

Eugenio BARBA

IN THE GUTS OF THE MONSTER

Speech of thanks on the occasion of the Honorary Doctorate bestowed on Eugenio Barba by ISA, Instituto Superior de Artes in Havana on 6 February 2002.

Dear Friends of ISA,

Even while I'm thanking you, you already know that this recognition befalls not only me, but Odin Teatret's actors and collaborators of 38 years, as well as all those who are part of the theatre group culture everywhere – this Third Theatre to which Odin Teatret is proud to belong.

I admit to being a little bit moved and very much satisfied. Here my ties with your island culminate. They began in 1946 in Buenos Aires at the Café Rex, where the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz used to meet his friends to translate *Ferdydurke*, a novel which has meant so much in my life. In his memoirs Gombrowicz remembers in particular two of these friends, their imagination and creative empathy in rendering in Spanish the linguistic deformations, eccentricities and paradoxes of his book. They were Cuban and their names were Virgilio Piñera and Humberto Rodríguez Torneu. Thus Cuba entered into my life through the solidarity of artists in exile.

It was in 1963 that I met my first Cuban. I heard him during a congress in Warsaw expressing his emotion over a performance that was not included in the official programme: *The Tragic Story of Doctor Faust* by Jerzy Grotowski who, at that time, was ostracised by the communist regime. I still remember the confusion which the intervention by Eduardo Manet, that young director of the National Theatre in socialist, tropical and defiant Cuba, created in the orthodox circles of the Polish Communist Party and theatre. His speech contributed to legitimising Grotowski's

activity and making it known beyond Poland as a provocation and a ceaseless stimulation for us all.

More than 20 years later, in the small Danish town of Holstebro, a Swedish actor from a political theatre group knocked at Odin Teatret's door. He was accompanying a young Cuban, Helmo Hernandez, who wanted to visit us. At that time, the winds of political theatre were blowing with vigour over Europe. Odin Teatret was constantly under accusation for its way of taking a stand, for its "formalism" or for its "elitist" decision to limit the number of its spectators. Also in Cuba the name of Odin Teatret was surrounded by scepticism and suspicion in debates and publications. Helmo Hernandez' visit made me rediscover the intellectual curiosity and desire for professional dialogue which characterised the few Cubans I had met. Consequently I invited him to the 4th session of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, in Holstebro in May 1986.

A few months later, on my way to Uruguay with Odin Teatret, I decided to stop off in Havana and visit him. I stayed only a few days and although my visit was not official, Helmo managed to arrange meetings and lectures. Here tenacious friendships were born with many theatre artists and scholars: Flora Lauten, Marianela Boán, Victor Varela, Magaly Muguercia, Rosa Ileana Boudet and Vivian Martinez Tabares. Helmo took me to Teatro Escambray which I had read much about and admired. Vicente Revuelta accompanied us. A picture remains indelibly imprinted on my mind: the Hanabanilla lake with its cobalt and emerald water, the surrounding mountains covered with palm trees and a small rowing boat with Helmo at the oars while Vicente Revuelta and I talked, like two credulous children, of ghosts and mermaids, of dragons, ogres and angels, that is to say of theatre and politics.

Acceptance of the heretical Odin Teatret took place in 1989. Encouraged by the Peruvian director Miguel Rubio, Raquel Carrió was now the sagacious Trojan horse who officially introduced Odin Teatret into Cuba with *Judith*, a solo performance by Roberta Carreri and with a workshop of mine here in this Instituto Superior de Artes. Roberta and I also participated in the first session of the EITALC,

the newly founded Latin American theatre school in Machurrucutu. It was here that my deep ties with Osvaldo Dragún originated, one of the purest and most committed artists I have met, and one of the most loved inhabitants of my professional fatherland.

Since then I don't remember how many times Odin Teatret has visited Cuba: sometimes I was alone, at others there was only Julia Varley. Odin Teatret's long stay in 1994, during the economical harshness of the "special period", was the merit of Lecky Tejada and Eberto Garcia Abreu.

Now here I am once again, surrounded by my Odin companions and among some of the people who give meaning and value to my professional work, and whose perseverance and commitment help me not to give up in moments of discouragement. This visit of 6 weeks in Havana and many towns in the provinces, also has its origin in what is for me the essence of "Cubanness": to take a stand driven by a compelling motivation. Today Odin Teatret is in Cuba thanks to the motivation of Omar Valiño, supported by Maité Hernandez Lorenzo and the thaumaturgical endeavours of Julián Gonzalez Toledo. To you all goes the gratitude of the Odin with the joy of a certainty that for many years to come we will meet again, resisting the spirit of the time.

The dance of the Big and the Small

All these names and facts are private anecdotes, and at the same time historical facts. What do I see when I think of history? I see the dance of the Big and the Small. Its grotesque and gentle rhythm, ultimately always cruel, hinders the uniform flow of time and instead scratches it, facets it, filling our lives with essence and substance, perfumes and passions.

There are moments during this dance when we are swept along, and others when we ourselves influence the course of time. Then it seems that our own hands guide our destiny. Many people think that this possibility of shaping one's own destiny is pure illusion. In reality, we illude ourselves that we are being illuded.

There exists a Big History which drags us along, submerging us, and in which we often feel incapable of intervening. We can neither know nor understand in which direction it is moving, while it is moving, and us with it. Only when we observe it in retrospect, when time has passed, do its twists and turns appear clear to us. The Big History concedes us no freedom at all. It moves on inexorably and goes where we know not where nor why. We often tell each other stories of Hope or Despair. All equally meaningless, even though they may at times kindle a feeble flame in the surrounding darkness.

Nevertheless in the Big History it is possible to outline small islands, tiny gardens where our hand may make its mark and where we can live out *our* Small History. This Small History, intertwined with refusals and “superstitions”, is that of our life, our home, our family, of the misunderstandings, the encounters and the coincidences that have guided us towards the craft and the environment to which we have decided to belong.

Clearly the Big History and the Small History are not independent. But the Small Histories are not merely portions of the Big one.

Children who build a small dam on the margins of the current of a great river, who make a tiny pool in which to bathe and splash around, do not play in the rushing current, yet neither are they separated from the water flowing in the centre of the river. They create, along its banks, small inlets and unexpected habitats, thus passing on to the future the marks of their difference.

Voltaire described all this in *Candide*. The illusion that the world in which we live is tolerable or that it is “the best of all possible worlds” crumbles under a deluge of irony and adventures. After lengthy participation in the mechanical game that is the struggle between pessimism and optimism, Voltaire’s protagonist arrives at the conclusion that we must work without thinking of the outcome of our work, just concentrating on “cultivating our own garden”. This attitude does not mean giving way, surrendering; it is not an appeal to selfishness or to a restricted and egocentric

vision of life. It is the affirmation of the necessity to contradict the Big History with a Small History that can belong to us and make them dance together.

Theatre is an attempt to stand in the waters of the river without letting oneself be dragged away by the current.

This is the history of theatre: small gardens and tiny pools of water sheltered from the force of the current. Sometimes submerged by it.

The other face of continuity

Let's pause for a moment at the expression "history of theatre". For something to have a history, there has to be a certain continuity between its past and its present. In what does the continuity of theatre consist?

There is a category of theatres that are like houses which outlive their inhabitants and keep an identity of their own while passing from owner to owner. And there is another category of theatres which are not made of bricks and stones but whose entire substance is the vulnerable group of people that compose it. These disappear with those people. They can be neither inherited nor refilled with new contents.

The life of the theatre is a dance between continuity and discontinuity. The histories of the "vulnerable" theatres often interfere with the histories of the theatre houses, but they move according to independent designs. Their form, their way of organising themselves and making contact with the spectators and with the social reality surrounding them do not conform with the models of the long-lived theatres. Their peculiarity derives from personal necessity and the degree to which they remain extraneous to the values of recognised and established practices.

It is a subterranean history of theatres without fame and without a name. It is a fertile and turbulent ground where unexpected values and unpredictable experiences arise and vanish. Here theatre renews and transcends itself. It is a palpable transcendence that consists in the surpassing of the limits which traditionally distinguish that which is theatre from that which is not, breaking down the frontiers

between work on a role and work on oneself, between artistic practice and political and social intervention.

The energy within theatre life at the beginning of the new millennium springs from the tension between the static lights of the theatrical firmament and the turbulence of the “vulnerable” theatres, between the theatre houses and the theatres that explore the deserts, between stability and precariousness.

This tension is something new.

Ever since the fifteenth century, the source of energy for European theatre has been the tension between tradition and experimentalism. In the twentieth century, the seat of experimentalism was amateur theatre and, at times, a few professional theatres when they invented new formulas to safeguard their own existence and dignity. Futurist, dadaist and surrealist circles were hotbeds of experimentalism right up to the more recent currents of the artistic avant-garde that have marked contemporary culture. “Free Theatres” and “Art Theatres” were niches of theatrical experimentalism, starting with Antoine and Stanislavski.

In Asian theatres too the tension that constitutes the source of energy was for a long time that between loyalty to tradition and the impulse towards innovation. For cultural and political reasons this tension became interwoven with the confrontation between foreign influence and respect for autochthonous forms. On the one hand it was the need to appropriate new trends which had reached Asia from the more powerful and colonialist countries. On the other hand it was a reaction to refuse foreign styles and rediscover the value of one’s own theatre knowledge. This dialectic of appropriation and rejection characterises in numerous variations the creativity of many artists from African and South American theatres.

Also in the theatre of European origin the tension between tradition and experimentalism has had a political connotation. Experimentalism and the avant-garde were often expressions of opposition towards conservative backwardness or a rebellion against the cultural institutions of the privileged classes and their sophisticated instruments of power.

Today at the start of the new millennium, the panorama has changed yet again. The rebellion of the theatre is above all the creation of a condition of insularity, of inner exile, a form of dissidence. The entire orbit of theatre is marginal in respect to the centres in which the life and culture of our time pulsate. Theatre resembles an archaeological relic from past ages. And yet it constantly renews itself. It continues to bear the mark of a diversity which may have the weakness of a limit or the strength and dignity of someone who is conscious of being a minority.

Theatre today can help us to impose respect for our own diversity. It is then converted into the practice of a dissidence.

A particular way of moving

The years have taught me how important it is to redefine for myself the habitual working terms in order to distil new images, flavours and fragrances. It is as though I was being suffocated by the craft. The only way to breathe a little oxygen is continually to ask myself *what* theatre is; *why* I keep on doing it; *how* to achieve a knowledge that contains its opposite, or in other words how to escape from the accumulation of experience which crystallises an identity, involuntarily becoming a barrier; *where* should I and my Odin companions next ignite all those decades of prestige, solitude and pride. In which prison, castle, ghetto or on which distant island could we arrange yet another barter, a fleeting and illusory moment of reciprocity and equality.

If today, dear Cuban friends, you were to ask me: “What is theatre?” I would answer: “It is a particular way of moving”. This particular way is an *ethos*, a behaviour which reveals the incorporated knowledge of a craft, and at the same time a convoluted knot of “superstitions” and personal ghosts – something we call values, our life’s compass.

To move, for an actor or director, signifies subjecting oneself for years with discipline and coherence to a mental and somatic practice which uproots us from the commonplaces and prejudices of our original culture and pushes us towards the

scabrous territories of “otherness”. This otherness has two faces. It is “the other” in ourselves, that part of us which lives in exile in the uttermost depths of our being. And it is “the other”, separated and distant from us in temperament, culture and gender. Theatre cannot be a philanthropic encounter in which we try to understand, explain or accept what is different. Theatre is a struggle; it is our need to take possession of “the others” – authors, colleagues, spectators, the dead – to blend with them, devour them, involving our entire metabolism in order to absorb the essential and expel the superfluous. Confrontation with “the other” is a rite of passage that renews the recognition of reciprocal and unexplainable forces and qualities.

Theatre moves us from an inferior level of reality to the reality of a deeper existence. It projects us from the surface into the opaque current of occult energies. We need only remember Marx, Freud, Niels Bohr and the very foundations on which we move, the subatomic universe that denies the evidence of Newton’s physics and derides any relationship between cause and effect, time and space, past and future.

Theatre moves our inner universe towards the world of tangible events, urging our Small History to dance with the Big History. Our anger, our exaltation and bewilderment are tempered by an artisan’s discipline. Emotions, sensibilities and impulses are subjected to a process of fiction and transformed into perceptible actions that caress or scratch the spectators senses and memory.

Theatre raises or lowers us socially, causes us to be accepted, recognised and recognisable, or else rejected, sometimes persecuted. The history of European theatre is one of a discriminated profession with numerous examples of actors who break down social barriers thanks to a consensus of admiration. Rachel, Adelaide Ristori, Jenny Lind, Eleonora Duse, Johanne Louise Heiberg and many others came from despised and repudiated social circles consisting of Jews, gypsies, illegitimate children or children of strolling players.

Theatre moves us literally, taking us on journeys. It is the materialisation of a geography that we cross mentally and physically to reach far off places and

milieus, to encounter surprising temperaments and temperatures. Theatre is a coming and going of relationships, a nomadism rooted in an *ethos*, in an incorporated craft.

I affirm that theatre is a particular way of moving. This is a valid definition from the point of view of someone who actively practises it. But any definition of theatre must take into consideration that a performance creates a bundle of relationships with diverse realities and always in a social space/time.

Theatre is a particular way of moving the spectator.

This is the aim of the long apprenticeship and the continuous efforts of every actor: to move the spectators, to create a fiction, a hallucinatory illusion. During the performance the actors' personal characteristics and skills, the characters' behaviour and destinies, the story's tensions and vicissitudes must lose their consistency for the spectators' senses, must become a transparent bridge that brings the spectators closer to their hidden wounds, to the scars of their inner struggles and compromises. This dialogue with oneself can only come about if the actor succeeds in awakening the torpid energies of every single spectator, sensations and memories from the intimacy of his or her Little History. Only if the actor succeeds in *moving himself* does he create the premises for moving the spectators, seducing them momentarily and dragging them out of the trenches of their convictions.

Technically speaking, moving the spectator presupposes paradoxical ways of thinking and behaving on stage. Stanislavski's magical "if", the *verfremdung* effect so appreciated by Brecht and theatre anthropology's pre-expressive principles of scenic presence are just some of the paths the actor may follow to be totally present and convincing on stage. The actor generates a different quality of presence, provokes an osmosis with the energies of the spectator and performs a social act. If s/he succeeds in this, the result is a process of individual meditation.

It is the triumph of absolute presence, the total engagement of the actor who executes his actions *hic et nunc*, here and now, in front of the spectators, at the very centre of his epoch and society. But the actor creates the reality of fiction *in order to be somewhere else*. Theatre is the art of ubiquity: it takes a stand in relation

to the circumstances in which our personal destiny and Big History have thrown us, and at the same time makes us live in Utopia, an ideal daily life. Theatre lets us live in the guts of the monster, and at the same time in an island of freedom.

Where is this “elsewhere”, in which physical, geographical, emotional, mental location is it to be found?

Dissidence and Utopia: a time within another time

On a sunny morning in the garden of a Roman villa a man in his sixties runs and jumps on the lawn like a child. He has spent a large part of his life in prison, isolated and tortured. Now, at last, he is free. He was born in '68 – 1568 – in Calabria, right on the southernmost point of Italy. His name is Tommaso Campanella, author of *The City of the Sun*, a book about a just and ideal society. He wrote it in prison in 1602 on the inspiration of *Utopia* by Thomas More, the writer who was executed for refusing to sign the document recognising Henry VIII as head of the Church of England.

Campanella, who was of peasant stock, was a Dominican friar, theologian, philosopher and astrologist. He also had visions and made prophecies. His enemies called him a wizard and a sorcerer. Scandalised by the narrowness of the ecclesiastical mentality, he abandoned the monastic order. This being a crime in those days, Campanella was jailed. When temporarily liberated, he became one of the heads of a conspiracy against the Spanish government who ruled the south of Italy. The plot was uncovered and the 140 conspirators (14 of whom were monks) were taken in chains to Naples. Some of the prisoners were dismembered before the eyes of the crowd, transforming their deaths into a spectacle. Others were hung from the masts of the ships of the Spanish fleet. The remainder were tortured until they gave away the names of their accomplices in the armed revolt.

Campanella was subjected to the “wooden horse” torture in which he was stretched out on a beam and bound tightly with ropes that ate into his flesh. Then he was suspended on a rope with his arms behind his back so that his shoulders were

dislocated. Finally he was made to endure the “waking” torture, a recent invention of Judge Ippolito de Marsilis. For this he was given food and wine in abundance. Digestion difficulties favoured sleep, but this was denied him. For 20, 30, 40 hours on end he was forced to sit on a high stool so that his feet did not touch the ground, and with his arms tied behind his back and pulled upwards. Each time he nodded off, his captors would beat him.

Campanella realised that at the end of the torture he would be condemned. He also knew that it was forbidden to put to death a sinner, a delinquent or a heretic if he was insane. A madman is not aware of his misdeeds and therefore cannot repent. Punishments and torments are inflicted so as to permit the condemned prisoner to redeem himself in the eyes of God. For this reason the victim should suffer and die while fully conscious in order to accept the sentence and repent.

So Campanella feigned madness. This pretence lasted days, weeks, months. Without respite, without giving way. During the intervals between one torture session and another, Campanella pulled faces, murmured meaningless phrases, was shaken by convulsions and set fire to the straw mattress in his cell. During the final “waking” torture, he replied to every question with the same obsessive words: “ten white horses”.

- Are you aware that your sins will condemn you to hell?
- Ten white horses.
- Have you ever practised magic?
- Ten white horses.
- Have you ever invoked Satan?
- Ten white horses.
- Have you not claimed the existence of other inhabited planets, apart from our world?
- Ten white horses.
- Do you maintain that the Pope is a usurper?
- Ten white horses.

- Did you write the infamous anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Three Impostors* in which Christ is declared an impostor, as well as Moses and Mohammed?

- Ten white horses.

Finally, at the end of the last endless “waking” session, he was declared legally insane and condemned to life imprisonment. He signed the document himself with a cross as do those who can neither read nor write. He remained in prison until 1626. There he wrote *The City of the Sun*, his Utopian vision of a just and humane society as well as numerous other books and poems. This was his “other freedom”, 27 years of “other freedom”, his “elsewhere”.

Utopia is a leap into an “elsewhere”, when this world shows its repellent face. Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella are amongst the first intellectuals to demonstrate the relationship between Utopia and dissidence. Or rather they indicate how dissidence is the capacity to live in a time within another time, the practice of a ubiquity which makes it possible to live simultaneously in a time-prison and on an island of freedom, the pool that sometimes lets us stand in the waters of the Big History without being dragged away by its currents.

The disturbing difference

It is important to preserve the testimony that, in practice, dissidence is both possible and effective. How can one be an effective dissident?

According to history and etymology, the word “dissidence” is derived from the Latin *dissidere*: to sit (*sedere*) separately (*dis*). It was used to designate the Polish protestants in the *Pax Dissidentium* which was signed in Warsaw in 1573 when King Henri de Valois committed himself to respecting freedom of religion and opinion. Hence a dissident is not a schismatic, someone who leaves or cuts himself off. Dissidents are individuals who create a distance without detaching themselves in order to affirm their “superstitions” and differences.

Difference is not in itself a value, but a condition. It may be a condition of inferiority, a phase preceding integration; or else a form of segregation which is chosen or endured. It becomes fruitful when it becomes *disturbing*. Normally, bodies which we qualify as different generate indifference, and are pushed to the margins of our mind and society. Or else they are perceived as a threat and generate hostility. When they no longer arouse fear, when they are not only strange and foreign, but also conquered, then they become museum and performance, acquiring the fascination of the exotic.

Theatre is beyond this logic. It may be a cosseted, subsidised or merely tolerated difference. It may be a self-satisfied difference. Or else it may become the practice of a dissidence that succeeds in fascinating, winning respect and appearing indomitable. It is disturbing because it does not adapt itself to the rules of the fight. Opposing it would be like struggling with a shadow – it slips through your hands the more you try to grasp it.

A fight anticipates a winner and a loser or, as a third precarious possibility, a truce. But in the end the fight aims to eliminate the problem and the contradiction, and lets homogeneity and integration triumph. A different thing altogether is the transmission of an indelible shadow, the practice of a “superstition” which perforates the solidity of the spirit of the time.

In this case the question is not one of being winners or losers. It is a matter of preserving a presence which does not conform and which does not end in the quicksand of the surrounding indifference. The disturbing difference wins, not when it manages to *prevail*, but when it is able to resist with its own presence, safeguarding its capacity to transmit to the future the mark of its own “unbelonging”. It is impossible not to live in *this* world. But it is possible not to belong to it.

Theatre is the experience of a chosen diaspora from the world we know, from the certainties and alibis of our culture. At times, some of our endeavours are caressed by the clouds, look beautiful and are applauded. But their incandescence and duration in the memory of the Small Histories and the Big History are indissolubly

linked to the anonymous action of men and women who embody the paradoxical craft of ubiquity: taking a stand in dissidence towards the world around us in order to live in Utopia.

A Grain of Sand

The concept of Utopia is closely related to that of an island. An island is not isolated, but stands by itself in the middle of the sea which is the means of communication *par excellence*. An island is connected to the outside world, yet at the same time distant. It is not cut off.

Let us remember the stories that are handed down to us from the past, the myths about gardens. There is something insidious in every tranquil garden. A venomous snake always lies hidden amongst the grass in Paradise.

What snake is concealed on the theatre's island of freedom?

When we start in our profession, our greatest dream is to till the soil of our craft, to cultivate its trees of knowledge and meet in a combat-embrace its familiar spirits as well as those spirits which invade it from remote corners of the globe.

When we start, we hold a flame in our hands to cast light on a distant voice: our vocation. With the passing of the years our hands clutch ashes, and all our energy and experience strain to keep alive the ember that still glows.

We have not landed on the island of freedom. We have been swallowed up in the guts of the monster.

Theatre is a monster that slyly suffocates our original necessity with habit, repetition, excuses and dull weariness. Theatre simply becomes a job, a familiarity with a craft that has lost its magic, its *ethos*, its ideals. At supper time we sit down and eat. At bedtime we yawn. We see a tree and we pick its fruit. Theatre survives and helps us to survive enveloped in a healthy fatalism of indifference and tepidity.

Only revolt can protect us, a revolt against ourselves, against our small temptations and compromises, against our acquiescence, our natural impulse to choose ingrained solutions and the least arduous path. The way of refusal, of anonymous and incorruptible work, every day, for years and years, transforms the monster into an island of freedom.

We must not nurture excessive ambitions. We must realise that inside the guts of the monster we are only a grain of sand.

We must be sand, not oil, in the machinery of the world.

Translation: Judy Barba