

## Eugenio BARBA

### THE HOUSE OF THE ORIGINS AND THE RETURN

*Speech on the occasion of conferring the title of Doctor honoris causa by the  
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Rector Magnificus, professors, authorities, students, ladies and gentlemen.

Allow me at this ceremony which honours my colleagues of the Odin Teatret and me to recollect the beginnings: the first word of a well known play:

- *Merdre!*

Perhaps the most known amongst the *incipits* of European dramas should be avoided in this solemn assembly. But it would be unjust, because this surprising exclamation is without any doubt the most significant.

The provocation with which Alfred Jarry opened his *Ubu Roi*, when it was written and pronounced for the first time, had to be deformed (*Merdre!*) in order to be acceptable. Today, if this expression was not distorted, it would be so banal as to pass unobserved. This deformed word should be written on the flags of our theatres, if theatres still hoisted flags on the top of their roofs, like in London, in Shakespeare's time.

This word on a banner is not an insult, it is a refusal. This is what theatre says, willingly or not, to the world which surrounds it. And to say it with efficacy and coherence, it has to distance itself from the language of daily life, re-elaborate it and situate it in a paradoxical place.

Paradoxical space is theatre's only homeland.

For this homeland Jarry created a sarcastic and antithetic image, worthy to appear as an emblem on a flag:

*Quant à l'action, qui va commencer, elle se passe en Pologne, c'est-à-dire Nulle Part.*  
(The action which is about to begin takes place in Poland, in other words, Nowhere).

It was the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1896 when on the stage of Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris Jarry pronounces these words which can sound bitter, ironical, even full of despair – anything but sad or provocative. They are cheerful and full of vitality like the black humour that I learned to enjoy in Poland. We should, however, reflect upon a fact: when Jarry put down on paper these merry and nihilistic words, he wrote *Nulle Part* (Nowhere) starting with capital letters. Not as an absence, but as an identity.

Poland is my professional homeland. I always thought so because it was here I lived the fundamental years of my apprenticeship. Here I assimilated the working language, the critical attitude towards historiography, the foundations of the know-how and of the ideal tensions in the scenic craft. Poland was the environment which guided my first steps towards my destiny. Today, almost half a century later, at the moment of my return to the house of my origins, I ask myself whether Poland has remained my professional homeland especially because of its strong vocation to represent for me the realm of *Nulle Part*.

What did Jarry want to tell us with this expression, in that distant 1896? Was he just hinting at the political dismemberment of the Polish nation? What was he alluding to when he wrote the words in capital letters? He knew Greek which he had studied for many years at school. And in Greek, *nulle part* is *oû tópos*, Utopia. Was he also suggesting this in his joyful and vital black humour? We know only too well, through our experiences and the History which has accompanied our lives, how much Utopia has to do with black humour.

I speak of Jarry, thinking of my Poland of more than 40 years ago, and here Witold Gombrowicz emerges with his *Ferdydurke*. We knew it by heart. Gombrowicz's novel, as a fabulous mocking myth, supplied the terms, the paradigms and the typologies through which Grotowski and I spoke to each other. And at once, in my mind's inner theatre, Gombrowicz and Jarry draw near to an artist who has populated the stage of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with indelible images, and whose presence I would like to evoke here: Tadeusz Kantor.

By birth and education I am Italian. By political experience, Norwegian. Professionally I am a Pole. In 1963, when in Jerzy Grotowski's and Ludwik Flaszen's theatre-laboratory 13 Rzedów I had to direct a text for my diploma as director, I thought of my roots, of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. I planned a double performing space, two stages, one at each end of the room, and Dante's journey in the middle, among the spectators, in the realm of Disorder – a word which should also be written with capital letters, just as *NullePart*. I looked for a stage designer and contacted Kantor. We met and conversed for a long time. He did not show any trace of the temper for which he was known. He was curious and polite. In Opole? And in which theatre, at the Ziemi Opolskiej? I answered that I worked with Grotowski. I remember the lightning in his gaze. Without a word Kantor got up and left. I never saw him again.

This is an anecdote, not history. Rivalry, jealousy, glory and fear are transient foam not to be confused with the sea's powerful waves doggedly raging against the stability of terra firma.

If I recall these waves which seem to have vanished, I am not calling the roll for a *umarla klasa*, for a “dead class”: Tadeusz Kantor, Heiner Müller, Julian Beck, Carmelo Bene, Jerzy Grotowski. These waves have turned into deep currents, they mitigate the climate in which we shape our professional acts, they are *our world*. We cannot confine this world, this mighty realm of *Nulle Part*, in an enclosure called “the past”, otherwise we ourselves risk death. These people are not our memories. They are our blood, the vital spirit which keeps us alive.

Anyone acquainted with my biography, knows well that more than any other experience, Poland for me was Grotowski. There is no point in repeating what I have already said so many times. This ceremony in 2003 is the most recent scene of a plot which began in 1961 when a 25 year-old Italian who had emigrated to Norway and travelled the world met in Opole a 28 year-old Polish theatre director who had not visited many countries, but had begun to explore the vertical geography, knew the art of politics and dissidence and was able to put them only to the service of spiritual freedom.

I recognize in Jerzy Grotowski my Master. Nevertheless I don't feel like his pupil and follower. His questions have become my questions. Yet my answers are becoming more and more different from his answers.

Jerzy Grotowski was a *sensible* person, therefore he was a destroyer of common places and illusions. He was a man of paradox and transformed paradox into a concrete region. He conquered his authoritativeness in the territory of theatre. He was a prophet in the original meaning of the word, because he did not speak in his own name, but in the name of an objectivity which was little evident.

He asked the fundamental question for the theatre of our time, the most painful and decisive one for its future. Theatre as art interested him only as a point of departure and he did not nourish the illusion that its potential future depended on aesthetics and originality.

Grotowski simply asked: what do we want to do with theatre?

Prophetic questions do not coin new words. They subvert common expressions. How often have we heard this question: “what is the use of theatre?”. True answers do not reach us through words. They are facts.

What do we want to do with theatre? Shall we resign ourselves to being the custodians of its forms, steered by tourists, functionaries of patronage and rules of the solemn museum of the “living

performance”? Or will we decide ourselves through our actions *why* this craft is so necessary to each of us, *what* should be extracted out of this prestigious find from a society which does not exist anymore, *with whom* we want to struggle to recognize the secrets and the potentialities of our craft, *how* and *where* we can to re-melt and re-use its materials and substances.

Grotowski transformed a way of saying, a general uneasiness and the discontent of theatre people into a *true* question. He answered with the evidence of accomplished facts. He took from the theatrical craft what could be used to create a rigorous discipline of freedom, disconnected from metaphysics or any doctrine. He circumscribed a very particular region in the realm of *Nulle Part*: a yoga without a shared mythology. He traced the route of a vertical journey starting from theatre.

At the roots of the fundamental question Grotowski put up a totem: technique. He was not referring to the manipulation of objects and machines, but to the empirical investigation of human action, of the human being in his/her entirety and integrity. Technique was the premise for a difficult and sometimes precarious union of those parts which in daily life are divided: body and mind, word and thought, intention and action. The totem was the technique of the actor, i.e., the technique of the relationship between one human being and another. “Actor”, even if used in the singular, always implies two persons: without the spectator there is no actor, nor *Performer*, even when written with capital letters. And we, of course, may interpret, define, embody or imagine the notion of “spectator” in whatever way we want.

Identical questions – divergent answers. It is not faithful orthodoxy but the encounter through differences that allows the past to circulate within each of us in our blood system.

The realm of *Nulle Part* promises acceptance, inspires a sense of isolation and solitude, exhales chimeras and, in certain rare cases, guides towards depth. This is the technique’s reward, when we advance on its path: the awareness that constraint turns into a tool of freedom.

In the realm of *Nulle Part*, paths originating from distant places meet and blend together. Other paths which have the same point of departure and seem indissoluble diverge. We can discover the steps which explore, upwards or downwards, the vertical geography. And we can find fortresses with ‘walls of wind’ which make it possible for us *to live in* our time *without belonging to* our time. In the paradoxical space of the theatre we can construct a *history parallel* to the History which englobes and drags us, transforming values that seem naïve dreams into solid human relationships.

I speak of facts which have already taken place. A sufficiently sharp or experienced gaze is able to distinguish the subterranean history of theatre in the modern world.

What can we do with theatre? My answer, translated into words, is: make a floating island, an island of freedom. This is derisory because it is just a grain of sand in the whirl of History and does not change the world. Yet sacred because it changes us.

I experience the realm of *Nulle Part* as a kingdom which has been abandoned by its kings and queens. Its life is regulated by many kinds of discipline, but no Law. It is the place where you can say “No” without negating obligations and ties. It is the place of Refusal which does not separate itself from the surrounding reality but, on the contrary, where the act of refusing may be chiselled as a jewel, as an ensnaring fairy tale which surprises us when it starts speaking to us and about today.

Today I feel deeply touched because I am in a fairy tale, and this fairy tale is told to me in Warsaw. What place can represent a fairy tale castle better than the university of the origins of my professional path to which I return as *doctor honoris causa* in the fifth act of my life?

Nevertheless, at the same moment, I see the bones which the bulldozers dug up in the ruins of Warsaw in the beginning of the 1960es. I belong to a generation which was hungry for books. When we raised our eyes from them we saw bones in the earth and debris taken away by lorries during the rebuilding of Europe after World War II. We discovered another hunger in addition to

the hunger for knowledge and books. It was as if we could not breath without reading, yet books were there to hide the truth.

For some of us who enjoyed the eloquence and poetry of books beside the horrid muteness of the bones of anonymous victims, theatre was a bridge between the hunger for knowledge and the hunger for what is revealed when knowledge is abandoned. This bridge can be built methodically, according to the best rules of architecture, but it is not made for stopping as though it were the finishing line.

Yes, theatre is art. But its beauty is not enough to ravish us. This art was depreciated for a long time. Finally it was appreciated and received the deserved recognition. My colleagues of the Odin Teatret and I are deeply moved and thank you for your appreciation and recognition. But we have seen the bones. One cannot pretend that the pomp of theatre ceremonies and their solemnity appeases our hunger. The vast palaces in fairy tales are there to visit and pass through. If we stay in them, we turn into illusory figures in the hands of witches and ogres whom we have become.

I love theatre because illusions repel me. I don't believe that discontent – this sense of rebellion which drives me on – may in the end die away. When it is reduced to silence, I smell the odour of lies in my nostrils. If the discontent were to fade, I would not know what to do with theatre.

To repeat, to repeat, to repeat. Action, in theatre, is accomplished to be repeated, not to reach a goal and go beyond it. To repeat means to resist, to oppose the spirit of the time, its promises and threats. Only if it is repeated and fixed, can a score begin to live.

More snow will fall and again it will be freezing cold. Inside this laborious discontent made of actions, and applying this craft of dissidence which I call theatre, my Odin colleagues and I try not to surrender to the enticements of progress and the impetus of the time. Without anxiety and with our beloved dead at our side, we watch how we fade away bit by bit, day after day.

Once again, my Odin Teatret's colleagues and I thank you. To those who today are 20 or 25 years old, we have no other lesson to hand down in words from this chair.