

Eugenio Barba

The Injustice of Language: Nando Tavianì (1942–2020)

His name was Ferdinando, but his friends and students called him Nando. I have often wondered what his fate would have been if he had been born in an Anglo-Saxon-speaking country. Fifty per cent of the books in the world are translated *from* English into other languages, while only 6 per cent are translated *into* English. What repercussions would his books and the environment that had grown up around him have caused, had they been known and metabolized internationally? This was the case in Italy, where he carried out his historian's research as a university professor, an engaged critic, and an advisor to theatre groups.

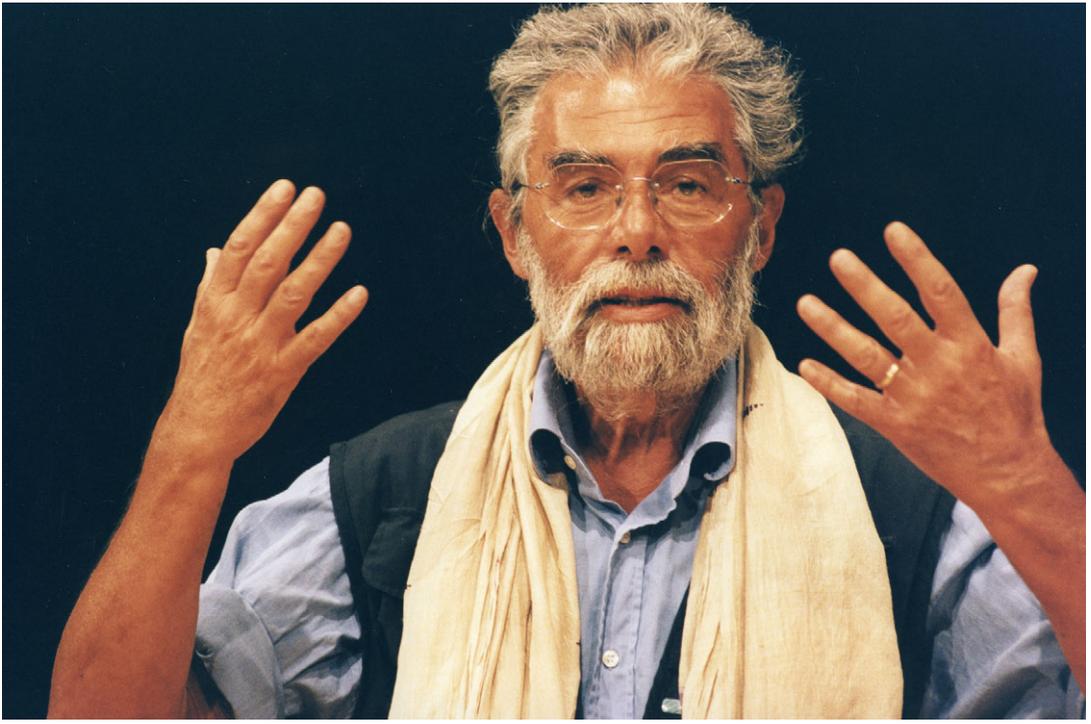
Known in Italy and translated into French and Spanish, none of Nando's books was translated into English. Some of his writings on Jerzy Grotowski's theatre have become part of *The Grotowski Sourcebook* (Routledge, 1997), and a few articles are found in the publications on Odin Teatret, for which he was the literary advisor for nearly fifty years. On his death in November 2020, friends and opponents agreed that Nando Tavianì, together with a small group of remarkable scholars who recognized him as a point of reference, had changed the very foundations of theatre studies.

Grotowski had called himself a teacher of performers. Nando, whom Grotowski greatly appreciated and invited to his refuge in Pontedera to ask for advice, was a university teacher who deeply marked the people who met him, most of all his students. In the ancient Scandinavian culture, the meaning and value of an individual's life materialized in the *eftermæle*: 'what will be said of one after one's death'. The reactions on Facebook from his former students tell of his 'exalting' lessons

that transmitted passion and curiosity. They were one of the best memories of their youth, had changed their lives, and 'overturned their soul'. 'We exist because of you,' explain some theatre groups, 'because we were lucky enough to meet you and follow your advice.' Many consider it an honour to have been among his students, and describe his patience, his puzzling questions, his sharp reasoning, and, above all, his human warmth: 'He loved us.'

Nando was an intellectual with an immense culture. He had followed the lessons of Giovanni Macchia – a great expert on Molière – who, in the Department of French Literature at the University of Rome, had opened the first institute of theatre history in Italy, guiding his young disciples towards what he considered to be the vocation of a historian: knowledge of the ancient, as well as the contemporary. Hence the importance of research on actors' lives – because theatre means understanding their situation in history, and not just in dramatic literature. Nando followed this double path: he immersed himself in documents concerning the lives and organization of past actors, and the testimonies of their spectators and their opponents (especially the Church), but also followed the theatre's upheaval in the years in and around 1968, with the growth of the new culture of theatre groups they prompted.

In this way, he transformed the history of theatre with regard to some specific topics. Perhaps his two most fundamental books are *La fascinazione del teatro. La Commedia dell'Arte e le società barocca* (*The Theatre's Fascination: Commedia dell'Arte and Baroque Society*: Bulzoni, 1970) and, in collaboration with Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della Commedia dell'Arte* (*The*



Secret of Commedia dell'Arte: La Casa Usher, 1982), in which he reconstructs the actors' lives as alternative enclaves – micro-societies detached from normal society. He described the 'other time' of this theatre as an intermission of freedom and enchantment, a time suspended from productive life and the impositions of the state and religion. In a period that saw widespread demands for transformation and a different world, Nando's young readers understood that theatre was a privileged moment in which to unleash energy and imagination in direct relationship with their own needs, and in rejection of the consumer society.

Nando wrote about the laboratory theatres of the twentieth century, about Grotowski, and what he himself had contributed to define the Third Theatre. His *Il libro dell' Odin (Odin's Book)*, published in 1975, was a collection of materials, testimonies, and interpretations of the Odin Teatret. The book provoked amazement, academic rejection – and enthusiasm among students. He was the first historian to

take a theatre group, which was hugely controversial in those years, so seriously. No other university professor would have used their years of research to follow their work so closely – with almost anthropological attention.

Nando was also a critic and a polemicist, and his writings of commitment to contemporary theatre are collected in *Contro il mal occhio (Against the Evil Eye: Textus)*, 1997). From 1973 to 1975 he taught at the University of Lecce, and later at the University of L'Aquila, retiring as Professor Emeritus in 2012, but continuing to lecture at Roma Tre University until three years ago.

It was at the end of the 1960s that Nando began to change the very terms in which theatre could be studied, ending the discussion concerning the centrality of performance, and establishing, once and for all, that theatre was not just a matter of that individual performance itself. He made it clear that the history of theatre was not simply a matter of aesthetics, literature, or good communication: equally important are the relationships between the actors in

companies and between their performances and the spectators. Theatre is made up of a set of misleading impressions, gaps in meaning, and even misunderstandings between those who do it and those who watch it. The study of relationships within companies can help us understand more about the creative process than can studying poetics or theories. The actors' values – and needs – carry the same weight as artistic judgements when it comes to the quality of the performance. *Commedia dell'arte* was not just about masks and improvisation, but a desire for social redemption, and a yearning for a different life.

Nando was not alone in making this innovative change of perspective. He was joined in a long-lasting collaboration with a group of outstanding scholars (Ferruccio Marotti, Fabrizio Cruciani, Clelia Falletti, Franco Ruffini, Claudio Medolesi, Eugenia Casini Ropa, Nicola Savarese, Mirella Schino, Hans Drumbl, Laura Mariani, and others) who acknowledged him as their point of reference. He achieved a similar impact as the literary advisor for Odin Teatret, as one of the founders of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, which was also a network connecting scholars from different disciplines from all over the world. Above all, he was a trusted friend to numerous theatre groups, defending the Third Theatre and promoting for many years the University of the Eurasian Theatre, together with Teatrocontinuo, Teatro Potlach, and Teatro Proskenion.

As co-founder of the influential journals *Biblioteca Teatrale* (1971) and *Teatro e Storia* (1986), which are still active to this day, Nando and his fellow academics modified the very way scholars *think about* theatre (and therefore study it) through the completely new type of relationship they were able to establish with theatre people. They were not critics, experts who knew better, knowing or knowledgeable theoreticians, but more like the actors' 'relatives', as Claudio Medolesi put it. They were there, not to judge the performances, but to reflect upon them, to give advice on all aspects that could lead to creation, which included anything from how to organize the theatre's kitchen to its artistic strategy.

In a letter to me, Ian Watson describes this particular role of the scholar that Nando embodied:

I have seen you and Nando together so often in different parts of the world, at various events with Odin Teatret at their centre. He struck me as a caring brother in your life. A life of always seeking answers to the next creative challenge. But he was no brother just of blood. He seemed to me a muse, the Odin muse that spoke to your creative spirit as it accompanied you on your journeys of discovery to the place where secrets are engaged, if not revealed.

I also miss him, not because I knew him well, but because he was at the centre of something that has been important in my life, the Odin Family.

Nando would smile at being called a muse, but he was a sudden shower of rain on the earth of my ideas and of those of the Odin actors, and of many others: a radically different way of seeing the history of the theatre, and questioning the facts of the past and of the present in a way that no one had done before.

But the reverse is also true. Nando and his fellow scholars looked with great interest not only at the Living Theatre, Grotowski, and the Odin Teatret, but also at unknown groups, because their deep knowledge of theatre history made them see values beyond the quality of the performances.

The partnership between Nando and me dates back to 1969 when, in Rome, he came to me asking questions after seeing Odin Teatret's *Ferai*. He was struck by the dynamic acting and the lack of a stage – something rather new at the time. This first contact became a deep bond. When he decided to write a book about Odin Teatret, he began his long stays in Denmark, his travels with our group on long tours in different parts of the world, his close association, sharing in the invention of projects, choices, ideas, words, and the rediscoveries of ancestors from the past.

One of his students recalled, fascinated, that, on one occasion, Nando started writing a sentence on the blackboard with his left hand, stopped in the middle, and finished writing with his right. This is the best image of our collaboration, like a haiku written by

Nando and me saying: theatre is politics by other means.

At the news of his death, I managed to write these lines:

Farewell, our brother in work

On 4 November 2020 Nando Taviani died, an original theatre thinker and scholar, a brother of work for all of us at Odin Teatret since 1969. He was our literary advisor, co-author of texts and inspirer of projects that turned our theatre group into an encouragement and a vocation for many others.

Together we planned the five months of Odin Teatret's stay in Carpignano, Italy, in 1974, where the idea and practice of 'barter' originated. He was with us when we visited Latin America for the first time in 1976 and discovered the *floating islands* of the Third Theatre – the theatre groups who believed that one could change oneself and even society. Through an intense dialogue, we invented theatre anthropology and we set up a school called ISTA, which was international, and a laboratory in its comparative research on the actor's technique.

During the long months of rehearsals for a new performance in Holstebro, Nando tried to

free himself from his university commitments in Italy and shared the 'journey' with us for as long as possible: enclosed together with the actors in the working room for ten to twelve hours, and then at my house for a few more, feverishly discussing, uncovering, misunderstanding, before collapsing with exhaustion.

'Now I'll call and tell Nando about it.' How many times have I said this – ten thousand, twenty thousand times? Until a couple of months ago, we phoned each other regularly and his final advice to me was about a journal on theatre anthropology and a foundation that I wanted to create. I saw him for the last time three weeks before he died from pneumonia. It was a strain for him to speak and stand. When we parted, he wanted to get up by himself, without help. In a superhuman effort he embraced me with all the strength of his exhaustion and whispered, 'I will not leave you.'

Dear Nando, you are close to us and you will continue to fly with us, as long as we continue to dream.

EUGENIO AND THE ODINS