



*Odin teatret, training 1967, Photo: Roald Pay*

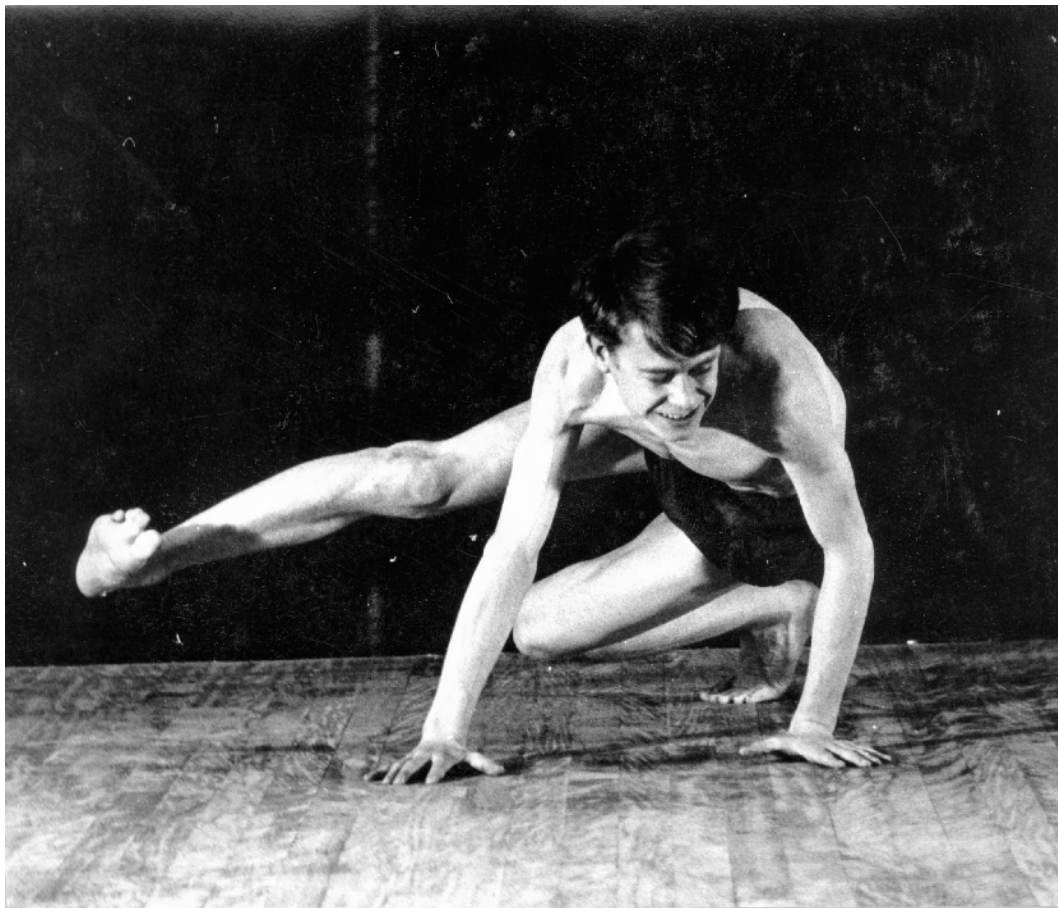
## The roots of our physical training

*By Iben Nagel Rasmussen*

When I first arrived at Odin Teatret, as a pupil, in 1966, we would immediately start practising exercises without having anything explained. I imagined, that like in my past life, someone would explain how and why. It was a shock that I had to do everything by just imitating what the older actors were doing. No philosophy, no deep “meaning”, just doing.

The training was not interrupted to explain or to correct something that might be wrong. Only after hours of intense work, we would be corrected or get comments from our director, Eugenio Barba, or an older colleague. In the beginning, I got tired immediately, but I had to accept that tiredness, with my body and, especially, with my mind.

When I saw Torgeir (Wethal) carry out the so-called “cat”, a chain of Yoga exercises elaborated by Jerzy Grotowski and Richard Cieślak, I didn’t see the actual exercises. I was struck by something else happening in Torgeir’s body. I could not call it beautiful or ugly in the aesthetic sense. It was rather something internal. His body became transparent.



*Torgeir Wethal 1967, Photo: Roald Pay*

The same thing happened when I listened to Else Marie (Laukvik’s) voice. There was an inner strength within her, overcoming many (so it seemed to

me) difficulties, but revealing an emotional landscape that touched me deeply.

During my first four years at Odin Teatret, I did not find in my own training the flow and transparency I had seen in Torgeir and Else Marie. I was getting desperate, thinking that I would never manage to find it.

On tour in Denmark, some of us were training in the morning without Eugenio Barba. For the first time I asked myself: what is a dramatic action? Not in general, but for myself. And I started to work on different ways of sitting, turning, letting my body fall out of balance to the floor and getting up again.

And here, alone but surrounded by my colleagues, I finally found the flow that I had been searching for years. The flow, which until that day, had always seemed to be interrupted by thought and tiredness making gaps in the training.

It was important that the impulse came from within myself. As the saying goes: the master can take you to the threshold, but he cannot push you over it. You have to do this transition yourself. The training remained hard, but I found it exiting, with rare moments of joy. The new elements would naturally lead from one to another in continuous waves. I could start out fast, then change to slow, be strong and later soft. The energy created by the exercises was leading me. I was “forgetting myself”, but at the same time being extremely alert.

This moment of individual discovery was a milestone. And has been the heart of my teaching ever since. It does not mean that the years of preparation were not important. They were. They taught me discipline and en-

duration, which are essential, but can remain sterile or even boring, without the spark of creativity.

On tour with Odin Teatret in the seventies, we began teaching short seminars in the morning, while performing in the evening. The situation obliged me to teach at a very elementary level. The students started from scratch and we had only a few days together. For me it made no sense. The important thing was the duration, to be able to cultivate what you had sown. I saw those people stuck where they were, with no means to continue.

It had taken me four years to finally find the so-called flow. How could I pass this knowledge on? Certainly not during a three-day seminar.

## HUGIN

In 1976, I decided to work for a longer period with a very small group of pupils: Karl Olsen from Greenland, Silvia Ricciardelli from Italy, and Toni Cots from Spain. We called the group Hugin – the name of one of the god Odin's two ravens in Nordic mythology. Our work took place early in the morning and in the afternoon, before and after my daily work with Odin Teatret.

After a while Karl left the group.

Eugenio Barba once noticed that the actors were totally worn out after a day's work of training and rehearsals. However, we all took off to a disco-club in the evening, to dance. "How come" he said quite annoyed "that you – who an hour ago looked *so* tired - now can go on dancing for hours without the least sign of fatigue".



*Hugin. Photo Odin Teatret*

Years later, some of the actors at Odin Teatret started to play instruments and sing, while others were carrying out different kinds of training or preparation for performances. I was dancing and improvising in a fancy “samba” costume. The flow was there from the beginning, because of the music. After each session, I would write down the steps and patterns I had invented. Or rather: which arose during the dance, from a hidden place within me.

We developed my experience with the little Hugin group. Both Toni and Silvia created their own powerful dances with variations and surprising elements.

When later on Eugenio Barba gave all the Odin actors three months off to travel and learn about and experience other cultures, Silvia and Toni went with me to Bali, where we all took lessons in Balinese dance.

When we came back, we began working on our next performance, *The Million*. Silvia and Toni joined Odin Teatret and parts of our dances, both Balinese and the invented ones, were used. After a performance in Denmark, a woman came up to me and said: "This Balinese 'ballet' was fantastic. A pity though, that the girl to the far right seemed not to have understood anything as to what it is all about."

That girl was me, the woman did not recognize me. I nodded and agreed my ability to imitate had always been poor.

Toni and Silvia remained with Odin Teatret until 1984, when we stopped playing the performances they were in: *The Million*, the street parade *Anabasis*, and *Brecht's Ashes* - some of The Odin's most popular and long-lived performances (1977-84).

## FARFA

An old monastery in Farfa, Italy, was the location of a seminar I directed in 1983, organised by Teatro Potlach.

The meeting lasted for three weeks. We had a small room at our disposal, in one of the towers. The floor was stone, the thick walls were cold, and I was sitting on a chair beside a little heater, watching the participants work. The group was absolutely not homogenous. I had asked for actors with experience and had myself met and chosen some of them. The idea had been,

to begin working at a professionally higher level than usually. However, some of the students had no theatre experience at all.

As the work went on, I discovered that their differences were a plus. The group had eight participants. We went through the basic training and began developing the Out of Balance exercises, which I had invented years before. It was here, among the soft hills surrounding Farfa, in complete silence and with nothing or nobody to disturb us (except for a monk who one day observed the training and stated that the actors were very “elastic”), that the group changed the original action of falling to the floor and getting up again, into a surprising and much better exercise.

To describe an exercise in words is useless, unfortunately, but anyway, the new sequence of actions did not contain the falling to the floor, only falling out of balance and regaining it just before reaching the ground. It developed a sort of recycling energy.

With the group, which we named Farfa, like the village, we continued the work on dances invented by each actor, just like we had done in the little group Hugin. And again: the flow came naturally because of the “music”, which sometimes just consisted of beating a chair with a stick or singing a rhythmic song. One of the actors, Cesar Brie, even played the transverse flute. I was amazed by the diversity of the dances and how they seemed to express the inner life of each actor. Their fantasy, their neck-breaking courage. The actors, both those with less experience and those with years of it, seemed to ride on the back of a wild tiger, holding on to its neck, while creating savage and nearly desperate “signs”. After each dance, they were asked to write down the elements they discovered, put them together in a sequence, and repeat them.

There was a picture of Virgin Mary hanging on the wall. We decided to use the image as a partner. All dances had to be directed towards her. New associations emerged, and we ended up with a montage of the actors' dances, with the Virgin being the main thread.

The process was extremely fruitful. We wanted to continue the work and met again, at Odin Teatret, the following year. We developed the draft and the tiny story we had begun in Farfa, and ended up with a performance, *Heridos por el Viento* (Wounded by the Wind). We also made a parade, *Brisas y Gnomos* (Breeze and Gnomes), and travelled in Italy, Poland, Spain, Wales and Denmark, where we performed, conducted seminars teaching our training, and made Barters. The activities with Farfa meant that I could not participate in the Odin performance *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*.

The group fell apart after a few years. But under the name of Farfa, only with Cesar Brie, we made two more performances: *Marriage with God*, directed by Eugenio Barba, and *The Land of Nod*, directed by Cesar Brie. We travelled with the two performances in Argentina, Uruguay, Denmark, Italy and Germany.

## THE BRIDGE OF WINDS

The project with Farfa taught me many things, and also many things that I should avoid. The structure of the group was wrong. I could not lead Farfa and participate as an actor in Odin Teatret's performances at the same time. I decided not to teach any more!

But life and theatre can put you in seducing situations. I met some people who made me change my mind.





*Members of The Bridge of Winds. Photo: The Bridge of Winds*

In 1989, we gathered at Odin Teatret to begin a work I thought would not last long.

But it did! In 2019, we will celebrate our 30th anniversary.

What made us stick together for so many years?

I “wanted to teach pupils for a long time”? Ridiculous. Today, all members of The Bridge of Winds are capable of teaching. And they are masters in different fields themselves. We have become like a family? Yes of course – children have been born into the group, we see each other once a year, we are very fond of each other. But without the training and the artistic work, these meetings would have no depth, they would not contain the powerful and sparkling energy that manifests itself every year.

The Bridge of Winds consists of people who, measured on an artistic scale, are very different. During the first years, the differences were so evident, that the word “amateur” would come to my mind. But that was only until I understood the character and the dynamics of the group.

The Bridge of Winds was not a fixed group, like Farfa, with all the problems and conflicts that destroyed it in the end. In The Bridge of Winds, the participants continue their daily activities in their own towns and countries after each meeting. I was surprised to discover, how our work in the narrow field of theatre training, could be useful for a person working with small children, or a musician finding new ways of using his or her musical instrument.

## THE WIND DANCE

That summer day in 1989, when we began what would be our long travel together, I started by asking all of the participants to show a small piece of their work: a song, a dance, a fragment of training, or a scene from a performance. A Danish girl, Caroline Bering, presented an exercise she had practised with the Polish theatre group Gardzienice. It was quite simple: a loose introvert body, a common audible exhalation, and three steps, like in the waltz, but with the body getting its impulse by going down, instead of sweeping along the floor. (As I said, it is useless to describe an exercise.)

We tried it all together: the step and the exhaling. After some days, we began to change the dynamics. Instead of being introverted, we added other principles, like throwing and pulling. Each actor was asked to find his or her own actions. We worked for hours and hours and hours, inserting the new elements into the dance. The new form it took, spread the energy like

arrows of light in the space, the whole group was moving like one living organism. The energy was generous and, despite the tiredness, seemed incredibly light.

Last but not least: the actors could go on dancing for hours. Alone or together, like a jazz band improvising, with specific notes coming together, separating, having short moments of solos, and then again interweaving in unpredictable patterns.

Today, when I watch the actors dancing, it awakens in me the memory of the big dancing halls in Buenos Aires, where elderly people dance the tango together, or with much younger partners, and how your eyes get caught by the elders' tender and compelling presence.

Iben Nagel Rasmussen

Ryde, July 2018



*Members of The Bridge of Winds 2018, Photo: Francesco Galli*