

COMPASSION



ODIN TEATRET

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COMPASSION

Dedicated to
the Palestinian Khalida Jarrar and Ahed Tamimi who defend hope

Actress: Julia Varley
Director: Eugenio Barba
Text: Eugenio Barba, Julia Varley
Props and costumes: Julia Varley
Assistant directors: Antonia Cezara Cioază, Jakob Nielsen
Poster: Antonella Diana
Programme: Rina Skeel

Eros, the divinity of antiquity, had many natures, in addition to that of passion: friendship and tenderness, affection and solidarity, sympathy and admiration. *Compassion*, Odin Teatret's solo performance with Julia Varley and directed by Eugenio Barba, presents three situations of Eros in the form of compassion. It is a triptych, three grotesque, sorrowful and emblematic stories from the contemporary everyday life and the darkness of myth.

First episode: a Yazidi monk plants a tree in the desert to make the birds return. The tree grows, but dead.

Second episode: a Chechen refugee's love for her husband who died at war.

Third episode: Tiresias, blind and seer, recalls the fate of Oedipus and his daughter Antigone.

Odin Teatret thanks: Adam Ledger, CATA, Fondazione Fo Rame, Franco Fancellu, Kathryn and Poul Erik Birkholm, Teatret OM

First performance: 28 August 2023, Teatro La Candelaria, Bogotá



Compassion by Dorthe Kærgaard

COMPASSION TEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE

FIRST EPISODE

Protagonist: Serafino, the Yazidi monk who plants a tree in the desert

*Agni partene despina
Akran de teotooke
Kaire nimfi anim fete
lipsilon tera iuranon
Akti non lambrotera
Kaire nimfi anim fete*

The villages burn. The families take refuge in the mountains; the women are taken as slaves. There is war in Syria. A Yazidi monk plants a tree in the desert. Celestial King! Neither words to justify, neither masks to veil, neither disguises to hide, neither pretexts to lie, nor feet to run away. Before you, my Lord, is naked what is covered, and exposed to the light what is invisible. You who dried up in one only stroke the fig tree of Judas, plant in me the life-giving tree of good deeds.

*Ankanim haraji go
Lekandre choboio kancharaze bos
Ierontesare...*

Can you hear? They have left us. Can't you hear? The birds have flown away. I don't know why they left us. I only know that they have flown away. Perhaps there was no more food for them. No, we have to do something. Yes, let's plant a tree that raises its branches in prayer and brings back the birds.

*Kristos i mei chenate pavorena fatapasava
Ahavusa patravosave potrove romovera
Otosoié pjalosa poion ioion retemerá iasata io ion
Tuja rumatare sumatra ion.*

This is the tree that will bring back the birds. I am waiting for the birds to return when the tree blossoms. Because this tree will grow, blossom and give fruit even in this desert. A monk does not know much about life, but one day you will hear a voice that will free you from your suffering.

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

*Marmin terunaakan
Marmin terunaakan remonuka...*

I remember the birds: doves, nightingales, pigeons, parrots, crows, buntings, green-finches, wrens, great tits, blue tits, hoopoes, blackbirds, goldfinches, blackcaps, toucans and siskins. Memory is what is left when we have forgotten. A swallow under the roof announces spring. A dove with an olive branch announces the end of the flood.

No, 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 woodcocks' nests.

*Hankananim haraji go,
lekandre choboio kancharaze vo
lerontesare baha sajajasbini.*

*Alagyaz armender
Falei ndere
Falei ndere
Almandera vita rmandera
liva gli gheggia
liva gli gheggia
Nenghere nefti inti gheggia
Nenghere nefti glio gheggia.*

I have got an idea: I will cover the tree with fruit to attract the birds. Look at the tree. How still it is, how deeply rooted in the earth. The tree will blossom, and we will have lots and lots of pears. And you birds will return and eat as much as you like. I feel troubled. My soul trembles. I feel alone in this darkness. In this moment God is beside me with His absence. Do you hear? Do you hear His silence? Why is God so quiet? Why does He not answer my prayers? I am confused. I do not understand why the birds have flown away. What is the meaning of their sudden disappearance? I continue to call back the birds.
I am only a monk. I am begging You. Bring back the birds. From the darkness lead me to the light.

*Valmara afosara
lesora gia ajche gheggia
O jorobe horinori nara nari*

*Jorobe horinori nara nnori nara
Darmalache zorez mains
Pieno marchan achbe chan.*

*Kemava polin kovin
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha
Tarino iare eva
Tarino iare eva.*

*Marmin terunaakan
Marmin terunaakan
Remonuka chapam koronami
letro li fado giu lanevevus
letre iero telenavanis
lor tor io ior sor soor technor ior io.*

*Hankananim haraji go,
lekandre choboio kancharaze vo
lerontesare baha.*

A brigade of larks. A congregation of pheasants. A procession of robins.
lerontesare baha...
A descent of woodpeckers, a richness of martens.
Sajajasbini...
A charm of hummingbirds.

Are You listening to me? No, You are not listening to me.
The birds flap their wings and fly to take messages to the other creatures of the Kingdom of God. Birds, bring me a message.

This tree is lonely; it grows alone amongst grey stones. It begs: fly, fly, fly, fly. Your leaves will be reborn in spring. This tree is crying and smiling; it tells stories of destroyed cities. It remembers: fly, fly, fly, fly. Your roots grow under the dust. This tree night and day wanders like a tired dream. It sings: fly, fly, fly, fly. God is a nightingale ready to die.
Thank You, my Lord, for this tree which has grown. Thank You for giving a home to the birds. Come back, divine creatures. Come back birds, it is spring, come back!

My Lord, have compassion for me.

SECOND EPISODE

Protagonist: Nikita, a Chechen refugee

Also at 4000 kilometres from Siria it is spring. A refugee dreams of returning to her home in Chechenia and sit down to eat with her family.

*Allah aikbar, Allah aikbar
Ashadua lah ela ha ellalah
Ashadua noha madem razul Allah
Hayallah saleh, hayllah faleh
Allah aikbar, Allah aikbar
Lah elaha ellalah
Vassalet vassalamo aleik
la shaiedano razul Allah
Uala ashobika taiebin vataherim.*

*Tiem tiach deshy mach bu hina.
Water is gold in war time.
So ianicha mochka sel dukha hanh tom hilla, masher hand agar joash steg vatzar tziga.*

The country where I was born had been at war so many years that I didn't know anyone who could remember days of peace.

*San dananie,
My parents,
San danoig, tzera da nanoig,
My grandparents,
Tzera da nanoig,
And even my great grandparents,
Ghinardara valar asap ha
Only knew of death and loss and displacement,
Yukira steg astar,
Exile,
Vieddelilar wuochuor,
Deportation,
Tranzer,
Refugees.
San nerøst.*

*San dananie tza leera suona tiach ai asap lattita, tsuoduch so Yusupoga marie
daya jellar tsar.*

My parents didn't want the same to happen to me, so they gave me in marriage to the neighbours' son, Yusup.

Yusupa bera bohka tørmeg buzzana haz kadjesh doulush, massua jetzar l kadjesh

dohkush vera its, tza nia jetzar.

Yusup had a bag full of precious cloth that he sold knocking on every door. Not one door, not ten doors, hundreds of doors.

Haz kadge du dohka, Haz kadge du dohka.

Bobo bochelibo, o la iwan, o la iwan, deit amanta kamarada deit amanta lo ho ho.

Haz kadge du dohka.

Precious cloth for sale! Precious cloth for sale!

Haz kadge du dohka.

But war came again.

Amma tom iuch veerá, Allah akbar.

Yusup had to go and fight, *Allah akbar.*

I lost my husband. My house burnt down.

So daiehá iezara, so iedara.

I ran away.

*Yusup haz steg vatzar, solla lochach a vera iz, duk liush a vatzar, amma tranzer
san dananie iuchechach hottor du elar tsuor.*

*Amma tom iuch veera, Yusup tom ba vøha vizar, san mair tepaz waierá, san tza
degara, so daieha iezara, so iedara.*

*So saieer hokka izbalie hazach a mohka, hassua hila rertach, kuzach ium iuá bot-
such hi møla haga a botsuch. So saieer hokka izabalje hazach a mohka.*

I have been through ten, no... twenty destroyed cities and I have reached the border of wonderland. Here people eat without being hungry and drink without being thirsty. Here everybody seems to be happy.

Niamoná, niamoná, niamoná kergile,

Ollemehe, ollemehe, ollemehe rododivá

Amokølle iedivé, amokølle iedivé.

Satiem tza teer shunnah...

In wonderland normality was not enough for people. Normality was all Yusup and I ever dreamt of.

Yusup, Mohammed, Ahmed, Fatima, Ali, Hassan...

Sinuchkasho, alla magra, umprai dunava.

Pusesheta rernaiuva, sara lazara.

Motudide shokodiza, peria sharena.

Itallaie pernaiuda, sara lazara.

Tajanie deilla, sa kornie! Tajanie deilla, sa kornie!

Sinuchkasho, alla magra, umprai dunava.

So shyina marie yesha, Yusup hergerá uggar.

When we got married Yusup chose his most precious cloth to make his wedding suit.
Louzar dehdelerá oirie hillantza.
 The wedding feast lasted all night, and we all sang and danced, danced, danced.
Niamoná, niamoná, niamoná kergile,
Ollemehe, ollemehe, ollemehe rododivá
Amokølle iedivé, amokølle iedivé
 The last time I saw my husband he was wearing a uniform. He said to me: “You are
 the only country I want to belong to and defend.” Damned country, damned country,
 damned country.

Hinza esherlaka, hinza esherlaka, esherlaka. Tajanie deilla, sa kornie, sa kornie!
 Yusup we were so happy,
San mair ho tza dagar joash.
 Yusup, do you still dream of me? Each time I close my eyes, I see you. Sing, my
 friend, sing.
Sinuchkasho, alla magra, umprai dunava.
Pusesgheta rernaiuva, sara lazara.
Motudide shokodiza, peria sharena.
Itallaie pernaiuda, sara lazara.
Aposnoga ibidem, miga nesnamo.
 No, I don’t want to remember. But memory hides in the depth of oblivion.

Shikta, salti, sakeshara, kuzach daguor. Douda! Douda!
San bepaq dizdelara, sa du iza, sa du iza.
 They came!
Doukush teach doush.
 My sister!
 Ho hila lea suna, ho leraie lea suna.
 On her body!
San yisha a a hecha.
 They danced! Danced! Danced!

Allah aikbar, Allah aikbar
Ashadua lah ela ha ellalah
Ashadua noha madem razul Allah
Hayallah saleh, hayllah faleh
Allah aikbar, Allah aikbar
Lah elaha ellalah
Vassalet vassalamo aleik
la shaiedano razul Allah
Uala ashobika taiebin vataherim.

Yusup, Mohammed, Ahmed, Fatima, Ali, Hassan, Tarik, Rashid, Nazir, Selim, Abder,
 Nehad, Hussein, Ibrahim, Aziz, Mehmet, Abdullah, Maysa, Kalil, Rafik, Idris...
Guriah dere iz, suan san dadas nanas, guriah dere iz.
 It was springtime when my parents introduced me to my future husband, Yusup, for
 the first time. I was sitting under the walnut tree talking to my younger sister as I
 used to do every afternoon. I was shy, he was shy, he whispered to me: I will build
 you a house close to your parents and treat you better than my only horse.

Yusup haz steg vatzar, solla lochach a vera iz, duk liush a vatzar, amma tranzer
san dananie iuchechach hottor du elar tsuor. Amma tom iuch veera, Yusup tom ba
vøha vizar, san mair tepaz waierá, san tza degara, so daieha iezara, so iedara.

Yusup, we were so happy. Come back, Yusup, come back!
Sinuchkasho, alla magra, umprai dunava.
San mair ho tza daga joash.
 Yusup, you were my king.
Sinuchkasho, alla magra, umprai dunava.
Vorreita sho dagasa. Yusup, Yusup, so marayellash tsum keraj aj, Yusup, boulush
ketar tsuna; Yusup soi zizak senna lila.
 Yusup have compassion for me, oh Yusup, have compassion.

THIRD EPISODE Protagonist: Tiresias, the blind seer

Ta’vro na si inanti’sume
Lulu’dia natu chari’sume
Mili’chios keee pra’os
Tin a’gria thalasa damazi
Omorfes kopeles arpazi.

Seven are the gates of the city of Thebes, and seven times seven, the city of Thebes
 will be destroyed. So says Tiresias, blind and seer. It is the day after the last battle.
 The war between the two sons of Oedipus for the dominion of the city Thebes has
 ended. The rebel Antigone has been punished for having desecrated the law of our
 city. The families bury their dead.

Harishan tila haldan, tila haldan! Oh!
Frolmadir hali parishaunn, aah! Oh!
Kadinna daredashtu golmaton tathbeer darmaooon. Oh!
Honna tash haru jazaram. Balami tchezem jezayaron.
Jazum jonum afandem seviemdev nahro sultaan maoww.

Yaana, yaaquina, yonkalla, baniva!
Ashey! rei tami ashkin all alii. Asiri taami eshkin all ali, sandam mafo jalma.
Shani halyamda youlm. Shalii halyam dayolm saan, Ahali dardaa ashwinai jalmeu.
Hej! Jozum nam dam badam baurum azir ya shemshemi jethmaaaan!
Baigo, gulle, mitu, berti.
Sahlidil chahrbi-il mayal hawdon tayal hun tholma maw.
Kwadi duli chan! Kwadi duli chan!
Sah-lidil chahrbi il mayal hawdon tayal hun tholma maw.
Haw-diii firma eshtadal hun tholma maw ando nadir.
Kwadi duli chan! Kwadi duli chan!
Jur-jhan al na sun-ma deir loaw gulgul hu vo mal hali.
Tshulgolu-yol goshtabul gul hela mauw zoro nadir... hu ha ei dai.

The ritual that purifies our city has ended. The families have buried their dead and for all of us it is spring, time to fall in love.

Ev ga na diston
O-ura no-o il io-os pos foti zi ke
Sta su na-fcharisti-this.
O-ti-i zoi chari zi
Mou aresi i o mor fia sou
Ketak-seple ka ma lia sou.

Many, many lives have been lived and many, many words have been spoken. Nobody knows the last word. Only the Sphinx, the mother of mystery, pronounces it as an enigma. Sphinx: what is the enigma today?
 All things to be understood require deep reflection. We are shrouded in darkness. Creon, lord of Thebes has condemned to death his niece, Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, and of his sister Jocasta. Poor Creon! Life has torn away his sister, and then also his niece, Antigone!
 Do you know what the people say? The people murmur and whisper: Antigone is not dead. She has survived and has taken refuge in the mountains.

Look, Aglaia is passing by; the mother who lost her two sons in the civil war. She is searching for her sons to bury them. She has gone mad and thinks she is Antigone.

At Thebes it is a time of turbulence. Creon why doesn't he speak, explain, give orders. A gift of the gods is madness. Madness does not respect the law. Antigone was mad. Her madness is contagious, and from death leads to immortality.

The people of Thebes are agitated. A few days ago, in our town, I was told that a well-known criminal had been beaten to death. Then people ripped out his heart

and liver, they fried them in oil and eat them. They did it to appear braver. If the people of Thebes eat human beings, why couldn't they ate me as well? Now I understand the piercing laughter of the people of Thebes which shows the dazzling whiteness of their teeth. The people of Thebes are eaters of human flesh.
 I don't know who it is.

Creon has to be on guard. They have hung the portrait of the rebel Antigone on the walls of Thebes. Antigone!
 Antigone, you were Creon's favourite niece. His heart bled when you did not respect the law, and he had to sentence you to death. What was the point of burying your brother who turned his weapons against our city? Antigone, Creon loves you. He embraces you once more and helps you to become a myth.
 Antigone, people will cry for you, but not for long. Life dries up tears quickly when one does not shed them for oneself.

The Sphinx ruled our city and its enigmas spread terror. Oedipus saved us from the Sphinx. But inexplicably the plague broke out. Poor Thebes, devastated by the plague and torn apart by civil war.
 How many of us will be saved. And how many of us will be damned?

Thōksa ston Krēonda poo iperaspīstike tin pōli mas ke katathīkase tin Antigōni.
Ītan nēa ke atīthasi, thāvondas ton athelfō tis. I athelfī tis i lsmīni ēkleye mēra nīhta. O Krēon prospāthise na tin parigorīsi, ma aftōs itan poo tin ēfaye.

Irresistible love,
 Love that steals the human fortunes,
 That guards nightly over young maidens,
 You who wander beyond the sea,
 Who visit the homes of shepherds,
 No-one can be saved from you.
 You bring destruction to the mind of whoever you possess.
 Even the just mind you know how to make unjust,
 And lead it to ruin.
 Now I feel my own self being dragged far away from the laws.
 I can't stop my tears. I see Antigone again
 Walk towards a different nuptial chamber:
 To the cold bed that puts everyone to sleep.

The children inherit the parents' crimes. What crime had Antigone's father Oedipus committed? Didn't he save Thebes from the cruelty of the Sphinx? I, Tiresias, have not forgotten.
 Oedipus was before the Sphinx. The Sphinx asks: "Which creature, having the same

voice, goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noon, and in the evening on three?" Oedipus replies: "*Anthropos*, the human being". Houses and temples will fall, but the name of Oedipus will live for centuries! Oedipus. Jocasta. Demetrios and Kostas, the sons of Aglaia the mother who has gone mad.

Foreigner who visits Thebes, the city which condemned Antigone, traitor of her homeland. Foreigner, walk safely in the dark because Creon has a thousand eyes, and he strikes with the weight of a stone because he has a thousand hands. His voice resounds on the shores of every land... and on the silence of all those who no longer speak, who no longer sing. And you are their voice, foreigner who visits Thebes.

Seven times seven Thebes will be destroyed, and seven times seven plus one Thebes will rise again. This is why Oedipus killed his father.

Tra gú di semikri
Antigoni
Tragou di see
Tragou di semikri
Antigoni.

Who will have compassion for you?

De sou mi lo
Gia peras mena
Milo giatin agapi
O pios potetou
Den agapi se
Thaga pisistofos.



Third episode: the blind seer Tiresias. Photo: Francesco Galli



First episode: the Yazidi monk Serafino. Photo: Francesco Corbelledda

Julia Varley

Winged Seeds

A sycamore tree was felled with a chainsaw on the 28 September 2023. It was around 300 years old and had grown in Northumberland, in the UK. Sycamores are big and resilient trees that spread winged seeds. This news, given in the first obituary for a tree by *The Economist*, reminded me of a harsh reality: it takes a long time to build and very little time to destroy. In an age of continuing wars, this becomes more and more evident every day. It happens in world history just as in our personal everyday stories.

In *Compassion*, a Yazidi monk says ‘this is the tree that will bring back the birds. I am waiting for the birds to return when the tree will blossom. Because this tree will grow, blossom and give fruit even in this desert’. The performance *Compassion* is like a small tree that needs time and care to grow. It is a gift to Eugenio Barba, Odin Teatret’s director. It was built out of a desire to keep alive our theatre group’s performances, memories, intentions and values. It is an act of stubborn resilience. It is a way of supporting the founder of a small tradition who maintains the burning flame.

At the end of *Compassion*, the blind Tiresias asks the spectators ‘who will have compassion for you?’. When I performed in Argentina in December 2023, the day after the elections and the victory of Javier Milei, the deep silence following the question put by a blind diviner made me understand that theatre itself can be a resilient tree spreading winged seeds of hope, memory and change. The winged seeds fall on me as a performer, on the director with whom I collaborate, but especially on the unknown spectators in search of an emotional support encouraging them to resist destruction. A theatre performance becomes a political act without uttering an opinion or a word of protest. The consequences are the secret messages cultivated by single spectators. The task I give myself is to offer hope and energy.

On 19 November 2022, Odin Teatret’s ensemble performed *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* for the last time. We were at Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. Having had the premiere only in September 2022, the production was young. Much too young to die,

I felt. I rebelled against that destiny and decided to give the work a future, even if I had to do it by myself.

A month earlier at Residui Teatro in Madrid, I had performed my work demonstration *The Flying Carpet*, in which I present texts from Odin Teatret's past performances. The last production I mention is *Andersen's Dream*. Saying the performance's title and date of the premiere (2004), I suddenly realised that twenty years had gone by. As I continued the demonstration, within myself I wondered what had happened to all I had done since then. Another sense of rebellion was born from the fear that all my more recent actor's experience would disappear.

Compassion started with the title *Remembering Thebes*. My ambition was out of proportion with my possibilities: I wanted to repeat the whole performance alone. After five years of continuous yet intermittent rehearsals, *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* had been presented for only three months. It felt unjust that this production would not go on tour for years as usually happened at Odin Teatret. I was sad at first, then angry, and then I had to react. This gave me the will to do the impossible: repeat the actions, songs and texts of all the five actors of *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever*.

The creation process of that performance had started with the question of where languages go when they die and with a choice of happy love stories. I was supposed to be a Mother Teresa figure who buries the languages, but I preferred to dance following Brazilian and Turkish melodies. I constructed a sequence of scenes using a sheet and a small, Mexican, yellow puppet made from a coconut shell. Then, during the period of Covid quarantine restrictions at home, I worked on Lu Hsun's short story of a madman who believes people are eaters of human flesh. In my sitting-room and on the lawn, I fixed scores and ways of saying my lines in Italian and English. Then the performance developed into the story of the city of Thebes after the plague and the war between the two sons of Oedipus, and I had to learn all the texts and songs in ancient Greek. I was given the role of the blind seer Tiresias, and the other characters became the wandering ghost of Oedipus, the Sphinx, Aglaia - a madwoman who believed she is Antigone - and Creon, the ruler of Thebes.

During the rehearsal period two actors left the production; one joined; one became pregnant; Eugenio Barba retired from being Director of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium to concentrate on Odin Teatret, ISTA and the Odin Teatret Archive; I left my responsibility as Artistic Coordinator of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium and founded the association Transit Next Forum to continue my Magdalena Project activities autonomously. In 2020, Eugenio and I had started the Fondazione Barba Varley in Italy while continuing to imagine a future for Odin Teatret in Denmark. We arranged contracts for future tours with no guarantee that these could happen. The

life-changing experiences around *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* are enough to fill a book that I will write one day. At the end of 2022, when Eugenio's contract, as well as those of most of the actors and my own were not renewed by Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, Odin Teatret also lost the space where we worked every day. We no longer had a fixed home. We had become wanderers. Our home was in the world where other theatre groups and friends invited and welcomed us.

My first step towards the creation of *Compassion* was taken during a resident workshop organised by the Centre of Theatre Anthropology in Argentina (CATA) in December 2022, during which Eugenio and I taught together with Ana Woolf and Silvia Pritz. I took the privilege of not following the work of the other teachers in the morning, to rehearse by myself and reconstruct a complete run-through of *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever*. I used two sheets with painted red blood stains from the original production, I accompanied my scores with the sound and songs of the other actors, I moved in a shorter space and remembered all the texts in ancient Greek. I missed the rocking bull from the original production, and the modern art paintings that made the floor yellow, and the wooden planks that built a house for the Sphinx and then fell to the ground with a crash, but nevertheless I continued. I showed the solo result to the workshop participants on the last day. Eugenio Barba, the director, did not react negatively. This gave me hope that I would manage. I think my determination and effort shone through even if it was evident that a solo could not bear a story being told in a not understandable language, without the support of a more complex appropriate montage of music and images.

A few days later I worked with Eugenio in the sitting-room of a friend's house by the sea in Uruguay. We were staying there with Lisa Block de Behar. We showed her a few scenes. Then I repeated the whole run-through again at a theatre group meeting in São Paulo, Brazil, organised in the home of Mundu Rodá directed by Juliana Pardo and Alício Amaral. Juliana Capilé and Tatiana Horevicht of Cia Pessoal de Teatro where also there. They had followed many rehearsals of *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* in Holstebro, Denmark, and they had seen the first performances. They knew what was behind my crazy attempt and their faces expressed their astonishment. How could I have the ambition of doing the whole performance by myself? I was truly exhausted each time I tried. Nevertheless, I continued. In São Paulo it also became evident that I could not reconstruct the singing variety of the whole opening scene with the blood-stained sheets of the original performance.

It was the first time that my motivation for a new solo was to keep a whole performance alive. At other times, such as for *The Castle of Holstebro* (1990),

I had wanted to show the process of transformation of my actor's material into a dramaturgical structure, or for *Doña Musica's Butterflies* (1997) to follow the imposition of a character who still had something to say, or for *Ave Maria* (2012) to make a memorial for the Chilean actress María Cánepa, or for *A Character that Cannot Die* (2019) to tell the story and the adventures of Mr Peanut, the character with a skull head. This time it felt different; it was also the first time I would make a solo without Mr Peanut.

In January 2023, Eugenio and I had work in Mexico, and we took some days off by the Pacific Ocean to develop the process of reconstruction I had started the month before. I left for Mexico with the determination to include two other characters I had played in Odin Teatret's ensemble productions: Nikita, the Chechen refugee from *The Chronic Life* (2011) and Serafino, the Yazidi monk from *The Tree* (2016). This demanded time for me to remember the scores I had not performed for a few years and to adapt the acting to a front on space instead of towards spectators on two sides according to Odin Teatret's usual 'river space'.

Our Sardinian friend Franco Fancellu introduced us to his son and his wife who had a circus training space on the second floor of their house, inland from the Pacific Ocean. We went there every day in the late afternoon. Eugenio would spend hours admiring the cactuses on Franco's terrace while I built the scenes from my notebooks. This is where one of the stained sheets became a puppet to represent Nikita's husband Yusup, in the place of the man's suit I used in *The Chronic Life*, and another stained sheet became the bag Yusup carried full of cloth for sale, and then, once opened, became a piece of precious cloth offered to buyers. I started using the texts in Italian and all the songs from *The Tree* repeated in a sequence by my character Serafino, while Eugenio made me fix birdlike steps and arm movements inspired by my attempts to get rid of the mosquitoes that appeared in hordes at sunset.

In Mexico I also started thinking of how I could make a transportable tree. I needed somewhere to hang the picture playing cards that represented Nikita's family portraits. In *The Chronic Life*, they also outlined a doorframe on a black background that I no longer had. Eugenio suggested hanging them on my own skirt, but I refused because their pins stung my legs.

As I kept on travelling and performing other productions, thoughts assailed me continuously in search of solutions. Nikita in *The Chronic Life*, Serafino in *The Tree*, and Tiresias in *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* had very different costumes. Their clothes, headwear and shoes were very important in presenting their characteristics and dramaturgical qualities. How could I change in front of the spectators? Where could I keep the costumes? How could I create a continuity from one character to

the next? Who was I, in between the characters? What would I say or do to occupy the time while changing? Were they telling a story? What did the characters have in common?

Back in Denmark, as if by magic, things happened. As soon as I returned, I put on the red silk skirt and top that belonged to Tiresias and, instead of wearing his golden embroidered black jacket over them, I put on Serafino's grey camel wool hand woven Palestinian cape from *The Tree*. Looking in the mirror, I was pleasantly surprised: the red silk fitted even better with the grey cape than the trousers and short skirt I had used in *The Tree*. Then I also tried Nikita's many layers of dresses and shawls over the red silk skirt. The red skirt was covered enough not to be a disturbance, so this combination also functioned. In my enthusiasm, I showed the new combinations to Eugenio. He nodded. Then, with the help of big safety pins, I joined all the layers of Nikita's costume so I could put everything on in two movements. Tiresias' red silk skirt and top, and his shoes covered with black socks became the basic costume to which I added Tiresias' jacket, Serafino's cape, and Nikita's dress when I changed character, adding the distinctive headwear for each of them.

I went to a cheap furniture shop looking for something where I could keep the costumes on stage. I knew that I did not want to hang them in view on a stand as I have seen in many other solo performances. I was also aware that whatever solution I found, it would have to fit in a suitcase to allow me to go on tour. I was lucky. In the shop's camping department, I saw a foldable cupboard that fitted in a bag. It was strong enough to hold the box on which I placed the stand for Tiresias' Japanese wig. It had three shelves so I could easily separate the three costumes. My next task was to cover the ugly dark green camping cupboard. Pieces of cloth I had bought years earlier in a Damascus *souk* fitted perfectly.

Tiresias had a little bag made of the stained sheet cloth. In *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever*, it contained many metres of yellow taffeta with which I filled the space while the other actors placed the paintings on the floor. I liked the little bag. I put it on the Japanese wig's round stand. It seemed like a mysterious head that could give the association of the Sphinx. I revealed the head suddenly by taking away Tiresias' jacket and wig that covered it before I wore them.

I have always used music stands to make props. They fold fitting one piece within the other, so they are easily transportable and adaptable. I imagined a music stand could be the base of my tree. To make extra branches, I added pieces of a foldable wooden measuring rule. Then I covered the whole tree with stained sheet cloth. The result was certainly not strong and resilient like a sycamore, nor was it realistic like the tree in Odin Teatret's ensemble production, but it added vulnerability to Serafino's naivety. I could hang the cards on its branches

and carry it like a cross. To give it more height, I placed it in top of a suitcase covered with another stained sheet. After watching a rehearsal, Antonella Diana and Sandra Pasini of Teatret OM told me they recognised the white tree growing from the rock placed in front of Odin Teatret's entrance in Holstebro. They were sure the image was created on purpose. From then on, every time I look at my fragile tree on the suitcase, I also see a sign of the theatre building that was our home for 56 years.

In March 2023, Eugenio and I, assisted by Odin Teatret's young actors, Antonia Cioază and Jakob Nielsen, rehearsed for two weeks in a feast room at Stendis Lejren, Vinderup, quite near my home, thanks to the hospitality of the owners, Kathryn and Poul Erik Birkholm. Even if it was cold, it was a luxury to be able to leave props, set and costumes in the same room for some days in a row. After rehearsals, I spent hours sewing and modifying costumes and props, adding an infinitude of details. I knew from experience that elements that seem insignificant can suddenly reveal unexpected connections and meanings. While I concentrated on the props and learning the succession of scenes, Eugenio and the assistants worked on words and sentences to clarify and link the stories of the different characters. Words like springtime, food, love, refuge and mountains became conscious leitmotifs in three episodes of the emerging dramaturgical unity.

Unlike Nikita and Serafino, Tiresias was not a 'victim'. He did not automatically create a feeling of empathy in the spectators. In search of the performance's overall dramaturgy, we needed to overcome the separation in the last part of the montage when Tiresias tells the story of the city of Thebes. The word 'compassion', which then became the title, helped us find a coherence. Slowly, by adding or slightly changing the texts, by punctuating the role of witness to the cruelty of history, by enriching the vocal changes with moments of emotional explosions in contrast to the exhaustion of narrating the consequences of war and the responsibility of power, Tiresias acquired the same humanity as the other two characters.

I presented what was still *Remembering Thebes* as a work-in-progress in Italy. The closeness of more friends helped give the performance the care and time it needed. Mattea Fo, Stefano Berteà and Jacopo Fo of Fondazione Fo Rame were encouraging spectators while we stayed in Alcatraz for a meeting of theatre groups in 2023. Gigi Castelli of Arhat Teatro came to see the performance in Ferrara at Teatro Nucleo's Totem Festival and then invited *Compassion* to Treviglio as part of the first celebration for Odin Teatret's 60th anniversary. While watching for the first time, Gigi asked himself in desperation why I was alone on stage. He could not accept that the Odin Teatret ensemble performances no longer existed. Flavio Cipriani and the



First episode: the Yazidi monk Serafino. Photo: Francesco Corbellotta

Italian amateur union of free theatres (UILT) hosted the work on various occasions. The UILT organisers had one difficulty: they could not understand that at the end of the performance I did not want to come on stage again for speeches and flowers. I understood them, but I would not give in. My total exhaustion at the end does not allow me to instantly become a 'normal' social person.

The official premiere was in Spanish in August 2023 in Bogotá, Colombia. Sofia Monsalve of Teatro de la Memoria had invited Eugenio and me for a week of intense activities at Javeriana University which concluded on the last day with *Compassion* at Teatro La Candelaria. It was very special for me to have our old friends Miguel Rubio, Patricia Ariza and Carlos Satizabal among the spectators together with young workshop participants who were discovering Odin Teatret for the first time. Thinking of when I had started the process of creation, the premiere seemed to have arrived quickly, with only a few weeks spent in a rehearsal space. Typically, my solos took years to develop, and Odin Teatret's ensemble productions were always worked on for at least nine months. *Compassion* appeared effortlessly, as if of its own will. Of course, I had confronted difficulties, but I didn't go through the usual moments of crisis and hard confrontations with the director.

My body had incorporated all the behaviour of the characters from *The Tree*, *The Chronic Life*, and *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* during years of rehearsals and public performances. I could remember every detail of the actions without thinking and hesitating. Usually when creating, rehearsing and performing a theatre

piece, different kinds of memories are present within me, helping and fighting each other. Life experience gives me references for creation. In rehearsal I focus on what comes next, on the changes the director has asked for, on the slight variations of rhythm in the words or in the sequence of actions. When performing, images come and go, and stories visit me suddenly. Memory is both forgotten and rooted in what I do, ready to react to what happens around me.

I thought a lot about these different memories during the rehearsals for *Compassion*, because, as the characters belonged to previous ensemble productions, their actions and behaviour had been embodied through years of repetition. At the same time, I was learning new successions of scenes and sequences of actions, a different montage of texts, songs and behaviour. Needing to remember the new changes, my mind fought with my body which already knew 'what' and 'how' to do things. My mind was trying to remember the new instructions while my body immediately acted and reacted without having to remember. The combination of these two memories was difficult. For example, having to remember a new list of different bird types was impossible until I managed to fix the eye movements with each name.

The sentences said by my characters - Serafino, the Yazidi monk who plants a tree in the desert to bring back the birds; Nikita, the Chechen refugee; and Tiresias, the blind seer - have different meanings for each as well as for me. When I think of the sentences, I realise that I exist because of memories submerged in my body, soul, and mind, without me consciously remembering. My identity depends on them. Then I recall what I say in the performance: 'memory is what is left when we have forgotten' and 'I don't want to remember, but memory hides in the depth of oblivion'.

The most interesting realisation was to notice how the voices, music and actions of all the other actors in the ensemble versions remained in me even though I was now alone. I could still hear the sounds, the songs, the instruments of all my colleagues in the original performances, even though the context, the space and, partly, the costume were now different. The order of the scenes had changed, and three different performances had melted into one. This happened for me on stage, but also for the spectators seeing *Compassion* for the first time: they saw and heard the ensemble performances that lived in their memory so concretely it was as if they saw ghosts. Only after seeing or doing *Compassion* many times did the ghosts start to vanish into the background to let the present take the lead both for me and the spectators.

In September 2023, I heard Parvathy Baul singing *Karuna* during her concert in Ayllón, Spain. It was the closing performance of The Magdalena Project Festival

organised by Viviana Bovino and Residui Teatro. We were together in a small church, which was illuminated by candles. The beautiful song cradled me and took me on a journey. As Parvathy twirled endlessly following the regular beat of her drum, I was filled with a longing mixed with memories. Parvathy sang *Karuna* at the end of Odin Teatret's ensemble performance *The Tree*, which we performed for the last time in October 2021 in southern Italy. While singing, Parvathy would first undo her long hair and use it to caress the corpse of the child soldier puppet, which lay in front of the severed heads of victims and perpetrators united by a white sheet, and then she would whirl, moving along the space between the spectators and a big artificial bare tree. I had just finished a scene of desperate bird-sound cries. At the end of the song, Parvathy's last word was *Karuna*. She addressed it to the sky, as if help could come from above. Then she calmly translated *Karuna* into the language of the spectators. *Karuna* means 'compassion'. Her tone of voice transmitted hope in the face of history's cruelty.

Listening, I wondered how Parvathy's voice could accompany me in the new solo *Compassion* that had started as *Remembering Thebes*. I told the director about my desire to be accompanied by Parvathy's song. I wondered if I could use a recording for the spectators to hear. The solution to satisfy the longing for company, hope and music had already been chosen by Eugenio with the word 'compassion' as the title. It had allowed us to understand the direction to follow while discovering the life of the new solo performance.

Compassion - the word and the performance - is a winged seed that had found its ground, put down roots and is growing. As a sycamore, *Compassion* should produce more winged seeds, being careful not to attract the attention of chainsaws.



Second episode: the Chechen refugee Nikita. Photo: Francesco Corbellella

Eugenio Barba

A Broken Teacup in a River of Blood

Life is a story told by an idiot.

William Shakespeare

Macbeth, act 5, scene 5, 28.

Water that generates hostility

The word 'rival' comes from the Latin *rivus*, river. There are always conflicts between populations that share a watercourse. Oddly enough, the pugnacious Apaches and their Yavapais neighbours had peaceful relations despite living near the Verde River in Arizona. The Yavapais, who called themselves 'people of the sun', were exterminated in the late 1870s, an effective genocide caused by their earth rich in minerals, gold, and even a river on which a dam was built. Today, about a thousand of them survive on three reservations and barely three hundred speak their language which is at risk of extinction. Among the few remnants of their culture is this song:

For everything to happen, let's dance.

Rain will come, fruit and game.

Food will never be lacking, if we dance.

Theatre is our dance on the unstable waves of a stream. We all know that history is a river of blood and that the historians and the artists, when they are not victims, must navigate its waters. Navigating, in theatre, means knowing how to stay afloat, swim stubbornly and bear witness in the first person. Theatre does not exist. I am the theatre.

Everything can be told. There is no person, world, sensation, object and event, true or fantastic, that cannot be evoked and described with words, sounds, colours, movements and shapes. Narrating, in theatre, means creating relationships and conjuring up an enhanced reality that is equivalent to the one we know or imagine.

Without forgetting that, in the concreteness of every day, the most trivial experience is inserted into a multiplicity of events and embraces simultaneously elements that follow one another although they are not linked by a logical relationship.

It is this simultaneity and discontinuity that characterises Julia Varley's performance *Compassion*, whose theme unfolds by evoking a special form of love. Eros, the ancient god, had many natures, in addition to that of sensual passion: friendship and tenderness, affection and solidarity, sympathy and veneration, falling in love and devotion. *Compassion* presents three situations of eros that stem from the news of our time and the darkness of myth. In the first episode, a Yazidi monk, during the massacres of his people by ISIS in Syria 2004-2009, plants a tree in the desert in the hope of bringing back the birds that have disappeared. The tree grows but is dead. The monk does not give up. The second episode describes the love of a refugee for her husband who disappeared in the second Chechen war 1999-2009. The commemoration of a normal life that will never return. The third episode takes place in an ancient time without dates where war reigns. The brothers slaughter each other in the city of Thebes, and among the corpses of the battle the blind seer Tiresias remembers the fate of Oedipus and Creon's deep love for his niece Antigone.

The urgent need to bear witness, or rather to keep alive: hence, to resist

I always have difficulty in deciphering the origin of my performances. Nothing is sudden, even if the trigger of the creative mechanism can occur under the pressure of an external fact. The roots, however, are buried in distant encounters.

I cannot identify where and when the first spark arises - an idea, image, title or text that sets in motion a process whose result produces an effect on the spectators. This not-knowing is not ignorance, but the beginning of another knowledge. I must accept regressing to an incoherent state of mind that allows not only me, but also the spectator to fall into the situation of a *new beginner*, as if it were the first time we were confronted with theatrical fiction.

The formula is simple: one has to be able to disorientate oneself and therefore bewilder the others who do not recognise the forms but perceive the tensions. It seems simple, but this process is full of thorns that tear our usual way of being and thinking - our identity. I have to imagine ways of groping forward together with the actors, without knowing where we are heading, and transmitting this experience to the spectators. We advance in circles, stumbling, making mistakes, forced to intuit the right direction at the cost of a thousand misunderstandings and retreats. This stressful condition of voluntary darkness is sustained by the faith that, if I do not give up, I will reach the light. Light is not clarity, but a synthesis of opposites that coexist in a performance whose intensified life radiates incomprehensibility.

Over time, I let circumstances force me into a creative process with the actors of Odin Teatret. After rehearsing several months, we ended up with a performance that surprised all of us who had created it. The tree had grown radically different from the seed hidden in the earth and cared for at length and with so much effort. The starting point was sometimes a sentence - mad lions in the desert - and the result became *The Gospel according to Oxyrhincus* (1985), a biography of Stalin told as the story of the false Jewish prophet Zabbatai Zevi. Another time the origin was the question whether a myth can die, and *Mythos* (1998) enacted the disappearance of the dream of revolution. An oxymoron by the Brazilian poet Paulo Leminski - chronic life - had generated the performance by the same title (2010) that described Europe in 2031 at the end of civil wars with floods of refugees fleeing from cities in ruins.

I know, for once, the precise origin of my decision to stage Julia's senseless project for her solo *Compassion*. I call it senseless because she wanted to reconstruct the Odin performance *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever* that had five actors and she - alone - wanted to embody them all.

Always, with Odin Teatret, I have been sceptical about communal ideologies, the optimistic ones, the illusory ones and the legitimate ones. I have always emphasised the value of the artisanal knowledge of our craft whose ethics unite those who practice it generating new relationships. I have always affirmed the strength of solitude that remains loyal to a few personal 'superstitions' that manifest themselves in work bonds and encounters.

I shook my head when Julia told me that she wanted to continue to present the entire performance alone. I felt compassion for this actress so viscerally linked to that bundle of actions that had given meaning to her life in recent years. She tried to remind me that the life of a performance is sacred and must be protected beyond personal contingencies. She did not utter these words, but this was the hidden meaning of her stubborn idea after almost half a century of commitment in Odin Teatret.

In Argentina, in Santa Fe, in 2022, during a torrid afternoon, Julia introduced me and the participants of a meeting at the CATA - Centro de Antropología Teatral en Argentina - to the five characters played by as many actors in *Thebes at the Time of Yellow Fever*. She leaped breathlessly from one character to another, ran wriggling, confusedly alternating precise details and awkward approximations, her sudden pauses revealing perplexity and insecurity.

This situation is at the origin of my decision to stage *Compassion*. I shared Julia's feeling of mourning at seeing such an energetic performance die, and I appreciated her determination to keep it alive at all costs. What has been scattered is gathered; what has been gathered is swept away, Heraclitus taught us.

Usually, compassion is aroused by those who are unhappy. The title of the performance, however, does not refer only to the feeling of involvement and empathy towards those who suffer but also to its complementary dimension: the tenacity of the individual who refuses the greatest crime: the killing of hope. For this reason, the Yazidi monk insists on taking care of the dead tree, and the Chechen refugee incessantly dialogues with her murdered family, enumerating their beloved names like a litany or a lullaby, and Tiresias pours, in a gesture of refusal and memory, a handful of green leaves on the image of Antigone who mysteriously disappeared in the mountains.

For me, *Compassion* is a *kintsugi*, a healing performance. The world that was our home collapsed. Julia bends down, picks up the fragments, makes them fit together in an unexpected order, trying to make them breathe.

Kintsugi, literally 'repair with gold', is a restoration technique invented at the end of the 1400s by Japanese ceramists to repair cups for the tea ceremony. The break lines are glued with a coloured lacquer and highlighted with gold dust. The ceramic objects repaired in this way are transformed into works of art. Their new life is accentuated by the precious metal that transforms fragility into strength and beauty. The repaired object presents a unique and unrepeatable interweaving of golden lines due to the randomness with which ceramics can shatter. For the Japanese, an aesthetic and interior experience can arise from incompleteness and a wound.

A broken teacup in a river of blood. In the name of compassion, Julia continues what Odin Teatret has always done: to resist.



Gaia Gulizia

The Spring of Life

Compassion is a solo in three portraits, or rather, landscapes: in fact, as if we were looking through a stereoscope, we cross three different scenes inhabited by as many characters-singers who narrate stories of life, death and hope. The common thread is the vital breath that pulsates, despite everything, in the heart of the human beings, always ready in the depths of their souls to plant a seed for a new spring.

The performance, of great poetry in its essentiality, is also a message of hope, a metaphor of the eternal yearning for peace of the soul that is the first condition for peace of the human community.

Between the present and ancient times, we listen to the narration of a Syrian monk, a Chechen refugee and the seer Tiresias. All three characters cross landscapes of war and, walking on the ruins of acts of destruction, find the strength to re-act to (re)create: wonder, beauty, new life.

A tree in the desert to call the birds and their song of life, the wonderland of life, the creation of the myth of Antigone: the red of the blood of violated life that impregnates the stage objects nourishes rebirth, in a perpetual regeneration of the cycle of life that always wins.

Julia Varley on stage communicates with her whole body and the voice that the body animates and that animates the body. Watching her is discovering the dance of the eyes, the flickering of the limbs, the cave of the throat from which life emerges, again and again: the life that Eugenio Barba (author of the text's poetry as well as the director) together with his actors takes around the world, nourishing its value.

The spring protagonist of this performance is also that of the life of Odin Teatret, reborn from the ashes of painful changes, more vital than ever.

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ODIN TEATRET

Odin Teatret (www.odinteatret.org) was founded by Eugenio Barba in 1964 in Oslo, Norway with four young people who had been rejected from the national theatre school. In 1966 Odin Teatret moved to Denmark and converted a farm outside Holstebro into a theatre laboratory. In 1983, the name was changed to Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium/Odin Teatret as a framework for an institution with many artistic and educational activities, a publishing house, film production, festivals and community initiatives. In 2022 Odin Teatret and Eugenio Barba left Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium and continue their activities in Denmark and around the world. In 2024, Odin Teatret's activities include performances in Denmark and abroad, teaching and workshops, intensive contact with theatre groups also through European projects, the annual intensive nine-day residency Odin Home in Ringkøbing-Skjern, the annual Transit Festival dedicated to women in theatre in Stendis, and the Thursday Poetry evening in collaboration with other institutions in Holstebro.

In collaboration with the Barba Varley Foundation Odin Teatret is active in the production of educational films and videos, the publication of books, the support of individuals and groups in disadvantaged situations, in sessions of the ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology), performances with the multicultural Theatrum Mundi Ensemble, the journal "JTA - Journal of Theatre Anthropology" and a series of films on theatre anthropology that can be downloaded for free (www.fondazionebarbavarley.org).

At the heart of this collaboration is LAFLIS, Living Archive Floating Islands (www.LAFLIS.org), created after Barba donated his library and artistic heritage to the Puglia Region in Italy. It is in Lecce, at the Bernardini Library, that the history of Odin Teatret lives again, as well as the extensive documentation on the Transit Festival directed by Julia Varley, the Magdalena Project and the Third Theatre groups. A digitised archive is available with documents dating back to 1960, when Barba went to Poland to study directing and met the young Grotowski. The ties woven during 60 years have led to the development of a professional and academic environment in cooperation with universities, groups and cultural associations. Odin Teatret's experiences, with 86 performances presented in 67 countries and in different social contexts, have generated a particular culture with roots in cultural diversity and the principle of 'barter': the actors of Odin Teatret present their work for a specific environment, which in turn responds with songs, music and dances of their own culture.



Odin Teatret: Eugenio Barba, Antonia Cioază, Claudio Coloberti, Jan Ferslev, Knud Erik Knudsen, Tage Larsen, Else Marie Laukvik, Jakob Nielsen, Francesca Romana Rietti, Anne Savage, Rina Skeel, Ulrik Skeel, Julia Varley



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