



The Laboratory Flux: a breath of fresh air

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Hearing about the title for the collection of articles I have been asked to contribute to, I wondered about the meaning of the word flux. We had considered the term *Flux* as a theme for the 13th session of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in Seville, in 2004. The word was difficult, however, because medically it means an abnormal discharge of blood or other matter from or within the body – not a particularly poetic association! For the ISTA session we then used the word *Flow* accompanied by *Rhythm*, *Organicity*, *Discontinuity*. Eugenio Barba wrote for the programme:

In my own mind I know what I mean by 'flow'. It is the particular experience when I, as a spectator, feel disarmed by a performance or a fragment of a performance, and am carried, as if by a stream, far from my mental habits and usual categories of judgement. In these cases, I distinguish between 'flow' and other words belonging to the same theatrical family such as 'rhythm', 'coherence', 'form', 'energy', *rasa*, 'organicity' or 'organic effect'. When I talk to others within a common working milieu, the term 'flow' indicates something we wish to differentiate from 'rhythm' (Barba, 2004, p. 1).

When I work as a director, I know that it is the rhythm of the performed actions that reveal to me the *truth* of what is happening on stage. The particular quality that allows me to believe in what I see is given by the exact and necessary timing which I call rhythm, sometimes slower and sometimes faster than what we usually perceive in reality. As an actress, I am aware of the importance of rhythm which materialises in the intensity of each change of tension in my torso as the cells of my body breathe and energy is directed in space. The flow comes when the actions have been repeated enough to be *forgotten*, when I am transported by what I am doing, without commanding or thinking of it. The flow is the freedom of taking into consideration the scenic context in which I move, transforming action into a reaction. I can obtain an organic effect for the spectator when pres-

ence, rhythm and flow are combined into the complexity of the performance in all its details. Can I use these words to write about a theatre laboratory?

Eugenio Barba continues for the ISTA programme:

However, the efficacy of the personal and of the working language becomes lost when I try to extract a useful abstraction from the subjective situation, i.e., when I try to achieve an objective comprehension of certain aspects of the craft. The empirical science of theatre, as we practice it within ISTA, is often based on a relentless analysis of the threshold of words, searching for concrete experiences, which correspond to them, both from the actor's and the spectator's points of view. [...] (Barba, 2004, p. 1).

When we work together, Eugenio Barba and I use very few words to communicate in the practice of our theatre. At Odin Teatret we only use the Danish *kraft* (power) and *sats* (impulse), together with *rytme* (rhythm) when it is lacking. If I try to explain to others how I work as actress and director, I fight to maintain the openness of understanding words in relation to experience where opposition is always present. I would like my thinking to be dictated by a tacit incorporated knowledge achieved during the many years of work as an actress. This is the point of view I start from as I set out to write about *the laboratory flux*.

The Question Remains: what is a laboratory flux?

If I am not thinking of theatre, the first association I get from the word *laboratory* is of scientific research in a closed room, with microscopes and test-tubes, fumes and thin rubber gloves, and a few people in white overalls talking secretly to each other. The energy is turned inwards. The word *workshop* makes me think of carpentry: wood, hammers and nails, clever hands, and no conversation. The aim of the artisan working in the workshop is to produce beautiful objects, not necessarily communication.

In theatre it is different. In theatre the effect of a laboratory and a workshop is to spread information, meaning and improved awareness. The energy moves in different directions and levels simultaneously. Identity in theatre gives life to creative oppositions: art and craft, discipline and freedom, research and repetition, relationships and solitude, know-how and learning, performance and rehearsal, training and improvisation, absorbing and teaching, community and isolation, inspiration and perspiration, words

and silence, dance and stillness, collectives and solitude, actors and spectators, documentation and experience, directors and uncertainty, song and speech, music and noise, light and darkness, outer and inner space, seating and streets, tickets and grants, individuality and society [...].

Some theatre laboratories of the past and present have had an influence on the way we make theatre today, but not only within the field of action confined to the studio or rehearsal space. In the beginning of the 20th century, Studios and collectives searched for a professional, spiritual, or political outcome for theatre, but since then these examples have given source to different directions¹. I believe that the biggest effect of theatre laboratories today is their social role, how they interact with the community, giving and taking, creating communication and fusion.

Some of the Studios in the first half of the 20th century, which we today consider as examples of theatre laboratories, were different forms of theatre schools. The first theatre practitioners to employ the term *laboratory* were Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya in the USA, when in 1923 they opened a school to teach Stanislavski's way of working². Books tell us that in 1962 Jerzy Grotowski did not have enough spectators for his performances every evening, as was expected of every *normal* theatre, therefore he used the term *theatre laboratory* to explain the fact that he carried out research. Later, Jerzy Grotowski went over to practising para-theatre, distancing himself from the actor's craft and art, aiming instead to establish a relationship with sharing participants³. In 1966, when the Mayor of Holstebro, Kai K. Nielsen, who had invited Odin Teatret to settle down in Denmark, asked what a theatre laboratory was, Eugenio Barba answered: *A theatre that does not perform every evening*. But if a theatre does not perform, what does it do?

Since the group had no performance to present, to justify its existence to the supporting politicians, Odin Teatret was forced to diversify its activity, learning and developing at the same time as earning a living. Therefore, Odin Teatret started organising workshops and seminars; it invited guest performances of artists like Dario Fo and Étienne Decroux who arrived in Denmark for the first time, made a film club, edited a theatre journal, published books, produced didactic films, archived documents, gathered children, created meetings with people from the town and built new rooms to add spaces to their theatre building.

All this inspired other theatre groups that were born in those years. Some of the groups called themselves theatre laboratories, others did not use the name but still recognised themselves in the practice of a different production form, of an environment able to operate individually and collectively. Here lies the source of the tradition of theatre laboratories from the late 1960s onwards. Odin Teatret became a reference not only because of its training and performances but also for its logistic, management and operative implementation.

In recent years I continue to witness theatre laboratories and groups discovering their meaning when going beyond the performance situation to invent new relationships. Odin Teatret and other theatre laboratories, as part of the ground-breaking movements of the 1960s and 1970s, began to reinvent the value of theatre. In search of survival strategies, when the box office and state grants were not sufficient, theatre practitioners began to teach, make performances in the streets, intervene in peripheral situations. The laboratory was out in the open, the energy moved outwards.

Referring to Odin Teatret and Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium as examples of theatre laboratories, their characteristics reveal to me the importance of being *environments* with a core of permanent collaborators able to work both in closed and open spaces, creating at the same time what is considered to be art and to be culture, producing performances in a separate – or sacred – room, and simultaneously growing as a stimulating interference in their communities. The value is not given by concentrating on only one field, but in being able to jump from one reality to the other, using a technique acquired by physical and vocal training to generate presence at all levels in society. The flux is also within the theatre laboratory itself: being able to commute.

In an article about Holstebro Festuge (Festive Week) – a 9 day and night staging of the whole town where Odin Teatret has its home – I wrote:

Today artistic visions and cultural justifications are not enough to prove the significance of theatre in our society. The theatre's credibility lies in its capacity to catch the various layers of the population who are indifferent to its expressions and artistic craft. This can be achieved only through a *re-thinking* of the actor's know-how and objectives in relation to a simple question: how can our craft help to generate relationships between individuals who are or have become foreigners to one another? Culture ministers and

politicians consider theatrical expression an art. They are right: we all have to give our maximum to maintain the artistic excellence of our craft. At the same time it is undeniable that today the value of theatre also resides in its ability to put down roots and find new purposes both in the light and dark sides of our society: in kindergartens and prisons, in villa neighbourhoods, psychiatric hospitals and old people's homes, among unemployed youth and ethnic enclosures, around half-empty churches and overfilled discotheques, in isolated farms, abandoned factories and dismantled shipyards as well as in crowded shopping malls, ghostlike peripheral towns and frenzied city centres. In these places, theatre has never been an urgent need or an imperative demand. *Re-thinking* means finding a way to awake such a need or demand. Theatre craft has already worked out many procedures, devices and processes that have assumed many labels: social or applied theatre, community theatre, theatre of reciprocity. What more can we do? (Varley, 2014, p. 57).

I have recently been asked to write about *Third Theatre* as defined by Eugenio Barba in 1976 after the first theatre group meeting during the BITEF Festival in Belgrade the same year. Often, I find that the discussions deriving from this definition divide theatres into either community or creative companies – with either a social or an artistic impact – into amateur or professional ensembles, into text based or commercial or avantgarde or postmodern performances, into groups for or against Odin Teatret, into those who practice training or those who do not. When using *re-thinking* in the article about the Holstebro Festuge, I was trying to overcome the divisions imposed by analysis to indicate that the power of theatre lies in its capacity of favouring communication there where it is normally interrupted. This power is based on a know-how from the craft. I continue in the article:

The actor is an expert in building relationships: with the past and the present, with a text, with herself, with spectators, with various types of space – personal inner space, physical, cultural, and social space. Odin Teatret actors use this expertise also in situations outside the artistic framework of a performance, applying their know-how as a catalyst for other types of interactions. The aim is not the creation of a performance to be judged as an artistic opus, but a transformative act of participation and mutual exchange between various sectors of a community. These interactions enable the participants to express their own diversity, which is both their greatest strength and the main factor keeping them apart. During a Festuge, the inhabitants of our town are not just a potential audience or a sociological entity. They are individuals with specific biographies, expectations, and interests. Only by appealing to the pride they feel for their personal background, and by

making them aware of what is advantageous for them, is it possible to trigger a situation of collective *barter*: a process-oriented exchange of cultural manifestations through songs, dances, story-telling and biographical accounts, examples of their own culinary tradition and games, even simulacra of ceremonies such as weddings (Varley, 2014, p. 57).

Lessons of a Theatre Laboratory

Theatre is relationship. It does not exist without at least two living persons sharing space and time. We never forget the importance of the spectators even when talking of theatre laboratories. Theatre makes people meet. The communication it establishes is based mostly on the language of the body, the expression of the face, the intonation of the voice, the density of its living images, and only partly on the words which are spoken. Presence and exchange of energy are essential. Theatre is real, and it is fiction. On stage we are, and we represent. The levels of being and representation can be separated in an abstract analysis, but not in what is really happening. I can talk about the difference between being Julia, the actress, and a character, but on stage these realities co-exist and dialogue with the perception of the spectator. The nature of theatre is not a dichotomy, but organic plurality and simultaneity. This is what allows us to see, understand and present the world around us differently. Theatre becomes the occasion to turn reality upside down.

As an actor who has trained in a theatre laboratory, I have learnt to create a dialogue between text and action, meaning and scenes, one part of the body and another, another actor and me, characters and spectators. When trained in a theatre laboratory, actors and directors become specialists in montage, bricolage, putting different elements together, contiguity, and trusting serendipity for creation. Our theatre practice is based on collaboration where the combination of diversity is interesting. We accept and treasure the differences, in a way that Jane Turner and Patrick Campbell call *unconditional hospitality*, because it contributes to the richness of our environment. Our know-how in building relationships as theatre practitioners can be particularly effective in putting together expressions of the different layers of a community, which are normally not experienced together.



Since March 2020 and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have all had to re-think our role as theatre people. Theatre shows its strength when at least two living people share the same time and space, which has mostly not been possible for the last year. Going online does not allow us to use our experience in how to mould stage presence and an energy flux with the spectator. Too often we have made mediocre films instead, not considering the specific technique of cinema that needs a different rhythm of montage. Nevertheless, our main responsibility during the pandemic has been to give energy: hope in action for the future. The meetings and festivals happening online are necessary to maintain a feeling of connection despite the isolation and in order to tell other stories in a time of an inundation of fake news. We have had to learn to speak through a partial digital image on the screen, how to create energy also with this medium: looking straight into the camera, making short concrete interventions in which every single word count, remembering to give space to others, preparing, offering alternatives, teaching, and sharing. The pandemic has allowed us to bring together more countries and cities via internet than what we could have accomplished before because of economical and logistical limitations.

Not being able to meet spectators, because the theatres are closed and gatherings are prohibited, is frustrating. The sense of theatre seems to disappear. At first, I reacted by saying we should use our time to prepare for when theatres could open again. Training, rehearsing, working on new scenes or on texts, was a way to actively prepare for the future. I transformed my sitting room into a training space rolling away the carpets and pushing all the furniture to the side. Then the months of lockdown continued, and it was difficult to keep the fighting spirit. Dancing was a solution: music forced me to react without thinking, it gave me energy and precision, necessity, and immediate form. Rather than rely on inner stories and feelings, I have always insisted on exploiting the motivation and inspiration that comes from outside: music, nature, presents, friends, pupils, paintings, costumes, shoes, objects, space, poetry... All these elements renew my will to continue working and give me tasks to build on. Other people ask me to write, talk, perform, explain, and by answering or reacting I move forwards. I take my energy from outside, let it pass through me and go out again. It is like breathing, inhaling and exhaling, another kind of flux.

Then I remember and find confirmation that theatre can be a person telling a story in the corner of a supermarket, a puppet moving behind the bars of a window-frame, clowns performing for children standing in a queue while their families wait for food bags, concerts in the condominium courtyards where spectators listen from the security of their homes, singing songs from balconies and windows, parading through a neighbourhood without ever stopping. Classic Italian theatres could remove their seating banks as the Italian director Gabriele Vacis proposed, and allow people to enter from the streets, find shelter, and gain an insight into the daily workings of theatres. Gabriele Vacis started making theatre following Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, founding his own group. He is now one of the best-known Italian theatre directors, so his suggestion was quite provocative when many other theatre practitioners were focussing on complaints. All these alternatives come from a different way of thinking of the craft that we have also learnt in the practice of theatre laboratories.

Theatre as Dissidence

During a session of the University of Eurasian Theatre in Scilla, Italy, in 2003, I once explained why Odin Teatret was a theatre laboratory by narrating an episode of our history. During the rehearsals of *Ashes of Brecht* in 1979, our director, Eugenio Barba, got very angry with one of the actresses of the group. He left, slamming the door, with the decided walk of somebody who has no intention of ever coming back. The next day all the actors went to the theatre as usual to carry out their training. We had a discipline and a daily schedule of activities which were independent from work on the performance and the reactions of the director. We carried on working as usual. Eugenio returned: our steadfastness made him reconsider his decision. The lesson for me was the centrality of the everyday meetings and activities of the group, regardless of the presence of spectators, the sharing of time and space, the exchange of ideas through concrete actions. A theatre laboratory's existence is based on the continuity of experience and on the needs of the different people involved. What kept us together was the demand to give the maximum in all situations and having the time to let results arise. Of course, conflicts are part of work process of a theatre laboratory, but we have learnt that dissidence and diversity are a source of creativity. The resolution happens in the concrete work towards a result that over-

comes disagreements and surprises us. Resistance is necessary to discover something new. We are trained in confronting difficulties, constrictions, challenges, opposition, and refusals so that they contribute to create an unexpected result.

Above all, a theatre laboratory teaches dissidence and resilience. We discover that difficulties are opportunities to learn, develop and change. It is not that we have an idea and decide how to realise it. At Odin Teatret, the problems we need to solve make us discover new paths to walk along. When the group left Norway and moved to Denmark, the performances had to find other communication channels than spoken language, since the actors did not speak Danish. The training introduced more physical, vocal and musical expression into the performances. When rehearsing in a small southern Italian village where the locals asked for the actors to show a play, the everyday exercises became a dance performance, and the practice of barbers was established as a consequence. When actors of different nationalities joined the group, each performance needed to find a solution for the comprehension of the text. We performed in an invented Russian for *My Father's House*, in Coptic for *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*, in many different languages for *Kaosmos* and *The Tree*, translating and commenting the original lines for *Ashes of Brecht*. The choices did not follow the concept of text as a sequence of words with a meaning, but discovered the importance of the different sounds of language; how to communicate through what could not be understood by the spectators, and give a concrete image of the incomprehensible and intercultural reality we live in. Finding alternatives that responded to our condition as a group of foreigners seemed to go against the usual procedures of theatre, but for us it was just a strategy of survival.

After decades working together, the renewal of challenges given by sets, young actors, and the avoidance of repetition, imposes new solutions. For *Mythos* we started with a zen garden that was difficult for the actors to walk on; for *Andersen's Dream* the African-Brazilian dancer Augusto Omolú imposed a dialogue between the actors that included the dance of the Orixás; for *The Chronic Life* the old and experienced performers found new ways of relating to the new, very young actress Sofia Monsalve; for *Ave Maria* I had to learn to make the Death character Mr Peanut look exhausted, fighting against his desire to keep on dancing happily in the streets. I could

give many examples of how every performance requires changes during the process of creation. We are dissidents also towards ourselves, going against the habits of the past and the clichés we have elaborated.

The actions we learn to mould on stage also become instruments for activism. The training in generating living postures teaches us to take a position also in a political sense. When in an actor's training exercise, we place our body out of balance, to fall and regain energy through a reaction, we learn that being in a place of risk gives back new impulses and shows us new perspectives. This is how I have understood why so many women in theatre work on the periphery both in a geographical and in a professional sense. They choose risk rather than security, being on the margins rather than in the centre. They prefer the challenge of continual change and adaptation to constraints rather than the fame of a recognised practice stuck into a method. They opt for a flowing and a transforming memory of experience rather than a knowledge fixed into books, methods, and formulas. They – and I – choose what I might call a *laboratory flux*.

The Argentine actress and director Ana Woolf has explained how teaching stage presence in theatre workshops has given women in Serbia the confidence to participate in demonstrations for their rights, Quechua-speaking women in the Andes the decisiveness to organise an international theatre festival, indigenous people in different parts of Latin America the self-assurance to stand for their values. When the Chilean actress María Cánepa taught diction to women of the poor neighbourhoods of Santiago during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, she gave them tools to speak in meetings in the place of their imprisoned husbands.

I chose theatre because it demanded action from me. As a political activist in the early 1970s, I was relying too much on words and ideology. In the theatre laboratory I have found my activism again, but now it is based on my total presence on stage and a way of thinking that is rooted in my craft as an actor. My feet show me the way; the creative opposition needed in drama turns conflict into a flowing possibility of development and resolution rather than a deadlocked war with no possible outcome.

Today, in a world no longer rich in time and patience, continuity in the culture of a theatre group has often been passed on to networks. The meeting is not every day in the working space, but it is still regular and un-

interrupted. It gives shape to its own history. The network of The Magdalena Project has taught me how my roots are eternally in transit and how we always need to consider context and how relative experience is. This awareness I share with my colleagues of the theatre laboratory I am part of, Odin Teatret.

Words have very different meanings depending on where one uses them. Before the fall of the Berlin wall, feminism in Western Europe could mean refusing to put on make-up, while in Eastern Europe it could mean using it. A word like *resistenza* in Italian, designating the struggle of the partisans against the Nazis in 1943 to 1945, so full of political implications and historical memory, used by an actor in a training exercise, tells of something which in English does not exist. If we say *resilience* or *resistance*, it still does not translate the deep meaning that the Italian word suggests, culturally and semantically, in its differing practical contexts. Being able to cross all kinds of borders, and being aware of the other point of view, is another aspect of the theatre laboratory flux.

Many imagine that the body is the common denominator of theatre laboratories from 1968 onwards. But often it was a political motivation that gave the first impulse towards a different kind of theatre. Many of us started making theatre as a way to change the world. When I started, I never imagined becoming an actress; for me theatre was just a way of being active, of not talking about injustice but doing something instead. I became an actress along the way. But I still remember what brought me to the garage in Milan where I put a mask on for the first time to perform a story from the Bread and Puppet Theater⁴. Some years later, when we realised that the world had no intention of being changed, the theatre group or theatre laboratory became the way of living the transformation directly in the body and in the community around us.

The theatre groups and laboratories that Eugenio Barba defined as belonging to Third Theatre appeared from the beginning of the 1960s at the same time in different parts of the globe without being aware of each other. They grew like mushrooms, not because of a common manifesto, but from a need to struggle, change and have an influence on history and reality. They developed different proposals whilst choosing other values, finding ways to be together through sharing and exchanging. Many adopted horizontal organisational structures, rather than the vertical ones we had inher-

ited from tradition. I remember that we wanted to learn from books or recognised teachers on our own terms. Dissidence was still the most important thing. Theatre was a way of living the revolution in the present.

Passing on Experience: not methods but duration and the body/mind as archive

Working in the group structure of a theatre laboratory means that the people decide what work should happen and this has consequences on *how* we work. There are no contractual roles to fill, but rather a dynamic of centrifugal and centripetal forces in which the artistic concentration on performances is often the heart that keeps everything flowing, while legs and arms and head strive to keep up with tasks, conditions and constraints imposed by economic, social, and historic developments.

At Odin Teatret, the performances, characters, and roles arise from the constellation of the group, from the single actors and their characteristics of age, gender, interests, language, and experience. In a *normal* theatre, actors are chosen to play a specific character, and the number of performers depends on the characters belonging to the text or the project. The starting points for a creative process in a theatre group are opposite to those of a theatre institution or of a project limited in time. The production structure of the theatre laboratory – based on a core of permanent members – has a social and organisational effect that goes well beyond the stage.

The centrifugal and centripetal dynamics in theatre groups can create conflict between actors dedicating their time and energy to personal projects when the group needs to assemble around the creation of an ensemble performance or a tour. But it can also be the diverse attention needed for the artistic work and other activities including community work, documentation, training [...]. A confrontation between the needs of the process and of the result can be destructive when we are not able to identify what phase we are in. The richness of the environment of a theatre laboratory like Odin Teatret comes also from supporting personal projects, even when they seem to not have anything to do with the group. We are aware that the motivation to collaborate comes also from the respect of the individual space which feeds into the general activities.

A characteristic of theatre groups that call themselves theatre laboratories is their duration in time. The combination of many years of experience with the capacity to dream of future, long-term perspectives automatically result in a shared history and a living archive. The archive is living because the people involved continue to work and invent projects and because documentation from the past is used to produce more films, books, magazines, and performances. This knowledge is not fixed and static but flowing and changing. We think in terms of people rather than methods, and in genealogy rather than legacy.

The archive is alive like the people who pass on their experience. The teachers are the lesson, and their knowledge is embodied. The work demonstrations, called *desmontaje* (disassembling) in Latin America when explaining the process of creation of performances, are examples of living archives. When I present a work demonstration, all the phases of my apprenticeship, improvisation and rehearsals are incorporated in what I show to spectators. The information is dense and cannot be reduced to words. As I go through the first steps of a process until reaching a result, the way I place my feet on the ground, the intonation of my voice, the particular tension of my fingers – everything contributes to pass on the experience.

When I work with other actors, the information passes from body to body, always in movement, never objective or in third person, but always part of a process. I know that my experience has to be translated into a personal language which changes depending on the person I work with. What people need to develop in a particular moment is different in the next. How we pass on, teach and learn, share and exchange, is a way of proceeding and a way of thinking which determines the quality of the laboratory flux. I pass on a memory that I always carry with me, not something I can leave behind, as the Cuban-Brazilian Luis Alonso Aude explained, in a talk during a meeting of scholars assembled as a part of the project, *The Ship of Fools*, in 2021⁵.

Sharing Diversity

At the end of 2020 Eugenio Barba retired from his position as director of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium-Odin Teatret, passing on the responsibility to Per Kap Bech Jensen. Eugenio Barba continues to be the director of



Odin Teatret, of the ensemble and of its performances. Younger groups and artists have gathered around us during the past years, maintaining their artistic autonomy within the framework of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium. It is a generation that has grown from the seeds sown in the wind by Odin Teatret. They understand theatre not only as performances in a traditional space, but as research, pedagogy, cultural interactive incentive, networking, and site-specific events, involving different artistic languages, images, body, music and song as a means to create exchange and be a catalyst for contacts, relationships and collaborations within the social/cultural patchwork of the community.

During a meeting in Holstebro with local politicians in 2018, I became aware that the reality of laws, state support and official structures would have an enormous influence on the future of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium when Eugenio Barba was no longer the director. In the 1980s, when Iben Nagel Rasmussen, the Danish actress who joined Odin Teatret in 1966, wanted to leave the group to work permanently with her pupils, Eugenio transformed our structure by inverting the title and subtitle, so that Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium became the umbrella under which one could find Odin Teatret, ISTA – International School of Theatre Anthropology, Farfa (Iben's group at the time), Basho (directed by Toni Cots), The Canada Project (directed by Richard Fowler), Odin Teatret Film, and Odin Teatret Publishing House. This new arrangement allowed Iben to continue to work with her group within the framework of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. Today, after the change of director and with the consequences of the coronavirus situation, Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium includes four theatre groups: Odin Teatret (directed by Eugenio Barba), Ikarus Stage Arts (directed by Carolina Pizarro and Luis Alonso), Váli Theatre Lab (directed by Alice Occhiali and Valerio Peroni), and Moon of Asia (directed by Søs Banke). All these groups are based in Holstebro, Denmark and rehearse, present performances, tour and teach (Váli Theatre Lab is especially engaged in theatre with children). Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium also includes other projects that transcend the borders of theatre like Cross Pollination/Parliament of Practices (dedicated to research and an ecological connection of different practices, directed by Adriana La Selva and Marije Nie), Idom Village Laboratory (with a focus on keeping alive relationships and activities in a village, directed by Kai



Bredholt), Nido Lab (a pedagogical project, directed by Donald Kitt), Transit Festival and The Magdalena Project (a network of women in theatre, with Julia Varley responsible for its activities at NTL), Ilita (a multimedia project, directed by Dina Abu Hamdan), Transformations of Traditional Chinese Technique (a research project conducted by Ding Yteng), Kompani To (a contemporary circus company directed by Tamar Ohana Goksøyr and Mari Dahl Stoknes), Riotous Company (an international company, directed by Mia Theil Have), Humørgruppen (a theatre for older people, directed by Kai Bredholt), The Ship of Fools (a research association of scholars with Adam Ledger, Annelis Kuhlmann, Exe Christoffersen, Jane Turner, Patrick Campbell and Tatiana Chemi), the Bridge of Winds (a 30-year-old international pedagogical project, directed by Iben Nagel Rasmussen), Kunstteater (a company that connects visual arts and theatre, directed by Mathias Dyhr), the MA Laboratory Theatre (a Masters course set up as a collaboration between Manchester Metropolitan University and NTL), CTLS-Centre for Theatre Laboratory Research (a collaboration with Dramaturgy Department of Århus University, directed by Annelis Kuhlmann). Other artists spend time in residence at Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium for intermittent periods, including groups such as Palle Granhøj Dance Company (Denmark), AjaRiot (directed by Isadora Pei, Italy), Rocío del Pino Lobos (Chile) and Cinzia Cordella (Italy). When presenting the amplitude of Nordisk Teaterlaboratoriums activities, I must include the production of performances directed by Odin Teatret actors with groups from all over the world (like Cia. Pessoal de Teatro from Brazil, Teresa Ruggeri from Italy, Masakini Theatre from Malaysia, Rosa Antunes from Brazil, Merida Urquía from Colombia [...]) and performances like *Babel Babel Babel* with Søs Banke and Martin Damgaard, produced within the framework of NTL. Comprehensive projects with Greenland National Theatre and with Dongil Lee in Korea occupy much of the yearly calendar. Performances like *Flowers for Torgeir* with Roberta Carreri, *Tierra de fuego* with Carolina Pizarro, *Fool in the Full Moon* with Donald Kitt, and others, are also included as NTL co-productions because, even though the actors belong to Odin Teatret, these performances have not been directed by Eugenio Barba. Historically Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium includes OTA (Odin Teatret Archives), ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology), Odin Teatrets Forlag (the publishing house that produced TTT – *Teatrets*

Teori og Teknikk and *The Open Page*), but with changes underway I am not sure about their connection to NTL in the future.

A division between Odin Teatret and what we call NTL for short is appearing within our general institution. It is difficult to maintain a feeling of unity without sharing the *work in the room* or being encouraged to collaborate beyond the limits we know. It is strange for me to notice how the concreteness of the body language, the learning and research, and of creative processes for a performance, results in a shared understanding which is very different from projects born from concepts or economical alliances. In the past, at Odin Teatret, all occasions would be invested in the people of the group; now NTL brings in people to fulfil programmed projects.

I planned the first, second and third NTL Festival and Meeting in 2019, 2020 and 2021 (this last one was cancelled due to coronavirus restrictions) to give an occasion for a meeting *in the room* of the constellation of groups and artists gathered around Odin Teatret. The proposal was to exchange artistic visions and plans, ideas for performances and already finished productions. I was in search of a way to feel a sense of belonging to a common history and a way to rediscover the unconditional hospitality within the new constellation of NTL, which is much more dispersed than we were as members of Odin Teatret.

The way of being together for us at Odin Teatret has always been manifest in the attention to detail: cleaning the space, caring for costumes and props, avoiding discussions and coming with new proposals if we disagree, focussing on a feeling of debt and gratitude: we have received and we have to give back. This was possible because we met every day in the working space.

I was interested in maintaining and promoting the laboratory flux, or as I called it in the programme of the 2nd NTL Festival, *The Spirit of the Laboratory*. This is what we could share. I wished for five days of intense diversity coloured by the common desire of learning from each other. The aim was to discover and discuss strategies to give inspiration and meaning to the multifaceted understanding of what theatre is for us who do it as well as for the spectators. Without forgetting the need to take a position in the society we are part of.

Today, after the isolation caused by the Covid 19 pandemic and the cancellation of the Festival in 2021, I notice how each group or artist within the NTL constellation concentrates on its own programmes, trying to keep afloat in a time when the sense of theatre itself is being challenged. The energy is turning inwards again, while thinking of one's own survival instead of getting inspired by the generosity needed to stand beside others.

How do we pass on the DNA of our theatre laboratory? A workshop is not enough, as working on one performance or project is not enough. Lasting shared working conditions, challenges and obligations lead to a complex combination of a way of thinking and reacting with the body, a politics through other means. The interest is not for experiments in theatre as an artistic form but for the possibilities of transformation that it allows. I pass on my experience by directing actors on the other side of the world. With some of them I have worked since the beginning of the 1990s. If I give workshops, I know that the only real information is that the road is long and that it is important to have questions. If I work with some of the people from the NTL groups, I do it in close collaboration with the person directing the work. Iben Nagel Rasmussen has worked for 30 years with the people of the Bridge of Winds, a pedagogical project. I have worked with The Magdalena Project network since 1983 when we first had the idea. The continuity makes us look at reality differently and challenge it with improved energy.

I finish this article just as I decide to step down from my responsibility as artistic coordinator of NTL. The combination of change of leadership and coronavirus restrictions have created an environment in which different priorities could turn into unnecessary conflicts. I prefer to let the changes occur without my divergent opinion being considered an obstruction, since I understand my responsibility in a different way. Now, I can sit back to see what plants will grow from the seeds spread in the wind by Odin Teatret, and if NTL will continue to be supported by a laboratory flux or if it will become one of the many theatres struggling to survive and keep a sense of the profession alive. I go back to the working space to find the pleasure of asking questions that have no answer.

I believe that Eugenio Barba has combined two essential characteristics of what has made theatre laboratories and theatre groups influential: the need for quality, which is to say do the work well, the extreme care for de-

tail, and at the same time fostering a spirit of rebellion. This combines an aristocratic, apparently conservative attention to tradition and history and the desire for continual change: a rare combination. The care for detail is the same as the carpenter's, who carefully chooses the best piece of wood, who knows how to put in a nail, who is conscious of the many ways to handle what s/he is working with. The spirit of rebellion makes one fight against conditions imposed from outside and find personal solutions.

We need to see all the possibilities of transformation, like when the Dutch Cross Pollination artist Marije Nie turns the question round: *If 4+4 is 8, what is 8?*⁶ An infinite combination of possibilities. Perhaps the laboratory flux is the capacity of imagining infinite combinations of change, exchange, and interaction. But what keeps alive this outwards and inwards flow of energy is the will and need to make this breath of fresh air last for years and years, refusing the normality of theatre: to be ephemeral.

Notes

- ¹ See Barba and Savarese (2019).
- ² See Gordon (2009, p. 16-40).
- ³ See Schechner (2001, p. 207-215).
- ⁴ The Bread and Puppet Theater was founded in 1963 by Peter Schumann on New York City's Lower East Side. It is one of the oldest, non-profit, political theatre companies in the USA, specialising in street and puppet theatre.
- ⁵ The Ship of Fools is a critical laboratory of scholars who have collaborated in the past in a systematic way with Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium and CTLS (Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies). Luis Alonso Aude's comment was given during a presentation at the event 'Ship of Fools Conversations,' held online from the 30-31 January 2021 in collaboration with NTL. See <<https://odinteatret.dk/dk/news/ship-of-fools/>>. Accessed on: 8 April, 2021.
- ⁶ Comment made by Marije Nie during a presentation at the aforementioned event, *Ship of Fools Conversations*.

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