

Eugenio Barba and The Chronic Life

End of September 2010, Holstebro, Denmark. The twilight slowly sets in and shyly protrudes Odin Teatret's yard. The path to the theatre serpents among the shades of light beaming out of earth where the trees are. I open the door of the theatre and rediscover in amazement the already familiar space shrouded in the shade of history belonging to a *tradition-in-life*. The rehearsals of *The Chronic Life*, the performance Eugenio Barba together with his actors work at are in full swing. The premiere is due in autumn 2011. Among the texts chosen by Eugenio Barba are to be found poems by Ursula Andkjær Olsen, one of the most appreciated contemporary Danish poets. Fernando Taviani and Thomas Bredsdorff brilliantly play the part of close councilors on Eugenio Barba's dramaturgy. The daily programme begins with the actor's training, each morning at a quarter past eight sharp in The Black Room. Never is there anything spectacular in the training. Never is the training for the other. It is the pursuit of the inner self on itself. And only those who re-discover the universe of inner self have the chance to feast upon the training, otherwise there is weariness and gravel, proof that your body is mortified, stoned, indifferent to the biological age. The training maybe a life buoy if one allows to be baited and hooked on. In spite of forty-six years of experience, the actors have not given up training before they start rehearsing. Each of them repeats his score improvising physical and vocal actions reiterating them into organic series. An atmosphere hallowed by beatitude and concentration is weaving and gradually lying down. One turns into a witness of a procession of scenes under the sign of the mirage and the miraculous. Powerful tensions entwine and chart unpredictable dramaturgical knots. The dramaturgy of Eugenio Barba is the one reshaping in contemporaneity the complex substance of the organic performance texture. The uttered text as a vocal undertaking and not as a merely semantic message erupts in a gush fused with sanctity. The cohabitation of the cluster of dramaturgical elements is natural and legitimate. And thus the word mingles unaware with the sound, the chant, the action and movement, posture and relation. Tage Larsen, Kai Bredholt, Jan Ferslev, Elena Floris play known or crafted instruments, Roberta Carreri carries on her score and improvises micro-actions using a cleaning cloth. Iben Nagel Rasmussen manages to fluctuate the audacity of the powerful movements of a warrior into soft, warm, ethereal motions. Julia Varley conceives wonders with a pack of cards that become gateways, source of destinies frail as sandcastles. Kai Bredholt drifts as in a vapor, with a bell on top of his head. Jan Ferslev madly springs into dance with Roberta Carreri and together they swing in the raving frolic of passionate lovers while Tage Larsen chases illusions with a coin that at a wink is in the air then disappears in the pocket, when it is when it isn't, as an illusionist taking a stone or a playing card out of his sleeve. Sofia Monsalve blends the innocence of gesture with the sadness of failed exploit. The actors, musicians, light and set designers, director's assistants - Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Jan Ferslev, Elena Floris, Donald Kitt, Tage Larsen, Sofia Monsalve, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Fausto Pro, Julia Varley, Raul Iaiza, Pierangelo Pompa, Ana Woolf - are a dynamic part of the process of creation. The actors wolf the accomplishment of scores that are to mature during the rehearsal that takes place in The White Room.

The working process of *The Chronic Life* has stretched along months of intense work. The metaphor-space is subject to change. Eugenio Barba embarks on the space designated by the two banks of spectators, erecting a fourth wall as a sort of entrance for the spectators. It seems an attempt aiming at a precise objective: to force the actors to explore their creative energies in a miniaturized space, to perceive the daunting proximity of the spectators as a unique challenge. In Wroclaw, Poland, within the project *Masters in Residence* at Studio Na Grobli, in the presence of participants gathered from

all over the world to witness the rehearsals of *The Chronic Life* (20-26 October, 2010), during the last two days, Eugenio Barba changes the playing space, prolonging it, eliminating the "executioner-wall", seemingly exterminating the elation of the actors' performing. However, the faintest shudder of the face muscles, the swiftest sideglancing, the most imperceptible fidgeting of the fingers are perceived amplified, sharply felt by each participant. The actors' performing, masterfully conducted, sails on a sea which is at times agitated by the wind, at times dead calm through waves of music and whispers and sounds. Eugenio Barba gets involved, living the most minuscule action-reaction of his actors, abandoning himself totally to their scores, while the next minute he is detached searching with a critical eye. The relationship with his actors is almost a conspirative work, a communication both through words and gestures. His audacity weaves with the tenderness, vulnerability with force, remarkably profiling a complex, powerful, overwhelming personality. The attention and concern bestowed on detail converge with unexpected contexts which he conceives only to make the actors face the unfolded thought, the unspoken word, the unexplored space. And the way he always takes his actors by surprise the same way he does not ask from them what he himself does not experiment. And he experiments sounds and actions and walking and postures and relations with the other, with the scenic object, and sings and dances and runs along the stage. Eugenio Barba himself is the performance he works at. And his books are enlived and abstract words frozen on paper such as *sats* and *flow* and *score* and *subscore* are incarnated to concrete forms, being the purest stage praxis.

Eugenio Barba's dramaturgy unfolds in the cadence of our natural mind leaps. The performance, work in progress, starts by enchanting us with the narration of a story. *There are stories to put us to sleep and stories to wake us up.* (*The Gospel according to Oxyrhincus*) Eugenio Barba's story is sometimes thought up, premeditated, under control, lucid, and sometimes felt inward out of control, irrational, churning with barbaric, basic impulses. And it does not find its organic attire only if narrated in action and gesture, be it ample or minuscule, in disrupted sequences of words, punctuated by silences, transposed life, shrieking for the essential, mutation-transmutation. Memorable is the scene where Eugenio Barba works on the enlacement of words interpreted by Julia Varley in a dynamic rhythm, with pauses rigorously emphasized in a dense crescendo while Roberta Carreri bemoans. It is as if one teller speaks to us, although the actresses perform in different voice qualities. Roberta Carreri experiments qualities and intensities of sound so as to entwine with the quality and intensity of Julia Varley's words. During their work the actresses attain perfection in interweaving their voices as if belonging to one scenic presence. And as an echo ceaselessly reverberating, Julia Varley's words from *The Castle of Holstebro* traverse the stage: *Knowledge which has not passed through the senses can produce nothing but destructive truth.*

Going round and round a grindstone, a donkey travelled a thousand miles. When he was unharnessed, he found that he was right where he started. Some men walk and walk. When night falls, they see neither city nor village nor creation nor nature nor power nor angel. They are wretched: they have suffered in vain. (*The Gospel according to Oxyrhincus*). Can we surpass our condition or not? Can we find an earthly or a heavenly father? Is life a chronic illness and if it is are we aware of the illness that grabbed and dragged us towards all our acts? Can knowledge be a life belt? Or innocence? Or the naivety of the idiot in his fanatic search of a meaning to give gist to his wandering through the world? Is uprooting the bitter fruit of our restless drifting from one place to another without genuinely finding out the place we can truly call home? Confronting the other leads to understanding or misunderstanding? How is it to eat when not hungry? Do you want to see or on the contrary it is warmer and more comfortable and convenient to put on shades to cover the horizon you want with all the ardor of soul to see looming?

And if I open a door do I dare to open the next one and the next one and all one thousand and one doors? And the doors I open, do they carry me to liberty? Is it or not the threshold to another reality the one I put my foot on day by day without being able to recognise it? Does the debris of honour forgotten in me sharpen my sense of dignity? And if not, is suicide to be the only form of liberty left for me? And then, am I to suicide day by day as to be able to bear my steps towards the night? Am I to put my head into a bag and suffocate myself and when I feel there is no way out for me to tear it and smash it to pieces and smile secretly in the mirror? Shall I hide carefully my tormented soul or shall I unearth it? Shall I straighten my back and softly pacing towards the coffin to curdle inside and to sleepeth into death and so to find my redemption? Shall I get on a ship and breathe in the smell of the salty breeze? Shall I close smoothly to the other to taste his flesh and gulp into his soul? And the house I dwell in, does it have an age? Does it age with me? Does it have sins? Are they mine? And in the myriad of thousands and thousands of nuances of sorrow can I have the hope of shared joy? And hope, how long can I harbor it? Where to? Questions, questions incessantly haunting me while witnessing the rehearsals of *The Chronic Life* orchestrated by Eugenio Barba.

Rehearsals! Oh, rehearsals! Opening from little things, a coin, a cloth, a playing card, the access of the sight and hearing and other senses towards the inside, to the inner stage, of each of us. And I ask myself, why do I feel? Why do I feel so alive, burning with passion? What is this longing for being? Being something, somehow? No! Just being. And with every question another question comes up and no answer. The stage squirms with the violence, of a profound, genuine conflict, the conflict with death. Am I reborn? It is not only I but they, merging into a we inhabiting this space now and here. Aren't conflict and violence malefic in their true essence? Apparently not. If your blood doesn't flow in warm waves of lava through your veins, will it ever flow onto the ground? No rest. Tumult. Tempest time. Oh! Theatre! Dance! Music! Poetry! Culture! Culture does not coerce to sleep, to stillness, to the perfect stillness of death while you are still alive. Culture hurts if you are to reach ultimate threshold of the Absolute. *You cannot die when you never lived*, violently painful you can hear the voice released from the viscera of the Performance of Eugenio Barba.