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"A SERIES OF OPENINGS": THE YEAR OF GROTOWSKI IN NEW YORK

Ben Spatz

The Year of Grotowski, like the legacy of Grotowski, is a complex phenomenon with uncertain and in some cases contested boundaries. Its center of gravity is undoubtedly the series of events organized by the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, Poland; but the program organized in New York by NYU and the Polish Cultural Institute marks another significant focal point. This essay presents an overview of New York events, with special attention paid to the last of these: "Grotowski and his Legacy: A three-day event at Lincoln Center," which culminated in an open meeting with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini of the Workcenter that Grotowski founded in Pontedera, Italy in 1986.

The diversity of guests invited to participate in the NYU/PCI program illustrates the complexity of Grotowski's legacy.[1] They include Grotowski's deepest and longest-term collaborators alongside those who worked with him only briefly and some who never met him at all. There were guests from Poland, Italy, Mexico, Canada, Singapore, the United States and elsewhere; scholars, practitioners, administrators, pedagogues, and several who no longer work in the arts; people who are used to speaking publicly about Grotowski and those who had never done so before now; not to mention the differences between those who encountered Grotowski in his youth and in his old age, as well as in their own youth or as adults. Overall, one could not have asked for better representation of the spectrum of Grotowski's work and lasting effects.[2]

Maud Robart was one of the few guests who had her own, separate event, as opposed to being part of a panel. This was a wise choice, since Robart began by rejecting the terms of the meeting and initially refused to answer questions posed by the moderator. In the absence of a talkative panelist, the event slowly developed into a more informal meeting in which many voices were heard, including voices from the audience. For those of us who stayed past the meeting's scheduled end at 9pm, this event became a unique and unexpected kind of encounter. By 11pm, the atmosphere had completely shifted. People were sitting in irregular formations, many on the floor, rather than in chairs and rows as at the beginning. Robart showed two short films, and

a lively discussion followed. Of all the Year of Grotowski events in New York, this was the only one after which I felt that those who had attended had been forged into a community by the experience.

The two films shown were Marc Petitjean's *La source du chant* (*The Source of the Chant*) and Michel Boccara's *Le silence du chant est un chemin vers le silence du cœur* (*The Silence of the Chant Is a Path towards the Silence in the Heart*).[3] Each was about twelve minutes long. Robart informed us that both films documented past work and should not be confused with her current research. However, since virtually nothing has been written about Robart's work in English, I will make a few remarks here on my recollection of the films.

Each film showed Robart at work with a small group of people, in beautiful spaces with wooden floors. The intensity of the participants' focus and the evocative qualities of the singing were very striking. There were undeniable similarities between this work and that which Thomas Richards leads at the Pontedera Workcenter; as well as significant differences, such as the presence of choreographed movement ("dance"?) and the absence of anything resembling a Stanislavskian score of physical actions. Immediately after the screenings, Richard Schechner remarked that the films had reminded him of the Workcenter and of *Downstairs Action* in particular. He went on to suggest that Robart's influence on Richards and the Workcenter has been seriously under-recognized.[4] Robart's only response to this was to clarify that she sees her work as part of a long tradition that cannot be owned by individuals.

The significance of Robart's work should not be overlooked. On the one hand, even if we are only interested in Grotowski and his legacy, we have to take Robart's impact on Grotowski and Richards into consideration in order to understand the genesis of the Workcenter. On the other hand, if we are really to be respectful of Grotowski's memory, then we must not only study his own work but also ask the same questions he was asking. In approaching such questions, we do ourselves a disservice if we do not pay close attention to Robart's ongoing research—as Grotowski himself did. The same can also be said for a number of unique artists who were present at the NYU/PCI events: Rena Mirecka, Ang Gey Pin, James Slowiak, and Jairo Cuesta—just to name a few.

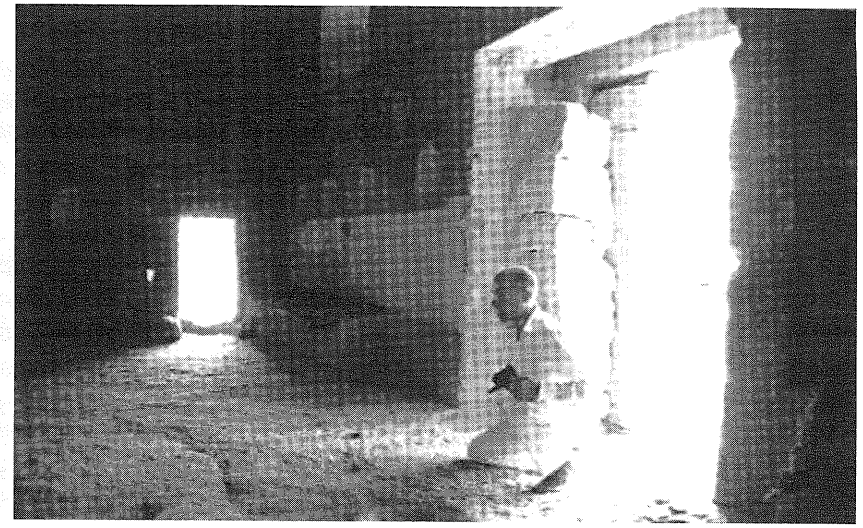
Nevertheless, the events at Lincoln Center in July were clearly the culmination of the NYU/PCI program. The first day of screenings covered Grotowski's early and middle periods: the Theatre of Productions—*Acropolis*

(1965) and *The Constant Prince* (1968); and Paratheatre/Theatre of Sources—*With Grotowski: Nienadówka* (1982). I will not describe these here since each can relatively easily be obtained for private viewing. The films screened on the second day, however, are unavailable at the present time. These are the films of the Workcenter, covering the last period of Grotowski's work as well as the Workcenter's activities since his death: *Art as vehicle* (1989, a film of *Downstairs Action*); *ACTION in Aya Irini* (2003, a film of *Action*); and *Dies Irae: The Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show* (2006).

There is a clear sense of development through these three films, although it is not simply a linear development. Each documents a different moment in the research of the Workcenter, which grew out of Grotowski's lifelong quest to understand the relationship between performance techniques and human presence, but which has now taken on a life of its own as the mature work of Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, Director and Associate Director of the Workcenter. Visible in the first two films is the rigorous use of performance techniques to realize a profound event of contact between human beings. Somewhere between a ritual and a performance, what the Workcenter calls "Art as vehicle" is a truly unique phenomenon.[5] In what follows, I will discuss the contents of the films and attempt to situate the Lincoln Center events in the context of New York City. To begin with, I will describe *Art as vehicle,* the 1989 film by Mercedes Gregory that documents the "opus" known as *Downstairs Action.* I have seen this film only twice, since it is not publicly available, and I never saw the work live since it has not been done since the early 1990s. Others have had better and more opportunities to study this opus in detail, but no description of it has yet been published in English.

In *Art as vehicle*, Richards leads a group of five doers: himself, Mario Biagini, Piotr Borowski, Nitinchandra Ganatra, and Nitaya Singsengsouvanh. The work takes place in a small room, the downstairs space of the Pontedera Workcenter (hence the designation *Downstairs Action*). The first twenty minutes of the hour-long film show preparation and a few moments of highly precise rehearsal. After that, the opus itself is enacted.

Downstairs Action is a work in which song, movement, and action form a unity—a "totality" in the sense of what Grotowski called the "total act." The songs, drawn (with some exceptions) from African and Afro-Caribbean traditions, provide its main structure and the fountain of its force. There are also several elements that seem to be the remnants of past rituals: texts spoken



Action in the church of St. John the Baptist in Cappadocia, Turkey (2005)

in English; a walk derived from the Haitian *yanvalou*; candles, a bowl of water, rice, a censer. These elements do not carry the life force of the work, which comes through the songs and in the bodies of the doers themselves. Instead they frame the work, surrounding it and supporting it psychologically and semiotically rather than viscerally.

The immediately striking aspect of *Downstairs Action* is the utter devotion and commitment of the doers to each and every action. This is especially true of Richards, who is plainly at the center of this work—its unique axis—leading its progress from start to finish. But it also appears in the others, each of whom comes forth and takes the lead for a moment. Of these, Singsengsouvanh is the most compelling, as strong a presence as Richards when she takes the focus. In one fragment, early on, she leaps wildly through the space like a young girl, with astonishing grace and freedom. In a later fragment, she sings alone and then to Richards, her voice and presence utterly that of an old woman in mourning. Both moments are impressive in their realness and truth. Together, in contrast, within the space of an hour, they are extraordinary.

Long after seeing the film of *Downstairs Action*, it is the songs that linger in one's memory—or rather it is the singing, the intensity and depth

of the songs and their resonance in the bodies of the doers and the space of the doing. In the vibration of the voices—especially Richards's—there is something extremely emotional and real, like the voices of people speaking just after a traumatic experience. But we know that *Downstairs Action* was done repeatedly, even daily, over a number of years. It is in no way like the spontaneous outpouring of feeling that follows a joyful reunion or a deadly disaster. In *Downstairs Action*, the doers have managed to capture an enormous flow of emotionality inside a precisely repeatable structure. In documenting this, the film *Art as vehicle* puts forth an irrefutable challenge to the performing arts.

Action is a later opus in "Art as vehicle," and it is a work of major significance to me personally. However, since this work is described in detail by Lisa Wolford in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, I will limit myself here to mentioning just the most salient differences between *Downstairs Action* and *Action* as they are documented in the two films shown at Lincoln Center.[6] To begin with, the primary axis now exists between Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini rather than in Richards alone. The alignment of the space has also changed so that there is a clear "front" and "back"; and a number of guests have been invited to witness the work. This particular film shows *Action* taking place not at the Workcenter's home base but in the beautiful, vaulted space of the Aya Irini church in Istanbul.

The quality of energy is different as well. In *Downstairs Action* one perceives the burning energy of a group of people who seem to be living out their whole lives in that small downstairs room. The dynamics of *Action* are gentler, more open and subtle, and in some places more theatrical. This is still not a theatre piece, but it is less wholly a ritual than *Downstairs Action.* In fact, it seems to be some kind of bridge or hybrid of the two: a ritual that was made to be witnessed. Perhaps, as Biagini suggests in his spoken introduction, this is a new form of art—one that only the twenty-first century has needed.

A third film was also shown. *Dies Irae: The Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show* (Jacques Vetter, 2009) is a performance that grew out of the residency of Singaporean artist Ang Gey Pin and her company Theatre Ox.[7] I do not know much about the details of the residency, but I found the account given by Richards and Biagini at Lincoln Center somewhat disconcerting. They seemed to underplay Ang's contribution as an artist in her own right—as opposed to merely their student—in a way that reminded me uncomfortably of the

questions Schechner had raised in the meeting with Maud Robart.

In any case, *Dies Irae*—unlike *Downstairs Action* and *Action*—is explicitly a piece of theatre. As such, I found it to be a provocative but flawed work. The pacing is relentless, the texts highly abstract and self-referential. Despite many skillful performances, the piece as a whole does not hold together. Its composition is clever rather than moving. *Dies Irae* is significant, however, in being part of an ongoing attempt by Biagini and Richards to forge a bridge between "Art as vehicle" and theatrical work proper. It is also particularly interesting in light of the fact that Biagini's next project—currently titled *Electric Party* or *I Am America*—is based on the poetry of Alan Ginsberg and incorporates a range of musical influences from punk to blues to opera.[8]

Equally important to these screenings were the two meetings that took place that week with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini: one in Lincoln Center's classy Kaplan Penthouse, attended by at least a hundred people, and the other in a small room at the Italian Cultural Institute on Park Avenue. At both meetings Richards and Biagini spoke with great energy and warmth, discussing their work from a range of perspectives that included the artistic, the technical, and the administrative. In doing so, they revealed a set of assumptions that are diametrically opposed to those of the theatre industry. Simply put, Richards and Biagini spoke as if acting were a valid practice in its own right; as if personal transformation through performance were as significant as public showings; and as if it were possible to conduct an artistic search with total integrity and no concessions made to commercial pressure. Through these assumptions they revealed a tremendous sense of *dignity* in regard to their work, next to which a commercial approach to acting looks positively debased.

Hearing Richards and Biagini speak this way was for the most part like a breath of fresh air. But there were also moments in which the attitude that I have just characterized as dignified seemed to cross the line into pretension. I was uneasy to see, for example, how zealous Richards and Biagini were in distinguishing their work from that of virtually all other artists—while at the same time taking for granted the respect and interest of the rest of the theatre world. No one could admire more than I do their devotion to the specificity and rigor of their craft. At the same time, I have often wished that they could find a more generous way to speak about the work of others. For if it is useful to approach "Art as vehicle" as something completely unique and incomparable, then it is also necessary to situate it in relation to other practices, both theatrical

and not. Otherwise we invite many problematic slippages, such as that between authority and arrogance.

Questions of language—how to speak about the work, especially in public—are not incidental to an analysis of Grotowski's legacy. Rather, they are central to this legacy and to the development of the performing arts in the twenty-first century. One of the things that Grotowski did was to show that values like authority, hierarchy, and mastery cannot simply be rejected as part of an ongoing struggle for democracy, secularism, and social justice. In the performing arts, these seemingly anti-democratic values are essential. It is likewise essential to find a way to speak about them in public, whether the language we use to do so is theatrical, spiritual, scientific, or artisan. The fact is that Grotowski's work has yet to be reconciled—in theory or in practice—with post-colonial, feminist, and materialist perspectives. The need for such a reconciliation, whether it takes place over decades or centuries, is part of the legacy of Grotowski. And these questions only become more urgent when the work itself is of such ferocious integrity as that of the Workcenter.

At the Italian Cultural Institute meeting, NYU/PCI Associate Curator Dominika Bennacer remarked that the week's events should be viewed not as a closing but as a series of openings. Indeed, openings provoked by Grotowski continue to take place across a profound diversity of cultural and geographical contexts. From the unique line of the Workcenter to the experimentation of young ensembles in England, Columbia, Iran, Ghana and elsewhere—Grotowski's name remains a dynamic force in the performing arts.

NOTES

1. For detailed information on the NYU/PCI program as well as events in Poland, England, Germany, Spain, and the United States, please visit <http://www.urbanresearchtheater.com/site/family.htm>.

2. There were also a few "unofficial" events—not part of the NYU/PCI program—that should nevertheless be counted as part of the Year of Grotowski in New York. These include a panel discussion on Grotowski and the concept of "Art as vehicle" organized by Theatre Group Dzieci; a screening of two films on Grotowski at the Philadelphia Society for Art, Literature and Music; and a performance by Nu Classic Theater at PS122 that presented "two fragments inspired by and leaning on the work of Grotowski and his actors." For more information, visit: <http://dziecitheatre.org/dzfiles/mass2009discussion.html> (accessed 8/30/09); <http://www.grotowski-psalm.org/> (accessed 8/30/09); and <http://www.collectiveunconsciousnyc.org/ugz/replikas-of-apocalypsis/> (accessed 8/30/09).

3. I am currently looking for copies of these two films (I do not know their publication dates) and would appreciate being contacted by anyone who has access to them.

4. Robart led one of two working groups in Pontedera for several years, until funding cuts required a major reduction in staff. However, no work in English discusses Robart's relationship with Grotowski and/or Richards in any depth.

5. For more information about "Art as vehicle," see Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford, *The Grotowski Sourcebook* (Routledge: 2001); *TDR* 52.2 (Summer 2008); and Ben Spatz, "To Open a Person: Song and Encounter at Gardzienice and the Workcenter" in *Theatre Topics* 18.2 (September 2008).

6. *ACTION in Aya Irini* was filmed by Jacques Vetter of Atelier Cinéma de Normandie–A.C.C.A.A.N. The doers of *Action* in this film are Thomas Richards, Mario Biagini, Marie de Clerck, Souphiène Amiar, Francesc Torrent Gironella, and Jørn Riegels Wimpel. (This team has changed over time, as a comparison with Lisa Wolford's description in *The Grotowski Sourcebook* makes clear.)

7. For more on the development of *One Breath Left* and *Dies Irae*, including photographs and a review of critical responses in Singapore, see Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders Through the Actor's Work: Foreign Bodies of Knowledge* (Routledge: 2009): 42-50 and passim. This book contains a valuable account of Ang Gey Pin's "atypical professional trajectory" (63) and her work with Grotowski, Biagini, and Richards.

8. Workcenter press release via email, August 28, 2009.