



Friday, Nov. 28, 1969

Grotowski's Seminar

One of the most striking aspects of the visit to the U.S. of Jerzy Grotowski and his Polish Laboratory Theater is that it has forced drama critics to think about the nature of theater. The audience for the final play of a three-play series was limited to 40 people. This means that opening night was virtually a seminar in drama for the first-string critics of New York.

The plays that followed *The Constant Prince* (TIME, Oct. 24) were *Akropolis* and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*. *Akropolis* contains a staggering irony in its title, for it is actually about Auschwitz. The title is an implicit judgment on a civilization that plummets from its zenith to its lowest depths. The inmates of the death camp spend most of the evening dumping each other in and out of wheelbarrows, piecing together homely sections of stovepipe and finally, one by one, entering a crematorium. The playgoer's knowledge that the pipes that the members of the cast have strung about the stage will channel the smoke of their own burning flesh makes *Akropolis* the most powerful indictment of genocide that has been rendered in the theater.

In *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, the characters are actors who have undertaken to improvise the roles of Simon Peter, Judas, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, John and the Simpleton—the Simpleton being the Fool in Christ and also Christ. As with all of Grotowski, this consists of rendering states of being rather than moving in any given plot direction. The play contains stinging parodies of Biblical episodes such as the marriage feast of Cana and the death and resurrection of Lazarus. It also has the sexuality of a wet dream, with one character rubbing a loaf of bread against his groin until he achieves orgasm. Perhaps the most unsettling sight and sound of the evening is that of several characters in turn biting into the naked side of the Christ figure and sucking his blood.

What, then, are the lessons to be learned from Grotowski and his magnificently trained ensemble company? First and foremost, that in serious drama there is no substitute for intensity. A play is like a magnifying glass that focuses the full heat of the sun on the head of a pin. Grotowski has discovered that the smaller the audience the greater the intensity. The relationship between actor and audience is subtly altered from performer and spectator to a

merging of personality in which each somehow acquires the identity of the other and suffers the same strife of soul.

One reason for this is that both playgoer and actor are forced to divest themselves of casual everyday preoccupations and behavior patterns. As Grotowski puts it, he wants to demonstrate "what is behind the mask of common vision: the dialectics of human behavior. At a moment of psychic shock, a moment of terror, of mortal danger or tremendous joy, a man does not behave 'naturally.' " By attacking the whole concept of natural behavior, Grotowski divorces himself from the cult of psychological realism, as exemplified, in the Actors' Studio. The Actors' Studio idea is that the self is an onion. If one peels off enough layers, one will reach emotional verity. But Grotowski's goal is spiritual truth. Through strenuous physical exercise and contemplative disciplines, his actors are trained to ignite as if in an atmosphere of pure oxygen.

What is the purpose of this combustion? Just as night most vividly defines day, Grotowski believes that blasphemy against a taboo re-creates a sense of the holy. If a man were to defecate on a church altar, for example, even a confirmed atheist would feel some sense of shock. In that shock, in the very act of profanation, some sense of the sacred would be reborn and reconfirmed. Opposites imply each other. Grotowski shows an audience the passion of man, his agony, his desolation, his death, and above all the violation of his body and his spirit. By portraying the utter humiliation of man, Grotowski reminds one that no prouder being ever issued from the hand of God.

The drawback to Grotowski's method is that while it would work perfectly in Hamlet, it would be no good at all for a superb comedy of manners like The Importance of Being Earnest. In the arrogant exclusivity of his definition of drama, Grotowski elevates the director and the actor while excluding much of the world's dramatic literature. But when it comes to plays and themes that are stocked with spiritual tinder, Grotowski has proved that no one can set them more fiercely ablaze.

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