

## **The British Grotowski Project: A Review**

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The Drama Department at the University of Kent (Canterbury, U.K.) has strengthened its position on the international map with The British Grotowski Project. In 2006, Paul Allain, Professor of Theatre and Performance in the School of Drama, Film and Visual Arts, was awarded £203,000 from the U.K.'s Arts and Humanities Research Council to carry out a re-evaluation of the theories and practices of Jerzy Grotowski. As director of the project Allain stated:

Jerzy Grotowski's contribution to world theatre is widely acknowledged. He has a central position in Britain in theatre studies and a still vital influence on theatre-making, especially devising and actor training in Physical Theatre. But teachers, students, academics and practitioners struggle with a lack of precise knowledge and access to primary sources, key texts, and good translations of his main treatises, as well as clearly articulated and accessible documents of and reflections on his practices. There is also no systematic analysis of his influence on British theatre-making and university drama studies. This project will address these knowledge gaps and re-map the genesis of Physical Theatre in the United Kingdom through Grotowski's important inspiration.

The British Grotowski Project will culminate in 2009 with an international conference held at the university.

As the project reaches its second stage, this article will report on some of the main events which took place throughout 2007. In particular, it will focus on "The Constant Prince: Re-Viewed," a one day symposium which took place last summer and was the final event of the first year's activities.

One of the project's core aims has been to disseminate knowledge which may help us to re-evaluate the range of Grotowski's influence. Who does this *us* refer to, and how is this knowledge disseminated? Firstly, it should be said that the project was never intended to be a theoretical exercise for the Academy, but was aimed at a wider audience, including the artistic community. Secondly, the gathered resources and literature will not only be disseminated through publications (a series of books is currently being prepared), but via more accessible and democratic channels. Therefore it is not surprising that the first step taken was the design of a website for the project ([www.britishgrotowski.co.uk](http://www.britishgrotowski.co.uk)). This virtual space has consistently expanded and now includes a list of useful Grotowski-related resources, online documents, and a list of workshops and events taking place in Canterbury and beyond. Moreover, the website aims to become a reference point and a forum for academics, students, and practitioners which will continue to develop beyond the project's official shelf life.

The first live event hosted by The British Grotowski Project at the University of Kent took place between the 26 and 28 of January 2007 and was co-organised by Para-Active (based in East London, this performance company draws on Central European and Asian traditions). The event was two-fold: Jola Cynkutis (Poland) and Khalid Tyabji (India) presented their piece *Stations*, and ran a workshop. Jola Cynkutis was introduced to Grotowski's theatre by Zbigniew Cynkutis, one of the core members of Grotowski's Teatr-Laboratorium who would become her husband. She participated in the 'Theatre of Nations' in 1975, and when Zbigniew founded the Second Studio in 1985, Jola became one of its principal actresses overseeing the company's training. It was then that she met Khalid Tyabji, who had travelled from India to become a member

of the group. Between 1987 and 1989 Jola helped Khalid in the creative process that led to his solo performance *Foolsong*. They collaborated again in 1997 and since 2000, when a third collaboration took place, they have worked together consistently. Their latest creation, *Stations*, shown twice in Canterbury, was developed throughout 2006 in Poland and India. The piece is composed of physical images and textual fragments (English, Polish, Sanskrit and Bengali); the couple skilfully combine their own personal talents and practice with their background training inherited from Grotowski. *Stations*—part score, part open structure—explores themes like tradition, identity, and transcendence. The performances were attended by over eighty spectators.

Fourteen of those sitting in the audience had explicitly come to Canterbury to participate in Jola and Khalid's workshop. Titled "From the Known to The Unknown," it was structured around the search for self-recognition, with the body as a tangible starting point. Through precise and demanding physical practice, the work leaders intended to awaken, open up, and free the whole organism: muscles, voice, and soul. Although the group was primarily formed by performers, actors, and educators, it demonstrated an eclectic mix of ethnicities, backgrounds, and ages. The experience was brief but intense, and was an excellent opportunity for participants to expand and deepen their practice, by engaging with some Grotowski-inspired methodologies.

On February 16, 2007, The British Grotowski team and some of its associates travelled to Central School of Speech and Drama (London) to participate in "How to Act." Their contribution to this four-day international conference was titled "In Dialogue with Grotowski: Doing not Acting" and consisted of a number of presentations, question sessions, and practical demonstrations. Allain, as director, introduced the project's aims, plans, and key areas of enquiry. Addressing the conference questions of what performer craft might be in the twenty-first century, he highlighted Grotowski's connection to Stanislavsky in relation to their work on 'physical actions'. Illustrating this, Allain showed a brief extract of the digitally restored *Constant Prince* DVD with English subtitles, demonstrating how misconceptions of the non-textual nature of Grotowski's work can be challenged and repositioned by new media and translation projects.

Andrei Biziorek, (Ph.D. student at the University of Kent) contributed with a presentation/demonstration focused on the relationship between rhythm and action, exploring how various notions of rhythm might be employed in actor training and in the creation of a score of physical actions. Pablo Pakula (Ph.D. student under the auspices of The British Grotowski Project), then at the start of his research, took this as an opportunity to set out a number of questions relating to the dissemination of Grotowski's work, and the creation of a possible genealogy of his impact on British practice. Finally, Dr. Giuliano Campo (Project Research Associate), and Persis-Jade Maravala (performer, co-director of Para-Active), presented a short piece on a Zoroastrian Persian litany as the first step towards a fuller performance. In her solo, Maravala used ancient vibratory songs, related to her personal history, in order to awake parts of her self which can never appear in everyday life or in group performance. This approach resonates with Grotowski's later work which aimed to reveal a vertical, higher connection expressed by the performer as 'doer'. Campo, who creatively assisted Maravala, explained that although they did not have a direct relation with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, they were aiming to arrive at a similar point where the 'action' was not directed towards the spectators but towards the performer's inner self.

Following these two large-scale events, The British Grotowski Project regrouped to organise the main activities for the summer. Amidst preparations, a smaller,

more intimate meeting took place. The twenty-second of March 2007, Ian Morgan returned to Canterbury, where he completed his Practice as Research M.A. in 2003. His practical research there, in line with his previous experiences and practice, led him to write a thesis entitled *From source, to score, to performance: investigating the development and efficacy of an actor's score of physical actions*. Originally from Wales, Morgan worked between 1992 and 1995 at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards and engaged in their active research on Art as Vehicle. In what almost felt like a private meeting, Morgan conveyed some of his impressions of this period, as well as reflecting on his more recent experiences with Teatr Piesn Kozła (Song of the Goat) with whom he has worked since 2005.

During the last two weeks in June 2007, The British Grotowski Project reached the climax of its first-year activities. Rena Mirecka and Zygmunt Molik, former members of Grotowski's Teatr-Laboratorium, were invited to lead two week-long sessions. This was the first time they had both worked in Britain for many years. Given Mirecka and Molik's stature and importance it is not surprising that these work sessions attracted international interest, some of the participants traveling from as far as Canada. During the first week Mirecka lead 'The Way' with seventeen participants. Her work, borrowing from a number of Eastern practices and beliefs, explored a territory that was beyond the merely theatrical. Although some time was dedicated to techniques such as 'the cat', the emphasis was on improvisation, impulses, inner life and consisted mainly of paratheatrical activities. Molik's work session was more closely linked to theatre craft. In the first half of the workshop he exposed the eighteen participants to his 'body alphabet' as a means to expand their physical abilities through associations and develop their inner life; the second part concentrated on voice work, in particular on opening new resonators.

During the weekend between Mirecka's and Molik's respective work sessions, on June 24, The British Grotowski Project hosted a day-long symposium: "*The Constant Prince* Re-viewed" which attracted an international audience of over fifty delegates. As part of the event, a unique exhibition was displayed in the foyer centred on visual documents of Jerzy Grotowski's landmark production *The Constant Prince* (1965). A number of sketches, drawings and photographs of the production were on show, many of them previously unseen in the UK. The most interesting were perhaps the rare colour photographs that depicted the vivacity of the red mantle used by Cieslak, and the scenographic drawings that gave an insight into the design process and progressive distillation towards the bull-ring arena or operating theatre which is so familiar to us now.

As the delegates took their seats, they were shown a number of short extracts from various documentaries on Grotowski, which are now part of The British Grotowski Project's growing archive. The focus of the symposium was nonetheless, the first UK screening of the digitally restored film of *The Constant Prince*. This important document is a melding of two recordings, with the soundtrack belonging to a performance recorded two years later than the footage. The precision with which the sound and the image are matched together is a testimony to the Teatr-Laboratorium's accurate and detailed work. The film had previously exchanged hands almost as samizdat, passed around in closed circles, but now an American distributor is negotiating its release on DVD. This format fully exploits the benefits of the magnificent restoration process. The previous graininess and fuzziness have been replaced by clarity as the quality of both image and sound has been radically improved. The delegates were thus able to view the film in a condition that does justice to one of the greatest achievements in twentieth-century theatre. Moreover subtitles have been

added in several languages; the English translation is by Allain. As he would argue during the open discussion, the addition of subtitles allows for a radical new understanding of the performance and its textual complexity.

The importance of the occasion was highlighted by the presence of both work leaders, Mirecka and Molik, who were joined by their former colleague Mieczysław Janowski. The trio, now in their seventies, were long-standing members of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre and performed in *The Constant Prince*. After the screening, they shared with the audience some of their memories and reflections on the production, and their work with Grotowski. Initially Allain and Zenon Kruszelnicki, who travelled from America to participate in the work sessions, translated from and into Polish; but Mirecka, Molik and Janowski were soon speaking in English. Despite the strong accents this proved to be a more immediate, personal, and thus more effective way to communicate.

Allain began the session by putting forwards some questions, one or two of the guests answering as they saw fit. The first to do so was Mirecka, who eloquently talked about the difficulty of the work and the high expectations placed upon the company by Grotowski who, she confessed, "was sometimes cruel." If something did not arise from an inner motivation, he recognized it; "he was like a laser", saying "this is not your organic reaction, you imitate something, you play something, you don't have a motive of your own." Mirecka summarised her challenges with questions: "How to give? How to maintain a condition of readiness? How to be the instrument? How to answer him? How not to lie? How sometimes to be authentic in a particular dimension? How to be, sometimes, total?"

Janowski was second to talk and expanded on Mirecka's contribution by suggesting that during their etudes, the company members would expose all their intimacy and become "naked." "We didn't act, we didn't pretend. In those scenes there was something new constantly born. Sometimes it was good, sometimes it was bad, but Grotowski was very patient. It [the performance] was something like a daily confession, there was nothing to show off, nothing for effect." Lightening the tone and illustrating his point, Janowski recounted one particularly humorous anecdote. During one of their sessions Grotowski said to him "Mietek, your back is crying." Janowski understood this as an instruction to cry, with tears from his eyes, but this was not what Grotowski wanted. He declared that "everything is possible", and told Janowski to turn around. When Grotowski said he wanted his back to cry, he meant it literally. Janowski tried to search for what was being demanded but after twenty minutes, Grotowski simply pronounced "I don't believe you. You know the way you are, do something. We know the way you are, so cast off the layers you have on." After a further hour of intense work and faced with constant disapproval, Janowski lost control. He took a chair and ran towards Grotowski, and, as he was about to throw it, he heard Grotowski say "Now I believe you." This anecdote caused amused laughter from the audience and resulted in a more relaxed atmosphere; things suddenly became more human, more personal. As the conversation progressed, it developed into a true meeting, an encounter, an exchange more in line with the nature of the work being discussed than with cool-headed academia. Janowski stated that Grotowski never had a plan, his work was constantly and continuously *in statu nascendi*. Sometimes of course, it was difficult, and there were moments when they needed a "caesarean section. Sometimes we had to stop everything, and Grotowski sometimes said that even if we had worked for six months, we must stop everything and start work from the beginning."

Ironically, the talk would come to a similarly abrupt end. Nevertheless, there was some time for questions from the floor. The audience, possibly due to the nature of

its members, asked focused questions that tended to have a practical rather than theoretical angle. Janowski answered questions about Flaszen's role in the creative process by saying that he was never in rehearsal. "Grotowski never invited him because he thought that Flaszen's mind was too analytic; he was too intelligent and this would have killed the spontaneity." Mirecka talked about the difficulties of balancing private with creative lives, and how they inevitably affected each other. Mirecka went on to confess, "It was important for us to have the discipline of private life. But sometimes I also went to the club to have a drink, to smoke a cigarette. Because after the performance it was morning, all new energy, time to go home . . ."

As mentioned earlier, the discussion came to a rather abrupt end. After approximately an hour, Janowski stood up, declared that the audience looked tired, and suggested that the conversation should continue in the foyer with wine and soft drinks. Everybody seemed to agree. As the formality imposed by the auditorium was left behind, the character of the event organically developed into a more social gathering. At one point, Mirecka prompted the people whom she had lead in 'The Way' to bring out the instruments used during her sessions. The symposium ended with a jovial musical improvisation; as some people continued their conversations here and there, others sang, played instruments and danced around the foyer. There could not have been a more appropriate ending to the event, or a more celebratory climax to The British Grotowski Project's first year of activity. As Mirecka herself had said during the discussion, "This huge work here in the University is an example how Grotowski, the great man, and my other colleagues who have left this world early, are still present in our lives."

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2008 Theatre Zar (Worclaw, Poland) will give a concert hosted by The British Grotowski Project. Later on in the moth they have organised a six day laboratory open to participants, Work Encounter: Traces will be led by practitioner with extended experience in work connected to Grotowski (Jade Maravala, Anna-Helena McLean and Ian Morgan).