
TDR Comment

Jerzy Grotowski
1933–1999

“I Do Not Put on a Play in Order to Teach Others
What I Already Know”

On 15 January 1999, Jerzy Grotowski passed from activity into history. The day after he died they phoned me, some journalists, to ask if Grotowski was “important to the American theatre.” Did the younger generations of American theatre people “know Grotowski’s work?” What is his “impact,” “influence,” “legacy”? As if he were some distant but maybe very rich uncle who had, in passing away, bequeathed an undisclosed fortune. I suppose Grotowski deserved these well-meaning but misguided inquiries. For more than 20 years he had worked nearly in secret. From time to time he appeared, made pronouncements, and offered interviews. Frequently his interviews and talks were published. He was well known and unknown simultaneously. Those making the pilgrimage to the Grotowski Workcenter in Pontedera, Italy, might be admitted to witness the ongoing research of the Grotowski group, led more and more in recent years by Grotowski’s designated inheritor, Thomas Richards (son of American director and educator, Lloyd Richards). Grotowski scholars said that the Polish director had “left the theatre”—a domain roughly bounded by the Wooster Group, Robert Lepage, and Pina Bausch on one side, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, and Ariane Mnouchkine in the middle, and Broadway, the Boulevard, and the West End on the other. Grotowski was no longer a part of that theatre.

I answered the journalists that most younger Americans interested in the theatre probably did not know much about Grotowski, had never seen or participated firsthand in his work, and could not directly study his methods. Still, Grotowski’s influence and importance were deep, wide, abiding, and growing. How can that be?

To address that question at this moment, I need to speak with two voices, one scholarly and one personal.

Grotowski is one of four great directors of Western 20th-century theatre. Stanislavsky systemized a method he felt would help directors to be respectful of plays and actors to be truthful with regard to playing “life” onstage. Meyerhold demonstrated both practically and theoretically how to put something onstage. Brecht, a poet-playwright-director, showed how authorship, staging, and social purpose could be joined. After Stanislavsky, acting was changed; after Meyerhold, directing; after Brecht, playwriting. But after Grotowski?

Around 1970, in the midst of a spectacular career making plays for the public, Grotowski decided to work either one-on-one or with very small groups. (There was an exception to this, which I will discuss shortly.) I was among

those who complained that a great director was abandoning ship. But over time I changed my mind. I now believe Grotowski never left the theatre because he was never in it. Let me explain.

From childhood, Grotowski was attracted by Eastern philosophies, by the spiritual life. When he was barely 20, at a time when such travel was difficult (remember Grotowski came of age in Poland under a repressive regime at the height of the Cold War), he journeyed to central Asia. Later he made trips to China and India. When he returned to Poland after his first Asian sojourn, there were few options open for him with regard to his interests. He once told me he selected theatre because during the workshop and rehearsal period—which he extended for months, even years—he and his small group of similarly minded people freely explored and expressed their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. “Process, not product” was more than a slogan. When the censor finally arrived, it was mostly to examine texts, not *mise-en-scène*. And what texts did they receive? Grotowski, during his Poor Theatre phase, made montages from classical works—Polish, Greek, and Biblical. Or he investigated well-known and virtually uncensorable texts such as Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* or Calderon’s *The Constant Prince*. Oh, but how he treated texts—classical, Renaissance, and modern! He deconstructed them, rearranged them, used them as materials rather than as finalities. His stagings were, as he himself put it, scalpels with which to dissect both the souls of the performers and the condition of contemporary European society and culture. The censors had no choice but to approve the words, and of the actions they had hardly a clue. That this period at Opole and Wrocław produced great works of theatre art is roughly parallel to saying that the stained-glass windows at Chartres Cathedral or a Yoruban Gelede mask, like many other religious or ritual objects and performances in many cultures, are great works of art. That they are, but as part of fundamentally spiritual processes.

From start to finish, with one exception, Grotowski’s work was designed for small groups. His Opole Theatre of 13 Rows and the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław admitted fewer than 100 spectators at a time, often many fewer. The Wrocław space was a room rather than a theatre proper. Even during the Theatre of Productions phase—the period during which were created such works as *Akropolis* (1962), *The Constant Prince* (1965–1968), and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* (1968–1969)—audiences were treated more as adherents or participants than as ordinary theatregoers. In fact the final version of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* was a bridge from Theatre of Productions to Paratheatre. In the later years of Paratheatre, roughly from 1974 to 1978, Grotowski opened his work to large numbers. In 1974, literally thousands, mostly from Western Europe and America, streamed into Wrocław for the “University of Research.” Paratheatre was evidence of Grotowski’s encounters in America with the “new age” and its utopian spirituality. This phase of his work was ended by more than the martial law imposed on Poland in 1980 and Grotowski’s subsequent permanent exile. For him, Paratheatre was too chaotic, scattered, undisciplined, and indulgent. He never again attempted to reach a broad audience either of spectators or of adherents.

From Theatre of Sources on to Objective Drama and then Art as Vehicle, Grotowski steadily moved closer and closer to his beginnings. He sought the ritual practices of many cultures as embodied in specific individual master performers in order to engage in what he described as “the meeting between the old one and the young one” in both the personal and cultural senses. He cloistered himself with small groups who trained, honed, and used actorly techniques in the pursuit of spiritual knowledge. For a time he worked at the University of California, Irvine. But increasingly he settled into the Grotowski Workcenter in Pontedera, supported by the enormous material

and emotional generosity of Carla Pollastrelli, Roberto Bacci, and others. There, Grotowski's innermost group maintained their solitude, even as they allowed outsiders sometimes to witness aspects of their work. This is not the place to discuss that work. Suffice it to say these adepts-artists went as deeply as they could into the practice of whatever it was they were playing with. These two concepts, practice and play, taken at their most serious and most spiritual, was what Grotowski gave his life to.

Grotowski's effects on the theatre will not be through the establishment of a method of actor training, an approach to *mise-en-scène*, or an insistence on a dramaturgy of political purpose. Grotowski will effect theatre through the effect he had on the people with whom he interacted on a personal, even intimate, level. Such an encounter might extend over years or it might last only a scintillation of time. Relating face-to-face with Grotowski could change the way a person experienced and understood the ground from which theatre grows. In other words, Grotowski changed lives and therefore changed the theatre. His tradition is that of the seer-shaman. His work was "technical" in the sense that Mircea Eliade remarked that the shaman is a "technician of the sacred."

Grotowski's effects on theatre flow from three ideas that he identified, explored, and attempted to systematize. First, that powerful acting occurs at a meeting place between the personal and the archetypal—in this he continued and deepened the work of Stanislavsky. Second, that the most effective theatre is the "poor theatre"—one with a minimum of accoutrements beyond the presence of the actors. Third, that theatre is intercultural, differentiating and relating performance "truths" in and from many cultures. He explored these ideas over a lifetime of scrupulous work with people, work that was precise, detailed, systematic, physical: a set of practices more than a colloquium of ideas or beliefs. His writings can appear inspirational or opaque. But working with him was another matter altogether.

Grotowski's influence operates the way a rock dropped into a pond causes waves to move outward in expanding concentric circles. One can find Grotowski everywhere in the theatre. Sometimes the mark is clear, such as with Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret in Denmark, the Theatre of the Eighth Day and Włodzimierz Staniewski's Gardzienice in Poland, James Sloviak and Jairo Cuesta's New World Performance Laboratory in Cleveland, or Nicolas Nuñez and Helena Guardia's work in Mexico. Sometimes the influence is not easily discernible on the surface, as with The Performance Group and through it to the Wooster Group; or the work of Joseph Chaikin, Tadashi Suzuki, Peter Brook, André Gregory, and many more. But, ironically, a wide-ranging indirect influence is not what Grotowski wanted. For him, such an outward movement of effects was too haphazard, too risky, too fraught with misuses and misinterpretations. His choice was to designate an inheritor, passing on to this person his closest, most guarded techniques and secrets in a direct line of descent like that practiced by the *noh* families of Japan. Such a one Grotowski found in Thomas Richards, in whose presence the master died.

And now I need to speak personally, as one who felt from time to time the heat of Grotowski's gaze, and who will miss him dearly. He was my teacher, and most especially so at the moment I was forming The Performance Group in 1967. I was among a dozen or so who participated in Grotowski and Ryszard Cieslak's first American workshop, at NYU in November 1967. For many who met Grotowski, encountering him was special. His presence hit like a Zen master's slap on the face. I always approached him carefully, with Biblical fear born of respect. Not that he wasn't also playful and ironic, generous and sympathetic. But he could go from support to icy sarcasm in a flash. It was hard to look deeply into his eyes, the conventional "mirror of the soul," because either you saw eyes reduced in appearance by thick glasses or, when

he took them off, a squint. His appearance was liable suddenly to change radically, as when in the late 1960s he morphed from being a chubby smooth-faced man in a dark suit and sunglasses to a skinny long-haired type in a blue-jean jacket toting a backpack—a cross between a hippie and a martial arts master. His health was always frail. Yet he did not take care of himself. He smoked, he ate erratically. Once in a California restaurant he ordered a very large steak, asked it to be singed only, and tore into the raw meat. “I am a wolf!” he exclaimed. He slept God knows when, certainly not at night when he exalted in his work.

Of what matter are these personal details? I know that others will have very different descriptions and experiences. We are all blind men giving opinions about the elephant. Grotowski shaped himself to suit his encounters with unique individuals. In his work one-on-one he had the unparalleled gift to enter into what Martin Buber called the “Ich-du,” the I-you, relationship. His shape-shifting was not trickery or avoidance, but an adjustment made to better drill to the core of the matter.

He was artistic and spiritual integrity incarnate.

The last time I saw him was in Copenhagen in 1997. We sat in the corner of crowded room talking and drinking coffee. Though nearly his age, I felt like his son. When I learned of his death, I wept.

—Richard Schechner

Announcements

Odin Teatret's 35th Anniversary
Holstebro, Denmark, 22–27 September 1999

Tacit Knowledge: Heritage and Waste

There exists a tacit knowledge in the performing arts made up of practices and experience which cannot be transmitted through the written word but only by the masters who embody it.

This age-old knowledge has come to us in the form of the crafts of these masters. It is incorporated today in only a few hundred individuals throughout the world who are able to pass on what they have learned. These performing artists truly can be considered living cultural patrimonies of humanity.

Our industrialized culture and our improved technology, which rightly tend to preserve for future generations the fruits of ancient knowledge—the concrete results and the craftsmanship of past masters—does not yet seem to have taken into consideration the significance of this tacit knowledge, which is now threatened.

“Tacit Knowledge: Heritage and Waste” is an international symposium organized by Odin Teatret on the occasion of its 35th anniversary. It will take

place from 23 to 27 September 1999 in Holstebro, Denmark. The program will include the presentation of four of the oldest living performing traditions: nō (Japan, 14th century); gambuh (Bali, 15th century); shamanistic ritual (Korea, 16th century); classical ballet (Europe, 17th century). There will be performances, work demonstrations, and discussions with the masters/pupils and specialists.

The working language will be English. Only a limited number of participants will be admitted. For further information, please contact: Odin Teatret, P.O. Box 1283, DK-7500 Holstebro, Denmark. Phone: +45-97-42-47-77. Fax: +45-97-41-04-82. Email: <OdinTeat@post4.tele.dk>. Website: <http://www.odinteatret.dk>.

Steel
The Art of an Industry
9-19 September 1999

Touchstone Theatre will host an 11-day, multiarts festival and conference focused on the culture of steel in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. A community-based collaborative festival, “The Art of an Industry” will feature *Steelbound*, an adaptation of *Prometheus Bound*, by Alison Carey of Cornerstone Theater, performed in Bethlehem Steel’s Iron Foundry. Workshop teachers will include Ysaye Barnwell, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Cornerstone Theater, Bob Franke, and Jay O’Callahan. For more information please contact: Shirl Gower, Steel Festival Coordinator, Touchstone Theatre, 321 East Fourth Street, Bethlehem, PA 18015. Phone 610-867-1689; fax 610-867-0561. Email: <touchstone@nni.com>.

Correction

The *TDR* Volume 42 Index, printed in T160, did not include the article “Camp Out: DIWA Arts and the Bayanihan Spirit” by Lydia Matthews, which appeared in the Winter 1998 issue of *TDR* (42, 4 [T160]). Our apologies to the author.