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978-0-521-73166-9 - Directors/Directing: Conversations on Theatre

Maria Shevtsova and Christopher Innes

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The conversations in this book are with directors who have significantly marked the Western theatre of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The majority of them represent a middle generation flanked on the upper side by Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler and Yury Lyubimov, one of the few Russian directors well established in the 1960s and 1970s whose fame crossed the borders of the Soviet Union before its collapse in 1991. Lev Dodin, who speaks here, has had far greater influence internationally with the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg than his older predecessor from Moscow, thereby reminding the world that the tradition in which he has his roots – that of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov – still provides points of reference for the middle generation, as several of the directors observe from their respective, widely different, perspectives. Peter Sellars, for instance, who is renowned for his avant-garde innovations, notably looks towards Meyerhold. But Jerzy Grotowski is also a major touchstone. Although younger than Brook, his impact on Brook, let alone on his own generation, is such that he appears to be out of his time, influential sooner than a chronological view might have expected. Thus it is that Eugenio Barba, who serves in this volume as a bridge to an earlier generation, acknowledges Grotowski as one of the ‘masters’ (Barba’s term) who helped to shape his practice, and this despite a mere three-year age difference between them.

Another bridge to the older ‘upper side’ is Max Stafford-Clark, a director whose commitment to text-based theatre and whose role in the development of new theatre writing define his particular qualities, linking him to a mode of theatre-making that is far from falling into

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oblivion, as Katie Mitchell and Declan Donnellan show, while affirming their own highly corporeal approach to 'text'. At the same time, Stafford-Clark's focus on nurturing playwrights for his work on the stage distinguishes him from a polymath like Robert Lepage, who writes, directs and performs his own scripts – a strong tendency of the middle generation, as Simon McBurney also demonstrates. In this respect, both he and Lepage not only anticipate but also provide a model for the next generation of theatre practitioners aspiring to multi-generic and cross-over production. Barba and Stafford-Clark, exemplary bridges, began their directing careers within a year of each other, with Barba founding Odin Teatret in 1964 and Stafford-Clark starting his work with the Edinburgh Traverse Theatre in 1965; and each is still very much an active force in the contemporary theatre, suggesting a continuum between a decade that saw the proliferation of many types of performance and the performance of today, much of it framed, as it must be, by the otherwise inventive culture of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Dodin and Elizabeth LeCompte, both slightly younger and born in 1944, began their directing careers in 1967 and 1970 respectively (LeCompte as Assistant Director to Richard Schechner), while Sellars, Donnellan, Lepage and McBurney all started their professional directing careers within a year of each other: Sellars directing his first pieces outside university in 1980, Donnellan directing his first play with Cheek by Jowl in 1981, Lepage joining Théâtre Repère in 1982 and McBurney co-founding Theatre de Complicite in 1983.

All these directors, European – including British – and North American, have developed their unique approach together with a clearly identifiable style; and all have established a coherent and distinct *oeuvre*. They have also established an international reputation, yet are still at the cutting edge; and they are now having a major influence, affecting a whole range of newer practitioners in ways they are not always conscious of both at home and abroad, well beyond their geographic frontiers which they cross and recross as they reconfigure the artistic dimensions of their work. In addition, this is the first generation where women have reached world-class rank, and it is only regrettable that Ariane Mnouchkine, a major pioneer, was so

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thoroughly tied up by her most recent production *Les Ephémères* (2006) with the Théâtre du Soleil, the elections in France of 2007, in which she campaigned vigorously for the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal, and her company's subsequent, all-consuming touring abroad that she was finally unable to find the time for the kind of in-depth conversation necessary for this volume. The complications of logistics, of being in the same place at the same time, made it similarly extremely difficult and, ultimately, impossible to have an appropriate interview with Anne Bogart, an emergent compelling voice at the younger end of the spectrum that we have identified as the middle generation of powerful directors. We wish to thank Mnouchkine and Bogart again for their tireless efforts and good will in attempting to meet the demands of our project.

In their diversity, directors we have interviewed represent the major innovations of our time; and they all, either implicitly or sometimes explicitly, raise theoretical questions about the nature and status of contemporary performance, since all are in some way challenging the principles of their earlier work or extending it past the expected boundaries. The conversation with each director is framed by an introduction giving biographical data and insight into some of his/her major productions, and by a chronology of selected productions as well as an indicative bibliography.

The conversations in this volume were all conducted between the end of 2004 and mid-2007, a relatively long timescale required by the need to fit in with the busy schedules of these directors, several of whom regularly tour internationally, and by the detailed editing process. After an extended discussion with each director—sometimes conducted over several sessions, sometimes accompanied by attending rehearsals, and in one case extended through performing a role in the current performance—the transcripts were edited, passed on to the director for comment, corrections and checking of facts. In some cases texts were re-edited, and all have been given final approval by our interlocutors.

A network of links between these directors emerged, both personal and thematic. Barba's development of Third Theatre and theatre anthropology indicates alternative, non-mainstream as well as

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non-avant-garde modes of directing and raises the issue of how far the definition of 'directing' can be stretched. His use of Asian performance forms links him to Peter Sellars, despite the great difference in their approach. Cross-cultural interplay, albeit in diverse ways, links Barba, Sellars, Lepage and, increasingly, McBurney. A second grouping centres around devised, physically based acting and directing, with LeCompte, McBurney and Dodin; and the fact that LeCompte and Dodin have several points in common in their directorial approach comes as a surprise, given the great difference between their cultural legacies, their perception as to what constitutes play, and their performance results. Even so, the connecting links between them are real enough, and reveal a good deal about the processes of performance-making. McBurney's stress on physical expression (having studied with Jacques Lecoq in Paris, following his involvement with the Footlights at Cambridge University) leads him to an exploration of comic modes. Lepage uses the body to explore narrative modes, also frequently in a comic vein. Sellars and LeCompte owe much to their North American context: LeCompte to the modern and postmodern dance and visual arts scene of New York, Sellars to the vibrant multicultural environment of Los Angeles, onto which he has grafted his critical politics, European experience and 360-degree view of the world, which make him a director with a truly global vision and commitment. Dodin's emphasis on the moving body is imbued with the comprehensive training to be found in Russia, thus complicating the picture of the relationship between the director and the actor, which is a principle of collaboration respected by all the directors cited in this paragraph.

Although these directors have taken 'physical theatre' to new levels, as a form it is of course not new. The importance of Lecoq to him also links McBurney to two of the older generation of directors not represented in this volume – Mnouchkine, whose 'transgression of cultures' (our terminology) in the pursuit of the art of directing and acting is physically based, and Andre Serban, whose recovery of *commedia dell'arte* represents another form of physical theatre – while Mnouchkine and Lepage share a strong appreciation of each other's work. Similarly, Lepage, throughout his career, has been in continual

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contact as well as competition with Robert Wilson, and shares his exploration of new media in performance with Peter Stein, who was working with new mechanisms in the 1970s: each of them directors who, like Brook or Grotowski, can be seen as *éminences grises* behind much contemporary directing in Europe. McBurney, for instance, admired Stein greatly while studying in Paris.

Devising is key to Barba, Lepage, McBurney and Dodin, their explorations having become, today, a model for the younger generation still in search of its own 'language'. Devising also links Elizabeth LeCompte to this grouping, while her experimentation with multi-media specifically parallels Lepage. However, LeCompte's emphasis on deconstructing texts is very much her hallmark. Her iconoclasm can be likened to that of Sellars, whose breaking of shibboleths, both social and theatrical, is a markedly sharp response to the contemporary world. By contrast, Stafford-Clark, Mitchell and Donnellan are strongly text-based and author-centred directors with very powerful and individual theatrical practices. Stafford-Clark has been instrumental in inventing a particular kind of verbatim theatre, which is highly political. Mitchell, although anchored in texts, finds ways to subvert canonical images and expectations of them, and she works from a scientific, neurological perspective, while claiming her theatre heritage in Polish and Russian theatre rather than from the British stage. In this she is as unusual a British director as Donnellan, who runs both a British company and a Russian one, the one working in English and the other in Russian. Donnellan brings his Russian experience (which includes *The Winter's Tale* in 1997 with Dodin's company) to his direction of British actors, thereby also extending conceptions of direction in Britain.

In addition to Donnellan's links with Dodin, there are also numerous personal connections that are revealed through these conversations, as one might expect. It turns out that as well as admiring LeCompte, Sellars worked in collaboration with The Wooster Group, in addition to training with LaMaMa. Similarly, a number of these directors—from Mitchell, Donnellan and McBurney to Lepage and even the autonomous Stafford-Clark—have produced work on the same stage, specifically, the Royal National Theatre (NT) in London.

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Sellars, Lepage and Dodin are regularly invited to show their productions at London's Barbican Centre, the latter having become a primary focus for internationally acclaimed work, especially in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The MC93 Bobigny plays a similarly high-profile curating role in Paris, enlarging the perception of audiences in France of what contemporary theatre can be and do.

Donnellan, who is personally close to Brook (as indeed is Dodin), is welcomed by Brook's theatre the Bouffes du Nord in Paris, as well as by the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, which had promoted Stein and Strehler in the 1970s. Strehler had a five-year tenure of the latter theatre from 1983 for showcasing adventurous and challenging work, as well as work not yet fully discovered, setting an example for those to follow him. Core productions of Dodin's Maly Drama Theatre, for instance, were presented at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe's 1994 Russian Season under the direction of Lluís Pasqual, opening out this ensemble company's achievements to spectators travelling to the event from the four corners of the globe. Thus it is that the programming of the Barbican and the Parisian venues named was beneficial to the dissemination of innovative theatre from which home theatres could also draw inspiration. Together with sites not here named – the Centre Beaubourg, for example, which offers a more intimate space suitable for The Wooster Group – they have channelled the energies of directors, performers and spectators alike, running the risk, perhaps, of homogenising work, yet failing to do so precisely because each artistic idiom, as developed by the directors we have selected, is strong and rich enough to maintain its singular identity.

There are also other forms of connection that emerge. For instance, Lepage and McBurney both speak about their work with music, in particular their recent collaborations with one specific group of musicians, the Emerson Quartet. Lepage, Sellars and Dodin are opera directors of renown, ranging, for Lepage, from adaptations of Brecht (*The Threepenny Opera/The Busker's Opera*, 2004) to the development of a new opera (Loren Maazel's *1984* at The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in London, 2005) and modern classics (Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, 1992, or Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, 2007). Mitchell, apart from directing opera, including *The Sacrifice*

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(2007) by contemporary composer James MacMillan (and she has fewer opera productions to date than her colleagues), has also staged the oratorio *Jephtha* by Handel (2003) and Bach's *St Matthew Passion* (2007). In fact it is not surprising, given the precedents set as regards opera by Brook, Strehler and Lyubimov and then Stein and Wilson, how many of these contemporary directors have moved easily from straight drama to opera. The main exceptions are those who have theatre companies of their own, such as LeCompte or Stafford-Clark, or Barba, or McBurney, although of course Lepage and Dodin also have their own companies, while even McBurney has involved not only string quartets, but also played against a full orchestra performing a Shostakovich symphony. Donnellan adds a new musical dimension by working on ballet at the Bolshoi in Moscow.

Possibly the reason is, as Sellars puts it, that only opera has the resources that allow for a long enough rehearsal time to develop interesting new performance work – particularly when (as he customarily does) the production is developed through a consortium of opera companies spanning Europe and the United States, which means being able to work with the same group of singers and dancers throughout (as with *Doctor Atomic*, 2005, which started out in Los Angeles, moved to Vienna and Brussels, then back to Chicago). The same luxury of time and resources is also available through companies that attract government or philanthropic funding, in a way that a single director on his or her own cannot. This is also an explanation why so many of the directors selected for inclusion in this volume run their own, long-standing theatre companies, or, like Dodin, head up a major state company. These all have the time to experiment and, in working with the same group of actors over a period, have the option of developing devised, strongly physically embodied theatre or, like Stafford-Clark, of developing new work by young playwrights.

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## I Eugenio Barba (b. 1936)

Born in Gallipoli in the heel of Italy, Eugenio Barba fled the military academy destined for him by his family to Norway, where he became a seaman. A UNESCO scholarship took him to Poland where, at Opole, he spent three years with Jerzy Grotowski as both his apprentice and assistant, subsequently disseminating information about Grotowski's work internationally with an integrity and efficacy that have been frequently overlooked by his admirers. Refused re-entry into Poland after his travels abroad, which included India and his discovery of Kathakali, Barba returned to Oslo to find that, as a foreigner, he had no chance whatsoever of directing in the established theatres of this city. Barba's solution to the problem of how to continue as a theatre practitioner was to found Odin Teatret in 1964 with young people who had not been accepted by the National Theatre School – 'rejects', as he ironically defines them and himself (*New Theatre Quarterly* (2007) 23: 2, 100). His was to be an alternative practice outside the confines of institutional regulations and demands.

In 1966, invited by the town council of Holstebro in Denmark, Barba settled in this out of the way rural spot with three of the original four actors of Odin, building living spaces, working spaces and a library in the farmhouse offered to him for his purposes. This complex was named the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (NTL) to signal Barba's goal of researching the art of the actor, and it was here that he set up supporting publishing ventures and film-making facilities and where he edited a journal; the seventh issue in 1968 was composed of the essays by Grotowski to be published almost immediately in English as *Towards a Poor Theatre*. The Odin was, and still is, the epicentre of



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the various activities of the NTL, all of which have promoted the group's interests across the globe. Barba's own writings have sustained Odin's fame and longevity—one of the longest-existing groups in Western theatre (albeit with some changes in its composition over the decades), rivalled only by Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, followed by The Wooster Group in the United States.

Formed in the spirit of utopian communities, the Odin evolved from the principles that Barba had inherited from Grotowski: improvisation-based practice, intensely personal internal experience made flesh, and the idea that performance was not only a craft but a way of life and, first and foremost, a matter of research in laboratory conditions. This was Odin's model in the first ten years of its existence as its members, all autodidacts, trained behind closed doors. The Grotowskian legacy, together with Barba's experience of negotiating different cultures and languages, his sense of being an outsider (to which he refers freely in his books and articles) and his thirst for intellectual research, much of which took a pedagogical turn, has certainly shaped his and the Odin's numerous projects. Apart from the productions that eventually came out of the actors' immersion in training, these projects include the encounters started at Holstebro during the 1970s with renowned practitioners—Jacques Lecoq, Etienne Decroux, Jean-Louis Barrault, Dario Fo, among them—and with such scholars as the anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Kirsten Hastrup and theatre specialists Ferdinando Taviani and Nicola Savarese. Barba's aim was to interconnect workshops, demonstrations, round-table discussions and conferences so that making theatre and thinking about it or conceptualising it could be part and parcel of each other. The academic side of practice, then, was not filtered out into a parallel area but integrated with practice as such.

The 1970s also saw the beginnings of Barba's life-long commitment to barbers, the Third Theatre and the International School for Theatre Anthropology (ISTA). As is well known, the barbers are an exchange of performances between the Odin and groups from different cultures, whether they are from remote communities (the Yanomani in Amazonian Venezuela, 1976), in suburban Montevideo (1987) or farming groups gathering in a local school during *Festuge*, a festival

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week in Holstebro (2004). These barter, based on cultural 'goods', involve songs, dances, acrobatics, Odin exercises and other informal, usually daily-life cultural pieces and are essentially about making human contact rather than promoting art. They are the precursors of Third Theatre, which might be best described as a networking operation between small, unofficial and even off-track theatre groups. The latter, in Barba's view, are disconnected from mainstream theatre but are just as removed from the various avant-gardes in train that, despite their apparent non-conformism, are actually legitimated by the social structures and values in place. Third Theatre, as he defines it,

lives on the fringes, 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

*(Beyond the Floating Islands, 1986, p. 193).*

This is, of course, a fairly accurate description of the Odin itself, and of relevance to Barba's account is the fact that Odin's daily 'theatrical experience' is made up of hours of training targeting the particular skills of the individuals in the group. Take Iben Nagel Rasmussen, for instance, who joined Odin in 1966 and has defined her performance identity through her elliptical narratives and her vocal and musical abilities, especially in playing the flute and drums. Or there is Julia Varley, who joined in 1976 and has become an expert storyteller, stiltwalker and otherwise adept street-theatre performer. The Odin has also maintained its own 'tradition' during these past decades by welcoming new apprentices who are supervised by an older actor but are expected to seek their own path. In other words, the group's community ethos is not meant to infringe upon self-regulated self-development, any more than Barba's overview of work-in-progress is meant to control that work. Nevertheless, this libertarian approach