

THE BEEBES

ODIN TEATRET

AT THE TIME



OF YELLOW

FEVER

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THEBES at the Time of Yellow Fever

Dedicated to

Torgeir Wethal, Augusto Omolú, Dag Åkeson Moe, Christian Ludvigsen, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jens Bjerneboe, Juan Cuevas, Nando Taviani, María Cánepa, Ole Daniel Bruun, Osvaldo Dragún, Rebeca Ghigliotto, Erling Lægred, Jerzy Grotowski, Luis Otavio Burnier, Raymonde and Valentin Temkine, Atahualpa del Cioppo, Pál Regös, Fabrizio Cruciani, Beatriz Seibel, Rénée Saurel, Dervy Vilas, Sanjukta and Raghunath Panigrahi, Franco Quadri, Mario Delgado, Zbigniew Osinski, Isaac Behar, Tage Hind, Clive Barker, Inger Landsted, Ludwik Flaszen, Vicente Revuelta, Leonard Pronko, Marco Donati, Luis Cerminara, Nina Király, Jens Okking, Pinuccio Sciola, Kai K. Nielsen, Maria Grazia Gregori, Jens Johansen, Nitis Jacón, Ole Sarvig, Marco Potena, Katsuko Azuma, Renzo Filippetti, Santiago García, Velda Noli, Peter Seeberg, Jerzy Gurawski, Suresh Awasthi, Poul Vad, Pacho Martinez, Alina Obidniak, I Made Pasek Tempo, Tony D'Urso, Cristina Wistari, Mette Jensen, Renzo Vescovi, Dag Halvorsen, Wojciech Krukowski, Vincent Gaeta, Stanislaw Krotowski, Beppe Chierichetti, Mike Pearson, Roald Pay.

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Production: Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium - Odin Teatret
odinteatret.dk

THEBES

at the Time of Yellow Fever

It is the day after the last battle. The war between the two sons of Oedipus for the dominion of Thebes is over. The rebel Antigone has been punished for profaning the law of the city. Families bury their dead. Oedipus' ghost wanders among the corpses. Creon and Tiresias are plotting for peace. The Sphinx and the plague lie in wait. For all of us it is spring, a time to fall in love. The future is a frenzy of sun and gold: a yellow fever.

Actors: Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Donald Kitt, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Julia Varley - **Scenic space:** Odin Teatret - **Light designer:** Fausto Pro
Light designer supervisor: Jesper Kongshaug - **Costumes and props:** Lena Bjerregård, Antonella Diana, Odin Teatret - **Visual art advisor:** Francesca Tesoniero - **Poster:** Peter Bysted - **Musical director:** Elena Floris - **Photo:** Rina Skeel - **Dramaturg:** Thomas Bredsdorff - **Advisors:** Gregorio Amicuzi, Juliana Capilé, Antonia Cioaza, Tatiana Horevicht - **Special advisors:** Nathalie Jabalé, Ulrik Skeel - **Tour manager:** Anne Savage - **Director's assistants:** Elena Floris, Dina Abu Hamdan - **Text and director:** Eugenio Barba

Thanks to Kostas Vantzios who took us to Thebes, Antonis Diamantis, Irini Koutsaki, Chryssoula Nissianaki, Frans Winther, Ana Woolf.

SCENE 1
RITUAL OF PURIFICATION

SCENE 2
OEDIPUS' SPIRIT WANDERS ON THE BATTLEFIELD
WHERE HIS TWO SONS-BROTHERS HAVE SLAIN EACH OTHER

SCENE 3
AGLAIA, A MAD MOTHER, BELIEVES SHE IS ANTIGONE

SCENE 4
OEDIPUS' SPIRIT REVEALS TO TIRESIAS
THE SENSE OF HUMAN DESTINY

SCENE 5
TIRESIAS EXPLAINS TO CREON: THEBES' INHABITANTS
EAT HUMAN FLESH

SCENE 6
THE MAD AGLAIA AFFIRMS: EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT
TO A PLACE IN LIFE

SCENE 7
ANTIGONE BECOMES A MYTH

SCENE 8
THE SPHYNX EVOKES OEDIPUS' FAMILY SAGA

SCENE 9
POLYNEICES' BURIAL

SCENE 10
YELLOW FEVER BREAKS OUT

SCENE 11
OEDIPUS RESOLVES THE SPHYNX'S ENIGMA

SCENE 12
SEVEN TIMES THEBES WILL BE DESTROYED
AND SEVEN TIMES PLUS ONE
THEBES WILL RISE AGAIN

Eugenio Barba

Thebes, my homeland

*Fly, swim, crawl, run.
To my spectators whom I created*

For many years, I have struggled to give life to performances about that which I do not know. This need obliges me to make an effort to become inexperienced again, knowingly making mistakes and stumbling for a long time in stammering or mute rehearsals. Here I am once again, stripping the actors of what they know, making them defenseless and thus imposing on myself the shedding of all knowledge. Longing for a new balance between ignorance and know-how.

The reality at my side

Sometimes I have the feeling that a thin wall of air separates the world in which I move from a world that is next to me. A spasm of memory or a change of awareness unexpectedly transports me to another reality. All it takes is a name, an image, a sound, and the thin wall dissolves and I slide into the world that runs alongside the one in which I walk. There, known and unknown figures approach and tell me stories that I know well, revealing, however, secret details or providing unexpected explanations. They slip into my hands, like unexpected alms, fragments of a renewed insight.

This dissociation has accompanied me since I was nine and saw my father die. This parallel reality is ready to welcome me in order to comfort or exalt me. My work as a director has justified this ubiquity. Theatre helps to mediate with the invisible.

First meeting

March 3, 2018. I meet with the Odin Teatret's actors who, in the course of time, will become six, then four and ultimately five. We decide to challenge ourselves once again with a new performance. Our last one? We gather in



Roberta Carreri and Eugenio Barba during rehearsals

the white room - Iben, Roberta, Julia, Kai and Donald. Elena is with us as musical director and assists me as director together with Dina Abu Hamdan.

Genesis of a story

February 19, 2019. From an interview with Anna Bandettini published in *La Repubblica* (Italy).

In November 2018, I started rehearsing with the Odin actors. I proposed to make an impossible performance: a love story with a happy ending. Each event, or theatre text, is immersed in a context. In the new performance, this context is a landscape of dead or dying languages that lie piled up as in a battlefield or an extermination camp. I am not speaking only of our language, poisoned by politics, vulgarity and hatred. Of the 7,000 languages currently existing on the planet, 3,500 are spoken by groups of less than fifty people, and linguists expect them to disappear within twenty years. While the 'impossible' love story unfolds, I imagine a Teresa of Calcutta who collects dying languages and places them tenderly on a clean sheet to give them a dignified death. She is accompanied by a mastiff puppy who sings opera arias. We will finish this performance in the near future, when the first androids, thanks to humans or science, will give birth to carbon and silicone babies. Odin Teatret's 'secret people' of the future.

The language of birds, whistles and yellow

I am sure of two characters: Teresa, the woman who searches for dying languages and gives them a decorous burial by laying them on a sheet. She is followed by Alexander the Great, a dog that speaks in whistles to the dead languages and, barking, translates what they say to Teresa.

This way of communication through whistles and trills is found in about seventy communities. In addition to the *silbo* practiced by the inhabitants of La Gomera in the Canary Islands, it is used by the Mazatecs in Mexico or the Bai in the Yunnan region in China. In Kusköy, Turkey, it is called 'the language of birds'.

The two protagonists of the love story are still missing, they have to be invented or surface from my memory. I called them Bathsheba and David. I also don't know the characters of the other two actors. Maybe they are anonymous travellers who venture into the lands of the past from where our present and future originate.

'Yellow' is the last word whispered by every language that dies. It is reminiscent of gold, of the sun glistening on the fields of wheat and rapeseed, of the hair of some women I have loved, of Van Gogh's hunger for life when he painted his tulips and sometimes, during his crises, swallowed this colour from the tube.

Falling towards the sky

January 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupts life and stalls all activities. Despite the lockdown, I manage to rehearse with some actors. I watch them improvising. They climb silently into the air. They don't fly, they swim. I graft into the performance *A Madman's Diary*, the short story by Lu Xun, with the frightening discovery that our neighbours eat human flesh. A table becomes a bull, three accordions pray together, bloodstains appear on white sheets and a vital yellow fever takes possession of the space.

May 2021. We resume rehearsals and I am forced to send two actors away. Thus the love story disappears definitively. It leaves a deep trace: the strongly present absence of a loved one.

Also the theme of the dying languages did not lead elsewhere. The character of Teresa who wished to bury them with dignified sweetness slowly disappears. Who will take her place?

Heraclitus affirmed that the divinities neither say nor hide, but hint. They express themselves in an enigmatic language like knots or celestial constellations. How can I grasp this essential language through the acting of my actors and the compositional mosaic of the director? How can I transform knowledge that reassures into a knowledge that is like a thorn, sharpening intuition, instincts and archaic memories? How can I work and ascertain: finally, I know nothing.

The performance is invented only after it is finished

The myths of antiquity pose no risk to us modern individuals. Their threats don't scare us. We are the product of this antiquity, but when we resume its stories we adulterate them by translating them into our present conditions, our norms and prejudices. In this counterfeiting process, I am aware of the risk of losing the *essential*.

This *essential* that I am unable to describe in words is manifest in the

bond-in-life between me and a handful of actors and a few spectators. I try to weave this *bond* during a working process of months and months together with my actors who are also driven by blind and mute needs.

After directing 79 performances, it seems superfluous to do one more. Yet I move towards Oedipus, *homo viator*, the pilgrim wayfarer who stretches out his hand to me. Together with my actors I grope in the dark. The actors recognise their characters only after they have created them. The director is on the verge of the *essential* when he invents his performance only after he has finished it. One has to stop before saying everything. But I had nothing to say. Theatre was a refuge, a floating island, a Galapagos of freedom.

What one discovers when giving life to a performance

A myth has accompanied my life in theatre since my very first steps. It is the saga of a Greek family, that of Oedipus and his city Thebes.

I presented Sophocles' *Oedipus tyrannus* as my *mise-en-scène* project at the Warsaw theatre school in 1961. It was during the Communist regime in Poland, and my revolutionary interpretation made the examining committee smile. In the final scene, the people of Thebes climbed a huge pyramid on the top of which Creon had taken refuge and drove him from power.

How many times have I taken up the story of Oedipus and his kinfolk?

In 1983, in *El romancero de Edipo*, Toni Cots was a disillusioned blind storyteller fleeing the city ruled by Creon. He saw the innocent perish innocently and the guilty live on with their guilt. When the plague was controlled, civil war broke out. Toni slipped into the different characters, from Jocasta to Antigone and Creon, restoring the kaleidoscopic contrasts and contradictions of the truths contained in a myth. Oedipus is condemned for his hunger for knowledge and for wanting to live according to the Delphic exhortation 'know yourself'. He sought his identity as a young man and is grateful, in his old age, to be allowed to rest in one place before moving to another where he will always be a stranger. Those who seek light, find shadow.

In 1986, in *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*, it was the slender figure of Antigone (Roberta Carreri) who danced in the centre, an archetype of thirst for justice and rejection of the laws of the city. Power easily

wiped out this young girl's body, but her shadow remained. Her life, so saturated with energy and brightness, permeated the darkness of history. *Memory is the spirit that guides our actions* was the *essential* that the performance tried to reach in the nervous system of the spectator. The weapon of the rebel, the intellectual or the actor consists in spreading a handful of earth: a symbolic and useless gesture against pragmatism, fashions and compromises of the spirit of the time.

In 1990, I met Oedipus, the father killer, a visionary with empty eye sockets, about to die in a sacred grove at Colonus, on the outskirts of Athens. Iben Nagel Rasmussen was starting a new performance and I tried to convince her to make her improvisations converge on the figure of Oedipus who evoked in me Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, Dostoyevsky's idiot. Thirsting for truth and a victim, his innocence was a blindness to the designs of the gods or of history. Oedipus-Christ-Myshkin: from myth to religious revelation to literary fiction.

Mythos, the Odin Teatret performance from 1998, took place as a wake at both the end of a millennium, and a short century that began in 1917 with the Soviet revolution and ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Characters from Greek myths gathered to immortalise a fighter who had embodied the myth of revolution. Then came the protagonists who have illuminated the extraordinary Greek civilisation: Medea who cradles her slaughtered children; Daedalus, who invented the labyrinth and saw his son Icarus fly and fall; Cassandra raped by Greek warriors and crushed by visions of the future; Orpheus violating the kingdom of the dead and whose head sails singing on the sea; Ulysses who comments sarcastically on the blind vitality of the living; and finally Oedipus who advises *tear out your eyes, so you will see the story in the light of your memories*.

The figures of the Greek myths are action and energy. Their ferocity is not vile. Their sufferings are not sadness. Their arrogance is not just a thirst for power or revenge. They don't believe; they are aware. They know the Reality: the ineluctable power of those forces that we call Evil.

I continued to move within the walls of Thebes, as if I predicted that one day, like Oedipus, I would be expelled from this city and would go *ad venturas*, towards things to come: adventures. The circle closes: the future, unexpected and unimaginable, brings me back to the uprooted condition of my youth.

Thebes, my homeland

March-April, September 2022. The character with the vocation to bury has become a mad mother who believes herself to be Antigone. We are in Thebes, in this mythical city of Greece so similar to the world I live in. Here, the sleep of reason generates monsters. The Sphinx whips space in an enigmatic race that is destruction and a genesis of the new. The plague, endemic and fair, strikes justly and unjustly. The community is split into factions ready to tear themselves apart and attack the palaces of power. The corpses of wars, emigrations, famines and discriminations besiege the city. Oedipus's spirit wanders among them while the blind Tiresias and the wise Creon talk, argue and appraise.

A father, Laius, orders his son to be killed, but it is he who is the one to perish. "Who am I?", his son Oedipus wondered. This question leads him to kill his father, marry his mother and beget sons-brothers, turning him into a victim and a seer. He dies in exile, repudiating his sons who kill each other in a fratricidal war.

Thomas Bredsdorff, our theatre's dramaturg, says that a myth is not simply a lie or a truth. A myth, in Odin Teatret's version, is a truth that is opposed to the dominant truth. Which one?

Thebes, my homeland.



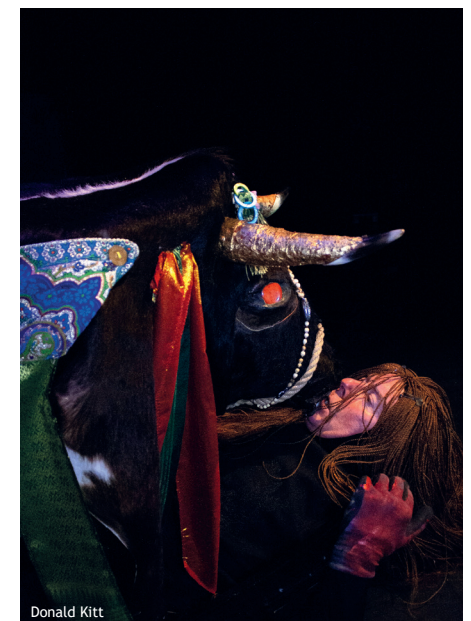
Iben Nagel Rasmussen



Kai Bredholt



Julia Varley



Donald Kitt



Donald Kitt, Iben Nagel Rasmussen

