

# antropologia e teatro

ARTICOLO

## The Trojan Women Project.

Building a bridge between cultures through a universal language  
di Monica Cristini

### Abstract – ITA

L'articolo indaga 'The Trojan Women Project', una sperimentazione di cinque anni conclusa nel dicembre 2019 con lo spettacolo presentato a La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club a New York City, che ha visto coinvolti artisti provenienti da diversi paesi, assieme ad attori, musicisti e designer della compagnia di New York, in un lavoro sulla rielaborazione della storica produzione diretta da Andrei Serban nel 1974 a La MaMa. 'The Trojan Women Project' è stato proposto a comunità con una recente storia di conflitto, con l'intento di approcciare problematiche socio-politiche attuali attraverso il teatro. I laboratori condotti con gli artisti in Guatemala, in Cambogia e Kosovo sono stati focalizzati sulla ricerca, attraverso il suono e il gesto, di un linguaggio comune, proseguendo le precedenti ricerche di Serban e della musicista Elizabeth Swados con la Great Jones Repertory Company, ma prima ancora di Peter Brook, sul linguaggio universale. Danze e musiche tradizionali sono state integrate nella rappresentazione e hanno facilitato lo scambio culturale e artistico grazie anche alla riproposta delle modalità del lavoro svolto negli anni Settanta. Nello scoprire una naturale identificazione con le donne di Troia e le loro vicende, gli artisti appartenenti alle compagnie provenienti dai tre paesi hanno trovato nella tragedia greca un luogo d'incontro e condivisione in cui elaborare la sofferenza e l'oppressione derivate dal vissuto del conflitto. Un obiettivo pienamente in linea con l'impegno di La MaMa per la creazione e diffusione di un nuovo modo di fare teatro.

### Abstract – ENG

The article discusses The Trojan Women Project presented at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in New York City in December 2019. The performance was the result of a five-years project that involved La MaMa's actors, designers and musicians together with artists belonging to worldwide communities. The work was based on the new production of La MaMa's historical performance directed by Andrei Serban in 1974. This new project engaged with communities with a recent history of conflict with the aim of addressing contemporary issues through theatre. Workshops done within some Guatemalan, Cambodian and Kosovan communities were focused on the exploration of sounds and gestures by using text, music, and scenography originally developed in the Seventies by Elizabeth Swados, Andrei Serban and the Great Jones Repertory Company. Both workshops and rehearsals led to performances created for these communities, who can use them as they wish in their future work. By working with artists and community members in different countries, 'The Trojan Women Project' developed a multi-phased kind of exchange, including stories, music and movements of the participants in the original La MaMa's piece in the workshops and performances. The legacy of the former work was kept creating a new vision of the ancient Greek tragedy, following Serban and Swados' artistic experimentation in adopting the ancient Greek language with new forms of language. Their aim was to experiment with universal form of communication. This project testifies to the lasting engagement of La MaMa in fostering the sharing of cultures and in supporting the experimentation of new creative way of doing theatre. An objective that was central for its founder, Ellen Stewart, since the foundation of La MaMa Cafe in 1961.

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ARTICOLO

## The Trojan Women Project

### Building a bridge between cultures through a universal language

di Monica Cristini

I believe very much that it is possible to communicate with every human being upon this Earth. We are all the same person. We are all the same entity. The was is the is and the is is the was. Our center is the universe. It is as if the Earth itself is one gigantic umbilical cord and all you have to do is to tune into this center. I try to do this through the theatre. Of course, our work is only a tiny, microscopic attempt towards tuning in to center, but many of the people I work with at La MaMa seek just that center.

(Stewart 1974)

*The Trojan Women* is a play that involved some artists of the Great Jones Repertory Company, the company of the La MaMa Experimental Theatre<sup>1</sup>, and members of theatre and dance groups from three different countries: Guatemala, Cambodia and Kosovo. The performance presented at La MaMa in New York in December 2019 closed a five-year project, The Trojan Women Project, during which actresses and other members of the New York company undertook an in-depth re-elaboration of the Greek tragedy, starting from the original production directed by Andrei Serban and Elizabeth Swados in the 1970s. The play involved the collaboration of more than fifty artists in creating a musical work in which the group's multiculturalism gave life to a choral effort of rare beauty. A revival of the Greek tragedy which is probably the example that comes closest to the ancient practices in which such choral effect was given by the union of actors, chorus and audience.

This study aims to investigate the artistic approach and the results of an effort that Peter Brook promoted in the early 1970s to recover universal language and the practices of bartering that Eugenio Barba had carried out in his travels with Odin Teatret in that same period. In retracing the different phases of the project, particular importance is given to the creative processes that led to creating the original performance of the 1970s and on which the group focused its theatrical research in the new multicultural context. Hence the

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<sup>1</sup> Founded by Ellen Stewart, initially called Cafè La MaMa, it was one of the first coffee houses that at the beginning of the 1960s, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, started Off-Off Broadway, a theatrical movement that favored experimentation and gave young playwrights the chance to present new plays, free from the commercialism of Off Broadway and Broadway theatre. Even today, La MaMa Experimental Theatre hosts different kinds of shows and companies from all over the world, as well as having its own in-house company, the Great Jones Repertory Company. For more details see Off-Off Broadway theatre see Bottoms (2004), Crespy (2003).

analysis gives ample space to anthropological references and the socio-political contextualization of what could wholly be considered an intercultural theatre experience. It was in fact both an international encounter between different cultures and performative traditions (Lo and Gilbert 2002) and, as we will see, an encounter between specific communities of the same nation (Bharucha 2000). Therefore, bearing in mind recent theories on cross-cultural theatre, the study focuses on the choice of classical tragedy as a link between different cultures, united by the painful experience of war.

In 2015 some members of the Great Jones Repertory Company – Onni Johnson, Kim Ima, Bill Ruyle and Geroge Drance – decided to embark on a path of artistic study and cultural exchange by inviting artists from countries with a recent history of conflict to work on *The Trojan Women*, in keeping with the approach developed in the early 1970s by the Romanian director Andrei Serban and the American composer Elizabeth Swados in Ellen Stewart's production for La MaMa. The work – simultaneously part of a research on universal language inspired by the workshops of Peter Brook conducted at the Parisian CIRT<sup>2</sup> and on his journeys to the



*The Trojan Women, New York 12.07.2019. Ph. Theo Cote*

East and to Africa – thanks to the peculiarity of the methodology adopted, based on the oral transmission of

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<sup>2</sup> The Center International de Recherches Théâtrales (CIRT) was founded by Peter Brook in 1970, for a research focused on the deepest roots of theatrical communication, and on the quest for what keeps alive a particular cultural form, studying what lies behind culture itself. The aim was to go in search, with theatrical means, of something capable of touching people as music can. Hence the first step was to set aside the principles of communication based on words and cultural references (Brook 1987).

the text in ancient Greek and on actors passing on their expertise to one another, opened up new possibilities for cultural and artistic exchange.

This essay stems from an in-depth study part of the European project *La MaMa Experimental Theatre: a lasting bridge between cultures* - MariBet<sup>3</sup>, which involves a combination of historiographic and socio-political studies. Specifically, in the survey devoted to The Trojan Women Project, the work ranged from archival research – focused on published and unpublished sources related to the original productions of the 1970s, the artistic approaches of Serban and Swados, and the influence of Peter Brook's research on their poetics – and on talks with the artists who took part in it, together with the consultation of video documents made available by the group and those present online. In particular, some interviews were addressed to the two project artistic directors, Onni Johnson and Kim Ima, both members of Great Jones (Johnson since the 1970s, Ima since 1996); Bill Ruyle, the musician who collaborated with Swados on the first production of *The Trojan Women* and later participated in the successive ones; Andrei Serban, director and creator of the play staged in the 1970s and of the last New York version in 2019.

The direct contribution by the artists made it possible to get a multi-directional perspective. Sara Galassini, also a member of Great Jones, who joined the group in the project's third phase, is an actress who for years has been devoted to social theatre. She based her story on her experience during the workshops, reminiscing on her first collaboration as a musician in one of the work's recent productions<sup>4</sup>. Kim Ima, already part of the group that staged the opera in 1996, was a former student of Andrei Serban, and testified to her experience in approaching a work shared with those who in the past had already participated in the experimentations with Serban and Swados: a completely oral method of transmission based on the experience of sharing, in which the study of the work and of the character was transmitted from actor to actor during the long period of *mise en scène*.

Bill Ruyle and Onni Johnson spoke instead of the creative process in terms of those who participated in creating the first production and who carried out the background research along with the other actors and artists of the company in the 1970s. Their testimony was fundamental for understanding Swados' and Serban's methodologies and research in those years, and for learning about the process of experimentation with sounds and language that resulted in the songs and music on which the work is based. Another step of the research was the comparison of the methodologies adopted in the past with their reframing in the specific context of

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<sup>3</sup> *La MaMa Experimental Theatre: a lasting bridge between cultures* – MariBet, has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie. Grant agreement No 840989.

<sup>4</sup> *The Trojan Women* was produced again in 1987, on the occasion of La MaMa's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and in 1996.

the new project's workshops. Lastly, but not least, the meeting with Andrei Serban led to a further essential in-depth understanding of his poetics and his vision of Greek tragedy, his research methodology and his approach to staging.

The interviews with these artists made it possible not only to get acquainted with the creative and artistic processes but also to understand the cultural and personal implications that arose in the different phases of work with companies belonging to other cultures and ethnic groups. An in-depth study that also made it possible to include the perspectives of the members of foreign companies, through their stories and reflections released in the videos documenting the different phases of the work. This part of the survey was useful for understanding the role that theatre and creative work have played in the lives of artists who have personally experienced war and who in some cases are still experiencing the consequences of conflicts or dictatorships that have severely affected the social and cultural life of their countries. The particularity of the project, shared with those who experience firsthand the post-war socio-political reconstruction process, has opened up a series of questions relating to the timelessness of Greek tragedy and the role of art and theatre for the populations that experience historical moments of crisis, but also the sharing of different creative approaches and artistic traditions.

Finally, it was essential to undertake an in-depth study of Serban's and Swados' approach to Euripides' work, which in the wake of the research Brook, Barba and Grotowski carried out in the 1970s led, anticipating the results, to rediscovering the essence of theatre, making this production universally shareable.

### *The idea and the choices*

In 2014 Onni Johnson, Kim Ima, Bill Ruyle and George Drance met to evaluate the possibility of undertaking a project focused on *The Trojan Women* with artists from countries with recent histories of conflict. The idea was to revive the production of the 1970s, which La MaMa had restaged on other occasions in the 1980s and 1990s, using Euripides' original ancient Greek text interspersed with parts in Latin and other ancient languages<sup>5</sup>, in a work focused exclusively on sound and not on word meaning. A piece like this, not couched in any modern language, opened up the possibility of collaborating with artists from other countries.

In the 1970s the play was conceived as free from any socio-political situations and without political intent of any kind. In this light, the group thought of choosing countries that were undergoing specific post-war or post-dictatorship situations, precisely to see if the work could have a particular resonance in those contexts. At the

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<sup>5</sup> Nahuati, Navajo and Swahili.

starting point there were also many questions: what would it be like to take *The Trojan Women* to countries with experiences of conflict? How would the artists from such countries cope in their theatrical experience with a drama that told the story of the women of Troy? What could they share with the people of these countries, and what could those people bring to the work? What happens to women and children in war-torn countries today? What happens to women when men take over? From these questions the group gave birth to a research dealt through Euripides' drama, which narrates events that are still very timely today.

In the spring of 2013, New York City hosted 'Season of Cambodia', a month-long festival celebrating through the arts the reaffirmation of Cambodian identity, during which many artists were introduced (Goodlander 2016). The event gave Onni Johnson the chance to meet some dancers and start up a dialogue with them on the chance of developing part of the project with them in Cambodia.

The second country chosen was Guatemala. Ellen Stewart had collaborated in the past with the Universidad Rafael Landívar in Guatemala City and so the group had contacts in this country, whose long war had scarred the lives of many citizens and especially indigenous peoples. Lastly, Kosovo was chosen because Maud Dinand, a La MaMa collaborator who had held a position there for the UN during the Balkan war, was in contact with some Kosovar theatre companies. In this instance too it meant working in an area particularly marked by the conflict and still in the phase of reconstruction<sup>6</sup>. In Guatemala, the project partners were El Centro de Danza y Investigación del Movimiento de Artes, Landívar at the Universidad Rafael Landívar in Guatemala City, and the experimental street theatre Caja Lúdica. In San Juan de Comalapa the indigenous women's theatre collective Ix Saqil Ik' also participated, engaged in telling their stories and their experiences as Mayan women and defending women's rights through theatre. In 2015 the company formed by the members of La MaMa also involved other artists from the communities of Guatemala City, Kaqchikel and Mam, and Actoras de Cambio from Huehuetenango.

The civil war in Guatemala has long since ended but its aftermath is still severely felt in the society, making it "one of the most violent countries in the world officially in Peace, where the human rights of the population continue without being fully respected" (Godoy-Payz 2008: 28). Even today, in 2021, human rights are systematically violated in Guatemala and the population is constantly prey to political violence inflicted by intimidation or violent attacks on workers' rights. People live in a chronic state of insecurity and fear from

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<sup>6</sup> The project was made possible by the contributions of some associations and fundraising campaigns activated by the companies. In Kosovo it was also supported by UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), by the US Embassy in Kosovo, UN Women, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), and the Municipalities of Pristina and Prizren. The closing festival in New York was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts; in Guatemala by the American Embassy, in Cambodia fundraising were activated by the companies themselves, already active in that area ([www.thetrojanwomenproject.org](http://www.thetrojanwomenproject.org). Accessed on 4/9/2021).

widespread organized crime and an ever-mounting number of homicides. During the war, women were the target of military violence, in the form of sexual torture and rape. Indigenous women were especially targeted, with violence used as a tool to weaken the social fabric of the communities and to create a climate of terror in the country. Even today, violence against women in Guatemala is very widespread and tolerated by a judicial system that is part of a society characterized by a wide gap between the social classes, based on ethnicity, age and geographical origin<sup>7</sup>.

In Guatemala, Johnson and Ima got in touch with a group of Mayan women who were looking for a way to network with other Mayan theatre groups, which was not easy, since different languages are spoken in various communities. Collaboration in the project enabled them to understand and get to know each other's work, as well as share it with the spectators in the final performances (Johnson 2021).

In 2016 the team was in Cambodia for three weeks, working in Phnom Penh with members of Amrita Performing Arts, an international NGO committed to reviving traditional Cambodian dance in order to develop new forms of contemporary dance, and in collaboration with Epic Arts, another NGO that promotes Cambodian artists and the spread of art by also working with the disabled. Cambodia is still in the reconstruction phase in the aftermath of the disastrous Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), which killed more than twenty percent of the Cambodian population. During the dictatorship, in an attempt to transform the state into a Maoist agricultural cooperative, intellectuals and artists were deported to extermination camps, all forms of art were suppressed, and hospitals and schools abolished. Later the Vietnamese government was installed, which was followed by a long period of instability in which the Khmer continued to be supported by the United States, Thailand and China. Cambodian independence was only re-established in 1991 with the Paris accords. Numerous artists' associations are now engaged in reviving the country's cultural heritage, and in promoting initiatives abroad, such as the New York festival, to make known their situation and culture (Thompson 2013).

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<sup>7</sup> In December 1996 an agreement between the Government of Guatemala and the guerrilla group URNG (Guatemala National Revolutionary Union) put an end to the civil war that had lasted 36 years, but, "although the ceasefire between the rebels and government forces has held up to the test of time, the legacy of direct and structural violence, evidenced in systematic human rights abuses, impunity, and unacceptable economic disparity, continues to haunt this nation of over twelve million people" (Janzen 1996: 55). Since the end of the war, more than 200.000 civilians have been killed in a genocide recognized by the UN (of which the military and allied forces have been responsible for 93%). Today the lives of indigenous peoples, not protected by the state, is strongly influenced by the presence in the country of a large number of foreigners, including evangelists who are changing the religious trend, previously predominantly Catholic and Maya. But in addition to these is also the strong demand for adoption from the United States, for which Guatemala has long been the second resource after China, supported by the high poverty rate and by compliant laws. Illegal drug trafficking also thwarts the course of social justice as the country is a preferential corridor of passage between South and North America (Janzen 1996).

Although the recent conflict in Kosovo affected the country for a shorter period than in Guatemala and Cambodia, it is nevertheless a nation that has experienced tensions between different communities that have lived there since the late nineteenth century and that suffered under the long dictatorial regime of Slobodan Milosevich, accused of crimes against humanity for the ethnic cleansing operations the Yugoslav army perpetrated against Muslims in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. After Milosevich's death, the country underwent a long period of clashes and attacks between populations belonging to different ethnic groups, which ended with the Kosovo War (1998-1999). Independence came only in 2008, as a result of the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation (Rahmani 2018; Gola and Selaci 2017).

Kosovo is the country in which The Trojan Women Project experienced its last phase abroad, starting in 2017. Here the American group collaborated with Artpolis, an activist Arts Company, to bring together a group of Kosovar artists belonging to different ethnic groups, professionals, students and community members. Serbs, Albanians and Roma for the first time found themselves sharing the artistic and workshop experience in an ethnically balanced company formed by the Great Jones' members in a city, Pristina, whose inhabitants are ninety percent Albanian.

In choosing the participants, the American group oriented itself through initial meetings scheduled online, and later in their respective countries with three-week workshops, during which attention was paid above all to the personal and cultural resonances of the artists who were participating in it, by sharing musical pieces and dances that had nothing to do with *The Trojan Women* play but which could be representative of different cultures (Johnson 2021).

The project was planned in four stages, the first in Guatemala (2015), the second in Cambodia (2016), and the third in Kosovo (2017), each of which ended with performances of the work open to the audience. The fourth and closing performance took place in New York, in December 2019<sup>8</sup>, with some of the artists who had taken part in the production in their respective countries of origin joining La MaMa. The idea was to bring *The Trojan Women* to different countries, make the work known to their artists and produce it at the end of the workshops, then leaving it to them to restage it or to continue working on it. It was like "guiding them on a journey and then leaving the ship for them" (Galassini 2021). The workshops then became a space where the original staging could be enriched with the performances of the participants, who shared their cultures,

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<sup>8</sup> In reality, the project also saw a short phase in Italy, where some artists held workshops with a group of immigrant youths from the southern coasts of Africa, at La MaMa Umbria International, its Italian headquarters, which Ellen Steward opened in Spoleto in 1990. Work is currently continuing in other forms with a group of migrants in Greece and Mexico, partly through meetings managed on the Zoom platform (Johnson 2020).



contributing elements from their traditions and their current artistic practices. But it was also a space for sharing the cultures, personal histories and experience of the conflict, and for enabling artists who live in the same country but who had never had the chance to meet and get to know one another.

The choice in the 1970s to stage the work in the original ancient Greek language, interspersed with parts acted in other archaic languages, was dictated by a quest for a *universal language*. A choice that proved even more effective in this project, where Greek was unknown to any of the participants, in breaking down all barriers to communication by employing in common the sounds of that language which no one understood. A solution that in some way also led to the knocking down of all racial and social barriers, in countries where the spoken language is at times a marker of the social class to which they belong, or where some people cannot write or speak the official language, as in Guatemala.

### *A new paradigm*

The project's workshop phase, divided into two parts in each country, the first one short, of familiarization, the second one for working on the performance, took place in a way similar to how the work on speech and gesture had been dealt with for the 1970s production.

In that period, the text of the first performance of *The Trojan Women* wasn't transcribed, but transmitted orally from one actor to another, and from generation to generation, leaving out the meaning of the words to focus on the sounds of ancient Greek<sup>9</sup>. In this way the actors' speech became an equivalent of music. Swados and Serban's goal was to find a pure, authentic expression that would lead to experience the story emotionally while being unaware of it on an intellectual level (Serban 2021; Ruyle 2021). A result that was fully achieved with the Project, where the artists on stage, in addition to not knowing ancient Greek, were alien to European culture and knew neither its mythology nor the story narrated by the Trojan women<sup>10</sup>. Working side by side to transmit the texts and songs also favored greater familiarity among the members of the group and an artistic, cultural exchange, as well as a reflection on the correspondence between the events of the tragedy and the experiences of the artists, men and women, during and after the conflict. A sharing that took place in a completely natural way, without forcing, growing out of the tragedy itself.

As already mentioned, Onni Johnson and Bill Ruyle were part of the cast of the first production of *The Trojan Women*, directed by Serban and Swados after having staged two other tragedies, *Medea* and *Electra*, the former

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<sup>9</sup> Swados had not annotated the original music pieces of the 1970s, a task that Bill Ruyle fulfilled at one of the performances of the following years.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of Guatemala and Cambodia.

produced by Ellen Stewart in 1972, the latter commissioned by Jean Louis Barrault for the Festival D'Automne and staged at the Sainte Chapelle in Paris in 1973<sup>11</sup>. Serban and Swados were deeply influenced by the research Peter Brook carried out on universal language, and it could well be said that it was they who completed that research while working on Greek tragedy, especially *The Trojan Women*, for which Swados had also investigated African and Indian-American languages, inserting inarticulate sounds in the text. A research strongly supported by Ellen Stewart, who has always sought in theatre a universal communication vehicle that goes beyond any linguistic and cultural barrier, thus encouraging the use of music and research such as what the two artists undertook. Both had spent a year with Brook, Serban at the Parisian CIRT and on tour, as assistant director for *Orghast*, staged in Persepolis<sup>12</sup>, Swados on his trip to Africa, where she had studied the sounds of African languages and some indigenous songs<sup>13</sup>. It was a period in which the travels of the masters of the theatre spread far and wide in the Orient, Africa and Latin America, the years of Eugenio Barba's *cultural barter*, when the director, along with the members of the Odin Teatret, related with the cultures of other countries through exchanges of artistic traditions<sup>14</sup>. With Brook, Serban had been in Lebanon, and had been able to work on unknown languages and sounds, which in the training phase were transmitted from actor to actor in an exercise based on inner listening and a perception of the meaning hidden in them. A long and intense process to discover one's own expressive possibilities. Upon returning to the United States, Serban decided to approach Greek tragedy, choosing at once to work on the ancient texts, dealing with the unknown language *archaeologically*.

Like the people who find objects in the ground, we dug through the very hard, rocky ground of this unknown language, trying to unearth deep, hidden emotions that would come through the vibration of the sound. I did not know the languages, and if I had been a professor, a specialist, I would never have been able to do it this way. By not knowing them myself, I could be exploratory and risky. (Serban, in Bartow 2002: 293).

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<sup>11</sup> On Serban's productions and approach to the two tragedies see Anna-Maria Narti (1973).

<sup>12</sup> Serban had joined the group at the invitation of Peter Brook, after the English director had attended the first play Serban directed at La MaMa, *Arden of Faversham*, in February 1970, heavily influenced by his reading of Artaud. With Brook he worked on *Orghast*, a play that came into being from a collaboration with the English poet Ted Hughes and from research on Avestan, produced in the summer of 1971 at the ruins of Persepolis in Shiraz in Iran (Brook 1987; Menta 1997).

<sup>13</sup> The group, made up of about 30 people, traveled to Africa for three months, working mainly with improvisation and staging short performances in villages they stopped at along the way. Their aim was to reach an ideal audience, totally open to what the company presented, and unconditioned by Western communicative and artistic forms (Brook 1987). During the journey Elisabeth Swados was able to familiarize herself with African musical instruments and to approach the languages and songs of the people they met along the way (Heilpern 1999).

<sup>14</sup> See Barba, Masgrau (2016).

Serban saw sounds as images and worked with the actors by offering them *sound images* to interpret such as looking for the sound of sunrise or sunset, or rendering through sound the light of day and the sun's heat. The training was based on exploring the sounds of ancient languages and on physical actions to make them means for creating powerful emotions.

[...] The core of our search is to try to work as if the whole world existed in a single word and each word represented a fragment of life. We perceive that in the theatre which uses comprehensible language, the word is used mostly to transmit something on the level of information or the level of psychology. People are not terribly interested in other dimensions of the word. When we approach an ancient language it is impossible to discern a literal meaning, but in this apparent lack of sense one rediscovers, perhaps, a greater potential for expression. In an immediate, concrete relationship with the word, the sound, one can perceive rhythms, energies, and impulses of a different order. (Serban 1976)

The sounds of ancient Greek became a vehicle of communicating and transmitting emotions, and it was a question of building the tonal scale of this universal language, no longer treated for its semantic value but for its musical and symbolic value at an archetypal level, which the actors achieved through their imaginations. It was the sound itself that conveyed the meaning.

The mythological elements of the tragedy were explored as metaphors, "emotional nuclei on which it was possible to work on a performative level" (Palladini 2005). Metaphorical images, like sounds, were also considered vehicles of communication of what takes place in *The Trojan Women*. In using image to express on stage the concreteness of metaphor, Serban came close to the Japanese Noh Theatre, whose influence came from the journeys he had made to Bali and Japan, and from CIRT workshops. He had also called upon Katsuhiro Oida, a Japanese actor who had been part of Peter Brook's group, to collaborate in staging the tragedies, and who had been involved in training the actors from as early as the first production of *Medea*, working on the movements and acting techniques of Noh Theatre.

Alongside Serban, Elizabeth Swados worked at the same time on the language sounds, songs and music, by seeking a type of sound inspired by something ancient and ethnic, while also developing a sound world for the symbols and visual forms that Serban created. A series of songs emerged, very different from each other but united by an underlying harmony: different rhythm and melody were created for the scenes that told the stories of the protagonists and the various dramatic situations. The music for Helen was strong and percussive, the one for Cassandra evoked prophecy, the rhythm for the soldier chorus was harsh and military. By using a

combination of ancient and indigenous languages, Swados was able to create a new non-literal language whose meaning was conveyed by sounds, rhythm, music and gestures. In collaborating with the actors of the Great Jones Repertory Company she continued the research she had started with Peter Brook in Africa:

I guess I'm trying to find the simplest elements that give a *source* to emotion. But the elements are a base. The actor can manipulate them for his own use. It's like having a really great text. Except that what comes out isn't necessarily a song. It might just be a sound. The sound somehow encompasses an entire feeling, and conveys it. (Swados in Heilpern 1999: 63)

By working on languages phonetically, she attempted to arrive at a sort of deep meaning or intelligence contained in the sound itself, the hyper-communicative value of ancient languages (Ruyle 2021).

Following a practice already experimented in those years in the theatrical Avant-garde, Serban involved the audience in the play, but in this case it was not only the action that developed among the spectators, who instead were guided to move along the stage space together with the actors and participate in the action itself, choosing from time to time to feel themselves as part of the women's chorus or of the group of soldiers, as simultaneously observers and witnesses. The use of space at La MaMa recalled the environmental theatre, where the performance stretched from the atrium to the entire theatre hall, to create an emotional connection with the audience but without violating the implicit boundaries between actor and spectator (Aronson 2000).

The production inaugurated the 74A East 4th Street theatre in New York<sup>15</sup>, the new space that Ellen Stewart had acquired for La MaMa with the support of the Ford and Mellon foundations. The play consisted of a first reduced version of *The Trojan Women* within *Fragments of a Trilogy*, which also collected two adaptations of *Medea* and *Electra* (Rosenthal 2017). The event was considered the culminating production of a Greek tragedy in the United States (in 1969 there had been the Performance Group's production of *Dyonisus in 69*, with a totally different approach to the text and towards the spectators), and at the same time one of the most successful experiments of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (Menta 1997, Aronson 2000). Serban's and Swados' approach aimed at making the tragedy more an emotional experience than an intellectual one. This made it accessible to American (and European, on tour) audiences of the 1970s, and made it current and still viable today.

Serban never framed the staging of *The Trojan Women* as a vehicle for a political message, even if, in the mid-1970s, the work was sometimes taken as such. The cruelty of the soldiers who press for the audience to move

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<sup>15</sup> Since 2010 the space has been renamed the Ellen Stewart Theatre. On the purchases of the buildings that make up La MaMa see also Miller (2015).

from one side of the performance space to the other can certainly lead those who have experienced any situation of political oppression to identify the experience of the tragedy with their personal one. The story of the Trojan women themselves, abused and imprisoned, was easily taken as representative of specific situations. Serban's intent was actually to get closer to the ancient reason for making theatre: to achieve catharsis. The question he ultimately pondered was the same as Peter Brook's: how could people from all over the world be united by the power of universal sound and emotion? He thought that a drama powerful enough to be able to speak to audiences at different levels for more than two thousand years did not need to be linked to a specific political issue to be effective (Serban 2021).

Many Greek tragedies, in their focus on war, raise the question of justice and feature characters in constant struggle with themselves, with fate, with others and with the gods. They are works that narrate the drama of a community and not of single individuals. In them the hero does not bring the solution to the problem but is the trigger for it. In reality, the tragedy depicts the suicide of the entire city of Athens more than the story of a single hero, "the political thought of the democratic city-state" (Critchley 2020: 45).

As a portrayal of the anger that emerges from the pain of a war's aftermath, *The Trojan Women* is able to inspire a reflection on reality through the medium of mythology, where myth is the vehicle that places mankind in contact with its deepest inner essence. Hence ancient tragedies place audiences before their own fragility, inviting them to face what they do not know about themselves: they "hold the power to dissolve and transcend all the artificial walls that we humans work so hard to build around ourselves" (Doerries 2016: 263).

### *The dual value of the tragedy*

In the workshop phase in Guatemala, Cambodia and Kosovo the group chose to take the same approach to the knowledge of the ancient text as in the 1970s. In each of these three countries, an initial three-week period was devoted to presenting the work and getting to know the members who would make up the group. After a few months off, Onni Johnson, Kim Ima, Bill Ruyle and George Drance returned to work with the companies for a longer period of about six to seven weeks. Hence the work concentrated on the oral transmission of the text in ancient Greek and Latin (with excerpts in the Nahuati, Navajo and Swahili languages), and the songs of the original play. At the same time George Drance was in charge of the physical training<sup>16</sup>, in order to create a

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<sup>16</sup> George Drance as a resident artist in La MaMa's Great Jones Repertory Company. He too was an ex-student of Andrei Serban's at Columbia University, and took part in the production starting in the 1990s.

vocabulary of movements especially where Western music would not have resonance because based on a different sound scale, as in Cambodia.

The participants were asked to work in the same way as in the past, repeating the words or single sounds uttered by one of the actresses and transcribing them in a notebook. The songs were learned in the same way, without the artists knowing at what point in the performance they would be inserted, focusing on a subjective level of the images that the sounds aroused and sharing them with the group.



*Rehearsal with Cambodian company in Phnom Penh, 2018. Ph. Onni Johnson*

When the time came to work on the facts narrated in the tragedy, the members of Great Jones asked the artists to tell how similar situations were dealt with in their culture, and then practiced in small groups for about thirty minutes. In this way, by continuing to work on the images, a bridge was established between the different cultures. And at the same time the respective life experiences began to be compared in relation to the history of the women of Troy, by considering the rituals of the different cultures belonging to the same country (for example, while for the artists of Guatemala City rituality is not an important element in everyday life, for the women of the Mayan villages it is a central part of their lives). The workshops were thus a chance to gain and share knowledge, not only between the American group and the foreign companies, but also between artists living in the same country, often in nearby cities, but who had never had occasion to meet each other, giving them an opportunity to have an intercultural exchange. In Kosovo (where Sara Galassini joined the group),

Albanian, Serbian and Roma actors discovered that they had songs in common in their respective traditions, constructed on the same melodies even if in different languages, which then became an additional channel of communication and which were later integrated into the performance<sup>17</sup>. Traditional songs were also used in Guatemala. Two women belonging to two different Mayan communities combined their songs into a single performance inserted later in the funeral ceremony of Andromache's son Astyanax, condemned to death because heir to the throne of Troy. In Cambodia, a similar approach was used in working on movements with traditional dances. At the same time, a traditional flute and the Guatemalan marimba were integrated into performing the musical pieces, along with instruments belonging to various ethnic groups, including indigenous ones. Thus, the same music was played from time to time differently, with significant variations (Ruyle 2021). Hence the workshops that had to deal with the companies in the various countries also took shape as places of a cultural interchange through what De Marinis defines as a "journey towards and into otherness, as a discovery, exploration and confrontation with otherness, starting from one's own, and therefore also as a journey towards and within oneself, or more exactly as 'work on oneself'" (De Marinis 2011: 170). With its reference to the fundamental relationship between theatre and anthropology, The Trojan Women Project went hand in hand with the research that Barba, Brook and Grotowski promoted in the early 1970s through journeys to discover the other and the *recurrent principles* in different theatrical cultures (Barba 1993).

While in the field of theatrical studies the experiences of the Avant-garde have been reconsidered in the light of new reflections on intercultural theatre (Carlson 1990; Dasgupta 1987; Fusco 1994; Balma Tivola 2014), and sometimes seen as appropriations of cultural and artistic forms of other countries<sup>18</sup>, the La MaMa project has instead promoted research based on a sincere artistic exchange aimed at sharing the creative and performative experience. In reappropriating Swados' and Serban's creative approach of the 1970s, the American group has experienced the communicative value of theatre in very different cultures and integrated their creative content in the final performance.

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<sup>17</sup> The Kosovo company was made up of young actors of Albanian, Serbian and Roma origins, and from different areas of Kosovo, Prishtina, Mitrovica, Drenica and Gračanica. People who did not experience the war firsthand, who were children during the conflict and belong to what is now called the generation of *the children of war*. Young people who found themselves divided and victims of prejudice against their respective ethnic groups inherited from previous generations. They later recounted how working together on the tragedy helped them to overcome all the cultural barriers and boundaries that real and political life had imposed on them, positively influencing family members and those close to them, and feeling it a duty to be positive examples for others (Mustafa 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Schechner takes a different approach to this theory, explaining that it isn't a matter of learning to be intercultural, but to remove the obstacles that prevent a return to interculturality: "For as far back as we can look in human history peoples have been deeply, continuously, unashamedly intercultural. Borrowing is natural to our species" (Schechner 1989). In the same journal, Carl Weber retraces the transculturality in the history of theatre (Weber, 1989).

In each country, the play was staged at different locations, with special preference for open spaces, and being able to perform for very different audiences in accordance with the venue. In this regard, in the creation phase, the American group had to deal with particular cultural issues that might influence the decisions regarding some aspects of the representation, such as Helen's nudity, which some cultures might tolerate while others would consider it absolutely taboo. The artists also had to take into account how violence against women is experienced in each country. Mayan actresses immediately identified with what happened to the Trojan Women because they themselves had survived such abuses during and after the conflict and were experiencing the terror of the violence in their country. So it was important for them to make their voices heard through the chorus singing (Johnson 2021).

Some members of the audience in Cambodia also associated the tragedy with the situation of women in their country, and the events of the Trojan war with the long period of oppression they had experienced. These impressions were shared both after the performances, when a space was provided for discussion with the spectators, and during the workshop, when some dancers told how liberating it was for them to be able to talk about the situation in Cambodia through the tragedy. Being able to do this indirectly allowed them to remain in the protective protected dimension of the stage and at the same time to elaborate their emotions through the work on symbols and metaphors, according to Andrei Serban's vision in his work (Alpuerto and Tola 2018 ; Ruyle 2021).

Spectators who saw the various productions of *The Trojan Women*, both the past ones and the latest presented with the project, reported that they felt that the story the tragedy told could be their own. In any city where the work was performed, the spectators glimpsed a part of themselves in the events presented or found a response to the social and political situations of their respective countries.

The fact that it was not acted in English, but communicated with sounds and symbols at a universal level, was actually the strong point of this work (Ima 2021). It should be recalled that Euripides (as well as Sophocles and Aeschylus), used in his works a language common to that of the audience of his time, made up of words but also of myths and metaphors, to discuss the effects of war on individuals and the community, with actors, chorus and spectators participating simultaneously in the same rite but at the concurrently witnesses of the same conflicts. Through myth and archetype, the tragedy therefore induces the viewer to reflect on his own experiences and on universally shared feelings and values, such as fear, pity, truth and justice. This is why ancient dramas are still so powerful today, because they are able to communicate with the most hidden and inner part of people.



Reviewing the experience of a conflict through the filter of a story that occurred in the distant past allowed the actors who took part in the project to elaborate their own war experiences in the context of a safe zone, that *gray zone* in which one is neither gods nor damned, a dimension free of condemnations or absolutions (Doerries 2016; Balfour 2007). As Doerries explains, human beings are cross-culturally connected in their responses to myths and rituals. In other words, the Greek tragedy has the ability to communicate with anyone, even those who know nothing of the peculiar mythology, because it mediates a sharing of the human experiences described in it. “People who have come into contact with death, who have faced the darkest aspects of our humanity, who have loved and lost, and who know the meaning of sacrifice, seem to have little trouble relating to these ancient plays. These tragedies are their stories” (Doerries 2016: 6)<sup>19</sup>. Doerries believes that the use of theatre to make a common experience of war is one of the greatest achievements of the ancient Greeks. The staging of tragedy offers universal terrain and language because of shared suffering and empathy:

If there is a woman tending a child, or a funeral rite, or a scene of violence between a man and a woman, you don't necessarily need to know the history of the Trojan women to understand what is going on. Anyone can relate to this. People made connections between each of these scenes and what was important to them. (Ima 2021)

About fifty actors participated in the final New York performance. The La MaMa company was joined by members of the Guatemalan, Kosovar and Cambodian groups, along with the audience, who, in the midst of such a large cast, felt even more that they were part of the performance. Moving among the actors led members of the audience to take part in the actions from the very beginning of the play, as for instance in the procession of the women taken prisoner by the soldiers. There followed the succession of scenes narrating the individual stories of the protagonists – Cassandra, Andromache and Helen – distributed over the stage space and presented to the audience through wooden walkways<sup>20</sup>. The scenes focusing on the individual figures alternated with choral segments in which the action shifted between the songs sung by the Trojan women's chorus, those sung by the soldiers' chorus and those sung by the children's chorus. The audience, surrounded by the action, virtually became a fourth silent chorus witnessing the tragedy at first hand as totally immersed citizens of Troy.

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<sup>19</sup> Bryan Doerries, director, writer and translator, is the founder of the Theatre of War, a project by which he presents readings of Greek tragedies to the military personnel, veterans and their families, writes that the tragedy stimulates a healthy and balanced response to personal suffering and that of others.

<sup>20</sup> The scenography was conceived by Jun Maeda (1941-2020), a Japanese artist who had designed the sets for the 1970s production and the Annex space. He has long collaborated with La MaMa and curated the sets for Serban, Peter Brook and Joseph Chaikin.



*The Trojan Women, New York 12.07.2019. Ph. Theo Cote*

This use of space and the deployment of the action which Serban chose, together with the rhythm and sounds of the ancient language<sup>21</sup> and music, guided the audience into a totally immersive experience, felt in the first person and which it was not easy to get away from even after the performance was over (Galassini 2021).

The most choral moment came in the scene staging the funeral rite of Astyanax, in which songs, music and dances were woven together and performed by Guatemalan, Kosovar and Cambodian actors in their respective countries, but above all in the final New York production, where the performers were simultaneously co-present. The direction, curated in different countries by Onni Johnson, was done at La MaMa by Andrei Serban, who worked with foreign artists on the rituals, songs and dances that express pain and suffering in their respective cultures, integrating them in the performance. Thus, the emotional force that emerged during the performances was the result not only of an artistic effort but also the expression of an extreme real-life experience of violence and death<sup>22</sup> (Serban 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Other languages were added in the play on that occasion: Kak'chiquel, Spanish, Albanian, Serbian, Romani and Khmer.

<sup>22</sup> In the scene of the funeral rite different types of dances were inserted: Cambodian actors performed a traditional dance, Mayan women staged the ritual lament of death and rebirth that is practiced in their villages, accompanied by an undulatory movement of the body, and one of the Kosovar interpreters contributed a ritual dance. They were simultaneously theatrical performances and real-life expressions, of the meaning of life (Serban 2021).

*The Trojan Women* is a play completely grounded at the senses, which involves audiences emotionally through sound and places them at the center of the action, in an exemplary scenic translation of the Theatre of Cruelty as theorized by Artaud. While Serban's approach to the Greek text has the merit of involving the audience in the action of the play, and of making Euripides' tragedy a reflection of the conflicts actually experienced in countries oppressed by dictatorships and war, it also facilitated a cultural and artistic exchange, and the participation of actors and dancers from different cities or countries, to break down the borders erected by culture, by language, and above all by war.

In retracing the different phases of the project and its stage creation, it was possible to see how much Serban and Swados, with the research they carried out in the 1970s, were able to grasp and develop the principles on which Peter Brook had focused his artistic work. The analysis carried out in this study has shown how after fifty years the creative approach and the scenic vision promoted by the two La MaMa artists have lost nothing of their efficacy for a cross-cultural theatre, where art becomes the preferred channel of communication and knowledge between artists belonging to very different cultures. Lastly, thanks to their adoption of studies on the timeliness of revisiting Greek tragedy in the theatre of war, it was possible to understand how this relevance was achieved also owing to the choice of producing *The Trojan Women*. We have seen how the work on Euripides' drama, as a bearer of universal principles and archetypes, facilitated elaborating the experience of conflict through an artistic experience shared between individuals with parallel experiences.



*The Trojan Women, New York 12.07.2019. Ph. Theo Cote*

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