

JERZY GROTOWSKI AND LUDWIK FLASZEN

By Leszek Kolankiewicz and Zbigniew Osinski



Jerzy Grotowski (born on August 11, 1933 in Rzeszów, Poland, dead on January 14, 1999 in Pontedera, Italy) theatre director and innovator, practical researcher in the field of performing arts, and, above all, the art of an actor, creator of ritual arts, theatre anthropologist. He studied acting in Cracow, Poland (1951-1955), then directing in Moscow, Russia (1955-1956, under Yuriy Zavadsky) and in Cracow (1956-1960). He worked as an assistant professor in the Theatre Conservatory in Cracow, and debuted as a director with *The Chairs* by Ionesco in the Old Theatre in Cracow (1957). He received his directing diploma in 1960.

In 1959, together with Ludwik Flaszen, Jerzy Grotowski took over Teatr 13 Rzędów (the Theatre of 13 Rows) in Opole, Poland, and founded there an institution later widely known as Teatr Laboratorium (the name was adopted in 1962). The Theatre Laboratory moved to Wrocław, Poland, in 1965, and operated there until 1984. After emigrating from Poland in 1982, Grotowski continued his creative activity with several international teams – first in Italy, then in the USA (Irvine, California, 1983-1986). He finally settled in Italy, where in 1985 he founded in Pontedera the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski (in 1996 renamed into the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards).

Grotowski's creative work consists of several periods: the theatre of productions (1957-1969); the theatre of participation or "paratheatre" (1970-1978); the Theatre of Sources (1976-1982); the Objective Drama (1983-1986); and the Art as a Vehicle, the Ritual Arts (1985-1999). It remains debatable whether the Theatre of Sources should be regarded as a separate period, or that it should be seen as a part of

the theatre of participation or the Objective Drama period. Similarly, the Objective Drama period could be treated as a preparatory phase for the Art as a Vehicle.

In the theatre of productions period Grotowski was creating theatrical performances based on his own scenarios adapted from Polish and world classics (especially of the Romantic period), such as *Cain* after Byron (1960), *Faust* after Goethe (1960, in the Polish Theatre in Poznan – the only production directed away from his Laboratory Theatre), *Mistery-Bouffé* after Mayakovsky (1960), *Sakuntala* after Kalidasa (1960), *Forefathers' Eve* after Mickiewicz (1961), *Kordian* after Słowacki (1962), *Akropolis* after Wyspianski (1962), *Doctor Faustus* after Marlowe (1963), *Study about Hamlet* after Shakespeare and Wyspianski, *The Constant Prince* after Calderón and Słowacki (1965) and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* (1968).

He called 'poor theatre' a theatre work presented in a specially arranged space (in collaboration with the architect Jerzy Gurawski) to create a new relationship with the spectator, different in each production. Performances of the Laboratory Theatre were designed for a small audience, so that the actors could create an active and immediate relationship with every spectator regarded to be a witness rather than an observer. This theatre was 'poor' because the means of production were highly reduced, leaving the actor the main creator of the performance. The Laboratory Theatre performers trained daily to make their actions organic even though non-realistic, and going beyond an ordinary behaviour only to culminate in an act of transgression called a 'total act' (a model example was Ryszard Cieslak in *The Constant Prince*). Grotowski compared the shock created in the spectator by the 'total act' to the symbolic effectiveness of the ritual. The Theatre Laboratory's performances were seen by only a handful of spectators, but thanks to Grotowski's book (*Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968) the idea of a 'poor theatre' became widely known.

In the theatre of participation period, more widely known as "paratheatre" or "active culture," Grotowski refrained from productions, and instead took on projects that assumed active involvement and collaboration of all participants. Among them were: *Special Project* (since 1974), University of Research of Theatre of Nations (1975), *The Mountain Project* (1977). These projects focused on the research on the expression of a human being acting in relation to other people and to nature. Unlike work-products (productions), these work-processes (projects) adopted the character of events (some conducted outdoors) based on scenarios that included rudimentary myth and ritual motives, and realized through improvised simple actions leading to a meeting between human beings. Grotowski called 'Holiday' (*Holiday: the day that is*

holy, 1973) the meeting of human beings away from the game and pretending of everyday.

In the Theatre of Sources period, Grotowski and his international team led transcultural research aiming at practical experiences and reflections in the fields of theatre anthropology and ecology of culture. From ritual techniques selected from different traditions he built simple structures of actions – mainly outdoor ones, based on the perception of the visible world – which were to create a possibility of reaching transcultural “sources of techniques.”

In the Objective Drama period, and later in the Art as a Vehicle, Grotowski dealt with the methodology of ‘physical actions’ (Stanislavski’s term) treated with the same rigour as ritual actions. The goal was not the theatre transformation, but rather a living inspiration, which, always mobilized by practice, would feed other domains of culture and the people who cultivate them. The *Performer* – not a theatre actor but a man of actions with an attitude of a warrior and a spiritual concentration of a priest – was to make his organism an open channel for passing energies through singing and dancing (*Performer*, 1988). In the field of Ritual Arts, Grotowski created *Action* (1988), an *opus* with a structure resembling a theatre performance, however not meant for the benefit of the spectators, but instead meant as a testimony of the quality of the energy of *Performer’s* ritual actions.

In all periods Grotowski led laboratory work, each time essentially different, and with a renewed or completely new team of young collaborators.

In 1997 Grotowski was nominated to chair the Theatre Anthropology at the Collège de France in Paris, France.

Ludwik Flaszen (born on June 4, 1930 in Cracow, Poland): Polish literary and theatre critic, essayist, theatre director, researcher in the field of performance art. Flaszen became famous as the author of the first lampoon against socialist realism literature, which he published in 1952, and later reprinted in the book *Głowa i mur* (*The Head and the Wall*; 1958), confiscated by political censorship. In 1959, together with Jerzy Grotowski, he took over Teatr 13 Rzędów (the Theatre of 13 Rows) in Opole – since 1962 Teatr Laboratorium in which he worked as the literary director, the director’s advisor, and, in the final period (1980-1984), as the head director. He greatly contributed to the crystallisation of the notion of ‘poor theatre,’ the term he coined and provided with its first description. His book, *Cyrograf* (*The Pledge*; 1971), an ironic representation of the condition of the member of Polish intelligentsia, offers a philosophical commentary on the communist society. In the 1970s Flaszen led his

own work-processes in the Laboratory Theatre called *Meditations Aloud*, which were based on orature and direct communion in dialogue. They were to lead to a meeting between human beings through exposure as in an intimate confession (*Księga – The Book*; 1973). He has been living in Paris, France, since 1985, where he leads acting methodology workshops and directs theatre (mainly his adaptations of Fyodor Dostoevsky's and Franz Kafka's works).

Why did Grotowski adopt the laboratory formula in 1962? Firstly, because of pragmatic reasons. Grotowski and Flaszen's theatre operated as an official, professional state institution under the Ministry of Culture and accordingly, under the appropriate regional authorities in Opole and later Wrocław. Acknowledged in the administrative classifications (however not used before), the formula 'theatre-laboratory' allowed for a relaxation or even complete removal of the authorities' requirements, which the official theatre institutions were obliged to fulfil. The demands included realization of four plans: the season plan of eight to twelve premieres each season (at least one of them had to be a work of the Soviet or Russian drama or a play from one of the countries of the communist block), the performance schedule containing at least six shows a week, the attendance plan, and the annual financial plan.

A second reason was the specific situation Grotowski found in theatre. It made him refer to a dear to him tradition of theatre laboratories, above all to Konstantin Stanislavski and the Reduta (1919–1939) – the first Polish theatre-laboratory led by Juliusz Osterwa and Mieczysław Limanowski.

Last but not least, Grotowski's personal dispositions were decisive, his inclination to a specifically understood and practiced research work, which he pursued throughout all his life.

By adopting the formula and the status of 'theatre-laboratory' Grotowski and Flaszen acquired the optimal possibility of conducting creative research under the circumstances of communist Poland, thus being able to create particular performances and artistic projects in Opole and Wrocław.

Note that Grotowski led a laboratory type of work until the end of his life, even though his Workcenter in Pontedera did not use the term 'laboratory' in its name.

Translation: Grzegorz Ziółkowski and Kris Salata
