Odin Teatret – Between Tradition and the Avant-Garde

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Abstract

Eugenio Barba followed the work of the director Jerzy Grotowski in Poland from 1961 to 1964. This was a period of profound revolution in theatre as an art form, with the abolition of the stage and the auditorium, and of the separation between the actor and the spectator. This way of thinking about and creating theatre was decisive when Barba created Odin Teatret in Norway, in October 1964, with a group of young people who had been rejected by drama school. In 1966 Odin Teatret accepted the invitation to settle in Holstebro, a small town in Denmark where the municipality offered the theatre a farm building and a modest grant. This cultural policy allowed the theatre laboratory to be born and to invent, as well as performances, new forms of theatrical culture. Odin Teatret redefined a way of doing theatre, between avant-garde and modern traditions.

In 1964 a meeting was held in Oslo at which a number of young directors and actors expressed their discontent with the absence of avant-garde theatre in Oslo. The Norwegian author Jens Bjørneboe relates:

> No one mentioned that in Oslo at that time, one of Europe’s most advanced avant-garde theatres was alive and thriving – Odin Teatret, which occupied a municipal shelter in an underground bunker.

Odin Teatret was founded in 1964, and its first performance, *Ornitofilene* (The Bird Lovers), was based on a text by Bjørneboe. The pictures from the rehearsals in the shelter bear an unambiguous resemblance to the classic conception of the avant-garde as a subversive outpost far from the established theatre.

Both Bjørneboe and the leader of Odin Teatret, Eugenio Barba, were inspired by Bertolt Brecht and his ideas of the theatre as not just mirroring the world, but contributing to change it. Even though Barba, as Brecht did, employed many of the aesthetic and political techniques of the avant-garde, he led the theatre in a direction in which negotiations with acting traditions came to play...
a particularly important part. This applies to oriental as well as Western theatrical traditions. As a result, the confrontation with naturalism and established theatre conventions (such as the ‘fourth wall’) actually had a much broader scope, extending the historical avant-garde movement in the theatre.

Odin Teatret had very little to do with the prevalent form of theatre in Oslo at that time, even though Barba was a friend of Bjørneboe. The cosmopolitan Eugenio Barba was born in 1936 in southern Italy. As a seventeen-year-old, eager to travel, he left his native country and somewhat coincidentally in 1954 arrived in Norway, where he worked and studied French and Norwegian literature and religious history at the University of Oslo. Foreign, dark-skinned and eccentric, he saw an opportunity to make a career for himself in theatre and art, and in 1961 he left Norway to study directing at the State Theatre School in Poland. This led him to the then unknown Polish director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), the leader of the small Teatr 13 Rezedow (Theatre of Thirteen Rows) in Opole. Here he followed Grotowski’s work for three years, until he was denied a visa to visit Poland in 1963. Back in Oslo, he wanted to establish his own theatre, as the institutional ones had shown no interest in his thoughts on theatre, based on Grotowski’s principles. He succeeded in gathering an ensemble of young people who wanted to act, but who had not been admitted to the traditional Theatre School, and with this group he started a new practice and form of training. They rehearsed Bjørneboe’s text in various non-theatre premises, such as an air-raid shelter. Ornitofilene was later staged in empty rooms at schools and other non-theatre-spaces.

Barba attempted to employ Grotowski’s method, especially the way it was developed in the staging of Akropolis (1962), inspired by Stanislaw Wyspianski’s classical drama. Grotowski had moved the setting of the drama to Auschwitz, and the scenic room of the performance was made to look like a concentration camp constructed by the actors/prisoners around and between the spectators, using props such as pipes and steel wire.

We discovered different ways to carry the pipes, attaching them to the floor and making use of the sound of this work in a rhythmic way through knocking, running or silence.

BARBA, in RASMUSSEN 1999: 18

As a result, the action had a feeling of real authenticity and not mere fiction. There was a double dramaturgy consisting of the actors’ actions as well as the narrative dramaturgy. This real work carried out during the performance was a form of dramaturgy that reminded Barba of the circus. The dramaturgy of the