

Towards a Poor Theatre Study Guide

Towards a Poor Theatre by Jerzy Grotowski

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Plot Summary

Towards a Poor Theatre is a collection of essays, interviews, and instructions for actors developed chiefly by Jerzy Grotowski and his Polish Theatre Laboratory, which Grotowski established to further the theory and practice of acting.

Grotowski begins by wondering what separates the theatre from its chief rivals, film and television. He finds that the essential unique element of theatre is contact with the "living organism" - the actor. Since theatre can never be as visually rich and lavishly designed and lit as film or television, let theatre be impoverished in these aspects, such that the focus on the actor is that much greater. In this regard, Grotowski criticizes contemporary productions, "rich theatre," that attempt to emulate film and television with complex lighting, gimmicky contraptions, large set pieces and scenery, etc.

Grotowski's "poor theatre" has several consequences. Such things as lighting, makeup, costume, props, and scenery are minimized or eliminated entirely. In order to break down the barrier between spectator and actor, the entire theatre is made to be the stage, with actors interspersed with spectators throughout the space.

The ideal actor in this system is termed the holy actor, who is able to commit himself fully to the enterprise, to the point of sacrificing himself utterly in the aim of stripping away the mask of lies imposed upon all of us by civilization. He enters a trance state, wherein outer reaction is indistinguishable from inner reaction. The aim of theatre, then, is a therapeutic attempt to reveal the truth and cause a self-revelatory catharsis in the spectator such as the actor himself experiences.

In contrast to other theoreticians like Artaud and Brecht, Grotowski supplies a method along with his theory and aesthetic approach, in the form of a long series of exercises for the actor. These exercises, which include breathing, conceptual experiments (the actor may pretend he is a tree growing), non-vocalizations, physical contortions, and yoga-like poses, aim to strip the actor of any inhibitions, resistances, or barriers the actor has set up psychically or biologically. In this way, Grotowski's method is what he calls a "Via Negativa," a negative way, based not upon the accumulation of techniques and "tricks," but of the actor shedding blocks.

Many pieces of advice are also given to the actor. The text is seen as secondary. Acting is a series of beats, a dynamic give and take plotted through what Grotowski calls a "score," borrowing from music. The actor should not act for motives like fame or fortune, for these are barriers to true art. Above all, the actor must have the courage and discipline to give his all to the stage, for only in total "self-donation" will the actor have the power to strip away the mask of lies of everyday life to discover and share the truth underneath.



Towards a Poor Theatre

Towards a Poor Theatre Summary and Analysis

Towards a Poor Theatre is a collection of essays, interviews, and instructions for actors developed chiefly by Jerzy Grotowski and his Polish Theatre Laboratory, which Grotowski established to further the theory and practice of acting.

Jerzy Grotowski first denounces labels of his theatre as experimental, which he associates with such things as stage gimmicks, clownish acting, and contemporary music. At the core of his theory is the quest to find what separates theatre from any other art form, especially film and television. He admits his large influence in this regard is Stanislavski, and he mentions other influences, such as Meyerhold, Delsarte, and the Peking (Chinese) Opera.

He aims not to employ his actors with "tricks" or "skills" to pull out at the right time, rather his theory seeks to break down barriers, so that the actor may give of himself fully in the act of performance. However, this is not to say actors should not depend on what Grotowski calls "artifice," which he defines as the articulation of a role through the expression of signs. These signs more accurately convey the intent behind a performance than so-called "natural" behavior, which can be superfluous and misleading. Grotowski's theatre then dispenses with the "natural" and attempts to distill available signs to their essence, where they are most powerful and where they can strip off the "mask of common vision" to the rich truth beneath the surface.

Grotowski started his theory that led to his "Theatre Laboratory" by asking, What is unique about theater, and what can be stripped away from theater to where it is still theater? He found that the actor and spectator is the only requirement for theater, and thus the actor forms the core focus of his theory. Lights, scenery, props, elaborate stunts, and even the text of the play itself are all unnecessary to the essential nature of theater. Grotowski contrasts his type of theater, where these elements can go away - a "poor theatre" - to the contemporary trend toward showy lights and elaborate stages that try to (without success) compete with film and television - the "synthetic" or "rich" theatre.

"Rich" theatre is kleptomaniacal, stealing bits from all different disciplines; Grotowski's "poor" theatre strips the art down to its essence, and borrows nothing from other forms. In fact, Grotowski found through his various productions that stripping away make-up, lighting, costume, props, etc., opened up new and promising potentials in theatre.

Grotowski describes theatre's "mythological" roots as well as "religious" roots, and that art's aim is to rip the "life-mask" from these roots to challenge conceptions and discover truth. In an increasingly secular age, where truth and belief are fragmentary, theatre still has the ability to rip this mask off, by confronting myth and by relying on the power of the "living organism," that is, the actor.



The Theatre's New Testament

The Theatre's New Testament Summary and Analysis

Despite the name "Theatre Laboratory," this new theatre is not in any way a scientific investigation. Rather, the "research" being conducted is not scientific but a penetration into human nature itself, and along with that, the probing of what makes theater unique.

In fact, "theatre" can mean many things to many people. It can be the dictionary definition in strict form, it can be a place for polemical debate and intellectual discussion, it can be the presentation of dramatic literature, a place of entertainment, or a place of culture to get noticed and fit in with high society. For the actor, the theatre is himself; for the stage designer, it is a place of possibilities for elaborate scenery. For the producer, theatre is again a multifaceted thing; they may wish for fame from it, or money, or they may have fallen into producing after an unsuccessful acting career, etc.

In this confusing stream of various definitions, one must use a method of subtraction rather than addition to find the real definition. And, by subtraction, one arrives at the actor and the spectator.

The actor must give himself wholly, and his motivations must be pure. An actor in it for the money is little more than a prostitute. Acting is in fact a profession of "wretchedness," and the actor who commits fully, humbly, and without ulterior motive, donating his soul, is said to be a "holy" actor, which is the highest kind of actor in the Theatre Laboratory. While not many, or even any, could attain this lofty ideal, it is still useful to strive toward it and speak of it as a goal. This kind of pure acting is not easy, does not lend itself to sudden fame or overnight success, and it is in fact quite thankless. The gratitude a "holy" actor might expect from an audience is not a standing ovation and flowers, but the silence of contemplation.

This actor is not full of tricks, but is able to shed falsities and lies to demonstrate the truth of humanity. He may learn to use all parts of his body in order to project his voice to the audience better; this ability in the Theatre Laboratory is not viewed as a technique, but as a natural resonance that was only before inhibited. The actor achieves a state of "trance," in which there is no difference between outer reaction and inner impulse (that is, the actor doesn't have to "think" to act). "Excess" is also a crucial term, meaning performance by the actor that goes outside of the usual or ordinary, for it takes the extraordinary to break the mask of everyday life to find the innermost truth behind.

Moving on, the ideal spectator imagined for this kind of theatre is one who comes to the theatre wishing for self-discovery, change, and challenge. This is an elite spectator, but not according to class lines or wealth.

Switching the subject back to the actor, the producer or director of a play must also strive for "holiness," though his world is necessarily full of obstacles and distractions



against this. The producer must be warm and emotionally open to the actor, just as he expects the actor to be on stage. One must be strict, but it should be the strictness of a close family member.

To achieve this type of theater, generally, it will require both seasoned veterans of the "normal" theatre to become disgruntled and move towards more independent, "poor" productions, and it will also take the teaching of young people as early as secondary school. A four-year program of acting, in addition to a four-year "apprenticeship" as a working actor who is still learning, is imagined as the ideal course of study for the "holy" actor.



Theatre is an Encounter, and Akropolis: Treatment of the Text

Theatre is an Encounter, and Akropolis: Treatment of the Text Summary and Analysis

Theatre is an Encounter: Grotowski clarifies the role of the written text in his theatre. He wishes to avoid either extreme in translating dramatic literature to the stage. At one extreme is a mere presentation of the literature in a purely illustrative way. At the other is discarding the text entirely and reducing it through nothing with changes and improvisation. Theatre is expressed as a series of encounters or contacts between artistic souls - between the producer and actor, between the actor and spectator, between actor and actor. In this context, the goal of theatre in respect to text is to give life to the inanimate text, to transform them and use them in service of the "encounter," to find the universal truth (such as the idea of "pilgrimage" in the *Odyssey*) to explore and challenge.

Akropolis: Treatment of the Text: Akropolis, by the Polish playwright Wyspianski, is treated to a radical reconfiguration in the Theatre Laboratory, because instead of being couched in terms of the Old Testament and antiquity, affirming the European tradition, and taking place in a cathedral, the Laboratory's Akropolis is performed by inmates in a concentration camp circa World War II. The question for the play now becomes, what happens to human nature when it faces total violence? The ending of the play in particular, originally a "luminous apotheosis," has been changed into a "tragi-comedy of rotten values," and in fact every bit of optimism has been weeded out, with the "ultimate vision of hope squashed with blasphemous irony."

How this radical transformation is put into effect is the subject of the remainder of the text. Spectators are intermingled very close to the actors, though they do not interact. This proximity, it is hoped, will heighten the effect of the performance to the point that it feels like the actors are figures from the spectator's nightmare. There is a pile of junk in the middle of the floor, and a large box, which the actors will use for various purposes. Stovepipes in particular will be hung to represent the gas chamber. Props are only used to reveal crucial truths; otherwise they are shunned in the Laboratory.

Costumes are formless flesh-colored bags, and actors are encouraged to maintain the same suffering expression throughout the play. These choices, along with a communal approach rather than the singling out of one or two protagonists, rob the actors of their identity, so they all become merely "tortured bodies." Actors employ a wide range of vocalizations, from bits of poetry to chants to screams to dialects and everything in between. This is to signify a kind of "Tower of Babel" effect, a clash of foreign languages meeting before extermination.



Frequently, the inmates will indulge in daydreams, pulled from the Bible or mythology, rendered all the more cruel when the inmates are betrayed by reality. These include Jacob struggling with an Angel, and Paris romancing Helen.

Eventually, these wretches find their "Savior," which is a bluish, badly mauled, headless corpse. They chant to this prop with orgiastic, religious fervor. These chants reach a fever pitch, then stop when the corpse is dragged into the box in the middle of the stage, after which all the inmates file in. This is meant to signify their deaths in the crematorium.



Dr Faustus: Textual Montage

Dr Faustus: Textual Montage Summary and Analysis

Notes have been compiled on the Laboratory's production of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. While Grotowski has not changed any of the text, he has shuffled the order of the scenes into a "montage," omitting some scenes and adding others that are entirely new.

In this play, Dr. Faustus invites guests over to his home, to confess his pact with the Devil, and tell the story of his life, as he has only one hour to live before the Devil claims his soul. The spectators are arranged at one of the tables on stage, as if they were one of the guests Faustus invited. Mephistopheles (the Devil) is here conceived as both a female and male in black robes, and there are various other guests (actors).

The play is described as a "dialectic between mockery and apotheosis." Faustus is a saint, so described because he strives for pure truth. In the world of the play, saintliness is contrary to God, for God has created the world, which is contradictory to truth. A saint must therefore be against God, and for Faustus this means to make a pact with the Devil. In this way, Faustus is a martyr in every sense of the word, for he knows his punishment will be eternal damnation. Faustus is portrayed as an innocent and likable young man. Through all of this, the idea of sainthood is turned completely on its head.

The true Act V, Scene II of Marlowe's play becomes the beginning act of Laboratory's rendition, where the guests arrive and Faustus begins his confession. The rest of the story, chopped up as flashbacks, become a sort of "biographical travelogue" as various events in Faustus' life are presented: his taking up of magic, his resolve to make a pact with the devil, his "baptism," his signing of the pact, his experience with his "devil-wife," Mephistopheles' seduction of Faustus, and on.

The last scene returns back to the present in Faustus' home. While originally Marlowe had Faustus regretting his decision (to make a pact with the Devil) in his last monologue, here Faustus has an "open encounter" with God, daring him to show his power and save him from damnation, or stop time. God then appears to show Faustus his "angry face," and after this fearful moment Faustus has his Christ-like "passion," whereupon his body is shaken by spasms and he can only inarticulately cry out. Mephistopheles then drags him on his back to hell, stripping the man of dignity, though ultimately Faustus is the victor, having defied god and achieved his (anti-)sainthood.



The Constant Prince, and He Wasn't Entirely Himself, and Methodical Exploration

The Constant Prince, and He Wasn't Entirely Himself, and Methodical Exploration Summary and Analysis

The Constant Prince: Calderon's classic play is given a new vision by Grotowski, a sort of "musical variation to the original musical theme." The play is staged low, and the spectators are seated high around it, on all sides, resembling something between "an arena and an operating-theatre." The Prince himself wears a white shirt, to symbolize purity, with his torturers/detractors wearing togas and top-boots, to symbolize arrogance in their authority and power. The Prince is subject to the violence and torment of the people, finally dying at the hands of this chaotic mob, and in this he is "offering himself to the truth as if in an act of love." In this play, Grotowski's theory of the stage is validated, for the actor (especially The Constant Prince himself) is the spectacle and unchallenged focus of the production. The Constant Prince (as played by Ryszard Cieslak) is said by theatre critic Josef Kelera to be an "inspired" performance, with the actor capable of a "psychic illumination." Thus, even an objective theatre critic (Kelera) is able to identify with the use of religious phrases ("holy actor," "purification," etc.) that Grotowski employs in his essays.

He Wasn't Entirely Himself: Antonin Artaud's contribution to theatre theory is examined by Grotowski. He believes that Artaud's "theatre of cruelty" has been taken to ridiculous extremes by his disciples, with plays no more than avant-garde, "chaotic, aborted works." The only thing "cruel" about these contemporary productions is the reputation blow to Artaud. However, Artaud's theories are difficult to put into practice, partly because he never advocated any techniques or ways to make his theories concrete. He in fact explained "magic with magic," such that his theories lack form and can be made to explain anything or be used for any purpose. Artaud is a study of contrasts. In one sense, he is brilliant for trying to separate dramatic literature from proper theatre, and compelling in his wish to suppress the barrier between actor and spectator by having the spectator in the middle of the room and the actors along the sides of the wall; in other senses, he tragically misread Balinese theatre (finding "cosmic signs" where there was instead well-known Balinese language, and Artaud's "cosmic trance" is so vague as to be useless.

Artaud's most useful contribution in the end, according to Grotowski, is the idea of putting the "sacred" back into theatre, of using myth as the dynamic foundation of theatre, and finally encouraging the actor to provide a "total act," a performance not merely a collection of gestures and expressions, but one given wholly and completely, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.



Methodical Exploration: Grotowski admires the Bohr Institute (a scientific research facility). While his Theatre Laboratory is not interested in scientific research, it is like the Bohr institute insofar that it makes deep inquiries into the nature of theatre, forming hypotheses, testing them, then creating new hypotheses. Like the Bohr Institute, the Theatre Laboratory brings together top minds from around the world. Also importantly, comparing the Laboratory to a science lab recalls the crucial need for technique and discipline, rather than having to rely on inspiration or theory.

Restating the role of the actor in the Laboratory, Grotowski maintains that the actor must a) endure a process of self-revelation, in a disciplined way, b) articulate this process and convert it into signs for the spectator, and c) eliminate any blocks, natural or otherwise, that would impede this process - the concept of the Via Negativa.

The actor's craft must be an objective, disciplined one. He must unveil the entirety of his being, becoming a gift to the spectator, achieving a total act. This, in turn, will effect a profound change in the spectator, and there is a certain resonance in the encounter between actor and spectator. This process can be codified into method and technique, though one must always be fearful of "playing by the rules," and in fact the method should be continually modified and open to alterations.



Actor's Training (1959 - 1962)

Actor's Training (1959 - 1962) Summary and Analysis

A large series of exercises for the actor are explained. Grotowski again emphasizes that the aim of the exercises is not to accumulate techniques, but to strip away resistances and obstacles inherent in the actor, adhering to the concept of Via Negativa. The routine described is said to occupy a full working day for the actor.

There is first the warm-up, involving such things as running on tiptoe, and doing short jumps while in a curled position. Next there are exercises "to loosen up the muscles and the vertebral column." The actor imitates a cat yawning and stretching from a state of being asleep, among many other exercises, including jumping like a kangaroo, and bending to make a "bridge" shape with the body. Grotowski here notes it is not worthwhile to simply repeat the same exercises day after day; this exercise is a process of research and thus should be done intelligently and adaptively.

Next are some yoga-like positions done "upside-down" from a headstand. Next are "flight" exercises, with the actor swimming through the air, touching the ground only with the ball of the foot, as if a bird in flight. Continuing the acrobatic routine is a series of leaps and somersaults, including the "tiger" spring, which can be done alone or in coordination with another actor, leaping at a different height simultaneously. There are then foot exercises ("walk pigeon-toed," "pick up small objects with the toes"), followed by pantomime style exercises.

Next come "plastic" exercises, with the emphasis being the "study of opposite vectors," that is, body parts moving in relation but opposite to one another. This can mean that the actor moves the hands in a circular motion one way, while the elbows move the other way. Other suggested exercises are an imaginary tug-of-war; caressing various objects; limping; playing games, such as make-believing one side of one's body is formal and rigid while the other side is loose and jelly-like.

Next are "exercises in composition," which involve more conceptual exercises. These include projecting a particular animal's character into your performance; metamorphosing into a tree; pretending to walk on different kinds of surfaces; and performing different types of gaits to indicate age, mood, or physical condition.

Following conceptual exercises are exercises of the facial mask, where the aim is to control every muscle of the face, independently of the others. To practice this, one could attempt to quiver the eyebrows very fast while trembling the cheeks only very slowly.

Next is a large emphasis on the voice, as the actor requires full control of his breathing, to carry his voice to the spectator, to honor the rhythm of a speaking scene, among many other reasons. There are three types of respiration: from the chest, from the belly, and both chest and belly, or "total." Total respiration is the most desirable, though there



are occasions to restrict respiration. Special attention is paid to ensuring the actor has an open rather than closed larynx, and there are various exercises to open the larynx.

The next topic is resonators, which are areas of the body which amplify the carrying power of the actor's voice. Though the number of resonators are "almost infinite," Grotowski confines study to just a few, including: the head; the chest; the nasal cavity; the laryngeal; the occipital; the maxillary; and the abdominal. Per the idea of the "total actor," the most effective resonator is the "total resonator," which involves the actor using his whole body to amplify sound.

Following this discussion are descriptions of "organic" exercises that help the actor to use these tools in a near unconscious fashion, so that the actor does not become conscious of his technique, which Grotowski claims leads to the closure of the larynx and a diminution of carrying power. These involve talking to a wall in an empty room and responding to one's own echo, or imagining one is drilling a hole in an object with one's voice, say a chair.

Diction is also important to the actor. The general advice is to expire the vowels and "chew" the consonants. The actor must not over-pronounce. Diction can reveal a character, and exercises in diction should aim to perform roles, such as an old miser, or a glutton. These type of exercises should never be done with the actual play text to be performed, and the actor should never read his part aloud mechanically, as this will lead to a "petrified" interpretation.

Finally there is rhythm, crucial in an actor delivering lines, and especially the sentence, perhaps the core unit of theatre text. Poetry and prose recitation is very similar; the only difference lies in rhythm. Rhythm involves proper respiration, functioning resonators, and proper diction.



Actor's Training (1966)

Actor's Training (1966) Summary and Analysis

These set of notes come from one of Grotowski's classes done in Brussels in 1966. Grotowski has maintained that his method is pliable and adaptable, and indeed we find that the 1966 routine he has developed for actors is quite different from the one used from 1959 to 1962. In general, the 1966 routine emphasizes to a much higher degree a "give and take" and the "encounter" between the actor and spectator. In this way, Grotowski himself participates in many of the exercises, challenging/helping the actor, or acting against him. Also, though students are dealt with one by one, the entire acting class is in attendance as a sort of spectator (they are told to keep complete silence). Grotowski says very little and does not "condemn" anything the actor does, which contributes to a warm, welcoming environment in which the actor is free to try many things and discover Grotowski's lessons only through a process of (self-)discovery.

First up is a practice in locating the resonators of the body, and projecting one's voice from those particular regions of the body. The text is wholly unimportant, and the actor is told to pay no attention to the words he is saying. While the acting is projecting his voice, Grotowski will push down on certain parts of the body, emphasizing the resonator or eradicating blocks.

Next, Grotowski plays a "tiger" to the actor's "prey," a silly exercise aimed at making the actor (and actors-spectators) more comfortable and less inhibited. Next the actor will "say" things and express emotions using nonsense syllables like "king-king" and "la-la-la."

Next come a series of inarticulate sound exercises, in which the actor is encourage to meow like a cat or roar like a tiger. The range of sounds the actor finds himself uttering at this point is surprising and inspiring; they accomplish sounds they did not know they could create.

Next come some conceptual exercises. Grotowski asks the actor to imagine they are warmed by the sun as he touches various body parts; in a similar fashion, the actor also imagines being cooled in a stream. More "animal" exercises follow, like the hiss of a snake or moo of a cow. Throughout it all, Grotowski time and again emphasizes that the body must be the first to "say" something, and only the voice follows the body. An actor will over-strain his voice if he forgets to act with the body, and the body is the "first vibrator and resonator."

The exercises that follow emphasize physical motion. These include acrobatic, demanding poses (a la yoga), slowly and intentionally performed. This includes imitating a cat stretching, acrobatic falling, elbowstands, and pantomime-style exercises like hugging the air.



The section ends with some general advice and principles. Never do anything that feels inorganic or disharmonious. Always let the body lead the voice. Always have a purpose for any action your body is doing. Always make an association between what your body is doing and what you are trying to relay/express. The exact text during these exercises is unimportant. Preparation is forbidden. Symmetry is forbidden; symmetry is gymnastics, and that's not what Grotowski wants. Philosophy is subservient to and only follows after technique; Grotowski asks, Do you walk home with your legs or your ideas? Also, do not think, do not access your conscious mind, and ignore spectators.

The Actor's Technique

The Actor's Technique Summary and Analysis

In an interview, Grotowski differentiates between aesthetics and methods. While other famous theatre theorists like Brecht and Artaud had wonderful aesthetic and philosophical considerations, they lacked any answer to the question, "How do you do what you are proposing?" There are very few actual methods proposed in theatre acting, and Stanislavski has provided one of them, though his disciples have subsequently mishandled and changed Stanislavski's method, in Grotowski's opinion.

Grotowski is different from these men, because he asks "What must I do?" and also "What must I not do?" His method of teaching actors is not to see what the actor is lacking and provide it to them through teaching, but to find out what is constricting the actor and preventing him from achieving his full potential. In Grotowski's Laboratory, the questions are not along the lines of "What does irritation look like?" because that would lead to stereotype and cliché.

The question is rather much more general: what is preventing the actor from achieving complete self-revelation in order to achieve the total act.

Grotowski in his teaching is very warm and never condemning, always inviting his pupil to aid in his own teaching. This creates a space that allows full trust and lack of inhibition, necessary for the actor to fully "sacrifice" himself to the performance.

Grotowski next states a difference between an actor's "role" and his "score," a term Grotowski has borrowed from music. While an actor's role is, narrowly, his character and the accompanying text, an actor's score is that entire range of "notes" or encounters in a performance, those moments of action/reaction that make up the crucial portion of a performance.

Lastly, Grotowski stresses that, while the actor must be mindful of the spectators' presence, he must not dwell upon it or act for the spectator, for this would devolve into mere exhibitionism.



Skara Speech

Skara Speech Summary and Analysis

This is the text of a speech Jerzy Grotowski made at the Skara Drama School in Sweden in 1966. He is directly addressing acting students and giving them advice. He advises the students first not to seek "ready-made" methods, which lead to clichés. For every action, find an association, not an intellectual one, but one perhaps from the body to memory. Memories usually involve physical reactions. Seek contact in your performance, with another actor or with the spectator, as it will shape your actions in a truthful manner.

The entire body is a system of resonators, and voice exercises merely intend to widen the possibilities of the voice. Learn to speak with various portions of your body, and never listen to yourself, as this will inhibit the resonators.

Next Grotowski advises actors to not depend on make-up for their transformation, but rather transform first, then put on make-up if necessary, which will heighten the expressiveness already within the actor.

Acting starts with emotional reactions, related and associated by the actor through his real memories. Perhaps a role calls for an actor to kill his mother. While the actor may not have this specific memory to draw upon, perhaps the actor killed a bird or otherwise had a powerful experience with death; in this case, a similar memory is also effective.

Spontaneity without an actor having a "score," those series of action/reactions within a scene, leads to chaos and should be avoided. To achieve art, always avoid clichés. "What a beautiful day!" does not always have to be said with happiness. Find other, surprising ways to say it. Avoid the "beautiful lie," that seductive action which nevertheless is false.

An actor should act with his whole self, be organized and disciplined. He should always expect to suffer and have a hard time of it. Exhaustion may, in fact, break down resistances and lead to further self-knowledge. Finally, an actor should not seek acclaim, praise, or fame, for the actor then becomes bonded to the spectator, making his performance lack conflict and truth and leading to exhibitionism or narcissism.

American Encounter

American Encounter Summary and Analysis

Acting is an ethical endeavor, for it does not hide from basic truths, and its goal is a certain purity and self-knowledge. Morality and immorality can be separated in this sense from ethics. It is also artistically ethical to take risks and be courageous. Additionally, the actor is an ethical living organism because he does not work for himself; instead, he derives meaning from contact, from encounters with other people. However, the actor must forever find a balance between working for the spectator (which as said before leads to exhibitionism) and working for himself (ignoring the essence of the theatre itself). An actor who works through contact will experience rebirths on the way to self-knowledge. A final rebirth results in the discovery (by the actor) of a "secure partner," who may be another actor but may not be, an entity whom the actor trusts completely and shares his most personal experiences.

Grotowski next describes a process, in keeping with his idea that the text of the play is a purely secondary consideration to the actor, whereby an actor first learns a role, then a score (as previously defined), and then finally the text. For an actor to start with the text first is a cheat and it will lead to a poor understanding of the underlying character and, ultimately, stereotypes.

Grotowski is asked why he demands his classes be conducted in silence (except for the one actor being taught). He first cites "public-tropism," a neologism used to describe the tendency of an actor to play for an audience. If the spectating acting students are talkative and congratulatory, he will begin to play to them and not learn. Secondly, silence is the best start for an actor in the creative process.

Next discussed is the evolution of the Laboratory's teaching. Grotowski first used yoga, but found it leads to an introversion and a serenity that is opposite the goal of an actor. So instead, in the end he merely borrows certain yoga poses that help to relax the spinal column and muscles used for projecting the voice, discarding the philosophy behind the poses. Later in his teaching, Grotowski also did research into Delsarte's method of physical exercises, again borrowing certain ones that were put to use in his own theoretical framework.

Grotowski lastly stresses that his exercises and method are always open. In fact, for a period of 8 months, his students did no exercises at all after they achieved a sort of perfection. At the end of the 8 months, he found the students developed new resistances. Thus acting is a sort of never-ending quest for self-knowledge.



Statement of Principles

Statement of Principles Summary and Analysis

This last section is a statement of principles that Grotowski intended for internal use within his Laboratory. Grotowski lays some very broad premises/theories.

Civilization involves a donning of masks, people hiding motives and feelings. Theatre seeks to discard these masks and reveal the "real substance." Theatre therefore has a therapeutic function. At the core of theatre is the actor; he needs no elaborate stage gimmicks, make-up, costumes, or complex lighting effects to make his art. The actor's performance is an invitation to the spectator. Through the "total act," the actor achieves a sort of transcendent integration with the spectator.

Art is practiced to break down limitations, to free ourselves, to refuse the lies we daily make for ourselves. In short, art is fulfillment.

The actor must have courage, the type of courage necessary to reveal himself fully. In order to achieve this, it is the teacher's/producer's duty to treat the matter of learning seriously and dutifully, and not to introduce jest or triviality. The producer must discipline the actor, but at the same time respect the actor's autonomy.

Creativity is accomplished largely in silence with few words. Explanations are not valuable, and condemnations/scoldings/whispered comments and anything of the like are certainly not tolerated. The actor and teacher/producer must always be prepared, in a state of solemnity, and outside excuses for exhaustion or other poor conditions of the body are frowned upon.

In acting, as in life, a man only does something from a "point of orientation," facing a direction, armed with experiences and motives, intent on accomplishing something. The basic task of the Laboratory is helping the actor to find this point of orientation, to examine its consequences.

There are a few things which hinder an actor achieving a total act, and these must be watched for. These include an actor manipulating another actor's performance in order to enrich his own role; importance placed on fame, salary, or large/important roles; and anything, inside the Laboratory or in an actor's private life, which inhibits creativity and performance.



Characters

Jerzy Grotowski

Jerzy Grotowski was a Polish actor and later theatre producer who founded the Theatre Laboratory and developed his own theories and methods on the subject of theatre acting. In his various interviews and essays, Grotowski comes across as intelligent, personable, and open to debate though at the same time confident of his theory. He advocates a theory of theatre that puts the actor at the center as the essential element of theater. Grotowski wonders how to separate theatre from its closest rivals, film and television, and decides that it is the contact with the living organism - the actor - that is unique and essential about the theatre. Since theatre cannot compete with the mise-en-scene - props, lighting, scenery - of film and television, Grotowski advocates the creation of a "poor" theatre. In the poor theatre, lighting, make-up, sets, and costumes are seen as superfluous, and are only used in minimal ways. Instead, the actor is the focus, and thus Grotowski develops a long routine of exercises his Laboratory can use with the acting student. The aim of these exercises are not to provide the actor a "bag of tricks," but rather take from him the accumulated blocks and barriers to truth and self-knowledge put upon the actor by civilization.

The Holy Actor

The holy actor is Grotowski's highest, or ideal, conception of the actor. The holy actor has eradicated all barriers to self-knowledge and self-revelation. He has given himself fully to his craft, and is wholly organized and disciplined. Continuing the religious connotation, the holy actor has "sacrificed" himself to his art. Acting thus becomes a self-donation, an abnegation of self. The holy actor has the power, through his alphabet of signs (gesture and expressions), to rip the mask away that civilization has imposed on existence to find the inherent truth or reality thereunder. The holy actor has complete control both of his voice, through eliminating any restrictions to the carrying voice and the resonators of the body that amplify that carrying voice. The holy actor also has complete control of every muscle of his body. The holy actor is, while acting, able to achieve a trance-like state, whereby outer reaction and inner reaction become one, and the actor does not have to "think" to act. This ideal actor is not motivated by fame, fortune, or applause, which is akin to prostitution, yet neither does he retreat completely inward, which is narcissistic and would defeat the very essence of the theatre. He has no ulterior motive, and wishes only to discover himself and, through this, share his knowledge in order to connect with the spectator.

Constantin Stanislavski

Grotowski admires Stanislavski for not only developing a powerful theory of theatre acting, in which he asked and answered all the right questions, but for going a step



further and developing a realistic method for realizing his theory. However, Grotowski disagrees with many of the answers Stanislavski arrives at, and he claims Stanislavski's disciples have corrupted the essential teachings of their master.

Antonin Artaud

Artaud is a theatre theorist who conceived of the "Theatre of the Cruel," meant to break the barrier between actor and spectator and make the actor's performance as visceral and emotionally powerful as possible. Though Grotowski admires much of Artaud's philosophy, Grotowski feels Artaud left little instruction for how to accomplish his Theatre of the Cruel.

Bertholt Brecht

Brecht is briefly mentioned as a man who created a brilliant aesthetic theory of theatre, but who left theatre lacking as to how to realistically accomplish some of his visions and philosophical musings.

Francois Delsarte

Delsarte developed exercises that established certain signs (gestures and expressions) meant to portray both interior and exterior emotions. Grotowski borrowed some of these exercises, though he altered them in order to adhere to his own theoretical foundation.

The Producer

In Grotowski's system, it is the producer's job to both discipline/shape the actor's performance, and respect the actor's autonomy. Above all, the producer must create a warm, welcoming environment in which the actor feels free to experiment and perform uninhibited.

Ryszard Cieslak

Ryszard Cieslak is a long-time and esteemed actor within Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory, who played the title role in *The Constant Prince*, among many other roles. In addition to acting, Cieslak helped Grotowski teach the physically demanding/acrobatic exercises in his seminars. He is an example of a holy actor.



Eugenio Barba

Barba recorded the exercise routine that Jerzy Grotowski utilized between 1959 and 1962, and was otherwise deeply involved in the Theatre Laboratory. He went on to become Grotowski's protege and spiritual successor.

Vsevolod Meyerhold

This Russian theatre producer is cited by Grotowski as an influence in the field of "bio-mechanical training."

The Courtesan Actor

It is pointed out that the words "actress" and "courtesan" were once synonymous. This gets at the idea that some actors act only for fame, money, and prestige. This kind of actor is the opposite of the Laboratory's holy actors, and such tendencies in students must be ferreted out.



Objects/Places

The Theatre Laboratory

This is Polish theatre producer Jerzy Grotowski's school of theatre which aims for a "poor theatre" to differentiate itself from film and television. It has minimal props, costumes, make-up, lighting, and scenery, just enough to communicate essential meanings. The chief focus of the Theatre Laboratory is the actor, and the communication between actor and spectator. Because of the importance of this communication, the barrier between actor and spectator is constantly challenged.

Actor's Trance

Ideally, the actor in Grotowski's theory is able to enter a trance-like state, where inner impulse and outer reaction are identical and unmediated. The actor does not have to think to react.

Akropolis

Akropolis is one of the plays put on by the Theatre Laboratory. It radically reconfigures Wyspianski's original play into a pessimistic look at inmates in an extermination camp circa World War II. Grotowski's key theoretical tenets are honored: very little in the way of scenery, costumes, or props; the spectators are seated on the stage among the actors; and the actors, made to look and act identically and communally, are the sole focus of the presentation.

The Via Negativa

Grotowski envisions, within his system, actors developing their craft "the negative way," or via negativa. That is, actors don't accumulate techniques, which Grotowski dismisses as tricks and gimmicks; rather, actors learn what not to do in order to break down barriers made of their self-resistance. Great acting is therefore not the addition of technique, but the shedding of resistances and inhibitions.

Score

In contrast to the actor's role, which is a defined character with certain text, an actor's score is a series of beats, a set of actions and reactions which define the actor's performance. This is a term borrowed from music, emphasizing the importance of rhythm/timing and the non-vocal (purely emotive) nature of the actor's craft.



Point of Orientation

Actors must start acting from a point of orientation, which is generally the sum of the actor's experiences in life, his biological traits/tendencies, his goals and desires, etc. It is the basic aim of the Theatre Laboratory to discover this point of orientation and examine its consequences. An actor discovering his own point of orientation is said to be in a process of self-discovery.

The Total Act

The total act occurs when an actor, the "holy" actor, completely gives of himself entirely to a performance, sacrificing himself in order to shatter the mendacious mask of everyday life. The actor has no intellectual engagement while in the total act; it is a trance-like transfer between his mind (physical memories) and his body, with a subsequent profound connection with the spectator.

Encounters

Encounters, variously called conflicts or contacts, are the basic unit of performance. The actor must use encounters, which are connections either between himself and another actor, himself and a physical object, himself and the spectator, or a body part and another body part, to shape his performance. This provides a "give and take," action/reaction dynamic.

Public-tropism

This is a neologism created to describe the tendency for an actor to gravitate towards spectators, perhaps in a quest for applause or simply acknowledgment, much as a flower grows toward its light source (tropism). This tendency must be curtailed and discouraged.

Resonators

Resonators are portions of the body which amplify the "carrying voice" or "acting voice" of the actor, that voice with which he communicates to the spectator. There are an infinite amount of resonators, but Grotowski lists a few important ones, such as the abdomen, chest, upper skull, and back of the jaws. An actor must learn to free these resonators so as to open up the possibilities/power of the carrying voice.



Themes

The Poor Theatre

Jerzy Grotowski begins his theory by determining what separates theatre from film and television. He concludes that it is the living organism - the actor - and the intimacy of contact he can achieve with the spectator to be the essential difference. Theatre, he maintains, cannot compete with the lavish sets and effects of modern film and television. Contemporary mainstream theatre, which attempts to emulate film and television with its impressive sets, stage gags, and complex lighting effects - a "rich" theatre - will never be able to truly compete. Instead, Grotowski advocates a "poor" theatre, which refuses to try to compete with its rivals but rather focuses on the actor.

In the poor theatre, the production sheds lighting, costume, make-up, props, and complex sets, making the actor all the more important and singular. Only the minimal lighting, props, etc., are included in a production. Secondly, the barrier between spectator and actor is broken down, and the entire theatre becomes the actor's stage, with the spectators dispersed or intermingled within the stage. This unique and radical staging maximizes the contact actor has with spectator, in the hopes that the actor-spectator relationship becomes more intimate and makes more impact.

In the poor theatre, the text is put in a secondary position to the actor's performance, though it is not entirely dismissed. Play text is "dramatic literature," and should not be viewed as theatre itself. This perspective on the text is made clear in production notes for three plays put on by the Laboratory. In *Akropolis*, the context of the play (a cathedral in which "statues" discuss religious matters) is discarded entirely and replaced by the horror of an extermination camp. In *Dr. Faustus*, the order of the play as intended is shuffled, creating a "montage" rather than a chronological play. And in the *Constant Prince*, text is similarly sacrificed to pull the focus onto the titular character and his performance.

The Actor and His Goal

Given the importance Grotowski's theory places upon the actor, naturally much of the book is dedicated to what the actor must accomplish, and how the ideal actor might behave. The actor's aim (concurrent with the theatre experience itself) is to shatter the mask that hides essential truths in human existence (and particularly the spectator's own existence, whose "mask" should shatter with the actor's performance). To do this, the actor communicates to the spectator with a series of signs, be they gestures, expressions, movements of his body, etc. Much of acting is reacting, and thus the actor is said to undergo a series of give and take "encounters," be it with the audience, another actor, the stage, or one body part to another. These pairs of action/reactions, these beats, form a sort of rhythm, and from this rhythm and the placement of beats, the



actor develops a "score," which is essentially a plan for orchestrating his body and voice during the performance, borrowing from music. The actual text for his role is secondary.

To achieve truth of performance, the actor must be deliberate in all of his actions, and specifically he should make associations between outer bodily reactions and inner physical memories. This is not an intellectual process, but is instead somewhere between pure intellect and pure instinct. Ideally, there is no difference between outer reaction and inner impulse, and associations are perfect and seamless. The actor is then said to be in a trance-like state.

The actor's goal is self-discovery and self-knowledge. By revealing himself and having the courage to do so, the actor peels away the aforementioned mask to reveal the truth behind the lies of life, for both himself and his spectator. Only a fully engaged, totally immersed actor is capable of total self-discovery. Using religious terminology, this actor, having "sacrificed" himself for his art, is said to be a "holy" actor, following a certain ethos and morality. The holy actor is the ideal actor in Grotowski's system. Whether or not this level of acting can be realistically attained is relatively unimportant: it is always useful to have a goal to strive toward.

The Via Negativa

Contrary to the teachings of many of Grotowski's contemporaries in the acting world, Grotowski's method is based upon the concept of "via negativa," a "negative way." Rather than an actor accumulating gestures, expressions, and techniques, which Grotowski dismisses as a "bag of tricks," the actor is taught to remove psycho-physical blocks he may have developed that prevent the full potential and power of his performance. Techniques provided according to certain rules are inherently false and lead to stereotypes and cliches, for the reason that every actor is unique, and thus one technique shared among many actors is ill-fitting and tends toward homogeneity.

An example of the Via Negativa method is in Grotowski's exercises involving voice. Rather than dictate rules, Grotowski at first simply observes an actor in his "natural" state of vocalizing. Through Via Negativa, the teacher asks not, "What can I provide this student?" but "What block/resistance/barrier can I remove from this student?" A common block in the arena of voice is the closure of the larynx. In the case of a closed larynx, Grotowski will not simply order the larynx open, but he will help the actor discover this block himself. Via Negativa is, ultimately, a confidence in the potential of the actor, both as a performer, and as a teacher of himself, as an agent of self-discovery. Similarly, through various other exercises, Grotowski will help the actor discover the different "resonators" in the body, those parts of the body that can be controlled to amplify the voice of the actor. Even here, Via Negativa dictates that this is not an accumulation of technique, but simply an unblocking of said resonators.



Style

Perspective

Perspective is slightly problematic in a book such as this, as it is a collection of interviews, essays, and notes, and as such bears multiple perspectives. However, the primary perspective is that of Jerzy Grotowski, for each section is dedicated to his vision and theory of theatre. Grotowski, at the time of the book's publication, is a well-respected theatre producer and theoretician of the Theatre Laboratory. He combines the philosophical capacity of an academic with the practical knowledge of a working producer of stage productions. He is well-read on previous theatre theoreticians (chiefly Stanislavski, but also Meyerhold, Delsarte, Artaud, and Brecht), and he acknowledges that his own theory has been, in part, shaped by the work of those men. Though he is a producer, he is clearly speaking from outside of the "normal" theatre, the contemporary "rich theatre" that he chides for its indulgences. In advocating a new theory of the theatre, he is standing opposite the majority of his peers and taking a confrontational position. Similar to his dual role as both philosopher and working producer, he is also teacher and student, imparting his wisdom but being quick to admit his method can and should change, and that he is open to modifications. Part of his theory is to create a warm and inviting environment for the actor to engender a free and open exchange; similarly, his perspective is not that of a narrow-minded pedagogue, but rather a free thinker interested in furthering theatre rather than enriching his own career or gaining prestige.

Tone

Tone varies in this book, as it is a collection of interviews, essays, and notes, and thus authorship (and therefore, persona) is variable. Of chief interest is Grotowski's persona, both as the progenitor of the theory the book is based upon, and as an author in many of the essays and interviews. His persona is that of a well-read, intelligent academic who is appealing to a narrow, specific audience, those passionate about the theatre and stage acting. He uses an impressively broad vocabulary, several neologisms, and the kind of formal rhetorical style one might expect from an academic essay or artistic manifesto. However, Grotowski also manages to be personable and approachable. His is not the voice of rigid authority, but of a passionate intellect who would be eager to debate his ideas, and even modify them based upon such a debate.

Another voice in the book is Eugenio Barba. His tone is a tad more authoritative than his teacher and mentor Grotowski; he seems more certain of the correctness of the theoretical framework being laid out. He is also more epigrammatic, though Grotowski and Barba both possess a lively style.

Finally, there are the compiled notes, be they of Grotowski's acting exercises, or of the various productions the Theatre has put on. In these notes, there is little room for



personality. The aim of the notes was to get as much down on paper as the productions/exercises were being presented, and as a result the tone is neutral, clipped, and purely functional, with emphasis placed not on rhetoric, but on capturing quantity.

Structure

Towards a Poor Theatre, as edited by Eugenio Barba, is a collection of essays, interviews, and notes reprinted from other sources. Though the majority are either written by Jerzy Grotowski or directly dictated from him, other sections are not and are included to further illuminate the theories and methodology of Grotowski. Chronology is not necessarily honored; the unifying aspect is simply Grotowski's early theories (pre 1968, when the book was published). The book begins with the seminal essay, "Towards a Poor Theatre," which provides a broad-strokes outline of Grotowski's theory of theatre, and the subsequent focus and theory of the stage actor. Next comes protege Eugenio Barba's own formulations and restatements of Grotowski's theories. The reader is then treated to a few "real-world" examples of the theories put into action, in the form of notes on the Laboratory productions of *Akropolis*, *The Constant Prince*, and *Dr. Faustus*. The next couple of essays provide a more philosophical approach to the underpinnings of Grotowski's theory, as Grotowski talks about the influence of Artaud, and the conception of his theatre house as a "laboratory" and the consequences of that terminology. With theory fully in place, the book moves on to methodology, with two long sections on exercises for the actor that Grotowski developed. Unlike other sections of the book, here chronology is important, and the reader is able to trace the evolution of the exercises from the period 1959-1962 to 1966. The last portion of the book returns to general statements on theory, specific advice to actors, and ends with a nice and concise summary of Grotowski's theory in the manifesto "Statement of Principles."



Quotes

Towards A Poor Theatre: "The education of an actor in our theatre is not a matter of teaching him something; we attempt to eliminate his organism's resistance to this psychic process. The result is freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses. Ours then is a *via negativa* - not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks." (16-17)

The Theatre's New Testament: "If I were to express all this [acting theory] in one sentence I would say that it is all a question of giving oneself. One must give oneself totally, in one's deepest intimacy, with confidence, as when one gives oneself in love. Here lies the key. Self-penetration, trance, excess, the formal discipline itself - all this can be realized, provided one has given oneself fully, humbly and without defense. This act culminates in a climax. It brings relief. None of the exercises in the various fields of the actor's training must be exercises in skill. They should develop a system of allusion which lead to the elusive and indescribable process of self-donation." (38)

The Theatre's New Testament: "The theatre must recognize its own limitations. If it cannot be richer than the cinema, then let it be poor. If it cannot be as lavish as television, let it be ascetic. If it cannot be a technical attraction, let it renounce all outward technique. Thus we are left with a 'holy' actor in a poor theatre. There is only one element of which film and television cannot rob the theatre: the closeness of the living organism." (41)

Akropolis: Treatment of the Text: "[Akropolis] is conceived as a poetic paraphrase of an extermination camp. Literal interpretation and metaphor are mixed as in a day-dream. The rule of the Theatre Laboratory is to distribute the action all over the theatre and among the spectators. These, however, are not expected to take part in the action. For Akropolis, it was decided that there would be no direct contact between actors and spectators: the actors represent those who have been initiated in the ultimate experience, they are the dead; the spectators represent those who are outside of the circle of initiates, they remain in the stream of everyday life, they are the living. This separation, combined with the proximity of the spectators, contributes to the impression that the dead are born from a dream of the living. The inmates belong in a nightmare and seem to move in on the sleeping spectators from all sides. They appear in different places, simultaneously or consecutively, creating a feeling of vertigo and threatening ubiquity." (63)

He Wasn't Entirely Himself: "Artaud intuitively saw myth as the dynamic centre of the theatre performance. [...] He did not however take account of the fact that, in our age, when all languages intermingle, the community of the theatre cannot possibly identify itself with myth, because there is no single faith. Only a confrontation is possible. [...] A confrontation is a 'trying out,' a testing of whatever is a traditional value. A performance which, like an electrical transformer, adjusts our experience to those of past generations



and vice versa, a performance conceived as a combat against traditional and contemporary values, whence 'transgression' - this seems to me the only real chance for myth to work in the theatre." (121-122)

Methodical Exploration: "In our opinion, the conditions essential to the art of acting are the following, and should be made the object of a methodical investigation:

- a) To stimulate a process of self-revelation, going back as far as the subconscious, yet canalizing this stimulus in order to obtain the required reaction.
- b) to be able to articulate this process, discipline it and convert it into signs. In concrete terms, this means to construct a score whose notes are tiny elements of contact, reactions to the stimuli of the outside world: what we call 'give and take.'
- c) To eliminate from the creative process the resistances and obstacles caused by one's own organism, both physical and non-physical, the two forming a whole." (128)

Methodical Exploration: "I am interested in the actor because he is a human being. This involves two principal points: firstly, my meeting with another person, the contact, the mutual feeling of comprehension and the impression created by the fact that we open ourselves to another being, that we try to understand him: in short, the surmounting of our solitude. Secondly, the attempt to understand oneself through the behavior of another man, finding oneself in him." (130)

Actor's Training 1959-1962: "Special attention should be paid to the carrying power of the voice so that the spectator not only hears the voice of the actor perfectly, but is also penetrated by it as if it were stereophonic. The spectator must be surrounded by the actor's voice as if it came from every direction and not just the spot where the actor is standing. The very walls must speak with the voice of the actor. This concern for the voice's carrying power is further necessary in order to avoid vocal problems which may become serious. [...]

The two conditions necessary for good vocal carrying power are:

- a. The column of air carrying the sound must escape with force and without meeting obstacles, e.g. a closed larynx or insufficient opening of the jaws.
- b. The sound must be amplified by the physiological resonators." (147)

Actor's Training 1966: "In all you do you must keep in mind that there are no fixed rules, no stereotypes. The essential thing is that everything must come from and through the body. First and foremost, there must be a physical reaction to everything that affects us. Before reacting with the voice, you must first react with the body. If you think, you must think with your body. However, it is better not to think but to act, to take risks. When I tell you not to think, I mean with the head. Of course you must think, but with the body, logically, with precision and responsibility. You must think with the whole body, by means of actions. Don't think of the result, and certainly not of how beautiful the result may be. If it grows spontaneously and organically, like live impulses, finally mastered, it will always be beautiful - far more beautiful than any amount of calculated results put together." (204)

The Actor's Technique: "What is the role? In fact it is almost always a character's text, the typed text that is given to the actor. It is also a particular conception of the character,



and here again there is a stereotype. Hamlet is an intellectual without greatness, or else a revolutionary who wants to change everything. The actor has his text; next an encounter is necessary. It must not be said that the role is a pretext for the actor, nor the actor a pretext for the role. [...] If he is content with explaining the role, the actor will know that he has to sit down here, cry out there. [...] [A]fter twenty performances there will be nothing left. The acting will be purely mechanical.

To avoid this the actor, like the musician, needs a score. The musician's score consists of notes. Theatre is an encounter. The actor's score consists of the elements of human contact: give and take." (211-212)

Skara Speech: "[Y]ou will not reach great heights if you orientate yourself towards the public. I am not speaking of direct contact, but of a type of bondage, the desire to be acclaimed, to win applause and words of esteem. It is impossible, working thus, to create something great. Great works are always sources of conflict. True artists do not have an easy life and are not, to begin with, acclaimed and carried shoulder high. At the start and for a long time, there is a hard struggle. The artist speaks the truth. This truth is nearly always different from the popular conception of truth. The public does not like to be taxed by problems. It is much easier for the spectator to find in the play what he already knows. So, there is a conflict." (241-242)

Statement of Principles: "Theatre - through the actor's technique, his art in which the living organism strives for higher motives - provides an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance: a totality of physical and mental reactions. This opportunity must be treated in a disciplined manner, with a full awareness of the responsibilities it involves. Here we can see the theatre's therapeutic function for people in our present day civilization. It is true that the actor accomplishes this act, but he can only do so through an encounter with the spectator - intimately, visibly, not hiding behind a cameraman, wardrobe mistress, stage designer or make-up girl - in direct confrontation with him, and somehow instead of him." (256)

Topics for Discussion

What is the definition of the "holy actor"? What is his purpose and how does he achieve it? Why is he important in the conception of the Theatre Laboratory?

What aspects of the Laboratory's production of Wyspianski's Akropolis demonstrated tenets of Grotowski's theory of acting and theatre?

What is Grotowski's theory of voice for acting? What is his subsequent methodology?

What is Grotowski's view of the playwright's text in his conception of the theatre?

As the word "laboratory" connotes some degree of scientific research, how is the Theatre Laboratory conceived to have similarities to a scientific laboratory? How does it differ?

What is the Via Negativa, and how does it relate to both Grotowski's theory and methodology?

Grotowski views contemporary society as one which has lost God, an increasingly secular and heterogeneous civilization. How does this impact his theory? How does the actor break through the "mask" in such a reality?