WORDS AND PRESENCE

Here, defined in explicit terms, is the vision of training which was already present in the two short letters from Barba to his actors. The training has now become a process of self-definition. Barba brings down to earth "the myth of technique": the purpose of training is not so much to prepare actors as to form individuals.

First published in "The Drama Review", 53, New York 1972. Translated into many languages, it has become one of the main texts for understanding his attitude towards technique and pedagogy.

Training does not teach how to act, how to be clever, does not prepare one for creation. Training is a process of self-definition, a process of self-discipline which manifests itself indissolubly through physical reactions. It is not the exercise in itself that counts - for example, bending or somersaults - but the individual's justification for the work which, although perhaps banal or difficult to explain through words, is physiologically perceptible to the observer. This approach, this personal justification decides the meaning of the training, the surpassing of the particular exercises which, in reality, are stereotyped gymnastic movements.

This inner necessity determines the quality of the energy which allows work without a pause, without noticing tiredness, continuing although exhausted and even then going forward without surrendering. This is the self-discipline of which I spoke.

Let us understand each other, however: it is not by killing oneself with exhaustion that one becomes creative. It is not on command, through force, that one opens oneself to others. Training is not a form of personal asceticism, a malevolent harshness against oneself, a persecution of the body. Training puts one's own intentions to the test, how far one is prepared to pay with one's own person for all that one believes and declares. It is the possibility of bridging the gap between intention and realisation. This daily task, obstinate, patient, often in darkness, sometimes even searching for a meaning, is a concrete factor in the transformation of the actor as an individual and a member of the group. This imperceptible daily transformation of one's way of seeing, approaching and judging the problems of one's own existence and that of others, this sifting of one's own prejudices and doubts - not through gestures and grandiloquent phrases but through the silent daily activity - is reflected in the work which finds new justifications, new reactions: thus one’s north is displaced.

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In the beginning, we had a programme of set exercises that we taught everyone and that everyone had to follow. These were exercises of every kind, taken from ballet, mime, pure gymnastics, Hatha Yoga and acrobatics. We worked out a whole series of physical actions and called this "biomechanics" after the term used by
Meyerhold. We defined biomechanics as a very dynamic reaction to an external stimulus. The exercises were of an acrobatic type and rather violent. However, we had transformed them according to what we imagined the training of the traditional Asian actor might be. Starting from this training as it existed in our imagination, we wanted to achieve a rhythm of work that was intense yet had the same precision and economy of movement, the same suggestiveness and power that we attributed to the Asian actor. For us, biomechanics was not a technically exact historical reconstruction of Meyerhold's exercises and their particular aim: namely, the creation of a social emploi for the actor. We used this term to set our imagination in motion, to stimulate us. What was it like, this biomechanics?

We attempted to re-invent it, to rediscover it in our bodies according to our own justifications. It was the actors who, individually or in collaboration, worked out the map of this territory. Within it were also the "battles", the fights, the exercises for the reflexes in which the actors had to adapt themselves immediately to a situation, think with their whole body, react with all of it.

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In spite of my experience in Asian theatre, especially kathakali, I haven't drawn directly from it. I tried to make my actors imagine this theatre of colours and exoticism, acrobatics and religiosity, by appealing to their subjectivity and imagination. Kathakali, like all Asian theatre, cannot be copied or transplanted. It can only serve as a stimulus, a point of departure. The actors in traditional Asian theatre are immersed in a tradition that they must wholly respect. They are executing a role whose minutest detail has, as in a musical score, been developed by some master in a more or less distant past. As with a pianist or a ballet dancer, their evolution cannot be separated from virtuosity. In western theatre, however, actors are - or should be - creators. Their clash with the text, through their own sensibility and historical experience, opens up a unique and personal universe to their spectators.

This essential difference also determines one's approach to the profession, the preparation, that which is usually called training. Even today, kathakali or kabuki actors begin their training at the same age as European children who wish to devote themselves to ballet. The psychological and physiological consequences are evident. It is meaningless to go to Japan or India and take exercises from kabuki or kathakali in order to adapt them passively to the European pedagogical tradition, hoping that our actors might become "virtuosi" like their Asian colleagues. Let me repeat, it is not the exercises in themselves that are decisive, but one's personal attitude, that inner necessity which incites and motivates the choice of one's profession, justifying it on an emotional level and with a logic that will not allow itself to be trapped by words.

This attitude determines the creation of norms that become almost an artistic or ethical superego in the actor. Similar norms are also to be found in theatre forms based on a purely technical apprenticeship. Here the historical circumstances and the environmental conditions in which the theatre work evolves, influence the development of these norms which are reflected in the technique. For example, the entire training of a young kabuki actor takes place in a rarefied atmosphere, without the possibility of contact with actors from other forms, such as noh or modern theatre, in a strictly
professional hierarchy petrified in family dynasties whose mentality contrasts with the efficient industrial vocation of contemporary Japan.

The same applies to *kathakali*. While the *kabuki* actor is owned by a large impresario firm which places him in various theatres, the *kathakali* actor works on religious ground (the temple courtyard), dedicates his work and his performance to divinities, lives in a very modest way without the prospect ever of becoming a star like his Japanese colleague. These socio-historical circumstances, together with a particular professional tradition which still has great value and prestige for the young would-be actor, are decisive factors in the conception and elaboration of that expressiveness which is codified and so transformed into technique.

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In the beginning of our activity we too believed in the "myth of technique", something which it was possible to acquire, to possess, and which would have allowed the actors to master their own body and become conscious of it. So, at this stage, we practised exercises to develop the dilation of the eyes in order to increase their expressiveness. They were exercises which I had seen in India while studying the training of *kathakali* actors. The expressiveness of the eyes is essential in *kathakali* and the control of their musculature demands several hours of severe training daily for many years. The different nuances each have a precise significance; the way of frowning, the direction of a glance, the degree of opening or closing the lids are codified by tradition and are in fact concepts and images which are immediately comprehensible to the "expert" spectator. Such control in a European actor would only restrain the organic reactions of the face and transform it into a lifeless mask.

So, at the outset, as in a melting pot in which the most disparate metals fuse, I tried to blend together the most diverse influences, the impressions which for me had been the most fertile: Asian theatre, the experiments of the European Theatre Reform, personal experience from my stay in Poland and with Grotowski. I wanted to adapt all this to my ideal of technical perfection even in the part of the artistic work which we called "composition", a word which had arrived in our theatre through the Russian and French terminology and Grotowski's interpretation of it. I believed that composition was the capacity of the actor to create signs, to consciously mould the body into a deformation rich in suggestiveness and power of association: the body of the actor as a Rosetta stone and the spectator in the role of Champollion. The aim was to attain wittingly, by cold calculation, that which is warm and which obliges us to believe with all our senses. But I often felt this composition to be imposed, something external which functioned on a theatrical level but lacked the drilling force that could perforate the crust of all too obvious meanings. The composition might be rich, striking, throwing the actor into relief, yet it was like a veil which hid from me something that I felt inside myself but didn't have the courage to face, to reveal to myself or others.

In the first period of our existence all the actors did the same exercises together in a common collective rhythm. Then we realised that the rhythm varied for each individual - some have a faster vital rhythm, others a slower one - and we became aware of an organic rhythm. Its perpetual variation, however minute, revealed a wave of organic reactions which engaged the entire body. Training could only be individual.
This faith in technique as a sort of magic power which could render the actor invulnerable, guided us also in the domain of the voice. At the start, we followed the practices of Asian theatre: straightforward imitations of certain timbres of the voice. Using Grotowski's terminology, we called the different tones of voice "resonators". In Asian theatre training, the young actor learns entire roles mechanically with all their vocal nuances, timbres, intonations, exclamations: a complete fabric of sounds perfected through tradition and which the actor must repeat precisely in order to gain the appreciation of a critical audience. We too began coldly to find a series of timbres, tones, intonations, and exercised them daily.

This period of calculated work, of pure "technicality", seemed to confirm that the hypothesis of the actor-virtuoso was right. The effects produced were interesting. But during their work a few actors managed to reach the territory of their own "vocal flora". This "flora" was opened up by stimuli that were striking in their suggestiveness, in their emotional charge, and were not based on logic or a certain intellectuality.

So we discovered the value of personal images for engaging the voice in order to attain one's individual sound universe. We avoided calculated effects or the mechanically placed voice aiming simply for reactions, responses to the image which served as a stimulus. We began to talk of vocal actions. That which for us had once been a postulate - the voice as a physiological process - now became a tangible reality which engaged the entire organism and projected it in space. The voice was a prolongation of the body which, through space, hit, touched, caressed, encircled, pushed, searched far away or close by; an invisible hand which stretched out from the body to act in space or to renounce action. And even this renunciation was spoken by the invisible hand. But in order that the voice might act, it must know where the point was toward which it was directed, who/what that point was and why it was addressing it.

From that moment I ceased to speak of resonators. The actors' bodies resounded, the room resounded, as well as something inside me as I listened, provided the actors really addressed this point in space which, although invisible to my eyes, was concrete to them, perceptible to all their senses, present with physical features.

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For a long time the "myth of technique" nourished our work. Then gradually it brought me to a situation of doubt. I had to admit that the argument for technique was a rationalisation, a pragmatic blackmail - if you do this, you obtain that - which I used to make the others accept my way of working and to give it a useful and logical justification. On a personal level - dimly, full of shadows - I felt that under the alibi of a work which the others defined as theatre I was trying to annihilate the actor in my companion, wash him of the character, destroy the theatre in our relationship so that we might meet one another as human beings, as vulnerable companions in arms who have no need to defend themselves, bound closer than brothers by the doubts and illusions of years passed patiently together: not the actor, not the character, but the companion of a long period of my life.

It was no longer a matter of teaching or learning something, of tracing a personal method, of discovering a new technique, of finding an original language, of demystifying oneself or others. Only of not being afraid of one another. Having the
courage to approach one another until one becomes transparent, allowing glimpses of the well of one's own experience.

From here stems that reservedness which refuses the presence of strangers during the work. When the time comes for others to be present as spectators, they are witnesses of this human situation that we continue to call theatre, because we have no name for this new frontier beyond which we have little to say to one another in a theatrical language, however perfectly phrased. Virtuosity does not lead to new human relationships. It is not the decisive ferment for a reorientation, a new way of defining oneself vis-a-vis others and overcoming facile self-complacency.

Thus the training transformed itself into a process of self-definition, far removed from any utilitarian justification and guided by individual subjectivity. Each actor gives it a personal meaning. Once again: the exterior forms of the exercises are of no importance. But self-discipline remains.

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During training one often runs the risk of a sclerosis. This is caused either by the ingenuous attitude which leads one to believe that with training comes creativity, or by the lack of personal justification which brings about the repetition of exercises as gymnastics. We too have gone through similar periods. Then I succumbed to the temptation to explain, to come up with a sort of training philosophy, Ariadne's thread for my companions lost in the labyrinth of uncertainty. With great loyalty my companions tried to motivate their own work with my words, my explanations. But something was wrong, something didn't ring true, and in the end a sort of split became apparent between what they were doing and what they wanted to do or believed they were doing to satisfy me, to meet me. When I realised this, I gave up all explanation.

After working together many hours a day for many years, it is perhaps my presence that speaks rather than my words.