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### Original Citation

Middleton, Deborah K. (2009) From Poland to Huddersfield via Mexico. In: British Grotowski Conference 2009: 'Grotowski: Theatre and Beyond', 11th - 14th June 2009, University of Kent. (Unpublished)

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From Poland to Huddersfield via Mexico

(Presented at Grotowski: Theatre and Beyond, University of Kent, 11 – 14 June, 2009)

## **Introduction**

In this paper I'm going to talk about the work in Britain of Mexican theatre director, Nicolás Núñez, and about how that work relates to Núñez's formative experiences with Grotowski, particularly in *Theatre of Sources*.

In representing Núñez, I'll be drawing on 16 years of close contact with him, and, more directly, on three main sources: Núñez's first book, *Anthropocosmic Theatre* (Núñez:1996); the chapter, *The Power of Grotowski in the New Millennium* (from Núñez's second book, *Teatro de Alto Riesgo*,) (Núñez: 2007), and an interview which I carried out with him earlier this year, also in New York (Middleton:2009).

## **Summary of Contact/NN in England**

I first met Nicolás at a CPR Conference in 1993, and later that year went to Mexico to work with him. Since then, we have collaborated on a number of projects in Britain and elsewhere. At the University of Huddersfield, he has run public workshops with titles such as: 'Theatre as a Personal Rite' (1996) and 'Theatre & Transformation' (1999).

Núñez's work falls into two closely connected categories – forms of actor training, and ritual-theatre productions. The actor-training is based in a series of psycho-physical structures which he calls 'dynamics', and which operate at the level of pre-expressivity, offering the actor access to heightened states of consciousness, awareness, and energy.

The experiences offered by Núñez's approach are not specifically theatrical, and many of the people who attend his thrice-weekly workshops in Mexico do so for reasons of personal rather than professional transformation. Many Mexicans are attracted to the work because of its roots in pre-Hispanic ritual forms. Onto this foundation of tools for encountering and altering the psycho-physical material of the self, Núñez builds specifically theatrical approaches, such as in his workshop in Huddersfield in 2001, entitled 'Efficient Acting = Control of the Mind'.

The 'dynamics' are also incorporated into his participatory theatre productions. *Cura des Espantos*, which toured in England and Scotland in 1999, took audiences on a night journey through woods, where they encountered both actors performing *mise en scene* and, at the heart of the work, a participatory ritual 'action'. In 2000, he created *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* a year-long project at Teotihuacan, the pyramid site just outside Mexico City, in which the story of Nanahuatzin was presented (Nanahuatzin is the culture hero who jumped into the fire to become the sun). From sunset to sunrise, the audience participated in a series of actions through which to allegorically make their own 'jump'. I co-ordinated a two-week version of *The Flight* for a group of British participants. *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* was dedicated to Grotowski – a seminal figure in the life of Núñez and in the development of his group, the *Taller de Investigación Teatral* (Núñez: 2000)

## **Brief History of Núñez and Grotowski**

Núñez first worked with Grotowski in 1979 on *Tree of People* in Poland. The following year, Grotowski went to Mexico, at Núñez's invitation, and worked for twenty days in the

Sierra Huichola. That work served as a process of selection for *Theatre of Sources*, and both Núñez and his creative partner, Helena Guardia, along with three other Mexicans (one a Huichol Indian) went to Poland for one year. During that time, they were involved in an exploration of 'actions'; each participant was asked to work on a personal action for some months and then Grotowski chose some of the actions for continued development and for sharing with people from outside the group. Guardia worked on a yoga-like sequence (which was still the basis of The Action she and Núñez witnessed in Pontedera in 1987 or '88). Núñez was asked by Grotowski to pick up a work on running initiated by Jacek Zymslowski. Núñez recalls Grotowski asking him to take on the 'inheritance' of the running from Jacek, to work inside it, knowing its intentions, and to do it in his own way (Middleton: 2009). Whilst Jacek's running is described as having been a strong, fast, strenuous run, Núñez's version of the work became the 'contemplative running' which is a cornerstone of his current practice – a form of meditation-in-motion which requires physical relaxation and strong mental focus and which results in the raising of energy (Middleton: 2001).

After *Theatre of Sources*, Núñez and Guardia worked briefly with Grotowski during the *Objective Drama* phase at Irvine, and Grotowski went back to Mexico in 1985 to work with Núñez at the foot of the volcano, Ixtaccihuatl (Middleton: 2009; Núñez: 1996).

Núñez and Guardia had already begun their research as the *Taller de Investigación Teatral* when they met Grotowski, but they returned to Mexico from *Theatre of Sources* changed in significant ways. Núñez told me that the early work of the *Taller*, (in part inspired by reading *Towards A Poor Theatre*) was already 'on the road', but that from Grotowski they gained greater seriousness, greater precision, and a profound clarification of their intentions (Middleton: 2009).

### **Influences, Principles and Practices**

Formally, 'contemplative running' and Núñez's other key techniques share some similarities with the actions of *Theatre of Sources*: psycho-physical, long-duration, dual structures of inner and outer 'scores'. More importantly, however, we can identify in the work of the *Taller* principles and perspectives that can be traced to Grotowski (though not, of course, exclusively so).

The following could be said to be characteristic of both *Theatre of Sources* and Núñez:

- making connection with one's own roots, particularly ethnic roots;
- encountering oneself;
- encountering the other;
- making contact with the environment;
- transcending daily behavioural conditionings;
- de-automatizing perception;

(Kumiega: 1986; Osinski: 1986; Schechner & Wolford: 1997)

For Núñez, Grotowski offered a guide to working deeply with oneself through immersive, experiential actions, and a model of theatre as a place of potential sacrality. Núñez writes

that Grotowski “recovered for our theater guild, a dignity and a mysticism that seeks the expansion and fulfilment of the human being” (Núñez: 2007) and these are terms which can readily be applied to the ‘Anthropocosmic Theatre’ Núñez has developed. Grotowski encouraged Núñez to find his way in this work through a profound encounter with himself and with his own culture. When I interviewed Nicolás in New York in March, I asked him about the significance of Grotowski’s influence upon him. He said:

Without Grotowski I would probably have lost myself. For sure, his knowledge and his influence was to root myself more in [my] heritage. You have to look at yourself, you are a Mestizo, you have the pre-Hispanic tradition in you and you have the Occidental tradition in you. You have to balance and you have to go through these roots, and that departure point made the difference. We [had already] worked a kind of Mexican stuff, but I never thought to really go into the archetypes of the pre-Hispanic structure. So once we contacted him, I saw it clearly ... He helped me to clarify the intentions. (Middleton: 2009)

As I have worked with Núñez over many years, and witnessed his work with others, I have been struck most by the attitudinal principles that are transmitted *through* and *alongside* the forms, that are sometimes embodied in the forms, and that often cannot be grasped intellectually but only via the kinds of experiences that the forms offer. These are foundational attitudes relating not only to theatre, but to questions of existence, to the fundamental matter of being a human in the world, of finding one’s way and not losing oneself, of making one’s work, encountering and experiencing the living moment with honesty and without fear. Núñez uses a developed terminology of concepts such as ‘good pain’, the ‘will to work’, ‘serious play’, and the image of the actor-as-warrior. Cognitive attitudes that serve as a foundation for states of being were forged and clarified for Núñez in the experiences with Grotowski, and are now expressed through the archetypes of pre-Hispanic Mexican culture which, Núñez says, contains a ‘whole process of inner education’ (Núñez 2000: 19).

I see this ‘inner education’ as a very substantial aspect of the transmission from Grotowski to Núñez to me. And though I don’t have any personal claim on that wisdom, when I work Núñez’s dynamics with students, I see them encountering the opportunity to learn about themselves within the secret challenges of the forms.

Núñez’s work requires participants to rise and meet themselves, to work an inner action that dilates their presence within the physical actions. His metaphor for the Actor is the Sacred Animal, about which he has written:

Certain qualities make an animal sacred. The horse achieves this rank, because it runs until it explodes; its *intent* exceeds its structure. The bull is also sacred because it attacks until it dies; its *intent* exceeds its structure. The theater animal is sacred; her *intent* exceeds her structure... Grotowski, the last of the great masters of the last millennium, the last sacred beast... [in life] was the most active agent of this tradition. In death, he is the touchstone for our not losing the way. (Núñez: 2007)

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