Theatre as journey, barter, waste, potlatch, reservation, ghetto, pueblo, emigration
A minor episode in the history of the New World tells of men who leave the safety of terra firma for a precarious life on floating islands.

Rejected as undesirable, they remain true to their own desires and build villages and towns, or merely wretched dwellings with a small plot for their crops, there where it would appear impossible to build anything on the waters and the currents.

The Floating Islands is a collection of the most important writings of Eugenio Barba on theatre. They are not «theoretical» or «autobiographical» writings. Filtered through precise historical experiences, they become a reflection on the social and personal significance of the theatre when it liberates itself from the bondage of a particular public and of the theatre market.

Eugenio Barba was born in 1936 in the south of Italy and emigrated while still in his teens to Norway where he worked first as a welder and later as a sailor on an oil-tanker. Of the men who have most profoundly marked the course of contemporary theatre, he is perhaps the only one not to have undergone an artistic or literary apprenticeship within the «theatrical system». He approaches the theatre in 1960 when he goes to Warsaw to attend the theatre school there. After only a few months he abandons his studies to join Jerzy Grotowski who is beginning his research at his «laboratory» in Opole.

In 1964, after a journey to southern India to study Kathakali, he founds Odin Tea-
The Floating Islands

Reflections with Odin Teatret
Edited by Ferdinando Taviani

Translations by
Judy Barba
Francis Pardeilhan
Jerrold C. Rodesch
Saul Shapiro
Julia Varley

Drama
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Theatralische Sendung: Laboratory
Bird’s-Eye View

On the first of October 1964 Odin Theatret is founded in Oslo.

The centers of theater are elsewhere. In Scandinavia, Stockholm is the theater capital. At the Dramaten, the world renowned director Alf Sjöberg is producing the classics as well as Brecht, while at the same theater the productions of another famous director, Ingmar Bergman, are staged. At Stockholm’s Moderna Museet in November 1964, the public attends a theater evening presenting a series of scientific experiments that develop to a more and more frenzied rhythm. Human guinea-pigs run, chain-smoking, while technicians measure their level of intoxication. Other human guinea-pigs are stimulated electrically, and a man lying on a couch, his face transformed into that of a rat, is activated by electric shocks that give him repetitive orgasms, not unlike rats under similar experiments.

The performance, orchestrated by the painter Öyvind Fahlström, lasts one hour: the spectators see an event, not a story.

The artistic milieu of Stockholm is among the first in Europe to organize Happenings, the latest novelty from the USA. In these Happenings, the tendencies and agitation of avant-garde painting and music ally themselves with the avant-garde theater: the destruction of significance, the rupture of the “information circuit”. But also the eloquence of pure fact.

Once again, and in a form apparently disguised, the art of theater seems to be nothing else but an anthology of all other art forms.

These are the years of the economic boom in Europe. In Italy one speaks of the “miracle”, Germany is already a great industrial power, and the Common Market looks to the future with optimism, planning its expansion. The new face of the Welfare State in Scandinavia is symbolized by Stockholm, in the process of losing its character of an old, northern capital and assuming the face of a modern metropolis in the era of advanced technology.

Bergman’s films reveal to the whole world the existence of a Scandinavian culture capable of becoming a point of reference.

Peter Weiss, the German writer who has lived for years in Stockholm,
has just written *Marat-Sade* in 1964. The next year he is to write *The Investigation*, an “oratorio” based on the trials of the Nazi criminals of the extermination camps.

The themes of daily absurdity are slowly replaced in theater by the themes of folly, excess and the violence of institutions. The distinctions, accepted in the 50’s, which opposed the political, didactic and rational theater to the theater of the individual, of existential anguish, are fading. The representation of history and that of the individual lose clarity in meeting: the ideological clarity of Brechtian theater disappears along with the paradoxical clarity of the pessimistic logic of Beckett and Ionesco, the great innovators of the 50’s.

The French Revolution gets lost in Sade’s mind, and Sade gets lost in the French Revolution.

Jean Genet writes “ceremonies” full of individual violence and rebellion. He had written *Les Paravents* in 1961, set against the war in Algeria. In France its performance will be prohibited until 1966.

The “explosion of peace” on the entire planet is not so easy to contemplate. In the United States these are the years of Johnson, who will send hundreds of thousands of young Americans to Vietnam. In Russia Brezhnev and Kosygin put an end to the hopes awakened by Kruschev. In China Mao launches the cultural revolution in 1966, with the enormous consequences it implies for the ideas and customs of generations to come. For the first time the prophets of ill tidings find listeners: a common ideology does not mean fraternity, and the disagreement between China and Russia is not a quarrel between brother parties, but the first symptom of a conflict between major powers.

Even in the “small world” of theater there are certitudes that begin to crack. The 50’s were the years of the Berliner Ensemble, of the Piccolo Teatro of Milan, of Jean Vilar’s Théâtre National Populaire. Theater was thought of as a representation and analysis of great historical and class conflicts, a public cultural “service” for all citizens. The most engaged critics developed the theory of the Theater of the City and the Public Theater. Louis Althusser, the French philosopher at the forefront of Marxist studies, dedicates a famous essay to *El Nost Milian* directed by Strehler: a naturalistic drama is transformed into a materialistic performance, an example of national and popular theater.

A new example becomes visible: that of Roger Planchon, who has broken the Parisian theater monopoly and has created the huge Théâtre de la Cité that can house 2000 spectators in the worker’s center of Villeurbanne, near Lyon.

Planchon warns the intellectuals and progressive men of theater against their own unquestioning acceptance of and fascination with Artaud’s writings which, rediscovered at the beginning of the 60’s, threaten to usurp the guiding function which up to then had belonged to the Brechtian doctrine.

The Theater of Cruelty and the Theater of the Body, says Planchon and others with him, cannot be separated from Artaud’s mysticism, from his metaphysical tensions, from his irrational and fundamentally reactionary tendencies.

New facts, still not well known, begin to sow seeds of doubt about the teachings and theories of the theater ideologists.

In 1964 the Living Theater arrives in Europe, exiled from the United States. “They dream of a society without money, and are forced daily to deal with economical problems”, writes Pierre Biner. The Ford Foundation had refused a grant to this anarchist theater group with an argument a la Brecht: the Living Theater doesn’t pay its actors sufficiently to permit them an adequate professional training.

In Paris at the end of 1964, the Living Theater shows *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, a performance without text, based on the physical expression of the actors. During the same period, the first news of Grotowski’s work comes into circulation. Some articles by Eugenio Barba are published in theater reviews in various countries, speaking of the abolition of the stage, of actors that move throughout the space in osmosis with the spectators. He writes about a performance in which the Polish hero Kordian is represented as committed to a mental hospital, his romantic ideals treated as the ravings of a madman. He writes also about *Akropolis*, based on the great symbolist text by Wyspianski and presented by Grotowski as acted by the inmates of a Nazi concentration camp.

Grotowski is not pursuing a “Theater of the City”. He works in a tiny room in Opole where fewer than 100 spectators can attend.

But in that room separated from “the great theater public”, as Peter Brook will say later, “it is possible to be confronted with that which would be impossible on stage: the representation, at a physical, emotive and intellectual level, of the horror, the degradation, the violence and the martyrdom of the concentration camps”.

Not even the Living Theater is a “Theater of the City”. Rather a theater against the city. Its performances, ignored for a long time by the official theater milieu, are attended not only by intellectuals, but even more by the youth of the “civil disobedience”, the pacifists of the sit-ins.
The youth opposition movement in the beginnings of the 60's had developed earlier in Scandinavia than in other countries. The great demonstrations against the atomic bomb were also demonstrations for a new quality of life, a dream of an alternative to the consumer society, perhaps the precursors to the great movement of youth rebellion which was to explode some years later in 1968.

These signs became evident in theater with performances attacking the tradition of the “classics” seen as fetishes of a culture to be oppressed and destroyed, or else as merchandise of the art market, with the actors opposing themselves to the spectators who are seen as representatives of the bourgeois society.

The gestures of disdain that had characterized the tumultuous evenings of the past avant-garde – the dadaists and the surrealists – return to favor. Peter Handke will write, in 1966, a play that will be a résumé of all these tendencies, *Insults to the Public*.

The didactic character of the new political theater tends to disappear behind the satire, the denunciation, the perorations. The non-Brechtian is not only Artaud, but also the theater of direct intervention. *McBird*, a university satire about Kennedy’s assassination and Johnson’s government, performed as a parody of *Macbeth*, becomes a national scandal in the United States and the object of debate in Europe; Peter Brook presents a performance in London on the bombing of Vietnam; *Viet Rock* by Megan Terry is taken up again and copied in many countries; LeRoy Jones gives theatrical expression to the black rebellion with *The Dutchman* and *The Slave*. In 1967 he writes and produces *The Slave Ship*, a re-evocation of black deportation from Africa, followed by an attack on the pacifist and integration ideology: Martin Luther King is decapitated in effigy and the actors play ball with his head. At the end of the performance they shake hands with all the blacks present in the room, and ignore the whites with disdain. It is not for them that they have performed.

A few young Norwegians seem, on the contrary, to be doing theater only for themselves. In October 1964, they gather round a 27 year old Italian who lives and works in Oslo, founding a theater with a mythical and engaged name: Odin Teatret. But apart from a name fraught with literary holiness, they have nothing: no space, no grants, no professional training. They do not address themselves to a precise public, nor do they unite around the project of a precise production. They want to become actors, but for the greater part of them this possibility seems remote. Eugenio Barba, the young Italian who has brought them together, came in contact with them by obtaining the list of candidates refused admission to the Oslo Theater School. Even Barba himself wanted to be a director, but no theater would give work to a young person with uncertain professional qualifications and without a perfect knowledge of Norwegian: how could he, for example, direct the diction of his actors?

Barba had in fact been through many schools, but apart from a period of one year he had never been to a normal theater school. I use the word “school” in a broad sense, including not only high school and university, but a factory, a ship, political activity, long journeys and above all a fight to keep his own identity as an immigrant.

Odin Teatret is apparently born as a theater responding to private needs. It is right that it should be so: it represents an answer to privation.

Barba and his actors work during the day to earn their living and train during the evening in temporary quarters; a university classroom, the hall of the architects’ cultural club and an air-raid shelter dripping with humidity.

Else Marie Laukvik, one of the founders of the Odin, remembers: “There were moments of doubt. Sometimes it could be embarrassing to observe the reactions of those who asked what we were doing: theater in a bomb shelter? Only five of you? Turned down by the theater school? Directed by an Italian from Poland? No stage? And the spectators?”

She continues: “Some thought that we were sponging on society, doing nothing useful and – worse – nothing acceptable”.

They are only five because the way in which Barba defines the terms of their work has disappointed the expectations of the majority of the young would-be actors. Even to them it does not seem useful and acceptable to train for so long on hard acrobatic exercises. Torger Wethal, another of the founders of the Odin, says: “I remember that period as a physical nightmare. When I started I was completely rigid and feeble. It took me about six months to learn the most simple elements of training that most of our students today learn in about fifteen days”.

Isolated and autodidactic, the people of the Odin are forced to draw inspiration from books by the great masters of the past, in particular Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. But what they do is not recognizable. They haven’t the possibility of referring to other experiences possessing a
certain measure of prestige in order to back up their practical choices.

Few people in 1964 know of the existence of Grotowski, of the Living Theater, or of the experiments that Peter Brook – known for his innovatory Shakespearean interpretations with great actors like Lawrence Olivier – is conducting with a group of actors, drawing inspiration from Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty.

Dario Fo is still ensconced in the territory of bourgeois theater, producing his surrealistic and satirical “farces” in the major theaters of Milan and Rome.

Ronconi is still a second-rate actor in mediocre performances within the official theater.

In its most evident aspects, theater research is entrusted to dramaturgy and production. An actor who trains daily and doesn’t limit himself to rehearsals and performances is totally unknown, or known only in the context of the distant oriental civilization rooted in traditional values.

During the spring of 1966 the “Grotowski phenomenon” explodes in Paris at the Festival du Théâtre des Nations, directed for the first time by one of the protagonists of European theater, Jean-Louis Barrault.

The Constant Prince becomes the event of the year. It is immediately catalogued as an authentic example of Artaudian theater. Grotowski’s name soon turns into an adjective to catalogue other theater groups.

Yet the first tour by Grotowski’s theater through western Europe has already taken place one year before the festival. It had been in Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen, organized by Odin Teatret.

When the Odin had started working two years before, in 1964, Barba had written the first book on Grotowski’s work, published in Italy, In Search of a Lost Theater. This first analysis of the Polish master’s work goes practically unnoticed in Italy. Renée Saurel writes a long review in Sartre’s Les Temps Modernes, and in the following years the book will be so sought after as to become a bibliographical rarity.

While Grotowski is receiving international acclaim in Paris, the Odin has to leave Norway and establish itself in Denmark. The possibilities for survival in Oslo are null. Only ten of the Odin’s fifty performances of their first play, Ornitofilene, presented for the first time in October 1965, had taken place in Norway. Therefore they accept an invitation to move to Holstebro, a small town of 20,000 inhabitants in north-west Denmark, now in the process of planning and carrying out a new cultural policy.

Ornitofilene is a text by the Norwegian writer, Jens Bjørneboe. In a village in southern Europe, a group of foreign tourists decides to create a modern hotel complex that would permit the local population to be liberated from poverty and misery. There is only one condition: the local hunters must stop shooting birds. But this “either/or” condition recalls an analogous situation: twenty years before, in the same village, those same tourists had come in Nazi uniforms, rounding up, condemning to death, torturing and killing. Yesterday’s Nazis are today’s tourists, friends of the birds; yesterday’s condemned and tortured are today’s hunters. The space in which the performance takes place is arranged like a conference room – or a courtroom – with a few small tables among the spectators. The positions become confused: don’t give in to blackmail; to be faithful to one’s idea of 20 years ago means today not to renounce the ferocious game of the hunt. To accept progress, the touristic “paradise”, the demands of a pacific sensibility, means to forget and betray. It is the daughter who commits suicide: the price for a father who has accepted to forget.

Behind these contradictions many others emerge. The whole performance – with its re-evocations of the pogroms, of the trials, of the violence of wartime and peace – shows both sides of each situation. The four actors transform themselves constantly into different characters. They pass from lyrical and tragic tones to those of the grotesque; scenes of total contrast dissolve into one another; the expressions of voice and gesture often contradict the words of the text. The critic of an Oslo newspaper makes an observation that will often be repeated about the Odin’s performances: “It is practically impossible to talk about this performance. But it was a strange experience. We were no longer at a safe distance from our problems”.

But when the Odin emigrates to Holstebro, it is without the performance. One of the actors has remained in Norway, new people have joined the group, and everything must start from scratch.

It defines itself as “Inter-Scandinavian Theater Laboratory for the Art of the Actor”, justifying thereby the fact that its activity is not that of a “normal” theater: regular performances.
Laboratory is a magic word: it doesn’t mean anything precise, and one doesn’t know what hides behind it.

In the history of theater one remembers the “laboratories” of Stanislavsky, Vachtangov, Meyerhold, and the laboratory of Copeau, the latter more like a real theater school.

When Grotowski defined this word in 1959, founding the “Theater Laboratory of the Thirteen Rows” in Opole, he used the Bohr Institute as an example: “It is a meeting place where physicists from different countries experiment and take their first steps into the no man’s land of their profession”.

Grotowski was a “professional” director and his actors were “professional” actors. They all had a territory to leave behind in order to tread the path of the laboratory.

But the director and the actors of the Odin cannot tread upon new paths. Their no man’s land coincides precisely with the very first steps they are taking in their profession. What can be their justification, since they have no performance to present, no professional qualifications, no cultural titles that can give credibility to the choice of an “experimental” path?

More than an institute of research, the Theater Laboratory of Holstebro is acknowledged for its “extrovert” activities. It arranges seminars for Scandinavian theater people, guided by major personalities of European and Oriental theater. It edits and publishes books as well as a magazine which deals, in accordance with its title, with the theories and techniques of theater: the Commedia dell’Arte, Dionysism, the reform of Russian theater, Piscator’s political theater, Zeami and the Noh actor, classical Indian theater, Gordon Craig, the work of Decroux and that of Grotowski.

The same eclecticism characterizes the seminars. The participants are given the possibility of working with Barrault, Lecoq, Dario Fo, the Colombo family of Italian clowns, Hideo and Hisao Kanze of the Noh theater, Sardon of the Indonesian theater, Shanta Rao (the Isadora Duncan of Indian Dance), Chaikin, Decroux, Krejča, Marowitz, and with Grotowski and the actor who incarnates his theatrical vision, Ryszard Cieslak.

From 1966 to 1972 it is mainly for this activity of cultural organization that the Odin is accepted in Holstebro and Denmark. The Odin is known in its homeland for the many guest performances by foreign ensembles which it organizes. Abroad it begins to be appreciated for its own performances, associated with those of Grotowski because Barba had been with him for three years during the period when Grotowski was starting his own theater revolution; and because, more than anyone else, Barba had contributed to making Grotowski known abroad. Grotowski’s book, *Towards a Poor Theater*, which has had an immeasurable influence on the history of modern theater, is published in 1968 by Odin Teatret’s Press, edited by Barba.

In 1967 the Odin presents its second production, *Kaspariana*. At the Odin there is a new generation of actors, and the theme treated by the production is that of the transmission of culture and the connected dialectics of violence and education, of liberation and colonization. This internal problem of the group coincides with a general uneasiness. During these years, the discussion of new pedagogics goes beyond the milieu of specialists and transforms itself into a heated debate involving major political implications and changes in customs.

In the Odin’s production, all this is filtered through a historical fact which, in the last century, had been an object of speculation for the first ethnologists and anthropologists: the affair of Kaspar Hauser, a “wild” youth who appeared in Nuremberg in 1828, was “educated” there and assassinated five years later.

As most of the actors are foreigners and cannot express themselves well in Danish, the performance lives essentially through dramatic actions and situations inspired by a scenario by the Danish writer, Ole Sarvig. Words are exploited for their sonorous effect and for the different associations that a text of many languages can stimulate independently from its semantic value.

*Kaspariana* is invited to the Venice Biennale, in the section devoted to student theater. Its two performances pass practically unnoticed. Only a few avant-garde critics appreciate the performance as an exercise revealing the technical rigor and the discipline of the actors.

The performance is also invited to Paris to the Festival du Théâtre des Nations in May 1968.

The Odin does not go to that festival: the May demonstrations in Paris have brought about the occupation of the Théâtre de l’Odéon, symbol of the bourgeois theater. Its director, Jean-Louis Barrault, is forced to resign.
Within all the European countries, 1968 marks the birth of new forms of aggression that don't merely involve political activity in its strictest sense, but also a new way of organizing cultural life, the search for an alternative production of music, cinema, literature and theater. Yet the other face of the coin is an ideological rigor that often leads to summary judgement and sterile destruction.

The Chinese cultural revolution constitutes an example even for theater. The Peking Opera has been reformed, and the traces of a feudal past have been washed away along with the aristocratic aesthetics; the actors tied to tradition have been removed. The theater has been transformed into a celebration of the revolution's values. Chiang Ching, Mao's wife, today scorned as a member of "the gang of four", guides this theatrical revolution.

In its laboratory of Holstebro, once referred to as "a monastic outpost of theater on the edge of Europe", the Odin remains unfluffed by the winds of renewal blowing through the world of youth in 1968-69.

Some months before, however, the Odin had organized a tour in Denmark and in the other Scandinavian countries of Dario Fo's ensemble presenting an anti-American satire, *Throw the Lady Out*. In Scandinavia Fo reveals himself as one of the great contemporary actor-authors. He holds a seminar in Holstebro, where he gives a series of practical demonstrations based on medieval texts from Italian popular literature. These demonstrations provide the basis for his *Mistero Buffo*, which in Italy will become the symbol of a new theater that cuts the ties with the economy, the organization and the audiences of the bourgeois theater: a new theater addressing itself directly to the working class and the militants of the left wing.

In the Europe of 1968, even Brecht is not safe from the struggle against tradition. It is said that revisionist and bourgeois directors have expropriated and "social-democratized" him. At the times the accusation of being a "bourgeois" author extends to Brecht himself.

In this fever of rejuvenation even Strehler, who has created his Piccolo Teatro in Milan as a model of "Theater of the City", leaves this theater to which his name has been associated since the first post-war years. He establishes an independent group, the Teatro Azione, which produces the *The Song of the Lustianian Bogey* by Peter Weiss, a cold and sarcastic document of the Portuguese atrocities in Angola.

But Strehler's "adventure" is short-lived. In 1972 he is again director of the Piccolo Teatro.

Barrault is to come back to a "real" theater much later. During his years of "exile" he works in a circus tent and in a boxing arena. He produces, among other things, a performance inspired by Rabelais: a research into total theater where dance, music, gesture and words are interwoven with the nostalgic departure towards the island of Utopia. Rabelais' discovery of sensuous pleasure is transformed into a hopeful voyage towards nothingness that unconsciously evokes memories of the youngsters' departure at the end of two Fellini films: *Satyricon* and *Roma*.

In 1968, Brook publishes a far-seeing book on theater, *The Empty Space*, in which he coins definitions that will soon become slogans. He talks of "deadly" theater - not deadly as can be an illness, but deadly as boredom - and of "holy" theater, foreseeing the birth of a "rough" and "immediate" theater, in which all the aspects of reality and experience can be represented as a mixture of tragedy and buffoony.

English history seems to repeat itself: the revolution comes to the Royal Shakespeare Company, to this temple of classic theater, in anticipation of its time and without bloodshed. In 1966, Peter Brook had built up a performance based on the improvisations of his actors and on a collectively written text: *US* (both "us" and "United States"), a performance on the American bombing of Vietnam and on Europe's responsibility.

In 1970 he founds the International Center of Theater Research in Paris, whose goal is not merely limited to the creation and presentation of performances.

But above all, from a theatrical point of view, 1968 is the year of *Paradise Now* and *Orlando Furioso*.

The Living Theater presents *Paradise Now* at Avignon and in the university halls occupied by the students. Each performance is also a political demonstration. The police often intervene. The audience is always invited to create, here and now, its own revolution, and to recognize the same signs of violence that characterize political power and repression as existing in sexual taboos, in attachment to personal belongings, and in fear and inhibition in front of others.

The Living Theater is to carry to extreme consequences its conception of theater as a means of direct political action. Not only does the group live as an anarchist community, but some of its members, among whom Julian Beck and Judith Malina, will travel to Brazil where, until their arrest, they will create a theatrical newspaper of propaganda and political agitation in the *favelas* of Sao Paolo.

In Europe, many theater people abandon the classical conception of
performance, developing a theatrical expression which often turns to political demonstration in factories, working quarters of industrial cities
and schools.

Despite efforts to hinder its publication by the managers of his literary estate, the project for a *Children's Proletarian Theater*, written by Walter Benjamin in 1928, becomes a manifesto in certain countries, giving inspiration to theater people, left wing intellectuals and educators working to break the authoritarian structure of the school system.

Within a few short months, the physical image of the theater seems to have exploded. What Grotowski was doing in the beginning of the 60's in a small room in Opole, seems now to be repeating itself on a larger scale in city squares, sport stadiums and gymnasiums.

The most festive, baroque and imaginative example of this theatrical explosion is Ronconi's *Orlando Furioso*. The Odin brings the performance to Scandinavia; afterwards it will tour the whole of Europe and the USA. The theater, not as a performance, but as a popular celebration, soon assumes political connotations.

From New York comes word of a theater group that carries huge puppets through the streets. In the Bread and Puppet Theater, the images of popular mythology meet with those of radical political satire. Its creator is a sculptor of German origin, Peter Schumann, who aims at a culture as necessary and elementary as is bread (another of Artaud's images that returns).

Later on in Paris, starting from principles similar to those of *Orlando Furioso*, Ariane Mnouchkine presents the story of the French Revolution from the point of view of the working people. *1789* is a performance conceived as a joyful celebration, a political and theatrical feast for hundreds of spectators.

*Ferai*, the Odin's third performance which arrives in Paris in 1969, is only for 60 spectators. It is judged as an example of ritual and esoteric theater, distant from social problems and history.

The story of those years is not only that of the youth movement, of the birth of the parties of the extreme left, of the attempts to ally the students with the workers. It is also the history of Dubcek's Czechoslovakia, of Prague's spring and the summer with the arrival of the Soviet tanks, of Jan Palach who burns himself alive: a desperate protest that leaves the "youth of '68" in doubt because it seems to them so tragically

naïve. But the death of the young student from Prague also sows unrest because it seems to result from a tragic discovery: the wrecking of the hopes for a better society.

The main characters of *Ferai* are Alkestis and Admetos. The references to the Greek myth mingle with those from Scandinavian mythology, according to the text by the Danish writer, Peter Seeberg. King Frode is so feared by his people that, after his death, it was sufficient to carry his corpse around as though on a throne to reaffirm the continuation of his rule. Admetos is the young successor to the throne. He wants to apply the norms of a just and free society, abolishing power and making possible a new quality of life. The people accuse him of being feeble and inexperienced, and of conspiring with criminals. Alkestis is a young woman who commits suicide.

The actors speak in their respective Scandinavian languages. The democratic aspirations, the idealism of the young king are in his words and his smile, yet are always denied by his actions. The spectators who read the text of the performance in the program tend to judge the significance of *Ferai* only by this text. A sociological survey on *Ferai's* audience — carried out in Holstebro by Ingvar Holm of the University of Lund in Sweden — reveals that this is an attitude typical of cultivated and habitual theater-goers. The spectators who do not usually go to the theater, and who come from more humble social and cultural backgrounds, seem to experience the performance in a completely different way. They don't concentrate their attention on the two protagonists as much as on the "chorus" of the people; they judge by what happens in front of their eyes, not by what the characters say.

In spite of its strictly limited audience and of its enigmatic, non-effusive character, nevertheless the Odin manages to capture the imagination of the spectators, reaching them directly on an emotional and an intellectual plane.

The success obtained in Paris, in all the major theater festivals, and in the European capitals, suddenly makes the Odin famous.

Back in Holstebro, the Odin just as suddenly stops performing *Ferai*. The group is dissolved. Only three of the previous actors return to the theater: Else Marie Laukvik, Torgeir Wethal and Iben Nagel Rasmussen, the last a member of the Odin since their move to Holstebro.

In 1972, the new production by the Odin is *Min Fars Hus*. In many countries, even after a considerable lapse of time, it is still talked about as a performance that opened unthinkable prospects and revealed a new way of perceiving and using theater.
The work on the production had started from reflections on the biography of Dostoyevsky, a young intellectual conspiring for the revolution and brutally torn from his political romanticism by deportation. Because of a historical paradox this ex-revolutionary marks the conscience and the society of his time with the writings of his mature years, when he seems to separate himself from progress and be born along by the most extreme contradictions, from philosophical nihilism to religious faith. But the production, after a work process that lasts over three years, arrives at a completely different result: it has no text, no story, no reference points constituted by precise facts, known and recognizable by the spectators. It is not on or by Dostoyevsky, it is simply dedicated to Dostoyevsky.

Min Fars Hus is the most personal performance by the Odin, on the limits of privacy. But it is also a performance that acquires a living, often burning significance for spectators of different backgrounds and ages.

The critics see that Min Fars Hus is beyond theatrical norms. Many categorize it, therefore, as a "difficult" play. The performance, however, under strange circumstances, is taken out to spectators who don't possess the Culture of Theater or of books. It comes in contact with them, merging into situations and encounters that will have profound consequences for the future of the Odin.

With Min Fars Hus, the Odin finds itself face to face with an apparent contradiction: its capacity of being socially present becomes all the stronger the more the group concentrates exclusively on its own problems. It discovers the public value of something that had always been hidden, at the roots of its theatrical products: its history, its ethics, its own particular "culture".

F.T.
STRANGERS IN THE THEATER

This interview with Eugenio Barba was recorded by Bent Hagestedt in 1968 and first published in The Drama Review (New York, 1969/45) under the title: A Sectarian Theatre.

Mr. Barba, could you give a brief account of your life?

In 1954 at the age of 17, I came to Scandinavia. I got a summer job as a welder in Norway, and stayed for a year. I then worked as a sailor on Norwegian boats for two years. While continuing my work as a welder, I later enrolled at the University of Oslo. I received a degree in Norwegian, French and the History of Religion. In 1960 I decided to devote myself to the theater, and through UNESCO I received a scholarship to study in Poland, where I remained 4 years.

My theater education began with a year at the theater school in Warsaw. The following three years were spent with Grotowski in Opole, where he had his theater until he moved to Wroclaw in 1965.

I returned to Norway, where I tried to enter the theater world, but to no avail; all doors were closed to me. My only chance was to begin for myself. Since it was extremely difficult to convince professional actors to work with me, I contacted some young people who passionately wanted to do theater, but were in the same predicament as myself: they had been refused admission to the State Theater School. We were eleven to begin with. Of these eleven, two came to Holstebro with me and are now my closest collaborators: Else-Marie Laukvik and Torgeir Wethal.

It is said that you have broken with Grotowski.

People within theater are always trying to show their own originality, denying their master, the tradition from which they themselves have sprung. Nothing could be further from my way of thinking. If
anyone exists whom I can call my teacher, my master, it is Grotowski. He taught me my craft, and I have the greatest respect for his work. His fundamental theories, his work process, and his professional consciousness are still a challenge for me.

You are a disciple as long as you recognize that your teacher still has something to give you, inciting you to further personal and independent growth. In this sense I am still Grotowski’s disciple and will be so for a long time.

It is said that your form of theater is sectarian.

We live in a society that loves to be liberal, where you resort to an alibi for inaction by trying to be “impartial” and “objective”, always saying: on the one hand ..., yet on the other hand ... People refuse to stand fast, to defend their viewpoint; and this is called independence, impartiality. In theater we have the possibility of defining ourselves in relation to others, and it is of the utmost importance to have a precise point of departure. We don’t know what result we are working towards. Therefore we have to begin with a consistent and rigorous framework, so that we don’t sink in the mire of compromises and crises we are subject to along the way.

If you commit yourself to theater you must offer something. You must not consume, be a parasite; you must create. We don’t choose our actors because of their talent, but because of their strength of character, their generosity, their perseverance. We are consistent in our choice of repertoire and our artistic goals. We are trying to construct a theater where people are not pawns pushed around by an absentee director as is the case in the cultural industry. Each member of our group must clearly understand his place within our little society and be responsible for his share of all the work there is to be done: physical, technical, administrative, as well as artistic. If you define sectarianism as a consistent mode of action – the more it is open and free, the more it is disciplined – then we are sectarian.

Many say that your form of theater contains no possibilities of development; that when you have seen one of Barba’s plays you have seen them all.

If you use this criterion, then you no longer have to read more than one James Joyce or Dostoyevsky or look at more than one Cézanne. I think that this “fault” lies within the artistic form of expression itself. There exist certain essential themes, felt as vitally important; just as wounds, obsessions which we constantly return to and deepen. This is what gives an organic coherence to a work, to an artist’s collective creation. It is self-evident that the questions one tries to solve, always from different points of view and with different methods and forms, find a resonance and fulfil a real need in certain people. But perhaps not in those you just spoke of; they have other obsessions than I.

European theater has developed out of religious rituals. Are you trying to create a new religion with your theater?

You take me for the son of God.

But those who have seen your performances often talk about mysticism and religion.

Those who see our performances and talk about them are in fact talking about themselves. If someone finds a religious resonance in our performances, perhaps it is because deep inside themselves there sits a repressed religious need which they project onto that Rorschach test which our performances are. This type of interpretation is more a reflection on themselves than on us. It is enough that so many people offer a “materialistic” explanation of our work, recognizing in it a dialectic perspective, to make us feel at ease with our “mysticism”.

You mentioned religious rituals before. There is a great lack of clarity with respect to this term, one which originally belongs to the history of religion. The ritual is a technique bound up with a religious belief. This act, this technique is used to influence a supernatural power. The Catholic Mass, for example, is a repetition of the sacrifice of Jesus; it has a precise meaning and function: redemption for those who partake of it. A ritual is always built up around the repetition of an action which was originally performed by a god or a supernatural hero. The moment we divorce this technique from its religious belief, we are left with nothing but an empty shell, a formula which the critics attach to the phenomena
of theater when they cannot be categorized in any other way. But that which might evoke ritual in our theater is what I would call behavior patterns. It has nothing to do with religion. It is a sort of biologically conditioned reaction which comes forth under special, extreme conditions. In moments of fear, boundless joy, terror or enthusiasm, we react in a manner different from daily life. We use another physical language, our voice changes.

In our work we try to develop and discipline these reactions and cut through the stereotype of social behavior which is the usual theatrical model. We are trying to go beyond our socially determined reflexes, to reach our living and basic nucleus, disciplining this process through signs and situations. We cannot help it if all of this sometimes reminds us of hieratic gestures in religious rituals or in certain ritualized oriental theater forms. Perhaps the "natural" behavior of the man in the street is not so natural after all. Perhaps when this man, aroused by a violent emotion, instinctively adopts a "strange" or hieratic attitude, he is closer to being natural than when he puts his feet up on his desk. Our search is of a psycho-physiological nature, and the scientific attitude that guides our work does not permit the hiding of our results, even if they remind us of rituals.

I have the impression that you, as all other artists trying to create something new, are influenced by a series of people and thoughts: Kabuki drama, Noh theater, Brecht, Stanislavsky, Jung. I asked about rituals because I seem to remember that Jung said somewhere that the salvation of mankind lies in the search for new rituals. Is this a thought that has inspired you in your work?

Theater cannot save society. It hasn't happened yet. Theater has an important collective function when it is an integrated part of a compact, structured society. In Greece it was part of the religious consciousness and helped in the individual's integration in the polis. The same circumstances were present in the Middle Ages and in other cultures such as those of Japan and India. But in our disrupted epoch it is ridiculous to suppose that our little Odin Teatret, with a spectator capacity of 70 per night, can save Denmark and the world. This isn't what we want. We do not want to save anybody. Nothing is further from our conception of theater than to be missionaries. As if we knew what was right, what was wrong, what was good, what was bad. Nobody these days can say: this is the total and absolute truth. We can only try to analyse and confront our personal truths with our daily experiences and impressions. This confrontation nourishes change; we are always travelling, always with new baggage. Perhaps we are creating new rituals without being aware of it.

Our reference point? We concentrate upon the actor's psychophysical possibilities: voice, body, how he establishes contact with the spectator from a different point of departure than that used by the so-called avant-garde or traditional theater. We want to create a new language, which will lead us towards a new form of contact, increasing our possibilities of approaching other individuals. A language that can strike us with the same immediate force as the sight of a mother protecting her child, or of a man who, in cold blood, kills another in the street. Even if we have not had a similar experience, or are not prepared in any way to interpret it, nevertheless we will still be touched in a direct, physical way. This is a precise, real point of departure. We do not have any theories or formulas that guarantee in advance whether something we do is right or not. We are beginners within our craft. We have no more than four years of experience behind us, and that is nothing. After twenty years, perhaps we can begin to say: "This, at least, should be avoided". Such judgement is built on personal experience, on the mistakes one has made.

My knowledge of Odin Teatret and its work is limited to the two plays you have shown publicly: Bjørnboe's Ornitifjel an and Kasperiana by Ole Sarvig, shown also at the Venice Biennale. In these plays there seems to be a critical attitude towards universal problems such as love and trust. A criticism of our society, of the Christian religion. I cannot reconcile this with your contention that you are a man who is working purely scientifically with the possibilities of theater. Perhaps your productions are not an attempt to save the world, but they seem to present the spectator with an enormous provocation.

Let's be precise. An anthropologist who travels to Brazil to do research among the natives can proclaim himself objective. Nevertheless he is not a piece of film, but a human being weighted down by thousands of years of history, confronted with other hu-
man beings stemming from another history. In such a case, the objectivity principle becomes one of sympathy, which grows from a generous openness towards the other, a refusal to judge in advance. But objectivity in the end is the result of a long evolution within the specific European culture, and it proves nothing other than the anthropologist being orientated by the society from which he has sprung. I have no pretences about being more objective than an anthropologist. Every time men of science have tried to separate objectivity from an ethical commitment – in the concentration camps, for example – human beings have been reduced to mere objects for one another, and the result has been collective murder. If the theater can be metaphorically compared to scientific research – for example psycho-physiology or acoustics – and if it can assimilate research from the social sciences such as anthropology, psychiatry, sociology, it is nevertheless more subjective and ethically committed than these other fields. Theater can no more identify itself with science than it can with religion.

You used the word provocation. Let us clarify our terms once more. We are not so unbearably pretentious as to want to unmask “the others”. This is normally just a convenient alibi for not unmasking oneself. Self-exposure is the only right we claim. The others, witnesses to this, are free to take it up themselves or not. If this is provocation, it is in a radically different sense from that usually implied. When we work on a play, we don’t say to ourselves that now we are going to unmask the bourgeois society. We are trying to expose and discover ourselves as members of this society. We discover within us obsessions, dreams, and desires, ranging from the naïve to the insane. We want to live in a world without oppression, where justice is not just a paragraph in a book, but a second nature, a world where no one dies of starvation, and where everybody lives in dignity. This longing, these utopian dreams, collide with our experiences, which teach us to be careful and pragmatic, to adjust to a society and an era in which scientific reasoning and un-reasoning, disguised as science, rule with hate, injustice, and cruelty. If we let our dreams escape freely, we will only add our contribution to disorder and misery. It will not be long before they shut us up in hospitals for psychopaths, unable to adapt to “normal” society.

This inner scream, this knot of utopian feelings, is what we are trying to conjure up in our performances, but always in opposition to the mutism, the cowardice, and the conformity of our daily behavior. You are right when you see a critical attitude built into our plays. But it is aimed at our own pragmatism and cynicism, at our lack of courage, at our paralysis which holds us back from changing ourselves and thus bringing the change in the world in which we live. This tension reveals itself through a web of counterpoint, rupture, asymmetry and contrast within our performances, an immediate incarnation of our need for complete sincerity, and our intense uneasiness in approaching it.
WAITING FOR THE REVOLUTION

Published in Odin Teatret’s magazine Teatrets Teori og Teknikk (Holstebro 1968/8).

To claim that the theatre must once again become a popular art would be to show oneself ill-acquainted with its history. We find only two eras in the past when the theatre represented a social event embracing the entire collectivity: the Greek drama and the Passion-Plays of the Middle Ages. But in those days, the theatre was not so much an aesthetic fact as a manifestation aimed at moral and religious edification.

Only a community bound together by strong and profound ties and by a common vision of life can react unanimously to a performance which, inasmuch as it touches on the sources of its faith and of its spiritual life, can become a possibility of action. Today, there no longer exists a homogeneous audience, but audiences reflecting our dispersed society. Once the common ground has disappeared – that is to say the religious faith and a deeply felt moral code – no form of theatre can claim to be popular, to be capable, in other words, of engaging the community totally. The theatre is no longer the only form of representation; there exist others which are more exciting and more suitable to the rhythm of our life: sport, television, cinema and, furthermore, foreign travel where an hour’s flight – the time required to reach a theatre in the centre of the town from the suburbs – takes us to a new country, to a fantastic world which is not made of papier mâché, but of real exotic scenery and animated by human beings who do not play at being, but are authentically spontaneous, a world which frees us from the constraints and the taboos that restrict us in our everyday surroundings.

What I have in mind when speaking of theatre is neither a place of pure entertainment nor a didactic or revolutionary centre. To fulfil these two functions there exist, on the one hand, discothè-
ques, night-clubs and cabarets, and, on the other, evening classes, political party schools and the streets.

The theatre is fiction, vision. Its intensity of suggestion is the one thing which acts on the spectators. When it applies itself to becoming what it endeavours to suggest, it loses its effect. In the 20's, there were dozens of agit-prop communist theatres in Germany. They were unable to check Hitler's advance and are now all forgotten. But Piscator and Brecht, who were voicing the same appeal, but in an artistic manner, belong to our dramatic and revolutionary heritage.

Today, the value of the theatre no longer lies in its sociological function which is diffuse and undefinable, but in the precise and distinct psychological meaning it takes on for each actor and for each spectator.

We have all seen performances where the actors play in an uncontrolled physical whirl - they call it spontaneity - with piercing cries and convulsive movements. At the very moment when they seek to express their total being, they go to pieces in a shapeless nonentity. And although the fundamental aspirations of such a theatre are worthy of respect, this form of communication brings out nothing new in the way of articulate consciousness of ourselves. Everything gets bogged down in a biological chaos, in impotence.

The theatre, like all artistic activities, is discipline. All visionary explosions must be mastered: the actor must ride on the tiger, he must not let himself be devoured by it. The physical exteriorization of the emotions must be canalized, controlled, and thus become a wave of explicit signs. It must not be allowed to get the upper hand and plunge the actor into confused actions which ape suffering. This false agony, this epidermic sentimentality akin to hysteria, this aping of the afflictions of contemporary man and, above all, this alibi of a good conscience felt by the actor, show up the misery and the hypocrisy of our whole age, of our whole society, and the theatre then becomes the true reflection of a condition which must be destroyed, beginning with the theatre. The spectator smiles at such a performance and feels reassured: this place is not dangerous, the deception continues. The impossible is not made manifest, the cries, the political slogans, the naked bodies on the stage are rags in which the actors clothe their inner void. Lucidity and know-how as regards the utilisation of one's

weapons are required in order to be a revolutionary: amateurs have never changed the course of history.

The theatre is not an exact science, a field in which one can attain, transmit and develop certain objective results. The results attained and the solutions found by the actors die and disappear with them. But the spectators perceive as objective signs the articulate actions of the actor, which are, however, the result of a subjective process. How can the actor be their matrix and be able, at the same time, to shape them into objective signs whose origin is in his own subjectivity? This is the essence of the actor's art and of his methodology. It is impossible to discover the formula, the tools, the instruments which might provide a definitive answer to this question.

During the process of training - which cannot be limited to three or four years - there is only one possibility: that of discovering, and then surmounting, the obstacles which hinder communication. The rest is incertitude.

The misapprehension begins with the pedagogy, that intimate and peculiar situation in which one generation offers its experience - of art and of life - to another generation. It is entirely illusory to teach a series of elements which, in reality, are only clichés and stereotypes: a little diction, a little theatrical history, a little psychology and, possibly, some notions of modern dancing and of acrobatics. A fresh approach to our art can only be determined by a continual renewal of our consciousness and of our personal attitude towards life. It is the process which transforms us, the day-by-day manner in which we apprehend our work.

Meanwhile, let the young people who have chosen the theatre furnish daily proof of the necessity of their choice, even by means of this inconsequent programme. Let them clash with a profession which imposes such inhuman demands that only a few persevere, those who are animated by an indomitable need, those who are not satisfied with superficial solutions, the demons of work who overcome the inertia which contains itself with futile results. Let them attain, with their own personalities and by their bodies and souls, the ultimate judgment on themselves as representatives of this society which still proclaims: thou shalt love thy neighbour. And furnish proof of the fact that this is achieved without chaos, without excess, without emotional masturbation, but with lucidity and cold blood.
It is no longer a question of being a missionary or an original artist, but of being realistic. Our profession gives us the possibility of changing ourselves and thereby of changing society. One must not ask: what does the theatre signify for the people? This is a demagogic and unfruitful question. But rather: what does the theatre signify for me? The answer, converted into action without regard and without compromise, will be revolution in the theatre.

LETTER TO ACTOR D.

This letter was written by Eugenio Barba to one of the actors of the Odin in 1967. It has often appeared in books and magazines in different parts of the world, either to illustrate the Odin’s vision of theatre or to present, in more general terms, its attitude towards a new actor. It was first published in the book Synpunkter om kunst (Copenhagen, 1968).

I have often been struck by a lack of seriousness in your work. This is not the same as a lack of concentration or good will. It is the expression of two attitudes.

First of all, it seems as if your actions are not driven by any inner conviction or irresistible need which leaves its mark on your exercises, improvisations and performance. You may be concentrated in your work, without sparing your energies, your gestures may be technically correct and precise, but your actions remain empty. I don’t believe in what you are doing. Your body clearly says: “I have been told to do this”. But your nerves, your brain, your spine, are not committed, and with this skin-deep commitment you want to make me believe that what you are doing is vital to you. You do not sense the importance of that which you want to share with the spectators. How then can you expect the spectator to be gripped by your actions? How can you, with this attitude, uphold the understanding of the theater as a place where social inhibitions and conventions are annihilated to make way for an open-hearted and absolute communication? You represent the community within this space, with the humiliations you have undergone, the degradation which has closed you up, your cynicism as self-defence, and your optimism as the essence of irresponsibility. All this, together with your guilt, your need to love, the longing for a lost paradise hidden in the past, close to the person who could make you forget fear. Everybody present with you in this space will be shaken if you succeed in rediscovering these sources, this common ground of human experience, the hidden fatherland. This is the bond that unites you to the others, a treasure
that lies buried deep within all of us, never unearthed, because it is our only comfort, and because it hurts when we touch it.

The second attitude I see in you is your embarrassment in considering the seriousness of your work. You feel the need to laugh, to sneer, and come with humorous comments about what you and your colleagues are doing. It is as if you want to flee from the responsibility that you feel is inherent in your craft, which consists in establishing communication with human beings and in assuming the responsibility for what you are revealing. You are frightened by seriousness, the knowledge that you are on the fringes of the permissible. You are frightened that everything you do is synonymous with tediousness, fanaticism, or over-specialization. But in a world where people around us either no longer believe in anything, or only pretend to believe in order to be left in peace, he who digs deep within himself to reach a clarity about his own situation, his absence of ideals, his need for spiritual life, will always be called fanatic or naive. In a world with cheating as a norm, he who seeks his own truth is taken for a fraud, a hypocrite. I wonder if you realize that all you create, everything liberated and given form by your work is also a part of life and deserves care and respect. Your actions before the community of the spectators should be powered by the flame hidden in the red-hot iron, the voice in the burning bush. Only then will your actions live on in the senses and the memory of the spectator, fermenting into unforeseeable consequences.

We know that when Dullin lay on his deathbed, his face deformed itself into all the important roles he had played: Smerdiakov, Volpone, Richard III. It was not just the man Dullin who was dying but also the actor, as well as the many stages of his working life.

If I ask you why you became an actor, you will reply: “To fulfill myself, to express myself”. But what does this mean? Who has fulfilled himself? Was it Manager Hansen who lived a quiet life, respectable and without problems, never tormented by answerless questions, or the romantic Gauguin, who broke with all of the social norms and finished his life in miserable poverty and degradation in a Polynesian village, convinced that he had found the lost freedom, Noa-Noa? In an epoch where belief in God is diagnosed as a neurosis, we lack the scales to weigh our life and tell us whether we have been fulfilled or not. No matter which personal and hidden motives have led you to the theater, once you are within, you must find a meaning which, stretching beyond your own person, confronts you socially with others.

It is only within the catacombs that we can prepare a new life. It is here that one can seek spiritual commitment without fear of confrontation with questions that will bring about a new morality. This presupposes courage: the majority of people has no need of us. Your work is a sort of social meditation upon yourself, your human condition and the events that touch you to the quick through the experiences of our age. In such a precarious theater which shocks the normal psychic being, every performance can be your last. You should consider it as such, the final possibility of reaching out to others, crying out your last word, your testament, the reckoning of your actions.

If being an actor can mean all this to you, then a new theater will be born. A new approach to the literary tradition will spring forth, a new technique and a new relationship between you and the people who come to see you each evening because they need you.