

Communitas or Colonialism: An Expanded Investigation into the Practice of Barter and Festuge

By Elizabeth Parks

Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you have a festival. Let the Spectators become an Entertainment to themselves.

--J.J. Rousseau, *Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*

They began to sing and dance, those typical forms of popular culture that are not limited to elaborate verbal language, but which, through the whole of their very physical presence, reveal the history and the vision of a community.

--Eugenio Barba, *The Floating Islands*

In the remote villages of Italy in 1974 a unique theatrical convention was born. Eugenio Barba and his theatre company, the Odin Teatret, which at that time had been in existence for ten years, were touring their production of *Min Fars Hus (My Father's House)* in his native Italy. One evening the company was approached by a woman who asked: "who are you?" Barba's reply was "Actors." This answer was met again with the question "But, *who* are you?" This ontological challenge forced Barba and the Odin players to not only define themselves but to *prove* that they were who they said they were. In response, the group performed songs and vocal improvisations they had used in their training. When they finished, they were not met with applause but with a reciprocal offer of performance as the villagers of Carpignano announced: "Now you must hear *our* songs." From this chance exchange of performance the barter was born (Barba, *Floating Islands* 120-121).

Seventeen years later, Barba and his actors would engage similarly with their “home” town of Holstebro, Denmark in the inaugural Festuge of 1991. Festuge, meaning festival, is the result of collaboration between Odin and the town of Holstebro. It is a week-long festival in which the community celebrates itself through both traditional and non-tradition performance. Specifically, festuge has included performances by the Odin Teatret, the invited international guest performers, street theatre, parades, dancing, singing, and skill or trade exhibitions from the citizens of Holstebro (Ledger 143, Barba, *Theatre: Solitude* 149-150).

The practices of barter and Festuge demonstrate the very social nature of the Odin Teatret and the work of Eugenio Barba but do they do something more? Do they provide a model of truly communal theatre of the sort championed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau? Adam Ledger notes that the upcoming 2014 Festuge is titled “Faces of the Future” and that the Odin is a “theatre in a new century” that demonstrating its progressiveness, contemporaneity, and relevancy by its engagement with itself and its community. But is it as much a theatre of the past as the future? To what extent do these practices satisfy Rousseau’s call for communal theatre and/or provide agency to achieve what the eighteenth-century philosopher was hoping for? What, ultimately, does one truly gain, from participation in a barter or Festuge? To address these questions I will look at the existing body of scholarship regarding barter and Festuge¹ and examine how these align with Rousseau’s notions of what theatre should be.

Conversely, I will bring the discussion into a more contemporary context by examining criticism of these practices within the last 20 years. In this section I will consider the following questions: what are the social and cultural consequences of barter and Festuge? Are these truly community-forming processes or are they the veiled faces of cultural colonialism, orientalism, and/or hegemony? What do Barba’s writing and that of his supporters suggest? To answer these

questions I will examine Barba's writing vis-à-vis critics and proponents of Odin's practice of barter.

The Barter: A Case Study

Shortly after the birth of the barter in 1974, Barba published a letter regarding the experience in *The Drama Review* in 1975 titled: "Letter from the south of Italy" (Barba, *Floating Islands* 119). In this letter he gives a detailed account of the exchange in Carpignano:

But often, after the performance, the people seemed animated by a desire to present themselves to us, to do something that corresponded to what they had seen . . .

The question that remained open so long ("Who are you?" "Actors." But how to prove it if we did not have a performance?) now found an answer: we would show we were actors through our training activities . . .

Thus were born our "dances" . . . We also put on clown shows, "parades," improvising our way through the village streets (*Floating Islands* 123).

Festuge, however, takes the notion of barter and expands it into a nine-day festival in which the Odin and the town of Holstebro celebrate themselves through reciprocal performance. The structure of the festival and its internal events are determined by members of the Odin, but what specifically happens within that structure is ultimately up to the townspersons and guest performers. In some cases, Odin members actually direct a performance using Festuge participants; in others, a framing device is employed in which performances occur. For example, in 2008 a "straw square" was arranged and re-arranged every morning so as to best frame that day's performances. Whatever the event and whatever its spatial arrangement, no expense is spared in terms of the festival's theatricality. Barba's early writing offers detailed accounts of

Festuger activities: “Every four hours, in a large car-park on the roof of a supermarket, groups of people united by the same profession, hobby or condition, presented themselves: the archers’ and rowers’ clubs, the owner of trained Alsatian dogs, of old American cars, . . .the fire brigade” (Barba *Theatre: Solitude* 149.) From fox-hunters to buglers to soldiers performing their military dressing ritual, to Danish children singing in Korean while performing tae-Kwando, Festuge is an elaborately orchestrated performance of community celebration and solidarity.

Over the past forty years, Barba has engaged in hundreds of barter all over the world and six Festuger (Ledger 146). Here, I would like to examine the positive effects of these performance conventions as they pertain to the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I will address the types of communities created and reinforced, the individual as emerging from these communities, the shift, if not diffusion or blurring of the performer/spectator relationship and how these phenomena align with Rousseau’s call for utopian communal theatre.

Community: A plurality of meanings:

First, it is important to note the plurality of meanings of the term “community” as it is used in this paper. Baz Kershaw asserts that there are two different types of communities: communities of interest and communities of location (*Politics of Performance* 30-31). Communities of interest are groups of people predicated on mutual interests and ideologies. As Ian Watson points out, the Odin is a community of interest in which the culture is “vocationally based;” all of its members come together for the practice of theatre as a laboratory for multi-disciplinary research, cultural exchange and international collaboration (*Dynamics of a Barter* 107; odinteatret.dk). Communities of location, however, are “created through networks of relationships formed by face-to-face interaction within a geographically bounded area” (*Politics of Performance* 31). In this way, the Odin is *also* a community of location in that all of its

members live and work in the Danish town of Holstebro. Kershaw notes these two communities are in a constant state of intersection, creation, and dissolution. Thus, any one person can belong to multiple communities at the same time. Barter and Festuge, therefore, become cases in which a community of interest (the Odin) comes face to face with a community of location (the host community) through performance.

With respect to interest, Stanley Fish asserts the existence of a similar type of community which he calls an “interpretive community.” Such communities “are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts” (304). That is, interpretive communities are groups with a shared interest or ideology that *enact* their shared interest or ideology through the creation of text. In the cases of barter and Festuge, the performance *is* the text. Ideology, as Kershaw points out, can be a powerful social glue which binds together disparate components of the social order of a group (*Politics of Performance* 18). Interpretive communities are proof of this binding agency of ideology. When a group of people assert “we know” or “we understand” a particular idea, this is a powerful binding act of fellowship that Fish considers to be the forging of a new or affirmation of an existing interpretive community. This act of fellowship is the execution of “interpretive strategies” or agreed upon ways of writing a text. Interpretive communities enact interpretive strategies through agreement; by saying “yes, we understand, we know and we are *together* in knowing.” In the case of the barter in Carpignano, when the residents of the village performed for Odin they were enacting the interpretive strategy of performance thereby joining Odin’s community of interest and creating a new interpretive community of barter. Barter and Festuge, then, are cases of engendering and enacting this fellowship by “writing” the text of performance. Thus, these performance

conventions seem to be phenomena in which reciprocal performance begets all three types of communities: communities of interest, communities of location, and interpretive communities.

Rousseau and communal performance:

With these notions of community in mind, barbers provide a unique space for what Rousseau calls for in his *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*: a theatre of the community, by the community and for the community; in essence, a place of reflexivity and celebration for a community of location to *become* a community of interest and, possibly, an interpretive community. Ian Watson, borrowing from Victor Turner, describes the barber as “spontaneous *communitas*” that is, a temporary assemblage of pure sharing and reciprocal generosity in which there is “a flash of lucid mutual understanding . . . a moment of intersubjective illumination” within a particular group of people (*Dynamics of a Barber* 97, qtd. in Schechner 71). This occurrence of mutual understanding aligns and supports what I have already discussed with respect to interpretive communities and communities of interest. Thus, *communitas* is the phenomenon resulting from the dialogue among the participants of a particular event in which there is a shift from “I/me” to “Us/we,” from singularity to plurality, from heterogeneity to homogeneity, from parts of a whole to *gestalt* (Schechner 71).

Despite the “spontaneous” nature of the resulting community, barber and Festuge are the result of work. Schechner points out that spontaneous *communitas* rarely “just happens” (71). Maria Shevtsova describes barber as the “ideal of a beautiful commune, where humans, labour and life are united in joy” (117). By engaging in barber, a community is enacting itself, engendering its identity. It must declare “this is who *we are*” because “this is what *we do*.” For example, when Barba and the Odin actors were asked “*who* are you,” their verbal and passive response “actors” was not sufficient, and they were forced to identify and define themselves by

doing. Thus, barter and Festuge make a community accountable to itself and, in Rousseau's terms, "animate" the community, compelling it to self-actualize. In the process, agency is provided for a multitude of new communities (ideological, geographical, interpretive, performative etc.) to emerge.

Consequently, by establishing "this is who *we* are," barter allows for a community to be *internally* strengthened. A prime example is the Odin itself. Shevtsova points out that "Odin's existence depends on internal solidarity, which the exercise of the barter reinforces" (118). As a group of actors from disparate cultures and traditions² their daily work together is a constant barter whereby members bring their own performance traditions and training methods to the Odin table. In other words, the Odin is an interpretive community based upon the interpretive strategy of sharing culture, traditions, skills, and personal training methodologies as a means of becoming a community of interest. This prioritization of sharing and community demonstrates that, ultimately, "*being together*" is paramount for the members of the Odin Teatret (Shevtsova 113).

Barter also provides an opportunity for unity to be imitated. That is, by seeing the Odin's solidarity in the barter, the host community is invited to imitate this same togetherness. It is a case of community generating community. When the residents of Carpignano offered to show their dances they were not just imitating the performance they had just seen; they were imitating the community of interest they had just witnessed. While the Carpignanites were already a community of location they became, temporarily, an interpretive community and a community of interest. Therefore, barter and Festuge are more than performance; they are performance conventions that provide agency for the mimesis of community.

Ironically, these performance practices allow not only for the emergence of new and strengthened communities, but the emergence of the individual *in* a community. Barter is “a space where communal harmony and individual liberty do not contradict each other, but coexist for the greater benefit of all” (Shevtsova 117). Just as with the community who must define itself, each performer defines him/herself in performance. Roberta Carreri, an Italian actress who has been with Odin for over forty years, explains this phenomenon when reflecting on barter she made with anthropologist Mette Bovin in the northwest African country of Burkina Faso : “I experienced very strongly that my dances were *mine* because I had created them myself. I had seen each one of them being born, and I will see them die. *Their* dances are *theirs* because they belong to the community” (qtd. Bovin 151). Just as barter makes a community accountable to itself it also makes the performer accountable to him/herself. By performing for the Burkinabé, Carreri was taking ownership of her dances and traditions. She had to choose what to present and by choosing material she was choosing herself. Barba calls this the freeing of “latent energy” in an individual, Rousseau calls it “the indigenous man who surprises you, to the point of admiration, with his talents and works” (qtd. in Ledger 131; Rousseau 294).

Finally, one could argue that barter creates a temporary place of equality as lines between performer and spectator are blurred. Barter and Festuge are precisely the realization what Rousseau argued for in saying: “Let the Spectators become an Entertainment to themselves” (344). The performer *is* the spectator and the spectator *is* the performer. Thus, each person in barter or Festuge operates equally on multiple levels. It is, as noted earlier, the abolition of status (Schechner 71). Even those who do not perform still operate in a way that is not exclusively spectatorial. The moment they begin to watch a member of their community perform they become an active participant, a collaborator of sorts because it is their culture that is being

performed as well. Ian Watson notes that barter spectators move: “from the ludic mode of the conventional theatre audience to witnesses of an exchange in which they had a stake; they were the barter’s ‘*invested community*’” (*Dynamics of a Barter* 97). All parties are equally invested because they all equally have something at stake. The result is an idyllic commune where singular roles in a community are dissolved. Maybe this was precisely Rousseau’s intention; little did he know he would have to wait three centuries before his idea would be realized.

Through performance, barter provides an occasion for community, culture, and the individual to emerge. Ultimately barter allows for the following: 1) the internal strengthening of communities 2) the strengthening of an individual within a community 3) the forging of new communities 4) the surfacing of the deep cultural history of a person and a people 5) a temporary space of equality. Is this not what Rousseau was aiming for when he asked for a theatre which makes us “applaud our courage in praising that of others, our humanity in pitying the ills that we could have cured, our charity in saying to the poor, God will help you!” (269)?

Barter and Festuge: Are they more than altruistic community-forming processes?

However beneficial the barter may be for the Odin Teatret and the communities with which it engages one wonders: What happens *after* the barter? Do these newly formed and/or strengthened communities blossom or wither? While there is considerable written and video documentation of what happens *during* a barter, there is little record of what follows one. Barba does note one case in which the Odin returned to Carpignano a year after the initial barter: “...we tried to make tentacles grow that would take hold and remain after our departure. We demanded not only a barter. We also asked the group that had invited us which problem in their village they most wanted to solve . . . we asked the people who wanted to attend our dances to bring a book” (Barba, *Theatre: Solitude* 122).

This quote and the chapter in which it is situated paint another picture of barter, one without such altruistic Rousseauian agendas. Barba, in fact, targeted this town because of its poverty and its apparent absence of theatre in hope of it being an ideal place for the Odin to define itself and what it meant by “theatre”: “we wanted to go to a place where theatre had never existed and had no meaning” (*Theatre: Solitude* 120). This, then, begs the questions: Is barter a place of equality or an example of cultural colonialism or mere artistic selfishness? Are Barba and the Odin propelled by hegemonic pursuits rather than global egalitarianism?

Kershaw reminds us that Barba is not in search of exchange *by equals*; rather, he is in pursuit of the “only possibility of finding equality” (qtd. in *Radical in Performance* 211). But, as Nicholas Arnold pointedly asks, what equality can emerge from a situation in which one group imposes itself on the other in the interest of helping? What right does an outside group have to decide what a community needs? In the case of Carpignano, was a library the best thing for this impoverished Italian community or was it the best thing in Barba’s eyes (1208)? Furthermore, what equality can exist when, as in the case of the Festuge the entire festival is orchestrated by Odin? The Festuge as a case of cultural, artistic, and dramaturgical domination by the Odin carries with it “echoes of hegemony” (Arnold 1209). As with spontaneous *communitas*, this type of domination rarely “just happens” (Schechner 71). Thus, barter and Festuge no longer “just happen.” They should now also be considered the product of calculated mediation and dominance on the part of Odin.

In this way, barter and Festuge are no longer the face of equality for which Rousseau had hoped. The dominance of the Odin over event proceedings indicates at the very least an imbalance of power and at the very most ethnocentricity and cultural colonialism. While Barba asserts, as noted above, that he is seeking the “only possibility of equality,” his practices indicate

otherwise. Rustom Barucha cautions against this type of “omniscience,” arguing that one community cannot assume that its knowledge or practices would be suitable or even helpful to another community. Barucha considers barter to be a dangerous imposition of “First-World” economic and cultural strategies on “Third-World” communities: “those of us located in the so-called ‘Third World’ find that the routes of cultural exchange are already mapped for us before we enter them. Invariably we meet through the patronage of First World economies” (33). This imposition of “First-World” modalities, in the context of barter, is further illuminated by Victor Turner’s observation that “industrial societies” [‘First-World’ societies] express, experience, and understand fellowship “within leisure and sometimes aided by the projections of art” (qtd. in Schechner 71). Thus, by the Odin establishing performance as the appropriate mode of community-forming, it is imposing its “First-World” means of community making on the poorer “Third-World” communities.

As evidence of this cultural domination, Arnold notes that in barter the offerings of the host communities are often manipulated and transformed far from their original form. He, like Barucha, considers this manipulation an example of European hegemony: “Their very presence speaks of the power that allows Europeans the luxury of a cultural, as well as geographical, displacement” (Arnold 1208). So rather than being empowered, the host community suffers from a gross inequality of power; it essentially becomes entertainment for Odin, not for themselves.

To be fair, Barba is neither ignorant nor dismissive of the cultures and traditions of a people. In fact, he himself cautions against a theatre group attempting to insert themselves in a community for the sake of provoking change (*Theatre: Solitude* 121). Barba claims that he is seeking out the marginalized for the purposes of morally building them back up. Borrowing a term from Barucha, Barba claims that barter allows a community to see their own “cultural

resources.” While Barucha admits that many communities live in ignorance of their own cultural resources he does not seem to approve of barter as a suitable means of bringing them to the surface (33). Kai Bredholt, an Odin actor who has taken up the charge of creating barter, insists that barter allows a community to realize and recognize these resources by enacting them (“Introductory Speech”). For example, Barba notes that some communities attest to having no cultural heritage. In this case, Barba directs them towards the community’s elders, to learn from them and to bring both the traditions and the elders to the barter. In this way, Barba *is* creating dialogue between two incommunicative communities within a geographic community by bringing to light the presence of cultural traditions and providing a process for future discovery and understanding of cultural resources. Although Arnold argues that the “cultural product” of a host community is not foregrounded in barter, I would argue that the cultural *resources* certainly are foregrounded. Thus, a community walks away with more than a product; they leave with a process and a newly tapped font of cultural information.

In addition to cultural hegemony, Barba has been accused of colonialism. Watson, however, strongly comes to Barba’s defense stating that barter is not “theft of exotica” (*Towards a Third Theatre* 108). He points towards Barba’s recognition of his own foreignness in his life and work with Odin: “Foreign body is the best term for our presence in this southern Italian village. Odin Teatret’s actors and the population are poles apart . . . But it is this difference, this “otherness” that has been our point of departure. We do not want to ‘teach’ anything, nor inform the people here of their social or cultural situation. We do not believe we have a knowledge of something they lack” (qtd. in *Towards a Third Theatre* 23).

From this perspective, difference or “otherness” is not a bad thing, nor is it something Barba is intent on changing. In fact, “othering” is a phenomenon of which Barba is all too keenly

aware. To this day, he is vocal about the prejudices he suffered as an Italian emigrant in Norway. He writes about the wounds othering has caused him but also about the importance of difference: “When the delineation of borders is lost, identity is threatened” (*On Directing and Dramaturgy* 95; *The Paper Canoe* 4, “Address to participants of the Odin Week Festival 2013;” *Theatre: Solitude* 147). Barba embraces and searches for difference and this point is one that clearly distinguishes him from his mentor, Jerzy Grotowski. Whereas Barba is invested in “the ultimate cross-cultural search for human wholeness” *despite* visible cultural difference, Grotowski was engaged in the same pursuit but his point of departure is the “moment that precedes the difference” (qtd. in Salata 77). Thus, Grotowski attempted to find commonality before difference entered the equation, while Barba seems to be seeking commonality as demonstrated in the face of difference.

It is here, on the importance of difference, where Barba and Barucha seem to find some common ground. Barucha, like Barba, champions the recognition and confrontation of cultural difference but condemns the use of existing frameworks to examine these difference, asserting that “we need to look beyond being accommodated within existing frames. Indeed, we should not fill up the existing slots of ‘cultural difference,’ because that is the surest way . . . of perpetuating our ‘otherness.’” He also condemns theatrical practices that privilege spectacle over the “interaction of difference” (33). Both of these offenses are committed in barter such that “existing slots” of host/visitor, performer/non-performer, privileged/impooverished are filled and cultural difference *is* the spectacle.

Of all offenses previously mentioned, no instance of barter seems to commit them more egregiously than Mette Bovin’s use of barter in executing “provocation anthropology.” Bovin, a Danish anthropologist, uses barter to “provoke” her subjects into sharing their cultural

resources.” She traveled to Africa with Odin actress Roberta Carreri to do ethnographic research on the people of Burkina Faso. Carreri entered the village and performed in an attempt to “provoke” barter. After some time, Bovin and Carreri were successful in inciting reciprocal performance thereby acquiring the desired anthropological information. These findings, private traditions that Bovin admits would have taken her years to unveil without barter, were taken back and later published in research mainly benefiting Bovin. Thus, despite providing a unique opportunity for Carreri’s cultural and performance identity to emerge, Bovin’s work presents itself as a case of cultural “theft of exotica.” What is most alarming is Bovin’s own admission of the lack of equality in her work. Carreri and Bovin both note how this experience foregrounded their white, privileged, European status. Bovin admits that from this privileged place she and Carreri entered a “Third-World” country and exited leaving “nothing behind...” Bovin intends this to mean that no inequality, judgment, or prejudice was left behind, but how equal can one consider an exchange to be in which one party leaves empty-handed (142-158)?

Returning to Rousseau one last time, the barter does commit one fatal error which the philosopher would likely be unable to forgive: mediation (Butler 38). Rousseau argued for events in which “nothing” happens because it is the gathering of a people that *is* the spectacle (344). While the inaugural barter occurred in the relative absence of mediation, today the structure, content, and dramaturgy of these events is determined by the Odin members. Thus barter in the twenty-first century is predicated on the conciliation of the host community and the unsolicited intervention of the Odin Teatret.

For better or worse, Rousseau, Barba, and the critics and supporters of barter and Festuge seem to be pursuing the same end: an effective catalyst for the potential of equality. Rousseau championed performance events that “animated” the people bringing them together like a large

family (348). Barba asserts that he is searching for what lies on the “other bank of the river,” while Barucha offers yet a third place of community: the river itself as metaphor for equilibrium and convergence (*Theatre: Solitude* 147; Barucha 32). Is it possible for theatre to create communities of interest, location and/or interpretation in order to create the equilibrium that would heal the wounds of colonialism, oppression, hegemony, and prejudice? Ultimately, the real problem is not *creating* the equality but *sustaining* it. Theatre is ephemeral and barter exists in a liminal space between total agreement and anarchy, utopia and riot, performance and spectator, actor and non-actor, solidarity and discord (Barucha 34; Kershaw *The Radical in Performance* 203; Kershaw *The Politics of Performance* 190; Watson *The Dynamics of a Barter* 98 & 104). What strategies, then, can theatre employ to create more permanent equality? Maybe it is a matter of allowing all that is possible and probable or, as Roland Barthes states: “asserting the very existence of plurality” (6). Maybe it is a matter of creating a space that precedes difference, as Grotowski sought. Maybe these practices already exist and it is simply a matter of time and exchange before this interpretive community can emerge.

1. This is the Danish plural form of Festuge.
2. At the time of the first barter, the Odin Teatret consisted of members from Italy, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. Over the last forty years, the cultural heritage of the Odin has expanded to include members Argentina, Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Bahia, Spain, Buenos Aires, and Colombia.

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photo by Tony D'Urso

Ollolai (Italy) 1975. Iben Nagel Rasmussen



photo by Tony D'Urso

Ollolai (Italy) 1975



photo by Tony D'Urso

Ollolai (Italy) 1975. Odd Ström





photo by Tony D'Urso

Peru 1978. Odin Teatret in a Street Parade



photo by Odin Teatret Archives

Chicxulub (Mexico) 1988. Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Jan Ferslev, Julia Varley, Torgeir Wethal, Richard Fowler, César Brie and Naira Gonzalez, preparing the performance "Talabot"



photo by Tony D'Urso

Peru 1978. Geronimo, Roberta Carreri's character