

The Dance of Opposition:

The Body of the Actor and the Body of the Group in Third Theatre

Introduction

This paper follows the one we gave at last year's IFTR conference in Hyderabad, as a part of our on-going research project into mapping the legacy and contemporary value of Third Theatre. Since then, in October 2015, Jane and I organised an International Symposium in Manchester at the Contact Theatre, which featured an array of workshops, talks and performances by artists and academics. Invited guests included the performers Luis Alonso, Mia Theil Have and Carolina Pizarro, who we subsequently interviewed in preparation for today's paper.

Luis Alonso is a Cuban-Brazilian actor and director. He is a long-term member of the Bridge of Winds - Odin actress Iben Nagel Rasmussen's international research group - and he is also artistic director of Oco Teatro-Laboratório, a laboratory theatre based in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Mia Theil Have is a former Odin actress and the current artistic director of UK-based Riotous Theatre Company. Originally from Denmark, she now lives and works in London. Carolina Pizarro is an actress from Chile. She recently joined Odin Teatret as a permanent member of the group. Prior to this, she worked on an on-going basis with Odin actresses Julia Varley and Roberta Carreri and formed her own company, Investigación Escénica. All three artists have continuing relations with Odin Teatret's sister organization Nordisk Teatrlaboratorium, which amongst other responsibilities, nurtures and incubates young artists from the Third Theatre community.

Our aim here is to investigate the intricacies surrounding the intercultural training processes at the heart of the Third Theatre tradition. We shall do this by drawing on the artists' voices, and exploring how they articulate the importance and value of this training in their daily practice. Whilst coloured by each artist's unique socio-cultural background and autobiography, it became apparent that their separate accounts of their embodied experiences of training in the Third Theatre tradition all pointed back to a "transcultural" level of experience that was difficult to put into words.

Whilst we are aware of the potential pitfalls of this term, and its problematic universalising and essentialist connotations, we aim today to map out this complex embodied territory of cultural negotiation, conflict and translation by drawing on Barba's notion of the *body-in-life*, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *the smooth and the*

striated and Ortiz' notion of *transculturación*. Our aim is not to drown out the voices of the performers in a cacophony of theory; we merely wish to delineate a conceptual framework a priori, which can do justice to the richness of Luis, Mia and Carolina's experiences and, together with their discourses, draw our attention to the role of corporeality in performer training, and its function as a form of creative intercultural dialogue.

Tracing Out the Body-in-Life

Barba's notion of the *body-in-life* is closely related to his celebrated concept of *travellers of speed*, developed in the article "A Premise on Written Silence" in *Beyond the Floating Islands* (1986), which was reprinted in an adjusted form in *Theatre: Solitude, Craft and Revolt* (1999). The underlying conceit is that there is a level of bodily experience – both technical and impulsive – a "Country of Speed" that transcends the boundaries of time and place. This "personal dimension" revolves around the "body-in-life", which is "[...]a constellation of fixed ideas, of very particular problems, of individual obsessions and hidden illnesses" (Barba, 1999: 43).

These personal fixations are in a later publication described as "[an] inner city, in that small and boundless territory enclosed within my skin, my nerves and muscles, in a personal and incommunicable microcosm [...]" (Barba, 2010: 14). This somatic "inner city", closely related in Barba's writing to solitude and "foreignness", evades facile semiotic translation and is comprised precisely of the recurring embodied principals – the *techné* or *animus* - that guide the artist through his/her work. Moreover, these principals, which do not necessarily obey temporal or cultural zones of stratification, coalesce into the "small traditions" that characterise the body of the group in Third Theatre praxis.

This complex, embodied play of temporal-spatial destratification maps onto Deleuze and Guattari's twin concept of *the smooth and the striated*. Speaking of a de jure or abstract distinction between two hypothesised forms of space, Deleuze and Guattari compare a *striated* space with a *smooth* one, and set up a number of dichotomies (fixed/mobile; delimited/open; sedentary/nomadic; etc.) to delineate the differences between the two, drawing on a number of technological, maritime, musical, mathematical, physical and artistic models (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). They emphasise throughout that this discursive division does not reflect the complex ways in which these two spatial modalities overlap and concatenate in the real, and that one is necessarily always already imbricated in the other.

One of the first examples they give of a smooth space is the fabric *felt*, which is contrasted with woven cloth. Whilst the latter is defined by vertical and horizontal elements that intertwine and intersect in a fixed, determinable fashion, felt is a supple solid, produced by entangling fibres through a process of “fulling” (pounding them together). The resulting material aggregate is in no way homogenous, but is a complex meshing of multiple strands that is nevertheless smooth (Ibid).

If we deterritorialise this model and trace it over Barba’s notion of the body-in-life, we can get a sense of how the theatre theoretician is attempting in his writing to map out a creative somatic plane characterised by this complex smoothness. In the case of the actor, as we shall see shortly, spatial-temporal strands are pounded together in the retort of the artist’s body during the durational process of training. The initial encounter with the craft is this “pounding” of intensities and affects, this smooth plane of embodied techniques, which are only disentangled and made discursive sense of in a striated fashion through distance and time. This striated integration of technique is reincorporated as the artist launches his/herself into the potentially smooth space of performance. Thus the smooth and striated are in constant dialogue with one another, as each artist embodies and processes training forms, which later feed into performance. This whole process is a complex form of intercultural dialogue, as it is characterised by intersubjectivity; the encounters between the actor and the Other, be that the director, other members of the group or other collaborators.

This is not to say that the idea of the *body-in-life* is not problematic; the complex web of intersubjectivity Barba tacitly articulates through this concept could easily be misconstrued as recourse to an individualistic, essentialising transculturalism that homogenises and eclipses difference. However, the term “transcultural” also deserves closer scrutiny. Whereas Pavis (1996: 6) suggests that the transcultural “[...] transcends particular cultures on behalf of a universality of the human condition”, Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz uses a similar term for his concept of *transculturation*, which denotes a very different, tripartite process of *acculturation* (acquiring another culture); *deculturation* (the loss or uprooting of a previous culture); and finally *neoculturation* (the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena) (Ortiz, 1947: 102).

According to Taylor (2003), paraphrasing Rama, later developments of Ortiz’ model emphasised the selectivity and inventiveness of transculturation, which allows the “minor culture” to impact on the major one. Transculturation is, in this sense, a complex process of intercultural negotiation and creative agency, a deliberate fulling/reweaving

of the many strands of the (postcolonial) social weft into new material. Hence, transculturation is at one and the same time striated and smooth; it is a zone of creative concatenation, of the subversive aggregation of cultural tropes into a minor tradition of revolt, of border-crossing, of dissent from within.

In many ways, this more complex cultural process is at the heart of the embodied praxis of the Third Theatre, particularly given this community's diasporic nature. Luis and Carolina are Latin American; Mia and Carolina are women; they are all cosmopolitan nomads, working in a varying array of geo-political contexts. In many ways, their experiences reflect the practice of a new generation of Third Theatre artists, working in a globalized mediated world, building on a small intercultural tradition in a mindful, respectful way.

From interculturalism to transculturation

Mia Theil Have firmly believes that her craft as an actor enables her to transcend any one culture. She says,

I do not actually recognize cultural barriers. [...] I participated in the gatherings known as ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) and these events formed a sense of myself as a creative performer and collaborator. (Have, 2016).

Here in the cultural eclecticism of ISTA, she found energy and inspiration, tenets that have informed the fundamentals of her teaching as well as practice, and are clearly reflected in her interest in working across disciplinary boundaries (over the past decade, Mia has worked with circus, opera, music, dance, and theatre).

She says you can see the inspiration of the traditions, practices, techniques she has encountered in her body - not so much the aesthetics or the specific expressions but an inspiration; a kind of response that is woven into the fabric of her identity as a performer. Following the weaving metaphor, she describes how in the midst of workshops and the training that she undertook when at an ISTA or with Odin, she was frantically weaving and it was highly colourful. But with distance and space she has been able to better reflect on what she has 'sucked up' and refined, and has made the information her own - filtered, edited by the body and the mind/memory into a pattern of her making (Idem).

In this weaving of principles, we can clearly see an embodied transcultural process in which the smooth and the striated are imbricated, as the tacit knowledge of the body-in-life is integrated into a young artist's working methodology. However, Mia differentiates

between the brief intercultural training experiences at ISTA, and the prolonged training that she undertook with Tage Larsen and Else Marie Laukvik at Odin Teatret and as an actress with the group. She notes that she doesn't adapt or interfere with the exercises she refers to as *plastiques*; here the form she learnt from Tage remains the same (Idem).

Essentially, Mia has an eclectic practice, in which intercultural principals garnered through contact with masters at ISTA and through Teatrum Mundi performances are integrated into her more prolonged work with techniques developed by Tage, such as stick work, and the vocal and physical composition training and creation of performance materials with Else Marie and Eugenio Barba. Moreover, she has trained recently to become a teacher of Ashtanga Yoga, to have a personal holistic practice that can travel with her on a mat and as a way to gain insight in anatomy and how to sustainably build a practice for various body types.

According to Mia:

One has to stand humble in front of new performance traditions as you know you cannot learn or know them in your lifetime. Collaborating with truly skilled performers working in circus or opera for example – I acknowledge, and recognize their craft and technique through my own rigorous in depth training and approach. Through ISTA and Odin I have picked up tools to distill principles in what I see and a methodology to create meeting points and collaborate with skilled artists of very particular traditions. This has often naturally put me in the role as a director in fields I had perhaps not foreseen, such as opera. (Have, 2016).

So at one and the same time, Mia's training means that she is both grounded and concurrently open enough to cross artistic and aesthetic cultural borders.

Carolina Pizarro describes how her training is based on Indian forms – specifically Kalaripayattu - but she also uses folk dances from Chile (learnt when she was a child) and elements of Brazilian Candomblé, as well as of Butoh. All of these forms come together in her performance work; it is a mixture of the forms. She says “[...] whether I choose them or they choose me – I do not know... They surprise me – and surprise me of my capabilities. I awaken things that I do not recognize in me” (Pizarro, 2016).

She describes how, by going away from her culture, she realized she was in her culture once again. To illustrate the point, she explains that she spent time with the Mapuche people in Chile, learning their dances. She recognized a similar consciousness to Kalaripayattu: both the Chilean dance and the Indian practice are connected to the

earth, to nature and have a consciousness of fire. She says that, without calling the Mapuche dance a mediation, it was like mediation (Idem).

She notes that the more you look for things far away the more you see them as an approximation of yourself, of your experience. Thus an intercultural pathway is essential for the artist but importantly not a tourist path. Time and engagement are needed to enter into the cosmological vision of the craft. The importance of the spiritual aspect of encountering a different form cannot be underestimated. When in another space/place, if you approach that space as a foreigner, you are able to discover yourself and open up and embrace other forms rather than reduce them to what is already familiar (Idem).

Thus, the body-in-life of the artist as a foreigner, navigating through different cultural forms, is characterized by complexity. The transcultural process of developing training within this tradition is more than a superficial adoption of codified techniques; the cultural displacement of foreignness can lead to a temporal-spatial condensation, where different fruitful connections can be made between practices within the body. The danger, however, is that alterity can be eroded through these subjective comparisons, and that inevitably a tourist-like gaze can take over. Thus there is a spectrum here, ranging from a touristic appropriation of form to the possibility through practice of sharing in the epistemic, ontological and spiritual values of a different culture.

On being a foreigner

For Luis Alonso, being a foreigner is hard but necessary. He says “[...] you have to open up a space around yourself that is big – and abandon yourself – with the innocence of a child not yet enculturated.” (Alonso, 2016). With reference to his initial work with the Bridge of Winds, he describes training as being “[...] extremely hard, and your body aches” (Idem). He describes it as a moment of transgression because, “[...] as a performer, you are required to let go of your body and its training and let someone else in” (Idem). This he describes as for him an example of being a foreigner: “[...] you must leave your roots, open up yourself to other people, spaces, other ways of thinking, speaking with your body” (Idem).

He says that it is not by chance that Odin is made up of foreigners because they have recognized a strength in enabling people to continually come in and travel through the spaces that they work and live in. This, he says, is not an intercultural space but a *liminal space*. An intercultural space is too superficial a description as it starts from a premise of

separation and suggests a coming together, as opposed to, what he describes in the particular context of the Bridge of Winds as, “[...] existing in an in-between space where ‘you encounter the ‘other’ in yourself as well as performers other to yourself, who are from different cultures but importantly have all travelled and left their culture behind for the month of the training” (Idem).

What occurs allows for a mixing, but is not necessarily producing anything that could be called a hybrid; the space is not about creative production but reinvigoration. The metaphorical form of the space is very delicate and the encounters, like the wind blowing through, mean that there are times when the performers do not recognize themselves, and times when they do recognize themselves and the ‘other’ but in a different way, “This is a space where we see ourselves as similar but also different – to say that there are points in common is also too superficial a description” (Idem) This, he says, is about the deep roots of our humanity.

For Carolina being a foreigner means having a distance, a feeling of not belonging that allows you to make attachments freely. She likes to be on borders as it provides her with a sense of liberty. She was offered a place teaching in Chile but she rejected the offer, because, she says, “I wanted to be free, to travel freely, to do theatre projects and discover myself as a foreigner in different contexts” (Pizarro, 2016). She describes how, as a visitor rather than a foreigner, things can look more beautiful than they actually are; as a foreigner, she says, “ [...] you can see beneath the surface of the tourist gaze” (Idem).

Describing her time in India she says it was sometimes like a mirror, “[...] we can be so similar [...] the poverty is familiar – you can walk with bare foot on the ground like in Chile” (Idem). She describes herself and the young Indian woman she trained with as two young people walking bare feet who had decided to make art independent of context, place, smells etc – they wanted to make the world more beautiful.

Again, Barba’s notion of foreignness as an integral condition for the development of the body-in-life comes to the fore; but in the case of Carolina, the connections are more important and more fruitful than the differences. There is a sense here of Kirsten Hastrup’s notion of “double belonging” (1987), and, as Nascimento (2010) suggests, of the artist’s work in intercultural training being akin to the anthropologist’s work in the field; both professionals transcend their own reality to exist in two different cultural universes at once, changing profoundly as a result. Thus, the emergence of what Nascimento has termed as a “professional culture” – the long-term embodiment of foreign performance techniques within intercultural performer training - resonates with

the neoculturation phase of Ortiz' transculturation model. For Carolina, as for Mia and Luis, a double belonging seems to be the outcome of their long-term embodied engagement through their training with performance practices from three continents.

Conclusion

Thus the transcultural dialogue at the heart of Third Theatre training is a liminal space: on the one hand, as Luis suggests, it would be too superficial to refer to this privileged space of embodied intersubjectivity as intercultural; yet on the other, different acculturated bodies do encounter one another in the space, and together through training and performance explore the shared needs, desires and obsessions that characterize the corporeal experience of a theatrical body-in-life.

This, we would suggest, is the dance of opposition at the heart of the dialectic between the body of the actor and the body of the group; the importance of solitude as a condition for the work, maintaining a permanent sense of foreignness and thus openness, even within your own professional culture, thus allowing for constant renewal and lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the smooth). However, this is counterbalanced by the importance of quasi-familial bonds; a sense of diasporic community and belonging to a small tradition; a striated structure that also holds and nourishes.

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