Unpublished document kept at Odin Teatret Archives

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THE GHOST ROOM

A continuous change

Since my first steps into the theatrical profession, training has been a point of constant orientation and I have spoken and written about it many times. I have crossed fields mined with illusions, but I cannot say that I am disenchanted. The training’s constant presence is for me a continuous change, always at my side, since it did not grow from a doctrine, but from my doubts and the questions they aroused.

Nevertheless, I feel uneasy every time I have to speak about training. It would be irresponsible to consider it as a theatre dogma. But it would also be deceitful to minimise its importance, treating it as a technical mirage or the practice of a minority with a limited scope.

As always, when I try to confront a question from a different point of view, I start to move backwards, returning to my beginnings.

We are in the early 1960s and I was not yet 30 years old. Jerzy Grotowski already behaved like an elderly master although he was only approaching his thirtieth birthday. In the speeches and practice of the theatre of that time, training and exercises were non-existent. They were described in books of theatre history as unusual and exceptional practices in Stanislavski’s and Meyerhold’s Studios or in Jacques Copeau’s school at the Vieux Colombier.

Since 1962, in the small Theatre of the 13 Rows in the provincial Polish town of Opole, Grotowski’s actors had been doing exercises in addition to rehearsing and performing. These exercises were not experiments nor were they fragments to be introduced into the performance. It was part of their daily work programme. Originally Grotowski had selected the exercises in view of the performance he was preparing. For example, he was using certain positions of hatha yoga, merely changing their dynamics. These exercises also continued to be executed when the performance was ready and presented publicly. With time they turned into the training’s basic sequences, chains of ‘physical’ and ‘plastic’ exercises.

In that period, European theatre people spoke of playwrights: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Brecht, Chekhov or the new ones: Dürrenmat, Ionesco, Beckett. The ‘great names’ on which my teachers at the Warsaw theatre school insisted, and later Grotowski, were of another race. They belonged to the realm of ‘doing’, not of ‘writing’: Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Osterwa, Tairov - the representatives of the Great Reform during the first three decades of the 20th century. And also the mime Marcel Marceau, a contemporary re-discoverer of a wordless theatre.

The first time I wrote about training in 1962, it was to list and describe the exercises developed by Grotowski in his theatre. I aimed at simplicity, exactness and rationality: a style similar to a ‘user’s guide’. I made a great effort to select words which would permit the reader to do exercises s/he had never seen and which might unleash his/her imagination. In the following years, I often met directors and actors who confessed to me, smiling, their blunders while attempting to follow my instructions in my book on Grotowski, In Search of a Lost Theatre (1965), and republished three years later in Grotowski’s Towards a Poor Theatre.

Some of those people, while admitting the misunderstandings induced by the Grotowskian exercises, also told me that in their perseverance they had invented new exercises: their own training. I drew this conclusion: more important than the
exercise’s form is the tenacious motivation to execute it to its extreme limits, contributing thus to its mutation.

The diverse natures of the exercises

In the theatre reformers’ books I read of suggestive visions, of mises-en-scène and, more rarely, of exercises. Soon I became aware that the exercises were different in nature. In some cases, they were amulets made of body memory: pre-established patterns which could be repeated as a mantra or a prayer.

This was the case for instance with the biomechanics exercises coined by Meyerhold. They were jewels of theatre knowledge, so entangled as to be hardly measurable. A few fragments of these have survived, filmed by their creator. It suffices to imitate them in order to realise the difficulty in deciding which details are essential, and which parts may be modified without impairing them. They are fixed forms, but they do not serve to transmit a form, a Meyerhold style. They convey, through a perceivable fixed pattern, the actor’s thought-in-action: contrasts, counterpoints, the simultaneous presence of multiple dynamic variations and directions within the same action. They are a sort of cubism in acting. At first they seem eccentric and abstract but, if we persist in examining them, they reveal the personal writing in code of a theatre craftsman and scientist.

These exercises condense a tangible physical and mental estrangement. They decompose daily gestures and recompose them, transformed and yet organic, that is, sensorially persuasive to the observer. On the other hand, the actor who executes them is like a traveler who returns to a familiar landscape after visiting the antipodes. This occurs even in the simplest action: clapping hands, for example. In our daily behaviour, first we open our arms, then we clap. In Meyerhold’s biomechanics, the hands are barely apart, they clap, then the arms open. It is an elementary estrangement, but from this simple example we may grasp the logic driving the complex and entangled score of these rigorously formalised exercises.

A completely different type of exercise aims at training specific abilities in the actors with regard to the use of the voice and physical actions. These widen the panoply of their possibilities, without anchoring them to a particular style, to a pre-arranged stage behaviour or a series of tried clichés that risk limiting their freedom. Freedom means choice. And we can only choose among an abundance of possible alternatives, all of which we master.

Of yet another genre are those exercises centered on rhythm variations, on the construction of interrelations with other actors, and on the composition of the dialogue and the physical/vocal contact. These micro-situations amplify the elasticity to adapt at once to the stimuli of the partner and/or context, strengthening the immediateness of the action/reaction.

There are exercises that seem like ‘society games’ which stimulate the imagination (to choose a character and be able to answer any question asked by one’s companions about this character’s life and way of thinking). Others train bodily reactions and awareness (everyone runs around the room, then freezes like a statue at a given signal, but ready to run again at a new signal, changing direction). Usually, these exercises are pleasant to perform. We are tempted to remain for a long time in their company, as though they were already theatrical actions.

Other exercises, instead, are difficult to learn and can hurt, as for instance the acrobatic ones. They seem to teach the actor the amazing abilities of the young body, and are therefore always seductive. They instill the conditioned reflex of precision and decision to cross the limits that we believe natural to us. Once they are mastered
and have been practised for a long time, they can be abandoned. Precision and
decision should characterise the actor’s simplest action: how to take a step, how to lift
a hand, how to sit or to get up.

There are exercises rooted on doctrines of the body, of respiration and
movement, gratifying when they seem to border on meditation and spirituality. Others
satisfy inventiveness and spontaneity with the thousand variations of improvisation
and its fundamental paradox: to control the rules of improvisation.

The enumeration of the different types of exercise is endless.

We can spend our life doing exercises and improvisations, experimenting one
‘method’ after another, exploring the means as if they were an end, continually
postponing the moment of the performance and the encounter with the spectators.
Through these practices, a new dimension of theatre amateurism (with the
superficiality and dedication that distinguishes it) is born which supplants the
performance with seminars and courses. These seminars and courses insert a virtual
space and time into daily life, and allow the participants to live a few days within the
theatre without the will or the real possibility of doing it afterwards. It is a
phenomenon which has spread since the first years of the 20th century, following the
reverberation of the research led by the protagonists of the Great Theatre Reform. For
some of them, training assumed such a central value that it mutated from process into
absolute finality. This drift of the exercises has created situations of activity which are
autonomous islets: neither professional nor amateur theatre; neither rehearsals nor
performance. Here we have one of the many ghost rooms of the theatre.

The risks are no fewer when training doesn’t let us forget the necessity to
create a performance and confront the spectators. Unconsciously, a sort of small
dogma can grow: that training leads to the actor’s artistic and ethical rebirth. And
therefore - a still more perversely dogma - that training can guarantee it.

"What is the point of it? I don't even know what it is!" most actors exclaim if
someone asks them what they think of the training. It is so easy to deride the ‘theatres
of the training’ that, by contrast, an emphatic desire to defend them arises with the
same facility.

Training becomes a flag and a fetish which accompanies the first years of
theatrical experience outside the schools and the ‘legitimate’ theatre. Then, if one
continues, training evaporates from the professional routine. It creates
disenchantments as strong as the illusions that had fed it.

There is nothing wrong in cultivating illusions. Illusions are vital when they
are born and grow into something else. They are the only spiritual nourishment that is
given to us, the dreams of which we are made. Illusions become destructive when we
let them crystallise into idols and dogmas.

Journeys within a room

I have often heard: ‘training, for an actor, is part of his/her job, as is training
for the musician, the mountaineer, the soldier or the athlete’. In reality, it is of a
substantially different kind. In theatre, the term ‘training’ is used metaphorically.

It coincides only partially with the learning period or with exercises aiming to
keep in form. It does not prepare to perform nor does it teach something. Rather it
makes us ready to estrange ourselves from our usual behaviour, the so-called
spontaneity or conventional theatricality.

When the masters of the Great Reform from the last century, from Stanislavski
to Copeau, from Meyerhold to Dullin or Decroux, gave such emphasis to the
exercises, their intention was not to take possession of a tradition but, on the contrary,
to refuse it. It was a paradoxical apprenticeship, not for an art whose forms were known, but for an art to come. From this point of view, training resembles that which in science distinguishes pure research from applied research.

Similar motivations were also at the base of Grotowski’s and The Living Theatre’s training. In their case, their specific training was an escape from a theatre that they experienced as a jail, unsuitable to bring forth their aspirations and demands.

Totally different were the training’s roots for autodidacts, a condition I have personally gone through with Odin Teatret. Since the 1970s, training has characterized the young people who gathered in small independent and underground groups, forced into autodidacticism. We were the illegitimate children of the recognized theatre, not its avant-garde. We were incapable of being admitted into it or of competing with it. Ever since our apprenticeship we were forced to struggle for our survival, outside the recognition of theatre schools or of the learning period in acknowledged companies.

As orphans who identify themselves with their grandparents, we cherished the ethos of the craft and the words of the Great Reform’s masters, as well as the close experiences of the Living Theatre or Grotowski. The Living Theatre and Grotowski might appear marginal or discarded, but they were aristocrats who had rejected the legitimacy of the theatre culture from which they originated and in which they had ceased to believe.

As autodidacts, our refusal was different: it was a rejection due to our inferiority.

I struggle to point out differences, at the risk of generalizing, in order to show how divergent phenomena, conflicting motivations, dissimilar rebellions and hopes are blended within the term ‘training’.

But both the refusal of the aristocrats as well as that of the orphans has complementary fields of action.

The first field of action has the vast dimensions of society, of the place that theatre occupies in it, the performances’ space, whether inside or ouside, fenced or itinerant, in cities with their customary audiences or in territories ‘without theatre’. In this geography, theatre men and women test their skill to create relationships and accomplish real journeys, breaking the circle of their tours, of fashions and the tides of the market.

The other field of action is restricted. It has the bare panorama of a journey around an apparently isolated room, where the actors work on themselves, between four walls, with no spectators. It is a totally different situation from that of rehearsal, where we can foresee the moment in which spectators will be sitting on the other side.

Although the space is small, the journey can be long and full of struggles. Seen from the outside, it often appears eccentric, even meaningless. Lived from the inside, whether we call them ‘exercises’ or ‘training’, the journey implies a way of thinking and an emotional motivation that express themselves in a way of doing.

A diverse professional identity

I was not blind. I was aware that admirable actors had never practiced any form of training. On the other hand, actors excelling in training were of little interest when performing. Yet, in my first years, these objections didn’t even occur to me in the situation of commitment and the discovery of the value of theatre that training offered my actors. I justified to myself - and I still believe it today - the necessity of training as an expression of a diverse professional identity. Training was the daily confirmation, humble and tangible, of the decision to devote oneself to theatre,
through the search for rigour and self-discipline. It was the personal conquest of each actor of the how and the why s/he was doing theatre. It forged the tools of his/her independence, personal growth and capacity to resist under adverse conditions. It encouraged each actor to practice and defend individual and artistic dissidence.

A small room contains the space of a vast geography. It is a solitude without isolation, a solitude in company.

At Odin Teatret, training persists still today - after 43 years. In the beginning, it took place in a jealously guarded space-time, without extraneous presences. After about ten years, it became a mutant room. Some actors ceased to enter it. Others persevered transforming this room into a flying carpet, a garden of their own or an island in which they were Prospero.

Even when some of my actors interrupted the training, even when I did not guide it anymore day after day, even when the lack of connection between the quality of an actor’s training and the quality of his/her results in the performance became evident to us all, training remained at the core of my reflections. A few of my actors and myself, each of us out of personal necessity, behaved like stubborn children.

Thus we discovered that to persist means to change oneself. And the transformations are so evident that, at times, they are the sheer negation of the points of departure.

A point of departure was very clear in Grotowski’s laboratory in the early 1960s: you do not stage training as a performance. It was also peremptory at Odin Teatret: never confuse training with rehearsal.

Yet, in exactly the same period, in 1964, the Living Theatre composed one of its most radical performances - Mysteries and Smaller Pieces - by assembling its own exercises. Ten years later, Odin Teatret too, in the village of Carpignano in southern Italy, composed The Book of Dances theatricalising the actors’ training. What had happened in the meantime?

Like Mysteries and Smaller Pieces, The Book of Dances also originated from the grip of circumstances: we had to present ourselves to the villagers, but we had no performance. We built a structured succession of scenes using exercises from our training, adding music, costumes and a few texts. The result remained for several years in our repertoire. When we stopped showing it, we replaced it with productions of the same kind. Meanwhile, the Living Theatre’s performance had become a classic in the theatre of the second half of the 20th century. The origin of both these performances composed by assembling fragments of training, and the fact that they were created almost by chance, as extemporaneous products, is an anecdote belonging to the truth, which however does not explain the deep reasons for their birth.

A transformation had taken place in the training, apparently a minute factor that caused a real mutation: the exercises were welded one to another. From our very first years we realised at Odin Teatret that the power and effect of the training was multiplied if, instead of executing first one exercise and then the following, we linked them together in a long-lasting continuous flow. In this way, it was no longer the exercise itself which was important, but its ending which became the beginning of the following exercise.

It seems an insignificant detail, but the practical consequences exploded as a mighty revolution. We used the term chain to denominate the series of exercises connected in a unique flow. But it was not really a chain, since the single ‘links’ were not fixed. The actor started with a pre-arranged sequence of about ten exercises which s/he had assimilated. The rest was improvisation: incessant alternation in the order of the exercises, accelerating and breaking their rhythm, executing them vigourously or
softly, surprising oneself by sudden changes of direction in the space. The better the actor performing his/her chain mastered it, the better s/he could react simultaneously while creating the impulses. *His/her actions were reactions.* They had a dynamic texture of lightness and vigour akin to dance and, if the chain was accompanied by music, it gave the impression of a ballet in constant evolution.

The chain of exercises was a repertoire of a limited number of patterns established in the smallest detail which, however, could always give life to dissimilar sequences, just as a limited number of cards can give life to endless and unpredictable games. Once training took this road, it ceased being a practice separated from the ‘creative’ phase. But creativeness always follows personal paths. After some years, there no longer existed an ‘Odin training’, but different types of training elaborated by the single actors with exercises, justifications and terminologies which seem to have little in common.

In our theatre, time devoted to training continued to be kept separate from rehearsal and other preparations for a performance. I became aware that I could no longer play a part as a teacher who explains and leads a common method. It was not my words that could stimulate my actors, but my presence as the other who asserts that he no longer knows the purpose of what they are doing. And I question myself about the sense and the direction of those solitary paths along which, every morning, each actor moves at training time.

The term ‘training’ was less and less suited to what happened in practice. We called it ‘fish pond’: each actor worked by himself, but in the same space. They didn't elaborate the usual chain of exercises, but scenic material which was not fixed, fragments of scenes for potential performances, the majority of which would never take place. A swarm of images, like a magma, filled the room, every figure with objects, playing musical instruments, wearing unusual costumes, using the voice and behaving in particular ways. The same actor passed from one to another of the figures s/he had invented and developed.

In a ‘fish pond’ multi-coloured fish swim, some ephemeral, others able to grow and leap into the sea. Each of them is in possession of its own embryo of life and none of them is already endowed with a destiny.

The distinction between training and performance had clearly disappeared. Today it is easy for me to explain this in a few words: this situation had arisen because we had continued to insist on this road, without being held back by the feeling that it was no longer useful. But I would be insincere if I affirmed that proceeding along this road for years and years was effortless and unproblematic.

At the same time, another parallel and complementary process was taking shape. It arose from a pedagogical need: some Odin actors distilled a few basic principles for the training. These principles were inserted in simple exercises, easy to learn and not fixed in elaborate forms. They functioned as land to be cultivated, in which each student could grow his/her own materials, working autonomously.

I too, when I led a seminar, stopped teaching exercises, and looked for procedures that allowed me to individualise and apply the principles and not the forms. I still used the word ‘training’ for that space-time in which I was free to follow traces that lost themselves in nothingness, lingering on misunderstandings and conjectures, and childishly questioning the obvious truths of my practice.

Recurrent principles in different forms: this is the field of my research - theoretical and practical, comparative and pedagogical - which I started with ISTA, International School of Theatre Anthropology. Theatre anthropology is a pragmatic comparative study of human behaviour in a situation of organized representation. And
it is not accidental that in every ISTA session the first hours of the day are devoted to what an observer would call training and exercises.

**Nobody’s room?**

The impossibility of reducing training to a unique definition, its mutability and contradictory nature, its risks and fascination are concrete facts. But to which reality of the theatre work do these facts belong?

The historical origins of training, its wealth and variety, the illusion of its virtue of professional rebirth, and the contrasting illusion of being able to do without it indicate changing conditions. But to which needs do these changes correspond? Is training, perhaps, a particular case of a more general problem? And if so, which?

After almost fifty years of practicing and studying the training, these questions were forced imperiously on me during the 2005 session of the University of Eurasian Theatre, a regular activity of ISTA. ‘Text and scene’: this theme, because it was so obvious, was the object of the investigation.

I imagined that we would discuss the ways according to which a text turns into live performance. But from the first day, one of the scholars opened another front. He explained that, in addition to the interpretation, direction, relationship with the spectator or scenic space, a preliminary problem existed: the demand to create an intermediary region between the space of the text and that of the performance. What was that region? It was not, of course, the rehearsal time.

Franco Ruffini, the scholar who had disrupted our programme, had come up with the example of Stanislavski. He sustained that all the stratagems that Stanislavski used for vivifying the text or the character to be staged were not interpretative devices. They were an accumulation of details that were interposed, as a vast and bulky ‘Chinese Wall’, or as a no man’s land, between the reading of the text and its mise-en-scène. This sequence of details appeared massive and out of proportion, but resulted appropriate as soon as it was thought of as a way to populate the intermediary space between the one and the other room of the theatre: that of the text and that of the performance. The substantial details didn’t serve to explore the text, but to escape from it, crossing a dense space that was connected to the text without belonging to it.

We all agreed in the case of Stanislavski. But was this situation to be found in other cases? We started to discuss this nameless intermediary region. Could its presence be generalised? And what was it really about?

What happens in this room, and what place does it occupy in the mental/practical building which we call ‘theatre’? It is not rehearsals. Nor is it the equivalent of work around a table, when the text is analysed in order to furnish a suitable interpretation, faithful to the author’s intentions or to the complementary or divergent ones of its interpreters.

Nor does this room have anything to do with the room of training or exercises. The latter seemed to us to be obvious. Instead, during the discussion, this obviousness became more and more questionable.

The idea of a ghost room, or of a nobody’s room, began to materialize in our discussion. We tried to define it. We didn’t know what it was, but we had recognized it. Or rather, it was there, waiting to be recognized.

The way of denominating it and the idea that we might have of it seemed to have little to do with theatre. It originated from the regions of a certain type of literature in which it was a recurrent presence. The nightmare of a ‘ghost room’ or of a ‘nobody’s room’ provides the plot of many fantastic and horror stories. Writers like
Howard Phillips Lovecraft and John Dickson Carr have evoked it, and it is from the latter that the title *The Nobody's Room* stems. It may seem strange to think about stories of this kind while speaking of training, also because the ‘nobody’s room’ is usually that of crime. And training has nothing in common with crime.

The ‘ghost room’ of the stories and novels is so called because at times it is there, and not at others. It moves. The protagonist has seen it, for example, in a friend’s house or in a castle, but when he returns he cannot find it. He asks himself whether he has dreamt it or, on the contrary, the others are lying and hiding a mystery, a treasure or a misdeed. The people living in that place affirm that the room he is looking for has never existed. They take him for a madman or a visionary.

In theatre, we are told: there are texts to interpret, rehearsals, performances. There is no room for anything else.

There has always been *something else*: the continuity of craft and trade, for example. As long as it was a real commerce, in order to live, actors had to possess a lot of interesting ‘wares’ to sell. They changed the performance almost everyday, keeping alive an ample repertoire, wasting the least possible and creating in haste. Around their performances, they had a *storeroom* in which they accumulated unused materials, ready to be exploited and recycled: fragments and entire scenes ready to be re-employed, always effective, or else old, demoded or forgotten materials, but suitable to be ‘fished up’ from oblivion to be reshaped and reinstated as a novelty.

It was the storeroom of the clichés, the wardrobe of the most obsolete conventions. It was the source of the profession’s aesthetical dejection according to the judgment of the theatre reformers who longed for renewal.

The storeroom of the clichés has always been hidden in the long history of European theatre. The actors didn’t speak of it nor did they show it. They even denied its existence. The connoisseurs and the reformers, glimpsing its presence, suggested discarding everything and letting in the new and fresh air of the twentieth century.

The storeroom of the clichés served less and less in a theatre which was no longer a craft where actors prepared innumerable performances in their own way. Theatre had become the activity of the new artists of direction who took care of every single *mise-en-scène* as an autonomous work of art. The storeroom of the clichés was useless and harmful when theatre began to be considered as an art to be protected, and no longer as a more or less dignified commerce.

The storeroom of the clichés became empty, then disappeared: a *ghost room*. Then one started feeling its loss. Nothing was lacking since everything that was lost was that which one wanted to lose. But the balance had been disturbed. Because the storeroom of the clichés filled an implicit un-programmed role, but an essential one: *it created the awareness of the theatre as a country one belonged to - the professional ethos*. Although encumbered with remains which were not considered worthy, it was an immaterial yet concrete space. It was the no man’s land that was interposed between daily life and the space of rehearsals and performances. Like the garden or the cellar that lies between the street and the house. The actors could walk in it, open the cupboards where pieces of past experiences were stored. For those who were richest in experience and talent, it was like the children’s nursery that some wealthy parents preserved intact. For the poorer, it was the cupboard of their resources from which they could draw their meagre living. For all of them, it was their *theatre-home*, their *theatre-country*. The incessant tours made their life nomadic, but they took with them that ghost room as *their own* theatre, similar to the house in which snails and turtles dwell. It was a *weight* that, nevertheless, allowed them to move.
All the anomalous and ‘wasted’ work that the twentieth century reformers invented, when they imagined the time-space of the exercises parallel to the rehearsals, aimed also at the reconstruction of that separate room. They emptied it of the clichés and filled it with novelties.

Unlike the old storeroom, this new one was presentable. It had the authoritativeness of good culture and was draped with the values of ethics and research. While previously it might have appeared uncultivated and vulgar, now it runs the opposite risk of being too sophisticated. In the past, the storeroom of the clichés was the room to be ashamed of or joke about. Nowadays, it is always on the verge of becoming the sanctuary of the theatre’s rebirth.

Risks and contents change but the ghost room continues to exist. It is nobody’s room and yet it is the most personal and intimate one. In our craft, training resides there with its fixed forms, its individual motivations and its emotional value.

I wonder: could training therefore be a particular case of a general demand for a ghost room? For a place where the necessity of theatre dwells before becoming a manufactured product?

Do I want to say, with this, that what we call ‘training’ is only an illusion and a source of illusions? I believe it to be quite the contrary.

Do I want to sustain, then, that training conceals an objective treasure or the overcoming of technical and artistic hurdles? Once more, I think it is quite the opposite.

So many questions remain suspended about the training, about its opportunity and quality, about what in it is essential and what mutable, about its utility and exaggeration. But one question in particular stands out, one which seems to observe all this from the outside, as if examining it from the clouds, without any concern to learn or ambition for artistic recognition. It is one of those childish questions.

This child looks at himself and the others who do theatre. He observes the weight that keeps them going. He appreciates their performances. At times he shakes his head, at others he is moved, opening his eyes wide to that trembling of the air through which the invisible seems to peep for an instant. He looks at the group, that difficult and fraternal company.

And he asks: which theatre will each of them take with them when they will no longer carry the weight of that theatre in which they grew and were shaped?

Our time’s theatre is no longer similar to that of the professionals of the past. Nor are we any longer disinherited beginners needing to invent our craft. But we still have the necessity of a portable theatre whose forms and secret sense belong only to the individual who does it. ‘Training’ or ‘ghost room’ are just words. The one is worth the other according to situation and age. We may fill the theatre that we take with us - its weight - with materials which vary from one occasion to another. It is the existence of that space, of that room that belongs only to us, that is essential. Not what furnishes it.

Translation: Judy Barba