

The Laboratory of the Humanities

Most of Wrocław's finest artistic and scholarly institutions are reaching their fiftieth birthday. The one I want to tell you about is of kindergarten age – only recently did it begin its sixth year of operation. However, it is difficult to overestimate its cultural emission and social importance. I consider the founding and operating of this institution the most important cultural achievement after 1989. I am talking about The Centre for Study on Jerzy Grotowski and for Cultural and Theatrical Research. Having mourned the dissolution of the Laboratory Theatre, and then having realized that the attempts at continuing radical theatre research in the same location will not satisfy perhaps over-inflated (but understandably so) hopes, I was afraid, even though I supported it, that the founding of the artistic and scholarly centre, too will not succeed. The intentions were rational and modest: above all, to save Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre space – one of the world's most important and exceptional theatre spots in this ending century. Outside of the consciousness – at the most, in the intuition of the founders of this institution – was a path to a new, not fully realized, or named, cultural needs of many people. From today's perspective, it hardly seems a coincidence the fact that around the same time, several interdisciplinary centers emerged in Poland to “dwell” at the boundaries between artistic practice, scholarly research, and public activities, to supplement the dominating cultural tendencies. Here are a few examples: Warsaw's Centre for Contemporary Art directed by Wojciech Krukowski; the Centre “The Borderland – of Arts, Cultures, Nations” founded in Sejny by Krzysztof Czyzewski; the Centre for Research in Musicology and Culture of Central-Eastern Europe “Muzyka Kresow” in Lublin, led by Jan Bernad and Monika Maminska.

We can say today “it was all hanging in the air.” But *what* was hanging, indeed? I can best talk about it using the Wrocław example.

The Grotowski Centre is a multi-functional organization. It is simultaneously a place for scholarly work and documentation, an institution for popularization and education, an open university of sort dedicated to theatre and its boundaries, and, finally, an artistic institution. It is as if we somehow put together a scholarly institute, a particular theatre, and a cultural centre.

Wherein lies the attractiveness of the public activities of the centre? Above all in the new possibilities of a deeper relationship one can develop with theatre art. If, for example, the centre invites Odin Teatret to perform, the more curious and ambitious spectator gains a chance not only to see a particular show, but also – through special workshop demonstrations, films, and discussions – to look into its creation, to learn the path the collaborators took searching for the form, to find out about their inspiration, and to get to know the secrets of the acting craft. Those especially interested are allowed to taste all this through practice by participating in artist-led workshops.

Conferences are organized in similar way – they are not reduced to presentations of papers and discussions, but instead, are complemented by practical demonstrations. It is one thing to talk about Rudolf Steiner and his influence on theatre, about Michael Chekhov's acting techniques, about the “alphabet of the body and the gesture” in old Indian dances, or about the rituals, dances, and music of Bali, and it is

another thing when the lectures and discussions are enriched by showings of the eurhythmics, performances by the artists of particular interest, and screenings of unique film documentaries. For these reasons, one could learn more at the centre within three days about Turkish theatre or about the language of the Odissi dance than if one had read all available written sources in our country.

There is a circle of young and older Wroclawians, and also visitors from Warsaw, Poznan, and other Polish cities (I should also mention regular guests from the Czech Republic, Germany, and Ukraine), who plan their weekends with the Grotowski Centre event calendar in their hand. It is because several times a year Professor Zbigniew Osinski offers “propositions one cannot refuse.” Speaking for myself, I must admit that even though over decades I have accumulated some knowledge about literature, culture, and theatre, the last five years, thanks to the centre, were especially fruitful for me. I came to know many new things, some I finally understood, some others I was able to systematize.

Those who regularly attended the events at the centre were able to meet distinguished people such as Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Anatoly Vasiliev, and Jerzy Grotowski himself. Not only did they have an occasion to watch a performance of the phenomenal Sanjukta Panigrahi, but also, with her help, learn the secrets of the Odissi dance. One has opportunities here to submerge in the theatrical tradition of the Far and Middle East from Japan, Bali, and India to Turkey, and our neighbor, Ukraine. A series of seminars and conferences, often accompanied by presentations, and always by film screenings, allows the participants to deepen their knowledge of the key figures and inspirational sources of European theatre (and in a broader sense, European culture) of the 20th century. They were dedicated to Gurdjieff, Hesse, Jung, Stanislawski, Michael Chekhov, Beckett, Osterwa, Limanowski, and finally to Grotowski, and Kantor.

Especially precious in the practice of the centre is its focus on the interdisciplinary context of theatre, and its attempts at building bridges between different traditions, as well as between the past and the current, with an open eye for the future. It is a place for presentations of cutting-edge theatres and artists, as well as extraordinary occurrences in the mainstream theatre. The great and renowned (such as Vasiliev) come here, but so do the beginners (like Bud’mo from Kiev). The center’s guests were Irena Byrska, and Michelle Kokosowski; Erwin Axer, and Leszek Madzik; Jerzy Jarocki, and Lech Raczak, Jerzy Radziwilowicz, and Theatre Wegajty; Jerzy Grzegorzewski, and Miroslaw Rajkowski (aliquot singing), scholars from France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Italy, and a young graduate, who, with her master’s thesis about phonosphere, introduced something new to the contemporary theatre scholarship.

The internship program offered by the centre is unique. It systematically introduces possibilities of practical learning of various acting techniques, from those worked out in the Laboratory Theatre (internships led by Zygmunt Molik), through many others of similar and different tradition, to pantomime (under the direction of Marek Oleksy).

What finally is the centre directed by the duet Stanislaw Krotoski – Zbigniew Osinski? The simplest answer that comes in the context of its work is: a laboratory of humanistic practices. Laboratory, because the work here is done without a recipe – it

remains a search. Practices, because the matter lies not in theory (at least not exclusively). Humanistic, because it all expands beyond theatre, or the narrowly-defined artistic creation.

For many Wrocławians, it is a place of a great opportunity. I cannot say, an opportunity fully appreciated and exercised.

Translated from Polish by Kris Salata with Kamil Piwko, proof-reading Teresa Kelley, translation edited by Grzegorz Ziolkowski. Wrocław 2004.