



ODIN TEATRET



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A CURA DI FRANCESCO CERAOLO E SIMONA SCATTINA

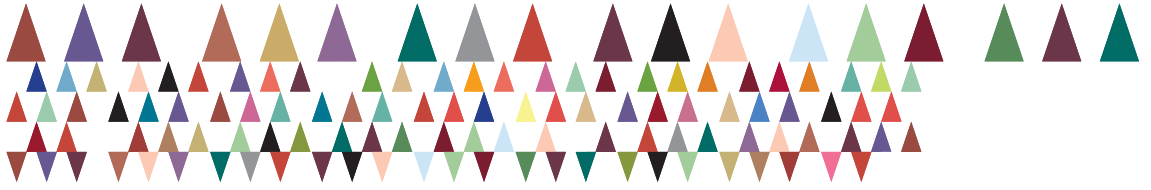
Odin Teatret

60 anni lunghi un giorno

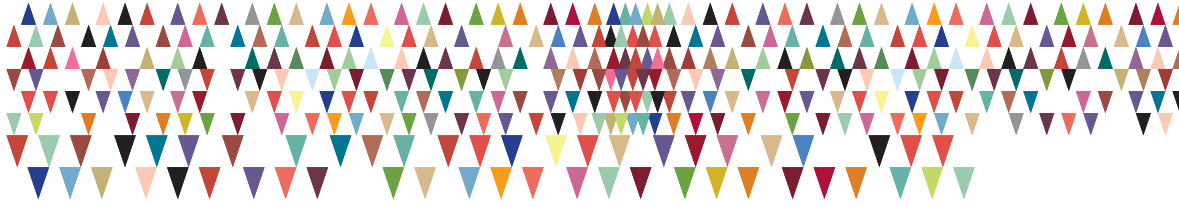



IL CONTEMPORANEO





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The Blessing of a Meeting: La MaMa and the Odin Training in the United States

di

Monica Cristini

The second half of the 1960s was marked by some of the most important encounters of the Western theatrical avant-garde (1). The Living Theatre's presence in France from 1964 onwards, at first in Paris and then in the rest of Europe, and the spread of the company's theatrical experimentation with notable influence on many European artists and groups, are well known. The importance of Jerzy Grotowski's stays in America is also well known; the first in 1967, during which some of the major artists of the American avant-garde, such as Richard Schechner and Joseph Chaikin, had the chance to directly experiment with the training of the Polish master and director.

Odin Teatret did not come to New York until the early 1980s (its first tour was in 1984; Perrelli 2024) but, albeit indirectly, the artistic practices and training of the group spread throughout the United States from as early as 1966, thanks to some artists members of La MaMa Repertory Troupe, the first group of La MaMa Experimental Theatre, founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961 in New York as part of the experimental Off-Off Broadway circuit (2).

At the beginning of the 1960s both the Off-Off Broadway theatre and La MaMa, as a part of it, were largely fostered by the inflow of amateur artists, authors with their first experiences and actors with training at the Actors' Studio or another of the several acting studios present in New York. These schools had in common an essentially realistic approach to acting that did not suit the staging of the new works presented in the circuit, inspired by the dramaturgy of the theatre of the Absurd and deeply influenced by the theories of Antonin Artaud, Gertrude Stein and Bertolt Brecht.

In its first years of activity, Off-Off Broadway focused on promoting young playwrights through the production of their works; there were no permanent companies (3). The only exceptions were The Living Theatre, founded years earlier in the framework of the Off-Broadway scene, and The Open Theatre, directed by Joseph Chaikin and Peter Feldman, formed by some members of The Living Theatre with the aim of creating a permanent workshop devoted, above all, to developing techniques for creating new works and staging them (4).

The earliest contacts with the European masters

It was in 1965 that Ellen Stewart of the La MaMa Experimental Theatre (5) decided to form two new companies with the aim of sending them on tour in Europe to promote New York's experimentation. The first, directed by Ross Alexander, was hosted for a month in Paris at the American Center for Students and Artists, and the second, guided by Tom O'Horgan, stayed at the art school of Elsa Gress and Clifford Wrights in Glumsø, near Copenhagen. It was this second group that for the first time encountered the Odin Teatret.

Ellen Stewart had come across Eugenio Barba's articles on Grotowski published in «The Tulane Drama Review» in 1965 (6) and, aware of the lack of a training for the actor that suited the Off-Off Broadway theatre's new dramaturgy and the ongoing stage experiments, she recommended that the company meet Grotowski (with whom Stewart seems to have already been in touch) and attend his seminars hosted by Eugenio Barba at Holstebro.

In 1966 Stewart was already working with «The Tulane Drama Review» editorial board and with Richard Schechner on Grotowski's visit at New York University, where the Polish director was invited to hold a workshop for students in the autumn of 1967. Some artists from the experimental circuit took part in it,

including members of The Open Theatre, who also participated in workshops organized in the following years. Joseph Chaikin had met Grotowski and his training method in 1966. The US director had been invited by Peter Brook, together with the Polish master, to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company at the staging of *US* and, on his return, had taught the actors some exercises he had learnt from Grotowski (7).

But let us return to the end of 1965, when Tom O'Horgan's company was invited to stay in Denmark until the spring of 1966: during this period the actors of La MaMa had the chance to present their plays to universities and small theatres in Denmark, in Sweden and England. Furthermore, in the autumn of that same year, during the second European tour of the company, some members of the group stopped over in Holstebro, at the time the new headquarters of the Odin Teatret, where they took part in the daily training of the actors with the aim of acquiring its techniques and then transmitting them to the rest of the group on their return to the United States (8).

It was an experience that marked the beginning of a radical change in the American concept of actor training. The exercises and principles acquired at Odin were transmitted to the other actors of the La MaMa Repertory Troupe and to the members of The Open Theatre because that very year some of O'Horgan's actors joined Joseph Chaikin's group in the co-production of *Viet Rock* (1966) and *America Hurrah* (1966) (9).

A different idea of workshop

Upon returning from his 1966 tour and following the example of the Odin Teatret, Tom O'Horgan decided to found a workshop for his actors, so that the training could be carried out on a daily and permanent basis, and where they could also work on the artistic creation for the staging of new works. Ellen Stewart strongly supported the initiative by fully financing the project and providing the company with a space, convinced that sharing the creative process and training was fundamental in the quest for a new creative language.

At Odin in those early years, training was carried out as a group activity aimed at acquiring an 'extra-daily' stage behaviour that would capture the attention of the public but also create a different relationship with it. Its work was based on achieving technical body definition thanks to tough training with the practice of physical and plastic exercises acquired by Eugenio Barba in Poland and others drawn from oriental disciplines and arts such as Kathakali, dance, mime, martial arts and acrobatics. Part of the work was also devoted to improvisation and to the creation of performances (10).

This was the type of training the Americans had come into contact with during those years, as the exercises undertaken at Odin became part of the daily training of O'Horgan's group. Following the example of Eugenio Barba, O'Horgan did not just teach his actors the exercises learnt in Denmark, but he also enriched his workshop with other techniques he had picked up during his previous education. He added some theatrical games created by Viola Spolin for the use of the body in a non-naturalistic way and for awareness of space (11), improvisation and other exercises learnt during his musical studies, in order to develop a personal method suitable for supporting the extreme physicality of acting and the group-centred actions in his productions. In the wake of the

Odin Teatret, he also included in daily practice acrobatic exercises and exercises borrowed from dance. The principles on which the training was based were also transferred to the stage action, as in the group scenes acted in 'slow motion' in the productions of *Futz!* or *Tom Paine*, both in 1967 (12). In the staging of these works the actors performed acrobatic actions and formed small groups emphasising their movements, extremely difficult for their slowness and precision. The technique of slow motion required a considerable mastery of one own's body; it had already been presented by Grotowski in his seminars and was part of the training routine of the Odin Teatret before being experimented by American artists.

In addition to organizing workshops in New York, the actors of the La MaMa Repertory Troupe held seminars at colleges and universities, where they taught students the training method they had learnt (13). For example, in 1967 Ellen Stewart, probably taking inspiration from the experience of participating in university theatre festivals in Europe with her companies, collaborated in the organization of the International Theatre Festival at Brandeis University, in Waltham, where Tom O'Horgan and some actors offered a physical training seminar with the students enrolled in the theatre program (14).

The Summer Seminars organized in Holstebro at the Odin Teatret, in which several actors and some American critics and scholars participated from 1966, contributed also to spreading Grotowski's teachings. Thanks to these encounters the American artists had the chance to learn the techniques and the exercises of the Polish master and of other European actors and pedagogues such as Dario Fo, Etienne Decroux, Yves Lebreton and Jacques Lecoq. In 1968 in Holstebro they also got to know of the publication of *Towards a Poor Theatre* (15), the essential work later to be distributed in New York thanks to Harry Carlson, a professor at Queens College of City University of New York, Richard Schechner, and the La MaMa actors, who suggested it to university courses and among actors. The book was widely circulated among artists and theatre scholars and was instrumental in spreading Grotowski's research in America (16).

The most widespread exercise among American companies was probably 'cat chain', which was developed by Grotowski and practiced in Holstebro. This was the exercise that actor and director Stanley Rosenberg showed to Andy Robinson, an actor from New York, in proposing to found a new company with him. Rosenberg was part of the first group directed by O'Horgan at La MaMa and was with the actors who had stayed at Odin Teatret in 1966. However, unlike his companions, he had remained there for a year, also collaborating on the creation of *Kaspariana* (1967).

Upon his return to the United States, he proposed founding a new resident company at La MaMa and Ellen Stewart suggested that it should not be a repertory company, but a company devoted to training actors (17).

In the autumn of 1967, La MaMa Plexus Workshop was founded. Among its members there were the actors Andy Robinson, Joel Zwick and Diane Callum, who began to develop the training, starting with the exercises learnt by Rosenberg in Holstebro, to which they added the theatrical games of Viola Spolin and some exercises learnt at The Open Theatre. Moreover, they added elements of improvisation and Commedia dell'Arte, mastered by Joel Zwick, who had previously obtained a master's degree at Brooklyn College.

The training at Plexus included plastic exercises developed by Grotowski to release muscular tension and to build a non-verbal vocabulary made up of expressive movements, starting from the principle that the body is a vehicle of emotions and feelings. The group later added exercises borrowed from Karate, classical dance and Tai Chi Chuan, to achieve discipline, control of movement and concentration (18). Over time, the collective training was also completed by individual work, suggested by Rosenberg on his return from the Summer Seminar hosted at Odin in 1968. As can be seen, the development of the training at La MaMa Plexus followed the suggestions coming from the practices of the Odin Teatret. Indeed, in Holstebro also the training of the actors was collective and undifferentiated at first; only in a later moment, time and space were devoted to individual training in which every actor experimented with her or his own expressive possibilities and worked on her or his character (19).

In his letters to Eugenio Barba, Stanley Rosenberg describes the company's work: the aim of the training was to obtain body-mind unity in individual and group actions, and awareness of the impulses from which they generate. Physical actions were conceived through improvisation and employed as a 'subtext' in the performance. He called them 'micro-dramaturgies', which his actors later demonstrated during workshops held for other companies and at universities. Although the reference to Stanislavskij's teaching is evident, the use of 'micro-dramaturgies' as a subtext following the action in performance undoubtedly came from Rosenberg's experience at the Odin Teatret. Besides, the program of the Summer Seminar of 1969, which Rosenberg attended with some members of his company, envisaged that the participant groups would practice their respective training inspired by Grotowski's pedagogy under the supervision of the master himself. The assigned task was to conceive during the seminar some 'micro-performances' that would be shown later to the enlarged group of the participants (20).

From 1968 on, La MaMa Plexus produced some plays (21), but above all it was active in various American colleges and universities, where the actors were invited to hold workshops for students in the theatre programs – among others, Queens College of the City University of New York and Yale University's Drama School. The group was also asked to aid in preparing the actors in the cast of *Hair*, the first successful musical directed by Tom O'Horgan on Broadway.

The development of a new training method and its diffusion

From 1969 on, Joel Zwick carried on his research with La MaMa Plexus, replacing Rosenberg as director and leader of the group: in his concept of actor training the links with the two European masters emerged even stronger. He promoted the idea of a 'negative training', which aimed at removing constraints limiting actor's creativity and search for personal skills, with strong references to Grotowski's 'negative way' concept (22).

He also included work on voice and resonators pointing, besides Grotowski, at Kristin Linklater's technique for voice strengthening and elasticity, developed from the teachings of the Lamda (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts) (23). The principle that Zwick pursued was the balance between creativity and technique, and between improvisation and discipline. His productions, in which he included 'slow motion' actions derived from training, focused on the

actor and her/his relationship with space, almost always left empty or furnished with few essential elements.

Among documents to be found at La MaMa Archive one can view a short demonstration video, filmed in 1969 by Shirley Clarke and some students at Kent State University during a seminar held by Zwick and the Plexus actors for university students during the Creative Arts Festival, which included a lecture by Ellen Stewart on the value of actor training (24). In the video Joel Zwick and Diane Callum perform physical improvisations based on the work done by the group on the relationship between actor and space. The work, documenting the workshop in the style of *cinéma-vérité* experimented by Clarke, shows the two actors in training, but the camera also shoots some of the students filming them. However, in the video one can notice the high degree of concentration reached by the two actors in coordinating with utmost precision their movements while perceiving the surrounding space. In performing their acrobatic movements in 'slow motion', in space and on the floor, the two proved to have acquired a perfect mastery of their own body and awareness of the presence of the partner with whom they synchronize their movements.

These initiatives had an impact on American theatre because O'Horgan's workshops, together with Schechner's courses at New York University and his work with The Performance Group, as well as The Open Theatre workshops, contributed to Off-Off Broadway theatre's transition towards a greater professionalism and, with the formation of new groups at La MaMa so as in the circuit of experimental theatre, to the shift of attention from dramaturgy and playwrights towards a directorial and repertorial theatre. From the second half of the 1960s on, numerous companies were founded in New York. Their repertoire testifies to peculiar aesthetic choices, and their stagings give clear evidence of the artistic approaches of the directors working with them on a permanent basis.

American artists therefore found in the development of self-discipline promoted by European training an alternative to the methods still widespread in the United States, which were mainly focused on ensemble unity, developing creativity and defining character, while not requiring any physical preparation (25).

The strong influence of the European masters has produced a radical change in the training of actors in American theatre, even if at the same time the techniques commonly used before the growth of the avant-garde continued to have wide currency. It is worth reminding that many actors came from the Actors' Studio, or other theatre schools teaching techniques alternative to those proposed by Lee Strasberg. At the same time American theatre consistently tended towards spectacularity, ostentatiously displayed in Broadway musicals and in commercial theatre in general, but also well present in the experimental scene. The same training methods developed by the companies were to be personalized, mainly thanks to workshops focused on creative work, some of them devoted to the collective development of scenic dramaturgy.

In the late 1960s, the approach to acting and actor training in American theatre, particularly in New York, changed significantly. Thanks to the influence of the European masters, seminars and workshops were increasingly aimed at researching the expressive potentials of the artist and understanding the

fundamentals of theatrical art. In America, as in Europe, Jerzy Grotowski's theories and practices were instrumental in bringing on a new way of conceiving the art of the actor. Among the proponents of the change, Richard Schechner with his Performance Group and Joseph Chaikin with his Open Theatre based part of their training on the principles and practices learned directly from Grotowski during his seminars held between 1967 and 1969 in New York. In those same years Tom O'Horgan with La MaMa Repertory Troupe and Stanley Rosenberg with La MaMa Plexus contributed to spreading Odin Teatret's training, which, though based upon Grotowski's teachings, owed much to the principles and exercises developed by Eugenio Barba.



Note

- 1** This essay is born out of the research carried out within the framework of the project 'La MaMa Experimental Theatre: a lasting bridge between cultures – MariBet', financed by the European Innovation and Research Program Horizon 2020, Marie Skłodowska-Curie, grant agreement N. 840989.
- 2** The reconstruction of the events that led to the spread of Odin's training in the United States was made possible thanks to La MaMa's archive materials, but above all to the consultation of the correspondence between Eugenio Barba and American artists, scholars and critics between 1966 and 1968 held at the Odin Teatret Archives (Ota), Fund Odin Teatret – Activities.
- 3** See Stephen K. Bottoms, *Playing Underground. A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off Broadway Movement*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2009; David A. Crespy, *Off-Off Broadway Explosion, How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960s Ignited a New American Theatre*, New York, Back Stage Books, 2003.
- 4** Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-garde Theatre: A History*, London-New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 75-107.
- 5** La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club Etc, one of the best-known venues of the Off-Off Broadway theatrical circuit, was founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961, with the name Café La MaMa, in a basement in the East Village. In collaboration with Caffè Cino, Judson Memorial Church, St. Mark's Church in the Bowery and many other minor venues, it contributed to the growth and the spread of theatrical experimentation in New York, hosting and staging works by young playwrights. See Cindy Rosenthal, *Ellen Stewart Presents. Fifty Years of La MaMa Experimental Theatre*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2017; Monica Cristini, *La MaMa Experimental Theatre – A Lasting Bridge Between Cultures*, London-New York, Routledge, 2023; Id., *Uno spettacolo per un caffè. Il teatro La MaMa negli anni dell'avanguardia*, Mantova, Il Rio, 2024, 37-59.
- 6** Eugenio Barba, Simone Sanzenbach, *Theatre Laboratory 13 Rezdow*, in «The Tulane Drama Review», vol. 9, n. 3, Spring 1965, 153-165; Eugenio Barba, Ludwik Flaszen, *A Theatre of Magic and Sacrilege*, in «The Tulane Drama Review», vol. 9, n. 3, Spring 1965, 166-189.
- 7** In 1969 the members of The Open Theatre took part in an exclusive nine-day workshop with Grotowski and Richard Cieslak, on which Chaikin wrote a quite detailed report describing the hard training experienced by the actors. Lead by Grotowski, the members of the Open Theatre were invited to perform a series of exercises meant to devise some actions originating from their individual inner impulses. Every exercise consisted in a personal investigation conducted with the help of a partner; the actions had no dialogue and consisted just in gestures and movements. Only in a later moment they were repeated with reference to a specific character. See Joseph Chaikin, *Grotowski*, Joseph Chaikin Papers, Box 18, Folder 15, Kent State University Libraries. Department of Special Collections and Archives.
- 8** The Odin Teatret Archives hold many photographs documenting the everyday work of the actors, in which the young artists can be seen performing different types of acrobatic exercises, guided and assisted by Eugenio Barba. For more information see also *Scandinavian Theatre Laboratory for the Art of Acting*, Fund Odin Teatret – Activities, 1966-1972, Ota.

- 9** *America Hurrah* is a trilogy of one-act plays by Jean-Claude van Itallie; *Motel*, one of them, had been staged by the companies of La MaMa during their European tours in 1965. *Viet Rock* had been written by Megan Terry following a seminar with actors of both companies.
- 10** Erik Exe Christoffersen, *The Actor's Way*, London-New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 48-56.
- 11** Viola Spolin, actor and pedagogue, had developed a technique based upon improvisation, and created the theatrical games, i.e. group exercises with a goal and a problem to be solved through the experience of playing. See Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater. A Handbook of teaching and Directing Techniques*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1999 [1963].
- 12** *Futzl*, by Rochelle Owens and *Tom Paine*, by Paul Foster, were produced by Ellen Stewart in 1967. After being premiered in New York, both plays were staged around Europe by Tom O'Horgan's company in tour and presented in some important festivals such as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto.
- 13** In those years the theatre program of universities in the Usa required students to attend classes by professional actors. Since the of 1960s, Ellen Stewart had provided teaching jobs for her actors, in the certainty that the academic world was the right place to spread the new physical training, thus endowing young artists with the skills that would allow them to take part in the ongoing experimentations and stage the new American and European dramaturgies.
- 14** Ann Weiss, who took part in the seminar, describes the sessions of a day of training with Tom O'Horgan and the actors of La MaMa in *Will Brandeis survive 'Massachusetts Trust'?*, based upon notes kept in Brandeis Interact International Theatre Festival (1968), La MaMa Archives/Ellen Stewart Private Collection.
- 15** Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. by Eugenio Barba, Holstebro, Odin Teatret Forlag, 1968.
- 16** See letters by Harry Carlson in Eugenio Barba, *Correspondence with Harry Carlson*, 1968. Fund Odin Teatret, Activities, Ota. In the epistolary exchange between Eugenio Barba and his US correspondents there are numerous letters from the latter asking for more volumes to be distributed and reporting about the sales.
- 17** Andrew Robinson, *Stepping into The Light. Sources of an Actor's Craft*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press, 2015 Kindle, Amazon.
- 18** See *Rosenberg-Barba Correspondence*, Fund Odin Teatret – Activities, Ota.
- 19** Christoffersen, *The Actor's Way*, cit., pp. 72-75.
- 20** Joseph Chaikin, invited to hold a seminar in Holstebro in 1969, asked for explanations about these 'micro-performances' in a letter to Eugenio Barba; the latter answered that they were short performances of some 15-20 minutes created starting from improvisations on a theme given by him or chosen with the group of participants. See the correspondence between Joseph Chaikin and Eugenio Barba in Fund Odin Teatret – Activities – B7A, Ota. The training at Odin owed much to Barba's apprenticeship with Grotowski. For further learning see Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, cit. and Eugenio Barba, *Land of Ashes and Diamonds. My Apprenticeship in Poland*, Aberystwyth, Black Mountain Press, 1999.
- 21** *Complexions, Inside Out, The Cylinder*, all produced in 1968; *Woyzeck, Last Chance Saloon, Man Versus Computer and Spring-Voices*, in 1969; *Dance Wi Me Or (The Fatal Twitch)* in 1971.
- 22** Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, cit.
- 23** Kristin Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Hollywood, Drama Publishers, 2006.
- 24** 1969 Creative Arts Festival. January 20-24. Printed leaflet. Kent State University Libraries, Department of Special Collections and Archives. Shirley Clark's film *Kent Mix* (1969) is available in Video Work: Documentation of 'Kent Mix' (1969), La MaMa Archives/Ellen Stewart Private Collection.
- 25** Monica Cristini, *La scuola per l'attore negli Stati Uniti: quale sperimentazione prima dell'Avanguardia?*, in «Antropologia e Teatro», n. 15, 2023, pp. 21-43.



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