

The Secret Art of the Performer: A Technical Analysis of Theatre Anthropology and Pre-Expressivity

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In the realm of performance studies, few works carry the technical weight and cross-cultural significance of **Eugenio Barba** and **Nicola Savarese's** *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. This seminal text does not merely document theatrical styles; it functions as a rigorous anatomical and physiological investigation into the "bios" of the performer. Theatre Anthropology, as defined by Barba and the **International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA)**, is the study of the pre-expressive behavior of the human being in a state of representation. It focuses on the underlying principles that govern a performer's presence before they begin to represent a character, tell a story, or express an emotion.

The Theoretical Framework of Theatre Anthropology

Theatre Anthropology departs from traditional drama criticism by shifting the focus from the "result" (the play, the character, the meaning) to the "process" (the physical and mental readiness of the performer). The core of this discipline lies in identifying transcultural principles that exist across diverse traditions, such as Japanese Noh and Kabuki, Indian Kathakali and Odissi, Balinese dance, and Western classical mime. These principles are not based on aesthetic similarities but on the biological and sub-biological mechanics of the human body under the pressure of performance.

Defining Pre-Expressivity

Pre-expressivity is the level of the performer's organization that deals with the "pure presence" or "life" of the body. It is the layer beneath the "expressive" layer. While expressivity is tied to specific cultural codes, psychological states, or narrative needs, pre-expressivity is concerned with the physiological and energetic mobilization of the performer. A performer who has mastered pre-expressive techniques is said to have a "dilated body"—a body that is alive, alert, and capable of holding the audience's attention even before a single word is uttered.

Technical Mechanics: Daily vs. Extra-Daily Behavior

Central to the technical breakdown of Theatre Anthropology is the distinction between **Daily Behavior** and **Extra-Daily Behavior**. This distinction is fundamental to understanding how a performer transforms their ordinary physical existence into a theatrical presence.

- **Daily Behavior:** Governed by the principle of maximum result for minimum effort. Our movements in daily life are functional, economic, and conditioned by habit.
- **Extra-Daily Behavior:** Governed by the principle of maximum expenditure of energy for a non-functional result. This does not mean "wasting" energy, but rather redirecting it into a state of permanent readiness or "luxury energy."

The transition from daily to extra-daily behavior requires a conscious deconstruction of habitual movement patterns. This is often achieved through what Barba calls "rendering the body difficult." By placing the body in a state of physical disadvantage or complexity, the performer forces the nervous system and musculature into a heightened state of awareness.

Comparison Matrix: Daily vs. Extra-Daily Principles

Principle	Daily Behavior (Ordinary)	Extra-Daily Behavior (Performative)
Energy Use	Minimal expenditure; economic.	Hyper-mobilization; “luxury” energy.
Balance	Stable, habitual, unconscious.	Precarious, conscious, dynamic (“living” balance).
Movement Path	Linear, direct, functional.	Curvilinear, resisted, or broken.
Internal State	Passive or reactive.	Active “Sats” (Impulse-readiness).
Center of Gravity	Centered over the base of support.	Shifted or lowered to create tension.

The Three Fundamental Principles of Pre-Expressivity

In *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Barba and Savarese isolate three primary principles that appear consistently in the training of masters across the globe. These are technical axioms that define the extra-daily body.

1. The Alteration of Balance (Precarious Balance)

In daily life, we maintain balance with minimal muscular engagement. In the performing arts, balance is often treated as a dynamic conflict. By reducing the base of support or shifting the center of gravity, the performer creates a “living balance.” In **Noh theatre**, this is seen in the sliding walk (*suriashi*), where the performer maintains a constant level while keeping the knees bent and the weight distributed in a way that suggests a potential for movement in any direction. This technique increases the muscular tension in the legs, which in turn radiates through the torso, creating a palpable “presence.”

2. The Law of Opposites

Every movement in the extra-daily state is born from an opposing impulse. To go left, one must first begin by shifting right. To go up, one must first press down. This is not merely a stylistic choice but a technical requirement to generate internal energy. In **Kathakali**, the performer never moves in a straight line; every gesture is preceded by an *anti-impulse*. This creates a sense of resistance, as if the performer is moving through a dense medium. This resistance is what makes the movement visible and “thick” to the spectator.

3. The Principle of Simplification and Omission

Extra-daily behavior is not about adding more movement; it is often about concentrating energy by omitting the peripheral. This leads to the “dilation” of the performer. By absorbing the energy of a large movement into a small one, the performer achieves a state of **intensity**. This is the secret of the “stillness” often seen in master performers. They are not passive; they are vibrating with contained energy. The “waste” of energy is omitted, leaving only the essential, high-tension core of the action.

The Concept of 'Sats': The Physics of Readiness

One of the most critical technical terms in Theatre Anthropology is **Sats**. Derived from Scandinavian and Germanic roots meaning “to sit” or “to set,” it refers to the moment of transition between one action and another. It is the “impulse” that precedes the action.

Technical analysis of the Sats involves examining the performer's **respiratory control** and **tonus**. At the moment of Sats, the performer is in a state of maximum potential energy. It is like an archer holding a bowstring taut; the arrow

has not yet flown, but the energy is fully present. Mastering the Satsallows a performer to change direction, rhythm, or quality of movement instantaneously. This “readiness” is the foundation of the performer’s “bios” or life on stage.

Expressivity and Phenotype Variability: A Technical Parallel

Interestingly, the search data mentions **Phenotype Variability: Penetrance and Expressivity**. While primarily a biological concept, it offers a fascinating technical parallel to Theatre Anthropology. In genetics, *penetrance* refers to the proportion of individuals carrying a particular variant of a gene who also express an associated trait, while *expressivity* refers to the variations in a phenotype among individuals carrying a particular genotype.

In the context of the performer, we can view the “genotype” as the technical training or the “score” of the performance. The “expressivity” is the individual performer’s ability to manifest that training. Just as biological expressivity is influenced by environmental factors and other genetic interactions, a performer’s expressivity is influenced by their mastery of pre-expressive principles. A lack of “life” on stage is often a failure of technical penetrance—the performer has the “code” (the lines, the steps) but lacks the physiological “bios” to make that code manifest as a living presence.

Comparative Table: Performance Traditions and Their Pre-Expressive Focus

Tradition	Primary Balance Technique	Energy Regulation	Key Technical Term
Balinese Dance	Lowered center of gravity; wide stance.	Sudden shifts in speed (Angsel).	Agem (Basic posture)
Japanese Noh	Slightly tilted pelvis; sliding steps.	Concentration (Jo-ha-kyu).	Kamae (Readiness)
Odissi (India)	Tri-bent body (Tribhangi); weight shifts.	Rhythmic stamping; eye movements.	Chauk (Square position)
Decroux Mime	Spinal segmentation; counterweights.	Muscular resistance (Dynamo-corps).	Le Contrepoids

Procedural Implementation: Building the Extra-Daily Body

For a performer or director looking to implement the principles of Theatre Anthropology, the following procedural steps are recommended for developing a pre-expressive foundation:

1. Deconstruction of Habit: The performer must identify their “daily” physical habits (e.g., leaning to one side, shallow breathing) and consciously work against them.
2. Establishing the 'Living Balance': Practice standing or moving in positions that are slightly unstable. This requires the continuous engagement of core muscles and the soles of the feet.
3. Development of Resisted Action: Perform simple tasks (e.g., picking up an object) while imagining the air is as thick as water. Focus on the anti-impulse before every move.
4. Isolation and Segmentation: Break the body down into segments (head, neck, torso, pelvis, limbs). Learn to move one part while keeping the rest in a state of high-tonus stillness.
5. Mastering the 'Sats': Practice stopping mid-movement and holding the potential for immediate change. This develops the “dilated body” and increases stage presence.

Case Study: The Presence of the Master Performer

Consider the work of **Sanjukta Panigrahi**, the late master of Odissi dance who collaborated extensively with ISTA. Panigrahi's presence was not merely a result of her expressive face or the beauty of her costume. Technically, her presence was built on the rigorous application of the *Chauk* and *Tribhangipositions*. These positions are physiologically demanding; they force the body into a series of triangles and curves that defy the vertical economy of daily standing.

By maintaining these positions for hours, the performer's muscular tonus is transformed. This transformation creates a “sub-score” of physical tension that the audience perceives as “magnetism.” The magnetism is a measurable bio-energetic state resulting from the controlled conflict between opposing physical forces within the body.

Troubleshooting Common Performance Failures

The technical framework of Theatre Anthropology allows for the diagnosis of common performance issues through a physiological lens:

- Lack of Presence: Often caused by “economic” energy use. The performer is using their “daily” body on stage.

Solution: Implement techniques of precarious balance and resisted movement.

- Unintentional Tension (Blockage): Unlike the “luxury energy” of pre-expressivity, blockage is static tension that prevents movement. Solution: Focus on the Sats and the flow of energy through the spine rather than locking the joints.

- Muddled Expressivity: The performer tries to “emote” before they have established a “bios.” Solution: Strip away the emotion and return to the pre-expressive score until the body is dilated.

The Legacy of Eugenio Barba and ISTA

Eugenio Barba’s work at the **Odin Teatret** and through **ISTA** has created a universal grammar for the performer. A *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* serves as the definitive encyclopedia of this grammar. It proves that while the stories we tell and the cultures we belong to are diverse, the physiological principles that make a human being “alive” in a performative space are remarkably consistent.

The “Secret Art” referred to in the title is not a mystical secret, but a technical one. It is the hidden work of the performer on their own physical and mental organization. By focusing on the pre-expressive level, the performer masters the ability to attract and direct the spectator’s attention, creating a space of shared experience that transcends cultural boundaries. This technical rigor is what elevates performance from mere mimicry to a profound, living art form.

In the modern era, where digital performance and phenotypic expressivity are becoming subjects of scientific study, the lessons of Theatre Anthropology remain more relevant than ever. They remind us that the heart of performance is the human body—a complex, energetic system that can be trained, dilated, and transformed into a powerful instrument of presence and communication.

Tags: #Theatre Anthropology #Eugenio Barba #Pre Expressivity #Sats #Performance Techniques #ISTA

