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Nicola Savarese. Eurasian theatre: drama and performance between East and West from classical antiquity to the present

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true to the original as much as possible. Rumánek tries to transfer the emotion on to the reader the same way as Noh Drama does to the audience – not on the stage, but in the soul of the spectator.

Although it is obvious that Rumánek speaks mainly from his own experience (for example a year-long training for Noh actors), field research and discussions with Professor Nishino (one of the leading figures in Noh research in Japan), his work lacks more detailed reference of sources. Even though it is clear through the work that all the translations are made from Japanese, there is no specific note about it. If it were longer, a glossary of Japanese terms with explanations at the end of the book would have been more helpful for the reader.

Rumānek uses the word Noh in feminine gender as a declinable word, which in Slovak language sounds rather strange. Usually the word Noh is classified as indeclinable neuter. Also declension of some Japanese terms is incorrect. However, the language Rumánek uses is readable and the text is easy to understand.

Nevertheless, this unique monograph as the first publication in Slovak language on Japanese Noh Drama could be recommended to anyone dealing with Japanese Noh Drama at every stage of knowledge on this topic. It is a detailed insight into the origin and development of the traditional Japanese Noh Drama trying to give

a complex view not only on the Drama itself, but also explaining the historical background and analysing theory and practice at the same time. It is the quality that almost all other publications in Slovak or Czech language lack.



Šárka Havlíčková Kysová |
Nicola Savarese. *Eurasian Theatre. Drama and Performance Between East and West from Classical Antiquity to the Present*

Translated from the Italian by Richard Fowler. Updated version revised and edited by Vicki Ann Cremona.

Holstebro/Malta/Wrocław: Icarus Publishing Enterprise, 2010. 640 pp.

If one examines theatre as art, and takes into consideration the division of the world into the parts known as the Orient and the Occident, then one is presented with a certain tension (a dramatic tension, so to speak); and it is very tempting to follow the historical evolution of the abovementioned

tension within its broadest context. Yet the division of the world into the East and the West may prove itself to be somewhat vague, and the presumed clashes between these two ‘halves’ of the world may be quite difficult to identify. However, if one accepts a (nowadays widely spread) concept of some of the Western researchers about the existence of substantial differences between the cultures, and therefore also between the theatres of the East and the West, one will then be able to find particularities as well as universalities that may be further applied, for instance, in the search for the principles of theatricality, and most notably in theatrical–anthropological research.

Most theatre studies scholars will probably connect the name of the author of this book, Nicola Savarese, with the name of his colleague, Eugenio Barba, and with the notion of theatre anthropology, which was presented in their collective work *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: A Secret Art of the Performer* (hereafter only *Dictionary*) (cf. e.g. BARBA and SAVARESE 1991), published for the first time in 1991. It is almost impossible to read Savarese’s book without paying heed to the *Dictionary*. There are a few explicit references in the book that document this – for example on the page 557, where Savarese directly quotes the term “Eurasian Theatre” that gave name to this book; in the 18th chapter of the fifth part of the book, where

he compares European and Eastern dance from a theatrical–anthropological point of view; or in the penultimate chapter of the book, which is dedicated to Barba, his concept of the theatre anthropology and of the Eurasian Theatre (cf. pp. 555–560). This chapter, called “To Heal a Wound”, summarizes Barba’s work and briefly recapitulates the principles of his research.

A question comes to mind, a question that is connected to the very genesis of the reviewed book. Why should one review a book today, in 2012, when the said book was published for the first time twenty years ago? The book came out for the first time in Italian (SAVARESE 1992) and has had nine more reprints (11). In the reviewed English edition, translated by Richard Fowler, the reader is presented with an updated and revised version of the book, at least according to the words of the editor, Vicky Ann Cremona. And it is owing to the fact that this book is supplemented with new materials, which was collected by Savarese following the years after the first publication of the book (11), that this book deserves attention even almost twenty years after its first issue (foremost the attention of those who were unable to read the book in Italian).

The book is divided into six parts – each of them is introduced with one or more mottos and divided into eighteen subparts – and boasts a total of 640 pages. Savarese deals with the

clash of the Western and Eastern (not only) theatre cultures on 565 pages, twenty pages are dedicated to bibliography, and the span of the index is more than fifty pages. The foreword to the book was written by its editor, Vicky Ann Cremona (8–11).

The first part of the book, entitled “The ‘Maschera’ of Marco Polo”, deals with encounters between the East and the West from antiquity to the Renaissance period, anticipating the later events in some chapters. Savarese discovers, or rather summarizes, the first possible influences exchanged between these two ‘worlds’. One of the notions that one may find in the book is the change in the European perception of Asia – from the Greek tragedy, the Roman perception of the Orient, and “The Fabulous Asia of the Middle Ages” (which is the title of the ninth chapter, 51 ff.), to Shakespeare’s ‘oriental’ sources of inspiration, for example in *The Merchant of Venice*, or in *Othello*, and up to East-inspired literary works of other European playwrights of that time, like Lope de Vega or Cervantes. By the end of this chapter Savarese anticipates some motifs that are going to be dealt with later on in the book – for example, the popular theme of abduction, be it either “from” or “into” the *serail*, present, for example, in the works of Mozart. Interesting passages in connection with the voyages of Marco Polo describe Polo’s encounter with a phenomenon, which, even today, still appeals to Western thea-

tre artists, and which is often reflected in literature – and that is the phenomenon of the *devadasis* (“slaves of the god”), or the prostitute-dancers of the temples, in Marco Polo’s case of the temples of Malabar (57–58). It should be mentioned that in the first part of the book Savarese deals with the topic of the influence of the West over the East only sporadically. The culture and the theatre of the East are presented, or rather recapitulated, to the reader – a fine example being the characterisation of the form and of the origins of the modern-day Peking Opera in chapter twelve (71 ff.). This genre, or rather the principle of ‘cooperation’ between the actor and the audience, is pointed out by Savarese as being one of the inspiration sources of Brecht’s estrangement effect. Generally, a Western historical perspective dominates in this part of the book – a view oriented towards the Orient. A noteworthy issue also arises in the notion of the connection between the medieval dances of Death and the so called *cham* dances, sacred dances performed (even today) in Central Asia, Buddhist Tibet. According to Savarese these dances might have been brought as a source of inspiration to the European continent by the Franciscan monks. Here Savarese touches upon an important issue of the role played by the missionary work of Christian orders in the dissemination of the influence of the Eastern cultures over the West,

and which is reflected in the following chapters even more meticulously.

Savarese opens the second part of the book with a treatise called “The Savage Harlequin” that deals with the contacts between the East and the West, mediated chiefly by the Jesuits. Savarese describes the exoticism appearing in the theatre of the 18th and 19th century. It may seem that Savarese takes a long time to prepare the stage for the ‘unmasking’ of the first *direct* and undocumented contact, or contacts, between the theatre in Europe and in Asia. Yet the reader may feel intrigued, or even excited, by the pursuit of this evolution. The question posed is why, even in spite of the “age-old commercial and cultural exchanges between Europe and Asia, did the first direct, conscious contact between their theatres take place so late when compared to that made between all the other arts?” (146) Savarese sees the main reason for the above mentioned situation in the fact that there were virtually no precise sources of information, and no relevant documentation of cross-cultural theatrical influences, before the second half of the 18th century. For example, it was only at that time that European playwrights started to imitate Asian dramatic texts (148). Among the reasons that stood behind the long-term negligence for the matters of migration of performance techniques Savarese counts “the aura of tales surrounding Asia and the Orient, to which corresponds an undervaluing of European

culture on the part of Asian people” (152), or a low social status of actors – this he connects to the fact that theatre and other similar activities and professions were regarded in the West as well as in the East as something ‘lowly’ (152), and therefore not ‘worthy’ of being documented. Savarese also reflects upon the possibilities of the evolution of theatre in different parts of the world, upon the drawing near and mixing of mutually distant theatrical cultures, and also upon the introduction of elements of a foreign culture into another culture (151). Here he refers to anthropological theories, foremost to the “theory of spontaneous generation” and the “theory of diffusionism” (149). One of the leading topics of this section of the book is the reflection of a Chinese text from the 13th century (*The Orphan of Zhao*) in Western drama – particularly in the works of Metastasio and Voltaire. Here Savarese demonstrates the manner in which this material was treated and repeatedly transformed in various works of art across the whole of Eurasia. In this manner, the second part of the book ushers in a papers on the beginnings of Orientalism, which are discussed in the following section.

Most of the chapters of the third part of the book are dedicated to India, above all to Kalidasa’s Sanskrit play *Shakuntala*. The section depicts the period between the Enlightenment and Romanticism while summarizing the beginnings and the progress of the

interest in the Orient within the scope of the “Oriental Studies”. Savarese points not only to the year 1785, the year in which the English translation of *Bhagavadgita* was made (189), but also to the ‘discovery’ of *Shakuntala* by Sir William Jones (192), who translated and published the play in 1789. *Shakuntala* constitutes a link within the framework of the text on the European perception and absorption of the influences coming from the Asian theatre. Some chapters in this section provide information on the theatre performances in India – in connection with Calcutta, Savarese mentions not only the Indian theatre activities (e.g. 251, the Hindu theatre, i.e. the first Western-style theatre run by the Indians, founded in 1831), but mainly the British theatre feats (e.g. 228, where the first British theatre in Calcutta – the “Playhouse”, founded as early as in 1753 – is mentioned). Savarese, in connection with the general interest in Indian performance activities, deals with the origins of the idea of the “Oriental dancer” that appeared in the 19th century (258). The bayaders in Europe of the 19th century became not only the prototypes of Oriental dancers, but also represented the essence of the Orient (256). Savarese thus sees the exoticism of the Enlightenment as a foreplay to Romantic Orientalism (256). In the sixteenth chapter of the third part of the book the author writes about Orientalism perceived as a “a complex of studies and artistic interests” that

“played a determining role in Romantic and post-Romantic culture” (266), and comes near to Said’s criticism of Orientalism that has gained prominence mainly since the 1980s (267; cf. SAID 1978, 2008).

The third part also reflects the reception of the Orient in opera – including the works from the first half of the 20th century, for example Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* or *Turandot* (ch. 16). Savarese’s enumeration of Indian influences on European theatre production does not leave out the inspiration by Sudraka’s *The Clay Cart* that the Symbolist artists used in A. Lugné-Poë’s production from 1885 (285).

It is mainly the Japanese source of inspiration that guides the reader through the fourth part of the book, entitled “An Emblematic Play of Mirrors”. Savarese follows the performances of actress Sada Yacco, a former geisha, and of her husband, theatre artist Kawakami, in the West at the turn of the 20th century. In this section Savarese has no other choice but to broaden (from a geographical point of view) the scope of his interest when he reflects the theatre activities of Japanese artists not only in Europe, but also in the United States. When describing the nature of Japanese productions, Savarese presents the reader with an opportunity to compare the form of art that was presented in the West by Kawakami’s group and the way it differed from the traditional Japanese art. Here (and also

later in the book) Savarese touches upon issues such as to what extent were Europeans or non-Asian cultures, Americans, aware of Asian, or rather Japanese theatre, whether they had access to the relevant literature, or whether they drew their knowledge from their own direct theatre-goer's experience. Savarese deals with the influence of European theatre on the way the Japanese theatre artists (particularly Kawakami) of the time thought about theatre. It is also here that Savarese deals with a topic that he also reprises, mainly in the last section of the book – that is the phenomenon of the international exhibitions and their influence on the perception of the Orient.

As regards to the topic, the fourth section of the book is the most consistent one – most of the chapters describe the story of Sada Yacco and Kawakami, and also their successes in front of the Western audience. Here Savarese demonstrates the importance of Asian theatre artists in the West.

The fifth part, “The Mobile Academy”, brings us to the 20th century. First Savarese discusses another Japanese artist, Hanako, who was adored in Europe. Here Savarese concentrates on Japanese/Asian Theatre as being something of a spectacle, not only as art, but commercially as well. He writes about the activities of an American dancer and businesswoman that also performed in Europe, Mary Louise Fuller (Loie Fuller), who –

apart from being an active artist herself – was not only able to recognize the potential of Hanako's artistic expression, but also supported the Japanese artist in her activities. However, Savarese also writes about the negative attitude – e.g. of Edward Gordon Craig – towards Hanako. It is also worth mentioning that Rodin drew movement sketches that were quite often inspired by the Orient, mostly by its dances. Savarese links Rodin's studies of bodily postures with theatre anthropology (397). Here Savarese draws near to the core of his observations – he follows artists coming from different cultures and observes the way they meet, and draws conclusions from such meetings: “[...] the various meetings and exchanges between artists with different cultural backgrounds played an essential role in the West not only in the formation of new way of thinking about the human body but, as a consequence, with respect to the creative process and the development of performances” (428).

The penultimate section of the book leads to a clear teatro-anthropological conclusion, which is brought about in the form of a comparison of European and Eastern styles of dances.

In the last section of the book Savarese deals extensively with the role and the importance of the world exhibitions in the intercultural exchange. In this context he further explores the issue of the so-called “human Zoos” and “savages” which was brought about at the end of the 19th

century. During these exhibitions, known also as the *spectacles ethnologiques*, Asians and Africans were presented to the Western man (462) in the fashion of present-day Zoos with exotic animals on display. The term “human Zoo”, according to Savarese, describes a “shameful European cultural attitude towards African and Asian peoples which was asserted in the second half of the century”.¹ It is within this context that Savarese begins the last section of the book. Here he focuses on theatre artists that were inspired by the Orient, as was for example the abovementioned E. G. Craig. Savarese describes Craig’s relationship towards ‘Asian’ theatre and also his experiences with it – experiences that originated solely in literature, as Craig never visited Asia (467). Craig saw performances of Sada Yacco (in 1900) and Hanako (in 1907), but he did not think of these as ‘real’ Japanese traditional theatre, and, what is more, to him Sada Yacco represented a “pollution of tradition” (467). The important part is, however, that Savarese focuses on concrete examples of Craig’s inspiration with Asian theatre, particularly the Japanese Noh theatre, while he was defining the principles of his own con-

cept of the *Übermarionette* (ch. 4 and 5). In the following chapters (as in the case of the chapters on Craig) Savarese identifies the influences of Asian theatre in the works of Copeau, Dullin, Claudel, Artaud, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Brecht and others. After this sequence he comes to the highlight of his treatise, dedicating the penultimate chapter – symptomatically entitled “To Heal a Wound” – to his long-term colleague, Eugenio Barba, to his “Odin Teatret” and to his concept of theatre anthropology and the Eurasian theatre. On page 557 one is presented with a quotation from their collective work, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, where one may find the term “Eurasian Theatre”. It is here where Barba states his attitude towards the clash, or differentiation of the Eastern and Western theatre cultures. To a large extent he founds his words on the experiences gained in the daily work with the actors of the “Odin Teatret”:

Today, the very word “comparison” seems inadequate to me since it separates the two faces of the same reality. I can say that I “compare” Indian or Balinese, Chinese or Japanese traditions if I compare their epidermises, their diverse conventions, their many different performances styles. But if I consider that which lies beneath those luminous and seductive epidermises and discern the organs that keep them alive, then the poles of

1 A remarkable exhibition took place in Musée du Quai Branly in Paris not long ago (29 November 2011 – 3 June 2012). It was entitled “L’invention du sauvage”, and was dedicated to the topic of “parading of savages” in “human Zoos”. For more information see the extensive exhibition catalogue (BLANCHARD 2011).

the comparison blend into a single profile: that of a Eurasian theatre. (BARBA and SAVARESE in SAVARESE 2010: 557)

Here one may observe, apart from other things, the importance of the fact that Savarese updated and supplemented the English edition of his book. Savarese adds to Barba's words:

Thus, professional, in-depth investigation no longer approaches Asian theatre on a level, however important, of potential exchange of creative stimuli, as had been the case in the past. The Asian theatres are no longer a research source to be referred to in order to refresh the imagination and the worn-out customs of Western theatricality. They become preferred partners in the analysis of aspects of the theatrical process, such as actor training and performance techniques, which precede creativity and make it live. (557–558)

Savarese's observations lead to a conclusion in the very last chapter, entitled "Borderless Performances", where he poses a vital question: Do Oriental theatres still exist? (561)

In his text on the encounters of different theatre cultures in the Eurasian area, Savarese aims at a chronological approach. The issues are dealt with within a broad, cultural-historical context. The author's observa-

tions are based on his own research and on large quantities of secondary literature, and he also presents the reader with extracts taken out of extraordinary materials – quotations (though very often borrowed) from period public press, from Jesuit correspondence, etc.

Although Savarese does not precisely define at the beginning of the book what he includes in the term "Orient" (neither geographically nor politically), and neither does he state what exactly does he mean by the concept of "Eurasian Theatre", in the course of reading of this book the reader is given enough time to find an answer to these questions. And it is mostly in the final chapters that the author offers a clear view of the issue. Although most of the chapters are in the form of a description, filled with all manner of valuable and interesting information, and owing to that the book at times becomes more of a thrilling voyage through the history of theatre and across continents, but from time to time Savarese also touches upon issues of a theoretical nature. He succeeds in emphasizing the universal principles of theatricality, and of the broader intercultural theatre life – this is also because of the fact that Savarese collected an extensive amount of materials, and out of these he cunningly extracted a wealth of stimulating ideas on theatre.

The journey that Savarese undertook together with the historical evolution of theatre is astonishing. He

began with the division of the world into two parts, the East and the West – a concept that tends to obscure the comprehension of ideas in the scholarly discourse – to reach a concept that utterly changes the quality of the original notion, i.e. the concept of the “Eurasian Theatre”. The elaborate journey through the history that Savarese took proved to be inevitable. To be honest, he is not the only one who, even today, ponders on how, or whether at all do the (theatre) cultures still meet.²

Vicki Ann Cremona, the editor of the book, points out in her preface that “Savarese focuses on one essential premise: the actor’s trained body” (9). He considers “the principles governing the use of the actor’s psycho-physical techniques in action” as they “developed and transmitted through exchange and interaction between performers from East and West” (9). The notion of “Eurasian Theatre” is based on the idea that actors with different cultural background exchange their body techniques, and that interactions between East and West established “the bases of the modern theatrical arts that permeate different styles of acting, dramas and performance” (9).

Even though Savarese’s book can be considered as highly illuminating, the topic of “Eurasian Theatre”

can be also treated more theoretically, considering the recent discourse on theatre theory. Although Savarese mentions some treatises dealing with Orientalism, and makes some references to the topics of post-colonial studies (referring e.g. to Said, Bharucha etc.), we can ask more complex and topical questions: e.g. why the Euro-American theatre studies are actually interested in ‘Asian’ theatre? What theoretical approaches should be applied to the topic? What methods should we use? Savarese’s book elicits a good amount of questions for further research. From my point of view that is the reason why the Savarese’s book is definitely worth reading.

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2 Cf. e.g. Patrice Pavis’s article on the problematics of intercultural theatre in modern times: “We can no longer hope to have the cultures meet.” (PAVIS 2010: 14)