

**With Grotowski**

*For one moment one might think that  
Vladimir and Estragon have met again  
and are waiting for a new Godot.*

Jan Kott





Peter Brook

# **With Grotowski**

## **Theatre is Just a Form**

Edited by  
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with Paul Allain



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## Grotowski

Grotowski is unique. Why? Because no one else in the world, to my knowledge, no one since Stanislavski, has investigated the nature of acting, its phenomenon, its meaning, the nature and science of its mental-physical-emotional processes as deeply and completely as Grotowski.

He calls his theatre a laboratory. It is. It is a centre of research. It is perhaps the only avant-garde theatre whose poverty is not a draw-back, where shortage of money is not an excuse for inadequate means which automatically undermine the experiments. In Grotowski's theatre as in all true laboratories the experiments are scientifically valid because the essential conditions are observed. In his theatre, there is absolute concentration by a small group, and unlimited time. So if you are interested in his findings you must go to a small town in Poland.

Or else do what we did. Bring Grotowski to London.

He worked for two weeks with our group. I won't describe the work. Why not? First of all, such work is only free if it is in confidence, and confidence depends on its confidences not being disclosed. Secondly, the work is essentially non-verbal. To verbalise is to complicate and even to destroy exercises that are clear and simple when indicated by a gesture and when executed by the mind and body as one.

What did the work do?

It gave each actor a series of shocks.

The shock of confronting himself in the face of simple irrefutable challenges. The shock of catching sight of his own evasions, tricks and clichés. The shock of sensing something of his own vast and untapped resources. The shock of being forced to question why he is an actor

at all. The shock of being forced to recognise that such questions do exist and that – despite a long English tradition of avoiding seriousness in theatrical art – the time comes when they must be faced. And of finding that he wants to face them. The shock of seeing that somewhere in the world acting is an art of absolute dedication, monastic and total. That Artaud's now-hackneyed phrase "cruel to myself" is genuinely a complete way of life – somewhere – for less than a dozen people.

With a proviso. This dedication to acting does not make acting an end in itself. On the contrary. For Jerzy Grotowski, acting is a vehicle. How can I put it? The theatre is not an escape, a refuge. A way of life is a way *to* life. Does that sound like a religious slogan? It should. And that's about all there was to it. No more, no less. Results? Unlikely. Are our actors better? Are they better men? Not in that way, as far as I can see, not as far as anyone has claimed. (And of course they were not all ecstatic about their experience. Some were bored.)

Grotowski's work and ours have parallels and points of contact. Through these, through sympathy, through respect, we came together.

But the life of our theatre is in every way different from his. He runs a laboratory. He needs an audience occasionally, in small numbers. His tradition is Catholic – or anti-Catholic; in this case the two extremes meet. He is creating a form of service. We work in another country, another language, another tradition. Our aim is not a new Mass, but a new Elizabethan relationship – linking the private and the public, the intimate and the crowded, the secret and the open, the vulgar and the magical. For this we need both a crowd on stage and a crowd watching – and within that crowded stage individuals offering their most intimate truths to individuals within

that crowded audience, sharing a collective experience with them.

We have come quite a way in developing an overall pattern – the idea of a group, of an ensemble. But our work is always too hurried, always too rough for the development of the collection of individuals out of whom it is composed.

We know in theory that every actor must put his art into question daily – like pianist, dancers, painters – and that if he doesn't he will almost certainly get stuck, develop clichés, and eventually decline. We recognise this and yet can do so little about it that we endlessly chase after new blood, after youthful vitality – except for certain of the most gifted exceptions, who of course get all the best chances, absorb most of the available time.

Grotowski's work was a reminder that what he achieves almost miraculously with a handful of actors is needed to the same extent by each individual, however large the cast.

The intensity, the honesty and the precision of his work can only leave one thing behind: a challenge. But not for a fortnight, not for once in a lifetime. Daily.

## From the Editors

Paradoxically, what is most interesting and most fascinating in theatre – in this peephole or keyhole – seems to be what is *not* visible: tensions, an alive relationship which can be sensed and experienced, but which cannot be fully seen, since what is to be *seen* are performances – i.e. symptoms. Also, in the case of the two protagonists of this collection of texts what is most intriguing seems to be what stays in the shadows: the changing, dynamic process of inspiration and never-ending dialogue between Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, which forms the essence of one of the most fascinating artistic friendships of the past century. It evokes, especially towards the end, the equally close relationship between Stanislavski and Meyerhold. Of course, this is only a comparison, and, as Peter Brook says, “a comparison is never completely true”. But it is one that illuminates.

In his autobiography, in which Peter Brook assembles the most important figures in his life, Grotowski is missing: without doubt due to the very importance that he has held for Peter Brook. Their shared relation has been as decisive for the one as for the other. We thought that by gathering the texts that Peter Brook dedicated to Grotowski and his thinking we might be able to regain this unwritten chapter of his memoirs. This chapter is reconstructed here, from many different sources.

They are also diverse in genre: there is a book preface, a film introduction, an official letter, a fragment from a larger text, an interview, an obituary note, etc. This is due to the ever-changing current of life which brought these articles into existence, whilst their chronological order in the book indicates the longevity of the relationship between the artists.

Grotowski and Brook also met in public dialogues; we have placed the transcription of one such meeting in the appendix. In it, we can discern that there is much that brings them close together – for instance, an understanding of theatre as a form or instrument which helps us to “find a way to the sources of what we are” (Brook). However, one should not overlook the differences between them. The main idea, the driving force behind Brook’s theatre is the concept of immediacy, of the immediate theatre which is a synthesis of the coarse and the subtle, the unsophisticated and the immaculate, the rough and the holy. In Grotowski’s work one should perhaps read *sublimation* instead of synthesis. From this point of view, Grotowski – blasphemer, in the spirit of Polish Romanticism – would seem to be yet another “saint” (after Artaud and Genet) of twentieth century theatre.

The relationship between Brook and Grotowski is a Shakespearean one, a relationship in which opposites connect, alternate and produce the sensation of an extraordinary vitality.

*GB and GZ*

## Editorial Notes

The author has introduced some changes to previously published texts and has authorised all his texts.

**Grotowski.** First published in *Flourish*, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Club Newspaper, in Stratford-upon-Avon, Autumn 1966. Reprinted in Jerzy Grotowski: *Towards a Poor Theatre*, preface by Peter Brook, Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag, 1968, pp. 11–13; and in a corrected version entitled “Grotowski” in Peter Brook: *The Shifting Point: Theatre, Film, Opera, 1946–1987*, New York: Harper and Row, 1987 and in the English edition of the book *The Shifting Point. Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946–1987*, London: Methuen Drama, 1988, pp. 37–40.

**The Holy Theatre (a fragment),** from Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968, pp. 66–68; New York: Atheneum, 1968, pp. 59–61.

**Introduction to the film *Akropolis*,** dir. James McTaggart, prod. Lewis Freedman, PBL 1968. The film was shot between 27 October – 2 November 1968 in Twickenham Studios near London. It was first broadcast on New York Television on Channel 13 on 12 January 1969.

**Artaud and the Great Puzzle,** in Peter Brook: *The Shifting Point: Theatre, Film, Opera, 1946–1987*, New York: Harper and Row, 1987 and in the English edition of the book *The Shifting Point. Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946–1987*, London: Methuen Drama, 1988, pp. 40–41. The text is a fragment of a transcription of a meeting led by Denis Bablet and published in *Travail Théâtrale* (Lausanne) 1973 no. 10.

**Introduction to the film *With Jerzy Grotowski. Nienadówka 1980*,** dir. Jill Godmilow, prod. Mercedes Gregory for The Manhattan Project/Atlas Theatre Co., 1980.

**Letter concerning the Objective Drama Project,** addressed to Prof. Jaime E. Rodriguez, Paris, 23 August 1983. The letter comes from the project’s archive. A copy was sent by Robert Cohen to the Grotowski Centre after the artist’s death.

**Grotowski, Art as a Vehicle**, in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, eds. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 379–382 (second revised edition 2001). The text is based on Peter Brook's speech in French on 14 March 1987 in Florence at a conference devoted to the work of Jerzy Grotowski in his Workcenter in Pontedera. The first version is in *Centro di Lavoro di Jerzy Grotowski. Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski*, Pontedera: Centro per Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale, 1988. In English: "Grotowski, Art as a Vehicle" pp. 31–35; in French: "Grotowski, l'art come véhicule" pp. 49–52; and in Italian (ed. Renata Molinari): "Grotowski, l'arte come veicolo" pp. 12–16. The text from the first edition was revised and corrected by the author on 15 September 1995.

**Totally Sensitive**, an interview with Peter Brook by Krzysztof Domagalik for his documentary film "Aktor całkowity." *Wspomnienie o Ryszardzie Cieślaku (1937–1990)* ["A Total Actor." A Tribute to Ryszard Cieślak (1937–1990)]. The interview was held on 1 July 1993 in Paris. The text was edited by Krzysztof Domagalik and translated by Anna Wojtaś, with the translation edited by Zbigniew Osiński, accompanied by his notes. It was first published as "Całkowicie wrażliwy" in *Notatnik Teatralny* 1995 no. 10 (Spring–Summer), pp. 35–39.

**Martyr and Storyteller**, a fragment from Peter Brook's *Threads of Time. A Memoir*, London: Methuen, 1998, pp. 196–197.

**Grotowski was**, *American Theatre* 1999 (May–June), p. 23. Text written on 3 February 1999 in Paris as a letter to the Bolivian journal *El tonto del pueblo – revista de artes escénicas del Teatro de los Andes*, ed. César Brie, 1999 nos. 3–4 (May), p. 165.

**To Go Beyond the Theatre**, an abbreviated version of an interview with Peter Brook by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz for her documentary film *Jerzy Grotowski – próba portretu* [*Jerzy Grotowski – Attempt at a Portrait*] (prod. ARTE and Telewizja Polska, 1999). First published in another version as "Wyjść poza teatr" [To Go Beyond the Theatre], translated and edited by Maria Hepel, *Notatnik Teatralny* 2001 nos. 22–23, pp. 89–92.

**Quality and Craft** [Qualité et artisanat], in *Alternatives théâtrales* 2001 nos. 70–71 (December), an issue prepared in collaboration with Académie Expérimentale de Théâtres and Odéon – Théâtre de

l'Europe, a statement from 6 June 2000 in Paris's Odéon Theatre. Translated from French by Duncan Jamieson, edited in collaboration with Paul Allain. Text subsequently revised by the author.

**Introduction to the conference "Towards the Essence",** in *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 2005 no. 2, p. 11. The text is based on Peter Brook's opening speech at the Grotowski Centre's conference devoted to G.I. Gurdjieff from 8–11 November 2001. Published in Polish in a special issue of *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* on G.I. Gurdjieff and his teaching, edited by Grzegorz Ziółkowski in consultation with Tilo Ulbricht and in collaboration with James Moore.

**Theatre is a Field of Life,** a fragment from a meeting with Peter Brook led by Dobrochna Ratajczakowa in Teatr Polski in Poznań on the evening of 6 March 2005, after Brook received an honorary degree from Adam Mickiewicz University. Published as "Teatr jest polem życia" [Theatre is a Field of Life], translated by Patryk Czaplicki in collaboration with Tomasz Morkowski, *Próba. Nieregularnik Teatralny* 2005 no. 1, pp. 7–18. This fragment comes from pages 9–11. It was republished as "Całe życie chciałem opuścić teatr..." [The whole of my life I wanted to leave the theatre...] in *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 2005 no. 1, p. 25.

**Appendix. A Dialogue between Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski led by Georges Banu.** A dialogue conducted in French by Georges Banu on 5 May 1989 in Taormina after granting Peter Brook the Premio Europa per il Teatro. Reprinted as *Dialogue entre Peter Brook et Jerzy Grotowski. Dialogue between Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski in La voie de Peter Brook. Peter Brook's Journey*, eds. Georges Banu and Alessandro Martinez, S. Gregorio di Catania: Premio Europa per il Teatro, 2004, pp. 31–53. Grotowski's answers were translated by Philip Salata and Julia Ulehla with Mario Biagini. They were not revised by Grotowski and were edited by Mario Biagini. Patrice Pavis kindly assisted Paul Allain's translation of Brook's answers and Banu's questions.



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