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‘Høre, at ekko!’: Echoes of Odin Teatret’s Training In Triangle Theatre’s Tribute to Danish Celebrity.

Dr Richard Talbot (Triangle Theatre, UK & Senior Lecturer in Performance, School of Arts & Media, University of Salford)

Abstract

Theatre companies and arts organisations are usually exhorted by their funders to demonstrate the sustainability and legacy of their projects. This article considers an aspect of the legacy of Odin Teatret, one of Europe’s leading companies working in the lineage of Jerzy Grotowski’s ‘Laboratory Theatre. It considers the significance of this legacy to Triangle Theatre and its associates, tracing the influence of Odin Teatret’s methods in Triangle Theatre's approaches to characterisation, vocal work and its relationship with the established theatre. The latter aspect is considered in light of Eugenio Barba’s notion of the ‘Third Theatre’. The article examines Triangle Theatre's Fringe-First winning work, The Dig (1992), created immediately after a period of training with the Odin, and the emergence of Triangle’s its 2003 tribute to the 1950s Danish singing duo, Nina and Frederik, from a participatory community project Nina and Frederick. The ‘full’ tribute show, På Genhør Med Nina og Frederik (trans) ‘Hear Nina and Frederik Again’, emerged from a turbulent phase in Triangle’s work, during which the ‘mantra’ absorbed in training and in subsequent dialogue with members of Odin Teatret, came into a conflux with the community arts agendas of a building-based Repertory theatre. This conflux is set against a popular cultural backdrop of increasing interest in celebrity impersonation beginning in the late 1990s and continuing unabated. Thus, the article is about the tensions and opportunities that arise when artists trained in experimental performance styles explore projects in the spaces between the popular and experimental creative zones. The article begins by analysing video footage of a performance of the Tribute at Odin Teatret’s theatre space in Holstebro, Denmark and offers a critical perspective on the way in which the tribute to Nina and Frederik is positioned as memorial event or document, in Triangle’s work. The article adopts Odin Teatret’s director, Eugenio Barba’s theory of incorporation in order to offer an insight into the problematics of imitation in training and performance.

Keywords: Tribute, Third Theatre, Odin Teatret, Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, Experimental Theatre, Laboratory Theatre, Voice.
This frame is taken from a projection as part of *På Gengør Med Nina Og Frederik* (Triangle Theatre, 2003) a tribute act that combines the audio-visual archive of singers Nina and Frederik Van Pallandt with live renditions of their songs. The footage includes original footage of Frederik singing a parody of The Beatles’ *Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)* (1965).

When Triangle’s Nina and Frederik tribute was performed at Odin Teatret, Denmark, someone in the audience gasped with delight at the slow motion frames in which Frederik comically blinks as he concludes his own mock-tribute - to The Beatles. Frederik's wink was surprisingly synchronous with sound of the final chord being plucked on the guitar. For the lagging digital image to chime with an ironic plectrum was perhaps a piece of magic in which the recording appeared to exceed itself and come alive. Perhaps this was an especial relief for the audience, since throughout the tribute act, Frederick (sic), my version of Frederick, had been strumming desperately to a prerecorded backing track. I had to mime as I don’t play the guitar. For an instant the projected image and the twang of the string seem to be co-present
with the imitation and so perhaps the illusion of re-enactment benefitted from a celebrity endorsement. In the blink of an eye, Frederik was somehow complicit with his fan and with his fakery, as if he had some investment in his own legacy, and yet acknowledged that ultimately it amounted to a joke. To compound this post-modern intertextuality, consider the fact that Frederik’s version of *Norwegian Wood* included him singing in an Indian accent and singing an extended and nasal *taan*, an embellishment or riff along the ‘-gian’ of ‘Norwegian’ in the style of a classical Indian vocal. Frederik was exemplary of his era, and fascinated by Sufism and Asian cultures, just as the Beatles were pursuing their gurus in India. In this clip from BBC TV, though, revisited in 2003, his joke about the Kash-Beatles would sound out of context, if not ‘dodgy’, if it were not for the co-presence with comical tribute act, ‘Nina and Fredrick’.

Triangle Theatre’s work has not always been inclined to the ridiculous, at least not intentionally. Indeed Frederik Van Pallandt would have approved of artistic director Carran Waterfield’s earnest practice of yoga and her interest in non-(West)-Eurocentric vocal techniques.
In this section of *The Dig* (1992), a solo performance, Waterfield sings a backwards version of *Gabriel's Message, a Baaque Carol*. The aesthetic of voice and sound is recognizably influenced by Odin Teatret, where Waterfield trained in 1990. The singer works across ‘bridges’ in the voice and emphasises a break in tone and pitch reminiscent of Bulgarian singing. Waterfield was most impressed by Iben Nagel Rasmussen’s work during her training and the appropriation of this song directly into this production, can be seen to underline this influence.

*The Dig* was the first piece Waterfield made after she returned from training in Denmark. The Edinburgh Festival ‘Fringe First’-winning production was devised in part at Whitefriars - a base for Coventry’s Archeology Unit. Whitefriars was associated with workhouses in the 1800s, among other things. In retrospect this was a journey into Carran Waterfield’s mother’s life story occasionally revisited in subsequent productions from *Looking for The Tallyman* (1998) to *The House* (2015).

Waterfield has shared training methods learned with the Odin, with many others including members of Bare Essentials (1992-2002), an autonomous group of young people that evolved from a group of pupils while she was still a teacher at Cardinal Wiseman Secondary School in Coventry (1986-90) and the influence continues to be felt by many others who have been taught or directed by her.
I have been co-artistic director of Triangle with Carran for the last 15 years. Carran has now returned working solo again after 15 years of sustained collaborations, and she is working without her frequent director, Ian Cameron.

My first visit to Denmark was with Triangle’s *My Sister My Angel* in 1997. I was struck immediately by the monastic atmosphere at Odin Teatret’s base in Holstebro. It is a place of order and industry, coupled with a quiet but subversive humour shared amongst both the artists and administrators. Naturally, perhaps, I know little about
the individuals at Odin Teatret even after several visits, but many intermittent encounters have furnished me with a strong footing made of very distinct experiences, like so many irregular farm buildings dotted along Denmark’s flat and distant horizon. From these singular experiences, I have adopted a mantra of self-discipline and self-determination in training, I have absorbed methods of theatre-making, and even the *habitus* of hospitality amongst many disparate theatre-makers. In the foyer of the company’s base there is a very strong impression of a vibrant, admiring international network of diverse practitioners whose numerous messages and gifts are carefully displayed along with a large map showing concentrations of pins in Latin America, Southern Europe and Asia.

In 1976 Eugenio Barba proposed the notion of the Third Theatre (Barba: 1986, 193-4) and contrasted the multitude of small fringe groups with

> on the one hand, the institutionalised theatre [...] a ‘noble’ version of the entertainment business; [and] on the other hand the avant-garde [...] defended in the name of the necessity to transcend tradition. (193)

For Barba, the Third Theatre groups are an archipelago, a fringe of distinctive and small communities that define themselves through their relation with the established theatre. They share a lineage and mythology influenced by the legacy of Poor Theatre practices, that is, an ethos of theatre-making in which the performer, their body and presence, are privileged over the spectacle and materiality of ‘the theatre’. Bare Essentials former members, Patrick Campbell and Rachel Karafistan refer to Third Theatre as a movement, having ‘joined in’ through a visit to the Odin at a very young age. For Carran Waterfield, the experience of Third Theatre is a political
stance of marginality, either enforced or voluntary that is set against notions of institutional and canonical power in theatre ecologies in the UK.

Commenting on the ways in which Third Theatre companies sustain themselves, Barba has observed,

the groups can only survive either by entering the circle of established theatre, accepting the law of supply and demand, conforming to fashionable tastes … or by succeeding through continuous work to individualise their own area. (193-4)

This process of individualisation involved the challenge of collaboration and dissemination of Poor Theatre methods. For Waterfield this was tested initially on *Tributaries* (1993), an intercultural project with musician Joji Hirota, director Ian Cameron and Vayu Naidu, a storyteller. Formerly a solo performer, Carran was being encouraged to collaborate by West Midlands Arts, based on a notion of economies of scale. There was a collaboration with Debbie Isitt (artistic director of theatre and film makers Snarling Beasties) on a project called *Ruby’s Slippers*, and a role as an angel in Isitt’s short film project *Johnny Watkins Walks on Water* (Dir. Debbie Isitt, 1994) A further collaboration with Ian Cameron was extended to include Isitt again, initially in the development of *Looking for the Tallyman* and then work on the short film, *Tribute* (2002). These collaborations were made possible due to the new phase of National Lottery funding which led to the Coventry Theatre Network initiative, overseen and administrated by the Belgrade Theatre. This represented an interesting moment in which disparate groups in Waterfield’s home city were brought into dialogue under the roof of the Repertory theatre. This was to be a turbulent time for Triangle Theatre as it struggled for visibility and control within the network, leading to an implicit competition with other ‘floating’ groups, and to compromise with the
marketing, financial and audience development agendas of a building-based theatre. Ultimately almost all the companies in the network were to collaborate in an adaptation of *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* (Dir. D.Isitt, 2000), staged in the main house of the Belgrade Theatre in a production which threw together London-based aerial dance company Scarabeus, Lecoq derived performance from Nick Whitfield, a long term collaborator with Isitt, plus spectacle and multi-media elements including ‘snowfall’ in the auditorium. It featured Waterfield as Cruella De Vil, and me as Pongo; it delighted children, upset their parents and was called ‘a mongrel’ by Lyn Gardner, the Guardian Theatre critic. VI Perhaps she had identified the eclectic hotchpotch of styles and ways of working in the piece, and the tensions between spectacle and the actor-centred methods that Triangle had derived from Odin Teatret.

In a letter to Nando Taviani, Barba has written about the significance for him of the many companies of the Third Theatre that have been supported by Odin Teatret - as a means of understanding ‘origin’, both for himself and for his collaborators (2010, 207-209). He observes ‘they are my origin’ (209). This is not a sentimental feeling, but a carnal one, he says, and it invokes, for me, an image of the god Saturn devouring and being nourished by his grandchildren. He belongs to their origin and by origin he means companies in a persistent state of becoming, that is:

> [...] linked to transition, to the need to refuse to belong [...] the permanent path of de-familiarisation and extraneousness. It is the impulse to meet the foreigner inside and outside yourself. (Barba: 2010, 208)

As is well known, the actors Eugenio Barba enlisted in Norway had been excluded from drama schools, and he too from a directing school in Oslo. When the company
arrived in Holstebro at the invitation of the local Mayor they met ‘violent’ opposition, as foreigners and artists. (Ledger 2012, 11; Waterfield 1998b, 7) For Barba the idea of legacy has been there from the outset, as a necessity for survival. He wanted to honour Grotowski’s work and influence by extending Grotowski’s methods, practicing them rigorously, and disseminating them tirelessly: ‘in order to resist we had to invent a mythology’ (Waterfield: 1998a, 6)

But Waterfield was not a foreigner in Coventry; she had been born there, the eldest in a large family. As a teenager, she had worked with her mum as an usher at the Belgrade Theatre. In spite of her frustrations, she did not want to become estranged through work that set itself in opposition to the ‘first theatre’, arguing that:

I [...] get the exile you talk about and the strangeness but I didn’t want to be strange. I have a concern for the accessibility of the work… the Nina & Frederick project is an example of trying to make the work more accessible to a wider public. (Unpublished interview with Barba, June 1998)
In Coventry in 1998 as part of the Arts Alive Festival hosted by the Belgrade Theatre, Waterfield invited me to work with her on a performance that in hindsight, was loosely following the barter methods of Odin Teatret. The social context of the theatre has become increasingly important to Barba and Odin Teatret, and the barter is one of their established methods of cultural interaction. (Ledger, 129)

Initially calling the project *Inside Out* we quickly felt the frustration of setting up performances for community members who, as Adam Ledger has identified, may be reluctant to perform even if they understand the exchange principle at work in the barter. As facilitators we found we were unable to perform ourselves, so we decided to make the administration and facilitation performative, and devised *Nina and Frederick* as a durational character-led mode in which we could be simultaneously organisers liaising between the Repertory theatre and the public, and performers. We distanced ourselves from the Belgrade Theatre by appearing in role and thus were able to win the confidence of the general public.

1A The Foyer Photographer: Damien Grazier © Triangle, 1998

We appropriated the name of the passé singing duo, Nina and Frederik and were able to appear at planning meetings, documenting the planning process through
audio recordings of our interaction. We recorded in the car, on the street and at every performance event. In the process we discovered the licence of interactive performance as a personal activism that was inclined towards an institutional critique. Immersed in-role like Roberta Carreri’s *Geronimo* or Julia Varley’s *Mr Peanut*, we could express our frustration at any tendency towards compromise and servitude to the Coventry Theatre Network and The Belgrade Theatre and so keep the dialogue with the public ‘real’. Julia Varley has gone further to explain the way in which adopting and being transported by character not only allows the actor to speak out loud but also requires the performer to interrogate their own stance and identity.

For years he has been the identity behind which I could both reveal and hide myself...He asks questions, thinks, and tells secret thoughts out loud. In this way, through him, I dialogue with myself. (Varley: 2011, 107)

We tried to bring the commercial together with the spirit of *barter* and discovered the art of *banter* through interactive immersed characterization. They accused ‘proper’ actors of ‘sitting on their arses in the green room’ (*Nina and Frederick* recording *Triangle*, 1998), although Carran complained initially that the performance of Nina and Frederick still lacked the visceral embodiment and self-discipline expected of the actor in Grotowski’s manifesto in *Towards A Poor Theatre* (1975). But, Nina and Frederick were a total act: to perform them involved a durational state of voice and body ‘flow’ that was as entrancing as it was exhausting to sustain.
1A The Foyer was popular but ineluctably and liminally ‘strange’. Over a period of six weeks and apparently living in the Belgrade Theatre foyer 24 hours a day, Nina and Frederick interacted with all-comers, providing participatory entertainment and most importantly singing karaoke. Regular visitors included the drunk, the disaffected, members of the theatre’s learning disabled company, and ‘frontline’ theatre staff members of the box office and catering teams, in short, those who often found themselves on the edge of established theatre events.

However, Nina and Frederick lacked what Kai Bredholt has as Otto the Bear in his barters in Cuba and Coventry. He has licence, both as a bear and as a performer that is clearly not a bear. He can invest in the animal but also draws attention to the illusion and dualities created by the performer in-role when he casually removes his head-mask and yet remains in the skin of his furry persona.
Part of the exhaustion of performing Nina and Frederick was the lack of boundary or duality of performer and character: to those who knew little of the theatre and yet intuitively understood the Belgrade Theatre as a publically funded space, we were there to be consumed. We needed a frame around Nina and Frederick, and needed to escape a yellow silliness that had become increasingly emphatic when we had joined forces with the Belgrade marketing team to promote Arts Alive. People were curious about our relationship with our namesakes and what had become of them. people asked.

Nina and Frederik\textsuperscript{xi}, © BBC TV, 1966.

The ‘real’ Nina and Frederik, Baron and Baroness Nina and Frederik, no less were the Kim Kardashian and Kanye West of the late 1950s to late 1960s, celebrated for their wealth beauty and charm, in a time that was already beginning to feel the rumbling of a revolution in popular entertainment and in political activism. Their naïve and saccharine renditions of Calypso songs were perhaps comfortingly simple but they belied the heady ‘Hippie’ social life in Ibiza of this ‘musical royalty’. The couple eventually separated and divorced and sadly Frederik was murdered in a drug related robbery in 1994.
We began to investigate an alternative mythology, driven not by the arduous and monastic rituals of a grueling actor training, but the ethereal otherness and risky hedonism of celebrity. Eugenio Barba again:

Human beings learn by imitation [...] but it is impossible to obtain the same power and force of the model [...] we try to appropriate ourselves of something, but [...] the thing appropriates itself of us [...] it becomes a sort of obsession and then this starts happening within my own metabolism and what begins as looking like imitation becomes transformed into nourishment. (Waterfield: 1998a, 11)

We travelled to Ibiza. We tracked down Nina and mixed with her circle; we visited their homes and went on board Frederik’s former yacht in Denmark and we documented our feverish fandom and our popular vocal training with Venice Manley.

In Send in The Clones: a Cultural Study of the Tribute Band (2012), Georgina Gregory argues that in the cultural climate “’hell-bent” on the commodification of identity’ (2010:2) tribute bands deserve more critical consideration. They respond to a popular insatiable appetite for the past, and, she argues, they represent an attempt to retrieve the live and intimate performance experience. Set against the trend for corporate management of music products and the increasing digital storage and distribution of popular music recording, the tribute act can be understood as popular resistance to corporate power. They could be understood as a third music theatre, perhaps. However, the tribute band aesthetic foregrounds artifice and this presented an ethical problem.
Far from a sign of their musical inferiority, failure is inherent to the appearance and embodied act of paying homage. It is impossible for those paying tribute thoroughly to incorporate the idol, and hence is replete with the uncanny: that is, the force of a once familiar object reappearing unexpectedly and out of context. As a revival of anachronistic objects, the tribute act is the ultimate in camp - a simulacrum adorned with glitter and make up as if to accentuate the forced resurrection. Arguably, the value of this gesture is increased by exposing the mechanism in the act of imitation, and of ‘bringing back to life’. Although tribute acts and their fans may accrue significant cultural capital through the economies of tribute performance, and possibly financial capital, more often than not they remain musicians who couldn’t make it any other way. (Gunther 2014). Thus the tribute reveals the deathly pallor of a legacy that is not fully made one’s own, and renders difference more visible.

We pulled together the documentation and collaborated with Debbie Isitt again on a mockumentary about our alter egos, Nina and Frederick to make a film called *Tribute: A Homage to the Forgotten Greatness of Nina and Frederik.*
In *Tribute*, the tearful Nina is exhausted by the overwhelming effort to make it in the entertainment business. As a Nina Van Pallandt impersonator, she knows she will never achieve the riches of her glamorous idol, but she refuses to give up: 'We are unique,' she says, tearfully. 'We know that' rants her partner and fellow performer Frederik, who is seething with fury that *The Tweenies* have poached his Little Donkey number, ‘but nobody else does,’ (London Film Festival, The Times review date).

The logic of imitation is almost the same in the X-Factor: impersonate your idols, become them in order to find your own voice, except that in discovering themselves the contestants find that they have to be like all the others that went before them and we know, tragically, that they are more often than not destined to disappear into obscurity without every truly unmasking themselves to themselves.
Sandra Reeve, with whom Carran has most recently been training to explore an eco-
biographically attuned somatic performance offers a rationale that links training and
the social context:

If “I” concentrate on training ‘my body’ not only am I
training the body out of context and thus supporting
an invalid belief, but also the influence of context
which could enable a greater sense of freedom or
stimulate possibilities of transformation, is always
missing from my awareness. A consideration of
environment is thus crucial both within subjective
movement practice and when witnessing the other in
movement. In the same way as quoting someone out
of context may serve to misrepresent them, so too
divorcing someone’s movement from its particular
context may lead to misrepresentation. (Reeve:
2011, 36-37)

‘I can’t believe it I’m in Matthew Kelley’s toilet!’ squeals Nina, delighted to finally have
reached the inner sanctum of the presenter of a British talent show dedicated to
tribute acts, Stars in Their Eyes (Granada/ITV, 1990-2006). For celebrities, the
private dressing room is famously a public space in which select fans can ‘seek an
audience’ with their idol thus staging themselves in order marking and reinstating
their individuality. The idol becomes the audience for the fan’s separation from the
masses. Dressing rooms are also notoriously spaces in which the normal distance
between star and fan can collapse, in acts of sexual impropriety or exploitation that
throw the identities and boundaries of social performance into chaos. As used by
Erving Goffman in his famous dramaturgical model for symbolic interaction, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), the backstage is a psychological space of ‘unmasked’ private behaviours, that are not intended to be viewed by a public, and front- or ‘on’-stage social performances work hard to conceal this. In a moment from the film *Tribute*, an old man visits the performers backstage. The illusion of being Nina and Frederik is sustained but in this instance, not by the tribute performers, but by the old man who insists that the performers ‘haven’t changed a bit’ and that they still affect him just as they did when his wife was alive and he and she saw Nina and Frederik perform. The ethical problem of impersonation is suddenly in question. Frederick suggests that the old man is confused and that it doesn’t hurt to keep a memory ‘literally alive’, all the while his fake moustache flaps away from his face as if to point at Frederick’s delusion. They seem at a loss what to say to him. They are all deluded, the old man and the two performers, by a fantasy that they share a history; in fact, according to a conventional linear temporality, they have missed each other by years. However standing in a liminal space, in a back room of a local museum, between stage and everyday life, and in a transitional state in which identities are fluid, they seem to share, as Barba puts it and as discussed above, an origin.

Perhaps this is the reason that Nina accepts that ‘it’s not fair to pretend’. Real tears flow and we see the actor deeply affected by the trap of the tribute. Having to perform the grace of celebrity makes her extremely uncomfortable, because the status feels barely earned. It seems that Nina and Frederick have no choice but to live the dream and by doing so fulfill the function of archetypal characters, like kings and queens. Although the Tribute industry superficially supports a notion of freedom, and individual expression, even if the aspirations are flawed, fans and tribute performers
are subject to their archetypal narrative according to the characters that they assume. In the process, however, and in moments such as this backstage encounter there is the possibility that they will begin a profound dialogue with themselves and the ethic of this and about who they are, just as Julia Varley has found with *Mr Peanut* in a different genre of incorporation, or channelling.

In Holstebro, the tribute version of *La Os Flyyve Til Een Stjerne*, as sung by the UK’s Nina and Frederick failed to impress because we were taught Danish in Coventry by a Norwegian. The rendition of *Baby It’s Cold Outside* was well received because it reinforced 1960s jokes about French and English national stereotypes and accents, precisely as performed by Nina and Frederik. As Nina and Frederik, Richard and Carran from Coventry, brought an audience from Holstebro to the foreigners in Saerkaerparken because that wanted to experience nostalgia CITE ?? ON NOSTALGIA, and were comforted by remembering what has gone forever or by rehearsing anachronist attitudes. In the context of a performance that was influenced
by the layering of image and association practiced by Odin Teatret this nostalgia was
offset by the critical perspective on the tragedy of celebrity for Frederik Van Pallandt
and his death, Most usefully according to Eugenio Barba, the play attracted people
to the theatre in Holstebro who would never usually attend their work and in doing so
perhaps Triangle paid tribute to the legacy and continuing survival of Odin Teatret.

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List of works:
The Dig (Triangle Theatre. 1992)
Tributaries (Triangle Theatre. 1994)
My Sister My Angel (Triangle Theatre. 1995)
1A The Foyer (Triangle Theatre. 1998)
Triangle Theatre, Waterfield C. & Talbot, R. Nina and Frederick recording, June 1998.
Looking for The Tallyman (Triangle Theatre. 1998)
Tribute: A Homage to the Forgotten Greatness of Nina an Frederik (Triangle Theatre, Dir, Debbie Isitt,
2002)

ii Paraphraser: Sabine Baring-Gould Arranger: C. Edgar Pettman

iii Iben Nagel Rasmussen was one of the first actors already resident in Denmark to join the company on its arrival from Oslo, in 1966. It had been founded in Norway in 1964 by Eugenio Barba.

iv At the time of writing, Carran Waterfield, artistic director of Triangle Theatre, was developing a new piece, The House, part of an AHRC-funded project with Dr Jenny Hughes of Manchester University titled Theatre, Poverty & Performance.

v Other groups included Snarling Beasties (Debbie Isitt), Talking Birds (Nick Walker, Janet Vaughen and Derek Nisbet), Absolute Theatre (Chris O’Connell and Julia Negus), Shaskeen Theatre (Kathy Leahy) and Pathways Theatre (XX). The network was later joined by the Belgrade Theatre’s disabled theatre group, directed by Richard XX.


vii Desert Island Discs. BBC. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009y3g3> [Accessed 9 Nov 2015]. The names of Nina and Frederik are spelt incorrectly n the BBC site. Ironically, they are spelt like Triangle Theatre’s tribute characters.