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Eugenio Barba – Nicola Savarese: The Secret Art of the Performer – A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology

'Theatre anthropology seeks useful directions rather than universal principles. It does not have the humility of a science, but an ambition to uncover knowledge which can be useful to a performer's work.' Eugenio Barba

The Gáspár Károli University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and L'Harmattan Kiadó have filled a long-standing gap by releasing *The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* by contemporary Italian theatre director Eugenio Barba and theatre theoretician Nicola Savarese – first published in 1991, then expanded and revised in 2005. While the original work was written in Italian, the excellent translators, Zsófia Rideg and János Regőcs, have rendered it in Hungarian based on published editions in French and English approved by the authors.

Barba's art is not unknown to Hungarian theatregoers. His work was presented at Szkéné Theatre as early as 1985 – then, after a long break, at the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen. Since 2015, Barba's company has been a regular guest at the MITEM Festival (Madách International Theatre Meeting), organized by the National Theatre. In 1964, Barba founded the Odin Teatret Company, which he transferred two years later from Oslo to the Danish city of Holstebro. It was there in 1979 that he created the so-called 'travelling university', the International School of Theatre Anthropology (or ISTA, for short). Up until the volume's appearance in 2005, ISTA held altogether 14 international meetings in different locations with participants arriving from a variety of cultural traditions – per-

formers and creative artists (actors, dancers, directors and choreographers), as well as scholars (theatre critics and experts in history and theory). At such occasions, all of which lasted several weeks, the courses – centred upon a particular theme – explored proposed fundamentals common to theatre technique in an empirical manner with physical exercises, work demonstrations and comparative analysis.

This volume represents the legacy of ISTA's 25 years, including the writings of Barba and Savarese, as well as texts by members of the research team. Thus, it assembles scholars such as Franco Ruffini, Ferdinando Taviani and Fabrizio Cruciani as authors of the terminology chapters within the 'dictionary', as well as excerpts from the writings of Marcel Mauss, Jerzy Grotowski, Marco De Marinis and Richard Schechner, among others, each receiving a single chapter. All throughout the dictionary volume, the sections share a uniform treatment of content, which is demanded by the work's systematizing endeavours. Barba and Savarese have created a comprehensive collection out of writings that make use of theatre anthropology's basic principles, methods and previously conducted historical inquiries. Thus, it clarifies concepts, which makes its appearance in the Hungarian language especially significant – not only in terms of promoting awareness and the canonization of Barba's theatre pedagogy work in Hungary, but also from the perspective of theatre anthropology research and theatre practices that incorporate the inter-cultural and trans-cultural theories of the twentieth century.

Just like the defining creators of director's theatre in the twentieth century (Craig, Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, Brook, Mnouchkine and Wilson), Barba and Savarese's theatre anthropology research gravitates towards traditional, non-Western rituals in the interest of radically renewing Western theatre (the theatrical conventions of the logic-centred, text-illustrative, bourgeois theatre of realism and its depictive style built upon the causality of psychological processes) in terms of its worldview and its means of expression. Under the powerful influence of his master Grotowski, Barba and his collaborators sought to discover the source of energy in the Eastern dancers and actors they studied, the basic principles governing the creation of a performer's stage presence, and how forms of movement from sacred Eastern rituals could be incorporated into contemporary European performance. In terms of the general interest in Eastern cultures, we must not ignore two facts. First, there is more extensive written documentation concerning Eastern traditions, so they are ripe for study and

more easily accessible than, for example, the cultural treasures of tribal African societies. Second, they represent the crystallized artistic forms of such advanced civilizations that, at the start of the twentieth century (for example, in India), their revival and methodological development were instrumental in strengthening national identity in the face of British colonialism.

In *The Secret Art of the Performer*, Barba and his colleagues' theatre anthropology worldview can be traced through accounts of their theoretical considerations and practical experiments, spanning several decades. The primary goal of this lab-style research – which is scholastic in spirit, but centred on actors and training – is to discover *basic principles* nurtured by performative techniques, embracing multiple cultures and built upon universal laws. Employing the thoughts of anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who can also be read in the volume, Barba distinguishes daily (*lokadharmi*) and extra-daily (*natyadharmi*) use of the body in terms of technique. These two techniques inform how in European culture – where there is much less room for sacred ritual and practically no physical techniques associated with ceremonies – it can be quite difficult to separate the sacred from the profane, daily from extra-daily, and realistic from stylised forms. Barba's theatre anthropology researches awareness of body use in Western dance and theatre, as well as its relationship to rhythm, while delving into the creation of extra-daily energy and the conditions and tensions related to the actor's pre-expressive state. From these, he derives the basic trans-cultural principles of balance, equivalence, omission and opposition. He also seeks methods of manifesting presence in the dilated body or purposive body, which gives rise to extra-daily physical technique.

The lexical volume of almost 350 pages containing more than 650 photos and illustrations, both in colour and black and white, explains principles and techniques, drawing most of its exciting examples from the traditions of Eastern dance theatre (Chinese opera, Noh theatre, the Odissi dance, Balinese dance theatre, Hindu Kathakali, Butoh, Kabuki, etc.). After all, in Eastern dance theatre, the performer's body is a ritual body, always using extra-daily techniques according to the given style and genre's unchanging set of rules. These forms are not built upon imitation. They are stylised artistic languages, all with an artistic logic and all radically departing from the tradition of European theatre in terms of their references. Yet, it is important for us to note that, besides Eastern examples, the volume's authors often cite other European creators as well – such as the artistic methods of Craig, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Grotowski,

Mikhail Chekhov or the pantomime artist  tienne Decroux – all of whom have worked out their own creative codification (technique) and conventions in line with their personal views.

A great number of the volume’s examples, based on inter-cultural and trans-cultural comparisons, place side-by-side (physical) techniques evolved from spatially and temporally distant practices – religious, ceremonial or theatrical in nature. Under categories presumed to be common, the actor’s full range of face, eye, hand and foot expression, the role of acrobatics, and the redefinition of rhythm are all investigated within stand-alone chapters. The variety of physical technique attains the quality of a *body orchestra* in the experience of the viewer, since the body’s individual means of communication (body parts, voice, rhythm) are able to act simultaneously. The entire range of tools is a constant source of inspiration for creators from all different cultures.

Authors of the terminology chapters explore the methodology of *planned spontaneity* – that is, how traditional dance and theatre technique can aid Western creators, who possess a mimetic and verbal background, in manifesting presence and in summoning the purposive body and the performer’s concentrated mind-body energy (the dilated mind-body).

The Odin Company plays an ever-current role in this work’s progress, which continues to this day. With its productions, publications, masters of traditional performance, established network of contacts and regular guest appearances, it has become an inter-cultural, global theatre workshop. Their stated purpose – identical to the philosophy of ISTA – is to forge a relationship with what is alien to them and to acknowledge and appreciate the merits of others. After all, these encounters are the best means of challenging the notion of anything belonging to a given culture – the manner of expression and gestures, the assumption of roles and the rules of conduct. The Odin Company’s international network places great emphasis on the acceptance of third-world masters, artists, scholars and companies as equal creative partners in the global workshop effort, as well as on solidarity with so-called third-world theatre – in which, as opposed to established permanent theatres and commercial entertainment venues, the group represents organized, nascent, fringe theatre movements. (It is worth mentioning that Barba himself operated throughout his career on the ‘independent’ alternative scene, outside of the establishment.)

Consequently, Barba’s concept argues for common basic principles and equality with regard to body technique, as well as freedom of experimentation that

can be removed from societal and cultural contexts. In Richard Schechner's opinion, however, not even the methods can be considered universal, since 1) its aesthetic principles are culture-specific (similarly, Erika Fischer-Lichte views the exercises as varying with the culture), and 2) the range of examples is relatively limited, as the study focuses mainly on traditions existing in Indian, Chinese and Japanese territories. Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup argues that the presentational experiences of different cultural communities can, in fact, be built into the cultural-artistic product; moreover, theatrical dialogue among cultures does not signify the creation of Barba's conceptual union, merely its temporary fusion.

From the perspective of dance and theatre pedagogy, the significance of the Barba–Savarese volume is indisputable. For that very reason, it can be regarded as a *textbook* – not just for those interested in physical theatre, but for every creator and researcher dealing with theatre arts. It is not made up insular methodology solely of concern to scholars, but seeks methods, in the course of training and instruction, to reach the aim of stripping the dancer's or actor's body of its everyday, automatic behaviour. Practicing the ritual, organic motions developed over decades can serve as excellent training elements for European actors, making them aware of their own bodies' manifestations. It gives them an applicable theoretical basis for their creative work, in addition to an understanding that, as a result of the exercises, their artistic bodies generate energy that can be transferred to the spectators. The series and system of acting-dancing exercises make up a long process, and to master them demands life-long development. In the course of generational knowledge transfer, certain secrets of mastery are also formulated; yet, they can only be passed on through step-by-step experience. Within this volume, the extensive visual documentation – typical of the Hungarian publisher's quality – provides great assistance in picturing the exercises and concrete examples and in making the descriptions clear and accessible, so the creative body may undergo the prescribed process.

Barba, Eugenio and Nicola Savarese. 2020. *A színész titkos művészete. Színházantropológiai szótár*. Budapest: Károli Gáspár University of Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Kiadó.