

LAUDATIO by prof. Piotr Oszlŷy of the Janacek Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno (Czech Republic) for the Honorary Doctorate bestowed on Eugenio Barba the 12th May 2017.

A SAILOR WITH THE BURNING HEART ON THE OCEANS OF WORLD THEATRE

Your Magnificence, Spectabilis, Honorabiles, ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

After the Second World War, artists from all over the world, having faced the horror of its aftermath including the Holocaust, had to answer questions about the further meaning of their artistic activities. They felt obliged to look for the forms which would artistically respond to the exposed and terrifying face of mankind. This search, which was most strikingly visible in the fine arts immediately after the end of the War, was in fact a call for help and an attempt to save art as such. In the 1950s and 60s, this call became an urgent and topical trend in the area of world theatre. This artistic search was then initiated by the most courageous and most sensitive young artists and their ensembles. Among them, in the first place, were: Judith Malina, Julian Beck, Joseph Chaikin and Peter Schumann in the United States, Jerzy Grotowski, Ludwik Flaszen, Józef Szajna and Tadeusz Kantor in Poland, Peter Brook in Britain, Augusto Boal in Latin America and Eugenio Barba in Scandinavia. They approached theatre in a completely innovative way. They were not burdened by previous conventions and they often entered the world of theatre from different artistic fields. A number of them did not receive any traditional theatre training. However, they did study theatre in depth and worked in theatres with extraordinary intensity. They made their creative research expeditions to both the recent and distant history of theatre, thus following up with the legacy of the Great Theatre Reform.

They felt a need which was so urgent that it might be called an obsession. It was the need to look for new forms, new concepts and a new understanding of theatre which would be able to speak about life in the world after an apocalypse, as well as to address this shaken world in which only little hope remained. Having been inspired by the ideas of Antonin Artaud, who had recognized and described the relationship between theatre and the cruelty of human existence, they looked for inspiration in non-European cultures and rituals which were not excessively affected by civilization. They looked for a new ethical and social status for theatre and new possibilities for theatre's

existence in contemporary society. Each of these personalities brought their authentic selves into the theatrical events of the second half of the 20th century, along with their originality and both human and professional uniqueness. All of the above fully applies to Eugenio Barba.

He was born in South Italy in 1936 and spent his childhood in the port town of Gallipoli. He studied at a military academy, started working in the merchant marine at the age of 18, left Italy, and settled in Norway after one year on the sea. In Oslo he started studying French and Norwegian literature and religious studies. After having watched Andrzej Wajda's film *Ashes and Diamonds*, which impressed him deeply, he decided to continue studying theatre in Poland. In 1961, he received a grant from UNESCO and enrolled at the PWST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Warsaw. During his theatre research trips all over Poland, he came across the Theatre of 13 Rows in the town of Opole. There, as well as in the mountain town of Zakopane, he met Jerzy Grotowski. At the beginning of 1962, he became an intern at the Theatre of 13 Rows. Working together with Grotowski essentially influenced Barba's artistic life, as well as the further development of world theatre and theatrical thinking.

While speaking in the town of Urumamba, in Peru, Eugenio Barba referred to his long-term cooperation with Jerzy Grotowski at the Theatre of 13 Rows, saying: "By his side, I have learnt the basic principles of theatre. To be more precise: Beside him I have intuitively recognized the specific meaning of the vocation, the reason why to do theatre." There, Eugenio Barba also first felt the need to write about and theoretically ponder theatre within a worldwide context. In 1963, he gave an exclusive interview with Jerzy Grotowski called *The Theatre's New Testament*, in which Grotowski comprehensively explained his conception and understanding of theatre. In the same year, Eugenio Barba published this interview in the prestigious Italian theatre revue *Sipario*. At the same time, using his great organizational talents, Barba helped Grotowski and his theatre to become known "theatre world-wide". Paradoxically, or perhaps typically for the political situation of the period, in 1964 Barba became a persona non grata in Poland. After having visited Oslo, he was not allowed to return to Grotowski. Thus, the communist totalitarian regime unintentionally influenced the development of world alternative theatre in a positive way. This step influenced Barba's creative temperament. He had been undoubtedly shocked by this forced isolation from his master, so he immediately started to be artistically active. In 1964, he founded the theatre group Odin Teatret, mostly consisting of young enthusiasts without professional training, which was named

after the Nordic god of the dead, poetry, magic and runes. With it, he started practically developing everything he had received from Grotowski in Opole.

Their first production *Ornitofilene (The Bird Lovers)* from 1965 posed important questions about the aftermath of the Second World War, about human integrity and the conflict between personal ethics and social morality. Thus, Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret declared that the themes of their artistic creation would always be found in the area of ethics. Their first production, which was prepared without any external subsidies, attracted wider attention in Scandinavia. This resulted in an offer by the town-hall authorities in Holstebro in Denmark, who invited the group to the town, suggesting that they could make it its home and accept material security for its future activities. Since 1966, the town of Holstebro with its 35 thousand inhabitants has become the seat of Odin Teatret – Nordisk Theaterlaboratorium. An old barn was rebuilt into a remarkable, simple and multipurpose theatre space according to the designs of the theatre's members. This modest, single storey building rapidly became one of the centres of world theatre. Here, Eugenio Barba and his Odin Teatret could start developing the increasingly distinctive programme of a theatre laboratory, inspired by Grotowski. Daily actors' training became part of the group's culture, and discipline was paramount. This discipline was understood as the ability to educate oneself unceasingly. The theatre's culture and relationships were so open and tolerant that they enabled each member to both personally develop and creatively search. Barba compared the ensemble to a pond which is like one complex organism consisting of individuals who – like fish in water – follow their own rhythm.

Eugenio Barba, whose authority as the ensemble's leader had been natural since the very beginning, created a series of performances with a small number of actors. These performances can be undoubtedly called "great". The second, *Kaspariana* (1967), the third *Ferai* (1969), as well as the fourth *Mit Fars Hus (My Father's House)*, 1972) brought the Odin Teatret international fame and won awards at prestigious festivals.

In the Czech theatrical milieu, reports about *Kaspariana* provoked reflections on Barba and his theatre's dramatic creation. In 1969, the March issue of the journal *Divadlo (Theatre)* dealt exclusively with *Kaspariana*. Barba's interview with Grotowski, *The Theatre's New Testament*, was also published in this edition. In spite of the fact that the totalitarian regime attempted to isolate Czechoslovakia from Western culture through so-called normalization, as well as through an

information blockade and various other means (the journal *Divadlo* was banned in March 1970), the attention of the Czech theatrical milieu – or the attention of those who were interested in an alternative conception of theatre – had already been drawn to the Odin Teatret and Barba's personality. Every single idea about his activities, which trickled through Poland or in another way, was a vital impulse for Czech theatrical thinking.

(In this context, let me mention a personal remark: In my archive, there is a valuable brochure published by the laboratory of the Odin Teatret. I received it in London from the director of International Theatre Club during my first theatrical stay in the West. It contains the programme of *Kaspariana*, as well as information about the laboratory's programme and the theatre's exciting documentation: the design, plan and description of the reconstructed theatre space. At the time, all those documents were of great importance for me.)

Since the very beginning of his activities, Eugenio Barba has made an unrelenting effort to study theatre and gain deeper insight into the very essence of the actor's art. Having spread his research into the global context, he regularly invited Jerzy Grotowski and the members of his Teatr Laboratorium, along with an increasing number of interns, to Holstebro so that they could participate in and lead various workshops. Apart from them, the European heirs of the Great Theatre Reform as well as the acting masters of non-European theatre traditions were often invited to Holstebro.

Since his youth, when he left his home country, Barba's destiny has seemed to be "the road". Therefore it was quite natural that after creating their first core performances, the Odin Teatret set off and regularly toured the world. This was mainly in the period between 1974 and 1984. The purpose of those tours was visiting small villages in Italy, France, Spain and Latin America whose inhabitants were not familiar with theatre. There, he examined the positions of both theatre and actor in society as well as in the history of culture. Other essential productions such as *The Book of Dances* (1975), *Anabasis* (1977), *The Million* (1978), and *Brecht's Ashes* (1982) were created during these trips.

In 1976, in Belgrade, he introduced his concept of "the third theatre". This concept includes a multiple world-wide community of both smaller and bigger theatre groups which work

outside both tradition and the avant-garde, outside big artistic centres, or on the edges of such centres. These communities of theatre groups are like “Saturn’s rings” around the mainstream. In their activities it is possible to recognize the conscious – or rather unconscious – search for new, original and lively meaning in theatre. This search is characterized by its fully creative and vital drive, zeal and enthusiasm.

All of these activities are interconnected in Barba’s conception of theatre anthropology. He can be called one of the pioneers of this now respected discipline. Regarding the anthropology of theatre, he wrote that: “Rather than generally applicable principles, theatre anthropology seeks *useful advice*. It does not have the humility of science, but it has an ambition to reveal connections and contexts which artists can use for their work.” In 1979, as part of the Odin Teatret’s wider activities, he – together with the theatre historian Nicola Savarese – founded the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA). There, the masters of both eastern and western theatre traditions, theorists, historians, and scholars from other fields regularly meet with active theatre-makers. During their sessions at the ISTA, they are all teachers and students at the same time. They mutually enrich each other, and together they look for the roots and essence of actor’s art.

Eugenio Barba has written approximately twenty books about theatre. His first book, *Alla ricerca del teatro perduto (In Search of a Lost Theatre)* was published in 1965, and it was the very first book about Grotowski’s theatre. In 1968 in Holstebro, he published the first printed collection of Grotowski’s texts on theatre, called *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Later, he wrote and published *The Floating Islands, The Dilated Body, Beyond the Floating Islands, The Paper Canoe, Land of Ashes and Diamonds* and a series of other books. He – together with Nicola Savarese – summarized his findings from the research at the ISTA in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, which was published in Czech in an excellent edition in 2000.

Since the moment he embarked on that ship sixty-three years ago, Eugenio Barba has been living outside of his home country. During his developing theatrical research, he has striven to understand various different world cultures and traditions.

As such, he is an artist who has proved that the status of “an émigré” – something he is and is not at the same time, because he is at home all over the world – has a high value for recognizing

the meaning of our shaken world. This value consists of the ability to understand people coming from somewhere else and those finding themselves in a foreign environment.

Eugenio Barba, who has devoted his whole life to theatre as a director, theorist and teacher in a completely unique way, is “a sailor with the burning heart cruising the oceans of world theatre.” To the Theatre Faculty, to the whole of the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts, it is a great honour as well as living inspiration that such a great personality and author is made one of its Honorary Doctors.