

TaPRA 2015 conference paper

Provocations 2x10 mins: Jane Turner and Patrick Campbell

Section 1 First Provocation: Jane

The Body as a shared body:

Over the past 12 months, Patrick and I have been developing a project titled *A Handful of Dust: the diasporic legacy of Odin Teatret* – specifically focused on creating a Third Theatre Network, which will enable research to take place that explores the impact and legacy that Odin Teatret have had on the international theatre community over the last 50 years.

In developing the research it became apparent that questions of legacy involved processes of transference of theatre practice (physical and dramaturgical) from one socio-political context to another – a ‘body’ of knowledge.

Our provocation will be in two parts and addresses the notion of Third Theatre.

Barba’s original manifesto, delivered as a report to UNESCO in 1976, following a gathering of theatre groups in Belgrade says,

Begin slideshow: slide of manifesto:

‘The Third Theatre lives on the fringe, often outside or on the outskirts of the centres and capitals of culture... Like islands without contact between themselves, ... people gather to form theatre groups, determined to survive... It is as if the personal needs ... wanted to be transformed into work according to an attitude ... an ethical imperative, **not limited to the profession only, but extending through the whole of daily life**’ (abridged extract taken from Barba, *The Floating Islands*, 1979: 145 - 147).

So, what is the status and currency of the term now: do theatre groups still identify themselves with the term? - can an ‘ethical imperative’ still pertain?

For me the term remains highly resonant for the following reasons – that I will further unpack in this first section of our paper:

- It identifies theatre practices that **choose** to reside on the margins of mainstream culture;
- It locates theatre practice that maintains a political ethos - often in opposition to cultural/political hegemony;
- It celebrates and offers a 'place' - a way of being together - to diverse/foreign/unruly theatre practice.

It is of course coincidental that Eugenio Barba and Homi Bhabha have surnames that sound similar but maybe there is something in their names that suggests a further level of synchronicity. In Homi Bhabha's book *The Location of Culture* he refers to Third Space as:

'...a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and migrants and refugees; gathering on the edge of foreign cultures; gathering at the frontiers ... gathering in the half-life, half- light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance ... gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also, the gathering of people in the diaspora (pages 199 - 200).

Homi Bhabha offers us a way to engage/re-engage with the notion of Third Theatre and how it may be resonant for us now.

Odin Teatret has always been centered around the notion of gatherings as demonstrated by the emergence of the Third Theatre manifesto.

A recent visit to Holstebro and Odin Teatret's base reminded both Patrick and I that at the core of Odin Teatret – and thus also Third Theatre - is an ethos of conviviality and hospitality.

For Derrida, 'unconditional hospitality' is an encounter with radical difference; an ethical, creative, even transgressive opening up to the Other, the 'foreigner'. Paul Gilroy's concept of 'conviviality' refers to the unruly, chaotic and creative encounters that take place on a pragmatic, daily basis between people of

different cultures within postcolonial societies. According to Gilroy, these encounters allow for “emancipatory interruptions” that break up the hegemonic social script, and usher in new multicultural expressive forms and ways of being together (Gilroy, 2004). This ethos reflects and reaffirms the importance of a translocal, diasporic sense of creative community, and is enshrined in the Third Theatre manifesto.

While Odin’s work is best recognised as a site for having a particular approach to bodily training for theatre performance and a particular approach to dramaturgical organisation, it is the **social structure and organisation of the group - the body** - that Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley maintain is the model of practice that is transferable, shared and embraced as a defining feature by theatre groups who consider themselves a part of Third Theatre. And in this body of practice we can identify the evident connections between Homi Bhabha’s gatherings on the edges of foreign cultures, Derrida’s hospitality: transgressive opening up to the ‘foreigner’ and Gilroy’s conviviality: ‘emancipatory interruptions’.

While ‘foreigners’ can come together in the light of gatherings and share training and their embodied practice, it is in the darkness - the interior individual memory - the place where we transform experience into meaningful ‘affirmation of our personal needs... an ethical imperative’, to cite Eugenio Barba, that diversity is made more distinct. I would contend that training is not the legacy but Third Theatre as a body has given ‘place to the place’ (Dufourmantelle, 2000: 14).

The absolute hospitality of Third Theatre asks that the body (individual or group) open up their ‘home’ to the foreigner – give place to them (ibid.: 25) – no questions asked. The hospitality offered to a foreigner is a tolerance of difference and also allows for a reciprocity that is based on acknowledged difference.

Remaining a foreigner is imperative as it ensures we (the individual body and/or the body of the group) resist complacency and over familiarisation – thus the paradox of the Third Theatre is to always remain a foreigner – in a state of alterity.

This point is echoed in Eugenio Barba's article for *New Theatre Quarterly* published in 1991 where he revisits Third Theatre and asserts that it can be understood as 'a legacy from Us to Ourselves' (page 3 – and title of the article). He argues that we are not inheritors of a 'great tradition', we work with the histories of people/'foreigners' who themselves worked with 'bare hands': another metaphor conceived by Barba that he uses to describe the imperative to work adopted by such 'foreigners' on an aspect of theatre that became their 'legacy from us to ourselves' – we learn in the light of these 'foreigners' and in the dark we transcribe the experience that we may remain 'foreign'.

The translation of such terms as Third Theatre operate for Barba as metaphors that importantly requires each individual to translate the metaphors in relation to their own 'professional experiences and lives' (1991: 9). In this instance the hybridity of the Third Theatre as a political/social/cultural/geo-political space is also understood metaphorically as a space/place of translation/negotiation; Third Theatre needs to be engaged in a dialogical discursive exchange – a continual negotiation of terms to retain a sense of vibrancy.

For Odin, who last year celebrated their 50th anniversary, it is crucial for them to resist becoming a 'theatre made of stone' – such theatres

'... represent themselves, not the people who inhabit them... (ibid.).

At the celebration in Holstebro last year the company – with the help of a large mechanical digger – dug a huge hole in the ground and dumped props and costumes from their previous 50 years of shows into the hole and buried them – constructing a children's swing on the site. Letting the baggage go, moving forward and seeking out new challenges has led Odin to an element of reassessment and reflection that in turn has enabled them to relocate themselves as foreigners.

While Odin have always sought ways of opening their doors to 'foreigners': the Odin Weeks, ISTA, Festuge etc., they have now elected to further open their doors to new and emerging theatre groups, offering them residencies and the opportunity to co-produce theatre at the Odin base in Holstebro. Barba realised

that over the years the company were spending more and more time away from their 'home' - leaving it empty and the townsfolk of Holstebro - who have actively supported Odin's residency for 50 years - more often than not, with a dark theatre. Opening up their home in this way is a striking shift: it recognises that new people/foreigners need to be able to inhabit their home - this is arguably another facet of what we argue as the conviviality and hospitality inherent in their group, and a defining feature of Third Theatre.

Section 2 Patrick

Thus, as Odin begin a process of opening up once again, fostering and mentoring the work of young emerging artists, it is timely to return to the wider notion of the Third Theatre. However, even in this early phase of our research, some key questions and problems are beginning to emerge for us. One of which, is the very term "Third Theatre". Despite our recourse to Homi Bhabha, and attempt to reframe the "Third" in "Third Theatre" from a critical perspective, the term nevertheless seems problematic today, anachronistic.

Resonant of the 1970s, of similar movements such as "third cinema" and evoking the spectre of the so-called "Third World", how can such a term persist in today's globalized, mediated theatrical context, characterised by hybridity, by a fusion of forms and discourses, by the blurring of high and low art, of the mainstream and the so-called avant-garde? Given the proliferation of psycho-physical approaches to acting, the acceptance of physically led and visually potent aesthetics as part of the toolkit available to even the most traditional of theatrical *metteurs-en-scene*, and Barba and Odin's own canonization within theatre academia, what radical currency can this term have for us today?

Isn't the very homogenisation of an overarching "tradition" problematic? Do we not risk effacing the uniqueness of each of the multifaceted groups we are researching, and in so-doing tie them indelibly to what was perhaps - in some cases - just a passing encounter with Odin Teatret and its poetics?

Our argument would be that the Third Theatre as a phenomenon obliges us instead to - more radically - deconstruct and contest what we mean by the term

legacy itself. Rather than a patrilinear, colonizing force, legacy would seem to be, in the case of the Odin diaspora, a fluctuating, processual, potentially subversive form of craft-based kinetic transference characterized by movement and open to negotiation and radical reinterpretation. One of the key concerns of the Network will, in fact, be to focus precisely on how key groups and companies in differing geopolitical contexts have transformed and adapted Odin's poetics and methodological approaches to suit their own varying pragmatic needs and cultural material contexts.

Third Theatre is produced from the nomadic experience of the foreigner – it is transnational, border crossing, problematically hybrid. However, if there is one constant that unites the disparate practitioners and differing strands of the Third Theatre, it is the focus on the body; the body of the actor, the kinaesthetic impact of the actor's craft on the director and, later, the spectators. It is this tacit, non-discursive negotiation - which Stanislavski termed "communion" and Grotowski called the "total act" - that is revisited and re-articulated by all these practitioners.

Moreover, the centrality of bodily labour in Third Theatre praxis imbues the actor's work on the self as a space where emerging values can be traced and small traditions founded. Training and performance, in this sense, are not just related to craft, to the development of a virtuoso expressivity – they become an experiential territory where self-limitations can be overcome and new relationships forged. Importantly, the participatory tendencies of recent Third Theatre praxis reveal that these new-found dialogical relationships between self and environment, self and other, are spreading out in innovative ways into the community, as the different groups' dramaturgical practices transcend the black box space and infiltrate different socio-cultural contexts.

In order to explore the play of negotiation and transformation so inherent of Third Theatre praxis today, I would like to present the work of a small-scale Brazilian theatre company operating on the edge of the Odin diaspora: Grupo NATA, based in Bahia, Brazil.

Section 3: Grupo NATA

Grupo Nata was founded in 1998 in the city of Alagoinhas, in the countryside of Bahia State, in the North East of Brazil. Artistic Director Fernanda Júlia was born into a family steeped in the traditions of Candomblé. Her mother Roselina Barbosa, is an *iyalorixá*, a candomblé priestess, and Fernanda Júlia herself is an *iyaô*, an initiate privy to the mysteries of the religion.

In 2006, Fernanda Júlia moved to Salvador and began to study Direction at the Theatre School of the Federal University of Bahia. It was here that she discovered the work of Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski. Their research into Theatre Anthropology and Art as Vehicle would, alongside the work of black Brazilian theatre companies such as TEN, the Bando de Teatro Olodum and the Companhia dos Comuns, serve as the fertile matrix out of which NATA's professional theatrical aesthetic and social activism would emerge. This culminated in 2009, at the end of her degree, with the debut of an award-winning performance that would prove to be a turning point in the history of the group; *Sirê Obá*.

***Sirê Obá* and the Activation of Ancestral Movement**

According to Fernanda Júlia:

Sirê Obá is the concrete result of our scenic research into the activation of ancestral movement [...] This consists of a scenic investigation that doesn't lose sight of its artistic roots, but presupposes an encounter between the actor and his/her African Brazilian ancestry, through the body, through the voice, through dance, scenic games, sonorous, visual, olfactory and gustatory stimuli. It takes place through the encounter between the actor and the four primordial elements of nature, because these four primordial elements of nature unite all the Orixás [...] Candomblé initiates know that the Orixá is part of the composition of our personality, what you would call an archetype. And it is by investigating this archetype, this primordial element of nature, and the personality of the actor in question, that I can help him or her to encounter his/her ancestry, his/her ancestral unconscious, which is deeper still. This transcends any messianic or religious drive. This doesn't have anything to do with catechism. It has to do with cultural identity. It has to do with journeying to the core of your existence. (Barbosa, 2013).

Drawing implicitly on the universe of Candomblé, and based on the *orikis*, praise poems recited during rituals to evoke the Orixás, this sensorial, physically charged and choreographic piece of devised theatre was based in part on the

structure of the xirê – the public ritual - of Candomblé. However, rather than directly transpose the dance steps of each Orixá, Fernanda Júlia developed a methodological approach predicated on Theatre Anthropology, encouraging her actors to create sequences of improvised movements that she could then map onto her knowledge of the ritually codified movements of the Orixás, and thus detect the archetypal ancestral energy influencing the work of each actor. This process acted both as a process of actor training and a means of collating scenic material that Fernanda Júlia could later craft into a performance through montage.

Fernanda Júlia's mother used the divinatory system of Candomblé to determine the Orixá of each actor prior to the commencement of the devising process. Aware of each actor's unique ancestral link to the divine, Fernanda Júlia was then able to guide the actors through an unconscious exploration of their Orixá's fundamento during the creative process, as the actors improvised sequences of physical actions (as in Barba's dramaturgical approach) however linked to internal impulses and encounters with the four elements in nature.

To the keen initiated eye, much of the scenic material that emerged would often reflect and embody key symbols related to the mythemes, ritual gestural language and/or energetic intensity of the actor's personal Orixá. These resonant actions would make their way into the final performance, and would guide the actor in an intimate exploration of his or her unique ancestry and cultural heritage, somewhat akin to Grotowski's notion of the vertical work of the actor/doer on the Self.

In the final performance, all of this improvised material was woven into a concrete montage in which each of the four actors became responsible for representing the primordial element that their movements most corresponded with, and embodying the Orixás connected to this element. The Orixás each appeared one after the other on stage according to the sacred "grammar" of the xirê. However, their movements were based on the actors' own sequences of actions, rather than an exact replication of the codified steps of the Dance of the Orixás.

Thus there is a deliberate, considered play of recursivity during the performance between the definitional level of Candomblé – its structural, semiotic organization, which is used by Fernanda Júlia to covertly mold the improvisations of the actors – and a broader recognition by the Grupo NATA of the Orixá as energetic tendency, as intensity, as an incorporeal potentiality of each body, which transcends the religious context. Hence a trace of the tacit, non-discursive experience of the indeterminate unknown, which lies at the heart of African religiosity and praise performance, haunts *Sirê Obá*, which is quite deliberately constellated around a perceptual field that is as characterized by affect and sensation as by discursive logic or linearity.

Thus, just as Odin's work forges an empty ritual – a scenic ecology dense with the pre-expressive training informing the actors' corporeity that envelopes the audience in a space where the sensible takes precedence over the logical – NATA's work draws on the living ritual of Candomblé, fusing African Brazilian praise performance and Third Theatre praxis in order to blur the boundaries between theatre and the sacred, aesthetics and identity, the Arts and cultural affirmation.