

Odin Teatret



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N Y T H O S

MYTHOS

Ritual for the short century

Based on poems by Henrik Nordbrandt and texts by Odin Teatret

Dedicated to Atahualpa del Cioppo

Kai Bredholt	Guilhermino Barbosa, soldier in the
Prestes Column	
Roberta Carreri	Cassandra
Jan Ferslev	Orpheus
Tage Larsen	Oedipus
Iben Nagel Rasmussen	Medea
Julia Varley	Daedalus
Torgeir Wethal	Odysseus
Frans Winther	Sisyphus
Scenic space:	Odin Teatret
Light designer:	Jesper Kongshaug
Music:	Odin Teatret, and political and popular songs
Musical director:	Frans Winther
Costumes:	Odin Teatret
Literary advisers:	Thomas Bredsdorff and Nando Tavianani
Translation:	Judy Barba
Graphics:	Marco Donati
Assistant director:	Gitte Lindholt
Dramaturgy and direction:	Eugenio Barba

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Eugenio Barba

ACTORS OF FEROCITY

We can imagine them, tired of killing and being killed, of pillaging and destroy-ing, of raping and being raped. These are the protagonists of the myths of Ancient Greece who, throughout the ages, have repeated their ferocious acts.

Can mythological characters represent History? Is History not the very oppo-site of myth? History is also the inexorable sense of becoming, the victory of Force over Justice, the ideals that are overturned, the recurring triumph of systems which make a mockery of all Utopias.

The performance is a funeral wake, at the end of a millenium and of a short century which began in 1917 with the Russian revolution and ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin wall. Around the corpse of a revolutionary are gathered the characters of the Greek myths. They take possession of him and introduce him to their immortality.

In honour of him who fought for internationalism and justice among peoples, the protagonists of the myths recount the lies and the horrors which made them eternal. They evoke the obscure ways of destiny: Oedipus, murderer and seer, with holes for eyes, wandering between Thebes and Colonus; Medea who cradles her slaughtered children; Cassandra, raped by warriors and oppressed by the vision of the future; Orpheus, the shaman who penetrated into the kingdom of the dead, and whose head floats in the sea, singing; Daedalus, inventor of the labyrinth and of flight, who witnessed the fall of his son, Icarus; Sisyphus, the tireless slave-worker. And all the while Odysseus comments petulantly on the blind vitality of the living with scepticism and mockery.

The characters from myths are only action and energy. Their ferocity is not wickedness. Their suffering is not sadness. Their callousness does not come from a desire for power. They are brutal, tragic, serene. They do not believe; they know. They acknowledge the true Reality: the inescapable domain of those forces we call Evil.

For this reason they are profoundly different from human beings. They do not understand us. They tease and love us, like blind children.

The funeral wake is for Guilhermino Barbosa. Maybe nobody remembers the name of this illiterate man who, from 1925 to 1927, marched 25,000 kilometres across the entire length and breadth of Brazil. He was one of Luiz Carlos Prestes' soldiers, fighting for the dignity of his country which was in the hands of corrupt leaders. The "Prestes Column" never knew victory. But it was never defeated. Guilhermino Barbosa grew old, barricaded into his shack in the Bolivian jungle, faithful to the ideal of the revolution.

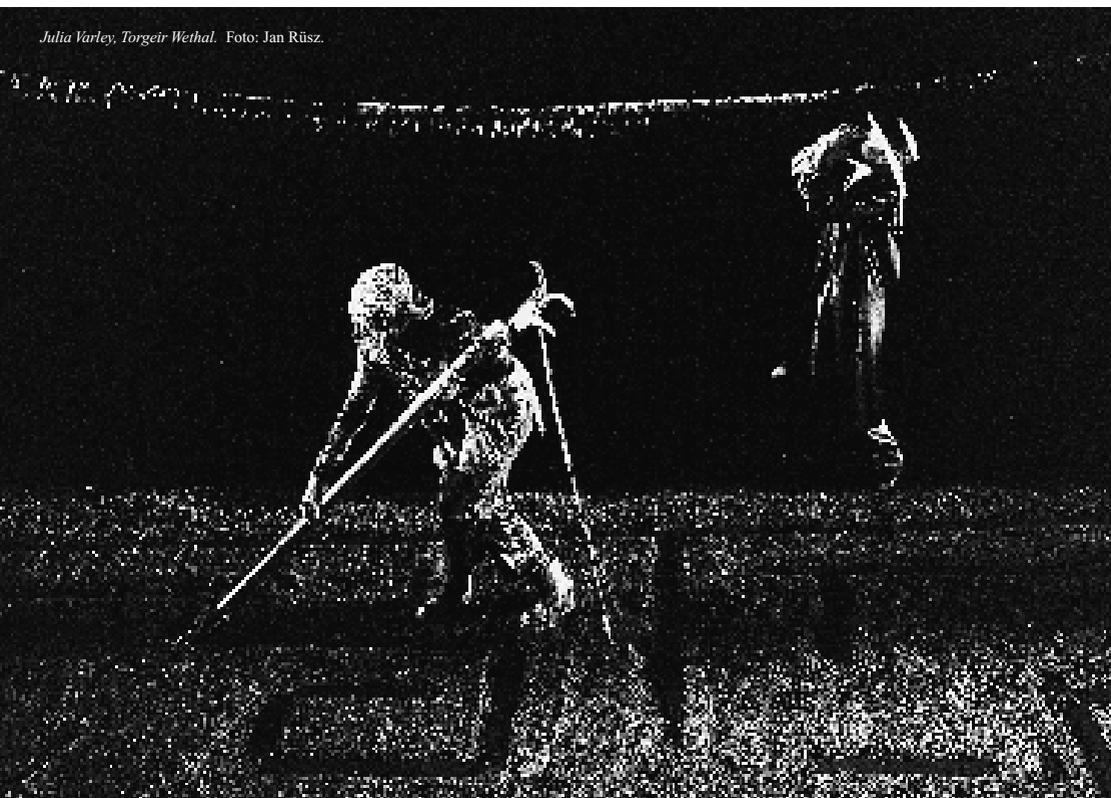
Is Revolution also a "myth"? There exist myths that embody the ferocity of His-tory, and myths that, on the contrary, teach us not to accept it.

What can myth be for us? An archetype? A value to be desecrated? Hope with-out faith?

Where is myth hiding today? Why does it die? How do we bury it? When is it reborn?



Kai Bredholt. Foto: Jan Rütz.



Eugenio Barba

POIEIN

The tacit collaboration with the poet Henrik Nordbrandt

When I talk of *text*, I talk of it as an artisan, using the term in its etymological sense: to weave, compose (from Latin *texere*). I refer to a literary work of a high level of craftsmanship and elaboration, complete in itself. It may be prose or poetry; it may have been conceived specifically for the theatre or for another purpose - a comedy, a tragedy, a short story, a collection of poems or even an essay.

There are infinite ways of working on a literary text in theatre. But they can all be grouped into two tendencies: working *for* the text and working *with* the text.

Working *for* the text means to consider the literary work as the principal value of the performance. The actors, the direction, the organisation of the space and the musical accompaniment are all used in order to emphasise the quality and complexity of the text, its allusions, its connections with the original as well as the present context, and its capacity to radiate out into different directions and dimensions. It is fascinating and meaningful work. I do not believe for a moment that it is a characteristic of old-style theatre. It can be the height of what is *new*. Theatre that works *for* the text transmutes literature into the experience of oral and visual sensoriality. The written words become voice, physical presence, flesh and blood, thought-in-action.

I love the theatre that follows this path to the bitter end. But I rarely practise it.

I shall therefore hold myself to the other tendency.

Working with the text

Working *with* the text means choosing one or more literary works and, instead of placing oneself at their service, elaborating them as a substance which must nourish a new organism: the performance. The literary text is used as one of the levels or components constituting the life of the scenic result.

Originally, the literary text was a complete and autonomous organism. Now it is *material ready to be transformed*, plunged into a process of choices and visions that are foreign to it. It begins to be elaborated by the intervention of the actors and the director, cut, dismantled and reassembled in something that is unrecognisable.

It might be said: this is not *with*, it is *against*.

I do not think so.

Works of art are characterised by the fact that life pervades every level of their organisation, every part, every cell. Not only the entire organism of a poem, but also the small knots of words, images and sounds all bear the traces of the skilled

hand that wove them together and gave them their density. This means that a poem may be subdivided into its small “verbal actions”, clusters of words and pictures which, nevertheless are not reduced to deteriorated fragments.

The thousands of details in an actor’s physical and vocal actions make the behaviour of a character credible and suggestive for the spectator. In the same way the language of a poem becomes credible and suggestive for whoever reads it or listens to it because it is made up of “verbal actions”, i.e. meaningful dynamisms which are richer and more surprising than those of daily language. Working *with* the text also implies the capacity to split it up into its verbal actions in order to discover new details and create new relationships.

There exists a *life* which pervades every level of organisation in the text/woven fabric and determines the complex simplicity that integrates its diverse components in a way which is not obvious. Compared with daily forms of speech, poetry depends on *deformation*: the unusual combination of words; sonorous, rhythmical and semantic tensions; leaps from one level of reality to another; interference between logics which, in “normal” thought, are mutually incompatible; surreal conglomerations; oxymora and synaesthesia. It is a series of procedures which, in the terminology of literary technique, are labelled as metaphor, amphibology, metrics, symbolism, synecdoche, allegory.

All this is pure literary technique, but also implies a way of thinking, a way of interweaving the “paths of thought”.

If we are to limit ourselves to one single example, Dullin used Japanese painting and the poetry of Poe, Baudelaire and Mallarmé as models for the actors in his Atelier. They were not intended as models to be imitated but for training the mind. Artaud spoke of the art of the actor as consisting literally of a “poem in space”. In many other cases the “trainer” of the mind has been music.

The fact that a poetic text may be cut, taken apart, reassembled in a form far removed from its original one, is in no way different from the work of breaking down, decontextualising and recomposing fragments of the actor’s physical score; or from a film director’s montage when he is working on two separate sequences of images, each one complete in itself, in order to interweave them and make them interact.

Working *with* the text means treating it as if it were an actor.

How I worked with Henrik Nordbrandt’s poems

To subject the literary text to the same treatment as that to which the actors are submitted belongs to the tradition of Odin Teatret. I worked in this way with *Kaspariana* (1967) when Ole Sarvig gave us, not a dramatic text, but a series of poems freely inspired by the character of Kaspar Hauser. Also in *Brecht’s Ashes*, in

1980, I avoided Brecht’s plays and concentrated on his poems. With these, as in many other similar cases, I carried out my normal craft as director: that is, a montage of actions.

In the spring of 1996 I read Thomas Bredsdorff’s book *Med Andre Ord* (In Other Words), newly published in Copenhagen by Gyldendal and devoted to Nordbrandt’s “poetic language”. Thomas referred back to the Aristotelian theory of the metaphor and the Platonic theory of the symbol in his analysis of Nordbrandt’s “paradoxical language”. I knew his poems. But the detours which Thomas now imposed on my attention made the density and effectiveness of those verses glow with a new light.

After reading his book, I decided that my next production would be based on Nordbrandt’s poetry.

Henrik Nordbrandt does not live in Denmark. He has set up house in Greece, Turkey and Spain. He is certainly not an “easy” person. When I suggested he wrote something for us, he replied that he found it difficult to collaborate with anybody. For Odin Teatret, too, collaboration with an author is far from easy. We agreed that we were made for each other, and that we could use his published poems in whatever way we wanted. On one condition: that he should first see one of our performances. He came to see *Kaosmos* in Holstebro and signed the contract. That was at the end of 1996, and since then we have had no news of him. Collaboration - like the performing arts and the language of poetry - can also be paradoxical.

From the 29 books of his poetry, we chose the poems we loved. To love means to struggle. They did not remain intact. Just as they did not leave us intact in our work on the performance over many months.

A sea of verses has seeped in between our intentions and our scenic actions. It has adapted to these. It has taken their form and has given them form. Nothing has been lost. Everything has been transformed, becoming engulfed or swelling into mighty waves.

If I had relied on my tastes as a reader, I would never have dared to touch Nordbrandt’s poems. It was my task as a director that determined their metamorphosis. It was the need to integrate them into the new organism that was beginning to take form through the leaps of incorporated thought which are the actors’ actions.

Poems about love and travel to far off places, existential reflections that are both mocking and despairing, terrible yet luminous personal visions have become the words of Oedipus and Cassandra, Odysseus and Medea, Daedalus and Orpheus, and of a Brazilian soldier marching with the rebels of the “Prestes Column”.

In many cases the poet’s compositions remain substantially in their original form. Sometimes they are altered by changing the tense of a verb, by moving from the first to the second person, or else a proper name may be added or taken out.

But other examples are more interesting. When the transmutation is profound, the life which pervades every single cell of Nordbrandt's poetry exhibits its force in full.

At times, for example, different fragments of poems or lines from a single poem have become the dialogue between two or more characters, as in the case of *Hvis du kunne se dig selv* (If you could see yourself):

*If you could see yourself
in my dreams
you would run away screaming.
You would scratch your face till it bled,
cover yourself with petrol
and shout for a flame.
Through my childhood's evenings
its autumns, its rain
you now drag yourself off
like a ghost from the future,
weighed down by a burden
greater than you thought you could bear:
the chains you drag
are twice as heavy as you
twice as long as your time
and the ghosts of those I have killed,
night after night, in anger
frighten you: the terrifying ghosts
of my relations, my schoolfriends,
my first love.
From all the doors
stream bones and hair.
From the trees, which time
has not yet felled, hang the dead, scorched by the sun.
Nails grow out of the ground.
What you are treading on is cartilage.
I shout your name
would call you back from the dead
but you do not hear me, do not know
that I walk by your side
and that only you can wake me
even with the lightest touch
the carress of your eyelashes.*

In the performance this poem becomes a dialogue:

Daedalus: *Medea, if you could see yourself in my dreams
you would run away screaming.
You would scratch your face till it bled,
cover yourself with petrol
and shout for a flame.*

Cassandra: *From all the doors
stream bones and hair.*

Medea: *Orpheus,
I call to my dead
but they do not hear me.*

Orpheus: *At your side walk the ghosts
of all those
you have killed
night after night.*

Sometimes it is as though the poem has undergone a process of evaporation. A few drops of it remain in suspension and join together as if in a new solitary constellation of stars. Of the first six lines of *Ud til havet* (To the sea):

*Finally we have reached the sea!
It stretches out in front of us
ten miles deep and full of secrets.
But from the flat beach where we stand
we can only see the surface.
It shimmers in the light of the July sun, but that is not all.*

only a sort of haiku remains:

*The sea in front of us,
deep, secret.
The surface shimmers.
That is not all.*



Tage Larsen. Foto: Jan Rüz.



Frans Winther. Foto: Tony D' Urso.

Iben Nagel Rasmussen. Foto: Jan Rüz.



Julia Varley. Foto: Jan Rüz.



Kai Bredholt. Foto: Tony D' Urso.



Torgeir Wethal. Foto: Jan Rüz.



Roberta Carreri. Foto: Tony D' Urso.



Jan Ferslev. Foto: Jan Rüz.

At other times, however, the poem is distilled, woven into the actor's actions and re-elaborated according to the rhythms of the scene. Thus the following reflection by Odysseus:

*Here is the tomb, with the funeral procession approaching,
where the coffin seems to enclose a secret.
The dead man knows
what exists between those hastily carpentered planks,
but only we can describe his corpse.
We are the living, we are the coffin bearers, the only ones who know.
Many who have never heard the night breeze
or watched the gleam of the full moon
first get to know themselves in their coffin.
You are just a rotting body
being carried by us now in a coffin
to a tomb amid tall sarcophaguses.*

results from the condensing of the poem *Ligbærerne* (The coffin bearers):

*Look at the graveyard with its tall sarcophaguses
where the funeral procession is forever advancing
and each tomb encloses a secret
unknown even to death.
Do you think the dead man knows what exists
between those hastily carpentered planks?
Maybe he knew himself - but his corpse
is and remains a strange object to him,
a thing only we can describe: a body
which is now being borne away in a coffin
by us who hold the brass handles
and so become his coffin bearers.
Do you see us with our sad faces
carrying secret upon secret away
under the tall cedar trees' whispering branches?
We are the coffin bearers, the only ones who know,
the only ones who know your hidden thoughts
after death, when you lie stiff in your coffin.
And many who have never heard the night breeze
or watched the gleam of the full moon
first get to know themselves in their coffin*

*when we describe him as a rotten body
which is now being borne away in a coffin
by us who hold the brass handles
in the graveyard between the tall sarcophaguses.*

On other occasions, fragments which come from various compositions are brought together, losing their original logic and creating another, in exactly the same way as the scores of the different actors, each of which is elaborated independently from the others, can detach themselves from the original intentions and so create a new meaning. For example, lines from the poem *Gobi*:

*Seven steps from Spring the questions become answers.
Your face from the dark is dusted by violets.
Nine nights from the mountains. Thirteen mouths from madness.
God masturbates us with his sickening mathematics.
The Gobi desert counts its cells by grains of sand,
we by tears, when we look into the spring sky.*

and from *Barberblade* (Razor blades):

*The spring has arrived and has split my life apart
like a packet of razor blades
that I dare not keep and dare not throw away
fine, small blades
which reflect the light like Asian lakes.
The thought that they will rust
without being used torments me just as much
as the thought of using them.
And when I try now and then to forget them
in offices or bars
they come back to me from places with exotic names
where I have never set foot.
Where on earth shall I put my feet
with so many razor blades around
without cutting myself and without breaking them?
They are so beautiful, they are so small.
It is because it is spring and the sky is blue.
And I stand here and call and call,
stiff as an icicle, with eyes closed until I fall.*

and from *Om foråret bygger de et hospital* (In spring they build a hospital):

*In spring they build a hospital around me
so that I can have a blue room in which to shout.
I do not know who they are. I do not know what I shout.
I only know the answers, answers, answers.....*

fuse in Cassandra's vision:

*Seven steps from spring the questions become answers
and the face of darkness is dusted by violets.
Nine nights from the mountains and thirteen mouths from madness
you wake in the labyrinth and the sky is blue.
You do not know what you shout, stiff as an icicle,
with eyes closed until you fall.*

I am well aware of the risks involved in providing such examples. Selecting only a few cases out of a hundred may make it appear to be mere mechanical *bricolage*. But what is essential is a sort of *state of necessity* which emerges in the course of the work and which springs from the precise context constituted by the actors' actions; by their relationships with the other characters in the particular scene; by the position of the scene within the overall dramaturgical rhythm; by the actions immediately preceding and succeeding it. That is the *state of necessity* of which I am speaking, and it cannot be exemplified.

Transposed onto paper, the physical process in which the texts are treated as the actions of the actors, risks resembling a literary game which would not only be disrespectful but would also be stupid and arbitrary.

However it seemed to me to be appropriate to provide some information concerning the peripetias through which the *doing* of the poet, his *poiein*, has been extended to the *doing* of the theatrical process.

The hidden energy

As I write these notes, Henrik Nordbrandt has not yet seen the result of our tacit and paradoxical collaboration. I cannot imagine what he will think of it.

But one thing is sure: after all the transformations to which it has been subjected, his poetry seems more alive than ever to me and my companions. I would call it indestructible, if I did not know that "all dies".

And I ask myself if *poetry* is not characterised precisely by this hidden energy which obliges us to work *for* it, even when we are fighting *against* it or using it simply as material with which to construct a different work.



Roberta Carreri, Kai Bredholt. Foto: Jan Rütz.





A MOONLESS NIGHT

Fragments of Eugenio Barba's speech to the actors at the first rehearsal of *Mythos*, 20 January 1997.

The Tierra del Fuego is an island. When Magellan sailed around the coast of Latin America, in search of a route to the Orient for spices, he passed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, not around Cape Horn, but through the narrow canal that separates the tip of the continent from an immense island, the Tierra del Fuego.

The island was inhabited by two tribes: the Ona and the Yamana.

The whole of this part of South America was covered by a single vast forest and in it lived the Ona. They were not good seafarers and wouldn't willingly go near the sea. The Yamana, however, were fishermen and lived in small boats in which a fire was always kept burning: the tiny flames that Magellan and his sailors saw shining in the night and that gave the island its name.

Until 1870, the Tierra del Fuego had not aroused the interest of either Chilean or Argentinian colonists, nor had it attracted European immigrants. But in 1840 England sent some warships to occupy the Falkland Islands. Argentina and Chile realised that, if they didn't intervene, the entire southern part of the continent would end up in European hands. And so Chile sent a frigate commanded by a Lieutenant Gonzalez to occupy the southernmost point of the continent. Sixteen hours later five French war ships arrived there, also ready to take possession of the territory, but they were too late.

Once possession was secured, it became necessary to exploit the land, put it to work, and to attract colonists. The Chilean governor had an idea: he went to the Falklands, bought three hundred sheep and took them to the Tierra del Fuego. This is the origin of the prosperity of the *ganaderos*, the wealthy Patagonian families who owned huge flocks of many thousands of sheep. In a time with no synthetic fibres, wool was essential and lucrative, especially in England, Belgium and Flanders.

Within ten years, these three hundred sheep had become four million. Still today, a visitor to the Tierra del Fuego has the impression of traversing a region swept by a cataclysm: endless expanses of grassland, necessary for the grazing of thousands of sheep, punctuated by the charred remains of countless huge trees. The *ganaderos* had set fire to the forest in order to procure the prairies for their flocks.

The Ona, who lived in the forest, saw the approaching white people, and watched their territory steadily diminish. The Ona had gods, fat and lazy, unlike the active Jewish God who continually intervened, making wagers with the Devil and giving out orders to His prophets. The Ona's divinities were the type that in the history of religions are called "idle gods", and there they were, plump and content, in the depths of the forest. The Ona realised that soon the fires would reach them. So they picked up their gods and brought them to the shore of the Strait of

Magellan. There they built a large boat, a sort of ark, not for saving human beings or animals, but gods. However they were poor boat builders and as soon as they started to cross the Strait, the ark sank.

The gods sank like stones.

The wealth of the *ganaderos* was enormous, comparable to that of the nitrate magnates of the north of Chile, or the rich rubber traders of the Amazon. The *ganaderos* too patronised the arts, built theatres and museums, magnificent houses and beautiful cemeteries on their remote plains.

They hired hunters to kill the Ona, whose way of life hindered the useful exploitation of the land. And when the hunters returned from their mission, they brought back severed hands. For every hand they delivered, they received a reward.

The Ona have all disappeared; not a single one is left. The last of them, a woman of eighty, died in the 1970's. A French whaler found her in a boat in the Strait of Magellan, on the point of throwing herself into the water. This was how the Ona committed suicide, as described by Salesian missionaries in their chronicles, drowning themselves in the Strait to rejoin their gods.

When I read how the Ona had disappeared, I recalled a book I had read in the 1950's: *The Roots of Heaven*, by Romain Gary. It must be the first ecological novel, describing how in Africa, at that time, thirty thousand elephants were shot every year. It is the story of Morel, a white man who, amid general sarcasm, had created a movement for the protection of the elephants. When asked whether it was not pathetic to defend animals while so many humans suffered and died from a thousand hardships, Morel answered: "Yes, but this is my battle. I don't want the elephants to disappear. In addition to justice, beauty, revolutionary ideology, democracy, love and all the things that give meaning to the world, I also want a tiny space in which elephants can roam in freedom without the risk of being hit by a bullet".

One day Morel raided the store of an ivory merchant and thought he was having a hallucination: he saw hundreds of elephants which were invisible and yet present. Of these invisible elephants only the feet could be seen. The bottom part of the legs had been sawn off, emptied and dried to be sold to tourists and abroad as huge ash-trays or umbrella stands. Yet Morel thought he saw not umbrella stands, but invisible elephants, where only the extremities had materialised.

Those sawn-off elephant legs reminded me of the severed hands of the Ona.

When I was in the United States recently, leafing through books on the autochthonous population, everywhere I looked I saw outlines of hands carved in the rocks, only hands. These cut-off hands have begun to accompany me.

Severed hands: and here I remember another book. In the 1930's André Gide went to Africa and among the many terrifying episodes of colonial reality that he describes, he writes about huge baskets, filled with the chopped off hands of black people who had not produced enough on the plantations.

Still more severed hands in an exhibition on the Nazca culture in Santiago de Chile. The Nazca culture flourished in Peru from 300 B.C. until 300 A.D. They have left huge incisions in the earth, the so-called geoglyphs, drawings that can only be seen from above. There are even those who affirm that they could only have been made by passing extra-terrestrials. The Nazca also had extremely sophisticated ceramic arts, and one of the recurring decorative motifs is that of severed heads and hands. There are vases decorated with heads that have been cut off, bodies without heads, and severed hands carrying severed heads. It is as if this culture were haunted by heads and hands torn from the body and in this saw a sign, a value, or maybe an omen.

Then I asked myself: what is it that characterises this millenium?

And I remembered yet another story, but perhaps it is not true, perhaps it is I who begin to colour historical facts with my own obsessions. In the war between Bogumil, king of Bulgaria, and the Basileus of Constantinople, Bogumil took more than ten thousand enemy soldiers prisoner and blinded them all, save a hundred. Of those he blinded, he also cut off a hand, but the privileged hundred conserved both their sight and all their limbs, so that they could lead their companions back to their king.

Our millenium, that is now disappearing, is the millenium of severed hands, of mutilated human integrity.

* * *

In our next production we will celebrate the death of a myth.

What is a myth? It can be a well-known affirmation, devoid of truth. A myth can also be a story that encloses a kernel of timeless truth, a problematic example, a wound that never stops bleeding in a shadowy zone of each individual, each epoch.

Maybe myth is the burning bush that illuminates one face of our experience, the most intimate, the most secret, inexplicable even to ourselves.

What is this truth that comes towards us like a burning bush?

* * *

A myth can be a narrative deprived of truth, or else it can be a dense distillation of truth. There is another possibility: it can be that a historical fact has become a myth.

I began to search for all the information concerning what, for me, has become a true myth: the life of Guilhermino Barbosa. His story has accompanied me during these last years, and although I have discussed it and retold it innumerable times, it has never become banal in my eyes; on the contrary, it has acquired a force, a radiance, a haunting power.

To find Guilhermino Barbosa, we must start from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo where, in 1924, some young lieutenants of the Brazilian army, in the name of the honour that characterises - or should characterise - an officer, rejected the political corruption of their President and the generals who supported him, rebelling against them. Their revolt, which became known as “lieutenantism”, was not carried out in the name of the proletariat, or social justice. It was inspired by one of their own army values: honour. “We, as officers, cannot permit corruption.”

The majority of the army remained loyal to the President and was immediately sent to quell the uprising. Meanwhile, other officers, in other garrisons across Brazil, rebelled and were crushed by the Brazilian army. In the southern Rio Grande, a 26-year-old captain of the Engineers, Luiz Carlos Prestes, together with his battalion, decided to join the insurgent officers of São Paulo. They began to march from the south, crossed into Paraguay, returned to Brazil, and finally met up with the other rebels. They had travelled 1500 kilometers on foot.

One of his men was Guilhermino Barbosa.

The insurgent officers, conscious of how desperate their situation was, decided to give up and seek refuge in Argentina. Luiz Carlos Prestes refused, wanting to continue, sure that other officers in other cities would rise up once they knew that the fight was still going on. In this way the “Prestes Column” was born. Together with his soldiers, he set out on a march in March of 1924 which lasted until July of 1927. In thirty months they crossed 17 states in Brazil, from the south to the north and back to the south. It is one of the most incredible military campaigns, the first example of “movement war”, the longest march since the conquest of India by Alexander the Great. They covered 25,000 kilometers on foot and horseback.

By comparison, the coast of Brazil stretches for 7,000 kilometers, the Long March of the Chinese covered 12,000 kilometers and the circumference of the earth is 42,000 kilometers.

They were pursued day and night by the army and by the *cangaceiros*, the outlaws of the interior whom the President of Brazil supplied with arms and provisions and transformed into a regular army. The exploits of the Prestes Column became legendary far beyond the borders of Brazil and South America, and reached Europe. How these few hundred men continually managed to escape capture and the ceaseless pursuit of far greater forces, was a story which thrilled the world.

In 1927 Prestes decided to end the march and seek refuge in Bolivia. He stated: “We have not won, but we have not been defeated.”

With all of his 630 men, armed only with 90 rifles, he crossed the frontier and handed over his arms to the Bolivian army. He agreed to be engaged by a French company that was building a railway, on condition that all his soldiers would also be given work there. In this way Luiz Carlos Prestes spent a year in Bolivia, together with his soldiers. He had become famous, and the Secretary of the Brazilian

Communist Party paid him a visit, as a sign of homage. He remained a few days and left behind some books: Marx, Lenin, Engels.

Prestes and his Column, who came from the south of Brazil, had received a shock when they marched through the northeast. This was an area of terrible poverty, where wealthy landowners kept the population in conditions of near slavery. The encounter with this unknown part of his own country rapidly sensitised Prestes to the social problems. When he and his Column arrived in a town or village, the first thing they did was to take the landowners’ deeds of property and the register of debtors from the archives of the municipality and burn them in the central square. Then they opened the prisons and liberated the inmates, most of whom were poor farmers awaiting trial. These actions also strengthened the legend of Prestes as the “knight of hope”.

In Bolivia, after having read the classics of communism, Prestes decided to go to Buenos Aires where, in 1931, he was contacted by an emissary of the Comintern who proposed that he go to Moscow to be trained as a leader for the future communist revolution in Brazil. Prestes went and dedicated the rest of his life to this task. Meanwhile, all his soldiers had returned to a normal life in Brazil. Guilhermino Barbosa remained living on the edge of the Bolivian forest.

* * *

I have gathered all this information in the course of the last five or six years. Many of the details about Prestes and his Column I owe to Domingo Meirelles, a Brazilian journalist who from childhood had heard the deeds of Prestes narrated by his parents. In the 1970’s, as an adult, he followed the route of the Prestes Column, interviewing those who, fifty years earlier, had participated or had been witnesses to what had happened. He wrote about this pilgrimage in *The Night of the Great Bonfires*.

In his book of almost seven hundred pages, half a page and one photograph are dedicated to Guilhermino Barbosa, the illiterate soldier who from the very beginning had fought with Prestes. When the Column was dissolved, Barbosa remained in the Bolivian forest. With the passing of the years, and as the government of Bolivia seemed to him to be more and more unreliable, he moved deeper into the jungle. In the seventies he was still living there, together with his wife and twelve children. He had never surrendered.

* * *

I would like to close my eyes, cover them with a black blindfold and wait for a night with no moon. Then I would climb onto the roof of my house, and attach a rope that would carry me to the other side of the street, all the way to the bell tower of the church. I would walk on this tightrope, in the darkness, arrive on the

other side and discover that there is no bell tower, that it had been demolished many years ago.

I always had a precise image of what it was to prepare a production: climbing a mountain. It's an ascent in which I am not alone, you are with me, and we are tied together by a rope. Each one of us has his own rhythm; if one hesitates, all must slow down, and all must speed up if the guide manages to find a better trail, a path that permits faster progress. Each choice must be made so that the entire group does not get pulled down. Each step, each stop, each tiny individual action has consequences for everybody.

At times during this climb, it can happen that we have to turn back in order to find the right way towards the peak; sometimes it seems as if we are moving farther away from the summit, but it is only a detour in order to discover a more solid point on the mountainface, a safer support for your boot, a better grip for your hands, in order to move on, still a little higher.

The group climb was a vision that in the past accompanied me during the construction of a production.

Over the years the image of the mountain has changed. Now, at the outset of a production, I see the edge of a great volcano, a mountain with a great black abyss. And I throw myself inside. You also throw yourselves after me and we fall into the darkness and I don't know if I'll be able to save you, be able to save myself.

Which certainties accompany us in our fall, in the emptiness leading up to our next production?

The poetry of Henrik Norbrandt accompanies us.

The destiny of Guilhermino Barbosa accompanies us, the peasant who covered 25,000 kilometers on foot and embodied the words of Prestes: we have not won, but we have not been defeated. It is the story of a wayfarer, *Homo viator*. He reminds me of another man, in another millenium, who set out to find his true identity, his own origins - Oedipus.

I know that Barbosa will be buried as myths are buried: to rise again. That's why myths die, in order to return to a new life.

I see Barbosa being buried by mythical figures - Medea, Daedalus, Cassandra, Orpheus, Oedipus, Odysseus, Sysiphus - and I see him rising again, like a moon that drips blood. But the drops of blood are the notes of a song of revolt that people believed would never be sung again. And the notes cross time and space beyond a horizon hidden by ever higher mountains of cut-off hands.

Translation: David Korish and Judy Barba





*Tage Larsen, Torgeir Wethal, Roberta Carreri, Frans Winther, Iben Nagel Rasmussen.
Foto: Tony D' Urso.*



*Roberta Carreri, Julia Varley, Iben Nagel Rasmussen.
Foto: Tony D' Urso.*

ALL DIES

(Fragments from the performance)

ODYSSEUS: Here is the tomb, with the funeral procession approaching,
where the coffin seems to enclose a secret.
The dead man knows
what exists between those hastily carpentered planks,
but only we can describe his corpse.
We are the living, we are the coffin bearers, the only ones who know.
Many who have never heard the night breeze
or watched the gleam of the full moon
first get to know themselves in their coffin.
You are just a rotting body
being carried by us now in a coffin
to a tomb amid tall sarcophaguses.

[...]

MEDEA: The evening sun fell on the walls.
On a single white wall.
On heavy, rusty hinges
that had once been green,
the door stood open onto darkness.
My cry echoed through the valley
and a screeching crow flew off.
In the whole world
only my children
did not reply.

[...]

OEDIPUS: More and more often I have never been here
and recognise only what I have forgotten.
Time is within each of us, and blind.
For the seeing, time is visible,
its slender outstretched hand,
its shining eyes,
its breath on the mirror.
I know all about time,
it knows all about me.
Time and I are equally blind

and equally afraid
of meeting the other's gaze.
Time is the way.
[...]

ODYSSEUS: Erase your traces.
Many years from now someone will uncover your traces
in places where you have never been.
[...]

MEDEA: Daedalus, I saw you in my dreams.
You turned towards me, smiling,
and then continued on tiptoe through the labyrinth,
a deserted moonlit room.
[...]

DAEDALUS: Medea, if you could see yourself in my dreams
you would run away screaming.
You would claw and scratch your face,
cover yourself with petrol
and cry out for a flame.
No, the labyrinth is not a moonlit room,
only doors,
all the doors that you must pass through, one after the other,
to feel exiled as a whole people.
[...]

CASSANDRA: You will ask for shade
and they will give you a rusty nail.
You will ask for a bed
and they will give you a stony road.
You will ask to die
and they will give you gold to stay.
And you stay.
[...]

GUILHERMINO: In front of bombed out houses
we warm ourselves now
around a pile of burning beds
where we once slept and loved.

The children we conceived there
are out in the streets
with our machineguns in their hands
pointed at the four corners of the world.
[...]

ORPHEUS: In winter, in the heart of the storm the signposts of the dead sing
and do not show the way to anyone but you.
[...]

CASSANDRA: From the doors of the houses women call into the darkness
to children who play amid the ruins of a church.
Drunk old men go home in the night
to kill their melancholic daughters
with broken bottles.
Black stallions with bloodshot eyes
run wild in the streets.
From the sound of their hoofbeats they sense
that the riders in the silver-studded saddles
died long ago.
[...]

DAEDALUS: This sea seems calm
because memory deceives.
Wherever I am
a part of me will remain here.
In the still reflection of the waters
I can see a monster,
my son and his wings,
like the contorted branches of an ancient olive tree.
[...]

MEDEA: Hear me, my friends:
Savage and cruel, time's sharp teeth
grab at life's loins, greedily dancing.
The sea is stirred by the hands of the dead.
[...]

OEDIPUS: Here the air is full of the dust of statues crumbled by time.
My lungs hurt when I breathe in deeply.

My sight is dimmed and I see the statues gather
to take the places that had been ours.

[...]

CASSANDRA: I see something move amongst the dead.
A child.
I take her out in the street and ask her:
Who are you? How long have you been here?
I don't know, she says.
Why are you among the corpses? I ask.
And she replies: I can no longer be with the living.

[...]

ODYSSEUS: I can't stand it, I say
and I can't stand saying it.
But on the other hand I can't stand
not to say it at all. I say
I cannot stand it and I really mean it.
But if I take myself too seriously,
then I simply cannot stand it.
So I just smile, but must be careful
not to smile too much. That I can't stand either.

[...]

OEDIPUS: Blind yourself. Tear out your eyes.
So you will see history only in the light of your memories.

[...]

ORPHEUS: Now I only see you, Eurydice,
as one sees a river
which has found its bed,
enjoying each ebb and flow,
each bend, each fish,
together with the falling petals
and the abandoned mining towns
where your lovers get drunk,
drowning themselves in your moonshine
to be washed up on the banks
of far off lands where we meet in our dreams.

[...]



Jan Ferslev. Foto: Tony D' Urso.



Jan Ferslev Kai Bredholt. Foto: Tony D' Urso.

MEDEA: This is the guest we awaited
so impatiently, you and I,
the guest who will separate us
and take us to our homes.

[...]

DAEDALUS: Today is the day of the prodigy and crime
when we will kill him without mercy
while he is filled with hope
and yearning to fight the evil-willed.
We will stab him in the back,
we will kill the man of revolt
with words strengthening
the blind tyranny of honest people
who hold that the human being is naturally good
and should never be beaten.

[...]

GUILHERMINO: I remember my mother
and the swallows skimming low
over the field where April rain
consoled the parched ones stretched in pain
through the truce of night that followed the battle.
I remember the parting groans
and the prayers of dying enemies, mingled there,
foes at dawn, but friends at dusk,
indifferent to glory and country,
deceived by the truth of a bullet.
Now we lie here in the mud.
Over us the swallows skim low
and all is hushed.

[...]

CHORUS: You shall pray. After victory, prayer
is fitting for all who mourn their slain.
You, the living, shall unmoor and sail
but Death's dark anchor will detain the best of you.
There must be other, nobler words for them
who nobly yielded their lives
for the world's fairest hope
linked with man's foulest crime.

CHORUS: All dies.
Not alone the mighty trees, people and grass vanish.
The poet's form of beauty and noblest deeds dissolve.
Truth itself decays
and from its sad ashes pain and falsehood grow.



Frans Winther, Julia Varley. Foto: Jan Rüssz.



Torgeir Wethal. Foto: Tony D' Urso.

Thomas Bredsdorff

ABOUT LIES AND TRUTH

Reflections on a process

Mythos is the name of the production. The word 'myth' has two meanings in modern usage. When Georg Brandes referred to 'the myths of romanticism' he might as well have said 'lies'. When, on the other hand, the Nobel laureate Johannes V. Jensen insisted that certain observations from diverse fields, which he skilfully combined, had 'become a myth' to him, he meant quite the opposite. A myth to him was an epiphany of truth.

What is peculiar about the two meanings of the word myth - lies and truth - is that they derive from the same origin. A myth is a story which, in the words of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, is lies and damned fiction - and yet the bearer of truth.

No bad title for a production by Odin Teatret.

But what is it supposed to mean, people often ask when watching the Odin actors aiming their exorbitant energy in some obscure direction. Spectators are not satisfied unless the meaning they have grasped has at least a little in common with that of the person in the next seat. Otherwise theatre cannot be distinguished from a Rorschach test.

What Eugenio Barba has to say elsewhere in this programme on the 'short century' and the dream of revolution that died, may be used as clues by spectators worrying about the meaning of the performance. Somehow theatre always refers to the outside world. No matter how much you stress the here-and-now character of the theatrical event it can only be fully appreciated by spectators who are in a position to combine what they see in front of them with their own memory and hopes, with life, in other words, that has been or is to be lived.

One should not, however, make the mistake of taking Barba's hints as a definitive clue to the meaning of the play. Hidden rooms always remain to be explored.

Some thirty years ago Odin Teatret hosted a seminar on political theatre. Those were the days when political theatre groups flourished. Some of them participated in the seminar. We watched specimens, on stage and on screen. They had two things in common. They all wished to change the world. And none of them had succeeded as yet in doing so. Except for one group, as one of the participants in the seminar pointed out, a group of rain dancers from some exotic land. They actually achieved what they were after. The film in which they appeared ended in a downpour.

Of course there is nothing political in this. But then none of the other theatre groups achieved what they had been so fervently endeavouring to accomplish. Moreover, most of them have long since thrown in the sponge.

Not so our host, Odin Teatret's enduring troupe, who never called themselves political when that was the fashion, but who do so with pride today. What is it they want to change? If it is the world of the theatre, they may as well forget it. Never ever will the other theatres become like Odin Teatret. Is it the world - which is as unaffected as it was thirty years ago? Hardly. What then?

Eugenio and I met for a couple of hours in an airport when *Mythos* was in a stage of germination and we began our discussions of the production. Three points were evident to me at this early stage.

Eugenio had read some poems by Henrik Nordbrandt. Like myself, he enjoyed discussing them on a fairly technical level, much the same way - and partly even in the same terminology - as he discusses his own theatrical work. He wanted to use the energy of the poems for a purpose. Furthermore, he had observed - and certainly is not alone in this - that a utopia is about to die, one which has been decisive for much of our century, generating both hope and terror, the utopia of a better society created by man through conscious action. Finally, he had a vision not of a different world but of a different setting, one which seemed impossible to create in the theatre but which nevertheless takes shape right there, in front of the spectators, the stage which becomes the foundation of *Mythos*.

These were the three ingredients with which I first became acquainted: Eugenio's discovery of some poems that I had brought to his attention; the observation that the myth of revolution was dead but would resurrect; the vision of an impossible setting. And, by the way, would I lend him a hand with the work on the poems and keep a critical eye on their transformation into action in space.

For a year I have been able to watch those rather diverging ingredients converge. Here they are, eventually, wandering on the seashore: Oedipus, Cassandra, Orpheus, Daedalus, Sisyphus, Medea, Odysseus, whoever, all those ancient fictions, that is: lies. Amongst them, there is also the stalwart revolutionary from South America who, we are told, is the only non-fiction character in the play, although he might as well be fictitious, since none of us has ever heard of him. They mingle, those characters, and combine with each other and the texts into a new myth, the myth of the energy which re-emerges in a different shape just when everything seems to be over.

As I watch the characters enacting their collective myth, I am struck by their loneliness. The mythical figures, together with the poems that deal with perpetual partings and distancing, become a theatre of solitude.

That, perhaps, is the harshest part of Odin Teatret's comment on the dying myth of collectivity: that in the last analysis we are what we were when we were born and will be when we die: alone.

For more than thirty years the members of Odin Teatret have scorned the false ideologies of collectivity and insisted on the power of loneliness. Together!

During long and tiresome rehearsals, in which scenes are repeated over and over again, it has often occurred to me that what they are in fact telling us is a story of endurance. Maybe they are really telling us their own story - about being alone while the rest of the world is preaching collectivity; about standing together when others preach that now it is everyone for himself.

A 'myth' is not just lies or truth. A 'myth', with Odin Teatret, at least, is also the truth which opposes the prevailing truths and hence is lies and truth at the same time.



TROY

Each day I am someone different than the day before
and day by day I move further into darkness:
Before me is a long line of people I have been -
those nearest, still wrapped in twilight,
those farther away, in the light, casting shadows
and the farthest ones, wholly transparent
like the husks of insects or rock-crystal statues
fallen forward or completely apart
exposing their hidden flaws and defects.
Those I will become stand behind me
a line of figures equally dark, equally vague -
I do not know how long it is -
clumsy, struggling, half-conscious bodies
waiting to take my place.
Each day I am someone different, and each day the same:
The figure in the middle that blocks the view
keeping those ahead from understanding
the wild energy and longing for light of those behind,
and keeping those behind from learning
from the flaws and failings of those ahead.
I am Helen, and at the same, the Hellenes
the rowers who row the carved prows into daybreak
and each separate rower who, chained to his oar,
rows with the feeling of never getting anywhere at all.

Henrik Nordbrandt

Translation: Alexander Taylor