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Jerzy Grotowski: Ascetic and Smuggler Allen Kuharski

The tragic irony of Jerzy Grotowski's death may prove to be that his absence is necessary for his past presence in both Poland and the West to be understood fully--and for a period of true candor and serious critical reexamination of his life and work to begin. The full complexity and stature of Grotowski's career has yet to be completely grasped, and no longer needs to camouflage itself from the perils of Cold War politics. Grotowski's death should compel the start of a new conversation around his life and work, rather than mark the end of one. And most important is that this conversation includes and inspires a new generation of actors and directors.

Grotowski talked about his work with actors in terms of sincerity and precision. And in fact his actors did consistently demonstrate a conviction and a technical mastery in performance previously unknown in Western theater. The appeal of the work was irresistible: a marriage of ethics and virtuosity that promised to renew and redeem the frivolous and increasingly irrelevant institution of the theater. But not only that, his work seemed to imply that such a sanctified yet secular art theater could assume a role of ethical leadership and renewal in society at large, and that the authority of church and state might even pale in comparison. Though Grotowski was scrupulously modest in his statements on these scores, his language implies a kind of theatrical messianism--a twentieth-century return to the Polish romantic heresy of the displacement of church and state, of God and czar, by the poet and the actor. A very seductive idea to theater people in any context, as demonstrated by the global impact of Grotowski's theory and practice over the last thirty years. A seduction to which I must admit, like so many others, I succumbed from afar.

Twenty years after first having *Towards a Poor Theater* handed to me by my professor in a Polish-language class at the University of Wisconsin, eighteen years after my first trip to Poland--largely inspired by reading Grotowski's book--and now reflecting on his death, I have confronted another side of his life and work. The Grotowski who spoke of sincerity and precision was real, but hardly the entire story. There is another Grotowski, a private and unofficial Grotowski, who is no less fascinating than the more public one.

This is Grotowski the Pole. This is the side of Grotowski that explains how and why his work not only happened to come out of postwar Poland, but could only have come from there. When Grotowski speaks of sincerity and precision, in an unexpected way he assumes the cloak of the high Polish romantic tradition, of Mickiewicz and Chopin. But there is another kind of Pole to be discovered in Grotowski, no less stereotypical. It is familiar to anyone who has ever heard Germans talking in private about their neighbors to the east: the untrustworthy Pole, the conspirator, the smuggler, the black marketeer. All those shady characters hanging around train stations and border crossings and expensive tourist hotels in Poland and Germany. What are they up to? Grotowski? One of those?

Yes. That is the Grotowski that fascinates me now. A transgressive Grotowski, one who echoes the historical association of actors with heretics and criminals. A messy Grotowski filled with riddles, complications, and contradictions--one whose depths and shadows are thrown into high relief by the

luminosity of his other persona. A Grotowski who might appear as a character in a collaboration between Shakespeare and Genet. Or perhaps Dostoyevsky. Grotowski appreciated Dostoyevsky.

With time I have become convinced that the official Grotowski, the kind and soft-spoken one, the one for export, the one you can take with you anywhere, is not worth talking about except in relation to the private one, the one smelling of cigarettes and the coal dust of Polish Silesia. The one who created Akropolis less than an hour's drive from Auschwitz in the formerly German city of Opole and performed the piece in the shadow of the Polish Communist Party's rising anti-Semitic campaign in the late 1960s--a campaign that resulted in the forced emigration of the majority of Poland's remaining Jewish population in 1968 and a crisis of conscience in Polish society whose aftershocks can still be felt. As Ida Kaminska, the distinguished artistic director of Warsaw's Jewish Theater, was packing her bags to emigrate to the U.S., the Polish Laboratory was riding the wave of the international success of Akropolis and The Constant Prince.

Grotowski's work always operated on this kind of theatrical, political, and ethical knife's edge. The Artaudian representation of the Holocaust in Akropolis was a visceral meditation by Grotowski's largely gentile company upon the ethical universe created within the concentration camps: in Catholic terms, a theatrical examination of conscience and a collective prayer and intercession on behalf of the deceased; in Marxist terms, an act of historical consciousness-raising and an act of solidarity. In either Catholic or Marxist terms, the production was clearly intended as an expression of ethical consciousness. Poland's communist rulers--not all of whom supported the party's anti-Semitic faction--surely hoped that the Polish Lab's foreign performances of the work before the so-called events of March 1968 would be effective cultural diplomacy, Poland's counterpart to the Berliner Ensemble in East Germany. After March 1968, the Polish Lab's performances perhaps most fully revealed the company's true character as a cultural expression of the values held by a variety of milieus in Polish society, values not always reflected in the country's governing regime and official culture "for export."

Certainly Grotowski's Polishness must matter--yet it remains the most elusive aspect of his life and work for Poles and non-Poles alike. Poles were confronted by the complexity of a radically eclectic, cosmopolitan, and unprecedented theatrical project; foreigners were confronted with the formidable complexity of Polish culture, history, and politics, and the potential embarrassment of admitting the depths of their own ignorance. Grotowski's work was always a source of confusion and hostility for most of the Polish theater community, and his approach to acting was never adopted into the curricula of Poland's drama schools. Yet Grotowski's theater did not develop in spite of its Polish context; it was somehow integral with it. To pass over such issues is to simplify and diminish his life and work.

Like any good Polish smuggler, Grotowski had a cavalier attitude toward official cultural and political borders. Invited as a drama student to Stalinist Russia, he educated himself on the taboo topic of Meyerhold and brought this knowledge back with him to Poland, where cultural policing was far more lax on that score. A member of the Communist Party since his student days, he nevertheless also identified with the work of Juliusz Osterwa (1885-1947), a progressive Catholic and a radical innovator of the interwar Polish stage. In spite of the consistent suppression of Osterwa and his followers in postwar Poland, Grotowski modeled the logo for his Polish Laboratory Theater on that of Osterwa's Teatr Reduta (Redoubt Theater) and clearly identified with Osterwa's

goals of rigorous actor training, communal living, and an ethos that combined social consciousness with spirituality. Osterwa was particularly renowned for his five various stagings of Calderón/Slowacki's *The Constant Prince* before the war.

Grotowski's early work was largely ignored or scorned in Poland, but among his first and most loyal supporters were Irena and Tadeusz Byrski, two leading members of the original Reduta company. Like Osterwa, the Byrskis (with whom I became acquainted while studying in Poland) were fervent Catholics and leftists, but firmly anticommunist. They shunned the open anti-Semitism of the Polish Catholic Church before the war and were active in the Polish resistance to the Nazi occupation, and for decades after the war their own work was suppressed by Poland's communist authorities (the same ones who subsidized Grotowski's company) even as their reputation as voices of artistic and moral authority in the Polish theater steadily grew through the years of Solidarity and the 1980s. Irena Byrska made her comeback as an actress at the age of eighty in Andrzej Wajda's film *Man of Iron* in 1981, just before the declaration of martial law and the subsequent banning of Wajda's film. Wajda's casting of Byrska touched the core of the Solidarity ethos: she embodied the promise of a genuine coalition of the artist/intellectual with the working class.

The Polish Laboratory Theater thus functioned as a kind of liminal space within the Polish theater and the larger cultural landscape. It was a space where ideological, cultural, and national boundaries became porous and fluid--often in ways that provoked confusion, anxiety, or mockery--just as postwar Poland itself inspires these responses, particularly Polish Silesia. The company's location in Silesia is a crucial and little-appreciated dimension of its history and character. Wrocław and Opole were German cities before World War II, with Wrocław (Breslau in German) the base of Max Reinhardt's interwar career and a major center of German Jewish learning. As a result of the Yalta Treaty, Poland's borders were shifted 150 miles west, with large areas of eastern Germany annexed and an even larger area of eastern Poland ceded to the Soviet Union. The result was one of the largest forced relocations of populations in human history (comparable to those that followed the partition of India a few years later), involving the expulsion of approximately eight million Germans from the new Polish territories and their replacement by over six million Poles expelled from what is now western Ukraine and Belarus.

The Polish populations of Opole and Wrocław (Grotowski's local audience) were overwhelmingly made up of former residents of the eastern territories, with the university center of Wrocław largely absorbing the displaced population of Łódź, one of prewar Poland's leading academic and scientific urban centers. For decades after the war, no formal treaty was signed between Poland and West Germany guaranteeing the finality of Poland's western borders, leaving the region's Polish population afraid of yet another forced relocation if the Germans ever sought to reassert their historic claims. This brutal chapter in Silesia's history came quick on the heels of the Holocaust (Auschwitz-Birkenau is also located in the area) and was followed by decades of calamitous ecological degradation resulting from its importance as a coal-mining and industrial center.

The Polish Laboratory was a magnet in the 1960s and 1970s for disaffected intellectuals, many of whom later became leading dissidents. Among these were Malgorzata Dziewulska, today the literary manager of Poland's recently refurbished National Theater in Warsaw. One of her responsibilities at the Polish Lab was being Joseph Chaikin's guide and interpreter on his first trip to Poland in 1975 as part of the Theater of Nations Festival, which Grotowski

hosted. When Chaikin, the child of Polish Jews who left the country before World War II, addressed an auditorium packed with university students in Wroclaw, he candidly discussed his own Jewishness and ambivalence about traveling to Poland, in spite of warnings to avoid the topic. The exchange between Chaikin and the Wroclaw students proved a catalytic moment for those attending and established a legend around Chaikin in Polish theatrical and intellectual circles that endures to this day. Grotowski the black marketeer was hardly going to advocate stricter controls on such exchanges--such risks were a given of his occupation, and even one of its rewards.

It was in the wake of the declaration of martial law in Poland in 1981 that Grotowski's sophisticated smuggling operation was finally forced to shut down. He quietly defected to the West in late 1982, in the midst of a protest boycott by Polish actors of the country's official theater, film, and television producers. He was arguably the most renowned figure in Polish culture to defect at the time, yet he scrupulously avoided playing the role of the victim or the martyr. He succeeded in keeping his defection a "nonevent" in the public eye. Many of his closest American contacts were not aware of his presence in the U.S. until weeks after his arrival, in spite of the reporting of the event in the Polish American press.

Grotowski's defection to the U.S. was perhaps his most volatile and delicate act of political and theatrical border crossing--with his own person becoming the contraband. The stakes were high, and the consequences of his choice included the dissolving of the Polish Laboratory in Wroclaw, one of the great theatrical ventures of the century, and the political and theatrical abandoning of his actors, including Ryszard Cieslak, in Poland in the wake of his departure. He lived quietly and discreetly in the U.S. and Italy for sixteen years, slowly but deliberately grooming a group of young American followers, with Thomas Richards becoming the heir apparent to his work. He gracefully accepted honors, such as being the first theater artist to be named to the Collège de France in Paris, and established his new research center in Pontedera, Italy. Like a Polish Candide in emigration, he tended his theatrical garden and in his own way exemplified the virtues of sincerity and precision.

But I find it hard to believe that the last years of his life lived in emigration were suddenly brought into a sublime and simple harmony. Thanks to what? A new life in suburban Los Angeles? Was this transplantation no less difficult and significant than those of Brecht or Thomas Mann to Los Angeles forty years earlier? Or indeed those of Mickiewicz and Chopin in the nineteenth century, or Czeslaw Milosz and Jan Kott in our own? For all his talk of sincerity and precision, the official and public Grotowski was anything but candid. Grotowski's silences were as significant as his statements about his life and work. Such silence and indirection were understandable and perhaps a necessity if he was to maintain a theater company in communist Poland, but unfortunately for us these traits followed him into emigration. If an atmosphere of confusion, anxiety, and mockery still surrounds his work, Grotowski himself is largely to blame, especially as the passage of time increasingly obscures the terrible eloquence of the productions of the Polish Laboratory Theater. The Polish Lab, like Grotowski himself, was most expressive and compelling for what it left unspoken, or more precisely for what it expressed nonverbally.

The work of the Polish Laboratory, and by definition any kind of laboratory, aspired to a closed and protected space for disinterested experimentation and inquiry. Unlike the sciences, however, in cultural work such laboratory spaces tend to become either utopian or arcadian in character, providing either rehearsals for a possible new social order or an escape into an

archaic one. If discussed and passed on within an isolated and artificial utopian/arcadian space removed from any messy specifics of history, culture, and politics, Grotowski's groundbreaking theory and practice are doomed to extinction--something that I regret to say is already all too easy to imagine in the context of the American theater. Grotowski's various theatrical enterprises aspired to be laboratories, and very significant things undeniably resulted. However, in reality the Polish Laboratory Theater no less than Grotowski's WorkCenter in Pontedera are institutions that exist under specific material, cultural, and political circumstances, and whose work can only be picked up by others who understand them as institutions on practical and social as well as philosophical planes. It is flawed theater and cultural history to proceed otherwise--which in this case cannot be separated from political history as well. To pass over Grotowski the Pole and emigre, warts and all, is ultimately to diminish Grotowski's stature and fatally compromise his work.

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<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theater/v029/29.2kuharski.html>