

Eugenio Barba's Written Work: The Theatrical Vision Implied in Its Structure

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Abstract. The starting point of this paper is an investigation conducted from 1992 to the present in the context of the Documentation Center of Odin Teatret to develop and update annually a critical bibliography of Barba's written work. The result is a 150-page document that contains all the texts published by Barba sorted by years of writing. The literature provides in each case details of the origin of the texts, the origin of the materials that comprise it and the many transformations that Barba effected in his materials. One of the most obvious characteristics of Barba's written work is its multifaceted dimension that manifests in a variety of formats, concepts, issues and themes. Barba's written work is like a big melting pot where he mixes and analyzes his theatrical influences, the vicissitudes of his long artistic career, meetings and professional experiences that marked him. The intention of this paper is to show how Barba's written work has gradually evolved towards a distillation of a deep and implied structure. This structure comes out with two intersecting elements: the different levels of organization that Barba distinguishes in his overview of theatre craft, and the professional dialogue he maintained with three great theatre cultures: the European theatre of the twentieth century, Asian classical theatre and the Latin American group theatre. The aim is to show how behind a seemingly heterogeneous, dispersed and multifaceted, Barba's written work organizes this multiplicity in a coherent and deeply structured theatrical vision.

Keywords: Eugenio Barba, writings, written works, theatrical traditions, reasons to do theatre.

Barba's written work has an apparently disparate character. On a formal level, his point of departure have been the numerous individual texts that he has published between nineteen sixty-two and today (about two hundred and sixty). From the nineteen nineties on, however, Barba creates a series of

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fundamental books through which he gradually organises his thinking. The majority of these books are anthologies of previously published texts or books that combine the re-casting of previous materials with new materials. In this way Barba has used his most important books to slowly distillate his individual texts and his fundamental ideas. The seven books that contain the core of his theatrical thinking are *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt* (published in its first edition with the name *The Floating Islands* and then in a second version with the title *Beyond the Floating Islands*); *The Secret Art of the Performer* (written together with Nicola Savarese); *The Paper Canoe*; *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*; *Ploughing the Sky*; *On Directing and Dramaturgy*. *Burning the House*; *The Conquest of Difference*.

These books are the point at which the most important of Barba's themes are structured within larger areas of reflection. By analysing what these areas are and how they are organised we can perceive the deeper structure of Barba's corpus. This is the aim of this article.

Four questions and three theatre cultures

Barba often notes that any theatre man or woman should respond, either explicitly or implicitly, to four key questions: where to do theatre, why, how and for whom. In my opinion this is the main frame of his written work.

But there is a second frame: the professional dialogue Barba has maintained with three great theatre cultures. The first one is an important part of the mainly European but also North American theatre culture that cross the entire twentieth century embodied by a group of great reformers who reinvented theatre practice in a very personal way. In that context we distinguished names like Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Copeau, Decroux, Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski or the Living Theatre, among others.

The second theatre culture that Barba has most intensely interacted with is classical Asian theatre. He came into contact with this culture very early on, in nineteen sixty-three during his apprenticeship with Grotowski. Barba travelled to India and by coincidence ended up in Kerala, where he "discovered" the Kathakali. Barba's dialogue with classical Asian theatre has been a constant of his entire professional career until nowadays.

The third theatre culture that has powerfully influenced Barba's professional identity has been Latin American group theatre. In nineteen seventy-six the Odin Teatret travelled to Latin America for the first time invited by the Caracas Festival. There, Barba came into contact with a handful of South American theatre artists and groups. From then on Barba's dialogue

with Latin American group theatre has been highly relevant, and has led him to an intense interaction with three generations of groups and theatre artists.

If we intersect the two frames and apply them to Barba's most important books it comes out a context that organises his written work. This context is a deeper structure that gives each of his books an implicit meaning. This structure, however, is not rigid, and has not been designed so from the beginning. It is a consequence of Barba's textual dramaturgy and his efforts to conceptualise the experiences that have strongly influenced him, professionally speaking. The result is a reflection that transforms his own identity into a theatre poetics.

Barba has replied to the four questions implicitly through his theatre practice, but he also done so explicitly in his most important books. In each case he has founded his ideas in a dialogue with one of the three mentioned theatre cultures. In professional practice the "where", "why", "how" and "for whom" to do theatre are melted into an organic reality where it is not possible to clearly separate them. However, in the structure of Barba's written corpus these four levels tend to be extrapolated and thought as if they were a reality in itself. By doing so, the director of Odin Teatret is attempting to underline the questions and specific function of each level in theatre practice.

Where to do theatre? The importance of the apprenticeship

Barba has conceptualised the question of "where" to do theatre by linking it to his own apprenticeship. He explores this question in the book *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*, which related his apprenticeship in Poland. Barba explains how he joined the official theatre school in Warsaw, and how after the initial euphoria of the first months, the learning program started to dissatisfy him more and more. Half way through the academic year, he took on board Grotowski's suggestion and, in January nineteen sixty-two, he decided to leave the school to become the Polish master's assistant director. At that time Grotowski was at an early stage in his theatre revolution; he was unknown internationally and in Poland he was considered a rather peripheral figure, an unappreciated rarity in the context of theatre life. Barba stayed with Grotowski from nineteen sixty-two to nineteen sixty-four, just in the period when the Theatre of 13 Rows evolved to become a laboratory theatre.

In the book Barba recounts his fellow students' perplexity at his decision to leave the school for the theatre of 13 Rows. They couldn't understand that he would leave the centrality of Warsaw school to go to the small city

of Opole to work with an eccentric that was far from the important theatre circuits. Working with Grotowski, Barba came into contact with a completely different way of practising and thinking about theatre. In the Polish masters' work Barba finds a powerful ethical dimension that he will also find later on in the great reformer's work and texts.

Where to do theatre? In a theatre laboratory. This is a concept that has obsessed Barba up to the modern day and about which he has often reflected. Barba conceives it as an attempt to root theatre into the edges of market logic, creating a space where it is possible to do theatre as a research inseparably connected to an ethical dimension.

In the overall structure of Barba's written contribution, *Land of Ashes and Diamonds* suggests that apprenticeship is also a part of the craft. He considers that the former should be done with a master. Thus, the apprenticeship becomes a process that goes beyond mere acquisition of a technical base. It should be a process in which the ethical dimension of the work becomes embodied through technique. The implicit meaning of the book is that every theatre person should be able to find their master, should find the way to be accepted by him and should turn him into a kind of professional superego. Letting oneself be totally influenced by a master is the premise to then be able to personalise this influence and transform it into a strong professional identity.

Why to do theatre? The search for personal meaning

The book in which Barba explores the importance of the personal meaning is *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt*. Through a collection of twenty-eight texts he reflects on the motivation that has galvanised his professional career with Odin Teatret. In this book the dialogue with Grotowski is expanded to the theatre reformers. Barba refers to this theatre culture with the name of "The tradition of the founders of traditions", and reads it as a kind of professional genealogy.

The book dives into an underground current that nourishes the vision of the reformers: the search of personal meaning. In that underground dimension of the craft Barba deciphers a recurrent idea: denying the established meaning of theatre to inject in it values that transcend its artistic dimension. If the reformers denied theatre practice as it was established in their period it was to convert it into something more than theatre: political, social, spiritual, anthropological or pedagogical action in the widest sense of the word.

For Barba the search for personal meaning of the craft is what takes theatre beyond its artistic dimension. This is the key idea of the book. Theatre is a strategy to live in a different way, with other values, in another context. Theatre is the Trojan horse that make possible to carry out a socially recognised activity refusing established values. Theatre practice for Barba is the way of refusal. Is a way to refuse the spirit of the time, but above all, a way to refuse "theatre" itself. The ethical attitude of denying the established meaning of theatre is an indispensable premise for strengthening and finding the personal meaning. Within Barba's written work *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt* is a kind of professional autobiography that attempts to recreate on paper his own search for meaning. Using multiple metaphors, the book looks constantly towards the essential reality of a theatre made to transcend itself. This is the main thread of the book: the tension between theatre and everything that transcends it. For Barba theatre as cultural goods or art does not justify itself. It is rather a practice that should be revitalised by imbuing it with very personal motivations. Then, the searching for the personal meaning able to fill the shell of theatre in order to transform it into something more than theatre is also an aspect of the craft.

How to do theatre? The construction of technique

In Barba's written work the construction of technique is split into two areas: the actor's technique and the director's technique relative to the overall composition of the performance.

The two books in which Barba conceptualises his reflection on the actor's technique are *The Paper Canoe* and *The Secret Art of the Performer* (the second one written together with Nicola Savarese). At this level of the craft it was very relevant the dialogue with the classical Asian Theatre. The dialogue grew in depth from 1980 (nineteen eighty) onwards with the creation of the ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and Theatre Anthropology itself as a study discipline aimed to search the pre-expressive principles of stage presence. Classical Asian theatre were fundamental to formulating this principles, and, later on, Barba broadened the dialogue to include the most European and North American technical traditions.

Asian traditions did not teach Barba and his actors how to do theatre, but they were key in helping him to conceptualise the construction of technique. Through Theatre Anthropology Barba developed an analysis of performative knowledge based on principles and not technical rules. This change in focus allows every one, in Barba's words, to "learn to learn". This is the foundation of actor's technique as developed by Odin Teatret. It is a vision that has allowed each actor to create his/her own training within the group.

The book in which Barba expounded his vision of the director's technique is *On Directing and Dramaturgy. Burning the House*. Developing a complex reflection Barba explain his way to organise the creative process of a performance by intertwining the dramaturgy of the actor, the dramaturgy of the director and the dramaturgy of the spectator. Barba formulates a series of principles and types of logic designed to turn the performance into an empty ritual. With these ideas Barba tries to avoid the construction of a performance with a clear sense that should be understood by all the spectators. The performance is an empty ritual neither because it is senseless, but because it is a montage of actions and histories aimed to create a large *potentiality* of sense. Each actor, the director itself and each spectator may and must "discover" their own sense of the performance.

Within his theatre poetics Barba gives technique the function of a premise. It is not the essential, but it is indispensable in order to turn the personal motivations into a practical reality. Without a good knowledge of technique the personal motivations can very easily become an inoperative rhetoric or solipsism. By thinking about the construction of technique (of both actor and director) in terms of principles, Barba turns it into a solid and efficient tool to make the personal motivations tangible. Doing so, technique may transcend the dimension of an artistic skill to become the praxis of an ethos.

For whom to do theatre? The conquest of value

Without strong personal motivations it is not possible to transcend theatre. But if we are not able to convert our personal motivations in good theatre the ethics that nourish them become unrecognisable to everyone else. The complementary nature of personal meaning and technique is what creates the fourth level of the craft, and perhaps the most enigmatic: value.

When the personal meaning of a theatre practice can be recognised and shared by other persons it becomes a value. Then, for some spectators, this practice acquires a strange magnetism that goes beyond the beauty or expressive power of the performance. The personal meaning of craft lies in its capacity to satisfy the intimate needs of the men and women that do theatre. By contrast, the *value* of the craft lies in its capacity to satisfy the intimate needs of the spectators. The value of a theatre is something intangible bestowed by the spectators who perceive in a theatre practice an ethical pattern that they can recognise themselves in. For Barba, the value of theatre does not lie within originality or aesthetic perfection, but within its ability to nourish the struggle, the aspirations and obsessions of some spectators.

But in professional practice, how can we conquer this value?

The book where Barba has reflected about the value of theatre is *Ploughing the Sky. Latin American Dialogues*. On the level of value, Barba's written work has two fundamental concepts. The first is the concept of "spectator". The director of the Odin Teatret has always refused the abstract category of "audience" to focus on the individuality of the spectator. The audience is an anonymous, faceless group. The spectator is a specific personality. To protect the personal relationship with the spectators, the Odin Teatret has always tried to create a proximity with them, for example, by limiting the size of the audiences. Another way of strengthening the individuality of the spectator is Barba's dramaturgical technique to create the performance as an "Empty Ritual". These strategies respond to the vital necessity to find "their" own spectators. The ones who, in turn, recognise the Odin as "their" own theatre.

Here we find the second key concept that Barba relates to the conquest of value: what he calls the "secret people" of the Odin Teatret. With this concept he is attempting to underline the importance of attracting and articulating a core of spectators that identify themselves with a particular theatre. They identify themselves with it because they perceive a set of values in the theatre practice that they deeply believe in. That theatre, then, becomes necessary for a group of spectators, and in this way conquers a particular value. This is the deepest stratum of Barba's theatre poetics: transforming the theatre into an invisible land where it becomes possible to weave deep human relationships. He refers to the secret people of the Odin with some metaphors: those who not belong to the world they live in, farmers who grow seeds of dissidence, the fabricators of indelible shadows, knights with water swords, warriors of tenacity.

The question of value reappears in Barba's work more and more intensely in his twenty first century texts. That is the key to explain why his texts are often open letters to a specific person or group of people.

To explore the level of the value the theatre culture that has perhaps been most decisive for Barba is the Latin America group theatre. Much has been written about Barba's and the Odin's influence on an important part of Latin American theatre. But the influence the latter has had on the former has come under less focus. This influence has been fundamental to conceptualise the importance and the function of value in the theatre craft. Barba has repeated on many occasions that an important part of the Odin Teatret secret people is in Latin America. The dialogue with some Latin American spectators and colleagues is the context of the book *Ploughing the Sky*.

In Barba's theatre poetics, value is not only a question that belongs to the spectators; it is also a level of the craft with some specific questions: how to identify his own spectators, how to collaborate with them on all levels, how

to make deeper the emotive links, how to imbue these links with continuity, how to be loyal to that “secret people”. These questions explain certain of Barba’s and Odin Teatret’s professional attitudes. For example, their obsession with dialoguing with the spectators beyond the performance. Or the strategy of putting their own international prestige at the service of anonymous groups and peripheral theatre organisations in order to strengthen their position in the medium they work in. Or contradicting the more basic commercial logic to be present working in particular contexts or places with very specific people. We might think that these professional attitudes are a kind of romantic altruism, an unproductive waste or blind idealism that might endanger the survival of a theatre group. And yet, it is exactly the opposite: it is a calculated professional ability that has a very precise aim: to nourish the theatre company’s resistance.



Barter in South Italy in 1974. Photo Tony D’Urso

When speaking about the Odin Teatret, a recurring question often comes up: What is the secret to its resistance? In November 2014 Odin Teatret will be fifty years old. How can a small theatre company last for fifty years with an unchanged core of people? There is not just one reason to explain the Odin Teatret’s longevity. But an important key is the function of the “secret people”. Constructing and feeding this “secret people” that gives value to

professional practice is fundamental for the durability of an artistic experience. A small independent company needs not only money and material resources. It also needs to have the conviction that the professional action involves other people beyond the group. It needs to know that it has no right to give up its fight to resist. To conquest a value is also a level of the craft. That dimension of the theatre practice is arguably the least obvious one.

The conquest of difference

This, for the moment, is Barba's last book. It is a collection of thirty-nine texts from which emerges a synthesis of his vision. From the point of view of this article the most relevant aspect of the book is that it goes through the four levels of the craft. Not in a linear way, but in a dynamic collage trying to show the global complexity of the theatre craft. In the previous books Barba was focusing his attention in one level. By contrast, the main subject of his last book is the deep interrelation of the four levels.

Barba's professional identity is the conquest of difference. A difference that was cast at the beginnings of the nineteen sixties in Opole and took a great detour through Asia, before ending up in Latin America. A difference that has been developed through a series of concentric loyalties to a master (Grotowski), to a genealogy of professional ancestors (the twentieth century reformers), to his own actors and to the handful of spectators that make up Odin Teatret's "secret people".

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Iben Nagel Rasmussen in the final scene from the performance *Talabot*, 1988.
Photo Jan Rüz