

## Building Bridges and the Flow of Tradition

My talk will focus on Project The Bridge - Developing Theatre Arts whose main work has been the performance *One Breath Left*. In it I will briefly examine two things: the context of this work and the practice. Until seeing the new version of *One Breath Left* I had my talk prepared – what I saw on Tuesday made me rewrite it completely. This is as it should be with the practice leading the documentation. Any way of thinking about the practice may be planned in advance but needs to acknowledge constant process and thus change.

This rewriting made me consider very pragmatically the key question of not just **what** to document and **how** but also the practical means of documentation. Documenting is also a practice, and a creative one. It need not be a dry process of theorization – but how can we align ourselves more closely with the practice, as is the chance offered here in this project?

If the documentation needs to evolve with the project the exciting possibility of using the web for fast publication seems central. This is not then just retrospective but processual. For example there have been seven versions of *One Breath Left*. I would be interested to know what makes each a version as such, when the work is evolving so quickly, but I assume it means a different constellation of performers. But how can those who have responsibility for documenting such an evolution catch this?

The ownership of materials on the web is also very different from traditional academic works by a single author. It allows multiple positions and authors, even impressions. This mode of dissemination is especially relevant for us, as we are a team or research group – structurally much closer to a scientific model, though with very different parameters. So together we need to find the means that reflect this range and diversity.

What then have I had to reconsider? I have seen three versions of *One Breath Left*. The first one Marco de Marinis described yesterday with four Singaporean actors. He gave the date of development May 1999, but the beginning was a year before in May 1988. Why mention this? I do not wish to be pedantic, but simply factually, The Bridge Project was underway **before** Grotowski died. As Thomas indicated yesterday Grotowski was aware of it. I will make clear later why this is important.

The first step onto the Bridge came through interaction with Theatre Ox from Singapore. Four of the group's members had all applied **individually** in 1998 at selection time, when new participants are chosen to join the Workcenter. They were all accepted and began to work partly as a group in May that year. Initially this was alongside the Workcenter downstairs in the Vallicelli space, for there was no room for them **within** *Action*, but then increasingly in closer collaboration, as their own work on ancient Chinese texts progressed. This further excited and gradually infiltrated the Workcenter's activities. After one year, a half hour sketch of a performance was made. The group (though with two different people) was invited to stay another year, during which a more formed shape evolved of a one hour long performance, with directorial input from Biagini.

During the same period, the group's leader Gey Ping Ang (who had previously spent a year at the Workcenter in 1994) worked with Richards on ancient Chinese songs. Her private work with Richards merged with the group's presentational work and so grew the specific dynamic of the performance / non-performance in *One breath Left*. I am not sure when exactly, but Theatre Ox then merged with the Workcenter. Through 2000 - 2001 the performance changed to include a 'death chorus' of performers from those who 'do' *Action*, including Biagini. This interaction, as Marco de Marinis rightly described it, was a radical step. This version was shown in Singapore and in the Generazioni festival of 2001 in Pontedera, as well as in Vienna in 2001 and 2002.

Different versions of *One Breath Left* have now been shown throughout Italy, in Poland, in Moscow and in Singapore.

De Marinis was correct to say that previously the links between the two modes were very visible. This binary of performance/nonperformance was an accurate way to describe it. It was, I quote, “an experiment in at times directing audience attention and at other times ‘abandoning’ it.” At certain moments in *One Breath Left* the performer, usually Gey Ping Ang, withdrew into what seemed like the private world of a song. The narrative drive surrendered to its demands, to allow the singing of the song to take its ‘natural development’, as it has been described. There was a letting go of the directing of the montage and narrative. Based on what I saw on Tuesday this seems to no longer be a valid way of describing it. Although the performer’s process might be using techniques from art as vehicle, externally this mode of work is no longer visible – Gey Ping Ang’s work is supported much more closely by and woven into the choral action. From an outside view, integration has happened through a process of layering and integration. There is now a much richer and more complex composition that the open rehearsal allowed us to see - revealing something of how the piece is constructed.

Significantly, Gey Ping Ang’s singing work does also not stand alone as the only musical line of action. The piece also uses songs from the Western tradition – specifically Gregorian chants from 7 AD. Thus this new version is called *One Breath Left – Dies Irae*. It also includes text from Kafka. The integration or bridging refers now also to Eastern and Western sources.

Yet I am uncertain if the metaphor of a bridge is still useful, though this is all it is – a simple way of describing something very complex. If I look at a bridge I always wonder how the middle bit has been built, the central link, which has no immediate foundation or connection to either side. In this new work we are much closer to the

centre of the bridge where it seems to hold itself up. I am not sure if the term the Bridge term is still valid. Is this not now simply a road ? For the spectator it is probably just a performance as Antonio Attisani said yesterday – it is art as vehicle and presentation **at the same time**. His useful call to keep questioning terminology made me wonder about this metaphor..

But what does *One Breath Left's* development tell us about tradition ? Carla Pollastrelli was right to call this word into question in her paper. But in the East it is very clear what tradition is – Vanessa Polselli reminded us of this in her discussion of transmission. There are clear models of this in Japan such as the iemoto system and the notion of a master – ideas that certainly interested Grotowski.

The contact with the Asian performers reminds us of this, though we should not assume that their geography makes them automatically carriers of tradition. Gey Ping Ang, for example, had to do a lot of research in order to even find them. But their important presence in the Workcenter has provided a Bridge connecting East and West. This has not been consciously intercultural – we should remember that the application of all four of the Ox members was individual and their work simply offered interesting potential. But this influence cannot be ignored.

It is important though that this new project is happening in Europe not Japan or India – however much Thomas might want to go there as he reminded us yesterday. In *Tracing Roads Across the East* is Moscow !! In basing this project in Europe, the Workcenter asks the key question - what needs can this project address in relation to our understanding of theatrical tradition in Europe ? And why might this be necessary ?

Nina Kiraly from Budapest yesterday explained very clearly the gap that the

Workcenter filled in Moscow between Stanislavski and Grotowski. This for me is perhaps the most important aspect of Thomas's first book, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*. Namely, the fact that it makes this connection explicit. This is always a shock for students who see two very different end points and find it hard to conceive that there may be a shared process. Why is this leap in understanding so difficult ?

The need to redefine our understanding of a European theatre tradition and bridge gaps is vital. This issue is central to the Tracing Roads Across document. Interestingly Eugenio Barba has just had a piece published in the May *New Theatre Quarterly* 19:2, 2003 called 'Grandfathers, Orphans and the Family Saga of European theatre' - which I discovered whilst writing this last week. In it he traces his roots like a family tree and criticizes both the naming of singular progenitors, (remember Carla Pollastrelli first cited Meyerhold in relation to Grotowski yesterday) as well as the tendency for theatre historians to write of 'disconnected traditions.' Theatre historians have too often written about conflict in the development of 20th Century theatre. Brecht is pitched in opposition to Stanislavski. Meyerhold 'split' from Stanislavski. But there is great danger in being so oppositional. It creates the too familiar 'story' of one artist betraying another, of rupture. Meyerhold was Stanislavski's student and he gave him the First MAT Studio to lead. In 1938, just before his death, Stanislavski described Meyerhold as his 'sole heir'. What tied them together is just as significant as what differentiated them.

Asian theatre specialist James Brandon refers to traditional performing arts in Japan such as Noh or Kabuki as making and being within a 'flow of tradition'. Even if we don't know what tradition per se is, we can usefully identify some of its attributes. My research into the practice of Tadashi Suzuki showed how in America many institutions have picked up the Suzuki Method, as has the director Anne Bogart director of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute. Why ?

For SITI it was in order to develop a sense of continuity, to create a community in a world that is very individualist and where actors often move from director to director and consequently feel isolated. It was also to help fight against the continuous pressure on them to be innovative. In Europe we lack an understanding of continuity and structures - artists are constantly expected to innovate, and projects are mostly short term. We need at least the **idea** of tradition, even if we do not all agree on what the actual term means.

In a paper 'Theory and Practice in the Theatre Studies at the University', presented at the 1998 Monash University Conference in Australia, Patrice Pavis discussed the need for a reoccidentalisation of European theatre. As he stated, we have moved on from interculturalism – remember the link with Ox was not intentional but was just serendipity, even if arose from and was enabled by the context of the important work and thinking around interculturalism in 1990s. I agree with Pavis that we Europeans do need to understand more about our own traditions - reflecting on what interculturalism has taught us but focused on our own histories and practices. This is an important shift that this project acknowledges and will contribute to.

One of the most interesting practices called into question by this project and the evolution in a very short space of time of *One Breath Left*, is the role of the director. Richards and Biagini are both performers as Grotowski was not. In this their work moves closer towards Asian models of performance practice and transmission where traditions are carried through the performer, rather than a director figure. In Europe theatre history has focused almost exclusively on directors' theatre, which Grotowski was part of for half of his working life. But now performers run the Workcenter. What difference does and will this make ?

Again though we should be careful to look for continuity rather than rupture.

The shift to performance that *The Bridge* encompasses might seem an inevitable development, or a conscious departure from Grotowski's previous focus. Where further could the Workcenter go with *Action*, meant primarily for the doer? The Workcenter found, by chance, the next step forward. It flowed, was not premeditated and it was something that Grotowski knew about. As knowledge of the craft of directing was lacking in Biagini and Richards, research was done into the earliest phase of Grotowski's explorations. Biagini returned to the early productions, which they had not seen themselves except on video, though Biagini in fact had only seen one piece on tape. It is important to remember that *Apocalypsis cum figuris* was last shown in 1980. The focus on craft has provided a constant core to all Grotowski's research and continuity - only now the range of applications of that craft is expanding.

But as the Workcenter now enters more fully into creating performance what is the craft of the director as experienced by the performer? *One Breath Left - Dies Irae* will be premiered in less than a month's time in Istanbul. How do they use the knowledge that transmission has given them, to direct? And they are doing this together, one totally inside the work, the other seemingly both inside and out, though this is an early and simplistic configuration. How does this operate? I imagine rhythm is one strong binding agent. But in European theatre, this way of making work is a radical shift forward from the more accepted notion of a singular director. My question to Mario and Thomas is to ask how in directing do they use the knowledge, the 'inner aspect of the work' as Grotowski called it, that transmission has given them as performers?

To conclude I have two questions. Firstly, in *Tracing Roads Across Europe* can the Workcenter show the map of traditions to be joined up and one which does not overemphasize difference, but rather flow and continuity - ideas familiar in Asia? It is also the responsibility of the documentation team to clarify the context of this practice. And secondly, focusing on the practice and collaboration, can they introduce a model of

a different kind of director and change our understanding of what that term means?  
And if so, how then does this new work change the work of the performer? These questions are just the beginning of a flow of analysis that hopefully will provide a bridge between the observer/reader and the theatre maker.

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