

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

7:2 2021

“Well-Staged Syllables”:
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

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Published in December 2021
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
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LEONARDO MANCINI*

The Shadow of the Myth. *El Romancero de Edipo* with Toni Cots Directed by Eugenio Barba (1984-1990)

Abstract

The article focuses on the solo performance *El Romancero de Edipo*, created by Eugenio Barba together with the Spanish actor Toni Cots, and staged in several countries between 1984 to 1990. The performance was the very first monologue directed by Barba in his long-standing career. For Barba, it was also the first direct approach to the tragic myth, following an interest already cultivated around the figure of Antigone from the early Eighties onwards, in a moment of crisis and need for renewal for the groups of the “Third Theatre” movement, defined by Barba in 1976. For Cots, the monologue was the last and culminating part of his almost ten-year experience as an actor at the Odin Teatret, where he had also developed a personal actor’s training technique (in part based on Balinese traditional dances) and had accompanied Barba through the first research activities in the new field of Theatre Anthropology. With *El Romancero of Edipo*, Barba explored the tragic myth and elaborated an original theatrical narration based on the creative process of the actor, within which lay the rhythm of the montage. The text was therefore sustained by a rigorous score by the actor and by a detailed line of physical and vocal actions, making use of simple but very effective scenic props such as a vase, a self-built mask, drapery, a wig, and a stick. In addition, the use of songs and melodies, as well as other literary sources, extended the performative language of the artwork, giving life to an innovative re-elaboration rich in transcultural influences. By analysing all these elements, the article ‘deconstructs’ the performance, retracing its sources and its development between the actor and the director.

KEYWORDS: Odin Teatret; Eugenio Barba; Toni Cots; Oedipus

Eugenio Barba’s vast theatrical career, nowadays extending over the span of six decades, started in 1961 with a study on Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, prepared for the admission to the Theatre Academy Alexander Zelwerowicz in Warsaw.¹ On that occasion, the then twenty-five-year-old Barba illustrated

¹ Barba’s entrance exam in Warsaw in 1961 is narrated in his autobiographical book *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*, dedicated to his apprenticeship period in Poland (see Barba 1999a, 15-16). The jury, chaired by the Polish director and critic Bohdan Korzeniewski, allowed Barba to undertake his colloquium in French.

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a project of *mise-en-scène* characterised by the presence of a pyramid on stage and the use of costumes and masks inspired by Babylonian bas-reliefs.² Barba's stay in Poland lasted until 1964, marked as his apprenticeship in the theatre, and culminated in the collaboration with Jerzy Grotowski in Opole from 1962. The creation of Odin Teatret as a group, founded by Barba in 1964 in Oslo and moved to Holstebro (Denmark) in 1966,³ sought to pursue a research on the actor's craft and presence in theatre practice which would mark a fundamental chapter of the Second Reform of the Theatre of the twentieth century.⁴ During the course of the following decades, many things naturally changed in and around Odin Teatret as well, starting with the succession of new generations of members and collaborators, but some essential conditions remained: the focus on *træning*⁵ and artistic creation, the dialogue with other theatrical cultures and masters and the need to preserve a space of isolation and concentration. In this sense, even the group's base, a former farmhouse transformed into a theatre, already fully reflected those characteristics of "solitude, craft, revolt", which would later

² Two sketches on *Oedipus Tyrannus* prepared for the admission exam, originally preserved by Ferdinando Taviani, are today kept in the Odin Teatret Archives in Holstebro (Fonds Odin Teatret, Series Environment, b. 7; see also Schino 2018, 185-6). Close friend to Barba, Taviani was literary consultant of Odin Teatret from 1975 to 2020, the year of his death.

³ Moving to Holstebro in 1966, Odin Teatret defined itself as an "Inter-Scandinavian Theatre Laboratory for the Art of the Actor" (see Turner 2004, 11, and Barba 1979, 15). For an historiographical background on the advent of theatre laboratory in Denmark and its consequences, see Kuhlmann 2013, 105-20. Focusing on Odin Teatret's tradition, Kuhlmann offers a discussion of theatre laboratory in the light of the fundamental notion of "living archive": a fertile context in which "layers of different technical skills and scenic forms of presence" give life to "coded body signatures", increasingly developed both in a local context while, progressively, taking on a "wider global resonance". In such an enlarged perspective, the theatre's archive becomes an integrated space of memory, research, and creation, collecting not only documents and materials but also witnessing the layering of the immaterial performing knowledge of acting and staging techniques acquired by the group. Theatre historiography as "the repertoire of the possibilities of the theatre: a living body that can / must become body-in-life" was also presented by Fabrizio Cruciani in a study published in the Italian journal *Teatro e Storia* (Cruciani 1993, 10-11).

⁴ A periodisation of the Second Reform of the Theatre between the 1960s and the 1980s has been presented by Franco Perrelli in his study on Living Theatre, Grotowski, Brook and Barba (Perrelli 2007, 3-16).

⁵ As has been noted by Mirella Schino, the use of the Danish word *træning* for the English *training* is common among Odin Teatret actors (see Schino 2018, 336). The word is frequently attested, for example, in Roberta Carreri's diaries: among the others, see for example the note dated "Holstebro 20.1.1981" in Carreri's diary (Fonds Odin Teatret, Series Carreri, b. 17a, 129), where the actress states: "Træning cannot become a series of exercises".

inspire Barba for the subtitle of his book on *Theatre* (Barba 1999b).

Twenty-three years after the first study on *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in 1984, a new work entitled *El Romancero de Edipo* was elaborated by Barba with the actor Toni Cots, a member of Odin Teatret from 1976 to 1985. Even after leaving the group, Cots performed the *pièce* worldwide until 1990, offering a suggestive confrontation with the archetypal material of the Attic tragedy based on the actor's work and his individuality. The dialogue between the director and the actor, through a four-handed process of creation which originated from the stage and resulted in the adapted text, interrogated the myth of Oedipus, and gave life to a theatrical narration enriched with full use of performing craft: voice (narration and singing), gestures, actions, self-built props, and elements of scenography. Focusing on a relatively less-known chapter in Barba's career, this article intends to offer a historical narrative and a critical contextualization of the *Romancero de Edipo*: first, following the performance's genesis in the director's maturation of interests, together with his collaborators at Odin Teatret and in the new framework of ISTA; subsequently, tracing the fundamental artistic and biographical profile of Toni Cots as an actor. Furthermore, Barba's attention towards the tragical myth is analysed within the cultural and socio-political context critically denounced by the director, facing new forms of artistic consumerism and a need of renovation for theatre groups in an increasingly homologated global scenario. Finally, an analysis of the performance is proposed, following the actor's work through the dramaturgical, physical, and vocal score created with the director.

1. At the Stake of Memory: Antigone's Shadow

Traces of Barba's preoccupation with the classical myth at the beginning of the 1980s are observable in some of his texts following Odin Teatret's performance *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus* (1985),⁶ presented twenty years after the group's debut in Oslo with *Ornitofilene* by the Norwegian writer Jens Bjørneboe (1965).⁷ In a speech given at the Venice Biennale in 1985, published one year later as *L'ombra di Antigone* ("Antigone's Shadow")

⁶ For a historical recount on the *Gospel according to Oxyrinchus* of 1985, a performance of caesura for a cultural season marked by theatre laboratories, see Perrelli 2007, 201-5.

⁷ The performance *Ornitofilene*, based on a text centred on the Nazi horrors of the Second World War, was produced by Barba with a group of actors who were not admitted to the National Academy of Dramatic Art of Oslo. The work was rehearsed in an air-raid shelter in Oslo of the WWII, and it was presented in October 1965. For an interview by Ferruccio Marotti to Barba and to Torgeir Wethal on "the years of *Ornitofilene*" see Taviani 1975, 1-19.

in the Italian Journal *Teatro Festival*,⁸ Barba reflected on the residual condition of the theatre in an increasingly homologated global scenario, where artistic independence appeared largely constrained by the triumph of cultural consumerism: an “ice age” which one could only hope to survive, extending a hand towards those who, in the future, would preserve the memory of theatre groups (Barba 2014, 224). A crucial issue – preservation of memory – which was soon recalled by Barba in his final discourse in 1987 in Qosqo (Peru), during the seventh international meeting of group theatres held in Urubamba, where he declared: “Memory is the spirit which guides our actions” (Barba 1988c, 287). Facing domination and oblivion, Antigone’s “fistful of dust” was presented in that occasion by Barba as the poorest act of rebellion, equivalent, in theatre history, to the handful of spectators who used to go to Grotowski’s first plays in the small Polish provincial town of Opole.

Speaking to the audience in Venice, back in 1985, Barba reviewed the archetype of rebellion, Antigone, and, in the glow of light coming from the myth, projected its figure on to contemporaneity. In this perspective, he offered a vision of the tragic character as an analysis of the “weapons”, perhaps vacuous but still necessary, at the disposal of the intellectual in contemporary society. As an example, he dwelt on a scene from *The Gospel according to Oxyrhyncus*, in which the character of Antigone, played by the actress Roberta Carreri, was persecuted by the figure of a Grand Inquisitor, played by Tage Larsen. The latter, after killing other characters, armed with a knife adorned with a bouquet of flowers, hurled himself at Antigone’s shadow, trying to erase it and scrape away its contours. The metaphoric and arcane meaning of the scene, declared by Barba himself, focused on the value of the human presence confronted with the omissions of history and with periodic attempts at repression and annihilation.⁹ Reflecting on the persistence of Antigone in his thoughts, Barba declared:

⁸ The essay *L’ombra di Antigone* has been translated into several languages and it is now contained in the already mentioned book *Theatre* (Barba 1999b; for the last Italian edition: Barba 2014, 221-4).

⁹ Barba clarifies its interpretation of Antigone in his already mentioned article *The shadow of Antigone*: “Then I understood why Jehuda persisted in trying to obliterate Antigone’s shadow: because it is easy to kill bodies, very easy, but some bodies leave shadows, as if their lives were so loaded with energy that they remained imprinted on history. Even if physically the people have vanished, their shadows remain to darken the beautiful landscape. There are people who have left deep shadows on the history of our profession. And there are many Jehudas who try to erase their shadows. But the shadows remain for those who know how to grasp the meaning of history, for those who want to remember, who do not want to lose the memory” (the English translation is contained in Christoffersen 1993, 184; for the original Italian: Barba 2014, 222).

Once again, I asked myself why the figure of Antigone had for a long time, for three or four years, continually returned to haunt me, like a ghost. First with *The Story of Oedipus* and then in this other performance, *The Gospel according to Oxyrhyncus*. I asked myself: what is Antigone trying to tell me? . . . I finally understood it when I asked myself what is the weapon of the intellectual and how s/he could fight against the law of the city. The weapon is a handful of earth, a useless and symbolic gesture which goes against the majority, against pragmatism, against fashion. This is the intellectual's role: to know that the gesture is useless, symbolic, and yet, nevertheless, to make it. (Barba 2014, 224)

As stated by Barba himself, Antigone therefore played a role of inspiration for *El romancero de Edipo* even before *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*. Such a long-matured gestation in the director's thoughts, before reaching a scenic expression, finds further evidence in a book, given as a gift by Barba to Cots in 1983: *Meine Schwester Antigone* by Grete Weil (1980), in which the ancient myth was evoked by the authoress as an interlocutory figure throughout her existence, from the appalling events of the Holocaust to the difficult return to post-war West German society as a survivor.¹⁰ As regards Oedipus' character, furthermore, its presence reflected Barba's interests towards the archetypal figure of the wandering man, which he would originally have liked to condense in a "performance of the future" dedicated, according to Carreri's notes of that time, to the figure of Christ. Such a performance, however, was not realised, since it was "technically (time-wise) not possible" (Carreri 1981, 9; Schino 2018, 417), but opened the road towards other, smaller, works.

2. The Individual in the Collective. Toni Cots at Odin Teatret and ISTA

It should be emphasised that *El Romancero de Edipo* was the very first monologue directed by Barba, inaugurating a series of works which Ferdinando Taviani would later classify as the *Kammerspielen* of Odin Teatret:¹¹ solo performances, or performances of two actors, resulting from

¹⁰ From a conversation with Toni Cots, March 21st, 2021. Cots read the book in the Italian translation by Amina Pandolfi (Weil 1981). I am grateful to Cots and Barba for having shared with me their memories about the process of creation of the performance during several conversations between 2020 and 2021.

¹¹ See Taviani 2005, 7. In addition to Toni Cots' *Romancero de Edipo*, Taviani also lists in the category of *Kammerspielen* the performances *Marriage with God* (with César Brie and Iben Nagel Rasmussen, 1984), *Judith* (with Roberta Carreri, 1987), *Memoria* (with Else Marie Laukvik and Frans Winther, 1990), *The castle of Holstebro* (with Julia Varley, 1990), *Itsi-Bitsi* (1991, with Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Frans Winther and Kai

new projects of research internal and parallel to the main group, from the early Eighties and during the next few years.¹² In June 1981, as witnessed by Carreri, Barba himself announced to the actors that he had decided to work on “smaller performances” and that Odin Teatret would become a “federation”, in which “groups could create independent arrangements” (Carreri 1981, 9). Consequently, the process of creation also shifted towards new approaches, which have been described by Ian Watson as “a combination of ideas by the performers, original improvisations, fragments of training research and/or dramaturgical materials developed for earlier productions that for one reason, or another, were discarded” (Watson 1993, 177). While the branches and activities continued to grow on a larger tree, according to a metaphor recently adopted in Barba’s studies, individual seeds of activity were increasingly cultivated (Kuhlmann and Ledger 2019, 155; see also Perrelli 2005, 29).

As has already been mentioned, Toni Cots became an actor at Odin Teatret in 1976 under the auspices of Iben Nagel Rasmussen, following an ‘adoption’, which implies an initial assumption of responsibility by the ‘adopter’, according to a process typical of Odin Teatret. Before joining Odin Teatret, Cots had completed his studies with a Bachelor’s degree in Performing Arts at the Institut del Teatre of Barcelona from 1972 to 1975, and he had travelled to Denmark for the first time in the summer of ’74. In that occasion, he saw *The Book of Dances*, a performance created that year by Odin Teatret in Carpignano, after the first experiences of barbers in Southern Italy;¹³ then, in 1975, he was admitted to a six-month seminar,¹⁴ after which he finally joined Odin Teatret in the November of that year.

During the following nine years, Cots worked intensively as an actor,

Bredholt), *Doña Musica’s Butterflies* (with Julia Varley, 1997); *Salt* (with Roberta Carreri, music by Jan Ferlsev, 2002).

¹² Still on the subject of the projects internal and parallel to Odin Teatret of that time, it is worth remembering that Cots himself created “Basho” (the name was a homage to the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō), while in 1984 César Brie and Iben Nagel Rasmussen gave life to “Farfa”, from which the pièce *Marriage with God* was elaborated, and Richard Fowler created “The Canada Project”. It was from this increasingly articulated organization that Odin Teatret was progressively surrounded by its broader framework, still today existent, named Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (NTL). Basho ceased to be part of NTL when Cots left Odin: see Ledger 2012, 198.

¹³ For a recount on *Book of dances* after the first barbers in Puglia, see Ledger 2012, 69.

¹⁴ Odin Teatret organised its first six-month practical seminar for actors in 1974, and a second one in 1976: see also Schino 1996, 42 (Schino dates the first seminar, which was internally called “Brigata internazionale”, to 1975). Schino notes that according to Barba Toni Cots participated in the second session: see Schino 2018, 46 and Fonds Odin Teatret, series Activities, b. 28.

participating in the Odin Teatret performances of that time: *Brecht's Ashes* (I and II edition), *The Million*, both staged worldwide between 1978 and 1984,¹⁵ *Anabasis* and the clown performance *Johann Sebastian Bach*. Parallel to the artistic work, in those years Cots played an important organisational role within the group, culminating in his role of assistant to Barba for the two first sessions of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA I, Bonn 1980;¹⁶ and ISTA II, Volterra 1981),¹⁷ and in the organisation of Odin Teatret's major tour in Spain, in 1983. There, in each city visited by the group, the actors settled in a house and gave life to numerous initiatives for the spectators, from work demonstrations to performances and meetings, under the name of *La casa del Odin* (presented in Barcelona, Valencia, Madrid). Cots himself prepared a demonstration of work, named *Puputan*, focused on Balinese Topeng dance and on his actor's training which he had studied in Bali: in a first moment, in 1978, together with Silvia Ricciardelli and Iben Nagel Rasmussen, he studied martial art Pencak Silat in Denpasar, with Tapa Sudana's cousin (named Balok, and friend of Cots), and Baris dance (with a teacher named Tutur); in 1979, alone, he studied Topeng with the dancer and teacher I Made Pasek Tempo.¹⁸ *Puputan*, already presented by Cots in

¹⁵ Some common poetical elements between those two works, well described by Watson after a presentation in La Mama in New York in 1984, appear to be present in *El Romancero de Edipo* too: in particular, the "use of a minimal set and minimal lighting changes", the engagement of each actor in "multiples roles, changing costumes and characterization in full view of the audience", and, on the level of the montage, a non-conventional narration. Barba's reflections on the relations and differences between those works are contained in his discourse "to actors" transcribed in his book *Il Brecht dell'Odin* (Barba 1981, 144-5).

¹⁶ During the first session of ISTA in Bonn, an International Symposium was held between 24 to 26 October. In that occasion, in an interview with Franco Ruffini, Jerzy Grotowski reflected on how he could see "a profound relationship between what Barba is doing in ISTA and what I am doing in the Theatre of Sources: we are both concerned with transcultural phenomena" (Grotowski 1980, 236-7).

¹⁷ Schino notes that "until 1987, ISTA was organized by Barba alone, with the help of a few actors (Toni Cots, Richard Fowler), although Odin actors sometimes participated and collaborated" (Schino 2018, 114). As regards Odin actors, "only Toni stayed for the entire session" (Schino 2018, 116). For a detailed discussion on ISTA, with several contributions from different scholars and practitioners, see Hastrup 1996.

¹⁸ Toni Cots' first stay in Bali, with Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Silvia Ricciardelli, took place between January 5 and March 25, 1978. A long, detailed, account of that period was typewritten by Toni Cots in a document, made of 38 pages and written in Spanish ("Diario de Bali"), now conserved at the Odin Teatret Archives in Holstebro. It describes the activities of each day, from lessons of Pentjak, Baris and Legong to meetings with local theatre groups. See Fonds Odin Teatret, Series Environment, b. 5 and Schino 2018, 184. A long interview by Taviani with Toni Cots on the work on the mask, taken during the meeting of group theatres in Lekeitio in 1979, Spain), is

some individual tours in South America, was described by Barba in a text of 1979, entitled *The Museum of the Theatre*, which, according to Lluís Masgrau, became an important milestone towards the formulation the two crucial “laws” (later named “principles”) at the core of the performer’s presence and theatre anthropology: the alteration of equilibrium and opposition (Barba 2015, 105-9).

3. *El Romancero*. Sources and Strategies of Acting Creation and Direction

During the second session of ISTA in Volterra in 1981, Cots started to work individually on some performative material, initially inspired by *Don Quijote*,¹⁹ before shifting to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, under Barba’s guidance. For the actor and the director, engaged in the preparation of the performance during the following months, the confrontation with the textual base of the myth took place with a relevant use of different sources. It was precisely in those years, reflecting on “narrative dramaturgy as a level of organisation” (Barba 2000, 60), that Barba specified his approach to the text no longer as a relationship with a fixed, closed source; rather, the text was assumed by him to be a tool to “open a plurality of possible stories” (Barba 2010, 90), carrying on the “tradition of the director who dissects and operates in a drastic way on the literary structure”, started by Grotowski (Barba 1999a, 39). Even approaching classical theatre, such a perspective would not distance itself from the original myth, but be well situated in the “forest of tales” within which the myth naturally follows its sinuous path (Bettini and Guidorizzi 2004, 36). In this regard, considering Grotowski’s approach to the classics, Barba recounted how the Polish director worked around literary sources, following a new “process, [which] generated a new *avatar* of the text, which thus acquired the same function as the myth that the Greek tragedians in Athens interpreted with a total freedom like a matrix of variants; for example, Antigone dies in Sophocles; yet, in Euripides, she survives and marries Hemon, son of Creon” (Barba 1999a, 39).²⁰ In 1986, in an interview titled *El cuerpo dilatado del actor*,

conserved at OTA (Fonds Odin Teatret – Series Environment, b. 5), while a picture of Cots’ physical training, between 1982 to 1984, can be found in the *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (Barba 1991, 245).

¹⁹ From a conversation with Toni Cots, March 21, 2021.

²⁰ In his autobiographical book already mentioned, *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*, Barba adds that “Grotowski approached the classics with the stubborn conviction that they contained an archetype, a situation which was fundamental to the human condition. To make the spectator aware of this, he constructed scenic equivalents which derived in a coherent manner from the text but altered its form with an extremism previously unknown in the history of theatre and which at the time was

Barba stated clearly that *El Romancero de Edipo* was not a “problem of text” (Barba 1986). On the contrary, its “*textus*” was conceived as the *summa* of all scenic elements interweaving one with another: text, presence of the actor, relations, proximity or distance from the spectators, lights, objects, etc. In such a perspective, the reformer Barba, “anti-demiurge” of the scene, already conceived the *mise-en-scène* not as “production and imitation”, but as a form of a “*super-directing*, highly creative and experimental” (Perrelli 2005, 18), in which “a new category of *dramaturgy*, extensively intended as *texture* . . . of different levels of writings”, emerged (Perrelli 2005, 19).

In the case of *El Romancero de Edipo*, the narrative plurality happens simultaneously inside and outside the work on the actor. The very title of the performance, *El Romancero de Edipo*, evokes an implicit homage to Garcia Llorca’s *Romancero Gitano* (1928); historically, it can even resound with the chapter on the *Roman d’Edippe* from the Norman poem *Roman de Thebes* of the XII century. On the dramaturgical level, the insertion of a Sufi tale, *The Tale of the Sands*,²¹ inside the story of Oedipus, is accompanied by the recurring referral to the word “sands” (*arenas*), pronounced by the narrator as a *leitmotif* in the whole performance, which also thematically recalls *El libro de arenas* by Jorge Luis Borges (1975). Simultaneously, a loss of centrality of the themes of parricide and incest is countered by a constant emphasis on the relationship with the community and the problem of power. The political conflict is therefore highlighted in Barba’s approach to Oedipus, in which the character, according to Vernant’s quote of Aristotle’s *Politics* (1253, 2-7), moves as an “isolated pawn in the game of checkers” (Paduano 2008, 42). In this perspective, as Guido Paduano has more recently stated, Oedipus, in his “social idiosyncrasy”, acts as a “*coincidentia oppositorum*” between the extremes of the social scale that he finds himself occupying, the apex of credit and that of abjection” (Paduano 2008, 53): an interpretation which can be well assumed for Odin Teatret as well, whose motto, inherited by the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, Nobel Prize in 1922, is “*contraria sunt complementa*” (Barba 1986, 274).

4. Between Light and Darkness: the Performance and its Score

As regards its dramaturgy, the performance follows a structure of chapters and subchapters which guides the spectators into the story of Oedipus. Such a structure is not explicitly marked, but it is made evident by the pronunciation of the *leitmotif* of the performance: *arenas* (“sands”). The original typewritten

considered to be sacrilege” (Barba 1999a, 39).

²¹ For an English transcription of the *Tale of the Sands*, see, among the others, Smart 1989, 265-6.

text, not signed but attributable to Eugenio Barba in its final form, conserves the titles of each chapter: “I) The narrator”; “II) Oedipus”; “IIa) Fight between Oedipus and Laius”; “III) Narrator: the Oracle of Delphi”; “IV) Oedipus and the Sphinx”; “V) Narrator: presentation of Jocasta to Oedipus”; “Va) Oedipus and Jocasta”; “Vb) Narrator: presentation of Jocasta”; “VI) Jocasta’s suicide”; “VII) Narrator: the history of Antigone”; “VIIa) Oedipus blindness”; “VIIb) Oedipus: soliloquy about his misfortune”; “VIII) Narrator: final singing”.²² Behind such a narrative dramaturgy stands the complexity of the actor’s dramaturgy, in which a main character – the storyteller – gives life to the alternance of characters related to Oedipus’ saga.

4.1 A Storyteller’s Many Characters

At the beginning of the performance, as the spectators enter the room and take their place in front of the scene, the actor sits cross-legged on the stage, wearing a black blindfold. In front of his feet, resting on the ground, stands a small red earthenware vase, illuminated by a circle of light coming from a lamp hanging from the ceiling. The actor sits silently and hieratically at the edge of the circle, with only his arms (covered by a white shirt) illuminated, while his face remains in darkness. When silence is finally established and the performance begins, the sitting ‘statue’ slowly becomes alive and progressively unfolds itself, uncrossing the feet, half-standing and bending the knees. From that position, the actor raises the vase from the ground to the height of his chest and pushes it forward towards the spectators. As he lingers for a short time, with a wave of his hand he seems to caress a word in the wind. Still with both hands, the vase is raised even higher above the actor’s head, and, from that height, is abruptly dropped on the ground, where it breaks into pieces and spreads sand on the floor.

It is only after this long initial action, already articulated in a series of smaller physical actions, that the text makes its appearance, as a sort of prologue, spoken in a hoarse voice. As the narrator starts to speak, with covered eyes as a blind Tiresias, he warns listeners: “Thus Creon will treat the people of Thebes, and the people will acclaim him as a saviour”.²³ In

²² “I. Narrador”; “II. Edipo”; “IIa. Combate entre Edipo y Layo”; “III. Narrador: el oraculo de Delfos”; “IV. Edipo y la Esfinge”; “V. Narrador: presentación de Yocasta a Edipo”; “Va. Edipo y Yocasta”; “Vb. Narrador: presentación de Yocasta”; “VI. El suicidio de Yocasta”; “VII. Narrador: la historia de Antígona”; “VIIa. La ceguera de Edipo”; “VIIb. Edipo: soliloquio sobre su desgracia”; “VIII: Narrador: canto final”. All English translations of the textual parts of the performance here quoted, as well where not otherwise stated, are mine.

²³ “Así Creonte tratará al pueblo de Tebas, y el pueblo lo aclamará como salvador”.

the following lines of the text, a quote from Bertolt Brecht's *Questions From a Worker Who Reads* ("Thebes of the seven gates")²⁴ emerges, while the narrator (defined by Barba as "a disillusioned storyteller fleeing the city of Creon": Barba 2014, 224) describes the perils of society assaulted by the epidemic ("when the pestilence is silent, civil war breaks out").²⁵ A sense of guilt dominates this first part of the text, and it is attributed by the narrator to the world itself, in which innocents perish and culprits survive ("I have seen everything in my useless days, with their innocence the innocent perish and the guilty with their guilt last"),²⁶ and to Oedipus, "who revealed the faults to himself".²⁷ At the centre of the narrator's prologue, the figure of Antigone is evoked as recipient of the text. Antigone's young face is said to be the representation of Thebes, the world itself, on to which the human feelings and disgraces fight their battle and show their effects ("The whole world is Thebes, from the face of a young woman: Antigone. Antigone, sister, companion . . . with your hands you will gather arid dust").²⁸ The text culminates with an isolated, final word, which recalls the performance's *leitmotiv*: "sands" (*arenas*).

As regards his non-verbal language, Toni Cots constantly accompanies the text by sustaining the words with precise vocal and physical actions, carefully prepared during rehearsals. In this way, Cots gives life to a complex double line of acting technique and interpretation, in which each word of the text relies on gestures, changes of voice, movements. In this precise work, the actor regulates his energy and leaves nothing to improvisation, making *El Romancero de Edipo* a 'lesson' on the modulation of the performer's presence. Moving on the threshold between *doing* and *being*, the actor constantly transforms his energy incorporating smaller, almost invisible changes. Cots's accurate and sophisticated work also reflected the interests cultivated by Barba at the height of the Eighties, after the first sessions of ISTA: to quote Barba himself from his text on *Eurasian Theatre*, it was in fact around that time that acting techniques became a way to represent the "phenomenology of thought", "the objective behaviour of the bios, which proceeds by leaps" (Barba 1988b, 129).²⁹ A score which is a "precise pattern

²⁴ "Una Tebas de las siete puertas donde los hombres llegan y parten".

²⁵ "Cuando la peste calla se anida la guerra civil".

²⁶ "He visto todo en mis inútiles días, con su inocencia el inocente perecer y con su culpa el culpable durar".

²⁷ ". . . que reveló las culpas a sí mismo".

²⁸ "El mundo entero es Tebas, del rostro de una joven: Antígona. Antígona, hermana, compañera . . . con las manos recogerás áridos polvos, sobre el pobre cuerpo del muerto".

²⁹ Barba himself has spoken of a "phenomenology of thought, this objective behaviour of the bios, which proceeds by leaps, is what I have tried to render

of actions which form the banks and the variations in level through which energy flows, transforming the natural bios into scenic bios and bringing it into view” (Barba 1995, 53).

4.2 Props and Scenography. A Mask, a Stick, a Drape, a Wig, and a Sheep’s Head

An action of transformation of scenography is, at this point, executed directly on stage: with sharp and precise movements, still bending his knees, Cots walks towards the back of the stage, and finally unfolds a white cloth hanging from the wall. At the top of the cloth, a wooden mask is revealed; then, Cots pierces with two long nails the two eyes of the mask, from which a red liquid starts to pour on to the cloth, leaving vertical traces of blood. Still blindfolded and not able to see, straight after this, he starts singing a text referring to Oedipus. With a melody based on a Sephardic song, and with a clear strong voice, Oedipus presents himself on his journey (“From my house I have left / Walking until here. . . From east to west / A long road awaits us”).³⁰ When he has finished singing, Cots folds back the cloth and covers the mask, but as he presses the fabric to the mask, the shape of the face is revealed in the white cloth, and traces of blood from the eyes appear on it, staining it.

With a small change to the costume, which consists in taking off the fabric that covered the eyes (with his back to the audience), Oedipus makes his appearance again, while Cots unbends his knees and almost straightens his body. When he comes back to face the spectators, he is walking with the aid of a long, wooden stick. In this scene, the stick assumes a variety of uses and meanings, accompanying the narration of Oedipus’ story since his childhood. In order, from a walking stick (“I was born in the city of Corinth to royal parents”),³¹ it becomes an object of defence pointed outward, able to produce the sharp sound of moving air (“Bad tongues say it’s not true”; “My name is Oedipus, leaky feet”; “you have to give way to me”);³² then, it is used as a stick for hanging hunted animals upon, which the actor hangs himself on and then falls on his side (“pierced my feet and hung like a pig”).³³ Again,

perceptible in *The Romance of Oedipus* with Toni Cots, *Marriage with God* with Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Cesar Brie, and *Judith* with Roberta Carreri” (Barba 1988a, 129).

³⁰ “Desde mi casa he salido / Dando pasos hasta aquí . . . Desde el oriente al poniente / Largo camino nos espera”.

³¹ “Nací en la ciudad de Corinto de padres reales”.

³² “Malas lenguas dicen que no es verdad”; “Mi nombre es Edipo, pies agujereados, chueco, cojo”; “tu tienes que cederme el paso”.

³³ “Me agujereé los pies y colgado como un cerdo . . .”.

when Oedipus meets the old man on the crossroad, the action of killing his father is undertaken with an alternance of gestures of harming himself with the stick and someone else. The sequence culminates pressing the tip of the stick on one of the shards of the clay pot from the opening scene, as if a weapon were inserted into the flesh of Laius' dead body. A silent scream by the actor (possibly echoing the silent scream of Helene Weigel in Brecht's *Mutter Courage*, after the death of Schweizerkas), followed by a sudden blow of the stick on the floor, shows the character's first, anguished awareness which will soon move from a state of innocence to guilt.

After walking backwards to the back of the stage, still as Oedipus, the narrator resumes his role and, in a hoarse voice, shifts his attention to the subsequent interrogation of the oracle. At this point, Oedipus is on his way back, and Thebes is presented to the spectators as a "unhappy and miserable city".³⁴ The light is suddenly switched off and the whole stage is plunged into complete darkness. The actor disappears and, in his place, a strange, mythical monster soon appears. In *El Romancero de Edipo*, the Sphinx is constructed from a sheep's skull, supported by a stick wrapped in fur, under which the hand of the actor controls its movement. The actor himself is hidden in darkness, so the mythical monster, which functions as a sort of puppet, is the only visible presence on the stage through the pronunciation of the enigma, inserted into the pièce in the version of Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* (10.83). In this case, the text is spoken, or rather whispered in a dry, low voice, in ancient Greek: "Ἔστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπουν, οὗ μία φωνή, / καὶ τρίπουν . . .".

The enigma is obscure, and, spoken in the original language, conveys the sense of its inaccessibility and its mysterious character. This linguistic choice emphasises the non-accessibility of the enigma as well, its non-comprehensibility and therefore, in a certain sense, its sacredness. In such a way, the enigma functions in the perspective, highlighted by Pierto Pucci, of "a certain secret concealment, with its double register of exhibition and reticence, of theatre and crypt, which also marks the enigma and the oracle" (Pucci 1996, 9). The actor's voice, whose source is not visible due to darkness, is almost no longer a human one, while the skull of the Sphinx, shown in profile, moves its mouth according to the words. The solution to the enigma is first sung in Greek by Oedipus; then, the answer is repeated also in its Spanish translation. Here, the version of the text of *El Romancero de Edipo* conserved at the Odin Teatret Archives³⁵ differs slightly with respect to the acted text audible in the recorded version of the performance. In fact,

³⁴ "Tebas, ciudad infeliz y miserable".

³⁵ Fonds Odin Teatret, Series Environment, b. 7 (see also Schino 2018, 186).

the actor only says, “I Oedipus, someone in search of himself”,³⁶ while the original text has “I Oedipus, not an intellectual, but someone in search of himself”.³⁷

Still in darkness, the obscure voice is heard again, as Cots speaks a new part of the text in which Oedipus reflects on the enigma. The solution — he says — is not “gods, kings, the sacred, society, the struggle between commoners and aristocrats”,³⁸ but the human being, considered as “unit of measurement”, “basis of all transformation”, “the beginning and the end”.³⁹ The focus of the human person, at the centre of theatre practice as research, resonates clearly in this part of the performance, in which the awareness of the individual is recalled as a fundamental part of the whole of existence. Even if painful and uncertain, an unknown path puts the person on the road and exposes it to a high number of risks; however, the safer course of ignorance does not necessarily prevent even more dangerous risks and creates the conditions for guilty indifference and self-annihilation (“Who does not know this, is eaten by the Sphinx. Many of those around me do not even realize that they have already been eaten”).⁴⁰ As the text dives into these reflections, an underground parallelism between Oedipus and the Actor emerges. In its archetypal statute, Oedipus is “an outcast and a chosen one” (Bettini, Guidorizzi 2004, 37), in a similar condition which can be applied to the condition of the actor in his continuous process of learning (giving up his/her ordinary life, embarking on a path of individual and solitary knowledge, the actor moves in search of an art whose heart resides in the human being himself).

When the lights turn back, the narrator proceeds to the description of the intimate life of the king and the queen, which subject is presented as a pretext for a broader reflection on the social and political context. Materialism and social interests are the basis of the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta, whose union is full of hypocrisy and distance (“in this union there is no passion, they have never seen each other before. They are two strangers”).⁴¹ While he speaks, the storyteller-Tiresias, again blindfolded, collects a golden veil, folded up as a wedding gift, resting on his open hands and stretched out in front of him.

³⁶ “Yo Edipo, alguien a la búsqueda de sí mismo”.

³⁷ “Yo Edipo, no un intelectual, sino alguien a la búsqueda de sí mismo”.

³⁸ “No dije: los dioses, los reyes, lo sagrado, la sociedad, la lucha entre plebeyos y aristócratas”.

³⁹ “El hombre como unidad de medida. El hombre como fundamento de toda transformación. El hombre como principio y como fin”.

⁴⁰ “Muchos de los que aquí me rodean, no se dan ni tan solo cuenta de que ya han sido devorados”.

⁴¹ “En esta unión no hay pasión, nunca antes se han visto. Son dos extraños”.

4.3. Oedipus as the Actor

The scene which follows is a sensual love scene between Oedipus and Jocasta. Toni Cots, as the old storyteller, with a golden robe covering his arms and a long black wig, sings an invented melody in a low voice, as he gently undertakes a series of actions which allow the figure of Jocasta to appear, seen from the rear, as a mannequin manipulated by the actor. Oedipus addresses her smiling, dismissing as ridiculous the rumours of his incestuous relationship with his mother (“Could you be my mother? Just because you are a couple of years older than me? Don’t be silly”).⁴² Alternating singing and movement, the actor gives life to a close, sensual dance, with the female figure which he embraces, made up of the flowing cloth and the long, black wig. In this scene, sweetness and despair coexist, while Oedipus speaks to the figure of his wife-mother and ends up laying her on the ground like a diaphanous ghost, devoid of matter, against the background of a white cloth increasingly stained with blood. Then, he drags her to the floor, pulling her by the hair, like a weightless being. Happy and unaware as a child, Oedipus even jumps repeatedly on the body of his mother, who is lying on the floor, holding her by the hair. In this action, he pronounces phrases of youthful enthusiasm towards life, almost like naïve mottos, while he keeps massacring the inert body of the female figure (“To wave, to fly over the mountain! Sliding down, resting sweetly on the grass that rustles and dances!”).⁴³ Suddenly, he becomes aware of her face, and throws her on the floor with disgust, before kneeling and lying beside her. At the height of the incestuous love, Oedipus reaches the peak of his illusion and self-conviction: “Now I know who I am. I am the king of Thebes, I am a happy man”,⁴⁴ still murmuring the melody of his invented song.

The storyteller Tiresias, blindfolded, makes his appearance again and focusses attention on the theme of memory (“In our memory, Jocasta, you are but a pale shadow. Oedipus remains in our memory . . . Sleep Jocasta, sleep in our memory”).⁴⁵ At this point, Cots puts on the golden robe and the wig, and becomes Jocasta himself. Giving her back to the spectators, Jocasta moves writhing in emotion and pain, panting and even miming a kind of self-flagellation with a lanyard, with which she eventually tries to

⁴² “¿tu podrías ser mi madre? ¿Solo porque tienes un par de años más que yo? No seas tonta”.

⁴³ “Ondear, volar por encima de la montaña! Resbalar hacia abajo!, posarse dulcemente sobre la hierba que susurra y baila!”

⁴⁴ “Ahora sé quién soy. Soy el rey de Tebas, soy un hombre feliz”.

⁴⁵ “En nuestra memoria no es más que una pálida sombra. Edipo queda en nuestra memoria. . . . Duerme Yocasta, duerme en nuestra memoria”.

hang herself. Suddenly, the actor slips out of her dress, and with gestural precision, unrolls a vertical red sheet on the back wall, at the top of which hangs Jocasta's inert body.

Introducing a new chapter, the storyteller turns in front of the audience, repeats the *leitmotiv* of the sands (*arenas*), and enters a new chapter of narration. As he grasps in one hand a crown of flowers bristling with thorns, which has been hanging since the beginning on the back wall, Tiresias announces Antigone's fate, which will follow that of her mother ("Thus will his daughter, Antigone, also die, hanged, suicidal").⁴⁶ Antigone is presented in her wandering journeys along with her blind father; as she wears her crown of flowers, she starts a long sequence of physical actions executed with accuracy and precision on the stage. The physical score, in this section, which lasts three minutes and fifteen seconds, alternating a variety of movements of different intensities and types, such as small runs, turns, dancing, pirouettes, jumps, kicks, hand gestures, and pauses. When he finishes, the actor is on the floor, crouched on the ground, with his arms outstretched: it is the old, blind Oedipus. Oedipus' first text in this second part of the performance, related to *Oedipus at Colonos*, resonates as the testimony of a migrant ("for us without a country, one place is worth the other. We should be grateful for being tolerated, because they allow us to linger for a while before proceeding to the next place that is foreign, with no memories").⁴⁷

At this point, Tiresias moves the story forward and enriches the narration with political reflections on the figure of Antigone, in which the theme of rebellion is presented ("obeying the law is the only possibility for a life in common, Antigone's gesture is rebellion").⁴⁸ While he speaks, Tiresias unfolds a fan, in the centre of which a lock of long black hair is attached. Completing his narration, he jumps towards the floor and leaves the fan on the ground, from which he moves backwards shifting his body from right to left, still blindfolded, and going towards the head of the Sphinx, whose figure had been watching the action on the right side of the stage all the time. The Sphinx's head, previously half covered with a very long black cloth as a dress, is now fully hidden by Tiresias, as the narrator reconstructs Oedipus' life ("from Corinth to Delphi, from Delphi to Thebes, and today from Thebes, exiled and alone, Oedipus continues to fulfill his destiny").⁴⁹

⁴⁶ "Así morirá también su hija, Antígona, ahorcada, suicida".

⁴⁷ "Antígona, para nosotros sin patria, un lugar vale el otro. Debemos estar agradecidos por ser tolerados, porque permiten que nos quedemos un rato antes de proseguir hasta el siguiente lugar que es extranjero, sin recuerdos".

⁴⁸ "Obedecer la ley es la única posibilidad para una vida en común, el gesto de Antígona es rebelión".

⁴⁹ "de Corinto a Delfos, de Delfos a Tebas, y hoy de Tebas, desterrado y en soledad, Edipo sigue para cumplir con su destino".

Oedipus is condemned for his search for origin and identity (or for complying to the Delphic maxim *gnothi seauton*, know thyself), resulting in a life of pain, loneliness and wandering (“Who seeks the light, finds the shadow”).⁵⁰ Finally, from Tiresias’ blindfold, a long thread of red fabric falls and reaches the ground.

The performance proceeds towards its end. After presenting Oedipus’ condition, the storyteller gives space to the narration of the *The Tale of the Sands*, from the Sufi’s tradition. According to Ninian Smart, the tales “relates to the doctrine of Fana, the transcending, in God, of the finite self” (Smart 1989, 265). Such a parenthesis is abruptly followed by the description of the future horrors of a civil war: “They kill the brothers. Corpses lie like excrements in the streets”.⁵¹ The city has become a dictatorship and tribunals have become places of repression (“The innocent are treated as guilty, a crime site is the court”).⁵² Under the rule of the tyrant even nature appears to be dominated, but it is a ‘waste land’ of exploitation and desolation, from which only dust remains (“From the earth his spectral voice rises, from the dust his whisper, his inebriated sword dances and the whole earth belongs to him forever. Creon!”).⁵³ Corresponding to this text is the physical action, acted by Cots as the blind Tiresias, of destruction of the crown of flowers that had characterized the figure of Antigone. The text is shouted out with an aggressive voice, as an announcement of imminent brutalities. Concluding the performance, Oedipus unfolds his fan, showing a lock of Jocasta’s black hair now attached to it. He turns towards the bottom of the space singing a poem, which defines the continuing of his journey into the world, in a closer relation with the invisible and those who are no longer alive. Exiting, he sings the following lines: “Over the rooftops / A dove flies / To wake the dead / If their sleep is heavy”. Then, he speaks the lines: “I go eating happily my bread, / I go where my heart goes. / I go where the gaze of my eyes goes”.⁵⁴

Oedipus, as the actor, wanders like a foreigner in the world. His last words are not just a lamentation about the transience of man, but rather extend the gaze beyond the threshold between the visible and the invisible within which even the theatre takes place (according to Barba, “theatre is the visible which can hide or reveal the invisible”: Barba 1988a, 7).⁵⁵ As has been noted by Franco

⁵⁰ “Quien busca la luz, encuentra la sombra”.

⁵¹ “Matan a los hermanos. Como excrementos yacen los cadáveres por las calles”.

⁵² “Los inocentes son tratados de culpables, un sitio de crímenes es el tribunal”.

⁵³ “De la tierra surge su voz de espectro, del polvo su susurro, embriagada su espada danza y la tierra entera le pertenece para siempre. Creonte!”.

⁵⁴ “Por encima de los tejados / Va una paloma al vuelo / Para despertar a los muertos / Si tienen pesado el sueño. / Me voy comiendo contento mi pan, / Me voy adónde va mi corazón. / Me voy adónde va la mirada de mis ojos”.

⁵⁵ Barba’s formulation on theatre was presented during the fourth session of ISTA

Rella writing on tragedy, through experience the actor lives in fact on the border between the dead and those who are alive, and the tragedy “transforms the conflict, the antinomy between the human and the non-human, between being and non-being, into a metaphysics of the limit” (Rella 1991, 7).⁵⁶

Through a sophisticated theatrical narration based on the actor’s craft, *El Romancero de Edipo* by Barba and Cots gives life to an intense narration of the story of Oedipus, capable of evoking the myth in its archetypal strength, renewing it from within and offering an evocative interpretation rich in personal additions. The choice of the use of Spanish adds linguistic richness and cultural depth in new directions, also reinvigorating the fortunes of classical culture in the Spanish linguistic area in the early 1980s.⁵⁷ But in comparison with a large part of interpretations, in *El Romancero de Edipo* the sacred is rediscovered and situated inside the work of the actor, escaping the perils of the passing of time and the caducity of aesthetic or technological fashions. Thanks to this, even today, the performance constitutes direct evidence of a personal approach to theatre, based on craftsmanship, far from the sole purpose of entertainment. It also well demonstrates how, even when the actor acts alone on stage, he or she is always a member of a living culture within which resides the theatre’s possibility of resistance to cultural decay and oblivion.⁵⁸

(Holstebro, 17-22 September 1986), dedicated to “The female role as represented on the stage in various cultures”. Following ISTA, Barba replied in 1988 to some commentaries and criticism advanced by Philip Zarrilli in an article entitled “For whom is the ‘invisible’ not visible?”, earlier published in 1988 in the same *The Tulane Drama Review* (Barba 1988a).

⁵⁶ In *Mythos*, a more recent group work by Barba and Odin Teatret (1988), Oedipus would make his way back, interpreted by Tage Larsen, in “an exploration beyond the threshold of death, into the world of myths and the dead” (Nagel Rasmussen 2006, img. 68).

⁵⁷ In a Congress on Oedipus, organised in Urbino in 1982, the Spanish scholar Fernández-Galiano still bemoaned the absence of the “oedipal matter” in his country, “which unfortunately still suffers from the consequences of a tremendous poverty in the direct and indirect classical tradition during the 18th and 19th centuries” (Galiano 1982, 135). In the same occasion the Argentinian scholar Hugo Francisco Bauzá noted the emergence of new revisitations of the Oedipus myth in the arts and literature, demonstrating the vitality of the myth itself, while losing, however, its original sacral context, or, in Rudolf Otto’s language, the *numinous* (Bauzá 1982, 257).

⁵⁸ After a meeting of group theatres in 1978 in Ayacucho (Peru), Ferdinando Taviani presented “the theatrical group as a group that elaborates its own culture; the culture of the groups as resistance and the only effective opposition to the cultural homogenisation that characterises ever more clearly, despite historical and geographical differences, our planetary civilisation”. The text, translated in Spanish by Toni Cots, is dated June 12, 1978, and it is now conserved at the Odin Teatret Archives (Fonds Odin Teatret, Series Activities, b. 56).

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