Eugenio Barba

Grandfathers, Orphans, and the Family Saga of European Theatre

In this essay Eugenio Barba, director of Odin Teatret, founder of the International School for Theatre Anthropology, and a Contributing Editor of NTQ, traces his own 'orphanage' from a professional family – and his discovery not only of an 'elder brother' in Grotowski, but of his two 'grandfathers', Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. He extends the metaphor to suggest how these two branches of a theatrical family tree, apparently of quite different impulses and temperaments, shared a working language, however differently this translated into their theatre practice. He sums this up as a common concern with 'showing how thoughts move', and relates this in particular to the ways in which the theatre lost, preserved, and has slowly rediscovered the work of Meyerhold, and to how the 'disconnected tradition' of his work re-emerges in unexpected places. This takes Barba on a journey from the home where Meyerhold received his friends in Moscow, as lovingly restored by his granddaughter, to Mexico and Colombia, where Seki Sano brought to a new continent his own discoveries from the 'theatre paradise' he believed he had found in the Soviet Union, in which 'the discoveries of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were part of the same baggage', thus passing, 'through the rigour of the craft, the meaning of a theatre that lives through revolt and a feeling of not belonging'.

VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD was my grandfather. It may seem bizarre, but it is an objective fact since it respects historical proportions.

Seen from afar, the profound transformations that occurred in the European theatre of the twentieth century resemble a family saga with its own traitors, heroes, and giants. A small tribe of a few hundred people, living through revolutions, defeats, dangers, and tragedies, defends, squanders, or regains the identity of its own *ethos*. It is within this 'family' – vast as it is when compared to the circles of an individual life, tiny beside the landscape of the surrounding history – that I feel the right to speak of Vsevolod Meyerhold as my grandfather. We know our biological family from the inside, without even being conscious of the fact. The family of our *ethos*, of our professional identity, has to be conquered through successive discoveries, attentive understanding, and sudden flashes of awareness.

In my family of professional *ethos* there are no parents. There is an older brother, Jurek – Jerzy Grotowski. Many uncles and relatives: Vakhtangov, and Copeau, Brecht, Decroux, Sulerzhitski, and Artaud. Ahead of them all, the two grandfathers: Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. Gradually, with the passing of the years, the affection I feel for my grandfathers becomes intertwined with an awareness of the distance between us and, at the same time, the depth of professional insight that can be drawn from them. It becomes knowledge and tenderness.

Thus we learn that grandfathers are very different from masters. There are two of them and they represent two branches of tradition or two 'small' traditions. They are not like the masters who become a single unique point of reference. The plurality of grandfathers makes us understand that the problem of a progenitor is a false one and a source of deception.

In the professional family which constitutes my history there was no equivalent to parents. I am an autodidact. This term necessitates an explanation, however. There is a difference between s/he who learns without the aid of normal school, yet masters a precise domain of knowledge such as is imparted by schools, and on the other hand s/he who is obliged

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not only to mark out *for him/herself* a field of knowledge but also to identify the foundations of a profession to which s/he was denied access. There is a difference between having to orientate yourself in a territory which recognizes you, and in which you recognize yourself, and having to trace your own territory, invent your own systems of orientation and discover where you belong. This is the condition of those who are, professionally speaking, orphans.

I come from this region of theatre.

The Birth of a Grandfather

The discovery of one of my two grandfathers coincided with my first steps in search of theatre, around 1960. This was Stanislavsky. Everybody mentioned him at the school I attended in Warsaw. Grotowski, who became my older brother, spoke to me about him continually. Stanislavsky was one of those grandfathers who give birth to legends.

Meyerhold, on the other hand, was a name always cloaked in mist. The stories I heard about him were fragmentary, laconic, and bitter. Legends circulated about him, too – ambiguous and sometimes grotesque. He was a huge fleeting shadow on the horizon. Bit by bit, I was to discover through books the story of this ghost whose shadow was both a magnified and fading projection. Above all, three books from the beginning of the 'sixties guided me on his traces.

Stalin had died in 1953. Three years later so-called 'destalinization' began, and again it was permitted to write about Meyerhold. After a few more years the first important translations appeared. In Italy, at the end of 1962, Editori Riuniti – which was connected to the Communist Party – had published *La rivoluzione teatrale* (*The Theatrical Revolution*), a selection of Meyerhold's writings. A new cliché was created among theatre people which added a third element to the current schematic antagonism between Stanislavsky and Brecht. People said: 'Stanislavsky is bourgeois theatre; Meyerhold is the revolutionary.' But every time those who had worked with them spoke of them, these clichés crumbled, as did those based on the opposition of Stanislavsky and Brecht. Both from the point of view of the craft and the *ethos*, a theatre 'revolution' implies certain practices that are not always reflected in political statements, or else they may be just as radical, risky, and intransigent as political intransigence.

In France, at the beginning of 1963, Gallimard published another collection of Meyerhold's writings, *Le théâtre théâtral*, edited by Nina Gourfinkel. It did not differ greatly from the Italian book; but the atmosphere which pervaded it seemed to me to be of quite another kind. The two books appeared almost simultaneously, with only a few weeks between them. Whereas the first emphasized the word 'revolution', the second stressed the concept of 'theatricalization'. Taken together, the two titles suggested that revolution and theatricalization were interdependent ideas. Theatricalization indicated the conventional aspect of theatre, research into form.

Both books derived from material by Meyerhold newly published in the USSR and most of the writings coincided. Both ended by recalling the immediacy of the personal dialogue, Chekhov's letters, and the meetings with the students as reported by Gladkov in 'Meyerhold Speaks'. What, then, was responsible for the different atmosphere that appeared to distinguish these two editions of the same texts?

The Italian book was compiled out of a need to document the past correctly, addressing itself to those who studied theatre. The French one had the flavour of a story intended for theatre practitioners. It conserved the sense of adventure, of discovery, of the vicissitudes of an artist who is perpetually restless, bellicose, with a mercurial temperament and the destiny of a martyr. This difference was barely noticeable, apparent in the tiniest details. Perhaps it was I who put it there and it was in no way the intention of the books' editors.

The Italian edition ended with an essay by Alexandr Fevralski, who was presented as being 'one of the major experts of Soviet theatre of the 'twenties'. In his text Fevralski introduced himself as one of the young

Meyerhold enthusiasts who had discovered a *raison d'être* in his work and teaching. His 'Memories' portrayed Meyerhold as if seen through the eyes of someone in love. Whoever had edited the book seemed not to notice this loving gaze. It was a surplus. But it was just this surplus, or this excess, that for me gave a sense to Meyerhold's story.

In the first lines Fevralski said:

> The close friendship that bound Meyerhold to the young derived from the fact that the same 'old man' was eternally young. Young in body and spirit, despite the grey hair, the tuberculosis, and the disease of the liver. When directing the exercises of biomechanics, he executed them with greater precision, ease, and elegance than the youngest, strongest, and most agile of his students. During rehearsals, it happened that Meyerhold could be seen dancing the part of a woman. He danced in such a way that he really appeared to be a young woman instead of the elderly man that he indeed was.

I was bewitched by this elderly master who, under the gaze of his pupils, transformed himself into a girl – a severe father who passed the time playing. I felt I understood the passionate subtext to the formal phrases which concluded Fevralski's 'Memories':

> For all of us Meyerholdians he was a second father, demanding yet ready to impart great artistic lessons that have become the basis of the activity of all those who followed him. We will all be eternally grateful to our master.

These resembled the banal phrases one reads about extraordinary men. However, behind the bombastic conventionalities I felt the tremor of that particular feeling that binds the disciple to the master and that transforms true pedagogy into a love story rather than a method.

In Fevralski's text I found for the first time the written negation of the schematic opposition between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky. Fevralski describes how, in 1938, he was present when Meyerhold turned up during one of the rehearsals held at the home of Stanislavsky, who had a serious heart condition. He told of the tenderness, the respect and esteem, Stanislavsky showed towards his younger colleague who was so plagued by the regime. That sense of family, with its tensions and conflicts yet imbued with a feeling of belonging and of common ideals, was more important to me – an orphan in search of a system of orientation – than any discussion about differences in methods and aesthetics.

The mist-shrouded grandfather began to attain a precise profile. Out of a ghost a person was born. He took shape feature by feature in a manner that was neither systematic nor predictable, just as he had described the creation of a character for an actor: sometimes a shoe may appear, or a hat, or a way of tilting one's head while listening. Then, slowly, from the fist germ the character emerges.

The Double Life of Theatre

Still more books, and now I read my ancestors' texts as though they had been written specially for me, for the orphan heir who inhabited the dark province of the theatre and knew nothing. It was an infantile and megalomaniac illusion. I nourished it secretly because I realized that it was a vital illusion.

A few years later, in quite another context, I experienced again the same combination of megalomania and modesty. In 1965, *Il trucco e l'anima* (*The Make-up and the Soul*) by Angelo Maria Ripellino was published. It was an account of the artistic adventures of the principal Russian directors during the first thirty years of the twentieth century. The author told of events that he had not seen as though he had witnessed them in person. With great precision in his use of documents, he did what any historian should be capable of doing: he searched for and found time gone by through the technique of the poet. At the centre of his interest and fascination was Meyerhold.

Ripellino was a prestigious scholar of Slavonic literature but was also well known and esteemed as a poet. On the page he traced the suggestive silhouettes of the protagonists with exact and essential words. He revealed to me that theatre has a double life: in the present of the performance and in the past which returns through books.

This double life was not an abstraction. I experienced it daily in concrete form. As an orphan who was enamoured of the ghosts of my grandfathers, I tried to decipher in the practical work with my inexperienced actors what it was that they were conveying to me in such a difficult way. And in the enigmatic clarity of their words I recognized with hindsight the solutions that I had come upon through guesswork in my rehearsals. I began a close dialogue involving my young actors and the old, ever-young shadows which talked to me from the past.

This double life made itself known on all levels. Both in my practical experience and in that which reached me though books, it was a question of distinguishing a formulation from the substance of that formulation. In many cases I could have substituted Stanislavsky's or Meyerhold's terminology for the key words that the actors and I used between ourselves during work to indicate technical procedures of which we had a clear experience. I realized that something similar also happened with the grandfathers' terminology. Those aesthetic theories which appeared to be divergent were, at times, only different metaphors. For example, it seemed clear that the three emblem-words that Meyerhold had used at three different stages to indicate his personal vision of the actor – the grotesque, dance, and biomechanics – concealed the same principle: coherent and persistent research always leading in the same direction.

Personally, the consequence of all this was not the obvious relativity of the various formulations but the stimulus to decipher the individual working languages which were so personalized and changing. This pragmatic jargon does not concern itself with the misunderstandings that the metaphors employed may cause in those who do not share the same experience. A sophisticated trap is laid for the reader: *particular words* appear to describe repeatable processes that guide to specific results, thereby creating the illusion that the terms used represent definitions, recipes, or even a utopia, instead of being a simple signpost.

The close dialogue in my work between the words that reached me from the past and those who recorded history dragged me out of my condition of orphan. It helped me to find my theatrical family and not to belong just to the panorama of present-day theatre. It was the discovery of a very special 'family tradition' – a vertical environment, in part rooted in the present, and at the same time sunk deep into the preceding generations. The deformations, the norms, and the fashions of theatre that surrounded me lost much of their agonizing weight. Above all, they were not the sole and inevitable reality. *Other ways of being* were possible for the theatre because there existed an elsewhere with which I could identify and measure myself.

Today I am grateful to the fate that introduced me to the profession as an orphan blessed with grandfathers. I have been able to grow up in a vertical environment, a theatre which does not stand entirely in the present and which makes dissidence – standing aside – a conditioned reflex that is just as precious as an ancestral home.

Perspicacious Theatre

Theatre, in our time, is necessary especially for those who do it. At the beginning of the 'sixties it was Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski who clearly indicated this mutation in the cultural and social reasons for doing theatre. They stressed the need not to suffer this change as a loss of meaning but to make it a point of departure to identify a *value*. If theatre becomes superfluous to our society, its strength can only come from its *difference*: in other words, its capacity to attract those spectators whose questions are echoed in the needs which drive certain people to make theatre.

At the time of the grandfathers – Stanislavsky and Meyerhold – theatre was still considered a necessary common good. Its social *raison d'être* was not yet in question. But Stanislavsky and Meyerhold laid the foundation for the value of the theatre from the point of view of those who do it. They created a *parallel life* beside the normal production of performances. They devoted themselves to anomalous activities concentrating on the quality of life of the artistic group, on

the existence and defence of a microculture, on the theatre as a laboratory for continual research or a nucleus of spiritual and political experience. They also used theatre practice as a means for the work of the individual on himself, as an instrument for exploring the quality of relationships between individuals and nurturing a spirit of opposition.

Stanislavsky felt intensely that the potentiality of theatre lay beyond the staging of texts. The actor's work on himself and on the character could come to have an autonomous value independent of whether the production was presented to an audience. He who was considered an ingenious director-demiurge began to favour the rehearsal phase, as though it were possible for him here to experience the very essence of doing theatre.

Stanislavsky transformed a paradox into a science. The paradox was the search for 'truth' or 'authenticity' through scenic fiction. He drew unexpected conclusions from the commonplace according to which daily life is a play and the whole world is nothing but a theatre. If this is true, doing theatre signifies interrupting our perpetual performance. It is not a *boutade*, a witticism. It was a consistent, methodical, and scientific line of action.

It was Meyerhold, however, who identified in his work a way to create a sort of fission in theatre practice, unleashing the potential energies for those who do theatre as well as for those who watch it. The first step had the characteristics of humble, craftsmanlike invention. For Meyerhold explained how and why the actor's 'plastic actions' did not have to harmonize with the words of the character. He pointed out how in daily life there exists a complementarity, or independence, between words and gestures. Words represent explicit intentions, whether sincere, conventional, or false, in relationships between individuals. But often gestures, attitudes, proximity, looks, and silences which accompany words do not only underline the relationships that they express, but *reveal the real nature of these relationships*, both from an emotional and a social point of view. He showed how the actor could thus consciously shape two levels of behaviour, outlining his movements according to a logic that interwove new relations with the words without having to illustrate them.

It was a technical procedure whose effects enabled the spectator not to stop at the surface but to consider simultaneously the multiple dynamics which are at work within the various realities of the individual and his/her relations with society. The gap between the two performing levels – that of behaviour and that of speech – gave depth to the spectators' vision, making them perspicacious.

The Spectator and the Actor

The search for *perspicacity* concerns both the spectator and the actor. This does not mean that both of them see and understand in the same way. It does not mean that both the actor and the spectator undergo the same *experience of an experience* when watching or performing a theatrical action. An actor can carry out his/her own exploration and search for a sense *in* and *with* the microcosm of his/her body-mind which remains independent with regard to the meaning perceived and the exploration carried out by the spectator watching the performance. The same performance can become a veritable *anthropological exploration* for both the actor and the spectator, but it is not necessarily the same expedition for both of them. I do not know whether Meyerhold really intended the last point in this way, but it is certainly what I learnt from him.

Often, both in Europe and in Asia, I have watched performances whose language I did not understand and whose plot was unknown to me, yet they remained engraved deeply in my memory. Meyerhold helped me to understand the reasons for this. For the spectator, the effectiveness of the actors does not depend solely on intellectual understanding but above all on their skill in creating an 'organic effect', in embodying the laws of life's movement – in other words, biomechanics. This particular understanding through the senses and the kinaesthetic reactions of the spectators sets in motion – as do words – their thoughts and make them *perspicacious*. The spectator then becomes a

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person who *is able to see as if he was seeing for the first time*. The performance acquires a consistency not merely of the interpretation of a text or of a knot of events, it does not simply turn into an emotional involvement, but it becomes the *experience of an experience*.

The fission operated by Meyerhold in the nucleus of theatre practice is the premise for dealing with dramaturgy in its complexity. Dramaturgy, as 'performance text', is an organism which is made up of various levels of organization, each with an autonomous life and interacting with the others like the lines of different instruments in a musical composition.

There is the narrative level of organization, with its plots and *peripeteias* – most thoroughly explored by traditional text-centred theatre. Another level is that of organic dramaturgy, which comprises the dynamics of the actions and the flow of impulses directed at the spectators' senses. This level of 'theatre that dances' gives the actions a coherence which does not stem from the meaning but from the capacity to keep alert, stimulate, and convince the spectators' senses, like music that is not aimed at the hearing but at the actors' and spectators' nervous system.

Lastly, there is the level of that which, for want of better expression, I call the dramaturgy of changes of states. I could define it as the totality of knots or dramaturgical short circuits which radically alter the meaning of the story and plunge the spectators' senses and understanding into an unexpected void that condenses and disorientates their expectations. Meyerhold continually emphasized the importance of this third level of dramaturgical organization, using and expounding the concept of the *grotesque*. His disciple Eisenstein applied the principles of the grotesque to film montage. He spoke of ecstasy, intended in the literal sense, as *ex-stasis* – a leap beyond the ordinary dimension of reality.

The density resulting from the manipulation and intertwining of the three levels of dramaturgical organization is not only meant to have an impact on the spectator's perception: it is also useful for the actor in his work on himself. In this case, the dramaturgy does not generate a performance but a score called 'exercise'. Meyerhold's biomechanical exercises are theatrical organisms composed for the doers, not for the observers. They are more than physical training, they are incorporated forms of a way of thinking.

Showing How Thoughts Move

History has saved a fragment of a film with a few biomechanical exercises composed by Meyerhold and performed by his actors. This document conveys to us, in a coded language, Meyerhold's thought-in-action. It is as if one could see it, alive, face to face. Meyerhold maintained that the actor had to know how 'to live in the precision of a design'. The document allows us to verify it with our own eyes. We see clearly how the actors live the exercises instead of simply performing them. Everything happens as though the design was a code that comes to life and blossoms in the organic nature of a specific individual.

The organic quality comes from the actor, but the design is Meyerhold's. It is the trace of a thought that lives through counterimpulses and contrasts, dilating certain details and simultaneously assembling them together with others that 'normally' belong to successive stages of the action. It invents *peripeteias* like a series of swerves in relation to a foreseeable line of conduct. The *peripeteia* does not only concern the development of a story, but becomes physical behaviour, dynamic design, a dance of balance and contrasting tensions. Each exercise lasts only a few seconds, yet long enough to condense the vision and the realization of the theatre as a discovery and laying bare of the skeleton hidden behind the appearances of what is visible.

The biomechanical exercises are not training patterns, but sensory metaphors showing how thoughts move. They train thought. They are actions that distil the way in which what we call 'life' reveals itself to different levels of organization, from that of pre-expressive presence and scenic *bios* to the expressive and dramaturgical, the social and political. They show Meyerhold as a

creative visionary in a *historical* theatre. He does not depict the colours of the places and the times, nor does he devote himself to the interpretation of historical events, but he plunges his gaze into the distant roots of what is to be. The 'design' of the exercises restores Meyerhold to us better than any photograph or portrait.

For a long time I thought of the exercises and their movement scores as an instrument for training actors. Then I realized that their greatest value resides in their being the channels of an inheritance that cannot be entrusted to words. It is a way of thinking and an *ethos* that the master engraves in the body–mind of his actors and that can be disseminated by them.

The Microscope and History

Deep in my heart as a theatre orphan there were the two statues of my grandfathers. Stanislavsky held a microscope in one hand and a book of poetry in the other; Meyerhold brandished in one hand a propaganda manifesto while in the other he turned the pages of history books in search of points of reference and terms of confrontation.

Both grandfathers were scientists – in addition to being artists and fishers of men. Stanislavsky practised the experimental science of the theatre and the actor; he loved to explore in depth starting out from his own experience and reaching the sources of scenic life and its basic shareable principles. He advanced from the complex to the simple, from the organism to the cell.

Meyerhold, on the other hand, regarded the nature of theatre in terms of struggle. In the microcosm of the individual – whether actor or spectator – he looked for the same patterns of action that characterize social change. Conflicts, tensions, and polarities were to him synonymous with life. The essential thing for him was not the search for the sources of 'truth' or 'authenticity', but the discovery of a way in which the dynamics of history can burst into and be miniaturized in the performance as well as in every fragment of the actor's actions and body–mind.

One of the things that made me feel close to Meyerhold was his voracity for the history of theatres. When we look through the many books that Stanislavsky has left us, we find ourselves in a panorama of direct testimonies, a crowd of actors whom he knew or had seen on many different stages both near and far. He remembers a gesture or an inflexion of the voice of even the most mediocre among them, using these as examples to be examined in depth by means of his scientific and poetic scalpel. He spans Russia and the rest of Europe, covering theatre, opera, and dance. It is rarely, however, that Stanislavsky feels the need to search through books for traces of a vanished theatre. He seems only to trust what he has seen with his own eyes and felt with his own senses.

Meyerhold loved to travel through the realm of the dead, through history. He probed the theatre-that-is-no-more in order to invent the theatre-that-is-not-yet. All his writings are crammed with inspiring examples and interpretations from the past. In the light of his own experience, he explains ancient documents, liberates them from the dust of the past, transforms them into voices with which to converse.

In the small family of reformers and prophets who changed twentieth-century theatre history, Appia, Stanislavsky, Decroux, and even Brecht were like pure scientists. Their research had the rigour of a process of deduction. They explored the scenic territory with a desire to identify the sources of the life and the new objectives of theatre. Others, such as Craig, Copeau, and Meyerhold, preferred a broad reconnaissance into history, collected material and workable examples, set new research in motion, and contributed to renewing theatre history. They created environments in which theatre artists could carry on a dialogue with historians.

These are not rigid distinctions. It is obvious that no one can do without history, just as there is no investigation into the past that is not nourished by experimental practice. It is a matter of differing propensities, not opposing methods. On the basis of these propensities, if I had to choose in which of the two groups to place my elder brother,

Grotowski, I could imagine him amongst the pure scientists together with Appia and Stanislavsky. As for me, I would put myself in the group that is headed by Craig and Meyerhold.

Those who enter theatre as 'orphans' have a special need for the past. Our particular condition forces us 'to build our own past' and invent a tradition. *Invention of tradition* has become a common expression since the brilliant collection of historical essays by Eric Hobsbawm in the mid-'eighties. It can indicate two very different prospects: an artificial composition, with a political and nationalistic aim, of a fictive origin, a myth fabricated as an weapon (this is Hobsbawm's view). Or it can signify a path traced in the dark sphere of the past connecting distant points, to be used as a system of reference. In the first case, the invention of tradition is an historical forgery. In the second, it is like a constellation. In the first case it nourishes fanaticism. In the second it is a means of orientation for the conquest of one's *difference* – that is, one's own identity.

Does there then exist an objective or invented *tradition* after Meyerhold? I don't think so. Does this mean that the essential core of his teaching has sunk into oblivion?

There are not only traditions whose continuity is based on the uninterrupted tension between innovation and conservation. There also exist *disconnected traditions* which are handed on through discontinuity and contradiction, evading the straight path. They pass from one element to another becoming unrecognizable just as the water of a dried torrent is unrecognizable in the cloud. The teaching of the masters – and the grandfathers – is not extinguished or passed on. It evaporates, and turns into rain where least we expect it. I shall become almost physically aware of this irony of history when, in my old age, I visit my grandfather's house.

The Grandfather's House

In May 2001 in Moscow, I met Vsevolod Meyerhold's granddaughter in the house that once belonged to her grandfather. She has succeeded in restoring it in the minutest detail, officially maintaining it as a museum and cultural institution, establishing a small harbour where artists and historians of different generations can meet. At the end of the nineteen thirties the wind of history swept over that house, leaving a trail of destruction. Even memory was at risk of being obliterated. Now her grandfather's house collects and conserves some of the most important documents in the history of the 'golden age' of theatre.

Maria Aleksejevna Valentej is the guardian angel of her grandfather's house. She looks fragile, but all her life has stubbornly fought against the dissipation of memory. She is burdened by the years, yet her eyes are filled with light. Tears misted my eyes that afternoon of 19 May 2001 in Moscow, in the 'yellow' living room where Meyerhold and his wife Zinaida Raikh used to receive their friends around the piano on which Shostakovich and Prokofiev played while Meyerhold imagined invisible scores for his productions.

The grandfather's house – that crossroads of culture defended by his granddaughter Maria – is a riot of colours. Here I discover the vivid scenographic sketches that I had so often seen as black and white photos in books. Dominating them is the large portrait depicting Meyerhold lying on a divan, pipe in mouth and a small dog curled on his lap. The background, a huge floral tapestry, is an explosion of colour. Piotr Konchalovski painted Meyerhold somewhat in the manner of Matisse – comfortable, sophisticated, pensive, and relaxed. Shortly to come would be his sudden arrest, torture, an infamous trial and death by firing squad.

We are seated at the large oval table drinking champagne and tea and eating little cakes, while Béatrice Picon-Vallin translates with trembling voice the quiet murmur of Maria Aleksejevna. Around this table they met, discussing and joking: Biely and Pasternak, Erdman and Olesha, Erenburg, Eisenstein, and Majakovsky. Occasionally too there were his old colleagues from the Art Theatre, Kotjalov and Olga Knipper, Chekhov's wife. Maria Aleksejevna's eyes are filled with tears as she thanks Béatrice Picon-Vallin for all she

has done and continues to do to spread and make known her grandfather's name. She also thanks all of us who pay homage to him through our work.

I feel pessimism turning to joy. It is not true that nothing can resist the barbarism of history. Everything had been contrived to make Meyerhold's memory vanish from the face of the earth. So it would have been, had not Zinaida Raikh's father and her daughter and son, together with Eisenstein, risked their freedom and perhaps their lives by hiding Meyerhold's documents between the pages of innocuous books in distant archives, safe from police raids. There would be little left of the grandfather but for the relentless struggle of his granddaughter, Maria Aleksejevna. Thanks to these people and their secret and courageous loyalty Meyerhold was not crushed by history.

Connecting the 'Disconnected Tradition'

Alongside the stories of resistance are the subterranean stories that tell of the spreading of Meyerhold's *disconnected tradition*. That long-limbed elderly man, a pipe in his mouth, stretched out amid a blaze of colour, has evaporated. His cloud has travelled far, so far that even Maria Aleksejevna has not heard about it.

Seki Sano was descended from an aristocratic Japanese family and had experienced prison because he diffused the idea of socialist revolution in his performances. He affirmed that the USSR was a 'theatre paradise'. He had arrived in 1932. He frequented Stanislavsky and became an expert on his method. He became one of Meyerhold's circle and from 1936 followed his activities. For Seki Sano theatre was a political art. He was not to be distracted by purely aesthetic disputes. He knew from experience that the discoveries of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were part of the same baggage. With this baggage he landed in Mexico in 1939 after also having to leave the United States because of his ideas. Meanwhile, in the 'theatre paradise' Meyerhold had been made to disappear.

Seki Sano, the Japanese who had been privileged to live for some years in 'paradise', trained an entire generation of the most pugnacious figures in Mexican and Latin American theatre. He translated Stanislavsky's key term *perezhivanie* into the Spanish *vivencia*. Learning along with him were Adolfo de Luis from Cuba and Alfredo Valessi from Nicaragua, and Jesus Gómez Obregón, later to be of enormous importance to the theatrical life of Venezuela.

One of the masters of Colombian theatre, Santiago Garcia, who founded La Candelaria Theatre, spoke to me at length of Seki Sano. In 1954 Rojas Pinilla, who headed the military dictatorship which controlled Colombia, decided to establish a national television. He let loose his men to search out the best man to direct a school for future television artists. Of course he had to speak fluent Spanish. They suggested a Japanese. He was the best, he was famous in Mexico, and he spoke Spanish. Seki Sano opened a school for actors in Bogotá in 1956.

Santiago Garcia was a young architect who dreamed of becoming a painter. He had studied in Europe and the United States. He had a good job, but still felt himself to be a prisoner. Intrigued by an advertisement in a newspaper, he presented himself to Seki Sano, who after a long interview accepted him amongst his pupils. Seki Sano introduced him to a theatrical way of being, an individual and collective dimension which surprised the dissatisfied young architect and changed his life. He gave up his job in order to become an actor and director. Today Santiago Garcia is a central figure in the history of Latin America theatre.

Only too soon the dictator learnt the appalling news that the Japanese director who had educated so many new talents was a communist. So dangerous was he that when he arrived in Mexico sixteen years previously, a newspaper had found it necessary to inform its readers: *es director teatral, no dinamitero* – he is a theatre director, not an expert in explosives. How many indirect and non-violent ways are there to be a *dinamitero*? And how many can the theatre allow?

After his expulsion from Colombia, Seki Sano returned to Mexico where he continued his activities until his death in 1966.

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It was the Kanto earthquake in Japan in 1923 that determined Seki Sano's political and artistic vocation. As a student he was destined to belong to his country's elite. The earthquake led him to discover that beneath a well organized life there lurked violence and injustice. Many of those in a position of power in modern Japan took advantage of the state of emergency to eliminate their enemies, persecuting the Korean immigrant workers and the communists, oppressing the discriminated cast of the *burakumin* and threatening and beating up some of the progressive political leaders. Government propaganda sowed fanaticism among the population. The earthquake taught Seki Sano that the ground under his feet was only seemingly stable. A natural catastrophe made him see the violent dynamics of history behind the mask of a civil society.

This, briefly, is a fragment of the *disconnected tradition*, the story of the Japanese who brought Stanislavsky and Meyerhold to Mexico and Colombia and who passed on through the rigour of the craft the meaning of a theatre that lives through revolt and a feeling of not belonging.

I have spoken of orphans. Perhaps I should have spoken of 'children of earthquakes', of those who do theatre knowing that at any time the ground may start to tremble and shake beneath them. We know that our performances – an ephemeral art we nurse as if we wanted to carry it through to eternity – can, at a moment's notice, be engulfed together with the entire island which contains and supports it, becoming a cloud, the sole remnant of an earth which no longer exists.

A huge cloud, like a galleon's sail, changeable yet always remaining itself, crosses the 'yellow' living room in Meyerhold's house. Our grandparents, dear Maria Aleksejevna, do not disappear. They evaporate.

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