



# TOWARDS A POOR THEATRE

## JERZY GROTOWSKI

EDITED BY

EUGENIO BARBA

PREFACE BY

PETER BROOK

# **Towards a Poor Theatre**



*Towards a Poor Theatre* contains texts by Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), interviews with him, and other supplementary material presenting his method and training. Originally published in 1968, it has established itself as a classic work on theatre.



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**Jerzy Grotowski**

Edited by Eugenio Barba  
Preface by Peter Brook

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Jerzy Grotowski created the Theatre Laboratory in 1959 in Opole, a town of 60,000 inhabitants in south-west Poland. Co-creator was his close collaborator, the well known literary and theatre critic, Ludwik Flaszen. In January 1965, the Theatre Laboratory moved to the university town of Wrocław which, with its half a million inhabitants, is also the cultural capital of the Polish Eastern Territories. It was here that it attained its present status of Institute for Research into Acting. The activities of the Laboratory have been continually subsidized by the State through the municipalities of Opole and Wrocław.

The name itself reveals the nature of the undertaking. It is not a theatre in the usual sense of the word, but rather an institute devoted to research into the domain of the theatrical art and the art of the actor in particular. The Theatre Laboratory's productions represent a kind of working model in which the current research into the actor's art can be put into practice. Within the theatre milieu, this is known as the method of Grotowski. In addition to its methodical research work and performances given before an audience, the Laboratory also undertakes the instruction of actors, producers and people from other fields connected with the theatre.

The Theatre Laboratory has its own permanent troupe whose members also function as instructors. Students, many of them foreigners, are also accepted on a short term basis. Close contact is maintained with specialists in other disciplines such as psychology, phonology, cultural anthropology, etc.

The Theatre Laboratory is coherent in its choice of repertoire. The plays performed are based on the great Polish and international classics whose function is close to the myth in the collective consciousness. The productions which testify to the progressive stages of Grotowski's methodical and artistic research are the following: Byron's **Cain**, Kalidasa's **Shakuntala**, Mickiewicz's **Forefathers' Eve**, Slowacki's **Kordian**, Wyspiński's **Akropolis**, Shakespeare's **Hamlet**, Marlowe's **Dr Faustus** and Calderon's **The Constant Prince** in the Polish transcription by Slowacki. At present a production is in preparation based on themes from the Gospel. The Theatre Laboratory also tours abroad giving performances. Jerzy Grotowski frequently visits various theatre centres in different countries, giving theoretical and practical courses in his method.

Grotowski's closest collaborator in this research is Ryszard Cieslak who, in the opinion of a critic from the French newspaper "l'Express", is the living image of this method in his role as the Constant Prince.



# PREFACE

by Peter Brook

**Grotowski is unique.**

**Why?**

**Because no-one else in the world, to my knowledge, no-one since Stanislavski, has investigated the nature of acting, its phenomenon, its meaning, the nature and science of its mental-physical-emotional processes as deeply and completely as Grotowski.**

**He calls his theatre a laboratory. It is. It is a centre of research. It is perhaps the only avant-garde theatre whose poverty is not a drawback, where shortage of money is not an excuse for inadequate means which automatically undermine the experiments. In Grotowski's theatre as in all true laboratories the experiments are scientifically valid because the essential conditions are observed. In his theatre, there is absolute concentration by a small group, and unlimited time. So if you are interested in his findings you must go to Poland.**

**Or else do what we did. Bring Grotowski here.**

**He worked for two weeks with our group. I won't describe the work. Why not? First of all, such work is only free if it is in confidence, and confidence depends on its confidences not being disclosed. Secondly, the work is essentially non-verbal. To verbalise is to complicate and even to destroy exercises that are clear and simple when indicated by a gesture and when executed by the mind and body as one.**

**What did the work do?**

**It gave each actor a series of shocks.**

**The shock of confronting himself in the face of simple irrefutable challenges.**

**The shock of catching sight of his own evasions, tricks and clichés.**

**The shock of sensing something of his own vast and untapped resources.**

**The shock of being forced to question why he is an actor at all.**

**The shock of being forced to recognise that such questions do exist and that – despite a long English tradition of avoiding seriousness in theatrical art – the time comes when they must be faced. And of finding that he wants to face them.**

**The shock of seeing that somewhere in the world acting is an art of absolute dedication, monastic and total. That Artaud's now-hackneyed phrase 'cruel to myself' is genuinely a complete way of life – somewhere – for less than a dozen people.**

With a proviso. This dedication to acting does not make acting an end in itself. On the contrary. For Grotowski acting is a vehicle. How can I put it? The theatre is not an escape, a refuge. A way of life is a way to life. Does that sound like a religious slogan? It should do. And that's about all there was to it. No more, no less. Results? Unlikely. Are our actors better? Are they better men? Not in that way, as far as I can see, not as far as anyone has claimed. (And of course they were not all ecstatic about their experience. Some were bored.)

But as Arden says:

For the apple holds a seed will grow,  
In live and lengthy joy  
To raise a flourishing tree of fruit,  
Forever and a day.

Grotowski's work and ours have parallels and points of contact. Through these, through sympathy, through respect, we came together.

But the life of our theatre is in every way different from his. He runs a laboratory. He needs an audience occasionally, in small numbers. His tradition is Catholic – or anti-Catholic; in this case the two extremes meet. He is creating a form of service. We work in another country, another language, another tradition. Our aim is not a new Mass, but a new Elizabethan relationship – linking the private and the public, the intimate and the crowded, the secret and the open, the vulgar and the magical. For this we need both a crowd on stage and a crowd watching – and within that crowded stage individuals offering their most intimate truths to individuals within that crowded audience, sharing a collective experience with them.

We have come quite a way in developing an overall pattern – the idea of a group, of an ensemble.

But our work is always too hurried, always too rough for the development of the collection of individuals out of whom it is composed.

We know in theory that every actor must put his art into question daily – like pianists, dancers, painters – and that if he doesn't he will almost certainly get

**stuck, develop clichés, and eventually decline. We recognise this and yet can do so little about it that we endlessly chase after new blood, after youthful vitality – except for certain of the most gifted exceptions, who of course get all the best chances, absorb most of the available time.**

**The Stratford Studio was a recognition of this problem, but it continually ran up against the strain of a repertory, of an overworked company, of simple fatigue.**

**Grotowski's work was a reminder that what he achieves almost miraculously with a handful of actors is needed to the same extent by each individual in our two giant companies in two theatres 90 miles apart.**

**The intensity, the honesty and the precision of his work can only leave one thing behind. A challenge. But not for a fortnight, not for once in a lifetime. Daily.**



# Towards a Poor Theatre

This article by Jerzy Grotowski has been published in: *Odra* (Wrocław, 9/1965); *Kungö Dramatiska Teaterns Program* (Stockholm, 1965); *Scena* (Novi Sad, 5/1965); *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* (Paris, 55/1966); *Tulane Drama Review* (New Orleans, T35, 1967). Translation: T. K. Wiewiczowski.

I am a bit impatient when asked, "What is the origin of your experimental theatre productions?" The assumption seems to be that "experimental" work is tangential (toying with some "new" technique each time) and tributary. The result is supposed to be a contribution to modern staging – scenography using current sculptural or electronic ideas, contemporary music, actors independently projecting clownish or cabaret stereotypes. I know that scene: I used to be part of it. Our Theatre Laboratory productions are going in another direction. In the first place, we are trying to avoid eclecticism, trying to resist thinking of theatre as a composite of disciplines. We are seeking to define what is distinctively theatre, what separates this activity from other categories of performance and spectacle. Secondly, our productions are detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship. That is, **we consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art.**

It is difficult to locate the exact sources of this approach, but I can speak of its tradition. I was brought up on Stanislavski; his



persistent study, his systematic renewal of the methods of observation, and his dialectical relationship to his own earlier work make him my personal ideal. Stanislavski asked the key methodological questions. Our solutions, however, differ widely from his – sometimes we reach opposite conclusions.

I have studied all the major actor-training methods of Europe and beyond. Most important for my purposes are: Dullin's rhythm exercises, Delsarte's investigations of extroverted and introverted reactions, Stanislavski's work on "physical actions", Meyerhold's bio-mechanical training, Vakhtangov's synthesis. Also particularly stimulating to me are the training techniques of oriental theatre – specifically the Peking Opera, Indian Kathakali, and Japanese No theatre. I could cite other theatrical systems, but the method which we are developing is not a combination of techniques borrowed from these sources (although we sometimes adapt elements for our use). We do not want to teach the actor a predetermined set of skills or give him a "bag of tricks." Ours is not a deductive method of collecting skills. Here everything is concentrated on the "ripening" of the actor which is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one's own intimacy – all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment. The actor makes a total gift of himself. This is a technique of the "trance" and of the integration of all the actor's psychic and bodily powers which emerge from the most intimate layers of his being and his instinct, springing forth in a sort of "translumination."

The education of an actor in our theatre is not a matter of teaching him something; we attempt to eliminate his organism's resistance to this psychic process. The result is freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses.

Ours then is a **via negativa** – not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks.

Years of work and of specially composed exercises (which, by means of physical, plastic and vocal training, attempt to guide the actor towards the right kind of concentration) sometimes permit the discovery of the beginning of this road. Then it is possible to carefully cultivate what has been awakened. The process itself, though to some extent dependent upon concentration, confidence, exposure, and almost disappearance into the acting craft, is not voluntary. The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not “**want to do that**” but rather “**resigns from not doing it.**”

Most of the actors at the Theatre Laboratory are just beginning to work toward the possibility of making such a process visible. In their daily work they do not concentrate on the spiritual technique but on the composition of the role, on the construction of form, on the expression of signs – i.e., on artifice. There is no contradiction between inner technique and artifice (articulation of a role by signs). We believe that a personal process which is not supported and expressed by a formal articulation and disciplined structuring of the role is not a release and will collapse in shapelessness.

We find that artificial composition not only does not limit the spiritual but actually leads to it. (The tropistic tension between the inner process and the form strengthens both. The form is like a baited trap, to which the spiritual process responds spontaneously and against which it struggles.) The forms of common “natural” behavior obscure the truth; we compose a role as a system of signs which demonstrate what is behind the mask of common vision: the dialectics of human behavior. At a moment of psychic shock, a moment of terror, of mortal danger or tremendous joy, a man does not behave “naturally.” A man in an elevated spiritual state uses rhythmically articulated signs, begins

to dance, to sing. A **sign**, not a common gesture, is the elementary integer of expression for us.

In terms of formal technique, we do not work by proliferation of signs, or by accumulation of signs (as in the formal repetitions of oriental theatre). Rather, we subtract, seeking **distillation** of signs by eliminating those elements of "natural" behavior which obscure pure impulse. Another technique which illuminates the hidden structure of signs is **contradiction** (between gesture and voice, voice and word, word and thought, will and action, etc.) – here, too, we take the **via negativa**.

It is difficult to say precisely what elements in our productions result from a consciously formulated program and what derive from the structure of our imagination. I am frequently asked whether certain "medieval" effects indicate an intentional return to "ritual roots." There is no single answer. At our present point of artistic awareness, the problem of mythic "roots," of the elementary human situation, has definite meaning. However, this is not a product of a "philosophy of art" but comes from the practical discovery and use of the rules of theatre. That is, the productions do not spring from a **priori** aesthetic postulates; rather, as Sartre has said: "Each technique leads to metaphysics."

For several years, I vacillated between practice-born impulses and the application of a **priori** principles, without seeing the contradiction. My friend and colleague Ludwik Flaszen was the first to point out this confusion in my work: the material and techniques which came spontaneously in preparing the production, from the very nature of the work, were revealing and promising; but what I had taken to be applications of theoretical assumptions were actually more functions of my personality than of my intellect. I realized that the production led to awareness rather than being the product of awareness. Since 1960, my emphasis has been on methodology. Through practical experimentation I sought to answer the questions with which I had begun: What is the

theatre? What is unique about it? What can it do that film and television cannot? Two concrete conceptions crystallized: the poor theatre, and performance as an act of transgression.

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion. This is an ancient theoretical truth, of course, but when rigorously tested in practice it undermines most of our usual ideas about theatre. It challenges the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines – literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, acting (under the direction of a **metteur-en-scène**). This "synthetic theatre" is the contemporary theatre, which we readily call the "Rich Theatre" – rich in flaws.

The Rich Theatre depends on artistic kleptomania, drawing from other disciplines, constructing hybrid-spectacles, conglomerates without backbone or integrity, yet presented as an organic artwork. By multiplying assimilated elements, the Rich Theatre tries to escape the impasse presented by movies and television. Since film and TV excel in the area of mechanical functions (montage, instantaneous change of place, etc.), the Rich Theatre countered with a blatantly compensatory call for "total theatre." The integration of borrowed mechanisms (movie screens onstage, for example) means a sophisticated technical plant, permitting great mobility and dynamism. And if the stage and/or auditorium were mobile, constantly changing perspective would be possible. This is all nonsense.

No matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical resources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television. Consequently, I propose poverty in theatre. We have resigned from the stage-and-auditorium plant: for each production, a new space is designed for the actors and spectators.

Thus, infinite variation of performer-audience relationships is possible. The actors can play among the spectators, directly contacting the audience and giving it a passive role in the drama (e.g. our productions of Byron's **Cain** and Kalidasa's **Shakuntala**). Or the actors may build structures among the spectators and thus include them in the architecture of action, subjecting them to a sense of the pressure and congestion and limitation of space (Wyspianski's **Akropolis**). Or the actors may play among the spectators and ignore them, looking through them. The spectators may be separated from the actors – for example, by a high fence, over which only their heads protrude (**The Constant Prince**, from Calderon); from this radically slanted perspective, they look down on the actors as if watching animals in a ring, or like medical students watching an operation (also, this detached, downward viewing gives the action a sense of moral transgression). Or the entire hall is used as a concrete place: Faustus' "last supper" in a monastery refectory, where Faustus entertains the spectators, who are guests at a baroque feast served on huge tables, offering episodes from his life. The elimination of stage-auditorium dichotomy is not the important thing – that simply creates a bare laboratory situation, an appropriate area for investigation. The essential concern is finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements.

We forsook lighting effects, and this revealed a wide range of possibilities for the actor's use of stationary light-sources by deliberate work with shadows, bright spots, etc. It is particularly significant that once a spectator is placed in an illuminated zone, or in other words becomes visible, he too begins to play a part in the performance. It also became evident that the actors, like figures in El Greco's paintings, can "illuminate" through personal technique, becoming a source of "spiritual light."

We abandoned make-up, fake noses, pillow-stuffed bellies – everything that the actor puts on in the dressing room before performance. We found that it was consummately theatrical for

the actor to transform from type to type, character to character, silhouette to silhouette – while the audience watched – in a **poor** manner, using only his own body and craft. The composition of a fixed facial expression by using the actor's own muscles and inner impulses achieves the effect of a strikingly theatrical transubstantiation, while the mask prepared by a make-up artist is only a trick.

Similarly, a costume with no autonomous value, existing only in connection with a particular character and his activities, can be transformed before the audience, contrasted with the actor's functions, etc. Elimination of plastic elements which have a life of their own (i.e., represent something independent of the actor's activities) led to the creation by the actor of the most elementary and obvious objects. By his controlled use of gesture the actor transforms the floor into a sea, a table into a confessional, a piece of iron into an animate partner, etc. Elimination of music (live or recorded) not produced by the actors enables the performance itself to become music through the orchestration of voices and clashing objects. We know that the text *per se* is not theatre, that it becomes theatre only through the actors' use of it – that is to say, thanks to intonations, to the association of sounds, to the musicality of the language.

The acceptance of poverty in theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form.

Why are we concerned with art? To cross our frontiers, exceed our limitations, fill our emptiness – fulfil ourselves. This is not a condition but a process in which what is dark in us slowly becomes transparent. In this struggle with one's own truth, this effort to peel off the life-mask, the theatre, with its full-fleshed perceptivity, has always seemed to me a place of provocation.

It is capable of challenging itself and its audience by violating accepted stereotypes of vision, feeling, and judgment – more jarring because it is imaged in the human organism's breath, body, and inner impulses. This defiance of taboo, this transgression, provides the shock which rips off the mask, enabling us to give ourselves nakedly to something which is impossible to define but which contains Eros and Caritas.

In my work as a producer, I have therefore been tempted to make use of archaic situations sanctified by tradition, situations (within the realms of religion and tradition) which are taboo. I felt a need to confront myself with these values. They fascinated me, filling me with a sense of interior restlessness, while at the same time I was obeying a temptation to blaspheme: I wanted to attack them, go beyond them, or rather confront them with my own experience which is itself determined by the collective experience of our time. This element of our productions has been variously called "collision with the roots," "the dialectics of mockery and apotheosis," or even "religion expressed through blasphemy; love speaking out through hate."

As soon as my practical awareness became conscious and when experiment led to a method, I was compelled to take a fresh look at the history of theatre in relation to other branches of knowledge, especially psychology and cultural anthropology. A rational review of the problem of myth was called for. Then I clearly saw that myth was both a primeval situation, and a complex model with an independent existence in the psychology of social groups, inspiring group behavior and tendencies.

The theatre, when it was still part of religion, was already theatre: it liberated the spiritual energy of the congregation or tribe by incorporating myth and profaning or rather transcending it. The spectator thus had a renewed awareness of his personal truth in the truth of the myth, and through fright and a sense of the sacred

he came to catharsis. It was not by chance that the Middle Ages produced the idea of "sacral parody."

But today's situation is much different. As social groupings are less and less defined by religion, traditional mythic forms are in flux, disappearing and being reincarnated. The spectators are more and more individuated in their relation to the myth as corporate truth or group model, and belief is often a matter of intellectual conviction. This means that it is much more difficult to elicit the sort of shock needed to get at those psychic layers behind the life-mask. Group identification with myth – the equation of personal, individual truth with universal truth – is virtually impossible today.

What is possible? First, **confrontation** with myth rather than identification. In other words, while retaining our private experiences, we can attempt to incarnate myth, putting on its ill-fitting skin to perceive the relativity of our problems, their connection to the "roots," and the relativity of the "roots" in the light of today's experience. If the situation is brutal, if we strip ourselves and touch an extraordinarily intimate layer, exposing it, the life-mask cracks and falls away.

Secondly, even with the loss of a "common sky" of belief and the loss of impregnable boundaries, the perceptivity of the human organism remains. Only myth – incarnate in the fact of the actor, in his living organism – can function as a taboo. The violation of the living organism, the exposure carried to outrageous excess, returns us to a concrete mythical situation, an experience of common human truth.

Again, the rational sources of our terminology cannot be cited precisely. I am often asked about Artaud when I speak of "cruelty," although his formulations were based on different premises and took a different tack. Artaud was an extraordinary



visionary, but his writings have little methodological meaning because they are not the product of long-term practical investigations. They are an astounding prophecy, not a program. When I speak of "roots" or "mythical soul," I am asked about Nietzsche; if I call it "group imagination," Durkheim comes up; if I call it "archetypes," Jung. But my formulations are not derived from humanistic disciplines, though I may use them for analysis. When I speak of the actor's expression of signs, I am asked about oriental theatre, particularly classical Chinese theatre (especially when it is known that I studied there). But the hieroglyphic signs of the oriental theatre are inflexible, like an alphabet, whereas the signs we use are the skeletal forms of human action, a crystallization of a role, an articulation of the particular psycho-physiology of the actor.

I do not claim that everything we do is entirely new. We are bound, consciously or unconsciously, to be influenced by the traditions, science and art, even by the superstitions and presentiments peculiar to the civilisation which has moulded us, just as we breathe the air of the particular continent which has given us life. All this influences our undertaking, though sometimes we may deny it. Even when we arrive at certain theoretic formulas and compare our ideas with those of our predecessors which I have already mentioned, we are forced to resort to certain retrospective corrections which themselves enable us to see more clearly the possibilities opened up before us.

When we confront the general tradition of the Great Reform of the theatre from Stanislavski to Dullin and from Meyerhold to Artaud, we realize that we have not started from scratch but are operating in a defined and special atmosphere. When our investigation reveals and confirms someone else's flash of intuition, we are filled with humility. We realize that theatre has certain objective laws and that fulfillment is possible only within them, or, as Thomas Mann said, through a kind of "higher obedience," to which we give our "dignified attention."

I hold a peculiar position of leadership in the Polish Theatre

Laboratory. I am not simply the director or producer or "spiritual instructor." In the first place, my relation to the work is certainly not one-way or didactic. If my suggestions are reflected in the spatial compositions of our architect Gurawski, it must be understood that my vision has been formed by years of collaboration with him.

There is something incomparably intimate and productive in the work with the actor entrusted to me. He must be attentive and confident and free, for our labor is to explore his possibilities to the utmost. His growth is attended by observation, astonishment, and desire to help; my growth is projected onto him, or, rather, is **found in him** – and our common growth becomes revelation. This is not instruction of a pupil but utter opening to another person, in which the phenomenon of "shared or double birth" becomes possible. The actor is reborn – not only as an actor but as a man – and with him, I am reborn. It is a clumsy way of expressing it, but what is achieved is a total acceptance of one human being by another.

