

GROTOWSKI AND THE INDIAN TRADITION

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According to the Indian tradition the *mahadharma* of one who creates a performance should be pervaded with *brahman*¹ *Dharma* is a word very rich in various meanings, shades of meanings and implications. But here it should be understood as denoting a right way of life, right shape or, if one prefers, denoting the meaning of existence. *Brahman* in its turn means here the substance of reality or, if we risk tautology, true reality, i.e., the very essence of what reality is in its deepest sense. Grotowski says² that actor and spectator make theatre [p. 19] repeating thus and acknowledging once again that which being true demands continuous reminders. Thus in Europe, as well as in India, actors and spectators are those who make a performance. It is their way of life that has to be pervaded with the truth about reality.

It is exactly here that we have the first and the most important common feature of the classical Indian theatre and of the research conducted at the Wrocław Laboratory Theatre of Grotowski. It is certainly a very characteristic feature although it may be a little imprecise. For it is absolutely apparent that this type of similarity results from a certain basic homogeneity of theatrical experience, wherever theatre is seriously practised, or if we may use an already introduced Indian expression, wherever a performance is created for serious purposes. It is worthwhile therefore to look for more definite similarities—and dissimilarities—for they are also present.

The well-known sympathy and interest which Grotowski entertains towards the Asian theatre and in particular towards the Indian makes many observers of his work think, that there is some kind of direct

dependence between what is being achieved in Wrocław and this theatrical tradition. Trying to test this assumption we have to point out first three moments in the work of Grotowski's troupe at which his research touched directly the Indian tradition—not only theatrical at that.

The production of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* in November 1960 was the first such moment. This choice of the classical Indian drama as one of the first plays in the repertoire would indicate deeper reasons and broader plans. So it was. For one of the foremost purposes of Grotowski seems to have been the liberation of actors out of an overwhelming tyranny of dramatic texts—i.e., literatures—which they have been serving obediently in the Euro-American theater. Grotowski was not so much looking for a drama as for a score which could be executed by the troupe free to choose its own manner of orchestration, i.e., free to choose its means of artistic expression. *Shakuntala* in a way seems to be a kind of score—as all classical Sanskrit drama—even in its original intention. This aspect of the classical Indian drama has been so justly stressed by H. W. Wells in his book.^{2a} And this aspect in the case of Grotowski's attempt was additionally augmented by the fairy and exotic atmosphere of the text, its naivete and perhaps by its not-too-happy Polish translation.³ All this permitted the producer to treat the text with a certain detachment and even slight irony. At the same time it gave actors a chance to look much more for their response to the text than acting it in a traditional manner. Thus Grotowski's quest of a dramatic score has brought about his first encounter—at least in his theatrical career—with the Indian theatre.

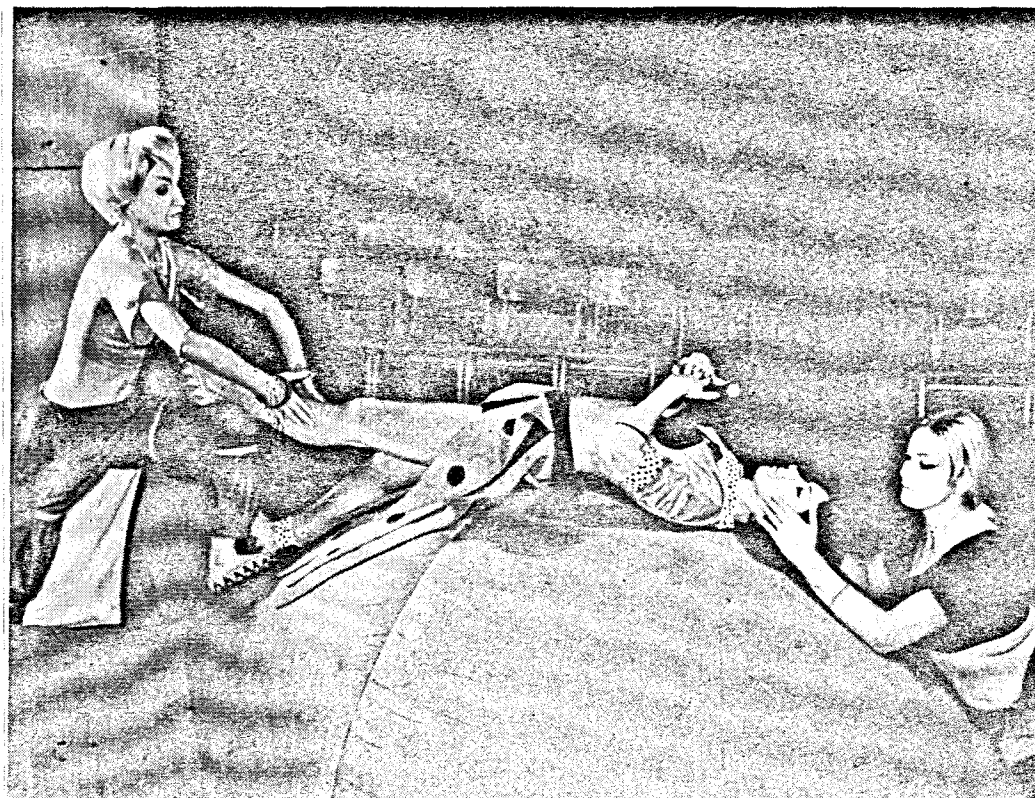
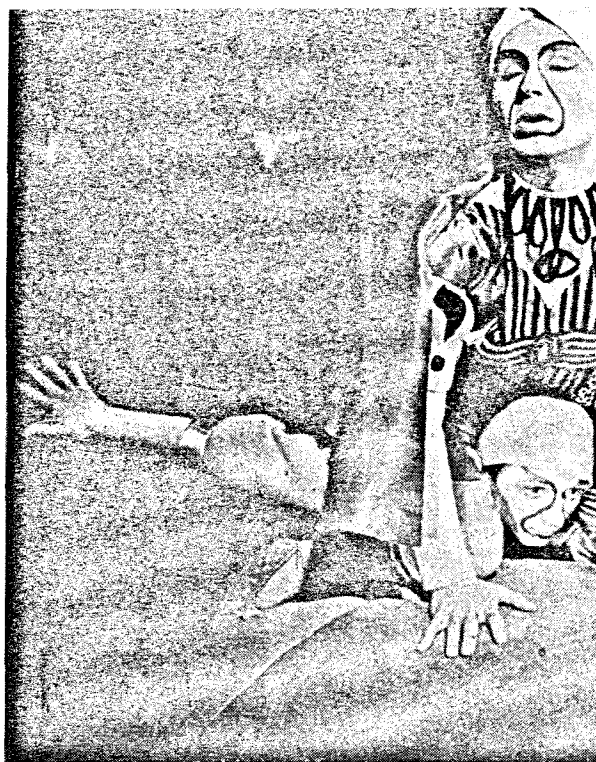
But as a matter of fact here ended this encounter. For when the Indian theatre wills its actor to convey the harmony of the score, Grotowski wants his to look for his psycho-physiological reactions to it, he wants him to denude himself psychologically. An Indian actor is an executor of a score and to a certain degree can remain unconcerned and cool—although this is a disputed problem. An actor of the Laboratory Theatre is in his turn a vibrating resonator—its vibrations, their timbre and tone depending more on the actor himself than on the score which he utilises. It seems to me that Grotowski and his troupe have had up till now, this attitude towards literary texts. Only nowadays their score cannot be so unfamiliar anymore nor so impersonal as in the case of *Shakuntala*. The troupe in its development discovered that the more meaningful for us here the text is, the more intensive, more penetrating and almost painful are the vibrations of an actor-resonator, as for instance in the last production of the Laboratory Theatre—in the *calypsis cum figuris* based mainly on Biblical texts.

The second sphere of contact with the Indian tradition in the work of the Laboratory Theatre was practical acting. The contact here took place at two main points but finally appeared to have been accidental and fragmentary. The first point concerned an extra-theatrical sphere—it was an interest in the *Yoga* technique. At first Grotowski expected to find in the yogic exercises a psycho-physiological discipline which would enable an actor to fully concentrate and to discover a perfect

harmony between psyche and physiology. Yet it appeared, to use the words of Grotowski himself, that 'despite all our hopes the opposite happened. There was a certain concentration, but it was introverted. This concentration destroys all expression, it's an internal sleep, an inexpressive equilibrium: a great rest which ends all action... That means all life processes are stopped and one finds fullness and fulfillment in conscious death, autonomy enclosed in our own kernel. I don't attack it, but it is not for actors' (p. 252). Thus although the Laboratory Theatre even now applies certain forms of yogic exercises, yet... the essential difference between these exercises and yoga is that these are dynamic exercises aimed at the exterior. This exteriorization replaces the introversion typical of yoga (p. 186). And here once again ends the meeting ground of this theatre with yoga. It ends with an otherwise comprehensible misunderstanding. For very widely accepted interpretation of *yoga* not only in Europe but in India as well, sees it exactly in these terms. Yet it is not the only interpretation. The other one, in my opinion much more correct, is symbolically enshrined in the image of the Nataraja. Here God, or Lord of Yoga-Yogeshvara, Yoganatha—is at the same time depicted as a cosmic dancer, the King and the Lord of Actors (*Nataraja, Nateshvara*). Both aspects do not contradict each other. The face of the Dancing God expresses the supreme concentration of a *yogi* while his body swings with the rhythm of the dance which is symbolic here of god's creative activity and his extrovercy, another aspect of which is the introvert concentration of a *yogi*.

The third and the last point of direct contact between Grotowski's work and the Indian theatrical tradition is the sphere of gesture. The Laboratory Theatre came in touch with the Kathakali performers somewhere in Europe—probably in Yugoslavia. But this encounter became meaningful only after a pupil of Grotowski and later on his collaborator, Eugenio Barba, an Italian, had been to India. Barba studied during his rather short period of stay in India, the Kathakali technique and after his return to Poland he tried to impart to actors of the Laboratory Theatre some elements of the actor's training taken from India. This venture as well remained episodic in the history of research of the Laboratory Theatre. And although Grotowski holds that... the type of training for the facial musculature used by the actor from the classical Indian theatre, Kathakali, is appropriate and useful (p. 145), nevertheless a different view finally prevails, namely that which stresses spontaneity of gesture (p. 196) despite that elsewhere Grotowski holds in connection with oriental theatre that spontaneity and discipline do not weaken themselves (p. 121) and are the source of acting that glows. Here should be quoted yet another enunciation of Grotowski which to my mind defines best his attitude towards gesture in oriental theatre. Discussing certain suggestions of Artaud he says that '... the sign

Illustrations: P. 19 Above: *Dushyanta and Vidushaka*. Below: *Shakuntala, Priyamvada and Anasuya*. From the production by Theatre Laboratory, Wroclaw, directed by Grotowski. P. 20 Above: *Sutradhara and Nati*. Below: Grotowski (Photo: Klaus Mehner).





which, in oriental theatre, is simply a part of a universally known alphabet, cannot be transferred to European theatre in which every sign has to be born separately in relation to familiar psychological or cultural associations' (p. 122). Consequently this attitude could have been considered as resulting from the influence of the Indian theatre provided Grotowski would not hold at the same time that he does not want to create a new convention. His only assumption which somehow could be treated as forming a convention is the one concerning an act of laying oneself totally bare, of a total self-sacrifice of an actor. All the rest must remain uncoded and the only indication here regarding the type of acting is a perfect harmony of means employed by an actor with this basic act of laying oneself psychologically totally bare. In this context it must be remembered that gesture-sign, *mudra*, of the Indian theatre remains always a part of rather rigid, codified convention.

None of the forms of contact described above between the Laboratory Theatre and the Indian tradition played in my opinion any substantial part in the search and the achievements of Grotowski's theatre. Certain unquestionable similarities and parallels have come about due to what has been already mentioned at the very beginning of these remarks. Namely, both Grotowski and the creators of the classical Indian theatre treat it as the way or the place where actors as well as spectators are searching for one, absolute and unique truth about reality. This seriousness of purpose creates in both cases similar tensions which in their turn result in similarity of definitions and conclusions. Still sometimes these tensions may provoke diametrically different opinions, yet always characterised by a substantially inherent and uncompromising search after Truth.

One of the basic differences in the manner of understanding theatre springs from Grotowski's conviction that '... group identification with myth—the equation of personal, individual truth with universal truth—is virtually impossible today' (p. 23). It is precisely this conviction which lies at the root of a tendency to strip theatre bare of all that is not substantial, so that finally, looking for the possibility of such identification at least in the individual sphere, it can be said while pondering over Wyspiński's *Acropolis*, which has been staged by the troupe—'... we are dealing with a theatre caught in its embryonic stage, in the middle of the creative process when the awakened instinct chooses spontaneously the tools of its magic transformation. A living man, the actor, is the creative force behind it all' (p. 76). It is perhaps because of this, that there is a necessity of this vivisection of theatre which Grotowski calls, 'a challenge to the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines—literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, acting—under the direction of a metteur-en-scène' (p. 19).

In the classical Indian theatre this aspect of the problem is diametrically different. Let us begin with the question of 'the disparate disciplines'. The most ancient Indian theoretical work concerning theatre, the *Natyashastra* says, that . . . 'there is no revelation, no learning, no art or craft, no device, no action that is not found in the theatre'

(I. 116). And more so—although the basic assumption concerning the man myth relationship is in the classical Indian theatre the same as Grotowski's—the conclusion was not negative. The identification of man and myth, putting an equation mark between the individual and the universal truth, have always been, in India, apparent. Therefore in this case theatre does not need to play the role of a battering-ram but has to influence, with the whole gamut of rich means, the subconscious of a spectator by way of his aesthetic sensitiveness, so that he identifies himself with myth and, it must be remembered, that each play enshrines the myth structure. This is possible according to Grotowski only when theatre, 'remains within the sphere of religion. Exactly then the spectator thus had a renewed awareness of his personal truth in the truth of the myth.' (p. 22). This formula expresses the very essence of the Indian classical theatre—but it is—according to Grotowski—a bygone fact for us. He holds that today confrontation and not identification is the only admissible attitude towards myth in Europe. (p. 23). Such a confrontation takes place in each of his performances and perhaps in the last one, i.e., in the *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* it takes place in the most drastic, most provocative and most thrilling way.

It may be thought, that this confrontation has aims similar to the classical Indian theatre. For the only myth of contemporary theatre is according to Grotowski, a myth incarnate in the form of an actor, in the form of his living body... 'The violation of the living organism, the exposure carried to outrageous excess, returns us to a concrete mythical situation, an experience of common human truth.' (p. 23). Now, if we remember that it is *Purusha-Prajapati* and his self-violation—otherwise called self-sacrifice—which constitutes the myth of the classical Indian theatre—and the entire Indian culture of that time as well⁴—then the circle will close—it will appear that the ultimate truth in both cases is the same. The only difference would lie in the stress which Grotowski puts on transgression, i.e., death, while the Indian theatre puts it on the integration, i.e., resurrection, without which death has no meaning.

Grotowski is right when he takes what comes about between a spectator and an actor for the essence of theatre. According to him an actor is a man laying his soul and himself bare for a spectator and in his stead (p. 45). The purpose of this wholesome immolation is to realise the unity of the individual and the universal truth. "When that which is individual and entirely intimate becomes revealed, and characteristic features of private behaviour are removed, then an actor becomes just a standard example of the human species."⁵

The classical Indian theatre has exactly the same purpose. But an actor behaves differently there—he does not reveal what is the most intimate—on the contrary—he hides it behind the stage-dress, make-up, acting, recitation and gesture so that only what happens in general, universally *sadharanikarana* remains. He does it in order to transfer his artistic creation into the sphere of universal truth. Thus

one can find in both ideas of theatre many common points though the approaches may appear different.

The demands concerning a spectator present still more apparent differences in both cases.—“We are concerned with the spectator”—writes Grotowski—“who has genuine spiritual needs and who really wishes, through confrontation with the performance, to analyse himself. We are concerned with the spectator who does not stop at an elementary stage of psychic integration, content with his own petty, geometrical, spiritual stability, knowing exactly what is good and what is evil, and never in doubt. For it was not to him that El Greco, Norwid, Thomas Mann and Dostoewsky spoke, but to him who undergoes an endless process of self-development, whose unrest is not general but directed towards a search for the truth about himself and his mission in life.” (p. 40).

The Indian classical theatre in its turn expects a spectator to possess certain inborn dispositions which are indicated by the Sanskrit term *sahridaya*, i.e., one who has heart, one who knows how to tune his heart in such a way that it becomes receptive of feelings conveyed by a poet and an actor. It is a psychic disposition which permits us to free ourselves from trivial everyday feelings. *Sahridaya* is one whose heart is like a mirror which enables in him an immediate identification with feelings emanating from the stage. And despite the advice that the best way to develop these dispositions is to be in continuous contact with art—the stress is laid much more on the emotional aspect of human personality and not so much on his intellectual ability. Grotowski on the other hand wants the theatrical experience to be as much emotional as intellectual or may be even intellectual before all? Although it cannot be said whether at this level of consciousness such distinction is still necessary.

Undoubtedly both approaches are rather discriminative regarding an audience. Neither Grotowski, nor classical Indian theatre are particular about the number of it. Both stress quality and not quantity.

Yet the most interesting would be to confront what Grotowski has to say about the role of theatre as an art liberating man from the bondage of everyday life, with what Indian aesthetics has to say on the same subject. I hope that conclusions drawn from this confrontation will support the initial assumption expressed at the very beginning of these remarks; it does not matter how different can—and must—be the method of actor's work by means of which he attains this goal.

In India, Abhinavagupta elaborated this question of the “liberating” capacity of theatre. His views in this respect can be summarised as follows: by means of confrontation of the spectator's, actor's and hero's realities and also by means of music and the entire atmosphere of a theatre-hall, the gates of which are guarded by symbolic Time and Death, theatre makes a transfer to a different fourth reality possible. In this reality everything happens in general, *sadharanikarana*, with no concrete everyday relations or connections. ‘This state of generality,

implies the elimination of any measure of time and space—time and space belonging to discursive thought—and, by implication, of the limited knowing-subject, who is conditioned by these but who, during the aesthetic experience, raises himself momentarily above time, space and causality and, therefore, above the stream of his practical life, the *samsara*.⁶ Grotowski, on the other hand, presents his views as follows: 'The actor's accomplishment constitutes of a transcendence of the half measures of daily life, of the internal conflict between body and soul, intellect and feelings; physiological pleasures and spiritual aspirations. For a moment the actor finds himself outside semi-engagement and conflict which characterise us in our daily life.' (p. 131). Grotowski speaks here about an actor but earlier he points out that this perspective 'opens up' for a spectator as well, in whose stead—so to speak—and in relation with whom an actor acts on the stage. This Grotowski calls a provocation, explaining earlier that theatre always appeared to him a place of provocation because exactly there we 'cross our frontiers, exceed our limitations, fill our emptiness—fulfil ourselves. This is not a condition but a process in which what is dark in us slowly becomes transparent. In this struggle with one's own truth, this effort to peel off the life-mask the theatre becomes full-fleshed perceptivity.' (p. 21) Exactly this is 'a total act' which is so often spoken about by the stage-director of *The Constant Prince*: 'It is the act of laying oneself bare, of tearing off the mask of daily life, of exteriorizing oneself. . . . It is a serious and solemn act of revelation' (p. 210). It accords well with a suggestion that an actor should 'always try to show the unknown side of things to the spectators.' (p. 237), as well as with almost Upanishadic vision of art as 'ripening, an evolution, an uplifting which enables us to emerge from darkness into a blaze of light.' (p. 256) It is difficult to brush away an impression that these announcements, different as they are—for they result from a different method which in the case of Laboratory Theatre is a product of a very precise analysis of the history of European Theatre and which grows out of that history—bare testimony to the fact that there is a kind of Jungian archetype of theatre which makes it possible that similar conclusions are drawn in such distant and different traditions. I am sure that Indian aestheticians would also endorse the following statement of Grotowski: "Theatre only has a meaning if it allows us to transcend our stereotyped vision, our conventional feelings, customs, our standards of judgement—not just for the sake of doing so, but so that we may experience what is real and, having already given up all daily escapes and pretence, in a state of complete defenselessness, unveil, give, discover ourselves. In this way—through shock, through the shudder which causes us to drop our daily masks and mannerisms—we are able, without hiding anything, to entrust ourselves to something we cannot name but in which live Eros and Charitas.' (p. 257).

The ultimate conclusion of Grotowski is suprisingly identical with the basic thesis of the classical Indian theatre expressed in the thought which opens these remarks. Thus the circle closes itself.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The Nāṭyaśāstra, V. 110
2. All figures in brackets refer to the pages of the book by Jerzy Grotowski entitled "Towards a Poor Theatre", Odin Teatrets Forlag, Holstebro 1968.
- 2A. H. W. Wells. The Classical Drama of India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay 1963.
3. Shakuntala, translated into Polish by S. Schayer, Biblioteka Narodowa, Wrocław 1957.
4. I have elaborated this point in my thesis entitled "The origin and the development of the ancient Indian theatre" submitted at the Banaras Hindu University in 1965.
5. Written personally by J. Grotowski during one of our conversations.
6. Raniero Gnoli, The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta, Roma 1956, p. XXI.