

**Jeremy Johnson**

**Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. How they reinvented Australian Theatre.**

... for earthly things can only be referred back to their spiritual archetypes through the faculty of intellectual perception, the insight which pierces through the symbol to the transcendent reality that lies beyond. Martin Lings, *The Sacred Art of Shakespeare*

If the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre belongs to Bertolt Brecht, the latter half is the property of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. The direction taken by Western theatre during the last century stands on the shoulders of these three pre-eminent figures in counterpoint to the performance model erected by the Moscow school of Meyerhold and Stanislavski. More than half a century on from Brook and Grotowski's landmark works in the 1960s, it would be hard to find any trained European or American director, actor or designer who hasn't been exposed to the concept of Grotowski's '*poor theatre*' and the theories laid out by Brook in *The Empty Space* as much as they have been to the earlier work contained within Brecht's '*epic theatre*.' In Australian contemporary theatre of the twenty first century, Brecht, as the godfather of 'Cultural Marxism,' has the most distinctively active presence. Yet, four decades ago it was Brook and Grotowski who altered the terrain of theatre in Sydney and Melbourne, revolutionizing not only what theatre could be, but how the ideas and practices of these two Europeans suited our creation of a wholly unique national performance identity. Their commitment to an ideology of the 'awakened actor,' physically and emotionally present to engage with an audience, found a receptive group of Australian theatre practitioners in the early 1970's who were eager to break with the confining traditions of British theatre, which had up until that time given our serious theatre a kind of branch office mentality. On the back of the swinging sixties, the arrival of the Whitlam era, and a disconnection with blue ribbon conservative social conditions, Brook and Grotowski's physical presence on the Australian shores as well as that of their work, became revered figures. This radiated from Rex Cramphorn's Playbox, the Pram Factory and La Mama in Melbourne and Nimrod Theatre in Sydney.

“ ... we Russians, belonging to neither East nor West, have never advanced in the march of enlightenment. The Renaissance passed us by while we remained squatting in our hovels ... ” Tom Stoppard, *The Coast of Utopia, Part One*, Chaadaev

Examining Brook and Grotowski one finds roots bound in deeply traditional practices. As Brook expressed, “*Tradition itself, in times of dogmatism and dogmatic revolution, is a revolutionary force which must be safeguarded.*” It was these ideas of tradition and revolution they held in common with George Ivanovich Gurdjieff. This Georgian mystic whose *Fourth Way* method provided a system for approaching self-observation that Brook and Grotowski employed in their transformative theatrical practices. Indeed much of this was evident in Stanislavski’s work with actors.

Why do we sacrifice so much energy to our art? Not in order to teach others but to learn with them what our existence, our organism, our personal and unrepeatable experience have to give us; to learn to break down the barriers which surround us and to free ourselves from the breaks which hold us back, from the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily for ourselves and for others; to destroy the limitations caused by our ignorance and lack of courage; in short, to fill the emptiness in us: to fulfill ourselves (Grotowski).

Tradition in all art forms began with an understanding of symbols and rituals before losing the attachment and substance to esoteric principals. Brook was particularly inspired by Australia’s indigenous history and culture, Creation stories and ceremonies, recognizing their contribution to the language of performance, while confirming the Fourth Way concept of reconciliation of opposites or Brooks own ‘unity in diversity.’ This ideology provides evidence for Carol Duncan in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*: “The challenge before the artist is not to repeat but to advance a spiritual history, to overcome its present obstacles and plot its future course – and, often, as a by-product, throw new light on the achievements of past artists.”

Through a *bricolage* approach, I will trace the ideas and influences that acted upon Brook and Grotowski in the development of their own performance methodologies, and investigate where they share or deviate from each other, and their sources (Gurdjieff). Ideas and practices will be analysed through the lens of Theatre Semiotics (Saussure, Circle of Prague, Pavis) with the assistance of autobiographical, experiential,

and theoretical documentation on their theatrical schema and its relationship with enduring historical rituals, beliefs, and traditions. Central to my dissertation are the archival materials and interviews with the living Australian practitioners and artists who have either worked with or modelled their concepts for theatre on Brook and Grotowski. This will provide research necessary to re-analyse and re-engage with these developments of 20<sup>th</sup> century performance history.

**The Key Questions to be addressed in this study:**

1. *What are the inherent features in Brook and Grotowski's cultural and spiritual mentality that resonated with Australian artists. And why do they no longer hold sway amongst a younger generation of contemporary practitioners ?* I will refer to Dr. Chris Hay's thesis *Inhabiting The Director's Chair*, an illuminating account of current methodologies in training directors at NIDA which though based on a Stanislavski model, is very much beholden to the new wave of German post- modernist performance makers. Brook and Grotowski are not mentioned at all.
  
2. *Can contemporary Australian actors re-engage with the disciplines demanded by these directors?* By conducting intensive training workshops in the manner of Brecht and Stanislavski, Brook and Grotowski it will offer a perspective enriching the qualitative research both from an observational, practical and experiential level. This thesis will endeavor to focus on a significant era in Australia's renaissance in performance making and how it has affected practitioners today.

Note: For the examination of Grotowski my association with Polish and Czech speaking artists provides the translation skills required for unearthing archival materials. For the analysis of Gurdjieff I will draw on my experience with 'the Work' as adapted by Diane Cilento at Karnak in Far North Queensland, who worked with the Kuku Yalanji people on many projects including the laser show 'Creation' 1996.

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