

## **The Mud and the Wind: an Inquiry into Dramaturgy**

David Korish

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Since 1979, the itinerant university known as the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) has been holding working sessions every two years. Through a variety of investigative activities--performances, work demonstrations, guest speakers, participatory practical work, group discussions--this "web of artists and scholars", as described by its founder Eugenio Barba, addresses a specific theme towards the inquiry of "the fundamental principles that generate 'presence' or 'scenic life' of the actor/dancer." (Barba) The 1996 session held in Copenhagen, entitled *The Whispering Winds of Theatre and Dance*, focused on deepening the understanding of that often thin line which separates theatre and dance. In 1998, the session held in Portugal was dedicated to the inquiry of the theme of organicity in performance, specifically addressing the tension between what is 'organic' for the actor versus what appears 'organic' for the spectator.

The most recent session, held in Bielefeld, Germany in August of 2000, entitled *Action, Structure, Coherence*, was driven by the theme of 'dramaturgy', specifically the performance dramaturgy of the actor/dancer. One of the threads that emerged during session was the complicated relationship between the physical dramaturgy of the performer and the written dramaturgy of the dramatic text. Three particular work demonstrations-- two by actors of the Odin and one by Japanese traditional masters--illustrated how this relationship can function within the confines of the work on a particular piece as well how a broader idea of dramaturgy can become a way for us to understand a possible connection between creative techniques, both past and present.

### **Work Demonstration of Roberta Carreri and Torgeir Wethal**

Odin actors Roberta Carreri and Torgeir Wethal began their work demonstration by explaining how they came to work on material from Ibsen's *A Doll House*. During a recent workshop with the Odin, some participants who work in the more 'traditional' professional theatre -- a theatre governed by the swift creation of character based on written texts and bounded by a limited rehearsal time -- questioned how they (the participants), can apply the working techniques of the development of physical scores to their professional lives. This concern interested Roberta and Torgeir to such a degree that they began to work on a kind of ongoing public improvisation, an open work session, in which they develop physical material based on and directly departing from the final scene between Torvald and Nora from *A Doll House*.

The question of how to generate dynamic physical form that is in relation to more traditional dramatic texts is something that we have been attacking for some time, and so the opportunity to see Roberta and Torgeir struggling with how to yoke a score of physical actions with the narrative provided by Ibsen was extremely enriching. I was particularly drawn to moments in which a line of dialogue or particular circumstance in the play generated a personal association, and from that association, they constructed physical actions that would complement the delivery of the line or enrich the situation of the scene, without disrupting the basic narrative flow.

For example, for Nora's entrance into this final scene (and here they explained that they cheated a little with the material because Nora is in fact already onstage; yet for their purposes they had her entering the space), Roberta observed that the home--her husband, the children--is dragging Nora down, sucking at her life. This generated for her an image that the floor of the house itself was deep in mud, an image she then transferred to her body by working on the physical energies of someone whose feet must slog through thick mud as she walks. It gave her entrance a physical quality that was both aggressively moving forward as well as fighting against something pulling her back, an extremely accurate physicalization of the situation in which Nora finds herself at that moment, fighting to move forward in her life while resisting the emotional tug backwards.

What is remarkable in terms of the dramaturgical relationship between performer and text is that Roberta is working in a *literal* and *associative* way at the same time. She is working literally in that her understanding of Nora's condition at this point in the drama responds to information directly drawn from the play. Yet with this information, she generates a personal and physical *association*--the mud sucking at her feet--that will enrich the moment for her internally as well as dynamize her physical expression of this particular scenic event.

After developing this kind of physical reaction to an association generated from the text, what was crucial at this point was how she went through the process of adjusting the physical action so that it didn't appear bizarre within the confines of the social behaviour of the play. In order to find in her body the physical sensation of tugging through mud, she needed to work with very thick mud, forcing a large, strenuous effort. Yet she was aware that moving this way would 'not make sense' in the play, and so reduced the size of her movements until arriving at the essence of a physical action whose manifestation was now *coherent within the terms of the drama*. In this way, she and Torgeir developed much of their score of physical actions, constructing the physical life of the scene. They created, in essence, *a line of associative physical actions both in relation to and coherent with the text*, a dynamic score that gave great physicality to the scene but did not disrupt its flow from a narrative point of view. For those of us who are trying to build the bridge between the physical work of the Odin and the world of 'traditional' dramatic literature, 'great plays', if you will, this demonstration provided valuable insight into possible connections between dynamic physical form--the performative dramaturgy of the actor--and the written dramaturgy of the dramatic text.

### **Work Demonstration of Tage Larsen and Julia Varley**

Tage Larsen and Julia Varley, also of the Odin, were tackling similar issues in their work demonstration. This work was driven by Tage's passion for Shakespeare and, again, the need to find working techniques that bridge the physical vocabulary they have acquired at the Odin with written material, in this case Shakespeare, whose conventions are perhaps less open to the physical scores that, as actors, they are trained to perform.

In this demonstration, in which Tage and Julia worked on a scene between Iago and Othello, the approach was in fact markedly different from that which Roberta and Torgeir took. Rather than developing the physical score in direct relation to the text--in an ongoing process in dialogue with the text, as Roberta and Torgeir had done--what Tage proposed was that they develop material in

improvisatory, physical dialogue with each other, and later adapt and mount this physical score onto the text. What was remarkable in this demonstration were two elements: first, the capacity of Tage and Julia, through improvisation, to develop a dynamic physical score that could become the foundation for their encounter when they incorporate the text; and second, how they weeded and molded the physical material so that the score of actions did not interfere with the sense of the scene itself. In the moment of joining the physical score (material that had been created with very little direct relation to the text itself) to Shakespeare's dialogue, Tage would often be troubled whether what he was doing on a physical level was simply 'too weird' in terms of its relation to the scene at hand. At one point, during the demonstration Tage took a drink of water from a glass, an event that mirrored something he had done during the working process with Julia and which turned into a kind of fortuitous inspiration. He explained that after accidentally taking a sip of water during the work, Tage wanted to transform the nature of the actions that they were creating so that they were as natural as 'taking a drink of water'. And so he molded and adjusted his physical material to accommodate this "strange language" of Shakespeare until the final arbiter was whether his physical action contributed to the text or whether it disrupted meaning, poetry and flow. As with Roberta's mud on the floor of her *Doll House*, Tage forced himself to negotiate between his own training and acquired technique and his appreciation for and understanding of the dramatic richness and complexities of Shakespearean dialogue. Yet in this case, Tage kept his sights on not only the dramaturgical relationship between his physical material and the narrative context of the scene, as we had with Roberta and Torgeir, but also on the complicated yoking of his physical actions with the conventions inherent in comprehension and musical appreciation of Shakespearean dramatic poetry.

### **Dramaturgy**

Ferdinando Taviani, one of the founders and principal investigators of ISTA, offered a provocative image of dramaturgy when he described it as 'the links' that exist in the chain of elements of dramatic action. By identifying dramaturgy not so much as 'events themselves in succession' but rather as the links which hold these events together, the bridges, he suggests that the construction of the piece will depend on our ability to identify and create these links. Clearly these two work demonstrations reflect Taviani's point, in that the actors of the Odin struggle to identify and create the links between their dynamic physical material and the narrative, as well as linguistic, nature of the material in order to create a dramaturgically coherent and exciting whole.

Yet, if we extend the idea of dramaturgy past the boundaries of the work on the piece itself to encompass the nature of both working circumstances and techniques, we can see how these two demonstrations also reflect the way these actors are trying to identify and create *professional* links, to find the dramaturgy, between their experience and professional circumstances different from their own: between the world of a largely stable group of rigorously trained actors led by a single director who, together, have developed a shared working vocabulary that facilitates a very particular approach to creating performance; and the world of shifting creative personnel, of varying vocabularies and working methods, of limited rehearsal time, of dramatic texts with narrative continuity, dialogue, characters. They ask, in effect, how can the work of the Odin reverberate outside the professional paradigm the Odin itself has fostered and within which the Odin has thrived?

The question leads us to an unfortunate conundrum: in both cases, we are before actors whose mastery of specific creative abilities has emerged only as a result of the very condition of their professional lives. Their capacity to develop and mold dynamic physical form -- be it in relation to Ibsen or Shakespeare or less traditional performance texts as is their experience -- has been acquired only as a direct result of their years of training and the very use of poetic, associative physical actions within the performance montages themselves. And so their ability to apply these skills outside their working conditions is predicated on them having acquired these skills in the first place, skills that their working conditions have nurtured in them. Eliminate the conditions and we risk losing the skills. Yet, as we move into an era where sustaining the group vision of theatre is becoming rapidly more untenable, it is essential we continue to search for these links between the deep, substantive working information of the actors of the Odin and the working circumstances that are not dictated by group theatre, circumstances we must make our own. In their work demonstrations, Roberta and Torgeir as well as Tage and Julia are taking very important steps towards finding and creating these links.

### **A Link: the Mud and the Wind**

One of the last events of this ISTA session was a shared work demonstration of Noh actor Matsui Akira (whose Noh interpretation of Aerosmith's *Stairway to Heaven* was truly one of the hallmarks of this particular ISTA) and Kainichi Hanayagi from the Nihon Buyo tradition. We were given a translated text of the scene being chanted and so afforded the opportunity to experience the Noh performance the way the Japanese audience experiences it, with the ability to associate what was happening with what was being sung. As I was watching, it occurred to me that the original creators of the physical material, a score that has been passed down for hundreds of years, may have worked in way not too dissimilar to how Roberta and Torgeir had worked in their demonstration. That is, they appear to have departed from the written text and developed a line of physical actions that were both poetic and associative yet not divorced from the narrative line. One clear moment was when the text mentions the ocean and the Noh actor glides his hand across the stage like the wind passing over the sea. The action does not illustrate the ocean but rather, as an association drawn from the text, enriches the scenic poetry of the moment. This approach, in fact the whole development of the physical

material in the classical Japanese form, seems to strike this same balance between the literal and the associative that Roberta exhibited as she pulled her feet through the mud: poetic physical actions in relation to the narrative line of the text. What struck me at this moment is that perhaps the actors of the Odin, as they move forward and forge these professional links between their work and an uncertain future, may also be uncovering a dramaturgical link of traditions with the past as well, between this new work and one of their principle ancestors: Zeami and his development of the Noh drama.

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