

INTERVIEW

JERZY GROTOWSKI—EUGENIO BARBA

Translated from the French by Saroj Bhutani

Eugenio Barba: The name itself of your “Theatre-Laboratory” brings to mind the idea of scientific research. Are you of the opinion that the association of ideas thus established, is justified?

Jerzy Grotowski: The term research should not lead one to think of scientific research. Nothing could be further from our pre-occupations than science “*stricto sensu*”, this being so not only because of our lack of qualification in this field but even more so because of our lack of interest in this sort of work. The term research implies that we peer into our profession to take a close look at it, as the sculptor of the Middle Ages did to the piece of wood from which he wished to carve out a form already existing within it; it implies that we are not working like the scientist or the artist but like the cobbler who searches in the shoe for the right spot into which he can hammer a nail. The second meaning of this term is, in appearance, somewhat irrational since it contains the idea of penetration into our own nature as a human being. Lastly, in this age in which all languages are mixed together as in the Tower of Babel, in which all aesthetic styles are fused into each other, the theatre is in danger of dying out, for its domain has been invaded by cinema and television. This leads us on to ask ourselves what is theatre,

in what manner is it differentiated from other forms and in what manner is it irreplaceable.

E. B.: Has your search led to a definition?

J. G.: What does the word theatre mean? That is a question that we find ourselves confronted with often, and to which the most diverse of answers have been given.

Theatre according to professors ?

For professors, the theatre is a place meant for a professional, from where this latter can spout out a written text, a place which gives him the opportunity to make a certain sum of gestures and to put into effect certain situations which help towards a better understanding of this text. Understood thus, the theatre is the utilitarian aspect of dramatic literature. The intellectual theatre is only a variation of this concept. Its disciples consider it only as a sort of platform for polemics. Here again, the text is the most important element and the theatre is there simply to give an exaggerated importance to certain intellectual theses, through an organised confrontation and struggle. It is a resurgence of the mediaeval art of elocution contests.

Theatre according to the spectator?

For the average spectator the theatre is above all a place for amusement. If the spectator goes there in the expectation of being face to face with a lighter among the Muses, the text, so to say, does not interest him in the least. What attracts him is what one would consider as the gag, the comic situation, and if occasion arises, the play on words, which would however constitute a return to the text. His greatest attention is concentrated on the actor as the subject of his attraction. A young lady sufficiently undressed is for the spectator of a certain age, an attraction by itself, at which he will express a cultural appreciation but which, in reality, satisfies certain deficiencies in his natural instincts. Or more simply, he desires only to relax, to distract himself as one would say, and we find then that amusement, humour, and humoristic values take, in this case, the upper hand over the literary value of the text. The spectator with cultural aspirations, likes, from time to time, to witness the dramatic rendering of a play from the international repertory. This

might even be a tragic play on condition that it contains an element of melodrama. Thus what the spectator expects is not homogenous. On the one hand it is necessary for him that he show himself as being a part of high society, which place is assured to him through the means of great art; on the other hand, he must have an outlet for a certain number of emotions which permit him some satisfaction. If the spectator feels pity for poor Antigone and distaste for the wicked Creon, even though he does not participate in the sacrifice of the heroine, he does not any the less feel himself as being her equal. For him it is a question of displaying noble sentiments. The didactic virtue of this kind of emotion is doubtful. The audience, consisting of a host of Creons, feels itself in unison with Antigone in the course of the performance, which does not in any way prevent it from acting like Creon immediately on returning to its normal occupations. It should be noted that the plays in which an unhappy childhood are evoked, are among the most successful. The fact of observing on the stage a poor tortured child, permits one to make common cause with the poor victim. Thus is it that one acquires the certainty of having raised oneself to a high moral level.

Theatre according to the actor:

For theatre people themselves, the concept of theatre is generally not crystallised. For the average actor the theatre is above all himself. But not what he is capable of doing through his profession: the theatre is himself, as a private organism. This attitude engenders the impudence and the self-satisfaction with which the actor presents to the spectator certain actions necessitating little knowledge, commonplace and ordinary actions such as walking, getting up, sitting down, lighting a cigarette, putting his hands in his pockets or performing gestures of everyday life, such as greeting or saying good-bye, and which, according to the actor, have nothing to reveal, but are sufficient unto themselves, for yet again it is he, the actor "X" who is the theatre. If the actor happens to possess a certain charm which captivates the spectators, they strengthen him in his beliefs. It is under such circumstances that the most primitive of acts such as that of accentuating one's entry on to the stage by accompanying it with the act of spitting and then wiping the spit with the tip of the shoe, is greeted by an ovation because it happens to be an act performed by a darling of the public.

Theatre according to the designer:

For the designer, the theatre is above all a plastic art, and this has positive consequences. The designers place themselves frequently on the side of the literary theatre. They say that *scenic design*, just like the actor, must be put to the service of the play. This profession of faith does not betray a desire to serve literature but the existence of a complex in relation to the producer. They prefer to be at the service of the author because he is further away from them and imposes less limits on them. In practice, the most remarkable of designers will confront the text with a plastic vision which goes beyond the imagination of the author and often exposes him. It is not by chance perhaps that designers have become in our country something like the pioneers of the theatre. They took advantage of the numerous opportunities opened up by the spirit of offence assumed by the plastic arts of the 20th century, which moved neither the authors nor the producers. Does that not constitute a danger? The critics who accuse the designers of invading the stage present in their justification many arguments that are objectively valid, but their approach to the problem is bad. It is as if they were upbraiding a carriage for not advancing at the speed of a snail. A designer's vision is creative, it is not stereotyped, and even if it were so, it loses its redundant nature by way of an immense amplification. This is what disturbs them and not the fact that the vision of the designer dominates over those of the actor and of the producer. But willy nilly, the theatre of the designer is being transformed into a series of living pictures. It is becoming a sort of "camera obscura" of captivating magic lanterns. But is it not thus ceasing to be theatre?

Theatre according to the producer:

What then is theatre to the producer? Producers are theatre people who take up this profession following lack of success in other fields. The man who once dreamt of writing plays, willingly becomes a producer; the unsuccessful actor, the actor who has played juvenile leading roles and who is nearing the critical age, becomes a producer; theatre critics who have felt intensely a complex of weakness in the face of an art which they are only capable of describing in writing, also enter equally willingly into the career of producer. Professors of literature whose scientific work bores them and who show an excess of sensitivity,

think of themselves as being competent to be producers. They are familiar with drama, and to their mind, what is theatre if not the manifestation of drama? It is because of all this that the opinions of producers about theatre are among the most diverse possible, not on account of their speculations relating to the philosophy of this art, but because of the psychological motivations which animate them. Their work is a compensation of diverse phenomena; for example, men whose political instincts may have remained unsatisfied become producers and indulge in the pleasure which this form of power gives them. This leads to formulas of interpretation more than often perverse, and it is thus that producers motivated by this extreme instinct of domination bring on the stage performances which constitute a real polemic with power; it is often from this that originate the performances of "revolt".

The peace of the brave in the field of literature

Naturally, the producer would like to be a creator, and that is why, more or less openly, he declares himself to be a partisan of the autonomous theatre, independent of literature, considering this latter as being merely a sort of pretext. But on the other hand, rare are those who are capable of creative work of this kind, and many are officially content either with the formula of the literary and intellectual theatre — the term "intellectual" is important here; it gives the impression of a man of the modern age — or to abide, in essence, by the formula of Wagner who said that the theatre should be the synthesis of all arts: an extraordinarily useful formula. It allows one to respect the text — a basic element not to be tampered with — and in addition, it does not lead to any conflict with literary and philosophical circles, for, it should incidentally be specified, that every writer, even he who can be called a writer only out of infinite courtesy, believes himself obliged to defend the rights and the honour of Mickiewicz, of Shakespeare, etc. . . simply because he thinks of himself as their fellow-writer. It is thus that Wagner's theory: "the theatre is total art" allows the prevalence of the peace of the brave on the literary field. This formula permits of the exploitation of scenic design, its plastic elements being integrated into the performance, and the attribution to this of all success. The same applies to music, be it original or pieced together from compositions of others. Add to that, more or less at random, the names of one or

several actors, and lo and behold, on the basis of these elements, each coordinated to the other, is born a performance which satisfies the ambitions of the producer: the person who keeps himself at the summit of all the arts and who, in practice, absorbs all these arts without being obliged to undertake a creative task which others accomplish for him, if at all there does happen to exist, in this arrangement of things, some one or the other who actually creates. Thus then, the quantity of definitions of the theatre is practically unlimited. To escape from this vicious circle, it would undoubtedly be better to adopt the method not of adding, but of eliminating, that is to say, of asking oneself what it is "without which" the theatre cannot exist. Let us see: Can the theatre exist without costumes and without stage-settings? It can. Can the theatre exist without music accompanying the development of the theme? Yes. Can it exist without the help of light effects? Certainly. Without a text? The history of theatre confirms that it can. The text made its appearance in the development of the dramatic art only at its later stages. If we put on to the stage a few people with a scenario which they have knit together in common, and who improvise their actions, as used to be done in the Comedia dell'Arte, the performance which will result from this will still merit being called theatre. And that is so even if the words are not articulated but muttered. Can the theatre exist without the actor? I know of no example of this. The case of the puppet theatre can be mentioned, but here again, we do find, in another way, an actor. Can the theatre exist without spectators? There must be at least one for the existence of a performance. Thus, there remain the actor and the spectator.

The actor the spectator

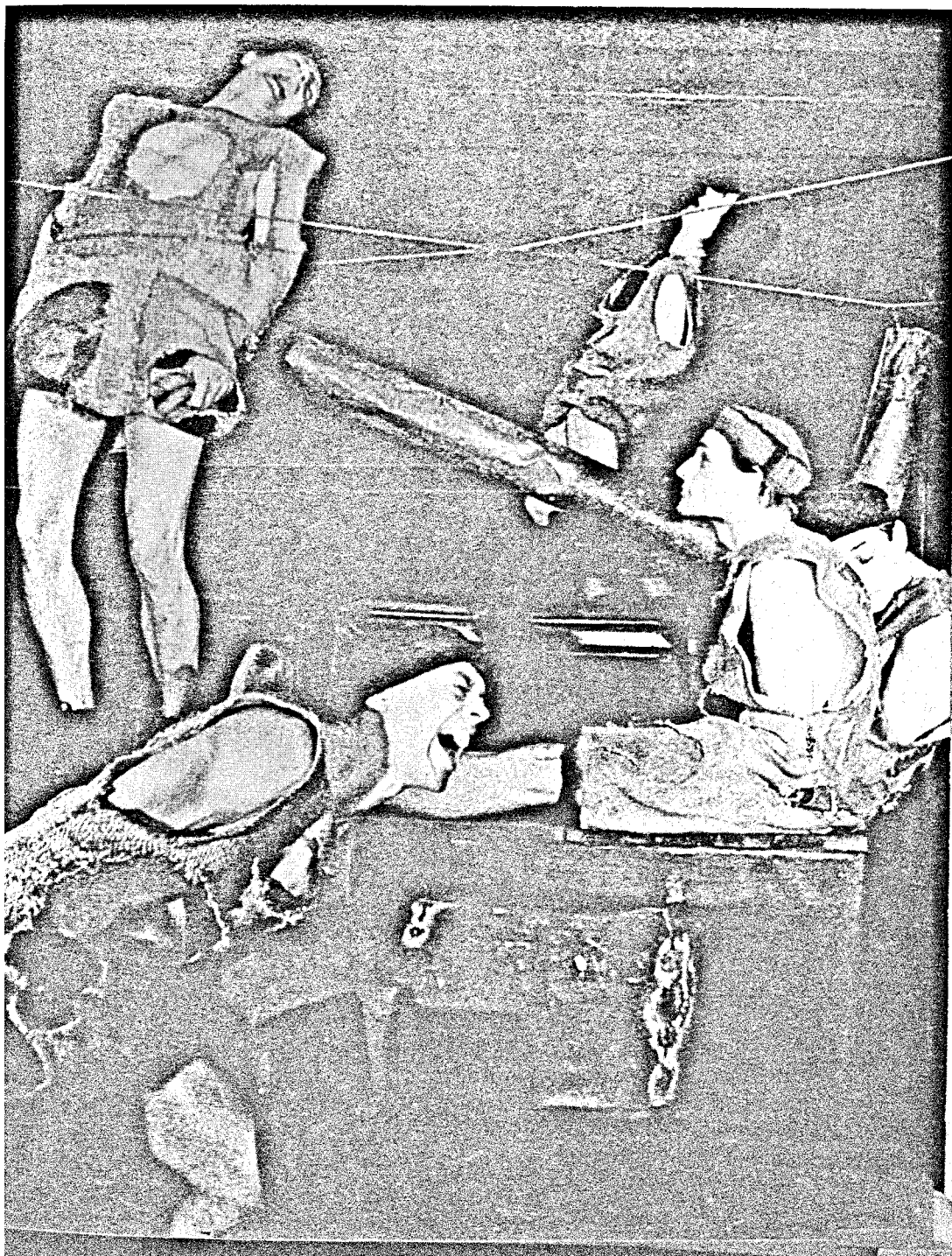
We can thus define the theatre as that which happens between the spectator and the actor. All the rest is supplementary, necessary perhaps, but supplementary. It is not a matter of chance that our work evolves from a theatre of rich means, in which are deployed the plastic arts, lighting, music, towards a theatre of poor means, an ascetic theatre that we are putting into practice since several years and within which remain in fact only the actor and the spectator, and in which all the other visual elements, for example the plastic elements are brought out by means of the body of the actor, the acoustics and the musical

effects by his voice etc. . . That is why we consider the text as a sort of spring board, and not as a model, not because we despise literature but because it is not in literature that is to be found the creative part of the theatre, even if great literary works can be an invaluable stimulus for this creation. If there remain in our theatre only the actor and the spectator, this imposes on both of them particularly exacting demands. And if we cannot train the spectator, at least in a systematic manner, we can certainly train the actor.

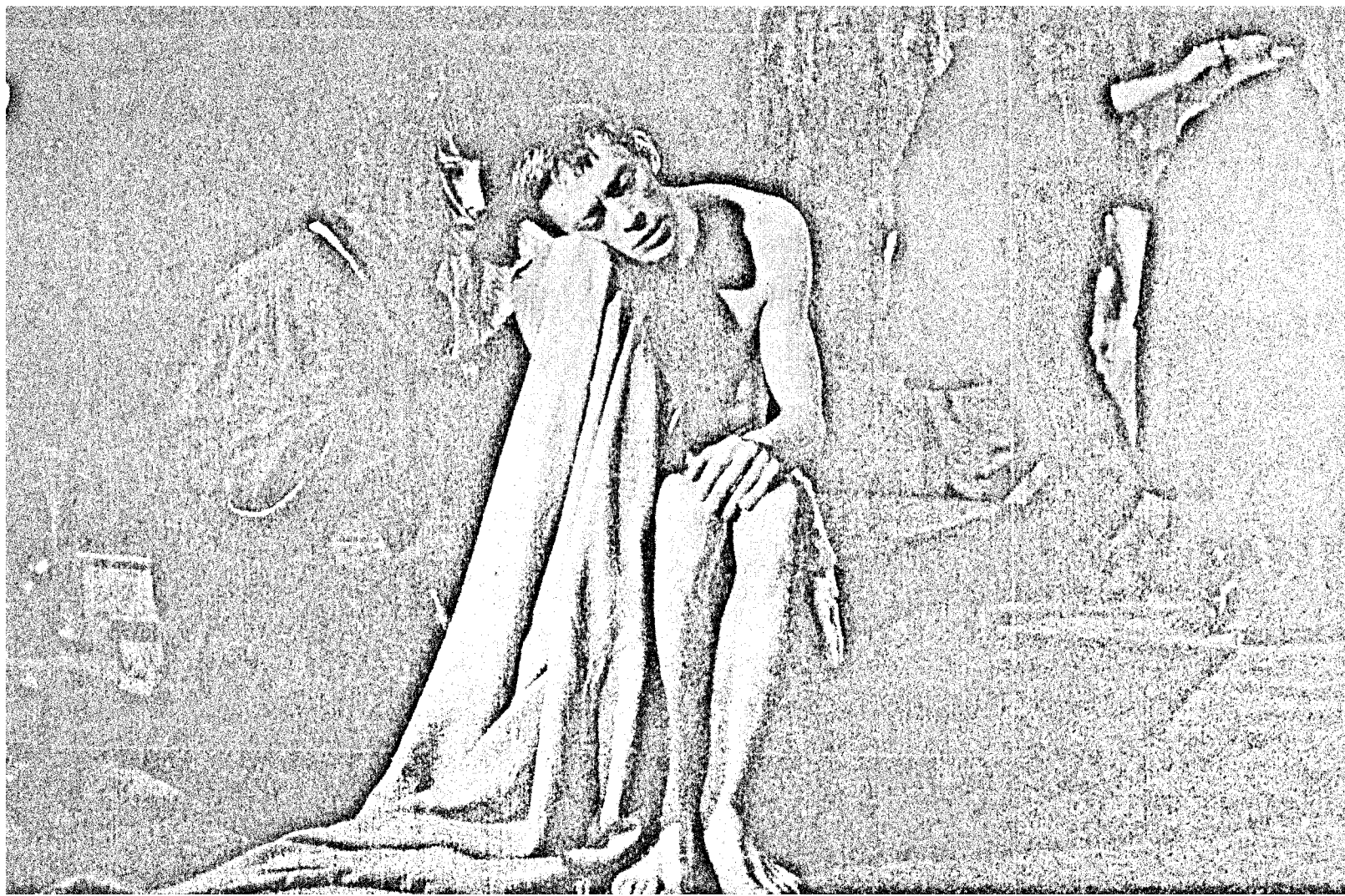
E. B.: What role do you attribute to the actor?

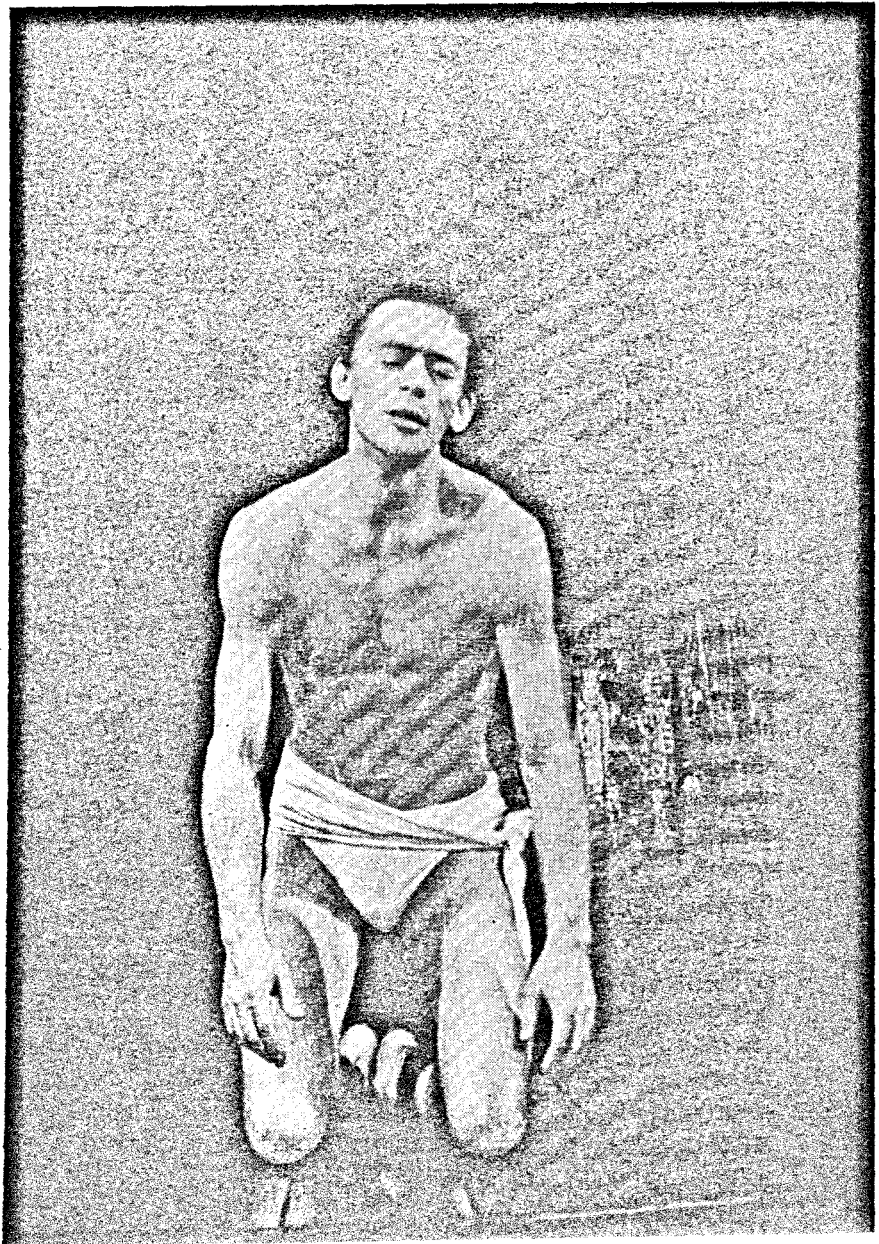
J. G.: The actor is a man who works publicly with his body, who gives it to the public. But if his body is satisfied with demonstrating only what it is, which is within the reach of any average person, if it does not become an instrument which obeys in order to accomplish a truly spiritual act, if it is exploited for money, and what is known as success in relationship to the public, then the art of the actor becomes infinitely close to prostitution. And it is not a matter of chance if, over the centuries, the theatre has been a symbol of prostitution, in one sense or another of this term. The terms actress and courtesan were at one time synonymous; today they are separated by a more precise frontier, and this is so not because of any change in the circles of the actor, but because of changes in the pattern of social life, for today it is the difference between the good woman and the courtesan, which has faded away. And what is more, what strikes one when one considers the actors profession, such as it is practised commonly, is its poverty, this bargaining away of an organism, tormented by its protectors: director, producer, etc. . . which, in turn, promotes an atmosphere of intrigue, of revolt etc. . . Just as according to theologians, only a great sinner can become a saint (take the Apocalypse: "because you are luke-warm, neither freezing nor burning, I will vomit you from my mouth"), in the same

Photographs: Page 51. "Acropolis" by Wyspianski, Paris and Helene, showing the charms of sensual love, but here Helene is a man; their lyricism is mocked by the jeers of other prisoners. P. 52 Zygmunt Molik as Jacob the Harpist, guide of the agonised tribe (note face mask without make-up). 2. Wedding of Jacob and Rachel, from "Acropolis; prisoners form the procession. Leading them Jacob carries an iron piece to replace his loved one.









way, it is the misery precisely of the actors profession which can be transformed into a sort of saintliness, and there are no lack of examples of this in the history of the theatre.

Naturally I am talking of saintliness as a non-believer, I am speaking of a "secular saintliness". If the actor accomplishes publicly a provocation of other men by means of a provocation of himself; if, through an excess, through a desecration, an inadmissible sacrilege, he searches into his self by over-stepping the boundaries of his ordinary personality of everyday life, he encourages the spectator also to undertake such a search. If he does not make an exhibition of his body, but if he destroys it, burns it, liberates it from all resistance to whatever psychic propulsion there may be, then he does not sell his organism but makes an offering of it, he repeats the gesture of redemption, he is then close to saintliness. If this manner of acting is not to remain something ephemeral, if it is not to be the chance explosion of an out-of-the-ordinary personality, a phenomenon not to be predicted in place and time, if a theatrical company whose daily bread were to depend precisely on this type of actor, has to exist, it is necessary to codify special methods of research and training. I would like to begin by talking here of the most technical and the most perceptible part of our work.

Saint-actor — courtesan-actor

E. B.: How do you conceive of the work of the saint-actor?

J. G.: A certain myth entails that the actor, enriched by a certain sum of experiences, acquires what is known as a technical arsenal, that is to say a sum of procedures, of devices, of strings from among which, by choosing for each role, a certain number of combinations, he can obtain a high degree of expressiveness, in order to please the public. I will not linger on the fact that this arsenal of technical means may constitute no more than a sum of clichés. A performance of this nature is inseparable from the concept of prostitution. The difference between the technique of the courtesan-actor and that of the saint-actor (to continue this extreme opposition) is practically that which separates the skill

Photographs: P. 53. "The Constant Prince" by Calderon; the persecutors confess to their victims. P. 54. Ryszard Gieslak as Prince Constant, in the Soliloquy towards Abundance.

of the courtesan, from the gesture of giving of oneself and of accepting, which is born out of true love, that is to say the offering of oneself. In the second case, what matters is to know how to eliminate what is importunate, to overstep every imaginable frontier.

In the first case it is a question of increasing one's skill, in the second of breaking down resistance and barriers. In the first case it is a question of the existence of the body, in the second, in a way, of its non-existence. The technique of the saint-actor will be an inductive technique, a technique of elimination, while that of the courtesan-actor will be a deductive technique, of additions of talent. This is the general formula to which are related their respective acts. The actor who accomplishes an act of autopenetration, of renunciation, of gifting away of his most intimate self, must have in his power the possibility of manifesting psychic impulses so subtle that they hardly appear to have had the time to emerge, and transport them into the sphere of the reality of sound and gesture, of impulses which, in our psyche, hesitate at the frontiers between the real and the dream world. In a word, he must be able to build up his own psychoanalytical language of sound and gesture, in the same way as a great poet gives reality to his own psychoanalytic language of the word. If, in addition, we take into consideration, for example, the problem of sound, the plasticity of the respiratory and vocal apparatus of the actor should be incomparably more developed than that of the ordinary man. What is more, this respiratory and vocal apparatus should be capable of bringing out each sound reflex so rapidly, that thought, which might hinder any spontaneity, has no time to interfere. In addition, the actor must decipher all those problems of his organism, which are accessible to him. He must know which are the means of directing the air which carries sound into a particular part of his body, which produce sonorities appearing to have been amplified by different types of resonators. An average artist is familiar only with elocution under its "mask", that is to say with the use of the resonator of the skull which strengthens the sonority of the voice, gives it a more noble shape, a sound more agreeable to the ear of the spectator. Sometimes, he guesses that in a similar manner, though for other purposes, a "pectoral" resonator can be made use of. But the actor who searches in a precise manner the possibilities offered

by his organism discovers that, truth to say, the quantity of resonators in it is unlimited. At least he can force into work, over and above these two resonators, other resonators (occipital, nasal, dental, larungal, ventral, lumbar, the total resonator which would encompass the totality of the body) and many others, some of which are still unknown to us. This actor will discover that it does not suffice to practise on the stage an abdominal respiration, for the multiple stages of psychic action necessitate diverse types of breathing, if it is desired not to have trouble with one's breathing and end up by meeting with a resistance from the body. He discovers that the articulation that he learnt at the School of Dramatics is too often accompanied by an obstruction of the larynx and that it is necessary for him to acquire the power of opening voluntarily his larynx, and to control its opening and closing from the exterior etc. . . If he does not solve these problems, the process of autopenetration fails, as he will come up against difficulties that will capture his attention. If the actor feels that he has a body, he cannot accomplish the act of autopenetration and of relinquishment. The body must free itself of all resistance. It does not suffice that, for example, in the respiratory and vocal field, the actor acquire the power of putting into action the afore-mentioned resonators, open the larynx and choose a type of larynx etc. . . He must teach himself to put all that to work unconsciously, at the culminating point of the problem of acting, which in turn necessitates yet another series of exercises. He must learn not to think, during the performance of his role, of adding technical elements (resonators etc. . .) but of eliminating obstacles, when these are perceptible (for example a resistance to sonority or to the range of the voice). This difference is not distinctly perceptible, yet it is on this that a success depends. This indicates that the actor will never acquire a trained technique, and that at each stage of searching into himself, of provocation due to excess, at each breaking down of his hidden barriers, there will appear new technical limits at a higher stage and that it will be necessary to learn to overcome them, starting once again from the basic exercises. The same goes for movement, the plasticity of the body, the gesture, the construction of a facial mask, with each detail of the "corporality" of the actor. It is not a question of acting oneself under given circumstances (what is called living a personality) no more than to propose a character keeping him at a so-called distance, in an epic manner, beginning with an analysis carried out

coldly, from the outside. It is a question of using a character as a spring-board, an instrument for scrutinising what is to be found behind our mask of everyday life, what constitutes the most secret means of our personality, in order to make an offering of it, to give it up. That constitutes an excess not only for the actor, but also for the spectator, for the latter, consciously or unconsciously, understands that such an act is for him an invitation to act in a similar manner, which leads frequently to opposition or to indignation, to the extent to the which our daily efforts tend ordinarily to dissimulate the truth about our soul not only from the eyes of others but also from our own. We flee the truth about ourselves and, lo and behold, it is suggested to us that we stop and look. We fear that we may be transformed into a statue of salt as was Lot's wife, if we turn around and look. I do not wish to cite examples here as that would take up too much space. Specific ones can be evolved at the time of particular performances.

Passive availability for an active theme

The accomplishment of the act in question, that of relinquishment, necessitates the mobilisation of all the physical and spiritual forces of the actor who should be in a state of passive availability. Passive availability for the purpose of bringing into reality an active theme. It is necessary to have recourse here to metaphorical language to say that what is decisive in all this, is humility, the spiritual inclination not simply to do something but to abstain from not doing this thing. Otherwise, excess becomes an impudence and no longer an offering. This means that the actor must act in a state of trance. Trance, that is to say, the power of concentration in a theatrical manner, such as I understand it, can be acquired with a minimum of goodwill. If I were to express everything in one phrase, I would say that it resides in the gift of oneself. It is necessary to give of oneself, completely denuded, in one's greatest intimacy, with confidence, as one gives of oneself in love. It is here that everything is concentrated: autopenetration, trance, excess, the discipline of form itself — all that is brought about if there has really taken place the sweet and warm gift of oneself. Just as in humility without restraint. This act culminates in a crescendo. And it gives rise to peace. All these exercises without exception, forming the chapters telling of the training of the actor, should not be exercises of skill, but

form a sort of system of allusions leading to the elusive and inexpressible process of gifting of oneself.

All this sounds a little strange and it is difficult to deny that we are dealing here with a sort of knowledge of the healer. If we are bent on scientific formulas, we can say that these are points of application of suggestion, having as its aim an ideoplastic performance. Personally, however, I must state that we feel not the slightest hesitation in making use of these formulas devised by "bone-setters". In reality, what seems magical, abnormal, is precisely what acts on the imagination of the actor and of the producer. I am of the opinion that it is necessary to draw up an entire special anatomy of the actor by looking for those parts of his body which the actor sometimes feels as being his sources of richness. It is in this way often that function the lumbar region, the lower abdomen, the solar plexus.

An essential factor of this process consists in the setting out of the structure of form, of artificiality. The actor accomplishing an act of relinquishment, throws himself as if into a journey which he narrates by means of his sound and gesture reflexes, addressing a sort of invitation to the spectator. The signs used by the actor must be articulated. The expressibility is always related to certain forms of controversy, of contradiction. The autopenetration which is not accompanied by discipline, does not become a release but takes on the form of biological chaos.

Discipline and spontaneity

E. B.: How do you reconcile spontaneity with a deliberate moulding into shape?

J. G.: The moulding of artificiality is a matter of ideograms (gestures, sounds), the appeal to associations in the psyche of the spectator. It is a task which evokes that of the sculptor in relation to a block of stone, it is the conscious utilisation of a hammer and a chisel. It consists, for example, in analysing the reflex of the hand found in a psychic process, then its successive evolution towards the shoulder, the elbow, the wrist, the fingers, and to determine the manner in which each of these elements united, can be articulated in one sign, in one ideogram which would

either communicate immediately the secret motives of the actor or provoke a sort of dialogue with them.

This process of formulation of a structure depends on a conscious search into the interior of the organism, of forms whose design is felt by us, but whose reality yet remains elusive to us. A wager is laid that we will find the ready form within the organism. Here we consider the performance of the actor being, as art, nearer to sculpture than to painting. Painting consists in adding colours, while the sculptor removes that which hides the form, so to say, already lying within the block in which we desire not to install it, but to delve it out.

All this work of formulation of a structure and of a form necessitates again an entire series of supplementary exercises, the invention of small themes for each organ of the body. At any rate, the decisive principle remains the following: the more we penetrate into that which is hidden within us, the relinquishment, the more has the exterior discipline to be tightened, which is the form, the artificiality, the ideogram, the sign; it is in this form that resides the principle of expressibility. That is enough about the postulates concerning the relationship with the actor.

To be concluded

Jerzy Grotowski, eminent Theatre producer and Director of the Theatre Laboratories Institute De Recherches Sur Le Jeu De L' Ateur, Wroclaw, Poland, has done outstanding work in experimental theatre. His theory of "The Theatre of Poverty" has been the subject of debate and controversy in international theatre circles throughout Europe and the United States. Of interest is his attraction to Kathakali as a form of theatrical arts.

Eugenio Barba well-known critic and writer on theatre arts, contributes to leading European and American Theatre Journals; has written on Kathakali in "T.D.R." Vol. X: No. 4 (formerly "Tulane Drama Review"). He now directs an Institute of acting research in Denmark.