives. A simple tree that took months and months of my life. But more about that later.

Lightness

After forty years of writing fiction, after exploring various paths and making various experiments, the time has come that I look for an overall definition for my work. I would suggest this: my working method has often been a subtraction of weight; I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all, I have tried to remove weight from the narrative structure and from language.

(American Lectures by Italo Calvino)

We began with an idea of lightness, trying to keep to it up to the end. Barba wanted to take this new performance to inaccessible places but nevertheless dense with relationships, expectations and interest. To do this, the only way seemed to take everything on the plane as **luggage**. We spent time studying the limitations and IATA rules (which also vary from carrier to carrier) and arrived at some conclusions. Maximum length 1.70 m., maximum weight per person, etc., etc.

The performance started with a limit of 300 kilos transportable by a dozen people on luggage with wheels. But an Odin performance is a precision mechanism. The position of the spectators, of the lights, of the entrance and exit, must always be the same. We had to find a way to bring along the seating scaffolds for 120 people. And everything else. And all by air, inside trolley suitcases.

We had to remove weight from the heavenly bodies to succeed.

Why make things difficult when they can be easy? And why make them easy when they are difficult?

(Eugenio Barba)



We worked for months with Laura Colombo and Ida Gunhild-Skovbjerg, trying to design and build the lightest seating tribune in the world. Still, all ideas were either too big for suitcases (prototypes in cardboard, wood, aluminium) or too heavy for the baggage allowance.

We had to take off weight. Remove weight from substance.

Air! A seating full of air!

We tried every form: cubes, sofas, armchairs... Until we discovered that we could use a long cylinder of a highly resistant material (that of life rafts)! A bench for forty spectators could be deflated and transported in a trolley suitcase. We would need four of them.

What was that strange, narrow space between the two rubber tubes? A boat load of desperate people? We did not know. No one did. Once they were inflated, we stood in silence.

We tried very hard. All. In the end the performance fits in three boxes with less than 900 kilos. It can fly by plane; not as accompanied luggage, but it flies. It fits in a van and takes 104 spectators, lights, structures and all the mechanisms.

Democritus wrote that men have invented the ghost of fortuity to justify their own recklessness. Maybe he was right. The performance, however, after many vicissitudes, went ahead. Somehow, it sailed on by itself.

The tree

We arranged to meet in Carpignano, near Salento in Southern Italy, to talk about the new performance. Through the green gates, the house opened on to a small courtyard. It was situated in Via Diego Personè, in the old and completely white part of the town. At the centre of this small courtyard, in the shadow of a pergola arch, sipping water with fresh lemon, Barba spoke to me of a tree that should grow before the eyes of the spectators. A few metres away from them. That should be strong enough to hold the weight of monks, criminals and saints climbing on its branches. Then, after cutting the trunk, it should... blossom! In the middle of that courtyard, flanked by large local white stones, there was a tree. I imprinted it in my memory and followed it until I forgot it.

While playing with a three-year-old boy, I asked him several times what he thought of me, and he answered calmly: “You are small!” I replied to his surreal smile, convinced and lying to myself: “No, I am big, how can you think me small?” And the child replied, looking at me completely sure: “You are small because you play games.” Who is more realistic? The child whose gaze is uncorrupted by adulthood and who sees reality more clearly and dynamically? Or the adult who hides to himself the real nature that he finds again in playing?

With total trust in each other and the recklessness that later will be called *design* (which only children can recognise at first sight), we both knew that we were going to do it. A tree would grow in the midst of the constricted space that would show itself only by working on it together. For months, we exchanged images of bark, pieces of wood, and entwined and twisted branches. Vegetal skeletons of a wounded humanity.

Istvan Zimmermann and Giovanna Amoroso already knew Odin Teatret. They had collaborated on the construction of the set for *Andersen's Dream*. We met at Cesena with sketches of the tree and some pieces of branches that Barba had collected on Danish beaches and that, for their structure and colour, resembled human bones. In their laboratory, the tree took shape, weight and colour.

The tree that grows gradually, breaks and is born again, has been built, dismantled and rebuilt several times during the performance. It is the fruit of the imagination, of the folly, of the determination and skill of men and women who have believed in it. Who have worked on it and found solutions and unpredictable and unthinkable systems for it. This continuous, mutative development keeps me completely absorbed when working at Odin. The feeling is still the same since the first “last performance” I have worked on.

The light

Eugenio Barba sent me photos from the rehearsals in Bali surrounded by greenery, under a roof of reeds and leaves. He had taken the tree with him, only the tree. The evening after sunset a couple of neon lights would remain lit under the roof. Neon (from Greek νέος -α -ov: new) is a noble gas, almost inert, colourless, which possesses a distinctive reddish glow when placed in a discharge tube.

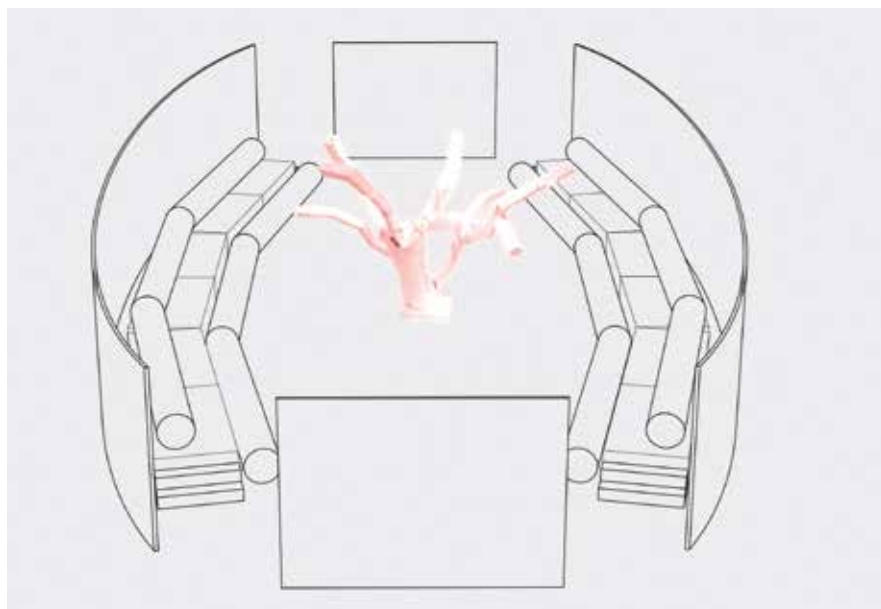
I love to still find it outside houses, under the canopies in tropical villages or small towns of southern Italy. Those images from Bali left a mark on all the subsequent work.

Always in trolley bags, always to check-in as luggage on a flight, always within the code of lightness and poetry of this performance, we searched for the neon traces dispersed in the air to reconstruct the nuances of diffused light, sometimes lurid and imaginative, of places forgotten by God. The places of horror, threat, abuse, torture and agony that *The Tree* tells about.

Video projectors used as profiles, shop sign LEDs as spotlights, mini profiles to make the fires that Fausto Pro expertly controls (while also performing at the same time) with a tiny remote control in his pocket. Necessary inventions. Patient and shared work of many people. Two programmers, Bruno Capezzuoli and Massimo Zomparelli, both Italians, who have agreed to work for months on a seemingly incomprehensible project. Using remote controls to turn on engines, projectors, lights, LEDs, sounds as calls from the wild. All at the snap of a finger. A deception where cruelty and authenticity bend the path of an adventure, which no longer follows the nimble clarity of logic but sinks into the “wound” of its historical era; the war that penetrates the unspeakable interior of the darkest and most devastating instinctual dynamics, looking for convulsive forms of expression, for a possibility of expression, for a body.

Here it is on stage, the body, in a pale and inconstant light. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Detached from the body, the word does not know and does not speak the essential. Darkness comes now. This is the “last performance”. I have died too. Now, turn on the lights!



The Tree

Dramatis Personae

SERAFINUS and AURELIANUS: two Yazidi monks in the Syrian desert at the end of the year 2000

A EUROPEAN WARLORD during the ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia (1991-2001)

An AFRICAN WARLORD commanding an army of child soldiers in Liberia's First Civil War (1990-1995)

An anonymous IGBO WOMAN from Biafra during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970)

IBEN, the aged daughter of a poet, who wants to fly away with her father

IBEN as a young girl who dreams of fighting the Red Baron

A STORYTELLER with a drum

A STORYTELLER with a violin

DEUS EX MACHINA, mute

A young YAZIDI MONK, just praying

Text of the performance

1. THE YOUNG IBEN WHO DREAMS OF FLYING AND DEFEATING THE RED BARON

2. TWO STORYTELLERS

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: When anarchy prevails, the whole world will be transformed.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: Listen, oh listen! I will tell you the story of a European warlord. He is a good husband and father; he loves his family. Why does he kill defenceless women, men, children and old people?

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: The memory of powerful men, of borders, priests and soldiers will disappear from the world. Here we have a warlord.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: He has no shame or fear; he is neither good nor bad. He does not judge.

3. THE EUROPEAN WARLORD PRESENTS HIMSELF

EUROPEAN WARLORD: I fight for my fatherland.

It's impossible to describe in words, to those who do not know, what civil war is like. War has a face, and you must make a friend of war. War and terror are your friends. If they are not, then they become enemies to be feared.

I've seen civil wars, wars that you have only read about.

This is the real sound of a battle. Not very impressive. I was there, among terrified men, raped women, slaughtered children. But you have no right to call me a murderer. You have a right to kill me. You have a right to torture me. But you have no right to judge me.

When I was young I read about the Americans during the Vietnam War. American soldiers went into a Vietnamese village to vaccinate the children for polio. They left, and after a while, an old man came running after them. He was crying and couldn't speak. They went back to the village; the enemy had come and hacked off every vaccinated arm. There they were, in a pile: a pile of little arms. And I remember that I cried. I wept like a grandmother. I want to remember. I never want to forget it.

And then it felt as if I'd been shot, shot with a diamond, a diamond bullet right through my forehead. I realised: my God, the genius of it, the will to do it. Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realised they were not monsters. These were educated men, gentle and responsible men: teachers, doctors, honest workers. These men who fought with their heart, who had families, children, who were filled with love, these men had the strength to do that.

You must have men who are moral, and at the same time are able to utilise their primordial instinct to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment. Because it is judgment that defeats us.

What do you know about war, you who have known only peace?

We must kill them. We must exterminate them. Annihilate them. Pig by pig. Cow by cow. Men, women, old people, infants. House by house. Village by village. Let them be eaten by dogs. Let them be food for invisible birds in the night.

A drop of rain. Does it come from the Mississippi? From the Nile? No! It's blood. Listen: birds! Amid the massacres and the horror, birds sing. As do men.

(Sings) We are the proud men. We are the strong men, leaning on each other. Our wild voices sing together, like wind in burning grass.

4. THE AFRICAN WARLORD PRESENTS HIMSELF

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: Here is the warlord Joshua Milton Blahyi.

AFRICAN WARLORD: I'm Joshua Milton Blahyi, an African warlord. I'm preparing a human sacrifice before I lead my army of child soldiers into battle.

5. TWO YAZIDI MONKS

SERAFINUS: No words to justify, no masks to veil, no disguises to hide, no pretexts to lie, nor feet to run away: before you, my Lord, what is naked is covered, and what is exposed to light is invisible. You who dried up in one stroke the fig tree of Judas, plant within me the life-giving tree of good deeds.

AURELIANUS: What's happening?

SERAFINUS: They have left us. Aurelianus, the birds have flown away!

AURELIANUS: What? There are no more birds? Where have they gone? Why? Why have they left us?

SERAFINUS: I don't know. I only know they flew away.

AURELIANUS: How can we get them back?

SERAFINUS: Maybe there was no more food for them.

AURELIANUS: Let's plant a tree. Here the earth is rich. The tree will grow strong and tall, and the birds will come back.

SERAFINUS: Let's plant a tree that raises its branches in prayer and calls the birds back.

AURELIANUS: Let's do it.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM (*sings*): There is a tree upside down. Its roots touch the sky, the branches spread deep into the earth. If you cut the roots, you cut the future; if you cut the branches, you cut the past. Then only the present remains. The tree has three branches: Creation, Preservation and Destruction. A bird lives above this tree and flies upwards into the infinite.

While flying the bird lays an egg once every four ages. The egg starts falling down towards the tree and turns into a bird. When this new-born bird finds itself falling, it looks at its mother flying upward. It flaps its wings and flies high up following its mother towards the infinite. Sarat, the poet, says: follow that bird and wake up!

SERAFINUS: Thank you, Lord, for this tree which has grown. Thank you for giving a home to the birds. Come back, divine creatures.

AURELIANUS: The tree is dead. The tree is dead! It has no leaves. It will never blossom. No fruit can grow. And the birds will never come back.

SERAFINUS: Celestial King, you who spread the light, wake the dawn and shape the future: strengthen this tree with your hand which created the heavens. Hurry up, Lord. If you forget this earth, it will collapse into the abyss.

No, Aurelianus, the tree is not dead. It only needs time and care. Soon it will

raise its branches to the heavens and bend under the weight of sparrows' and swallows' nests.

AURELIANUS: Let's pray.

6. THE EUROPEAN WARLORD SINGS ABOUT HIS DREAM OF A SNAIL CRAWLING ALONG THE EDGE OF A RAZOR BLADE

EUROPEAN WARLORD: I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a razor blade. That's my dream, that's my nightmare. Crawling, slithering, along the edge of a razor blade, and surviving.

They call me an assassin. What do you call it when assassins accuse the assassin? They lie. They lie and we have to be merciful to those who lie. I hate them. You want to judge my orders? Are my methods unsound? Those orders have been given with love to my fatherland!

Srebrenica, I hate them. Vukovar, I hate them. Prijedor, I hate them. Foča Bijeljina, I hate them.

(Sings) I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a razor blade. That's my dream, that's my nightmare. Crawling, slithering, along the edge of a razor blade, and surviving.

7. THE IGBO WOMAN FLEES CARRYING THE HEAD OF HER DAUGHTER IN A GOURD

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: I am a woman looking for my love. In vain. My love is cold and does not care for me. I love not knowing where to find him. My love has no mercy on me. I burned my house, and made the world my home. I embraced the unknown; the known looks foreign to me. Now I roam in forests and in barren lands. I am dying slowly with tears that burn.

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: The Igbo woman flees carrying the head of her daughter.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: This is a woman who is trying to escape a massacre. I hate them.

8. DIALOGUE ABOUT TREES BETWEEN THE IGBO WOMAN AND THE TWO YAZIDI MONKS

IGBO WOMAN: Who are you? Are you escaping too?

AURELIANUS: We're monks. We're praying.

IGBO WOMAN: What are you doing here, in the shadow of this tree with no leaves?

SERAFINUS: We are waiting for the birds to return.

AURELIANUS: Because the tree will blossom even in this Syrian desert.

IGBO WOMAN: No! This is the tree around which, in Africa, the slave traders made their victims walk before they shipped them over the ocean.

SERAFINUS: This is the tree which will make the birds come back.

IGBO WOMAN: This is the tree of forgetfulness. Anyone walking around this tree would no longer remember their country, their house, their family.

SERAFINUS: You will remember. Memory is what is left when you have forgotten.

IGBO WOMAN: I listen to the words of this monk. They sparkle like stars. I take them in my mouth. I eat salt. The monk meets angels, speaks with heaven, discusses mysteries. He sets himself on fire. He runs away. He doesn't get anywhere.
What is he saying? What more is there to say? He's handing out salvation.

9. IBEN, THE AGED DAUGHTER OF A POET

IBEN: I know what trees are for. They are there to hang things on, to hang up the washing, to hang men, to bear fruit, to be climbed and to dream under. I learned this from my father. When he was alive, my father stood between the future and me. He planted a pear tree when I was born. We grew up together, the tree and I, like twins. My father used to say: when you grow up you'll be strong enough to fight against the Red Baron.

10. THE MONKS ADORN THE TREE WITH ARTIFICIAL PEARS TO ATTRACT THE BIRDS

AURELIANUS: Why do birds fly and not crawl on the ground like ants or us?

SERAFINUS: Because they have wings and flap them to take messages to the other creatures of the Kingdom of God.

AURELIANUS: But the birds belong down here with us where the tree grows.

SERAFINUS: Look at the tree. How still it is, how deeply rooted in God's earth. Let nature teach us stillness.

AURELIANUS: We are born believing. A man bears beliefs, as a tree bears pears.

SERAFINUS: Patience is necessary. One cannot immediately reap where one has sown. There'll be plenty of pears! Plenty of pears!

AURELIANUS: Now the birds will come.
SERAFINUS: Now the fruit will call them back!

11. THE MONKS QUESTION GOD'S SILENCE AND TRY TO ATTRACT BIRDS WITH WHITE MAGIC

SERAFINUS: Aurelianus, where are you? I feel troubled. My soul trembles. I feel alone.

AURELIANUS: Serafinus, don't be afraid. You are not alone. God is always with us.

SERAFINUS: In this moment God is beside me with His absence. Do you hear?

AURELIANUS: What? The birds?

SERAFINUS: No, His silence. Why is He so quiet? Why does He not answer our prayers?

AURELIANUS: Your questions confuse me.

SERAFINUS: I am troubled too. I do not understand why the birds flew away. What is the meaning of their sudden disappearance?

AURELIANUS: Don't despair. There is always a light somewhere. It may not illuminate much, but it wins over obscurity.

SERAFINUS: Sometimes it is difficult to keep the flame of life alive when our eyes can't see it.

AURELIANUS: Serafinus, let's begin the ceremony! Can you hear the birds coming?

SERAFINUS: I can hear something! Are they coming?

12. THE AFRICAN WARLORD MAKES A HUMAN SACRIFICE

IGBO WOMAN (*whispering to the head of her daughter*): The evening shadow has touched you. With sewn up eyes you will wander far afield where this river of life doesn't flow. I will know nothing more of you, of your hand which searched for mine in the dark, as only the roots search for each other in spring.

13. THE AGED IBEN REMEMBERS THE YOUNG IBEN

IBEN: Yes, it is hard to fight against the Red Baron.

14. THE MONKS BUILD A NEST FOR THE BIRDS

15. THE AFRICAN WARLORD LEADS HIS CHILD SOLDIERS INTO BATTLE

AFRICAN WARLORD: The kingdom is quiet. Come on! My soldiers come here! Come here and sing! Please, sing!

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN (*sings*): The night is soft and bright, with no wind. The night birds are moaning over the rooftops and trees. The moon glides over the mountain, like a golden frog, and illuminates a dreaming child.

AFRICAN WARLORD: Come here, my warriors! Follow me! Let's run together, always forward! Carry on! Faster! Let's fly together into battle! Forward! Carry on!

16. THE MONKS CONTINUE TO ENTICE BACK THE BIRDS WITH MAGIC AND PRAYERS

AURELIANUS and SERAFINUS: An ascension of larks. A bouquet of pheasants. A charm of hummingbirds. A congregation of plovers. A deceit of lapwings. A fall of woodcocks. A murder of crows. An ostentation of peacocks. A band of jays. A brood of hens. A cast of falcons. A descent of woodpeckers. A gaggle of geese. A huddle of penguins. A murmur of starlings. A peep of chickens. A raft of ducks. A richness of martens.

17. THE TWO WARLORDS TALK ABOUT IDEALS, DEATH AND LEGACY TO THEIR SONS

AFRICAN WARLORD: Why is the forest so quiet?

EUROPEAN WARLORD: You are right: life is unimaginable without war.

AFRICAN WARLORD: There is nobody around here.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: Despite desertions and betrayals, we need to keep alive the flame of our ideals.

AFRICAN WARLORD: And there are no birds up in the sky.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: In theory there is nothing to prevent a man from becoming immortal. The body is prepared to defend itself against everything, even death.

AFRICAN WARLORD: You are right; it is really quiet here, in this forest.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: In order to be efficient, you must be in good shape, and look at the world with eyes of steel.

AFRICAN WARLORD: I look around, and the calm of this empty forest worries me.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: I worry that my son might not understand what I've tried to be.

And if I were to be killed, I would want someone to tell him everything - everything I did. There's nothing I detest more than the stench of lies.

18. THE WARLORDS MEET THE TWO MONKS

AFRICAN WARLORD: Hey you! What are you doing here?

EUROPEAN WARLORD: He's asking what you are doing.

AURELIANUS: I'm a monk. I'm praying.

AFRICAN WARLORD: Whom are you praying to?

EUROPEAN WARLORD: He's asking the name of your God.

AURELIANUS: The God who surrounds us all.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: Even this dead tree?

AURELIANUS: The tree is not dead. God is alive!

EUROPEAN WARLORD: Let's be reasonable! Let's build something useful with this wood. Let's build a house!

AFRICAN WARLORD: Have you heard! Build a house! Monk, you are a crazy, stupid man. Ah! You are really out of your mind! Let's do it quickly! Let's build the house! Soon we will be victorious!

EUROPEAN WARLORD: Are you also a monk?

SERAFINUS: I'm a monk.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: Do you know how to sing?

SERAFINUS: Yes, I sing to God.

EUROPEAN WARLORD: So sing to your God! Louder! Louder! Let's have fun. You there, jump, jump. Climb up! Get down! Fly! Jump, jump! Get down! Jump! Climb up! Small bird! Big bird! Fly! Faster! Fly!

AFRICAN WARLORD: Fly! Fly! You! Come here, now. Let's chop down the tree! Chop it in two!

19. THE IGBO WOMAN NARRATES

IGBO WOMAN: At five o'clock in the afternoon I was to meet my sister. I looked up at

the clear sky, it was a beautiful day. But it was already the day after, and my sister was dead unexpectedly. I wanted to hold her hand. She lay on the other side of the street. I could not reach her.

My house is burning. I cannot save my daughter. I watch the survivors who cry. In a way, it is not painful. Only sad and grey. Normal. Also death has normal days. A stranger stopped me and asked: where do you come from? From a normal day, I answered. He was relieved.

20. IBEN TELLS WHAT HAPPENED AFTER HER FATHER'S DEATH

IBEN: Her father died and left her a small farm. The little girl was standing there alone, looking at the shiny red tractor. She and her Daddy used to sit inside it and circle the blue fields. Then she put her head in the crook of her arm and she started to drift, drift into the belly of a ship. And the ship opened and she went inside it and saw her Daddy behind the control board streaming beads of light. He was very different, because he was not human, not human. The little girl's face lit up with such naked joy and she fell on her knees and cried out: "No, Daddy, don't leave me here alone. Take me up, Daddy, to the belly of your ship. And let me fly up where you are not human, not human."

But nobody heard the little girl's cry. Nobody there except for the birds around her farm. And the little girl looked up, the rays of the sun burned, and she saw the birds coming. She crawled onto the back of a raven and she flew up, up, up, up, up, up, there where we are not human. "Fly! Fly!" her father said. "We live in birdland!"

21. THE IGBO WOMAN SAYS WHAT SHE THINKS

IGBO WOMAN: I'm running away to save myself. Life must not disappear. How can you say that it must not disappear? They will catch up with us. The men will empty their seed. We will give birth to their children. Words do not appease my hunger. Silence does not appease my hunger. My body is a gift to the earth.

One day, when I am old enough, mature enough and pacified enough, human beings will no longer disgust me. One day, when I have lived enough, everything will become clear. I will embrace those I hate and, dribbling, I will thank them for all they have taken from me. I will hold this consolation to my breast like a precious daughter.

I always carry with me a brick to show the world how my house used to be.

22. SERAFINUS BUILDS A BIRDHOUSE ON THE FELLED TREE

SERAFINUS (*sings*): This tree is thirsty in the middle of grey cement. It begs: fly, fly, fly, fly. Your leaves will be reborn in spring. This tree is smiling; it tells stories of destroyed cities. It remembers: fly, fly, fly, fly. Its roots grow under the dust. This tree is covered with nails and dirty whitewash. Fly, fly, fly, fly. The dead don't dance under the earth. This tree wanders night and day like a tired

dream. It sings: fly, fly, fly, fly. God is a nightingale ready to die.

23. A TABLEAU WITH EXECUTIONERS AND VICTIMS

EUROPEAN WARLORD (*to the monk Aurelianus in his arms*): Welcome home, my son. What have you seen out there, in the big world?

(*sings*): You saw a new born baby with wild dogs all around it. You saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it. You saw a black branch with blood that keeps dripping. You saw a room full of men with their hammers bleeding. You saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children. And it was a hard, it was a hard, it was a hard rain that fell.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: My compassion's boat is filled with nothingness. I have no more space for anything else. Oh, boat woman who sails towards the sky. You were born many times, you died many times. What will happen now?

24. THE STORYTELLERS CONCLUDE THE STORY

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: Finished?

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: Yes, it's over.

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: I wonder if these people have understood anything.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: Of course they have, thanks to your violin and my songs.

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: On the other hand, human behaviour is incomprehensible.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: All of them, young and old, fly about in prey of passions.

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: Anyway our conscience is clear. We did a great job.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: Right! Our conscience can rest. Our work was worthy and deserves a reward!

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: Well, shall we conclude?

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: Yeah, let's end this story.

STORYTELLER WITH VIOLIN: When anarchy prevails, the whole world will be transformed.

STORYTELLER WITH DRUM: For you, my beloved, I left my home, I gave up everything and wandered over the seven seas but found no jewel.

25. THE YOUNG IBEN CLIMBS A TREE IN HER FATHER'S GARDEN

26. A YOUNG MONK PRAYS FOR THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD TREE

27. THE BIRDS ARE BACK

Text proposed by the actors and the director
Holstebro, Villa de Leyva, Wrocław, Batuan: March 2015 - September 2016



Two Yazidi monks and an Igbo woman (Donald Kitt, Julia Varley, Roberta Carreri)



1



2

1. Two Yazidi monks (Donald Kitt, Julia Varley)
2. Poet's daughter as a young girl, Yazidi monk (Carolina Pizarro, Luis Alonso)
3. Poet's daughter, African warlord (Iben Nagel Rasmussen, I Wayan Bawa)
4. Yazidi monk (Donald Kitt)





1



2



3

1. European warlord
(Kai Bredholt)
2. Yazidi monk (Julia Varley)
3. Two storytellers
(Elena Floris, Parvathy Baul)



4



5



6

4. Two warlords (I Wayan Bawa, Kai Bredholt)
5. - 6. Igbo woman (Roberta Carreri)

The Sanctity of Fiction

To Ariane and the people of the Soleil

When we knock on the door of Theatre, we receive a promise: follow me, I am the Path. I will take you wherever your imagination, your *daimon*, your deepest need want to go: to fame, money, escape from yourself or into yourself, to the struggle against injustice, an encounter with the other or the search for the New, for Beauty or God. I am the way of refusal, revolt, solitude. I am science, esoterism and a warcry. I am Mecca, Bodhgaya, Jerusalem and Benares, the place which makes you a pilgrim. You cannot follow me without a change happening within you.

This promise is a fiction and a daily reality.

A Stranger has come to dwell in my brain, Proust asserted one day. It was the thought of death. For some people this thought doubles the haste, the intensity of doing, the need for excess. Even if we always find a solution to the vicissitudes of life, questions subsist, containing a secret. We keep on formulating them, unwittingly and in different ways. Ghosts, fantasies, images of men and women, books, vanities, desires and ambitions appear. These are both fiction and reality, irrefutable as an axiom. The day we will be able to disclose the secret of our questions, the earth will open and the Stranger will be there to welcome us.

Feigning death

Perfumes as fresh as a child's flesh. This line of poetry crosses my mind while I watch a human silhouette with no clothes. A half-moon brightens the clearing delimited by the spectators who glimpse this recognisable yet unusual body entirely covered by a sensual ochre colour. Other silhouettes emerge from the obscurity, covered with the same colour which emphasises and annuls their nudity. Their vulnerability increases with the din of a motorcycle ridden by a naked and ochre teenager. He switches the motor on and off, and the powerful



Photo: Michèle Laurent

Eugenio Barba and Ariane Mnouchkine at the meeting of Théâtre du Soleil and Odin Teatret, March 2016

headlamp picks out and dissolves a group of ochre-coloured youngsters, standing and crouching like waiting cattle.

The motorcycle is a playful mastiff. It whirls around, accelerates and slows down, detonates and silences the motor, spitting puffs of smoke which irritate the throat and the eyes. A young actress moves slowly, unrolls a white cloth, stretches it out it above her head, and a jaguar stirs cautiously on this small screen, brought to life by a hidden projector. A teenager lies down on the ground, holds aloft an old typewriter, bends his knees, and a companion sits on them as on a stool and types on the keys. A young man runs after a girl, grabs her and pushes her to the ground, throws himself on top of her, struggling and rolling. I feel the weight and the tensions in the clasping bodies and also the pain of the flesh scratched by the stones. Around us, the forest breathes, thinks and murmurs.

“Theatre Festival of Alta Floresta, Mato Grosso, December 2015. *Boé* by the theatre group Faces from Primavera do Leste. Dramaturgy and collective directing by the actors. A native dies and the tribe assembles for the farewell ritual. The performance is an anthropological study of the funeral ceremony of the Boé-Bororo, known for its emotionality and ties to the afterlife”. This is what is written in the programme.

Here, in the Brazilian Mato Grosso, the landowners keep on hunting down the natives while they fell hundreds of kilometres of Amazonian forest and turn

it into lucrative soya fields. It is the new gold, it grows abundantly thanks to the chemical fertilisers that pollute the water and ground. Nature and the inhabitants are poisoned while statistics show the Mato Grosso's economy is flourishing.

How much is a human being worth? Is he worth more when old, young, alive or dead? And an actor, how much is he or she worth? Is he worth less today than yesterday? What decides the value of an actor? Objective merits? Aesthetical criteria? Technique? The metaphorical categories of the Übermarionette or the Holy Actor? Economy? The senselessness of History which holds us all hostage?

The theatre where the Festival takes place is a wooden shack. Behind it, a clearing extending to the edge of the forest is the stage where yesterday night the group Faces recreated the ceremony accompanying the death of a Bororo. Were they also representing the predicted death of the whole tribe?

A tiny garden, adorned by car tyres painted in vivacious colours and half buried in the earth, is the foyer of the theatre. A couple of benches, some chairs and a table welcome the waiting spectators. This humble building is on the outskirts of the town, on an asphalt road which turns into a path after a few kilometres and disappears into the dense vegetation. From here trucks loaded with gigantic tree trunks, illegally felled, emerge.

Alta Floresta is a small Brazilian town of around 50,000 inhabitants whose foundation goes back to 1978 on orders from the military government. It is situated in Amazonia, around 800 km from Cuiabá, capital of the state of Mato Grosso, and a 75-minute flight by the only daily plane. The forest was to be tamed and become pastures, soya fields, wood for construction. In 1989, a couple of school teachers gathered together a few of their students and founded the Teatro Experimental. Today the two teachers no longer lead the group, but their students, now adults, continue as a collective. They built with their own hands a theatre with a floor of beaten earth and walls of planks whose interstices let in the light. In the rainy season the noise of the rain on the roof accompanies their performances. A few spotlights on the walls and a primitive uncomfortable tribune for the audience: I watch the performances of a festival which gathers theatre groups from the region.

What would I do if I lived here? My question remains unanswered. The theatre, even when inexperienced, is action, an alternative to the discourses of the mind. It is fiction, yet the consequences are real. They are invisible, but active in the inner world of those who do theatre and of those who see it, in their city and also in far off places. I believe in it. More than a half century with Odin Teatret supports my belief.

Theatre: the place of feigned death

The actor is an expert in inventing the conditions of a creative instability between being partly himself and partly a ghost. The ghost is the apparition of that part of himself which lives in exile in his inner world. But the actor also masters the technique to die to himself without any mystical emphasis, and assume a life that comes from afar: the character. The poet is a feigner, writes Pessoa. He is so good at this act that he even feigns the pain he really feels. The actor is a poet who feigns death in a laboratory of mirages where the spectators, in the lukewarm black box in which they have voluntarily confined themselves, carry out imaginary journeys to the edge of life. It is tragedy that gives nobility to the theatre: the fatal destiny of heroes, of the innocent as well as the infamous - Hamlet, Antigone, Iago.

"I died many times, but never like this" is written on the grave of an Etruscan actor in Tarquinia. The theatre is the place of feigned death, echoes Michel Leiris in *Fourbis*. As a child, he awaited excitedly the death of Romeo and Juliet or of Cyrano: to know how to die is the great actor's acid test. Leiris concludes sadly: today only a few actors know how to enact the great Elizabethan murders without being ridiculous. For him, the loss of the art of dying is the proof that the theatre no longer fulfills its purpose: to build a bridge from our world to another.

Theatre becomes then a hasty fiction of dramatic matters of life and death. Yet, at times, this fiction intensifies life through the theatre's dance-struggle between its urge for success and the memory it wants to evoke, with its desire for acceptance and its vocation to stir the interiority of each single spectator. For some directors and actors, the need to exploit this fiction and infect the certainties of the spectators is as uncontrollable as hunger or the thought of the Stranger.

Those who have seen Beauty are condemned to death. Like a question which contains only mystery, this line of Novalis has accompanied me in the creation of every performance of Odin Teatret.

Ornitofilene (1965), the friends of birds. "Woe to the father who betrays, because his daughter will die in his place", whispers the daughter to her father, a fighter in the Resistance ready to reconcile himself with his Nazi executioners. The daughter caresses her father's hair, spits in his face, climbs on a table, grasps a rope hanging from the ceiling, her hands slip around the noose, she places it on her head like a crown, pushes it down round her neck. Then just a step and she sways in the void: Odin Teatret's first death.

Kaspariana (1967), the story of Kaspar Hauser and his apprenticeship

to an early death. A stranger approaches Kaspar, a knife in his hand, he raises the blade and strikes. Darkness envelops the spectators, a choir sings a psalm: "Beautiful is the earth, beautiful the pilgrimage of the soul towards Heaven through the mighty empires of the earth."

Ferai (1969). The title is a geographical hybrid: The Faroe Islands in the North Sea and the city of Feres which gave birth to Alcestis who, in the Greek myth, sacrificed her life to save her husband, the king. On the black floor the sceptre sparkles: a knife whose handle is a flute. When the king plays it, his subjects dance behind him like rats. Alcestis, the queen, kneels, approaches her breast to the blade, glides over it, presses her abdomen on it with a lament of suffering and enjoyment. Her body is shaken by two invisible arms, her headgear slips down, the sea of wheat of her long blond hair shines, the imposing black tunic splits in two and the slender body of the actress dressed in white emerges. She smiles and groans: "Pain and misery, misery and pain, a cloud of dust at the queen's feet. How does the seed germinate? It dies, and when it does it knows it lives."

My Father's House (1972). The fake execution of Dostojevski ordered by the Tsar and the sentence by Prince Myshkin, the Idiot, protagonist of the novel by the Russian author: "It happens at times that an infinity of strange things unconsciously surface in the mind even at the moment of being led to the scaffold". At the end of the performance a letter was handed to each spectator asking them to write their reactions. "I would like to have the courage to let my face come alive like yours. Do you suffer or are you happy when you act?". "I too possess scattered shards of a violent beauty which torments me." "The most beautiful and the most painful scream of love I have ever heard. Odin makes me think of two words in Greek, my mother tongue: *oduné* = pain, *edoné* = voluptuousness." "Your sweat, your wrinkles and your slightest breath communicate something which is distant and split." "When, fluttering barefoot, you disappeared behind the door, my tears flowed from your lips to remember the storm and afterwards (*sic*).". "At times your scenes are disgusting, they are so violent that I am ashamed not to shut my eyes while you are enfolding us with your sounds and provocative movements and we sense your breath on our necks. I relived an experience I had forgotten when, as a child, something happened which was a matter of life or death."

Come! And the Day Will Be Ours (1976): this was the message that the American General George Armstrong Custer sent to his officer to encourage him to participate in what he imagined would be an easy massacre of Indians.

It was the year 1876 in Little Bighorn. It was him who met his destiny and was killed. The performance evoked the annihilation of the culture of the Sioux Oglala, but also that “dark is a way and light is a place”. Such was the reality of the warrior-shaman Tashunko Witko who died pierced in the back by the bayonet of an American soldier. He was called Crazy Horse because he had experienced that two realities exist: one which you share with others, and one which belongs only to you, in which the horses dance as if mad.

Ashes of Brecht (1980). With tenderness and ingenuity we recounted the deaths which accompanied Bertolt Brecht in his life and exile. A Jew runs amongst the spectators without finding an exit while a military cook fries onions, filling the room with an appetising smoke. Walter Benjamin hangs himself while fleeing Hitler and Brecht remembers his friend: “To tire the adversary was the tactic you liked when you sat at the chess table in the shade of the pear tree. The enemy who chased you from your books doesn’t get tired by people like us.” Brecht wraps his arms around the corpse of Margarete Steffin, his beloved secretary: “Since you died, my dear little teacher, I wander without seeing, without peace, bewildered in a grey world. My general has fallen, my soldier has fallen.” The performance’s central scene is the victory of Katrin - the mute daughter of Mother Courage - who awakens the city of Halle with her inarticulate cries and saves its population from an enemy attack. She is seized by the soldiers, raped and shot. With her hands, in deaf-mute language, she murmurs: “When you make me happy I often think: now I could die. So I will be happy until the end. When you get old and think of me, I will look just like today. And you will have a sweetheart who is always young.” A love poem by Brecht to Ruth Berlau.

The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus (1985). *The Dead* was a short story by Jorge Luis Borges on which we worked for a few weeks to sketch a performance. We have often followed such a practice at Odin Teatret to warm up for the “true performance”: a period of rehearsals of another story or text. In the *Gospel According to Oxyrhincus* other tragic characters appeared: Joan of Arc at the stake; Antigone who was buried alive with her revolt; the symbolic death-initiation of an executioner. If you want to live, you must kill: we are in the world of the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi - Stalin - who reigns through prosthetic hand gestures and with words like a metallic gurgle.

Talabot (1988). The name of a Norwegian merchant ship and the odyssey of a living Danish anthropologist stubbornly following her path: the death of her father, the death of the teacher who guided her in the academic world, the death of a

Mapuche nanny at the hands of anonymous killers in Argentina, the endless litany of victims and martyrs in History accompanying the biography of the protagonist. We had prepared for this performance rehearsing by night for one month *Ivona, Queen of Bourgogne* by Witold Gombrowicz, who died from a fish-bone in her throat.

Kaosmos (1992), chaos and cosmos, disorder and creation: the decomposition of a country, Yugoslavia. The excess of Death at the service of patriotic passions which slaughter to give space to an unforeseeable order.

Mythos (1998), the murder of a song, the Internationale. And with it the extermination of hope as well as the memory of millions of victims, accomplices whether unaware or aware, in the countries in which communism was the law, and in the countries in which communism was the mirage of a new dignity. The actors prayed in front of a sea of graves: "There must be other nobler words for those who nobly gave their life for the most just cause in the world united to the most infamous crime of man."

Andersen's Dream (2004). Life is a fairy tale full of impossible tasks: learning the language of the snakes and fighting against an army of ants. The fairy tale is a universe of pure anarchy where those who struggle along reasonable paths lose, and those who behave foolishly in the end marry a princess. Life is a fairy tale populated by monsters, men and women half-animal and speaking corpses. It is not the world of myth, it is one of confusion. It is a world that children love, but which doesn't love children. There they die in profusion.

The Chronic Life (2011). The dead, like a fire, warm up the memories of their dear ones. Wives and children look for the road by the light of the flames, while the passersby disperse disturbed by the ashes blowing in the wind. The widows of a Chechnian mujahedin and a Basque terrorist exchange memories while a teenager with a gun in his hand leads a young blind violinist through the closed door which protects the spectators.

The Tree (2016). The history of a huge dead tree: the tree of History, the tree of longings, the tree of forgetfulness. The moon glides over the mountains illuminating child-soldiers who dream, monks who pray, mothers who curse the Heavens and warlords anguished over the fate of their sons.

And again in other performances: Eik's suicide, a young Danish poet, in *Itsi Bitsi*; Mr Peanut's trilogy - *The Castle of Holstebro*, *Doña Musica's Butterflies*, *Ave Maria* - where Death had the role of a seducer, of a benign grandmother and of Durga, proficient in metamorphosis; *Judith*, a biblical heroine chops off the head of her lover, an enemy of her religion; *Orô de Otelo* - A Ceremony for Othello - where the murder of Desdemona, in fiction, is followed by the murder

of Othello in reality. Augusto Omolú, the main actor, was snatched away by death without having time to measure himself with it. He perished, stabbed in his house in Salvador, just before returning to our theatre for this performance.

I go to search for a Great Maybe: apparently these were Rabelais' last words. But was it not certainty I searched for with my Odin companions during these 50+2 years?

To die while feigning

I have always thought that a theatre performance is living rhythm: poetry and music. In *An Actor's First Lesson*, the young Indonesian poet Warih Wisatsana writes: "This stage becomes a station / a place where a pair of lovers break their promise: / one commits suicide, / the other one pretends to die". This can happen in the poetic universe as well as in daily life. But on stage? In the living rhythm of fiction, the actor, with *real* actions, reveals the reality of the invisible, thus revealing himself.

The not yet eighteen-year-old Torgeir Wethal founded Odin Teatret with me in Oslo in the distant 1964. He died of cancer in June 2010. For forty-six years we experienced together a particular form of collaboration, sparse in words and strengthened by mutual patience.

Torgeir had taken his first steps as an actor while at secondary school. Erik Trummmler, a German refugee from Nazism, taught him that the power of fiction goes beyond the stage. The bond with Trummmler lasted many years, also when Torgeir left Norway and moved with Odin Teatret to Denmark. Another experience was decisive for him: a one-hour improvisation with a Swedish actress in 1966 in Holstebro, during Jerzy Grotowski's first course abroad. The thirty participants were asked to lower their heads and cover their eyes with their hands. They heard Grotowski whisper something, then a rustling and the muted sound of footsteps. After an hour they received the order to look up and reopen their eyes. Torgeir and the actress, standing, were radiant. Grotowski, sitting, was his usual self, inscrutable behind his habitual sunglasses. Since then, the reverberation of this improvisation enveloped the many characters of Torgeir's career.

I was abroad when in 2009 the doctors diagnosed in him a malignant lung tumour which was spreading throughout his body. I went from the airport straight to his home. He should concentrate totally on his chemotherapy, I told him. Therefore I had decided to restructure the four different performances we had in our repertory, replacing him with another actor. There were no comments or objections. The following day, and for several weeks, for hours and hours

Torgeir guided his colleague in how to take his place, symbolically dying to the performance while keeping it alive. I observed him while he was pointing out to the colleague the thread of actions to be developed. It must have been a strange feeling to suggest from the outside that which he had always done from the inside. He was ascertaining something difficult to experience: the materiality of one's own absence. He indicated the technical stratagems: a colleague's impulse which started the chain of his reactions; where to place an object which he had to move without being noticed; the exact moment to produce a sound or to turn on a light.

Torgeir never spoke about his imminent death, as if pretending not to notice it. For weeks and months he knew how to translate this fiction into actions before our eyes. Though his strength decreased, his attitude was careful and detached, with his usual terseness and reluctance to alacrity that exasperated me. His imperturbability was amazing. Is this the actor's nobility? Can it be called courage? Or is it the demonstration of a professional reflex acquired during an entire life in art and which now is *ars moriendi*?

At the same time, Torgeir continued to participate in the rehearsals for our new performance whose title, *The Chronic Life*, had been decided two years before his illness. In the morning he went often to the hospital for checks and treatment. Thus the actors and I found ourselves working on two performances: in the morning we developed a new version without Torgeir, in the afternoon we rehearsed with him the structure including his character. It was not easy for the actors to remember the two variations; they kept mixing them up between forgetfulness, misunderstandings, indecisions and mistakes. When the cancer reached his brain, Torgeir not only forgot what he had to do or say in rehearsals, but often could no longer distinguish right from left. His colleagues prompted him in which direction he had to move, or they explained that he should take a key out of his pocket and give it in a certain way to one of them. This mental confusion applied to all the actors who rehearsed a performance with a double life. Grotesque and bizarre situations arose continuously provoking, in spite of ourselves, a general hilarity. Puzzled, Torgeir looked at us as if we had suddenly stripped ourselves of the seriousness which characterised our rehearsals.

We behaved as if we didn't know we would finish the performance without him. So did he, and to such an extent, that at times we also believed it. Torgeir died while feigning. He succeeded in not allowing the Stranger to dominate him. He was expert in making real actions created by the fiction of

his body and mind. He limited himself to remaining an actor, to focusing on that way of working which doesn't depend on the hands of the clock, but on the intensity with which time is lived. He knew how to use his last energies to remain a *body-in-life* taking advantage of the intervals in which the Stranger was absent from his mind.

A theatre group remains alive as long as it does not adapt totally to its time. I imagine that many of us at the Odin - when aware of the approaching end - hope to follow his example. We don't demand much, only to continue to the end to shape our life within the absolute fiction of theatre. We helped Torgeir in this.

The rigor mortis which leads elsewhere

In theatre, we are often faced with the claim to understand the motive and the purpose of an actor's thought, action or intention. But a vocal or physical action starts without asking itself *why* it begins, said one of my actresses who had chosen to work at Odin Teatret because its director never asked the motive for his actors' actions. The beginning is the contrary of Death, *the beginning is*. It was this affirmation of Life she looked for and in which, without knowing it, the director believed.

Torgeir had abandoned the idea of a new entrance examination for the State Theatre School in Oslo in order to follow me, an anonymous foreigner who had founded a theatre group with no venue and who imposed on his inexperienced would-be actors hours and hours of physical and vocal exercises. In 1964, in Norway, a similar preparation to the theatre conflicted with every form of reasonable behaviour.

Torgeir and three other colleagues, amongst whom Else Marie Laukvik who still works at Odin Teatret, discovered a very personal reason for diving into the extenuating duration of the exercises. They did them again and again: forms with no meaning, caskets without jewels, mirages of pure appearance. They repeated them with intransigence and commitment. Impassibility was not easy when tiredness took over. It became difficult to respect the exact design of the exercise without the least change or deviation. All their will focused on proposing again that which they had learned as an empty dynamic formula to be filled with one's own motivation.

Repeating corresponds to verifying again the original physical experience. The hidden transformative force of the exercise - still unknown to the person who executes it - does not lie in the fidelity to the model or in the hope of an artistic development, but in *copying with pride* until drifting into a dimension that goes beyond the physical shape.

An exercise is a way of thinking with the whole body. It allows one to absorb and metabolise the succession of manifold minuscule elements together with their refined simultaneous orchestration. The exercise is a vibrant structure of organic tensions, a progression of notes of inner music, a rhythmic declaration of faith. The actor embraces the air, yet he performs a real action. He must know how to repeat the model and reproduce it, *identical and yet in another way*, without squandering its power, riding its form up to the moment of uniqueness. *When does repetition cease to be repetition? What does repetition become when it is no longer repetition?*

This way of proceeding seems to be an apprenticeship similar to *rigor mortis*. Many, at that time, considered the Odin training as an expression of sectarian fanaticism, a rigid military discipline, a suffocation of individuality.

Yet, since those first days and despite my total inexperience, I have believed in the exercises, and I have experienced them, thanks to my actors, as *a path that leads elsewhere*. The exercises are a voluntary yoke, in the sense of uniting and finding oneself as an individual, i.e. *not divided*. The appearance of a yoke is due to the technical process of superposing on oneself a shining lamina - the mute form of the exercise which closes in on itself. This form remains mute if repetition is not practiced for months and years until meeting a *being* which moves our body/spirit according to the rhythm-breath of a mysterious motivation.

In theatre, the secrets of repetition are part of an inner doctrine we are incapable of communicating. They act simultaneously with an external doctrine which we expose in vague or peremptory intentions and words. *Those who know how to copy will know how to do*. It is the manifest mystery of the actor's persuasive doing which is a challenge to the spectator's gaze and rationality.

Did Torgeir, in the last part of his life, dominate death just as a good actor knows how to master his own role? Is it an exaggeration to think of the theatre's contradictory nature as a living struggle against death in which an actor reveals his nobility?

After 50+2 years of life, for all of us in the Odin, the price for not dying earlier increases for every passing day.

Rowing while pretending to find one's bearings

In theatre, we are not defined by our natural limits, but by the fact of knowing how to abolish them. Discipline is synonymous with personal need, technical

knowledge and preparation for adversity. Discipline varies as the roads we travel vary. What does not change is the awareness of the nature of the path towards the same aim: the conjunction of contraries. Complementarity manifests itself through a host of tiny reciprocally contrasting reactions and details which are precious because of the time, repetition, elaboration and stubbornness they have demanded.

Pride and anger force us to persevere: we don't want to bend or become too reasonable. We must keep floating, gliding over the surface, aware of the rocks appearing from below. *Keep on rowing, while pretending it is a way to find your bearings*: this is an indication which I could give to anyone who wants to do theatre. What counts are the oars, like the wings for the albatross. You must build your own oars. The effort to go beyond your capabilities and your need for dissidence are the conditions for moving forward. To move on the surface is not superficiality, it is the action of freeing us from the place that destiny and History have reserved for us and which imprison us in art and in life. The surface turns distances into ways of communication. Odin Teatret's manifold activities belong to the surface which is commitment and legacy to unknown heirs. The first commandment for a sailor is not to scrutinise the abysses and the secrets of the sea, but to keep the keel off the sea floor. To strand is a sign of the incapacity to measure oneself with reality and delude its constraints.

It is the gaze of the spectators which decides. Not their eyes but their brain which is a mixture of an animal past and an individual biography.

The sanctity of fiction

It is the thought of the Stranger which protects me from life. More than the awareness of the transience, the absurdity and the injustices of the human condition, this thought is for me a source of knowledge and experience. It is the peak of an apprenticeship whose origin was an instant which lasts a lifetime. I have studied for a whole night the face of my father during his agony when, as a child, I was at his bedside among whispering adults busying themselves around him. It was as if a curtain was torn apart and I lived the mystery of *the body-in-life*. I experience it again at the peak of Eros, and I try to evoke it with my actors in the vulnerable space of theatre fiction.

The Stranger, the thought of death, is the Sky in which the roots of Odin Teatret's life are embedded.

The dialogue with the Stranger is the compass which has oriented me in

the Country of Speed, a motherland and a time which don't coincide with the nation and the epoch I cross. This continuous wandering - in my inner world, together with others, between the same unavoidable difficulties and "young" roads - transfigures the monotony and the fatigue of theatre. The dialogue with the Stranger forces me to tighten bonds before, during and after the performance: between actors and spectators, past and present, cynicism and hope, intention and action, history and biography, between the old man I have become and my grand-children yet unborn. Each of my calculated decisions or impetuous reactions is addressed to this mute Sky. It is a dialogue which is incomprehensible to reason, feasible only through a personal technique that is objectively efficient for the actors and the spectators.

In the fiction of theatre, sanctity doesn't consist in accomplishing extraordinary deeds, but in the stubbornness of making ordinary things extraordinary. In theatre, sanctity is a rare plant whose roots are artifice (*ars facere*) and sacrifice (*sacrum facere*). Artifice is linked to the skill of creating a fiction which is more intense than life itself through the actor's physical and mental know-how. Sacrifice does not necessarily involve hardship and suffering abnegation. It is the accomplishment of an action celebrating the essential - the value which gives a sense to ourselves and to what we do through our craft.

Every form of life manifests itself in two ways: a natural one in reality and a fictitious one in art. Both manifestations are irrefutable to our perception. Both affect our physiology, sensibility and memory, the scars of our past, our mood of the moment, the values of our conscience and the faculties of our judgement.

We experience the fiction of art through a filter: the rhythms, intonations and tensions of human beings on a stage; the accidental movements on a road which inspire the words on the paper; the clever disposition of apples in a painting by Cezanne. We always need a splinter of life to spark off our gaze and thus propelling an invisible hand which sweeps away the veil before our eyes.

The theatre, this work of living art which we take for granted, can become an apparition thanks to its fleeting duration. Each of us has lived this experience at least once. Each of us has lived the sanctity of fiction in the moment in which fiction was no longer there. Our gaze had slipped away *elsewhere*.

"For me a tragedy's most important act is the sixth" writes Wislawa Szymborska in her poem *Theatre Impressions*. The paradox of this "sixth act", which doesn't usually exist in a tragedy, is followed in the poem's second line by "the resurrection from the battles of the stage": the obvious getting up of

the actors who have feigned death. Wigs and costumes are rearranged, a knife is pulled out from a breast and a noose is removed from a neck. The victim looks happily into the eyes of the executioner and the rebel walks beside the tyrant without a grudge. The actors have waited patiently behind the scenes without taking off their costumes and wigs. Now they mingle and, hand in hand, are ready for the final bow. They enter in single file, the dead together with those disappeared without trace. The curtain lowers definitively. It has not yet touched the floor when a hand hastens to pick up a flower while another retrieves a sword left on the stage. As if all this was essential. *Niepoprawna gotowość rozpoczęcia od jutra*: the incorrigible readiness to start all over again tomorrow.

Then, says Wislawa Szymborska, a third hand appears, invisible, which does its duty, and tightens around my throat.

Translation: Judy Barba



Photo: Tommy Bay

Odin Teatret, August 2016. **Standing:** Annelise Mølgaard Pedersen, Nathalie Jabalé, Fausto Pro, Lene Højmark, Donald Kitt, Ulrik Skeel, Per Kap Bech Jensen, Anna Marie Houe, Else Marie Laukvik, Eugenio Barba, Tage Larsen, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Frans Winther, Anne Savage, Jan Ferslev. **Below:** Francesca Romana Rietti, Carolina Pizarro, Kai Bredholt, Rina Skeel, Julia Varley, Roberta Carreri, Luis Alonso, Pushparajah Sinnathamby, N.K Brinth, Elena Floris and Sabrina Martello.

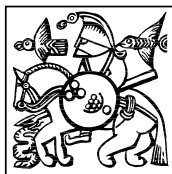


ODIN TEATRET - NORDISK TEATERLABORATORIUM

Odin Teatret/Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium's activities include: Odin's own productions presented on site and on tour in Denmark and abroad; "barter" with various milieus in Holstebro and elsewhere; organisation of encounters for theatre groups; hosting other theatre groups and ensembles; teaching activity in Denmark and abroad; the annual Odin Week Festival; publication of magazines and books; production of didactic films and videos; research into theatre anthropology during the sessions of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology); periodic performances with the multicultural Theatrum Mundi Ensemble; collaboration with the CTLS, Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies of the University of Århus; the Festuge (Festive Week) in Holstebro; the triennial festival Transit devoted to women in theatre; OTA, the living archives of Odin Teatret's memory; WIN, Workout for Intercultural Navigators; artists in residence; co-productions; children's performances; exhibitions; concerts; round tables; cultural initiatives; transformative processes and community work in Holstebro and the surrounding region.

Odin Teatret's activities as a laboratory since 1964 have resulted in the growth of a professional and scholarly milieu characterised by cross-disciplinary endeavours and international collaboration. One field of research is ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) which since 1979 has become a performers' village where actors and dancers meet with scholars to compare and scrutinise the technical foundations of their scenic presence. Another field of action is the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble which, since the early 1980s, presents performances with a permanent core of artists from many professional traditions. Under the name of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, younger artists and groups that are closely connected to Odin Teatret's history and experience develop their artistic autonomy in the form of residencies, co-productions and local activities.

Odin Teatret has so far created 76 performances, performed in 64 countries and different social contexts. In the course of these experiences, a specific Odin culture has grown, founded on cultural diversity and the practice of "barter": Odin actors present themselves through their work to a particular milieu which, in return, replies with songs, music and dances from its own local culture. The barter is an exchange of cultural manifestations and offers not only an insight into the other's forms of expression, but is equally a social interaction which defies prejudices, linguistic difficulties and differences in thinking, judging and behaving.



ODIN TEATRET

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