

Eugenio Barba

## **THE THEATRE INTELLECTUAL AGAINST THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PRESENT**

The name of Christian Ludvigsen has been linked to that of Odin Teatret ever since we first toured in Denmark in 1965, and later moved from Norway to Holstebro in June 1966.

Holstebro is not far from Århus where Christian Ludvigsen taught at the University in the newly established institute of dramaturgy. I remember with gratitude the attitude with which he approached our activity, his keen interest and trust. All of this was of enormous help to us in our beginnings when we *made* theatre and *thought* about it in a way which was not easily recognisable by others.

We were forced to be different, and Christian Ludvigsen was one of those who knew how to recognise a value in this difference which needed to be defended.

We were autodidactic and we were foreigners. We could try to do a bad imitation of the best professional theatre. Or we could invent our *own* theatre and our *own* way of being professionals. We did it with the wholesome rigour and jacobinism of youth. It is natural that the reactions were tinted with incomprehension, irony or indifference. People asked: is what they are doing really theatre? Is it of any use to people? Do they deserve subsidies? Christian Ludvigsen was one of those who explained why such an anomalous and isolated theatre as Odin Teatret was at that time, had the right to exist and be supported by the community.

This is one of the functions of intellectuals who belong to the culture of the theatre, whether historians, critics or theoreticians: to defend weak theatres, those extraneous to the prevailing tastes and criteria. This defence is not only a question of well pondered and historically rooted arguments, but also the stance of someone who has a title, a role and cultural prestige.

Reading this, many will smile: "Here we have the typical way of thinking of theatre people. For them intellectuals are merely tools to ensure them sustenance, recognition and publicity". Their smile is out of place. This they will easily understand if only they have the patience to reflect upon some general features of the culture of the theatre which is constantly threatened by its indissoluble bond with the present.

What would our artistic landscape be if, as in a new Atlantis, all texts, paintings, music and films had disappeared - works which, when first created, were not considered deserving to exist? Among these "rejected" works we know today that there are many masterpieces which our civilisation could not do without. The works made by human

actions, products of theatres, are however unable to endure a first phase of indifference or condemnation, as can those made up of words, colours, sounds written on paper, images recorded on film or electronic waves. These can withstand time. Theatre performances are unable to benefit from delays: they must be approved immediately when born, otherwise they don't exist and never will.

This implies that theatre life risks losing the contribution of those works unsuitable to the present, but which may already have a foot in the future and are sources of energy for the development of other artistic forms. When the human being lives at the mercy of the values of the present alone, this is the sign of a state of barbarism. In theatre it is essential to find the forces able to oppose the dictatorship of the present. One of these forces can be constituted by a particular type of spectator. These are minority spectators, able to compensate for their limited number by the weight of their knowledge, experience and prestige.

It is important to avoid all misunderstandings on this point: it is not a minority wishing to impose its own tastes on the majority of the spectators. On the contrary, it is a restricted group of people who nevertheless can strengthen that which otherwise would be shipwrecked among indifference and general incomprehension. It is not a question of opposition between the many and the few, but of an attitude of professional ethics in order to create a counterweight to the irremediably ephemeral character of the theatre doomed to be enslaved by the present.

It is certain that my gratitude towards Christian Ludvigsen is motivated by many personal reasons. But it also arises from considerations of a more general and objective character.

Although essential, the defender's role of the "rejected" theatre cannot last long. The "rejected", if it succeeds in living, becomes perhaps strange and different, but with a place and a role of its own in the general landscape. Our tradition suggests several roles to the intellectual who comes into contact with a theatre ensemble: playwright, dramaturg, literary adviser, ideologist, official spokesman in the world of criticism and culture. In short, the person who writes the text, composes the performance's programme, writes review or theorises. None of these functions is negative. What is negative is their stiffening in one role. Often the collaboration between theatre people and intellectuals fails or degenerates because it is organised according to an abstract division of work. In theatre, the only division of work which succeeds is that which doesn't start from a strict division of roles but develops in an organic way among the different people active in the process.

The theatre is not alive because it is a sum of specialisations, but because it is the painstaking interweaving of a fabric of relationships and a common *ethos*, in which every individual is totally committed, dissolving the specialised mask.

My collaboration with Christian Ludvigsen made me understand this from the very beginning of Odin Teatret's existence, and later several other experiences have confirmed it. If not a conscious programme, then for me this has at least become a value in my professional life.

Intellectuals who collaborate with a theatre ensemble, even when they are open-minded and professionally well prepared, cannot confine themselves to practicing that which they often call "their own competence as an intellectual". The situation forces them to choose: either to sterilise the relationship or to turn themselves into an intellectual who trespasses.

If we don't reason according to the schemes of the division of work but according to those steering any meeting between human beings, it is evident that a meeting is possible only if each part abandons his or her own territory and steps into an unknown terrain which leads beyond the safe limits of personal specialisation.

The same applies when a craftsman of the theatre meets an intellectual: it doesn't help to surrender a part of the job, to expect solutions or proposals. It is necessary to advance in the other's terrain, demanding, at the same time, that the other also enters a territory which is foreign to him.

After all, this dynamic is no different from that established between actor and director when the work grows and becomes alive.

Being an intellectual who trespasses doesn't involve advancing into territories far from one's own specialisation. It means above all to accept the relative character of one's own visions, definitions of things and their sense. We often have an excessive trust in the categories which the experts use, and we believe that their way of classifying and defining events coincides with the discovery of the true essence of these events.

From the very start, the relationship between Christian Ludvigsen and Odin Teatret was not founded on a clear definition of roles and division of work, but on proximity among individuals, on a free way to interact, which resulted, at times, in projects and common activity and, in others, remained apparently inactive for longer periods, almost in a state of listening, of contiguity and watchful expectation.

The model which was shaped with this first relationship developed through time. I believe that this model of trespassing and overcoming roles is the cause of one of the features that Odin Teatret has acquired in its long history. Today a heterogeneous and substantial entourage of intellectuals is gathered around Odin Teatret. They seem stimulated by their connection with our theatre group, and sometimes they interact among themselves as if they were a real working group. But in fact they are not, nor do they formalise their reciprocal relationships or those with the Odin. Above all, they

don't translate the web of their relationships into academic programmes of interdisciplinary research, but into a free mutual influence between individuals.

This constellation which has gradually grown during Odin Teatret's first 25 years, is at the origin of the structure of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology. The more this structure is deprived of formal bonds, the more it has given proof of its solidity. Here, theatre artists and intellectuals, expert in different disciplines, periodically come together in an environment of practical investigation and comparative study which doesn't take into consideration distinctions of roles or common aims, nor a unitary vision of the theatre, of its practice, history and theory. The stimulus to gather together comes just from trust and a mutual interest, the inclination for empirical research and the acknowledgement of the fertility of circumstances in which everyone is forced to surmount the limits of their own role and specialty.

ISTA is a place and a time in which practitioners and intellectuals can live and work closely, overcoming the fundamental gap: that which separates the experience of the actor from the experience of the spectator.

Among the different kinds of ethnocentrism there is one which doesn't depend on geography or frontiers between cultures, but on a purely theatrical perspective. This ethnocentrism scrutinises the problems of the theatre only from the point of view of the observer. This unilateral point of view, due to the fact that the observers are incapable or unable to displace themselves, makes them believe that the theatre corresponds to the face that it shows them.

This halved vision of the theatrical reality is often the cause of the missed dialogue between the theatre's observers and its practitioners. Those in the audience don't understand those on the stage. They believe they are talking about the same things and soon they realise they are talking about totally different things. The dialogue breaks down. The one who has the weakest thought, fewer weapons on the theoretical plan, or less ability in formulating ideas, takes on the view of the other. Needless to say, in the majority of cases the actors accept the views of the intellectuals even when they are aware that they conflict with their personal experience. The ethnocentrism of the observer becomes the equivalent in theatrical terms of a process of colonisation.

Moreover, the intellectual is often a "critic", an individual placed by our cultural conventions in the position of a judge, thus exerting a power whether willingly or not. It is easy to understand why often the relationship between the two hemispheres of the culture of theatre - the people of action and those of reflection - is a series of parallel monologues or polemics rather than a dialogue.

It is a shame that the function of the intellectual has been almost entirely identified with that of the critic or of the person responsible for the text to be brought to scenic

life. Or, in particular situations which deceive even more, it is identified with the figure responsible for the correct ideology. All these are false configurations of the relationship between the two hemispheres of the theatre. They have the serious defect of reproducing a hierarchy of roles which is unproductive on a practical level and unacceptable on the ethical one.

For us theatre people, the intellectual can be something more: an ally in the struggle to escape to the dictatorship of the present. Not only at the beginning, when the spirit of the time threatens every different theatre. But also subsequently, when the dictatorship of the present threatens the theatre from the inside in the form of respect for the impelling norms set by the market, the labour unions, the laws of the state and the competition. Above all, the intellectual is our best ally when our theatre, although affirming that it is artistically consistent, abdicates from the risk and the continuous effort to escape from our mannerisms.

In this very moment of danger and loss, it is particularly important to listen to those intellectuals who forged their tools by delving into the past and by facing people who are no more. I speak of those intellectuals who have a familiarity with shadows as well as with living bodies. We need them, because they help us to remember that there exists a theatre which engraves its shadow on history.