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# What is ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology)?

Eugenio Barba first defined ‘theatre anthropology’ as the study of the human being in an organized performance situation in a lecture in Warsaw in May 1980. The first session of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) was held in October 1980 and the last to date in 2023. This article gives a personal account of ISTA’s history from its origins, rooted in Eugenio Barba’s interest in Asian classical theatre techniques and the founding of Odin Teatret in Denmark, to the most recent experiences, which include the intercultural production of *Anastasis/Resurrection* at the 2023 Theatre Olympics in Budapest. It identifies masters of given ISTA sessions and their invaluable contribution to the School’s emphasis on, and understanding of, craft, as well as the distinguishing characteristics and points of change and development of selected ISTAs.

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**Key terms:** Eugenio Barba, Theatrum Mundi, Odin Teatret, intercultural, presence, pre-expressivity.

IN AUGUST 2023, I was on tour in Bogotá in Colombia. A participant told me during a workshop that he practised ‘theatre anthropology exercises’. I was curious about what he meant, as Theatre Anthropology is a comparative field of research that identifies common principles in different stage genres; it is not a method that compiles exercises. Officially, in books, ‘theatre anthropology is the study of human behaviour on a biological and sociocultural level in a situation of representation’.<sup>1</sup> In Denmark just a few days earlier, another workshop participant had shown me a physical position that he called being in *sats*, even if it was not. *Sats* is the Scandinavian word for ‘impulse’, which Eugenio Barba uses in his personal terminology when defining the organic effect of an actor/dancer on the stage. The word is now used in university Theatre Anthropology courses around the world.

I have begun to ask myself whether those confidently professing that they practise Theatre Anthropology principles know the origin of their definitions. The meaning of

the theories referred to in books has adjusted to academic forms and ways of thinking. For most younger students, direct contact with the teaching of the practitioners who established the field of research is not possible.

What is Theatre Anthropology? And what is ISTA – International School of Theatre Anthropology? How did ISTA come about? Much has been written about Theatre Anthropology and ISTA, and the many issues of the *Journal of Theatre Anthropology (JTA)* aim to contextualize the research of the past to the present day.<sup>2</sup> Films and photographs offer visual testimonies to pass on the experience in a more comprehensive way than words. In 2021, Eugenio Barba, Claudio Coloberti, and I created ten films on Theatre Anthropology, each of about sixty minutes, trying to answer some of these questions.<sup>3</sup> The third 2021 film on Theatre Anthropology includes recordings from the symposium of the Salento ISTA session in 1987 in Italy, which deal with daily and extra-daily technique. Here Barba says:

Actors are human beings like any other, yet when they step on to the stage they cannot be like any other. The ability of knowing how to attract and guide attention forces them to renounce their daily behaviour, which would not be able to ignite the interest of the spectator. Thus, the actors have to deny their daily behaviour in order to use a scenic behaviour, or an extra-daily behaviour. It is through the actors' extra-daily behaviour that the spectators can confront themselves and reflect on their own daily behaviour. The extra-daily behaviour – technique – is a certain way of using our material presence and our voice, [making them] perceptible [to] the spectators.

Theatre Anthropology studies the technical principles of the actor/dancer's extra-daily behaviour. ISTA was founded in 1980 to be the environment where such research would happen. Seventeen ISTA sessions have taken place in different countries between 1980 and 2023. They are intermittent and can last from one week to two months. ISTA's permanent environment consists of dancers and actors from various performing traditions with a staff of scholars from different fields.

In May 1980, six months before the first ISTA session in Germany in Bonn, Barba gave a public lecture in Warsaw about theatre anthropology, announcing that he wanted to create a 'non-school'. Later, during an Odin Week Festival in Holstebro in 1995, he changed the definition to 'an itinerant comparative laboratory on the extra-daily technical principles which induce stage presence in the actor/dancer'.

When analyzing the actors/dancers from different traditions, Barba had distinguished different levels of organization: stage presence (the pre-expressive level); narration; relationships with other actors; and elements of the performance (space, music, light, props). All the research developed at ISTA deals essentially with pre-expressivity, or scenic presence.

In his article in the first issue of the *Journal of Theatre Anthropology* in 2021, Franco Ruffini, scholar and one of the founders of ISTA, explains clearly how pre-expressivity should be understood:

The pre-expressive level is not an invention, nor is it really a discovery. Rather, it is the simple acknowledgment of something obvious. If we consider how an action – such as drinking a glass of water

– is normally carried out, 'the man or woman in a performance situation' must, in addition, *show* that s/he is carrying it out and attract the spectator's attention to the action. The action carried out by the actor costs more, in terms of energy, than the same action carried out by the ordinary person. The actor must use a surplus of energy to signal the action s/he is carrying out. This is evident.

But if this surplus of energy is used for signalling – drinking in a strange way, pulling faces, and suchlike – the effect obtained is opposite to that intended. The spectator's attention is attracted by the signal, and is therefore distracted from the action that was the object of signalling. To be effective, the surplus of energy must be invested in the action itself. So the action becomes 'inconsistent' with respect to the logic of the ordinary person, but, vice versa, becomes 'consistent' with respect to another logic in which the action is perceived as the re-action to a contrary force. . . .

The pre-expressive level is something evident, like a light. You just need eyes trained to see. The merit of Eugenio Barba lies in having had this ability to see.

But, once the light has been seen, there is nothing else to be discovered. The same three principles – luxury balance, dynamic of opposites, and consistent inconsistency – are not 'other'. Rather as the incandescent filament is nothing other than the lighted bulb that contains it. Once the evident nature of light has revealed itself with its principles, it only serves to illuminate what is 'other' than itself.

Hence the ecumenical vocation of theatre anthropology. The pre-expressive level sheds light on Asian traditions, as it does on the training of theatre groups or modern dancers or ballet, on Decroux mime and on Commedia dell'Arte, on the masters of the twentieth century Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, or Craig – but also on the company actor of the nineteenth century. More than a new discipline, from the beginning theatre anthropology has stood as a call to arms to the most diverse scholars so that they might look afresh at their respective fields of research *in the light* of the pre-expressive level. For this call to be effective it was, of course, necessary to create an environment in which to gather those called up. Being a far-sighted strategist, Barba knew this. And he invented ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology.

Without ISTA, the evidence of the pre-expressive level ran the risk of having to rely on chance, of an encounter with eyes capable of seeing it, and of looking at the 'other' in its light. ISTA is a unique interdisciplinary environment. The scholars, the master actors and dancers, and – for the first two sessions – the students had not simply to feel summoned, as in a typical conference, but truly called to arms. Or even enrolled in the cause. Hence the operating strategies of ISTA, such as the group runs before dawn, or the command of

silence, in the face of which the alternative to refusal could only be that exercise of freedom and creativity which consists of one's own free will doing the will of another. And, [let it] be clear, this 'other' – Barba – was perceived as the spokesman of a shared interest.

On the other hand, a young Italian director, Federico Fanella, describes ISTA in 2023 as 'a transcultural dialogue between East and West':

an environment of scholars and practitioners from all the theatre cultures of the world who put together their studies and research to find recurring principles that mark a Copernican revolution in a simple and gentle way. The aim is not to impose rules and techniques on anyone but provide suggestions and advice, which may even be denied, refuted, or reworked. Within ISTA, the denial of ethnocentrism makes possible that cultural relativity – and therefore the diversity of the world – completes and enriches a landscape of artists who continue to draw from these studies to create new ones, in a continuous process of creation and study in search of a 'better' technique. Theatre pre-expressivity becomes a place where both the performer and the spectator (in this case 'pre-interpretation') converge in an elementary basic approach to these disciplines. Here lies the strength of the transcultural discourse that theatre anthropology develops, within the fundamental actor-spectator relationship, giving light not only to 'what' and 'how' the actors express themselves, but observing the artistic and technical process that leads actors to do so in a particular way.<sup>4</sup>

## Origins

ISTA's roots are to be found in Barba's passionate interest in Asian actors. Already at the end of the 1950s, when deciding to become a theatre director, he was fascinated by the refined stage language of what he then called 'oriental' performers. This was enhanced by his direct acquaintance with Kathakali in India in 1963.

Barba founded the autodidact theatre group Odin Teatret in 1964 in Oslo, Norway, with young people who had been rejected by the State Theatre School. At that time, theatre was a building and a written text to be interpreted. Odin Teatret marked the beginning of change, of many different conceptions of theatre and its venues by rehearsing in a

classroom or in an anti-atomic refuge, by the actors taking off their shoes before entering the workspace and doing physical exercises as training and improvisations to create the actor's material and performances. During this process, the Asian performers were referred to, both as examples and inspiration (Figure 1).

Before starting Odin Teatret, Barba had spent four years in Poland (1961–64), one at the Warsaw State Theatre School and the next three following the work of Teatr Laboratorium 13 Rzędów, directed by Jerzy Grotowski and Ludwig Flaszen in the provincial town of Opole. It was during this period that he also travelled to India, observing Kathakali performances and noting how young children underwent strenuous training. At that time, the apprenticeship and creative process of Asian traditional theatre forms were unknown in Europe. Barba described the impact of seeing Kathakali in an essay, which, for the first time, gave information about the apprenticeship and structure of this form abroad.<sup>5</sup>

In 1966, after touring its first production, *Ornitofilene*, Odin Teatret moved to Holstebro in Denmark. Losing the language shared with the spectators (Norwegian and Danish are quite different, especially in pronunciation) increased the need to find other forms of communication beyond comprehension of the text. The group's vocal and physical training developed the musical, tonal, and emotional possibilities of the voice, and basic physical impulses became the language to which spectators could react, without necessarily understanding. The references were Jerzy Grotowski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Motokiyo Zeami's newly published *The Secret Tradition of Noh Theatre*, and Ukiyo-e prints of Kabuki actors.

The cowsheds and pigsties of the old farm given by Holstebro Municipality to the Norwegian group were transformed into a theatre with two big naked spaces without a stage (the first black rooms in Europe) on the outskirts of the town. In the period 1966–77, Odin Teatret organized workshops and seminars about technical aspects – an innovative activity that spread throughout Europe after 1968.



**Figure 1.** ISTA, Bologna, 1990. Photograph: Fiora Bemporad. Courtesy of Fiora Bemporad and Odin Teatret.

Such teachers as Jerzy Grotowski, Étienne Decroux, Jacques Lecoq, Dario Fo and Franca Rame, and the Colombaioni clown brothers were invited to Denmark for the first time. Week-long seminars with Balinese, Javanese, Japanese, and Indian theatre/dance ensembles were also organized. The aim was to learn from experienced international artists, from their performances, work demonstrations, and methods of apprenticeship, at the same time as earning an income as organizers. The need was to learn *how* to be present on the stage from those who had embodied a technique. Even the most distant procedures could be useful and inspirational. The forms of the Asian artists were extraordinary but, most of all, there emanated from each individual an incredibly seductive force, on and off the stage. At the same time, they shared and explained their work with great humility. Recalling how the young boys in Kerala trained for Kathakali, Barba asked the invited artists about the beginning of their

apprenticeship, what had motivated them, their first meeting with their guru, and how they dealt with the rigorous discipline. He wanted to know about the process hidden behind the result.

In those first years, Odin Teatret's publishing house printed the journal *Teatrets Teori og Teknikk* and books about theatre acting technique with issues dedicated to Balinese, Japanese, and Indian theatre forms. The first book, published in English in 1968, was *Towards a Poor Theatre*, a collection of texts by Jerzy Grotowski, and the second, published in Danish (from its 1960 French translation) in 1970, was Motokiyo Zeami's *The Secret Tradition of Noh Theatre*.

The 1970s were also the years of meetings of theatre groups, and Odin Teatret made its first tours to Latin America, starting with the festival in Caracas in 1974 directed by Carlos Giménez. Barba wrote the Third Theatre Manifesto in 1976 in Belgrade after a meeting of theatre groups he had organized with the

support of UNESCO within the Theatre of Nations and the BITEF Festival. The Manifesto gave a name to an existing reality of theatres that were neither traditional text-based theatre nor experimental, but followed their own autonomous identity as theatre-makers aiming to transform society or themselves. In 1977, another theatre group meeting took place in Bergamo, Italy, organized by Teatro Tascabile and its director Renzo Ves-covi; in 1978, a first theatre group meeting was organized by Cuatrotablas and its director Mario Delgado in Ayacucho in the Peruvian Andes – an encounter that has since been repeated every ten years.

Barba helped collate the programme of these encounters, inviting to Bergamo the Balinese dancer I Made Bandem, his wife Swasti, and their three dancer children, the renowned Noh actor Hideo Kanze, and the Kathakali performer Krishnan Namboodiri. Some of them had previously given demonstrations at Odin Teatret in Holstebro.

Besides interest in Asian performers, the development of training and the physical language at Odin Teatret, and the autodidactic environment of theatre groups, Latin America played an important role in the origin of ISTA. The 1970s was a period of military dictatorships there, and theatre people were often deeply committed politically. They were in search of definitions of their own cultural identity. Although Peruvian and Colombian theatre groups regularly invited Odin Teatret, some people criticized it as an example of cultural imperialism, imposing models imported from Europe. Odin Teatret's capacity to involve spectators in peripheral and disadvantaged zones and the practice of bar-ters was admired, but technical exchanges were open to obstruction by ideological stand-points that did not favour dialogue.

In 1979, Hans-Jürgen Nagel, head of the Kulturredaktion in Bonn, generously agreed to finance Barba's proposition for a context of comparative research with highly skilled masters from different cultures and the participation of fifty actors and directors from various theatre groups. The Asian masters who had been to Holstebro during seminars gave their go-ahead for a 'neutral' professional territory

in which the Latin American and European theatre groups could widen their knowledge horizons, avoiding any reference to Odin Teatret's aesthetics and dramaturgical findings. One purpose behind the first ISTA was the creation of this neutral territory, which intended to favour dialogue and shared discoveries. Thus the first ISTA occurred in 1980, lasting one month, followed by another month of shorter sessions in Scandinavia (Figure 2). The organizers in Scandinavia were theatre groups: Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Grenland Friteater in Porsgrunn, Norway; and Teater Schahrazad in Stockholm, Sweden. Barba coined the name ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) on a train in Japan in June 1980, when visiting Tadashi Suzuki in his remote village, Noga Mura. His reasoning was that, at a time of laboratories and workshops, a school would recall the basic apprenticeship of craft.

The participant artists of this first adventure were Toni Cots (Odin Teatret), Sanjukta Panigrahi (India), Katsuko Azuma (Japan), I Made Pasek Tempo (Bali), and Tsao Chun Lin (Taiwan), assisted by Richard Fowler (Canada) and Gilla Cremer (Germany). The scholars were Fabrizio Cruciani, Franco Ruffini, Nicola Savarese, Ferdinando Taviani, and Ugo Volli (all from Italy), and Jean-Marie Pradier (France). Together with Barba, they are the founders of the ISTA tradition.

## Principles

The first 2021 film on Theatre Anthropology records the symposium at the end of the 1980 ISTA. The demonstrations and talks introduced such terms as daily and extra-daily behaviour, underlying recurring principles, and the pre-expressive level, which is the core of Theatre Anthropology and ISTA. Barba's use of the term 'pre-expressive' comes from a discussion with the French biologist Henri Laborit, whom he met in 1979 at a meeting for theatre practitioners and scientists organized by Jean-Marie Pradier at the Jelena Góra Theatre in Poland, directed by Alina Obidniak.

Laborit commented that theatre practitioners continually jumped from one level of organization to another, passing from actors'



**Figure 2.** Eugenio Barba and Ni Made Putri. ISTA, Bonn, 1980. Photograph: Nicola Savarese. Courtesy of Nicola Savarese and Odin Teatret.

apprenticeship to the social function of theatre, and from the dramaturgical structure of texts to the use of space in set designs. He reminded people that a complex organism like the human body was composed of cells, organs, systems, and social relationships, and that it was important to understand which 'level' was being referred to in a discussion. Barba's idea of a distinction of levels of the analytical organization of craft elements, together with that of pre-expressivity, had emerged from a combination of his talking with Henri Laborit and his looking for years at the training of Odin Teatret's actors, his fascination for Asian traditional theatre forms, and his need to find a way of communicating with Latin American theatre groups. Motivation and knowledge were derived not from abstract theories but from reactions provoked by concrete circumstances.

In his May 1980 Warsaw lecture on Theatre Anthropology, Barba postulated that trans-cultural principles were at the base of each performative technique. In the transcript of

this lecture titled 'First Hypothesis' in *JTA* in 2021, he defines the following laws:

For actors and dancers, it is essential to achieve the effectiveness of a behaviour that has a sensorially persuasive power and that transports the spectators into the reality of stage fiction. . . . The first is the law of alteration of equilibrium. . . . It is exactly the position assumed when ready to jump or spring in any possible direction. . . . This brings us to the second 'law', the law of opposition. . . . The principle of opposition is the base on which actors construct and develop their action. . . . The third 'law' could be defined as the law of 'coherent incoherence'.<sup>6</sup>

For theatre and dance practitioners used to concentrating on the results and the expressive effect of their performances, it was difficult during ISTA sessions to 'learn to see' and concentrate only on the physical postures, the change of tensions in the torso and its effect on balance, and the oppositions in direction of different parts of the body that made the performers' presence alive, independently of narrative. During the individual Asian

artists' demonstrations, costumes, music, make-up, and the original rhythm were taken away while Barba insisted on pointing out Sanjukta Panigrahi's *tribanghi* (three curves in the body), Katsuko Azuma's sliding feet, and I Made Pasek Tempo's raised shoulders and the three phases of his steps.

Scholars and practitioners alike were caught by the fascination of the total artistry of the Asian performers and so were unable to see beyond/beneath/before the results. It was also difficult for them to accept the intercultural pre-expressive family that spoke the same stage language, despite their different backgrounds, beliefs, opinions, and rituals. Those who referred to cultural anthropology in general needed to hear again and again that theatre anthropology deals both with pre-expressivity, the basic level of the presence of an actor on the stage, and the extra-daily technique that is required to achieve such presence. The study was done comparing stage techniques and performers' behaviours

from different genres and traditions. When participants finally managed to 'see' beyond the results, they discovered transcultural principles that belong to the material culture of the craft and to the intelligence of the body: they learn to think with their feet (Figures 3 and 4).

### The School

ISTA is not a regular school functioning all year round with didactic programmes and degrees. Rather, it is an itinerant and intermittent school, which emerges whenever an organizer finds the necessary funding to host about a hundred artists and participants for the time decided upon in a place where everyone can live, sleep, eat, work, and perform, preferably in isolation to achieve maximum concentration. This is not an easy task.

ISTA organizers do not come from well-off cultural institutions, but mostly from theatre groups whose director or actors had participated in a previous ISTA session. Hans-Jürgen



**Figure 3.** I Wayan Bawa (foreground). ISTA, Albino, 2016. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.



**Figure 4.** (Standing, left to right) I Wayan Bawa, Julia Varley, and Keiin Yoshimura. ISTA, Albino, 2016. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.

Nagel in Bonn, in 1980, was followed by the following people and places: Roberto Bacci, Director of the Piccolo Teatro di Pontedera and the Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale (Volterra, Italy, 1981); Patrick Pezin and Nicholas Peskine (Blois and Malakoff, France, 1985); Odin Teatret (Holstebro, Denmark, 1986); Nicola Savarese and the Mediterranea Teatro Laboratorio (Salento, Italy, 1987); Pietro Valenti and Renzo Filippetti of Teatro Ridotto (Bologna, Italy, 1990); Richard Gough and Judie Christie of the Centre for Performance Research (Brecon and Cardiff, Wales, 1992); Nitis Jacon, FILO (Londrina, Brazil, 1994); Sven Sahlström and Chris Torch of the Interkult (Lövanger and Umeå, Sweden, 1995); Trevor Davies, Lene Thiesen, and Kirsten Hastrup (Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996); Marco Abbondanza, Sete Sois Sete Luas (Montemor-o-Novo and Lisbon, Portugal, 1998); Siegmur Schröder of the Theaterlabor (Bielefeld, Germany, 2000);

Ricardo Iniesta of the Atalaya Teatro (Seville and La Rinconada, Spain, 2004); Jarosław Fret and Grzegorz Ziółkowski of the Grotowski Institute (Wrocław and Kryżowa, Poland, 2005); Alessandra Pozzi and Fabrizio Persico of the Associazione Diaforà (Albino, Italy, 2016); Irene Di Lelio of Linee Libere and Vincenzo Mercurio of the Teatro Proskenion (Favignana, Italy, 2021); Attila Vidnyánszky and Zsófia Rideg of The National Theatre in Budapest, and Nikolett and Géza Pintér-Németh of the Sinum Theatre Association in Pécsvárad (Hungary, 2023).

The appendix to *Thinking with the Feet*, about the 16th ISTA in Albino in 2016, offers information concerning each session: the daily programme, an account of the session's themes and the names of organizers, artists, scholars, and participants, as well as the names given to the different spaces and the various times of day.<sup>7</sup> These names change for each session, following references that may be



geographical, mythical, historical, or biographical.

Here are the precise dates and themes of the seventeen sessions of ISTA:

**1. Bonn (Germany), 1–31 October 1980**

Theme of the session and public symposium: 'Theatre Anthropology'.

**2. Volterra (Italy), 8 August–8 October 1981**

Theme: 'Pre-expressivity/Improvisation'.

Theme of the public symposium: 'Theatre Anthropology'.

**3. Blois and Malakoff (France), 12–26 April 1985**

Theme: 'Dialogue between Cultures'.

Theme of the public symposium: '*Le Maître du regard*'.

**4. Holstebro (Denmark), 17–22 September 1986**

Theme: 'The Female Role as Represented on the Stage in Various Cultures'.

**5. Salento (Italy), 1–14 September 1987**

Theme: 'The Actor's Tradition and the Spectator's Identity'.

Symposium theme for invited specialists: 'Theatre Anthropology'.

Theme of the public symposium: 'Semiology of Performance and Theatre Anthropology'.

**6. Bologna (Italy), 28 June–18 July 1990**

Theme: 'Performance Techniques and Historiography'.

Theme of the first public symposium: 'Theatre Anthropology: Ethos and Pre-expressivity'.

Theme of the second public symposium: 'Performing Techniques and Historiography'.

**7. Brecon and Cardiff (Wales), 4–11 April 1992**

Theme: 'Working on Performance East and West/Subscore'.

Theme of the public symposium: 'Fictive Bodies, Dilated Minds, Hidden Dances'.

**8. Londrina (Brazil), 11–21 August 1994**

Theme of the session and of the public symposium: 'Tradition and Founders of Traditions'.

**9. Lövanger and Umeå (Sweden), 9–21 May 1995**

Theme of the session and of the public symposium: 'Form and Information: Performer's Learning in a Multicultural Dimension'.

**10. Copenhagen and Louisiana (Denmark), 3–12 May 1996**

Theme: 'The Performer's Bios: The Whispering Winds in Theatre and Dance'.

Theme of the public symposium: 'Theatre in a Multicultural Society'.

**11. Montemor-o-Novo and Lisbon (Portugal), 14–25 September 1998**

Theme of the session and of the public symposium: 'O-Effect: That which is Organic for the Actor/That which is Organic for the Spectator'.

**12. Bielefeld (Germany), 1–10 September 2000**

Theme: 'Action, Structure, Coherence'.

Theme of the public symposium: 'Dramaturgical Techniques in the Performing Arts'.

**13. Seville and La Rinconada (Spain), 15–25 October 2004**

Theme of the session and of the public symposium: 'Flow: Rhythm, Organicity, Energy'.

**14. Wrocław and Kryżowa (Poland), 1–15 April 2005**

Theme of the session and of the public symposium: 'Improvisation: Memory, Repetition, Discontinuity'.

**15. Albino (Italy), 7–17 April 2016**

Theme: 'The Actor's Know-how: Personal Paths, Techniques, and Visions'.

**16. Favignana (Italy), 12–22 October 2021**

Theme: 'The Actor's Presence and the Spectator's Perception'.

**17. Pécsvárad, Pécs, and Budapest (Hungary), 7–21 May 2023**

Theme of the session: 'Pre-expressivity – Composition – Montage'.

The first two sessions of ISTA in Bonn and Volterra lasted one month and two months respectively. Scholars, students, theatre and

dance practitioners, university teachers, and critics left their jobs, studies, theatres, families, and everyday commitments for a long period of research about something nebulous which Barba had called 'theatre anthropology'. The third session in Blois lasted only ten days and the artistic staff was reduced to the ensembles from India and Japan and only a few scholars. The short duration gave a different pace to the activities and marked a change in the way of thinking of the School.

When planning demonstrations and symposia for the first ISTA in Bonn, Barba had to be careful to give equal space and time to each invited master. With no previous experience for reference, improvisation and research were combined while a structure had to be identified – one that could satisfy participants' demand to do practical classes, scholars who wished to understand, and masters who had to accept that they were to explain the first days of their

apprenticeship instead of showing their artistic achievements in performances.

During the second ISTA in Volterra, the participants and teachers were divided into 'families'. Since then, smaller groups have always been organized for practical work. Only when the ISTA sessions had more than one hundred participants, as in Holstebro in 1986 and in Copenhagen in 1996, did all the work happen in plenary sessions through demonstrations (Figure 5). When there are fifty to sixty participants, the daily programme begins with 'silent time' (when participants and staff maintain silence), broken by a song at sunrise, followed by breakfast, practical work in smaller groups, demonstrations and professional biographies, lunch, the 'dreamtime' (a time for resting or dreaming in other professional ways), the 'bazaar' (exchanges among the participants), comparative 'seances' on technical principles with Barba, supper, and



**Figure 5.** (Left to right) Jerzy Grotowski, Steve Paxton, and I Made Djimat. ISTA, Copenhagen 1996. Photograph: Fiora Bemporad. Courtesy of Fiora Bemporad and Odin Teatret.

performances. The daily programme of ISTA sessions is influenced by the local eating customs, the time of sunrise and sunset, whether performances are open to the public or not, whether they take place within the closed ISTA venue or outside, whether the session is accompanied by a symposium or not, and whether the participants rehearse to be on stage for a *Theatrum Mundi* performance.

All the times on the schedule have a specific name, often with reference to the session's theme, as do the groups and the spaces.<sup>8</sup> The time and zone of silence help not to disturb those who might be resting, but they are also a way of inducing communication through behaviour instead of words, placing everyone in the same position. Punctuality, breaking silence with a song, sharing the cleaning jobs, offering a space to exhibit personal work documentation, and building an ISTA library with books brought by every participant also create an atmosphere of work that follows extra-daily conditions and values.

To generate an environment of exchange and research, ISTA participants are chosen according to various criteria, including different nationalities, ages, experience, performance genres, and, especially, finding people who, in turn, could develop and stimulate autonomous activities in their own settings. The participants are theatre practitioners, scholars, academics, directors, actors, dancers, critics, students, leaders of cultural groups, anthropologists, and schoolteachers. At ISTA they become familiar with different ways of thinking *about* ISTA, and how they react to previously unknown procedures when facing the simplest questions as if they were being asked for the first time. All participants enjoy the privilege of 'learning to learn', and doing so by looking beyond any immediate result, aesthetic, or style.

For the first ISTAs, participants were invited personally, treated as guests, and often even had their travel paid. ISTA started accepting applications in 1994. The 5th Session in Salento was structured around the myth of Faust. It only had thirty participants, most of them invited scholars. Everybody slept in the dormitories of a children's summer camp: men and women, young and old,

university professors and students, all shared the same spartan conditions, as is customary for any ISTA.

Receiving many applications made the selection of participants very difficult. There can be few places where the organizers insist on a high percentage of local participants. The 15th and 16th ISTA declined to have any previous ISTA participants, which meant excluding members of the scholarly staff.

### The Teachers

Until the late 1990s, Barba travelled every year for longer periods to Asian countries, to meet and talk with ISTA artists, observe their teaching and performances day after day, and prepare the next session with them. He had established a personal affinity and friendship with each of them, which continued with masters who joined the ISTA adventure later on. Particular artists were invited to share their experiences, irrespective of any specific theatre or dance form. Several generations of teachers have marked the various sessions with their personality. The first generation included Sanjukta Panigrahi (Odissi dance, India), Katsuko Azuma (Nihon Buyo, Japan), and I Made Pasek Tempo (Balinese dance-theatre). Then came the Japanese Kanho Azuma, Kanichi Hanayagi, and Akira Matsui; the Balinese I Made Bandem, I Made Djimat and I Wayan Bawa; the Chinese Pei Yanling; the American Tom Leabhart (Decroux tradition); and the Afro-Brazilian Augusto Omolu (Candomblé orixa dance).

Early meetings with Tom Leabhart and Akira Matsui happened outside ISTA, at festivals and conferences, or during Odin Teatret's tours, thanks to a network of collaborators kept alive by common interests and research. In Salvador, in Brazil, director Paulo Dourado introduced Augusto Omolu to Barba and me. Omolu was trained in classical ballet and modern dance, and belonged to the Candomblé culture practising orixa dance. After seeing how suddenly he changed from the soft energy of Oxum to the vigorous energy of Ogum during a class – in a similar manner to how Sanjukta Panigrahi did in her dance – we decided

to invest in his presence at ISTA and helped him to build a performance based on his own orixa dance tradition, *Orô de Otelô*.

Realizing that even western performers can be responsible for keeping Asian traditions alive because of their passion for these ancient forms, a younger generation of teachers joined the ISTA sessions: the Argentinian Ana Woolf; the Italian/Balinese Cristina Wistari; and the Italian/Indian Ileana Citaristi. Ana Woolf practises Tadashi Suzuki's 'grammar of the feet', combined with Latin American dance steps. Cristina Wistari started in the 1980s as a pupil of the Balinese master I Made Djimat, and accompanied him to ISTA from 1995. Cristina Wistari performed, studied, and taught in Bali; she devoted herself to keeping alive the Gambuh tradition, one of the oldest forms of theatre and dance in the world, by fundraising internationally, organizing performances, and ensuring the teaching of younger generations by older masters. When she died in 2008, I Wayan Bawa took over the artistic leadership of the Gambuh ensemble, and became aware of the enormous difficulty of maintaining the interest of a younger generation. He remembers Cristina Wistari, together with his own father, as people who taught him the first rudiments of dramaturgy and improvisation. Ileana Citaristi is a pupil of the late Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, also an ISTA collaborator and Sanjukta Panigrahi's guru. After twenty years learning and performing, she started a school in Orissa, where she teaches Odissi dance to young Indian girls and boys. She is known as a choreographer of innovative dances presented at classical Indian dance festivals, and is sent abroad as a representative of Indian classical dance by the Indian government. Ileana Citaristi was one of the ISTA teachers in Seville in 2004.

New teachers joined ISTA from the Magdalena Project (a network of women in contemporary theatre) and Transit Festival: the Indian Parvathy Baul and the Japanese Keiin Yoshimura, both present for the first time at the Albino ISTA of 2016. Parvathy Baul is a young artist in a tradition dominated by men. She carries the responsibility of an oral tradition, aware of being one of the last to have learned songs directly from the old Baul

gurus. Parvathy Baul founded a school for young people and an ashram in Bengal to maintain the Baul tradition. Keiin Yoshimura, living in modern Tokyo, devotes herself to preserving the quality and beauty of ancient Japanese forms of dance, music, and martial arts. She has practised Kamigata-mai with Yukio Yoshimura and Kisho Yoshimura, Noh theatre with Hideo Kanze and Izumi Mikawa, and the traditional martial arts Kendo and Kyudo.

Other teachers joined the 14th ISTA, both in Wrocław and in an aristocratic manor house in Kryżowa: Gennadi Bogdanov for biomechanics; and, as specialists in vocal improvisation (one of that session's themes), Michael Vetter and Natasha Nikeprelevic, as well as Brigitte Cirla and Vincent Audat, people whom Barba knew and found inspiring.

At the 15th, 16th, and 17th ISTAs, participants worked with the Italian Alessandro Rigoletti, Caterina Scotti, and Tiziana Barbiero (actors from Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo), representing such traditions as Kathakali and Odissi from India and Flamenco dance from Spain. All three belong to the small tradition of group theatre enriched by a passion for traditional techniques in dialogue with contemporary experiences. Similarly, the Brazilian Alício Amaral and Juliana Pardo of Mundu Rodá have dedicated part of their time as contemporary theatre practitioners to learn and preserve the Cavalo Marinho, a *brincadeira*, which is a play/dance/game/ritual developed in the sugar-cane plantations of northern Brazil. Amaral and Pardo had been invited to give demonstrations at the meeting called 'The Performer's Embodied Knowledge: A New Exploration into Traditional Techniques' in Shanghai in 2014, and were invited to the 16th Session of ISTA as an integral part of the artistic staff, to teach, give demonstrations, and perform. The Indian Kutiyattam performer Kapila Venu also came to the 16th Session in 2021. The Hungarian folk dancer István Berecz and the Taiwanese Yalan Lin joined the teaching staff at the 17th ISTA in Pécsvárad in 2023.

Much the same process applied to the scholars who began, regularly or intermittently, to follow the ISTA sessions: Lluís

Masgrau, Peter Elsass, Mirella Schino, Marco de Marinis, Patrice Pavis, Clelia Falletti, Janne Risum, Ron Jenkins, Exe Christoffersen, Patricia Cardona, Susanne Vill, Zbigniew Osinski, Leszek Kolankiewicz, Annelis Kuhlmann, and Jonah Salz. Each session presented unexpected challenges: artists had to lecture; scholars had to experience practically the *bios* of an action. In the continuing tension between the permanent people involved in ISTA and the need for transformation, the artistic staff was adjusted and Barba's role as a director assumed different contours.

### Odin Teatret

I first encountered Odin Teatret personally in 1976, when the group had already established the 'barter', an exchange of Odin's theatre performances with the various cultural expressions of local communities, creating itinerant street performances as well as indoor productions for a few spectators placed around a stage space.<sup>9</sup> I had started making theatre in the beginning of the 1970s, which was part of young people's social revolution of the time. Only after meeting Odin Teatret did I start to think of learning a craft. There, adopted by the actors of the group, my apprenticeship consisted of physical and vocal training, exercises with props and acrobatics, and improvisation and composition.

One of my first memorable shocks at Odin Teatret was participating in the Indian seminar in Holstebro in 1977. I was responsible for preparing breakfast for all the invited guests and participants. For the first time I saw Kathakali, Odissi, Kathak, and Barata Natyam. I sat at the feet of Shanta Rao, the first female Kathakali performer and a Barata Natyam and Kuchipudi dancer (who had three different gurus without either of them knowing it). I listened to her in amazement as she explained how she defied tradition and taboos. Uma Sharma explained that one never stops learning from one's teacher. In the last row of the participants, I tried to follow the increasing rhythm of the Kathakali steps shown by Krishnan Namboodiri. The beauty of the very young Sanjukta Panigrahi, who had been recommended by Chérif Khaznadar,

has stayed in my memory forever. The costumes, the make-up, the smells, the jewels, the music, the voice of the drumbeats, the intricate footwork, the piercing look in the eyes, the hand movements – everything seemed far beyond the normality of what I had seen before.

My initial contact with ISTA was in October 1980, when I helped to organize its shorter gatherings in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden after the Bonn session. In those early years, Barba kept ISTA quite separate from Odin Teatret; it was his personal project, shared with scholars and artists from different genres and cultures. He took only Toni Cots and Richard Fowler with him as close collaborators, occasionally inviting other Odin actors – Tage Larsen, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, and Roberta Carreri – but only for short periods and specific purposes. His attitude began to change in 1987 for the Salento ISTA, when he invited the whole Odin ensemble, which, at that time, was preparing the new production, *Talabot*. Torgeir Wethal did not attend, nor did Roberta Carreri, who was touring her solo performance, *Judith*, and neither did I because of a previous commitment with the Magdalena Project. It was in the session in Bologna in 1990 that all Odin actors were integrated in the ISTA as participants. During the Albino session in 2016, Roberta Carreri and I began to lead classes on the autodidactic tradition of group theatre.

The 'Tre-Tre', an exercise derived from Odin Teatret's training, was used in the Montemor-o-Novo session in 1998. The name Tre-Tre ('three-three' in Italian) was given because three Odin Teatret actresses (Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Roberta Carreri, and I) created it; each of us proposed a montage of three sequences of movements considered the 'perfect exercise' that Barba had asked for. The Tre-Tre was introduced as a common framework for the practical classes and was taught in accordance with the different genres present in Montemor-o-Novo: Nihon Buyo, Balinese Dance Theatre, Decroux Corporeal Mime, Afro-Brazilian Orixa Dance, and Odin Teatret.

In 2004, one of my pupils, the Argentinian Ana Woolf, was chosen as a master for ISTA, passing on her Tadashi Suzuki technique,

mixed with elements of Latin American rhythms. In 2005, I discovered that the new ISTA masters were my own age, and that they did not impress me with their extraordinary presence on stage in the way that the old masters did. Even so, they filled me with admiration for the extraordinary eagerness with which they passed on a craft and kept it alive. In 2016, I realized that the masters were even younger than I was.

Odin Teatret's solo and ensemble performances have been part of the most recent ISTA programmes, side by side with traditional Asian performances. At first, we Odin actors felt young and small compared with the Asian artists. With time, and the death of the first generation of ISTA masters, the position of the Odin Teatret actors within ISTA was reversed and *we* became the experienced generation that was even able to inspire the Asian artists. In the last ISTA sessions, participants and teachers looked at Odin Teatret actors as the 'old' masters and at Barba as the guru of gurus. But ISTA masters have also joined Odin Teatret: the first was Augusto Omolu, who joined the group in 2004 for *Andersen's Dream*; Parvathy Baul and I Wayan Bawa participated in *The Tree*, premiered in 2016.

Underlying principles emerged during ISTA sessions – characteristics that Odin Teatret actors had, in their training, compared with those of the Asian artists, or European ballet dancers, or mimes from the Decroux tradition: the knees were bent, the balance was precarious, the actions started from counter-impulses. A particular use of the body allowed the performers to retain a quality of presence, which captures the spectator's attention, without interpreting or expressing anything.

During ISTA sessions, the principles of stage presence were evident when I improvised dialogues of strong and soft energy, fast and slow rhythms, impulses and counter-impulses, dance and immobility, with Sanjukta Panigrahi, Kanichi Hanayagi, Kahno Azuma, I Made Djimat or Augusto Omolu. It was the thinking of the body that guided actions and reactions – a professional culture that we shared. Being on stage together for improvisations, classes, and demonstrations

was an incredible privilege that ISTA had offered me – a rare occasion to concentrate on research.

In 1994, the explanations in my work demonstration-performance *The Dead Brother* capitalized on theatre anthropology's principles. Thus, to quote from the spoken text:

The actor is the person who makes actions. Unlike a movement, an action is something that changes. The muscle tone of the actor's torso must change, consequently changing the perception of the spectator. A real action consists of at least three phases – a beginning, a change, and an end; the balance is moved away from the centre and controlled; the weight is transformed into energy; each action contains an opposition that can be revealed through different directions, gathering energy in an impulse (*sats*) or building a resistance; the action is coherent, following a logic which is not accidental; it is believable through the precision of the extremities – the feet, hands, and eyes. A sequence of actions, creating further changes, can be moulded through a variation of rhythm, an alteration of the quality of energy; reducing the form in space and maintaining the dynamic information; colouring with extrovert or introvert qualities; transposing to other parts of the body, or finding equivalents.<sup>10</sup>

### Discontinuous Continuity: New Generation

The 2021, the 16th ISTA took place during the Covid period in Favignana, an island off the coast of Sicily. The rhythm of the sea accompanied the activity when we broke our silence with the daily song to sunrise on a beach, following through to the performances in the evening beside the waves beating against the boat landing. We worked in an old tuna factory that had belonged to the Florio family, who had invented the way of keeping fish under oil in small tins. The factory had been closed since the 1970s for lack of fish in the Mediterranean, and the local mayor was trying to launch cultural activities at the site. ISTA used a very long hall for the plenary sessions and many smaller rooms and courtyards for the classes (Figure 6). Some evenings the wind beat so strongly that the black curtains of the changing room flew away.

This ISTA had a new title and logo: 'ISTA NEW GENERATION'. Meanwhile, the Covid pandemic still imposed rules and restrictions. It was

organized as part of Fondazione Barba Varley activities because the new director of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, the umbrella institution to which Odin Teatret had belonged until 2022, was no longer interested in ISTA. The initiative was risky economically because the Covid pandemic meant participants were still afraid or unable to travel. But the need for many theatre practitioners to gather in the same space and time, and share sweat, laughter, and future projects, was immense. It was ISTA's responsibility to make a session happen, despite all the difficulties.

The preparation was, in fact, full of hurdles. Every teacher had to receive an entry visa to Italy and Covid-free certificates. People from some nationalities were required to spend a period in quarantine in Italy, which prevented Yalan Lin from coming from Taiwan. Our schedule had to adapt continually to the changing reality dictated by the pandemic and the different ways in which countries and governments reacted. I Wayan Bawa from Bali and Mundu Rodá from Brazil were to spend their quarantine period in Favignana, while Parvathy Baul had to do the same in France, and Keiin Yoshimura in Spain. When the artists finally arrived at the airport in Palermo, a storm broke out and the ships could not sail to Favignana. Solutions that did not break the Covid rules had to be found urgently.

During the session all participants and organizers had to have their temperature taken every morning, and those who had not been vaccinated against Covid had to have a test taken every forty-eight hours at the only local chemist. Only six people could sit at the same table to eat, and food could not be transported to the working space. All these iron constraints made the session different from others, but, at the same time, showed everyone's enormous motivation.

An online course happened parallel with the 'presential' session to facilitate contact with all those who would have liked to participate but could not travel. For the first time, ISTA's demonstrations were live streamed, and the Italian scholar Leonardo Mancini led daily online interviews with the teachers during the lunch breaks. The 2021 theatre

anthropology films were programmed as part of the online course, which forced Claudio Coloberti and me to work every night to finish them in time for the next day.

For this session, Barba decided to insist once more on the first day of work. The title was 'The Actor's Presence and the Spectator's Perception'. Public events and barter with the local population had been planned, but the Covid pandemic forced ISTA to change its programme. 'An actor/dancer's first days of apprenticeship are decisive,' the announcement declared, and during the demonstrations, the artists exposed what they had learned on the first day, while during the classes the participants experienced the first steps, hand gestures, and the salutation to the teacher. Barba went deeper into explanations by asking questions intended to uncover details that could reveal hidden knowledge.

Apart from its new organizational structure, this ISTA introduced a new generation of artists. Alício Amaral and Juliana Pardo of Mundu Rodá brought to ISTA lively Brazilian colours, rhythms, dance steps, and songs from the tradition of Cavalo Marinho, which they had practised since 2003. They were a breath of fresh air with their festive attitude and comic improvisations. The participants felt at ease with their defiance of authority and derision of over-seriousness, even if they had to recognize that this apparent freedom from rules needed stern application, training, repetition, and technique.

Kapila Venu from India was also symbolic of the 'new generation', and came to encounter Barba's terminology and practice at first hand (Figure 7). Barba had met Kapila's mother, Nirmala Paniker, a dancer of Mohiniyattam, and her father, G. Venu, a great expert in Kutiyattam, one of the oldest living theatre forms in the world. Barba and I had seen Kapila Venu perform in Kerala when we visited her parents with our friend Ravi Gopalan Nair in 2012, and her performance had impressed us deeply.

Francesca Romana Rietti, who is responsible for the Odin Teatret Archives and Fondazione Barba Varley Archives, wrote about Kapila Venu at the 16th ISTA:



**Figure 6.** ISTA, Favignana, 2021. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.

Kapila spoke about all this when answering a question from a participant who asked what she was feeling in measuring herself for the first time against the investigation implemented through the tools of theatre anthropology. She declared that, for someone like her who was completely immersed in the practice of a traditional technique, the encounter with such research is equivalent to the possibility, not so much of making it survive by passing it on identical to itself from generation to generation, but of revisiting it through a process of regeneration and analysis of the very principles on which it is based.<sup>11</sup>

The new generation became particularly evident in the *Theatrum Mundi* production *Anastasis/Resurrection*. Stefano Di Buduo, a digital stage and light designer, and Mirto Baliani, a soundscape composer, added some technological effects to the performers' presence. This was a new era for ISTA.

### **Theatrum Mundi**

During the ISTA in Hungary, artists of different theatre and dance traditions shared their specific composition and montage techniques,

allowing the participants to experience and compare principles and strategies that contribute to the final montage of a performance. Central for the participants was the application of these principles in the montage of Barba's *Anastasis/Resurrection*, a *Theatrum Mundi* ensemble performance with an international cast of seventy-five performers at the National Theatre of Budapest in the frame of the 2023 Theatre Olympics.<sup>12</sup>

Already at the Seville ISTA in 2004, while reference was shifting from the stratified expertise of Asian performers to Odin Teatret's contemporary experience, I thought that the most important pedagogical contribution that Barba could now give ISTA was for participants to observe how he directs, interweaving distinct dramaturgical processes. After 'learning to see', the question was how recognition of the underlying principles of presence can help to determine the composition of a performance work.

The first three ISTA sessions established knowledge about theatre anthropology,





**Figure 7.** Eugenio Barba and Kapila Venu. ISTA, Favignana, 2021. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.

coining terms like ‘pre-expressivity’ and ‘extra-daily technique’. ISTAs from 1987 confronted different themes. In Albino and Favignana, the focus went back to the beginning, analyzing the first day of apprenticeship and the principles of presence for a generation that had never experienced research in theatre anthropology directly. The 17th ISTA in Hungary and the creation of *Anastasis/Resurrection* concentrated on the relationship between stage presence and the dramaturgical totality.

Since 1987, *Theatrum Mundi* performances were presented at the end of ISTA sessions, initially as a simple montage of different independent scenes presented by each invited artist. It was a ‘montage of attractions’ (as Sergei Eisenstein called it), an anthology of the amazing theatrical achievements in distant epochs and places. The session in Bologna in 1990 marked a change in the structure of the *Theatrum Mundi*, when scenes were created through improvisation and direct dialogue

between performers from different traditions. The love scene between *Odin Teatret* actor Torgeir Wethal and (the Buyo Kabuki onnagata) Kanichi Hanayagi was first created in Bologna, and was later developed in many other *Theatrum Mundi* productions, notably *The Island of Labyrinths* (1996) and *Ego Faust* (2000).

In Bologna, musicians from the different traditions collaborated to compose original music that they could perform together, adapting the tuning of their different instruments. Participants were included for the first time as a chorus singing from the balcony above the courtyard where the *Theatrum Mundi* was performed. I worked on a grotesque love scene between Mr Peanut and Rangda with Tjokorda Raku Tisnu, and the scene was developed later for other *Theatrum Mundi* productions, with *I Made Djimat* as Cheluluk. Roberta Carreri improvised a clown sequence with Shogo Fujima between Geronimo and the Kabuki clown, and then a

love scene with I Nyoman Budi Artha that became fundamental in *Ur-Hamlet*.

One of the most impressive Theatrum Mundi performances was in Londrina in 1994. Even though the structure had been prepared during the whole ISTA session, the performance was rehearsed and fixed the same day of the public presentation, at the end of which Barba fell to the ground in exhaustion after getting off the bus taking him to the closing feast. The Theatrum Mundi in Londrina was performed on three floating stages on a lake connected by thin invisible bridges. An underwater bridge from the shore allowed some theatrical figures to reach the stage, as if walking on water, while others arrived by boat. For this Theatrum Mundi, Sanjukta Panigrahi and Augusto Omolu had improvised playing deer and hunter together, using Odissi and Candomblé codes. Fireworks went off at the end while coloured lights illuminated the trees that reflected in the water on the other side of the lake.

The ninth 2021 theatre anthropology film is entirely dedicated to Theatrum Mundi productions showing many scenes that were developed throughout the years. *The Island of Labyrinths* and *Ego Faust* contain many of them, including Gretchen's madness, while all performers follow their own rhythm and displacement independently; the last dance of monsters, where Death is transformed into a baby in a woman's arms while Sanjukta Panigrahi performed 'Moksha' ('Liberation'); the enactment of Bob Dylan's song, 'Tomorrow Is a Long Time'; Kanichi Hanayagi's hikinuki, when he suddenly changed from a woman in red to a white ghost; Sae Hanayagi's spider woman catching Torgeir Wethal's Faust in her spiderweb; and the signature of Faust's contract with Augusto Omolu's Mephisto.

When Sanjukta Panigrahi died in June 1997, Barba, my colleagues at Odin Teatret, and I feared that it would be impossible for ISTA to continue. Sanjukta, considered the queen of the ISTA Republic, passed away suddenly during preparations for the 1998 Montemor-o-Novo ISTA, where a Theatrum Mundi was to be performed at the Gulbenkian Foundation. Sanjukta's husband, the musician and composer Ragunath Panigrahi, and

all her musicians played for the Theatrum Mundi performance titled *Four Poems for Sanjukta*, reminding everyone of her beauty and power while having to accept the painful fact that no one is indispensable.

In Seville in 2004 and in Poland in 2005, part of the time was dedicated to improvisations and montage, which later became part of the Theatrum Mundi production *Ur-Hamlet*, staged in 2006 and 2009. Barba worked with the participants on *The Besieged Castle*, populating it with rats and foreigners. *Ur-Hamlet* was the answer to a time of crisis for ISTA when it seemed difficult to gather the artists for ISTA sessions. Some masters had died, others had become well known and no longer had the freedom, because of their responsibilities, to travel abroad. Noh performer Akira Matsui had visited ISTA in Bielefeld in 2000 and had remained in contact. In Bali, Cristina Wistari was fighting to keep the Gambuh tradition and school alive. *Ur-Hamlet* was the potentially positive answer to Trevor Davies's offer to host a *Hamlet* production at the Elsinore festival in Denmark. Barba worked for a long time with the idea of the ghost of Hamlet's father crossing the courtyard of Elsinore Castle on a tightrope, above the spectators. But the restrictions on the historical monument did not allow this to be realized, so Barba went back to the chronicle about Hamlet written in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus in around the twelfth century.

In *Ur-Hamlet*, the court was rendered by the Gambuh ensemble of thirty-six Balinese dancers and musicians, Akira Matsui was the plague invading the castle, and a chorus of fifty international participants worked with Augusto Omolu to become the invading foreigners who then die of the plague. I, in the role of the first Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, told the story in Latin while examining the bones dug up from the castle's foundations. Hamlet's father (Cristina Wistari) was killed by his brother (I Wayan Bawa); Gertrude (Roberta Carreri) married the brother. The Afro-Brazilian Augusto Omolu was Hamlet, who pretends to be mad and, at the end, avenges his father. Looking at the castle's courtyard strewn with corpses, Saxo proclaimed: 'At dawn, instead of birds, dogs will wake you.'

Working with a chorus of many participants was repeated for another Theatrum Mundi production, *The Marriage of Medea*, in 2008. Here they were a multicoloured group of young people, once again trained by Augusto Omolu, to follow Jason (Tage Larsen of Odin Teatret) while the Balinese Gambuh ensemble represented Medea's family, accompanied by a Balinese fishing boat on wheels. Medea's jealousy was created in a scene that showed the complementarity of human nature by doubling up Medea as her own jealousy. The children were two puppets, drowned by Medea and their nurse.

### *Anastasis/Resurrection*

*Anastasis/Resurrection* had different starting points: the last scene of *An Ordinary Day in the Life of the Dancer Gregorio Samsa* featuring the Italian Lorenzo Gleijeses; the death and resurrection of a bull in the Brazilian Cavalo Marinho; and a Japanese cherry orchard in flower as a landscape, reproduced digitally. After Barba had chosen his title, he imagined three resurrections: that of a child, a bull, and nature. But for a resurrection to be, there first had to be death.

Augusto Omolu had worked with the chorus scenes for *Ur-Hamlet* and *The Marriage of Medea*. He was able to unify the impulses and rhythms of about fifty people dancing together in a short time. When Augusto Omolu died, Theatrum Mundi productions no longer had a guide capable of extracting commitment, energy, and presence from a group of international participants who were not accustomed to working together, let alone with such intensity. During the Favignana ISTA in 2021, Mundu Rodá and Ana Woolf took over the task of making scenes with a large group of people, fixing scores that included ways of advancing, falling, getting up, running, stopping, using props and voice, and playing percussion instruments – elements of a chorus.

Mundu Rodá worked with participants on a scene with arches of ribbons, drawing an intricate choreography that crossed and turned. Two lines of people held the arches up and down; two people passed

underneath them while dancing and singing, following the whistle orders given by Juliana Pardo, while Alício Amaral kept the rhythm playing a *rabeca*, a kind of violin. The dance steps filled the space with energy, and the coloured ribbons and the movement of the arches gave the sensation of a popular feast (Figure 8).

In Cavalo Marinho, many of the choreographies were danced in a circle directed inwards. Often the participatory characteristic of the *brincadeira* (see above) did not take into consideration the spectators' point of view. Juliana Pardo and Alício Amaral presented the death and resurrection of the bull, one of the scenes of Cavalo Marinho. The death was developed with scenes of battle, dialogues, dances, and songs with a dramaturgy constructed over the intervention of different figures, while the resurrection happened rapidly and non-dramatically, justified only by the words of a song sung by all those participating in the feast.

Ana Woolf worked with more compact choreographic structures, with foot-stamping, grounded steps, and strong body attitudes and positions. The steps were adapted from Tadashi Suzuki's training for a special composition that opened and closed the group, which also advanced forcefully or, by contrast, held vigorous – not frozen – immobility.

*An Ordinary Day in the Life of the Dancer Gregorio Samsa*, performed by Lorenzo Gleijeses and directed by Barba, Gleijeses, and me, had a very different aesthetic from the Brazilian popular feast. Mirto Baliani designed the lights in combination with the soundscape of recorded music and sounds. The set was a black space in front of a screen where a circle of light was at times projected, shadows appearing at others. Four metal balls on a long string from the ceiling marked the rectangular space, and an automatic Hoover moved in the space, commanded remotely by Manolo Muoio. During the last scene, Gregorio Samsa, the dancer performed by Gleijeses, moves quickly in between the balls swinging on the strings; the lights were like shotguns hammering and underlining the rhythm of the music, until Gregorio Samsa was caught up by the strings, hanging from them in exhaustion, as



**Figure 8.** ISTA, Budapest, 2023. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.

in a spider's web. His spoken poem was to his dead son.

Yalan Lin, from Taiwan, played the dead boy's mother in continuous dialogue with his father, performed by Lorenzo Gleijeses. Joining ISTA in Hungary for the first time, Yalan Lin was asked to prepare a performance based on her Nanguan style. In it, her female character took off her traditional Chinese costume, rubbed off her make-up, and moved on stage with rarified Butoh movements. She sang

traditional songs and recited texts in high tones. Her score was the mother's behaviour.

Barba had imagined a field of cherry trees in blossom for Keiin Yoshimura's *Yuki* scene, the delicate Kamigata-mai-style dance in full Japanese traditional costume with layers of different kimonos and black wig. Then the cherry trees slowly lose their flowers and leaves, dying to remain as naked black silhouettes. Together with the digital set designer and filmmaker Stefano Di Buduo, Barba

searched for images that could give the impact of nature dying and resurrecting. Stefano Di Buduo aimed to envelop the space of both actors and spectators with projected images of water, waves, and desert, as well as trees.

Mr Peanut, Odin Teatret's character with a skull head, who changes from woman to man, and from red to black, to a bride in white, has always been part of *Theatrum Mundi* productions. As I prepared Mr Peanut for Hungary, I knew it was a matter of understanding how to react to the construction and rhythm of the different scenes and all the other characters: how to be a shadow for Keiin Yoshimura, lead the burial chorus, dance in between the Brazilian colours, accompany the entrance of the spectators with I Wayan Bawa's clown, and, once again, perform the transformation of Death into a baby held in the arms of a woman.

Performing the boy, the ten-year-old Mateus De Aquino enjoyed copying all Alício Amaral's Cavalo Marinho movements, steps, postures, comic solutions, and voice, and then, when his character died, he remained totally still. The black Kari Kathakali demon character, presented by Alessandro Rigoletti of Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo in Albino, pulled out the guts of the dead boy, emitting terrible cries while shaking branches with leaves. Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo also made a scene from their *Waltz* performance. I Wayan Bawa contributed with comic intermissions and with the Topeng Tua, the mask of the old man. The Hungarian István Berecz danced and played music using his boots and legs as drums, clapping them, jumping, and hitting his heels with incredible speed. Ibolya Páli sang Transylvanian songs, her voice coming from behind the spectators.

Barba chose Parvathy Baul and Alício Amaral as storytellers, the narrative happening through the exchange of song and music – a device born from an improvisation realized during the Favignana ISTA. Parvathy and Alício had found a common musical ground for a dialogue that included dance steps, musical instruments, rhythm, and smiles. The pleasure they found in their improvised exchange was catching for everyone watching. Their music lifted the spectators off the ground and let them fly in their imagination.

*Theatrum Mundi* productions have always had live music, bringing together musicians from different corners of the world (Figure 9). Annada Prasanna Pattanaik was available to join ISTA again after a pause of fifteen years, so his flute could create atmospheres of intense longing, romance, distance, and calmness. On tour in Morocco, I had experienced how Rachid Bromi accompanied the impulses of a performer on stage with his oud and I had convinced Eugenio Barba that we should invite him to ISTA. Classical Japanese musician So Sugiura, who accompanied Keiin Yoshimura, already had experience in collaborating with musicians from totally different playing styles. Rina Skeel of Odin Teatret had the task of enhancing the collaboration, while Mirto Baliani recorded all the rehearsals to create doubling effects, echoes, and distortions.

Rehearsals happened in front of the participants of the 17th Session in Pécsvárad. Everyone experienced how initial ideas are forced to change when the combination of rhythms, actions, impulses, steps, gestures, tones of voice, and dialogues determines the direction that the performance itself decides. The dialogue of the family composed by an Afro-Brazilian boy, an Italian father, and a Chinese mother was especially demanding for reaching the quality of credibility and pathos for the spectators.

The last step was to adapt the montage to the big stage of the National Theatre in Budapest. We used the stage's impressive depth by opening doors and lifting iron and velvet curtains bit by bit. The lights helped to concentrate and enlarge the space. The stamping procession of the chorus advanced as an indistinct clump behind the dead child, carried on his father's back, to reach the front in full focus, while the demon Kari appeared from beneath on a lift.

Afterwards, during a meeting with the spectators, Keiin Yoshimura said that the *Theatrum Mundi* ensemble was a unique demonstration of how different human beings can communicate and build a community. With its festive energy, *Anastasis/Resurrection* was a truce in the deadly conflicts raging in the world outside the theatre. For just an hour, fiction offered a gasp of oxygen and hope.



Figure 9. ISTA, Budapest 2023. Photograph: Francesco Galli. Courtesy of Francesco Galli and Odin Teatret.

## Notes and References

Nitis Jacón died on 19 December 2023, while I was writing this article. When I heard the news, I immediately decided to dedicate this text about ISTA to her. Nitis Jacón was a psychiatrist, doctor, theatre director, and producer, and politically engaged. She gave an international name to FILO, the theatre festival in her hometown Londrina, Brazil, and she managed to organize the only ISTA session in Latin America in 1994. Nitis insisted that a Brazilian performing tradition should be represented at the ISTA session in Londrina. Thanks to her, Augusto Omolu became a member of the ISTA teaching team and a few years later an actor at Odin Teatret. The whole ISTA family owes a lot to Nitis. She was an exemplary member of the ‘tradition of the impossible’ in our craft.

1. Eugenio Barba, ‘First Hypothesis’, *Journal of Theatre Anthropology (JTA)*, No 1 (2021), p. 45–51 (p. 45). This is the transcript of a lecture by Eugenio Barba in Warsaw in May 1980, originally published in Polish in the journal *Dialog* (XXVI, No. 1, p. 94–100), and soon after in English in the first issue of *Théâtre International* (1981).

2. See <<https://jta.ista-online.org/>>.

3. The films can be downloaded at <<https://fondazionebarbavarley.org/>>.

4. Private correspondence, 2022.

5. ‘Le théâtre Kathakali [The Kathakali Theatre]’: *Les Lettres Nouvelles* (Paris: May, July, and October, 1965), ‘Lecture’, *Bouffonneries*, No. 9 (1983); *Tulane Drama Review*, XI, No. 4 (1967), p. 37–50; *Teatro 2*, No. 2 (1967) and *Teatro*, No. 1 and No. 2 (new series, 1968 and 1969);

*Libretti dell’Arcoiris* (Rome, 1977), p. 10–48; *Festival di Chieri ’88* (Turin, 1988), p. 24–54; *Teatrets Teori og Teknikk*, No. 21 (Holstebro, 1974), p. 25–46; *Dialog*, XXXIV, No. 12 (1979), p. 107–111; *Il teatro aldilà del mare*, ed. Nicola Savarese (Turin: Studio Forma, 1980), p. 32–4; *Máscara*, No. 1 (Mexico, 1989), p. 8–24; *Mimesis*, No. 5 (Istanbul, 1994), p. 1–15.

6. Barba, ‘First Hypothesis’. Here, for the first time, Barba defines ‘theatre anthropology’ as the study of the human being in an organized performance situation, pointing out three technical principles as ‘laws’, which determine the various acting styles in different traditions.

7. Vicky Ann Cremona, Francesco Galli, and Julia Varley, *Thinking with the Feet* (Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag, 2017).

8. For a description of the inner structure and working condition at the various ISTA see *The Performer’s Village: Times, Techniques, and Theories at ISTA*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (Graasten: Drama Denmark, 1996), and Cremona, Galli, and Varley, *Thinking with the Feet*.

9. See Eugenio Barba, ‘Creating Earthquakes’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, XL, No. 1 (February 2024) [NTQ 157], p. 1–30.

10. *The Dead Brother*, directed by Eugenio Barba, explains how performances are created at Odin Teatret and presents the different phases of the process in which text, actor, and director interact.

11. Francesca Romana Rietti, ‘Learning to Teach: Chronicle from Ista/NG 2021’, *Journal of Theatre Anthropology*, No. 2 (2022), p. 327–37 (p. 335–6).

12. See Maria Shevtsova, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 4 (November 2023) [NTQ 156], p. 377–86 (p. 382–6).