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Odin at Fifty

THIS is a very brief announcement in the form of a personal homage, as of that of *NTQ*, to Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret. It will be followed by Ian Watson's full account in our November issue, *NTQ120*.

Barba and the Odin celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in Holstebro whose mayor offered the company a shelter and a home. It happened forty-eight years ago, two years after Barba founded the Odin in Norway in 1964, but had no financial support to ensure the group's survival. The dwelling to which they came was a pig farm on the outskirts of the town. Slowly the farm was restructured, with studios and rooms for the actors. The edifice was subsequently extended in stages, longways and upwards for another floor and for a turret/tower built in memory of Sanjukta Panigrahi. This incomparable Odissi dancer had deeply marked the Odin, and gave to its many ISTAs her invaluable embodied knowledge and great heart. Barba's grief is till palpable when he speaks of her and her untimely death in 1997, and his pain is, indeed, as much a tribute to her influence as to his gratitude for all that she had done. The Odin's home has since become a magnificent centre of creativity and research, including archival research, that engages in dialogue with everyone who crosses its threshold in whichever capacity they come.

The birthday celebrations were at the tail end of the triennial Festuge (festive week) held during 14 to 24 June 2014, now in its ninth edition; and this means that the Festuge has become an integral part of the town's life. The idea for the festival came from the Odin as a way of thanking Holstebro for its hospitality and, in some measure, for having borne with the company when its activities seemed remote or 'strange'. What was simply unfamiliar about it had provoked suspicion and even anger. Yet the town's inhabitants have come round, and have willingly opened up to collaboration with the Odin not only in all preparatory and organizational matters from start to finish, but also in artistic programming and performance events.

The citizens of Holstebro perform in that juxtaposition of frequently surprising opposites which has always been the hallmark of the ISTA gatherings. These contrasts have as much to do with the performance genres, forms, styles, expressions, and expressivities set into play and arranged by Barba as with their cultural provenance and so with their markers of cultural specificity, similarity, and difference. Difference is here not a sign of being 'outside' or 'other' but of energy that is gathered into the folds of acceptance and peace.

Every Festuge has had a theme, and that for 2014 clearly articulates the festival's underlying values of coming together and sharing, especially in today's climate of uncertainty. The theme of 'Faces of the Future: Ghosts and Fictions' essentially focused on the future as exemplified by the young – children

and adolescents who, in countless ways, stressed hope for the future. This hope was possibly nowhere more explicitly evident than in what might be called a 'site-specific promenade' through the local town hall, its innards – offices, meeting rooms, corridors, passageways – beautifully wrapped up in the manner of Christo. Within this rather ghostly environment, children from Holstebro's ballet school, youth orchestra, opera classes, and choir performed with astonishing skill and ease as walkers passed from event to event, stopping longer where their desire took them.

Here you came upon a young father, whose legs had been blown off in the war in Afghanistan, playing an accordion with his teenage cellist daughter atop a huge canvas-covered mound; beneath, as Barba explained to me, were the bookshelves and tables of the library within the precincts of the town hall. There a solo performer from an Italian group was singing Piaf songs; somewhere else a young girl was painting her arms black, and somewhere else again a group of elderly locals were reading/reciting, seated at a table. The word 'future' appeared written on the floor or on a wall, and you would have to be a hard-bitten cynic not to have been moved by the sense of openness, expectation, and unassuming confidence that enveloped the performers and their performances.

A similar kind of atmosphere emanated from outdoors events, not least the grand closure of the Festuge in the park, where unbelievably young dancers from Bali (one surely no more than five years old) danced in ornate costumes beside young, bare-chested ebullient boys from Kenya. Or else one and the other threw the Holstebro ballerinas into relief or, somewhere further back in the collective picture, the breathtaking Baul instrumentalist-singer-dancer Parvathy, who, in all her performances, was nothing if not in another dimension altogether, somewhere near God.

Generations of the same families, usually three generations, as well as seasoned practitioners and theatregoers whom the Odin had invited, enjoyed the richness and variety of these shows, and it was quite clear that the people of Holstebro perceived them as belonging to them. Familiarity with the Festuge over twenty-five years had developed something like empathetic understanding: foreign visitors were not so much 'foreign' as themselves in Holstebro. The long-term social effects of the Festuge project were visible. In this generous labour, which the Odin shares with the town, and that the town offers its people as well as its visitors, are the seeds of what can only be called a major achievement.

There is plenty in the Odin's centre that demonstrates its varied activities over fifty years, and in which beautiful posters from all over the world recall Odin's well-known productions. But, looking back, not only is the longevity of the group miraculous – it is still composed of virtually the same people (two have sadly passed away) – but so is the immense scope of what the Odin has done with integrity and faith across geographical as well as social and moral space. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and it is this amazing whole that emerged in all its force in Holstebro in June. This certainly demands the salute of recognition and thanks.