

4. JERZY GROTOWSKI'S LABORATORY, A MODEL FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOP

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Abstract: *Grotowski concludes that theatre can exist without sets, without costumes, without music and without light effects and even without text. The argument in support of this surprising thesis comes from the very history of the theatre. In the evolution of theatrical art, the text was one of the last elements to be added. The theatre cannot exist without actors, not even the puppet theatre, behind the stage being hidden another manipulative actor. Furthermore, it cannot exist without the audience. Consequently, following the successive eliminations, only two elements remain: the actor and the audience.*

Key words: *Grotowski, theater, actors, audience, laborator*

1. Introduction

Although only a limited number of people had the opportunity to witness or be apprenticed to Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre productions, the actor training techniques that Grotowski put into practice spread rapidly and effectively through the press, workshops, stagings of plays and lessons taught in class. Throughout his life, Grotowski often acknowledged Stanislavski's important influence on his work, even emphasizing certain points of continuity and confluence visible in various projects. He also told the story of how he was enchanted by the Russian director, convinced that his teachings hold the key to theatrical creativity. A key element in the actor's training was, for Grotowski as well as Stanislavski, the effort to make him live more truly on stage. However, the difference between the two directors consists in how this truth can be better expressed in an aesthetic context.

2. Discussions

Grotowski, who was also influenced by Meyerhold, shared his belief that the naturalistic emphasis on imitating reality prevented the manifestation of a deeper level of truth. Although Grotowski's approach to physical training is closer to Meyerhold's vision, the emphasis on the wholeness of the act and guiding the actor to develop the most subtle nuances of his inner life has nothing in common with the principles of constructivist theatre. The Pole is often considered a successor to Stanislavsky in the education of the stage performer.

Grotowski already mentions various methods of acting training in his writings. However, after the publication of his book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, the author becomes more cautious in providing descriptions of physical and vocal exercises because he noticed the tendency of some practitioners to absolutize these techniques, to turn them into good recipes at any time. Exercises, he believed, only serve to prepare for authentic creativity, but do not provide it. Exercise is useful for the actor to prepare his body-instrument, but it is not enough. Grotowski will

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always warn that the exercises taken ready for each occasion only lead to stereotypes. Repeated methods over and over again prevent the actor from manifesting himself authentically. Grotowski himself rejected the term “method” associated with his work, arguing that only a few theatre people, including Stanislavski, managed to approach the actor’s training in such a detailed and complex way that it could be called a “method.” Thus, the Laboratory Theatre avoided fixed schemes, emphasizing the importance of variously applied techniques. It is more important for the artist to become to understand the essence and ethics of Grotowski’s exercises than to practice them as they are.

Although he rejected the idea that there were predefined formulas for stimulating creativity, Grotowski tried to develop a game methodology that would free the actor from his limits. The Laboratory Theatre, which Grotowski founded in Opole, Poland, in 1959, became famous for its promoted style, a distinct style of play that emphasized the importance of meeting the actor and the spectator. In this direction, the director develops an aesthetic that minimizes the contribution of costume, makeup, decor and lighting. It reduces the importance of plastic elements, which have a life of their own, to strengthen the effects produced by the artist.

Since Grotowski’s theatre places the actor at the center of the stage event, depriving him of outside help, he must show real skills. It was not the imitation of reality that interested Grotowski, but the performer’s ability to embody a spiritual act. The actor must be, through the extraordinary discipline to which he is subject to and through the power to change his masks, a kind of saint capable of penetrating the essence of things. Lacking material rewards and widespread appreciation, Grotowski’s actor is motivated to reach that moment in the game – the “total act” – when he can go beyond appearances and convey a universal and personal truth, giving himself completely to the audience. The Laboratory Theatre Company was not concerned with the question of behaviour in the role or shaping based on the character, but with the way in which one’s own person could expose oneself through acting in the play. The role is actually a tool for exposing the actor’s ego. Through it, it was sought to produce in the spectator a state of self-contemplation, and not to communicate the simple image of an affective state.

Grotowski often argued that a major aspect of Stanislavski’s legacy, to which he adhered, was that the performer must train daily and learn continuously. He asked his students to practice their body and voice regularly, not caring about “how to do it,” but insisting on “how to become it.” In his research, he started from the sad truth that theatre people themselves do not have a clear conception of the art they serve. The number of definitions given to theatre is practically unlimited. To avoid this vicious circle, Grotowski embarks on the path of essences, gradually eliminating everything that seems superfluous. He will complete his research with a major question, namely: what is indispensable? Question with which we totally agree and to which we try to find the answer in the Theatre Workshop. The Grotowski method consists in the successive elimination of those elements without which the theatre can exist anyway and in the identification of the indispensable ones, respectively, of those essential elements due to which the scenic art exists and manifests itself for centuries.

Following this nuanced analysis, Grotowski concludes that theatre can exist without sets, without costumes, without music and without light effects and even without text. The argument in support of this surprising thesis comes from the very history of the theatre. In the evolution of theatrical art, the text was one of the last elements to be added. The theatre cannot exist without actors, not even the puppet theatre, behind the stage being hidden another manipulative actor. Furthermore, it cannot exist without the audience. Consequently, following the successive eliminations, only two elements remain: the actor and the audience. Therefore, the theatre could be defined as “what happens between the spectator and the actor”, the rest being additional elements. His laboratory theatre itself has undergone an evolution from a theatre rich in the constant exploitation of light, the visual arts, music to an ascetic theatre in which only the actors and the audience remain.

That is why we allow ourselves to say that Grotowski’s laboratory is a form of theatrical workshop. In both cases, such a theatre presupposes a maximum exigency. In the sense that it must replace the plastic elements by the means of one’s body, and the acoustic and musical effects by one’s voice. In agreement with this idea, the teachers and guides of the Theatre Workshops carry out training sessions that develop to the maximum the corporal and vocal possibilities of each actor-student that must find his own language based on them. Grotowski puts the actor at the center of his concerns. In the Theatre Workshop, we put it above any student-actor, as well. Self-knowledge, discovery, overcoming obstacles and pushing some brakes on the way to the total act are the objectives pursued in the theatre workshop.

3. Results

In the Grotowski laboratory, in order to achieve these great goals, the actor must know a process of “holiness” (a secular holiness, to be more precise). In his approach, he reveals himself, takes off his daily mask, and invites the audience to a similar process. Repeating the phenomenon of atonement, the actor does not sell his body, but sacrifices it. Grotowski distinguishes between the “holy actor” and the “courtesan actor” starting from the difference between the technical abilities of a courtesan to give love and the capacity for giving and acceptance born only from a true love. In this context, the technique of the “holy actor” is an inductive technique (an elimination technique, respectively), and that of a “courtesan actor” is a deductive technique (an accumulation of tricks).

A theatrical workshop should be based on the following ideas: “we are not looking for recipes, for stereotypes [...]. The actor must be asked: what are the obstacles that block you on your way to the total act that must commit all your psychophysical resources, from the most instinctive to the most rational [...]. Memories are always physical reactions. Our skin is the one that does not forget, our eyes. What we have heard may still resonate in us [...]. Never listen to your own voice [...]. If you listen to yourself, you block your larynx and block your resonance process. Always talk, discuss and make contact with concrete things [...]. Make the actions concrete, linking them to a memory [...]. Contact does not mean staring but seeing [...]. If you want to create a true masterpiece, always avoid

clichés. [...] You need to be aware of the action behind the words. Words are always a pretext. You never have to illustrate the words. To be really bored means to be very active. If you want to create a true masterpiece, you must always avoid beautiful lies. Try to show the viewer the unknown side of things. The decisive factor in art is the result, and to get the result – and this is the paradox – you do not have to look for it. If you look for it with your teeth, you will block your natural creative process [...]. You don't have to think about the result and the result will appear.”¹²⁸

So, an example worth following in the achievement of an Experimental Workshop is the theatre-laboratory of Jerzy Grotowski. We could say that the poverty we face in any theatre school can be transformed from inconvenience into a means of self-knowledge and discovery of the creative potential that dwells in us. Another feature encountered both at Grotowski and in the Experimental Workshop with students is the small number of participants. It may seem insignificant, but concentration and research at higher levels can only be accomplished in an atmosphere of trust, of inner freedom, an atmosphere in which we can bear to discover the truth about ourselves. As Grotowski stated, “we consider the actor's personal technique to be the core of theatrical art; [...] Educating an actor does not mean teaching him anything, we are trying to eliminate his organic resistance to this process.”¹²⁹

In the workshop, theatre must be seen as a challenge “to transcend our borders, to go beyond our limits, to fill the void within us – to fulfill us.”¹³⁰ To the question “what does the word theatre mean?”, Grotowski answers from different perspectives and positions, concluding that to the innumerable definitions given to the theatre we must not, in any case, add others, but, on the contrary, to remove from them. A very wise thing in our opinion. We totally agree with the idea that the theatre is “what happens between the spectator and the actor”. From here we come to realize that if the audience is made up of various categories of people who go to theatre with different expectations, the actors remain the ones we can prepare in such a way that through them the audience is brought in unison, for a few moments, in a mood in which there really is an **exchange** – of energy, of information, of emotion, of faith.

When asked if his theatre is for an elite, Grotowski answers that he is only interested in the audience able to ask questions about themselves and look for an answer together with the actors through what they achieve on stage. We could say that this is the ideal audience we all dream of, but at the same time we do not think it is good to ignore some spectators who come to theatre, maybe narrow-minded, rigid, careless, but who can change their state, leaving at home vexed, upset, relaxed or fallen into thoughts. So, we plead for the theatre to be taken to the streets (no matter how controversial it may sound), in the sense of going to the spectators. Indeed, the audience would be wonderful if they prepared their souls before

¹²⁸ Jerzy Grotowski, *Spre un teatru sărac (Towards a Poor Theatre)*, translation by George Banu and Mirella Nedelcu-Patureau, Unitext, Bucharest, 1998, pp.122-123

¹²⁹ *Op.cit.*, pp. 9-10

¹³⁰ *Idem*, p. 13

entering the stage, but let us not forget the one we are trying to wake up from the whirlwind of the century of speed and make then turn to us, the artists, so that we can give them a moment of reverie.

Nowadays, the temptations of the internet, cinema and television are great, but there is one element that they cannot take away from the theatre: “the proximity of the living organism”¹³¹. Because of this, Grotowski proposes to abolish the distance between the actor and the audience by eliminating the stage, destroying the borders. More concisely, he talks about the need for a room theatre. We do consider that intimate theatre reaches the spectator faster, but there are shows that cannot be played up close, they require a detachment, an overview of them.

The experimental workshop proposes in a first stage the opening from an emotional point of view, both of the leader and of the participants – in our case, of the students –, creating a climate of mutual trust, so that there is no more fear of passing beyond the normally accepted limits and to weave a special harmony, to give birth to an inner peace. Grotowski, through his theatre, wants the actor to heal from the possible problems he has and to follow “a normal lifestyle.” By this is meant a strict program and the engagement of all energy in the creative process.

And here we come with an observation. We believe that the “holy actor” is an ideal that is difficult to achieve today, and, as Grotowski himself states, it is an extremely difficult task to gather a company of such actors. So, we apply many of the principles of poor theatre in the experimental workshop, but without claiming to take over the whole Grotowskian system, which would be difficult to assimilate by today’s students anyway. The most important principle to keep in mind in the learning process is “first, do no harm”. “The second is common to all professions: if you are demanding of your colleagues, you must be twice as demanding of yourself.”¹³² The workshop guide must first and foremost be a good psychologist and have “a special technical skill: the art of directing.”¹³³

4. Conclusions

The student’s sensitivity must be awakened by an appropriate shaping, connecting him to the most stimulating phenomena of culture. He must be prepared for the contact and exchange that takes place through the show between the actors and the audience, but for this it is also necessary for him to understand that only by researching and training methodically can he be creative. The essential conditions of the actor’s art are the following, according to Grotovski:

- “To stimulate a process of self-revelation, going to the depths of the subconscious, then channeling this stimulation to obtain the desired reaction;
- To know how to articulate this process, convert it into signs and be disciplined. In concrete terms, this means building a score whose notes are microelements of contact, reactions to the stimuli of the outside world: we can call it *giving* and *taking*.
- To remove from the creative process the resistance and obstacles due to one’s

¹³¹ Jerzy Grotowski, op. cit., p. 26

¹³² Idem, p. 30

¹³³ Idem, p. 32

own body, both physically and mentally (both forming a whole).”¹³⁴

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¹³⁴ Idem, p. 60