IN SEARCH OF THE TRANSPARENT BODY

Iben Nagel Rasmussen was born in Copenhagen in 1945 to the writers Ester Nagel and Halfdan Rasmussen.
In 1966, when Odin Teatret moved to Denmark, Iben joined as a pupil and since then she has participated in all the performances of the group except for one.
In the years 1969-70 she developed her own personal training which in the following years she taught to new pupils of the theatre.
In 1976, parallel to her work as an actress, Iben began to train three pupils and established the group ‘Hugin’.
In 1980 Iben created Odin Teatret’s first work demonstration: Moon and Darkness, in which she shares her experience of physical and vocal training, the work on characters and the way in which they are then integrated into the performances. In the same year she established the international group Farfa. With the actors/pupils of Farfa she continued to develop the principles of her training and produced several performances.
In 1990, always parallel with the work of the Odin Teatret, Iben assembled another group: the “Bridge of Winds”, with actors/pupils from Europe and Latin America, the majority of whom are teachers themselves in their own countries.
In 1999 Iben created yet another group with younger pupils exclusively from Europe who train with her twice a year.

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A conversation about training with Iben Nagel Rasmussen

(Text interview with Iben Nagel Rasmussen)

Eugenio Barba. Iben, when you arrived at Odin Teatret more than thirty years ago, you began your apprenticeship by learning a few exercises.
What was important for you at the time in those exercises?

Iben Nagel Rasmussen. The important thing was the attitude of the actors who immediately started to do the exercises without having anything explained.
You said nothing.
I had imagined that, as in my past life, someone would explain.
In school everything had been explained in words. Nothing was ever left unexplained. So for me it was very strange...
it was a shock that I had to do everything without knowing why. There was no philosophy.
I simply had to jump when a colleague came at me hitting out with a stick, or crouch down when the blow was aimed at the neck. This continuous training was not interrupted to explain, for example, that this was wrong, and this not. Only after quite a long time - a long time for me because...

EB. ...Several days or several weeks...?

INR. No, now I am talking about hours, half an hour for one exercise for example, maybe even less, I don’t remember. But after that it was corrected by you or by a colleague.

VIDEO

INR. I got tired immediately, it was so difficult. Also the acrobatics and everything was just like... the breathing that you had to... You had to accept tiredness right from the start, with the body and especially with your mind, I had to accept this tiredness...while thinking: this may go on for hours.

EB. So the exercise was teaching certain qualities: a physical ability, for example, to react immediately to the action of a colleague, but also a mental attitude: to work at length when tired, to cohabit with this exhaustion, to discover the existence of other forms of energy within us that can suddenly be awakened. Is this what you associate with that period of training at Odin Teatret in the beginning?

INR. Yes, those were the first things.

VIDEO

EB. At the time, what was the most interesting thing for you when doing the exercises?

INR. What was most important for me was watching the “old” actors, Torgeir and Else Marie. When I watched Torgeir doing the chain, for example, it was very...

EB. The chain of exercises, that is the succession of exercises...

INR. Yes, the chain of Yoga exercises which Grotowski and Richard Cieslak had elaborated. Here I did not see the actual exercises, I saw that... something else was happening throughout Torgeir’s body, as in the so-called “cat” chain for example. That is what really struck me, and it was also the same thing that struck me when I saw Ornitofilene, Odin Teatret’s first production, while at the “folk high school” in
Holbæk. It was that ‘transparent body’ which for me...it was not an ability to be, like “I want the body to be beautiful, as in ballet, or...”, it was not an external aesthetic; it was like... it was something...’internal’... which made the body become something else. It was not a beautiful or an ugly body, but it was as though transparent. I saw this very clearly in Torgeir in the “cat” chain, which I think he had worked on with Grotowski during the seminar here, the first of Grotowski’s seminars in Holstebro. It was the same thing with Else Marie’s voice: it was not that it was a beautiful voice, or a delicate voice, or a voice... I don’t know, it was like that inner strength within her that she always had, the sensation that it was like matter that was becoming transparent.

It was the same with her voice. I thought: “if only I could achieve something like that, have a transparent body and a voice which is carrying such passion, that inner something which you could feel was overcoming so many difficulties”.

VIDEO

EB. For some years you performed the exercises which already existed at the Odin or that we developed, inspired by Grotowski. However, at the beginning of the 70’s you began to oppose this tendency and to invent exercises which were your own very original exercises, different to the ones we had been doing previously. Why?

INR. It was as though I did not find within the training, that which I had seen in Torgeir or Cieslak... I remember we were on tour, and I thought... I asked myself for the first time, not in general, but for myself: what is a dramatic action? And from there I started to work on all the different ways of sitting, turning, falling on the ground and getting up again, going off balance. For me now, looking back, to go off balance and then recover it, to fall to the floor and get up again, was like... a phoenix. I throw myself to the ground, completely lose my balance, don’t know what is happening, and then I get to my feet again, as if... reborn.

INR. I found that this flow which I had been searching for years and years and which was never there, always seemed to be interrupted by something: by thought, tiredness or by gaps in the training, so that I never found this flow. However, in the new exercises, I had found it at last.

VIDEO

EB. The fact of doing your own elaboration: inventing, working on, developing a whole range of exercises has also given you a sense of confidence in your teaching when you pass on your experience to others. In the beginning how did this come about?
INR. There was no need for me to do it immediately, so I waited four or five years maybe. I started to teach and it was as if I had overtaken all the difficulties, all the problems. I knew why that was... or how to achieve through these exercises which... The first times I was teaching I remember I put lots and lots of energy into sustaining, helping, in order to give what for me had been so important at the start: not interrupting, giving very simple tasks and also finding a certain ‘freedom’ within the training.

EB. But at the beginning when you taught, you also taught exercises!

INR. Yes, at first I taught what I had discovered, what we called the “Swiss exercises”.

EB. And then after a while you refused to teach. You didn’t really want to teach.

INR. No, that was because when we were on tour I taught at a very elementary level: the students started from scratch, and then we had two days to teach before leaving. So you taught something that...for me was not...it was not important. The important thing was the duration, to be able to cultivate what you had sown. I saw those people stuck where they were, with no means to continue.

EB. And that is what pushed you to invent another form of pedagogical relationship with a fixed group of people who met together for a few weeks once a year: in other words your “Bridge of Winds” project. This project, this pedagogical situation of yours is now 10 years old. When I watch it, I immediately notice differences. The first is a question of terminology. You often use a word that we never used at Odin Teatret: the word ‘energy’. How come this word has been introduced into your way of talking with your collaborators and your students?

INR. It was because I had no other word. It is a word that is easy to understand for those working and I think is also clear for those watching. You see a slow energy crossing the space, or you see a strong energy or a soft one.

VIDEO

EB. If you were to explain the biggest differences between your own apprenticeship and what you apply in the “Bridge of Winds”, what would be the most obvious ones?

INR. It is that they have to invent...I give the indications to them but they must...I don’t teach the exercises as I did in the beginning at the Odin, even the exercises that I had come up with. I set a task. For example: find three or five ways of sitting, three ways of jumping, three ways of turning round. This means that their logic...that from the beginning they get into the habit of inventing, assembling and following a logic of their own. It is not my logic, because afterwards they won’t be
working with me. They will work alone in other contexts. So they must invent a sort of …body poetry which they can repeat and to which I can add other elements of information. But the foundation is theirs, and then they can also take exercises from the other pupils.

VIDEO

EB. When you watch what your students are doing, what they are inventing, you choose, you make a selection. Some of their solutions are good for you, they have a meaning, others on the contrary, do not. What is important in what they do?

INR. It is important that every exercise has a beginning, a little “knot” and a solution. It is not that I do something… get to my feet, or do something ‘gymnastic’. But, for example if I see one of the students kneel down and then get up in exactly the same way, I say: “That does not work. You must find another solution for this exercise.” Then the student continues to work and I may also show or give an exercise. Sometimes that happens.

VIDEO

EB. Now you have used the word ‘gymnastic’. What is the difference between an exercise performed by an actor and a gymnastic exercise?

INR. Gymnastics serve quite another purpose. Gymnastics keep you in form, develop your muscles, make you supple. That’s not the aim. The aim is that other thing which I mentioned before: the ‘transparent body’. Through the exercises something else appears. Together in the work room, you feel a type of energy which is intangible, which you cannot explain.

EB. And you explain this…to your students?

INR. No...No...No...