



THE LAND OF NAKED VOICES

By Iben Nagel Rasmussen

“Hearing is the most important sense of all. When studying a scene, I often close my eyes and listen. If it sounds right, it looks right.”

Ingmar Bergman, film director.

November 1965 – Holbæk Kunsthøjskole

The actors enter the room with determined steps. We – the pupils of the school - sit in rows of chairs facing each other. There is no stage, the actors appear right in front of us. At the end of the space, there is a black podium.

We are in a courtroom and the spectators are witnessing a trial. Are we also accused? Of what? I understand only a few words of the language they speak – Norwegian. The tall actor asks us something about killing songbirds. I know I should be engaged and answer. But I can't. He looks frightening. There are only four actors, they are dressed in grey and black, and they move around in the school gym as if they were weightless: flying, jumping, one actress standing on another's shoulders,

then she hangs from the ceiling on a rope. They drag each other, they talk with voices I wouldn't have imagined existed, low, hoarse, high. And they... sing. The two girls sing Scandinavian psalms with an intensity of sorrow, beauty, pain, and joy that penetrates my body and mind, reaching and touching a secret place inside me, which I seemed to have forgotten, as if it was sleeping behind a veil of ice.

I do not shed a tear, I am paralyzed.

I want to go there, be there with them.

In their land of naked voices.

Holstebro, September 1966

Yes, I got in – I crept through the window they always leave open, into the cellar at this school where we work until our own theatre is ready. I arrive at six o'clock, an hour earlier than everybody else, to go through the acrobatic exercises we practise every morning.

Yesterday I was spying. Eugenio Barba was working with Else Marie (Laukvik) on the voice. I stood behind the half open door and listened. She was sitting on the floor, while Barba walked around her. The range of her voice, the intervals she was able to perform, changing from one to another, and the emotions they awoke, overwhelmed me.

If one day I would be able to do something like that – in my own way. I would give my entire life.

Holstebro – Odin Teatret, 1967

“Dig with your voice down under the floor. Now – call somebody sitting on the roof, touch the trees outside the window, push, blow a balloon full of warm air. Your body is a resonance box, your voice can resonate in different parts of it”.

He walks around us listening, giving indications, and touching now the breast, then the throat, the forehead, the back, or the stomach. “Don't imitate the older actors, don't manipulate or distort your voice, begin in your own daily tone - what did you eat this morning?”

“Coffee, bread, and some ...”

“Yes that’s right – that’s your normal voice, begin with that. Who are you talking to? Don’t touch yourself, you cannot control or feel with your hands if you are doing the exercise right, *I* can, but you cannot.”

Barba calls work with the resonators the base of our daily voice training. He is guiding us step by step and is capable of performing all of them himself, even the difficult throat resonator. “Describe a landscape, paint a wall, touch a person with your voice, caress her gently.”



Training, Odin Teatret, 1967, Photo: Roald Pay

After an hour, he stops the training and gives each of us themes for improvisations. Strange themes. He whispers in my ear, so that only I can hear it: “All eyes are resting on you.”

He is patient, giving oceans of time - in silence.

In the afternoon, we begin working on the new performance. We are asked to improvise songs and find the tonality of the texts.

“Don’t squeak. I can’t hear you. Use your resonators, don’t let the text become monotonous! Change the resonator, amplify

the volume, now make it soft. No, no, no how many times do I have to tell you: *Use your resonators!*

Seminar at Odin Teatret, 1968

Dario Fo stands on a small stage construction in our white working room. He takes a sip of milk – lukewarm horrible *milk!* And begins, with large gestures, to sing a song of the flagellants, used in Catholic religious processions (13th – 15th century), where participants go penance-whipping themselves till they bleed. I nearly fall off my chair. This way of using the voice is so different from anything Scandinavians would do. Dario Fo continues by explaining how, in the performance *La Signora é da Buttare*, he put small pieces of what he calls *grammelot* in the Italian text. It is an invented language that sounds like a real one. The spectators cry with laughter, when the tall, loose-jointed man demonstrates how he speaks a very sophisticated “French” or terribly flat “American”



Dario Fo, Photo: Nicola Savarese

When the seminar is over, we try it out in our work at Odin Teatret and use it in the performance *My Father's House*, about the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. We improvise, invent words, and then fix our “Russian” language.

The freedom I feel, while speaking an invented language, is enormous. The sounds, the form, and the sonorous qualities are not intellectually controlled. I am being guided by a flow of colors and images.

Salento, 1974

We are in the small village Carpignano in Salento, in 1974, to work with Odin Teatret for half a year, away from our daily surroundings and routines.

Why do they strike me in such an unexpected way? The South Italian voices? The way people speak loudly in the small streets, and when they sing, their voices have an authenticity that perhaps stems from the fact, that they are deeply rooted in their bodies. Many of their songs are combined with a working situation: collecting olives, putting tobacco leaves on a string to dry, or picking grapes.

Here, on the heel of Italy's long boot, we begin to train the voices outside, very early in the morning (because of the heat). We go to the sea or the nearby fields. We sing to the rising sun, talk to the trees, and dialogue with the waves.

We come back to Denmark with two outdoor performances and a street parade. We have been climbing buildings, roofs, and balconies. We have learned to sing, shout, and talk to spectators gathered in a courtyard or in a market square. Our voices seem to be full of the earth, the sun, and the Italian language.

1976, Granada - Spain

The dictator Francisco Franco is dead. The people and the land seem to breathe after 37 years of dictatorship.

It is late afternoon and the sunset has just begun, when I walk together with Catalan actor Toni Cots by a small gypsy house, beside a dusty road.

A man sits in front of it, singing and playing the guitar. Flamenco! It is the first time I hear it. The voice is incredibly powerful. It sounds painful, but at the same time full of vitality. His son of only four is dancing in front of him so vigorously, that the dust is whirling up.

The man stops singing and playing: “It’s for my son,” he says. “The song is about how he will grow up in freedom. I’m not afraid any more to let my voice be heard.”

1986, La sierra - Argentina

With the remains of the group Farfa, we have just finished a barter, exchanging songs and dances in the high tableau (*la sierra*) at the foothills of the Andes in Argentina. The local group has arranged a typical *asado*, with big pieces of meat on an enormous grill. We eat and drink red wine, continue to sing, talk, and laugh.

A tiny Indian woman steps forward with her little drum and sings a *copla* (a special type of song from the highlands) to thank us. A moment of total silence arises – we have nothing in common and still, she managed to burn through our differences and touch me. After a short while, I answer with an improvised song. She embraces me and tears are running down her cheeks.

So – I ask myself: what is technique?

The Bridge of Winds, 1989 – 2018

“Use your resonators!” I repeat Eugenio Barba’s returning appeal from when I myself was a pupil in the Sixties.

In *The Bridge of Winds*, as in the groups *Hugin* and *Farfa*, the work on resonators has been the base of our vocal training.

During my over 50 years in theatre, I have not found a better way to expand the potentiality of the actor’s voice.

It is a simple technique: the voice gets rooted, and vibrates, in different parts of the body. Soft or strong, reaching out in the space, carrying out actions. There are countless of other ways to train the voice for professional singers. But we are actors who sing, not singers who act.

Just like in the physical training, you have to reach a point where you “forget yourself”, focusing on a landscape within or outside yourself. That is why you should not put your hand on your breast, head, or stomach, to control if the resonator is right, and that is why we do not manipulate the breathing. I have experienced that problems in the actors’ work with the voice often occur because the student wants to control the breathing.



The Bridge Of Winds

The meeting with Dario Fo at Odin Teatret in 1968, was a great inspiration: his demonstrations of the flagellants' outcries in the religious processions, the weavers' singing while they were passing the threads over and under each other into incredible patterns, the workers communicating by shouting to one another in the lagoon, where they hammered huge poles into the muddy ground under the water, and later again, my experience of how the women in South Italy were accompanying their work with songs to distract themselves from the monotonous repetition of pulling thousands of tobacco leaves on strings.

The voices seemed to bind the single practitioners together, creating one pulsing organism.

At the first meeting of The Bridge of Winds in 1989, I asked each actor to create rhythms and cries to accompany an imaginary working situation, or imitating someone selling fish, balloons, or fruit at a market square.

The actors also presented, and later taught to each other, songs from their respective countries. We made an extremely rough, but also fascinating for me, sequence of what came out of this work. The songs and rhythms became the base for a concert with almost only voices: *Voices in the Wind*. Today, like the group itself, it is nearly 30 years old. The youngest participants were born into the group and must have experienced the acoustic waves as embryos.

When later on, professional musicians joined the group - the flutist Nikolaj de Fine Licht and violinist Elena Floris, the structure did not change, but the quality and variations of the songs became more refined, with two, three, or four voices.

Voices in the Wind is the watermark of the group. The “one pulsing organism” that characterizes The Bridge of Winds.

Iben Nagel Rasmussen

Ryde, August 2018