

Grotowski's Influence on American Actor Training (a roundtable)

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As I thought about what to say today, I started to make a list of all the topics I might address. But, since I've been teaching acting – what Richard Schechner has referred to as “Grotowskian” acting – for 30 years now, my list started to get very long. And I realized that in the time we would have here today, I could really address only one or two subjects meaningfully. So what I shall do is spend most of my ten minutes talking about one pair of pedagogical issues that especially interest me as a teacher.

But before doing that, I thought I might list a few topics which I will mention only glancingly, or not at all... but that we may want to explore during our discussion afterwards:

So: Things I'm NOT going to talk much about include:

- The practical advantages of approaching acting through the body – for acting students and for acting teachers: Things like: the voluntary nature and the undeniability of physical actions.
- Then there are several important problems inherent to this work: For instance, the seductions of physicality, the balancing of effort and non-effort, and the difficulties of making the transition from non-verbal to text-based acting.
- And finally, there are a raft of other pedagogical issues which can arise. For instance: The similarities and differences with Stanislavskian trainings, the blurry line between art-making and therapy, and the ways in which this work is – and is not – related to meditation practice.

Now to begin in earnest--

No. Before I begin, two disclaimers:

First, to be clear: I worked with Grotowski only for four weeks in 1967. That's it. I never took part in any of the later phases of Grotowski's journey. And second: what I'm talking about here is *my* teaching. If I make reference to Grotowski, I do so because I learned important things from the man – not because I wish to assert that I am carrying forward *his* work.

So: What I'd like to concentrate on now are the centrality of the act of questioning, and some implications of what Jerzy Grotowski called the *Via negativa*.

Not quite forty-two years ago, at 40 East Seventh Street, Jerzy Grotowski led a four-week workshop which Richard had helped arrange and which he and I both attended. Our fellow student Tom Crawley kept a journal of that workshop, and in that journal, Tom reports that at one day Grotowski encouraged us by saying:

“Continue searching and asking questions because answers are not fruitful, only questions are. Once you find an answer you've reached the point of stopping and must begin again.”

Of course when Grotowski said things like that, I had no idea what in the world he was talking about. At the time, I was entirely consumed by the excitement and the terror I felt while attempting the physical exercises he had us doing... so such meta-physical comments – and Grotowski made lots of them – generally went over my head.

But after thirty years of employing *les exercices plastiques et corporels* in my teaching, I've come to understand why Grotowski told us that the physical exercises were but “jumping-off place for an actor's own creativity, for his own exploration of himself and his own experience.”

And I've come to believe that what was *most* essential in the work was Grotowski's attitude of questioning – and his idea that training is a *Via negativa* – the fascinating, challenging body work was simply an effective tool for engaging in that questioning process. And I've come to see that without an underlying interrogatory attitude, and without a willingness to hang out in the experience of *unknowingness*, the *plastique* and *corporel* exercises can actually tie some acting students into muscular and mental knots.

To illustrate: I recently taught an actor who had performed for many years, and had come to depend upon one simple “technique” in his acting work: He knew he could make a scene work for him by “playing an intension.”

But in my acting class this guy was clearly having a hard time. We were attempting to apply the physical acting training they had learned to scene-work, and he was very uncomfortable making this transition. So I asked him what was going on.

He told me that he felt as if the physical acting work was just adding an extra layer of something he had to **do**, in addition to the technique which worked for him.

I replied that I thought of the physical work not as something to **do**, but rather as a kind of awareness, a way of listening to and trusting what his body was telling him. Rather than being something to do, I felt it was actually more like a way of letting go.

When I said this, he seemed greatly relieved, so I pressed him a little further, “And what would it be like if you also ‘let go’ of ‘playing an intension?’” I asked.

He thought for a minute and then replied, “I’d be afraid of entering so deeply into an emotion that I might drown.”

“Ah,” I said. “But that fear is exactly what the *exercices plastiques* are there for. They are not something which you ‘do’ in addition to ‘playing an intension.’ And, unlike ‘playing an intension’ they will not serve to allay your fear of drowning in your emotions. They are not like an oar you can hold on to keep your head above that flood. They are more like a set of swimming strokes, or perhaps like a challenge – to breathe underwater.”

Unfortunately, the class ended at that point, so I can’t tell you whether this sage advice of mine was helpful – but I may work with this actor again next year, so I may find out.

But I wanted to tell you this story to illustrate how I’ve come to view *les exercices plastiques et corporels*. In fact, they serve an actor in several ways. At minimum, they are both a catapult that can throw the actor into deep emotional waters and, at the same time, they are a relationship to the water itself, a relationship that can allow the actor to survive below the surface. But... if you try to treat these exercises as a device, a sort of life-preserver to save you from the terrors of the deep, they will only get in your way.

For the terrors of the deep, these fears of drowning in emotions or in the unknown, the terrible uncertainties the actor feels at each moment on stage in front of strangers, these sensations are **not something to be saved from**. They are the very heart of acting.

Of course both acting teachers and acting students have good reasons to evade this unsettling condition, and to avoid the *Via negativa* that leads us to it.

For us teachers, entering this path can entail fighting against our personal, professional and institutional desires to impart skills, techniques, and forms. It may require us to overcome the reflexive pride that arises within us as our student's abilities to perform "improves." And it may necessitate resisting the temptation to answer many of the questions that our students ask.

And for acting students it can mean letting go of thinking that learning means accumulating skills. It can deprive them of the comfort of looking to a teacher for praise. And it may entail searching for a new source of energy in their work... a strange kind of joy which lies within uncertainty itself.

And this last implication – that Grotowski's view of learning as a *Via Negativa* implies the existence of joy in uncertainty itself – can mean grappling with some of our deepest personal and societal prejudices about what "uncertainty" and "doubt" really are.

In the sixties, Doubt was a positive, creative act for many of us. The same year Grotowski taught at 40 East 7th Street, Tim Leary lectured next door at the Filmore East urging us to "Turn on, tune in and drop out." And when he did, we understood what he was saying: He was confirming our suspicion that doubting "the system" and dropping out was a joyous, life-enhancing action, a revolutionary act, a step towards making a better world.

But nowadays – after 40 more years of mendacious politicians, military adventurism, avaricious financiers, and reality TV – Doubt is no longer a joyous

act for most of us. We have lost our faith in the world, and Doubt feels more like a bitter, cynical curse.

But in 1967, Grotowski also told us: “Being wounded by others – losing faith in the world – causes an actor to carry with him his own stalemate. This prevents him from being fully present.”

And I would maintain, one simply cannot teach this “Grotowskian” work while maintaining a cool, 21st Century version of Doubt. For the *Via negativa* depends upon a belief that human beings come into this world physically and emotionally multi-potent, unrestricted, and open, that we are born capable of feeling and expressing anger and joy and love and pain with our full bodies and our full voices and, most essentially, that we are born capable of experiencing the unknown as a “wonder-filled” thing.

The *Via negativa* requires that we view the act of doubting and questioning not as mere skepticism or cynicism but as something literally “wonder-ful.”

A friend of mine, a poet in her sixties, told me recently that her first husband was a scientist who was a devoted skeptic. But, she said, though he called himself a skeptic, he actually wore his skepticism as a kind of armor, a protection against the unknown and the unknowable. “He called himself a skeptic,” she said, “But he was actually a cynic.”

But in our 1967 workshop, Grotowski spoke about the dangers of this very tendency in actors: He warned us that: “A very ‘armed’ actor is often a very insecure one. Resign yourself from being armed,” he said, “from knowing what to do. Face yourself as though unknown.”

In our world, it seems to me, there exist two threats to true questioning: The first is one that all of us here today easily condemn: Fundamentalism – which is a system that provides positive answers that serve to stop up the awe-filled voids which questioning opens. But the other threat, I would assert, is much harder for most of us to disown: it is our reflexive, cynical doubt, which is also a kind of certainty, but a negative one, a certainty that this world and its human beings are basically flawed. This self-protective skepticism is, I would suggest, actually just the most recent incarnation of that ancient Western cultural and Christian belief in – and dread of – Original Sin.

Grotowski, you know, often opined that acting was a sacrificial act.

As a teacher, find that what I must sacrifice in order to teach this work is nothing less than my cynical view of life itself.

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