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Eugenio Barba: The **tradition** of the **impossible**

Eugenio Barba in conversation with **Antonis Diamantis**



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Eugenio Barba: The tradition of the impossible

Eugenio Barba in conversation with Antonis Diamantis



Introduction

Eugenio Barba recently turned 85 years old. One would expect that, at this age, he would have decided to reduce his artistic pursuits and creations. On the contrary, as you will read below in the interview he gave to me in July 2021, he has started a number of new activities in the fields of pedagogy and research of the performing arts, and is also preparing his new theatrical production with actors at the 'Odin Theater', the theater he created 55 years ago in Oslo, Norway, staging a show that will have the myth of Oedipus as a point of reference. And all this while continuing, tirelessly, his involvement with the International School of Theater Anthropology (ISTA), since he not only presents in digital form ten new courses entitled 'I am learning to see: The presence of the actor / dancer and the spectator's perception' —where he teaches the principles of a performer's presence— but also organises another ISTA session that will take place between 12-22 October 2021 on the island of Favignana in Italy. Along with his new creation, the "Barba-Barley Foundation" publishes the very important Journal of Theater Anthropology on the subject of Anthropological Theater (<https://jta.ista-online.org/>). Theatre Anthropology, together with the "Third

Theater" — a term introduced in a text by Barba in 1976, at the Meeting for the Third Theater in Belgrade, which is essentially a "manifesto" of the theatre — are two of Barba's most important contributions to the pedagogy of theater, in understanding the stage principles that govern it but also the relationship of theatre and artists with society.

But what is Theatre Anthropology? Is it science? This term was first mentioned by Barba at the International Meeting 'Theatrical Research and Cultural Multiculturalism' in Trapani, Palermo, Italy, organised by the Libero Theater in collaboration with the School of Philosophy and Language of the University of Palermo, where entitled "Knowing or Understanding" (published in Journal of Theater Anthropology/JTA, number 1-The Origin sp. 10-12) states:

"... There are two possibilities in human life to know and to learn. One through a logical, analytical, linear, intellectual process; the other through experience. They are two equally important ways of coming into contact, of absorbing, transforming and distilling what we live into knowledge. These two ways are so complementary that they cannot be translated into

each other's language. For me, theatre is experience. It is not linear rational knowledge, but simultaneity. It is a dialectic between a series of elements that coexist in the space and time of the theatre performance and make it different from other expressive means requiring linearity (...) The term anthropology, as it was defined at the beginning of the 20th century, is the study of man at a biological and socio-cultural level. Theatre anthropology means the study of man in a performing situation on a biological and socio-cultural level. Is such a science possible? (...) My lecture ended by introducing my project for a school where teachers teach nothing. It was ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology (...) The difficulty is to find pedagogues who do not teach anything so it is impossible to imitate them. Hence my choice of oriental actors. It would be absurd to learn oriental techniques for a short time (...) Oriental actors allow us to understand with the body. We must be able to see not the conventions and styles, but the laws that guide their stage presence, and apply these in our European bodies. Starting from there, one can individually build a new pedagogy that is based on this understanding of certain processes in one's own body (...) Theatre anthropology is the study of the behaviour of human beings who use their physical/mental presence (body/mind) according to principles different from those of everyday life in a situation of organised representation. This extra-daily use of the body is what we call technique. A cross-cultural analysis shows that the actor/dancer's work is the result of the fusion of three aspects that refer to three distinct levels of organisation:

1. The actors/dancers' personality, their sensitivity, artistic intelligence, social persona: those characteristics that make them unique and uncopyable.
2. The particularity of the traditions and the historical-cultural context through which the actors/dancers' unrepeatable personality manifests itself.
3. The use of the body/mind according to extra-daily body techniques based on recurrent and transcultural principles. These recurring principles constitute what theatre anthropology defines as the field of pre-expressivity.

The first aspect is individual. The second is common to all who belong to the same performance genre. Only the third concerns all the actors/dancers of all times and cultures: it can be called the "biological" level of theatre and dance (...)..."

During the ceremony where Eugenio Barba was awarded an honorary doctorate of the Department of Theatrical Studies of the University of Peloponnese, held on 3 July 2019, Maria Velioti-Georgopoulou stated the following:

"...Thus, he introduces the term pre-expressivity 'used in relation to the actor, in relation to someone, who uses an extra-everyday body technique, that is, beyond the usual everyday technique, exclusively in a situation organised representation' (Barba 2008,

p. 179). Pre-expressiveness (of the actor) is the pre-eminent object of study of the pioneering research branch of Theatrical Anthropology introduced by Eugenio Barba.

The study of the pre-expressivity of the actors or, as he tells us, 'the study of the actor and for the actor', does not mean that he is not approached as part of the reality to which he belongs or that the socio-cultural — ultimately historical — context is sacrificed on the altar of the stage act alone. According to Eugenio Barba, the burden of the study falls on the actor, on his stage presence, as through the technique of pre-expressiveness he is the one who will capture the viewer ..."

(Published under the title "In praise of Eugenio Barba: honoring his values", in the magazine Pelopas-Interdisciplinary Journal of the University of Peloponnese, Volume 3, issue 2 July - December 2019)

My relationship with him goes back 30 years, when I first visited him in Holstebro, the headquarters of the Odin Theatre in Denmark. The acquaintance with him, with his work, but also with his actors, was to influence my theatrical future through collaborations in European programmes as well as participations in the Odin Theatre Festival, seminars organised in Greece (Athens and Heraklion, Crete, now headquarters of Omma Studio (see Roberta Carreri 'Traces' p.282–283), trips to Holstebro with performances by Omma Studio there and, in particular, with the establishment of the Center for Theatrical Anthropology in Heraklion, Crete in February 2020, which to date has organised two conferences in Rethymno and Chania in collaboration with the University of Crete with the participation of various Greek and international academics and aims to organise a third conference in Patras in May 2022 in collaboration with the University of Patras. Eugenio Barba is the Honorary President of our Center (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/354578852581835>).

Eugenio Barba was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese in Greece (3 July 2019). He has also been honored with many international awards: the Danish Academy Award, the Mexican Theater Critics Award, the Pirandello International Award and the Thalia Award of the International Theater Critics Association.

In 2000 he was awarded the Sonning Prize, which is awarded every two years by the University of Copenhagen to individuals who have made significant contributions to the development of European culture, and honorary doctorates by several universities: the Universities of Bologna, Warsaw, Plymouth and Edinburgh to the Universities of Hong Kong, Buenos Aires, Tallinn and Shanghai. He has directed 81 theatrical productions with the Odin Theatre and many more Street Theater performances at Festivals and Theatrical Encounters. In recent years, interest in Barba and his theatrical studies has seen a boom in Greece and, as a result, he and his actors visit the country and hold seminars. At the same time, the translation and publication of a significant number of his books has begun, helping in the understanding and comprehension of his overall work.

The conversation that follows took place in the summer of 2021.



Antonis Diamantis

Antonis Diamantis: *Recently, with Julia Varley, Odin Teatret actress, you established the Fondazione Barba Varley. What does this creation mean for you?*

Eugenio Barba: When I was young, I looked at renowned theatre directors and asked myself: why don't they take advantage of their reputation in order to help others? I am now an old man and after more than 60 years in theatre I have accumulated a certain capital of recognition. For many years Julia Varley had wanted to create a Foundation to support initiatives by women in theatre. I have no money with which to contribute, but I imagined that my name could help support her intention.

This was the first seed of the Fondazione Barba Varley which we had been discussing for several years and which was legally established in late 2020. Soon both Julia and I understood that our Fondazione could be a vehicle to continue the cultural politics or political culture that has impregnated our life at Odin Teatret. This involved widening our objectives. For this reason, the Fondazione turns to the submerged culture of the "nameless" in theatre. Its purpose is to support fields of action animated by people who are disadvantaged by gender, ethnicity, geography, age, way of thinking and acting inside and outside theatre.

A.D.: *When you mention the "nameless", those who are not the protagonists in the books of theatre history, are you thinking of theatre groups which you call Third Theatre?*

E.B.: Our Fondazione is related to the visions, interests and fields of action of women and men who, from the Living Theatre in the United States to Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium in Europe, from La Candelaria in Latin America to the Red Tent of the Karakumi Theatre in Japan, have grafted the life of the theatre onto the reality of life in a different way.

We think of the groups and theatre artists who, since the 1970s, have established themselves as autonomous cells of a new system of production and relationships, demonstrating the transformative function of theatre for those who participate in its processes and for those who benefit from its results.

This ethical-professional heritage is a source of inspiration and a concrete example for anyone who today wants to fight for different modes of actor-spectator relationship in an age eager for change. What would we be without the awareness of what no longer exists? It helps to know that there is a Fondazione that appreciates *impossible* projects.

A.D.: *What you mean by impossible projects?*

E.B.: There is a *tradition of the impossible* in theatre. This is confirmed by the lives of Eleonora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt,

Isadora Duncan, Konstantin Stanislavski, Ellen Terry, Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Helena Modrzejewska, Adolphe Appia, María Guerrero, Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht.

These artists were able to imagine and, at times, realise a theatre considered impossible by their contemporaries. Today they appear to us as pioneers who transcended the horizon of theatre, lending another dimension to our profession which arose as entertainment.

It is in this *tradition of the impossible* that our Fondazione has its roots. It is a tradition that goes beyond a First Theatre centred on text and a Second Theatre devoted to experimentation. It resurfaces in the varied culture of the Third Theatre groups and of many other theatres that operate on geographical, social and artistic peripheries.

A.D.: *Could you describe the activities of your Fondazione?*

E.B.: The activities of the Fondazione Barba Varley for 2021 include scholarships, the establishment of itinerant centres, the publication and presentation in Italy of the book *Third Theatre. A Battle Cry*, the editing and publication of *JTA - Journal of Theatre Anthropology*, the online conversations *Constellations of the Nameless*, and a session of ISTA/NG, International School of Theatre Anthropology–New Generation on the island of Favignana, Italy (12-22 October). Finally, the Fondazione awards a Barba Varley Award which this year will be conferred on the network of Mexican journalists engaged in investigating the *desaparecidos*, and to a collective supporting the families of the *desaparecidos* in Mexico.

A.D.: *You and Julia keep creating initiatives which weave relationships and collaborations. What are the Fondazione's expectations in organising a session of ISTA/NG (International School of Theatre Anthropology – New Generation) on the island of Favignana together with the Italian theatre groups Linee Libere and Teatro Proskenion, the Polish Grotowski Institute and the Danish Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium/Odin Teatret?*

E.B.: A huge part of the Fondazione's energy is devoted to PROSK - A PROJECT FOR SHARING KNOWLEDGE. This transmission and spreading of know-how and technical information concerning the craft of the actor/dancer takes place through different channels. The first channel is a written communication in the shape of *JTA - Journal of Theatre Anthropology* which is available in both hard copy and digital form and can be downloaded for free ([Journal of Theatre Anthropology \(ista-online.org\)](http://JournalofTheatreAnthropology.org)). It is an annual publication in English, French and Spanish.

The second channel of PROSK deals with a series of ten films about theatre anthropology. They show previously unseen documentation from the various ISTA sessions and connect the principles of theatre anthropology to the creative principles recurring in other artistic fields like painting, sculpture and poetry. The films each last an hour and have been composed and edited by me and Julia Varley together with the Italian film-maker Claudio Coloberti. They will be ready in October 2021.

The third channel is the session of ISTA/NG (International School of Theatre Anthropology – New Generation) which

will take place on the island of Favignana (Italy) from 12 to 22 October 2021. Its theme is: *The Presence of the Actor and the Perception of the Spectator*.

In the session of ISTA/NG, theatre and dance artists from Japan, Bali, India, Brazil, Argentina and Europe will introduce the participants to the pre-expressive level of their styles, i.e. the level of scenic presence. These artists will analyse the first steps of their apprenticeship and exemplify, through demonstrations and practical work, how they learned and personalised their specific technique. The participants will have the opportunity to experience their "first day" while becoming aware of the principles which give life to the physical/mental know-how of an actor/dancer.

A.D.: *You have toured the world for more than fifty years with Odin Teatret's performances, ISTA sessions, pedagogical seminars, workshops, masterclasses and European Union projects. How much has meeting extraordinary people and civilizations influenced your work and life?*

E.B.: You forget that I am an emigrant and I was not yet 18 when I left Italy and settled in Norway. My whole life has been an endless reactive exposure to people, places and startling circumstances. This had a deep impact on me. I had just finished my high school at the military college in Naples. I was able to translate a dialogue of Plato from Greek and to read Catullus's love poems in Latin, but I could not speak a single foreign language. In Oslo, I sank into an abyss of incomprehensibility. I moved in a universe of indecipherable sounds and struggled with all my senses to find my way in this culture so different from mine. I tried hard to understand what people were saying, my daily sustenance was at stake. I found a job at a sheet metal workshop and learned how to be a welder.

This long period of incomprehensibility transformed my perception about people's behaviour and social relationships and developed a propensity to decipher intonations of the voice and impulses of the body. I scrutinised the tiniest details: the way of sitting, the postures, the kind of tension in the fingers, the directions of the gaze, the inflections of the voice, the creases around the mouth - an encouraging smile or a wry grimace. I used all my energy to exorcise the trauma of uprooting and incommunicability until my progress in the Norwegian language allowed me to have confidence in verbal expression.

I had become aware, however, that the human animal has three vehicles of communication: words and their meanings; the tones of voice or the way of singing their emotional charge of communication; finally, the physical tensions, the dynamisms of behaviour, gesticulation and mimicry that do not mean, but say.

This initiation into deciphering incomprehensibility was a preparation for theatre work that I began ten years later. When the actors and I left Norway and moved with Odin Teatret to Denmark, we went through the same experience of losing our common language, Norwegian. We were forced to create performances amputated from the roots that constitute one of the foundations of the bond between actors and spectators: a shared language. Even today, behind my social mask and professional assurance, I feel like a skinless body which reacts to the least tones of voice or slightest gestures of people addressing me.

A.D.: *You are one of the few known directors who influenced the course of theatre in the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, this year you gave up leadership of the theatre you established in 1964, although you are still directing your actors. Why did you make this decision? What are your plans for the future as a director of Odin Teatret and as a writer of many books about the meaning and mission of theatre and the actor's craft? Could you tell us something about your new projects?*

E.B.: Over the course of 57 years, together with my actors, I managed to transform the small Odin Teatret into a Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (NTL), with a panoply of performances, didactic initiatives, research into theatre anthropology, a publishing house, a film company, sociological surveys, Festive Weeks in the community of Holstebro, a festival for women in theatre and an exceptional digitalised Archive with unique documentation on Grotowski, Asian theatres, group theatres and of course Odin Teatret. Today NTL is a conglomerate of many autonomous activities steered by different artists and their own collaborators. It is this dynamic diversity which has characterised until today our professional environment in Holstebro and been an inspiration to many people.

All these activities presume not only knowledge and experience, but also innovative energy and daring which only young people possess. I wanted a young generation to take over while the old nucleus of actors and I could concentrate on making one more performance. I stepped down on January 1st, 2021, and handed the artistic and administrative responsibility over to Per Kap Bech Jensen.

Today in Holstebro I am focusing on rehearsing *Thebes at the Time of the Yellow Fever*. The Greek town and the saga of Oedipus and his family appear to me as a reflection of our lacerated epoch. The performance should be ready next autumn. The rest of my energy is invested in the Fondazione Barba Varley with its Project for Sharing Knowledge.

A.D.: *What is the meaning of training a performer today in this global situation of pandemic?*

E.B.: I regularly carry out teaching activities in the field of directing and theatre anthropology. Since 1964 I have had contact with generations from different cultures and nationalities who approached theatre in accordance with the spirit of the time: sometimes revolt and experimentation, at other times civil commitment or calculation, and still others resignation or disorientation.

Anyone who crosses the sea or Europe to come to the small Danish town of Holstebro to share my knowledge and that of my actors is driven by a motivation that time and the vicissitudes of history do not change. They want to learn, they are thirsty for knowledge, they are eager to experience a change in their way of thinking, acting, engaging themselves. My relationship with an actor who has been with me for decades or with a young man or woman who follows me for a short time is the same. I demand the impossible from them. In our profession, the impossible is the possible that takes more time.

Theatre has no meaning in itself. We who do theatre breathe a meaning into our craft. Each person working in

this profession, established with the purpose of entertaining, injects into it his or her personal dreams, ambitions, ingenuity and scepticism. Theatre will go on in spite of financial crisis, pandemics and wars. And each generation will bring about its own surprising solutions in a future where technology is becoming a stimulating competitive sparring partner.

A.D.: *What is the future of theatre?*

E.B.: Let me answer like a Pythia. The human body is tragicomic and locked up in a cage of conventions and prejudices. The only thing that matters is passion to free oneself from the cage and keep the flame alive until you are ninety. Passion is manifested by constantly throwing pebbles into the pond in which we are immersed. The pebbles cause tiny ripples in the form of circles that move away, a minute energy that enlightens a few and makes others laugh. Then there are those who earn their bread by deciphering our circles in the water.

A.D.: *You are the founder of theatre anthropology. What is the necessity for it and what, in the future, will be the value of its results upon the research into the performer's craft and the scholars' studies?*

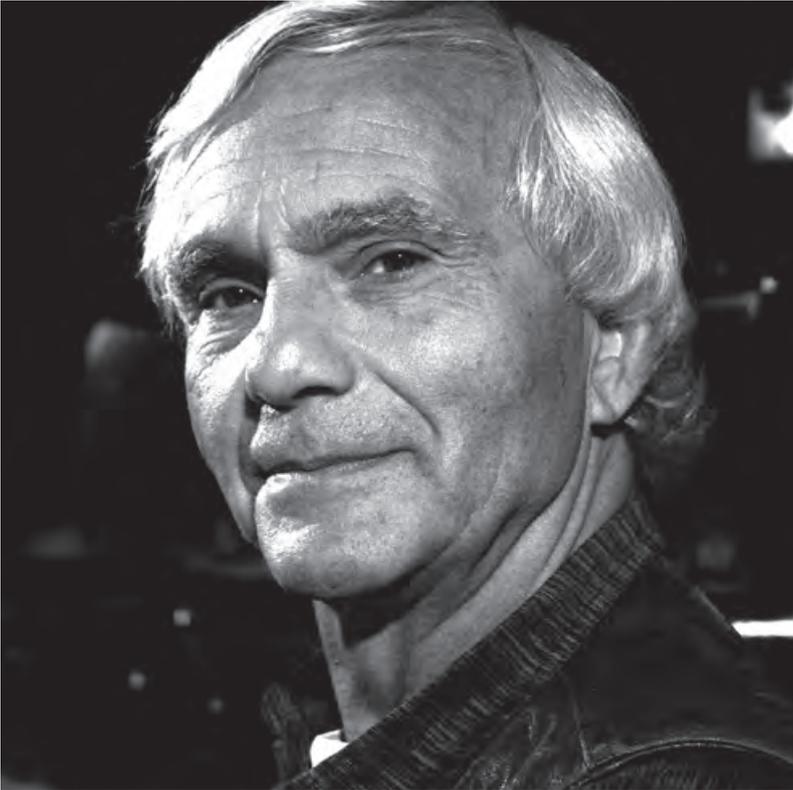
E.B.: In our theatre profession, in addition to knowledge, intuition and premeditation, another fundamental requirement is necessary: the ability to arouse kinesthetic empathy and induce a change of consciousness in the spectators through the actors' physical and vocal actions.

Theatre is fiction, that is, a form of intensified imagined reality. To achieve this effect, it is necessary for actors and dancers to have an incorporated knowledge, a discipline and a very individual superstition that each defines with his or her own words. It is easy to trivialise the term craft or technique by repeating that this is not the most important thing. But finding one's own meaning in theatre corresponds to a personal invention of the craft. Theatre craft requires a strong commitment to a knowledge and a know-how that you must conquer by embodying it. Theatre anthropology introduces an actor or a dancer to the knowledge of technical principles that intensify stage presence and sharpen the perception of the spectators.

Theatre or dance is tamed time, mad time, informed time and time put into form, condensed time and evaporated time. These different natures of time are decided by the rhythm, the changes of energy, the flow of tensions in the actor and the dancer. All this is technique, know-how, and thinking with paradoxical and at the same time operative categories. This is the field of theatre anthropology.

A.D.: *What are your thoughts about your companions in your artistic and also in your daily life? What do you mean by Odin Teatret's "secret people" as you wrote in *The Children of Silence, Reflections on Forty Years of Odin*, TDR Vol.49,1 (Spring 2005)?*

E.B.: I imagine that by companions you mean my theatre collaborators who have shared their lives with me for decades, some of them over fifty years. It is a unique feat in the history



had the typical philosophy of the people of that town. When she broke a leg, she was glad because she had not also damaged her arm. Yes, I owe to my mother my attitude to feel happy. And, of course, also to the people who make me happy.

Photos: odinteatret.dk

Eugenio Barba was born in Italy. He is a director, theater teacher and founder of the Odin Teatret and the International School of Theater Anthropology (ISTA).

Antonis Diamantis is the director, theatre educator and founder of the Omma Studio theatre and the Center of Theatre Anthropology in Greece

of theatre. I am a director who has directed 78 performances with the same actors. Our strong bonds are above all professional. We consider ourselves artisans and our theatre is the environment where we can challenge our craft, improve our skills, fulfil a personal process of development and at the same time intertwine our individualisms into the collective body of a performance which has a value for our spectators.

Many of these spectators establish deep bonds with us, they are our *secret people*, our motherland which embraces us when we are on tour. Sometimes they write to us, they travel from far away to visit us, some of them even fight to find financial conditions to invite us to their place.

Odin Teatret is a paradox: a theatre laboratory with actors from a dozen countries and many languages, active in Holstebro, a no-name small provincial town in Denmark. Yet its duration since its birth in 1964, and the permanent core of actors who have aged together with their spectators unfurls an energy which inflames many people's spirits. They speak of Odin Teatret as a legend. By saying this, they refer to their own dreams and needs to which our existence has given form.

A.D.: *Are you happy?*

E.B.: It depends on how you define happiness. I experience often moments of elation, rapture and exultation. The causes are manifold: the pleasure of an exciting book, the sight of a beautiful woman, the blue sky impacts me deeply and plunges me in a sort of ecstasy, witnessing as director a surprising detail in my actor during rehearsal, being centred in the present moment and feeling a deep gratitude, being aware of people who love me, meeting old friends, the sensation that no illness threatens me... I could keep on naming all the reasons, fantasies and situations which make me soar in this particular state called happiness. It is a temporary state, a flash which lasts briefly yet enhances the sense of what I am doing or experiencing in this particular moment.

My mother taught me to taste happiness. She was from Naples and