

The British Grotowski Project

Two years into a three year project, funded generously by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, I am starting to consider what light we have cast on what might appear an odd conjunction and formulation. For Grotowski was rarely active in Britain, though the celebrated story about the lost wheelbarrows at Edinburgh Festival in 1968 when *Akropolis* was presented, and his long term connection to Peter Brook that began concretely with a 10 day workshop with Ryszard Cieślak at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1966, serve as two distant but pivotal points for such an investigation. But our concerns are many, and do not stop at Grotowski's material presence in the UK. Influence is felt well beyond live presence and participation. Although we are building a clearer account of his and his collaborators' activities in Great Britain, including in more recent times the first visit of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards to Britain in 2005, we are also, with our project partner the Grotowski Institute, helping to remedy the deficit of materials and thus knowledge that exists about Grotowski in English language circles in several ways: through various publication and translation projects; a multi-modal conference at the University of Kent in Canterbury in June 2009 titled 'Grotowski: Theatre and Beyond', which will bring British, Polish, Italian and American scholars together along with an exhibition, performances, film screenings, papers and discussion; by developing a small archive of audio-visual materials and texts in English (some can already be found online at www.britishgrotowski.co.uk) for students and researchers to explore here in the UK; and a series of workshops and presentations by those connected to or rooted in what we may call the Grotowski tradition. It was particularly important in this last aim to establish an intergenerational

practice-based dialogue. There are many young British groups stimulated by Grotowski's ideas, ethos and exercises, who may in fact have little direct experience in this area, their insights gathered perhaps from the semi-samizdat circulation of grainy extracts of a black and white recording of *The Constant Prince*, and about three key texts, which of course include *The Grotowski Sourcebook* – though a rich resource, this last leaves out many crucial European texts and inevitably overemphasises reception of Grotowski's work by American academics and critics (most of the texts gathered there were previously published in *The Drama Review*). We have wanted to deepen and augment prior knowledge, in a theoretical and above all practical way, through bringing the likes of Ang Gey Pin, Zygmunt Molik and Rena Mirecka to Canterbury. For Gey Pin, a former key member of the Workcenter for several years, it was her first visit, but for the latter two, their work sessions at the University of Kent came after an absence in Britain of many years. These visits have also helped teachers, from university down to secondary school level, where Grotowski is taught to 16 year olds as part of the given curriculum. Whilst delighted at his appearance in this canon, I have to wonder on what basis this can be done, aware of how limited useful materials are, and then how misleading some of those might be. One key set A level text by Sally Mackey and Simon Cooper (*Drama and Theatre Studies*, Nelson Thornes, 2000) has a chapter on Grotowski that covers Objective Drama and Art as Vehicle in one sentence as it uses Jennifer Kumiega's book, *The Theatre of Grotowski*, published in 1985, as its primary reference point. The thought of schoolteachers making sense of Grotowski's long and shifting oeuvres, which word I take in the largest sense rather than as theatre productions, was one of the motors behind the

project – could this research be useful at a quite functional level, as well as providing new knowledge and insights for more advanced scholars and students?

So what have we done? Firstly we have discovered how much more there is still to do. Often research merely opens up new questions and possibilities rather than closing options down. But the work sessions and talks led by key international artists which we have documented in various ways including on film to be edited for future dissemination, have offered stimulating opportunities for performers and teachers, many of whom have attended several sessions to build their knowledge systematically, in a way that is far richer than the short-lived experience endemic to a supermarket workshopping approach. We have also acted as advocates, persuading Methuen to republish Kumiega's long out of print though seminal book, as well as helping Jill Godmilow to find support to distribute an almost hidden gem, *With Jerzy Grotowski: Nienadowka 1980*. This documentary in English shows Grotowski return to his childhood home, thereby revealing the fount of so many of his later obsessions and interests. The picture it gives of him, playful and teasing with a clear though broken English, undoes so many of the widely circulating assumptions about an autocratic director figure, creating a much needed complexity. My work with Italian scholars Luisa Tinti and Ferruccio Marotti translating subtitles for the digitally restored *Constant Prince*, which we presented in 2007 in a small symposium with Mirecka, Molik and Mieczysław Janowski participating, has helped to emphasise the often neglected significance of text in Grotowski's performances. This can be something quite obscure to non-Polish speakers who have in their analyses often reduced the beautiful poetry of Calderon-Slowacki, to name one example, to a stream of grunts

and cries. And forthcoming publications with the Grotowski Institute of 'Brook on Grotowski' and of Ludwik Flaszen's collected texts, and a dialogue with Zygmunt Molik conducted by my research associate Giuliano Campo which will be spliced with personal photos as well as stills of exercises and an accompanying DVD, will all help us see more clearly the extraordinary range of activities conducted by Grotowski and his collaborators and their legacy. Ten years after Grotowski's death, there is not only inevitable reflection on what he achieved, but also a less desirable positioning leading to claims for special places at the Grotowski high table (this is especially evident in Lisa Wolford's article 'Living Tradition: Continuity of Research at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards' for the recent *TDR* T198 Summer 2008). But as Zbigniew Osiński has pointed out in an article in *Konteksty* in 2006 ('Dzieło Jerzego Grotowskiego jako przedmiot badań'), 'no one can claim the right to a monopoly' (taken from the English summary, p.176). If our project contributes in some small way to broadening the vision of Grotowski's idea and practices, whilst deepening in both an embodied and an intellectual way understanding of this, then we will have been successful.

This reassessment of Grotowski is especially important in the UK for two reasons, amongst many others. Firstly, there has been enormous excitement about the growth of physical theatre – something to which Grotowski has contributed greatly, rather ironically perhaps, as he made quite clear his scorn for merely plastic performances that lacked emotional or psychophysical depth. This apparent contradiction needs further probing, inevitably enlightening the still vexed question of how to combine words and action, to put it at its most basic level. And secondly, in British theatre schools, colleges and

universities, Grotowski and Stanislavsky are too frequently seen as being at opposite ends of artistic poles, showing not only a lack of understanding of the role of text and ‘associations’ in Grotowski’s oeuvre, reducing his work to the aesthetics of spectatorship with scant regard for process or the Polish language, but also of his continuation of Stanislavski’s own research into physical actions. These issues are becoming steadily clearer as they begin to be articulated, but these are large shibboleths to dismantle. Two years on then, in spite of what we have already achieved, really the work is just beginning.

Professor Paul Allain

Director of the British Grotowski Project

University of Kent at Canterbury

September 2008

1317 words