Living Tradition

Continuity of Research at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards

Lisa Wolford Wylam

In order to continue the investigation of someone else we should know in practice what he already found.


On 14 January 1999 Jerzy Grotowski, in the words of Richard Schechner, “passed from activity into history” (1999:5). Mortality had eclipsed the Polish director’s pronounced tendency to remain a resisting subject, one who shifted incarnations and positionalities in ways that consistently frustrated the efforts of taxonomic historians. This ongoing metamorphosis can in a sense be seen to parallel Konstantin Stanislavsky’s continuing self-revision, his willingness to surren-

Lisa Wolford Wylam is Associate Professor of Theatre at York University. She is coeditor, with Richard Schechner, of The Grotowski Sourcebook (Routledge, 1997), and with Antonio Attisani and Mario Biagini of the forthcoming Doorways: Performing as a Vehicle at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards (Seagull Press).
der initial precepts as practical research uncovered new possibilities that called into question the efficacy of prior approaches. However, such a process of “permanent self-reform” (Grotowski [1969] 2008b:33) has substantial implications vis-à-vis historical interpretation and assessment, because those attached to the outcomes of earlier phases of creative research are often reluctant to modify their approaches in light of subsequent findings. As Sharon Carnicke lucidly demonstrates in her study of the markedly disparate constructions of Stanislavsky’s teachings in Russian and American theatre cultures, such mutations are fueled not only by poor translation and overt censorship, but by the structures of feeling dominant in a given time and place (see Williams [1961] 2001), along with the idiosyncrasies and relative competencies of individual instructors purporting to represent a particular approach (Carnicke 1998). Grotowski found kinship with the Russian master not only through his practical investigation of Stanislavsky’s precepts—most significantly the method of physical actions—but also in regard to their shared history of problematic appropriation.¹ “I think of [Stanislavsky] often,” Grotowski remarked, “when I see what kind of confusion one can cause. Disciples... I think it also happened to me” ([1969] 2008b:31).

Almost 40 years have passed since the height of the international furor surrounding the Laboratory Theatre, and the 50th anniversary of that celebrated company’s founding in 1959 fast approaches. Some might wonder how much cultural cachet remains attached to Grotowski’s name, at least in the US, where according to Stephen Nunns (1999), Grotowski long ceased to be relevant and the approaches that seemed so revolutionary in the ’60s have since been revealed as quaint and naïve. In light of such an assertion, it’s intriguing to note how liberally Village Voice writers in the intervening years have tossed about the appellation “Grotowskian” or dubiously hailed as “heirs of the Grotowski method” companies ranging from the North American Cultural Laboratory to Poland’s Teatr Pieśń Kozła. Contrary to Nunns, 21st-century theatre artists continue to promote their work by emphasizing a linkage to Grotowski, whose status in the highest echelon of the canonical avantgarde offers significant allure for those attempting to persuade funding agencies and presenters of the significance of their own experimental theatre work. Arts organizations in Britain, Poland, Italy, France, Crete, and North America regularly host paratheatrical events and/or workshops in Grotowskian technique, making it possible for affluent students and aspiring practitioners to spend their summers shuttling among picturesque locales in pursuit of embodied experience (or, as Antonio Attisani jokes, “initiation”). Boston’s Pilgrim Theatre claims a “unique [...] artistic legacy from those members of Jerzy Grotowski’s company with whom [they] trained in Poland”; in 2006 they offered workshops at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst on “Encountering the Legacy of Grotowski’s Polish Theatre Lab” (KO Theater Works 2006). A recently published book by James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta intended as a primer on Grotowski’s work includes various exercises and activities representative of the authors’ own independent practice alongside those actually derived from Grotowski, a

Figure 1. (facing page) Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini in Action at the Church of John the Baptist, Cappadocia, Turkey, 2005. (Photo by Frits Meyst; courtesy of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards)

¹. It is useful to remember that Grotowski studied directing in Moscow in the 1950s, working most notably with Yurii Zavadsky, who studied with Stanislavsky and was subsequently a key pupil of Evgeny Vakhutangov. In his later years, Grotowski sometimes spoke of this period, relating with glee how Zavadsky and various colleagues of Stanislavsky from the Moscow Art Theatre marveled at his work with actors, repeatedly telling him that they saw in him the living image of Stanislavsky. Always striving to correct historical accounts that positioned his work as an extension of Antonin Artaud’s, Grotowski often noted that he saw his own research as a continuation of Stanislavsky’s, picked up from the point at which death interrupted the Russian master’s work (see Richards 1995; Wolford 2000).
blurring of boundaries certain to confuse novice students (see Slowiak and Cuesta 2007). Paratheatrical publicity for Theatre ZAR of Poland’s engagement at UCLA aggressively promotes the group as “second generation disciples of the late–theatre revolutionary Jerzy Grotowski” (UCLA Live 2007), an assertion that prompted a Cheshire Cat grin from a colleague who wondered which of the Laboratory Theatre actors was the alleged father. The British Grotowski Project, directed by Paul Allain and supported with more than $400,000 by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, features an open call on its website for artists who consider their work to be influenced by Grotowski’s to “stand up and be counted” (British Grotowski Project 2006); such an unjuried invitation, which effectively erases the distinction between those who self-nominate as Grotowskian and those whose knowledge is rooted in firsthand engagement with Grotowski’s practice, runs directly counter to Grotowski’s lifelong effort to resist dilution and commodification of his work. Such a call equates efforts by students, amateurs, and paratheatrical enthusiasts with the independent activities of Grotowski’s former colleagues from the Laboratory Theatre, as well as the ongoing praxis of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards.

Observing in a 1981 essay that Grotowski inspired a generation of theatre artists to confront rather than illustrate dramatic texts, Schechner lamented that “too few people undertook the rigorous body training and intellectual discipline to make their work along these lines” anything more than shoddy, mass-produced junk (1981:53). I remember asking Schechner whether Grzegorz Bral’s Teatr Pieśń Kozła, from Wrocław, Poland, should be included as part of a publication project we were developing on Grotowski’s influence; having recently seen the

2. The specific activities that pertain to Slowiak and Cuesta’s independent work rather than to Grotowski’s practice include “body mapping,” “Four Corners” (derived from the Beckett play Quad) and “Listening.”
group perform at La Mama, his response was immediate and forceful: “Absolutely not. Pretentious and incoherent. Everything Grot would’ve hated” (2006). The frankness of Schechner’s assessment was refreshing, particularly in light of how rarely such criteria as quality or even actual consonance with Grotowski’s theatrical approaches are considered relevant to the ways such cultural production is represented and received. While it is perhaps not surprising that in current parlance the term “Grotowskian” (when not thrown out quasi-generically as a descriptor for any touring Polish ensemble) has come to be used most frequently as a synonym for physical theatre or minimalist approaches to staging, such a process of “branding” presents a particular historiographic challenge in relation to an artist whose work was actually seen by such a small percentage of those it inspired. Schechner’s obituary for Grotowski obliquely touches on this point even as it affirms Grotowski’s status among the foremost theatrical innovators of the 20th century: “After Stanislavsky, acting was changed; after Meyerhold, directing; after Brecht, playwriting. But after Grotowski?” (Schechner 1999:5). Schechner goes on to conclude that

Grotowski’s effects on the theatre will not be through the establishment of a method of actor training, an approach to mise-en-scène, or an insistence on a dramaturgy of political purpose. Grotowski will affect theatre through the effect he had on the people with whom he interacted on a personal, even intimate, level. Such an encounter might extend over years or it might last only a scintillation of time. Relating face-to-face with Grotowski could change the way a person experienced and understood the ground from which theatre grows. In other words, Grotowski changed lives and therefore changed the theatre. (1999:7)

What Schechner says is undoubtedly true, though I would suggest that in regard to the depth and thoroughness of an individual’s apprehension of Grotowski’s work and creative techniques, it matters a great deal whether that encounter extended over years or lasted only a moment. Not that proximity and duration are in themselves guarantees of accomplishment, but in the case of those working under Grotowski’s direction, prolonged interaction elucidated to a greater degree the effort and attention demanded in the work. The extent to which the work requested a full mobilization of the actor, not only on the level of technique, but also personally—specifically in regard to those subtler aspects of work that can be approached only after technique is mastered—could only be realized by actors who tested those limits over time.

To clarify the historical dilemma: Bertolt Brecht left behind not only a theatre company that still survives as an institution, but also an array of scripts, model books of productions, and theoretical writings that, taken together, make it relatively simple to distinguish between that which pertains directly to his practice and that which represents an expropriation of his ideas—i.e., to differentiate between what is Brecht’s and what is Brechtian. Thus one can read a play by Caryl Churchill or Luis Valdez, or view a performance by Guillermo Verdecchia, and appreciate both the author’s innovations and the theatrical and historic traditions by which the work is informed. But a bad piece of agit prop, whether performed on a street corner or on a subsidized stage, poses no real danger to Brecht’s reputation, regardless of what its creators might claim about working with “alienation” or other Brechtian techniques. Would that the same could be said of Grotowski! Unfortunately, the relative scarcity of reliable knowledge about Grotowski’s work has made it easier for less-than-exemplary practitioners to claim application of a so-called “Grotowski method.”

The situation is exacerbated by the mythology that veils Grotowski’s work, as well as the fact that the Laboratory Theatre’s performances were created for small audiences. Further, the extent to which Grotowski’s post-theatrical research reconfigured the role and place of the spectator—cast first as active coparticipant and later as intermittent and nonessential observer—creates particular challenges for historical and critical assessment. Thus it seems that few have sufficient firsthand knowledge to differentiate between competent and unskilled expropriations
of Grotowski’s ideas, much less to recognize and distinguish among the range of practices indexed by the imprecise category “Grotowskian.”

Granted, multiple factors are at work in what has begun to emerge as a sort of Grotowski heritage industry, some clearly informed by nationalist cultural agendas, others by economic opportunity. As an American expatriate living in Canada (and one who moreover became acquainted with Grotowski’s work in the period following his emigration), I can never fully comprehend the unique place Grotowski occupies in the Polish cultural imaginary. Halina Filipowicz vividly evokes the sense of national and cultural loss prompted by Grotowski’s departure from Poland in her insightful comments on a disparaging essay by Kazimierz Braun:

[B]ehind Braun’s “Where is Grotowski?” I could not help hearing a less strident tone. His question reverberated with the elegiac sense of an ending and the pervasive sense of exile from the time when the guru from Poland commanded the attention of the world. Braun’s question may well have been: “Where is Guratowski?” And so his essay seemed less an uneasy confession of aversion than a testimony of cultural as well as personal deprivation. (1991:181)

Allain likewise marks the magnitude of loss inflicted by Grotowski’s departure first from theatre, then from his troubled homeland:

Grotowski’s vow in 1970 not to make another theatre piece [...] for some represented a sort of death as he disappeared from the world of public presentation in which he had made such a significant impact. For others (and especially Poles) he “died” when in 1982 during martial law he left Poland. (2005:48)

Such a proprietary impulse on the part of his erstwhile countrymen is clearly discernible in Leszek Kolankiewicz’s “Grotowski alla ricerca dell’essenza” (Grotowski’s Research on Essence), first published in Polish in 2000 and later in Essere un uomo totale, and is most nakedly apparent in the author’s recounting of the traumas suffered by Grotowski’s former collaborators in the years leading up to the dissolution of the Laboratory Theatre (Kolankiewicz 2005 [2000]). Collectively such writings suggest the dimensions of Grotowski’s iconic status in Polish cultural history, while simultaneously intimating what’s at stake for Poles in the construction of his heritage and legacy. Concomitantly, since Polish scholars—with the notable exceptions of Jan Kott and later Zbigniew Osiński—lacked access to the research Grotowski conducted during the years he spent in the US and Italy, critical discourse on his work generated within a Polish context has consistently failed to grasp the significance of his post-theatrical investigations. The Polish scholarship was also removed from the developing thread of inquiry that grew progressively more focused, eventually uniting what Grotowski identified as the final three periods of his research, a progressive accumulation of skills and deepening of practical knowledge which— together with the precision and emphasis on artistic craft that characterized the work of his Theatre of Productions period—provided the necessary foundation for his research in the domain of Art as vehicle.

3. Richard Gough’s Black Mountain Press recently announced that they would publish the English-language version of this collection, including Kolankiewicz’s essay, which begins with a forceful critique of Schechner’s “Exoduction” (see Schechner 1997) and goes on to interrogate Grotowski’s historicization of his own praxis as articulated in The Grotowski Sourcebook. Various elements of Kolankiewicz’s historiography are rendered suspect by thinly veiled personal insinuations, but I find it especially peculiar that a native speaker would misrecognize the Polish term bos—used by some collaborators to address Grotowski—which I was told means “one without shoes” (thus the hidden pun in Attisani’s phrase “barefoot philosophy”) for the English “boss.” Rather than enforcing hierarchy, as Kolankiewicz suggests, “Bos” functioned as a kind of endearment that offered the people working with Grotowski in different capacities—particularly those of us from a much younger generation, for whom excessive familiarity would have seemed inappropriate—a mode of address that connoted affection and intimacy, since it was only ever used by those with whom he had accepted a working relationship.
Whether I stage one production more or less does not matter, but it is important that I hand on to you everything which I have stored up throughout my life.

—Konstantin Stanislavsky (in Toporkov 2004:154)

Regarding the matter of legacy, Grotowski did everything in his power to clarify that he entrusted responsibility for continuing the research that he viewed as the culmination of his lifework to Thomas Richards. As the work of Art as vehicle evolved under Richards’s leadership, he was profoundly assisted by Mario Biagini, who joined the Workcenter in 1986 and continues to be a key contributor to the research. Richards and Biagini were named in Grotowski’s will as heirs of his intellectual property, though this material bequest is an altogether different matter from what Grotowski spoke of as “transmission,” which relates rather to what he articulated as the “reopening of tradition” within the practice of Art as vehicle. 4

The 1995 publication of Richards’s At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions, which features both a preface by Grotowski and a key essay printed in appendix, must be understood as a crucial expression of Grotowski’s efforts to establish Richards’s position as his essential

---

4. Like his counterparts among the great modernist authors, such as Beckett and Eliot, Grotowski often stipulated precise conditions regarding the circulation of his texts. Certain stipulations prohibiting or limiting publication were included at Grotowski’s request in contracts, for example his written agreement with the Collège de France, which clearly states that his lessons must never be published as a text (with the exception of “very short quotations” permissible under terms of fair use), but only circulated via audio recording. Other directives were conveyed to Richards and Biagini verbally, or outlined in notes dictated to Biagini by Grotowski in the weeks prior to his death. The fact that Richards and Biagini have been proactive in attempting to ensure that such instructions are honored has been described by some as censorship, a claim that has also been applied (even more problematically) to the Workcenter’s expressed preference not to be lumped into an amorphous Grotowskian soup.
The book’s cover image juxtaposes the right half of Grotowski’s face (bearded and aged) with the left half of Richards’s (intense, young, and identifiably black). This montage literalizes the notion of conjoined minds, a visible analog for the intimate creative relationship Grotowski sought to foreground. Grotowski’s preface underscores the message of the photomontage:

The nature of my work with Thomas Richards has the character of “transmission”; to transmit to him that to which I have arrived in my life: the inner aspect of the work. I use the word “transmission” in the traditional sense—in the course of an apprenticeship, through efforts and trials, the apprentice conquers the knowledge, practical and precise, from another person, his teacher. (in Richards 1995:n.p.)

Grotowski often reiterated that “‘transmission’ in the traditional sense” was the central preoccupation of his final years, emphasizing the profound obligation he felt to ensure that the knowledge he had accumulated through his lifetime of study—not only of theatre, but of embodied practices relating to what he described as “techniques of interiority”—not be lost in the wake of his death. This preoccupation was not a matter of ego—i.e., not a wish to be remembered as the originator of an artistic practice that I analyze elsewhere as a form of invented tradition (Wolford 1998)—but rather grew from a desire to create conditions propitious for the survival of this very particular means of work on oneself using the tools of performing arts. Grotowski’s renaming of the Workcenter in 1996, from which point it became known as the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, further demonstrates his efforts to articulate an incontrovertible relationship of continuity, as does his final text, published posthumously in 1999. Grotowski was acutely aware that for any living practice, the passage from its founding toward the next generation is a crucial stage of development, and he focused his undeniably titanic will on establishing conditions within which the work could flourish without depending on his personal guidance or protection. To that end, beginning shortly after the relocation to Italy in 1986, from the time he first viewed Richards as capable of leading work on his own, Grotowski gradually opened a distance from the daily practice of Art as vehicle, insisting that all involved must take into consideration Richards’s fundamental leadership within the practical work, and eventually describing his own role as that of advisor or Teacher.

What can one transmit? How and to whom to transmit? These are questions that every person who has inherited from the tradition asks himself, because he inherits at the same time a kind of duty: to transmit that which he has himself received.

What part has research in a tradition? To what extent should a tradition of work on oneself or, to speak by analogy, of a yoga or of an inner life be at the same time an investigation, a research that takes with each new generation a step ahead?

In a branch of Tibetan Buddhism it is said that a tradition can live if the new generation goes a fifth ahead in respect to the preceding generation, without forgetting or destroying its discoveries. [...]
But here I speak of a domain that is artistic and that is not exclusively artistic. In the field of Art as vehicle, if I consider the work of Thomas Richards on *Action*, on the ancient vibratory songs, and on all this vast terrain linked to the tradition that occupies the researches here, I observe that the new generation has already advanced in respect to the previous one. (Grotowski [1998] 1999:12)

Schechner, like most scholars of Grotowski’s work, understands this focus on transmission in relation to traditional *artistic* practices, drawing a parallel to the way performance knowledge is passed from one generation to another in the great noh families of Japan (1999:7). Yet Grotowski’s repeated emphasis on the unique nature of his relationship with Richards, along with his explicit reference to the “inner aspect of the work,” suggest that artisanal knowledge is by no means the most essential element of what he sought to convey. Scholars frequently seem to be misled—perhaps in part by Eugenio Barba’s study of kathakali during the period of his active collaboration with Grotowski—into imagining that Grotowski’s interest in India sprang from a fascination with Asian theatre and dance, a field of study more consonant with Barba’s own research. Instead, the true subject of Grotowski’s extensive investigation in India always focused on techniques relating to human interiority:

In fact, since I was nine, my first point of orientation has been the great figures of Hindu techniques. And it is this first center of interest (how one works on oneself with someone else, so to speak, in the performative context) that afterward traversed theatre. In the course of my life I always looked to frequent people that were in an unbroken relation with this or that technique or tradition. And there, in different fields, I received a direct transmission. I have been helped a lot in my life from this point of view. There are also certain figures or “elders” for whom I feel an enormous gratitude. In Central Asia, in India, in Latin America, in China, in the Caribbean, I met people like this. I did not ask myself, “Is it theatrical or not?” but rather: “What do they know practically, these people, about the possibilities of the human being?” ([1995] 2007:119; translated by Mario Biagini)

The opportunity to view Asian performer training methods was never so alluring for Grotowski as Mount Arunachala, the chosen home of Ramana Maharshi. On one occasion when Grotowski sought to deepen my understanding of Art as vehicle, he opened a copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* to an illustration of Ramakrishna dancing, ecstatic, enrapt at the singing of a *kirtan*. When Grotowski speaks of transmission in the global sense, he refers to this broad field of knowledge regarding interior evolution rather than to aesthetic performance *sensu strictu*.

What Grotowski tirelessly strove to transmit to Richards in a dynamic of intimate collaboration that extended for nearly 14 years was not simply a body of theatrical technique, but rather his embodied understanding of how to approach that for which theatre can serve as a vehicle. Consequently, it is imperative to remember that tradition in the sense Grotowski invokes refers neither solely nor even primarily to theatrical tradition (e.g., tracing a line of descent from Stanislavsky through Vakhtangov to Zavadsky, to himself and then forward to Richards), but rather to those embodied practices and knowledges pertaining to what sometimes have been called initiatic traditions. Within such domains, in stark contrast to Western theatre, it is common for a person of knowledge to engage in prolonged apprenticeship with a younger practitioner to whom the teacher ultimately transfers responsibility for continuation of his or her practice. Teacher: one through whom the knowledge passes. The product of this labor (if one chooses to view the matter in such terms) is not and was never intended to be another

---

7. Grotowski’s apartment in Vallicelle was a veritable library of philosophy and comparative religions. He used the example of Ramakrishna to elucidate for me the nature of what Richards calls the “inner action,” but also to convey a basic understanding of different psychological types and their corresponding processes in the vocabulary of yogic practice.
artwork; rather, the artist himself—Performer, in Grotowski’s specialized usage of that term—was in a sense the opus, the one prepared to carry the teaching forward by making it his own. “I did not want to play the old game of master and disciple,” Grotowski clarified, “I wanted to put in [Richards’s] hands a tangible and practical thread that I myself received from other hands” ([1995] 2007:121). We can ask: What precisely was transmitted from master to apprentice? A way of doing, certainly, and doing at a high level of craft something that only a very particular type of artist can hope to accomplish. But not only this. By no means only this.

It is crucial to remember that Richards was in no sense a passive receptacle for Grotowski’s wisdom, as reductive labels such as “inheritor” might seem to imply. Rather, it was through the alchemical interaction of Teacher and Performer that Grotowski and Richards together opened a door toward specific possibilities that could not be actualized without the particular capacities of this apprentice; the forms in which this practice manifested are thus shaped by the specificities of their collaboration. When I was in residence at the Workcenter in 1995, Grotowski read to me from his interview with Jean-Pierre Thibaudat, wanting to ensure that I understood it correctly despite my limited French; he lingered on a particular line, which he translated as, “He is the man of research I was searching for,” emphasizing Richards’s agency as investigator, his pivotal role in both envisioning and embodying the praxis of Art as vehicle. “What [Grotowski] discovered through Thomas, he did not know before,” Biagini elucidated in a conversation with Kris Salata, “but the basis was theatrical experience and his personal work on himself” (in Attisani, Biagini, and Wolford Wylam, forthcoming).

Grotowski, in his 1995 interview with Thibaudat, noted that when he worked with an individual from a different culture, he characteristically took as a point of departure that person’s...
ethnic background and the traditions and literatures pertaining to it. “There,” Grotowski explained, “everyone finds again things that are, if not familiar, at least unconsciously alive” ([1995] 2007:120). The central importance of songs linked to ritual practices of the African diaspora used as tools in the work of Art as vehicle raises interesting questions vis-à-vis the specificity of Richards’s relationship to such materials, which he observes held a strong attraction for him due to their rootedness in a cultural matrix to which he was linked by ancestry yet from which he felt disconnected. As the younger son of landmark director and educator Lloyd Richards and dancer and writer Barbara Davenport Richards, Thomas Richards’s position vis-à-vis identity politics is unavoidably complex, inflected on the one hand by his mixed-race background and on the other by his father’s singular stature as emblematic of 20th-century African American theatre. Although Richards resists essentializing constructs of identity, he has acknowledged that he was drawn to work with Grotowski partly because the emphasis on African vibratory songs appealed to his wish to connect with the African aspect of his heritage. 8 When I asked Richards whether he is consciously influenced by knowledge of these songs’ function within Haitian Vodun and other African diasporic practices, he replied that although the work of Art as vehicle is far removed from orthodoxy or matters of belief, his awareness of the songs’ ritual usage and properties has productively fueled his own creative process as both leader and doer. 9 It would be dangerously reductive, however, to conclude that Richards has privileged access to the process for which these songs can serve as tools simply as a result of phenotype. Rather, Grotowski understood that Richards’s attraction to the Afro-Caribbean songs and his capacity to reconnect with something perhaps analogous to the ritual processes to which they were historically linked provided a fruitful terrain for discovery. Richards’s aesthetics and sensibilities were unavoidably informed by the work to which he was exposed in his formative years, including his study of jazz music as well as his father’s deep involvement with African American theatrical and cultural performance. Thus I would suggest that the specificity of Richards’s identity is not irrelevant to a critical understanding of Art as vehicle, and that historicization of this body of work in relation to African diasporic performance offers a productive lens for future inquiry.

While some might share Kott’s curiosity about whether Grotowski’s alleged “Method” can be separated from his metaphysics (1970:201), I regard any consideration of Grotowski’s legacy that focuses solely on his contributions to theatre practice as significantly wide of the mark, fetishizing as an end what for Grotowski was only ever a means. To validate solely the theatrical aspect of his legacy effectively negates everything Grotowski accomplished after the age of 36. Although such a reading might be alluring to those who view the productions of the Laboratory Theatre as the pinnacle of Grotowski’s achievement, I maintain that his mature research is far too important to be minimized in deference to postmodern skepticism or to accommodate discomfort with energetic processes for which Western discourse lacks both conceptual and linguistic precision. When I discuss the subtler dimensions of the work of Art as vehicle with my friend Daniel Mroz, a director who has made a prolonged study of Asian meditative and martial disciplines, he comprehends instantly that Grotowski’s articulation of a transformation

8. The conjunction of this African aspect with physical organicity, something articulated by both Grotowski and Richards, is rendered problematic by historic patterns of reducing the black man to his body as a strategy for upholding racist domination. I understand Grotowski’s articulation of this conjunction to be specific to what he saw as the possibilities and obstructions at work in Richards as an individual, rather than commentin in any abstract way on organicity and black embodiment.

9. Grotowski used the word “doer” rather than actor to refer to the artists contributing to research in Art as vehicle, highlighting the etymological root of act/or as “one who does” and marking the separation of performance from mimesis in his work of that period. The term features prominently in both “From the Theatre Company to Art as vehicle” (1995) and “Performer” ([1988] 1997). In the latter text—which Grotowski explicitly told me was intended to help Richards apprehend certain possibilities of artistic and interior development that Grotowski saw as within the younger artist’s grasp—Grotowski explains his concept of Performer as man of knowledge in relation to African, Asian, and First Nations traditional practices.
in quality of energy from dense to light, *tamasic* to *sattvic*, is neither metaphoric nor nebulous, but rather refers to concrete processes that can be activated by means of embodied practice. In my doctoral dissertation (1996), I referred to Art as vehicle as a form of embodied prayer, citing as analogues traditions such as Mevlevi dervish dancing, in which a codified artistic form becomes the visible container for an intention directed elsewhere. Given the volatility of religious terminology and the anxieties to which it gives rise, allow me to instead propose “dynamic meditation” as a (hopefully) less fraught articulation of the Workcenter’s exploration of alternative potentialities of performing arts. Insofar as Art as vehicle explicitly situates performance as a means, a practical approach to something beyond theatre-as-representation (a something Grotowski refused to codify or express in sectarian terms, referencing with frustrating but conscious generality as the “higher connection”), its aims are unfashionably contrary to dominant trends of postmodern thought, although by no means alien to the ritual function of theatre at its ancient roots in Greek and Egyptian Mysteries.

From the earliest period of his work, Grotowski explicitly stated his aim of finding a way to restore to theatre its ritual function. Having arrived at the conclusion that such an aim could not be accomplished within contemporary theatre, Grotowski explored the improvisatory encounters of paratheatre and the techniques of sources that he located in the embodied practices of subaltern cultures before returning in his final years to an emphasis on theatre craft—but a vision of craft that metabolized the understanding he had gained through his fieldwork, a practical, ethnographic investigation of cultural performance and the potential psychophysiological efficacy encoded within selected performative artifacts. Through his collaboration with Richards and the team working closely alongside them, Grotowski ultimately realized within the framework of the research of his Ritual Arts period a performance practice that combined artistry and precision with an interior dynamic he articulated in relation to the “objectivity of ritual,” an opus capable of exerting a discernible impact on “the body, the heart and the head of the doers” (in Richards 1995:122). If the spectator’s presence is rendered secondary and primary attention is given to the efficacy of the ritual process for the doing.
persons, does that mean that what takes place is not theatre? Surely it is restored behavior, in Schechner’s terms, minutely repeatable—a thousand thousand times behaved.

Elsewhere I have discussed the methodological challenges resulting from the ambivalent positioning of Grotowski’s work at the intersection of theatrical and esoteric traditions (see Wolford 1998, 2002). Nowhere is this challenge more acute than in relation to the misunderstandings that have already begun to emerge regarding Grotowski’s repeated use of the phrase “transmission in the traditional sense,” misunderstandings to which I realize I may have contributed. Let me explain. In response to Thibaudat’s question regarding whether transmission in the sense he articulated was necessarily a singular phenomenon, Grotowski clarified that it was not always the case:

though a long time is needed and when one is old, strength and health have their limits. Practical teaching burns energy and brute energy diminishes with age. And yet there are several forms and fields of transmission that don’t carry this “global” notion, but which pertain to certain aspects of the actor’s craft or work on oneself, to borrow Stanislavsky’s term. And in this sense, I have worked and I work with several people—actors, directors, practitioners, researchers—simply to be of service to others in the framework of their own quest ([1995] 2007:121).

Seeing myself reflected in Grotowski’s reference to researchers and others with whom he worked to be of service in their own quest, I found affirmation in this statement and so cited it in a way that validated my own experience, adding the following gloss:

Interpreting transmission in this way, each of Grotowski’s near collaborators has benefited from his teaching. […]Grotowski’s sincere and deep desire to do what he can to help others prepare for their respective destinies is broadly diffused, extending to all whom he admits into his circle. But Richards’ position is admittedly unique. (Wolford 1996:293)

One of the things that sometimes made it challenging to work with Grotowski as an editor was his intransigent insistence that any word for which he had articulated a particular, specialized usage (e.g. Performer, verticality, transmission) not be employed in proximity to more quotidian uses of the term, as he maintained that such juxtaposition could only create confusion and dilute the particularity with which he sought to invest language. By latching on to Grotowski’s reflections about transmission in the nonglobal sense, I fear that I have undermined this crucial distinction, leading other scholars to perpetuate and compound the error. Allain, for example, cites various collaborators of Grotowski’s from diverse periods, rationalizing that, “Even if the actual, direct transmission is carried through Richards, the inheritors are plural and not singular and the theatre richer for that. In such a broad context, how can we talk about a single legacy?” (2005:58).

Grotowski was a brilliant and generous man who taught many things to many people, providing crucial lessons and guidance for many, myself included. Yet it is at best disingenuous and at worst dishonest not to recognize that what passed between him and Richards was unique. Over the years I’ve developed greater appreciation for Grotowski’s circumspection regarding language and now understand that referring to profoundly dissimilar experiences by the same name can only create confusion; by way of analogy, both the tiger and the tabby are felines, but only a fool would fail to recognize the difference between them. And so I have come to accept that reiterating Grotowski’s words about transmission in the nonglobal sense runs the risk of diluting what he insisted was a unique phenomenon in his lifetime. After all, transmission in traditional contexts remains, like discipleship, a dynamic relation that implies reciprocal consent. Regarding Allain’s reference to plural inheritors, it’s undoubtedly true that numerous theatre artists have benefited deeply from what they learned while working under Grotowski’s supervision, and that such experiences have profoundly and lastingly enriched their subsequent independent work. Indeed, much of the work generated by Grotowski’s former colleagues merits
historical and critical attention in its own right. But precisely for this reason, it’s imperative to
differentiate Grotowski’s own work and the legacy he took such efforts to ensure—which is
adamantly and unambiguously singular—from the broader dispersal of his influence in the lives
of others who worked alongside him, but without this aim of global transmission. Although both
Grotowski’s praxis and his articulation of the sacred dimensions of performance have enriched
theatre culture in ways both implicit and overt, the self-described “former stage director” did
everything he could to emphasize that after the premiere of *Apocalypsis cum figuris* in 1969,
theatre per se was no longer his primary concern. As Filipowicz sagely observes, insofar as the
research of Grotowski’s final years “falls within the long tradition of mysticism, then its potential
for serving the theatre’s practical needs of the moment is really beside the point” (1991:182).

What Grotowski articulated as a conscious effort and responsibility to pass to another’s hands
a living tradition of embodied knowledge—a tradition of which he and Richards together, each
in his function, were simultaneously creators and inheritors—must be recognized as a phenom-
emon of an entirely different order than the relatively widespread adoption of artistic styles and
pedagogical techniques inspired by poor theatre. Although the majority of recent workshops,
candlelit performances, and academic exchanges that claim indebtedness to Grotowski empha-
size the contributions of his Theatre of Productions phase, this was not at all the legacy with
which the uncompromising hermit was concerned, having viewed theatre as an “abandoned
house” that he himself departed more than a quarter century before his death.

Not long ago someone asked me: “Do you want the Center of Grotowski to continue
after you disappear?” I responded “no” simply because I responded to the intention of
the question; it seemed to me the intention was: “Do you want to create a System which stops
at the point your research stopped, and that then becomes taught?” To this I responded
“no.” But I must acknowledge that if the intention had been: “Do you want that this
tradition, which in a certain place and a certain time you have reopened, do you want
therefore that this research on Art as vehicle, that someone continue it,” I would not be
able to respond with the word “no.” (Grotowski 1995:133)

Throughout his final period of work, Grotowski single-mindedly labored to ensure that this
reopened tradition might survive as a living practice; this, he explicitly stated, was how he chose
to repay the debt he felt to life in reciprocity for the knowledge made available to him. Thus
it is crucial to differentiate between the multiple expropriations of Grotowski’s aesthetics and
techniques of actor training on one hand, and the explicit singularity of Richards’s apprentice-
ship on the other.

*Art as vehicle poses in practice questions linked to craft as such, legitimate on either extremity of the chain of
performing arts.*


The mythology surrounding the Workcenter in Pontedera, Italy, has tended to overemphasize
a monastic image, a hermitage, something isolated and protected from the world around it.
Certainly there was some truth to this notion in the first years after the Workcenter’s founding.
In the period of its gestation, the research of Art as vehicle needed time to articulate itself, to
become deeply rooted in Richards and he in it, before it was made available to a larger circle. Yet
since the early 1990s, increasing numbers of performing artists and other interested persons
have witnessed the Actions created by Richards and his colleagues. The Workcenter frequently
invites selected artists and companies to witness the research done in Pontedera, demonstrate
their own creative work and approach to training, and then engage in dialogue.

This impulse toward progressively greater engagement with contemporary theatre culture
flourished from 2003 to 2006 in the framework of Tracing Roads Across, an ambitious itinerary
of creative research and exchange sponsored by the European Union’s Culture 2000 program
along with arts organizations, cultural institutions, and universities in 11 nations. Described as a
“three-year traveling cultural dialogue,” Tracing Roads Across opened the Workcenter’s praxis to audiences both within and beyond Europe (tracingroadsacross.info). Administered and coordinated by Gülsen Gürses, artistic director of Theater des Augenblicks in Vienna, Austria, Tracing Roads Across featured conferences and symposia, film screenings, work exchanges, and extended workshops, along with ongoing development and presentation of all branches of the Workcenter’s research. Activities included multiple residencies in Pontedera, Vienna, and at the Moscow Theatre School of Dramatic Art (then under the artistic direction of Anatoly Vasilyev), along with working sessions in Bulgaria, Crete, Cyprus, France, Poland, Tunisia, and Turkey. In each location, individuals were invited to witness the Workcenter’s research in Art as vehicle and project The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts, and to take part in conferences and open discussions; events were free and open to the public, and translators were provided to facilitate dialogue. The majority of residencies lasted from one to two months, allowing members of the Workcenter team to interact deeply with their host communities. Particularly in smaller villages, as for example during a two-month residency in Zaros, Crete—where presentations took place in sites ranging from a small Greek Orthodox church to a tavern to a community center—genuine dialogue occurred between Workcenter artists and local residents. In each location, events were fully attended, bringing together residents who knew nothing of the Workcenter’s research with performing artists, scholars, and students who followed the project with greater or lesser frequency for its duration. Tracing Roads Across also explicitly incorporated written and video documentation, with an international documentation team of emerging and established

10. While tickets are sold at a modest fee for the performances developed within project The Bridge, One breath left, and Dies Irae: The Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show (both of which were frequently presented in theatre spaces), individuals invited to witness the work of Art as vehicle are never charged admission. This distinction strikes me as significant insofar as it implicitly situates the observer not as a consumer but rather as a colleague in the craft.
scholars who have since continued to collaborate in various dyads, and a film team led by Jacques Vetter that has evocatively captured the Workcenter’s opuses both in Pontedera and elsewhere, most notably in historic churches in Turkey and France. In addition to *One breath left* (2000) and later *Dies Irae: The Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show* (2004)—performances developed within project The Bridge that I discuss in greater detail below—individuals had the opportunity to witness both *Action*, on which Richards and his colleagues have carried out continuous work since 1994,\(^1\) and a new opus in the domain of Art as vehicle, first titled *The Twin: An Action in Creation* and since 2005 simply *An Action in Creation*.

Richards’s initial impetus to create a new opus traces back to 2000. Although *Action* remains an important element of the Workcenter’s praxis, Richards became aware of the need for newer team members to have a structure within which they could more actively seek to discover for themselves the interior process he articulates as “inner action,” one in which space was available for them to take on progressively greater responsibility as their work matured. Richards deliberately refrained from moving at the outset toward a tightly condensed structure comparable to *Action*, working with team members both collectively and individually to create multiple hours’ worth of performance material structured in modular sequences. Until midway through 2005, nearly the whole of the research team was involved in development of *The Twin: An Action in Creation*, after which point Richards continued work on the emerging structure with a smaller group. He also eliminated “The Twin” from the title of the piece, explaining that he preferred not to preemptively shape expectations, particularly while the structure was still being discovered. In the version that emerged during the final months of Tracing Roads Across and has since been a focus of ongoing work, Richards leads three younger team members: Cécile Berthe, Francesc Torrent Gironella, and Pei Hwee Tan. Each has matured remarkably not only in terms of performance craft but also in regard to their respective capacities to access the subtler dimensions of the work in Art as vehicle since 2005 when they began to work with Richards in the more intimate dynamic of the smaller team.

In notable contrast to the Workcenter’s supposed isolation, the process of developing *An Action in Creation* was carried on largely in public view, regularly open to witnesses throughout the duration of Tracing Roads Across. This way of working, fully exposed, created an extremely vulnerable situation for the doer, since in addition to maintaining attention to all elements of performance craft (integrity of the score, the technical elements of the songs and spoken texts, contacts with partners), s/he must also remain permeable to the process of interior ascension at the core of Art as vehicle. These working sessions typically accommodated from 20 to 30 witnesses depending on the size of the venue, and each presentation was prefaced by a short verbal introduction by Richards in which he contextualized his choice to open the Workcenter’s creative process to public view and introduced the textual material that provided the point of departure for the work.

As Attisani demonstrates in “Acta Gnosis,” the texts of the Nag Hammadi library, most particularly the Gospel according to Thomas, were central to Grotowski’s later work and material to which he returned time and again. “The Hymn of the Pearl” from the Gnostic Acts of Thomas was a text to which Grotowski was especially drawn. This parable recounts a Prince’s journey from the East to an earthly land where he must steal a pearl guarded by a devouring serpent before being allowed to return home. After arriving to the land where the serpent resides, the Prince disguises himself by adopting the locals’ mode of dress and partaking of their food, after which he falls into a sleep of stupor, forgetting himself and his task. The Prince’s

---

\(^1\) Richards and his colleagues continue to work on *Action*, a performance structure on which they have carried out continuous research since 1994. In an essay forthcoming in the collection I am coediting with Attisani and Biagini, *Doorways: Performing as a Vehicle at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards*, I address the growth and development of the structure over 10 years, reflecting on the ways in which the work has shifted to encompass the arrival and departure of individuals from the research team.
parents, the Rulers of the East, sends an eagle to wake him and remind him of his duty, after which he succeeds in wresting the pearl from the serpent and reascends to the East, where he is reunited with his parents and his vigilant twin, the Brother who remembers everything. On one level the text is a straightforward quest narrative evoking a descent from the Absolute to incarnation and a possible return. The way the text is dealt with in *An Action in Creation* is not concerned with representing this narrative; rather, the text becomes a sort of scrying mirror in which each of the doers is invited to experience for themselves this journey of anamnesis. “What might this story be about?” Richards asks:

Might it be an inner journey? If yes, the question is, is it possible to enact this again? And how? Maybe the story is about each one of us. The sleep of stupor is here now. The devouring serpent is here now. And what about the pearl, the Brother with his capacity of remembering, and the doorway to the house of the Father? Are they also here? Maybe this foreign land is here now. It’s our daily life. (2008:162)

Unlike previous Actions, in which the process of inner ascension is approached primarily through song, spoken text predominates in *An Action in Creation*, with the quest story repeated multiple times in fragments, a refrain that functions for the doers as a tool to aid in remembering their purpose.\(^\text{12}\)

*That which will remain after me cannot be on the order of imitation, but of surpassing. In the same way, I did not imitate Stanislavsky, I searched for what was possible after. A research cannot be limited to a single life. It is a matter of several generations.*


Tracing Roads Across concluded with a 2006 symposium in Pontedera that also marked the 20th anniversary of the Workcenter’s founding. After the symposium, conference presenters and artists from the Workcenter gathered in a small restaurant for a final dinner, a farewell for some, since the conclusion of the project also marked the end of several team members’ residencies. After drinking much wine, it was already closer to morning than night when some members of the Workcenter along with Kris Salata and myself retired to an apartment shared by two of the actors with a bottle of cachaça and another of Tuscan red. “So,” one of the women asked about my prior acquaintance with the Workcenter, which stretched back to the early ’90s, “does that mean you knew Mario before?” The preposition with which her question ended, curiously pregnant, referred not to the time prior to Grotowski’s death—she herself had known him then as well—but rather prior to the emergence of his uncannily subtle perception and singular presence, seeking intimation of an earlier period when he might have been “just Mario.”

Barba speaks of the time he spent with Grotowski in Poland (1962–1964) as his apprenticeship in strategy (Barba 1999). During the years Mario Biagini worked alongside Grotowski in Pontedera (from 1986 until Grotowski’s death), I surmise that the former stage director taught Mario everything he could convey on that topic along with a great deal more, ranging far beyond matters relating strictly to performing arts. A student of ancient languages with a deep knowledge of Sanskrit texts, Biagini shared with Grotowski not only an abiding interest in techniques of interior development rooted in an Indian cultural context, but also (if my intuition is correct) a common orientation in relation to yogic practice. I perceive Richards’s way to be different, something in the nature of his process manifesting as an unguarded and lucid openness, a lack of calculation sometimes foolishly mistaken for naïveté. In Biagini, I’ve long believed Grotowski found someone with a sufficiently analogous mental process to be able to absorb certain aspects of his lifelong study that could only bear fruit for another of a similar

---

\(^{12}\) For further discussion of *An Action in Creation*, see Attisani (2006), Salata (2007), Richards (2008), and Attisani, Biagini and Wulford Wylam (forthcoming).
type. I’ve ceased to be surprised by Biagini’s uncanny prescience and his unsettling habit of responding less to what is said than what is meant, but after years of lamenting how few artists inspired by Grotowski’s practice demonstrate even a fraction of his wisdom and profound understanding of human psychology, I’m consistently humbled by the extent to which Biagini embodies precisely those qualities.

A key contributor to the Workcenter’s research since shortly after its founding in 1986 and its Associate Director since 2000, Biagini’s gifts were already in evidence by the time I first met him in the early ‘90s, manifest in his exceptional capacity to serve as both catalyst and resource for the transformation of energy central to Art as vehicle. In a conversation with Salata, Richards acknowledges Biagini’s “capacities and extraordinary human presence” as the result of protracted development. “[W]hen one stays in this work for a long time,” Richards observes, “one incarnates the work” (Richards 2004). More than two decades of praxis of Art as vehicle has transformed each of them, by no means solely in regard to the maturation and refinement of their performance craft. In both Richards and Biagini, some tangible residue of a subtle rain has left its traces over the years, polishing something within them to translucence.

Richards and Biagini have been colleagues since the earliest period of the Pontedera work. Theirs is an extraordinary collaborative relationship, the initial steps of which are recorded in Richards’s first book, where he repeatedly shares examples drawn from his work with “B.” “From that adventurous period, full of surprises,” Biagini recollects, “I remember the strange sensation that Grotowski was showing me the road toward finding my brother—a brother never met but always sought—the road toward perceiving and recognizing, toward opening my eyes” (Biagini 2008:153). Richards likewise uses the metaphor of brotherhood to describe their working relationship, noting that as he progressively took responsibility for leading other actors in the work, Biagini has increasingly “been helping, almost like a younger brother, a brother, assisting and supporting in an extraordinary way” (2008:19). Although Richards is just two years older than his Italian colleague, his position of leadership within the work underscores his seniority.

In public conferences, Richards and Biagini complement one another seamlessly, shifting responsibility for taking the lead in a given moment as required by the demands of a specific task, each supporting and challenging the other in a spirit of attentive rigor and profound generosity. The foundation of their remarkable collaborative relationship is forged from a relentless pursuit of integrity in creative work, an insistence on self-surpassing that concretely models the influence of Grotowski’s teaching in their work and lives. Beyond this deep mutual respect there is yet another dimension clearly perceptible in their professional interactions, something Grotowski spoke of as “solidarity in ascent,” a profound commitment to supporting one another in service to the work.
Biagini is skeptical regarding the notion of a vast Grotowskian fraternity. “But what does it mean?” he asked, his eyes narrowing in concentration as often happens when he begins to analyze a point. “A Grotowskian Method? It is absurd. There is no such thing. People working in Grotowski’s ‘spirit’? What’s that? Only an escape from personal responsibility into imagination” (2007). Biagini’s rejection of a “so-called Grotowski System” is consistent with the late director’s insistence that he had no method, and that the ambition to create one was a product of his youthful identification with Stanislavsky; although Grotowski’s deep regard for the Russian master’s work was lifelong, he quickly gave up the aspiration of creating a similarly comprehensive approach to actor training. “Surely the only ‘Grotowski Method,’ ” Biagini continued, “consists of looking for your own way, in your own time, and with your colleagues of the moment” (2007). Indeed, Grotowski repeatedly warned artists inspired by his approach to theatrical work against merely copying his techniques, but rather urged them in a sense to metabolize them, to use his praxis as a point of departure for creating their own practical solutions, approaches that would make sense in the context of their own work and lives. This sentiment is clearly articulated in “Reply to Stanislavsky” (in this issue), where Grotowski dismisses slavishly imitative approaches as artistically barren.

Beginning in 1998, the year before Grotowski’s death, Biagini was given responsibility for guiding the artistic development of four young actors from Singapore, a task that ultimately evolved into a new line of research within the Workcenter, project The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts. Ang Gey Pin, a Singaporean Chinese actress who had been a member of the Workcenter team in 1994, made an application to return, as did three other members of her company, Theatre OX, an ensemble then in the process of dissolution. The four women were accepted as a resident group, and at Grotowski’s and Richards’s suggestion Biagini guided development of their work on theatre craft. Under Biagini’s direction, an opus began to emerge through the women’s research involving Chinese traditional songs, One breath left, initially presented to the public at Fondazione Pontedera Teatro in April 2000. Throughout the germination of the project, Richards supervised Biagini and advised on development of the piece, creating an unusual and productive dynamic of collaborative direction. Richards also worked individually with Ang on the Chinese songs included in her score. “This line [of research],” Biagini explains,

isn’t strictly to do with the scope of theatre. It’s connected rather to what we do in our work on traditional songs. We approach ancient songs, selected not to create a structure as spectacle, but to see what is possible for the human being who sings, to discover a new possibility of experience, of perception.” (Richards and Biagini [2002] 2007:302)

The premise and narrative frame of One breath left were simple, focused on a woman (Ang) on her deathbed as she remembered the events of her life. After several years of work and the arrival and departure of various members of the creative team, a separate performance emerged around the spine of the woman’s deathbed experience, one in which Biagini figured centrally as an antiheroic director figure whose manipulation of the woman in a bizarre ritual game becomes the apparent cause of her death. Titled Dies Irae: The Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show, the performance was presented to the public from 2004 through 2006, often in nontheatrical spaces or convertible performance spaces that accommodated from 70 to 100, though it was also performed outdoors, most strikingly in a valley in Cappadocia, Turkey, in July and August 2005. The text of Dies Irae, like that of Grotowski’s Apocalypsis cum figuris, is a montage composed of fragments of prose and verse from multiple sources. Substantial passages of T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets (1936–42) in the script suggest a subtly ironic citation of Grotowski’s theatrical masterpiece, though in the Workcenter’s production the subject is more closely linked

13. All translations from “One breath left: considerazioni” are mine. The full English translation will be included in the forthcoming Doorways collection.
to the struggle within one’s own soul, for which the Biblical Day of Judgment and apocalypse become a metaphor, than to what Grotowski termed “the apocalypse of a hangover” ([1969] 2008a:47). Yet it is not in these literary allusions that I most sensed an active conversation with Grotowski, but rather in the extent to which the performance confronted the question of what might be possible after Grotowski, engaging not only the culmination of the director’s work in Theatre of Productions, but also the subtle interior dimension central to the research of Art as vehicle.

Although the textual montage and mise-en-scène of Dies Iræ cited aesthetic idioms characteristic of poor theatre, the performance—with its bright electric lighting, minutely structured score, and fluid adaptation to the different contexts and environments in which it was presented—was refreshingly void of the candlelit clichés of Grotowskiisms. Performed on a traverse stage defined by a rectangular fabric floor in a vivid red, Dies Iræ eschewed the limitations of theatrical realism, incorporating fixed tableaux and rhythmic movement, stark images of bodies in extremis. Individual and choral singing and liturgical chant alternated with spoken dialogue, each functioning as equally privileged carriers of meaning. Attisani describes the performance: “everything happens in a banquet for the eyes and the ears, and then for the heart, lasting a little longer than one hour, which is a touching reply to Grotowski, because the separation once needed—between actor and doer and between Art as vehicle and Theatre as presentation—ends here and at last long theatre becomes both again, and that is not a small thing” (2004:26).

Conceptualized as “a bridge stretching from the world of the theatre to the investigations on Art as vehicle” (Workcenter 2003), the research conducted within project The Bridge explores the possibilities of combining two disparate vectors of intention within a single performative structure, one directed toward the observer and the other toward the doing person. Richards uses the metaphor of skin to suggest the relation of this more overtly theatrical branch of inquiry to Art as vehicle, observing that the skin of a living organism is composed of multiple layers: the epidermis, visibly and tangibly interacting with the world, and the subdermal levels receiving nourishment from the blood (in Attisani and Biagini 2007:305).

While this branch of investigation differs from Art as vehicle insofar as the construction of montage in the spectator’s perception explicitly lies within its aims, the performances developed within project The Bridge opened a space within which the actors could explore the subtle process of energy transformation central to the Workcenter’s research in that domain. This phenomenon manifested with particular force in Dies Iræ through the axial conflict between its male and female protagonists (Biagini and Ang), but was also clearly perceptible in the work of other team members, quite poignantly in a line of actions developed by Elisa Poggelli and introduced in the final months of the production’s evolution.

In “From the Theatre Company to Art as vehicle,” Grotowski used the image of a chain with many links to represent the relationship between conventional aesthetic performance, what he termed “art as presentation,” and the work of Art as vehicle (in Richards 1995:118–21). He understood these two realms as linked, though he also emphasized the different vectors of attention at work in these disparate domains, with “art as presentation” concerned primarily with creating an impact on the spectator and “Art as vehicle” focused rather on the interior process of the doing person. Grotowski acknowledged the difficulty of striving to combine work oriented toward Art as vehicle with theatrical production in a single performative structure, saying that he himself had investigated these disparate registers in two distinct periods of his research. Theoretically he acknowledged that it should be possible, though he also warned of certain dangers:

Figure 7. Mario Biagini, Johanna Porkola, and Souphiène Amiar in Dies Irae at Gül Valdisi in Cappadocia, Turkey, 2005. (Photo by Frits Meyst; courtesy of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards)
If one works on Art as vehicle, but wants to use this as something spectacular, the emphasis easily shifts and, therefore, in addition to every other difficulty, the sense of all this risks to become equivocal. So we could say that it’s a very difficult question to resolve. But if I truly had faith in the fact that, in spite of everything, it could be resolved, surely I would be tempted to do it, I admit. (Grotowski 1995:132)

Reflecting on the young theatre artists who introduced similar questions in their response to the Workcenter’s research, Grotowski elaborated:

If this question is posed on a mental level, formulated, methodologic, etc., then I tell them that they should not follow us in this field, that they should not look for Art as vehicle in their work. But if the question is suspended—in the air, almost in the unconscious, to manifest itself later in some way in the interior work or in the work on oneself during the rehearsals—I don’t react against this. In this case the question outlines itself, but is not formulated, not even in thought. The moment in which it becomes formulated is very dangerous, because it can transform the thing into an alibi to justify the lack of quality of the performance. To think “I will do a performance which is the ‘work on oneself,’” can mean in the world as it is: “I have the liberty to not do well my work in the play, because in truth I am looking for other riches.” And here we are already at the catastrophe. (Grotowski 1995:132–33)

The research conducted in the framework of project The Bridge, like all the Workcenter’s performance practices, emphasizes artistic competence and credibility as indispensable prerequisites, thus avoiding the danger of transforming the aspirations underlying Art as vehicle into an alibi for self-indulgence or shoddy craft. For newer members of the research team, work within project The Bridge often serves a pedagogical function, providing a venue where they can hone artistic skills while striving to become receptive to the more subtle aspects of the Workcenter’s praxis. Richards cautions:

Nevertheless, it’s important to understand that the Workcenter hasn’t suddenly begun to “do theatre.” Our line of research is the same, regarding what can happen to a human being who does within a performative act. With project The Bridge, we are hunting for a new link: a theatrical event that creates a bridge, penetrating inside the essential work. (Richards and Biagini 2007:309)

This alchemical pursuit clearly differentiates the work developed under Biagini’s direction from performance-as-commodity, representing a step forward into what Grotowski himself regarded as the tempting unknown.

In viewing the different branches of research with which members of the Workcenter are currently engaged, it seems to me that they have found a way to transform this chain Grotowski spoke of into a sort of dynamic continuum, the disparate links dissolving to allow free circulation between something we can call “acting,” and something else, rare and ineffable, that cannot be contained by the term. Here the performers’ doing embraces the spectator’s gaze, even if the more subtle aspects of their effort challenge the limits of scopophilic perception. That which circulates within Dies Iræ, subterranean yet almost tangibly evident, is nourished by the same sources tapped within the work of Art as vehicle. Seen in this light, the research of project The Bridge demonstrates the healthy growth and adaptation Grotowski repeatedly insisted were essential for a living tradition to flourish. Developing alongside ongoing research in the domain of Art as vehicle, this active inquiry into the permeability of different registers of performance—pursued with tireless integrity and attention to artisanal competence—is crucial precisely insofar as it does not merely rehearse/recite but rather extends a body of investigation, adapting in response to time and circumstance and the needs of its creators.

The conclusion of Tracing Roads Across also marked the end of the eight-year process of development that generated both One breath left and Dies Iræ. Following a hiatus of several
months in 2006, the Workcenter has embarked on a new phase of work supported by the city of Wrocław and administered through the recently renamed Grotowski Institute (previously the Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski’s Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Research). From 2007 to 2009, the Workcenter will spend three months of each year in residence in Wrocław, presenting their research and conducting workshops and exchanges with theatre artists. The structure of the project, which allows the Workcenter to remain in Pontedera for the bulk of each year, affords much needed time for focused research after the demanding itinerary of Tracing Roads Across. Biagini has recently begun supervising a new program, aptly titled Open Program; since that work is in its earliest stage, it’s impossible to predict what form it will take or when, though I anticipate that Open Program will provide a site for Biagini to continue investigating the possibilities of moving toward more recognizably theatrical performance while maintaining the interior dimension of the Workcenter’s research. Under Richards’s leadership, work continues on both Action and An Action in Creation, with newer members of the team continuing to make significant advances as they deepen their capacities to use these performative artifacts as tools.

Concerning the matter of Grotowski’s legacy, understood as the reopening of a tradition and the evolution of a complex body of research, it seems only fitting to give Richards the final word:

Regarding the heritage of Grotowski, I don’t know... Yes, I know that I am looking to protect something. What? Something that he passed to me. That he put in our hands, and that is a way of work. But to protect this something doesn’t mean to put it in a box—like a concept, a technique, an ideology, or a system. Something was put into your hands and you go forward—will you also look to pass it into the hands of another? Maybe this is the heritage of Grotowski, the fact that it should arrive in someone else’s hands? It’s something alive. Not an idea. Not something static like a concept. It’s a ceaseless battle for a quality—in art, in your engagement in art. It’s not like—yes, like when you finish your studies and you can put that nice hat on your head and the objective is reached. It’s more like a living plant that can die. What has been passed to you can die, and you know that if it doesn’t grow, it will die. Maybe a tradition is this: to recognize that something precious has a value that can go beyond your life. (Richards and Biagini 2007:308)

References

Allain, Paul

Attisani, Antonio
2004 “Figure dell’ira in un balagàn.” Primafila 105:22–26.

Attisani, Antonio, and Mario Biagini, eds.

Attisani, Antonio, Mario Biagini, and Lisa Wolford Wylam, eds.

Barba, Eugenio

Biagini, Mario
2007 Personal conversation with author. Wrocław, Poland, 8 November.
Braun, Kazimierz
The British Grotowski Project

Carnicke, Sharon

Filipowicz, Halina

Grotowski, Jerzy

KO Theater Works Inc.

Kolankiewicz, Leszek

Kott, Jan

Nunns, Stephen

Pilgrim Theatre

Richards, Thomas
2004 Personal conversation with Kris Salata. Vienna, Austria, 6 November.

Richards, Thomas, and Mario Biagini

Salata, Kris
Schechner, Richard


2006  Personal communication with author, 13 June.

Sellar, Tom

Słowiaiak, James, and Jairo Cuesta

Taviani, Ferdinando

Toporkov, Vasily Osipovich

Trav S.D.

UCLA Live

Williams, Raymond

Wolford, Lisa


Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards