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After Grotowski – the Next Generation

In NTQ62, Joanna Ostrowska reported on Grotowski's last visit to his native Poland before his death in 1999. Here, Paul Allain assesses the Grotowksi inheritance in Pontedera, Italy, which had been the base for Grotowski's research since 1986 – specifically, on the second Generazioni International Theatre Festival, held there in June 2001. Paul Allain's doctoral research on the Gardzienice company took him to Poland during the years of ferment around the fall of Communism. He is presently Senior Lecturer in Drama in the University of Kent, and was co-editor of the recent *Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*.

PONTEDERA is a name that has entered into theatre history. Known in Italy for the Piaggio scooter factory that brings the small Tuscan town ostentatious wealth, it has been the centre for Jerzy Grotowski's theatre research since August 1986. You can hardly imagine two such contrasting scales and models of work – mass utilitarian production alongside small-scale, personal, and exclusive exploration. Piaggio keeps turning out new scooter models, but Grotowski died in January 1999 after many years of illness and a near-reclusive existence. What remains of his work in Pontedera?

One indicator is the Generazioni International Theatre Festival which I attended in June 2001. For this, its second year, the central focus was French and Italian connections in theatre and dance. Théâtre Tattoo, directed by Mladen Materic, were presenting *La Cuisine* in the nearby town of Cascina and there were workshops by French artists. These ran alongside the work of Italian groups, that included Roberto Bacci and his Laboratory Company of Pontedera's experimental production of *Cio che resta*, based on Thomas Mann.

It was Bacci who first invited Grotowski here in 1986 and who has hosted his work since. As Artistic Director of the Pontedera Theatre Foundation he is also one of the organizers of this festival. But what drew me here was to investigate the continuing legacy of Grotowski's last years, visible now in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards's showings of *Action* and *One Breath Left* (the latter created with Theatre Ox), as well as the performances of the Polish theatre group Studium Teatralne, who were presenting the trilogy *Miasto* (*The City*), *Polnoc (Midnight* or *North* – the word can mean either), and the world premiere of *Czlowiek* (*Man* or *The Human Being*).

At 7.20 on a Wednesday evening one of the Workcenter actors, Juri Piroddi, drove me five or so miles outside Pontedera to their rural workshop space. A disparate group of twelve British, American, French, and Italians had been told to wait at Cafe Marianelli, next to Pontedera's small railway station. Carla Pollestrelli, the administrative and managerial force behind the Workcenter and Bacci, checked us off. *Action* was not listed on the festival programme and was presented only for invited non-paying guests.

Much is still done informally here with heartening warmth and enthusiasm. Thomas Richards, named inheritor of Grotowski's decades of research and practice, brings energy to the festival that Grotowski in his seclusion and frailty could save only for the workshop space. An infectious camaraderie exists amongst those who have worked here, but this ease can turn abruptly into strict discipline, concomitant with the immense demands of the practice. Nowhere is this more evident than in the awesome transformation of Mario Biagini, who is almost Richards's 'younger brother' (as Richards describes it) in this constellation.

Biagini is the unsung hero of the Workcenter.[1] Polylingual, effusive, and supportive,

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he introduces the performance *Action* (that is 'not a theatre event') to this tiny audience who are huddled around a table in the brick former farmhouse. After his calm, precise introduction in English and Italian – the gist of this is noted in Lisa Wolford's document '*Action*, the Unrepresentable Origin' (1995)[2] – he leads us into a vaulted space. We sit on twelve chairs placed on stone before an immaculately polished wooden floor that reflects the light of the four candles placed on it.

Biagini disappears quietly, only to return in a whirlwind seconds later with the rest of the company to 'do' *Action*. He then transforms into a possessed soothsayer, who prefaces the production with a text in English in a role that Wolford has described as a 'fanatical prophet'.[3] It is his presence which also drives so fiercely and yet compassionately the collaboration with Singaporean group Theatre Ox in their co-production *One Breath Left*, that is directed by himself and Thomas Richards.

Action is increasingly being presented around the world, most recently in May 2001 in Moscow for the Third Theatre Olympics. After these Generazioni showings, it was heading for a tour of south-east Asia. The company is feeling its way with touring and struggling with many of the questions this brings into play – the need for full resources; safeguarding *Action*'s intimate nature whilst opening it up to international audiences; finding a space equivalent to the rich atmosphere and acoustic support of their upstairs studio; and charging appropriate fees. Such touring may well have to become the lifeblood of the Workcenter, whose finances are precarious, with participants self-funded for long periods, usually of not less than one year, and only Biagini and Richards as actors on the permanent payroll.

It is not just pragmatics that drive this opening up, for the group exude a strong sense of wanting to share the fruits of their research. The justification for this clearly makes sense with a piece like *One Breath Left* which tells a story through texts and music, uses objects, lighting, costumes, and scenography, and which is avowedly theatrical – described in the programme as an 'opera'. How one manages to promote and manage such a personal piece as *Action,* that Biagini suggests we should respond to as a 'poem', is another matter. Yet it is an error to consider Grotowski's work in his last decade as exclusively closed. Small-scale it certainly was, but many theatre groups watched the work and commented on it, often during exchanges that Richards has described in *The Edge Point of Performance.*[4]

There is no need to recount *Action* here for this has been done ably by Wolford. The body of the piece remains the same, though the personnel has changed and roles have necessarily shifted. At the time of writing, the Workcenter group comprises the American Ryan Etzel, the Algerian Souphiène Amiar, the Sardinian Juri, a Belgian woman Marie de Clerck, and the Norwegian Jörn Riegels Vimpel, as well as Biagini and Richards. Several of these joined within the last couple of years (Etzel only in February 2001), and with the exception of Biagini and Richards this is another group entirely of 'doers' from that documented in Wolford's piece. The fact that participation has to be self-funded naturally sets time limits.

One notable change is that Biagini now plays the opening 'prophet', formerly played by Jerome Bidaux. Lisa Wolford differentiated Bidaux's approach from the others as being closer to acting rather than 'doing', and wondered how Biagini (who was about to take over this role when she wrote her piece) would shift between the two tasks.[5] In fact he adopts both without any tension or elision, with clarity and definition. He is able to support the others with absolute openness but in the next minute adopt the twisted body of Christ crucified on the floor or play the opening 'character'.

Wolford's question is entirely appropriate: the work seems so personal, detailed, and purposeful that it is hard to imagine how one doer can replace another in their line of actions. Yet there is no sense now of understudying or borrowed clothes – all moments are totally inhabited, and it is only Wolford's documentation which raises doubts. The pragmatics of performance rule even here, and individuals must sacrifice their own interests

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to the integrity of the whole, as the personal yields to the group's or external demands. Yet even this is done with absolute conviction.

The performance's volume, skill, and intensity (particularly the vibrant resonance of the Afro-Caribbean songs in Richards's and Biagini's bodies, amplified further by the three vaulted arches of the space) were quietening. At one point Richards became a boy. It was not as if he was playing a boy character. The transformation was total, and I was convinced he had become a 'little Richards'. Adults act children with great difficulty, often causing much embarrassment both to themselves and their audience. This was a sleight of body, a fleeting moment in a storm of actions. Yet it was Biagini's unrelentingly supportive and open vocalization that remained in my physical memory.

'One Breath Less'

Two days before I had talked to Biagini at his kitchen table where he nursed a sore throat, having been told by a doctor not to speak. I was shocked then by his capacity to open his larynx and his body to sound, and to offer himself to Richards as a base support on which they could jointly build their scores and from which Richards could sometimes fly. This was evidently not chance, but Biagini's substance and technique, for he did the same in *One Breath Left*. He has participated in the Workcenter almost from the beginning and his practice epitomizes the rich gains of this experience. Yet the wider value of his art, like Richards's, is that he has learnt how to transmit this to others and not just possess it for himself.

One Breath Left was presented in the 'Ex-Co-op' space in Pontedera town later in the evening after *Action*. The Ex-Co-op is not some defunct co-operative theatre group's space but a long room in a empty concrete shell that once housed the Co-op supermarket. Noises from the street outside drift in. Five or so rows of seats make the auditorium and two long coloured cloths create a funnel-like stage space that usurps the rows of pasta once housed here. There are more than twelve of us (perhaps fifty), but it is still intimate. With a similar whirlwind to the start of *Action*, the performers sweep through the audience and onto the stage. This group have refined the art of dramatic entrances – surprisingly rapid appearances that leave you immediately expectant and focused. There is no audience warm-up here or languid beginning. We are straight in.

One Breath Left is overtly more theatrical and presentational than *Action*, but it should not be defined by difference alone. It very much seems to belong to Theatre Ox's own group and national culture, drawing on ancient Chinese songs and a story derived from ancient texts of Chinese philosophers such as Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. The vocal range is high, nasal, and atonal, after the deep resonance of *Action*'s songs, though the sound is pulled out and almost conducted by the singer with a similar almost semaphoric waving of the arms, resembling the arm movements of Tai Chi. Lead performer Gey Pin Ang is small and physically compact, but she shows extraordinary range and vocal projection as the dying woman, whose final dream-like fragmentary moments and recollections the piece presents.

One Breath Left was already 25 minutes long before it was invited for reworking and exploration at the Workcenter in a competitive tender that attracted some 90 groups. Yet the collaboration, which doubled from the initial one-year period, has clearly made significant impact on the four performers from Singapore, who move with lightning speed and absolute precision in complete interactive harmony. Their rigour is tempered by moments of light comedy, including a hand-puppet play above a tautly stretched white sheet and the absurdity of familiar philosophical conundrums spoken emphatically and energetically in pidgin English, projected directly to the audience in a storytelling mode:

> Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt be butterfly,
> doing as it likes, not know of Zhuang Zhou.
> Then woke up; now he is Zhuang Zou.
> Yes, not know if Zhuang Zou dreamt be
> butterfly or butterfly dreamt be Zhuang Zou.
> Butterfly? Zhuang Zou ? Must be some
> difference, it is known that things change.

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Such texts (though not those of the songs, which are in both gibberish and Hokkien) are given to the audience before they enter the space, though you are requested 'Please do not bring this sheet of paper with you in the working space', presumably to prevent any distractions or rustling. The same procedure happens with *Action* when the ancient anonymous Coptic texts (translated by Biagini into English) are briefly handed over after his introductory speech. This preliminary reading outside the space does help you focus on the sounding of the text rather than its meaning, but in both pieces no word is ever lost to poor enunciation or projection. The texts are spoken always with purpose and clarity.

Performance/Non-Performance

In 2000 the piece was presented by the Asian actors alone, and was shown in the first June Generazioni Festival, followed by Singapore in July. This year *One Breath Left* employs a chorus of Workcenter performers (though not Richards) who act as foil, support, and provocateurs for the Singaporean actors' songs and action – the 'death chorus'. They add a rich choric level and an enigmatic hooded presence of witnesses who interject vocally as well as physically.

One Breath Left was to return home for the Singapore Arts Festival 2001 and an Asian tour immediately after the Pontedera presentations. These in turn had followed nine showings in Moscow (coupled with *Action*) as part of the Experimental Programme of the Third Theatre Olympics. Its partnering with *Action* (which in each evening precedes *One Breath Left*) makes absolute sense in showing the progression from 'art as vehicle' to 'art as presentation'. The moments of vibratory singing in *One Breath Left*, that seemingly transport performers into concentrated rapture with their eyes half closed, blend seamlessly with the more explicit narration and theatrical moments of role-playing, caricature, and prop manipulation.

This dual showing represents a shift and opening up in the Workcenter's activities, in a phase described broadly as 'The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts'. This began in May 1999 and is exploring the liminal area between presentational and vehicular art that is simultaneously for and not for a spectator. The programme for *One Breath Left* stipulates that, 'What appears is not theatre in a strict sense, nor is it "art as vehicle". Rather what is emerging is a performance/non-performance' (my translation). Biagini's dual role in *Action* is adopted in this piece by all the Singaporean actors. It is an experiment in at times directing audience attention and at other times 'abandoning' it. The experiment works.

This shift may have been given impetus by Grotowski's death but it is hard to draw conclusions or trace trajectories in relation to this work, which is always organic, fluid, and surprising. In his 1991 piece 'Grotowski Blazes the Trails', for *TDR*,[6] the long-time observer of Grotowski's practice Zbigniew Osinski appeared contradictory:

> It is impossible to anticipate what will happen at the centre in the future. It is certain, however, that theatre productions oriented towards a spectator will never take place here.

A decade on, he seems mistaken. But *One Breath Left* took place in a supermarket in Pontedera far from the rural seclusion of the farmhouse space, to which Osinski is perhaps more specifically alluding. Grotowski's shadow lingers in many guises, and the 'shape-shifter', as Richard Schechner called him, is still shifting.

Studium Teatralne and 'Czlowiek'

Sandwiched between *Action* and *One Breath Left* was the Polish group Studium Teatralne's premiere of *Czlowiek*. Piotr Borowski was one of the few Polish collaborators with Grotowski in Italy. What he learnt there is immense, as his performances demonstrate, but he has not adopted Grotowski's discourse nor yet created his practice.[7] Borowski is refreshingly simple in his reflections on his own work, employing the very pragmatic rehearsal language with which he speaks to the young actors in his company. In Grotowskian terms his performances are pure 'art as presentation' with a rich dramaturgy, simple

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elements of costuming and scenography, and crafted rhythmical musicality of the spoken text and songs.

The performances share many of the technical hallmarks of the Workcenter's practices but the actors' work on themselves always has the end goal of presentation, while maintaining a disarming selflessness and openness. Borowski has taken these techniques and principles and tested them in a wider field, passing on his extensive experience (six years with the Gardzienice Theatre Association in their founding years followed by seven years with Grotowski) to the youth of a transforming Poland.

Through them he examines and tests (the company's very name denotes a theatre research project and indicates the seriousness and depth with which they investigate) not only the practice, but also what it is for young artists to make theatre and live in a reawakening country. Studium Teatralne's performances are full of these young actors' unsophisticated discoveries, which are channelled through a physicality of extreme diligence and virtuosity. It is this correlation that brings these very honest pieces alive and this quality which lit up the Italian festival audiences for a second year.

Studium Teatralne grew out of a month-long workshop in April 1994 after Borowski had returned to Warsaw and was looking for potential collaborators. Seven years later he still works with several of those young students and participants, most of whom at that time had little experience of theatre and nothing that could be called a training. Since then, the company have made three performances and established a base with a large studio and a small rehearsal room in Praga in the poor East Side of Warsaw.

Their sense of collective ownership of the process and the productions is very strong. Borowski leads from behind, pushing and demanding with candid but caring attention, like a stern but warm and playful father. Their success at the 1999 Passaggio Festival led them to be invited back to Pontedera to show their trilogy and present the premiere of their latest piece, *Czlowiek*, before a receptive and supportive audience.

Studium Teatralne's work is remarkable for its precision and freshness, and for the performers' stamina and vitality. Their technique is founded on constant movement in and filling of the space, with lightness and speed. The training exercises include back-bending cat-like stretches that demand great flexibility, akin to Grotowski's early Laboratory training. Another central element is 'silent stepping'. High leaps, running and giant strides end in controlled positions held taut in the lower half of the body. All movement is conducted without noise, a 'silent dance'. This develops the concentration and attention as much as the body, as the performer looks for responses, is aware of the space and potential interactions, whilst maintaining strong personal control.

In a workshop I observed with British students in 1998, the actors hunted each other in the space, the slightest creak of the floor giving their presence away. It is this dexterity and delicacy of movement which allows them to speak clearly but gently, with the words tripping on the tongue. The company demand only two things when presenting their work: a large and deep empty space and a level and stable floor.

The actors operate as a tight chorus, even if some roles stand apart as symbolic leaders or figureheads. In *Polnoc* this is a young man who killed himself because of love; in *Miasto* it is a young village girl. Yet all individual actions are built up and furthered by the responses and participation of others. The actors are on stage all the time and collectively create complex scenes, through which their bodies interweave with heart-stopping alacrity and split-second precision.

In *Czlowiek* there are moments of military training akin to group martial arts practice. Each of their performances possesses a flowing dramaturgy of linked scenes and musicality, as motifs reappear, musical refrains accompany vibrant dancing and fighting, and the actors float lightly across the stage with moments of interaction accompanied by rapidly uttered dialogue and speeches. It is hard to know where to look, for there are multiple focal points each with its own concentration, moving images, and rhythm, and

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each making a specific contribution to the total scene.

Awakening of a Nation and a People

Borowski's three works deal with the grand themes of love, fear, war, and sacrifice, seen through the eyes of young Poles experiencing the post-Communist transformations and the people's embrace of marketing and consumerism. In many ways Poland feels like a young country, awakening and repositioning itself culturally within Europe after the destruction of the Second World War, Martial Law, and the fossilization of Communism. The group reflect this excitement, this opening up and inquisitiveness.

The characters in their works move through a series of short vignettes (in *Miasto* these are streets along which the young girl traverses; in *Polnoc* they are stages like the stations of the cross) to emerge with greater knowledge. Their performances are imbued with a sense of awakening self-awareness, for the actors as people as much as for the fictional roles they adopt, and on a grander scale for a nation.

The trilogy shows the company and its actors growing up fast. *Miasto* depicted a city of criminals, extortionists, and poverty-struck figures vying for innocents and looking for the main chance. From observations of their immediate locale, the rough streets around their base in Warsaw, they then moved on to tackle a classical Polish dramatic text. This also involved collaborating with composer Arek Was, whose recorded music provided a subscore to much of the action.

Polnoc was a response to Mickiewicz's great nineteenth-century poem *Dziady* (*Forefather's Eve*), Parts Two, Three, and Four, that charts the partition and suffering of a nation divided between foreign powers and searching for its messiah and rebirth. It is to the youth and the poet that Mickiewicz turned, represented by the messianic suffering figure of Konrad, who in this instance is a young man returning from the dead after killing himself for love.

Rarely has Poland seen such a young and energized Konrad as Studium Teatralne's David Zakowski. This elevated classical role is normally taken by 'senior' experienced actors, but Borowski is clever to highlight the fact that Mickiewicz wrote this piece in his twenties, the average age of his actors. It makes Konrad's self-sacrifice and optimism all the more real and all the more poignant. The company used this text to ask questions about themselves: 'Who am I? Whom do I resemble? What shall I do? What is the purpose of this journey?'

Czlowiek is an anthem against war, moving the company's focus from the personal (measured through their responses to a classic text) to a broader investigation of what it is to be a human being and how we make choices, unaware of the implications they might have. It traces the growth of evil (alluding to the son of man Adam and his progeny Cain and Abel) and the search for a means to purify the world. One protagonist believes the way to achieve this is through a cleansing war, but this leads only to suffering and devastation. After the optimistic birth of a child saviour comes a wedding, whose joyful celebration is broken up by the air raid siren that fills the Piaggio factory with its awful wail. (A small auditorium had been constructed in an empty shell of part of the factory for the performances.)

In this piece the actors push themselves by developing a complex evolving scenography, creating spaces within the total stage area through moving tall seven-foot towers of wooden bullet- and grenade-boxes that come apart into segments. These roll on wheels that flow with the actors' constant rhythmical dancing. Out of these boxes appear helmets, building a field of death at one point as an actor sings a lament about Golgotha, accompanied by his accordion.

The trilogy is subtitled *Three Times Yes; Three Times No*. The actors ask us who we should choose and which path we should follow. The work is profound and touching without being sentimental, and moving in the actors' honesty and innocence. There is no question that the world does not need saving or at least purifying. Catholic sensibilities and traditions permeate the trilogy and still drive Polish theatre forward.

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Czlowiek ends with a reprise in which texts, actions, and musical and rhythmical motifs from the previous performances reappear. It is hard without further viewings (I saw *Czlowiek* once in Pontedera, though it was shown three times altogether, before it also headed off to Moscow and the Theatre Olympics) to say more about how these pieces conjoin thematically or culminate in the final part of the trilogy. But what is clear is the growing maturity and sophistication of this group on a technical and physical as well as dramaturgical level. The acting work is consistently precise, energized yet carefully modulated, and skilful. Though each piece foregrounds particular actors, the group operate as one single body. The company has immense potential and is exciting to watch partly for the anticipation of following many more years of their creativity.

The Grotowski 'Transmission'

Grotowski has passed on techniques and immeasurable understanding of the craft of performance to many more than just the three groups I observed in this festival. These are some of the closest inheritors of his research, but they are not the only ones. (For example Maud Robart, one of the principal collaborators on Theatre of Sources and art as vehicle, was leading a workshop in Poznan in Poland almost at the same time as the Generazioni Festival.) Yet what is more significant is that he has passed on a working ethos, evident in the humility and innovation of the best researchers and artists, who proceed slowly and cautiously in a bid not only to protect their work from the potential destruction that comes with recognition and acclaim, but also to keep themselves from the degradation of self-importance.

Grotowski never reappeared after his retreat from 'art as presentation' but he consciously and assiduously passed on his mantle to Richards and others, aware of the need to sustain traditions and enable their continuation. The search for traditions was at the core of his investigation. Yet it seems now that things are speeding up and that, as the actual presence of Grotowski recedes, the path of self-discovery and exploration for his followers becomes more exciting and open-ended.

Both Richards and Biagini have rejected the idea that they are responsible for upholding Grotowski's 'heritage', preferring instead to talk about 'transmission'. What is certain (though in writing this I should recall Osinski's prediction cited earlier) is that the work of Grotowski is, two and a half years after his death, very much alive.

Notes and References

1. Wolford accurately describes Biagini's presence and role in *The Grotowski Sourcebook* in her essay, '*Action*: the Unrepresentable Origin', p. 414. Biagini is 'unsung' to the extent that it is Richards who was chosen by Grotowski and it is he whose thoughts and writings are published in English. In some Italian publications – for example, *Giganti della Montagna Jerzy Grotowski rivista di cultura teatrale*, Anno 1, No. 0 (Department of Romance Studies, University 'La Sapienza' of Rome, 2000) – Biagini is given equal voice. In actuality this is clearly a dynamic partnership of equals and it is only the publications in English which skew the picture. Richards also writes about their working relationship in *The Edge Point of Performance (*Documentation Series of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski, 1995), p. 43–7.

2. From *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), originally from *TDR*, XL, No. 4 (1996). It is interesting that in his introduction Biagini did not deter us from clapping or participating, as in Wolford's experience. Perhaps as the work has now been shown and discussed more frequently and widely there is an implicit understanding that this would be inappropriate.

3. Ibid., p. 414.

4. Published in 1995 as part of the Documentation Series of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski, this is the main source of insider explication about what happened behind the walls of the Tuscan farmhouse building. *The Edge Point of Performance* comprises an interview with Richards by Wolford: see p. 30–3 for a discussion of these exchanges.

5. See Endnote 5 of her essay in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, p. 500.

6. Zbigniew Osinski, 'Grotowski Blazes the Trails', *TDR*, XXXV, No. 1 (1991), p. 95–112, reprinted in *Sourcebook* as Chapter 39. For the quotation, see *Sourcebook,* p. 395.

7. Nothing about their work has been published in English except my interview with Borowski: see 'Interview with Piotr Borowski: Artistic Director of Studium Teatralne, Warsaw', in *Slavic and East European Performance*, CUNY, New York (Fall 1999), p. 15–23. This followed a tour of British universities which I organized in October 1998. At that time Borowski was wary of calling his group actors. Now he is happy to apply that term, believing they have acquired enough understanding and experience to merit its use. He still employs some words such as 'energy' with extreme caution, but is not as concerned as Grotowski was with explanations of the work.

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