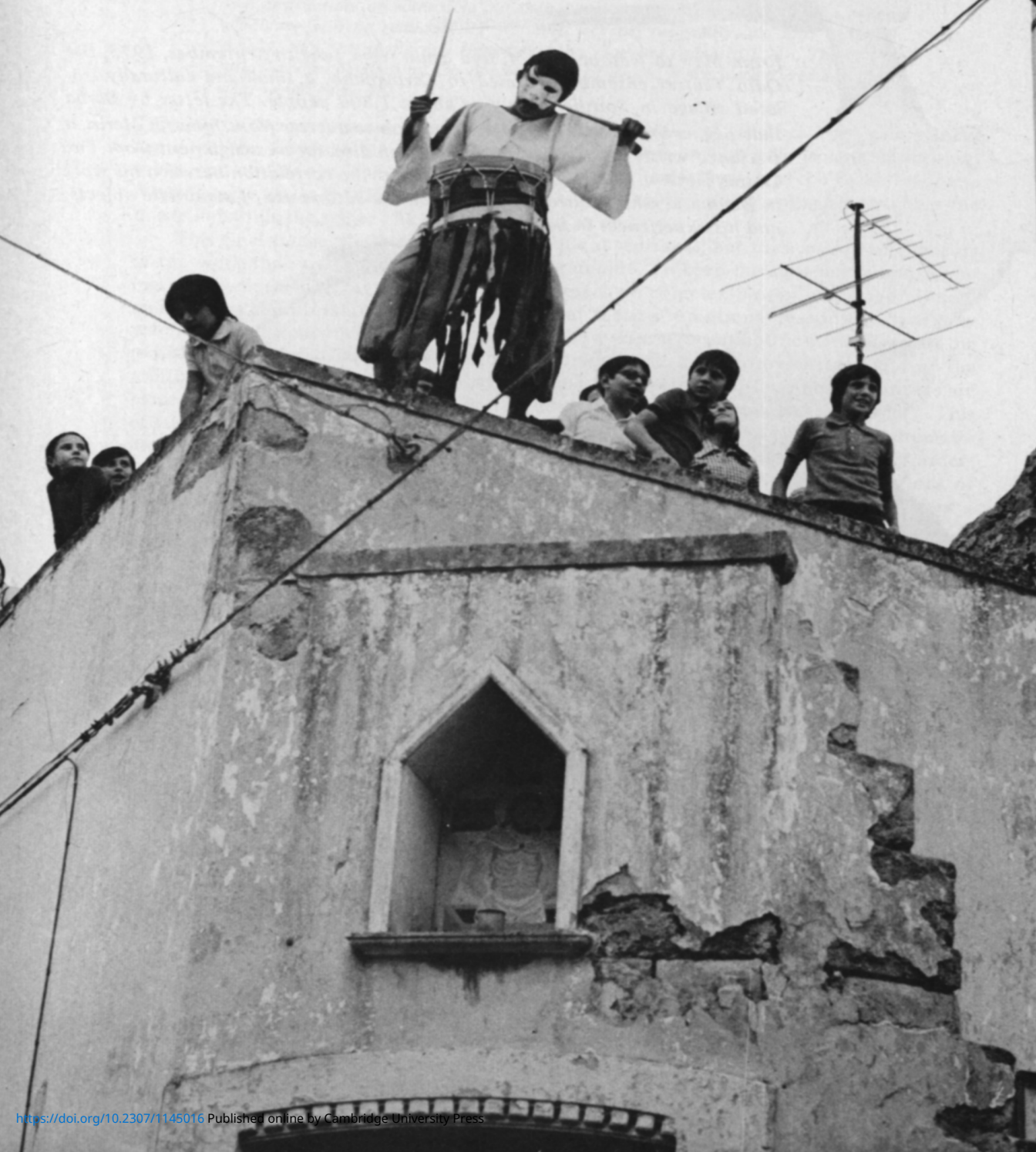


Letter From Barba

Ollolai, Sardinia,
Southern Italy
September, 1975

Dear Jennifer Merin,

I will try to answer your questions about our work, about its development, about the importance of our experiences in the South of Italy, not point-by-point, but in a continuous statement.



In some cases the answers will be implicit. There are, however, questions which one cannot answer in words, which must be answered in action.

–Who are you?

–Actors.

But was the word “actor” a real answer, when the question came from an old woman dressed in black, who spoke only in dialect, in a village in the South of Italy? Or from a peasant, or a shepherd?

For them, actor means “cinema.” It means “television.” But what does it really mean when we want this word not to refer to institutionalized entertainment, to the television everyone watches, to the respectable theatre that people see from a distance as something defined and difficult, that is loved and studied by only a few enthusiasts?

Where are we really actors? In Holstebro, perhaps, and in all the places where we performed before audiences that knew why they came to see us. This region of theatre is scattered a little everywhere, some thousands of persons in every city.

But if we went outside this region, who were we? What did we become in an isolated village in Apulia or Sardinia? What did we have to become in order still to recognize ourselves in this word, “actor,” facing new people whom we could no longer recognize in the word “spectator?”

One can work for years in a recognizable place, behind a door with a sign with the word “Theatre” written on it. All that you do there acquires a meaning, not only for you who do it but also for those outside. And not only does what is done have a meaning, so also does what is *not done*, what is rejected. Your work seems, on this level, *justified*. You are distinguished by what you affirm and what you deny, yet it always seems to affirm theatre and to deny theatre.

What happens when the door and its sign are knocked down? It can happen that what at first would have been “facile,” “banal,” “old,” “lacking in interest,” appears to you now, in areas without theatre, strangely essential. The choices and the rejections that until now, in the light and under the protection of the theatre, had defined you in distinct outlines, vanish. If you try to look at yourself in those who surround you and observe you, you become aware that the mirror reflects something nebulous: your manners and features seem to be lost in mist.

Then one has to start again from the beginning:

–Who are you?

–Actors.

–But, *who* are you?

It was a challenge: if we are actors, if we have chosen the condition of actors, how can we prove it? And again, what does our *condition* become in these new territories? Will we be like mountebanks who entertain? Like propagandists? Like missionaries? How could we justify the fact of being there, alien and different, doing what we do?

One evening, after about a month of our stay at Carpignano Salentino (until then we had lived in almost total isolation, concentrating on our work) we decided to visit some

The title photograph by Tony D’Urso was taken during an Odin Teatret ensemble “parade” in the village of Carpignano.

friends from the University of Lecce who had come to stay in the same village. We took our musical instruments and left our quarters.

It was the first time that we had appeared in town in a compact group and even more with musical instruments and the multicolored clothing we used in our training. It was also the first time, in so many years of theatre work, that we found ourselves facing people in the street. Before, instead, we had been alone among ourselves, in our work rooms or at our seminars among a few attentive and interested persons.

People immediately began to follow us, asking us to play. We arrived at our friends' house but they were not in. Without intending to, we found ourselves in the open, in a public square, surrounded by many people waiting for us to do something. We had our backs to the wall and so began to play: popular Scandinavian folk songs and vocal improvisations as used by our actors in their training.

We sang and played for about an hour. And what surprised us most, at the end, was not the long applause of the public ("What had Odin actors become: a casual group of musicians?"), but the fact that some people said to us: "Now you must hear *our* songs." They began to sing, those who surrounded us, work songs, songs with the special rhythm that accompanies the movement of the tobacco and olive harvests, and also songs of unhappy love and of death. From this improvised situation was born our idea of the "barter."

What happened at Carpignano recalled a similar situation in the mountains of Sardinia where, about five months before, we had brought our most recent production, *My Father's House*.

In these isolated localities where theatre had never appeared, the audience of shepherds and peasants reacted with disconcerting behavior. But we quickly grasped its meaning: it was the way that people in the small towns of Italy behave at the cinema, where they comment on what is seen on the screen. In response to the film, the live audience exchanges reactions and ironic or serious comments, while on the screen the images continue imperturbably to unwind. These were also the reactions of *our* audience. Their insecurity before the new theatrical fact was shown in comments, noisy exclamations, loud bursts of laughter, and sometimes in deep silences.

But despite this enormous clamor, which at first left us perplexed and which was so far from the silence and attitude of audiences used to the conventions of theatre, at the end there was always applause and then a great desire to ask us questions: they felt they "had not understood" because—they claimed—they were lacking in "culture," and they asked us to explain. But often, after the performance, the people seemed also animated by a desire to present themselves to us, to do something that corresponded to what they had seen. They began to sing and dance, those typical forms of popular culture that are not limited to elaborate verbal language but which, through the whole of their very physical presence, reveal the history and the vision of a group of men. What had happened in Sardinia after *My Father's House* happened anew in Carpignano, with our songs and the songs in response.

When rumors of a foreign theatrical group spread to other localities around Carpignano, young people came and asked us to go to them. We answered frankly that we were no philanthropists, that no one likes to work for nothing, that we wanted compensation, but that we did not want money. We wanted them to present themselves to us in the same way we presented ourselves to them, with their songs and their dances. These young people often answered that they did not know how to sing, nor did they know the songs of the place. Sometimes they said that there were no traditions in their locality. We then asked them to seek out the old people, suggesting that they go to the taverns where the old people meet and learn songs from them, or else invite the old people themselves to come into the village square to sing.

When one arrives in a village in the South of Italy, in the summer when everyone is out of doors in the evening, it seems split in two: on one side the old, on the other the young. Each group behaves and dresses differently and meets in different places. One realizes that the split is not only deep but felt by both groups as a wound. The old feel the void behind them. They live in a place that *has been* but which no longer really *is*. The young live there as strangers, sometimes intolerant, sometimes uselessly nostalgic for a past way of life that they sense is a possible antidote against the "values" that flow here from the big cities, but that seem to them irretrievable. Thus, masses of diverse experience, almost two eras, two worlds, live a few meters apart from each other, but parallel, without meeting, comparing, confronting. They meet only in the restricted space of the home, parents and children, under the suffocating forms of incomprehension found in families. In the places where we were invited, after we had sung, elderly men and women, whom we would have imagined to be closed in a distant and impenetrable reserve, came forward and sang and danced.

But, if the people in the towns of the South of Italy presented themselves to us with their dances, how would we, if we had to dance, present ourselves to them?

In our group there are Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Italians. None of us know folk dances, nor feel the need to learn them.

Seeing the peasants dance I felt more strongly aware of how I and my companions belonged to a culture where common ties no longer existed and where everyone is searching, as individuals, to find them. For us to try to present our folk dances would have been to pass ourselves off as something we did not feel we were, because dance is the *unrationalized, uncalculated moment, when our biological and social inheritance seizes us, transports us, lifts us from the earth, makes us realize all our energies.*

In what circumstances were the actors of the Odin seized, raised from the earth, left to release all their energies, driven by a necessity that was not only a desire to enjoy themselves but an essential need to be present and to join others? In their work.

The question that remained open so long ("Who are you?" "Actors." But how to prove it if we did not have a performance?) now found an answer: we would show we were actors through our training activities, in which the actor seems carried by the wave of his energies, when his weight and mass seem multiplied and to transform him into a force, which radiates around him.

Thus were born our "dances" in which each actor, beginning from the drive and needs that distinguish his individual work, seems to destroy the force of gravity. But our actor did not start with the assumption that he wanted to or had to dance. It was a result that came involuntarily and was viewed by others as dance.

We also put on clown shows, "parades," improvising our way through the streets of the villages.

We presented ourselves now very differently from our previous performances that were the outcomes of a very long process in which a group of young people was trying to reveal a truth of their own; to crack, to break the skin of clay in which our living body moves and in reality hides itself. To crack it, to break it, and let the flesh, the blood, come to light. Now in the streets of these villages we had taken on a new skin. If someone who had known us through our productions had seen us here again, he would have found it hard to recognize us.

One reads the chronicle of deeds of the actors of three or four centuries ago, reads the descriptions of their performances before aristocratic audiences or in the public squares



Odin ensemble members "parade" in Carpignano.

Photo Tony D'Urso

where the audience is called "the people." One reads the description of their dances, of their acrobatics, of their noisy colorful entrances into the towns where they went to gather up the last spare coins. The descriptions are lively and detailed. They succeed almost in making us hear the sounds, see how the actress made herself provoking and modest at the same time, how this actor made himself appear seductive and another one instantly moved the audience or made it laugh with his lines. But these actors seem to have no substance. They are two-dimensional figures with a face painted on the front. What lies behind?

The chronicler was interested only in portraying the theatre, not those who made it. In those times actors were not allowed to think of themselves as artists, and no one called what they did "culture." Why did they do this useless thing, theatre? We know: to earn money, to survive. But who were they to have decided to survive in such a manner? Servants who wanted to become their own masters, and serve only on the planks of the stage? Young people who enjoyed adventure? Men caught in the illusion of prolonging their youth, avoiding the roles and rules that govern the life of those doing useful and accepted work? People who fled from fear or shame? Or others who were simply born into the roving world of the theatre? Mature and old men no longer able to live outside this endless dreariness filled with movement that others call adventure?

The actor of three or four centuries ago is a distant figure, about whom we can give whatever answer we wish. But if his image is distant from ours, it is as if his ambiguity brings him closer to us.

Who are you? Actors. But, *who* are you?

It has been almost ten years since I wrote an article called "Theatre and Revolution."

I spoke of how only a continuous renewal of our awareness and of our personal relation toward what was happening around us could create a new attitude toward our craft. I said that it is the process that transforms us, that the necessity of this choice of ours must be put to the test through our daily work, with such inhuman demands that only a few persist: those who are animated by an irreducible necessity, the "demons of work" who cancel the inertia that would leave us content with trifling results.

The article concluded: "It is no longer a question of being missionaries or original artists, it is a question of being realists. Our craft is the possibility of changing ourselves, and thus changing society. We must not ask ourselves: What does the theatre mean to the people? That is a sterile and demagogic question. We must ask: What does the theatre mean to *me*? The answer, converted into action, without compromises, without looking back, will be the revolution in theatre."

I have quoted my own writing because later another question followed. It arose concretely in the very life of our group: The revolution in theatre. And afterwards?

The Odin Theatre has performed often in Italy. We have presented *My Father's House* sixty times during seminars with young people: students or members of little theatre groups. Very often they questioned and doubted that a laboratory theatre, which operates in the Danish welfare state, could function in a society as full of contradictions as Italy.

But what is it that counts? A preconceived form of theatre, or the attitude one has toward one's surroundings, the manner in which one tries to turn one's "yes" and "no" into action when confronted with what one hears and sees? We decided to live for a few months in Italy during a period in which we no longer did the old performance (*My Father's House*) and had not yet produced a new one. A period, that is, in which we were only a group of people, not a theatre group touring with a play. And we wanted to go to a place where theatre had never existed and had no meaning. The village where we went to live, Carpignano, was chosen in one of the poorest areas of the South of Italy, where in each family a father, a son, or a brother had emigrated to Switzerland or Germany. A small and isolated village.

My companions and I have always felt uneasy seeing someone try to be familiar with others who are different from himself: when an adult infantilizes himself with children, or when a student wants to believe himself the same as workers or peasants. We felt ourselves different, and we lacked the missionary calling to make others accept our truth.

But our truth could be defined only in confrontation with the truth of others. From this encounter with the different we were compelled to reveal, through a whole series of reactions which at first we were not aware of, the gap between our purposes and what we are capable of achieving.

After we arrived in this little village of the South, we did not mingle with the people right away. We lived for three weeks in total isolation in the center of the village, relying on our most secure point: our work. We got up at five in the morning, exactly the same time that the peasants went to work in the fields. Our training was held far from the village in fields that were deserted yet where we could be seen. We sometimes saw the bronzed and impassive faces of men and women who observed our work, our physical and vocal training. Despite all the questions our disconcerting behavior provoked, the people felt a logic in it, a necessity, and a discipline, the meaning of which escaped them but which was solid in its reality as work.

They were different from the peasants of Carpignano, these actors from the Odin, with their long hair, their Scandinavian culture, their pattern of behavior, their way of

thinking, the prejudice of their apparent lack of prejudice. Later, it was our difference that became the measure of our meeting.

In isolated places, even if struck by emigration, reached by television, tempted by the glitter of big cities and their imagined pleasures, there still exist profound rules and taboos, which regulate the life of the people. It is foolish to believe that the theatre, that a theatrical group, can break these taboos and create a condition of freedom and new opportunity. If a group seeks to do this, it violates the organism of the community which reacts immediately and rejects it. In Italy, there have been theatrical groups chased and even stoned from villages where they tried to "provoke" the population in the illusion of shattering taboos. An arriving theatre group should not be like those ethnologists who in studying the population seek to camouflage themselves, believing they can be assimilated.

It is not the village that should be the object of study but the theatre group. On its arrival, it continues to follow its rules of life, its disciplines, the realization of which is important to each member of the group. It avoids, however, behaving in public in such a way as to offend and trample on rules which are vital to the village. Then it is the theatre group that becomes the object of study for the population. It is no longer the theatre that wants to conquer the village, but the village that wants to seduce the group, and in this attempt reveals the need for theatre, something of which they were ignorant before, and which, had it been presented from the outside as a kind of gift, would have been felt as something alien, belonging to another planet.

It is in diversity that men meet and define themselves reciprocally, but in a diversity that—for the theatre group—involves a life consciously chosen, while for the people of the South of Italy, it is instead a hard existential condition from which they cannot escape.

This diversity fascinates. We want to discover it, to measure it against our experience, that which we know, which makes us secure. But to do this we must face it, we must show ourselves, we must expose ourselves. Our stay in the South of Italy was to be for us proof that it is not the performance—a result which is limited in time—that counts, but the group with its behavior, with its vision realized in work filling the entire day.

During the five months of our stay at Carpignano, the "barter" enlivened the entire region. If we brought our songs, our dances, and grotesque scenes, our parades to a village, they were able to give us in exchange something of the kind, or else a group of them could come to us at Carpignano, or maybe go to another place, where another group had to reciprocate or go elsewhere in their turn. The last three months were a lively "barter" among peasants, workers, and students who went to present themselves reciprocally in the village squares with their own culture.

There was no professional theatre. Yet the theatrical situation existed: a point in time that permitted a gathering together, the occurrence of situations involving unknown people who made an impact and attracted other people to them.

A small group of foreign actors, seemingly not well-grounded in social and political questions, had destroyed the theatre, but they had brought to light the ore hidden in that mine.

But can one go further? Can one transform the "barter" from a cultural phenomenon into something that will leave a mark on the political and social situation of the place? After many experiences, the "barter" reminded me of the body of an octopus without tentacles, a little pulsating sack that emits coloring material which momentarily seems to change the color of the water, but then vanishes, disperses. How can tentacles be given to this little sack, tentacles capable of clinging to a small piece of rock and breaking it off?

Thus it was that in the following year, in 1975, returning to Carpignano and later to the mountains of Sardinia, we tried to make tentacles grow that would take hold and remain after our parting. We asked not only exchange, we asked the group that had invited us which problem in their village they most wanted to solve. The answers were many and varied.

Then, as a condition of our presence, we insisted on mobilizing more than musicians or people who sang. In Monteiasi, near Taranto, in the South of Italy, a group of young people had rented a room at their own expense and had brought some of their own books there with the intention of creating a library for everyone, something that had always been lacking.

When we went to Monteiasi, in addition to the "barter," we asked the people who wanted to attend our dances to bring a book. It was paradoxical: why not pay in money instead of coming with a book? What are these written pages, which were alien to the peasants, yet which now permitted them access to the entertainment? It was our desire to support those who wanted to make their village aware of the usefulness of something that was apparently superfluous. The books were brought to the library at the end of the evening. That dark little room now became something very clear in the memory of many who attended. But in doing this, where were we going?

And we, we who are not missionaries, what did we really receive in exchange? How can theatre concretely affect something which is outside of theatre? How can it open a breach—in fact not in words—in the wall that, even though dividing us from others, lets us live freely?

To do it, it is necessary to return to humble crafts: things that one can really have an impact on are always much smaller than those one can talk about. Even so, trying always to break out, we run the risk of losing our way.

I think of theatre as a body continually losing blood. Each time that it descends into the streets and encounters reality, it suffers blows, loses blood from wounds that do not heal. The body of theatre cannot live on its own blood. Its hemophilia requires it to nourish itself on blood that comes from other bodies. It always needs new blood, it cannot survive on its own. There is a hemophiliac theatre that denies its condition: white as a larva, in its crystal tower, surrounded by authorities and interpreters who proclaim it everlasting, and undertake operations of reinvigoration through diagnoses and theories.

But there is a theatre conscious of its hemorrhages, which separates itself from the protective circle of its learned men and seems to lose itself in a reality that ignores and degrades it, has no use for it, and that in collision with this reality, bleeds.

It is necessary to survive. Transfusions sprinkle the brain with a blood that cannot come from the body of theatre, but from other bodies, until now ignored and held at a distance, rejected as treacherous and dangerous.

Whoever wants to treat its hemophilia, flinging himself against every obstacle, seems to be struck with a new mode of perception, of using his own senses, of reflection. He lives a new life that sometimes he cannot explain, while the learned men and authorities shake their heads observing him, disturbed by the fact that a sick man who should have followed the prescription, is nursing himself alone, achieving results with some provincial healer, who must be rejected in the name of science and good sense.

You are losing blood; and while you refuse to lie immobile in bed, under a canopy, on a catafalque, you have gone beyond, crossed the frontier into a no-man's land: behind you lies the territory of theatre, before you another frontier. You are unaware of what territory you are slipping into. You advance cautiously, but obstinately. Sometimes your



Moment in clown show in Carpignano.

Photo Tony D'Urso

steps carry you back toward the frontier of theatre, and the learned men and authorities smile, relieved. Sometimes you seem almost to disappear on the horizon and your fate becomes incomprehensible. Who are you? A loner who vanishes into the desert, or he who, advancing, even losing himself, finishes by marking a path?

At Gavoi, a small village in the interior of Sardinia, a group of young, leftist workers and shepherds told us how they lacked money to publish information on the condition of the workers in a nearby factory, and on the condition of the shepherds. We told the population that, in addition to the "barter," we were interested in knowing more about their living conditions and had asked the group of young people to gather materials about the place. We asked the population to help them discharge their obligation to us. In this manner, the villagers cooperated and gave money toward the collection of this information, which was then distributed among them.

In every place there was a different form of compensation, adapted to what the people of the place truly felt as a need, which they would then try to fulfill even after the theatre had left.

In this way, revolutions do not happen, nothing apparently changes. But it is the only possibility that the little sack of the theatrical octopus has to grow a tentacle that grasps, hoping that other tentacles will begin to grow, take hold on the rock and finally succeed in shaking it.

At Ollolai, a village even smaller than Gavoi, they told us of the need to open a small archive of the local traditions that seemed threatened and on the way to extinction, to

collect old musical instruments, fairy tales, stories, biographies of the old people. So then we asked. . . .

In these unknown places, among these uncelebrated people, will the actors lose the drive they seemed to possess? Will they lose the intransigent commitment to their own art that seemed to give them bearings and which allowed them to present themselves to others only at the summit of their work, of their own experience?

In our last performance it was as if seven young people had abandoned the skin of their being as actors. As crabs who have lost the shelter of their shells, they were nevertheless able to survive the panic of finding themselves a parcel of white and rosy flesh, at the mercy of pain that could be inflicted at the slightest touch. Their almost unnatural nudity drew our looks and made us want to trample them and also to protect our hands. They were shaken by their passions, by the memory of a security now lost, and by nostalgia for another. On their bodies, the slightest quivers, the slightest tensions could be distinguished. The interior volcano, seeking to be rid of its fire, made them palpitate, seemed to want to burn their fragile flesh. However, despite the embarrassment, almost the horror they roused, we felt extremely close to them: paradoxically strangers in this unknown landscape, in a group and in deep solitude, they moved forward as if they would become men.

Dear Jennifer Merin, if you came here now, into the mountains of Sardinia, you would see the actors of the Odin, running through the streets and squares, as figures delineated by a bizarre painter. Are they players on tour only for their daily bread and for the applause of the audience, or are they *Alvars*?

The Hindu *Alvars* profess that the divinity does not exist, that hope does not exist, that all is illusion. In the search for a truth beyond all this, they perform acts disapproved by all society, which make a scandal of them and isolate them. But they are the *fools of God*, and their conflicting passions in search of a unity falls into a realm which society respects: religion.

Within the realm of theatre, the inhabitants transform themselves into strollers, into tight-rope walkers, into beings of ridicule, and the people laugh and applaud. But sometimes their laugh freezes, when the stroller abandons the show of his virtuosity and almost shamelessly disowns the existence of any divinity, disowns his profession, seems to go amok, as if controlled by a searching will that wants not to be shut up within the applause of a ring of spectators.

Now—dances and parades—the masks are like crusts on the faces of our actors. Soon, in their new performance, they will again melt that with which they have covered themselves. The mad horse will be left free to fly and fall, pursuing its visions.

Eugenio Barba

Translated from Italian by Jerrold C. Rodesch