

ZAR AND OTHER MICROCULTURES OF "GROTLAND"

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On December 3, 2007, I attended a lecture/demonstration at the University of California, Irvine by Teatr ZAR, the resident company at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, Poland—a company about whom both Seth Baumrin and Marvin Carlson recently wrote in these pages.¹ The demonstration took place in "Grotowski's Barn."² The week before, the producing organization Arden2 had brought the U.S. debut of ZAR's production *Evangelie Dzieciństwa* (Gospels of Childhood) to the UCLA Live International Theatre Festival, where it had received a rapturous review from the *Los Angeles Times*.³ As we entered the Barn, we obeyed the slightly imperious commandment posted on the door, "All shoes must be removed before entering, by order of Jerzy Grotowski." (The floor is polished wood.) There followed a detailed presentation of ZAR's physical work, as well as the songs that they had learned during their expeditions to the Caucasus and Greece. Robert Cohen, who had originally brought Grotowski to Irvine, remarked in a short speech after the presentation that ZAR's work had powerfully recalled for him the chanting and physical exercises that Grotowski himself had led during the 1980s in the Barn, the fields outside the Barn, and the Yurt next door. After Cohen's remarks, the members of ZAR entered the Yurt and performed one last song while we, the witnesses, peered through the windows and doors at them in the sacred space. It was as if some shamans from Grotowski's country—not Poland, but a special country that only Grotowski and his followers inhabit—had come to sing a kind of musical good-bye for him that Monday afternoon in southern California.⁴

ZAR is one of many inhabitants of what I'm calling "Grotland." It's an artistic territory that exists both in and outside of Poland today. In an article entitled "Grotowski's Ghosts," British theatre scholar Paul Allain contends that "Grotowski's . . . influence ranges across countries and cultures," and that therefore to speak "only in terms of Poland would limit and distort the much wider impact Grotowski has had."⁵ This is, no doubt, true: In the United States alone, there are a number of theatre companies whose founders worked with Grotowski himself and continue to be powerfully influenced by his work—to name just two, James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta's New World Performance Laboratory in Cleveland and Matt Mitler's Theatre Dzieci (Children) in New York. Moreover, there are others whose founders have

worked with collaborators of Grotowski—for example, Ben Spatz's Urban Research Theatre in New York and Stacy Klein's Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, Massachusetts. Nevertheless, there are certain trends in what might be termed the artistic customs of Grotoland that are particularly evident in Polish theatre, especially theatre of the "alternative" or, as the Poles sometimes say, *offowy*, type.

There are, for example, groups who, to a greater or lesser extent, mainly emphasize the physical aspect of Grotowski's work. During the heyday of Grotowski's Theatre of Productions phase, he had developed a series of exercises, called *exercices corporels* and *exercices plastiques*, that enabled the Laboratory Theatre actors to make physical demands on themselves that went beyond what their bodies could previously do. These exercises and Grotowski's idea that actors should use their bodies to construct a system of signs based on their own impulses have had a huge influence on many alternative theatre companies in Poland. Among these companies belong both groups whose founders worked directly with Jerzy Grotowski and those who worked with Grotowski's collaborators in the Laboratory Theatre. For example, the founder of Warsaw theatre company Studium Teatralne, Piotr Borowski, worked with Grotowski and Thomas Richards for seven years in at the Workcenter in Pontedera, Italy.⁶ I was able to see his company's production of *Hamlet* in July 2005 in Warsaw, and it struck me as a skillful and interesting piece of physical theatre, but only "Grotowskian" in the way its young actors were able to use their bodies as expressive instruments. Indeed, Borowski has said that he does not want his company to "be seen as followers of Grotowski but as independent."⁷

Many of the older alternative theatre companies, such as Poznań's Teatr Ósmego Dnia (the Theatre of the Eighth Day), claim Grotowski more categorically as an influence on their physical training. Ósmego Dnia, which in its early days worked with Teo Spychalski of the Laboratory Theatre, on their website describes their physical training:

The actors prepare themselves for improvisation through appropriate physical training, a tradition derived from the Laboratory Theatre of Jerzy Grotowski. This physical training has as its task the emotional and spiritual opening of the actor; it allows him or her to attain a state of psychic preparedness that permits broadening the boundaries of honest speech, of so-called "internal truth." In addition, work on the body inevitably leads to improvement of its expressiveness and

symbolic possibilities. Therefore the system of practical exercises during so-called warm-ups on the one hand aims in the direction of "the unknown," and on the other helps name "the unknown," shaping it into a precise and readable sign.⁸

This training results in a far less dancelike performance than Studium Teatralne's but still in what theatre historian Magdalena Gołaczyńska describes as acting "with their whole bodies, emotionally, with a manifestation of feeling characteristic of the 'Eighth' style."⁹ Body work is perhaps Grotowski's most lasting legacy in the culture of Grotoland, especially in the work of the Polish alternative theatres.

More connected to Grotowski's later research—research that was, ironically, carried out largely outside of Poland—are those Polish groups that combine Grotowski-inspired physicality with work on traditional or ancient song. These groups are principally connected to Grotowski through Włodzimierz Staniewski. Staniewski joined Grotowski in the early years of his paratheatrical research and left in 1977 to found the Gardzienice Center for Theatre Practices. In a certain sense, Staniewski and Grotowski in the 1980s and 1990s could be said to be engaging in almost parallel lines of research. While Grotowski investigated Mexican, Asian, and Haitian rituals, Staniewski carried out expeditions to border regions in eastern Poland; their musical interests both converged, however, in what Grotowski called "the cradle of the Occident,"¹⁰ which includes ancient Greece, the heritage that Staniewski's most recent productions have drawn from.

The successor groups to Gardzienice include Stowarzyszenie Teatralne Chorea (Chorea Theatrical Society), led by Tomasz Rodowicz (Gardzienice member for twenty-five years); Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre), led by Anna Zubrzycki (fifteen years) and Grzegorz Bral (five years);¹¹ and ZAR, led by Jarosław Fret (one year). These groups can all be described, in Lisa Wolford's term, as "microcultures that acknowledge a debt to Grotowski's teachings,"¹² and the particular debt they owe to Grotowski is based on his reverence for ancient song. Polish theatre scholar Juliusz Tyszka records that at the 1996 International School of Theatre Anthropology conference in Copenhagen, Grotowski said that for him and his collaborators in the Art as Vehicle phase of his work, "Song is an important problem. . . . Songs grow directly from reactions to life's travails; they come from something 'under the skin,' something wholly organic."¹³ Grotowski's insight—that "anonymous chants from distant times"¹⁴ serve as the best source material—



A crowd scene from the performance of *Gospels of Childhood* by Teatr ZAR

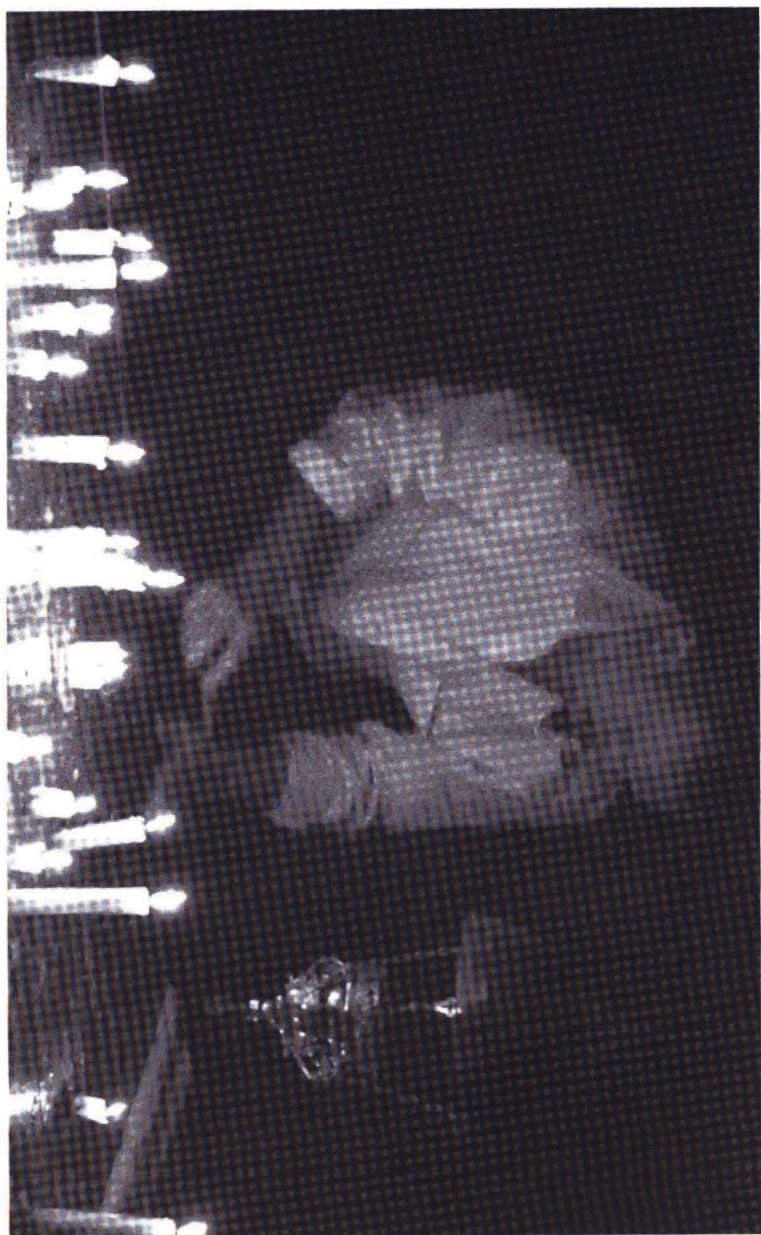


Kamila Klamut and Przemysław Błaszczyk in the performance of
Gospels of Childhood by Teatr ZAR

has also been central for Gardzienice and its successor groups, all of whom have based performances on ancient songs. Staniewski has said in an interview about Gardzienice's practice, "We start with the question, 'How do we sing it?'"¹⁵ Grotowski, however, seems to have started from almost the opposite premise: "When we begin to catch the vibratory qualities [of an ancient song], this finds its rooting in the impulses and the actions. And then, all of a sudden, that song begins to *sing us*. That ancient song sings me; I don't know anymore if I am finding that song or if I am that song."¹⁶ This is also the feeling that one gets from watching a performance of ZAR's *Gospels of Childhood*—not that the actor/singers are using the songs to tell a story, but that the songs somehow precede the story and even predetermine its telling.

In the case of Teatr ZAR, these songs have come from expeditions that ZAR director Fret and some of the other members of ZAR took to Georgia and Greece in 1999–2003. During these expeditions they worked with groups that have reconstructed old liturgical songs from the medieval Sioni Church in Tbilisi, Georgia, and with sacred music from the Orthodox Republic of Monks in Athos, Greece. Most importantly, they also traveled to Svaneti, an isolated region in the highest part of the Caucasus Mountains in northwestern Georgia, whose inhabitants speak Svan, an unwritten language in the South Caucasian language group (a language group that also includes Georgian). The Svans have a tradition of polyphonic singing that is nearly two thousand years old; Georgian polyphony is said to be the oldest in the world, and some of the Svanetian songs are the oldest and most complex in Georgia.¹⁷ Their oldest songs have many archaic words and syllables that are no longer understood by the Svans themselves, even though they use them in the songs. In its way, the existence of this music perfectly illustrates another of Grotowski's assertions about ancient song: "[T]he song becomes the meaning itself through the vibratory qualities; even if one doesn't understand the words, reception alone of the vibratory qualities is enough."¹⁸ ZAR's performance of the Svanetian songs rendered their vibratory qualities palpable not only in the production of *Gospels of Childhood* but even in the lecture/demonstration in the Barn.

ZAR also seems to be squarely situating itself in Grotland by the way that they define their relationship to the audience. As Tyszkiewicz writes, "Such a conventional understanding of theatre whereby one performs onstage for *somebody else* does not reflect Grotowski's approach."¹⁹ Rather, Grotowski took inspiration from the example of Juliusz Osterwa, who, in the period between the two world wars, founded the Reduta Theatre, Poland's first experimental



Przemysław Błaszczyk in the performance of *Gospels of Childhood* by Teatr ZAR

laboratory theatre: "Osterwa wrote about acting *in relation* to the viewer, face-to-face, full of acceptance and understanding. He warned about acting *for* the viewer though. Acting *for* is mediocre and pathetic. The only viewer one can act *for* is God."²⁰ Even during Grotowski's so-called Theatre of Productions phase, his actors "compared performing *for* an audience to prostitution and definitely broke away from such an approach to pursue their calling."²¹ Fret has said that ZAR's work is not *only* for the audience; it is as much for their own development as it is for the audience's edification.²²

This is a subtle, but perhaps crucial, difference between ZAR and the rest of the microcultures of Grotland, both within and outside of Poland. Like the other companies I've mentioned in this article, ZAR is deeply committed to ensemble work and to long-term development of projects; they have been working on *Gospels of Childhood* since 2003. They also share with many of the others an interest in some of the themes inherited from Polish Romanticism that Grotowski explored during his theatrical period. But their commitment to performing for themselves rather than primarily for the audience brings them closer to Grotowski's declaration, "The actor should . . . seek to *liberate* himself from the dependence on the spectator, if he doesn't want to lose the very seed of his creativity."²³ In this respect, ZAR is even more Grotowskian than such close collaborators with Grotowski as Eugenio Barba, who says instead "all actors meet the same problem: how to make their presence work for the spectator."²⁴ This difference can be seen in the way *Gospels of Childhood* is staged: the chorus stands mostly in a closed circle, with some members keeping their backs to the audience. Compare this, for example, to Gardzienice's recent production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, where the chorus is placed on a series of boxlike risers, full front to the audience.²⁵

ZAR's status as the resident company at the Grotowski Institute seems to have brought them closer to the spirit of Grotowski than many practitioners who actually worked with him in person. So it was only fitting that they came to sing a *zar*, a type of Svaneti funeral song that gives the theatre its name, for Grotowski in his Yurt. The word *zar* comes from the Georgian word *zari*, meaning "bell," and ZAR was able to briefly turn the Yurt into a kind of bell, vibrating with the sound of their voices. The Svaneti believe that the men who perform these songs embody a procession of ghosts who accompany the dead person during his or her funeral. But ZAR is more than just a group of ghostly avatars of Grotowski and his ideas; it is a lively microculture in its own right,

which is continuing to find its own way. It will be interesting to follow their further development and see how this company comes to grips with the paradox of performing for an audience but not *for* an audience—a paradox the master himself was never able to resolve.

NOTES

¹ See Seth Baumrin, "The Grotowski Centre in Wrocław: Performance at the Headquarters of Paratheatre?" and Marvin Carlson, "*Gospels of Childhood* at Brzezinka," *SEEP* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 31–40 and 97–9.

² This is a real barn that was brought to the Irvine campus and specially modified for Jerzy Grotowski's Objective Drama Research project when Grotowski was in residence in Irvine full-time in 1983–1986 and part-time in 1987–1992. Next to the Barn is a smaller building, the Yurt, which was constructed especially for Grotowski's use.

³ Mark Swed, "Short, Sacred, Haunting," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2007, Calendar section.

⁴ See *SEEP* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2000), *Grotowski at Irvine and Beyond*, which includes articles by Robert Cohen and others.

⁵ Paul Allain, "Grotowski's Ghosts," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15, no. 1 (February 2005): 46.

⁶ For more about this company, see Paul Allain, "Interview with Piotr Borowski: Artistic Director of Studium Teatralne, Warsaw," *SEEP* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 15–23. Borowski was also a member of Gardzienice for six years before he went to Pontedera.

⁷ Qtd. in Allain, "Grotowski's Ghosts," 57.

⁸ "Kilka słów o metodzie pracy w Teatrze Ósmego Dnia" [A Few Remarks about the Working Method in the Theatre of the Eighth Day], *Teatr Ósmego Dnia*, http://www.osmego.art.pl/nowa/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=12. My translation.

⁹ Magdalena Gołaczyńska, *Mozaika współczesności: Teatr alternatywny w Polsce po roku 1989* [A Mosaic of Contemporary Life: Alternative Theatre in Poland after 1989] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2002), 116. My translation.

¹⁰ Jerzy Grotowski, "From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle," in *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, by Thomas Richards (London: Routledge, 1995), 130.

¹¹ For more on Teatr Pieśń Kozła, see my review, "Song of the Goat's *Chronicles*—A Lamentation," *SEEP* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 44–9.

- ¹² Lisa Wolford, *Grotowski's Objective Drama Research* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 131.
- ¹³ Juliusz Tyszka, "Jerzy Grotowski w Kopenhadze—trzy spotkania z mędrcem" [Jerzy Grotowski in Copenhagen: Three Encounters with the Sage], in *Mistrzowie* [Masters] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2006), 73. Translated from the Polish by Eva Sobolevski.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ¹⁵ Włodzimierz Staniewski, interview with Richard Schechner, *TDR: The Drama Review* 31, no. 2 (1987): 147.
- ¹⁶ Grotowski, 127 (italics in original).
- ¹⁷ *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Music of Georgia," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Georgia.
- ¹⁸ Grotowski, 126.
- ¹⁹ Tyszka, 75 (italics in original).
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97 (italics in original).
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 75 (italics in original).
- ²² Conversation with the author, December 5, 2007, Claremont, California.
- ²³ Grotowski, 124 (italics in original).
- ²⁴ Eugenio Barba, "The Steps on the River Bank," *TDR: The Drama Review* 38, no. 4 (1994): 116.
- ²⁵ *Iphigenia at Aulis* had its world premiere at the La MaMa Annex in New York, October 4–21, 2007.