

Martyna Kasprzak-Strzelecka

Doctoral Studies at the Faculty of Polish Studies, Chair in Theatre and Drama

Title of the Thesis: *Theatrum Mundi Ensemble – Eugenio Barba’s Intercultural Project*

Supervisor: Tadeusz Kornaś, Ph.D, Jagiellonian University Professor

Head of the Chair: Grzegorz Niziołek Prof., Ph.D

Theatrum Mundi Ensemble – Eugenio Barba’s Intercultural Project

The thesis is an attempt to characterize and analyse the performances as well as the work methods of Theatrum Mundi Ensemble – an intercultural theatre group run by Eugenio Barba as a part of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA).

During the ISTA sessions, actors and dancers who represent different continents and cultures present traditional acting expression styles which may sometimes be fundamentally different from one another. The shows serve as a base for examining the principles that control the art of acting. With the use of the theatre culture diversity, shows are produced under the aegis of the Theatrum Mundi Ensemble and then they are presented during single or several-time performances. The crowd scenes are based on select European texts translated into the language of Asian dancers. So far, there have been premières of: *Ego-Faust* (2000), *Ur-Hamlet* (2006), *The Marriage of Medea* (2008). All of the above-mentioned performances are analysed in the thesis.

Ego-Faust is based on the legend of doctor Faust and his infernal servant Mephisto translated into the language of Afro-Brazilian, Indian and Japanese dancers. Two main sources constitute the basis for the plot: the dramas by Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The performance was prepared with the 12th ISTA session in mind (2000, Bielefeld, Germany) and it is the climax of the previous projects by Theatrum Mundi. Forty actors, dancers, musicians and singers who represent various cultures participate in it.

As far as *Ur-Hamlet* is concerned, the inspiration comes from the literary foundation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – the story of the Danish Prince Amlethus described in an extract from the 13th century chronicle *Gesta Danorum* written by Denmark’s first national historiographer Saxo Grammaticus entitled *Vita Amlethi*. Barba not only refers to the text by Saxo Grammaticus, where the story of Prince Amlethus was mentioned in writing for the first time, but also disputes with Shakespeare’s work and tries to show that the cruel principles which ruled in the middle ages are closer to today’s world than the harmonious

and orderly concepts of renaissance or Shakespearean melancholic dilemmas and doubts. The *Theatrum Mundi* Ensemble of nearly one hundred took part in the monumental production. Among others, it was composed of the Odin Teatret actors (Eugenio Barb's parent ensemble), dancers from the Gambuh Desa Batuan Ensemble from Bali, a Japanese nō actor or an Afro-Brazilian candomblé dancer.

The myth of Jason, a Greek hero praised for retrieving the Golden Fleece and his tragic bond with Medea who helps him complete the task, is the starting point for *The Marriage of Medea*. According to Barba, the title married couple is a symbol of acceptance and tolerance of extreme differences, including geographic and culture ones. The performance emphasizes this with a contrasting cast – Jason is impersonated by Tage Larsen, an actor of Odin Teatret, while Medea is played by Ni Made Partini, a Balinese gambuh dancer. Apart from that, two other members of Odin Teatret took part in the performance (including the Afro-Brazilian dancer Augusto Omolú), thirty-two musicians and dancers of the Balinese theatre Gambuh Desa Batuan Ensemble, a candomblé musician Cleber da Paixao and an international group of thirty-three actors coming from twenty-three European, South-American and Asian countries.

By collaborating, the *Theatrum Mundi* Ensemble actors become members of one theatre culture. Though all of them come from various theatre traditions, for the time of the collaboration, they accept shared behaviour norms and patterns. The director has a superior position. As opposed to an anthropologist, he grants himself the unique right to interfere in the theatre culture for a shared goal. This extraordinary meeting builds a social interaction which challenges the differences in thinking and behaviour as well as linguistic habits of both actors and the audience.

The intercultural theatre creates hybrid works which arise from blending performative traditions of various culture areas in a more or less deliberate way. The creation is accompanied by an interest in the cultural identities of the applied forms and the desire to blend them together. According to Barba, such intercultural practice of experience exchange between the actors of Odin Teatret and other groups, the participation in the ISTA workshops, where artists who are open to foreign influences gathers or western actors taking lessons from Japanese or Indian masters may induce a search of a new professional identity and the development of one shared theatre culture.

For the TME director during the preparation of a performance, culture differences are pushed into the background. He prioritizes the practice and collaboration with actors of different traditions. The director builds TME shows similarly to the Odin Teatret performances – by juxtaposing freely chosen elements of the traditional performance techniques while often adopting European texts as starting points. Each of the performers acts in their own way, side by side with the other participants with whom they sometimes interact. But the TME shows are not about blending in or an attempt to perform a culturally strange art. They are about creating a coherent whole from various theatre traditions, while it is made sure that none of them are lost.

Importantly, Barba's perspective on intercultural theatre differs considerably from other intercultural practices (for example those of Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook or Ariane Mnouchkine). The comparison of Barba's activity with other forms of intercultural theatre which I make in one of my doctoral thesis's chapters not only expands the context but also highlights Barba's concept.

It must also be pointed out that Barba's intercultural performances and comparative experiments conducted as a part of ISTA constantly remain controversial. Critics like Richard Schechner, Marco de Marinis, Philip Zarrilli question many aspects of theatre anthropology and ISTA's research status. The scholars often go as far as to accuse Barba of "cultural imperialism" by imposing his ideology and training methods on other cultures. However, regardless of the evaluation of Barba's activity at the *Theatrum Mundi Ensemble* and the ISTA, his work has inspired many discussions on intercultural practises.

What is noteworthy, as Barba claims that Europeans still remain burdened with the colonial discourse, he calls for ethnocentrism to be abandoned and tries to prove that identifying with the culture of Asian theatre combines two traditions which not only differ as to their ideas but also are historically conflicted. Such practice is also an expression of the professional ambition and curiosity of theatre artists which can be noticed both in European and Asian theatre. However, should a similar practice become a form of resisting ethnocentrism, it would have to reframe the character and scope of its previous interests.