

Theatrical Anthropology and *the gestural archetype*

Alina CRISTEA¹

Abstract: *One of the most complex working tools in theater laboratories worldwide is, and we will demonstrate during this dissertation, Theatrical Anthropology. Eugenio Barba defines Theatrical Anthropology as “the study of pre-expressive scenic behavior that underlies the different genres, styles, roles and traditions, personal or collective in the theater” or, as Stanislavski says, the study of the organic nature of all art people, of all nationalities and from all eras. In an organized situation or state of representation, the projection of the physical and mental presence of the actor is based on an elementary architecture, built on the meta-physical pillars of principles different from those of daily life. This projection will be identified during this work in the concept of “extra-everyday behavior”, opposed to the daily notion of behavior. From this “dance of oppositions”, as Barba calls it, the perfect balance of the statue of a desirable stage projection is born. Specifically, in the daily context, the energy and posture of our body are dimensioned by the cultural, social or job status. In a situation of representation (extra-everyday or extra-cotidian), they must be resized, radically changing. This radical metamorphosis is done using the technique that involves both the physical and the mental. At the base of the techniques are the returning-principles. One of them, the basic one, is sats, as the Barba calls it. Sats is the energy impulse from which the action feeds itself, a priori and a posteriori, it is the impulse of a movement ready to be released, it is the pre-expressive modeled energy. Throughout this dissertation, we will call it a gesture archetype, an original personal expression, containing, together, the origin and intention of the movement. At its core, the archetype is an unconscious content that immediate awareness and perception changes, that is, within the meaning of the respective individual consciousness in which it appears. The change takes place, in fact, just before the awareness, because the gesture archetype contains its present and future energy from which it will start and when the action will stop.*

Key-words: *Theatrical Anthropology; Eugenio Barba; scenic behavior; theater; gestural archetype; sats; dance; Stanislavski.*

1. Introduction

One of the most complex working tools in theater laboratories around the world is Theatrical Anthropology. Eugenio Barba defines Theatrical Anthropology as “the study of pre-expressive stage behavior that underlies different genres, styles, roles and personal or collective traditions in theater”² or, as Stanislavski would say, the study of the organic nature of all artists, of all nationalities and of all ages. Further, we will analyze some of the most important systemic, basic elements with which Theatrical Anthropology operates. If the actors or dancers understand the mechanism they will have the opportunity to access their inner creative energies whenever they want, with the help of ways of thinking about what must become mentalities and specific techniques.

2. Action - the visible part of the pre- and post-actantial impulse

In an organized situation or state of representation, the projection of the physical and mental presence of the actor is based on an elementary architecture, built on the meta-physical pillars

¹ Faculty of Arts, “Ovidius” University from Constanta, alin_t7@yahoo.com.

² E. Barba. 2003. *A paper canoe. Treatise on Theatrical Anthropology*. Bucharest: Ed. Unitext, p. 30.

of principles different from those of everyday life. This projection will be identified during this paper in the concept of “extra-everyday behavior”, in opposition to the everyday notion of behavior. From this “dance of oppositions”, as Barba calls it, the perfect balance of the statuary of a desirable stage projection is born. Specifically, in the daily context, the energy and posture of our body are dimensioned by cultural, social or professional status. In a situation of representation (extra-everyday), they must be resized, radically changing. This radical metamorphosis is done with the help of the technique that involves both the physical and the mental. The techniques are based on *the returning-principles*³. One of them, the basic one, is *sats*, as Barba calls it. *Sats* is the energetic impulse from which the action is fed, a priori and a posteriori; it is the impulse of a movement ready to be released, it is the pre-expressively modeled energy. Throughout this dissertation, we will call it a *gestural archetype*, an original expression, which contains the origin and intention of the movement, together. Basically, the archetype is an unconscious content that immediate awareness and perception modifies, namely in the sense of the individual consciousness in which it appears. The change takes place, in fact, at the very moment before the awareness, because the *gestural archetype* contains its present and future energy from which it will start and in which the action will stop. The idea of the *gestural archetype* was suggested to me by the leitmotif of Kant's research in “The Critique of Pure Reason”: all knowledge begins with experience but does not come entirely from it. “There is no doubt that any our knowledge begins with experience, for by what else could our faculty of knowledge be awakened to function, if not by objects which exert influences on our senses and which, on the one hand, produce themselves representations, on the other hand, set in motion our intellectual activity in order to compare, link or separate them, thus processing the raw material of sensible impressions into a knowledge of objects called experience? Thus, chronologically, no knowledge precedes experience in us, and with it begins all knowledge. But if any of our knowledge begins with experience, it does not mean that it comes entirely from experience. For it may well be that our knowledge by experience is a composite of what we receive through impressions, and what our own faculty of knowledge (being provoked only by sensible impressions) produces in itself, an addition which we do not - we distinguish it from that raw material before a long exercise has made us pay attention to it and able to separate it”⁴.

Specifically, the archetypes underlying the decryption and understanding of the theory of the collective unconscious⁵ are, practically, *the returning-principles* of Theatrical Anthropology. These principles are, in fact, conscious contents when they are put in the tension of the balance of comparison. *The returning-principles* can also take on individualized overtones, depending on who produces them and who observes the existence of their production. As a general-valid feature, these principles do not take into account the spatial or temporal coordinates, cultural, civilization, language or specific. For example, one of these returning principles, called by Barba *sats*, is understood by Stanislavski as a *tempo-rhythm* crossed by the inner energy, by Meyerhold, Grotowski and Decroux as *stillness in motion*, and we will call it *gestural archetype*. This term defines the energy of pre-movement, the metaphorical place where the action starts and where, after the action has ended, it stops.

Understanding, aligning and disciplining the body and mind to reach the state of grace of this awareness of pre- and post-movement energy is achieved through several techniques and continuous work and challenges with oneself. In Oriental theater, this access to the

³ This expression is part of Eugenio Barba's terminological apparatus.

⁴ I. Kant. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Bucharest: Ed. All, pp. 49 - 50.

⁵ C.G. Jung. 2014. *Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*. Bucharest: Ed. Trei, p. 11. According to Jung, the collective unconscious is a part of the psyche that consists essentially of contents that were once conscious, thus not being acquired individually, and owe their existence exclusively to heredity. The concept of archetype, the inevitable correlate of the idea of collective unconscious indicates the presence in the psyche of certain forms of universal spread (...) called by Hubert and Mauss as “categories of imagination”.

perfect way to embody the state of grace takes place over a generation. However, we do not have this luxury and this is where Theatrical Anthropology enters the scene. With its help, through personalized improvisations, an actor can identify, assume and then reproduce, through repeatability, the energy of the pre-movement that ensures his stage credibility. Stanislavski says: “I discovered the secret. It consists in the fact that it is not allowed to stick to one and the same thing, to repeat indefinitely what has been worn out”⁶. Thus, he denies belonging to a concept, a theory, a beaten path and therefore easy to cross. The believable stage needs a different load at each show to be credible, and Theatrical Anthropology gives the actors/ dancers the tools to do so.

The muscular relaxation that Stanislavski is talking about is an artificial one because it is consciously installed only after or during a laborious pre-conscious work on the muscles. The *gestural archetype* is the central point of focus to which Stanislavsky refers, and this type of concentration must be trained like a muscle, until the awareness of muscle tension or relaxation becomes intuitive, pre-expressive. In this way, the actor can reach the state long sought by all the great masters of theater. *Movement in motion* is called and is the state designated by Japanese actors by No, especially *koken* and *shite* as the most difficult to play on stage. Staying still and, at the same time, transmitting dynamically, although it may seem paradoxical, a disciplined and gifted actor can achieve through exercises. Stanislavski succeeded, Barba too.

The actor's way of thinking is moving in space. Is thought revealed in motion or the movement that guides thought? The *gestural archetype* arises in the actor's body before thinking, which could hinder or censor him. It represents pre-movement as a reaction to an extra-everyday state needed on stage at a given time. The energy of this pre-movement is motionless and at the same time active, ready to erupt. It is the moment before the cat jumps, which does not jump, but we know that she is ready to do it. This specific type of impulse rendered accurately before taking shape and continued beyond the completion of the formal gestural movement, also renders the scenic likelihood, so sought after by the two great creators. The *gestural archetype* can also be the answer to the great question, inherited since antiquity and debated by Diderot, “how can an actor reproduce, every night, on stage, with the same intensity, the feeling” or, we would say now, how to adjust the sensitive broadcast in depending on one's own tempo-rhythm so that the reception is “chosen and complete”. *Gesture archetypes* represent the nodal points of coherence, both for Stanislavski and Barba, of the “score”, the dance of movement that underlies the dynamically sensitive architecture of each spectacular situation. An actor who reaches, through discipline, sacrifices and self-teaching (Stanislavski) or all this and a few master totems (Barba), to perfectly master his body and psyche, to have access, through an elastic spiritual portal to the subconscious and its entire store of masks, can play anywhere, anytime, anything and anyway, regardless of gender or requirements. This is the total actor and the intelligibility of the fact that Barba today and Stanislavski, a century later in the past, came to the same conclusion in the same way.

“Pre-feel,” says Stanislavski, “pre-movement,” says Barba, and in fact they both refer to the same thing: the basic cell of movement, the *gestural archetype*.

4. Conclusions

“No matter how far we look for examples in time and space, human life and activity are part of some frameworks that offer common features. (...) Understood in its broadest sense, anthropology is the discipline dedicated to the study of this human phenomenon. Undoubtedly, it is part of the whole of natural phenomena...”⁷. Theatrical Anthropology

⁶ K.S. Stanislavski. 2012. *The Actor's Work on Himself*. Bucharest: Ed. Nemira, p. 9.

⁷ C. Levi-Strauss. 2011. *Anthropology and The Problems of The Modern World*. Iasi: Ed. Polirom, p. 32.

analyzes all the cultural phenomena of the actor/ dancer's access to the status of total creator and provides the necessary framework for understanding and analyzing in depth the way in which this is done.

5. References

Book

Barba, E. 2003. *A paper canoe. Treatise on Theatrical Anthropology*. Bucharest: Editura Unitext.

Jung, C.G. 2014. *Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*. Bucharest: Editura Trei.

Kant, I. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Bucharest: Editura All.

Levi-Strauss, C. 2011. *Anthropology and The Problems of The Modern World*. Iasi: Editura Polirom.

Stanislavski, K.S. 2012. *The Actor's Work on Himself*. Bucharest: Editura Nemira.