

EUGENIO BARBA

The Moon Rises from the Ganges

**My Journey through Asian
Acting Techniques**



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My Journey through Asian Acting Techniques

Edited, introduced,
and with an appendix by LLUÍS MASGRAU
Photo selection and captions by RINA SKEEL
Translated from Italian by JUDY BARBA



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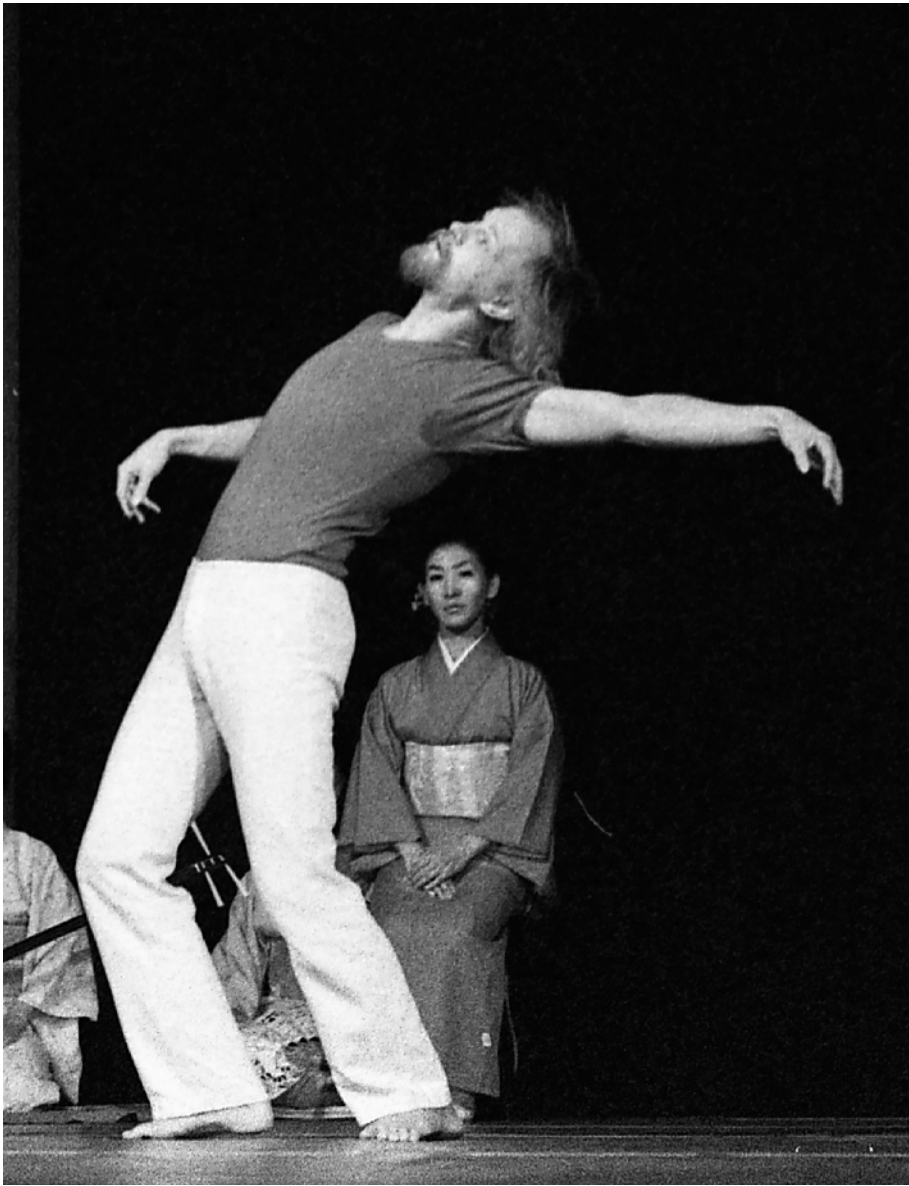
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INTRODUCTION

**Eugenio Barba and
traditional Asian theatres**

BY LLUÍS MASGRAU



► Volterra, 1981. Part of the day at ISTA – the International School of Theatre Anthropology – was spent watching the demonstrations by the individual performers. The purpose was to compare ways of thinking, technical procedures and the working terminology in the different performance genres. Here, the Swede Ingemar Lindh demonstrates Étienne Decroux's corporeal mime. It is interesting to notice the concentration of Katsuko Azuma (nihon buyo) watching in the background.

East and West in twentieth-century theatre culture

In his impressive *Eurasian Theatre*, Nicola Savarese (2010) describes the flow of exchanges between actors, dancers, mimes, and singers that unfolded with alternating frequency between East and West from ancient times to our day. However, the facts show that during many centuries the Western and Eastern theatres were two worlds apart with no direct and deep contact. The constraints of geography transformed the Asian theatres into a reality accessible only to travellers and adventurers. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth that the first direct exchanges between Asian and Euro-American stage artists took place with mutual repercussions on each other's craft.

The beginnings were a few tours of actors-dancers, especially from Cambodia, Java and Annam (Vietnam), within the framework of World and Colonial Exhibitions, as well as the presence of Chinese traditional theatre on the West Coast of the USA (San Francisco). But it was the tour of the Japanese Kawakami Otojiro and Sada Yacco in 1899 in USA and subsequently in Europe that provoked the first interest and enthusiasm in Western audiences and among theatre professionals. This first-hand acquaintance, marked by the unfamiliarity Americans and Europeans alike had of Asian theatres, generated curiosity and surprise as well as a host of debates and misunderstandings.

The first Asian performances seen in Europe and America were appreciated mainly for their exotic aesthetics, their theatricality and gorgeous costumes. The actors' achievements – with rare exceptions – went unperceived. The critics of the time mentioned the actors' power of expression but didn't analyse the inner logic and merit of their technique. A deep ignorance existed on this question. Nicola Savarese puts this problem in its cultural context when he writes:

The reason for this ignorance is familiar: it lies in the ancient and deep-rooted schism between *body* and *soul*, much emphasised by the Christian message, which defined the body as the source of instinct and animal satisfactions, and the soul as the cradle of spirituality and noble aspirations. [...] One of the consequences of this culture of division, still in full force in the nineteenth century, was an undervaluing not only of the culture of the body but also of every notion of body technique. Consequently, artistic techniques, whether practised by actors or dancers, were not

taken into consideration outside the most strictly limited professional contexts, and sometimes not even then.

(Savarese 2010: 398)

It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that the significance of corporality in theatre and dance became a topic for discussion.

In addition, another significant factor dominated European culture: the division between dance and theatre as two completely different performative universes. In the West, the debate on the appropriate corporal culture for the stage took place first in the dance milieu and later in that of the theatre. It is not strange then that the Asian actors' performances had more consequences at first for dancers than for actors and directors. The realism reigning in European theatre, with its narrative demands and dispersed acting technique neglecting an autonomous corporal stage language, constituted a context in which the Asian performers' skill appeared distant and unusable. But the same performers represented a powerful incentive for those dancers who tried to renovate their art. Cléo de Mérode, Ruth Saint-Denis, Loie Fuller, Ted Shawn, and even Nijinski were inspired by Eastern forms in their attempt to disrupt the traditional codes of Western classical dance.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in an atmosphere of renewal and search for expressive forms as alternatives to realism and naturalism, a few directors and pedagogues became keenly interested in the traditional Asian theatres and tried to acquire more information about their actors-dancers. Little by little this knowledge became a reference in the effort to create new teaching methods aiming at a 'total actor' skilled in all the expressive means: dancing, singing, reciting, improvising, and even writing. Together with ancient theatre forms (Greek tragedy, *commedia dell'arte* and the neglected and scorned popular circus, cabaret, and the whole theatrical patrimony which Meyerhold called by the Russian name of *balagan*), Asian theatres were a source of inspiration – with a pre-eminent role, according to Savarese (2010: 448) – for the practice and theories of the protagonists in the theatre's Great Reform.¹

¹ Barba uses this term coined by the influential Polish director Leon Schiller in the 1930s to define the period of profound mutations in European theatre from the beginning of the twentieth century until the Second World War. In a little more than three decades, the European theatre's unitary model disappeared, and modern theatre, as we think of it and practise it today, took shape. These structural and anthropological changes were the consequence of the experiments, teaching methods and visions starting from the generation of Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Konstantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jacques Copeau to that of Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, and Antonin Artaud.

The Asian theatres provided examples of long-lasting living traditions as opposed to the extinct European forms such as Greek theatre, *commedia dell'arte*, Elizabethan theatre, and that of the Spanish Golden Century. In addition, the Asian theatres made use of a theatricality rooted in rigorous and demanding acting skills. Finally, a third reason explains the fascination of the European reformers for Asian genres: they conveyed a sophisticated artistic quality, which was alien to Western settings, a radical otherness.

We should keep in mind that the European theatre reformers were not simply looking for a new aesthetic alternative to naturalism. They were eagerly searching to escape from the professional mentality of their time, the uses, customs, and practices of a craft that was the expression of a transient culture marked by commercialisation, spectacularism, and the star system. For this reason they were not merely satisfied with performances that filled the theatres. Their needs pushed them towards a theatrical model that went beyond all this. The minor and more overwhelming theatre revolutions in the twentieth century took place in laboratories, studios, ateliers, workshops, small schools, artistic communities, and enclaves where the foundations of an autonomous and influential theatrical culture were laid (Cruciani 1995 and Schino 2009). Almost all these micro-cultures – which in time would change the features of Western theatre – pointed to a new type of actor. Here the model of the traditional Asian performer found fertile ground: it was an effective example of the ‘total’ actor.

It was not a question of imitation. During the whole twentieth century the Western reformers confronted the Asian theatres to extract stimuli capable of nurturing their own practices and theories. They knew how to extricate ideas, analogies, technical resources, and fertile misunderstandings which, blended with other influences in the crucible of their obsessions and research, gave place to new forms and actor models. Edward Gordon Craig, Alexander Tairov, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba are among those who experienced this encounter with Asian theatres in the search for a new actor. Each case was different and followed its own individual path, but, until Grotowski, this confrontation was characterised by three factors defining a specific horizon and the possibilities that derived from it.

First, until the beginning of the 1960s, the interest in Asian performers didn't imply a journey to their land in order to get acquainted with their art in its

cultural context. The contact took place within the short stays of Asian companies in Europe and North America during Colonial and World Exhibitions, or within the framework of tours bound by commercial, practical, ideological, and economic demands. These alien contexts, very different from the original ones, altered some fundamental aspects of the Asian theatricality and favoured a host of misinterpretations.

Another factor, deriving from the first, was that direct knowledge of Asian performers was very limited. Edward Gordon Craig saw Sada Yacco in London in 1900 and Hanako in Florence in 1907. Stanislavski and Meyerhold had also the opportunity to appreciate the art of these two Japanese actresses. In 1928, Meyerhold saw the kabuki company of Sadanji Ichikawa – the first to perform outside Japan – on tour in the Soviet Union (in Leningrad and Moscow). Two years later, in 1930, Meyerhold attended another kabuki performance in Paris, that of the Dotombori Theatre from Osaka led by Tokujiro Tsutsui, also seen by Charles Dullin. This company came from the USA and, after a stop in Paris, performed in London, Berlin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Milan, and Rome. Brecht saw the Company in Berlin. Meyerhold saw the fragments of Peking Opera that the company of Mei Lanfang presented during the Theatre Congress in Moscow in 1935.² Mei Lanfang had previously performed in the USA in 1930 (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles). Stanislavski, Tairov, Eisenstein, Brecht, and many other directors saw the work demonstration by this famous Chinese artist. Craig, who also participated in the Congress, accompanied Mei Lanfang to *The Princess Turandot*, Yevgeni Vakhtangov's legendary performance from 1922, which was still playing in 1935. Artaud witnessed a show of Cambodian dances at the National Colonial Exhibition of Marseille in 1922. Later on, in 1931, he discovered Balinese theatre in Paris in the Dutch pavilion of the Colonial Exhibition. These were accidental encounters, limited to single performances or fragments of these and, therefore, not sufficient to foster the study of the acting processes or the logic inherent to the performances' preparation.

Acquaintance with the Asian performers' working methods, with their technical procedures and apprenticeship – this is the third factor – took

² In the eighteenth century, the Jesuits gave the name of 'opera' to Chinese theatre forms because of the predominant role of music and song. In recent years, the experts employ more and more the term *xiqu* to refer in general to Chinese traditional sung theatre, and *jingju* to refer to one of its traditions, the Peking Opera. The term *huaju* (spoken theatre) denotes performances based upon Western models. In this book I will keep to the terms 'Chinese theatre' and 'Peking Opera' since they belonged to Barba's cognitive and imaginative universe and were used by him in his texts.

place mainly through books, in other words via an intellectual path. In some paradigmatic cases, such as with Brecht and Artaud, seeing the performances was neither preceded nor followed by any reading. In fact, Brecht and Artaud were not much interested in the Asian theatres as such. The Asian actors-dancers were an enlightenment, a sudden inspiration illuminating and encouraging personal inclinations and ideas which the two creators had long carried in their mental baggage. In other cases, the study was real and even passionate, but it was carried out in an indirect way through books and iconography. Until the 1950s – and this was another obstacle – books and articles on traditional Asian theatres were not written by theatre specialists but by philologists or by people who, due to their occupation (diplomats, missionaries, merchants), had lived for years in Asia and had become interested in local performances. The experience of the French playwright Paul Claudel is an exception. He was the French Consul in various towns in China (1895–1909) and the Ambassador in Tokyo (1922–28). During his stays in these two countries he became interested in their various traditional theatre forms and left a few competent texts with his impressions.

Due to these circumstances, knowledge on Asian actors-dancers was fragmentary and prone to misinterpretation. Savarese quotes Meyerhold, who summarises this situation perfectly:

‘I knew Kabuki theatre from the theoretical point of view, from books and iconographical material, I knew kabuki theatre technique, but when I finally watched one of its performances, it seemed to me that I had read nothing, knew nothing about it.’

(Meyerhold in Savarese 2010: 531)

The arrival of Asian performers in Europe and the USA unleashed a two-way influence. The discovery of a theatrical reality so different from its own became a stimulus both for the Euro-American and for the Asian stage. The case of the couple Kawakami Otojiro and Sada Yacco is emblematic. The performances of the Japanese actresses Sada Yacco and Hanako unleashed a huge debate and deserve a short comment. Particular circumstances in Japan turned Sada Yacco and Hanako into actresses who toured in Europe. They took advantage of their experience as geishas and performed in one-act plays with historical Japanese plots made comprehensible to Western audiences. When they went back to Japan, Sada Yacco and Kawakami (her director and partner in life) did the opposite: they adapted plots from the Western repertory (for example *Othello* and *Hamlet*) to Japanese taste and sensibility.

Sada Yacco's and Hanako's basic technique was a mixture of buyo dance (taken from kabuki) used by the geishas, as well as martial arts. It was far from being a traditional theatre technique. Craig was not so enthused by Sada Yacco's and Hanako's performances since he considered them to be a falsification of kabuki. Other Western spectators, less informed than Craig, believed that these were genuine examples of kabuki. Savarese contextualises the situation by explaining:

Kawakami and Sada Yacco's performances were an imitation of *kabuki*: but an imitation is not necessarily a forgery, just as an operetta is not a 'little opera' or a 'fake opera', but simply a 'small-scale opera', the renewal of the model in a different light style. It may therefore be said that, in the world of Japanese theatre, geisha dances were (and still are today) an 'imitation' of *kabuki* dances, or that *kabuki* itself is an 'imitation' of *nō*. In other words, a model developed over time, at levels of expression, technique, culture, and economy different from those of the original.

These different levels of imitation of *nō* theatre, which is the original model, are still visible. They are apparent when we watch the same story being performed in the styles of *nō*, *kabuki*, and *Nihon buyō* (Japanese dance), which has incorporated also the geisha dances. These are three *styles*, or rather, three *different levels* of art, each having its own particular artistic formulation, its own prestige, and its own public of passionate followers.

(Savarese 2010: 345)

The wave of renewal that swept over European theatre during the first thirty years of the twentieth century weakened as a result of Nazism and Stalinism, and, later, the Second World War. The new theatre culture shaped by the protagonists of the Great Reform was destroyed or fell into lethargy. We had to wait until the 1950s to find the first signs of a renewed interest, thanks to the publication of books on traditional Asian theatres by Western scholars who also had a close bond with theatre practice. These were mostly American and British, who, after living in Asia because of the Second World War, taught in universities in the USA and trained generations of students, filling them with a passion for Asian performances. Faubion Bowers, who was General Douglas MacArthur's personal interpreter, wrote *Japanese Theatre* (1952), *The Dance in India* (1953) and *Theatre in the East* (1956). Bowers was in charge of the US Censorship Office in occupied Japan just after the Second World War, and he saved kabuki theatre from a total prohibition since its performances were judged to be imbued with 'feudal' and militaristic ideology (Okamoto 2001). Earle Ernst published *The Kabuki Theatre* (1956). The British Adolphe Clarence Scott lived for several years in China and Japan working for the British Council and published *The Kabuki Theatre*

of Japan (1955), *The Classical Theatre in China* (1957) and *Mei Lan-Fang, Leader of the Pear Garden* (1959). In 1960, René Sieffert translated Zeami's *The Secret Art of Nô* into French (1960). Another American scholar, Leonard Pronko, wrote *Theatre East and West: Perspectives towards a Total Theatre* (1967).

After the Second World War, the first European director to show an interest in traditional Asian theatre was Grotowski. India's philosophies and religious systems were one of his passions and influenced the development of his personality as well as his theoretical formulations. Nevertheless, in the beginning, Grotowski's eagerness towards India didn't include its traditional theatres. His *mise-en-scène* of *Shakuntala*, the Sanskrit text by Kalidasa, at the Theatre of the 13 Rows in 1960 was a result of his knowledge of Indian literature and gave him, above all, an alibi to move the actors away from a realistic style. Grotowski made his actors use positions of hatha yoga (which he himself practised) and let the speech be enhanced by suggestive intonations derived from the sonority of mantras. The choice of the classical text *Shakuntala* corresponded less to an attraction to the traditional or popular forms such as kathakali or yakshagana (totally unknown in the West at that time) and more to the challenge of implementing a 'theatrical theatre' that Grotowski and Ludwik Flaszen had postulated in their first programmatic texts.

Two years later, in 1962, Grotowski spent a month in the People's Republic of China with an official Polish delegation, where he had the opportunity to see Peking Opera at first hand, to visit some drama schools and to speak with specialists from the milieu (Osiński 2014: 95–105).

By that time, the direction of his theatrical experiments had changed. After *Akropolis* (1962), by the Polish symbolist Stanisław Wyspiański, Grotowski established in his theatre the practice of training, apart from performances and rehearsals, in which his actors deepened their technical knowledge through exercises. In this way, the Theatre of the 13 Rows, known for the daring *mise-en-scène* of avant-garde texts by Jean Cocteau and Vladimir Mayakovsky, took the first steps towards its transformation into the history-making Laboratory Theatre.

Grotowski was the first European director who went to Asia and saw *in situ* traditional Chinese performances. Undoubtedly, this first-hand knowledge reinforced his predisposition to theatricality and contributed to the development of some aspects of his actors' training (Osiński 2014: 95–105). One year later, in 1963, Eugenio Barba, his Italian assistant, travelled to

India for six months and brought back information about kathakali exercises. Grotowski introduced some of them in his training. However, Grotowski's interest in Asian theatres faded in his later trajectory, while his fervour towards Hindu philosophies remained intact.

This historical outline – unavoidably schematic and incomplete – is necessary when approaching Eugenio Barba's accomplishments and putting into perspective his contribution to the dialogue between Western and Asian theatres. It stops in 1963 when Barba starts to develop his relationship with Asian theatres. Later on, directors such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Bob Wilson, among others, were contributing to enlarge the Western dialogue with traditional Asian theatres.

Journey of learning

Eugenio Barba was interested in the Asian cultures, mostly for their philosophies and religions and less for their theatres. In 1955, as a young immigrant working as a welder in Oslo, he came upon Romain Roland's book *Ramakrishna's Life*. The discovery of this mystic, one of the main exponents of the cultural renaissance in nineteenth-century Bengal, led to other readings on the various developments of Hinduism and Buddhism and motivated Barba's first journey to Asia. In 1956, only twenty years old, he signed up as a sailor on a Norwegian merchant ship bound for India and the Far East. His goal was to visit a temple on the Ganges built for Ramakrishna by a rich widow in Dakshineswar near Calcutta, where, as Roland recounted in his book, the Hindu ascetic daily descended the stairway to make his ablutions in the river (see 'The steps on the river bank' in Part IV). After this first journey, Barba persevered in widening his knowledge on Hinduism. Six years later, when he arrived at the Theatre of the 13 Rows in Opole, Poland, this common interest was the main point of contact with Grotowski (Barba 1999a: 48).

Barba's fascination with Asian cultures and their views of the world – one that has enthralled him throughout his life – has never been a strategy for extending the limits of his Italian background, enriching it through a dialogue with foreign cultures. Already at this early stage, it wasn't an intercultural dialogue that moved Barba, but a deeper existential need. Before dealing with theatre, the East was for Barba an opportunity to break the bonds with his Italian and European background and to build the uprooted identity of an emigrant. This would become one of his persistent obsessions, probably

the most significant: to let roots grow out of the need not to belong in any one place but to shape an ideal homeland made of values and without borders. Barba defined this process by expressions such as ‘to sink roots in the sky’ or ‘the conquest of difference’ (Barba and Watson 2002: 234–62).

When, in January 1962, after a year at the Warsaw theatre school, Barba joined the Theatre of the 13 Rows, Grotowski had just begun his iconoclastic *mises-en-scène* of Polish classical texts, which, in less than a decade, made him into an influential theatre reformer. Grotowski had just finished *Kordian* (1962) by Juliusz Słowacki and was on the verge of starting on *Akropolis* (1962) by Wyspiański with Barba as his assistant. In the course of rehearsals, Grotowski introduced in his theatre a regular training with various types of exercises which were not directly connected to the preparation of the performance. In August of that same year Grotowski travelled to China, and, in June 1963, Barba went on a second trip to India, this time in search of ‘professional secrets’. Barba knew nothing of the existence of the traditional Indian theatres, since, at that time, there was very little information about them in Europe. After stopping in Delhi, Bombay, and Madras, he ended up, almost by chance, in Cheruthuruthy, a village in Kerala, home to the most important school of kathakali, the Kerala Kalamandalam. For three weeks he lived with the pupils of the school, attending from dawn to late evening their daily training, and saw several kathakali performances (see ‘In search of theatre’ in Part I).

When Barba returned to Europe, he wrote a long essay on kathakali, which at the time was published in its totality or partially in French (1965), English (1967), Italian (in three parts, 1967, 1968, 1969) and Danish (1974). Barba’s text contributed to drawing attention to kathakali, until that moment unknown in Europe, and to awaken an interest in it (see ‘The kathakali theatre’ in Part I).

Barba’s stay at the Kerala Kalamandalam had long-lasting consequences. This experience marked deeply his professional personality, and he refers to it again and again in his writings. Beyond the forms, the aesthetics, the training, and the kathakali actor’s dramaturgy, what genuinely impressed Barba was the ethos of those boys who got up every day at dawn to do their exercises for hours in silence. This ethos didn’t spring from ideals or personal obsessions, but from the discipline, the meticulousness, and the humility with which those young boys learned the demanding technique of their tradition. The whole sense of their doing theatre seemed to be encapsulated in their submission to the tradition of which they were a part.

Barba had studied at the official theatre school in Warsaw, and he knew the atmosphere of the European theatres. He came from a context in which the professional practice was often adulterated by self-centred conceit, intellectual justifications, ideological discussions, debased attitudes, political ideas or commercial demands. The experience at the Kerala Kalamandalam showed him that technique is an embodied ethic – the craft's foundation. An incorporated technique is impregnated by values and norms, something that later Barba defined as professional ethos. No theatrical adventure could do without that dimension of the craft. The absorption of a technical knowledge implies a resistance that forces the student to take a position and materialise personal motivations into a concrete behaviour.

The sojourn in Kerala and the 'discovery' of kathakali constituted for Barba an authentic *Wanderlehre*, a journey of learning and a displacement of his criteria that implemented his professional education. Thus, Barba, at the very beginning of his apprenticeship, experienced the encounter with an Asian theatre.

Inspiration

In October 1964, Barba founded Odin Teatret in Oslo, Norway, with a group of youngsters who had failed to be admitted to the State Theatre School. Two years later, in June 1966, he and his actors emigrated to Denmark and settled down definitively in Holstebro, a small town of 16,000 inhabitants in north-west Jutland. Until the beginning of the 1970s, they concentrated on the growth of a personal technique. In these first years, the value and the need of a technical insight constituted Barba's main professional compass. This need was amplified by the fact that they were autodidactic. Above all, there was the challenge of proving an artistic competence which, in the beginning, they didn't possess due to their rejection by the official theatre milieu.

In the process of building his actor-model, Barba leaned on what he had learned with Grotowski. At the same time, he read books by the theatre reformers and attempted to personalise and integrate in the Odin training the teachings of Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Dullin, the pantomime of Marcel Marceau, and classical ballet. In the solitude and isolation of Holstebro, the books of the great reformers were an anchor, a refuge, and a stimulus of the first order. In the theatre culture that Barba was forging for himself and

his actors, the influence of Asian theatres was to be found side by side with the appeal of the European tradition of the Great Reform.

In spite of the experience in Kerala – short and related to one tradition – the diversity of the Asian theatres continued being for Barba and his actors a distant, mythical reality, which inspired them through pictures and the few books available at that time. *Ukiyo-e* prints of kabuki performers or A.C. Scott's book on Mei Lanfang (1959) encouraged them to invent exercises of a training that drifted away from Grotowski's and already contained features of its own.

The vocal training was also populated by Asian suggestions and references: how could they reach the sonorous range and the impact of a noh actor or a Balinese arja performer? At this stage, one can see Barba's intention to avoid the imitation of the Asian forms and use them as an incentive to create their own exercises. His approach to the Asian actors' knowledge was not very different to that of the great European reformers. Basically, they shared the same lack of a direct and deep knowledge (see 'The most disparate metals' and 'A dreamed and reinvented Arcadia' in Part II).

This stimulation in the Odin training was enhanced by Barba's readings on this subject. In 1964, he began publishing the four-monthly *Teatrets Teori og Teknikk*, a journal in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, mostly about actor's technique from the Great Reform as well as from Asian theatres. Issue no. 15, in 1971, was exclusively about acting in China and Japan. Barba wrote several articles of various lengths: on kabuki, on Chinese actor training, on Mei Lanfang, about comparing the Russian formalists' research to Brecht's *Verfremdung* and Zeami's *hana*, the actor's 'flower' (see 'Mei Lanfang' and '*Priem ostrannenija, Verfremdung, hana*' in Part II). The following number, from the same year, was a special issue in book form: a Danish translation of René Sieffert's French translation of Zeami's writings. In 1974, issue no. 21 was entirely devoted to kathakali and to various theatre and dance forms in Bali.

To remedy its professional isolation, to survive economically and to witness practical examples of theatrical knowledge, Odin Teatret, from the very year of its establishment in Denmark in 1966, began a pioneering practice which in time became common throughout Europe: that of inviting actors and directors to Holstebro to give practical seminars for professionals from all over Scandinavia. A host of young and less young artists, more or less known, some of whom became the theatre protagonists of the following decades, were invited to teach: Jerzy Grotowski, Otomar Krejča, Dario Fo, the brothers Carlo and Romano Colombaioni, Étienne Decroux, Jacques Lecoq, Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, Joseph Chaikin, Julian

Beck and Judith Malina with their Living Theatre. Barba and his actors saw at first hand how these artists thought and worked during their creative and teaching processes, living with them during the seminar, asking them all sorts of questions, and absorbing the glow of their artistic identity.

In the early 1970s, Barba took a further step in his relationship with Asian theatres when he invited renowned traditional masters to international seminars in Holstebro.³ This initiative must be seen in the context of a time in which Asian performances were a rarity in Europe and America – Asian actors had never led seminars or presented work demonstrations.

Odin Teatret opened the 1972 seminar with grandeur. It included Japan's most important theatre genres: the *noh* company of Hideo and Hisao Kanze, *kyogen* with the Nomura family, a selected group of *kabuki* actors led by Sojuro Sawamura, and Shuji Terayama's contemporary avant-garde group Tenjo Sajiki. More than sixty artists, who never mingled in their own country, travelled together and defied their reciprocal prejudices during their work demonstrations and performances at the Odin. This huge enterprise was made possible thanks to collaboration with the Venice Biennale. It was the first and only time that a European seminar gathered such a number of genres and different classical and contemporary Japanese actors.

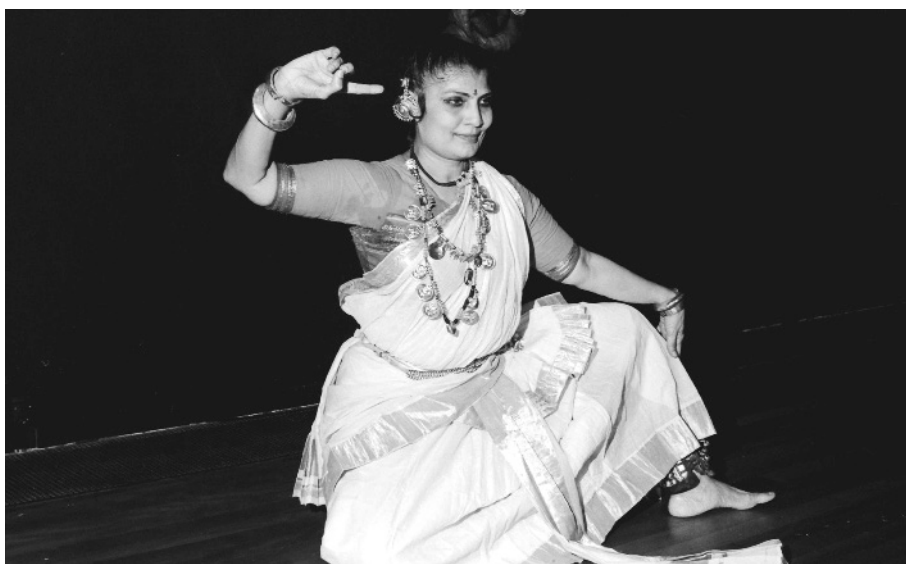
In 1974, the seminar involved Balinese and Javanese theatre forms, with thirty-five artists, among whom the Javanese choreographer Sardono Waluyo Kusumo and the Balinese masters I Made Pasek Tempo and I Made Djimat.

In 1976, the Odin devoted its seminar to some of the genres from India. Once again, the idea was to gather masters and musicians of different styles who were not accustomed to observing their respective work processes in their own country. The Scandinavian participants were able to attend work demonstrations and performances of the highest level: Shanta Rao, one of the protagonists of the renewal of Indian classical dance, one of the first women from a Brahmin family to take up professionally *bharatanatyam* and the first woman to learn *kathakali*; Uma Sharma, a dancer of *kathak*; Krishna Namboodiri (whom Barba knew from his first journey to Kerala) presented *kathakali*. Barba also invited the young Sanjukta Panigrahi with her husband Raghunath, whose artistic mastery was transforming a regional dance, the *odissi*, into a classical one.

³ Barba has always called his Asian collaborators 'masters', an attempt at translating the Indian *guru*, the Japanese *sensei* and the Chinese *ta shi* which means teacher, an older person who masters the craft.



- Holstebro, 1972. The American-Canadian professor Frank Hoff watching Hideo Kanze (noh) during a demonstration in Odin Teatret's white room at the Japanese seminar.
- Holstebro, 1974. The dancer-choreographer Sardono Kusumo teaching Balinese children who participated in his performance. Among his main collaborators were I Made Pasek Tempo and I Made Djimat, both from Bali, who, after 1980, became part of the ISTA staff.



► Holstebro, 1976. Shanta Rao during a demonstration in Odin's black room at the Indian seminar. She was forty-six and a legend in her country. Born to an upper caste, she embraced a career as a bharatanatyam dancer and was the first woman to study kathakali.

►► Holstebro, 1976. Sanjukta Panigrahi. Her talent was decisive in transforming the odissi from a regional to a classical dance. At the Odin seminar she expected just to give a performance. Consequently, she refused to do anything as alien as a working demonstration. After seeing Shanta Rao's exposé of her technical biography, Sanjukta agreed to do the same. With the years, she excelled at showing the various layers of technical knowledge hidden behind the levity and splendour of her dance.

Through these encounters with Asian traditional actors/dancers, Barba gained first-hand insight, which he combined with information from books. From an ethical point of view, Barba felt an affinity with these representatives of century-old traditions, and he didn't hesitate in September 1977 to invite Hideo Kanze (noh), Krishna Namboodiri (kathakali), and the Balinese I Made Bandem and his wife Swasthi Widjaja with their daughters to the Encounter of Third Theatre in Bergamo, Italy. These Asian masters were later often welcomed by Third Theatre groups all over Europe, especially in Italy. Jerzy Grotowski, whom Barba had invited to the Encounter, saw their demonstrations and included Namboodiri and Kanze in his symposium 'The Art of the Beginner' in Warsaw (4–7 June 1978).

When Odin Teatret began to arrange the Asian seminars, Barba and his actors had about ten years of experience behind them. They had accumulated a remarkable technical know-how that impregnated their performances. *Ferai* (1969) and *Min Fars Hus* (*My Father's House*, 1972) had been internationally acclaimed, and the critics spoke of a new actor-model. The presence of Asian performers in Holstebro played a fundamental role as an inventive stimulus to compare the technical efficacy of actors from different genres. Once again, it was not a question of interculturalism but of finding personal paths towards artistic autonomy (see 'A dreamed and reinvented Arcadia' in Part II).

But the encounters with the Asian performers at the Holstebro seminars had another consequence. Barba wove a web of professional complicity, in some cases involving deep friendship with some of the Asian masters who became close travelling companions when, in 1979, Barba founded the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA).

Beneath the skin: levels of organisation and recurring principles

Towards the end of the 1970s, Barba glimpsed another way to relate to traditional Asian performers. When, in 1963, he came back from India, he was haunted by the question 'How was it that kathakali actors affected him as a spectator although he knew nothing about their theatre tradition?' He was not an expert in their acting conventions, nor did he grasp the stories and the inherent religious content. Nevertheless, those actors had the capacity to hold his attention and to enthrall him with the intense 'life' they radiated. The

young Barba was disturbed by his failure to explain the peculiar communication between him and the kathakali actors.

Now, after fifteen years' work with his actors and countless professional experiences, Barba began to modify his view of Asian performers. Some of his actors were the cause of this change.

In January 1978, Barba set in motion one of those 'earthquakes', which, over the years, he regularly provoked in order to revitalise his group. This time, he barred his actors from working in the theatre for three months: they were paid but were free to do what they wanted.

Some of them used the opportunity to travel and learn. Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Silvia Ricciardelli, and Toni Cots went to Bali, where they learned basic baris and legong dances. Toni Cots also studied topeng (mask theatre) and the martial art pencak silat. Tom Fjordefalk went to India to learn kathakali. The rest of the actors chose other destinations. Roberta Carreri and Francis Pardeilhian went to Brazil and learned capoeira and the Candomblé dance of the Orixás. Else Marie Laukvik visited Haiti. Julia Varley and Tage Larsen learned ballroom dances – waltz, paso doble, and cha-cha-cha – in the small town of Struer, 15 kilometres from Holstebro. Torgeir Wethal planned to study flamenco in Spain, but gave up the idea and remained at home.

Back at Odin Teatret, Toni Cots and Tom Fjordefalk kept on working with the Balinese and kathakali forms, structuring their new knowledge into work demonstrations. Watching the daily training of these two actors, who alternated Asian elements with those of Odin, Barba no longer saw their diversity but became aware of the analogies that existed under different technical 'skins' (see 'The museum of the theatre' and 'Beneath the skin' in Part III).

This new way of seeing and the resulting questions and doubts became the field of research at ISTA. From then on, the contact and collaboration with the Asian performers increased through their presence at ISTA sessions and Barba's frequent sojourns in Asia in order to follow the creative and teaching process of certain masters. This fieldwork deepened his knowledge of the specific nature of the various apprenticeships for the Asian performers and their way of thinking with the body-mind.

In 1980, Barba produced the first hypotheses concerning his new field of research (see 'Knowing with the mind and understanding with the body' in Part III). Its focus was the analysis of scenic behaviour through which actors and dancers from various genres and traditions build their scenic presence. Right from the start, Theatre Anthropology developed in two directions:

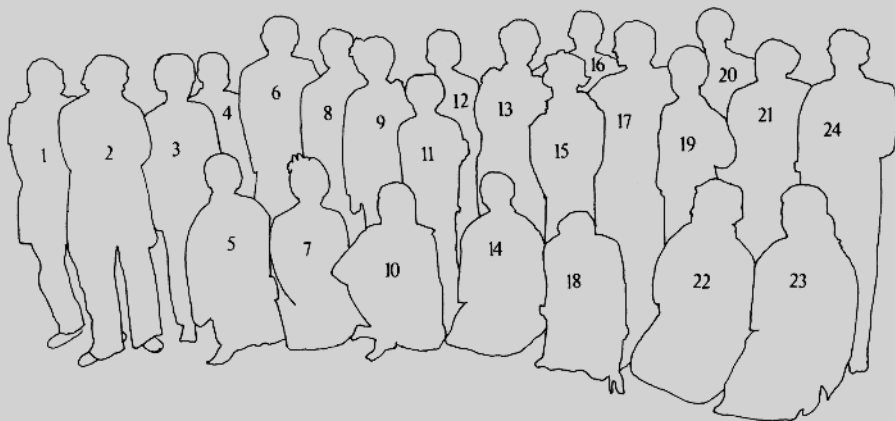
What is ISTA?

Eugenio Barba established ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, in 1979 as a situation of exchange for theatre practitioners and scholars whom he had met and befriended. There they could mutually show, compare and discuss their technical and creative processes. ISTA was meant as an inspiration for the invited 'friends' as well as for directors and actors from the Third Theatre groups. The Asian performers were accompanied by their ensembles of up to ten people, including the musicians, in order to present the magnificence of their tradition in a real performance after dissecting in depth the technical steps leading to these results. Participation was free, but after the seventh ISTA in Wales (1992), the participants paid a symbolic fee. ISTA sessions ended with a public two-day symposium and performances by the different masters. The necessary funding was provided by the organisers who were mostly theatre groups but also established cultural institutions and a prestigious festival.

What Barba at first expected to be a single meeting with technical exchanges between theatre friends, evolved into ISTA and, thanks to its continuity, into a unique milieu of pure research. No results had to be achieved in order to be applied or shown publicly. During a session, much time was dedicated to scrutinising an actor's performance, his or her scenic figure. The individual performers recreated the learning phases of their first day of work, showing or recounting in detail the corrections and advice of their teachers. They presented a performance with costumes and music, then they showed the same thing without music, then also without costumes so that participants became aware of the particular postures and orchestration of tensions in the performer's scenic anatomy. The performances showed clearly that the styles were different, but the demonstrations by the performers about the technical foundations of their individual styles also showed clearly that similar principles were used by all of them to reach this diversity. Barba defined 'theatre anthropology' as the study of these recurrent pre-expressive principles.



► Holstebro, 1986. ISTA's artistic staff during the fourth session: 'The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures'. [1] Hemant Kumar Das (India); [2] Jagdish Prasad Varman (India); [3] Desak Made Suarti Laksmi (Bali); [4] Gangadhar Pradhan (India); [5] Katsuko Azuma (Japan); [6] Mei Baojiu (China); [7] Ni Made Wiratini (Bali); [8] Kanichi Hanayagi (Japan); [9] Swasthi Widjaja Bandem (Bali); [10] Iben Nagel Rasmussen (Odin Teatret); [11] Gautam (India); [12] Sanjukta Panigrahi (India); [13] Tracy Chung (Taiwan); [14] Kanho Azuma (Japan); [15] Ni Putu Ary Widhyasti Bandem (Bali); [16] Yvonne Lin (Taiwan); [17] Pei Yanling (China); [18] K.N. Vijayakumar (India); [19] Helen Liu (Taiwan); [20] Raghunath Panigrahi (India); [21] Kelucharan Mahapatra (India); [22] Takae Koyama (Japan); [23] Shizuko Kinea (Japan); [24] M.P. Sankaran Namboodiri (India).



a theoretical one and a practical one. It provided tools to conceptualise the performers' pragmatic knowledge while, at the same time, formulating useful indications and technical procedures to guide the practical work towards an effective scenic presence. Barba's hypotheses presented two innovations, which, in time, had numerous consequences.

The first of these innovations considered the performer's work according to levels of organisation. Barba took this concept from biology and physics and applied it to the theatre craft. Hence his formulation of a primary level of organisation for the performer, which he called the pre-expressive level. This level comprises the mental and somatic processes utilised by actors and dancers in order to transform their social and private presence into scenic presence; or, according to Barba's terminology, from daily to extra-daily behaviour. This way of thinking implied putting aside the historical, social, cultural, political, religious, and aesthetic aspects present in each tradition. On the contrary, it concentrated only on the mental-somatic dynamics and principles that enable the performers to mould their energy into patterns of scenic behaviour, thus establishing a sensorial and kinaesthetic relationship with the spectators.

This way of thinking generated misunderstandings and polemics, almost all related to the difficulty to understand or to accept the cognitive logic of the organisation levels. Barba has insisted on the fact that the establishment of levels of organisation is a cognitive strategy or an operative fiction.

Obviously, the pre-expressive does not exist in and of itself. Similarly, the nervous system, for example, cannot be materially separated from the entirety of a living organism, but it can be thought of as a separated entity. This cognitive fiction makes effective interventions possible. It is an abstraction, but is extremely useful for work on the practical level.

(Barba 1995: 104)

In the final result, the pre-expressive level appears to merge together with the expressive level in a complex and indivisible reality. But in the inner logic of the performer's work, the pre-expressive level is frequently clearly defined. The technical procedures of the Asian performers are an evident example of this demarcation. A similar way of thinking is also to be found in the texts of the Western reformers and in the technical procedures of their actors: for instance in Stanislavski's concept 'the actor's work on himself' (as opposed to 'the actor's work on a role'); in Michael Chekhov's insistence to distinguish between the 'what' and the 'how' in the actor's work; or in Decroux's conceptualisation of what he calls the 'manner'.

Barba is aware that he has not invented pre-expressivity. He has only given it a name and has delimited it in order to make it the field of his research. Barba has emphasised that the fact of not taking cultural, social, and historical aspects into consideration when studying the performer's work doesn't mean to deny their importance. It means simply to concentrate on the study of one level of organisation: that of scenic presence.

For those who investigate the secrets of scenic life, to distinguish a pre-expressive level from the expressive level does not mean that one is forgetting that the value of theatre lies in the meaning which the performance in its entirety assumes and reveals. It means following the normal criteria of every scientist and every empirical researcher: to choose one's field of research; to treat it *as if* it were autonomous; to establish operatively useful limits; to concentrate on these limits and to make an inventory of them; to compare, find, and specify certain functional logics; and then to reconnect that field to the whole from which it was separated for cognitive purposes only.

(Barba 1995: 105)

Barba's second innovation – derived from the first one – was the practice of approaching the performer's work in categories of principles and not technical rules. It was a question of 'seeing' through the rules characterising each tradition in order to capture and formulate the recurring principles underlying the different techniques. These 'recurring principles', according to Barba, constitute the pre-expressive level shared by different acting techniques. The advantage of envisaging the acting knowledge in categories of principles, and not of rules, resides in the fact that this knowledge can be transplanted into different performative situations. A principle is not bound to a form but to a work logic. It is an abstraction that can be applied in different ways according to the personal, aesthetic, social, and narrative necessities of each theatre practice.

In order to explore and verify the pre-expressive principles, Barba conceived ISTA as a dynamic laboratory. Active from 1980 until the present time (2015), ISTA has developed through seventeen public sessions in countries as different as Germany, Italy, France, Denmark, Great Britain, Brazil, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, and Poland. Lasting for anything from two weeks to two months, ISTA is structured in two complementary teams of collaborators under Barba's direction: actors or dancers (with their respective companies and musicians) belonging to diverse styles and traditions, and scholars coming from various countries: theatre specialists, anthropologists, semioticians, psychologists. The members of these two teams form a relatively stable core of collaborators although, logically enough, changes have taken place over time. The ISTA sessions are an occasion to gather both teams of collaborators and make

them work together with a maximum of 100 participants (actors, dancers, scholars, choreographers, directors, critics, etc.). The totality of those seventeen international sessions denotes a landmark with regard to the dialogue between Western and Asian theatre.

It is interesting to note that, as a rule, it was not large institutions that sponsored and organised the ISTA sessions. Most of these sessions were possible thanks to the audacity and stubbornness of anonymous Third Theatre groups and, in some cases, of single individuals. They followed their desire to bring ISTA to their respective countries or working milieus, thus revealing the capacity to find enormous economic and organisational resources for such an event. In this way, ISTA has developed its activity in areas at the edge of the main theatre system, articulating a net of contacts and professional relationships firmly anchored in alternative values to those of the official theatre.

Barba has explained that he labelled his project a 'school' as a paradox or self-provocation (Barba 1999b: 90). In fact, ISTA contradicts all the pedagogical assumptions of a school: no stable headquarters, no teachers imparting specific subjects, no permanent students, no fixed curriculum. Rather than a school, it recalls a laboratory in which practical knowledge and theoretical reflection interact mutually in a fertile way. This is one of ISTA's attractions: a milieu favouring an exploratory attitude where practice and theory not only cohabit but end up losing their profiles and blending in a complex, dense reality. Thus, the masters' practical descriptions of the 'first day' of their apprenticeship, the work demonstrations, rehearsals, performances, lectures, comparison of specific technical aspects such as improvisation, rhythm or subscore/subtext, personal dialogues and discussions, spontaneous initiatives and experiments – all these blend and alternate during the working period from early morning to late at night. Two books are useful in becoming acquainted with the dynamics of the ISTA sessions: *The Tradition of ISTA* (Skeel 1994) and *The Performers' Village* (Hastrup 1996).

In the first sessions of ISTA, Barba concentrated mostly on Asian acting traditions, which generated the misunderstanding that these were his field of research. This misunderstanding often stems from a confusion between some historical or circumstantial aspects regarding the evolution of Barba's research and the paradigm of Theatre Anthropology itself. The field of Barba's research was the pre-expressive level, and its main goal was to explore the recurring technical principles through which a performer built his scenic presence. Thus, Barba has always considered the various acting techniques – and not only the traditional Asian ones – as a particular manifestation of