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From the centre to the periphery

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The performative body is typically centre stage, especially in psychophysical training and the theatre laboratory tradition. Rather than the body in stasis, Julia Varley has spoken of the movement from the centre to the periphery and its reverse in relation to the actor's embodied craft (Varley 2010). As a figure of thought, and as a companion piece to our other essay in this edition, here the Ship of Fools (SoF) scholarly collective invites a short journey through its nautical imaginary, or, perhaps, a drift through notions of centres and peripheries ...

For Varley, the image of the centre to the periphery articulates the experience of the flow of energy from the spine to the limbs and towards spectators. Conversely, perhaps the actor carries the stage 'in' the body, especially in postdramatic practices; the body is enough. Then, to take a position, to be centre stage, is also to occupy space. To place oneself strongly. Yet as scholars, we spend much of our time on the edge: on the edge of a room, as observers of rehearsal or training, or as spectators at a performance. But when we write about this work, we place our experiences, which are not solely intellectual but also bodily and affective, back at the centre of an academic task. Our scholarly 'outputs' are, too often, coldly measured and assessed, scrutinised from different sorts of peripheries. Continuing movement cycles, as scholars, some of us have found ourselves on stage again, speaking about our work at artistic gatherings.

Back and forth movement, or contraction and expansion, is also a way of understanding the artistic relationships that circulate around the current constellation of the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium (NTL); groups and artists gather, then disperse, stretching the threads of their connections. Each rooted through our inner axis - the spine with its impulses,

embodied memories and felt senses - they and we carry differing traces of lived experiences: of training, spectatorship, critical engagements. But centres move; what was the centre of a group, a network, a moment in rehearsal or performance, even a discussion, can quickly shift. What is important, then, is not our fixed positionality, either central or peripheral, but the movement in between these poles. These shifting positions and the navigation of roles is central to the emerging praxis of our critical laboratory.

Socially, peripheries are often paradoxically central. Encounters on the peripheries offer intersubjective challenges, where the individual must negotiate, grow, expand and transform. SoF is, similarly, a laboratory in flux, in which the transient movement from centre to periphery is key. The group's praxis is fundamentally dialogical (both in terms of our exchanges as scholars, and the ways in which we engage with artists). This recentres the laboratory away from a private and 'objective' space, becoming more akin to the complementarity of quantum physics; indeed, Odin Teatret's logo includes physicist Niels Bohr's motto '*contraria sunt complementa*', and the ying/yang image. Eugenio Barba has, further, developed Bohr's notion (Favrholdt 2008) as a metaphor for interactivity - or interference - between theatre artists and inhabitants of a village or city quarter. In real terms, we find that the artists of the NTL and the wider diaspora of what has been called 'Third Theatre' are increasingly interested in our scholarly questions and want to embrace criticality. Today, in fact, there appears to be an attempted dissolution of the boundaries once separating practice and research: the artists, and we, dialogue and fuse, informing laboratory theatre and the critical laboratory alike.

In his essay 'The Deep Order of Turbulence' (2000), Barba speaks, too, of disorientation as a creative tactic, a technique, drawing a seemingly chaotic cartography of possibilities, but also a freedom to pursue different routes and thus make discoveries. This complex cartography has also been re-explored in Barba and Savarese's more recent publication, *The Five Continents of Theatre* (Barba and Savarese 2018). Now, Barba is no longer the director of the NTL and has himself also moved from the centre to the periphery. This is partly a result of age and long years of work, and partly to free him to pursue new adventures. It is also a provocative act. Still, through his extensive practice and writings, Barba might be seen as a sort of 'North Star', a point of orientation that unites our various interests in practices globally. As such, he might be both central and peripheral: the centre of some sort of 'heavens', but on our periphery when navigating the Earth. Or is Barba, perhaps, a lighthouse, paradoxically keeping us away from the rocks and risk of shipwreck, but also a strange attractor, as if moths to a light.¹

Like Bohr, Barba finds that 'order and disorder are not two opposing options, but two poles that coexist and reinforce one another reciprocally. The quality of the tension created between them is an indication of the fertility of the creative process' (Barba 2000, 59). As a collective, the members of SoF actively seek the creative revolt of disorientation, abandoning the pressures and the rivalries of academic publishing in order to work together, engendering research and supporting young scholarly

¹ In mathematics, a 'strange attractor' suggests the pattern or order towards which apparently chaotic systems tend.

practitioners. By operating on the fringes of academia, away from our institutional 'homes', we are able to set sail together and chart new waters, new orientations, amidst the 'floating islands' of laboratory theatre (Barba 1979).

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