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The Five Continents of Theatre: Facts and Legends About the Material Culture of the Actor by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese (review)

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Transnational

EUGENIO BARBA. THE MOON RISES FROM THE GANGES: MY JOURNEY THROUGH ASIAN ACTING TECHNIQUES. Edited, introduced, and with an appendix by Lluís Masgrau. Photo selection and captions by Rina Skeel. Translated from the Italian by Judy Barba. Icarus Publishing Enterprise and Routledge, 2015.

THE FIVE CONTINENTS OF THEATRE: FACTS AND LEGENDS ABOUT THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE ACTOR. By Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese. Translated by Thomas Haskell Simpson. Leiden: Brill, 2019 (Italian edition, 2017).

To scholars and practitioners of world theatre, Eugenio Barba is a well-known theatre director, having founded and nurtured the experimental international troupe Odin Teatret, known widely for their community-based barter theatre and intercultural spectacles for nearly six decades. Barba's productions continue to be produced, revived, and toured by his troupe and individual performers, some of whom have been with him from the beginning. As producer, he has created a wide and deep network of "Third World Theatre" groups in Europe, South and Central America, many of whom were nurtured, trained, and even financially supported through the frequent workshops and laboratory productions Odin sponsors at their home in Holstebro, on an island in Denmark.

As an author, Barba has identified the technical and psychic qualities that make great actors and performances, expressed in

muscular prose in books that have become bibles to collaborative theatre groups around the world. In particular, *The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (Routledge 1991, Italian original, 1983), opened up new ethnographic fields in performance studies.

Because of his many enterprises, it is perhaps less obvious that Barba is also a long-term student of and collaborator with Asian performing artists. Barba's company is informed by many "classical" traditions, including ballet and ballroom dance, folk-song, ritual, and festival performances from Europe, South America, and the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. However, as is clear from this book, the greatest influence on his work is the Asian theatre. Barba has studied formal movement patterns, breathing, "becoming a character," mask-work, and *mise-en-scène* of Asian traditions including Indian *kathakali* and Odissi dance, Japanese *noh* and *kabuki* dance, Balinese masked *topeng*, and ancient *gambuh* theatre. Most of these were made through observations of training practices and productions *in situ*; others were teased out during residencies and open workshops at Odin and Barba's International School for Theatre Anthropology (ISTA).

Barba is perhaps the most profound and practical practitioner in a long tradition of theatre directors attracted to Asian theatre as inspiration and stimulation to their own work. However, as a working director, few since Craig, Eisenstein, and Peter Brook can put into words the precise technical vocabulary of astute observation coupled with a perspective of Western aesthetics, myth, and anthropology as he can. As artistic director and manager of the Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark since 1964 (he retired in 2020, passing the torch to long-term collaborator Julia Varley), Eugenio demonstrates the practical perspective of an actor, poet, and teacher's ability to offer sensory examples that are both romantic evocations yet reverberate as profound truths. Despite occasional excesses, there is a humility and purity to his work and life that comes out in this book summarizing his prolonged and profound encounters with Asian dance and theatre.

This book compiles Barba's writings over five decades on Asian theatre, including conference lectures and keynote speeches, book prologues,¹ theatre programs, and a disparate selection of essays, diary entries, and personal correspondence—many as-yet unpublished in English. The appendix also lists Asian performers who have participated in workshops and productions at Odin from 1963 to 2013 (pp. 260–277), a remarkable testament to a deep and ongoing knowledge-seeking and collaborative creativity. By taking a long sliver of one vital aspect of Barba's multifaceted career, *Ganges* provides a

fascinating accounting of the (Asian) sentimental education of a great pioneer of 20th century theatre.

Ganges is meticulously edited with an excellent introduction by long-time collaborator and scholar Lluís Magrau. He has collected these writings on Asian theatre, many offered for the first in any Western language. They were translated diligently from Italian, Danish, Portuguese into English, using an evolving terminology and theoretical approach. Each article is preceded by an introduction by Magrau, situating it within the context of Barba's work at the time and its subsequent translations in other languages. Unlike many Westerners who train in Asian arts briefly and then write about their experiences as disciples, Barba's Asian influence is rarely worn on his sleeve. He observes with a director's trained eye, not seeking to imitate exteriors but to explore practical tensions and rhythms. Odin actors might train briefly in Asian forms, but watching performances and observing training and "work-demonstrations" inspired Barba's processes. Rather than pick up on the superficial otherness of Asian forms that have excited Western practitioners and theorists—the exotic movements and chant, masked ecstasy, or stylized gender-bending—Barba hones in on the underlying process of performers' mastering codes and scripts, "pre-expressivity," and "actor's bios."

The articles included here are divided into chapters based on specific countries visited—India, Taiwan, Bali, and Japan—as well as pan-Asian perspectives. They include some of the first articles purportedly in any Western language on training on *kathakali* (1963) and Mei Lanfang and Chinese opera (1971). The seeds and flowering of his previously published ideas are present here in more rambling perambulations. We can see ideas developing that have become commonplace in actor training and theory today: the *via negativa* "way of negativity" of blockages and restrictions to acting technique that force a new, second stage presence with the surplus energies; the energy created through slowing down/speeding up; the body developing through daily, disciplined exercises; each actor developing a personal "score" even while flexibly accommodating the music and fellow performers' actions, at the same time responding to the immediate spectators. Reading *Ganges*, one comes to understand how these ideas developed, often with different nomenclature, with confusion clarified by the editor's precise historiographic emendations. The reader, like Barba himself, gains access to his thinking through "zigzags, deviations, and senseless detours" that lead, somehow, to great insight.

These selections help to locate the evolving thinking of one of this centuries' greatest scholar-practitioners on how to harvest, ethically and practically, the fruits of ancient Asian genres' training methods and

performing techniques. Long before “cultural appropriation” became a stigma, Barba was displaying how theatre artists could, and always have, entered other culture’s territory to stimulate their own, and the lending culture’s genres, to mutual benefit.

Some have argued that such borrowings and elevation of Asian performance is a continuation of the dominant Western artist and scholars’ Orientalism, a veneration/diminishment of the “exotic” east through framing it as Other. Particularly today, when “cultural appropriation” has become a call to arms, such historic intercultural collaborations may be challenged. Personally, having participated in three ISTA sessions and assisted noh actor Matsui Akira in Barba’s 2006 *Ur-Hamlet* production, it seems to me that Barba avoids the trap of cultural appropriation by concentrating on specifics, learned at reliable sources, and by asking masters to introduce their practices in their own words or training. The performers he invites are all masters of their genres, many possessing their own ideas of how their forms relate to the global context. This rarely involves appropriating specific artefacts or dances but rather to harness their energy and complexity with his own troupe in deconstructed classics like *Hamlet*, *Faust*, or Andersen’s fairy-tales, drilling down to discover practical commonalities of technique, breath and movement control, codes of action, vocal vitality, and spectacular and surprising mise-en-scène. However, this book offers no simple recipes for creating performance, only an antidote to in-grown Western training systems, “useful stratagems in preventing mechanical habits.”

Although the scrupulous compiling and editing that went into this book provides a grand scope of Barba’s Asian influence, there remains another project to be written. What about Barba’s counter-influence on the masters he worked with? For example, in Japan, how was his approach to observation of workshops to extract potent, transferrable techniques absorbed by influential noh performers and brothers Kanze Hideo and Hisao, directors Terayama Shuji and Suzuki Tadashi, kyogen actor Nomura Kosuke, and buyo dancer Azuma Katsuko, when they returned to Japan and continued their own careers? The careers of Sanjukta Panigrahi and Wayan Dibia are also inextricably linked with Barba as true collaborators on a multi-decade exploration of performance practice, pedagogy, and creation that have made a lasting impact. Furthermore, each of the dedicated Odin actors, and many other long-term participants, could probably write their own books about their own understandings and techniques acquired from these Asian encounters. Even the ISTA interpreters and facilitators of Asian performers such as the late Cristina Wistari of Bali and myself

were also inspired in their scholarship and performance practice by these encounters.

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Another subsequent valuable addition to Barba's canon is *The Five Continents of Theatre: Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor*. Meant to complement Barba and Savarese's analysis of psycho-physical actorly presence in *Theatre Anthropology*, this volume is grounded in the fundamental journalistic questions: When (ritual, festival, and entertainment circumstances), What (the physical stage), How (on actor training systems, troupe organization, and production circumstances), Whom (spectators and promotion), and Why (politics, aesthetics, and economics of performance).

Each chapter contains short and long-form essays, chronologies, biographies, and entertaining "debates" by polemic stand-ins for the authors. However, the reason the book is so hard to put down (and to pick up; it is a hefty 400-page tome!) are the illustrations. A wealth of exquisite, well-chosen drawings, paintings, posters, and photographs are presented, collage-like, on large-format pages. Lengthy captions explain the particulars of each, so the effect is not a mere hodgepodge, but juxtapositions that open up correlations and significant distinctions. Reflective of both authors' long-standing interest in the intercultural, the rich Asian pictorial expressions of millennia are present throughout. It is a volume to devour like popcorn, surveying at dizzying speed the entire cinematic history of global human theatrical expression, inclusive and stimulating.²

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NOTES

1. Full disclosure: Barba kindly offered the epilogue to my own edited volume on *The History of Japanese Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). I attended three of his ISTA sessions, and interpreted for noh actor Matsui Akira in his *Ur-Hamlet* production (2009).

2. For more videos of Odin Teatret, including the Bali/noh *Ur-Hamlet* at the Ravenna Festival see <https://odinteatret.dk/research/ista/>.