

## Eugenio Barba

### THE PARADOX OF THE SEA

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*Centuries, weapons and the sea which unites and separates*

According to Luis Borges, the Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto believed that the indispensable ingredients for a great book were ‘the dawn and the west, centuries, weapons and the sea - that treacherous abyss and means of communication’.

This applies not only to those important texts about which Borges, our modern Tiresias, spoke but also to cultures, provided that we don’t regard them as universes encircled by metaphoric or real walls, moving towards one another and, at times, colliding dramatically. The term culture conceals a flow of interactions and appropriations, simultaneous processes of decanting and interweaving that converge or obstruct each other. The unity of a culture is a web of contradictions: a culture maintains its own identity on condition that it is able to endure and cohabit with tensions and metamorphoses.

But I ask myself: why *weapons*?

When I was thirty or forty years old , those ‘weapons’ that in the verse of our modern Tiresias are included with the ‘centuries’ and the ‘sea’, reminded me of the heroes of *Orlando furioso*, of the *Chanson de Roland*, or of Baldwin, the fourth king of Jerusalem, crusader and leper. Now that I am about to turn seventy, that same verse doesn't evoke ancient legends but the daily chronicle of the times in which I live, the events reported by the newspapers and which appear in the animated indifference of the television, between a talk-show and the commentary of a football match.

*A country called exile*

I don't recognise these times as my own. I want and am able to enjoy the wind of another way of living time. Perhaps it is an illusion, yet the country in which I dwell allows me this illusion. I have often wondered if this country can be quoted as an example or whether it is just an exception. ‘Exception’ implies something exceptional, but it is a bitter word, because I know that in the end the exception confirms the rule it opposes.

In order to escape rhetoric and bitterness, I tell myself: my country can be defined as a voluntary exile. The country in which I dwell is the theatre. But also around the term ‘theatre’ we must understand one another.

There are theatres standing as houses, surviving longer than their inhabitants, and maintaining an identity of their own while passing from hand to hand.

Then there are other theatres whose identity ignores stones and bricks. Their architecture consists of the relationships between the people who compose them. They cannot be inherited or filled with new contents: they will disappear with those same people. These theatres are formed by the intertwining of the paths traced by their inhabitants. When they stop advancing, their theatre loses its recognizable profile, its house. For me, for example, it would be a sheer contradiction to think of Odin Teatret continuing after those people who founded it and still keep it alive today. It would be as incongruous as thinking that a fist persists once you have opened your hand.

Such is the country in which I live. It is very small and yet vast. We are so many, spread over different continents, far from each other, profoundly different, bound by solid, elastic and fragile ties like the threads of a spider’s web. At times we are few, just three, four, fifteen people. At others, we spend time, energy and money to gather together for two days, a week, a month. Then we separate again, and each of us returns to the not-isolated loneliness that identifies us.

Such is the paradoxical space of my country. To live the 'exile' as a country is a living contradiction. It is a sad sign of our times that this type of exile can resemble a utopia. But it is a sign of the times which was often recurrent in history. The theatrical profession, in all countries and ages, even before being characterised as a craft producing images and performances, was distinguishable as a profession in exile - or rather, the profession of the exile.

### *The act of multicultural birth*

Inside this living contradiction, it is difficult to experience as a problem, a threat or a pressure, the events that shake our surrounding world, the confusing intertwining and the unexpected clashes among cultures, their quarrels for the same territory, the continuous changes of geographical and mental borderlines. Multiculturalism, in the country of the theatre, is not an emergency. It is something obvious which belongs to its act of birth. Its long history suffices to demonstrate it.

Those who practiced the theatrical craft, in Europe as in Asia, always lived the condition of strangers, as if they were in transit. The actors' troupes were composed of people coming from different regions and social classes. Theatre was *foreign* in the world in which it lived and among the spectators who made it live, above all because it contradicted the limitations and the hierarchies that maintained order in the surrounding society. For this reason theatre often constituted a separate micro-society, discriminated and despised. And therefore it was, at times, an island of freedom.

When in the twentieth century theatre seemed destined to perish because it appeared inadequate for the demands of modernity with its urban structure, economy and new types of performances, theatre people practiced - more through force of circumstance than as a conscious plan - a double strategy. On the one hand they induced the surrounding society to recognize the stage profession as a cultural good to be protected, releasing it from the chains of commerce. Our profession is *art*, they claimed, and managed to get it subsidized and safeguarded as a valuable *national legacy*. While this change of mentality was taking place, a few men and women established archipelagos of small autonomous theatrical islands. Each of these small islands lived, and still lives, in its own cultural environment as a negligible minority, capable nevertheless of opening its own path into new territories, thus escaping the customary enclosures of the commercial theatre and traditional artistic performances.

Marginalisation within its own professional and cultural environment is compensated by a widened sphere of action. A similar process of compensation concerns also the century-old performative traditions. The more a classical European or Asian theatre genre loses vigour locally, becoming old-fashioned within its context of origin, the more it acquires prestige beyond its own traditional boundaries, overcoming the cultural barriers and expanding the impact of its presence in a dense mesh of exchanges and decanting. In other words, it finds a new equilibrium within a multicultural horizon.

The theatre profession is no longer separated by language barriers. Despite its differences, it is welded more and more into one planetary professional country. It becomes possible to speak of a *unitary theatrical culture* that embraces experiences whose roots are in a distant past, in classical traditions, once respected or persecuted, as well as in small autonomous islands that carry out borderline practices.

*Diversity* is the basic matter of theatre. The fact that today diversity is experienced as a dramatic historical condition whose consequences worry governments and single individuals, should not let us forget that it is the fundamental material on which theatre has always worked. *Anyone who uses theatre as his/her own craft must know how to work on his/her own diversity.* S/he must explore it, weave it, transforming the curtain that divides us from the others into an enthralling embroidered veil through which others can look and discover their own visions. Which are *my* visions? I ignore them until a golden veil or a gleaming cobweb captures them. Until someone *strange* stops being a *stranger* and begins to talk to me with a voice that is both not mine and not not-mine.

For an emigrant like me, who affirms that his roots are in the sky, theatre has become the tool for encounters and exchanges to overcome mutual indifference. It is a technique that establishes relationships, helps to withstand conformity and builds bridges.

### *Organic subterranean bridges*

It is interesting to observe the inner nervous system of the organic bridges which theatre builds. In the relationship with the spectators, the living nature of these bridges derives from the ability of the performer's presence to reinforce a quality of awareness, independently of the words. We experience this when we are confronted by an actor who knows how to give scenic form to his/her body-in-life, or when we listen to a singer who captivates us even when we ignore his/her language.

In the relationship between performers from different genres and cultures, the bridges consist in the paradox of the techniques, similar to the paradox of the sea that unites and separates.

Acting techniques are doubly paradoxical, because we make prolonged efforts to appropriate them for the sole purpose - once we are in control of them - of freeing us from them. According to the way we look at them, techniques may separate or connect those who practice our profession. We can decide to look at technique as something in which the context, the ideologies, the religions or the dreams that are at the base of a tradition or of a small theatre group are distilled. Thus, at the same time that we glorify them, we make them useless, turning them into a wall or embalming them in a museum.

But we can also choose to approach the various acting techniques as the ground where we can meet, the place of physical translations and somatic re-foundations that unite and allow performers of distant origins to establish a dialogue between them.

It is up to us to decide whether techniques serve to separate or unite us. On their own, techniques are nothing. Their *meaning* is not in their origin. They whisper something important to each of us only in the moment we start to discover how to use them. Every culture has given a form to its own spectacular eloquence according to its own styles. To do so, they had to create a living subterranean theatre, an organic theatre of foundations with a basic technique.

Working at the surface of the styles, we can mutually admire the artistic results. We can also achieve a syncretism which at times is very effective, and at others leans towards degradation, muddled rather than composite.

The subterranean space of the foundations, on the other hand, becomes, for its very nature, the territory of the exchanges where the country of the theatre experiments its multicultural unity and organic complexity. The foundations are neither wine cellars nor catacombs. They are paradoxical subterranean bridges that allow the passage from one point to another in the country of the theatre which is united although spread in geographically distant places.

Unlike in theatre, in real life bridges do not always act as a means of communication between two regions, between the banks of a river, between one tribe and another, between the water and the sky.

### *The bridges and the simplicity*

Ronda is a town in the mountains of Andalusia, famous for its bridge built at the time of the Arabs, high up beside a gorge at the bottom of which a river plunges furiously. During the Spanish civil war, the Franco troops used it as a suitable place to execute prisoners. They tied them one to another, standing on the parapet, then a bullet in the neck of the first in the row - and down went all, crashing against the rocks and being dragged away by the impetuous stream. Ernest Hemingway immortalised this story in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

But I want to speak of another bridge, a splendid one. Kozda Mimar Sinan, the Michelangelo of the Ottoman Empire, was the architect of the Edirne mosque and that of Suleyman the Magnificent in Istanbul, as well as the impressive bridge on the river Drina in Visegrad, Serbia, at the end of the sixteenth century. The bridge of Mostar, one of the most admired in Europe, is also

attributed to him. This architectural masterpiece, described as a rainbow rising above the Milky Way, leaps over an abyss. However, it was not the ingenious Sinan who created this bridge, but Harudjin, one of his disciples, who built it in 1666 by order of the sultan Suleyman the Magnificent at the request of the town's citizens.

For centuries, the bridge of Mostar glorified his city and was the pride of its population of Catholic Croats, orthodox Serbs and Croats, and Moslem Serbs.

Every time the actor Slobodan Praljak crossed it to go to his Theatre of the Youth, he could not help admiring the stone blocks smoothed by the caress of time. Slobodan had begun his career when his country was still called The Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. He was not only an actor, but also directed plays by Bertolt Brecht and Evgenij Schwartz.

The dismemberment of the Yugoslav Federation started. First Slovenia detached itself, later Croatia, then Croats and Serbs clashed trying to annex as much territory as possible from Bosnia, whose majority was Moslem. Actor and director Slobodan Praljak left the stage and devoted himself to the mission of national growth. As a Croat, he was in command of the military position which, from the surrounding hills, regularly tormented the Moslem city of Mostar. His *chetniks* were skilled and clever. They shot to wound the leg of a passer-by who ran between the barricades, then they waited for rescuers hastening to help, and liquidated with precision both the wounded and the rescuers. It was Slobodan Praljak, the appreciated actor and director from the artistic milieu of Mostar, who ordered the guns of his position to bombard Harudjin's bridge that had defied the centuries. Like a rainbow, the bridge vanished in a grey rain of splinters, joining the reckless waters of the river.

The following day, at dawn, who did the obstinate and distant roosters greet with their crowing? For whom were the dogs barking?

*Centuries, weapons and the sea that unites and separates.* There have always been wars. Violence due to intolerance, also. Racism and xenophobia have always thrived. But today we see that xenophobia, racism, violence and war do not hide behind the flags of opposite interests or conflicting ideas about the future of the world. They act under the banner of *roots* and *civilizations*. Cultures and civilizations seem to oppose one another just as contrasting ideologies once did. We would never have imagined that this would happen in the twenty-first century. Such a situation seems to belong to the mediaeval age of Roncisvalle or that of the empty holy grave for the sake of which Christianity crossed the sea and brought arms to Jerusalem. Even the criminal racism that infested history in the twentieth century seems less archaic.

The centuries distill and individualise the cultures. The sea unites and at the same time separates them. The organic processes that characterise and hold them in motion are long, subtle and intricate, at times incomprehensible. But when weapons enter into action, everything becomes simple.

When history speaks in simple terms, art and culture fall into desolation. The worlds that they create are like iridescent soap bubbles which burst at the first breath of wind, returning to the nothing of which they are full.

We gather to discuss the encounter between different cultures. We reflect on the particular art of underlining our own borders in order better to perforate them and cross over them. We question ourselves about the risks of syncretism. We affirm that 'diversity' is not only a condition of departure but a goal to be reached. And while we are disputing about complexity, the daily world around us is simplified.

Simplicity is merciless. It says: '*Us or them*'.

But - common sense replies - *we need them*: we need *their* work.

In this way, the Law too shows its simple and armed aspect. Many of us declare: of course, we have to live together, but not to the point of questioning the absoluteness of our own civilization's values. We accept a multi-ethnic society, provided that it is not multi-cultural.

In simpler words: *they* may be among us, provided that *they* assimilate, that is, that *they* submit and are exploited.

In the last century, effective compromises were elaborated to mitigate the harshness of the market in which work is bought and sold. But these compromises can be outflanked by immigration laws. Exploitation finds again a legal colour: legitimate self-defence in a war between civilizations. A humanistic and decent flag hides the bullying of those who know or have the illusion of being the strongest. Weapons and laws pretend not to defend our interest in prevailing, but the rightful desire to preserve our integrity.

The centuries and the sea are vast and immeasurable thoughts. Or perhaps minuscule, as the daydreams that we believe and hope will protect us.

### *The castle*

Light is crystalline here in Elsinore, on this August afternoon. The world around me is the image of order, peace and good taste. On the sea, in front of the coast of Sweden, several boats sail on different ribbons of time: roaring motors and rowing boats, yachts for modern regattas and an ancient frigate that shows itself capable of silently dominating the sea.

The castle of Kronborg, that regal building, stretches out towards the sea with its huge windows and towers that all seem identical, yet each is different from the other, when carefully inspected. Around the castle, the tourist commerce is never impudent. Near the harbour, cool Danish beer is served by courteous waiters from Morocco.

We are in the same heart of civilization and sit comfortably on our hopes.

- Would you create a performance here?

- In the castle?

- Inside its rooms or in the courtyard.

- I would like to make a performance as though it was a court's feast, with its luxury and poisons. Outside the walls, itinerant sellers, curious people, mountebanks, fireworks and guns that shoot blanks.

- And the performance inside will be...

-... *Hamlet*, of course.

My friend Trevor Davis suggests that I direct *Hamlet* in the castle of Elsinore where the only ghosts to appear for centuries have been theatrical ones. As soon as I step inside the courtyard, the architecture of the castle leads my gaze upwards. I feel a desire to populate the air between the four walls. Up there, Ophelia will drown in a river that flows in the emptiness beneath the clouds. An ancient bishop will come out of the church tower preaching a modern sermon, the equivalent of *to be or not to be*. Hamlet is a son hunted by a loving Father-Ghost who pursues him, pacing incessantly in the void above the spectators.

Here is the heart of my civilization: of the great theatre and of the small Denmark.

Then I hear dogs barking. They are many and sound fierce. The magic of the sea which reflects the castle vanishes and dark lightning cleaves the crystalline August light. Is the banal barking of dogs enough to make me change my mind?

The actuality of history has many voices.

No more mountebanks around the walls of the castle and no aristocratic feast inside. No Shakespeare, but the naked struggle of power as the mediaeval Saxo Grammaticus described it, in his elegant Latin that so few of his contemporaries were able to understand. No terror of appearances from the Other World, no pathos of existential questioning: only the anguished panic for real and supposed foes.

I imagine the deceptive safety of the people inhabiting the castle. I envisage their laws pruned by the rhetoric of justice and reduced to the pure relationship of power such as Machiavelli prompted to his Prince, so simple and deprived of a moral alibi, that their author seemed to his contemporaries to be an emissary of Hell.

The castle is threatened, not by Fortinbras, but by rats and foreigners. The inhabitants, afraid of the plague, chase them with merciless coldness. They see in these miserable paupers in search of a refuge, their future inner enemies, the sign of a siege to come.

There Saxo wanders, between the law of the Weapons and the weapons of the Law, solitary as a blind man. He had once described his country as an embroidery of waters, seas and rivers, among which the Danish fields emerge as jewels. Now, in Elsinore, sarcastic and helpless, he contemplates and portrays the rebirth of archaic barbarities in the same heart of one of my culture's historical castles.

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