

THE ODIN THEATRE

Activities at the Theatre-Laboratory, Holstebro, Denmark

Neils Sorensen

In Europe the student of theatre can find three institutions called "theatre-laboratories" which are completely different from professional theatres and from drama-schools as well. Wroclaw Theatre Laboratory, Poland, under the lead of Jerzy Grotowski and Ryszard Cieslak, the Scenographic Institute of Prague run by Miroslaw Kouril, and finally The Odin Theatre, directed by Eugenio Barba have this in common, that they base their artistic activity principally on research.

The Odin Theatre was founded in Oslo, Norway, in September 1964 by a group of young people who had been turned down by the National Theatre School. Two of the original members, Else Marie Laukvik and Torgeir Wethal, are still with the group today, besides the Italian director, Eugenio Barba.

When in June 1966 the Odin Theatre moved to Holstebro in Denmark on the invitation of the local municipality, it changed the original conception of work which was to be an independent theatre group giving regular performances and transformed itself into a theatre laboratory—"that is to say a centre for methodical research and practical trials of certain hypotheses in the field of theatrical pedagogics which are manifested through performances."

At present the laboratory is composed of two artistically distinct groups, both of which are working on productions and pedagogic activities: The Odin Theatre, already mentioned, and The Studio II, the latter led by Yves Lebreton, whose essential preoccupation is mime ("mime corporel").

At present, 1972, the total number of theatre workers at the laboratory is 15. The work is distributed amongst all the members, both actors and administrative staff—who are then personally responsible for those tasks that they undertake.

Activities

The following activities are undertaken by the theatre laboratory:

- regular courses in theatre pedagogics both in Scandinavia and abroad
- courses in group dynamics
- pedagogic activity for children
- art and theatre exhibitions
- an art cinema study circle
- two sociological surveys (one of which has been both planned and realised by the laboratory)
- preparation for the presentation of three companies from abroad
- preparation of two new professional seminars
- preparation of three issues of TTT (Theory and Technique of Theatre)
- distribution of films lent from the laboratory's archives
- preparation of didactic films on the training of the actor.

Seminars

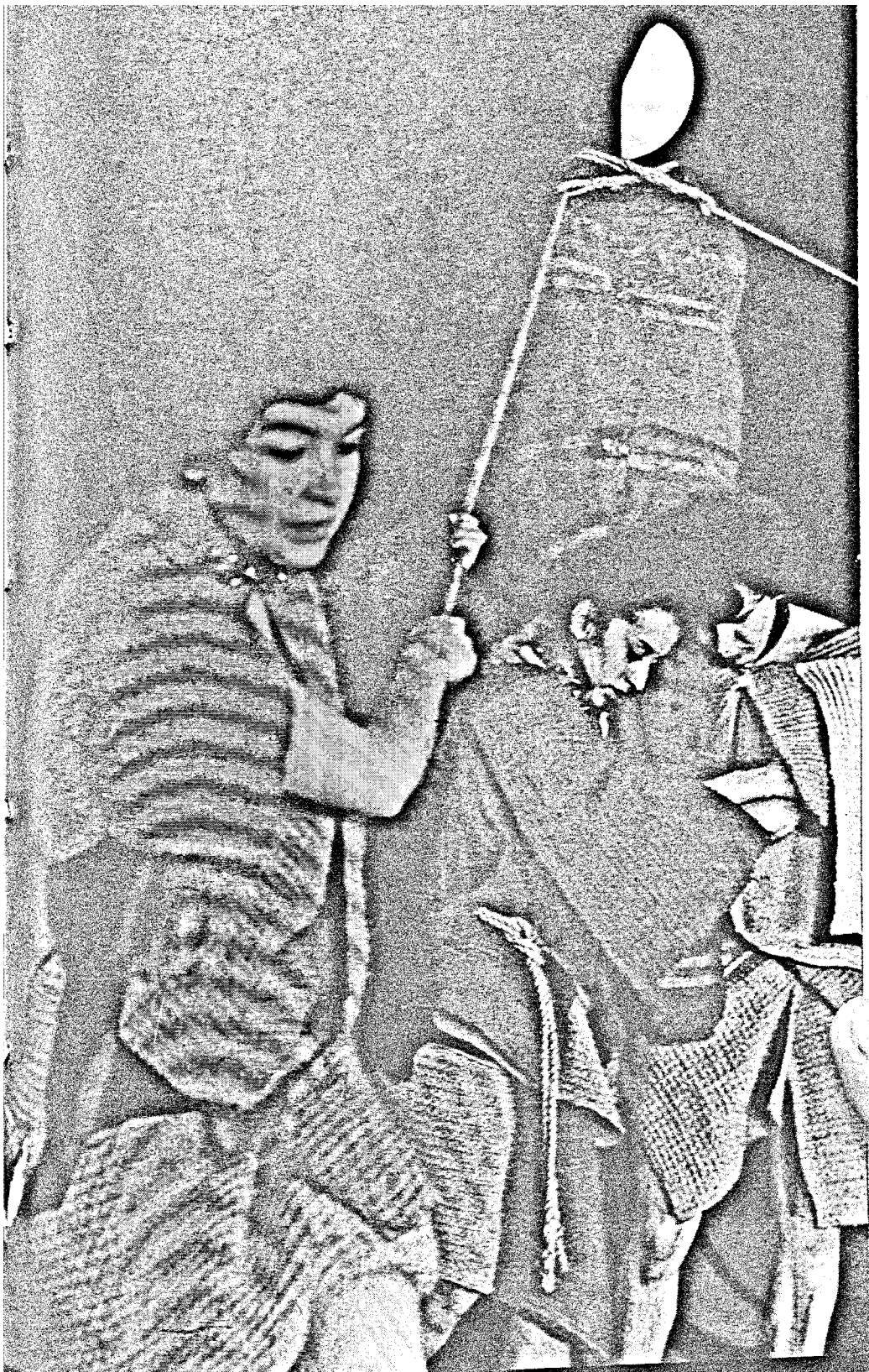
The two annual seminars—inter-Scandinavian events, bringing together about 100 participants points to the international fame of the Odin Theatre. The subject for research at the seminars from 1966 till now has a large scope, among others:

- “The Myth around Commedia Dell’Arte”
- “Theatrical Language” (mime)
- “Political Theatre”
- “Group Theatres in Scandinavia”
- “English Fringe Groups”

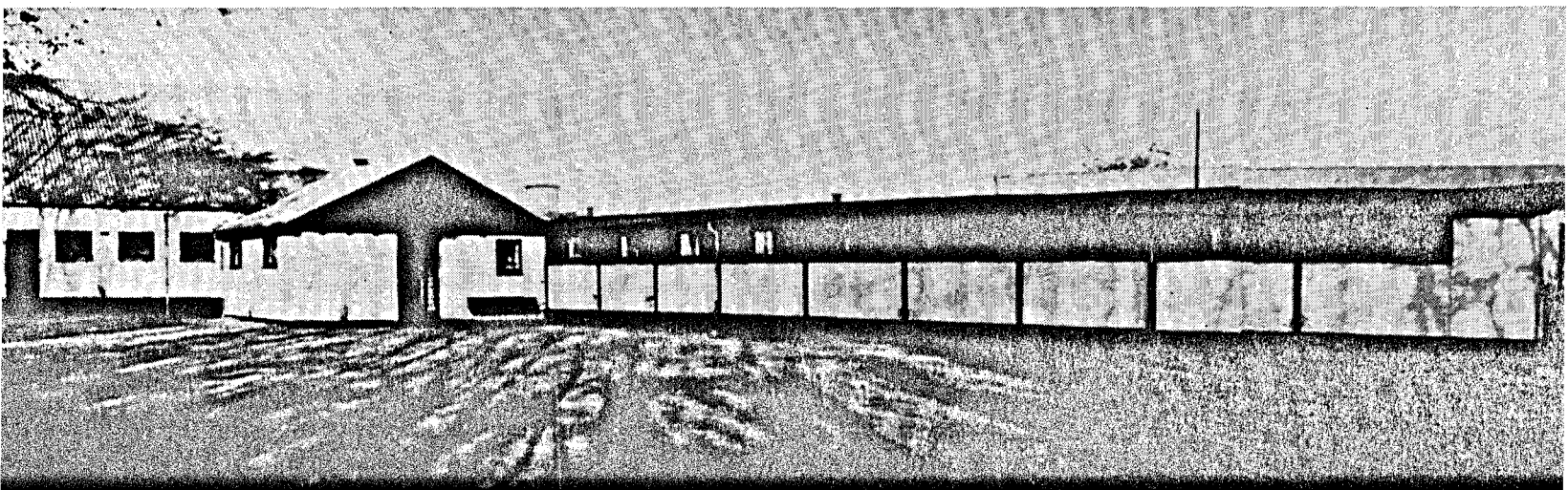
In September 1972 the first “Japanese Seminar” as scheduled with performances and demonstrations of the classical Japanese theatre, Nôh and Kabuki. In addition: guest performances of Modern Japanese groups.

The aim of the seminars is to “Provide an opportunity for direct interchange and confrontation between different theatre personalities and milieux. The intention is not that one should “learn” in the tradition sense of the word. The participants in the seminar should be confronted with methods of work and ideas

Illustrations : Page. 57-59. Scenes from the Odin Theatre production of “Fera” by Peter Seeberg, directed by Eugenio Barba. Page. 60. The Odin Theatre Buildings. Photographs, Courtesy: Odin Teatrets Foto, Holstebro, Denmark.







as presented in the work-demonstrations given by the various personalities and groups. In this way the seminar becomes a direct experience leading to a more precise definition of own work."

During the seminars fertile theatre personalities of both Eastern and Western Europe and the Americas have been present. Jerzy Grotowski and Ryszard Cieslak (Poland), Otomar Kreca, Jan Kacer, Ladislav Smocek (Czechoslovakia), Charles Marowitz, Joseph Chaikin (USA), Giovanni Poli, Dario Fo (Italy), Etienne Decroux, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jacques Lecoq (France) have participated as lecturers, demonstrators and inspirators.

Publications and Films

At the publishing firm run by the laboratory ("Odin Teatrets Forlag") are edited a series of magazines and books under the title "TTT" (The Theory and Technique of the Theatre) concerning pedagogic and technical problems within the theatre. The headline of the "TTT" publications can usually be connected with previous seminars or seminars to be held:

No. 11, *Political Theatre* by Erwin Piscator.

No. 15, *The Art of the Theatre in China and Japan*.

No. 16, *The Secret Tradition in Nôh* by Zeami.

No. 17, *Group Theatre in Scandinavia*.

TTT publications are published in Scandinavian languages with one exception.

No. 77, *Towards a Poor Theatre* by Jerzy Grotowski, published in English 1968.

Mostly during the seminars theatres from abroad are presented, the most wellknown being those of Nuova Scene of Dario Fo (*La signora a da buttare*), the Teatro Libero's *Orlando Furioso* and *Oh! Les Beaux Jours* by the Renaud-Barrault Company and in 1971 *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* from the Wroclaw Theatre Laboratory, Poland.

The latest activity of the laboratory is "The Odin Theatre Film". This branch has started to produce a series of didactic films concerning the training of the actor. Two films have been finished: "Corporeal Mime" and "The Training at the Theatre Laboratory, Wroclaw"—under production is "Abstract Mime". The films are produced in collaboration with the experimental section of Italian T.V.—RAI—servizio sperimentali—but they can be distributed to theatre schools and drama-departments from the laboratory.

The Scenic Space

The cow-shed and pigsty of an old farm were put at the disposition of the Odin Theatre by the municipality of Holstebro. The transformation and fitting out of these buildings was done in order to provide the necessities of a theatre-laboratory. It was done in two stages: work was finished on the first stage in February 1967, and on the second in April 1968.

The buildings are arranged as follows:

1 work room (for training and performances)		
black		150 metres square
1 work room (for training and performances)		
white		155 metres square
1 foyer		78 metres square
5 dressing-rooms for the actors	each	10 metres square
1 administration office		24 metres square
1 artistic director's office		7 metres square
1 kitchen		7 metres square
1 library and meeting place		110 metres square
2 showers		
5 lavatories		
1 sauna		
1 store room		26 metres square
1 technical laboratory (film, photography, sound)		21 metres square

The Work Rooms

They are completely empty (15 X 10 X 4) metres square without anything that could suggest a stage. Central heating radiators and electricity cables providing current to the various sources of illumination for the rooms are placed beneath the floor, the length of the walls, covered by metal grills. There are holes in the ceiling into which aluminium brackets can be fitted to hold projectors or other objects. Both the black and the white rooms are of identical size and are both used for training and performances.

For each of the Odin Theatre's productions, one of the rooms is arranged to a new and well-defined scheme aiming at the establishment of a new spatial relationship between spectators and actors, and at the osmosis of these two groups present in the room.

The architectural arrangement of the room creates a sense of unity which allows the audience to become integrated in the theatrical action through a different and specific spatial disposition for each new production. The entire room is used as a stage, and the Odin Theatre's director constructs each production by making conscious use of the spectators as figures or scenographic elements.

Other small theatres can play in this room. Using a system of light collapsible platforms, a limitless number of possible

arrangements of the scenic area and the audience can exist; proscenium arch, theatre-in-the-round, Kabuki, amphitheatre, Elizabethan, or simultaneous use of several small stages.

The presentation rooms have been constructed to hold a maximum of 90 spectators: they were conceived as the prototype of an intimate and mutable theatre.

Objectives

From "Introductory Material to the Theatre-Laboratory" from which extracts have been quoted, the following passage will sum up the purpose of the theatre: "The existence of a theatre cannot be justified if it does not have an acute awareness of its social mission. By this adjective, "social", we mean an emotional attitude towards ones fellow man which lets the artistic result spring forth, both in its aesthetic and technical expression.

"The name of our theatre is not fortuitous. It was quite natural for us to name it after that Power who so much characterised our century: the god of war, Odin, the great "berserk". In the same way that our fathers called forth and confronted their own demons by giving themselves a free rein in collective ceremonies, so are we gathered here—spectators and actors—to call forth our "Odin side", which is lying in wait in the darkness within all of us, and to fight it in the clear light of day.

"This struggle with the other, hidden within ourselves becomes an instrument for a deeper recognition of our own interior physiognomy, and illuminates those secret forces which rise up, unexpected, and possess us when their time is ripe.

"Our theatre does not wish to entertain, nor to defend a thesis. It simply wants to pose questions which each one of us has to answer. "Committed art does not provide The Right Answers; it simply poses the right questions".

"Through violence against ourselves and through interior struggle we are reborn—and here lies the life-blood and Shaman-Odin—little by little, drop by drop we broaden the waters of our consciousness."

Neils Sorensen has been closely associated with the work of Eugenio Barba and the Odin Theatre, having attended some of the Seminars and courses as an observer. Mr. Sorensen came out to India in 1972 to make a close study of the folk theatre of the country.
