

THE GROTOWSKI CENTRE IN WROCLAW: PERFORMANCES AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF PARATHEATRE!?

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In July 2006, I visited the Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Research, located in the Rynek, Wrocław's center.¹ No longer the shell-shocked post-War Wrocław of November 1964, when Grotowski moved from Opole, this bit of prime real estate retains a medieval appearance while also standing as a consumerist spectacle of contemporary capitalism. One example of this is a banner advertising Piast beer that hangs from the fourteenth-century town hall.

Wrocław, the capital of Lower Silesia, is a booming city. Renovation and public works are carried out rapidly according to strict timetables associated with municipal grants. Within this atmosphere, the intense work of Grotowski's extended artistic family continues. The Centre's administration (the fourth since 1989) pursues serious work at a high level against a backdrop of urban frivolity where narcissistic nightlife in second-story discos pulsates until dawn. The Centre, served by three entrances off *Przejście Żelaznicze*, an alley bisecting the Rynek's center, buzzes energetically with the work of a young generation of artists.

The Centre's directors, Jarosław Fret and Grzegorz Ziółkowski, have run the institution over the last three years and will continue for three more. Fret is the director of governance and administration; Ziółkowski is the program director, responsible for research, publications, and the archives. Duties connected to program activities, workshops, and collaborations are shared between the two men. Fret, a stage director in his prime, and Ziółkowski, a consummate scholar and theatre practitioner, are hard men to find, even in Wrocław. When Fret is not working with his group, Teatr ZAR, he is giving workshops in Rome, Wales, or Brazil. And Ziółkowski—equally busy—is teaching at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań or giving workshops in South Korea and in Wrocław. When in their shared office, both work intensely with the staff, mostly graduate students in philology or cultural studies at Wrocław University. Clearly the energy of 'Grotowski's Theatre Laboratorium' inspires the younger generations at the Centre.

Founded initially to protect Grotowski's archives, the Centre like Grotowski's theatre receives support from the Wrocław municipal government. Effective administrators, Fret and Ziółkowski, successfully maintain strong ties with Kazimierz Grotowski (Jerzy Grotowski's older brother) as well as with the Centre's board, which consists of Stanisław Krotoski and Professors Janusz Degler, Józef Kelera, Leszek Kolankiewicz, and Zbigniew Osiński.

The idea for the Centre was a matter of necessity for its first directors in 1989. The Theatre Laboratorium ceased its activities in 1982 with Grotowski's emigration; its dissolution became final in 1984. Wrocław authorities were unsure what to do with Grotowski's documents. They asked Tadeusz Burzyński (a local journalist who died in 1998) and Professors Degler and Kelera of Wrocław for advice. They suggested keeping the documents together in an archive to prevent them from being consigned to various university libraries. The archive was the modest beginning of the Centre. From 1985 until January 1987, when he died in a car crash, Theatre Laboratorium actor Zbigniew Cynkutis directed the Drugie Studio Wrocławskie (Second Wrocław Studio), established on the former site of the Laboratorium. Mirosław Kocur, (now professor of cultural studies at Wrocław University and author of books on Greek and Roman theatre) assumed leadership for the next two years. The Centre itself was formally established in 1989–1990 under the leadership of Zbigniew Osiński and Alina Obidniak, who directed the theatre at Jelenia Góra and was later replaced by Stanisław Krotoski. When Krotoski and Osiński retired in 2004, Fret and Ziółkowski took over. Despite their relative youth—thirty-three and thirty-four—they were well prepared for the job. Fret had already been connected with the Centre for nine years, and he chose Ziółkowski who had previously undertaken projects at the Centre.

The new directors have organized many events, such as the first Eastern European meeting of ISTA, Eugenio Barba's International School of Theatre Anthropology. Their Polish translation of Barba's *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* has led ultimately to the development of a publishing house. But the Centre works on many levels. Primary concerns have been reorganization, the building of staff, and the promotion of a new public profile to speak to a younger generation. Ziółkowski and Fret are focused on the generation born in the 1990s, after the communist regime. Ziółkowski says:

They have different experiences behind them than we did. In 1988, when I began my theatre education in Warsaw, I remember the Orange Alternative's happenings, student strikes, and our great hopes for political transformations. Now the younger generation faces unemployment problems and the opportunities offered by the EU. In a new Poland, a place like the Centre—in-between theatre and the academy—had to emerge. In rigid communist Poland, it was hard to imagine (though Grotowski with the Laboratorium paved the way for combining an institute for research with theatre) a place where practice goes hand in glove with theory—this is what the young generation needed and still needs.²

Fret and Ziółkowski have worked hard to transform the Centre. As part of this transformation, the Centre has established a relationship with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera that will commit the group, led by Richards and Mario Biagini who are Grotowski's legal heirs, to giving demonstrations and workshops in Wrocław.

Completion of building renovations within the time frames imposed by the local Wrocław government is essential to assure future support. The Centre's transformation of Brzezinka (the eighteenth-century stable converted into the rural home of paratheatre in the 1970s) into a viable workcenter proves their commitment to renovation and has emboldened them to keep working.³ "We are renovating a new space: Grobla. Jarek's Big Baby," says Ziółkowski, referring to the project as Fret's special province.⁴ Grobla, a behemoth on Na Grobli (as the street is called), is a four-story, dilapidated boating club on the banks of the Odra River, remaining from German occupation. Its enormous ballrooms and meeting halls are viable for conversion into theatrical space perfect for actor training, workshops, group housing, and performances. The transformed institute will incorporate three sites: Przejście Żelaźnicze in the Rynek; Brzezinka in the forest; and Grobla, which is in-between—in the city, but outside its center. Each of these locations will help facilitate three important areas of the Centre's development.

The first is higher education. Grobla will develop into a degree-granting school by 2009–2010, primarily in the field of actor training.⁵ The second is artistic production. Grobla will offer an umbrella structure of support for three groups—providing spaces, administrative support, and help

in securing grants. The goal is to assist independent, non-commercial ensembles (including university groups) from rapidly changing Central and Eastern Europe, unknown in the West because they lack contacts and money to tour, as is often the case with Ukrainian, Serbian, and Russian contemporary groups. The Centre plans to house and promote such companies and co-produce some of the outstanding results.

The third is publication. The school will promote further research and sponsor translation of scholarly writing on Grotowski into Polish and bring out Grotowski's writings in a critical edition including *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Ziółkowski also proposes publishing Polish translations of the works of modern masters, such as Julian Beck and Tadashi Suzuki, and, pursuing collaborative ventures with Italian and English publishers, to give modern Polish theatre texts greater international exposure. Ziółkowski contends, for example, that Juliusz Osterwa and Mieczysław Limanowski, founders of the Reduta Theatre, are little known in the West. Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Wyspiański have achieved some recognition, but deserve further, more extensive studies.

Ziółkowski argues that the Polish tradition of transformational theatre, as found in Mickiewicz, Wyspiański, and Grotowski, should be known in greater depth throughout the world. What the Institute can provide, he maintains, is a coherent program of Polish studies. In 2008, the Centre will establish an acting atelier for approximately eighteen to twenty people (from Poland and abroad). Students will immerse themselves in the Polish tradition.⁶ Fret's own Teatr ZAR serves as the model of a Polish theatre group dedicated to study while it also pursues performance research.

Fret's administrative role is to report and make monetary appeals to the municipality of Wrocław as well as to central governmental authorities. Fret must also go to the Centre's board for approval, not only with regard to programs, but also renovation projects. But his most exciting and challenging innovation has been to establish a role for performances at the Centre, since it was the founders' position that the Centre ought not present its own public performances but instead function eternally as a custodial headquarters and vault for activities associated with Grotowski's legacy.

The current administration is committed to effecting change. The subtle changes already underway are probably best captured in a simple open window in the third floor workroom that faces Przejście Żelaźnicze. Przejście

Żelaznicze was the home of the famous performances of the sixties and the 1975 University of Research of a Theatre of Nations where now Fret's ZAR performs *The Gospels of Childhood*. The piece takes as its point of departure Grotowski's *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*. This window had remained closed since the founding of the archive, preserving, as it were, the status quo. Now open, it announces a shift from museum to living cultural organism. This new attitude is a significant departure from the founders' opposition to performance. In 1989 Osiński averred, "The Centre will not . . . [o]rganize its *own* theatrical or paratheatrical practices."⁷

Fret calls ZAR "an undertaking, a program," which has been exploring the same issues for four years.⁸ Whether it can be called a performance or not, ZAR marks a new beginning. By absorbing Grotowski's teachings and using them as a foundation for new work, a young generation of theatre artists invigorates his legacy: "ZAR was created as a permanent program of The Grotowski Centre. We are not a group like a little theatre or a company, and they are not employed like actors. It's a program all the same,



Jerzy Grotowski's *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*

even if we keep the people with us. It's part of the research."⁹

On July 11, I attended Teatr ZAR's *Gospels of Childhood* at the Grotowski Centre, a work presented on occasion with no particular regularity. Ten actors (six men, four women) perform; the men sing Georgian religious music, while Martha and Mary (both in red) tell their biblical story in images through movement as well as song. Two women in black fill other roles. *Gospels* is lit by candles on three swinging chandeliers. A mound of black earth sits under a table. Many stories intersect; Martha and Mary visiting Christ's grave and Lazarus's resurrection are enacted in Slavonic ritual—sacred and profane. Never does one central action dominate. Instead simultaneous actions unfold before the spectators.

In one fragment, Martha and Mary on their way to the sepulcher re-enact the ritual washing of feet in a bucket that can be seen in filmed rehearsals of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*. Fret acknowledges this:

It is a quotation from *Apocalypsis*. In *Apocalypsis* you will see a different variation of this but the exact text of the sequence is a quotation from [Grotowski's] *The Gospels*, which never premiered openly; there was only one showing for invited guests. We as a generation know this only from a short film. It's Rena Mirecka and Maja Komorowska; and we understood, it is about Mary going to the grave; so it's very connected with our theme. And also I was very impressed by how the sequence is composed. So we decided to use this as a free quotation. Of course, we changed the climax of the sequence.¹⁰

The stories of Christ's resurrection and Lazarus's rising are told, as they were in *Apocalypsis*, through a combination of sacred and profane imagery. Some of the most compelling images in *Gospels* are a woman lying down on a cross drawn in chalk on the floor, feigning an epileptic fit, only to break out in derisive laughter when she draws the pity of Mary; Mary in childbirth; Martha raped; and a wedding procession in which the groom violates his bride. These images and others point to ZAR's frustration with the influence the Christian story plays in daily life. This is best expressed when Mary berates Martha, who is washing herself after the rape, for not helping at home but instead seeking out Christ on the road. His absence from their home, the sisters believe, caused their brother Lazarus's death. Immediately after Lazarus dies, Mary and



The Gospels of Childhood, directed by Jarosław Fret, Teatr ZAR

Martha read from John 11:32, "If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." This serves to capture a palpable frustration with Christian resurrection myths that resurfaces throughout the performance. At the end, a quotation from the Mount Athos Easter Song *Christos anesti* intensifies this frustration: "Let them be born for one childhood. For everyone will be salted with fire."¹¹ The production ultimately proposes that humans are not redeemed; lives are not restored—forgiven yes, but never reborn.

The songs and singers' constant presence enable the audience to focus easily on the entire performance, not merely one specific action but many. Near the end, the work continues over five minutes in perfect blackout, accompanied by powerful singing. In darkness the earth is dug up, as though Lazarus were rising. The audience hears singing and digging and smells earth in complete darkness.

Fret asks timeless questions about human suffering. Whether Lazarus was saved or punished twice to suffer life's indignities again is important to ZAR's confrontation with death. Fret says:

People have often asked me to do it much more clearly, "Do it as it was." But I am making theatre, not a confession. It's not about interpretation; it's my understanding of things. I'm using this fragment [from *Apocalypsis*] to say something more important than the death of Lazarus. It's about the death of my child . . . my small child. It's not to tell the story of Jesus resurrected as it should be told, but what the story means to me after 2000 years of that story, after the second death of Lazarus.¹²

Fret contends that Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus was a second punishment causing him to be dead twice without imparting any special knowledge for humanity.¹³ To make the mystery of death's permanence and the tragic, incongruous hope for rebirth (and therefore second death) tangible for the audience, Fret shut down the lights for quite some time, taking all visual imagery away from spectators' eyes, thus creating internal images strictly through song. "My image is that I'm standing on the edge of a grave, leaning and looking, simply as a child; it's not death but listening to the cantor singing the funeral song."¹⁴

The conjunction of spirituality and blasphemy in *Gospels of Childhood* is part of Grotowski's legacy of "apotheosis and derision" of ritual and myth.¹⁵ But Fret's focus on the human spirit evokes another, slightly older legacy: that of Juliusz Osterwa. "Osterwa used to say in some of his essays that God created the theatre for people for whom the church is not enough. If you are not fully engaged then your life will be empty. Your church cannot help you. You can find it in theatre."¹⁵ When I asked him whether he is part of any avant-garde, Fret says, "It is better, more interesting, to work with strong ancient structure, not to invent tools, but to see how this generation, in completely different circumstances—in Georgia, in Thessalonica—will work with it, live with it, survive with it."¹⁶ Fret and Ziółkowski have shown that they have learned to live and survive with Grotowski's opus and legacy. As administrators, scholars, and artists they have made Grotowski our contemporary.

NOTES

¹ The Centre, since this article was written, has been renamed the Institute for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Research in order to better reflect its commitment to education under the leadership of Jarosław Fret and Grzegorz Ziółkowski. The change officially took place at a ceremony on December 28, 2006.

² Grzegorz Ziółkowski, interview with the author, July 11, 2006, Wrocław.

³ According to administrator Magda Mądra, this transformation has aroused concern among the previous generation of paratheatre practitioners, who scoff at the presence of electricity and running water, some saying it is now more like a hostel than the rough outpost in the forest it was for them.

⁴ Grzegorz Ziółkowski, interview with the author, July 11, 2006, Wrocław.

⁵ The 2009–2010 plan for a school that collaborates with universities from the U.K., Italy, and Poland to establish a graduate program with guest professors for masters degrees in acting is unique because it is not in the Polish university tradition to offer degrees for practical work.

⁶ "Mickiewicz is studied, but there are not many—apart from Daniel Gerould and Halina Filipowicz—who read his *Lecture 16* at the *Collège de France* as a cornerstone of the Polish theatre tradition." Grzegorz Ziółkowski, interview with the author, July 11, 2006, Wrocław.

⁷ *Ośrodek Badań Twórczości Jerzego Grotowskiego i Poszukiwań Teatralno-Kulturowych, 1990–1999: The Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Cultural and Theatrical*

Research, ed. Zbigniew Osiński, brochure (Wrocław: The Center for Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work, 2000), 24.

⁸ Jarosław Fret, interview with the author, July 12, 2006, Wrocław.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ ZAR program, Wrocław, July 2006.

¹² Jarosław Fret, interview with the author, July 12, 2006, Wrocław.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ In 1961, critic Tadeusz Kudliński claimed that in *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) Grotowski had imposed a dialectic of "apotheosis and derision" on the original text. Grotowski adopted Kudliński's formula as a dramaturgical *modus operandi* for productions to come. Eugenio Barba, *The Land of Ashes and Diamonds: My Apprenticeship in Poland* (Aberystwyth: Black Mountain Press, 1999), 20.

¹⁶ Jarosław Fret, interview with the author, July 12, 2006, Wrocław.

¹⁷ Ibid.