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Shamans Of The 20th Century

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Jerzy Grotowski

A Shaman Director

by Etzel Cardëña

*We do not demonstrate action to the viewer,
we invite him...to take part in the "shamanism"
in which the living, immediate presence
of the viewer is part of the play acting*
Jerzy Grotowski (1986:49).

In his preface to Jerzy Grotowski's collection of essays, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968), Peter Brook, one of the most innovative and successful theater directors of the century, concluded the presentation of his Polish counterpart by stating that "The intensity, the honesty and the precision of his work can only leave one thing behind. A challenge. But not for a fortnight, not for once in a lifetime. Daily." These words, written while Grotowski was still engaged in theatrical innovation, are both prophetic of my own reaction to my experiences with a Mexican theater group working along the lines of Grotowski's own inquiry, and a subtle introduction to what would come later in the Polish director's career, i.e., a program to alter the basic consciousness, social and cultural

structures that we have inherited along with the belief that they are immutable, to create an "active culture" where dichotomies such as process/product, actor/spectator, are overcome.

Grotowski, first in the small scale of theater audiences, later in the vast expanses of natural settings in Europe and other continents, has pushed the thin thread between life and art to its breaking point, so that participants have the possibility to reacquaint themselves with their bodies, their surrounding and their fellow human beings, in a different way than they have exercised to that point. His goal is not the induction of exotic states of consciousness for their own sake, but to "cleanse the doors of perception" so that a direct contact with physical and organismic reality can be established without the mediations of conceptual filters or psychological defensive stratagems.

Calling a theater director, no matter how successful or creative he might be, a shaman of the twentieth century, requires explanation, lest the term becomes nothing more than an extravagant compliment. Art, with its obvious invitation to question and even subvert the conventional interpretation of reality, has been the activity of many visionaries who, given communal support and other cultural circumstances, might have become shamans in hunter-gatherer societies. Shamanic traditions, either as a historical starting point or, paradoxically, as a utopian goal for twentieth century avant garde, have exerted pervasive influence in the arts, particularly in those forms (e.g., theater, performing arts, dance) in which the artist is his or her own medium. But Grotowski's claim to a shamanic robe (including the ability to induce changes in conscious states for the healing of the shaman's community) is stronger than that of almost any other artist or, for that matter, of any Westerner. A brief review of some landmarks in his development support this contention.

Born in 1933, Grotowski was the enfant terrible of Polish theater throughout his studies and first productions. In addition to being influenced by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, common for individuals involved with the theater, he undertook a two-month trip through Central Asia in 1956 where, among other things, he saw a mime who would later compel

him to describe some of the clear motifs of his work, namely nature and universal patterns embodied in unique individuals. "Nature—changeable, movable, but permanently unique at the same time—has always been embodied in my imagination as the dancing mime, unique and universal" ("Ekran," Grotowski, 1986:18). Around the same time, he must have been involved in extensive reading of Eastern philosophical and psychological books because he gave, in 1957, sixteen lectures on "The Philosophical Thought of the Orient," including Yoga, Buddhism, and Taoism. These lectures exemplify two other important strategies in his path: the recourse to non-Western traditions and, as indicated by his interest in Yoga and the later writings of Stanislawski, the use of physical disciplines to produce changes in the ordinary modality of consciousness and ways of relating to one's body and the world at large.

During the 1960s, Grotowski saw his role change from that of a theater director of a small experimental theater group in Opole, to arguably, the most influential theater developer of new acting techniques and forms of representation of the second half of the century. Although heavily criticized in Poland, during the second part of the sixties, Grotowski's outstanding productions earned him enthusiastic praises from some of the most important theater figures in the world, e.g., Peter Brook, from England; Jean Louis Barrault, from France; Joseph Chaikin, from the USA, etc. A number of young and eager theater groups took the collection of his articles edited in "Towards a Poor Theatre" (1968) as the method of acting and performance creation. This vertiginous ascent in Grotowski's fame can be explained in many different ways, but certainly some of the elements that contributed to his impact in the world are:

1. *the incessant and uncompromising concern with the basic themes of human existence, among them, the nature of madness ("Kordian," produced in 1962), the search for meaning and salvation in the era of extermination camps ("Akropolis," produced in 1962) and the feasibility of human dignity*

- and purity even amidst intense suffering ("The Constant Prince," produced in 1965);
2. *the development of an honest and valid encounter among humans, at first explored through the use of the audience as a close, in every sense, and intimate element of the production (for instance, in the production of the "Tragic History of Doctor Faustus," 1963), the audience members were treated as guests to a banquet offered by Faustus), later in the fostering of spontaneous communal rituals.*
3. *an extraordinary program of actor training that, instead of the conventional accumulation of skills, proposed a methodical and totally committed liberation of the actor's body and psychology through the exploration and exposure of any form of self-deception and limitation. The final product of the exploration of the actor's spontaneity and direct reaction/perception was a total commitment to every action during the performance, a "total act" unmediated by the conceptual apparatus and personality distortions and defense (the foremost example of this approach might have been Ryszard Cieslak in "The Constant Prince," in which his performance was commonly described as involving an altered state of consciousness that allowed him to endure the incredible physical and psychological demands placed upon him).*
4. *closely related with the above, Grotowski's proposal of a "poor theater" that, in contrast to the increasing technicality of commercial ventures, requires only the direct contact between the, literally, self-sacrificing act of the performer and an audience willing to partake of the communal ritual of atonement and purification.*

Despite the evident acclaim and success of his activities of

the sixties, Grotowski decided to take much further his "statement of principles" (1968), which included a need to learn with others what our unique experiences and organisms can teach us, to eliminate the constant self-deception and social stratagems involved in common relationships, to go beyond the limitations created by ignorance and cowardice, "to fill the emptiness in us." In the late 1960s, thousands of people—both inside and outside of the theater—in different countries were eager to experiment the intimacy, honesty and intensity of Grotowski's work increasingly, he saw that even the decreasing distinction between performers and audience was still a limitation to an honest encounter among the people wanting to establish a sense of community among themselves and with nature.

In the 1970s, Grotowski abandoned any new projects framed within performance conventions and initiated a number of "paratheatrical" events, with names such as "Holiday" and "Project: The Mountain of Flame," in which participants met for a number of days and nights to explore the possibilities of being human in a setting minimizing hierarchical and verbal interaction. In these events, people from many parts of the globe met in a specific place, maybe a forest, and with minimal, frequently non-verbal, guidance from Grotowski's associates, explored the sense of freedom and re-encounter with other human beings, with the natural place and, ultimately, with themselves. These goals were sought through the blossoming of ritual activities initiated by any participant(s), then continued by other spontaneous, "organic" (in the sense of directly physical, spontaneous, non-conceptual) patterns of individual and group reactions.

In the late 1970s and through 1983, Grotowski decided to explore more methodically the common forms of "natural" organismic expression and ways of liberation found in different traditions, to investigate the "sources" of creativity and consciousness expansion. With a multi-national core group of thirty-six people (from India, Haiti, Poland, USA, etc.), he explored traditional techniques utilized among the Huicholes in Mexico, the Haitian Vodun practitioners, the Yoruba of Africa, and the yogis of India. This stage in Grotowski's work

was designed the "Theater of Sources" and provided the basis for his current work on "Objective Drama" being carried out at the University of California, Irvine.

In his latest endeavor, Grotowski has unified his longstanding interest in rhythmic motion and sound patterns that, presumably, have a direct effect on biological functions and conscious experience, with his leading toward a rigorous, systematic approach. In ongoing work with traditional "master" performers and ritualists from various traditions (for instance, a Sufi dancer and Haitian ritualists), Grotowski's "technical specialists," accomplished and versatile performers, learn and record the movements and sounds of the traditional "masters" and later perform and teach those patterns to others.

In recent years, Grotowski has concentrated on the technical education of future performers, both at the University of California, Irvine, and at his Center in Italy (Grotowski, 1987:30-41). While his research on specific human actions (e.g., physical movements, songs, etc.) that help to transform the human nervous system and expand conscious capabilities has continued, he recognizes that these techniques are fraught within specific cultural traditions that cannot be fully taught or learned by an outsider. These techniques—what he calls *organons* of *yantras*—can nevertheless be discovered/developed/explored within one's own performing tradition to allow the display of what is both deeply personal, unique, and historical, and ahistorical, biological, continuous.

In his extraordinary career of three decades, the Polish director/shaman has come full circle to the origins of theater: the elimination of the illusion of disconnectedness (with one's body, with human-made and natural rhythms, with others, with the Universe at large) through shamanic performance and communal rituals, and back to the specialization of master performer/shamans who use their artistry to wage battle with inner and outer demons to reveal the joys and terrors of the human condition. Grotowski, himself austere, has combined an uncomprising shamanic quest with the role of a trickster par excellence. The theater director and shaman who, while not in view as a performer, creates the possibilities for transcending

human limitations and, from his corner, directs fellow travelers.

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Three Urban Shamans in Southeast Asia

The following three profiles are based on my fieldwork in Southeast Asia in 1960, September 1971 to September 1972, summer 1975, June 1978 to June 1979, and spring 1987. I selected urban shamans to prove the emergence of new shamans when needs become so strong that people begin to look for shamans. I chose Southeast Asian shamans not because there are no shamans to be found in the big cities of the West but because I want the reader to experience urban shamans against a background not so close to home.

Of the 2.65 million people living today in the city state of Singapore, 76 per cent of them are Chinese (either Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese or Hakka), 15 per cent Malay, 6.5 per cent Indian, and 2.5 others (Eurasians and Europeans). Singaporeans have, therefore, not only different ethnic backgrounds but practice also different religions. Malays are predominantly Muslims, Indians either Hindus or Sikhs, and the various Chinese groups go to Buddhist or Taoist temples and may go to Christian churches, too. Some even have converted to Christianity without giving up their visits to shamans and spirit mediums.

The other large Asian city I chose is the capital of Thailand. Bangkok has over six million inhabitants; 80 per cent of them are ethnic Thai, 15 per cent Thai-Chinese, 4 per cent are Malay, and 1 per cent either Indian, hill tribe or other minorities. The majority of Thai are Theravada Buddhists but some Thai-Chinese practice Mahayana customs, too. Thai-Malay are Muslims and Thai-Indians either Hindu or Sikhs.

Shamans of the Twentieth Century

Shaman

Photo 13

*Hindu shaman,
possessed by the God
Rama (Sembawang
Shipyard, Singapore)*



Photo 12

Jerzy Grotowski, the shaman director

Photo 14

*Chinese shaman,
blessing a client (Upper
Serangoon Road,
Singapore)*

