

ADRIANA GAŁDYŃSKA-MAZAN (Poznań)

Jerzy Grotowski's Idea of an Actor's or Performer's Inner Action

Jerzy Grotowski was not only a theatre director, but most of all a researcher who embarked on a quest for measures to develop the skills of the actor and then the performer – the man of action. The research conducted by Grotowski and his team of actors (first in 'Teatr 13 Rzędów' [the 13 Rows Theatre] in Opole and later in 'Teatr Laboratorium' [the Laboratory Theatre] of Wrocław in the 1960s) contributed to the emergence of a technique of self-improvement based on identifying and rejecting an actor's internal barriers, both physical and spiritual, to exteriorisation. Exteriorisation is defined as a process whereby an actor's resources, from the most instinctual to the most conscious, are mobilised in his acting. After ten years of working as a director in the domain of 'art as presentation', Grotowski moved on to paratheatrical activity directed not so much at the actor, but simply at the man who desires to rediscover himself and free himself from the masks he dons in his daily life. Grotowski's paratheatrical experiences led to the emergence of two research programmes: the 'Theatre of Sources' and 'Objective Drama'. This, in a broader perspective, led him to develop the idea of 'art as vehicle', implemented in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards at Pontedera in Tuscany, Italy. Grotowski's time in Pontedera was the closing stage of his life and his artistic pursuits. His work has been continued by Grotowski's disciple, Thomas Richards. Note that the term 'art as vehicle' was coined by Peter Brook and subsequently borrowed by Grotowski.

What should be stressed here with relevance to the subject in hand is that, in all the above-mentioned research projects, contact with music was crucial for both the actors and the other participants (music performed by the actors themselves and by representatives of traditional cultures). In the 'Theatre of Sources' project (1977–1980), Grotowski cooperated with a group of thirty-six people representing the cultures of India, Columbia, Bengal, Haiti, Sub-Saharan Africa, Japan, Poland, France, Germany and the USA. During this period, Grotowski organised

small expeditions to Haiti (from 18 July to 8 August 1979), Nigeria (9–15 August 1979), the area of Białystok in Poland (22–25 August 1979), Mexico (from 1 January to 1 February 1980) and India (2–25 February 1980).¹ The basic aim of these undertakings was not to find the sources of theatre or of pre-theatrical practices, but to find source techniques containing dramatic elements (such as a specific, sometimes very basic, type of behaviour, e.g. a specific manner of walking or moving) and most of all the sources of these techniques that have been hidden under the thick layers of culture and civilisation in an individual. These source techniques were believed to be still present in mystery techniques: the *bauli*, a dramatic and musical form of yoga; phenomena at the intersection of Japanese *zen* and *nō* theatre; transformation and possession processes in African cultures; peyotism.²

The 'Objective Drama' project that Grotowski ran at the University of California, Irvine was based on the archaeology of ritual techniques and studies into traditional chants, dance, incantations, language structures, rhythm and use of space.³ Grotowski cooperated with a small team of ex-

¹ Robert Findlay, 'Grotowski's l'homme pur: Towards Demystification', *Theatre Perspectives* 2 (1982), 51–52; Robert Różycki, 'Wyprawy terenowe Teatru Źródeł' [Field expeditions of the 'Theatre of Sources'], *Notatnik Teatralny* 4 (1992), 143–157. According to Zbigniew Spychalski, we can assume that Grotowski was the leader and guide during the expeditions to Haiti, Mexico and India, which sometimes met with the participants' objections. It was Grotowski who had all the contacts and resources to prepare these expeditions and he wanted to make the crucial decisions (he rarely consulted his decisions with other participants); a fragment of an unpublished interview with Zbigniew Spychalski from 3 November 2005.

² Possession by gods in Haitian culture is, according to Grotowski, a state in which an archetype (a Jungian term) becomes a person and supplants the ego for a moment. It is at this moment that the form of expression of a given god seems identical to the possessed, irrespective of who the possessed is. According to Grotowski, this approximates the source techniques (Jerzy Grotowski, 'Wędrowanie za Teatrem Źródeł' [Wandering after the 'Theatre of Sources'], *Dialog* 11 (1979), 99). Jung defined an archetype as 'factors and motifs that order certain mental elements by turning them into images (that need to be called archetypal) and in a way recognisable only on the basis of the achieved result. They precede consciousness and probably are the structural dominants of psychology in general [...] Archetypes, as a priori conditions, are a specific psychological case of a pattern of behaviour known to biologists that gives all living organisms their specific character. Just like the manifestation of this basic biological project, the manifestations of an archetype may change as it develops.' (Carl Gustav Jung, *Archetypy i symbole* [Archetypes and symbols] (Warsaw, 1993), 183).

³ Lisa Wolford, 'Grotowski's Art as Vehicle: the Invention of an Esoteric Tradition', *Performance Research* 3 (1998), 87. Cf. *Ścisły program badawczy Dramat Obiektywny prowadzony przez Jerzego Grotowskiego. Prospekt* [The strict research programme 'Objective Drama' led by Jerzy Grotowski. Prospectus] (*University of California at Irvine, 12 March 1984*), trans. and ed. Grzegorz Ziółkowski, *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 1–4 (2000), 407–408.

perts on a number of traditional techniques from Bali, Taiwan, Korea, Haiti and the Americas. The project included activities for both individual actors and groups and basically consisted in teaching participants, through oral instruction, traditional chants, dances and other techniques involving movement.⁴

The discussed aspects of Grotowski's work in the 1970s and 1980s formed a framework within which the idea of art as vehicle could emerge. Elements of this art are treated by the performer as vehicles on which to travel back in time in search of his origin. These elements include singing archaic chants (mostly of African and Afro-Caribbean origin, related to voodoo possession ceremonies), dancing the archaic *yanwalou* dance (also a voodooistic practice), practising precise movements in a specified tempo-rhythm, working on evoking internal impulses and shaping them into specific structures, discovering points of contact between the acting partners and, finally, working with ancient texts, mostly fragments of apocryphal Gospels, especially the Gospel according to Thomas.

With reference to the Afro-Caribbean songs, Grotowski would ask the following questions:

Who [...] is the person who sings a song? Is it you? And if it is your grandmother's song, is it still you? After all, if you examine your grandmother through the impulses of your own body, then it is neither you, nor your grandmother, but 'you examining your grandmother by singing'. And perhaps you are heading further on, to a place, a time that is hard to conceive, when someone sang the song for the first time. What I mean here is a genuine traditional song that is anonymous. We could say: it was the folk that sang. But there was someone among this folk who started it. And here you are faced with this song, so you need to ask yourself the question where it was born. [...] If you are able to follow the song towards the beginning, it is no longer your grandmother who sings it, but another forebear of yours, someone from your land, your village, from the area of your parents' or grandparents' village. The very manner of singing encodes space. [...] You will discover that you are from a place. As the French saying has it, *tu es le fils de quelqu'un*. You are not a tramp, you are from somewhere, from a country, from a place, from a landscape. You are surrounded by real people, no matter if they were closer or farther away. It is you: two, three, four hundred years ago, a thousand, but it is still you. For he who started singing the words for the first time was someone's son, the son of a place, of a land. And if you cannot reach this, you are no one's son, you are severed, barren, infertile.⁵

Now let us move on to discuss why Grotowski used voodoo songs to work with his trainees at the Workcenter. The rationale behind it is quite complex, yet one issue seems particularly relevant. Namely, Grotowski believed in the 1920s theory that the culture of Africa was of

⁴ Ibid., 407.

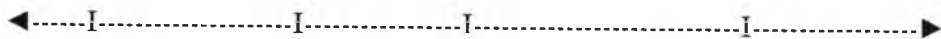
⁵ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Tu es le fils de quelqu'un', *Didaskalia* 39 (2000), 15.

European, Jewish and finally Egyptian origin. The theory has it that the African Yoruba cult on which other Afro-American possession cults are based, derived from Old Egyptian mysteries. These purportedly penetrated from Egypt to West Africa, to the sacred city of the Yoruba, Ife, located in today's Nigeria. Later research subverted the theory,⁶ but Grotowski still considered African and Caribbean archaic songs as a continuation of something that started in ancient Egypt (or elsewhere in even earlier times), in other words, as an extension of the cultural roots of the West, i.e. ancient Egypt, Syria, the area of Israel and Greece.⁷

Art as vehicle was aimed at strenuous training requiring strict discipline, focus on detail and precision, comparable to the performances of the Laboratory Theatre. But this was not a turn towards art as presentation. In Grotowski's view, art as presentation is one end of the same chain,⁸ the other being practice related to art as vehicle.

Trainees at the Workcenter are mostly actors willing to improve their technique. Their skills in working on their soul, body and voice are the foundations on which to build by further, laborious work at the Workcenter. Actors are divided there into two basic groups. One comprises those who dedicate themselves to permanent education in acting (with elements of ritual forms). In Grotowski's terms, these trainees are *actors*, whose work is one crucial aspect of the Workcenter's activity. The other aspect is the work of trainees directly involved in the idea of art as vehicle.

Performing arts



Art as presentation (a performance is assembled in the spectator's mind)	Rehearsals for the play	The director works with the actors to improve their technique	Art as vehicle (performative structure assembled in the actors' minds)
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⁶ Jacek Dobrowolski, 'Tańczący zbawiciel Jerzego Grotowskiego' [The dancing saviour of Jerzy Grotowski], *Teatr* 12 (1998), 40. Cf. Leszek Kolankiewicz, 'Grotowski w poszukiwaniu esencji' [Grotowski in search of essence], *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 49/1-4 (2000), 93-94.

⁷ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Od zespołu teatralnego do sztuki jako wehikułu' [From the theatre troupe to art as vehicle], *Notatnik Teatralny* 4 (1992), 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Grotowski called those involved in art as vehicle *doers*, as their actual aim was not to perform in front of an audience (as was the case with *actors*), but to strive for verticality,⁹ which is what stretches between organicity (the physical nature) and the awareness of a higher level of consciousness related to the discovery of one's origin. The highest level that an art as vehicle *actor* and then *doer* can achieve is that of *performer*, man of action, not a man who plays someone else.¹⁰

awareness – higher-level consciousness, subtle energies

energy transformation = internal process / action

organicity – the realm of the body, instinct, heavy energies

For Grotowski, a performer becomes a dancer, a priest, a warrior, a man of understanding for whom cognition becomes a necessity. A performer is able to discover in himself the organicity of his ancestor, a forebear, not exactly identical with this ancestor, but one that could have been his. There appears in the memory of this contemporary performer a reminiscence of an ancient rite performer.¹¹ This is the process in which cognition manifests itself. In the face of a cognitive challenge, the performer's body produces internal impulses that bring a certain rhythm into existence. The performer needs to be able to connect the rhythm with the song. The stream of life the performer has discovered in himself is articulated through forms, which is why the witnesses of the performer's action enter into a state of intensity (a term of Grotowski's), induced by the fact that they sense a presence. The performer thus becomes a bridge between the witness and the presence, somebody's presence; in other words, he becomes a pontifex, a maker of bridges – an archpriest.¹²

According to Grotowski, performing arts comprise a number of links, as in a chain. A theatre performance is a visible theatrical link, and the rehearsals for the performance are an almost invisible link, as we only notice their effect in the performance itself. There are also rehearsals which are not a preparation for the premiere, but an actor's area to explore himself and his abilities, an area to transcend certain limits. An example of this kind of link are comprehensive actor trainings at the

⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Performer', in *Teksty z lat 1965–1969* [Texts from the years 1965–1969], ed. Zbigniew Osiński (Wrocław, 1990), 214.

¹¹ Ibid., 217.

¹² Ibid., 215.

Laboratory Theatre which Grotowski ran in the 1960s. The opposite end of the performing art chain is art as vehicle.

For Grotowski, in a traditional repertory theatre the director and the actors work towards staging a particular work to produce a vision in the spectator's perception. 'If all elements of a performance are mastered and faultlessly combined, an effect, a vision, a story will emerge in the spectator's perception; to some extent, the performance is produced not on the stage, but in the spectator's perception. This is a specific feature of art as presentation'.¹³ Art as vehicle, in turn, attempts to create an image in the perception, not of the spectators, but of the performing artists. What is assembled here are the elements of an internal process (internal action). In art as vehicle, the musical and kinaesthetic performative structure produced by the artist is not meant for the audience. If there are some outsiders invited to see the structure, they are considered as witnesses. Their being there is irrelevant for the performers. As Grotowski would say, 'From the point of view of technique, art as vehicle is almost the same as theatrical art; we work on songs, impulses, forms of movement; sometimes we even use narrative elements'.¹⁴ Everything is reduced to the bare minimum, until a structure of Action is created, as precise and complete as in a theatrical performance. In art as vehicle, performers refer to a ritual and its objectiveness, realised by the fact that the elements of the strictly pre-defined structure¹⁵ called Action (purposefully spelt with a capital A) are at the same time instruments of their work on their bodies, hearts and minds.¹⁶ These elements include singing, dancing and performing various movements.

Action as opus is not a narrative, although in its construction we can distinguish a beginning, a climax and an end. An Action is a performative opus based on a score (a term borrowed from the realm of music) consciously developed and rehearsed by artists. A score, as seen by Grotowski, functions only in the minds of the performers and comprises traditional songs (mentioned before) in a specific order, various physical actions (spelled with a small a) and the Haitian dance of *janwalou*. Each of these structural elements has a place in the logic of the internal process going on in the minds and bodies of performers.¹⁷ There is no room for improvisation whatsoever. According to Richards, 'the work of performers is oriented toward the creation of a comprehensible performing structure

¹³ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Od zespołu teatralnego', 34.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ For Jerzy Grotowski, an Action is a performative structure objectified in details; *ibid.*, 40.

¹⁶ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Od zespołu teatralnego', 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

through the montage of series of basic little reactions and actions, and finally – which from the point of view of acting seems fundamental – it's looking for the development of the ability to repeat a performing score hundreds of times and each time maintaining its precision and truly alive process'.¹⁸

For Richards, this last aspect is fundamental from the point of view of acting.¹⁹ An Action, a performative opus, is an objective support for the performers in, to use Grotowski's term, 'travelling along the vertical line'.²⁰ Grotowski viewed verticality also in terms of energy related to yoga techniques. It was not the amount, but the quality of the energy that mattered. According to him, a line should connect the heavy organic energies (related to life forces, instincts, the senses) and more subtle energies, linked to acquiring the higher awareness resulting from, for instance, the discovery of one's lineage. The vertical journey towards the subtlety and transformation of energy is, in other words, *the inner process or the inner action*, as Richards referred to it.²¹

Most important in constructing an *inner action* is singing archaic chants. Grotowski viewed archaic chants as persons. A person hidden in the chant could only be uncovered through work with it, which meant maintaining a proper tempo and rhythm with all their fluctuations within the melody, and in particular an element that determines its resonance: vibrations so tangible that in a way they become the meaning of the song itself. 'A song becomes the meaning itself through the vibration qualities; even if you do not understand the words', as Grotowski said, 'the perception of vibrations is enough'.²² The vibrations occur only when chanting is deeply rooted in the inner impulses of the body, which he understands as motivation, an impulse, a gathering of energy before taking action.²³ According to Grotowski, 'a modern man sings without feeling the difference between the sound of piano and violins. There is a huge difference between the two kinds of resonance, but nowadays people look only at the melody, not being able to perceive the difference in resonance'.²⁴ Resonance occurs in a chant only when melodic efforts are combined with actions rooted in the impulses of the body, which in turn can only be formed in the process of transforming energy – *an inner action*.

¹⁸ Thomas Richards, *The Edge-point of Performance* (Pontedera, 1997), 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Od zespołu teatralnego', 37.

²¹ Thomas Richards, *The Edge-point of Performance*, 17.

²² Jerzy Grotowski, 'Od zespołu teatralnego', 37.

²³ Jerzy Grotowski, Lecture 7 delivered to the Collège de France.

²⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Od zespołu teatralnego', 38.

Thus chants, and the impulses related to them, are 'people': some are women, some are men, some are old, others are young. Przemysław Wasilkowski, a Polish actor who worked with Grotowski and Richards in Pontedera for almost a year, repeats that every song or chant has its quality of energy, every one of them is a somebody.

'They are', he explains, 'alive'. 'Connecting the songs is internal assemblage. You have to be able to feel the energy of the chant and combine it logically with another song. You have to know what and when something should happen and what follows what'.²⁵ This is important when constructing *inner action* and communicating with a partner at the same time. 'Songs originating from Afro-Caribbean cultures have become the means of realising a spiritual purpose. Yet such songs are not only tools for travelling in time and constructing *inner action*'.²⁶

While Wasilkowski was staying at the Workcenter in Pontedera he worked with a song by the Greek composer Nikitas Kostas as his main instrument. The song was incorporated into the currently performed Action (capital A) called *Action in creation*. With time, only the melody remained unchanged, while the lyrics were altered. The presence of this song in the Action is the best example that *inner process* does not require an ancient song, although this is usually the case. Truly important, however, is that a song is created in a particular mood of the composer and that its structure can be used as an instrument. This is how Richards describes their work with a traditional chant:

We start to work on an ancient song which is a funeral song, and this song is also a very potent tool because of the vibratory qualities which are coded in it. We start by singing the song in rehearsal, first working on it technically, so that the melody is precise and sung in tune by the whole group following the leader of the song. The rhythm is becoming exact and the words of the song are pronounced with the leader. Then, we begin to work not only technically: while singing, the leader begins to go toward the *inner action*. The transformation of energy is happening, it's working. We stop. Then we begin to gradually develop the acting lines. We see that this song is funeral song, so we approach it, as one possibility, like actors working on the situation of funeral. [...] I imagine, for example, that I am faced to the coffin. There is a line of people before the coffin and I am waiting to be able to look in. I watch the others before me who, one by one, look into the coffin. I arrive closer. Who is in the coffin? It's my grandmother. What does the face of my grandmother look like in the coffin? And now a precise memory comes back to me from the funeral of my grandmother. I remember the image of someone in my family who is whispering something. I start to work on this as an actor. I gently let the corporality of that person from my family come into me. How did

²⁵ Excerpt from an unpublished interview with Przemysław Wasilkowski which I conducted in May 2005.

²⁶ Ibid.

he stand at the coffin? What was the exact angle of his spine? How old is that person? What is his relation to my grandmother? I let myself remember through doing the small actions of that person faced to the coffin. What is his reaction as he sees her face – which now becomes my reaction. It's as if what I wanted to say to her in life and never said, I wish to say to her now, in this last moment. It comes into my mouth. There is second of hesitation, I whisper it to her. Then, someone is behind me – did they hear me say that thing? I turn to see if they heard [...] So, we begin, thus, to construct these detailed series of small impulses and reactions around the circumstance of the funeral, which can be related to a precise memory: we create our acting score. [...] We memorize this score. Now we go through the score, but all the time as we do, this funeral song is happening.²⁷

The score evokes associations in a performer, brings up memories. Intoned chant releases energy. 'The two things begin to happen simultaneously', says Richards, 'as if you have your horizontal score, related to your line of actions, related to the contact with your partners, the order of actions – and something like a vertical score which is related to this *inner action*, your vertical itinerary, what *quality* of energy is with you now. So you have two territories which can begin to be working simultaneously. In this way, the acting score can go hand in hand with what we call verticality, with what I perceive as the *inner action*'.²⁸

At this point, it is important to elaborate on Grotowski's and Richards's attitude to chanting the ritual songs. They are to serve a particular purpose, namely support the inner process. At the same time, through the sound and its quality a performer externalises the process or an inner experience. Richards compares this to a situation when an uttered or chanted prayer expresses a person's profound emotion, and the way of delivering a prayer fully expresses his/her state of mind. To reach or enhance the inner process, actors modify the melody or the rhythm of a song.

The main concern, however, is not whether a minute change in a song will improve its esthetical perception by the performer. What is important is how a particular sound influences the mind of an artist. Grotowski strongly opposed any embellishments in a song, although he did accept structural changes if they had some relation to the inner process. In his Action, the influences of European harmonic thinking are clearly visible. The main author of the Action is Richards, while Grotowski was only a consultant. It is Grotowski's most important student who decides in what order the songs are to be sung; he recites the fragments from the Gospel according to Thomas and oversees the flow of the Action.

²⁷ Thomas Richards, *The Edge-point of Performance*, 38–40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

Richards comes from the United States of America and in his youth learned to play the saxophone. He also studied music in America and in Europe, and because of this the way the artists' voices are combined in the Action is a manifestation of the European way of thinking about sound. The Action is built according to the rule that one artist sings solo and the others double the melody at a third or a fifth. The sounds that emerge have nothing in common with traditional music. The only elements that can be referred to as traditional draw on traditional African antiphonal singing. Rhythm is additionally enhanced by the clapping of the artists. These techniques result in very simple rhythms.

However, according to Richards, *Action in creation* is not a musical composition in the European sense of the word. The main purpose is the inner experience, the *inner action*. And that is the place for the sound. It could be compared to a trampoline that allows the actor to move in time and to transform the energy. What the witness perceives is a secondary issue. Performers working within the framework of art as vehicle can, during their work enhanced by inner action, experience induction. This can also occur if someone witnesses the performative structure.

Richards describes his process:

[...] in my contacts with Mario²⁹ it is that I expect something from him and he expects something from me, something related to our vertical scores. If I am the leader of the song in that moment, he orients himself to my process in such a way that it becomes two people going on this journey, not just one. Or when he is the leader of a particular song, in that moment I orient myself around his process. And in some way, there is an induction which happens in me – through following him – which in me then becomes active. [...] This can create a strong energy reservoir between the two people, and what we can call the transformation of energy can seem to be no longer existing just in one or in the other, but in both and between.³⁰

This phenomenon could be perceived as a very specific form of communication between the artists, with music being the medium of communication.

Having completed such training, the actors/performers return to art as presentation. The skills they acquired in the field of art as vehicle make their performance more credible in the eyes of the viewer. Actors practising art as vehicle work in isolation, almost like in a monastery, as the workshops at the Workcenter are six days a week, taking a dozen or so hours a day. Grotowski himself compared art as vehicle to a car or an

²⁹ Mario Biagini, Thomas Richards's assistant.

³⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Edge-point of Performance*, 43–44.

aeroplane that allows the performer to travel in space and time³¹ and related it to monks practising Gregorian chant. He emphasized that beyond the technical plane of a Gregorian chant there is an additional intangible element closely related to a particular state of mind that accompanies the chant. Grotowski noticed that the same is true in the case of dancing dervishes. He said: 'this is the second pole. Without the isolated work, something in theatre of productions dies. At least at this end. On the other hand, without theatre of productions this hard isolated work would be completely pointless. The two opposites are indispensable to each other'.³²

Translated by Adriana Gałdyńska-Mazan

³¹ Zbigniew Osiński, 'Zapis spotkań Grotowskiego ze Szkołą Wasiliewa' [Record of Grotowski's encounters with Vasiliev's school], *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 1-2 (2001), 283.

³² *Ibid.*

