

EUGENIO BARBA

QUESTIONS FROM MY SECOND LIFE

Speech of thanks on the occasion of the Honorary Doctorate bestowed on Eugenio Barba by the University of Peloponnese, Greece, on the 3rd of July 2019.

We all have two lives, and the second one begins when we suddenly discover we are old and are treated as such. Our physical integrity and our social identity mutate radically. The awareness of the present moment, the smile of a stranger, the blue brightness of the sky, the disbelief after a night without pain in the bones renew the enchantment of life. I'm at the centre of my here and now.

The world of my youth has disappeared. I look around and a question arises naturally: are the acceleration of time, the pace of life and the irruption of technology compatible with my way of imagining, loving and fulfilling my work as a director, as a specialist in archaic technology - the human being?

I feel pride and contentment in this hour of celebration here in Nafplio, in this University so young while at the same time a depository of the wisdom of a millenary culture that has deeply marked me. Yet I also feel something which resembles injustice. The merits that are attributed to me and for which today I receive the honorary title of Doctor cannot be the result of only one individual. I have been active in theatre, that is, an artistic discipline, an embodied know-how and a trade that can occur only through a close interaction between different individuals with different skills.

Everything I know, which I realised on stage, and which I later translated into words on paper, I owe to my actors, to the many collaborators whose ideas and skill in accomplishing them led to artistic initiatives, as well as to many other people who often have nothing to do with theatre. Here around me there is a whole secret people, both alive and dead, teachers who never knew me, spectators who have only imagined my performances, friends who I have never met. They wait with curiosity to listen to the words I will choose to thank you, while once again I revolve around the few ideas, or polar stars, that have always guided my steps.

Odin Teatret is a theatre group but also a theatre laboratory which is geographically rooted in Holstebro, a small Danish provincial town. We constitute a milieu of individuals from various nations and languages who have found their roots in the professional homeland of the theatre craft.

Many speak of Odin Teatret as a legend. How does a theatre become a legend? Doing what is impossible for a theatre to do in our society. Our 55 years of activity with the same core of actors are a proof that the theatre cannot be identified only by a performance. Theatre may be the tacit understanding of individualists who, for deep personal reasons and through a shared artisanal discipline, express their diversity in a form of life and work. Our identity as theatre is manifold: didactic pursuits, artistic endeavours and collaborative activities which catalyse and include the many subcultures of the community in which we live. We have managed to infringe the two

laws of the theatre DNA: the financial obligation to produce performances, and the impossibility of keeping the same group of actors for years and years. We unfurl festive ceremonies together with our spectators, "bartering" cultural expressions with them. For over forty years we have devoted ourselves to what I have called theatre anthropology, researching the principles of the actor's pre-expressivity and stage presence.

Our literary adviser Nando Tavianini says that Odin Teatret is essentially political. The definition that the theatre is "politics by other means" does not refer only to the contents of the performance, the stories and events that can more or less affect the historical experience and the civil awareness of the spectators. It involves also the manner in which a theatre imagines and develops its structure of internal relationships and interactions with the outside. How it renews itself, how it decides to act, how it achieves the effect of becoming an outsider, moving against the mainstream through technical and artistic means and the manifold relationships it can create. The aim is to avoid being swallowed up by the spirit of the time and by market trends, and maintain an identity as "foreigner" through surprise and the value of cultural initiatives in the very heart of the fragmented community in which we live.

Today I can affirm: theatre is energy. I persist with my actors in letting performances flourish which cannot be understood in their entirety because they are not addressed to the spectators' intellect but to their being-in-life. Energy is a slippery word, a term with different faces. Yet it is enough to pick up a baby, stand beside a dying person, lay our lips on those of a woman or a man, watch a tree, a cloud, a spider for our whole being to sense a message and react. It is a message of energy which cannot be verbalised, and yet we feel it is aimed specifically at us. This message is a *text* that we decipher with our entire organism and its different memories.

This kinesthetic-gestural and subliminal process corresponds to the different rhythms and natures of energy. We can imagine this as the text of a language that we cannot understand but in which we - both actors and spectators - can identify ourselves organically, dynamically and rhythmically. Like the poets who identify themselves totally in every word they write, or the painters whose brushstroke on the canvas coincides with the energy of their needs and ancestry. "In each of my brushstrokes there is my blood mixed with my father's", wrote Cezanne in a letter.

When I talk about energy, luminosity, messages which we decipher through our blood and inner scars, what do I want to deny? Against whom or what do I oppose? Am I just a messenger even though I don't know for whom and don't understand the meaning of the message?

A question that arises from the history of the theatre

The theatre as we know it today was born in Europe around the 16th century as a financial endeavour with the sole purpose of gain. It was necessary for those who took part in it, and who sought profit and appreciation from the spectators. It was a mercantile and mercenary activity. Literature stretched its tentacles on this venal theatre. The mercenary actors made it accessible, adding the attraction of eroticism, seduction, fear and mockery.

Amateur theatre developed separately. Since it did not depend on the approval and the remuneration of the spectators, it could be more daring. It provoked, unintentionally, a Copernican revolution: the theatre is necessary for those who do it, not only for economic reasons, but also as a cultural and spiritual need. An island of freedom, to summarise it in a simple formula.

This Copernican revolution was absorbed in the 20th century by the professional theatre with its commerce of performances. This new face of the need for theatre was the sign of its ennoblement. Actors were raised to the level of artists and intellectuals. It was obvious, however, that when applied to the rules of the profession, this Copernican revolution born in the regions of amateurism was doomed to failure when it tried to survive within the financial sphere of trading performances. It gave life to luminous artistic initiatives that sooner or later clashed with the laws of the market, and after a few years dissolved. It found new vitality and resources when the era of grants, subsidies and widespread patronage began, often regulated by state laws. How long would Stanislavski and his Moscow Art Theatre have survived without grants?

The era of subsidies gave rise to the splendour of 20th century theatre, the golden age of our art. Today it is not bizarre to see an actor awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature or honoured with a university degree. They are the tangible sign of the end of discrimination. From the point of view of the history of culture, it is the downfall of a secular preconception. From the point of view of the history of the theatres it is the end of an era.

This end coincides with the moment in which the theatre as a whole has become an archaic minority genre in the panoply of our time's performance forms.

This fact raises a question: what will happen to the theatre with the possible ending of subsidies? What will become of this potential island of freedom with its discipline and commitment, its revolt and refusal? What will become of the "young people" who, endowed with sophisticated technologies, search for their path and, moving away from the illusions and ideals of their predecessors, advance into the regions of drought?

Old people have an advantage over the young: they have lived longer. They know that work can only be accomplished by working. Fridtjov Nansen, thinking of his life, used to say: the impossible is only the possible that takes more time.

Questions from my professional biography

Will all I have done disappear with my death? I only have my body and its inner constellations. There lies what I know that I know and what I am not aware of knowing. My insight as director, like that of my actors, has difficulty in finding adequate words. Its roots sink down into the doing. To safeguard the effectiveness of this almost mute insight I use commonplaces and unusual words. But when this language wants to explain too much, it gives the impression of littleness, rhetoric or incomprehensibility. In which urn - method or theory - can I hand down the essential of my insight-in-life?

Why so much stubbornness and so many efforts? What did I want from my work? Experience has made me aware of the gap between perception and understanding between those who created the opus and those who observe it. I know that imagination is the most scientific among human faculties since it is the only one capable to intuit the universal analogies that mystics call *correspondences*. Above all, I deeply believe that the action is *sats*, impulse. It is the energy of the actor that awakens that of the spectator.

My biggest difficulty? To inspire actions in the actor that rise to the dignity of the enigma. I try to establish coincidences between the precise execution of physical and acoustic details, and the plurality of their meanings within the setting of space and time in which I mix them: oxymoron in the actions and ambiguity in the scenes. As the first spectator, I sense the effect of evidence and mystery that actions and objects will provoke in the eyes of the viewer.

Is my craft just know-how, fiction, form? Words, intonations, silences, gestures, movements, immobility are a tangle of perceptible forms. But the design of all these thousands of tensions - the actions of the actor's score - are not the form. It is the way to make the spectator perceive sensorially what lies *beyond* the form.

Did I strive for an engaged theatre? The actor's actions must *say*, not mean. They must be enough in themselves. Each vocal or physical action has its own power, an individuality and existence of its own. The energy of an action must *say* enough in itself to resist the aggression of ideas and meanings. It ought to leave a trace in that part which lives in exile within each spectator.

In one of his notebooks, the painter Edgar Degas wrote these lines: "Piron claims that a cat is a cat. I say the opposite. Often a single word says too much. A thin gauze should veil the portrait without hiding the features." My knowledge as director is encapsulated in this formula. I deny what the text affirms. I avoid tautology through elusive action. But even by eluding, I must say something about the cat in question. A single word can be too much, and elusion risks turning into omission. I must devise a thin gauze, an estranging artifice that, without hiding the cat's features, veils the way in which I am evoking it. Veiled actions and scenes in order to render the viewer perspicacious.

Can theatre be the path towards another form of life? Every form of life is manifested in a structure. In theatre, this structure is double: the particular relationships which characterise the working environment, and the way of composing the dramaturgy of a performance. When I say dramaturgy, I think of scattered bones waiting for a compassionate undertaker, a universal judgment or a demiurge - the actor - who brings them back to life.

What is *life* in theatre? The thousands of living tensions of the actors reveal the life of the dramaturgical structure to the senses and to the memory of the spectators. As director, I am-in-life when accompanying the actor in the growth of this pulsing organism, the performance. It is the orchestration of a flow which technically consists in splitting up the totality to make space for the independence of the scenes. Each scene, in turn, breaks down to highlight the independence of the intertwining of the

actors' actions. In the end this intertwinement too disappears to emphasise the independence of the actions of each individual actor, his or her *energy that says*.

It is the most intense moment in the director's symbiosis with the actor. Together we operate a succession of changes in the living structure: from light to darkness, from obviousness to ambivalence, from crowd to desert, from fiction to reminiscence, from human to insect, from death to vulgarity. We mingle technical skill and disturbing images. We weave a warp of triviality, lyricism and fantasy with a profusion of details - confused, lazy, drunk, frantic - but always real.

What is theatre? It is the supreme science of the mystery of life, accessible even to the disinherited of the earth.