Seth Baumrin

Where is My Grotowski? The Masquerade Plays On

Seth Baumrin's present research focuses on Grotowski in the context of Poland and the Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (PZPR, Polish United Party of Workers) during the years 1956 to 1989. For this he has consulted archives in Poland, notably in Wroclaw, and has conducted more than eighty interviews with people close to Grotowski and to the PZPR, as well as with Grotowski scholars. This research was integral to his participation in events in Poland during the Year of Grotowski, including the major theatre festival in Wroclaw, 'The World as a Place of Truth', organized and supported by the Grotowski Institute, directed by Jaroslaw Fret. What follows is a snapshot of his personal view of our present conceptions and misconceptions of Grotowski – and of how we relate to him. Seth Baumrin is an Assistant Professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. His numerous theatre and opera productions include Milhaud's *Médée*, Lorca's *As Five Years Pass* and Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*.

AS THE SO-CALLED Year of Grotowski draws to a close I ask, have the events of the year perpetuated a myth of Grotowski; constructed new Grotowskis; or clarified who he was and continues to be for new generations of artists and scholars? To what extent does his work position the present generation of theatre practitioners to create their own work within schema relevant to Grotowski's work in theatrical performance, devising methodologies, training, witnessing, and spiritual dimensions such as theories of existence, healing through self-knowledge, and investigating the sacred and profane – without merely replicating or quoting him?

Has how Grotowski is (re)presented, (re) constructed, and (re)produced by participants diverged from or resembled earlier constructions of Grotowski? My challenge to participants is: is anything new being said, or are the 'Grotowski people' nostalgically rehashing and regurgitating what has been said already?

Now is the time to ask these questions rather than after YoG is over, because it will fade away and Grotowski will become just another historical distortion. The challenge is not merely restricted to 'Grotowski's people'. YoG is devoted to young students and practitioners, and even if it weren't, Grotowski is constantly in the minds of theatre people, even if as a subject of derision. The opportunity exists to remember him as a whole person, very much alive in our work, instead of as a similitude or obligatory exemplar of asceticism.

'I like Grotowski's earlier stuff better.' That's what many young YoG participants said to me; they are talking about what has come to be known as the 'Theatre of Productions'. It's odd that the necessity to periodize and categorize his work has bcome currency in Grototwski discussions. It seems antithetical to the truth of the man, whose opus defied characterization.

But perhaps because so much attention is paid to his productions, the admiration the young feel for productions from 1959 to 1970 (which they see in DVDs of grainy, often poorly edited reconstructions devised from ill-conceived 16mm film documentation) is good because, beyond Grotowski's productions, his paratheatrical non-audience work is held captive in books and the minds of participants in whose memories one can have only limited faith, not because of their age or virtually sycophantic (though understandable) devotion to Grotowski, but because selective memory functions as a myth-making machine, here attuned to lionizing Grotow-

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X09000645

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000645 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ski rather than explaining in straightforward language what he did. Poorly articulated memories of Grotowski are disturbing because Grotowski people on the one hand discuss the importance he placed on linguistic precision (placing the same importance on it themselves), but on the other hand rarely write or say anything meaningful to youth culture.

What kind of value does any of this have to young creators among us if people in the Grotowski circle choose myth? The truth as far as I can tell is unknowable because of the cone of silence that hovers over the most important of Grotowski's surviving practitioner colleagues; they speak of and to the young, but do they know this generation? What can self-appointed aristocratic theatre veterans of Soviet-occupied Poland, for whom the nineteenth century has barely ended, say to people who have surrendered to the twenty-first? Can the young be rescued from the so-called globalized digital world in which the living reappears only to be emptied of meaning in virtual representation?

Perhaps one asset of the YoG events is that they cause the youngest among us to question how little an effect Grotowski actually has had outside his circle. Though I believe he is a grandfather to us all, the profession on an international basis seems more focused on marketplace survival and links allowing actors to cross from theatre to film rather than travel along theatre's main artery – Grotowski: a genealogical link to sources that can resuscitate dying theatre.

Where is my Grotowski?

I believe that we who attend these events should explore the multiple representations of Grotowski and his work and the contentious nature of such representations. Foucault writes that the historian

> will not be too serious to enjoy [history]; on the contrary, he will push the masquerade to its limits and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing.[1]

Let us push the masquerade! Burnet Hobgood's notion of six Stanislavskys, each one as compelling as the other, though some fabricated by the Soviet Realist demagogues and others by Stanislavsky himself, is merely one precedent for this type of carnival.

Foucault's historical masquerade applied to Stanislavsky results in Hobgood's six personae of Stanislavsky. One is: the 'insecure artist, ineffectual in the governance of the Art Theatre'. Two: 'the Stalinist persona', the 'icon of the Soviet theatre'. Three: 'the compliant servant of Marxist-Leninist dogma' who disavowed idealism 'in favour of . . . a more materialist bent'. Four: the 'opinionated arbiter of taste at the Art Theatre' portrayed by Bulgakov. Five: the author of *My Life in Art*, which for Stanislavsky was the shaky beginning of his investigations of the actor's technique, but for the world the premature memoirs of a famous man. Six: Torstov, the fictional pedagogue in his trilogy.[2]

Yet these various personae distract from Stanislavsky's professional identity. The masquerade is intensified by the way translation obfuscates the already enigmatic author.[3] The same masquerade plays on now for Grotowski.

Of course, there can be many Grotowskis. Józef Kelera says:

> In my opinion there will not be one Grotowski. I think there will be as many Grotowskis as the many people writing about him. Everybody will have such a Grotowski as they prefer most. And maybe such as they deserve.[4]

I challenge us to be clinical about the multifaceted nature of actual Grotowski and to examine how various (re)presentations of Grotowskis came into being. I believe a Grotowski simulacrum is at work, sometimes creating credible Grotowskis and sometimes unsustainable, bizarre *über*-Grotowskis, existing only in irrelevant theoretical paradises. But all these Grotowskis have an impact on theatre practice. Let us question the construction of Grotowski as mythical being – the legend – before the statue of an inscrutable hero is erected as little more than a meaningless monument.

Grotowski's relevance to young theatre practitioners necessitates a particular epistemological question: whether Grotowski is knowable after his death. Such knowledge can open doors to establishing precedent for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000645 Published online by Cambridge University Press

how theatre history records Grotowski's professional identity and living tradition in spite of the layers of hagiography and derision that adhere to writings about him. Grotowski should be studied in light of this epistemological query now – yes, so soon after his death – if we are to fathom his professional identity before he is thoroughly relegated to mythic and legendary status, a statue at the gates of the theatre rather than a presence within it. Such study is especially crucial since the work of lionizing and mythicizing Grotowski was already in progress while he was living. There is no reason to obscure his professional identity now. No shroud of mystery should hang over so important a figure in the (re)vitalization of theatre.

Because Grotowski was primarily a speaker – a man of words which other people such as Eugenio Barba, Ludwik Flaszen, and Zbigniew Osiński have transcribed – the insufficiency of any transcript or written testimony of witnesses to his work must be acknowledged and balanced against the witness's own subjective understanding. The essay 'Grotowski Repeated' by Stanislaw Rosiek demonstrates how transcriptions of Grotowski's words either from memory or electronic recording are elusive:

> On March 20, 1981, Jerzy Grotowski came to Gdańsk. At the time of the meeting, Grotowski explained, 'Someone who is taking notes or has a tape recorder only keeps formulas from the meeting.'[5]

Nonetheless, four people took notes at the Gdańsk meeting. These notes are included in Rosiek's essay. And although the transcripts are similar in most respects, they differ sufficiently to raise the question: what actually was said?

The (re)presentation of Grotowski takes international YoG events as a case in point, a particular site of representation among many of many Grotowskis. Of course it has always been impossible to recuperate him, even before his death. This is what happened to Stanislavsky, who was lionized in life by his students and the Soviet state. Perhaps he made this happen for the sake of survival, but now mostly all that's left of him are myths, misconceptions, and lies.

Like Stanislavsky, especially in view of his relentless insistence on the *truth*, Grotowski – who spent so much energy protecting that truth by not mutilating it with words; who operated in silence or communicated in code to avoid being disturbed; and when he spoke was always accurate with words; who is lionized by his students and in his final years by the state – is known to us more through myths, misconceptions, and lies. Kelera asks if Grotowski

> quoted, let's say, Master Eckhart or only referred to his model of perception of man. . . . Does that mean he was a mystic? If he demonstrated throughout his life . . . great knowledge of yoga, does it mean that he was a yogi and a Hindu? If he was fascinated by Gurdjieff, does that mean that we have to relegate him to theosophy? And finally, if he studied Jung and was looking for cognition through inner experience in accordance with Jung's teachings, does that mean we should connect him with gnosis? Who was Grotowski after all? Maybe he was simply himself?[6]

As with Stanislavsky, Grotowski personae abound. I ask: why listen reverently at YoG altars and shrines when we can barely hear ourselves?

Know Grotowski in yourself and not yourself in Grotowski.

Notes and References

1. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 160.
2. Burnet M. Hobgood, 'Stanislavsky's Preface to *An Actor Prepares* and the Persona of Torstov', *Theatre Journal*, May 1991, p. 220–1.
3. Ibid., p. 219–32.
4. Józef Kelera, 'Exodus', *Grotowski Many Times* (*Grotowski wielokrotnie*), Osrodek badańtwórczosci Jerzego Grotowskiego i poszukiwań teatralno-kulturowych, Wrocław, 1999, p. 179 (trans. Amalia Wozna).
5. Stanislaw Rosiek. 'Grotowski Repeated' ('Grotowski powtórzony'), Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz, Terytoria, Gdańsk, 2009, p. 1 (trans. Daniela Lewinska).
6. Józef Kelera, op. cit., p. 180.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000645 Published online by Cambridge University Press