

Tight-Rope Dance: A dialogue between Theatre Anthropology and Cognitive Sciences

Theatre Anthropology is the sciences which studies man in a situation of organized performance.

There are many Anthropologies. But as ever, Anthropology means the study (the discourse, in Greek: *logos*) of man (*anthropos*). There is Cultural Anthropology, that is the study of man in his cultural context, the human being's behaviour in different cultures. There is Social Anthropology that studies the human being's behaviour in society. And there is criminal Anthropology, physical Anthropology, and so on...

Theatre Anthropology is a recent branch of the study. It was born in 1980, official date of the first ISTA session in Bonn, Germany (ISTA is the acronym of International School of Theatre Anthropology). At that time, Theatre Anthropology was the name given to a reflection, a theorizing on the art of the performer that had been going on for some years and pivoted on a theatre man, Eugenio Barba, an Italian who had moved to Denmark. Eugenio Barba was, and is – after forty years – the director and founder of Odin Teatret, a theatre group now famous all over the world for its productions, surely, but above all for its reasearch in the art of the performer, the discipline, ethics in the performer's work, and its filiation from Grotowski. At that time, there was also a small group of intellectuals, historians and theatre scholars, around Eugenio Barba, mostly Italians.

The name Theatre Anthropology was coined in order to identify with precision, and name the subject of those long reflections, and then define a possible theory around a theatre practice.

Theatre Anthropology is the science wich studies the human being's behaviour in that particular situation which is an organized theatre performance.

Why should one study and analyse such behaviour? And why should one study and analyse it, *as if* it were different from the daily behaviour of the human being?

Yes, it is different from daily behaviour, anyone can tell you that. And it is not only because of the surface, or the style of the performance, for instance, the ballet dancer, who uses a codified style of dance that is very far from daily life behaviour, or mime, or a performer from classic Asian theatre (Japanese Kabuki theatre or Noh theatre, or the Indian Kathakali or Orissi Dance). No, it is not only that.

Even in the most naturalistic Western actor, daily behaviour is different from stage behaviour.

What is that diversity? But, after all, is it so important to ask such a question?

To ask what is that – let us call it *mobilization*, for the moment – that mobilization of the inner energies in the performer which makes the performer attract the spectator's attention, with authoritativeness, or seduce him or her with subtlety?

And is it so important to ask what is that inner mobilization in the spectator who, even if kept to his/her seat, is being enthralled into a tempest of emotions and into a cinaesthetic participation in the performer's action?

So many spectators' writings, novels, poems, memories during the centuries, all tell us of that fascination, due to a transformation of the performer on stage. [i.e., a different quality of presence, different from daily life]

The memories of so many spectators tell us that they were fascinated just by the appearance of an actor, or an actress (NOT by the character represented by the actor, NOT by the story told by the play).

This phenomenon always occurs (when we witness great theatre).

Is it so important to try to discover its laws?

In 1715 an Italian author, Pier Iacopo Martello, wrote about the actors of the Commedia dell'arte (Pantalone, Arlecchino, the Zannis, the Doctor from Bologna, the Captain), and said that they «provoke laughter as a disease» - a disease that shakes the body (like Parkinson's disease) losing control. The 18th century is very severe with the actors' theatre, coming out in defence of a literary, educational, moral theatre – briefly, a theatre that is useful to strengthen the moral values of an orderly society.

Pier Iacopo Martello dismissed any effort to understand the theatre of the comici dell'arte defining it a disease. Others, in the century of Romanticism, would speak of fascination, magnetism, of the great actors. Today as well, people speak of «the secret art of the performer». Therefore, the discourse on the performer is shrouded in mist, is muddled – because the performers never speak of their techniques (rather they conceal them to maintain the halo of mystery and fascination), and the spectators, who on the contrary speak a lot, fall under the performer's spell and while wanting to understand, have no tools to do so; therefore they declare themselves helpless and, according to their own culture, they speak of disease, as in the 18th century, of divine inspiration (in ancient Greece and Rome), of fascination, magnetism during the Romantic period as well as today.

This is exactly what Theatre Anthropology studies – and looking for concrete answers, it finds out that the performer's charm, his or her strong presence on stage, or scenic *bios*, has a ground/reason which is both physical and physiological.

A performer is on stage and attracts and keeps our attention. Our eyes follow the performer and never abandon him or her. We question every little movement, every little change in him/her in order to read his/her intentions: and we start reacting on our seat. Our spine, our muscles, every part in our body is in tension, a slight or a strong one, as if we are preparing to react and we don't know in which direction and why: a state of alert. For which reason? For an actor who hasn't done anything yet!

But, is it really true that he hasn't done anything?

Theatre Anthropology helps us read the complex architecture of that body that, consciously or unconsciously, is starting up a technique which consists in controlling breath and challenging balance. All appears immobile but all is moving with exaggerated and contrasting/antithetical tensions in the different parts of the body: what keeps the actor still is a hidden dance within the body, a continuous dynamism between antithetical forces: a TIGHT-ROPE DANCE.

This is the «secret», the «magnetism»: a physical imbalance. Perhaps this is not all: because, that which is endangering one's balance is a body-mind, and the physical imbalances interlace with an imbalance of the emotions, therefore with repeated challenges to that background, that tapestry of daily average emotions, that helps us live without shocks – without shocks until something, maybe a danger, appears to ruffle that balanced emotional setting. The actor voluntarily puts his/her body in a precarious imbalance engaging his muscles, and he also puts his emotions in a precarious imbalance engaging his/her imagination: a dance on the rope with a slack rope, challenging death with very large swings, or in sudden jerks.

Is this the first time?

Along the centuries, the contacts between Psychophysiology and theatre, and Cognitive sciences and theatre, have been more frequent than one usually thinks. But they were always approaches to the theatre from outside the theatre: from the sciences to the theatre. In Theatre Anthropology the approach is the other way round: from the heart of the theatre to the outside – first the theatre principles and then: contact with the sciences. Here the theatre is studied *juxta propria principia*.

But is it the first time?

No, it isn't. Theatre Anthropology is the point of arrival of all 20th century research, it is the heir to Stanislavski's science, that permeates all the past century arriving to us. Stanislavski is famous throughout the world for creating the so called «system» for the training of the actor, a system which unifies inner and corporeal techniques in order to reach a creative condition. He taught the actor how to be true on stage –

to be true means to be organic – as we all are in life (but not all performers on stage).

He helped the actors find their truth drawing support and stimulus from their own body: Stanislavski's system aimed at freeing the actor from physical and mental tensions, taught how to concentrate (and free one's mind – as in yoga for instance), and to develop one's imagination (by means of the «magic if»), and to refine one's sensorial and emotional faculties.

Stanislavski wrote many important books, thus laying the foundations for a science of the actor. His most fundamental book is *The work of the actor on himself*: if you want to be a performer, what you need is not just learn this or that technique, you must work on yourself in order to get to know yourself and to modify yourself –

and the work on oneself – you know – is the most important that may exist (from a philosophical point of view) and the most delicate/tricky that may exist (from a psychological point of view).

That is why, Stanislavski – and all the other theatre directors-pedagogues of the 20th c. – created the laboratories, isolated and protected places and time, apart from the stage and the performance;

that is why, now, we can say that the process is more important than the result (i.e. the work on oneself is more important than the performance);

that is the reason of the springing up everywhere, outside the theatre, of many and many situations like laboratories, workshops, in which normal people – having no ambition to become actors – use theatre techniques to challenge themselves and develop their own creative potentialities and become free and able to express themselves, in beauty.

[the most fundamental of skills is the skill of orchestrating the self – and theatre seems to be able to train // for that skill]

Stanislavski too had his predecessors, that I can only name in passing.

At the end of the 19th century there was a great movement that in Germany was called Körperkultur (Body culture) for the liberation and reappropriation of the body; all over Europe the suffragettes` and the womens` liberation movement spread rapidly; and even before, the modern pedagogy was born in the first half of the 19th century, with Pestalozzi, who protects the freedom and spontaneity of the pupil, Froebel and his Kindergaerten (a school method respecting of children and using toys and playful methods); and the Freinet and the active pedagogy, and so on. These movements – Körperkultur, the womens` liberation movement, the new pedagogy, all dedicated great attention to the holistic wellbeing of the human being (body and mind), and studied how to free and potentiate the human being`s creative faculties – and this is where they encounter the theatre in its deepest essence: as a technique for the investigation and expression of the self.

If we move to a theatrical context, we have many examples: from Delsarte (and his analysis and philosophical interpretation of “every little movement” of the human being) to Rudolf Laban (and his harmonic laws of movement in space), from Jaques-Dalcroze (and his Eurythmics for training children to a creative expressiveness and the harmony of their own being), from Gurdjieff, the founder of the Institute for the Harmonic Development of the Human Being... to the generation that changed the theatre at the beginning of the 20th century - above all, Stanislavski`s science of the actor, and Meyerhold`s biomechanics, to Decroux, the creator of contemporary mime, and to Grotowski (who closes the century) first with his Teatr Laboratorium in Poland and then with his more advanced research – when Grotowski looks at the theatre as a tool, as a means of knowledge and accomplishment of the self (and he speaks of the art as a vehicle). --> [and we arrive at] Eugenio Barba, whose vocation is to highlight and transmit the richness achieved by the last century. His vocation

urged him to found the Theatre Anthropology that is, of course, a University teaching (a chair of Anthropologie Théâtrale was founded specially for Jerzy Grotowski at the Académie Française in Paris) – but it is above all, a group of persons, of researchers – and a place in which to do research: a place that is different every time. It is a sort of Academy of the Art of Performance and a sort of itinerant University.

And

it is the science
which studies the human being
in that particular situation
which is an organized performance.

And, to conclude: the ethical task.

Our ethical task as theatre people is not to dissipate our heritage.

If we belong to that group of people who think that theatre is an art and that, like every true art, it is the deepest expression of the human being, and if we are aware / that, unlike every other art, its tool and medium is the artist himself – if we are convinced of this, then we are the heirs of this chain of researchers, a chain which is a century long.

The central position given to the performer is the red thread identifying this chain, or tradition. And this tradition has always crossed and held a dialogue with scientific research and with the questionings regarding MAN.

Each epoch has had its tools. Today we have ours and we would be traitors to our tradition and our time if we didn't use them. We have and can use *the tools of cognitive sciences*, in order to continue this chain and noble effort of knowledge and potentiation of the human being's possibilities.