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Searching for Something a Little Visionary: Anthony Nikolchev Interviews Matej Matejka, Director of the Studio Matejka

Erratum

Addendum appended at author's request. November 20, 2014.

Searching for Something a Little Visionary: Anthony Nikolchev Interviews Matej Matejka, Director of the Studio Matejka Anthony Nikolchev

The [Studio Matejka](#) began its activities in 2010 under the auspices of the [Grotowski Institute](#) in Wrocław, Poland, as a physical theatre laboratory exploring twenty-first-century performance techniques that specifically work across borders: borders between performance genres, borders between training techniques, and borders between individual expression and collective resonance. Through practical investigation, the performers work to develop the strength, agility, and dexterity to physically “speak” through a diverse range of ideas, images, and vocabularies.

The Studio is led by [Matej Matejka](#), a Slovak actor, teacher, and director, and composed of [eight performers](#) from seven countries. Additionally, the Studio is regularly accompanied by external affiliates. [Vivien Wood](#) (UK), [Sarie Mairs Slee](#) (UK/USA), and [Milan Kozanek](#) (Slovakia) assist the leader in psychophysical research. [Ditte Berkeley](#) (Denmark/UK) and [Jarosław Fret](#) (Poland) lead music training and supervise music composition. [Bryan Brown](#) (USA) collaborates on the dramaturgy of the performances. The academic team of the Studio is supervised by Sarie Mairs Slee (USA) assisted by [Torbjorn Oppedal](#) (Norway) and [Ragnhild Freng Dale](#) (Norway) who record, contextualize, and inform the laboratory research. The Studio’s film and documentary team is comprised of [Adam Hanuljak](#) (Slovakia), [Peter Kotrha](#) (Slovakia) and [Karol Jarek](#) (Poland).

Anthony Nikolchev: Why did you start the Studio Matejka?

Matej Matejka: I was always searching for the ways and systems of an actor, and I remember I was never satisfied with the system that was offered in the university, in the acting school, and because I was always very physical and was doing a lot of physical activities, dance, and different movement disciplines, I was always interested in the combination of my actor’s work in this direction. At that time I felt that it was a fascinating combination but something that must have much greater potential as an actor, to combine movement and inner expression, than just dance and singing at the same time.

I was lucky enough to become part of [Farm in the Cave](#) [a Czech theatre company], where my director, Viliam Dočolomanský, taught me a lot of things, [and] really was very demanding and also deeply researching something I was interested in. This is this inner expression through physicality. He gave me the opportunity to lead the training in the company when we were beginning, so from scratch, from the moment that we were starting as a company. We just knew the ideology that we are searching for something different, something deeper, something more honest and yet, something that is inspired by big theatre thinkers like [Grotowski](#) and [Artaud](#). He gave me a chance to lead the work from scratch, from nothing. He guided me, but from that moment I already got the opportunity to teach and, at the same time, develop myself as an actor. So since this time, which was thirteen to fifteen years ago, I started to develop a lot of things as a pedagogue, parallel to [how I was developing as] an actor.



Anthony Nikolchev in his solo performance *The Echoes Off The Walls Underground Are Louder Than Your Footsteps Above Me*, directed by Matej Matejka and Yuri Kordonsky (Sala Laboratorium, The Grotowski Institute, Wrocław, Poland, February 2013). Photo by Margielski Photography. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.

When I got a job in the Grotowski Institute, it was a transition from just temporary training and developing one of the lines as a leader and an actor in one of the [theatre] companies—as [Teatr Zar](#) was later. I really needed something more. I desperately started to need a space to start to discover ideas and exercises entirely with a group of people who are dedicated just to that. So at one moment I started to have this need. I needed to take it further. When I was leading workshops, I had a feeling that even if it is one or two weeks, it is not enough. I can't really discover anything. I can just recycle something that is very slowly discovering as an idea of specific exercises or pedagogical approaches for the physical performer.

So this was the reason why. Actually, it was naturally somehow born in me that there will be a moment when I really need a group of people with whom I can start to develop these ideas—take it further—than just for the training within the company or the workshops which I was leading. Luckily, the director of the Grotowski Institute also proposed, on his own, that I should start my own research. He proposed that it should be a studio named by my name. At that time I had the feeling it was a joke. And it took me another year before some concrete steps [were taken], and [we issued] the real call for the Studio Matejka.

AN: So you're saying that you wanted to have a group of people who were devoted to this sort of complete exercise that you're looking for. Now what is it about that work—because I understand that you do not have one way that you are already set in doing it, but rather sort of investigating, as you are working in the Studio, in the ways to create those full exercises—what is it about that type of work that you're looking for that speaks to you more than any other work?

MM: It's very simple. Because it's mine. That's of course, first and foremost, probably. There are a couple of elements. Of course, one of them is because it's mine. Why? Why am I searching for what is mine? I must say that I was always hoping for somebody who would teach me many, many things that can make me develop, and one who would really challenge me. I was always ready as a young performer to go really far. And I did at one moment even question my own self, or self-confidence, ego, anything. I was almost ready to give myself. As a student of the traditional cultures, you just give yourself to the teacher, and you give your life. I found one teacher like that, but I had a feeling this person slightly misused that after a couple of years. And his research wasn't as much searching as an actor; he was searching more for performance, not for the sake of the actor. So, what I am trying to say, it was also out of a need that I would really get a teacher or *the* teacher. How else do you say it in English? There is a special ...

AN: Well, there's *mentor*.

MM: Mentor. Or there was recently a really good film ...

AN: [The Master](#)?

MM: *The Master*. Yeah, I was really searching for the master.

AN: What makes your physical work different than the other physical work out there? Or is that not important for you—it's just, your work is your investigation?

MM: Now, after these three years, I know technically what makes it different: the exercises we had to go through, and finally we made essential results out of them, that we can pass [on] in workshops or in preparing productions. We can actually pass it on to the other students. That makes a difference, our specific exercises. This is something that is different because we created our own path to develop certain material.



[Alexandra Kazazou](#) on the set for the Studio Matejka short film [Life While You Wait](#). Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.



[Zuzana Kakalikova](#) and [Guillaumar Froidevaux](#) on the set for the Studio Matejka short film [The Mess](#). Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.

If I look at your question from the perspective of what makes it different from the perspective of approach, [it] depends on who is my point of reference of difference. If I look from the perspective of Teatr Zar, I can tell you a completely different story about difference as an ex-actor of Teatr Zar than if I speak about the theatre school where I was studying, or [the] standard theatre approach. What makes it different when I speak about the mainstream theatrical approach of [the] actor to [the] performing craft is that I am really searching for something a little visionary almost. It's this visionary need that theatre should not anymore be just an intellectual narrative message given to audience, but it should really be a mixture of intuitive, energetic exchange rather than just explanatory, interpretive space. I feel this deeply from myself as a consumer, as an artistic consumer. When I go to the cinema (or it's not only cinema), generally media has a great power to tell me a narration, and at one point in my life I started to question, "why would I ever want to do theatre as an actor? What is the point?" Going to see theatre, and seeing something that we all agree is very pretentious and the performer is interpreting a narrative, and I as an audience agree on this interpretation, pretending that I agree that he is going to tell me something that we both don't really believe in, where what's most important is what it is about rather than how it is made. Then I think we are a little bit backward because this message or this direction, this path, this line or channel of communication is already taken over through different media, and in a much more efficient way.

What can theatre have that [mass] media cannot? It's personal contact. It's an exchange which is almost beyond words. It's a catharsis which is a combination of real human contact and chemistry, which can be either described through modern science, or it is something that is still beyond description. It's a mystery of our human reality – meeting, real exchange, chemistry. There is so much we still don't understand in our lives about ourselves, and I think it's great to actually deal with that. The theatre can do it because it has a power of real energy, while in film you really have to be – and it can sound a little bit like an excuse, and I believe that also it can sometimes be an excuse in my work as well, and I know we clashed about this a couple of times – but in theatre you can still avoid [being] consequently logical. You can do things that don't [have] sense at all but have power, while in film you really have to use the power of imagery, images that are literally based on the camera, and narrative logic, and of course you can play with narration a lot. It's a quite different medium. However, I love to use film, and I am curious how our physical expression and stylization would translate on film, but it's almost on a different level. I would like, in the future, to more and more divide this. If there were an opportunity for deeper and greater research, I would dedicate separate research for the expression of the performer on film, and separately for the theatre.

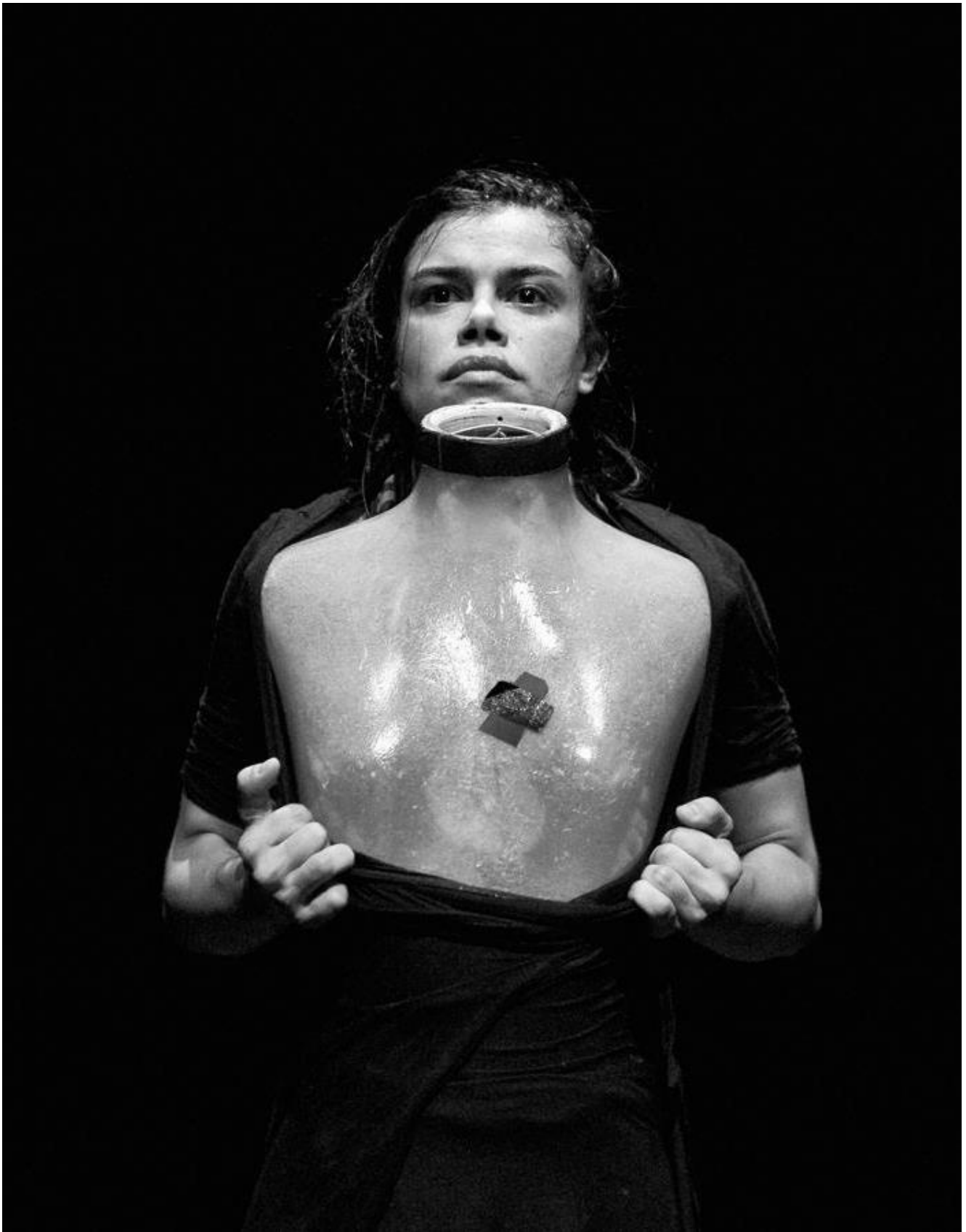
So it's this power of presence. It's what Grotowski was speaking about as the power of theatre as a ritual. Coming back to the sources of meetings. This is another perspective I wanted to mention. I think that theatre can still – and it's extremely important in our time – be a place of exceptional meetings of people. In our time we are becoming more and more separated from each other physically. We are strongly individualized. A collective experience is usually happening only through media, through [the] Internet, through cinema, through gathering linked by a medium. Logically, when you look at the word of *medium*, just thirty, fifty years ago, not speaking about a hundred, what did it mean at that time? What would be the first association? It would be a human being who, probably, through some extrasensory perception, or some – not magic but even psychologists were using it – subconscious manipulation, the medium was transmitting. If you go a longer time ago into the tribes, when humans become a medium, or when you go to South America and look [at] some dances, people are becoming mediums; the spirits are coming into them. This is the origin. Anyway, the word *medium* is coming from a transmission of something else into somebody else, which is human, which is real, while everybody else is watching and encountering that. This, as a point of reference, fascinates me to think about the theatre. It's really possible to experience something together more than just being in [a] safe [seat] from a distance and staring at somebody on the stage who is [reciting] a narration which I can see in the cinema. How to come closer to the common experience? This is what makes me really excited about theatre. I can't say this is what makes our work different, because we are [still] very far from this, and this is really visionary.



Matej Matejka (left) and Anthony Nikolchev (right) on the set for the Studio Matejka short film [Paradise](#). Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.



Matej Matejka on the set for the Studio Matejka short film [Twenty Second Street](#), directed by Matej Matejka. Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.



[Gema Galiana](#) in a scene from her solo performance *The Woman Decomposed*, directed by Matej Matejka (Sala Laboratorium, The Grotowski Institute, Wrocław, Poland, February 2013). Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.

AN: So in that description it's not necessarily an audience, but just a group of witnesses around the medium, so to speak. In our work, with the Studio, how far do you go away from creating theatre as a production, and going toward the investigation of these sensory ideas among the group? And then how to bring it back to the performance, like what Grotowski battled with?

MM: I would love to answer this question in a couple of years. What we did in the Studio was basically research, which had not an aim at all to create a performance. Originally, I was really curious about certain exercises, [about] their potential and then [their] potential [to] roll over, like a snowball effect. From the exercise you find potential, and then from that potential you take it further, and then you take it further, and what will appear? That was [the] base of the Studio's research. By the end of [that] research, we realized we spent so much time together, we [had] created so much material together, that it would be ridiculous to not create performances together. We are all young artists that want to perform. We want to meet people. It's almost so self-indulgent, on the other hand, if you just close yourself for yourself. But I must say that when I got the opportunity to start the Studio, I couldn't imagine that. I am so honored and overexcited, almost, that I am able to take it [up to] such a scale of making performances. I didn't allow myself to think about it.

I was building a structure that was rigorously trying to recycle [the] ideas of the exercises and [the] precision of the actor with specific body parts and [the] awareness of specific body parts, and then complexity, and [look at it] from this side and from that side. Absolutely not thinking about performance at all. Slowly through time, when we were about halfway through, I started to realize that probably I had to think about performance, or it's going to be self-destructive if it's not going to happen, for me and all of my colleagues. So the circumstances under which the performances are created are not typical. I wouldn't say that the circumstances were properly developed according to the concept of the research of the Studio. It was the cream on the cake. But this cream on the cake could have been and was a little bit tricky as you know, in the way that the material we built throughout this research—there was a little bit of this and this and this—and now let's quickly find out some themes and make something out of this that is a performance. Of course it wasn't quickly, it was taking time; however, we were creating four performances in the same time.

I suddenly realized that I am not anymore the teacher of an actor. I am not the leader of the training. I am not "the master" of [the] performer. But I am the director. It's different. It's very difficult to speak about consequent research. I suddenly became completely experimenting on my own. I was never experienced as a director. I never studied directing. I just had a lot of experiences. I think at the end of the day it translated amazingly into the performances because it was a little bit thrown into the space. It was a little bit all exploded, and from my perspective, like, "Oh, we will see what will happen." I can't really organize this more because I am throwing myself in such an unknown space—not that I wasn't [taking a] risk before as a leader of the training—but as a director I just threw myself in[to] such a universe of possibilities. We will see all the research gave us, and now God help us. This phase was not consequently—it couldn't be—really embraced.

However, now, as a feedback for what happened, seeing it, I think our training [was] reflected amazingly [well] there. The performances need to be performed, to mature, to really become real performances. I could see it now in the performance of [*Awkward Happiness*](#), which was performed in Gdańsk. I really like the reflection of the audience in Gdańsk. The actors, after the performance, were completely confused because the audience didn't react, almost at all, and then in the end, they clapped very little. I came to the actors, and I also had a little bit of a mixed feeling, and they thought it was a horrible performance, and it wasn't. It was powerful. We had a meeting, luckily, with that audience. They started to ask questions and [make] comments, and slowly, it turns out that they were so impressed that they didn't feel like clapping. They started to say to the actors that they hadn't seen for a long time such honest and pure people on stage. They had a feeling that they are totally opening their souls, they are speaking about themselves, that they are naked on stage. I think this is one of the strongest, most beautiful compliments we received, [and it] is reflecting all of their intentions. In the end of the day, we created a very strong physical expression. I value it. It's a product. It can one day be a method that can be [carried] further. But any expression or any method can never have the essence of something that is really worth it: the part of the actor—something truthful, honest, real, that really makes you as an audience feel catharsis sharing that with

the performer. What I value most is what is behind that expression – this search of stripping down the masks of characters that should show, interpret something, instead of just be itself. Be here and now, instead of showing you something.

This is how I feel this research translates into the performances.

AN: It seems like it's an ongoing relationship that will get formed. It's not possible, like you said, to put all of the research into a performance. And if we felt that pressure, the performance would probably be so weighed down by that idea. You need who the performer is. If you imagined having an audition for a performance by the Studio Matejka, I'm sure you would make your decision by assessing the person's inner expression, their intuition.

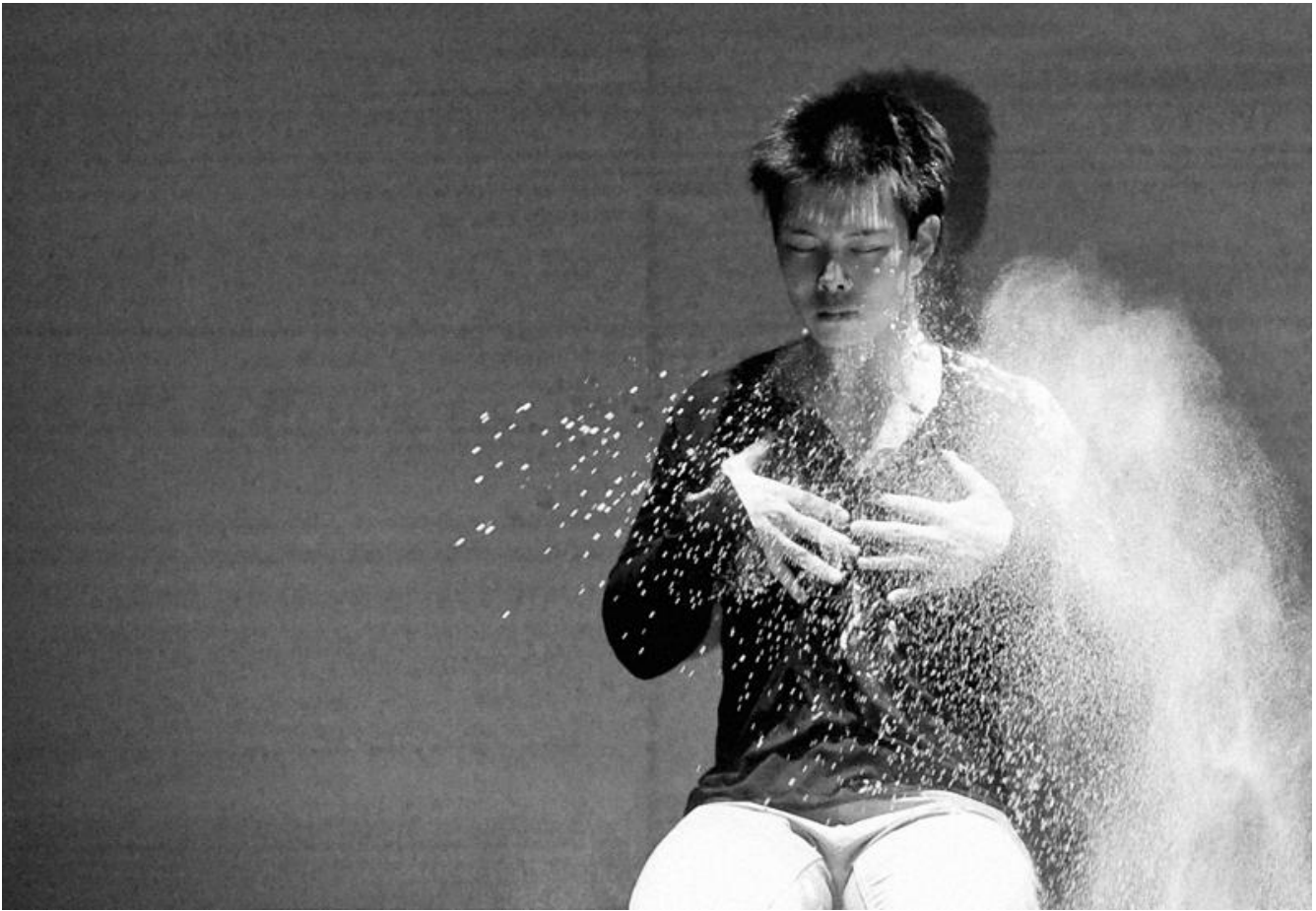
MM: Absolutely. I would probably value commitment much more [than ability]. This is what I did also in our audition. I valued commitment and dedication more than skills. I believe once you really commit to something, you can do it.

AN: But isn't there also something about the performer? You could have someone who is really committed, who is *just* really committed. Personally speaking as an actor in the company, I think all the actors have also their ability to be expressive as people without the Studio Matejka work. It's about putting their techniques ...

MM: Yeah, I don't want to underestimate the quality of performers at all.



Matej Matejka directs Zuzana Kakalikova during a Studio Matejka work demonstration at Salford University, Manchester, UK. Photo by lamujertranvia. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.



[Daniel Han](#) in a scene from the performance *Awkward Happiness*, directed by Matej Matejka (Na Grobli Studio, The Grotowski Institute, Wrocław, Poland, February 2013). Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.

AN: You have to find the merge, the relationship of where who you are as a performer and what the technique is that you are learning in the training goes together to make a performance.

MM: [I] absolutely agree. But when you go further with this question, you realize it's almost a question of approach to life. Once you give yourself, your hearts, and your commitment to something, there is no way you can't be good [at] it. It's maybe a question of time. And because I chose this kind of person, I also knew that this kind of person didn't start to be committed and give their heart in the moment they were joining the Studio. It's something that you live with. So all of you were giving your hearts into your work a long time before. This is what brings you quality as performers. It must be inside of the human being, and then everything else will build on top of it. You can have incredible talent, but if you don't have humility and commitment, you will not take it very far. It doesn't matter what kind of job you choose.

AN: Final question: where do you go—specifically not talking about business or creative ideas or the company ideas, but specifically with your physical research—where do you go next?

MM: Right now, with the Studio, we have a frozen period in relation to research, but a very blossoming period of exchange and opening to the world, making workshops, sharing our ideas and our experience, creating performance[s] and trying to perform them all around the world. Generally, opening to the outside world. I don't know how long this period will last while I really feel it's going like a sine curve. Also with me, I feel that now is a time to open to the world and be extroverted. I have this need, and I see that everyone from the Studio does too. However, I feel the first glimpse of, "Ah, next research, next research." That will be something really special, something further, a whole new platform for understanding.



[Magda Koza](#) in a scene from the performance *Awkward Happiness*, directed by Matej Matejka (Na Grobli Studio, The Grotowski Institute, Wrocław, Poland, February 2013). Photo by Karol Jarek. Reproduced courtesy of Studio Matejka.

I know that I would like to divide the phases and periods of research—the period of training and the period of creative research. I would not mix it. In our older research we were mixing it all together. We were researching how to bring the regular training and make from it something creative, which is incredibly important, but then we realized that were maybe going a little too far with creation, so I was bringing back the regularity to the skills.

If we keep the team that we have, at least partly, in the future research, you see [there's] life there. That's life experience. There's a seed in the ground, two years of research, and this seed starts to grow, meets the world. All of you are getting completely different experiences of meeting audiences with the language you were developing and combining with your previous experiences. [The] audience is an incredibly important part of research and the craft of the performer. And from this perspective, the new research has to start. It can't start from [a] blank sheet, absolutely not. It has to start from where we are and what we experienced together, but again, how to get to know our bodies even better, even further, and even more accessibl[y]. And because we are trying to be very contemporary and modern, we are inspired by all these modern technologies, which are all around us and are incredibly helpful. We would also like to find very efficient approaches to our craft. We don't have to do something crazy for three months or for half an hour that we might manage in five minutes—a very aware approach. If we are speaking about typical physical conditioning—body building through awareness of space, through contact with somebody, [a] literal, technical awareness—I would like to shift the whole research and use some basis of very recognized movement techniques from all around the world to even further develop some kind of methods or techniques of performers through the regular training, and then to divide [it] to have a whole period for how to use the basis of this training—a whole period dedicated to create all sorts of creative tools. So create a lot of performative forms, a lot of situations, a lot of almost tiny performances, or experiments with the

collage of possible intuitive narrations of performance. To really play much more through this research on the scale of dramaturgy – inner dramaturgy of the actor and the relationship between dramaturgy that the actor understands and feels and perceives versus the outside eye, and to confront this – a whole period that is based on building creative material and dealing with that.

AN: It seems appropriate too, because the dramaturgy of this kind of work is unique in the sense that the way that the material gets created or the expression of the material is not concrete in the narrative sense.

MM: Exactly, and this is something fascinating for me. It's very typical for me, because what fascinate[s] me are usually the things that are not obvious. To really search for the things that go together and nobody [has] put them together before.

Matej Matejka is the founder and leader of Studio Matejka. He studied acting at the State Conservatory in Bratislava, Slovakia, and also at JAMU University in Brno, Czech Republic. For five years he was a member of the Farm in the Cave theatre studio in Prague. Since 2005, he has collaborated with the Grotowski Institute, where he engages in physical theatre research. A member of Teatr ZAR, he has led physical training for the company and performed in *Gospels of Childhood*, *Caesarean Section*, and *Anhelli: The Calling*. He also leads work sessions entitled "Wakening the Listening Body" at the Grotowski Institute..

Anthony Nikolchev is an actor and writer originally from California who studied theatre and bioethics at Wesleyan University. Since 2009, he has been working both in the United States and Wrocław, Poland, first touring with his own solo performance, then working at the Wrocław Puppet Theatre, and currently working with Studio Matejka. He is the recipient of the Best Actor award at the 2012 United Solo Theatre Festival in New York for his performance *The Echoes Off the Walls Underground Are Louder than Your Footsteps Above Me*. In 2013, he also collaborated as a writer and performer with Vivien Wood Company in *Exile*, a dance theatre performance touring in England.

ADDENDUM

After publication the Editors received this clarification from Matejka and Nikolchev:

Anthony Nikolchev conducted the interview “Searching for Something a Little Visionary” with Matej Matejka in April 2013. The Studio Matejka is an evolving project, and thus the following amendments are attached in order to reflect the most current description of the Studio Matejka at the date of the interview’s publication.

The Studio is led by Matej Matejka and began its laboratory research with eight performers from seven countries—Daniel Han, Guillaumarc Froidevaux, Zuzana Kakalikova, Riken Ngomle, Alexandra Kazazou, Gema Galiana, Magda Koza, and Anthony Nikolchev. In addition to the eight performers, the Studio included documentarians and an academic team. The initial research occurred from October 2010 to March 2012, and the article describes collaborators and the Studio Matejka’s infrastructure during that initial research period.

This research resulted in four performances—a quartet, and three solos—that, since 2012, continue to tour Europe and the world. The Grotowski Institute, under the direction of Jarosław Fret, has supported the Studio Matejka since its inception in 2010.

Most recently, The Studio Matejka produced the site-specific performance *Harmony of Contradictions: Poland*, in partnership with visiting artists from Poland and around the world. It continues its research in the Grotowski Institute, developing bridges between research, the performer's skills, and the process of building performances. Presently, the Studio Matejka is evolving to include a broader team of performers and other project-based collaborators. The Studio's research and survival formula is in constant process and, therefore, it does not maintain a traditional company-based model but rather a knowledge- and experience-based exchange.