

Eugenio Barba (Brindisi, 1936) founded Odin Teatret and spearheaded "Third theatre", which emerged on the outskirts of major capitals in Europe and Latin America in the 1970s. Detached from institutions and avant-gardes, the movement focuses on the search for one's own roots. Its ornament is collective creation and the non-hierarchical organisation of work.

# Eugenio Barba / Odin Teatret

## SELF-PENETRATION

17.04 – 28.09.2025



Ajuntament de  
**Barcelona**

[LA VIRREINA]  
CENTRE  
DE LA IMATGE

Iben Nagel Rasmussen practicing the “Swiss exercises.”  
Photograph by Torgeir Wethal. Holstebro, Denmark, 1971.

The dramaturg and theatre researcher Eugenio Barba (Brindisi, Italy, 1936) and his company Odin Teatret share with modernity the desire to delve into the depths and simultaneously explore the distant. Both the interiorities of the body and remote cultures constitute privileged territories of self-exploration for this Nordic company.

Between the founding of the company in 1964 and the creation of the International School of Theatre Anthropology in 1979, Barba's "Third theatre" manifesto refers to the hundreds of groups that operated on the outskirts of major capitals in the 1970s. These were groups working on the fringes of *first theatre*, represented by the theatre institution, and *second theatre*, represented by the avant-garde. The basis of *third theatre* companies is the search for their own roots, their ornamentation, collective creation and the non-hierarchical division of labour.

Although Odin Teatret is still active today, the exhibition traces its activity between 1971 and 1979, a period during which it supported dissident forms that began with what Barba dubbed "collective self-penetration", eventually taking to the streets of Europe and Latin America.

## ROOM 1: ATHLETICISM rhymes with ASCETICISM

*If you come to Odin to do theatre, leave; if you come to be part of a group, stay.*

Eugenio Barba to Toni Cots (1975)

After a few years with Jerzy Grotowski in Opole (Poland), Eugenio Barba began his own *theatrical exercises*, which, in addition to their biting reference to the *spiritual exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, drew on Hindu darshanas, Gurdjieff-style esotericism, and the theatrical techniques of Stanislavski and Meyerhold, to which would later be added those of François Delsarte and Charles Dullin, or the contemporary influences of Colombaioni clowns or the mime Marcel Marceau.

Although Jerzy Grotowski was only four years his senior, Eugenio Barba appointed him master and set about making him known on the other side of the Iron Curtain. To this end, he invited critics from Western Europe to see his performances and,

already on his return to the Nordic countries, published *Towards a Poor Theatre*, a collection of the master's writings. Grotowski's work and performances were fundamental to the art of the latter half of the 20th century, influencing both theatre and the Italian Arte Povera movement.

Training, says Barba, is a "daily, tenacious, patient task, often in the dark, attempting to find a meaning, a specific factor in the transformation of the actor into a human being and a member of the group". The aim of training is not to teach anything. It is therefore a *pedagogical fiction*, pure form without content.

## ROOM 2: THE HOUSE OF ODIN

*What interests me is the possibility that theatre offers to shape and animate new pueblos. I use the Spanish word because today there are groups that are like pueblos in both senses of the word: a physical place where one lives (...) and a human group made up of people who feel united.*

Eugenio Barba in Ferdinando Taviani, "Le monde du tiers théâtre...", *The UNESCO Courier* (January, 1978)

In 1966, Eugenio Barba and a group of young people who had been rejected by the Oslo Theatre School moved to a cattle farm on loan from the municipality of Holstebro in the far northwest of Denmark. There, they created a parallel life dedicated to anomalous activities focused on community experience.

Besides training, they organised encounters and seminars with Dario Fo, Jacques Lecoq, Jean-Louis Barrault, the Living Theatre, and Jerzy Grotowski and Ryszard Cieslak. In 1974, Eugenio Barba founded the International Brigades with a group of students from a variety of backgrounds who would receive training for eight months. Similar encounters were later held regularly in cities throughout the world.

The move to Holstebro was a result of the city council's policy to attract new inhabitants. It therefore opened new facilities and, after buying a sculpture by Giacometti, invited Odin Teatret to move to these outskirts. The press then picked up on the dissatisfaction of a section of the population with this wastefulness.

If the stage during the early 20th century was the privileged place to try out new ways of life (see Isadora Duncan, Asja Lācis, Brecht and Schlemmer), the substitute for specific struggles to break away from bourgeois realism following the Second World War was communal introspection.

### *Min far hus*

*The few times I looked up during the show, I saw nothing but tense faces like mine, stuffy faces, redder or paler than usual: we were really hideous, or to put it delicately, plain (although very much so), we 60 bachelors (more like 55 and three plugged-in girls, with Eugenio Barba, who, sitting among us, cheered on his own looking like a calm young fireman). I was very angry when a friend asked my opinion at the end of the show: my opinion was that we were disgusting—at least, I surely did—but there was no point in saying so: we had to shout it out in a Dostoevskian manner, adding a kind of happening to the dramatic psycho-trap we had just fallen into.*

Spectator at the 1974 Venice Biennale in  
Mirella Schino, *Il crocevia dell ponte d'Era* (1997)

The first time that the company employed an invented language was in *Min far hus* (The Father's House, 1972). To the exclusions of being an outsider and self-taught, Odin added the exile of language: babbling. The spectators were put to the test; rather than understanding, they were invited to *secrete meanings*. For Barba, one “must open the spectators’ eyes with the same gentleness that we close those of a loved one who has just died”.

### ROOM 3: BARTER

*They all told us, “Yes, but your group can work in Denmark, because Denmark is a country where things are good; there are no social problems in Denmark; Denmark can afford theatre.” Then, as if it were a challenge, we said, “Okay, now that we’re going to start working on the new show, let’s do it in a*

*completely different situation, geographically and socially.” We indicated Italy, a very specific place in Italy, a place that has no theatrical tradition, a place where theatre seems to make no sense at all.*

Eugenio Barba in Ludovica Ripa di Meana, *In cerca di teatro* (1974)

Being a foreigner is a constant in Odin’s language and way of being. Consequently, after premiering several shows at the Holstebro headquarters, the company moved to Salento, a region in southern Italy, where they locked themselves away in an old house to rehearse. At the same time, they held workshops for children and, later, driven by the curiosity of the locals, they held work demonstrations that became moments of diffuse spectacle in which the boundaries between actors and spectators were blurred.

Their time there was based on the experience of *barter*. Odin’s clown and juggling performances were followed by the traditional dances and songs performed by the inhabitants of Carpignano in return. The aim of the contact was not to build bridges, raise awareness or entertain. Nor did Odin seek to learn old tunes or enjoy the giddiness of the exotic. The barter—claims Barba—was limited to being “a way of distancing from ourselves, from our own origins”, “a way of experiencing theatre as emigration”.

### *Anarcho-fascism*

In an article from 1977, Ugo Volli recounts the resistance of Italian institutions to Eugenio Barba’s theatre. The legendary Giorgio Strehler, founder of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, labelled the Artaudian theatre of Grotowski and Barba anarcho-fascist and accused them of creating “the theatre of the Red Brigades”.

The Venice Biennale was one of the few institutions open to its poetics, repeatedly inviting the company, although it tended to circulate in self-managed spaces, thereby articulating a network of companies that practiced what was known as “Group Theatre”.

## *Odin controversy*

In 1976, the company was invited to the Caracas Theatre Festival, which brought together 54 companies from around the world. After refusing to go to the city's newly inaugurated Hilton Hotel, its members were rehoused in a school. Minutes before the premiere of *Come! And the Day Will Be Ours*, the company this time refused to perform the show because of the noise outside. The controversy was reported in the press. Some companies expressed their solidarity with Odin.

The controversy was a symptom of a deeper confrontation linked to the apparent lack of political commitment in the company's shows. Genevière Rosenthal, a spectator from the *Latin American Theatre Review*, described Odin's shows as "real Rorschach tests".

During this first visit to Latin America, Barba came into contact with the companies Cuatrotablas (Peru), La Candelaria (Colombia), Libre Teatro Libre (Argentina) and the CLETA centre (Mexico), and these would become essential for understanding Odin's later work.

### *Detour (1)*

After returning from Venezuela, Odin Teatret, which had never performed in Spain because it refused to do so under the dictatorship, packed its bags for Barcelona. Toni Cots, the company's Catalan actor, contacted the researcher Xavier Fàbregas and also Joan Font, director of the Comediants, in order to organise street parades and shows in Barcelona, Mataró and Canet de Mar.

In Valencia, however, the mayor was opposed to *El libro de las danzas* (The Book of Dances) being performed on the streets of the city. It was in the Bétera psychiatric hospital, run by Dr Enric Jordà, that the *barter* finally took place.

### *Barba method (27/11/1975)*

There is a summary in one of the diaries where Toni Cots recounts his experiences with the company and the type of rehearsals that took place at that time.

*1st improvisation: The stimulus is a theme (e.g.: “Our destiny is death”).*

*2nd improvisation: The stimulus is a phrase agreed with the performer that sums up the chosen theme (e.g.: “She arrives with the bones of her parents and eats the lime from the walls”). The performer constructs a story with specific actions. You have to be able to repeat the improvisation with all the details.*

*3rd improvisation: The guide asks the actors to change some details (e.g.: “Change the bicycle for a wheelbarrow”), eliminating excesses and mistakes.*

*4th improvisation: Working from gestures. Placing dramatic emphases.*

*5th improvisation. Working with two performers: The same improvisation without altering the results of the previous sections. The actors have to look at the other improviser. No physical contact is necessary.*

*6th improvisation. Working with three performers. Warning: Some will be stopped during the work while others continue. The aim is to construct a scene from the collected material.*

*First stage: Organising the entrances of the performers and the direction in which they look. Relationships begin to emerge.*

*Second stage: Vocal work is added.*

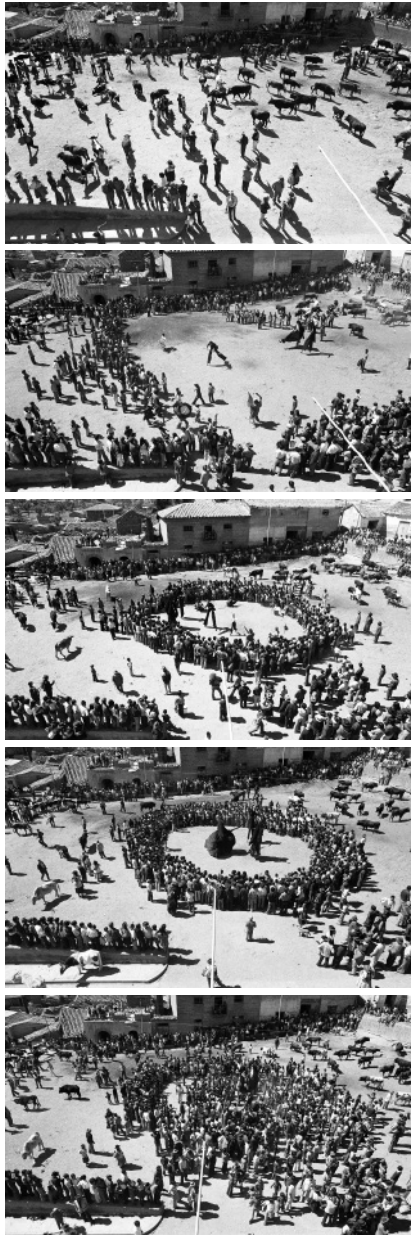
*7th improvisation: Defining the space in order to reduce the area in which the performance takes place.*

## ROOM 4: EMPTY RITUAL

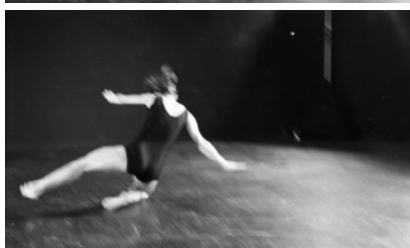
*I don't believe in mutual understanding. I believe in the insurmountable incommunicability of those who act together. However, the fruit of their actions can be shared and unified. I believe in theatre as an empty ritual. A space that exists as long as the need to resist continues to burn within us. Resist what? Resisting means opposing the seductive voice that whispers from the depths of each of us: this is your country. Here you can stay.*

Eugenio Barba, *La conquista de la diferencia* (The Conquest of Difference, 2008), published by the Peruvian company Yuyachkani





*Anabasi*. Photographs by Peter Bysted. Ayacucho, 1978.



Iben Nagel Rasmussen practicing the “Swiss exercises.”  
Photographs by Torgeir Wethal. Holstebro, Denmark, 1971.





*The Book of Dances and Come and the Day Shall Be Ours.*  
Photographs by Tony d'Urso, Karohi, Amazonia, Venezuela, 1976.

The inner excavation of training is followed by journeys to distant geographies, facets of a tendency in the theatrical avant-garde to explore subjectivity by pushing it to its limits. For the moralist Eugenio Barba, even language is a burden to undertake this journey. By stripping the theatre of all artifice, the joviality of the *verbena* will take on the seriousness of ritual.

### *Limits*

*It was an awful experience: we were performing for dead people, unaware of their fate—these people would be gone in a generation. And yet the theatre allowed us to show an aspect of the white man's life, when he is neither missionary nor doctor. It was ultimately perhaps the most pointless show. Did we need to travel 3,000 kilometres by plane and boat, at considerable risk, to perform in front of 80 people who looked at us with the same amused gesture as when we look at gorillas? We had the opportunity there to experience the limits of what theatre can achieve.*

Eugenio Barba in Jean-Jacques Daetwyler,  
*L'Odin Teatret et la naissance du tiers théâtre* (1980)

The documentary filmmaker Manuel de Pedro and the Kurare cooperative suggested to Odin that they *barter* with the Dayaderi community in the Venezuelan Amazon. The anthropologists Jacques Lizot and Kenneth Good, who would be accused of many abuses years later, also lived with the Yanomami. A *barter* took place against this background in which, in addition to the theatre, fabrics and utensils were exchanged for objects made by the community.

NOTE: Although members of the Yanomami people were given a voice to recall this period in the films *Segredos da Tribo* (José Padilha, 2010) or *A última floresta* (Luiz Bolognesi and Davi Kopenawa, 2021), Odin's visit still lacked testimonies from local participants in the exchange.

### *Detour (2)*

In 1978, Barba suggested that the actors leave the company temporarily to study other theatre techniques. Although Tor-

geir Wethal did not go to Andalusia to study flamenco, Tom Fjordefalk went to Kerala to study Kathakali; Roberta Carreri and Francis Pardeilhan went to Brazil to study Candomblé; Else Marie Laukvik went to Haiti to familiarise herself with Yanvalou; Tage Larsen and Julia Varley remained in Denmark to study ballroom dancing; and Silvia Ricciardelli, Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Toni Cots went to Bali to take classes in Baris and Legong dance and Pencak Silat martial arts with masters I Ketut Tutur, I Agung Rai and Balok.

## ROOM 5: THIRD THEATRE

The spell of the Orient, the fashion for occultism, and the fascination with primitivist communitarianism were, in the words of Susan Sontag, “the last refinement of colonial mentality”. A refinement to which Eugenio Barba is no stranger. Third theatre, however, does not refer to inaccessible cultures of distant times, usually considered ahistorical and apolitical, but defines very specific contemporary practices of theatre companies in Latin America and Europe that stand in opposition to mass culture.

Written in the autumn of 1976 at the International Group Theatre Encounter in Belgrade, the manifesto immediately became a symbol. Third theatre is not the beginning of an artistic movement, much less a political one, but the result of a social agreement for which theatre provides the stage. In the 1970s, theatre became the mouthpiece for aspirations for change that were not reflected in public policy. In the Third theatre, the demands of a generation found a theatrical nation with limited political agency yet enormous charisma.

Barba parallels the struggle of independent theatre companies demanding visibility and legitimacy with the emergence of Southern nations demanding representation in international forums. Nonetheless, Eugenio Barba wrote “Third theatre” years after similar manifestos. Glauber Rocha’s “The Aesthetics of Hunger”, Julio García Espinosa’s “For an Imperfect Cinema” or Octavio Getino and Pino Solanas’ “Towards a Third Cinema” are tirades that also give an account of an artistic movement emerging from the margins. The difference with these texts, which outline a “revolutionary cinema before the revolution”, is that Barba’s text

appeared when defeat was no longer a fear but a fact. The revolution was already over. In 1976, the hopes of 1968 had already been buried in Paris, Prague or Mexico, and the Latin American theatre companies with which Barba collaborated were working with the military uprisings in Brazil, Chile or Argentina in the background.

The “new world” during this period was no longer to be found in the demands of the Summits of Non-Aligned Countries or in the social movements that had already disintegrated, but in the invisibility of the rehearsal rooms, where, in the words of Darko Suvin, an “experimental space and collective laboratory” opened up, a promiscuous refuge of dissidence and utopia. Barba explained it retrospectively in these words: “Young people who refused to take up arms in their struggle for a better society used another kind of revolt: a symbolic struggle, theatre. For me—says Barba—the Latin American groups were the concrete proof of theatre as a practice of personal and social rebellion.”

*1976: Encounter in Belgrade*

*For many years, Latin America adopted European theatrical forms, the only ones that were considered equal to the dominant social classes, but now there are many groups that oppose the hegemony of institutional theatre.*

Horacio Czertok in *Cultura* 7 (July 1977)

Making the most of UNESCO’s invitation and in parallel with the Belgrade Festival (BITEF), Barba organised an encounter that brought together companies from Europe and Latin America that did not work around the big theatrical institutions or the texts of Western tradition, but built their own traditions. They exchanged working methods at the encounter, training exercises and improvisations that, besides the performances, structured the daily life of the companies and constituted what Jean-Jacques Daetwyler called the “culture of the group”.

*1977: Encounter in Bergamo*

*We are miserable! We come from a country with a deep cultural identity. In Peru, we belong to a social class that has almost*

*completely lost this identity. Or it has been hidden by another presence that does not give us a new identity, but a false, bastardised mass culture that prevents us from remaining rooted in our true traditions. We are like the blind, deaf and dumb. Nonetheless, during our travels, by meeting people from other cultures, we have learned to see ourselves and our country more clearly. Everyday encounters help us to affirm who we are and where we come from. Theatre is an encounter, a confrontation with our lost identity.*

Declaration of the Cuatratoblas group posted on the  
the doors of the Bergamo Encounter (1977)

After Belgrade, the Second Group Theatre Encounter took place in Bergamo, similarly under the auspices of UNESCO. Barba again invited the groups he had come across during his tours. Besides a workshop, the Comedians performed a street parade that would bring them international fame.

*1978: Encounter in Ayacucho*

The accusations of formalism and cultural imperialism were repeated at the Third Group Theatre Encounter.

“The long experience of Odin Teatret—recalls Barba—a group of self-taught outsiders who had achieved artistic and technical autonomy outside the European theatre system, was once again denied (...) Odin’s entire biography was understood in terms of gringo aesthetics, of rich Europeans. The professional commitment of our group of emigrants without national roots was interpreted as the privilege of those living in a nation that can afford the luxury of theatrical laboratories.

In Ayacucho, I sensed the existence of another language that went beyond the way of expressing my experience in order to make professional contact with others. I felt the need for another language to approach Latin American groups, to talk to their actors and directors, without getting caught up in the filters of aesthetics or the prejudices and excuses that we call ‘cultural identity’”.

In 1979, after the Ayacucho Encounter, Eugenio Barba set up the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), which, while continuing to be itinerant, sought to circumvent



cultural conflicts by replacing the stormy constellations of group theatre with the techno-scientific harmonies of the actor's work.

### THIRD THEATRE

Eugenio Barba

*Internal document for the participants of the International Meeting of Theatre Research, also known as the First International Workshop of Group Theatre in Belgrade in 1976, first published in the International Theatre Informations (Paris, autumn 1976).*

A theatrical archipelago has been forming during the past few years in several countries. Almost unknown, it is rarely subject to reflection, it is not presented at festivals and critics do not write about it.

It seems to constitute the anonymous extreme of the theatres recognized by the world of culture: on the one hand, the institutionalized theatre, protected and subsidized because of the cultural values that it seems to transmit, appearing as a living image of a creative confrontation with the texts of the past and the present—or even as a “noble” version of the entertainment business; on the other hand, the avant-garde theatre, experimenting, researching, arduous or iconoclastic, a theatre of changes, in search of a new originality, defended in the name of the necessity to transcend tradition, and open to novelty in the artistic field and within society.

The Third theatre lives on the fringe, often outside or on the outskirts of the centres and capitals of culture. It is a theatre created by people who define themselves as actors, directors, theatre workers, although they have seldom undergone a traditional theatrical education and therefore are not recognized as professionals.

But they are not amateurs. Their entire day is filled with theatrical experience, sometimes by what they call training, or by the preparation of performances for which they must fight to find an audience.

According to traditional theatre standards, the phenomenon might seem insignificant. But from a sociological point of view, the Third theatre provides food for thought.

Like islands without contact between themselves, young people in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Japan gather to form theatre groups, determined to survive.

But these groups can only survive on two conditions: either by entering the circle of established theatre, accepting the laws of supply and demand, conforming to fashionable tastes, giving way to the preferences of political and cultural ideologists, and adapting themselves to the latest acclaimed results; or by succeeding through continuous work to individualize their own area, seeking what for them is essential and trying to force the others to respect this diversity.

Perhaps it is here, in this Third theatre that, beyond the a posteriori motivations, one can see what constitutes the living matter of the theatre, a remote meaning which attracts new energies to the theatre and which, in spite of everything, keeps it alive in our society.

Different people, in different parts of the world, experience the theatre as a bridge, constantly threatened, between the affirmation of their personal needs, and the necessity of prolonging them in the surrounding reality.

Why the theatre in particular as a means of change, when we are well aware that other factors determine the reality in which we live? Is it a question of blindness, of self-delusion?

Perhaps for them, the theatre is a means to find their own way of being present—which the critics would call “new expressive forms”—, to seek more humane relationships among men, with the purpose of creating a social cell inside which intentions, aspirations and personal needs begin to be transformed into actions.

The abstract divisions, made arbitrarily and instituted from on high—various schools, styles, tendencies and other labels which bring order to the recognized theatres—can be of no use here. It is not the styles nor the expressive tendencies that count. What seems to characterize the Third theatre, what appears as a common denominator among such different groups and experiences, is a tension difficult to define. It is as if the personal needs—ideals, fears, multiple impulses which would otherwise remain more or less obscure—wanted to be transformed into work, according to an attitude which from the outside is justified as an ethical imperative, not limited to the profession only, but

extending over all of daily life. But, in the end, they are the first ones to pay the price of their choice.

One cannot dream only in the future, waiting for a total change which seems farther away at each step we take, and which nevertheless gives free reign to all the alibis, compromises, and to the impotence of waiting.

One wants a new cell to be formed immediately, but without isolating oneself in it.

To submerge oneself, as a group, in the universe of fiction, to find the courage not to pretend... Such is the paradox of the Third theatre.

Curator: Roger Bernat

DL B 7747-2025

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Tickets: 10 euros online and at the box office

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Performative exhibition by Søren Evinson and  
Roger Bernat with the participation of Toni Cots,  
former actor of Odin Teatret.

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