

# INTRODUCTION TO PERIPETI AND SERENDIPITY

*By Erik Exe Christoffersen*

*Peripeti* (Danish for Greek *peripeteia*) is the name of a new magazine attached to The Department of Dramaturgy, University of Aarhus edited by staff members of this department. Erik Exe Christoffersen is chief editor of the first issues of the new magazine, assisted by co-editors each taking a turn. The title of the magazine *Peripeti* (change, reversal of the situation, point of no return) refers to a crucial element in practically any kind of dramaturgy. The term originates from Aristotle's *Poetics* in which *peripeteia* is the condition of the dramatic progression towards catastrophe or climax. Also *peripeteia* is central for various forms of rupture, disconnections and new thinking in dance as well as in performance. In a more theoretical or cultural sense, *peripeteia* may represent the crucial turning point of new acts, thoughts and art forms. It is the ambition of *Peripeti* to locate itself in the limbo between theatre, performance and dance, between dramatic, rhetorical or visual strategies and in the fractures of dramaturgy.

*Peripeti 2* is about theatre laboratory tradition under the title of *Why a Theatre Laboratory?* It is in English and includes the programme of a three days' international symposium from October 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> 2004. This is the first initiative taken by the Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies (CTLS), a newly inaugurated centre under Aarhus University in cooperation with Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium. *Peripeti* include articles on Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Copeau, Decroux, Grotowski, Peter Brook, Théâtre du Soleil, and Odin Teatret and the theatre laboratory praxis of these masters and inventors, including, of course, reflections on their function and effect. In the last article, Eugenio Barba reflects on the creative process of Odin Teatret over the last 40 years. In addition, we also include the curriculum vitae on those participating in the symposium.

The occasion of the symposium is to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in October 2004 of Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium/Odin Teatret. Congratulations.

The third issue of *Peripeti* (spring 2005) will focus on *New Danish Dramatic Poetry*. The fourth issue will focus on the aesthetics of the dogma movement. The fifth issue is on *Henrik Ibsen* and the relationship between realism and modernism, Ibsen research and different views on the actuality of Ibsen as a dramatist. The autumn 2006 issue will focus on the theme of dramaturgical processes in relation to didactics and art

work. Finally the theme in 2007 will be political theatre and dance with subtitles such as new realism, privacy aesthetics and other hybrids that make use of reality effects in theatre and in dance.

The first issues of *Peripeti* are free of charge and available on request. Please send an envelope with Danish stamps dkk. 21,00 and your name and address on it to the Department of Dramaturgy. Subsequent numbers will be sold at dkk. 50,00 (inclusive of postage).

You will also find the magazine on the website of Department of the Dramaturgy at [www.hum.au.dk/dramatur/Forskning/publikationer.htm](http://www.hum.au.dk/dramatur/Forskning/publikationer.htm).

## The Principle of Serendipity

Why theatre laboratories? The necessity of a theatre laboratory or theatre studio as a place where scenic life can be investigated and develops independently of performance and audience goes back to the late 1800s. The process in search of autonomy, and maybe only today, has this process reached a final and complete unfolding with a theatre like Odin Teatret. Free as it is from national, textual, and traditional conventions. Odin Teatret is autonomous without being isolated, since the theatre is in constant exchange and dialogue with what is outside its own universe. One could say that theatre is set free as in a vacuum, from the tradition of making and presenting theatre. This, in return, obliges theatre to fill out the empty space both in terms of form and meaning. This condition applies for the actors and the directors, and for dramatists like Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekov. As Chekov puts it through Konstantin Treplev in *The Seagull*, 1896 (in Stanislavski's mise-en-scene performed by Meyerhold):

“Here you have a theatre! See, there we have the curtain, the foreground, the background, and finally the empty space. No artificial scenery is needed. You look straight to the lake and the horizon. At half past eight sharp, at the very moment of the moon rising, we will raise the curtain.”

(Chekov: *The Seagull*).

The empty space must be filled up with the score of the actor. Strindberg indirectly comments on this new concept of staging in *Fröken Julie* (1898) presented by Théâtre Libre in 1893 in a pantomimic interlude:

“Is played as if the actor really were alone in the room; according to a situation, she turns her back to her audience; does not look in the direction of the

audience; is in no way busy as if afraid that her audience should lose patience.”  
(Strindberg: *Fröken Julie*).

Theatre invents the frames for autonomy. In Stanislavski's words, it is all about creating an organic behaviour in order to create a believable scene. Clichés, external play, declamation, controversial entries, and frontal play towards the audience were all principles that Stanislavski sought to eliminate by introducing an organic way of performing. First and foremost, the organicity is real action, neither naturalistic nor realistic performing. The organicity is a principle that deals with the connection between the actor and the part, between the mental, the interior and the physical exterior, between subtext as the interpretation and intention of the actor, and the appearance of the character. The organicity is in opposition to the mechanical, automatic behavior, habit and any kind of *doxa*. It is a constant creative process in search for new means and ways of acting, with a never ending necessity of filling the empty space. Stanislavski refers to an organic, creative nature.

“It is not “theatre” (...). It is reality, a piece of life itself (...). In theatre we are looking for living art. It does not find its energy in being logical nor consequent, on the contrary for its audacious lack of logic. It is rhythmic in its mere lack of rhythm, psychological precisely in rising above conventional psychological laws. It breaks all laws, and that is the reason why it is good”  
(Stanislavski, *Building a Character*).

Stanislavski accentuates the action, not as a representation or mimesis, but as a scenic reality. Compared to Aristotle, the organic dimension takes a different angle. According to Aristotle, the essential matter of the tragedy is the act. It is the soul of the tragedy. Aristotle sees the act as an organic form in which beginning, centre and ending are linked in a causal entity. The causal dimension demands a progression of the act, and acts that are not causally conditioned are superfluous and unnecessary. Causality demands an organic form in which part and entity are united into a whole. Furthermore, causality means that the narrator is hidden behind the plot, as a narrator's voice or comment would break the organic principle. Also as a general rule, the epic is incorporated into the dramatic act.

It can be said that causality is complicated because the idea of unity goes against basic experiences of modernity and its vision of interpretation as crucial, but also ambiguous. Life cannot be described causally, it must be described as complementary. The retro perspective analysis is turned into a personal and subjective construction, conditioned by present time. The causal linearity is replaced by a form in which one act does not follow the next, rather they are parallel, reflecting or even

contradicting each other, creating a complex heterogeneity. The relationship between beginning and end loses its linear causality, and hence the determinism that encloses the entity. Focus moves from result to method. And this may very well be the essence of theatre laboratory: an experiment with acting, not from a normative perspective, but from a need to fill the empty space. It becomes a question of inventing alternative ways of creative acting.

*Serendipity* is a term that originates from the British writer Horace Walpole, 1754 and from a Persian fairy-tale about three princesses from Serendip (Arabian name for Sri Lanka), who made discoveries they did not search for. The term is used for scientific discoveries made by chance and in concentration giving unexpected discoveries such as x-rays, penicillin or the Americas, to mention a few. King Oedipus' unravelling of the assassination of King Laios is an example of serendipity: in search of a murderer, eventually he becomes a blind wanderer. Serendipity is a misunderstanding that results fruitfully and fertile outcome may very well be the result of errors and casual premises of a process (see Shakespeare *The Comedy of Errors*). Duchamp's *Readymade* or Man Ray's *Objet trouvé* are based on serendipity, and also Merce Cunningham introduced the principle of chance in the development of choreographic steps and forms. For a good number of artists, this topic becomes a complex question, not only of chance, but about the construction of serendipity.

Serendipity can also be seen in early Romantic thinking with its yearning for the absolute. This yearning is only satisfied in fragments and through tortuous processes of art. The work of art becomes in itself an enigmatic and non-linear road similar to the arabesque. Examples of this are the roundabout methods in a good number of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tales like *The Ugly Duckling*. Or Karen Blixen's tale about a man who wakes up because of a noise in the middle of the night in his little house, runs out of the house into the darkness, falls into a ditch, gets back on his feet, falls into a second and a third, and ends up discovering a leakage in the dike where water pours out. Having worked hard all night, the next morning, he finally finds a stork in front of his house. At this point, the reader realises that it is possible to make a drawing of the unsuccessful course of the man, and seen from above, this appears to have the shape of a stork (from *The African Farm*) revealing a totally different reality.

## *Odin Teatret*

“There are dark forces, which blind you, and there are dark forces, which give you insight. We are led by dark forces - where? - We don't know.”

(Eugenio Barba, in *Itsi Bitsi*, 1991).

I shall try to outline some fundamental characteristics of the work of the Odin Teatret in relation to the term of theatre laboratory. The fact that the group is celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary is extraordinary because Odin Teatret often has taken distance from contemporary doctrines. Derided from its beginning as an avant-garde scandal that had nothing to do with theatre, as a theatre which refuses to change. Odin Teatret has maintained a self-reflexive and paradoxical identity which is expressed in its productions and associated activities as a theatre laboratory.

Through training the group had to develop its own specific dramaturgy. This is exactly why Odin Teatret caused a scandal when it began. The work was simply not recognizable as text based theatre. The training, which did not use either costumes or stagedesign, did not even resemble a rehearsal of a text. It was based on various kinds of exercises, including acrobatics and mime, which did not aim to create character but rather to establish a presence in the empty space; the same was true of a number of other activities - film making, seminars, publishing, and pedagogical events. This was a fundamentally different paradigm of theatre that rejected the common understanding of theatre as the interpretation of text and instead took real action as its starting point for theatre: a personal meeting with an existential, ethical and political dimension. Odin Teatret linked itself to the theatre studio tradition of Stanislavski and Meyerhold, and with Grotowski's theatre laboratory with the central idea of developing the actors' techniques. The logic of Odin Teatret's seminar activities and established ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in 1979; the study of recurrent principles in the performer's scenic presence and dynamism (Barba: 1991, 1995); and later on the creation of CTLS (Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies) in 2003 in collaboration with Aarhus University are all to be found in this connection. Odin Teatret is a distinct theatre group that has created 60 productions and developed a particular way of working, its discipline and needs. At the same time the group has tried to redefine art and theatre in general, both on a formal level by means of the actors' stage presence (in contrast to the theatre of illusion), without distinguishing between dance, theatre, and vocal skills, and in connection with different cultural contexts (geographic, artistic, pedagogic, and scientific). In this sense Odin Teatret is an ensemble company: The group is the

creative subject that develops the material that forms the basis of the various dramaturgies of the performance text. As mentioned previously, this is a theatre paradigm in which the meeting between the audience and the performance is the real action, and this is defined as theatre. The elaboration and exploration of this artistic action has been, and remains, the ambition for Odin Teatret.

The Odin Teatret is built on a need to communicate that applies to both the individuals and the group. At the same time Odin is committed to the inadequacy of language and representation and to the dissolution of given meaning and tradition in modernity. That is to say that, in each individual production, there is a commitment both to create a meaningful communication with the spectators and to make the spectator's access to the work difficult, so that in principle the work is ambiguous in its openness or paradox. Each separate work is at one and the same time open and closed, i.e. there are no simple narrative sequences, characters or references that can be pursued by the spectators. There are several different narratives, several dramaturgical layers that complicate the spectator's "access" and understanding, while simultaneously the spectator is relatively free to choose his or her own associations and thus create a personal meaning. There is no possibility that the work can be decoded as a single subject matter, nor is there a privileged interpretative position from which the performance can be viewed in its totality. This, however, is true for both the artistic subject (the director and actors of Odin Teatret) and for the spectator. This dynamic ambiguity and strange (*verfremdet*) access are common features in the history of Odin Teatret, not only in individual artworks but also in Odin's organisation and its creative process. Odin Teatret shares a principled experience of and insight into Modernity's loss of given meaning with, for example, Chekhov, Kafka and Beckett. Odin's *Kaosmos* offers many points of resemblance with Beckett's *Endgame*, and Kafka's story about the man from the country who could not gain access to the door of the Law is retold in this production. However, it also mirrors the impossibility of the spectator's access to meaning.

The avoidance of unambiguous meaning as a principle can obviously be explained in many different ways. The result, anyhow, is a duality: the loss of meaning is connected with a will to reality at the performative level. The autonomy of both the actor and the spectator is connected with the need to rethink theatre as an institution, as performance practice and relationships. This is a point of view that refers to Stanislavski who coined a number of principles for the individual actor, and the ensemble as a whole in order to perform real actions.

The basis of Odin Teatret is its artistic autonomy. Certainly, Odin Teatret is far from the centre of the art establishment, but maybe that is exactly why the autonomy is maintained as a space protected in very many concrete ways. The closed performances, in contrast to the “open” political street performances, are created in an abstract, black room (the black box) where the spectator is able to concentrate entirely on the work, and where all superfluous elements have been removed. The space creates the autonomy of the performance and each performance has its specific scenic arrangement. The spectators are not allowed access to a performance after it has begun, and it takes place, without breaks, within a finite period of time. Odin constantly tries to recreate and redefine the essence of theatre autonomy by rejecting everyday life. Economy of movement, pragmatism, “the spirit of the time”, habits, and clichés are being fought against persistently for the sake of a *different* relationship between body and mind and a *different* historical continuity, a *different* perspective. What is essential is not idealism or a transcendent truth; rather the link is with a theatre action that combines necessity and ambiguity.

However, Odin Teatret also carries on the tradition of the historical avant-garde, (especially the Russian avant-garde), in which the clash between Aristotelian poetics and realism leads to a renewed interest in the formal issues: movement, sound, dynamics, and the actor’s physical presence. Interest in the real action, in accordance with Stanislavski and Copeau, leads Odin Teatret to break with the text and with the theatre’s representational way of thinking, so that it becomes possible to speak of theatre as real life, as a second organicity, an intensified presence complementing the textual formation of meaning. To this can be added that the political ambition of the avant-garde was that art should replace everyday life and create another way of life, and the organisation of Odin Teatret is an example of this. Odin Teatret, to a large extent, shares the political tendencies seen in the Russian avant-garde and in theorists of the avant-garde like Brecht and Benjamin. The political issue is emphasised in Odin’s various cultural exchanges, like the *barter* which has been employed all over the world as an organised exchange with a particular local culture; the *work demonstration* which, like Brecht’s *Lehrstück*, draws the spectators into a creative space and demonstrates decisive principles for the actor’s presence and creative processes; and the *Festuge*, an annual event in Holstebro, during which Odin Teatret coordinates and works with many of the local cultural institutions, organisations and initiatives in Holstebro, using the urban space as a seven-day performance stage.

At the same time Odin Teatret has assumed many of the artistic features of the avant-garde: the montage, the principle of coincidence, fragments of reality as a

communicative action of the performance. Odin Teatret makes and explores *theatre*. Thus Odin's concept of the essential is close to being a paradox that breaks with tradition and also carries it on. Odin is anchored in a romantic yearning for the absolute, and at the same time one can talk about modernism's avoidance of unambiguous meaning and a search for personal meaning as being central to the work. The group consists of "homeless" individuals searching for the historic roots of their own theatre. The essential becomes a process between oppositions, a dynamic birth, an action and a principle of mutability. The essential is sought through the principles of negation and complementarity, not by causality as Aristoteles defines action. The essential is not the result but the way of serendipity.

### *The blindness of the process*

The serendipity effect is the unforeseen result of a process, a discovery, which turns out to have a character completely different from what one was seeking. It is not just Odin Teatret's performances that are characterized by something unlooked-for:

"When somebody looks at our past, or when we ourselves let memories flow, we seem to forget the innumerable zigzags, the long deviations and senseless detours. They were not conscious 'searches' for anything in particular, merely symptoms of uneasiness, restlessness, desire for adventure and an irresistible feeling that luck was waiting for us elsewhere. (...) European twentieth century theatre sprang from an Oedipean bubo, not only because it killed the authority and the model of tradition which had generated it, but also because, like the adolescent Oedipus, it set out on a wandering solitary yet personal search for meaning, origins and identity".

(Eugenio Barba in Watson, 2002.s. 252)

The strategy of working with several different layers of meaning is a key feature of Odin Teatret. This means that the process being created is not interpretative but one that searches for chance connections or pivots. Furthermore the creation of meaning is rendered difficult by a deliberate avoidance of redundancy in the staging. Movement, voice, text, props create a *heterophony*, but do not say the same thing; rather they are saying different and often contrasting things. This dramaturgical controversy creates a *Verfremdung* (Brecht), a grotesque (Meyerhold), or for the Russian formalist Shklovskij, *Ostranenie*. It is a disturbance of the predictable creation of meaning, giving birth to paradoxes in the performance text and in the actor's single score and theatres history.



The place of enunciation is the Odin Teatret: the theatre's black room, the training room, the room of exile with different dramaturgical layers. The fictional level can be seen as a modern tragedy about the loss of illusions and innocence, and modernity's schism between words and action. Odin is an analysis of "revolution", revolution that fails in many ways: *The Gospel according to Oxyrhyncus*, 1985; *Talabot*, 1988; *Itsi Bitsi*, 1991; *Kaosmos*, 1993; *Ode to Progress – A Ballet*, 1997; and *Mythos*, 1998. All of these are works that, more or less directly, take the post-war combination of modernity, fragmentation and progress as a theme.

"His (the Angel of History) face is turned towards the past. There, where we see a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that constantly piles wreckage upon wreckage, throwing them at his feet. He would prefer to remain, awaken the dead and put back together what has been laid waste".

(Walter Benjamin's text on progress is handed to each spectator after the performance *Talabot*, Barba 1999, p. 318).

What is crucial, however, is the fact that this is not viewed from the outside. The theatre is part of this pile of wreckage; the theatre is in the middle of modernity's fragmentation and not outside it. The "leaps" of the montage may as such be termed "wreckage upon wreckage", a piling up of the past as metonymic displacements or coordinated connections.

It is characteristic of Odin Teatret that Modernity's loss of experience, expressed in pathos, is connected with romantic irony, in which fragmentation and discontinuity create a sceptical self-reflection. There is no discrepancy in the relationship between irony and pathos in Odin Teatret, rather there is a complementarity linked to the necessity and ambiguity of their articulation. On the one hand, the loss of "home" is a tragic condition. On the other hand, however, the nomadic and provisional elements are a strength that makes it possible to overcome the tragic condition, although this is not the same thing as rejecting it.

Odin Teatret consists of a group of individuals all of whom go their own ways and follow their own principles, although bound by a common history, organisation, and performances. Odin Teatret allows individual development and this is clearly demonstrated by the number of solo performances and work demonstrations. The autobiographical theatre is manifest in *Itsi Bitsi* (1991):

"Since I started to feel whole as an actor, I conspicuously lost the ability to speak. Was that the price I had to pay to find my own language? ... It is as if I can still hear Eik whispering, let us never grow cold and cynical, never become empty inside. If he could see us now, would he be able then to see the little

flame which I try to protect, which speaks in the characters I portray and which the others call theatre?”

(Text in *Itsi Bitsi*)

Here and in others performances the basic is real action:

“Does such a thing exist which is constant and absolute? If it does, it is at the bottom of a labyrinth. Thus the thread becomes sacred because it does not bind but combines you with something or someone that keeps us alive (...) It is said that a performance is images and metaphors. At this point I am sure. I know that it is not true. A performance is real action. That is why I do not allow the thread to be stretched until it breaks”

(Barba, letter to Aramis/Grotowski. Programme, *Itsi Bitsi*, 1991, Barba, 1995).

The theatre is a public performance place but also a way of protecting a dream or vision and a way of surviving, i.e. real action and life. The performance creates and renders visible personal roots and it is detours that combine theatre with a historic and concrete reality. The autonomy of training is the condition and necessity of the theatre as real, organic action, whereas the difficulty of access to the performance and its concentrated ambiguity allow the audience to experience the surprising and fruitful force of the serendipity principle.

*Translation: Annette Gregersen og Birthe Kibsgaard*

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## WHAT IS A THEATRE LABORATORY?

*By Janne Risum*

In 1905 Stanislavski and Meyerhold opened the first pioneering stage laboratory of this experimental kind.

"But in what form and where were we to realize our dreams? First of all they demanded preparatory laboratory work. For this there was no place in the theatre with its daily performances, its complex duties and its stringent budget. We needed a special institution, which Meyerhold aptly named "theatrical studio". This was neither a full-fledged theatre nor a school for beginners, but a laboratory for the experiments of more or less mature actors." (Stanislavski, *My Life in Art* 1926)

For the rest of their lives both were to continue on their own such a laboratory - or studio - activity, which permits an independent, continuous and systematic experimental work with the means of expression of the actor, uninterrupted by the normal time limit and result orientation of preparing a performance. They considered it to be a historically vital task - and so an absolutely necessary complement to their stage productions - in this way to explore the basics of the various traditions of acting and to develop modern ways of acting from the most essential devices of the art of the actor. Through their apprentices this laboratory approach has been passed on for instance from Vakhtangov to Grotowski and Barba, or by those pupils of Stanislavski who took their own version of it to the USA. In France Copeau was a pioneer. In 1916 Craig, Copeau and Stanislavski even planned to start an international studio cooperation, but had to drop it due to the subsequent radical changes in Russia. After the Second World War the laboratory approach to theatre work has grown to become a trendsetting innovation with countless offsprings all over the globe, and with such other major European innovators as Decroux, Brook, Mnouchkine, or Kantor.

The CTLS studies the aspects of this development. However it has so many simultaneous, paradoxical, and widely ramified aspects, that even though some family patterns are evident, it would be ridiculously reductive to look for a simple genealogical tree. The danger the other way round is not to be able to see the wood for the trees. Therefore the CTLS starts by posing a strictly analytical question: what is the technical artistic meaning of the term laboratory, and does a theatre laboratory

tradition exist which could be defined objectively by a category of historiography? That is, to which degree do theatres using the laboratory approach or defining themselves as laboratories actually share activities or values?

One pertinent question is that of context. Thus the policy of Stalin is the immediate context, when Stanislavski announces in 1935:

"Our main task is to create a theatre laboratory, a theatre of great masters, a theatre of model devices of the actor's mastery. Such a theatre must serve as the pinnacle, to which all other theatres aspire. We must make the highest demands on such a theatre and give it the greatest resources. But the laws of eminent mastery, the laws of profound realistic art, are not the privilege of high-ranking theatres, on the contrary, all amateur circles, young workers' theatres, and studios can and must study them." ("October and the Theatre", *Sovetskij teatr* 10/1935).

To throw some light on all this the CTLS will host an international symposium with invited speakers, *Why a Theatre Laboratory? Risks and anomalies in Europe 1898-1999*. We have chosen to look at the activities of some central theatre innovators from this angle and to do so in an international research perspective. We have so invited a group of theatre scholars from different countries to speak, who are specialists in the subjects which they are going to examine. Together, the speakers will thus throw light from many sides on a series of central and in many ways related aspects of the question. We might of course have invited many more qualified scholars, not to speak of theatre practitioners with long experience in the field of what they consider to be theatre laboratory work, also in many countries. However this is beyond our capacity on this one occasion.

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