

The Paper Canoe

A Guide to Theatre
Anthropology

Eugenio Barba

Translated by Richard Fowler



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THE PAPER CANOE

Eugenio Barba, director, theorist and founder of Odin Teatret, is today one of the major points of reference for contemporary theatre. *The Paper Canoe* is the first major study of theatre anthropology; it distils all the research of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, and focuses upon the pre-expressive level of the performer's art. Barba defines this as the basic technique which creates 'presence' on stage; a dilated and effective body which can hold and guide a spectator's attention.

The Paper Canoe alternates between detached analysis and the observations of an ardent traveller who reveals the value of theatre as a discipline and a revolt. It comprises a fascinating dialogue with the masters of Asian performance and the makers of twentieth-century theatre, such as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Craig, Copeau, Brecht, Artaud and Decroux, making their thoughts and techniques accessible and relevant to contemporary practice.

The Paper Canoe establishes beyond doubt the importance of Barba's practical and theoretical work for today's students and practitioners of performance.

Eugenio Barba is the Founder and Director of Odin Teatret, and Director of the International School of Theatre Anthropology. He is also Examining Professor at Aarhus University in Denmark and the author of *Beyond the Floating Islands* and *The Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*.

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To Judy and Nando

and to the builders of canoes

Else Marie

Torgeir

Iben

Tage

Roberta

Julia

with gratitude

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PREFACE

I wrote this book in Holstebro, but I conceived it during long, silent rehearsals and on journeys, while seeing performances and meeting theatre people from various continents. It grew during involved discussions or 'brainstorms' dealing with questions which at first seemed childish or foolish: What is the performer's presence? Why, when two performers execute the same actions, is one believable and the other not? Is talent also a technique? Can a performer who does not move hold the spectator's attention? Of what does energy in the theatre consist? Is there such a thing as pre-expressive work?

A friend, gentle and insistently curious, made me sit down and put everything on paper. From then on, my room was invaded by books, by memories of and dialogues with my 'ancestors'.

There is a land-less country, a country in transition, a country which consists of time not territory, and which is confluent with the theatrical profession. In this country, the artists who work in India or Bali, my Scandinavian companions, or those from Peru, Mexico or Canada, in spite of the distance between them, work elbow to elbow. I am able to understand them even if our languages separate us. We have something to exchange and so we travel in order to meet. I owe a great deal to their generosity. Their names, dear to me, are remembered in the following pages.

When one is working, to be generous means to be exigent. From *exigent* comes *exact*. Precision, in fact, has something to do with generosity. And so in the following pages, precision, exactness, will also be discussed. Something which appears to be cold anatomy on paper, in practice demands maximum motivation, the heat of vocation. 'Hot' and 'cold' are adjectives which are in comfortable opposition when one is talking about the work of the performer. I have also tried to alternate 'hot' pages with 'cold' pages in this book. But the reader should not trust appearances.

The 'ancestors' are the most exacting. Without their books, their tangled words, I could not have become an auto-didact. Without a dialogue with them, I would not have been able to hollow out this canoe. Their names have a double existence here: within the current of questions, they are live presences; in the bibliographical notes, they are books.

It was Fabrizio Cruciani who, with his exacting gentleness, obliged me to sit down and put this book together. He imposed a commitment upon me, he bound me to a contract. When he read the manuscript his first reaction was one of satisfaction, because the notes to the text had the required precision: 'He wrote them just as we would have done', he said of me to a mutual friend. By saying 'we', he meant 'historians'. The pain I felt when he died is slowly becoming pride.

I asked my companions from Odin Teatret and ISTA to read the manuscript. Some of them found errors or inaccuracies, proposed changes, made their demands and their tastes heard with insistence. I am a fortunate author.

The abbreviation ISTA, which stands for the International School of Theatre Anthropology, and which is, like all abbreviations, rather forbidding, represents the attempt to give form and continuity to something which evolved almost on its own. It was a strange environment, in which performers, directors and theatre historians gathered together, most often in Italy. Odin Teatret was at the centre of this environment. Once it was given a name and a mobile structure, scientists and artists from other continents joined it. ISTA became increasingly international: a Babel of languages in a shared village where it is not always easy to distinguish between artists, technicians and 'intellectuals', and where Orient and Occident are no longer separable. With time, the familiar yet remote figure of Sanjukta Panigrahi became an integral part of this village.

The Paper Canoe comes from this village and is for those who, even though they may not have known it, even when it no longer exists, will miss it.

E.B. Holstebro, 25 February 1993

1

THE GENESIS OF THEATRE ANTHROPOLOGY

It is often said that life is a journey, an individual voyage which does not necessarily involve change of place. One is changed by events and by the passage of time.

In all cultures, there are certain fixed events which mark the transition from one stage of this journey to another. In all cultures, there are ceremonies which accompany birth, establish the entry of the adolescent into adulthood, mark the union of man and woman. Only one stage is not sanctioned by a ceremony, the onset of old age. There is a ceremony for death, but none to celebrate the passage from maturity to old age.

This journey and these transitions are lived with lacerations, rejections, indifference, fervour. They take place, however, within the framework of the same cultural values.

This much *is known*. But what is it that *I know*? What would I say if I had to talk about *my* journey, about the stages and transitions in the contrasting landscapes of collective order and disorder, of experiences, of relationships: from childhood to adolescence, from adulthood to maturity, to this annual countdown where every birthday, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-five, is celebrated by recalling my past achievements?

If memory is knowledge, then I know that my journey has crossed through various cultures.

The first of these is the culture of faith. There is a boy in a warm place full of people singing, fragrant odours, vivid colours. In front of him, high up, is a statue wrapped in a purple cloth. Suddenly, while bells ring, the smell of incense becomes more pungent and the singing swells, the purple cloth is pulled down revealing a risen Christ.

This is how Easter was celebrated in Gallipoli, the village in southern Italy where I spent my childhood. I was deeply religious. It was a pleasure to the senses to go to church, to find myself in an atmosphere of darkness and candlelight, shadows and gilt stucco, perfumes, flowers and people engrossed in prayer.

I waited for moments of intensity: the elevation of the Host, Holy Communion, processions. Being with other people, feeling a bond with them, sharing something, filled me with a sensation which even now resonates in my senses and in their subconscious.

So I can still feel the pain I felt in my knees when I saw a friend's mother one Good Friday in Gallipoli. The procession of Christ with the cross on His shoulders, accompanied only by men, wound through the narrow streets of the old town. The procession of the Virgin, calling after Her Son, followed, half a kilometre behind. This distance between Mother and Son was poignant, announcing the final separation and emphasizing it through a vocal contact: the 'lament' of the Mother of Christ, accompanied only by women. Those whose prayers had been answered followed Her on their knees. Among them was my friend's mother. I was not expecting to see her, and at first reacted with the embarrassment typical of children who see their parents, or those of their friends, behaving in an unusual way. But immediately afterwards I was struck by the stabbing pain one feels when one walks hundreds of metres on one's knees.

I lived with an elderly woman for a number of years. She must have been about seventy. In the eyes of a ten-or eleven-year old boy, she was very old. I slept in her room. She was my grandmother. Every morning, at five o'clock, she got up and made very strong coffee. She would wake me and give me a little. I enjoyed the sweet warmth of the bed, in the cold room in that southern village with no heating in the winter. I was warm, and my grandmother, wearing a long, white, embroidered nightdress, would go over to the mirror, let loose her hair, and comb it. She had very long hair. I watched her from behind; she looked like a slender adolescent. I could just make out the withered body of an old woman, wrapped in a nightdress, and at the same time I saw a young girl dressed as a bride. Then there was her hair, very long and beautiful, yet white, dead.

These images, and others as well, which I recall from the culture of faith, all contain a 'moment of truth', when opposites embrace each other. The most transparent is the image of the old woman who, to my eyes, is both woman and child, her hair flowing sensuously, but white. A portrait of coquettishness, vanity, grace. And yet, I had only to look from another angle and the mirror reflected back a face worn and etched by the years.

All these images are brought together by physical memory: the pain I felt in my knees on seeing my friend's mother, the sensation of warmth while I watched my grandmother combing her hair. Revisiting this culture of faith, the senses are the first to remember.

My journey through this culture was happy, yet it was punctuated by profound sorrows. I lived through a harrowing experience which, at that time, did not take place in the anonymity of a hospital but in the intimacy of the family. I stood by my father's deathbed, witnessing his long agony. As it dragged on into the night, I felt bewilderment, which became certainty and dismay. Nothing was said explicitly, and yet I realized from the faces and behaviour of those present, from their silences and their glances, that something irreparable was happening. As the hours passed, dismay gave way to impatience, unease, tiredness. I began to pray that my father's agony would end soon, so that I wouldn't have to remain standing any longer.

Again a 'moment of truth', opposites embracing each other. I observed simultaneously the elusiveness of life and the materiality of the corpse. I was about to lose forever one of the people I loved most and yet was discovering in myself impulses, reactions and thoughts which impatiently invoked the end.

At fourteen I went to a military school. Here, obedience demanded physical submission, and obliged us mechanically to carry out martial ceremonies which engaged only the body. A part of myself was cut off. We were not permitted to show emotion, doubt, hesitation, any outburst of tenderness or need for protection. My presence was shaped by stereotyped conduct. The highest value was placed on appearances: the officer who demanded respect and believed that he received it; the cadet who cursed or silently mouthed obscenities, concealing anger or scorn behind the impassive façade of standing to attention. Our behaviour was tamed through codified poses which conveyed acquiescence and acceptance.

I have an image of myself in the culture of faith: singing, or not singing, but involved with my whole being, on my own but nevertheless in unison with a group, amid singing women, lights, incense, colours. In the new culture, the image is of an impassive and immobile me, lined up geometrically with dozens of my peers, supervised by officers who do not permit us the slightest reaction. This time the group has swallowed me up; it is Leviathan, in whose belly my thinking and my sense of being whole within myself crumble. I was in the culture of corrosion.

Before, feeling and doing were the two simultaneous phases of a single intention; now, there was a split between thought and action; cunning, insolence, and cynical indifference were presumed to be determined self-assurance.

There is the immobility of the believer at prayer. There is the immobility of the soldier at attention. Prayer is the projection of the whole of oneself, a tension towards something that is at one and the same time within and outside oneself, an outpouring of inner energy, the intention-action taking flight. Attention on parade is the display of a stage set, the façade which exhibits its mechanical surface while the substance, the spirit, the mind, may be elsewhere. There is the immobility which transports you and gives you wings. There is the immobility which imprisons you and makes your feet sink into the earth.

Thus, my senses recall my passage through these two cultures, where immobility acquired such diverse charges of energy and meaning.

Like an acid, the culture of corrosion ate into faith, ingenuousness and vulnerability. It made me lose my virginity, in all ways, physically and mentally. It generated in me a need to feel free and, as happens when one is seventeen, to dissent from and deny all geographical, cultural and social constraints. So I set off into the culture of revolt.

I rejected all the values, aspirations, demands and ambitions of the culture of corrosion. I longed not to integrate, not to put down roots, not to drop anchor in any port, but to escape, to discover the world outside and to remain a stranger. This longing became my destiny when, not yet eighteen, I left Italy and emigrated to Norway.

If one of our senses is mutilated, the others become sharpened: the hearing of a blind man is particularly acute, and for the deaf, the slightest visual details are vivid and indelible. Abroad, I had lost my mother tongue and grappled with incomprehensibility. I tried to get by as an apprentice welder among Norwegian workers who, because of my Mediterranean 'exoticism', treated me sometimes like a teddy bear and sometimes like a simpleton. I was plunged into the constant effort of scrutinizing behaviour which was not immediately decipherable.

I concentrated my attention on intercepting movements, frowns, smiles (benevolent? condescending? sympathetic? sad? scornful? conniving? ironic? affectionate? hostile? wise? resigned? But above all, was the smile for me or against me?).

I tried to orient myself in this labyrinth of recognizable yet unknown physicality and sounds, in order to explain to myself the attitudes of others with respect to me, what their behaviour towards me meant, what intentions lurked behind compliments, conventions, banal or serious discussions.

For years, as an immigrant, I experienced every single day the wearing see-saw of being accepted or rejected on the basis of 'pre-expressive' communication. When I boarded a tram, I certainly did not 'express' anything, yet some people withdrew to make room for me, while others withdrew to keep me at a distance. People simply reacted to my presence, which communicated neither aggression nor sympathy, neither desire for fraternization nor challenge.

The need to decipher other people's attitudes towards me was a daily necessity which kept all my senses alert and made me quick to perceive the slightest impulse, any unwitting reaction, the 'life' which flowed through the smallest tensions, and which took on for me, attentive observer that I was, special meanings and purposes.

During my journey as an immigrant, I forged the tools for my future profession as a theatre director, someone who alertly scrutinizes the performer's every action. With these tools I *learned to see*, I learned to locate where an impulse starts in the body, how it moves, according to what dynamic and along which trajectory. For many years I worked with the actors of Odin Teatret as a *maître du regard* searching out the 'life' which was revealed, sometimes unconsciously, by chance, by mistake, and identifying the many meanings that it could take on.

But still another scar marks my physical memory: the period from 1961 to 1964 that I spent in Opole, Poland, following the work of Jerzy Grotowski and his actors. I shared the experience that few in our profession are privileged to have, an authentic moment of transition.

Those few we call rebels, heretics or reformers of the theatre (Stanislavski and Meyerhold, Craig, Copeau, Artaud, Brecht and Grotowski) are the creators of a theatre of transition. Their productions have shattered the ways of seeing and doing theatre and have obliged us to reflect on the past and present with an entirely different awareness. The simple fact that they existed removes all legitimacy from the usual justification, often made in our profession, which maintains that nothing can be changed. For this reason, their successors can only emulate them if they themselves live in transition.

Transition is itself a culture. Every culture must have three aspects: material production by means of particular techniques, biological reproduction making possible the transmission of experience from generation to generation, and the production of meanings. It is essential for a culture to produce meanings. If it does not, it is not a culture.

When we look at photographs of productions by the 'rebels', it may be difficult to understand what, on a technical level, is novel about them. But the novelty of the meaning that they gave to their theatre in the context of their times is undeniable. Artaud is a good example. His productions left no traces. Yet he is still with us because he distilled new meanings for that social relationship which is theatre.

The importance of the reformers resides in their having breathed new values into the empty shell of the theatre. These values have their roots in transition, they are the rejection of the spirit of the time and cannot be possessed by future generations. The reformers can only teach us to be men and women of transition who invent the personal value of *our own* theatre.

At first, Grotowski and his actors were part of the traditional system and the professional categories of their time. Then, slowly, the gestation of new meaning began, through technical procedures. Day after day, for three years, my senses absorbed, detail by detail, the tangible fulfilment of this historic adventure.

I believed that I was *in search of a lost theatre*,¹ but instead I was learning to be in transition. Today I know that this is not a search for knowledge, but for the unknown.

After the founding of Odin Teatret in 1964, my work frequently took me to Asia: to Bali, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Japan. I witnessed much theatre and dance. For a spectator from the West, there is nothing more suggestive than a traditional Asian performance *seen in its context*, often in the open tropical air, with a large and reactive audience, with a constant musical accompaniment which captivates the nervous system, with sumptuous costumes which delight the eye, and with performers who embody the unity of actor-dancer-singer-storyteller.

At the same time, there is nothing more monotonous, lacking action and development, than the seemingly interminable recitations of text, which the performers speak or sing in their (to us) unknown languages, melodiously yet implacably repetitive.

In these monotonous moments, my attention developed a tactic to avoid giving up on the performance. I attempted to concentrate tenaciously on and follow just one detail of a performer: the fingers of one hand, a foot, a shoulder, an eye. This tactic against monotony made me aware of a strange coincidence: Asian performers performed with their knees bent, *exactly like the Odin Teatret actors*.

In fact, at Odin Teatret, after some years of training, the actors tend to assume a position in which the knees, very slightly bent, contain the *sats*, the impulse towards an action which is as yet unknown and which can go in any direction: to jump or crouch, step back or to one side, to lift a weight. The *sats* is the basic

posture found in sports—in tennis, badminton, boxing, fencing—when you need to be ready to react.

My familiarity with my actors' *sats*, a characteristic common to their individual techniques, helped me see beyond the opulence of the costumes and the seductive stylization of the Asian performers, and *to see bent knees*. This was how one of the first principles of Theatre Anthropology, the change of balance, was revealed to me.

Just as the Odin Teatret actors' *sats* made me see the bent knees of the Asian performers, their stubbornness provided the opportunity for new conjecture and speculation, this time far from Asia.

In 1978, the actors all left Holstebro in search of stimuli which might help them shatter the crystallization of behaviour which tends to form in every individual or group. For three months, they dispersed in all directions: to Bali, India, Brazil, Haiti and Struer, a small town about fifteen kilometres from Holstebro. The pair who had gone to Struer to a school of ballroom dancing learned the tango, Viennese waltz, foxtrot and quickstep. Those who had gone to Bali studied *baris* and *legong*; the one who had been in India, *kathakali*; the two who had visited Brazil, *capoera* and *candomble* dances. They had all stubbornly insisted on doing what, in my view, ought absolutely to be avoided: they had learned styles—that is, the results of other people's techniques.

Bewildered and sceptical, I watched these flashes of exotic skills, hurriedly acquired. I began to notice that when my actors did a Balinese dance, they put on another skeleton/skin which conditioned the way of standing, moving and becoming 'expressive'. Then they would step out of it and reassume the skeleton/skin of the Odin actor. And yet, in the passage from one skeleton/skin to another, in spite of the difference in 'expressivity', they applied similar principles. The application of these principles led the actors in very divergent directions. I saw results which had nothing in common except the 'life' which permeated them.

What was later to develop into Theatre Anthropology was gradually defining itself before my eyes and in my mind as I observed my actors' ability to assume a particular skeleton/skin—that is, a particular scenic behaviour, a particular use of the body, a specific technique—and then to remove it. This 'putting on' and 'taking off', this change from a daily body technique to an extra-daily body technique and from a personal technique to a formalized Asian, Latin American or European technique, forced me to ask myself a series of questions which led me into new territory.

In order to know more, to deepen and verify the practicability of these common principles, I had to study stage traditions far removed from my own. The two Western scenic forms that I could have analysed (classical ballet and mime) were too close to me and would not have helped me establish the transcultural aspect of recurring principles.

In 1979, I founded ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology. Its first session was held in Bonn and lasted a month.² The teachers were artists from Bali, China, Japan and India. The work and the research confirmed the existence

of principles that, on the pre-expressive level, determine scenic presence, the body-in-life able to make perceptible that which is invisible: the intention. I realized that the artificiality of the forms of theatre and dance in which one passes from everyday behaviour to 'stylization' is the prerequisite for making a new energy potential spring forth, resulting from the collision of an effort with a resistance. In the Bonn session of ISTA, I found the same principles among Asian performers that I had seen at work in Odin Teatret actors.

It is sometimes said that I am an 'expert' on Asian theatre, that I am influenced by it, that I have adapted its techniques and procedures to my practice. Behind the verisimilitude of these commonplaces lies their opposite. It has been through knowledge of the work of Western performers—Odin Teatret actors—that I have been able to see beyond the technical surface and the stylistic results of specific traditions.

However, it is true that some forms of Asian theatre and some of their artists move me deeply, just as do the actors of Odin Teatret. Through them I find again the culture of faith, as an agnostic and as a man who has reached the last stage of his journey: the count-down in reverse. I rediscover a unity of the senses, of the intellect and of the spirit, a tension towards something which is both inside and outside myself. I find again the 'moment of truth', where opposites merge. I meet again, without regrets, nostalgia or bitterness, my origins and the entire journey which seemed to distance me from them and which has in fact brought me back to them. I find again the old man that I am and the child that I was, in the midst of the colours, the smell of the incense, and the singing women.

In every one of Odin Teatret's productions, there is an actor who, in a surprising way, divests her/himself of her/his costume and appears, not nude, but in the splendour of another costume. For many years I thought this was a *coup de théâtre* inspired by *kabuki*, the *hikinuki*, in which the protagonist, with the help of one or more assistants, suddenly divests himself of his costume and appears totally changed. I once believed I was adapting a Japanese convention. Only now do I understand this *détour* and return: it is the moment of Life when, in Gallipoli, the purple cloth fell and I saw, in a statue, the risen Christ.

It can sometimes make sense to confront a theory with a biography. My journey through cultures has heightened my sensorial awareness and honed an alertness, both of which have guided my professional work. Theatre allows me to belong to no place, to be anchored not to one perspective only, to remain in transition.

With the passing of the years, I feel pain in my knees and a sensual warmth, as an artisan in a craft which, at the moment of its fulfilment, vanishes.

DEFINITION

Theatre Anthropology is the study of the pre-expressive scenic behaviour upon which different genres, styles, roles and personal or collective traditions are all based. In the context of Theatre Anthropology, the word 'performer' should be taken to mean 'actor and dancer', both male and female. 'Theatre' should be taken to mean 'theatre and dance'.

In an organized performance the performer's physical and vocal presence is modelled according to principles which are different from those of daily life. This extra-daily use of the body-mind is called 'technique'.

The performer's various techniques can be conscious and codified or unconscious but implicit in the use and repetition of a theatre practice. Transcultural analysis shows that it is possible to single out recurring principles from among these techniques. These principles, when applied to certain physiological factors—weight, balance, the use of the spinal column and the eyes—produce physical, pre-expressive tensions. These new tensions generate an extra-daily energy quality which renders the body theatrically 'decided', 'alive', 'believable', thereby enabling the performer's 'presence' or scenic *bios* to attract the spectator's attention *before* any message is transmitted. This is a logical, and not a chronological 'before'.

The pre-expressive base constitutes the elementary level of organization of the theatre. The various levels of organization in the performance are, for the spectator, inseparable and indistinguishable. They can only be separated, by means of abstraction, in a situation of analytical research or during the technical work of composition done by the performer. The ability to focus on the pre-expressive level makes possible an expansion of knowledge with consequences both in the practical as well as in the historical and critical fields of work.

In general, the performer's professional experience begins with the assimilation of technical knowledge, which is then personalized. Knowledge of the principles which govern the scenic *bios* make something else possible: *learning to learn*. This is of tremendous importance for those who choose or who are obliged to go beyond the limits of specialized technique. In fact, *learning to learn* is essential for everyone. It is the condition that enables us to dominate technical knowledge and not to be dominated by it.

Performance study nearly always tends to prioritize theories and utopian ideas, neglecting an empirical approach. Theatre Anthropology directs its attention to empirical territory in order to trace a path among various specialized disciplines, techniques and aesthetics that deal with performing. It does not attempt to blend, accumulate or catalogue the performer's techniques. It seeks the elementary: *the technique of techniques*. On one hand this is a utopia. On the other, it is another way of saying, with different words, *learning to learn*.

Let us avoid equivocation. Theatre Anthropology is not concerned with applying the paradigms of cultural anthropology to theatre and dance. It is not the study of the performative phenomena in those cultures which are traditionally studied by anthropologists. Nor should Theatre Anthropology be confused with the anthropology of performance.

Every researcher knows that partial homonyms should not be confused with homologies. In addition to cultural anthropology, which today is often referred to simply as 'anthropology', there are many other 'anthropologies'. For example: philosophical anthropology, physical anthropology, paleoanthropic anthropology and criminal anthropology. In Theatre Anthropology the term 'anthropology' is not being used in the sense of cultural anthropology, but refers to a new field of investigation, the study of the pre-expressive behaviour of the human being in an organized performance situation.

The performer's work fuses, into a single profile, three different aspects corresponding to three distinct levels of organization. The first aspect is individual, the second is common to all those who belong to the same performance genre. The third concerns all performers from every era and culture. These three aspects are:

- (i) the performer's personality, *her/his* sensitivity, artistic intelligence, social persona: those characteristics which render the individual performer unique and uncopiable;
- (ii) the particularities of the theatrical traditions and the historical-cultural context through which the performer's unique personality manifests itself;
- (iii) the use of the body-mind according to extra-daily techniques based on transcultural, recurring principles. These recurring-principles are defined by Theatre Anthropology as the field of pre-expressivity.

The first two aspects determine the transition from pre-expressivity to performing. The third is the *idem*, that which does not vary; it underlies the various personal, stylistic and cultural differences. It is the level of the scenic *bios*, the 'biological' level of performance, upon which the various techniques and the particular uses of the performer's scenic presence and dynamism are founded.

The only affinity connecting Theatre Anthropology to the methods and fields of study of cultural anthropology is the awareness that what belongs to our tradition and appears obvious to us can instead reveal itself to be a knot of unexplored problems. This implies a displacement, a journey, a *détour* strategy which makes

it possible for us to single out that which is 'ours' through confrontation with what we experience as 'other'. Displacement educates our way of seeing and renders it both participatory and detached. Thus a new light is thrown on our own professional 'country'.

Among the different forms of ethnocentrism that often blinker our point of view, there is one which does not depend on geography and culture but rather on the scenic relationship. It is an ethnocentrism that observes the performance only from the point of view of the spectator, that is, of the finished result. It therefore omits the complementary point of view: that of the creative process of the individual performers and the ensemble of which they are part, the whole web of relationships, skills, ways of thinking and adapting oneself of which the performance is the fruit.

Historical understanding of theatre and dance is often blocked or rendered superficial because of neglect of the logic of the creative process, because of misunderstandings of the performer's empirical way of thinking, and because of an inability to overcome the confines established for the spectator.

The study of the performance practices of the past is essential. Theatre history is not just the reservoir of the past, it is also the reservoir of the new, a pool of knowledge that from time to time makes it possible for us to transcend the present. The entire history of the theatre reforms of the twentieth century, both in the East and in the West, shows the strong link of interdependence between the reconstruction of the past and new artistic creation.

Often, however, theatre historians come face to face with *testimonies* without themselves having sufficient experience of the craft and process of theatre making. They run the risk, therefore, of not writing history but of accumulating the deformations of memory. They do not possess a personal knowledge of the theatre with which to compare the testimonies of the past and therefore they cannot interpret them and restore the living and autonomous image of the theatre life of other times and cultures.

The historian without awareness of the practical craft corresponds to the 'artist' shut within the confines of her/his own practice, ignorant of the whole course of the river in which her/his little boat is navigating, and yet convinced of being in touch with the only true reality of the theatre.

This results in a yielding to the ephemeral. The non-expert in history and the non-expert in practice involuntarily unite their strengths to defile the theatre.

Those who have fought against a defiled theatre and who have sought to transform it into an environment with cultural, aesthetic and human dignity have drawn strength from books. Often they have themselves written books, especially when trying to liberate scenic practice from its enslavement to literature.

The relationship that links *theatre* and *books* is a fertile one. But it is often unbalanced in favour of the written word, which remains. Stable things have one weakness: their stability. Thus the memory of experience lived as theatre, once translated into sentences that last, risks becoming petrified into pages that cannot be penetrated.