

Once Upon a Time...

A Brief History of the Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and Cultural and Theatrical Research (1984-1990)

On January 28, 1984, the Wrocław daily, *Gazeta Robotnicza*, published the following statement made by the members of Teatr Laboratorium:

Some time ago, our theatre practically ceased its existence as a united creative company. We transformed into a loose assembly of individuals working on their own projects or research.

Such transformation is quite natural. We think that as Teatr Laboratorium we have achieved all we were to achieve. We are amazed that we lasted as a group for a quarter of a century, and that we continued to evolve, that we inspired each other and transmitted our communal energy to others.

A creative life of a group is not as long as a creative life of an individual. Some of us will undertake the risk of an independent artistic life, while some others may choose to continue working together, but as a different, new organisation.

We remember that we all began from the same source, whose name is Jerzy Grotowski, Grotowski's theatre. We are saddened by the loss of Antoni Jaholkowski, Jacek Zmyslowski, and Stanislaw Scierski, who passed away so prematurely.

After twenty five years along a common path, we feel as close to each other as at the beginning, regardless where each of us lives -- but we have also changed, and are different people now. From now on, each in their own way must fulfil the tasks set by their artistic calling and the time we live in.

On August 31, 1984, after 25 years of existence, the Theatre of 13 Rows, The Institute of Actor's Method, the Actor's Institute – in other words, Teatr Laboratorium decided to dissolve.

We wish to express our gratitude to all who have helped us, accompanied us, and trusted in us over the years in Opole, in Wrocław, in Poland, and around the world.

Founding members:

Ludwik Flaszen, Rena Mirecka, Zygmunt Molik, Ryszard Cieslak, and the Company.

Although such decision was expected since December 1982, when Jerzy Grotowski decided not to return to Poland, still, its official announcement met a rather unsettled public response. The press vividly commented and elaborated upon the statement. In some opinions Teatr Laboratorium had to be “saved, and the pedagogical work of living people and their living method must be returned to Polish theatrical reality.” Many appealed to the authors of the statement that they be guided by “their duty to the public and to the city,” and that they consider working in Wrocław, not abroad. (O. Jedrzejczak, “In the Coffin Named the Theatre Laboratory,” *Zycie Literackie*, 1984, No. 12). The decision, however, remained unchanged, and on September 3, the Polish Press Agency announced in the daily, *Slowo Polskie*:

“TEATR LABORATORIUM HAS DISSOLVED

On August 31, following the collective decision taken by the ensemble in the beginning of the year, the world-renown Wrocław-based avant-garde Laboratory Theatre ceased to exist. Simultaneously ceasing its operation was the Jerzy Grotowski-led Actor's Institute – an organisation that for several years specialised in the research of innovative theatrical means of expression.”

At this point, it was the Wrocław authorities who would have to decide the fate of the theatre's premises, as well as its rich archives. Still before the summer recess (on June 28), Stanislaw Krotoski, the director of the regional office of the Department of Culture, called a meeting with Tadeusz Burzynski, Jozef Kelera, and the author of this text. It took place in the empty room on the first floor of Teatr Laboratorium. There, Stefania Gardecka spread long rows of file-folders on the bare floor. There were about 150 of them,

but they represented only a portion of the archives. We walked around them, opened some to check their contents. There were various forms, notes, memos, correspondence, workshop documentation both from Poland, and abroad, lists of their participants and guests (three files marked “Young and Old Friends”), materials about The Tree of People, the Theatre of Sources, and the Vigil projects. Our job was to decide what to do with all this – what was to go to the state archives, what to the Ossolineum Library, and what was to be simply recycled.

We sat down and stayed quiet for a long moment. And then, suddenly we simultaneously began to talk, saying that, by all means, these archives must be saved in their entirety, and that they should remain here, in this very special spot on the theatrical map of Europe, and that the erasure of this spot would be a regrettable and irreplaceable loss in our cultural history. We discussed all options of saving the archives in their location. Advised by Stanislaw Krotoski, we decided to write a memorial to the authorities. I was assigned to write the document. We had to act quickly, because we heard rumours that the Polish Socialist Youth Organisation was planning to use Teatr Laboratorium premises for a disco – the very room that held *The Constant Prince* and *Apocalipsis cum Figuris*.

The memorial was ready within a week. The three of us signed it (see the entire document on page 26), and presented it to the party and government authorities (the vice-voivode Danuta Wielebinska, and the Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Party (PZPR) Boguslaw Kedzia. It was met with a cordial understanding. I was advised to wait patiently, and assured that an appropriate decision would be made soon. After the summer recess, the authorities accepted Zbigniew Cynkutis’ offer to reconstitute the theatre into Wroclaw Second Studio under his direction. Three months later, on January 1, 1985, Wroclaw Second Studio began its work.

According to the statute crafted by Cynkutis, the archives were to remain a part of the Studio as its historical research section. Two employees were hired to organise and catalogue the collected materials. Soon, the section was named The Centre of Documentation of Teatr Laboratorium. Its activities were to be overseen by a scholarly council whose members were Tadeusz Burzynski, Janusz Degler, Jozef Kelera, and Zbigniew Osinski. During our conversations with Cynkutis, we insisted that the Centre be excluded from the Studio’s daily activities, and that it gained the autonomy (even if partial) that would allow for focusing on its main goal. We were disturbed by the Centre employees’ participation in the daily work of the theatre. The two-year period of the Centre’s work resulted in an exhibition: “Teatr Laboratorium – the End of its 25-year-long Wandering” prepared by Iwona Zietkowska, and designed by Lech Mrozek. On March 26, 1987, in the downstairs room, the exhibition opened and displayed: 63 posters, (36 from the production period, and 27 from the period 1970-1984), 47 photos and photograms, opening night invitations, an award by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs granted to Teatr Laboratorium for its outstanding achievements in propagating Polish culture abroad, and props and costumes from *Acropolis* (the shoes and the violin), *The Constant Prince* (the gown and the podium), and *Apocalipsis cum Figuris* (the coat and the walking stick of the Simpleton, the two dresses of Mary Magdalene, and the jacket of Lazarus). The materials were ordered chronologically (by the premiere dates), and divided into two sections: the production period (1959), and the paratheatrical period (1970-1984). Due to limited space, the documentation of several activities outside of Poland was not shown. On January 7, 1987, Zbigniew Cynkutis died in an accident. Tadeusz Nestorowicz took over the directing position, while Mirosława Kocur became the artistic director. The work on the archives reached a dead point. Our concerns about the future of The Centre of Documentation were expressed by Tadeusz Burzynski in his article “Grotowski – wielkosc nieurojona” [“Grotowski: a Non-Imaginary Value”], published on May 12, 1988, in *Sprawy i Ludzie*:

This kind of centre may have the same administrator, share the bank account, the bookkeeper, the custodian, or even the performance space, however, it cannot be a part of the theatre activities, in this case, of Wroclaw Second Studio. Such a situation causes major misunderstandings. The archives may be a psychological burden for the theatre – its curse, as it is the case with the *Apocalipsis* room for anyone who will perform there. The theatre may also be a burden for the archives not only because (it still happens) it uses its only rehearsal space, but also because the archives of Grotowski in the theatre of the young Kocur – or

even that of great Dejmek – seems unfortunate, if not plain wrong. I doubt that Andre Gregory would ever donate the remarkable documentary of Jacek Zmyslowski's *Vigil* to any theatre in Poland, including the one established by a Grotowski actor and run on Teatr Laboratorium premises.

There are two solutions possible here. The first one is to separate Wroclaw Second Studio from the Centre of Documentation of Teatr Laboratorium. As the second solution, I suggest that the premises vacated by Grotowski be taken over by a newly-created centre under his name, which would conduct scholarly and educational tasks, collect and analyse documentation on Grotowski, his troupe, students, continuators, and, perhaps, other of his contemporary theatre innovators. Such centre could have an option to sponsor theatrical or paratheatrical projects by young unconventional artists. It could take care of, provide help to, and enable a start for those who cannot find themselves within the traditional theatre structures.

Many shared concerns about the future of the Centre. At the beginning of 1989, following the theatrical fiascos of the Studio, it became clear that a theatre here would not succeed. The authorities shared this view. A good occasion for discussing this matter was a scholarly session in Kowary, which Alina Obidniak organised in May to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the take-over of the 13 Rows' Theatre by Jerzy Grotowski and Ludwik Flaszen. During our conversations with the director of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Art and Culture, Adam Zindulski, we worked out a program of the Centre as an independent institution. Soon, Wroclaw Second Studio dissolved, and, in September of 1989, a decision was made to create the Centre of Studies on Jerzy Grotowski's Work and of the Cultural and Theatrical Research. Zbigniew Osinski was appointed its director. In November, at the first press conference, he introduced the Centre's function as an artistic and scholarly research institution whose goal is to not only collect and systematically describe the documents regarding Grotowski and his troupe's activities, but also to remain open for experimentation and practical research. The Centre officially inaugurated its activities on 01.01.1990.

Translated from Polish by Kris Salata with Kamil Piwko, proof-reading Teresa Kelley, translation edited by Grzegorz Ziolkowski.
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