

ÅSEN TEATER

Eugenio Barba's speech at The Prize of Hope celebration 2011:



HOPE AND INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

Without hope we cannot live. Hope can be a strength or a burden. It can fuel mediocre illusions or harmful and fierce beliefs. It can inspire those “truths” that leaders of doctrines proclaim eternal and philosophers call “idols” or “vital lies”.

In Odin Teatret's most recent performance, *The Chronic Life*, the comfort and uneasiness of the world in which I live and which I know through journeys, newspapers, books, film and television, is evoked through a mosaic of details, each of which is easily recognisable. The spectator can identify the interlacement of privileges and exclusions as well as the unforgivable sin of our society – “to eat

without hunger and to drink without thirst”, in the words of Charles Baudelaire. But the performance as a whole - because of the way reactions and circumstances are connected and interwoven - causes a reverberation of incomprehensibility. The performance doesn't proclaim the hopeless absurdity of life. It points out another way of living hope as inverted despair, that is as poetry: a subverting way of looking and rebellious vitality.

There is no hope when we are convinced that nothing can be done because conditions don't allow it. Despair, before being a state of mind, is the painful acceptance of the status quo, the admission of the forces at stake, of everything which is evident, sensible and which in the end we submit to. Despair is inaction which comes from understanding only too well that which encircles us.

A mysterious bond ties hope to incomprehensibility. Hope is a dark force and cannot be deciphered. However, hope helps me to see closely and in detail that which I feel the need to refuse, without sheltering behind preconceived judgements, contempt and resignation. And without deluding myself that I have found the key which throws light on what I experience as dark forces.

One of the most refined totalitarianisms of our time is the obligation to clarity, the disdain for the state of I-do-not-understand, the shared devaluation of the feeling of incomprehension whose secret effects prompt decisive choices in our life. The cult of clarity, which served to enlighten minds, serves today also to darken them.

Every time we turn on the television, open a newspaper or listen to a politician or an expert, the world is presented to us as something that has been understood and can be explained. Every piece of information depicts facts coherently interpreted and commented, ready to be classified; or else exposes the impatient waiting for the solution of the enigmas of politics and news stories. There must be an explanation. If it is late in coming, the event will in time end among the refuse of unexplained news, and thereby destined to extinction. Anyone who speaks or writes fears above all not to be clear. The need to be understood impels us to censor our reactions and feelings which we are unable to understand in depth. Even in linguistic behaviour, the expressions that cannot be clearly translated from one language into another are discarded. The gift of clarity loses vigour and sense when it buries the gift of ambiguity and the sensation of not seizing everything.

If I ask myself: “what is theatre?” I can find several bright answers. But none of them appears to be of any practical use in intervening in the surrounding world, in the attempt to change at least a tiny corner of it. If I ask myself in which paradoxical enclosure in space and time I may allow the dark forces which rule in history and in the individual’s interiority to surface, and how I can make them perceptible in their physicality without producing violence, destruction and self-destruction, the answer is evident to me: it is the enclosure called theatre.

The image of Fridtjof Nansen appears. He was a scientist leading the International Bureau for Refugees of the League of Nations, Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He died in 1930 at the age of seventy. In the years of his maturity, he was a polar explorer, the most creative among the Norwegian explorers. The ships that opened the road to the North Pole were imprisoned by the ice during the long winter freeze. Nothing could be done. The only hope was to succeed in not succumbing and to wait for the weather to change. Because times do change and even the longest night, as Brecht sings, is not eternal. Nansen did something more. He dreamt with open eyes against despair. He dreamt a contradiction: the navigation of a ship imprisoned by invincible ice. He called his ship Fram (Forward), a name that could be turned into derision. Nansen studied the ice; the conditions of the psychic and physical resistance of the men in the homicidal vice of the frozen season; he calculated the tides and currents. Because also the frozen sea moves and changes. He let himself be trapped by the ice and exploited its long, desperately slow drift. He turned it into a paradoxical static navigation, ready to take the initiative again at the first change in the season. Nansen is the great master of the deep hope.

Beyond the ephemeral swarm of thousands of small daily hopes, there is the deep hope which dwells beyond the border of the Great Freeze and its fear. If we want to keep the deep hope alive, there is no other means than to look at it from its opposite, steering the dark face of its negation. To keep hope alive - and thus deny despair - is an arduous enterprise, and in certain historical moments we know it only too well. The act of hoping is as strenuous as the act of withstanding. It means to react in first person, often with actions which are incomprehensible to the criteria of the craft and the expectations of others.

Until now I have made performances which refer to events and experiences of the past or the present. For the first time, *The Chronic Life* is imagined in a near future, simulated and simultaneous. The action takes place in Denmark and Europe: different countries at the same time. The story unfolds during the first months after a civil war. To make this scenario less believable (which is no consolation) I have chosen a relatively close date, 2031. I have striven to *con-fuse* the relationships between the various elements of the whole, weakening the spectator's illusion of being able to recognise the chains of cause and effect. The whole, seen in just one glimpse, delineates a landscape that cannot be grasped rationally.

A multitude of voices, day and night and through many means, comment upon the various whys of history which besieges our lives and which threatens to drag them into chaos. The intelligible answers stifle the questions that concern us most, dilute their urgency and become a sedative. We know this, but we cannot do without them. The fiction of understanding consoles.

I don't think that my undertaking in theatre consists in furnishing a reliable interpretation of events which others have narrated, or in showing ways out of the vice in which we feel trapped. I believe in the urgency of another task: to give form and credibility to the incomprehensible and to those impulses that are a mystery even to me, turning them into a skein of actions-in-life to offer to the spectator's contemplation, annoyance, repugnance and compassion. I would like this skein of actions-in-life to infect that zone in each of us where unbelief blends with naivety.

We assume that a theatre performance has above all the aim of communicating. This is true up to a certain point. What "awakens" the spectator is the way the actor alternates alchemically situations of incomprehension with moments of pure information. This process generates a state of empowered life with inner consequences, which only the theatre can trigger in the human being. In such moments we spectators feel a crucial question arise in our mind: what other reality is hidden behind that which seems totally clear to us? Is clarity a form of blindness, manipulation or censorship?

A ship gripped by the ice's vice: I do theatre to turn her into a tiny precarious islet of resistance for me and for my fellow travellers, actors and spectators. On this islet, which a thousand sea-paths link to the surrounding geography, I weave

performances that seem and are obscure. I try to bring into the light the dark forces which inhabit me, my biography, the history in which I am caught up, the difference which I have conquered and the differences which others have known how to conquer. I want to repay the spectators for their effort to come to the theatre by offering them the vision of an incomprehensibility that they can recognise because it is what they want to refuse: the image of the country they would like to leave. It is the wish to distance oneself that preserves the seed of hope.

I would like the performance to open a tiny crack into the dark incandescent magma of the individual and his painstaking zigzag to free himself from an icy embrace: that of the implacable and indifferent Great Mother of Abortions and Shipwrecks, Our Lady History. Perhaps it is not the question "from where do I come" which defines our identity, but the question "from where do I want to go away".