

# **At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions**

Thomas Richards

With a preface and the essay "From the  
Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle" by  
Jerzy Grotowski



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# AT WORK WITH GROTOWSKI ON PHYSICAL ACTIONS

**Published** here in English for the first time, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* is a compelling account of nearly a decade's work of one of the central figures of twentieth-century theatre.

Jerzy Grotowski's closest collaborator, Thomas Richards, provides a thorough and compelling insider's view of the more recent period of Grotowski's research. He writes with clarity and passion of his apprenticeship with the master director. Grotowski himself contributes a preface and a major new essay "From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle." Not since the publication of Grotowski's own *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) has this profoundly influential theatre practitioner's work been so thoroughly or accurately explored.

**Thomas Richards**, a performing artist, earned a degree in Music and Theatre Studies from Yale University as an undergraduate and also holds a Master's Degree in Art, Music and Performance from the University of Bologna. He became Jerzy Grotowski's assistant in 1986, when the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski was founded in Pontedera, Italy, and is now Grotowski's essential collaborator.



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*I would here like to express my gratitude to a dear friend, Michel A. Moos, whose intense efforts and cooperation in the final phase of redaction have contributed greatly to the completion of the present English version.*

*Thomas Richards  
Pontedera, February 1994*

*To Fabrizio Cruciani*

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# PREFACE

I consider this book a precious report that permits one to assimilate some of those simple and basic principles which the self-taught at times come to know, yet only after years of groping and errors. The book furnishes information regarding “discoveries” which the actor can understand in practice, without having to start each time from zero. Thomas Richards has worked with me systematically since 1985. Today he is my essential collaborator in the research dedicated to Art as vehicle, in which I am now involved at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski, in Pontedera, Italy.

In *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, Thomas Richards does not speak of our present work, that is Art as vehicle. The reader will find indications about this subject in my text, “From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle,” published in appendix. Mr. Richards’ book speaks about the first three years of our work together, dealing with “physical actions,” a *necessary premise* for anyone active in the field of performing arts.

Thomas Richards was born in New York City in 1962. Before working with me he studied at Yale University where he obtained a degree in Music and Theatre Studies. In 1985, he participated as a member of the performance team in the Focused Research Program I directed at the University of California, Irvine. After one year, I proposed that he become my assistant and we transferred to Italy where, in 1986, the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski was founded at the Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale in Pontedera. He has continued his personal research in close collaboration with me, and has assumed responsibility for directing one of the two programs at the Workcenter. At the same time, he has continued to pursue his university studies, and in 1992 received his M.A. from the

Department of Art, Music, and Performance at the University of Bologna.

The nature of my work with Thomas Richards has the character of “transmission”; to transmit to him that to which I have arrived in my life: the *inner* aspect of the work. I use the word “transmission” in the traditional sense—in the course of an apprenticeship, through efforts and trials, the apprentice conquers the knowledge, practical and precise, from another person, his teacher. A period of real apprenticeship is long and I have worked with Thomas Richards for eight years now. At the outset, he was the *doer* (he who does, he who is doing in action) and I led him from the outside. With the passing of time, I asked him not only to act as *doer* but also to lead the work. As the leader of one of the two groups at the Workcenter, he conducted the practical daily work—it was he who became the teacher of the group—while I remained on hand and sometimes worked directly with the members of the group. But mainly I pointed out, when it was necessary, practical problems which Mr. Richards then resolved with them. During this period I also continued the individual work with him. This process still goes on today. Therefore my working relationship with Thomas Richards (in the course of the first three years described in this book and of the five years following dedicated to Art as vehicle) is one of “transmission,” and for this reason I feel he is the right person to write about the work.

Mr. Richards’ present book is of notable value for the young actor who wants to dedicate his life to the battle in art. It speaks of some indispensable elements of craft which, once learned, i.e., dominated in practice, can help one to exit from dilettantism. Herein the reader can obtain much information on how not to be stuck in practice. He will also find many “private” episodes narrated by someone who, at the moment in which he writes, has acquired the knowledge and authority to guide, develop, and complete, alone, the work with others. In each of these anecdotes he has hidden an alarm or an indication concerning that interior and personal discipline of which we cannot speak only in technical terms, but without which every vocation becomes suffocated and there is no possibility of either learning or technique.

Jerzy Grotowski  
February 1993

P.S. Over the last ten years my research was supported by, among others, American contributions and grants. I would like to express my appreciation to the University of California, Irvine, to the National Endowment for the Arts, to the Rockefeller Foundation, to the International Centre for Theatre Creation, and to the MacArthur Foundation for awarding me with a Fellowship.

My gratitude goes also to the French Ministry of Culture and to the Académie Expérimentale des Théâtres, directed by Michelle Kokosowski, for the help I received.

I especially wish to thank Peter Brook.

It would have been hard to go through these years without the constant care, help, and friendship of Mercedes and André Gregory.

And finally a very special acknowledgment to those who have made possible the existence and the functioning of my Workcenter in Pontedera, Italy: the Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale, its director Roberto Bacci, and Carla Pollastrelli.

J.G.

AT WORK WITH  
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PHYSICAL ACTIONS

by Thomas Richards



# STANISLAVSKI AND GROTOWSKI: THE CONNECTION

*Artists who do not go forward go backward.*

*Konstantin Stanislavski*

*There is no standing still, only evolution or involution.*

*Jerzy Grotowski*

For the last eight years I have worked continually with Jerzy Grotowski. The practical knowledge I have of “the craft,” I gained from him.

Grotowski knows that to learn something means to conquer it in practice. One must learn through “doing” and not through memorization of ideas and theories. Theories were used in our work only when they might help solve a practical problem at hand. The work with Grotowski was nothing like a school where one learns lessons by rote. I am convinced he was trying to teach not just my mind, but the whole of my being. Often he would repeat to me that the true apprentice knows how to steal, how to be a “good thief”: this demands an active effort from the learner, because he should steal the knowledge trying to conquer the capacity *to do*.

Grotowski would often give me a specific task; for example, to resolve with our group some technical problem which had appeared in the work. If I asked Grotowski how to resolve this problem, there would normally come no reply or just a knowing smile. At that moment, I knew I had to figure it out for myself. Only when I had accomplished the task to the best of my ability, would he step in and analyze my mistakes. Then the process would begin again. This method of teaching takes an enormous amount of time and patience. The person learning will inevitably arrive at

moments of failure. Such “failures” are absolutely essential; for here, the apprentice begins to see clearly how to proceed along the right climb. Given that the way in which I learned to work with physical actions was not at all customary from the point of view of the current educational system, I do not here develop a theoretical analysis. Rather, I remember the way in which my comprehension of, and capacity to work with physical actions evolved through practical research with my teacher, Jerzy Grotowski.

I am aware that many people have experienced “Grotowski workshops” conducted by someone who studied with Grotowski in a session of five days, for example, twenty-five years ago. Such “instructors,” of course, often pass on grave errors and misunderstandings. Grotowski’s research might be mistakenly construed as something wild and structureless, where people throw themselves on the floor, scream a lot, and have pseudo-cathartic experiences. Grotowski’s connection to tradition, and his link to Stanislavski, run the risk of being completely forgotten or not taken into account. Grotowski himself, however, did not forget those who came before him. Faced with his predecessors, he was a “good thief,” examining thoroughly their techniques, analyzing critically their value, and stealing what might work for himself. Grotowski’s work in no way negates the past but rather, searches in it for the useful tools that may help him in *his* work. “Create your own method. Don’t depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you!”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Stanislavski and this is exactly what Grotowski did.

The axis of this text is a method, or better yet, a practice, finally central to the work of Stanislavski, and later developed by Grotowski: *physical actions*. In the last ten years of his life, Stanislavski placed a new emphasis on what he called “physical actions.” He stated a clear opinion of what he considered to be the core of his research: “*The method of physical actions is the result of my whole life’s work.*”<sup>2</sup> This strong statement calls for clear understanding. What did Stanislavski mean by “method of physical actions”? Why was he using the word “physical” instead of “psycho-physical”? Why, at the end of his life, was he speaking about “physical actions,” when so much of his earlier research had been based on the attempt at calling forth precise emotions? And this work on physical actions, how does one put it into practice?