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# Transnational Pathways of Eurasian Performance Arts

## Introduction

The thematic section on transnational practices in Eurasian performing arts has been inspired by the international conference *Contemporary Acting Techniques in Eurasian Theatre, Performance and Audiovisual Arts: Intercultural and Intermedia Perspective*.<sup>1</sup> Three of the five articles in this section are expanded versions of papers presented there. The selected contributions reach beyond the exclusively European or Asian cultural perspective towards complex relations and interactions transcending the framework of a single continent, and the

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<sup>1</sup> This online event took place on 28–30 September 2021 and was co-organized by three institutions: Faculty of Humanities of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (represented by the theater scholar Marzenna Wiśniewska, the sinologist and theater scholar Maciej Szatkowski, and the present author), The Grotowski Institute in Wrocław (represented by Jarosław Fret and Monika Blige), and The Bridges Foundation, convener of the annual InlanDimensions festival (represented by Nikodem Karolak).

authors offer original analyses and interpretations of the objects of their inquiry. Our thinking about the relations that are increasingly often referred to not as international or cross-cultural but, in line with a new research trend in social sciences, as transnational and transcultural, enjoys the patronage of Eugenio Barba. For many years, as a practitioner and author, he has encouraged other practitioners and researchers of theater and performance arts to see Eurasian theater not in terms of a single vast geographical area (continent), but in terms of a shared cultural space, which has been developing dynamically for millennia, especially in the sphere of ludic and artistic performances (this concept has been co-developed by Barba's long-time collaborator Nicola Savarese).

During the conference, Barba recalled two arguments from his book *The Moon Rises from the Ganges: My Journey Through Asian Acting Techniques*. The first one concerned the mutual influences, not always innocent or free from self-interest, between the cultures of Europe and Asia:

In the meeting between the East and West, seduction, imitation, and exchange are reciprocal. We in the West have often *envied* the Asians their theatrical knowledge, which transmits the actors' living work of art from one generation to another. They have *envied* our theatre's capacity for confronting new subjects and the way in which it keeps up with the time. Such flexibility allows for personal interpretations of traditional texts that often assume the energy of a formal and ideological conquest. In the West, stories that are unstable in every aspect but the written; in the East, a living art, profound, capable of being transmitted and involving all the actors' and spectators' physical and mental levels but anchored in stories and customs which are forever antiquated. On the one hand, the theatre which is sustained by *logos*. On the other a theatre which is, above all, *bios*.<sup>2</sup>

The second argument, which was at the heart of Barba's talk, concerned the existence of a tradition of traditions, a common pool of knowledge about the extra-daily body techniques of the performer (actor-dancer). This tradition is complex in nature and one should rather speak of its transculturality than its universality, although Barba and the artists of his Odin Teatret were looking for the universal when they began exploring the principles of theater anthropology

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<sup>2</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Moon Rises from the Ganges: My Journey Through Asian Acting Techniques* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 241.

in the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and in books such as *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*.<sup>3</sup>

Barba's approach to theater anthropology is represented in this section by Simone Dragone. Her article *Finding Kokoro through the Eyes: Butoh in Roberta Carreri's Work and Pedagogy* tells about the distinguished Italian actress who joined the Odin Teatret company in the 1970s, participated in the first ISTA session in Bonn in 1980, and was consistently inspired in her acting development by the techniques of Japanese Butoh dance. Proposing an entirely different way of thinking about the transnational, Jakub Kłeczek analyzes Masaki Fujihata's exhibition *BeHere/1942*, presented in Los Angeles. It is difficult to say what is more compelling in this analysis: the theme of the erased history of Americans of Japanese descent, confined to 'internment' camps after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, or the technological complexity of the exhibition, which on the one hand enables the participants' immersive experience of a dark event from the past, and on the other hand persistently calls for a critical assessment of propaganda photographs from that time.

Aesthetic, institutional, and socio-political aspects of transnational artistic practices have been problematized in a slightly different way in the lectures by two conference keynote speakers: the acclaimed Hong Kong theater directors Tang Shu-wing and Danny Yung. Their rich experiences of transnational/transcultural collaboration in Asia and around the world are presented here by Marzenna Wiśniewska and Maciej Szatkowski. Tang Shu-wing, whose theater maturation was significantly influenced by Jerzy Grotowski, offered considerations on the director's method of working with the actor within the framework of minimalist theater in the essay *Performing: Feeling, Auto-Transformation, and Expression*. Danny Yung, in turn, presented an in-depth reflection on the institutional entanglements of theater artists in Asia, introducing in his very title the thought-provoking metaphor of 'caged culture' (*Cultural Institution and Institutional Culture from the Transcultural Perspective: What Is the Culture behind the Stage, and What Is the Culture inside a Cage?*<sup>4</sup>).

Theater performances by both these directors have been presented in Europe, including Poland. A particularly multifaceted understanding of transcultural and transnational collaboration is represented by Yung. His company Zuni

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<sup>3</sup> Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> The adjective "post-crosscultural," used in the title of Yung's conference talk, was substituted with "transcultural," which is a better fit for context in which the director's activity in the sphere of multilateral cultural exchange should be interpreted.

Icosahedron's production *The Interrupted Dream* exemplifies a unique combination of the inspiration of traditional Chinese opera (*xiqu*) and the conventions of physical and political theater well known in the West. In the text of the lecture included here, the Hong Kong artist evokes examples of transnational/transcultural collaboration in Asia that involve combining theater traditions in order to carry out dialogue about memory that unites and divides.

An important complement to the thematic section is Maciej Szatkowski's review of *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* (2020), the latest research monograph by the sinologist and theater scholar Rossella Ferrari. The researcher competently outlines a transnational perspective on studying the theater of the Sinosphere, which is a highly complex conglomerate of Chinese cultures; she distances herself from the conventional image of a homogenous Chinese culture. After all, the Sinosphere encompasses both the People's Republic of China and the cultures of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, which have been developing for decades under autonomous rules, as well as the multi-million Chinese diasporas in other Asian countries. Ferrari shows special interest in the work of Danny Yung, having analyzed and interpreted it for many years.

The contributions in this section provide some insight into the process of discovering and problematizing transcultural and transnational relations. The transcultural approach has emerged as a result of a critical evaluation of intercultural theater, not infrequently entangled in colonial inheritances. The transnational approach stems from a reflection on the effects of globalization, from research into the economic and political activities of individuals and communities outside the framework of the nation-state, as well as from research into the heterogeneous, 'mixed' cultures and complex identities emerging as a result of global migration. Stephen Vertovec, an eminent scholar of transnational phenomena, has indicated problems that, while not new in themselves, call for in-depth scientific reflection: diasporas and other migrant transnational communities, the consequences of cultural reproduction, such as creolisation, bricolage, hybridity, or intercultural translation, taking place not only on the North-South axis, but also within non-European cultures that should not be treated as monolithic.<sup>5</sup> This certainly opens up new possibilities for exploring phenomena that belong to more than just one national culture (a promising perspective also for theater and performance scholars) without necessarily

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927083>

applying to them only the critical or revisionist approaches typical of many researchers working in postcolonial and decolonial studies.

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