

On Dramaturgy in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: We propose to discuss the notion of *dramaturgy written on stage* as an emerging form in the twenty-first century theatre. Also, we emphasize the idea that this form of creating the performance is rooted in a theatrical tradition. Thus, we notice that, in Eugenio Barba's vision, *the dramaturgy of the performance*, structured on three levels of organization, respectively *the organic or dynamic dramaturgy of the actor*, *the narrative dramaturgy of the director* and *the evocative dramaturgy* that includes the *dramaturgy of the spectator*, is representative for the collective creation as the actors are co-authors of the performance, but, at the same time, it is representative of that type of performance that embodies the director's thought, reminding of the *practitioners-playwrights'* way of creating dramaturgy. In *the dramaturgy of the performance*, instead of a sequence of events, which unfold according to the cause-effect equation, the director opts for a complex web of actions that *suggest* and not *affirm*. We, also, note that in this new dramaturgy in which the smallest action is treated as a dramaturgical element, special importance is given to the spectator seen as an individual who, first of all, exists by himself/herself and then as part of a whole/audience. Under the influence of Artaud who visualized the performance as *poetry in space*, the new dramaturgy opposes textocentrism, proposing a symbolic language meant not only to *whip the spectator's senses* putting him/her in a *state of play*, but also to provoke in him/her a *change of state*. Thus, the performance no longer addresses the spectator's *understanding*, but his/her *perception*, creating the necessary conditions for the spectator to forge his/her own dramaturgy based on his/her *emotional and intellectual reactions*. Writing dramaturgy on stage is specific to those theatre companies that, alike the Troupe de Monsieur and the Globe Theatre, create the performance in the stage laboratory.

Keywords: dramaturgy, scenic action, collective creation, director's vision, spectator

Motto:

“The evocative experience involved a leap of consciousness in the spectator: a *change of state*. (Barba 2010: 183)

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare or Molière wrote their plays for the actors, in order

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to be incarnated on stage, and not to be published. The creative process, occurred on stage, involved an act of writing down the actors' cues or of converting the orality in a written form. Today we deal with two types of dramaturgy: on the one hand, the dramaturgy understood as the art of writing dramatic texts, on the other hand, *the dramaturgy of the performance* as an emerging form in the twenty-first century. With the publication of Eugenio Barba's book, *Bruciare la casa: Origini di un regista*, in 2009, we witness nowadays the birth of a new definition of dramaturgy. Barba operates, in the theatre practice, the distinction between the dramaturgy as a procedure which belongs to literature and the dramaturgy *created on stage*. Together with his intensified studies on *identifying and comparing certain technical principles belonging to actors and dancers from different genres*, studies that led to the coagulation of a new field of research, namely *theatre anthropology*, the director re-evaluates the notion of dramaturgy which he defines as *the work of the actions*.

Trying to explain in my own words the technical terminology of my own theatre tradition, I defined 'dramaturgy' according to its etymology: *drama-ergon*, the work of the actions. Or rather: the way the actors' actions enter into work. For me, dramaturgy was not a procedure belonging only to literature, but a technical operation which was inherent in the weaving and growth of a performance and its different components. (Barba 2010: 8)

The dramaturgy *created on stage* emerges against the background of a *tension* between the performances based on *pre-existing written dramatic texts* which unavoidably imprint the playwrights' style in the universe and atmosphere of the performance and *the physical and concrete language of the stage* which can be materialized in the absence of a *pre-existing text*. Richard Schechner speaks about "the new theatre civilisation, where the performance is written on stage, and not on page, as being a civilisation which risks to lose its memory" (Barba 2012: 202). In the new theatre civilisation, there are certain practitioners who choose to give shape to their productions by creating the whole spectacular organism on stage.

Revisiting the dramaturgy, Barba approaches it from the perspective of the coexistence of opposites, of the creative chaos and the orderly thinking, of the director's vision and the technique, of the freedom of creation and the craft. Dramaturgy, therefore, is not reduced to a procedure of writing a dramatic text, but is a concrete way of creating the performance in its entirety. Orality, fictional subjectivity, overlapping planes of perspectives, contradictions between intention and expressed intention prevail in the performance texture. The dramaturgical work consists in creating the actions that weave the story of the performance. Characters and scenes are built by making use of an outer geography, the landscape of historical and cultural values, and of an inner geography, the realm of personal fantasies,

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respectively by making use of a rich palette of narrative sources and of the *imagination-in-action* of the director and actors. Barba identifies three levels of organizing the dramaturgy which he considers essential: the level of the *organic dramaturgy*, the level of the *narrative dramaturgy*, and the level of the *evocative dramaturgy*.

At the level of organic or dynamic dramaturgy I worked with physical and vocal actions, costumes, objects, music, sounds, lights and spatial features. At the level of narrative dramaturgy I worked with characters, stories, texts, events and iconographic references. The evocative dramaturgy had a different nature from the other two. It was a goal. It designated the work necessary to make the same performance reverberate differently in the spectators' biographical caverns. I recognised it only from its effects: when it succeeded in touching the personal superstitions, the taboos and the wounds of the spectators, as well as those of the director, the first spectator. (Barba 2010: 10)

During the rehearsals, the director generates what he calls the *Disorder*, namely that "logic and rigour which provoke *the experience of bewilderment*" in the director and in the spectator, or that "irruption of an energy that confronts us with the unknown" (Barba 2010: 17), causing, thus, a chaos of creation or a creative storm capable of reflecting the *quality of any living organism* in a continuous oscillation between *Order* and *Disorder*. *Order* and *Disorder* are two exploratory paths which accompany the whole process of forging the dramaturgy. Gradually, the dramaturgical levels crystallize, establish relationships, intertwine, undergo modifications due to the transfers of the actions from one sequence to another, transplants of meanings, changes in the order of actions and scenes. It is a creative process whose objective consists in replacing the linearity with non-linearity, or in finding a way to tell several stories in one or to hide a story behind each scenic action by creating *dramaturgical knots, reversals*, coexistences of opposites. The story of the performance, which contains several stories in itself, is meant to address the senses and the mind, the fleeting thought and the memory of *each spectator*. Sometimes the significant detail turns out to be a turning point in the unfolding of actions, causing the narrative path to be reversed. The investigation of the scenic *bios*, in which the pre-expressive level is considered "generator of the theatrical organism and of the actor's dramaturgy" (Marinis 1996: 257), leads to a detailed analysis of *the layered nature of the performance* and to the identification of the copresence of succession and simultaneity. In the process of weaving the two dimensions of the dramaturgy of the performance, instead of a succession of actions, which takes place according to the cause-effect equation, the director opts for a complex web of actions which *suggest* and not *affirm*. In this process, the rehearsals begin in the absence of a text or a script or a production plan.

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At Odin Teatret there is no preliminary work on the text or on ‘the character’, understood as a part of a dramatic organism with pre-defined and well delineated contours. It is the performance itself, when the rehearsals are over, which defines the characters and their relationships. [...] The starting point is not a scenario explaining to the actors the existing relationships and situations, scene by scene, between the different *dramatis personae*. There is nothing to help the actors to foresee how the plot will develop and end. Nobody knows in advance the story or its purpose. (Taviani 2011: 20-21)

We are present at a *vivisection* performed on the actor who creates materials for the performance, more precisely, their *scores*, in order to whip the spectators’ senses. *The dramaturgy of the actor* is the basis or the *nervous system of the performance*. At the level of *the narrative dramaturgy*, we deal with narrative nuclei assembled in such a way as to create for each spectator the possibility to follow a thread of the story. The level of *the evocative dramaturgy* is a result of the director’s vision which involves the spectator in the creative process in order to provoke in him/her a *change of state*, and, at the same time, to determine him/her to forge his/her own dramaturgy. Thus, the performance is seen as a *theatrical composition resulting from a plurality of executions: of the director, of the actor and of the spectator* (Barba 2010). Obviously, in this case, the director makes use of the collective creation formula, and we mention, here, in this respect, two representative performances, *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, Jerzy Grotowski’s final production from the first phase of his research, the *Theatre of Productions*, and Peter Brook’s performance, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Collective creation represents a way of conceiving a theatre performance that cannot be reduced to a single definition. Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva’s study, *Toward a New History of Collective Creation*, emphasizes the idea that the collaborative practices, known today in England and the United States as *devised theatre*, span more than a century of theatre history; they begin with the experiments of Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, continue with the practices of Jerzy Grotowski and, nowadays, with the group work carried out at Odin Teatret and The Workcentre of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards where we identify a group professional ethics aiming to *facilitate and to support the centrality of the actor in the creative act* (Syssoyeva 2013). For Barba, *the actor’s dramaturgy is the indication of his autonomy as individual and artist and represents his contribution to the creation of the dramaturgy of the performance*.

Regarding the work of the actor, we note that, in the case of Stanislavsky, we deal with *the emotional identification*, in the case of Brecht, with the double hypostasis of the actor, respectively *the one who shows and the one shown*, in the case of Grotowski, with the immersion of the actor in a *process of self-penetration and revelation of his deep self through a sacrificial act*, in the case of Barba, with the actor who is the creator of his/her own score which, regardless of the narrative dramaturgy,

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tells *a story made up of rhythms, oppositions, simultaneous actions* (Barba). Therefore, the actor no longer identifies or distances himself from a character who has an independent existence in a dramatic text, but prepares materials based on his reactions to the theme or idea proposed by the director for the performance in preparation.

It is a way of proceeding in which every actor is responsible for his or her own personal path, refining it with extreme care like a detail whose only importance is that it be alive, before knowing the landscape of which it will be a part. [...] Every detail is a physical action precisely designed. [...] It is the fruit of an imagination-in-action, rooted in the actor's physical-mental organism. More than a sign, it is a cell with a life of its own, although still not part of an organ and a destiny indicating its identity and belonging. An action-cell can be transplanted in different unprogrammed contexts. The director-playwright is responsible for this operation and acts, above all, as a transformer of meaning. (Taviani 2011: 17-20)

The golden rule in creating *real actions* is synchronism for body and voice manifest themselves at the same time. In training, the actor acquires the capacity *to think with the body*, that is, "to translate instantly the intentions into actions" (Carreri 2007: 177), and through improvisation, which represents the realm of the actor's absolute freedom of manifestation, where images, states, sensations, rhythms, memories come to life. Sometimes, during improvisations, the actor follows *the logic in jumps of the associations allowing him/her to continually re-act to the actions he/she executes* (Carreri 2007: 100). Through the work of the actor rooted in the laboratory research, a *sensorial-spiritualized dramaturgy* or a *meta-carnal dramaturgy* is coagulated, aspiring to produce an *organic effect* on the spectator. Throughout the creative process, the actor's score is subject to changes made by the director until it becomes "a coherent sequence of dynamic peripeteias: *bios* (life), scenic presence ready to represent and acquire a meaning by being connected to a text, to the score of another actor, to an object, a melody or a light" (Barba 2010: 30-31).

The narrative dramaturgy is designed so that *the story's literary, social, political and ethical connotations* (Barba 2010: 88) to be deciphered by the spectator. The director makes use of various narrative sources such as poems, stories, novels, proverbs, biographies, essays, memories, photographs, paintings which he relates to the actors' scores. The narrative sources, passed through the filter of the versatile personality of the actor, are modified so as to contribute to the creation of *narrative contexts*. Sometimes, the starting point in this *anatomical-mystical adventure* may be a fact published in a newspaper, but this fact is detached from its daily reality and correlated with facts from distant or recent history, and sometimes with moments from the biographies of the director and the actors, in an attempt to identify and create those archetypal figures relevant today. Bundles of possible meanings are embedded in the

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physical and vocal actions of the actors, in unusual sounds, in invented languages, in songs, screams, murmurs, whispers, in vocal intensities, intonations, volume, musicality. The dramaturgical levels intertwine generating allusions and ambiguities which carry meanings on multiple levels of communication. The scenes, ordered by the director who, in this sense, applies the technique of montage, address directly the perception of the spectator. The spectator no longer receives a narrative developed according to a logic imposed by a text, but a succession / simultaneity of the sequences developed according to the director's logic in which characters and situations are poured in the pattern of the dramaturgical montage. For Barba, "[...] theatre is experience. It is not linear rational knowledge, but simultaneity" (Barba 2021: 10).

Countless experiments have been made and are being made regarding the condition of the spectator, but also the role he plays in the *unfolding* of the performance. Exploring the nature of the relationship that is established between actor and spectator led to the identification of several hypostases of the spectator seen as a *passive entity*, *active entity*, *participant*, *witness*, *spectator-actor*, *player* and *co-author*. In this respect, we note that there are numerous practitioners interested in identifying and implementing a series of procedures to involve the spectator in the performance. For example, following Bertolt Brecht's model, Augusto Boal addresses the rational part of the spectator in an attempt to increase his capacity for analysis and comprehension, but also his decision-making capacity, as "the participant has to intervene decisively in the dramatic action and change it" (Boal 2008: 117). In the absence of the fourth wall, in the *forum theatre*, the actor addresses the spectator directly and invites him on stage to give him the opportunity to intervene in the unfolding of the stage narrative. The aim is to make him aware that once he has the capacity to intervene in a fictional reality, he could also acquire the capacity to intervene in the reality as such.

... the audience, the people, have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, in theatrical practice. Maybe the theatre in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without a doubt a rehearsal of revolution. The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practises a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. (Boal 2008: 119)

Another example is the *reminiscence theatre* in which, sometimes, the procedures of the *verbatim theatre* are used, the interviews taken with the participants being narrative materials used in the performance. Participants have the opportunity to contribute narratives for the performance in preparation, and sometimes to get directly involved in the creative process, and even to play various roles in the performance. The *educational theatre* also, through interviews, debates, improvisations, engages the participants in the elaboration of the performance and the

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interpretation of the characters. At the same time, the multidisciplinary performance, predominantly nonverbal, which is sometimes presented to us as a result of combining live music with moving sculptures, machines, songs, dances, acrobatics, projections, and in which the actor no longer hides behind the character's mask, but is engaged in physical activities, aims to provoke, especially, visceral reactions in the spectator. And more examples can be given. It is desired for the spectator to leave his armchair in the performance hall and to go on stage to intervene in the narrative unfolding or to become a subject of study and at the same time an interpreter of his own story. Or it is desired for the spectator to become a player in a performance similar to a video game and according to a predetermined code to intervene in a so-called emergent narrative.

In the dramaturgy of the performance, the spectator is seen as co-author. In this regard, Marco De Marinis observes:

We can speak of a dramaturgy of the spectator in a passive or, more precisely, objective sense in which we conceive of the audience as a dramaturgical object, a mark or target for the actions/operations of the director, the performers, and if there is one, the writer. We can also speak of a dramaturgy of the spectator in an active or subjective sense, referring to the various receptive operations/actions that an audience carries out: perception, interpretation, aesthetic appreciation, memorization, emotive and intellectual response [...]. These operations/actions of the audience's members are to be considered truly dramaturgical (not just metaphorically) since it is only through these actions that the performance text achieves its fullness, becoming realized in all its semantic and communicative potential. (Marinis 1987: 101)

The performance no longer addresses the spectator's *understanding*, but his *perception*, thus creating the necessary conditions for the spectator through his *emotional and intellectual reactions* to give birth to his own dramaturgy. The rehearsals represent the propitious environment for creating the dramaturgy of the performance which takes the spectator out of an *everyday space-time* favouring his propensity to project his consciousness into a *fictional space-time*. This results in a translation of the spectator's perceptions on the level of the fictional reality of the performance. If we define dramaturgy as a sequence of events, these events can be narrative and then we deal with literature; the events, however, can be dynamic, organic and then we deal with a dramaturgy of sounds which stir emotions within the spectator; and, thirdly, we deal with a succession of perceptual events which are, in fact, the true experience of the spectator. Each spectator has his own biography and will experience this sequence of perceptual events differently. So the director can create this sequence of events in such a way that it always makes the spectator unsure of what he perceives. To some extent, the director can lead the course of the

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spectator's very personal associations as "Each spectator who might have watched my performance was considered an individual made up of a blend of my spectators-fetishes" (Barba 2010: 184). There is a dialogue between the actor and the spectator, a dialogue of actions and reactions, a play of mutual stimuli. The performance is a meeting place between the values of the past and those of the present, between the values of the director and the actors with those of the spectators. The actors catch the spectator's attention alluring him into a space-time of initiation by sharing experiences that generate a process of remembrance in the spectator. Treated as a part of the dramaturgy, the spectator becomes subject of reflection and investigation for the director, and his reactions are subjected to a thorough analysis. The director intervenes on the passive nature of the spectator who becomes an active presence in a *here and now* of the spectacular event. This intervention is based on a procedure of decomposing "the reactions and the mental behaviours of the spectators-fetishes into a few possible basic attitudes" (Barba 2010: 184). The spectators-fetishes are, in essence, possible ways of perceiving the reality as such which directly influence the perception of the fictional reality.

... a child carried away by the euphoria of rhythm and wonder [...] the blind Jorge Luis Borges, who enjoyed the least literary allusions and the thick layers of vocal information; the deaf Beethoven listening to the performance through his eyes, appreciating the symphony of its physical actions; a bororo from Amazonia who envisaged it as a ceremony for the forces of nature [...]. (Barba 2010: 184)

As an observer at the rehearsals for *The Chronic Life*, dramaturgy and direction by Eugenio Barba, I had the opportunity to come into direct contact with the concrete ways of creating the dramaturgy of the performance considered a science of the stage, in which the smallest scenic action is treated as a dramaturgical element. The action of the performance, centred on the theme of the father seen in a double hypostasis, mortal and divine, is set in a post-war future. The dramaturgy brings to light the various facets of the war treated as a permanent state of individual and collective being. The spectator is transmitted the idea of historical cyclicality, of the permanence of the state of war; after all, "The books which preserve the revolts of the past evoke the spirit of our time. The images in the newspapers are superimposed on the pages of the books" (Barba 1985: 23). Actors and spectators are in close proximity in a studio space where a young boy embarks on a journey in search of his father. In the space designed and named by the director the *space-river*, the spectator, sitting face to face with the other spectators, has the opportunity to choose the actions he watches and thus to create his own montage. Phantom-like characters inhabit this space whose setting is called by the director, *The Raft of the Medusa*. The performance text is performed by actors in several languages, Danish, Norwegian, Spanish, English,

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Romanian, Chechen and Basque. Many stories are told, some hidden behind the actions executed by the actors, others inserted in the actors' essentialized lines and in the relationships between the actors and the props, music, spectators. Historical, religious, political, and cultural figures and facts are treated in emotional and ironical modes through series of identifications and alienations of the actors, thus further accentuating the atmosphere of loneliness and dissolution of an entire world *crushed by the ferocity of history*. Day by day, the rehearsals begin with the training of the actors who repeat their songs and work on their scores which are written and rewritten on stage. Training is the space-time of the physical-vocal-mental exercise, of working on scores, in which discipline is self-discipline and the foundation of the entire work.

In conclusion, we note that the dramaturgy defined by Eugenio Barba at the beginning of the third millennium differs radically from the so-called traditional dramaturgy, respectively from the procedure of writing a dramatic text by a playwright. Dramaturgy is no longer understood as belonging to literature. Barba's perspective is characterized by radical novelty. Through investigating the nature of the scenic elements which contribute to the creation of a theatre performance and their reinterpreting according to different ways of functioning, we witness the emergence of dramaturgy as *the work of the actions*. The understanding of the dramaturgy and, consequently, of the playwright oriented towards the creating of the whole spectacular organism, of which the performance text is only a part, also redefines the work of the director and actors. As a result, the director, the actor and also the spectator are involved in the dramaturgy of the performance, each having his/her own level of working on dramaturgy. Eugenio Barba proposes a new method of approaching and creating dramaturgy, a twenty-first century method, emerged from his theatre research.

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