

András Timár

---

# On the Generosity of Theatre Historiography

## Review of Eugenio Barba–Nicola Savarese: The Five Continents of Theatre. Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor<sup>1</sup>

*“Tradition is also the practice of rejection, attraction  
and resolution. For us, tradition is a retrospection  
to mankind, our craft, and the history just preceding us,  
from which we are dissociating ourselves with consistent  
and permanent work.”*  
(Eugenio Barba)

It will be a special celebration for those interested in theatre studies when they pick up this curious volume, exceptional in both content and design, as *A színház öt kontinense. Tények és legendák a színész materiális kultúrájáról* [*The Five Continents of Theatre. Facts and legends about the material culture of the actor*],

---

<sup>1</sup> This review is based on the English translation of the book.



Picture 1. Demolition of the National Theatre/  
Nemzeti Színház building on Blaha Lujza Square

a book series by the Theatre Workshop of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, which will be published in 2023 under the names of Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese.

The Hungarian edition of the book is based on the text of the 2019 English edition of the original Italian work, first published in 2017, and was translated by János Regős, an expert in Barba's oeuvre, and Nikolett Pintér-Németh.

This volume, which is unique in the Hungarian-language publishing on the history of theatre in terms of its visual appeal – with prepress work carried out by WellCom Graphic Studio and the printing by Pauker Printing House – creates for the reader-spectator a patchwork-like contemporary “playbook” with scientific sophistication, inviting associative thinking on more than 400 pages with 1400 black and white and colour pictures and texts of various length and types. The text system of the six chapters (five plus one extra), consisting of fragments, shorter and longer trains of thought, along with a huge number of images interwoven with them with captions which sometimes contain exciting facts, historico-philosophical analyses, at other times impressions, anecdotes and a variety of questions, constitute the structure of the volume. And they create the hermeneutic freedom, the infinite web of interpretation, which – hopefully – can make the volume lasting even in the age of a change in the structure of thought identified as the “pictorial turn,”<sup>2</sup> for a public of readers who enjoy the primacy of visual experience and imagination, and who in many ways have changing and altered demands.<sup>3</sup>

2 W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Pictorial Turn* [A képi fordulat]. Transl. Sándor Hornyik, *Balkon*, 2007/11–12. 2–7.

3 The first caption on the opening page may as well be read as a motto for the digital native generation: “This book is a tree that sprouted from graves – and the Internet.”

The theatre director Barba, with the systematic support of the theatre scholar Savarese, transformed some fifty years of professional experience into a discourse in the visual and textual world of their volume, consciously and repeatedly bringing to our attention that their intention was not to theorise and conceptualise, but to do practical work. They do this knowing that Barba's oeuvre is perceived by theatre studies as a crucial point of reference for theatre anthropology, for inter- and transculturality, and as such, certainly contributing to the theoreticality of theatre studies.

The Barba–Savarese volume is worth contextualising from various aspects. On the one hand, it is important to establish a dialogue with the previous Barba–Savarese book, *A színész titkos művészete. Színházantropológiai szótár [The Secret Art of the Actor. Dictionary of the Anthropology of Theatre]*, published in 2020 by Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and L'Harmattan.<sup>4</sup> The authors of this book make an attempt to provide a systematic description of the highly Grotowski-influenced laboratory research to uncover the underlying principles of the Eastern and Western dancer-actor's craft built upon the universal laws that inform performative techniques and transcend cultures. They studied awareness of the Western dancer-actor's use of the body and their relationship to rhythm, the generation of extra-daily energy, the actor's pre-expressive ('prior to expression') state and tensions, the methods of realising presence in the resolute body created by extra-daily body techniques.<sup>5</sup>

The publication of the Barba–Savarese volume is timed to coincide with the 10th Theatre Olympiad, which will be part of the 17th edition of the Pécs–Pécsvárad–Budapest Theatre Olympiad. It will also be linked to the ISTA/NG (International School of Theatre Anthropology/New Generation founded by Barba in 1979) and the resulting production *Anastasis/Resurrection*, which will be performed only once, at the National Theatre in Budapest, and will be presented by ISTA/NG masters and participants from twenty-seven countries under Barba's direction.

---

4 Eugenio Barba–Nicola Savarese, *A színész titkos művészete. Színházantropológiai szótár [The Secret Art of the Actor. Dictionary of the Anthropology of Theatre]*. Transl. János Regős, Zsófia Rideg, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary–L'Harmattan Kiadó, Budapest, 2020.

5 Read more about the volume in András Timár, Eugenio Barba–Nicola Savarese: *A színész titkos művészete. Színházantropológiai szótár [The Secret Art of the Actor. Dictionary of the Anthropology of Theatre]*. *Urania*, December 2021, 104–109.

Thus, whereas the 2020 “dictionary volume” addressed the dancer-actor’s physical-mental techniques and his relationship with the audience, the *Anastasis* performance, unfortunately scarcely documented in contemporary critical writing, summarised the artistic diversity of Barba’s theatre aesthetics, which drew upon the archetypes that recur throughout the oeuvre (such as birth, death and rebirth, celebration and sacrifice, the intoxication of the vegetation of existence).

*The Five Continents of Theatre...*, edited for almost twenty years with the collaboration of numerous contemporary theorists and scholars, exposes the Barba–Savarese experience that the bodily techniques and the relationship with the audience presuppose another, equally important element: the actor’s auxiliary techniques. The material culture of the actor is based on the various levels of organisation and forms of activity of the theatre profession. Everything that determines the practical, economic, aesthetic and social aspects of the actor. Since these auxiliary techniques do not only recur in various historical periods but also in all theatrical traditions, a comparative study of them shows that the actor’s material culture, with its varied processes, forms and styles, derives from the way in which they respond to the same practical needs. The authors suggest that all readers and spectators of the publication may find analogies with their own theatrical traditions, but they nuance the comparative approach by noting that their analysis cannot be exhaustive, since “not all theatrical traditions have transmitted their cultural heritage through words and images”.<sup>6</sup> Based on Barba’s definition of the genre, reading his “travel guide” allows us to become part of a multicultural journey across millennia and continents, witnessing a dialogue imbued with a desire for knowledge, whose fundamental and only question is: *how to make theatre?*

The first five units of *The Five Continents of Theatre...* are organised around the five basic questions of Anglo-Saxon journalism (the five English Ws): *when, where, how, for whom and why theatre is made*. Each of these chapters discusses the aspects of “the material culture of the theatre” listed under each question-word subheading by the authors, and shows the impact on the participants in the event (actors, audience, directors, writers, etc.). While the first five chapters include discursive text units alongside the fourteen hundred images and captions, selected from eleven thousand, the sixth concluding chapter – subtitled *Theatre*

---

<sup>6</sup> Quotation from the manuscript.



Picture 2. Using the handkerchief on stage (Stanislavsky as Gajev Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchards*, 1904)

and History. Pages fallen from Bouvard and Pécuchet's notebook, contains only images and captions.

The theatre-historiographical approach of this publication evokes the ideal of freedom in Barba's theatre aesthetics and form. The brief statements of fact, glosses, dictionary-like entries, and passages from the theatre artists, creators and theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries do not add up to become a voluminous argument, neither do the hundreds of images become a didactic picture album. The reading process is repeatedly interrupted, changes direction and forces the reader to focus on the theatrical-cultural traditions of the five continents referred to in the title, as represented in texts and images, and their interrelationships, through the discovery of the links between two narratives (as the subtitle indicates, "*facts and legends*") of historicity and cultural traditions and rituals.

The publication offers a history of theatre that does not seek to create the impression of linear-causal historiography. The postmodern distrust of grand narratives is dissipated through a sometimes shocking, sometimes playfully ironic, but always easy-to-read-and-watch form that does not impose, or even articulate, exclusive values and judgements. Offering experience is thus more easily perceived as *generosity* rather than revelation.

The authors steer clear of chronology: the cave paintings are not intended to represent performative acts of prehistory but are part of an argumenta-

tion that first links them to the dance of humans with animals and gods, and then examines the diversity of cultural traditions in which animals are found on stage, from Greek vase paintings to Peking opera to masked characters in Balinese spectacles, while also not being oblivious to the visual and textual narrative of where the humanised ape stories of the 20th century, from King Kong to Tarzано to *Planet of the Apes*, originated. Events are also examined as constructs when creating a highly eclectic chronology called "*Stages 1 and 2 of the Great Reform*". This exciting chapter charts the development of theatre architecture and technology, as well as the rise of neo-avant-garde theatre independent of literature, through a hundred years of design, political and cultural history, from the opening of Wagner's theatre in 1876 in Bayreuth to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

The opening conversations of the chapters evoke the figures of Bouvard and Pécuchet, the titular characters in Flaubert's unfinished novel, written over almost two decades, who, as Barba and Savarese's doubles, discuss the facts and legends surrounding the actor's material culture. The playfulness of the analogy of the two author pairs lies in the fact that the two Parisian scribes in Flaubert's novel pursue sciences driven by a desire for encyclopaedic knowledge but are gradually led to realise how incomplete the answers to their questions in the textbooks are. The comic-ironic presence of these characters is a reminder of the need to avoid the classical seriousness of narratives on theatre-making, as well as the incompleteness and humility of accumulating knowledge.

It follows from the above that, in presenting the structure of this collage-like volume, we should respect the regular derailments of narrative logic, while establishing our dialogues with the events, places and people, traditions, myths and methods that the authors consider crucial, in Savarese's words, "personal compasses."<sup>7</sup> *The five continents and the five question words* provide a structure around which the themes and the questions emerge: what are the changes in material conditions that have shaped theatrical performances from the beginning to the present day; how the economic and organisational aspects of public performance have changed; what is the role of patronage; how have payments, tickets and subscriptions changed; how have the audience and the performers travelled; how has advertising been introduced and used increasingly; what is the origin of box office practice and how it has changed; how experiments with

---

7 Quotation from the manuscript.

theatrical space have affected the relationship between the performer and the spectator; how has the role of staging grown; how the design and construction of theatrical sets, lighting, make-up, props and costumes have evolved.

By the material culture of the actor, therefore, the authors mean everything that the actor curious about the world surrounds himself with and that he interacts with: a theatre building, a candle, a handkerchief or a theatre telescope, as well as the events of world history.

We must also see that in a volume organised around five question words, there are some 'stories' that clearly receive more attention. Throughout his oeuvre, Barba very consciously canonises the so-called Third Theatre, the 'poor theatre' movements that are organised outside the mainstream at the group level rather than within the institutional stone-built theatre and commercial entertainment theatre. He embraces theatre-makers in a state of political and social emergency, who are *struggling, homeless, discriminated against*, driven by the need to create professional theatre despite their difficulties, even at the risk of their lives. The two authors indeed select theatre companies, creators and theorists from five continents who have contributed to and/or played a significant role in the material development of theatre in places and situations less familiar to the reading public. Great passages from the writings of Rousseau, Baudelaire, Banu, Tolstoy, Lukianos, Goethe, Grotowski, Orwell, Appia, Artaud, Walter Benjamin, Brecht, Fuchs, Meyerhold, Suzuki, Mnouchkine, Isadora Duncan, Sarah Kane, among others. The fifth sub-chapter (Why?) titled *The Little Anthology of Actor's Honour* contains columns on the exemplary and shocking (fate) stories of the theatre profession, such as the lives of Ira Aldridge, Josephine Baker, Ichikawa Kumehachi, Abdias Nascimento, Meyerhold's prison letters, suffragette actresses, the Soviet Gulag and the theatres of Nazi concentration camps.

The sixth chapter features long pages of tiny thumbnails and (press) photographs, juxtaposing many of the defining historical and theatrical figures and events of the 20th and 21st centuries. This, for instance, juxtaposes masked figures from the most diverse places and eras in theatre history (from the ancient Greeks, Chinese, Vietnamese opera and Kathakali to Ivory Coast or to the clown Grock from Gibraltar) and the cover of *The Economist*, which featured a medical mask of Mao Tse-tung during the spread of SARS-CoV. There are also photos of protests by a number of rights groups where participants covered their faces with masks carrying important messages. Juxtaposed are ornate and burnt-

down theatre buildings (such as the ruins of the National Theatre/People's Theatre building in Blaha Lujza Square, Budapest),<sup>8</sup> jubilees and heroes, victims, photographic documentation of the remembrance of crimes against nations and humanity. Portraits of Rosa Parks, Jan Palach and Thích Quảng Đức, and a photograph in prisoner's clothing of Auschwitz-Buchenwald prisoner number 18,729, Józef Szajna, who later became an internationally renowned artist as Grotowski's designer colleague.

The volume, great not only in terms of Barba's oeuvre and for art education, but also from the point of view of educating people to think, concludes with a sentence that may be read as the *ars poetica* of this publication: "I am sure that there will always be people – many or few, depending on the vicissitudes of history – who will cultivate theatre as a kind of bloodless guerrilla warfare, as a secret rebellion under the open sky, or as the prayer of an unbeliever. In this way, they will find ways to channel their separateness into an indirect path without turning it into destructive actions. They will experience the apparent contradiction of rebellion, and it will be transformed into brotherly love and a solitary vocation that creates bonds".<sup>9</sup>

### Sources

- 
- Eugenio Barba–Nicola Savarese. 2020. *A színész titkos művészete. Színházantropológiai szótár.* Ford. Regős János, Rideg Zsófia. Budapest: Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem–L'Harmattan Kiadó.
  - Jean-François Lyotard. 1993. „A posztmodern állapot.” In *A posztmodern állapot. Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty*, ford. Bujalos István–Orosz László. Budapest: Századvég.
  - W. J. T. Mitchell: „A képi fordulat.” Translated by Hornyik Sándor, *Balkon*, 2007/11–12.
  - Timár András. 2021. „Eugenio Barba és Nicola Savarese: A színész titkos művészete. Színházantropológiai szótár.” *Urania* 1: 104–109.
  
  - This review is based on the Hungarian translation of the English edition of Eugenio Barba-Nicola Savarese: *The Five Continents of Theatre – Facts and Legends about the Material Culture* (2017). The Hungarian edition will be published by the University of Theatre and Film Arts and is expected to be available in spring 2023.

---

<sup>8</sup> Quotation from the manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> Quotation from the manuscript.