

Eugenio BARBA

## IN PRAISE OF FIRE

*Speech of thanks on the occasion of the Honorary Doctorate bestowed on Eugenio Barba by the National University of the Arts (IUNA) of Buenos Aires, on 5 December 2008.*

*My speech is like smoke and my body is the burning.* I begin with this sentence in order to prevent the title of my speech - "In praise of fire" - sounding like a defense for destruction. It is intended, instead, as a celebration of transformation, and thus of resistance. The initial image is the title of a play by Deb Margolin, an American actor and playwright, a pugnacious artist who often performs alone. Her body is her stage, and "burning" becomes synonymous with being-in-life.

For centuries the spectators have seen the actors by the flickering light of candles and gas, in an atmosphere alive with sudden and volatile shadows, far removed from the docility of our domesticated electricity.

Each of us has at least once experienced a performance that has scorched us, reducing to ashes our idea of theatre, the actor's art and our role as spectator.

Children and old men, people in love or insane, have watched unforgettable and fugitive performances in the dancing glimmer of a fireplace or a bonfire in a field.

There are the torches which visionary artists have cast into the practice and the conception of our craft, setting off fires fed by the coherence of their lives.

Theatre is "the land of fire".

When speaking of performance, especially among professionals and connoisseurs, the idea of fire returns as a leitmotiv: the *fire* of the acting, the audience that is *inflamed*, the *ardour* of passions and applause. When a comedy is *brilliant* and *sparks*, when the tragic actor *glows* with fervour and rebellion or the actress *blazes* with scorn or a desire for revenge, the spectators, petrified yet happy, are touched by doubt: is it just their impression or is a fire brooding somewhere?

For centuries theatres could not withdraw from their sudden but binding appointment with the flames. On average, they burnt down once every fifty years.

All the theatres in San Francisco were destroyed in the three-day conflagration after the earthquake of 18 April 1906: Grand Work House, Tivoli Work House, Alcazar, Fischer's & Alcazar, California, Columbia, Majestic, Central, Orpheum and the Chinese playhouse in Chinatown.

The Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, the Châtelet and the Théâtre Lyrique were razed to the ground during the Paris Commune in 1871, when the Communards set public buildings on fire.

José Posada immortalised the devastation by fire of the theatre in Puebla in a lithograph that sold like hot cakes in Mexico, while the burning down of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1942, caused by German bombs, inspired Stalin's speech which ignited the patriotic spirit of his people.

A whole theatrical generation perished in a blaze on 5 September 2005 in the theatre of Good Sweif, in southern Egypt: more than forty artists, directors, critics and scholars watching *Grab Your Dreams* by Mohamed Shawky. They were the core of the theatrical movement of the '70s and '80s.

At times a burning theatre seems to force its inhabitants - the actors - towards other cities, towards exile or new adventures, as was the case with Wilhelm Meister in the novel by Goethe. Or as the anonymous artist imagined when he drew the well-known actor Jodelet running for his life from the fire of the Parisian Théâtre du Marais in 1634. However, if these were catastrophes, how can we consider them as metaphors?

The whole Dutch Pavilion in the Colonial Exhibition was reduced to ashes, the only exception being its theatre. It was the somnolent summer of 1931 in Paris, and the newspapers moved their readers with descriptions of the Balinese performers escaping with their gilded costumes clutched tightly to their breast. Many Parisians went to see the performances of these eccentric dancers, ready to risk their life to save their disguises. Among them, Antonin Artaud.

At the end of the Preface to *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud speaks of fire. He appears to hint at martyrdom, but in reality he is questioning life. He clarifies what culture ought to be and what it is not. The smoke of his words is indeed exhaled by a body. Therefore it is necessary to translate his words to the letter, as a mantra against the spirit of his century and the one in which we live:

*“When we use the word “life”, we must be aware that we are not referring to life as we recognise it from the surface of facts, but to that fragile and unstable centre which forms don’t reach. And if in our time there is something hellish and truly accursed, it is our artistic hanging around forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake and signaling through the flames.”*

Artaud doesn't explicitly speak about actors. Yet those victims, those signs through the flames and that stake have been instantly understood as an extreme and ideal image of the actor. Julian Beck and Judith Malina made this image into the cornerstone of their Living Theatre, a *theatre-in-life*.

Antonin Artaud was perhaps the poorest, most wretched and, from a professional standpoint, the less authoritative among the protagonists of the theatre's Great Reform in the first half of the last century. From the point of view of the craft, he has little to teach us. Yet, today we count him among our teachers, although he never was one. He was the student of his own divided soul and learnt a lot from it. He linked the heart of the theatrical art indissolubly to the sufferings of the ailing soul. Artaud never laid down arms, and throughout his life he kept on succumbing and rising again to fight. Up until the night when he took off a shoe and, holding it in his hand like an amulet, set out on his final journey.

Artaud pointed out to us, people of the theatre, not the secrets of the craft but that which we, through the craft, have to endure and perhaps hope for: exile. This is only a tiny part of our profession. But without this tiny part, art and craft are just a “straw fire”.

We know why theatre buildings have burnt and burn: because of carelessness, the cruelty of the Heavens, speculation, gangsterism, fascism, revenge and intimidation or just old age.

In the theatre, in this “land of fire”, two different natures materialise. The one is catastrophe, the other transformation. The one destroys, the other refines, strengthens the iron and separates the gold from the mud. I speak in praise of this second fire. From this second fire our profession draws its life and value: its *dance*.

Do we dance? Yes, we do. Or rather, no, we don't dance. We make theatre. But who can say where the difference lies, or where the border passes?

We dance always, but not always in order to adjust to an aesthetical genre. We dance as if on glowing coals, because this dance is essentially a non-destructive refusal, a non-violent war against nature which subdues us. And therefore, more or less knowingly, a rejection of the history to which we belong. *As if* we had wings; *as if* mighty roots sank deep into the earth under our feet; *as if* our “I” was another; *as if* we were free. But humbly, because for us this dance must have the humility of a craft, and is barely more than the exercise of the *as if*. And for the spectators it is first of all a pastime.

If there is something that is apparently impossible to associate with the praise of fire, it is the idea of the pastime. And yet...

Our art is not made to be art. It doesn't strive to reach a definitive form. It endeavours to vanish. It is an archaic art, not only because today it is excluded or it excludes itself from the main performance

genre of our time – that of the reproduced and reproducible image. But above all because in the guise of a pastime it can conceal a spiritual search, a process that shakes, strengthens and at times changes our consciousness, introducing us to a condition governed by other values.

We must remain with our feet firmly planted on the earth and our eyes on the box office. But we must not forget that theatre is fiction in transit toward another reality, toward the refusal of the reality that we presume to know. Theatre is fiction that can change both those people who act as well as those who observe. Nothing grandiloquent, menacing, heretical, extreme. Just a pastime.

Being a pastime is the elementary level of our art, as is bread for Mediterranean food. You can't eat without bread. But in the end bread alone is not enough.

The pastime may be a value in itself. When time seems never to pass, for those deprived of freedom or those who stand before their own suffering, the amputation of their identity or their death, the pastime can be a formula for life, a resilience to horror. Dostoevski tells of a vaudeville played with aristocratic clothes and feet in chains in a Siberian camp. But for the convicts it was a way *to escape into another life*. Performing plays as amateurs, during the years of the bloody war between the army and the Shining Path, in Ayacucho in Peru, was an action close to heroism for a group of young people I knew. They were also actors because they longed to have a *lifeboat* to escape from the horror.

In Europe, during the Renaissance, one of the ways of enlivening a feast was a real fire. The wealthy host to the festivities bought one or two houses, chased away their inhabitants and filled the buildings with artificial fires and gun powder, setting fire to them. Such performances were much applauded.

For those who are not directly involved, a fire can be a show. And for those who recount it, it can become a metaphor for the disruptive strength of the theatre in the heart of a city, or of its nature as a hotbed of moral infection. At the same time it might be an image of the actors' condition of "homelessness", always on the verge of being expelled: by fire, fundamentalists, those in power or economic exploitation.

Perhaps I ought not to use fire as a metaphor in the country where the Picadero theatre was burnt in 1981.

When I read that in Argentina the peace of cemeteries reigned, that there were thirty thousand *desaparecidos*, thousands of political prisoners and a million exiles, that the people's leaders were dead, incarcerated or had left the country, and that any form of organisation seemed impossible, then the initiative of Teatro Abierto appears to me as *a dance on glowing coals* by a handful of actors and authors, stage designers and technicians, no more than a couple of hundred, opposing the violence of History.

The dictatorship's thugs who set fire to the Picadero theatre in August 1981 had not foreseen that their criminal act would foster a vaster *dance*. Numerous directors of commercial theatres offered to continue Teatro Abierto's initiative, dozens of painters donated their works to collect funds, while well known personalities from the arts expressed their adhesion.

The writer Carlos Somigliana described this *dance* thus: "The underlying objective of Teatro Abierto was to be able to look again at our faces without being ashamed."

There is a fire which cannot be extinguished in the consciences of theatre people as well as in the memory of theatre buildings.

The evening of 7 May 1772, in Amsterdam, during *Le déserteur* by Monsigny, a comic opera in three acts, a fire ravaged the Schouwburg theatre, taking eighteen victims. In just three years, a larger, more imposing building was erected.

Up to 1941, the Schouwburg was the city's main playhouse, situated in the Plantagebuurt in the heart of the old Jewish quarter. In October 1941, the Germans who had occupied Holland changed its

name to Joodsche Schouwburg (Jewish Theatre) to be used only by Jewish actors, musicians and spectators. In September 1942 the theatre was closed and became an assembling centre. One hundred and four thousand Jewish men, women and children were herded into it and from there sent to the extermination camps in Germany and Poland.

From a centre of culture and enjoyment the Schouwburg became a sinister place of anguish and pain. After the war that space could not resume its original function and remained closed for years. It was designated as a memorial. Today, entering into the ex-theatre, we see an eternal flame burn.

With this image of a fire as pure memory, burning without the smoke of words and without bodies, I could close my speech.

I will conclude, however, with an imaginary toast as is the custom in theatre, when we resort to mime instead of material objects.

Let's imagine that here in front of me, on this academic table, there is a bottle of beer. And let's return to the banks of the Thames, to one of our ancient theatrical fatherlands.

We find the news of the first fire in the history of European theatre in a letter by the English aristocrat Sir Henry Watton, dated 2 July 1613 and sent to Sir Henry Bacon. He starts by announcing that he will put all political discussions and state arguments aside, wishing to recount the latest news from the riverside.

Sir Watton reports that "The King's Actors", Shakespeare's company, has staged a new play, *All Is True*. The performance was sumptuous, with magnificent costumes and carpets on the stage, a richer and more stately party than a court ceremony. During the performance, canon salutes were fired and a few sparks landed on the thatched roof, causing the total destruction of the building in less than an hour.

We know that within one year the Globe was rebuilt, this time with a tiled roof. In 1642 the Puritans, in their religious ardour, closed all playhouses, including the Globe whose architectural shape sank into oblivion. A few decades later, when theatre was allowed again, the professionals adopted the Italian stage. More than three centuries went by and the Globe, one of our myths, was resuscitated. The remains of the former building were discovered in 1989 on the banks of the Thames and, on the initiative of Sam Wanamaker, the American actor and director, a new Globe was reconstructed in 1997 similar to the ancient Elizabethan model and close to the place of the original one.

Sir Watton knew all too well that a drama should end with the light touch of a farce, and he concluded his letter reassuring Sir Henry Bacon that only one of the spectators had risked his life. His trousers had caught fire and he would probably have been roasted alive if it were not for a jovial drunkard who had extinguished the flames with his bottle of beer.

Among so many fires, would it not it be appropriate to offer ourselves a cold beer?

*Translation: Judy Barba*