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## The drama of the Pre-Expressive

Theodoros Terzopoulos' production  
of **Waiting for Godot** from  
a Theatre Anthropology perspective

### Abstract

The article analyses Theodoros Terzopoulos' staging of *Waiting for Godot* at the National Theatre, using the perspectives of theatre anthropology, focusing on how the work can be perceived as a performance of waiting. The paper discusses the definition of ritual, cultural performances, performativity, and describes the pre-expressive, explaining Eugenio Barba's terminology, comparing it to the set of tools of the performance.

**Key words:** theatre anthropology, cultural performance, rite, pre-expressive, Godot

### The performance of waiting, the drama of the pre-expressive, the rite of waiting for Godot

*35<sup>th</sup> minute. "What are we waiting for?" – "Godot."*

"Greek director Theodoros Terzopoulos staged Beckett's most famous work, and the production was included in the programme of the 11<sup>th</sup> MITEM Festival. In the hands of Terzopoulos, *Waiting for Godot* becomes one lens to decipher the Other who, inside and outside of us, summons opposites: animal longing

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and divine tension, madness and dream, delirium and nightmare. A show that questions our own humanity. On stage, two young performers and three of the most intense and sensitive Italian actors; the music is signed by Panayiotis Velianitis, one of the first Greek composers of computer and computer aided music. The performance [...] [is] set on 'the ruins of the world', in a future more or less close to us, where all the present and the past wounds [are] kept open. The same for the expectations... At this borderline of human existence, what are the minimum possible conditions for restarting life, a life that is worth living? In *Aspettando Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) there are two possible answers [...]. The first is the effort to communicate and coexist with the Other, the one who is before us, despite of any obstacles, even when these seem formidable! The second is the effort to communicate with the Other inside us, this inscrutable and dark area of repressed desires and fears, forgotten senses and instincts, the region of the animal and the divine, where madness and dream, delirium and nightmare are born," says the playbill of the National Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

To understand how the analysis takes on an anthropological character, rather than following the aesthetics of theatre, I draw on the perspective of theatre anthropology, and more specifically on the approaches of Richard Schechner, Eugenio Barba, Nicola Savarese and Patris Pavis. Nevertheless, it will remain on the borderline, partly for reasons of the multidisciplinary of theatre studies as well as the absurdity of the play, and partly due to the theatrical elements of the production.

Theatre anthropology is a discipline of theatre studies and applied cultural anthropology at the same time. According to Richard Schechner, a prominent scholar in the field, "Just as theatre is anthropologizing itself, so anthropology is being theatricalized" (Schechner 1985, 33). Schechner's statement is true in several ways. The anthropologisation of theatre is true also in the sense that, as anthropology gained ground, Western theatre established more and more connections with the rituals of non-Western cultures, and in the dialogue between them, Western culture's own rituals, theatrical elements and dramatic forms began to play a mediating role; this interest motivated the theatre anthropology research of Jerzy Grotowski and his student Eugenio Barba in the 1960s, as well as the involvement of Peter Brook, Richard Schechner and Ariane Mnouchkine. However, anthropologization also means that theatre is heavily exposed to

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1 See <https://nemzetiszinhas.hu/en/play/waiting-for-godot-2/related-links> (last visited: September 15, 2024).

the mediatised, technicised world of contemporary culture, to phenomena that transform one's cultural strategies, rewrite or question one's patterns of behaviour, alter one's perceptions, delineate one's thinking. The theatricalisation of anthropology is the result of a process that has made anthropology "an intellectual poaching license" (see Geertz 1994), i.e., interdisciplinary approaches have theatricalised anthropological research (see Ungvári Zrínyi 2011, 65–66).

Using the line of inquiry of theatre anthropology, I could also analyse *Waiting for Godot* from the perspective of cultural performance studies: to what extent can it be considered a social drama, moreover, as Schechner writes, "...I discovered that performance can take place anywhere, in all kinds of circumstances, and for incredibly diverse purposes. [...] Erving Goffman's 1959 breakthrough book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* made me feel that performances coexist with the conditions of human existence in a broad sense."<sup>2</sup>

Along the lines of this approach, why not consider *Waiting for Godot* as a *performance\_of waiting* (performable on stage and in the theatrical medium)? In addition, to borrow Barba's concept of the pre-expressive, the pre-expressive is *itself* a state of *waiting*. Based on the research and conceptual framework of Lukes and Turner (see Connerton 1997; Turner 2002; 2003) the performance *Waiting for Godot* (!) is a rite. The rite of waiting.

In this sense, what we have is a multi-layered production, composed along the lines of theatre anthropology, on which the director's special, unconventional, body-consciousness-based actor-directing technique is built.

## Rite, cultural performances, performativity

Rite is not only a relevant question for the anthropology of the spectator: in ritual action there is no difference between player/performer and spectator, as they participate together in the privileged, sacred space and time of the play. This privileged nature is valid for the historical period of the birth of the theatre, but also for the rites celebrated at all times, even the everyday ones (Ungvári Zrínyi 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> Goffman's book was published in English in 1956, and the German edition Schechner refers to, *Die Präsentation des Selbst im Alltag*, was published in 1959. (The book is also available in Hungarian, translated by Gábor Berényi, under the title *Az én bemutatása a mindennapi életben*, Budapest: Pólya, 1999.) The above quote is my own translation.

It is before us, the audience, that the sacred space opens and closes, presented to us by Terzopoulos with the scenic element of the cross and audio inserts reminiscent of church music. Withered flowers on the proscenium with light on them—just as the flowers on the altar welcome a person entering a church (floral decorations are customary in Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran churches and Jewish temples), the audience is also greeted by this prop. The biblical, sacral layer remains present in the background (sometimes in the foreground, for example during Lucky's monologue),<sup>3</sup> which is reinforced by the director through the play with the cross, the altar theme and the final scene (eleven bloody books descend into the space).

Rite, in Lukes' reading, is rule-governed activity of a symbolic character where rules guarantee repetition, the reproduction of a previously imposed order; in order, as the religious historian Jan Assmann argues, to "keep the world in mind" (Assmann quoted by Ungvári Zrínyi 2011, 123; the quote is my own translation).

For the two characters, Estragon and Vladimir, this ritual waiting marks their days and defines their future. They go to bed, wake up, fall out, make up, dance, starve and eat, sleep and wait according to rules. Their sacred space is the country road, the cross (element) that towers and builds around them, sometimes protecting them.

Victor Turner sees ritual as an anti-structure because it breaks the monotony of the structures of everyday life and allows one to move into another, ritualistic, more genuine world (Turner 2002).

In the culture of globalisation, however, knowing the composition of contemporary lifeworlds, we can observe that the process of everyday life is not homogeneous (we assume that it never was, only the continuity of human practice has made it appear that way); it is made up of experiential realities and spaces, as postmodern cultural strategies seek to create privileged spaces and times in the everyday world (see Welsch's description of the aestheticisation

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3 "LUCKY – Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast..." (Source: Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* [https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/1882602/mod\\_resource/content/1/Godot.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/1882602/mod_resource/content/1/Godot.pdf) p. 34.; Hungarian: Beckett 2015.)



Picture 1. Scene from the National Theatre's production of *Waiting for Godot* (Director: Theodoros Terzopoulos, Photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

of reality, the composition of physical and virtual realities in media spaces, Ungvári Zrínyi 2011, 123). Thus, places and events that were not previously within the domain of traditional rites have the chance to become rituals.

The experiential reality of Gogo and Didi (i.e., Estragon and Vladimir) is defined by the repetitive ritual acts they perform while waiting (going to bed,

sleeping, eating, quarrelling, dancing and meeting), through which they move from their miserable, everyday experiential space into a ritual, genuine world.

43<sup>rd</sup> minute. "What are we doing now?" – "We are waiting for Godot."

Enrico Fiore, who is quoted in the review lines next to the playbill, also refers to the performance as a composition unfolding in waiting: "Terzopoulos' *Waiting for Godot* is a theatrical machine, encouraging the spectator's gaze to succumb to the composition unfolding in unfulfilled expectation, defined by the actors and the stage space."<sup>4</sup>

## Eugenio Barba's conceptual framework

### *Presence as energy*

In the training of theatre-makers outside the realist tradition, research into the presence of the actor is a prominent feature. Starting from the 1960s, often on the border between performance and theatre, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner or even Joseph Chaikin explored the potential of the actor's presence through different approaches, writes Barba in his book *Paper Canoe* (2001).

Eugenio Barba, who, after his collaboration with Grotowski, continued his research with his own company, Odin Teatret, made a number of observations on presence, which are based on his research in the field of theatre anthropology and Eastern theatre traditions. One of the most significant of these is the identification of a *pre-expressive* (pre-expression) stage in the actor's presence on stage, where the actor's presence is able to capture the spectator's attention before conveying any message.

In 1979 Barba founded the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), whose first conference was held in Bonn in 1980. Theatre anthropology was developed on the basis of transcultural observations, comparative analyses and continuous interdisciplinary discussions; it "is the study of the pre-expressive scenic behaviour upon which different genres, styles, roles and personal or collective traditions are all based" (Barba 2001, 20).

Theatrical anthropology distinguishes between daily and extra-daily use of the body, i.e., technique. The former is effective, organised according to the

4 See <https://nemzetiszinhas.hu/en/play/waiting-for-godot-2/related-links> (last visited: September 15, 2024).

principle of “minimum energy input—maximum work.” In contrast, the extra-daily technique is not driven by efficiency but it works according to the principle of wasting energy and transforming the body into a technical form. Theatre anthropology classifies a performer’s work into three levels or organisation: 1) the performer’s personality; 2) the stage traditions and socio-historical context; and 3) pre-expressivity (the extra-daily use of the body). The latter is the biological level of the stage, i.e., the *bios*.

Barba considers this so important that, in his opinion, “[i]f [performers] are not effective on the pre-expressive level, they are not performers. They can be used within a particular performance but are no more than functional material in the hands of a director or choreographer. [...] The effectiveness of a performer’s pre-expressive level is the measure of her/his autonomy as an individual and as an artist” (Barba 2001, 133).<sup>5</sup>

Theatre anthropology is the study of human behaviour when using one’s physical and mental presence in consciously designed performance situations according to principles that differ from those used in everyday life (see Barba and Savarese 2021).

The first factor—the personality of the actor—is unique. The second—the tradition of the stage and the socio-historical—extends to everyone who belongs to the same performing style. Only the third, pre-expressive category applies to all performers of any era or culture; this is the “biological” level of performance. The first two factors determine the transition from pre-expressivity to representation (expressivity). The third is the invariant element (*idem*) that underlies cultural, stylistic and individual differences. The repetitive, recurring principles that can be detected at the biological level of performance enable the use of different modes of play, the individual elaboration of stage presence and dynamism. For certain physiological factors (body weight, balance, position of the spine, direction of gaze), these principles create pre-expressive tensions

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5 Cf. “This extra-daily use of the body is what is called technique. A transcultural analysis of performance reveals that the performer’s work is the result of the fusion of three aspects which reflect three different levels of organisation 1. The performers’ personalities, their sensibilities, their artistic intelligence, their social *personae*: those characteristics that make them unique and one of a kind. 2. The particularities of the traditions and the socio-historical contexts through which the unique personality of a performer is manifest. 3. The use of physiology according to extra-daily body techniques. The recurrent and transcultural principles on which these extra-daily techniques are based are defined by theatre anthropology as the field of pre-expressivity” (Barba, Eugenio and Nicola Savarese. 2006. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. New York: Routledge, 5; Hungarian edition: Barba and Savarese 2021, 10–11.)

within the body. This creates a new field of force, in the theatrical sense the body becomes “decided”, “alive”, the presence (the scenic bios) is manifested, with which the performer engages the attention of the spectator, even before any personal expression is formally expressed. At the same time, this “before” implies a logical sequence rather than a temporal precedence. The different levels of organisation cannot be separated, within the performance and from the spectator’s point of view. They may only be separated through a kind of abstraction during analytical research and the technical realisation of the composition by the actor or dancer. ISTA’s research is concerned with the study of the principles involved in the extra-daily use of the body and their application in the creative work of the performer. Accordingly, theatre anthropology investigates the socio-cultural and physiological behaviour of humans in performance situations (see Barba and Savarese 2021).

*55<sup>th</sup> minute. “What are we doing?” – “We’re waiting for Godot.”*

### *Energy-saturated immobility*

Another fundamental term that Barba coined in relation to energy is *sats*, the energy-saturated immobility, the moment/state before a movement, when the whole body is already in tension but the action is not yet visible. The energy can be suspended in the form of immobility in motion. *Sats* is the common element that unites the different individual artistic techniques of the actors of Odin Teatret. “My familiarity with my actors’ *sats* [...] helped me see beyond the opulence of the costumes and the seductive stylization of the Asian performers, and *to see bent knees*. This was how one of the first principles of Theatre Anthropology, the change of balance, was revealed to me”—testifies Barba in *Paper Canoe*. He continues by stating that it is not the desire to express that determines action, but the desire to act that determines what one expresses. Theatre anthropology places great emphasis on the presence of the performer and the conditions and the creation of this presence. Barba argues that presence has nothing to do with force, pressure or the pursuit of speed by all means. The actor can be extremely focused even when immobile. One example he gives is the bow that the archer draws but holds the string without releasing it. In immobility, restrained kinetic energy and tension are present. “I use a Scandinavian word, *sats*, to describe energy gathered onto itself, the starting point of action, the moment in which we concentrate all our forces before aiming it at an action” (Hungarian edition: Barba 2001, 97–98).



## Director Theodoros Terzopoulos' training – energising the actor's body

Theodoros Terzopoulos, in his book *Return of Dionysus*, on theatre and the practical methodology of actor training, published in Hungarian last year (translated by András Kozma; Budapest: University of Theatre and Film, 2023), explains how he works with actors to implement his elaborate concept. Rehearsals for a production are usually preceded by lengthy training. The focus is on working with the diaphragm, which helps to refine the senses. In the director's approach, the actor's body transcends the physical body: it includes senses, feelings, imagination and instincts.

"The founder of the Attis Theatre developed his special method several decades ago, and it is taught at many theatre academies around the world. The most important factor is energy. Energy is often talked about in theatre, but it is often understood to mean muscle power. But it is much more than that, it also covers mental and emotional energy. Terzopoulos' method helps to mobilise all of these at once. The daily task is to work with the diaphragm to refine our senses. The Body, says Terzopoulos, is, with a capital letter, much more than a physical body: it includes senses, feelings, imagination, and instincts. But it all begins with the correct diaphragmatic respiration.

[...] From the moment you enter the world of energy, your body becomes softened, invigorated, animated, and strengthened. But it also becomes softer—the barriers, the mental and muscular resistance disappear. We arrive at what we might call a psychosomatic energy field. This term is also often misinterpreted, even though it is a very concrete thing. It means that one's whole being, body and soul, are interconnected. Terzopoulos' method is therefore a complex, psychosomatic work process which is independent of rehearsals and performance and must be worked on separately. Of course, the foundations that we build in the training sessions are put to use on stage. It is an investment, the results of which will hopefully be visible in the quality of the performance."<sup>6</sup>

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6 See the Greek actor and director Savvas Stroumpos' words here: "Test és lélek energiái – a Terzopoulosz-módszer" ("Energies of Body and Soul – the Terzopoulos Method"), *Nemzeti Magazin* 2023/8. Online access: <https://nemzetiszinhas.hu/magazin/2022/03/test-es-lelek-energiai-bakkhansnok> (last visited: September 15, 2024).

The crunches, the hard work with the diaphragm is evident in all the actors during the performance of *Waiting for Godot*. For the two protagonists, the pre-expressive is discernible before every scene and every utterance, their speech typically starting from a presence that is the result of a physical act. A recurring ritual element is that they lie down, touching their heads, talk and fall asleep. The Boy's walking back and forth, his turning, motion, sequences of movements reflect a dance and choreographic technique. The bent knees constitute the actors' 'base position'. Their facial expressions, eye movements, teeth chattering, laughing, crying, wailing, body tremors, shaking, sometimes getting into an ecstatic state (saliva flowing from his mouth, while we do not hear an utterance) show a complete transcendence. Terzopoulos makes his actors use extra-daily use of their bodies, as Marcel Mauss writes in his book chapter "Biographical List of Body Techniques" (Mauss 2004), but also as we can read in the anthropological dictionary *The Secret Art of the Performer*, with many examples: "Every extra-daily technique is the consequence of a change of a point of balance in the daily technique. This change effects the spine and therefore the way the upper part of the body is extended, and the way the pelvis is held: that is, the way we move in space" (Barba and Savarese 2021, 271).

He keeps the actors *awake* and *alert* throughout, but in the final scene he lays the two bodies on top of each other and then bloody books descend from above.

Nothing proves better how valid the arsenal of theatre anthropology is and on what a wide spectrum the results of existing research and methods can be interpreted than the fact that the production of an absurd drama in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a theatre director who is also renowned in Europe can also hold its own in an analysis based on the aspects examined by theatre anthropology. As a result of the work of the artists and researchers mentioned above, there is growing number of artists, researchers and spectators whose artistic insights or practical training are formulated within the tools of theatre anthropology.

*85<sup>th</sup> minute. "We'll have to come back tomorrow to wait for Godot."*

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