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Performing Exilic Communitas:
On Eugenio Barba’s Theater of a Floating Island

The next two chapters of this book study the condition of exile in its middle passage: the exilic subject’s necessity and choice of adapting to his/her new country and of building a new home in a new land. Chapter 3, “Performing Exilic Communitas: On Eugenio Barba’s Theater of a Floating Island,” is dedicated to the work of Eugenio Barba and his company Odin Teatret. Chapter 4, “The Homebody/Kanjiža: On Josef Nadj’s Exilic Theater of Autobiography and Travelogue,” examines the work of Josef Nadj, the French choreographer of Hungarian origin. Together, Chapters 3 and 4 study exile in its secondary manifestation: not as banishment but as a self-imposed life adventure, a nomadic experience, and a state of displacement.

By shifting emphasis from a discussion of exile as banishment to an exploration of exile as a self-imposed cultural and economic condition, this study claims that once in a new land, a political exile, a refugee, or a self-imposed emigrant, similarly to any displaced person, faces a need for searching and choosing strategies of survival. These strategies are something every exilic individual determines for him/herself. The two artistic practices chosen for this book – Eugenio Barba’s theatrical endeavors and Josef Nadj’s experiments with modern dance – exemplify particular mechanisms of survival in exile. As this section demonstrates, a voluntary departure from the native shores provokes the self-imposed condition of exile and triggers a claim for the territory of one’s adopted country as a professional homeland. This is achieved either through the creation of one’s own floating island of a newly constructed artistic community, as in Barba’s case, or by preserving the memory of the exile’s native land within the territory of the dancer’s body, as in Nadj’s case.

In Eugenio Barba’s theatrical practice, creating a utopian community of the initiated (the exilic artist’s theater company, a professional community of theater nomads) becomes the exilic subject’s manifestation of a new homeland, the homeland of the profession originating within the territory of an adopted country. As Barba explains, “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 theater” (“The Paradox of the Sea”).¹ Thus, the life and work of Eugenio Barba, an artist in exile, becomes the testing ground of inter- and intra-cultural borrowings that are adapted to his everyday artistic practices. “The necessity to remain foreign, to be a floating island that does not put down roots in a particular culture” defines his exilic condition (Turner, Eugenio Barba, 23). This “necessity to remain foreign” causes Barba to seek cultural diversity and to promote a type of theater which “transcends cultural specificity and encourages the development of an identity that is formed from living in the theatre rather than a society” (Turner, Eugenio Barba, 23).

As Barba insists, the trajectories of both his own life and his company coincide and thus represent the journey of an exilic nomad: “there are people who live in a nation, in a culture. And there are people who live in their own bodies. They are the travelers who cross the Country of Speed, a space and time which have nothing to do with the landscape and the season of the place they happen to be traveling through” (Beyond the Floating Islands, 11). This view of himself and his company as an exilic wanderer appears in Barba’s productions and writings even today, after his almost half-a-century life and work as a Danish theater maker, a head of a theater enterprise situated in and partly sponsored by the city of Holstebro (Andreasen, “The Social Space”, 157–60). As Barba explains, “the feeling that we were born under a tent” and that “we will die under a tent” determine the company’s traveling routes and its creative searches (“How to Die Standing”, 5).

Nowadays, however, the paradox for Odin Teatret has become how to remain an outsider, “how to exploit the disadvantages and advantages that come with being ‘a foreigner’ and how to transform them? Not into something bizarre or interesting, but rather the opposite: where foreigners can keep their particular nature – who they are and where they are from – and at the same time be part of the integrated dynamic of the ‘polis’, of the society” (Barba in Milosevic, “Big Dreams”, 293). Here Barba hints at the irony of the exilic condition as he sees it: the exilic artist’s desire to remain a foreigner while being accepted into his/her new society. As he further states, Odin Teatret “has been able to not only be accepted in Holstebro but also somehow make people feel proud that their theater is so strange, and made by foreigners!” (Barba in Milosevic, “Big Dreams”, 293) Accordingly, today, as in its earlier days, Odin Teatret seeks a state of transition, transition as culture, which ideally should provide every member of the company, an exile on his/her own, with the devices of personal estrangement and with a sense of safety in the group, analogous to what Victor Turner defines as a communitas (The Ritual Process; and Dramas, Fields and Metaphors). In his 2010 article “The Sky of the Theatre,” Barba once again positions Odin Teatret within his personal mythology as his own and his actors’ protective shelter from the hardships of exile. As he writes, “theater is not only a profession, but a small and somewhat childish microcosm in which I may live other lives” (“The Sky of the Theatre”, 100).