

Gioacchino Palumbo

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Buddah Still Works— the Work on Oneself Never Ends

Essay on Grotowski

Abstract

This essay uses the personal recollections of Italian director Gioacchino Palumbo, including the experience of viewing of *Apocalypse cum figuris* as well as some personal encounters with Jerzy Grotowski, to present a subjective account of selected aspects of Grotowski's theatrical and non-theatrical practices, with an emphasis

on understanding theatre as a lifelong work on oneself. Palumbo highlights those aspects of Grotowski's work and quotations from his statements and writings that have contributed to his own development as a theatre artist. Particularly interested in Grotowski's attitude to diverse sources of inspiration, Palumbo extensively discusses Grotowski's interview on Gurdjieff, considering it as a representative example of artist's approach to cultural phenomena that influenced him. The essay is preceded by an introduction in which Giuseppe G. Condorelli presents the original theatrical work of Palumbo, who has been running his own theatre laboratory in Catania since 1981.

Keywords

Jerzy Grotowski, George Gurdjieff, cultural mobility, Italian theatre

Abstrakt

Budda wciąż działa – praca nad sobą nigdy się nie kończy: Esej o Grotowskim

Punktem wyjścia eseju są osobiste wspomnienia włoskiego reżysera Gioacchino Palumbo, w tym doświadczenia związane z oglądaniem *Apocalypsis cum figuris* i osobistymi spotkaniami z Jerzym Grotowskim, a celem – subiektywna prezentacja wybranych aspektów teatralnych i pozateatralnych praktyk Grotowskiego, z naciskiem na rozumienie teatru jako trwającej całe życie pracy nad sobą. Palumbo podkreśla te aspekty twórczości Grotowskiego i cytaty z jego wypowiedzi i pism, które przyczyniły się do jego własnego rozwoju jako artysty teatralnego. Szczególnie interesuje go stosunek Grotowskiego do różnorodnych źródeł inspiracji, dlatego obszernie omawia wywiad Grotowskiego na temat Gurdżijewa, uznając go za reprezentatywny przykład podejścia artysty do zjawisk kulturowych, które na niego wpływały. Esej został poprzedzony wstępem, w którym Giuseppe G. Condorelli przedstawia Palumbo jako oryginalnego artystę teatralnego, prowadzącego od 1981 roku własne laboratorium teatralne w Katanii.

Słowa kluczowe

Jerzy Grotowski, Georgij Gurdżijew, mobilność kulturowa, teatr włoski

Giuseppe G. Condorelli

With Grotowski and *Beyond* Grotowski: The Journey of Gioacchino Palumbo and the Teatro del Molo 2

Each gesture, each little motion is an ideogram which writes out the story and can be understood only if its conventional meaning is known. The spectator must learn the language, or rather the alphabet of the language, to understand what the actor is saying.¹

The revolution of Jerzy Grotowski’s “poor theatre” is a fundamental cornerstone in the formation of Gioacchino Palumbo’s dramaturgical aesthetics. Palumbo has been active in Catania, Sicily, since 1981 with his laboratory-school, the Teatro del Molo 2.² An experience and *praxis* directed toward the theatre itself, stripped of all decorative elements, and conceived around its essential aspects, it instead places attention on the actor–audience relationship. The four decades of the Teatro del Molo 2 have been characterized by the relationship between training and engagement on stage, sustained by some consistent choices deriving from the Polish master Grotowski: attention to the spoken word, revival of Myth, rereading the contemporary world through the lens of the past, and a particular focus on technique and working on the “natural voice” and “natural breathing.”

Gioacchino Palumbo opened this theatre-laboratory after years of productive networking and travel: from attending DAMS,³ it having just been founded at the University of Bologna by Umberto Eco, and lectures of Baldi, Costa, Ferrero and

¹ Eugenio Barba, “The Kathakali Theatre,” trans. Simonne Sanzenbach, *The Tulane Drama Review* 11, no. 4 (1967): 38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1125137>.

² *Molo*, in the name of this theatre, means “pier” or “wharf.” The name of the theatre, production titles and characters have been left in their original Italian (translator’s note).

³ A degree course in Drama, Art and Music Studies at the University of Bologna founded in 1971 (translator’s note).

Ruffini, Squarzina and Giuliano Scabia—some of whom were not only scholars but engaged on the stage themselves—to the revelation of Jerzy Grotowski's *Apocalipsis cum figuris* in 1975 (the same year a section of the Venice Biennale was dedicated to him). Palumbo was among those fortunate enough to be there on the island of San Giacomo in the middle of the lagoon where, under the enchantment of night, they experienced a true wonder.

The encounter with the theatre of Grotowski allowed Palumbo to connect his interest in cinema with that of theatre and, specifically, movement techniques originating from India,⁴ which the Polish director used in the training of actors and which, among other reasons, also prompted Palumbo to take a long trip to India. Thus began an extraordinary adventure: various workshops with Grotowski and his actors in Italy and elsewhere in Europe; and formative working experiences with professionals from Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, with its years of daily training for actors, though Palumbo's own primary objective remained directing, which is why he also addressed the dramaturgical work within the companies' workshops. Influenced by Grotowski's teaching and his long apprenticeship with him, Palumbo absorbs and assimilates that chemistry of empathic interaction that simultaneously celebrates the performer and the participant spectator. This is an objective reached by following what the Polish director defined *via negativa*: a work of technical-expressive aestheticism capable of becoming the *total act*, involving the body, physicality, instinct, movement, and feeling. The actor overall encounters/exposes the deepest part of the self, reaching and exploring an original completeness that, on the one hand, might evoke the Platonic myth of the hermaphrodite in *Symposium* and, on the other, builds a new idea of the "space of the stage": no longer a chamber of wonders, a privileged place of special stage effects and directorial wisdom but rather a reinvented, shared space for the ritual of the performance. In this way, the spectator becomes a "witness," the stage becomes the structure for a space continually (re)thought and (re)contextualized: the actor is replaced by the "doer."⁵

The unfathomable space between the interpretive act and the truly aesthetic act of the gaze is denied: the observing subject and (sub)object observed—the performance—coincide. The "poor theatre"⁶ becomes theatre-communication:

⁴ Francesco Cappa, "Una pratica teatrale interculturale: L'immaginario orientale e il teatro povero di Grotowski," *Riflessioni e teorie* 15, no. 2 (2017), <https://rivistedigitali.erickson.it/educazione-interculturale/archivio/vol-15-n-2/una-pratica-teatrale-interculturale-limmaginario-orientale-e-il-teatro-povero-di-grotowski/>.

⁵ Grotowski's reframing of the terminology of actor to "doer," in Italian *l'attunato* (translator's note).

⁶ Cf. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag, 1968).

The “post-theatre” of Grotowski, overthrowing the comparative order of the theatre and society according to Gurvitch and Goffman, has identified a submerged consonance between theatre and life, filled with meaning and pressing for discovery. . . . He understood, rather, that the failure of theatre, in inverted commas, places both an impotence and an archetype on the agenda; and that the prevalence of one or the other depends on our capacity to experience . . .⁷

Consequently, Palumbo, proposes a strongly interiorized theatre with Teatro del Molo 2: not merely a spectacle, nor even perhaps a performance as it is commonly understood, because Palumbo believes primarily in an “essential” theatre. This is a theatre in which respect for the dramaturgical score, discretion of directorial intervention, and the fundamental nakedness of the stage, become its indispensable if not integral elements.

It was also partly a complex study of the territory, an ethnoanthropological approach, that saw Gioacchino Palumbo engaged in many parts of Europe, from Sardinia to Spain, yet never forgetting his Sicilian roots. Palumbo poured these experiences back into his laboratory workshop activities that continue steadily regardless of their transformation into “performance.” A laboratory workshop can in fact

offer itself with caution to the complicity of its spectators, without reopening itself or returning itself to society; redefining the audience this way, the stage is able to become the free and uncontaminated space of experience, where—by definition—the most total decontextualization takes place. It is the sub-void in which it is possible to pursue the extra temporality of the “origins of the theatre” or of the performance, to reach the re-presentation of the mythical “original performer” . . . ; that is, the space to analyze the extra quotidian of the performance, and break it down to the “cells” of its singular actions, to the very “molecules” of energy contained, like in Barba’s applied research on the actor.⁸

The stage action, dramaturgical project, directorial intervention, and actors’ movements become the elements of a sacred performance: consider the very particular arrangement of the audience during Grotowski’s performances. The “performance,” then, seems to arise not only from the encounter with the texts, but with a series of experiences that combine to become the elements of preparation themselves. As such,

⁷ Claudio Meldolesi, “Ai confini del teatro e della sociologia,” *Teatro e Storia* 1, no. 1 (1986): 135, https://www.teatroestoria.it/pdf/1/Claudio_Meldolesi_34.pdf.

⁸ Piergiorgio Giacché, “Antropologia culturale e cultura teatrale,” *Teatro e Storia* 3, no. 1 (1988): 44, <https://www.teatroestoria.it/pdf/4/p.giacche.pdf>.

Molo 2 has always reflected an idea of theatre as a reflection of Sicily's own situation: "the economic backwardness and its remote position in relation to the processes of modernity means that, in these areas, ancient expressive techniques remain intact which, had they developed elsewhere, would never have been able to survive."⁹

And on this island the Teatro del Molo 2 continues to operate in the largest sense of the word: through laboratory workshops, seminars, drama studies, actual performances, interventions in the local neighborhoods. Indeed, the engagement with areas that are not so familiar with theatre culture, as well as the fixed activity of the workshops (not always destined, as highlighted, to become performances), constitutes the very essence of Palumbo's theatrical activity.

In this way, the essence of Teatro del Molo 2 takes shape, as mentioned, from the practice of workshops of which long training—that always precedes the performances—seems indicative of an idea of theatre not only as an uplifting experience but also as a philosophy: Palumbo dedicates particular attention to the preparation of the actors. All the laboratory workshops of Molo 2 are based on dramatic techniques aiming to acquire a personal method for creating a "character" and developing stage actions. The dramatic expressiveness, physio-corporeal presence, and quality of movements, and the consciousness of the interrelationships between these, constitute its main objectives and this methodology is based on the work and the formulations of both Grotowski and Stanislavski.

Equally important, parallel to the theatrical training laboratories on the art of acting, is what Palumbo defines "Archedrama," a laboratory based on group experimentation in the psycho-corporeal practices of mindfulness, of "awareness":¹⁰ scattered in the softened light of the grand hall of Teatro del Molo 2, the participants' bodies draw irregular spirals, irradiated by a common breath, the rustle of clothing seeming to suggest a warm rain; their voices—first subdued—a hot breeding ground of indistinct sounds, an inviting landscape: cradle, nest, an all-encompassing warmth before the final silence.

From Transgression to Myth

The creative process was like a journey with an unknown destination. Nothing was predefined, and many scenes were assembled and disassembled several times and, until the last day, I saw performance as a living organism, to be fed and cultivated with our attention.¹¹

⁹ Renato Palazzi, "Il sipario s'alza a sud," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, December 3, 2006.

¹⁰ Original word in English (translator's note).

¹¹ Gioacchino Palumbo, *Il Teatro del Molo 2: Diario di bordo—Spettacoli, performance, film* (Roma: Bonanno, 2010), 46.

The investigation into myth—its rediscovery and reinterpretation—seems the design watermark of Palumbo’s dramaturgical and directorial experience for the development of a theatre of civil storytelling. This is also in the light of the teaching and influence of Grotowski who took an ambivalent if not openly critical attitude towards myth:

Grotowski fully realizes that the relationship the ancient man had with myth is dead and buried and cannot be resurrected in today’s rationalistic society, but he is also conscious that a comparison with the contemporary is necessary in the use of myths and their symbolic representations, or else risk spiritual impoverishment and the assumption of a perpetual mask of deception towards phenomenal reality and the reality “penetrated” into the body (for the body as archive of the story of the individual and the society to which it belongs . . .). While the ancient man accepted myth in the atmosphere of perceptive-elaborative dynamics (meaning the animation of nature was a fact and not just a representation), modern man can only approach a similar knowledge that is determined by an asceticism, fixed in the work of the actor, that consists of a continuous desecration-sacralization of his way of perceiving the theatrical reality and representing it on stage. In this, even if Grotowski never affirmed it, lies the therapeutic value of the theatre of research breaking down defensive barriers (that is to say, the mask, and broadening the free influence of the Self).¹²

In confronting a genre so complete, therefore, there is often a risk of staging a mere stylistic exercise or piece of directorial narcissism. Gioacchino Palumbo’s approach disrupts any etymological repurposing because it appears projected towards productive experimentation in which the designated space for improvisation becomes central.

Of the sixty performances directed by Palumbo, some performances appear to me especially emblematic of his work and thinking. The first performance of the Teatro del Molo 2 *Europa dopo la pioggia* (Europe after the Rain) (first performance in the exhibition *Emergenze e Dintorni della Scena* [Emergencies and Surroundings of the Stage], Florence, June 1981) is a sequence of scenes stemming from various literary influences and from *La recita* (*The Travelling Players*, 1975),

¹² Giovanni Lancellotti, “Recensioni, riflessioni sulla scrittura” *Il Quaderno di Nessuno. Newsletter di Saggi, Letteratura e Documentazione Teatrale* 14, no. 4 (2015), <https://www.teatrodinessuno.it/doc/grotowski/teatro-povero>.

a film by Theo Anghelopoulos: the stage writing¹³ consists of a montage of actions and, of all of Palumbo's theatre, is the most in line with Grotowski's ideas and also embraces the influence of the Odin Teatret and distils his experience with the workshops with Ryszard Cieślak, Stanisław Scierski, and Teo Sychalski.

Palumbo writes that the

initial idea was to create a scenic event, its fundamental texture being made up of structured actions and arising from a particular assemblage of improvisation. The underlying theme is the relationship between individuals, their concrete destinies, and a great tragic historical event, the most devastating of the twentieth century in Europe, the Second World War and the Holocaust.¹⁴

At the same time, the main idea was that the performance did not use texts written specifically for the theatre as its reference texts, but rather cinematographic works, autobiographical accounts, novels, screenplays and paintings (the title of the show was titled after the painting by Max Ernst), that is, pre-texts: "the definitive text was not the dramaturgical material but the stage writing; a structure of living actions."¹⁵ It is the directorial assemblage and editing of these improvisations that give life to the performance: every actor reveals himself to himself, he extracts his experience and manifests it. The problem was to make these improvisations somehow constant, "precise, detailed, rigorous, but without emptying them of their inner impulse, their authentic reactions; without transforming them in an empty form. This for the actor is the most difficult task. To repeat without emptying."¹⁶ Evidently, the theatre of Palumbo tends to privilege a strong relationship with the spoken word, like Ancient Greek theatre, an idea that presupposes the entanglement of diverse expressive codes and that simultaneously marries body language with thematic universalities, and is bound to the history of the island. This theatre, strongly symbolic, is also intended as homage to Sicily: a way of taking root.

Voci su Medea (Voices about Medea) is undoubtedly one of the works in which the exploration of myth is most focused. This portrays a serious and noble Medea far from the Euripidean tradition, who, in Christa Wolf's interpretation (one of

¹³ Italian *la scrittura scenica* was translated as the "stage writing," a term created by Roger Planchon (*l'écriture scénique*), and defined in Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 362 (translator's note).

¹⁴ Palumbo, *Il Teatro del Molo 2*, 42.

¹⁵ Palumbo, 42.

¹⁶ Palumbo, 43.

Palumbo's favorite writers), through very different if not opposing accounts (the "voices" in the title allude as though to a delusion, to an unsubstantiated rumor), moves away from the myth to subvert it in the light of its *reversed gaze of second sight* and rises up in search of a different way of behaving in the political space of the *polis*: more chthonic and feminine. Palumbo's adaptation of Wolf's novel portrays an atheist "Me-dea" sorceress,¹⁷ a wise miracle worker from Colchis who does not know the malice and secrets of the court; a wife who has never learnt to hold her tongue; an emancipated woman who rebels against the all-male exercise of power, guilty only of wishing *to alter reality* by denouncing the terrible crime upon which rests the power of King Creon of Corinth. If Ifinoe's death is a necessary sacrifice according to the tactful gloss of the state officials, for Medea it is simply state murder, Ifinoe a victim of its heinous *rationale*. In an openly visionary theatrical form, in which original music by Carlo Cattano formed a thread of continuity across speech and gesture, the characters' points of view follow one another in the itinerant space of the performance—straight line, circle, hemicycle. Acamante (Rosario Minardi), councilor and supreme court astronomer, dark eminence who shows, by handling a feather, the subtlety of a power practiced with the cautious lightness of cynicism; Giasone (Giovanni Calcagno), a naive hero, part puppet, part courtier, less a comrade; Glaunce (Rossana Bonafede), an epileptic friend-enemy who has learnt from shamanist Medea not to "ignore the shadows" and to reconstruct her original trauma during her delirious fits of passion, a trauma tied to the violent figure of her father; finally Medea herself (Giovanna Centamore), exiled by those "who have learnt the horror" with false and foul accusations—fratricide, conspirator, infanticide—prepared to embrace the void into which the Palace's officials have condemned her. *Voices about Medea* is a performance of great expressive power which it demonstrates in its overall structure having also absorbed the unforgettable lesson of Pasolini: in its spiral movement, in its cold and sparse atmosphere, and above all in its costumes.

The performance *Frida: Albero della speranza sii solido* (Frida: Tree of Hope be Strong) co-produced by the Teatro Stabile of Catania, is another example of the recontextualization of a myth of modernity, in which Grotowski's rich underlying influence is also present. This performance is not a celebration of the pop icon *Frida* but a *close reading* of the Mexican *bohemian*, born three years before the revolution of Zapata and Villa, who recognizes herself—after a terrible incident (a handrail pierced her back and part of her vagina)—like

¹⁷ Author's emphasis of the name, *dea* meaning goddess (translator's note).

a “bottle adrift, tentatively waiting to be found and saved.” It is on this canvas, and in this scene, that the life and images of her paintings, her passionate letters, flow together, while the narrative voice of the protagonist (Donatella Finocchiaro subdued her natural expressive exuberance into an evocative performance), reconstructs key events in the background: from relationships with her father (Bruno Torrisoni), an epileptic and talented photographer, from whom she inherited “the patience of the craftsman,” to communist militancy; from friendship with Tina Modotti, to the exhilarating vitality of painter-seducer Diego Rivera (Vincenzo Failla); from falling in love to marriage with this man who is “all combinations”; from the distinct and conflicted relationship with Riviera’s ex-wife Lupe (Pamela Toscano) and with the exile Trotsky to disagreements with the sister Concetta (Egle Doria); from frequent miscarriages—a loss she will always feel acutely—to extramarital affairs, and finally with those also in the art world beyond Mexico. In a form resembling monologue, the narrative unfolds on many levels, united under Palumbo’s direction into a multi-medial whole: truly dramaturgical (the extraordinary case of Frida); cinematographic (the restorative dynamic of the story); dialogic (the relationship Frida has with her family, her sister, her companion Diego Rivera, and the art world). This woman of “broken body,” caressed by the smooth sensuality of the live music of Nello Toscano (a jazz musician from Catania), above all portrays without extravagance (think of Julie Taymor’s film) the necessity rather than the choice of painting, and of its sublimating role. The central statement of the performance reads: “This is how I portrayed my recomposing myself, my pulling myself back together.”

This strongly political theatre in which the spoken word, the structure of the action, and movement assumes a central role, finds full realization in Ritsos’s *Fedra* (*Phaedra*) in which Palumbo stages the political and problematic heroine of the great Greek poet, rather than the hapless Euripidean protagonist: the woman’s passion is not only for her son Ippolito (Hippolytus) but additionally and above all for the truth. It is not superfluous to note that Ritsos wrote the text during the dictatorship of the “colonels,” to which the whole monologue allusively refers. Never, in the original story, are Fedra and Ippolito face to face in the way they are in Ritsos’s text. Fedra—who Liviana Pino performs with captivating sobriety—does not turn to Ippolito, mute but steadfast in his “icy chastity,” but turns to her own torment, her devouring passion. Indeed, the long strip of fabric/blood around her body—not only marks her journey from woman to mother but clearly alludes to her incestuous transgression and its tragic consequences—strongly characterizes a stage which is stripped bare and essential, focused. That blood—a sort of “inverted” semantic field, in which every possible nuance of her body and guilt converge—inhabits the space thanks

to a fundamental and prevailing directorial hand: the sensual lasciviousness of Fedra is never emphatic, vulgar: almost a simulacrum of her own memory, of her own obsession, of her insatiable torment, she is certainly closer in her “authenticity” to Seneca’s Phaedra. In Ritsos’s poem, however, the drama does not only take on the contours of a shameful and unnatural insolence, but rather of a necessity: that of telling the truth at all costs, of throwing away the mask itself that initially covers the protagonist’s face. Like this, she is a simulacrum, a semblance: and yet unplaceable, in perpetual wandering of the senses and feelings, “invaded” by her own shadows before the same fabric/blood becomes a death noose. In the long process of the monologue’s internal unravelling, the distortions of the musical commentary—created by the transfiguring sounds of Jan Garbarek’s saxophone and chaotic resonances of Sollima’s cello—mark the limits of a distance, a gap perhaps, which enclose the threshold (*lamaca-limen*) of the stage: can we attempt to understand? Can we share? Light the shadows? Perhaps the implicit invitation of Palumbo, of all his theatre, his praxis, is to push us, as Fedra did to the “spectacular,” beyond.

Translated by Gertrude Gibbons

Gioacchino Palumbo

Buddah Still Works—the Work on Oneself Never Ends: Essay on Grotowski

I begin with some personal impressions and memories: I saw *Apocalypsis cum figuris* knowing very little about theatre and almost nothing about Grotowski. It was 1975, at the Venice Biennale. I was a university student at that time; after two years of architecture studies, I had enrolled on DAMS, the entertainment degree course at the Bologna University of Umberto Eco, Giuliano Scabia, Adelio Ferrero, Luigi Squarzina, because I was fascinated by a certain kind of cinema. I had taken a break from my studies, going on a year-long trip to the East, seven

months of which were spent in India. I was interested in oriental philosophies and disciplines, and I read widely and held the unconfessed hope of meeting a secret, unknown master. I had a very strong idea about what performance is, a vision of never-imagined spaces of the theatre, something dazzling. I used to go to the theatre quite rarely, but I wanted to see *Apocalypse* because I had heard at university that the actors of a company, led by a Polish director I did not know at the time, used to train with movement and breathing exercises taken from oriental techniques, not specifically from theatrical disciplines, but from yoga and other forms. I was able to book tickets for the show thanks to a university contact. I reached the meeting place in Venice. We were a small group of spectators and were put on a ferryboat that headed out into the dark sea of the Lagoon of Venice. We disembarked on an uninhabited islet, the isle of San Giacomo in the lagoon. In silence we were guided to an isolated building. A bare room with stone walls, one light projector aimed at the wall. The audience sitting in a circle. The performance begins. So alive. Astonishing to me. Bright and dark. I remain enchanted.

At the end of the play someone told me it was possible to meet the members of the company. I don't know why, maybe because I mentioned my trip in India, someone offers, unexpectedly, an opportunity to take part in two workshops. One of them, *Song of Myself*, was held by Teo Spychalski, the other one, *Incontri di lavoro* (Work Meetings), by Stanisław Scierski. I accepted the offer, thinking it's a new experience. I was touched by Spychalski's equilibrium and skill in leading in a very calm way. Regarding Scierski, I remember I was impressed by the generous strength and the impeccability in his work and, at the same time, by the angst and the despair—so powerful and contained—I perceived after the workshop, walking with him through Venice's alleys.

After a few weeks I took part in a workshop guided by Ryszard Cieślak—*Special Project*—in Montegalda in Veneto, in the castle surrounded by a wood. There, for the first time I had the unhoped-for opportunity to talk with Grotowski, in a glade between the wood and the granary, outside of the hamlet, where the rule of silence was strictly observed. He listened to me with kind awareness and patience. He struck me with the quality of his presence and his careful gaze: his face has something of the trees around us. We talked about India, some places and meetings and Vedanta. I asked him, maybe with a certain naivete, about influences of oriental disciplines in his work, I mentioned my interests, I asked him about *satori*. I still remember his last words: "Remember, Buddha still works." Buddha still works. The work on oneself never ends. It takes a lifetime. You are always researching. There is no ultimate truth, no final point, or a static and permanent "enlightenment." The search for essence, for Life in life, has no end.

Over time I have come to understand the importance of that sentence. And I think today it sheds a light on Grotowski's entire work. On the difficult, imperious coherency that flows beneath his choices, his abandonments, his sudden and sometimes painful turning points. These have always been dictated by an interior need, by the urgency to question, by the necessity to remain faithful to his aims. Ludwik Flaszen—one of his first and most valued collaborators, whose words always reveal deep gratitude and affection, free of any easy idealization and mythologizing—underlined that the source of his strength lay in his faithfulness to the primary aspirations of his childhood.

Stanislavski, when he was quite old, and when his method was already known and appreciated all over the world, declared, knowing that his teachings were used in many actors' studios, that he felt he needed another lifetime to really learn how to apply it! True research is always a work in progress. The same can be said of Grotowski's journey, and perhaps that is why he said he felt Stanislavski was like a father, always open to new perspectives, guided by true and sometimes unpredictable discoveries. The theatre director and teacher Anatoly Vasilev, one of the foremost experts on all the different stages of Stanislavski's work, once said that he considers Grotowski to be the one who, more than any other person, has continued Stanislavski's research, who has "saved more things" of his work, who has kept him alive.

Another meeting with Grotowski remains impressed in my memory—many years later, in May 1989 in Taormina. That year, Taormina Arte was awarding the Europe Prize to Peter Brook. Grotowski was present in those days and took part in an unforgettable open conversation with the English theatre director, in the symposium entitled *Dal cammino alla via* (From the Path to the Road), organized by the International Association of Theatre Critics. Since our first meeting in 1975, many tragic and painful events had befallen the actors of Teatr Laboratorium, and others were yet to come. At a small, isolated table of the Congress Center, I had the opportunity to meet the Polish master and carry on an intense dialogue in hushed tones. At that time—after various experiences of apprenticeship and work, including some years spent with Domus de Janas, an ensemble made up of people coming from Odin Teatret, where we practiced daily—I had founded a theatre center (Teatro del Molo 2), which I still direct, and where I organized theatre workshops, one of which is a very precise and essential one on vocal techniques, dealing with Beckett's texts, led by Ludwik Flaszen. From that meeting I also remember an observation by Grotowski's on the possible risks of some forms of workshop activity, and, in particular, the risks inherent in the disruptive effects of some experiences if they are not compensated by continuous and rigorous work, by reevaluation, by real integration.

He stressed the importance of technical precision, of structure, of a sheltered work. I mentioned the formative environment of my work and my contact with the “school” of Jeanne De Salzman, the intended heir of George Gurdjieff’s teachings.

In Grotowski’s work, this discussion bore testimony to a transition from one phase of his work to another, already developed ten years earlier, testimony to a significant, meditated change of direction from the previous paratheatrical phase of participation and encounter to the “Theatre of Sources” and more, to “Art as Vehicle”, to the “doer,” to the Workcenter and the collaboration with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, designated guardians of this work, and to the last “hermitage” of Pontedera. Then, at an imperceptible signal from Carla Pollastrelli—irreplaceable assistant and translator, who watched over the meeting like a guardian angel, always attentive and discreet—I moved away, relinquishing my place to Yoshi Oida (who in the following years led a very popular workshop in our theater center). She had come with Peter Brook, who at that time was busy with other people, with numerous, valuable work demonstrations.¹⁸

What elements constitute his legacy, theatrically and otherwise? There are many answers to this question, although it is certain that Grotowski did not leave, and did not seek to leave, a “system.” In his theatrical work, thanks to his collaboration with the architect Jerzy Gurawski, he developed the idea of an architecture of space, unique and different for each production, with precise, unrepeatable proxemics that allow a profound relationship between actor and spectator. As in Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, where the audience is arranged as if it were invited to dinner, the Last Supper, where Faust tells his story in a space that recalls the refectory of a monastery. And also a particular use of a composite dramaturgy that responds to other, internal needs and structural criteria, as in *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, where he turns to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, to works by Simone Weil, to the Dostoevsky of *The Brothers Karamazov*, to fragments of the Bible. And there, in this last show, *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, he continued the experiment, extending it to all the actors of the ensemble, with one of the fundamental elements of all his research work, which is what Grotowski had defined, in his letters to Eugenio Barba during the years of *The Constant Prince*, the discovery of the “technique 2.”

Despite the fact that *The Constant Prince* by Calderon de la Barca and Słowacki is the pinnacle of his theatrical work, it is perhaps in this period, in this discovery

¹⁸ The documentation of those days can be found in the book, *Gli anni di Peter Brook* (The Years of Peter Brook). Georges Banu and Alessandro Martinez, eds., *Gli anni di Peter Brook: L'opera di un maestro raccontata al Premio Europa per il teatro* (Milano: Ubulibri, 1990).

of “technique 2,” that the need to go beyond the theatre, or at least beyond the “theatre of presentation” of performances, emerges and defines itself. “*The Constant Prince* marks the beginning of a new period in the aesthetics of our company,” Grotowski writes to Eugenio Barba, his irreplaceable fellow traveler, inviting him to join him for at least a few weeks. It was no longer a question of acting, but of “penetrating the territories of one’s own existence.”¹⁹ Here the direction of the work is powerfully outlined. Acting is a means to go beyond, and theatre is a journey without shortcuts to the essence of life, a vehicle through which it is possible to connect with a higher level, to explore moments of totality, of real presence. “The work with *The Constant Prince* has been completely different,” writes Grotowski, “and is based purely on the principle of the organic nature, with no orientation towards the signs or the composition.”²⁰ “There is no longer the duel between life and illusion, or imitation, a real, organic, clear, precise reaction.”²¹ And again, “If the act takes place, the actor, the human being, goes beyond the state of incompleteness to which we condemn ourselves, in daily life. . . . The actor who achieves this reaches wholeness This is the phenomenon of total action The actor repeats the script and at the same time reveals themselves to the limits of the impossible.”²² And when Eugenio Barba saw the show, he was surprised and impressed by Ryszard Cieślak’s work, by the boundaries he crossed, by the new territories he opened up, despite his deep knowledge of Teatr Laboratorium’s practices. Barba writes

From the beginning, from the first seconds of the show, it was as though all my memories, the categories with which I supported myself, disappeared from under my feet, and I saw another being, man who had found his fullness, his destiny “*Now he surely won’t manage anymore.*” And yet it was as though a new wave, stronger, higher, greener, rose out of his body and expanded around him It was only later, sheltered from this fury of the elements, that I reflected on the fact that an entire horizon, which up until then had surrounded my theatrical land, had been shifted by countless miles to reveal a difficult terrain, still to be studied, but which existed and could bear fruit.”²³

¹⁹ Jerzy Grotowski, *Tecniche originarie dell’attore*, a cura di Luisa Tinti (Roma: Università degli studi di Roma La Sapienza, 1982).

²⁰ Grotowski, *Tecniche originarie dell’attore*.

²¹ Jerzy Grotowski, “Teatro e Rituale,” in *Il Teatr Laboratorium di Jerzy Grotowski 1959–1969*, a cura di Ludwik Flaszen e Carla Pollastrelli (Pontedera: Fondazione Pontedera Teatro, 2001).

²² Jerzy Grotowski, “Dalla compagnia teatrale a L’arte come veicolo,” in Thomas Richards, *Al lavoro con Grotowski sulle azioni fisiche* (Milano: Ubulibri, 1993).

²³ Ferdinando Taviani, ed., *Il libro dell’Odin: Il teatro-laboratorio di Eugenio Barba* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1975).

For this reason “technique 2”—a script of impulses that each time have been relived, remembered, incarnated, and constructed each time with a precise adolescent memory of going beyond daily limits as a starting point—remains a founding passage, pointing to new boundaries in the theatrical field, in the creation of shows, and, with progressive and sometimes painful adjustments and gradations, in the field of post-theatrical activity and work on the self. Here, too, there is a danger of being imprecise in defining the beginning of a “discovery” that continues to have multiple ramifications. Already during the rehearsals for *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus*, especially in the work with the main actor, Zbigniew Cynkutis, the need and the possibility of a *total act* emerged, one of a revelation, of a wholeness, of a performative element with an aspect of transcendence, of a rupture that goes beyond individual limits.

For me, from the distance of years, Jerzy Grotowski’s strong roots in Polish culture appear more and more clearly. This is evident, but not limited, to his choice of texts to put on the stage. From Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve* to Słowacki’s *Kordian*, from Wyspiański’s *Acropolis* to Calderon/Słowacki’s *The Constant Prince*, all of them belong to the Polish Romantic tradition. From these dramas, the Polish director, in line with his entire journey, has brought to light and intuited above all the existential and metaphysical aspects of the Romantic soul. These are productions in which his poetics are gradually defined and mature, perhaps reaching their peak in *The Constant Prince*. It was from Mickiewicz that he probably absorbed the notion of the total act, so seminal in his work with actors. Like Mickiewicz who broke with the established norms of poetic composition, the Polish director broke with theatre understood merely as the production of shows. He also shared with the author of *Forefathers’ Eve* a deep interest in the teachings and writings of the great mystics.

Another sign of this rootedness in his native culture is his declared inspiration by Juliusz Osterwa and Mieczysław Limanowski, founders of Reduta in the 1920s. This group, which drew on some of Stanislavski’s ideas and translated them into their own original approach, had very strict, almost monastic rules. They dedicated themselves to workshop research on the art of acting; they opened a school for actors that was intended to be a vehicle for the transmission of ideas; they had a very strong sense of community and a professional and individual ethos; they gave great importance to rehearsals and took their shows to small towns. These are all aspects that, as he himself has emphasized many times, have had a decisive influence on Grotowski.

Zbigniew Osiński and many other authors have thoroughly and sharply analyzed Grotowski’s rich and varied sources of inspiration. Some of these sources are rather hidden, others are clearly invoked by the Polish maestro:

from *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* and the Hasidism of Martin Buber to Meister Eckhart and the mystical school of Renan, from the fictionalized accounts of Carlos Castaneda to the writings of Ronald David Laing, from the *Vedanta* to the *Samkhya*, from Ramana Maharshi to George Ivanovich Gurdjieff.

An interview with Grotowski entitled “A Kind of Volcano,” which appeared in the collection of essays on Gurdjieff, is a valuable testimony to the detailed knowledge that Grotowski had, at least in the final period of his research, of Gurdjieff’s works and his teaching work.²⁴ In the interview, conducted by Michel de Salzman, a profound connoisseur of the Armenian maestro’s work, Grotowski demonstrated his deep knowledge not only of the fundamental texts and documents, but also of the works that are considered less significant, from which he drew lively, sharp, and decisive impressions. This interview—conducted in Paris at the beginning of February 1991, at a time when his work was focused on ancient songs and their “vibratory” qualities—is, in my opinion, particularly indicative of the living relationship that Grotowski had with his sources of inspiration or his ideal interlocutors.

And since these sources posed living questions to him, they gave him the opportunity for operational interaction, for real possibilities of experimentation, and for rigorous and careful research practices. In any case, these were topics that had interested the Polish director since childhood and had a decisive influence on all his theatrical work. And above all, as for the other sources of literary and non-literary inspiration, they are always grafted, verified, and brought to life in an inexhaustible, continuous practice of inner work and active experimentation. In the case of Gurdjieff, I have the impression that he was anything but of secondary importance in the foundations of the second phase of his post-theatrical work, from Objective Drama on, and then in particular in Ritual Arts.

“Gurdjieff succeeded in something very rare: he created a *contemporary tradition*,” Grotowski declared, adding that his modernity lay in the fact that this was true research and, “If, from everything, I had to take only one vector, it would be “work on oneself.”²⁵ And here, too, is the resonance with his own work: “He was above all an investigator who penetrated deeply into the practical and technical areas of the traditions that he was able to meet.”²⁶ This is what we can say today without hesitation about the Polish maestro. Grotowski further declared,

²⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, “A Kind of Volcano,” interview by Michel de Salzman, in *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, ed. Jacob Needleman et al. (New York: Continuum, 1996), 87–106.

²⁵ Grotowski, “A Kind Of Volcano,” 96.

²⁶ Grotowski, 97.

from the moment I began to read about Gurdjieff's work, the practical, comparisons not only had to corroborate but also to *touch me*, it is obvious. It would be difficult to analyze: which details, which elements? Because there is also a danger of asking oneself: "From where comes this element, and from where another?" What is important is not that they come from somewhere, but that they work.²⁷

To see if they work: this is the element that excites him, that really counts, to see what serves his purpose, what can be useful. This is where his pragmatic spirit of "doing," of active culture, emerges, and this is where an idea that underpins all his research returns, the idea of *efficacy*, of seeing if certain techniques work "objectively" within one's own activity, if they have a certain effect on the one who practices them, even extrapolated from the cultural context from which they come. This is a feature that constitutes the premise of the research in the field of traditional ancient techniques of the Theatre of Sources and also of the work on Art as Vehicle, of the criteria of scrupulous processing of Action, carried out with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini. Thus, the research was on the possibility of elaborating and composing an objective process through the elements of performative arts, through a structured sequence of actions. Grotowski pointed out to Gurdjieff's relevance to his own practice, by stating: "As far as I know, nobody made this kind of effort: to unstick the things, to dissociate them from theological content in order to bring them back to their pragmatic qualities."²⁸ He went on to say:

He was a searcher who had investigated several domains and several traditions, even if he was very much concentrated on the cultural cradle, which is the Mediterranean basin, but not only there, also a little bit farther to the east. In a certain way, he was doing a scientific work in order to understand. To understand not in order to formulate verbally, to understand so as to be able to do.²⁹

Here, too, he stresses the primary importance of the attitude of *doing*, together with the need of a science oriented in this direction, and as such it requires an appropriate language. Grotowski highlights, for example, Gurdjieff's choice of the term "buffers," a key element of his teaching, which recalls the technical

²⁷ Grotowski, 94.

²⁸ Grotowski, 98.

²⁹ Grotowski.

language of the time, free of any sentimental or theological implications, scrupulously avoiding the use of religious terminology.³⁰

In my opinion the notes Grotowski made on Gurdjieff's Movements are of particular importance, with some poignant analogies to his work on the concept of Art as a Vehicle. He observed that "when a Gurdjieffian group does Movements, these Movements are not intended for spectators."³¹ This analogy helps him to further clarify the difference in objective between the actor of the theatrical period and the doer in Art as Vehicle period. The aim of this phase of the post-theatrical era is the effect that the elements used have on those who practice them, on those who perform them. "When I say 'elements,' I am thinking of physical actions, of tempo-rhythms, of composed movement, of contact, of the word. and, above all, of the ancient songs."³² All these elements obviously belong to the field of dramatic art, to the theatrical tradition.

With regard to the different objectives of the doer and the actor, I am also struck by Grotowski's observation on the need to avoid aesthetic ends, i.e. choices made in function of those who witness the structured actions. Impressed by Gurdjieff's work on his movements and sacred dances, Grotowski observes with his usual quality of attention; "Another thing that struck me is that in some composed elements—which can be compared with liturgical gestures—what has been avoided is the danger of aestheticization."³³ And he goes on to say that in his eyes the Movements are rooted in "a deepened research which starts out from ancient elements, but which is, at the same time, contemporary. After all, the traditions are only founded in this way."³⁴ I am aware of the risks of comparisons that reduce the complexity of a work, but how can we not hear in these most thoughtful words a resonance with the projects he was working on at the time: the Ritual arts, the work of vibratory songs? In his work on ancient techniques and traditions, and at the same time on being a contemporary man who knows how to move in today's work, Grotowski perhaps sees himself, his own practices, and also the constant difficulties that he faces in creating the conditions for rigorous and authentic research, and this refers both to the

³⁰ "Buffers," is an expression used by Gurdjieff to denote "a shock absorber" deeply rooted in man. See P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1949), 155.

³¹ Grotowski, "A Kind of Volcano," 89.

³² Grotowski, 90.

³³ Grotowski, 93.

³⁴ Grotowski.

theatrical period when he worked in Poland, and to the subsequent phase when he was forced to work elsewhere.

A significant detail, which indicates the objectivity, the exactness of an action and its effect on the one who performs it, appears in another notation, decisive for a better understanding of the careful gaze with which Grotowski observes what interests him for his practical work. He was struck by a remark Jeanne de Salzmann made about the movements of hands, where she observed that at the beginning of a movement, the energy is up and consciously put in, but when the hand is lowered, the conscious energy is no longer present, and that it is the movement itself that causes this loss of awareness.³⁵ One might say that in his relationship with the materials and the readings that interest and enthuse him, he has a director's eye that sees what is useful for the work, that tries to intuit the secret line and discards what is not useful, that chooses what works and composes and orders the fragments according to his objective or according to a higher order of laws. He was always rooted in experience, beginning with consolidated, patient and tenacious experiments.

Another element of convergence is the distinction between "objective" and "subjective," art, an idea that Grotowski explored in his American research project, Objective Drama. Objective art, as Ouspensky explained in *In Search of the Miraculous*, for Gurdjieff was art in which the effects were not subjective, personal, but objective, experienceable, like the sound or music that brought down the walls of Jericho and crumbled the stones, just as one might presume the "effects" of performing a determined and precise sequence of vibratory songs or certain elementary actions are objective. But, the decisive affinity with Gurdjieff's teaching is something that Grotowski calls verticality that allows a passage from the coarse to the subtle, from rough energies to fine energies, from an ascending current, towards the source, and a descending one, towards the life of the body.³⁶ This idea, according to Grotowski, is one of the fundamental aspects of the Armenian maestro's practice and teaching.

I don't think it's important to establish whether there is a direct, exclusive influence, even if only in terms, between the two seekers: what interests me here is to underline the essential convergence, the common orientation and direction of their research. Grotowski, specifying that the phenomenon of verticality belongs to the field of energy, compares it to an ancient elevator: "a big basket with a rope by means of which the person who is inside, by his

³⁵ Grotowski, 92-93.

³⁶ Grotowski, 88.

own effort, has to move himself from one level to another. The question of verticality means to pass from a so-called coarse level—in a certain sense one could say an ‘everyday’ level—to a level of energy much more subtle or even toward the higher connection.”³⁷ And, again in a surprising concordance with Gurdjieff’s teaching—and after his demise, Jeanne de Salzmann’s teaching—on the ascending and descending currents and on the importance of the impact on daily life of the experiences of opening up towards the upper level, he specified: “if one approaches much more subtle energy—then there is also the question of descending, while at the same time bringing this subtle something toward the more common reality, which is linked to the ‘density’ of the body.”³⁸

In another passage of the interview, Grotowski also noted a difference in attitude between himself and Gurdjieff. Reflecting on the Armenian master’s last period of teaching, especially the Paris period, he said: “There is this very special, very exceptional orientation in Gurdjieff, which can be called the acceptance of the conditions of a person’s life, and that they are the best point of departure for work on oneself.”³⁹ For Grotowski’s own work, on the other hand, the effect of isolated, extraordinary working conditions, intense and concentrated, was of central importance, as he explicitly stated: “I am . . . very interested in the possibility of keeping a certain isolation and I think that the monastic system—the Tibetan, for example, or even certain Christian hermitic ones—might have created useful conditions.”⁴⁰ But then Grotowski went on to observe that Gurdjieff, too, in the time of the Château de Fontainebleau, had established conditions of retreat, special, almost monastic, conditions of life and work, very different from ordinary life.

What remains fundamental, in his work and his heritage, is his reaching back to the roots, to the origins of the theatrical and ritual arts. This is still his inescapable legacy, his most relevant influence on contemporary theatre, his questions and his research on the primary elements of theatrical practice and the arts of action, on the needs from which these arts spring, on the origin of the techniques and the practices. These are living questions, more necessary today than ever: about what goes beyond the theatre, on the work on oneself, which even a certain theatrical practice can understand, on the practices of “verticality” that can lead to the passage from the coarse to the subtle and vice versa. The challenge remains.

³⁷ Grotowski, 88.

³⁸ Grotowski.

³⁹ Grotowski, 99.

⁴⁰ Grotowski.

And we must not forget the words of Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol, disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch, the grand master of Hasidism, mentioned in Martin Buber's stories. Before his death he supposedly uttered words much loved by Grotowski: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"⁴¹ Why have you not been fully yourself, deep down?

Translated by Iain Halliday



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⁴¹ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 141.

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Buddah Still Works— the Work on Oneself Never Ends

Essay on Grotowski

Abstract

This essay uses the personal recollections of Italian director Gioacchino Palumbo, including the experience of viewing of *Apocalypsis cum figuris* as well as some personal encounters with Jerzy Grotowski, to present a subjective account of selected aspects of Grotowski's theatrical and non-theatrical practices, with an emphasis on understanding theatre as a lifelong work on oneself. Palumbo highlights those aspects of Grotowski's work and quotations from his statements and writings that

have contributed to his own development as a theatre artist. Particularly interested in Grotowski's attitude to diverse sources of inspiration, Palumbo extensively discusses Grotowski's interview on Gurdjieff, considering it as a representative example of artist's approach to cultural phenomena that influenced him. The essay is preceded by an introduction in which Giuseppe G. Condorelli presents the original theatrical work of Palumbo, who has been running his own theatre laboratory in Catania since 1981.

Keywords

Jerzy Grotowski, George Gurdjieff, cultural mobility, Italian theatre

Abstrakt

Budda wciąż działa – praca nad sobą nigdy się nie kończy: Esej o Grotowskim

Punktem wyjścia eseju są osobiste wspomnienia włoskiego reżysera Gioacchino Palumbo, w tym doświadczenia związane z oglądaniem *Apocalypsis cum figuris* i osobistymi spotkaniami z Jerzym Grotowskim, a celem – subiektywna prezentacja wybranych aspektów teatralnych i pozateatralnych praktyk Grotowskiego, z naciskiem na rozumienie teatru jako trwającej całe życie pracy nad sobą. Palumbo podkreśla te aspekty twórczości Grotowskiego i cytaty z jego wypowiedzi i pism, które przyczyniły się do jego własnego rozwoju jako artysty teatralnego. Szczególnie interesuje go stosunek Grotowskiego do różnorodnych źródeł inspiracji, dlatego obszernie omawia wywiad Grotowskiego na temat Gurdżijewa, uznając go za reprezentatywny przykład podejścia artysty do zjawisk kulturowych, które na niego wpływały. Esej został poprzedzony wstępem, w którym Giuseppe G. Condorelli przedstawia Palumbo jako oryginalnego artystę teatralnego, prowadzącego od 1981 roku własne laboratorium teatralne w Katanii.

Słowa kluczowe

Jerzy Grotowski, Georgij Gurdżijew, mobilność kulturowa, teatr włoski

Giuseppe G. Condorelli

Z Grotowskim i *poza* Grotowskim: Gioacchino Palumbo i Teatr Molo 2

Każdy gest, każdy najdrobniejszy ruch jest ideogramem, zapisem fabuły i można go zrozumieć tylko wtedy, gdy zna się jego umowne znaczenie. Widz musi opanować ten język lub raczej jego alfabet, aby zrozumieć to, co „mówi” aktor.¹

Rewolucja „teatru ubogiego” Jerzego Grotowskiego stanowi jeden z fundamentów estetyki teatralnej Gioacchina Palumba, który od 1981 prowadzi w Katanii na Sycylii swoją szkołę-laboratorium Teatr Molo 2. To przestrzeń doświadczenia, ale i teatr w sensie praktycznym, zaprojektowany tak, by uwzględnić specyfikę i cechy konstytutywne projektu, pozbawiony scenografii czy innych elementów dekoracyjnych, skupiony raczej na budowaniu relacji między aktorem a widzem. Powiązanie działalności pedagogicznej i praktyki scenicznej definiuje cztery dekady funkcjonowania Teatru Molo 2, w trakcie których ukształtowały się jego główne wyróżniki: uwaga poświęcona słowu, przywołanie mitu, odczytywanie współczesności przez pryzmat przeszłości, skupienie na technikach pracy z „naturalnym głosem” i „naturalnym oddechem” zapożyczonych od polskiego mistrza.

Gioacchino Palumbo zakłada swój teatr-laboratorium po latach bogatych w kontakty i podróże: począwszy od studiów na nowo założonym przez Umberta Eco Wydziale Sztuki Muzyki i Spektaklu (DAMS) na Uniwersytecie w Bolonii, gdzie uczęszcza na wykłady Baldiego, Costy, Ferrera, Ruffiniego, Squarziny i Giuliana Scabii (wielu z nich, oprócz pracy naukowej, aktywnie działa w teatrze), aż do fascynacji *Apocalipsis cum figuris* Jerzego Grotowskiego, pokazywanej na Biennale w Wenecji w 1975. Palumbo należy do tych szczęśliwców, którzy na pogrążonej w wieczornym uroku wysepce San Giacomo, mogli doświadczyć prawdziwego urzeczenia.

¹ Eugenio Barba, „Indyjski teatr kathakali”, tłum. Witold Kalinowski, *Dialog*, nr 12 (1979).

Spotkanie z teatrem Grotowskiego pozwala Palumbowi połączyć pasję do kina i do teatru, a zwłaszcza rozwinąć zainteresowanie technikami dynamicznymi o wschodnim rodowodzie², które polski reżyser stosował w treningu aktorów, i które stały się, również z innych przyczyn, inspiracją dla samego Palumba podczas jego długiej wyprawy na Wschód. Tak rozpoczyna się droga artystyczna reżysera, na którą złożą się między innymi: uczestnictwo w seminariach organizowanych przez Grotowskiego i jego aktorów we Włoszech i w Europie, warsztaty i współpraca z Odin Teatret Eugenia Barby, a także lata codziennego treningu aktorskiego. Niemniej w centrum zainteresowań Palumba sytuuje się reżyseria i dlatego w laboratoriach teatralnych skupia się on również na praktyce dramaturgicznej. Wierny autorytetowi i naukom pobranym u Grotowskiego, Palumbo przyswaja i odtwarza środowisko empatycznej interakcji, którego zadaniem jest podkreślenie znaczenia zarówno aktora, jak i widza. Cel ten można osiągnąć, wybierając to, co polski reżyser określał jako *via negativa*. Polega ona na wypracowaniu techniczno-ekspresyjnej ascezy, która pozwoliłaby osiągnąć akt całkowity, angażujący ciało, fizyczność, instynkt, ruch i uczucia. Aktor ma odkryć najgłębszą część siebie, dotrzeć do stanu pierwotnej pełni, która z jednej strony przywołuje platoński mit hermafrodyty z *Ucztu*, z drugiej jednak strony przyczynia się do ukształtowania nowej koncepcji „przestrzeni sceny”, która nie jest już gabinetem osobliwości, uprzywilejowanym terytorium efektów scenicznych i reżyserskich pomysłów, a raczej odnowioną i współdzieloną przestrzenią, w której odbywa się rytuał przedstawienia. Widz staje się „świadkiem”, architektura sceny nabiera cech przestrzeni wciąż (re)definiowanej i (re)kontekstualizowanej: aktor zmienia się w aktanta.

Zanika dzięki temu przepaść między aktem interpretacji a czysto estetycznym aktem spojrzenia: podmiot oglądający i przedmiot (ale i podmiot) oglądany współgrają ze sobą. „Teatr ubogi”³ staje się w ten sposób teatrem porozumienia:

Post-teatr Grotowskiego, podważając zasadność propozycji Gurvicha i Goffmana, traktujących teatr jako model relacji społecznych, pokazuje podskórne powinowactwo teatru i życia, niezwykle istotne i domagające się odsłonięcia. [...] Porażka teatru w cudzysłowie każe zmierzyć się z widmem impotencji, ale i na nowo

² Francesco Cappa, „Una pratica teatrale interculturale: L’immaginario orientale e il teatro povero di Grotowski,” *Riflessioni e teorie* 15, no. 2 (2017), <https://rivistedigitali.erickson.it/educazione-interculturale/archivio/vol-15-n-2/una-pratica-teatrale-interculturale-limmaginario-orientale-e-il-teatro-povero-di-grotowski/>.

³ Zob. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag, 1968).

odsłania pewien archetyp teatru – to, który z tych elementów przeważy, zależy już od naszej umiejętności eksperymentowania.⁴

W konsekwencji, również Palumbo w Molo 2 proponuje teatr silnie uwewnętrzniony: nie są to zwykłe spektakle, ani nawet coś, co zwyczajowo zwane jest spektaklem: katański reżyser wyznaje bowiem ideę teatru „esencjonalnego”. Nieodzownymi czy wręcz konstytutywnymi cechami tego teatru są: szacunek dla tekstu dramatycznego, dyskretna interwencja reżyserskiej oraz surowość sceny ograniczonej do tego, co niezbędne.

Ważnym aspektem pracy Palumba jest też podejście ento-antropologiczne, dogłębny wysiłek poznania terytorium: widać to w zaangażowaniu reżysera w projekty w różnych częściach Europy, od Sardynii po Hiszpanię, a także w kultywowaniu własnego sycylijskiego dziedzictwa. Te doświadczenia wykorzystuje Palumbo na laboratoryjnych warsztatach, organizowanych niezależnie od tego, czy przerodzą się potem w „spektakl”. Laboratorium

tworzy z uwagą wspólnotę własnych widzów, bez konieczności wystawiania się na widok publiczny; tak zredefiniowana widownia przekształca scenę w swobodną i czystą przestrzeń doświadczenia, gdzie – z definicji – dokonuje się najpełniejsza dekontekstualizacja. Tworzy się tam rodzaj próżni, w której można dociekać poza-czasowości „źródeł teatru” i przedstawienia, docierając do mitycznego „pierwszego performer” [...], przestrzeń, w której można analizować poza-codzienną przedstawienia, rozbić ją na „komórki” pojedynczych działań, na „molekuły” skumulowanej energii, podobnie jak czyni to Barba w swoich badaniach pracy aktora.⁵

Projekt dramaturgiczny, działania sceniczne, interwencja reżyserska i gra aktorów stają się w ten sposób elementami misterium: można przypomnieć w tym kontekście szczególne rozmieszczenie widowni na spektaklach Grotowskiego. „Przedstawienie” powstaje zatem nie tylko w konsekwencji spotkania z tekstem, ale i wskutek serii doświadczeń, które współtworzą proces jego przygotowania. Ta idea wpisana jest nie tylko w założenia Teatru Molo 2, ale również w sycylijskie realia: „zacofanie gospodarcze, uwstecznienie względem procesów modernizacyjnych sprawiają, że w tych rejonach zachowały się w nienaruszonym stanie

⁴ Claudio Meldolesi, „Ai confini del teatro e della sociologia”, *Teatro e Storia* 1, no. 1 (1986): 135, https://www.teatroestoria.it/pdf/1/Claudio_Meldolesi_34.pdf.

⁵ Piergiorgio Giacché, „Antropologia culturale e cultura teatrale”, *Teatro e Storia* 3, no. 1 (1988): 44, <https://www.teatroestoria.it/pdf/4/p.giacche.pdf>.

techniki ekspresji, które gdzie indziej, gdyby nawet miały szansę się rozwinąć, nigdy by nie przetrwały”⁶.

Działania Teatru Molo 2 są na Sycylii szeroko zakrojone: organizuje on nie tylko seminaria, studia dramatyczne, warsztaty i spektakle, ale też inicjatywy lokalne: można wręcz powiedzieć, że to właśnie zaangażowanie w miejscach, gdzie kultura teatru nie jest silnie zakorzeniona, a także stała praca warsztatowa – której celem, jak już wspomniano, nie zawsze jest stworzenie spektaklu – stanowią esencję aktywności teatralnej Palumba.

Prawdziwy sens Teatru Molo 2 przejawia się właśnie w praktyce laboratoryjnych warsztatów, w których długi trening – zawsze poprzedzający spektakl – sugeruje dodatkowo ideę teatru rozumianego nie tylko jako budujące doświadczenie, ale także jako filozofia. Palumbo poświęca wiele uwagi przygotowaniu aktorów. Wszystkie warsztaty Molo 2 opierają się na technikach dramatycznych służących wypracowaniu własnej metody tworzenia „postaci” i pracy nad działaniami scenicznymi. Ekspresja dramatyczna, obecność psycho-fizyczna, jakość ruchu, świadomość wzajemnych relacji tych elementów stanowią główny cel laboratoriów, a metodologia pracy opiera się na wytycznych Grotowskiego i Stanisławskiego.

Obok laboratoriów teatralnych poświęconych sztuce aktorskiej, równie istotne jest coś, co Palumbo określa mianem „Archedramatu”. Jest to laboratorium oparte na grupowych ćwiczeniach psycho-fizycznych praktyk uważności, *awareness*. W przyćmionym świetle przestrzeni Teatru Molo 2 ciała uczestników, synchronizując oddech, rysują w powietrzu nieregularne kształty. Szmer ubrań przypomina odgłos letniego deszczu; przyciszone ludzkie głosy są niczym ciepła gleba nieodróżnialnych dźwięków, niczym przytulny pejzaż: kołyska, legowisko, otulające ciepło przed nastaniem ostatecznej ciszy.

Od transgresji do mitu

Proces twórczy był niczym podróż w nieznanym celu. Nic nie było z góry założone, sceny były wielokrotnie budowane i rozmontowywane, a ja aż do ostatniej chwili postrzegałem spektakl jako żywy organizm, który należy karmić, i o który należy się troszczyć, poświęcając mu uwagę.⁷

⁶ Renato Palazzi, „Il sipario s'alza a sud”, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, December 3, 2006.

⁷ Gioacchino Palumbo, *Il Teatro del Molo 2: Diario di bordo – Spettacoli, performance, film* (Roma: Bonanno, 2010), 46.

Studium mitu – jego ponowne odkrywanie i reinterpretacja – wydaje się kolejną stałą cechą dramaturgicznej i reżyserskiej drogi Palumba, który zmierza w ten sposób w stronę teatru narracji obywatelskiej. Widać tu szkołę i wpływ Grotowskiego, który wobec mitu zajmował stanowisko ambiwalentne czy wręcz otwarcie polemiczne:

Grotowski zdaje sobie doskonale sprawę, że relacja, jaką człowiek starożytny miał z mitem, umarła i nie może zostać wskrzeszona w dzisiejszym racjonalnym społeczeństwie; ma równocześnie świadomość, że dla współczesnego człowieka konfrontacja z mitem i jego symbolicznymi przedstawieniami jest niezbędna, gdyż w przeciwnym razie ryzykuje on duchowe zubożenie i życie w stanie wiecznego niezrozumienia rzeczywistości fenomenów, oraz rzeczywistości, która „przenika” do jego ciała (rozumianego jako archiwum historii jednostki oraz społeczeństwa, do którego ta jednostka należy [...]). Podczas gdy człowiek starożytny przyswajał mit w procesie postrzegania i przetwarzania rzeczywistości (a zatem animizacja przyrody była dla niego faktem, a nie formą jej przedstawienia), człowiek współczesny może zbliżyć się do tego rodzaju poznania jedynie poprzez ascezę, wpisaną w pracę aktora. Polega ona na ciągłym desakralizowaniu-sakralizowaniu własnego sposobu postrzegania rzeczywistości (teatru) i tego, jak przedstawia się ją na scenie. Na tym właśnie, choć Grotowski nigdy wprost się do tego nie odnosił, polega terapeutyczna rola teatru eksperymentalnego (zburzenie mechanizmów obronnych, zdarcie maski, by poszerzyć swobodny wpływ Jaźni).⁸

Zmierzenie się z gatunkiem tak doskonałym jak mit niesie jednak ryzyko przekształcenia spektaklu w ćwiczenie stylistyczne lub pokaz reżyserskiego narcyzmu. Podejście Palumba podważa zasadność ściśle etymologicznego odtwarzania mitu, koncentrując się na twórczej pracy eksperymentalnej, w której najważniejsza jest przestrzeń improwizacji.

Spośród około sześćdziesięciu wyreżyserowanych przez Palumba spektakli niektóre wydają się szczególnie reprezentatywne dla jego pracy i poetyki. Pierwszy spektakl Teatru Molo z *Europa dopo la pioggia* (Europa po deszczu) miał premierę w czerwcu 1981 roku we Florencji, podczas przeglądu *Emergenze e dintorni della scena* (Stany nadzwyczajne i okolice sceny). Tekst sceniczny jest tu pomyślany jako sekwencja działań inspirowanych tekstami literackimi oraz filmem *Podróż komediantów* (1975) Teo Angelopulosa. W tej montażowej konstrukcji reżyserskiej

⁸ Giovanni Lancellotti, „Recensioni, riflessioni sulla scrittura”, *Il Quaderno di Nessuno. Newsletter di Saggi, Letteratura e Documentazione Teatrale* 14, no. 4 (2015), <https://www.teatrodinessuno.it/doc/grotowski/teatro-povero>.

Palumbo zbliża się najbardziej do założeń Grotowskiego, choć widać tu także wpływ Odin Teatret oraz laboratoriów Cieślaka, Scierskiego, Spychalskiego.

Palumbo pisze:

Punktem wyjścia był pomysł stworzenia wydarzenia scenicznego utkanego z działań powstałych wskutek szczególnego montażu improwizacji. Motywem przewodnim jest los pojedynczych, konkretnych istnień ludzkich w zderzeniu z najbardziej tragicznym momentem historii dwudziestowiecznej Europy – katastrofą drugiej wojny światowej i Holokaustu.⁹

Ponadto innym ważnym założeniem było to, by nie opierać się na tekstach pisanych specjalnie dla teatru, ale raczej czerpać z filmów, opowiadań autobiograficznych, powieści, scenariuszy i dzieł malarskich (tytuł *Europa po deszczu* pochodzi od obrazu Maxa Ernsta), a zatem pre-tekstów przedstawienia. „Ostateczna wersja sztuki nie była tekstem dramatu, ale tekstem spektaklu, strukturą żywych działań¹⁰”. To reżyserski montaż improwizacji powołuje spektakl do życia: każdy aktor odsłania się sam przed sobą, wyzwala i eksponuje swoje wewnętrzne przeżycia. Największą trudnością było nadanie improwizacjom trwałego charakteru, by móc powtarzać je „w sposób precyzyjny, szczegółowy i zdyscyplinowany, nie pozbawiając ich jednocześnie głębokiej pasji, autentyczności, nie przekształcając ich w pustą formę. To najtrudniejsze zadanie aktorskie. Powtarzać, nie odzierając z treści¹¹”. Oczywiście teatr Palumba przywiązuje również duże znaczenie do słowa, podobnie jak teatr grecki. Dzięki temu ma możliwość połączenia różnych języków ekspresji, spontanicznie wykorzystując mowę ciała, uniwersalne toposy i wątki z historii wyspy. Teatr ten, silnie symboliczny, jest w tym sensie również nieoczywistym hołdem składanym Sycylii, formą powrotu do korzeni.

Jednym z projektów szczególnie skupionych na studium mitu są *Voci su Medea* (Głosy o Medei). Postać tytułowej bohaterki Palumbo oparł na tekście Christy Wolf, jednej ze swoich ulubionych autorek; jest to zatem Medea wzniosła i dostojna, odległa od tradycji eurypidejskiej. Śledząc różne, czasem wzajemnie się wykluczające wersje historii (tytułowe „głosy” wskazują wręcz na donos lub oszczerstwo), tekst wychodzi od mitu, by następnie – przy pomocy „odwróconego”, „drugiego spojrzenia” bohaterki – całkowicie go przewartościować, próbując odnaleźć w politycznej

⁹ Palumbo, *Il Teatro del Molo* 2, 42.

¹⁰ Palumbo, 42.

¹¹ Palumbo, 43.

przestrzeni *polis* chtoniczne i kobiece formy działania. W odczytaniu Palumba *Medea* jest czarodziejką areligijną, światłą cudotwórczynią Kolchidy, której obce są podłość i hipokryzja dworu; jest żoną, która nigdy nie nauczyła się trzymać języka za zębami, jest też wyzwoloną kobietą, sprzeciwiającą się sprawowaniu władzy wyłącznie przez mężczyzn. Jej wina polega tylko na tym, że pragnąc „zmiany rzeczywistości”, ujawnia zbrodnię, na której opiera się władza króla Kreona w Koryncie. Jeśli według pragmatycznego słownika ludzi władzy śmierć Ifinoe jest ofiarą konieczną, dla Medei jest to zbrodnia popełniona przez Państwo, konsekwencja jego okrutnej racjonalności. Forma spektaklu jest otwarcie wizjonerska, a oryginalna ścieżka dźwiękowa Carla Cattana nadaje gestom i słowom wyszukany charakter. Kolejne postaci przedstawiają swoje świadectwa w dynamicznej przestrzeni sceny, poruszając się po linii prostej, półkołu i okręgu. Akamas (w tej roli Rosario Minardi), doradca, szara eminencja i najwyższy astronom dworu, trzyma w ręku piórko symbolizujące dyskrecję władzy sprawowanej z cyniczną lekkością. Jazon (Giovanni Calcagno) jest bohaterem naiwnym, po części marionetką, po części człowiekiem dworu, w najmniejszym stopniu mężem Medei. Glauke (Rossana Bonafede), epileptyczna przyjaciółka-przeciwniczka, która od Medei, bieglej szamanki i znawczyni ludzkiej psychiki, uczy się „nie ignorować cieni” i w toku zapalczego delirium dociera do swojej pierwotnej traumy, związanej z postacią brutalnego ojca; na koniec Medea (Giovanna Centamore), wygnana przez tych, którzy „dotarli do strasznej prawdy” na podstawie fałszywych oskarżeń o bratobójstwo, dzieciobójstwo i wichrzycielstwo, kołysze w ramionach pustkę, na którą skazały ją prawa Pałacu. W *Głosach o Medei*, przedstawieniu o wielkiej sile wyrazu, Palumbo twórczo przetwarza również pamiętne odczytanie *Medei* Piera Paola Pasoliniego: widać to między innymi w spiralnej strukturze akcji, wyszukanej i surowej przestrzeni sceny, a przede wszystkim w doborze kostiumów.

Spektakl *Frida: Albero della speranza sii solido* (Frida: Drzewo nadziei trzymaj się mocno), zrealizowany w koprodukcji z katańskim Teatro Stabile, jest kolejną próbą rekontekstualizacji nowoczesnego mitu, w której widać wpływ Grotowskiego. Nie jest to gloryfikacja Fridy jako ikony popkultury, ale intymny list meksykańskiej artystki, urodzonej trzy lata przed wybuchem rewolucji Zapaty i Villi; Frida, w następstwie strasznego wypadku (poręcz okaleczyła jej kręgosłup i narządy płciowe), widzi w sobie „unoszącą się na wodzie butelkę, która pragnie być odnaleziona i ocalona”. Na płótnie sceny przesuwają się kolejno obrazy z życia i z dzieł malarki, fragmenty jej emocjonalnych listów, a słyszany w tle głos narratorki (w roli Fridy Donatella Finocchiaro, która ograniczyła swoją naturalną ekspresję na rzecz wykonania aluzyjnego, niemal wycofanego) odtwarza najważniejsze etapy jej biografii. Począwszy od więzi z cierpiącym na padaczkę ojcem, cenionym fotografem, po którym artystka odziedziczyła „cierpliwość rzemieślnika” (w tej roli Bruno Torrisi), przez walkę

komunistyczną, przyjaźń z Tiną Modotti, magnetyczną żywiołowość Diega Rivery (Vincenzo Failla), malarza-uwodziciela, aż po narodziny miłości i ślub z człowiekiem, który był dla niej „wszystkimi możliwymi kombinacjami”; od osobliwej i trudnej relacji z byłą żoną Rivery, Lupe (Pamela Toscano), i z wygnańcem Lwem Trockim, przez kłótnie z siostrą Concettą (Egle Doria), kilka poronień – niezrealizowane macierzyństwo jest dla niej źródłem nieustannego cierpienia – skończywszy na romansach pozamałżeńskich z ludźmi meksykańskiego i zagranicznego świata artystycznego. Narracja, prowadzona głównie w formie monologów, rozwija się na kilku planach – *stricte* dramatycznym (historia wyjątkowego życia Fridy), filmowym (retrospektywna dynamika opowieści) i dialogicznym (relacje Fridy z jej rodziną, siostrą, mężem Diegiem Riverą i światem sztuki) – które reżyseria Palumba scala w gęste multimedialne kontinuum. Frida, kobieta o „okaleczonym ciele” (które wykonywana na żywo muzyka katańskiego jazzmana Nella Toscana pieści z wysublimowaną zmysłowością) opowiada bez emfazy (by przywołać film Julie Taymor) o przymusie bardziej niż potrzebie malowania i o jego sublimującej roli: „Tak sportretowałam – mówi jeden z kluczowych wersów spektaklu – moje uzdrowienie”.

Fedra, na podstawie poematu Janisa Ritsosa, jest przykładem teatru silnie politycznego, w którym słowo, struktura akcji i ruch mają centralne znaczenie. Palumbo, zamiast nieszczęśliwej postaci z Eurypidesa, chce pokazać złożoną osobowość bohaterki w wersji współczesnego greckiego poety. Jej namiętnością nie jest wyłącznie Hippolytos, ale przede wszystkim prawda: nie pozostaje bez znaczenia fakt, że Ritsos napisał swój tekst w latach dyktatury „pułkowników” i do tego aluzyjnie nawiązuje cały monolog. W oryginalnej wersji mitu nigdy nie dochodzi do tak bliskiej i bezpośredniej konfrontacji Fedry i Hippolytosa. Fedra (grana z przekonującą wstrzemięźliwością przez Livianę Pino) nie zwraca się jednak do milczącego, choć trwającego w swojej „zimnej cności” Hippolytosa, lecz przemawia do własnego cierpienia, do toczącej ją namiętności. Przypominający smugę krwi pas materiału, który okala ciało bohaterki, symbolizuje jej drogę od kobiecości do macierzyństwa, a jednocześnie jasno nawiązuje do przestępstwa kazirodztwa i jego tragicznych konsekwencji. Jest też elementem silnie naznaczającym przestrzeń sceny, surową i ograniczoną do minimum. Dzięki oszczędnym, a jednocześnie stanowczym zabiegom reżysera, krew Fedry staje się polem semantycznym, w którym koncentrują się wszystkie możliwe konotacje ciała i grzechu. Uwodzicielska zmysłowość bohaterki nigdy nie jest wulgarna, karykaturalna. Jest ona raczej posągami swojej własnej obsesji, swojej pamięci i niezaspokojonego pragnienia, bliższą w swojej „naturalności” Fedrze Seneki. Poemat Ritsosa nie jest jednak poświęcony wyłącznie gorszącej i wynaturzonej *hybris*; pokazuje również potrzebę wyznania prawdy za wszelką cenę, konieczność zrzucenia maski, która

w pierwszych wersach utworu zakrywa twarz bohaterki. Fedra, mimo posągowej natury tej postaci, jest jednocześnie bohaterką nieuchwytną, a przed śmiercią (której narzędziem staje się wspomniany krwawy pas) błąka się bez celu w gęstwinie zmysłów, uczuć i prześladujących ją demonów. Monologowi – zapisowi procesu jej wewnętrznego rozkładu – towarzyszy żywiłowy komentarz muzyczny oparty na dźwiękach saksofonu Jana Garbarka i niespokojnym brzmieniu wiolonczeli Giovanniego Sollimy. W głębi sceny znajduje się rodzaj bramy, przejścia, zakrytego przez wiszący hamak, wyznaczający granice przestrzeni spektaklu: Czy można podjąć próbę zrozumienia? Współodczuwania? Rozjaśnienia mroku? Być może na tym właśnie polega kierowane do wszystkich zaproszenie teatru Palumba: chce przeprowadzić nas, tak jak robi to „wspaniała” Fedra, na drugą stronę.

Tłumaczenie Natalia Chwaja

Gioacchino Palumbo

Buddah Still Works—the Work on Oneself Never Ends: Essay on Grotowski

I begin with some personal impressions and memories: I saw *Apocalypsis cum figuris* knowing very little about theatre and almost nothing about Grotowski. It was 1975, at the Venice Biennale. I was a university student at that time; after two years of architecture studies, I had enrolled on DAMS, the entertainment degree course at the Bologna University of Umberto Eco, Giuliano Scabia, Adelio Ferrero, Luigi Squarzina, because I was fascinated by a certain kind of cinema. I had taken a break from my studies, going on a year-long trip to the East, seven months of which were spent in India. I was interested in oriental philosophies and disciplines, and I read widely and held the unconfessed hope of meeting a secret, unknown master. I had a very strong idea about what performance is, a vision of never-imagined spaces of the theatre, something dazzling. I used

to go to the theatre quite rarely, but I wanted to see *Apocalypsis* because I had heard at university that the actors of a company, led by a Polish director I did not know at the time, used to train with movement and breathing exercises taken from oriental techniques, not specifically from theatrical disciplines, but from yoga and other forms. I was able to book tickets for the show thanks to a university contact. I reached the meeting place in Venice. We were a small group of spectators and were put on a ferryboat that headed out into the dark sea of the Lagoon of Venice. We disembarked on an uninhabited islet, the isle of San Giacomo in the lagoon. In silence we were guided to an isolated building. A bare room with stone walls, one light projector aimed at the wall. The audience sitting in a circle. The performance begins. So alive. Astonishing to me. Bright and dark. I remain enchanted.

At the end of the play someone told me it was possible to meet the members of the company. I don't know why, maybe because I mentioned my trip in India, someone offers, unexpectedly, an opportunity to take part in two workshops. One of them, *Song of Myself*, was held by Teo Spsychalski, the other one, *Incontri di lavoro* (Work Meetings), by Stanisław Scierski. I accepted the offer, thinking it's a new experience. I was touched by Spsychalski's equilibrium and skill in leading in a very calm way. Regarding Scierski, I remember I was impressed by the generous strength and the impeccability in his work and, at the same time, by the angst and the despair—so powerful and contained—I perceived after the workshop, walking with him through Venice's alleys.

After a few weeks I took part in a workshop guided by Ryszard Cieślak—*Special Project*—in Montegalda in Veneto, in the castle surrounded by a wood. There, for the first time I had the unhoped-for opportunity to talk with Grotowski, in a glade between the wood and the granary, outside of the hamlet, where the rule of silence was strictly observed. He listened to me with kind awareness and patience. He struck me with the quality of his presence and his careful gaze: his face has something of the trees around us. We talked about India, some places and meetings and Vedanta. I asked him, maybe with a certain naivete, about influences of oriental disciplines in his work, I mentioned my interests, I asked him about *satori*. I still remember his last words: "Remember, Buddha still works." Buddha still works. The work on oneself never ends. It takes a lifetime. You are always researching. There is no ultimate truth, no final point, or a static and permanent "enlightenment." The search for essence, for Life in life, has no end.

Over time I have come to understand the importance of that sentence. And I think today it sheds a light on Grotowski's entire work. On the difficult, imperious coherency that flows beneath his choices, his abandonments, his sudden and sometimes painful turning points. These have always been dictated by an

interior need, by the urgency to question, by the necessity to remain faithful to his aims. Ludwik Flaszen—one of his first and most valued collaborators, whose words always reveal deep gratitude and affection, free of any easy idealization and mythologizing—underlined that the source of his strength lay in his faithfulness to the primary aspirations of his childhood.

Stanislavski, when he was quite old, and when his method was already known and appreciated all over the world, declared, knowing that his teachings were used in many actors' studios, that he felt he needed another lifetime to really learn how to apply it! True research is always a work in progress. The same can be said of Grotowski's journey, and perhaps that is why he said he felt Stanislavski was like a father, always open to new perspectives, guided by true and sometimes unpredictable discoveries. The theatre director and teacher Anatoly Vasiliev, one of the foremost experts on all the different stages of Stanislavski's work, once said that he considers Grotowski to be the one who, more than any other person, has continued Stanislavski's research, who has "saved more things" of his work, who has kept him alive.

Another meeting with Grotowski remains impressed in my memory—many years later, in May 1989 in Taormina. That year, Taormina Arte was awarding the Europe Prize to Peter Brook. Grotowski was present in those days and took part in an unforgettable open conversation with the English theatre director, in the symposium entitled *Dal cammino alla via* (From the Path to the Road), organized by the International Association of Theatre Critics. Since our first meeting in 1975, many tragic and painful events had befallen the actors of Teatr Laboratorium, and others were yet to come. At a small, isolated table of the Congress Center, I had the opportunity to meet the Polish master and carry on an intense dialogue in hushed tones. At that time—after various experiences of apprenticeship and work, including some years spent with Domus de Janas, an ensemble made up of people coming from Odin Teatret, where we practiced daily—I had founded a theatre center (Teatro del Molo 2), which I still direct, and where I organized theatre workshops, one of which is a very precise and essential one on vocal techniques, dealing with Beckett's texts, led by Ludwik Flaszen. From that meeting I also remember an observation by Grotowski's on the possible risks of some forms of workshop activity, and, in particular, the risks inherent in the disruptive effects of some experiences if they are not compensated by continuous and rigorous work, by reevaluation, by real integration. He stressed the importance of technical precision, of structure, of a sheltered work. I mentioned the formative environment of my work and my contact with the "school" of Jeanne De Salzmann, the intended heir of George Gurdjieff's teachings.

In Grotowski's work, this discussion bore testimony to a transition from one phase of his work to another, already developed ten years earlier, testimony to a significant, meditated change of direction from the previous paratheatrical phase of participation and encounter to the "Theatre of Sources" and more, to "Art as Vehicle," to the "doer," to the Workcenter and the collaboration with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, designated guardians of this work, and to the last "hermitage" of Pontedera. Then, at an imperceptible signal from Carla Pollastrelli—irreplaceable assistant and translator, who watched over the meeting like a guardian angel, always attentive and discreet—I moved away, relinquishing my place to Yoshi Oida (who in the following years led a very popular workshop in our theatre center). She had come with Peter Brook, who at that time was busy with other people, with numerous, valuable work demonstrations.¹²

What elements constitute his legacy, theatrically and otherwise? There are many answers to this question, although it is certain that Grotowski did not leave, and did not seek to leave, a "system." In his theatrical work, thanks to his collaboration with the architect Jerzy Gurawski, he developed the idea of an architecture of space, unique and different for each production, with precise, unrepeatable proxemics that allow a profound relationship between actor and spectator. As in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, where the audience is arranged as if it were invited to dinner, the Last Supper, where Faust tells his story in a space that recalls the refectory of a monastery. And also a particular use of a composite dramaturgy that responds to other, internal needs and structural criteria, as in *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, where he turns to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, to works by Simone Weil, to the Dostoevsky of *The Brothers Karamazov*, to fragments of the Bible. And there, in this last show, *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, he continued the experiment, extending it to all the actors of the ensemble, with one of the fundamental elements of all his research work, which is what Grotowski had defined, in his letters to Eugenio Barba during the years of *The Constant Prince*, the discovery of the "technique 2."

Despite the fact that *The Constant Prince* by Calderon de la Barca and Słowacki is the pinnacle of his theatrical work, it is perhaps in this period, in this discovery of "technique 2," that the need to go beyond the theatre, or at least beyond the "theatre of presentation" of performances, emerges and defines itself. "*The Constant Prince* marks the beginning of a new period in the aesthetics of our company," Grotowski writes to Eugenio Barba, his irreplaceable fellow traveler,

¹² The documentation of those days can be found in the book, *Gli anni di Peter Brook* (The Years of Peter Brook). Georges Banu and Alessandro Martinez, eds., *Gli anni di Peter Brook: L'opera di un maestro raccontata al Premio Europa per il teatro* (Milano: Ubulibri, 1990).

inviting him to join him for at least a few weeks. It was no longer a question of acting, but of “penetrating the territories of one’s own existence.”¹³ Here the direction of the work is powerfully outlined. Acting is a means to go beyond, and theatre is a journey without shortcuts to the essence of life, a vehicle through which it is possible to connect with a higher level, to explore moments of totality, of real presence. “The work with *The Constant Prince* has been completely different,” writes Grotowski, “and is based purely on the principle of the organic nature, with no orientation towards the signs or the composition.”¹⁴ “There is no longer the duel between life and illusion, or imitation, a real, organic, clear, precise reaction.”¹⁵ And again, “If the act takes place, the actor, the human being, goes beyond the state of incompleteness to which we condemn ourselves, in daily life. . . . The actor who achieves this reaches wholeness This is the phenomenon of total action The actor repeats the script and at the same time reveals themselves to the limits of the impossible.”¹⁶ And when Eugenio Barba saw the show, he was surprised and impressed by Ryszard Cieślak’s work, by the boundaries he crossed, by the new territories he opened up, despite his deep knowledge of Teatr Laboratorium’s practices. Barba writes

From the beginning, from the first seconds of the show, it was as though all my memories, the categories with which I supported myself, disappeared from under my feet, and I saw another being, man who had found his fullness, his destiny “*Now he surely won’t manage anymore.*” And yet it was as though a new wave, stronger, higher, greener, rose out of his body and expanded around him It was only later, sheltered from this fury of the elements, that I reflected on the fact that an entire horizon, which up until then had surrounded my theatrical land, had been shifted by countless miles to reveal a difficult terrain, still to be studied, but which existed and could bear fruit.”¹⁷

For this reason “technique 2”—a script of impulses that each time have been relived, remembered, incarnated, and constructed each time with a precise adolescent memory of going beyond daily limits as a starting point—remains

¹³ Jerzy Grotowski, *Tecniche originarie dell’attore*, a cura di Luisa Tinti (Roma: Università degli studi di Roma La Sapienza, 1982).

¹⁴ Grotowski, *Tecniche originarie dell’attore*.

¹⁵ Jerzy Grotowski, “Teatro e Rituale,” in *Il Teatr Laboratorium di Jerzy Grotowski 1959–1969*, a cura di Ludwik Flaszen e Carla Pollastrelli (Pontedera: Fondazione Pontedera Teatro, 2001).

¹⁶ Jerzy Grotowski, “Dalla compagnia teatrale a L’arte come veicolo,” in Thomas Richards, *Al lavoro con Grotowski sulle azioni fisiche* (Milano: Ubulibri, 1993).

¹⁷ Ferdinando Taviani, ed., *Il libro dell’Odin: Il teatro-laboratorio di Eugenio Barba* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1975).

a founding passage, pointing to new boundaries in the theatrical field, in the creation of shows, and, with progressive and sometimes painful adjustments and gradations, in the field of post-theatrical activity and work on the self. Here, too, there is a danger of being imprecise in defining the beginning of a “discovery” that continues to have multiple ramifications. Already during the rehearsals for *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus*, especially in the work with the main actor, Zbigniew Cynkutis, the need and the possibility of a *total act* emerged, one of a revelation, of a wholeness, of a performative element with an aspect of transcendence, of a rupture that goes beyond individual limits.

For me, from the distance of years, Jerzy Grotowski's strong roots in Polish culture appear more and more clearly. This is evident, but not limited, to his choice of texts to put on the stage. From Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* to Słowacki's *Kordian*, from Wyspiański's *Acropolis* to Calderon/Słowacki's *The Constant Prince*, all of them belong to the Polish Romantic tradition. From these dramas, the Polish director, in line with his entire journey, has brought to light and intuited above all the existential and metaphysical aspects of the Romantic soul. These are productions in which his poetics are gradually defined and mature, perhaps reaching their peak in *The Constant Prince*. It was from Mickiewicz that he probably absorbed the notion of the total act, so seminal in his work with actors. Like Mickiewicz who broke with the established norms of poetic composition, the Polish director broke with theatre understood merely as the production of shows. He also shared with the author of *Forefathers' Eve* a deep interest in the teachings and writings of the great mystics.

Another sign of this rootedness in his native culture is his declared inspiration by Juliusz Osterwa and Mieczysław Limanowski, founders of Reduta in the 1920s. This group, which drew on some of Stanislavski's ideas and translated them into their own original approach, had very strict, almost monastic rules. They dedicated themselves to workshop research on the art of acting; they opened a school for actors that was intended to be a vehicle for the transmission of ideas; they had a very strong sense of community and a professional and individual ethos; they gave great importance to rehearsals and took their shows to small towns. These are all aspects that, as he himself has emphasized many times, have had a decisive influence on Grotowski.

Zbigniew Osiński and many other authors have thoroughly and sharply analyzed Grotowski's rich and varied sources of inspiration. Some of these sources are rather hidden, others are clearly invoked by the Polish maestro: from *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* and the Hasidism of Martin Buber to Meister Eckhart and the mystical school of Renan, from the fictionalized accounts of

Carlos Castaneda to the writings of Ronald David Laing, from the *Vedanta* to the *Samkhya*, from Ramana Maharshi to George Ivanovich Gurdjieff.

An interview with Grotowski entitled “A Kind of Volcano,” which appeared in the collection of essays on Gurdjieff, is a valuable testimony to the detailed knowledge that Grotowski had, at least in the final period of his research, of Gurdjieff’s works and his teaching work.¹⁸ In the interview, conducted by Michel de Salzman, a profound connoisseur of the Armenian maestro’s work, Grotowski demonstrated his deep knowledge not only of the fundamental texts and documents, but also of the works that are considered less significant, from which he drew lively, sharp, and decisive impressions. This interview—conducted in Paris at the beginning of February 1991, at a time when his work was focused on ancient songs and their “vibratory” qualities—is, in my opinion, particularly indicative of the living relationship that Grotowski had with his sources of inspiration or his ideal interlocutors.

And since these sources posed living questions to him, they gave him the opportunity for operational interaction, for real possibilities of experimentation, and for rigorous and careful research practices. In any case, these were topics that had interested the Polish director since childhood and had a decisive influence on all his theatrical work. And above all, as for the other sources of literary and non-literary inspiration, they are always grafted, verified, and brought to life in an inexhaustible, continuous practice of inner work and active experimentation. In the case of Gurdjieff, I have the impression that he was anything but of secondary importance in the foundations of the second phase of his post-theatrical work, from Objective Drama on, and then in particular in Ritual Arts.

“Gurdjieff succeeded in something very rare: he created a *contemporary tradition*,” Grotowski declared, adding that his modernity lay in the fact that this was true research and, “If, from everything, I had to take only one vector, it would be “work on oneself.”¹⁹ And here, too, is the resonance with his own work: “He was above all an investigator who penetrated deeply into the practical and technical areas of the traditions that he was able to meet.”²⁰ This is what we can say today without hesitation about the Polish maestro. Grotowski further declared,

¹⁸ Jerzy Grotowski, “A Kind of Volcano,” interview by Michel de Salzman, in *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, ed. Jacob Needleman et al. (New York: Continuum, 1996), 87–106.

¹⁹ Grotowski, “A Kind Of Volcano,” 96.

²⁰ Grotowski, 97.

from the moment I began to read about Gurdjieff's work, the practical, comparisons not only had to corroborate but also to *touch me*, it is obvious. It would be difficult to analyze: which details, which elements? Because there is also a danger of asking oneself: "From where comes this element, and from where another?" What is important is not that they come from somewhere, but that they work.²¹

To see if they work: this is the element that excites him, that really counts, to see what serves his purpose, what can be useful. This is where his pragmatic spirit of "doing," of active culture, emerges, and this is where an idea that underpins all his research returns, the idea of *efficacy*, of seeing if certain techniques work "objectively" within one's own activity, if they have a certain effect on the one who practices them, even extrapolated from the cultural context from which they come. This is a feature that constitutes the premise of the research in the field of traditional ancient techniques of the Theatre of Sources and also of the work on Art as Vehicle, of the criteria of scrupulous processing of Action, carried out with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini. Thus, the research was on the possibility of elaborating and composing an objective process through the elements of performative arts, through a structured sequence of actions. Grotowski pointed out to Gurdjieff's relevance to his own practice, by stating: "As far as I know, nobody made this kind of effort: to unstick the things, to dissociate them from theological content in order to bring them back to their pragmatic qualities."²² He went on to say:

He was a searcher who had investigated several domains and several traditions, even if he was very much concentrated on the cultural cradle, which is the Mediterranean basin, but not only there, also a little bit farther to the east. In a certain way, he was doing a scientific work in order to understand. To understand not in order to formulate verbally, to understand so as to be able to do.²³

Here, too, he stresses the primary importance of the attitude of *doing*, together with the need of a science oriented in this direction, and as such it requires an appropriate language. Grotowski highlights, for example, Gurdjieff's choice of the term "buffers," a key element of his teaching, which recalls the technical

²¹ Grotowski, 94.

²² Grotowski, 98.

²³ Grotowski.

language of the time, free of any sentimental or theological implications, scrupulously avoiding the use of religious terminology.²⁴

In my opinion the notes Grotowski made on Gurdjieff's Movements are of particular importance, with some poignant analogies to his work on the concept of Art as a Vehicle. He observed that "when a Gurdjieffian group does Movements, these Movements are not intended for spectators."²⁵ This analogy helps him to further clarify the difference in objective between the actor of the theatrical period and the doer in Art as Vehicle period. The aim of this phase of the post-theatrical era is the effect that the elements used have on those who practice them, on those who perform them. "When I say 'elements,' I am thinking of physical actions, of tempo-rhythms, of composed movement, of contact, of the word. and, above all, of the ancient songs."²⁶ All these elements obviously belong to the field of dramatic art, to the theatrical tradition.

With regard to the different objectives of the doer and the actor, I am also struck by Grotowski's observation on the need to avoid aesthetic ends, i.e. choices made in function of those who witness the structured actions. Impressed by Gurdjieff's work on his movements and sacred dances, Grotowski observes with his usual quality of attention; "Another thing that struck me is that in some composed elements—which can be compared with liturgical gestures—what has been avoided is the danger of aestheticization."²⁷ And he goes on to say that in his eyes the Movements are rooted in "a deepened research which starts out from ancient elements, but which is, at the same time, contemporary. After all, the traditions are only founded in this way."²⁸ I am aware of the risks of comparisons that reduce the complexity of a work, but how can we not hear in these most thoughtful words a resonance with the projects he was working on at the time: the Ritual arts, the work of vibratory songs? In his work on ancient techniques and traditions, and at the same time on being a contemporary man who knows how to move in today's work, Grotowski perhaps sees himself, his own practices, and also the constant difficulties that he faces in creating the conditions for rigorous and authentic research, and this refers both to the

²⁴ "Buffers," is an expression used by Gurdjieff to denote "a shock absorber" deeply rooted in man. See P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1949), 155.

²⁵ Grotowski, "A Kind of Volcano," 89.

²⁶ Grotowski, 90.

²⁷ Grotowski, 93.

²⁸ Grotowski.

theatrical period when he worked in Poland, and to the subsequent phase when he was forced to work elsewhere.

A significant detail, which indicates the objectivity, the exactness of an action and its effect on the one who performs it, appears in another notation, decisive for a better understanding of the careful gaze with which Grotowski observes what interests him for his practical work. He was struck by a remark Jeanne de Salzmann made about the movements of hands, where she observed that at the beginning of a movement, the energy is up and consciously put in, but when the hand is lowered, the conscious energy is no longer present, and that it is the movement itself that causes this loss of awareness.²⁹ One might say that in his relationship with the materials and the readings that interest and enthuse him, he has a director's eye that sees what is useful for the work, that tries to intuit the secret line and discards what is not useful, that chooses what works and composes and orders the fragments according to his objective or according to a higher order of laws. He was always rooted in experience, beginning with consolidated, patient and tenacious experiments.

Another element of convergence is the distinction between "objective" and "subjective," art, an idea that Grotowski explored in his American research project, *Objective Drama*. Objective art, as Ouspensky explained in *In Search of the Miraculous*, for Gurdjieff was art in which the effects were not subjective, personal, but objective, experienceable, like the sound or music that brought down the walls of Jericho and crumbled the stones, just as one might presume the "effects" of performing a determined and precise sequence of vibratory songs or certain elementary actions are objective. But, the decisive affinity with Gurdjieff's teaching is something that Grotowski calls verticality that allows a passage from the coarse to the subtle, from rough energies to fine energies, from an ascending current, towards the source, and a descending one, towards the life of the body.³⁰ This idea, according to Grotowski, is one of the fundamental aspects of the Armenian maestro's practice and teaching.

I don't think it's important to establish whether there is a direct, exclusive influence, even if only in terms, between the two seekers: what interests me here is to underline the essential convergence, the common orientation and direction of their research. Grotowski, specifying that the phenomenon of verticality belongs to the field of energy, compares it to an ancient elevator: "a big basket with a rope by means of which the person who is inside, by his

²⁹ Grotowski, 92-93.

³⁰ Grotowski, 88.

own effort, has to move himself from one level to another. The question of verticality means to pass from a so-called coarse level—in a certain sense one could say an ‘everyday’ level—to a level of energy much more subtle or even toward the higher connection.”³¹ And, again in a surprising concordance with Gurdjieff’s teaching—and after his demise, Jeanne de Salzmann’s teaching—on the ascending and descending currents and on the importance of the impact on daily life of the experiences of opening up towards the upper level, he specified: “if one approaches much more subtle energy—then there is also the question of descending, while at the same time bringing this subtle something toward the more common reality, which is linked to the ‘density’ of the body.”³²

In another passage of the interview, Grotowski also noted a difference in attitude between himself and Gurdjieff. Reflecting on the Armenian master’s last period of teaching, especially the Paris period, he said: “There is this very special, very exceptional orientation in Gurdjieff, which can be called the acceptance of the conditions of a person’s life, and that they are the best point of departure for work on oneself.”³³ For Grotowski’s own work, on the other hand, the effect of isolated, extraordinary working conditions, intense and concentrated, was of central importance, as he explicitly stated: “I am . . . very interested in the possibility of keeping a certain isolation and I think that the monastic system—the Tibetan, for example, or even certain Christian hermitic ones—might have created useful conditions.”³⁴ But then Grotowski went on to observe that Gurdjieff, too, in the time of the Château de Fontainebleau, had established conditions of retreat, special, almost monastic, conditions of life and work, very different from ordinary life.

What remains fundamental, in his work and his heritage, is his reaching back to the roots, to the origins of the theatrical and ritual arts. This is still his inescapable legacy, his most relevant influence on contemporary theatre, his questions and his research on the primary elements of theatrical practice and the arts of action, on the needs from which these arts spring, on the origin of the techniques and the practices. These are living questions, more necessary today than ever: about what goes beyond the theatre, on the work on oneself, which even a certain theatrical practice can understand, on the practices of “verticality” that can lead to the passage from the coarse to the subtle and vice versa. The challenge remains.

³¹ Grotowski, 88.

³² Grotowski.

³³ Grotowski, 99.

³⁴ Grotowski.

And we must not forget the words of Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol, disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch, the grand master of Hasidism, mentioned in Martin Buber's stories. Before his death he supposedly uttered words much loved by Grotowski: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"³⁵ Why have you not been fully yourself, deep down?

Translated by Iain Halliday



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³⁵ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 141.

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