

7-31-2014

Jerzy Grotowski in Copenhagen: Three Encounters with the Sage

Juliusz Tyszka

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/mimejournal>



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tyszka, Juliusz (2014) "Jerzy Grotowski in Copenhagen: Three Encounters with the Sage," *Mime Journal*: Vol. 25, Article 4. DOI: 10.5642/mimejournal.20142501.04
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/mimejournal/vol25/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mime Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Jerzy Grotowski in Copenhagen: Three Encounters with the Sage

Juliusz Tyszka

The first part of the Tenth Session of the International School of Theatre Anthropology ([ISTA](#)), which took place in Copenhagen, May 3–8, 1996, entitled “[The Performer’s Bios: The Whispering Winds of Theatre and Dance](#),” comprised several informal presentations by masters of theatre and dance who talked about their creative biographies and demonstrated the rudiments of their respective methods. The performer’s *bios* means, according to Eugenio Barba, co-creator of theatre anthropology and one of the animators of ISTA, “the essence of a stage performer’s effect” – a specific kind of energy transmitted to the audience, shaped by the performer’s natural predispositions, her biography, and her technique.

A community of over three hundred theatre practitioners, critics, and scholars came together for the first part of ISTA to take part in an intensive schedule of workshops, sessions, performances, talks, chats . . .

For the first two days almost everyone, with the exception of [Eugenio Barba](#) and his collaborators, kept their respectful distance from the person of [Jerzy Grotowski](#), who was dressed in a well-worn black suit. Grotowski would make his entrance to Kannonhallen (the place of the symposium) usually unexpectedly, always attracting the intense-yet-distanced attention of all present.

We all waited for a meeting scheduled with him for the late evening May 5. When the time came, the Kannonhallen auditorium was filled beyond capacity – in addition to the three hundred or so participants of ISTA, over two hundred people from “the town” joined in.

Grotowski, dressed in a gray poncho, took a seat on the stage accompanied by a translator, who was there to assist him in case he got in over his head linguistically. (He employed her services only once during the evening.) Surprisingly his English had improved immensely in comparison to his performance in New York in 1993. What great effort this must have been for this ailing sixty-three-year-old man! Well, Grotowski simply always conquers whatever skill he deems necessary to his work and his personal growth. That is one mark of his greatness.

Our host, Eugenio Barba, gave a short introduction. He delivered his remarks in an unusually emotional tone, exceeding his usual emphatic delivery. This creator of [Odin Teatret](#) concluded that Grotowski first demolished the barrier between the actor and spectator, making of them both participants in a spectacle/ritual. In Grotowski’s theatre the spectator and the actor both were reaching for something central. He developed and expanded on [Stanislavski](#) and [Meyerhold](#). His particular contribution is to make daily training into an autonomous part of the actor’s craft, regardless of rehearsal and work on plays.

Grotowski considered his stage productions as a part of his personal legacy that contained an especially important message. This message must be engaged with by every educated individual.



Akropolis, version 3; Opole, 1964. From left, Gaston Kulig, Rena Mirecka, Zbigniew Cynkutis, and Ryszard Cieślak. Photo by the Laboratory Theatre. Reproduced courtesy of the Grotowski Institute Archives.

When he began his search for new expression as the leader of the [Laboratory Theatre](#), Poland was in the grip of a communist dictatorship. The secret police listened in on phone calls, routinely opened private mail. Yet Grotowski thought of theatre as a fountainhead of freedom. He got this feeling of freedom from training sessions where he experimented one-on-one with his actors. Encounters with the audience also were quite intimate, since their numbers at Laboratory Theatre spectacles were very limited. Barba recalled performances of [Akropolis](#) or [The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus](#) in Opole for two or three audience members.

Barba considers Grotowski to be the mentor who taught him resistance against reality. The Laboratory Theatre was a tiny island whose participants labored under the assumption that there were no barriers they couldn't overcome. Because true barriers may only be erected by the individual alone and by his profession. Barba also fondly recalled legendary nightly discussions with Grotowski conducted in French in a bar at the Opole train station.

After that he ceded the floor to the main attraction of the evening.

Grotowski began with his traditional request not to record the meeting. People often ask him why. The reason is obvious to him: those who record don't pay attention at the moment. They can always say to themselves: "Well, I've got this on tape." Grotowski is bothered by this potential lack of engagement with them even if only on an intuitive level. That's why he asks us to turn the tape recorders off and for our careful attention. After that request some turned their devices off, others didn't—as always in life. As for me, I gripped my pen and began quick note taking.

"My mission here was to talk about the performer's *bios*; however, I've decided to talk about my own road in life and the corresponding stages of my work," continued Grotowski.

Eugenio Barba correctly recalled that workshops in the Laboratory Theatre were characterized by their freedom, yet the context of Grotowski's choice of theatre as the place of the fulfillment of his life's mission was wider. In his childhood, he was influenced by [yoga](#) and the [Hindu religions](#). Thus, he believed that he

should choose for himself a profession then nonexistent in the European tradition and become someone who is concerned with human development. He meant for this to be development for its own sake. In other words, from the time he was nine, he planned to create something akin to his own brand of yoga.

His first dilemma was to choose a college major that would be consistent with the training needed to implement his plans. It was an incredibly difficult choice since not only had studies of this sort not yet made it into European culture, Grotowski's ideas were completely opposite from the social norms and understanding in Poland at the time. There were, however, three possibilities where individual studies of yoga could be disguised. Those were Hinduism Studies at Jagiellonian University (after the degree one could study classical yoga), Medicine and Psychiatry (also one could work on yoga since the mentally ill can and should continue to develop), and lastly drama school. When it came to the last choice, Grotowski reckoned correctly that the regime would control the text and the performance, i.e., the product of rehearsals, but would have no interest in rehearsals alone, if a person played his cards right. (Indeed, rehearsals at the Laboratory Theatre lasted from six months to three years and for the members of the ensemble they became an enclave of freedom. The most interesting things in their creative relationships happened in rehearsals.)

When it came time for college entrance exams, traditionally the drama schools had their auditions first. Grotowski went to his audition completely relaxed, convinced that he was not getting in anyway. This looseness proved a great asset, and to his great surprise, he did not have to take any more entrance exams. He got in. "At the age of nineteen I had programmed 'the computer of my mind' for theatre," he stated.

From that point on, he thought and communicated in terms of theatre, and not, for example, psychiatry. Still, the goal he was pursuing had not changed since his childhood. Sure, his mind was and still is informed by theatre and tuned to a theatre wavelength, yet even when he was engaged in theatre *sensu stricto*, he was particularly sensitive to the ritual aspect of theatre, to seeking for human integrity, to seeking for the unity of knowledge and practice. From the beginning his approach was anthropological.

In the years 1959–64 he reached the halfway point of his developmental path in theatre. For example, he had learned how to discover the unique, singular composition of space for each of his productions. (By the way, he does not think that the stage of the Italianate type is a bad development. He sees its good sides and believes strongly that it is not useless to a director. It proved useful for staging some masterworks, for example, *Mother Courage* directed by Brecht himself. However, it certainly should not comprise the whole of what the director has to work with.)

While working on *Akropolis*, he solved the mystery of psychological distance between the actor and the viewer. Staging this classic Polish drama in the context of the Auschwitz death camp forced him to confront actors—"shadow people"—with real people, the audience. He discovered then that acting in very close proximity to the audience creates a psychological chasm between the actor and the viewer.

Subsequently, in *The Constant Prince*, he put the audience very high up, at a great distance from the stage action. They sat several meters away, yet psychologically they were closely connected.

Conventional thought about theatrical space is fairly naïve. It's intuitive to believe that close proximity between actor and viewer creates connection; it happens to be the opposite.

The best space for theatrical production is a large empty hall that can be managed differently for each staging.

A key discovery of Grotowski's early period was montage. He cut the texts of his dramas and later the score of his performances like a film editor would a movie. His montage was guided by the archetypical confrontation of actors and audience. In the literary text, Grotowski was after the deepest layers of our consciousness in its tribal connections, our hidden motivations, and the mythical quality of existence. That layer of the audience's subconscious was brought up to the surface by *blasphemy*, for example.

He also engaged in montage that focused on the relationships between the actor, image, prop, text, and space. This was not a total novelty—this kind of montage was employed by Meyerhold and the great Soviet cinematographers of the 1920s. Grotowski's translation of it into theatre, however, was radical and shocked the critics, who were caught off guard by the freedom with which the actors and director treated the text—as if it were only a part of the editing process.



The Constant Prince, version 1; Wrocław, 1965. In the foreground, Rena Mirecka, and Ryszard Cieślak. Photo by the Laboratory Theatre. Reproduced courtesy of the Grotowski Institute Archives.

He staged mostly great Polish classics and masterworks of the Western canon. It was a matter of personal values. He revered these texts from childhood; for example, he had memorized *The Constant Prince* at the age of nine.

In terms of his artistic development, the most important period came next, between 1964 and 1969. He realized at that time that the thing that mattered most to him in theatre was the human knowledge gained during work with his actors. Knowledge? Yes, because Grotowski's natural interests lie outside the world of art. His personality is suited better for scientific exploration than artistic endeavor. When in the process of doing theatre he would discover something in his artistic territory, he immediately lost interest in that part.

His development followed a path of a spiral—in each period he was doing similar things but at a different level.

After the first crucial findings of his early theatre work, he posed an important question: What is it *in theatre* that seems to him the most important and enjoyable? What makes him most happy in that work? He realized that happiness was spelled out in the creative relationships forged with other human beings, his actors. Thus the years 1964–69 were spent working out the “Grotowski acting method.” The adventure of the method was not the training per se; it was the contact itself: the conquering of the fear of human contact, the gathering of inspiration, and the quest to bring light to the actors' creation. [Ryszard Cieślak](#) in *The Constant Prince* was like [Dostoyevsky](#) working on [Crime and Punishment](#) or [The Idiot](#). Something profound was happening to him, something that was fundamental in the context of the whole of human fate. The work with Cieślak was for Grotowski the most important adventure of his creative life. It was the opening of the endless “well” of the actor's possibilities; it allowed transcendence of everyday human realities. It was a great adventure.

When it comes to the training itself, it did not prepare actors for creativity. Rather, it was like daily flossing, like gymnastics, something done in order not to grow old too fast. The most important part was the creation of conditions for creative acting, not the training.

During the 1969–70 period the Laboratory Theatre ensemble achieved the highest possible levels of acting effectiveness. Grotowski, watching his colleagues, realized that they had become too proficient; they knew too much, their ability to employ various tricks was too great. The ease with which they entered the state of acting creativity was too great; they were too perfect. It certainly was good for them. Grotowski, however, in accordance with his “scientific” nature, quickly lost interest in doing theatre. He simply already “knew how.”

Thus the next question he posed was, How could one find the tipping point at which people come to true creativity? What is lacking? What do they need to do to cross that last borderline? His answer: they lack a primary connection with other people based on the acceptance of self and others. They fall short of relationships with other people that are on a “human” level.

He then began the period of [paratheatrical explorations](#)—searches that went beyond the artistic for straightforward contact between people. First, he worked with an enlarged ensemble of the Laboratory Theatre, with fairly exciting results. Unfortunately, when this action was extended outward to an even larger number of participants, usually the effect was emotionally empty.

Paratheatre “happened” to him like all the other phases of his creative work, without planning. He is not a “technological” artist—he does not pose a goal for himself, does not plan out a path through subsequent steps or milestones. Rather, he works more like a gardener who sows the seed, watches over it, and cultivates the plant, giving it the time necessary to grow. That has been the *modus operandi* for his whole life. He certainly did not plan to engage in paratheatrical exploration when he did.

Paratheatrical acts unleashed in their participants a powerful “emotional ego,” which spoiled their contact with others. Some people felt blocked. Of course, they wanted to open up to others, yet, on the other hand, they did not want to lose contact with or acceptance by other participants.

Grotowski decided to focus next on the exploration of the solitary human’s search for his profound essence. He asked himself: “What can a human do with his solitude?” Out of this question developed the problem of the human’s relationship to the natural environment. “How do we avoid offending the environment?” When we walk in the forest, for example, it is not enough to be quiet and abstain from tossing cigarette butts willy-nilly. We must notice the forest. And usually, we don’t. When in the forest, we still act as if we were in the city, in the subway; we set a goal and we pursue it. “How does one recapture sight and hearing, the natural awareness of the world?”

Thus the [Theatre of Sources](#) came about. Grotowski collaborated on its program with an international group of specialists from Africa, India, Haiti, and other countries. Between them there was not one common language; to complicate matters, the group was constantly growing, and communication became harder and harder. Finally they invented a method—they communicated through various gestures and actions. The great precision of their actions allowed them to communicate and to understand each others’ respective cultures.

Paratheatre lacked precision; with Theatre of Sources Grotowski returned to it. That’s how he reached a higher level of his creative life’s “spiral.”

Paratheatre, Theatre of Sources, and [Art as vehicle](#)—the program he is presently working on—are not all part of the same project, which is often suggested by many commentators and in festival notes when he is in attendance (such a suggestion, by the way, is catastrophic to those not intimately familiar with Grotowski’s explorations). Art as vehicle is something completely different than Paratheatre, not in the least because the program does not include anyone outside the particular ensemble he collaborates with.

Theatre of Sources meant for Grotowski a great adventure; it provided for him a “second youth.” It was however, a project within a limited timeframe. Research that happened within its parameters brought concrete effects, which allowed him to take the next step: to create wide-ranging, long-running programs. Grotowski named them [Objective Drama](#), Ritual Acts, and Art as vehicle. These programs are planned with great precision and involve precise practices from Grotowski’s participating collaborators.

Theatre was “the first letter” in “Grotowski’s alphabet”; Art as vehicle is that alphabet’s “last letter.” His consequent explorations follow a straight linear process. One prepares the next. And thus Grotowski “in

silence” spins his “Ariadne’s thread” (in [Norwid](#)’s terms). Art as vehicle is the last program, planned for many, many years.

[Mercedes Gregory](#)’s film, *Action*, documenting the everyday actions of his collaborators from the [Grotowski Workcenter in Pontedera](#) was made seven years ago. It is not indicative of what the group does today. The year 1989 was the third year of the Art as vehicle program; this year is its tenth. Today a film like that would be documenting something very different—actions of greater precision and complexity, even if emanating from the same intentions and leading in the same direction.

One fundamental change in the work on Art as vehicle comes from the fact that while in the beginning they worked in complete isolation, rarely sharing their *Action* and then with just a handful of friends, now they have found a way to share their discovery with numerous theatre ensembles from around the world and other “seekers” of new ways of doing anthropology. In the last three years they have hosted over a hundred ensembles. That is quite an achievement for a group in “isolation from the world.”

Visits usually go like this: a group comes into the center and in their first day they watch a presentation of an *Action*. The next day the visitors put on their own performance and their training session. The third day is reserved for discussion; they come together, eat, drink, and talk. Sometimes they come away with crucial professional insight.

Of course, what Grotowski and his collaborators do as part of an Art as vehicle project is quite different from purely theatrical craft. On the other hand, there are elements of performance: for example, there is internal improvisation, work on pairing absolute precision with complete spontaneity. There is also work on a method for singing.

Song is an important problem for them. For some time they have been trying to discover how to sing with their whole bodies. Songs grow directly from reactions to life’s travails; they come from something “under the skin,” something wholly organic. This “something” allows for a full emergence of the song and its lyrics. Thus, the sort of questions that Grotowski and his collaborators are seeking answers to do pertain to some elements of the acting craft.

Conversations during those meetings with visiting groups have as their subject the work and life of the members. The Grotowski group engages in sincere professional analysis of their guests’ work. There is no intention there of changing anything about it. The others have their lives, their theatre, and their creative path. No one wants to “convert” anybody. Grotowski and his group simply try during their analysis to state what they found interesting in the work, what in their view is at the work’s core. They examine the guests’ way of approaching the text, their ways of achieving spontaneous action, etc.

Their guests work in the sphere of “art as presentation,” which is greatly needed. We need a whole lot of performances in our world, and it’s great that their guests are doing that. Grotowski and his people when meeting with groups from the world of “art as presentation” simply want to help them in the development of their craft. In the contemporary world there is space for thousands of performing ensembles and for maybe two or three practicing Art as vehicle. And that is quite enough. The influence of those two/three groups is still going to be large. When it comes to Grotowski’s group, more and more careful and thoughtful observers, e.g., [Peter Brook](#), have recently confirmed the importance of their experiments to theatrical practice around the world and the influence of their exploration on world theatre.

[Mercedes Gregory](#)’s film shows a phase of their work, which was observed by a handful of witnesses. By now the number of witnesses has grown considerably. They consist of colleagues who also assume the role of viewers as they sit and watch *Action*. Grotowski’s closest collaborator, [Thomas Richards](#), describes this situation using the term “window.” The actors operate in a “secret room,” but it is possible to glance inside through the “window” of their meetings with groups who come visit them.

The questions most often asked by their guests are: “What is good in our work?” as well as “Why are you doing this especially for us?” This second question results from a misunderstanding. Grotowski’s group does not show *Action* for their guests! Such a conventional understanding of theatre whereby one performs on stage for *somebody else* does not reflect Grotowski’s approach, as even during its theatrical phase, the Laboratory Theatre troupe performed not *for* its audience, but *against* it. The group compared performing *for* an audience to prostitution and resolutely broke away from such an approach to pursue their calling.

The guests of Grotowski’s group in Pontedera observe his *Action* and can analyze it from the point of view of their craft. A phenomenon of induction often appears during similar exchanges. In physics,

induction occurs when an electric current goes through two adjacent wires, and only one of them is live. Grotowski's group gives their visitors a chance to experience something similar. Many of their members become "induced." The only criterion here is an unbiased reception of *Action* as performed by the group from Pontedera.

In a sense, Art as vehicle is a return to Grotowski's quests from an earlier period, before he worked in theatre—a period when, from the age of nine to eighteen, he contemplated developing a special kind of yoga. In his present research, he continues to use tools from the arts of presentation. To describe these is difficult, but possible. There is a fundamental difference between the "art of presentation" and an *Action* from Pontedera—Grotowski's group today works on a different level of energy.

The word "energy" is very misleading. We understand "energy" in the everyday context of human activities as muscle tone—the amount of energy stored in muscles. Contemporary men appreciate this type of energy and always want to be very "energetic." This is nice and useful. Today Grotowski himself increasingly appreciates this type of energy, as he grows older and his health weaker. He considers knowing how not to lose this energy an important lesson. Young people lose too much energy by undertaking various tasks only to stop and then start something else. By contrast, older people know better that they must work continuously on a specific task. To start on a project takes more effort than to continue doing it. These are normal, everyday concerns and normal, everyday observations.

Grotowski and his collaborators from Pontedera work on something entirely different, however. They seek to transfer the vital energy that enables us to survive into a subtler and brighter energy, filled with lightness. Hindus use the word *guna* to signify that transfer of energy. It is a matter of infusing the inner flow of the primal life force into everyday activities of individual beings. One needs to learn to differentiate between these two types of energy and how better to use the light and subtle energy.

To speak of all this is difficult, and it makes little sense to delve into this issue further. Rather, it is better to experience it. This powerful exercise of transferring one's own energy changes one's perception of the world.

Some ask: "Why are you doing this?" Grotowski answers by bringing up the teachings of yoga masters: "If one knows to do this, then one also knows why he is doing it." The important thing is to perceive something essential in the transformation of energy: to mold within us the need to achieve it. Yet, if one can exist or live happily without it, then it does not make sense to force it.

It is most efficient to seek this subtle energy through sound: the sound of the voice and vibrations of the body. Grotowski began his research in this field by studying Buddhist mantras. It turned out that they are interesting as well as unlimited. Singing through all of them would take too much time and, as it turns out, "life is too short." Besides, mantras were found to be responsible for slowing down vital functions, and Grotowski wanted to understand the whole organic process, including the intensive transformation of energy.

After "trying" numerous different chants, it turned out that Grotowski's group prefers the ones that belong to western traditions—from the regions of present-day Egypt, Syria, Israel, and Greece, as well as from Coptic and Aramaic cultures. They are anonymous chants from distant times.

Working through these chants requires a perfect understanding of their tempo and rhythm, melody, and texture. Singing these chants makes it possible to get at that fruitful subtle energy. Singing helps to seek the roots of the chants deep in us. This process should not be manipulated because when it is brought about artificially, under the false conviction that we are able to mobilize our inner center by mastering a "technique," the entire process amounts to nothing.

Different centers of energy were discovered in India (*chakra* is "center of energy" in Hindi) as well as in Europe and in the pre-Columbian cultures of America, as indicated in the representations of human life in numerous drawings, sculptures, and paintings.

(I remark with a certain surprise that for the past couple of minutes some listeners have been leaving the room. Are they disappointed? Is the lecture not what they expected? They want to be on time for the last metro? Grotowski doesn't notice anything. He continues to speak, reflects, and gathers English words carefully—he finds the right words easily and accurately. It shows he discusses this topic in English daily.)



The Constant Prince, version 1; Wrocław, 1965. Ryszard Cieślak in the title role. Photo by the Laboratory Theatre. Reproduced courtesy of the Grotowski Institute Archives.

His young collaborators borrow his techniques and understanding of the basics of their craft. Grotowski also teaches them a sense of independence from themselves. This sense of independence is fundamental. They have collaborated with over a hundred groups, and each had its own leader. It is always made clear from the outset that the leaders are not Grotowski's students. There exist certain rules on a very basic and broad level, but what counts most is what he shares with only a few.

His main collaborator at present is Thomas Richards, who has accompanied him for over eleven years. Such a long collaboration is rare in Grotowski's creative trajectory. In fact, collaborating with him demands that both sides invest time and concentration. (The Tibetans have it that tradition is, above all, about examination.) Richards attempts to continue the direction of his master's research. Grotowski holds a deep

belief that the student who continues his master's investigations can improve the shared research by 20 percent. Meanwhile Richards improved beyond "his" 20 percent already while working on chants.¹ It is a very difficult field of research. Researching and developing the archaic traditions of transmission are both a great adventure and a risk. Mistakes can be very dangerous.

In the "art of presentation," as in *The Constant Prince*, a montage was realized in the viewer's reception. Montage also exists in Art as vehicle, where it serves to make perceptible the transfer of energy among the participants. In "the art of presentation," montage allowed the viewers to be open to a transfer resulting from the technique and the "tales of collaborations" between the actor and the director. In Art as vehicle, montage opens a space for energy induction.

Grotowski finishes his talk and opens the floor for questions.

First question: What is the difference between a "holy actor" and "a doer" in an *Action* in relation to Art as vehicle?

Answer: The "holy actor" used to be a blasphemous challenge for the entire theatrical practice. "Holy" acting referred in the Laboratory Theatre to the respectability of the craft, condemning its dominating trait of "prostitution." This term is not in use anymore.

There were several attempts to alter this terminology because it was often imitated in often unacceptable and simplified contexts. While any change of terminology was oftentimes shocking to many, he considered it a return to the essence.

Question: Does Grotowski consider himself a "multicultural" person?

Yes, certainly. When he works with a Jew in Israel, he begins his conversation using cabalistic terminology. With a Chinese, he tries to talk about Taoism. His Polish identity is a fact, but he thinks it is necessary to build upon one's place of origin – to perpetually transcend its boundaries. Moreover, it is very difficult to locate the "essence" of a certain culture. [General Piłsudski](#) used to say that Poland is richest culturally at its edges rather than in the center.

The writings of [Gurdjieff](#) helped Grotowski's eager studies of "multiculturalism."

We should never (and not only in the context of studying other cultures) take the role of a teacher, but that of a student. One should go through life being attuned to other people's secrets. Grotowski stole many secrets from many wise people who wanted him to take their cultures' secrets.

The trajectory of our destiny begins within us, and we have to stir it constantly. Only then can we acquire wisdom.

Question: What does Grotowski think about a theatre group leader's work effectiveness?

Answer: Leadership depends on several factors such as which group member the leader emotionally connects with the most.

In his present work, Grotowski can say that, among others, he does not seek some sacred dogmas in his collaborators. He shares the strongest ties with Thomas Richards. Yet, though they conduct precise research together, they generally talk very little.

What people do every day influences their lives. Grotowski does not believe, however, that it has to always be so. It is also all right if the work does not influence life as long as it is solid in its own right. Such work, however, carries with it the danger that it can, in turn, uncontrollably influence other aspects of one's life.

Question: Grotowski spoke of his artistic trajectory with reference to an ascending "spiral." What is its next step?

Since he started in theatre, he has ascended very high up his "spiral." There is a connection, however, between what he and his collaborators do in Pontedera, and the theatre he practiced with his group in Wrocław and Opole. His small group will have a far-reaching and lasting influence on contemporary theatre.

¹ In autumn 1996, the Jerzy Grotowski Workcenter in Pontedera changed its name to Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards.

Incidentally, if one desires to have an influence on others at all costs, it will be a bad influence. Grotowski's favorite metaphor in this context is a gardener's work. He and his group plant a seed. But the seed grows freely.

Grotowski is not going up his "spiral" toward a return to productions.

His personal relations with members of groups who visit Pontedera are very intense. They remind him very closely of his relations with other group members from his theatrical period.

Art as vehicle is the last stage of his output. If someone decides to continue his work, let him. However, one should not lose sight of the goals that were the impetus behind the work in first place.

Question: In the version of *Action* appearing in Mercedes Gregory's film, the "doers" worked especially on the voice. Does Art as vehicle incorporate body training?

Answer: Whatever is shown in the film took place a long time ago. With reference to body work, they very intensively studied basic body positions that encourage sonic resonance. The "hunter's pose" is most efficient for their goals. It is a universal position, present in every archaic tradition, preserved in cave drawings in France as well as Africa or Mexico. They don't attach as much importance to this position today. This position was for some "doers" back then a useful and helpful (though slightly unnatural) body shape – not for others.

Today they are working a lot on the body. It is training that releases energy. In the past, sudden activations of interpersonal games disturbed this work; today, they restrict physical training only to the body work that does not necessitate accompaniment by the making of sound. The goal of this work is to open up and unblock the "inner channel" that leads to the "light and bright energy."

"Motions" – a series of muscle-relaxation exercises leading to falling down on the ground – are an important part of their training. The secret behind successful motions lies in slow and careful movements along a circle, sensibility, and search, "listening," and "seeing." At every step, a "doer" has the right to say about himself: "I hear what I hear, and I see what I see."

Concentration of this kind does not have anything in common with "forced concentration." The person who forces himself to concentrate can at best say about himself: "I see a fly, which means that I see a fly."

Question: What is the goal of Grotowski's present explorations? Could one describe them as quests in the fields of therapy, religion, ritual, social work, or theatre?

Answer: Of course, there are some ritual elements in what they do. But Grotowski refuses to qualify his explorations as of "ritual orientation." There are various different phenomena behind their work. He dislikes the Procrustean-bed division between knowledge and emotions. This division, "either this or that," does not hold true in life, which consists of a bit of everything. Their explorations are what they are. One cannot force them into one or another of the aforementioned Procrustean beds because they won't fit and that's that.

Laughs can be heard among the audience. People nod understandingly. It is with great satisfaction and – I must acknowledge – with a certain relief that I look at Grotowski, how he answers questions – at times difficult questions – with little effort and with charm and how he always answers wisely and with respect for the inquirer (though not everybody is worthy of it). He is in great shape – he is joking to establish a good relationship with his listeners. Grotowski – a showman? Yes, a little bit. Three years ago, he was sick and weak to the point that speaking caused him difficulty. Thankfully, he got better.

Question: Did it ever bother him that he was not an actor?

Answer: On the contrary, he was an actor, in his early days – a rather bad actor, however. Nevertheless, he wanted to experience being an actor for himself in order to understand what it entails. This experience led him to horrifying realizations. He realized how much an actor must deal with factors extraneous to yet perpetually controlling his work – most importantly, the director and the critic.

It was very important to experience this in order to understand how easy it is to block an actor, to suppress his natural predispositions.

It is difficult to blame old professors who teach traditional techniques of acting. Some of them really helped him, giving him many "tricks" about how to deal with stage fright.

He remembers, for example, a very good professor at the [State Drama School in Kraków](#) who knew how brilliantly to block actors playing traditional scenes. Grotowski remembers that he enjoyed glancing at the audience from behind the curtains to study the viewers' amazed reactions at the scene of Lady Milford's courtyard from [Schiller's *Love and Intrigue*](#). During one of the rehearsals, the old professor argued with the costume designer, who had designed rather modest costumes of the epoch. The professor believed that one should not restrain oneself from revealing the splendor of the outfits even if it jeopardized questions of authenticity. Why? The professor explained it very simply: "The ladies in the audience like to envy the actresses." And he was right.²

It is important to always know what it is that one is doing. Jesus said, "Blessed is he who knows what he is doing."

The acting experience was very important for Grotowski and gave him the knowledge he needed in his work as a stage director later. But that should not be a rule. Brecht, for example, was never an actor, yet he was an excellent director. According to Grotowski, he was a much better director than writer.

For a playwright, prior acting experience does not have to be important, while for a director it can be important and helpful.

It was now time for written questions gathered across the conference room.

Question: Why didn't he show workshops in Mercedes Gregory's film?

Answer: "I know, I know – first we have five days of workshop with so-and-so, and we create a work of art in the following two weeks." (Laugh.)

Question: Is he interested in theatre?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Isn't he afraid that those who come to Pontedera will mythologize his work?

Answer: People mythologize everything, so why wouldn't they mythologize his work? It is natural, unfortunately.

In Poland, for example, there is a lot written about him even though a lot of it is untrue. Reading this, he feels as though he was dead and was learning about the posthumous exegeses of his works. (Unfortunately, historians have always falsified history.) Polish historians write, for example, that the philosophy and culture of the Far East interested him. Yes, this is true. Furthermore, they write that the theatre of the Far East also interested him. Nonsense!

Fascinating, but normal.

Going back to his life trajectory: though his work has evolved, many elements remain stable. He always worked to understand the organicity of human beings; it was always useful in his work to compose wholeness by montage and division into composing "pieces" (it was fascinating). Also, he was always gathering practical wisdom.

Question: Grotowski said a short time ago that the most creative period in each theatre group's existence equals more or less a dog's lifetime. Consequently, each theatre group could work really creatively only for ten to fifteen years. How does he judge his friends from Odin Teatret, who recently celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the group's existence?

Answer: "Very kind question. (Laugh.) To start, a clarification: he did not come up with this concept on his own – he paraphrased Professor Bohdan Korzeniowski, and so he did not talk completely in his own name. He stands by his opinion, nevertheless. He believes that the admission of young actors to a group can enliven it for some time. But these are exceptions, not the rule.

² Grotowski refers here to the diploma show of fourth-year students at the State Drama School. Grotowski was the assistant of the "old professor," Władysław Krzemiński. The premiere was on January 17, 1955 at the Theatre of Poetry in Kraków. See Zbigniew Osiński, *Grotowski i jego Laboratorium* [Grotowski and his Laboratory] (Warsaw: PIW, 1980), 19–20.



Rena Mirecka during exercises, Opole, 1964. Photo by Fredi Graedl, the Laboratory Theatre. Reproduced courtesy of the Grotowski Institute Archives.

Question: What connects him with practice, and what with theory of theatre?

Answer: He prefers that little connects him with theory. Theory reminds him of war—scholars trying to prove at any price against other scholars that their theory is right. This incentive to prove oftentimes speaks against the facts. In turn, one cannot just ignore or do away with theory—theorists will always write about practice. A characteristic example in the history of theatre is the case of [Edward Gordon Craig](#), who achieved little as a practitioner but contributed tremendously to the development of this artistic practice as a theoretician.

The meeting with Jerzy Grotowski came to an end. ISTA participants carried on discussions outside the conference room of Kanonhallen late into the night. I myself was highly disappointed, though not at all about Grotowski's talk—on the contrary, I was impressed by his great shape and wisdom, and the cleverness and concrete nature of his answers. Rather, I was disappointed that I did not get the chance to ask him a question. I raised my hand high for over twenty minutes but the Master's eyes kept evading me while he was acknowledging other questioners. Had I fallen out of favor? Why?

The intensity of the International School of Theatre Anthropology allowed me to quickly forget about my worries. In less than two days, however, the Master's puzzling behavior was explained in sensational ways.

On May 7, in the afternoon, the phone rang in my hotel room and Ulrik Skeel, Odin Teatret's administrator, informed me that Mr. Grotowski was inviting all the Polish participants of ISTA for a separate meeting the same day at 11 p.m. in the hotel lounge. I was speechless.

A few minutes before 11 p.m., I walked down the long hall, which was, seriously, about half a kilometer, toward the bar. At some point, as I was passing hundreds of similar doors, one of them opened, and Jerzy Grotowski emerged unexpectedly. Understandably, a "Do not disturb" door tag hung outside his door.

There was now a table covered with many bottles of all kinds of light and harder alcohol in the reserved part of the lounge where ISTA participants ate breakfast early in the morning. A group of about ten people stood next to the table—all Poles from home and abroad who had participated in the first part of International School of Theatre Anthropology. Also present was Ms. Hana Pilátova from Prague, a specialist in Polish theatre who was a trainee at the Laboratory Theatre back in the 1960s during the Prague Spring.

The evening began with an unpleasant incident. Ms. Pilátova had invited one of her students to attend the meeting. When everyone sat down to table, she asked if the Master agreed to having one additional person. Grotowski turned gloomy and stated that his invitations were clear—Poles and Pilátova only.

Strange. It was known that Pilátova and Grotowski had collaborated for years at the Laboratory Theatre, worked hard to disseminate their output in Czechoslovakia (in the “underground,” against the “people’s” authorities), and cultivated an uninterrupted friendly relationship up to their meeting in Copenhagen. Nevertheless, the poor young woman had to leave the room. The categorical motives of Grotowski’s insistence on the specific conditions of our meeting were not entirely clear, but it was he who did us the honor, and not the other way around.

To report about that “Polish meeting” presents me with difficulties. I did not take notes, and though I listened carefully, it is not the same to write from memory where I risk distorting and manipulating what happened. Also, I was preoccupied with observing Grotowski’s influence upon his listeners, his “magic” when he spoke, and his relationship to his respective interlocutors. One of them, for example, a once-renowned mime from Wrocław and later instructor at a theatre school in Barcelona, did not hide his dislike of the Master. I was curious if the two men would begin to argue. But they remained respectfully neutral.

I don’t think that the content of this particular conversation, kept strictly professional and free of any sensational topics, was much different from Grotowski’s other conversations with people from various places. Many themes returned in Grotowski’s second talk at ISTA.

I want to conclude by sharing uncertainties of moral nature with the readers. The infamous Grotowski devoted one of his evenings during a big international meeting to his countrymen. This was the very theme of the meeting. Doesn’t this theme assume a priori a certain intimacy; doesn’t it bind us to be discreet about it?

Because it was nevertheless a “public gathering” and because the Master did not ask for our discretion, I have decided to describe in general terms a few conversations which I remembered and recall the best and I believe are worth describing.

First: Since his lecture at a ceremony inaugurating his honorary doctorate at the [University of Wrocław](#), Grotowski has often advised his countrymen against the commercial financing of theatre institutions. He believes that public patronage is better able to adequately sustain the existence of troupes, especially in experimental theatre.

He shared with us the sensational story of his unsuccessful escape from Poland together with his mother and brother shortly after the war. [His father](#), a Polish officer stationed in the West, organized their passes to cross the “green border.” When everything was ready, the mother and boys went to Kraków, where they failed to meet with their guide. This person had been arrested earlier that day. Yet, if [Mrs. Grotowska](#) and her sons had escaped, the Laboratory Theatre would have probably never existed. In the West, a similar enterprise is unthinkable. But it was possible in Poland, despite all the difficulties presented by the totalitarian system.

I remember that in the fervor of his animated narration, Grotowski used the expression, “Lenin and his gang.”

His remarks about New Age spirituality were also interesting. He believes that this movement contains a lot of “intellectual garbage” from many centuries but contributes nevertheless to an interesting and positive evolution of “western intellectualism.” That slow evolution leads away from narrow scientific rationalism to wider, richer, and deeper ways of discovering the world. It also enriches contemporary man’s ontological reflection. For example, it is much easier than before for Grotowski to talk with American students. He talks with them about God and various kinds of energy, and they understand quite well while their professor listens quietly to these conversations afraid to join in.

Grotowski asked us at some point about the developments in theatre in Poland. He was not interested in generalities, but rather asked about what interested him most particularly. He mentioned that he has

heard a lot about [Teatr Kana](#) and based on what he heard, he thinks that – from the point of view of his own views and preferences – it is the most interesting phenomenon in contemporary Polish theatre.

When after about three hours the conversation turned to what is going on with Polish theatre, Polish festivals, etc., Grotowski pleaded fatigue and left. He bid us a warm farewell and encouraged us to stay and partake of the refreshments still left on the table.

We could not drink; there was still too much agitation from what took place earlier. Long discussion continued into the wee hours of the morning.

Two more particulars bear recalling here. First, at the beginning of our meeting, Grotowski filled his glass with some strong dark liquor and once in a while wet his lips with it. Also, at some point he took out a pack of Camels, broke the filter off a cigarette and lit up. We took it as symptoms of his health getting better.

Second, nearby, next to a pillar, some of the ISTA organizers were having their late supper. When in the course of the evening, they got carried away and their laughter got too loud, Grotowski did not hesitate to send an “emissary” to them asking them to pipe down. Of course, it worked.

The next presentation by Grotowski at the Tenth International School of Theatre Anthropology, took place on May 10, 1996, during the second part of the ISTA symposium “Theatre in a Multicultural Society.” It took place in a conference center with the charming name of “Louisiana,” 20 km from Copenhagen, on the shore of the Sund straits. On a clear day, it was possible to see from the Louisiana’s terrace all the way to the coast of Sweden.

The spacious conference room once again was filled to capacity. Once again, disregarding Grotowski’s plea to not record him, cassette recorders were humming all around. Grotowski was quite obviously tired of the whole “Copenhagen conference marathon,” and this fact affected the coherence and efficiency of his remarks. Also, he did not prepare anything “special” for this particular venue, and so he was speaking on the fly, referring liberally to many of the topics from his talk at Kannonhallen. With great satisfaction I also caught several allusions to our Polish discussion in the hotel bar.

My notes from the Louisiana meeting are thus less cohesive; simply taking them in the first place was difficult under the circumstances. I ask thus for indulgence on the part of the readers for some lapses in narration.

Grotowski opened with remarks on his road to “theatre anthropology.” During his studies in drama school in the 1950s, his interests led him to study human reactions in a variety of unexpected situations. He was trying to capture those reactions that were individual (singular), and those that were typical (human). He worked on developing the range and honing the skill of his experiments and observations. Eventually, he came to believe that theatre (or a theatrical element) exists also in a myriad of rituals and techniques (such as yoga). Thus, knowledge about theatre, directing, acting, could be subsumed under the general study of humans – anthropology. Thus, his applied knowledge achieved through the “practice” of theatre gave him later a knowledge base to study and research unusual human practices (individual or shared), all over the world.

Conventional anthropological research starts with anthropological studies (theory). He found his own way to anthropology by doing – the practice of making theatre. The transition from theatre to anthropology was guided by his personal tendency away from theatrical creation but toward research and the study of the “human actor,” something he had talked about at length in Kanonhallen.

This transition was very difficult, in large part due to the fact that conceptually “anthropological theatre” did not exist; all the conceptual language describing his “discovery” had to be invented. In the beginning, Grotowski simply turned to works from the discipline of cultural anthropology, keeping in mind that they were supposed to help him solve practical problems of communication, not in building new theories.

First came analysis of the essential differences between theatre and ritual. The two exist in highly polarized contexts of different functions. There is, however, great similarity and overlap of practice in the shaping of the event either through montage, or the free flowing of “life” taking place “live” in the body of the performer/participant.

“Montage” as a form of theatrical craft was conceptualized already by [Diderot](#). He argued that the actor himself, in a completely “cold-blooded” way, must manipulate the audience’s emotions through an appropriately planned “montage” of behaviors. (This methodology took a particularly strong hold in French theatre.) A very similar vision of theatre and the actor’s craft was arrived at by Meyerhold. His starting point, however, was not the “cold-blooded” actor, rather it was his intuition about the audience’s reactions and the possibility of shaping them through a precisely constructed spectacle. [Eisenstein](#) found the most effective use of the technique of montage. His, now classic, gimmick – first a picture of an old woman, then a gravesite – was supposed to convince the viewer that in this sequence of pictures a widow is represented. The same type of montage was soon adapted for theatre. The relationship of image, sound, and character was constructed as a montage all confronting the viewer.

Brecht, as well, lectured about the necessity for the separation of the actor and the character played by him, but fortuitously was more lax in his practice. In arguably his greatest masterpiece, *Mother Courage*, “human” actors are placed in “human” situations.

The second possibility of shaping a theatrical event as well as a ritual is to let it be controlled by the unaffected inner “life” of the performer. In the sphere of theatre, it is known as the famous Stanislavski method. Stanislavski wanted to teach his actors to “live the life of the characters” through a search for the necessary inner associations and motivations. The actor in the act of performing was supposed to be analogous to a writer – to Dostoyevsky writing his novels, creating his characters in front of the public’s eyes. Stanislavski’s work involved two important phases: (1) “emotional memory” (the actor asks himself: “What would I be feeling in a situation analogous to that of my character?”); (2) [physical actions](#) – that was the latter part of Stanislavski’s search for a method, when he realized that reliance on “emotional memory” alone is the wrong choice. Emotions are, after all, not subject to our will – for example, someone does not want to fall in love, and yet he does, does not want to go into a fit of rage, but he does, etc. The feelings of hatred, anxiety, and all other emotions operate under similar conditions. Thus came the realization that emotion cannot provide a stable basis for the actor’s craft of transforming him or herself into a character. “Method” so conceived does not necessarily lead to authenticity of emotion, more likely to a proto-hysterical state of agitation.

Once Stanislavski realized this, he initiated the most creative phase of his work. He modified the essential actor’s credo from “What would I feel?” (in my character’s circumstances) to “What would I do?” That is the portal for the actor’s inner search for his human experiences. Stanislavski called this search “physical work” to emphasize what he believed to be its most important aspect. Of course it was not purely physical as the actor building on the basis of his physicality had to also reconnect with a myriad of experiences, including those “borderline” experiences, “psychological scars” we all carry around.

Grotowski recalled here a story told to him by one of the actors. (Perhaps – this he did not reveal – it came out once during an improvisation.) This young man found himself one day deep in a forest when a heavy rain started to fall. He tried to find shelter under a large-canopy tree. Suddenly, he heard heavy breathing coming from very close by. Could it be another man? An animal? He listened for a while and came to believe with near certainty that on the other side of the massive tree trunk, there was, cowering in fear of the forest, the rain, and him, a young girl.

How long did they stand in the rain under the tree? Who knows? The boy lost any sense of time. They both were afraid to move; they just listened for the other’s breath. Eventually, he could not detect her breath anymore, and when he decided to finally look to the other side of the tree, she was gone. He never learned who was there that day.

How does one recollect such story? Certainly not through “emotional memory.” The danger of falling into stereotype and emotional tackiness is too great. The only way there is through “physical memory.”

[Vakhtangov](#), at the latter stage of his career, arrived at a clear vision of fusing Meyerhold’s montage and grotesquerie with the inner work he had learned from Stanislavski. Stanislavski approved of Vakhtangov’s work as an expansion of his own technique; thus he welcomed [Princess Turandot](#) enthusiastically. All the people from Stanislavski’s circle were convinced he would condemn the “wicked experiment.” Yet Stanislavski praised it, because he was aware that Vakhtangov found a way to use actors’ “inner technique” for the purposes of creating concentrated, *theatrical* reality (as opposed to “realism” on the stage). After Vakhtangov’s untimely death, the older master took on his student’s students, wanting to

integrate Vakhtaganov's "discovery" into his own method. (A side note worth its own consideration is the overturning of traditional master-student roles here between Stanislavski and Vakhtaganov.)

The two possibilities—montage and free-flowing "life"—we would also find in rituals. African [vodou](#) ritual forms from the Caribbean, for example, are based on an absolute free-flowing "life" in the bodies of the performers. [Bali's rituals](#), however, are fragmented; they are put together from many little segments. After each fragment, the performers take a little break.

The same segmentation we will find in [Peking Opera](#). Oh, yes, as part of this theatrical convention actors take miniscule breaks, which remain undetected to the average viewer. A careful observer of a master training session, however, would be able to perceive them. The training is done "piece by piece," a method worked out by generations of actors allowing for the craft to be passed on from father to son.

The actors of Peking Opera construct their gestures on stage in accordance with hieroglyphics similar in their shape to Chinese alphabet figures. That kind of craft is capable of surviving thousands of years. There is even room for improvisation, but the Chinese masters prefer to keep that a secret (unless someone wants very much to "steal" it . . .). They can improvise in two ways: 1) by changing their *élan*—or "chain of impulses"—every day they achieve a different structure of stage occurrence; 2) by changing the order of the details of the performance—these changes are so subtle they're undetected even by Chinese opera connoisseurs.

This type of improvisation takes place in the context of thoroughly arranged chains of signs/codes. These are highly artificial gestures; still, as the name suggests, "art" is a highly "artificial" phenomenon. In Chinese theatre, among Chinese actors, gesture has a privileged place among the different means of expression. In Western theatre, the language of gesture is very limited and largely clichéd.

In vodou and other Caribbean rituals, gesture does not have a special role above other means of expression, since gesture in itself does not dominate the free-flowing "life" within the performer's human body. Performers' hands and their whole bodies work "organically" in vodou, as energy impulses are sent through from a few distinct centers in the body, just as always naturally occurs in organic life. These are physical impulses, yet their nature is more complex and extends far beyond "pure" physicality. Whole lines of organic movement in vodou are initiated by impulses from specific points in the body. Careful gesture—the kind that denotes physicality in Peking Opera—is in vodou completely secondary.

In between the two extremes of shaping the process of theatre and/or ritual—montage or free-flowing "life"—there exists a large space for a number of "in-the-middle" techniques. Grotowski recalled here an anecdote told often by Stanislavski with a great sense of revulsion, a story of a certain Russian actor's agony, which Stanislavski supposedly witnessed. This actor, on his deathbed, "performed" in his agony all the clichéd theatrical gestures he had used during his professional life on stage. For Stanislavski, this tragic/grotesque story constituted a powerful argument that even the most artificial elements of an actor's craft can become "second nature."

Grotowski relativized Stanislavski's understanding of the anecdote. Stanislavski was a well-known crusader against the mannered, nineteenth-century acting technique he inherited. If, however, we look at the horrible tragic moment through the eyes of the dying actor, we gain another perspective. Why did the man repeat those gestures? Perhaps because they were dear to him, they were extraordinary, the gestures of his theatrical triumph? Grotowski brought in another story to bear on the issue, that of a famous cellist, who also while dying was said to gesture as if "playing the cello." Just another artist releasing the memory of his beloved craft through his body.

The next part of Grotowski's talk concentrated on discussing the situation of the viewer in relation to the two acting principles—montage and free flow.

If the director and actors recognize the viewer for what he is, they are then permitted to deceive him—they are, after all, engaged in making "art." Still, they are obliged to do it skillfully: for example, Grotowski and Cieślak working together in *The Constant Prince*, where love and martyrdom became one as a result of a very skillful, thought-out montage. The actor was able to utilize in his acting "score" his intimate self safely, because the viewer was living in the illusion created by this effective montage.

Stanislavski thought along the same lines, when he spoke about the role's perspective, the actor's perspective, and the viewer's perspective. Ultimately, the actor is *not* Hamlet; he knows that his character

will die in the fifth act and that he must preserve a lot of energy for that moment. The director is the one responsible to the perspective of the viewer.

When something is happening on the stage *for real*, the audience opens up to that experience. In the Laboratory Theatre the ensemble, on the one hand, “deceived” the audience, but on the other, they gave the viewers a lot of “toys” to play with beautifully without trespassing the boundaries of their role. Because responsibility to the viewer first and foremost means the acceptance of his position *as a viewer*.

[Osterwa](#) wrote about acting *in relation* to the viewer, face-to-face, full of acceptance and understanding. He warned about acting *for* the viewer though. Acting *for* is mediocre and pathetic. The only viewer one can act *for* is God (or, as in India, a whole multitude of gods). Coming back to [Reduta](#), Grotowski studied thoroughly its actors’ attitudes toward the audience, and it turned out to have been more complicated than Osterwa had declared. The actors of Reduta often played *against* their audiences; they manipulated them, laid traps for them, or shocked them. Reduta’s performances often turned into “power plays.”

A similar type of “war” with the audience takes place at a rock or pop concert. During those performances, it’s not uncommon that the musicians use the audience’s “life energy” to power up their own performances. [Mick Jagger](#) at his peak is the best example of that type of performer. He heats the audience up first and then sucks their life energy like a vampire to power himself up and gives it away yet again during the course of the concert.

In the old days, actor-craftsmen played *for* the audiences all of their lives, not seeing anything unbecoming in the job. Their professional ethic required that they honed their skill thoughtfully and tirelessly. The goal was perfection of the craft. They used to say: “If I don’t practice my skills for even one day, the next day *I* can see it, after two days my colleagues can see it. After three days the public can see it too.”

Relationship to the viewer and to something like the “professional calling,” and “the craft” were just as complex in the old theatre as today. Achieving personal mastery was a process akin to sculptor’s work with clay; the audience as well was sometimes perceived as part of the clay – matter to be shaped.

Actors who took a different direction, like Osterwa, and after him the Laboratory Theatre, among others, said to themselves: “We don’t play *for* the audience!” There was respect for the viewer, obviously, but his/her gaze was never the final determinant of what was going on onstage. How then did they justify their “calling” and their grueling training? As an answer, Grotowski recalled an anecdote from a long process of renovation of a famous Kraków [altarpiece](#) by [Veit Stoss](#). When the conservators took apart the whole piece, including the parts never seen by the public, they were astonished to find that even background figures that never saw the light of day were carved out in just as scrupulous a manner as the front piece. For whom were they thus made? God?

The question remains, what is the role of the viewer in a theatre where the actors don’t play *for* the audience? The true role of such a viewer is to be a *witness*. What does being a witness mean in a theatrical context? Grotowski gave us another anecdote to make this function more clear. Once he saw a documentary made during the Vietnam War. A large part of the documentary concerned a Buddhist monk committing an act of self-immolation as a protest against the war. Grotowski became fascinated by the sequence of pictures depicting this act. What was shown? First, other monks, the protagonist’s “assistants” in the act, poured gasoline over him. Then they set fire to him. At that moment the camera captured people around the monk changing their pattern of breathing. That change was extremely important. Was the monk an actor? Of course not. Were the people watching his self-immolation an audience? No. They were witnesses watching a specific existential truth unfolding before them. If, in the place of the monk, they saw a circus act, they would have become spectators. But whenever someone creates a *truth*, the spectators, transformed into witnesses at that moment, will take it with them into the wider reality. It’s this realization that guides Grotowski in his work: if an “act” created by a performer is *true*, its viewers will be transformed into witnesses.



Ryszard Cieślak during exercises, Opole, 1964. Photo by Fredi Graedl, the Laboratory Theatre. Reproduced courtesy of the Grotowski Institute Archives.

This same transformation from viewer into witness is possible during the Grotowski ensemble's work, *Action*, in Pontedera. The performers labor in order to transform their own reality. When true, a sort of "induction" takes place. Grotowski's role is to teach participants to create situations in which they can communicate on personal as well as technical levels. His references are his own "primal tradition" and his deep sense of the "eternal calling" that characterizes his personal mythology.

Still, he is in constant pursuit of sages who could teach him more, from whom he could "steal" more secrets. He dreams of new encounters opening up new perspectives. Whenever he mentions that dream, he tells a humorous didactic story about the meeting between [Einstein](#) and [Bohr](#). Reportedly, Einstein told his Danish colleague that his quantum theory goes against universe's essential harmony. Bohr retorted, "But it works!"

Grotowski thus moves through the world sensitive to other people's special qualities, their own "eternal calling" that might yet teach him something new.

Prof. Kirsten Hastrup, co-chair of the Louisiana symposium, chose for the topic of her remarks a citation from [Artaud](#): "We must believe in life's meaning reborn through theatre, where man, calmly and fearlessly, becomes the master of that which is inert and wills it into life."

This calling when taken at its most general universal implication, says: "If I am able to cause something to emerge into life, I am duty-bound to do it."

During the tenth session of ISTA a lot was said about multiculturalism. The first person in Grotowski's life who showed a multicultural slant to her beliefs was his [mother](#). She proudly reminded him that as a child during Easter she mercilessly provoked her confessing priest. She used to tell him, "Monsignor, I don't believe that a religion could be the divinely inspired truth. Every religion has a tendency toward fanaticism." Or she would say, "Monsignor, I believe that animals have souls too." The priest would try to

mitigate his little heretic's provocative ideas, but soon gave up, realizing how long the confessional line behind her was. He would give her penance and send her home not risking any more scandal.

Grotowski remembers that his mother read all the holy books, including the Qur'an. She used to say they could be read many different ways but that they all were a part of a Great Testament for humanity; when read carefully they strengthened one another. She also told her sons, "Our ancestors' material wealth was turned to dust by wars and uprisings. Do not accumulate material wealth, gather knowledge and experiences." "My mother was my first 'guru,'" concluded Grotowski.

The next sequence of Grotowski's remarks was taken up by the subject of the theatrical ensembles coming to his center in Pontedera. As Grotowski already mentioned in Kanonhallen, these visits/workshops are divided into three parts, taking three days in all. The first day is taken up by the demonstration of the performing structure by the resident group at Pontedera. The goal of this exercise is to change the level of energy in the participants. There is no collaboration at this stage; it would be destructive to the work done by both visiting and resident ensembles. The second day is taken up by the demonstration of the performing structure of the visitors. The third day is a meeting and discussion about what both groups saw and experienced the previous days. The most interesting part of these discussion sessions is the questions posed by both groups. The most pertinent ones usually concern the respective characters of the score and the flow of each group and the relationships between them.

The transformation of performing energy is the main goal of the Pontedera group's research. They are after "organic activity." Grotowski came across something akin to this idea his sophomore year at college while reading a text by [Mieczysław Limanowski](#) about actor training. Limanowski came across in the writing as a *yurodivy*;³ Grotowski already then knew that *yurodivye* possess an indisputable kind of wisdom.

The last part of Grotowski's remarks at Louisiana was dedicated to the concept of "energy." This concept, energy – what it means, what different kinds of energy there are – was discussed often at the tenth session of ISTA. That varied understanding was even demonstrated by some great practitioners of theatre and dance.⁴ Not surprisingly, "energy" constitutes one of the basic terms or key words used in theatre anthropology.

Smirking, Grotowski noted that thanks to the popularization of New Age movements that concept is espoused everywhere by everyone. Fifteen years earlier when he was just starting to use it, people were looking at him with pity in their eyes. Now, Grotowski is searching for a proper replacement for that unfortunately clichéd expression. He has not come across anything suitable yet, but continues his search faithfully. For now, he believes that to use the term responsibly, one must also describe its precise context; otherwise it would be better to avoid it.

In the context of theatre, the use of the term is more or less avoidable. In the theatre there does not really exist a situation of "energy flow," with the exception of "vampirism," such as mentioned in connection with Mick Jagger earlier. It does not make sense to talk about energy in the context of theatre in its basic description as muscle tension. This "worrier energy" (Hindi *raja*) is not what Grotowski has in mind. He is interested in light energy, transparent, giving the impression of trans-illumination (Hindi *santi*). We may pass in our lives from the first kind of energy to the other; furthermore, we should do it, for this other kind is incredibly important to our life. The modern lifestyle separates us from "light" energy, separating us thus from our deepest inner selves. The flow of that kind of energy is the only true gauge of the life process.

The existence of points in our bodies where energy is stored or concentrated has been known for millennia. Let's look at it from a point of view of an easily recognizable reaction. Let's imagine that we are driving a car that's going very fast and all of a sudden we see a child wonder into the road. What happens to our body? We feel a deep pang in the pit of the stomach. In this way (and Grotowski does not wish it on anybody), we can learn one of the most obvious centers of energy accumulation in our bodies.

³ A Russian Orthodox kind of saint, a holy sage.

⁴ Related in the Polish press by Magda Grudzinska, "Czym jest 'the performer's bios'?" [What is 'the performer's bios?'], *Didaskalia*, no. 13–14 (June–August 1996); Juliusz Tyszka, "Dziesiąta sesja ISTA" [The tenth session of ISTA], *Teatr*, no. 11 (1996).

This process of energy transfer in the human body, which is very basic to our existence, can be understood and mastered. There are several ways of working to achieve that mastery. One is working in accordance with Jung's theory. According to the procedure, at the half point of our lives, we should ask what have we done so far and what else might we do to fulfill our potential. (It helps if one is an artist of some sort.)

The second half of our lives should be already intuited during the first half when we work out the details of our technique. We can't forget at the same time that working on certain techniques still means practicing yoga in general, meaning in this context, we allow for our potential to develop.

Grotowski finished here visibly tired. [Richard Schechner](#) came up to him and gave him a warm embrace. (A few days earlier he was exchanging testy comments about the "cult" of Grotowski that overtook some of the ISTA participants. When Barba sat Grotowski on stage during a final improvisation by a few of the ISTA multicultural teachers, Schechner, true to his sarcastic temperament, asked, "Here's the king, and where's the queen?") Now he was hugging his mentor undoubtedly sincerely, since it would be unusual for a person as bright and thoughtful as he to fail to see that here we had an occasion to meet a sage, who simply towered over all others in his experience and wisdom, and that we're unlikely to be so lucky again soon. Then again, he also challenges us to, like him, feverishly look for books, encounters, discussions, and people who'll be happy to let us "steal" their ideas and techniques. That we will passionately yet methodically seek, creatively always unfulfilled.

Grotowski continues to be a tremendously difficult challenge. Let's look at ourselves. Can we take on that challenge?

– *Translated by Eva Sobolevski and Kathleen Cioffi*

Juliusz Tyszka is a professor in the Department of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, specializing in theatre studies. The author of six books, editor or co-editor of many others, and translator of several more, he has also written approximately two hundred articles on various aspects of contemporary theatre and performance studies. His many writings have been published in Poland, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, Romania, and Yugoslavia. He is a contributing editor to *New Theatre Quarterly*, and has been a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Department of Performance Studies, New York University.