

INTERVIEW

JERZY GROTOWSKI—EUGENIO BARBA

The first part of this interview appeared in "Sangeet Natak" 8

Translated from the French by Saroj Bhutani

Eugenio Barba : What about your relationship with the spectator?

Jerzy Grotowski: Our postulates in this connection will contain nothing new. They are the same as the demands which are made on the spectator for each true work of art, in painting, in sculpture, in music, in poetry, in literature. We are not bothered about the spectator who goes to the theatre to satisfy a social need for contact with culture, that is to say to have something to talk about to his friends and be able to relate that he has been to such and such a performance, and that it was interesting, in other words that we serve for him as a means of satisfying his "cultural needs". All that is falsehood. We are not bothered either about the spectator who comes to the theatre, as one says, to relax after a hard day's work. The spectator certainly has the right to relax after his work, but there are for that purpose several means of diversion, starting with a certain type of film and ending up with the cabaret or music-hall, with, in between, a whole series of others among the related arts. We are concerned with the spectator who experiences an authentic spiritual need, and who really desires, through contact with the performance, to analyse himself. We care about the spectator who does not remain at the elementary stage of psychic integration, at the minute geometric spiritual stabilisation, where he knows exactly what is good and what is bad and is in no two minds about it. For it is not to these that El Greco, Thomas Mann, Dostoevsky, address themselves, but to

him who goes through the infinite process of his own opening out, whose anxiety is not general but directed towards the search for truth about himself and about his mission in life.

Horrible rigidity of corpses

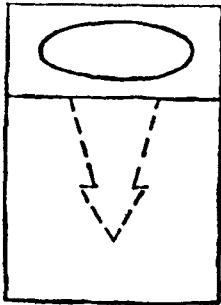
E. B.: Is that not a theatre meant for the elite?

J. G.: Yes, but for the elite which has nothing to do with the social origin or the state of wealth of the spectator. Nor even his education. The labourer who has not known schooling can live this creative process of search into himself, whilst the university professor may be already as if dead, already moulded, definitely formed, into the horrible rigidity of the corpse. And this must be said from the start. We do not care about any halfpenny-tupenny spectator but about particular spectators. We cannot know if the theatre is something which is still necessary today, in view of the fact that all that constitutes social attraction, diversion, effects of colour and form, traitors through which one can observe the life of the higher spheres etc. has today been taken over by television. We all repeat like mere parrots the same question: is theatre necessary at all? But we only ask this to get the stock reply: yes, it is necessary, because it is an art which is always necessary and always young. A public is organised for it on a large scale. Well, no public is ever organised for the cinema, nor for the television screen. If, one fine day, all the theatre halls were to be liquidated, a large percentage of citizens would only get to know about it several weeks later, whilst if the cinema and television were to be liquidated, society as a whole would scream the very next day.

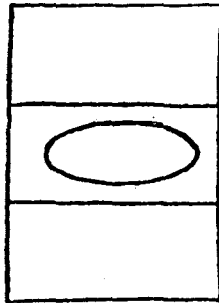
A saint-actor for a theatre of poverty

Many theatre people are conscious of this problem but they offer a false solution to it: since the cinema dominates the theatre by its technique, let us make the theatre more technical. Plans for theatre halls are invented, performances are perfected which permit of an ultra-rapid change of scene, of lighting, of ways of acting, of sources of light etc. . . but never will it be possible to attain, despite all this, the technical skill of the cinema or of television. The theatre must understand its limits. If it cannot be richer than the cinema, let it be poor, if it cannot be lavish like television, let it be ascetic, if it cannot constitute a technical attraction, let it abstain generally from technique. We thus have: a saint-actor for a poor theatre. There is only one element that the cinema,

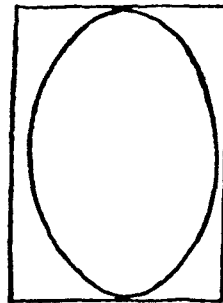
no more than television, is not in a position to steal away from the theatre. That is the proximity of living organisms which makes for the fact that each provocation of the actor each one of his magic actions (which the spectator would be incapable of reproducing) becomes something great, extraordinary, close to ecstasy: it is therefore necessary to suppress all distance between the actor and the spectator, to eliminate the stage, to abolish all frontiers. May whatever is most violent be acted face to face, let the spectator be within arms reach of the actor, let him feel on himself the breath and the perspiration of the actor. We find ourselves here face to face with the necessity for a chamber theatre. Why, after all, should there be theatres for the masses? Theatre halls are no longer absolutely necessary today, and if they are, it is precisely for spectators having special needs. Let them be poor and small in numbers. Let them be for those people who build themselves in restlessness. A sort of spiritual catacombs in the midst of our lucid civilisation, made up of haste and of frustration.



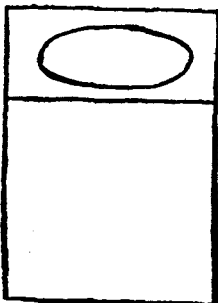
Academic stage



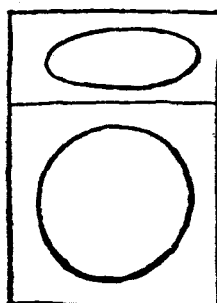
Central stage



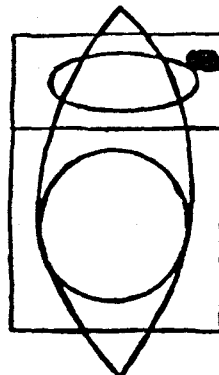
Theatre Laboratory—doing away with the stage



Single unit Theatre



Theatre in two units



Theatre in which both actor and spectator are put simultaneously on the stage.

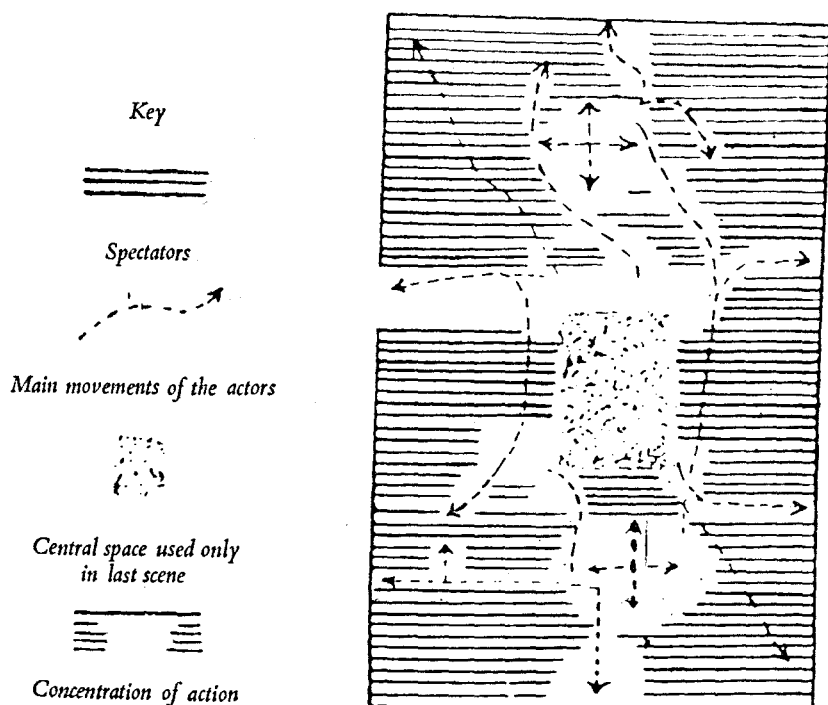
E. B.: How do you propose to bring together states of restlessness which one has the right to assume as being diversified?

J. G.: In order that the spectator may, in his confrontation with the actor, find a stimulus for his search into himself, there must exist a certain common field, something which is already there in both of them which they can curse with a gesture or before which they can kneel in unison. That is why the theatre must, without great tension, attack what one can call collective complexes, the signs of the collective unconscious (or of the superself), the myths which are not a construction of the mind, but are inherited in the blood, the natural climate, religion, etc.

Archetypes ?

When I speak of archetypes, I have not in mind the substratum distilled by men of science. I think of elementary things which are so intimately mixed that it would possibly be difficult even to submit them to a rational analysis: religious myths for example, the myth of Christ or of Mary, biological myths like all that is born in a general way in any community, the symbolisms of love, of birth and of death, or more widely Eros and Tanathos, national myths that it would be difficult to reduce to formulas, but whose presence we feel in our very blood when we read Part III of the "Ancestors", "Kordian" or the Ave Maria. Again, it is not a question of the speculative search for elements required for the putting up of a performance. I believe that if we take up the work on a performance or on a character, concentrating the greatest attention on the search for that which will hurt us the most deeply, insult us in our most intimate self and simultaneously give us a total feeling of purificatory truth which, in the long run, will give us peace, if that is the path on which we seek to tread, we will end up inevitably in collective performances. It is necessary to be familiar with this concept only so as not to stray from the right path when we find ourselves on it, nevertheless this concept must not be imposed from the beginning. What aspect will it take on during the performance? I do not wish to give examples here. I think these are sufficiently brought out in the descriptions of "Acropolis" or other performances. I would like to attract attention to the peculiar character of this act in which are united fascination and excess of negation, accepting and refusal, attack against what

is sacred (collective performances, archetypes) desecration and worship. As for the spectator, in order to put into motion this peculiar process of provocation, it is necessary that he detach himself from the springboard of the text which has already enriched itself with a general association. Thus, we need either a classic text which, in a way, we desecrate before the experience itself, but to which at the same time we give its truth, or a contemporary text in which are contained even banal elements, stereotyped but rooted in the psychology of society.



"Acropolis" (Wispianski). Explanatory sketch of movements within the set designed for the play.

E. B.: The ideal of the saint-actor, is it not a dream? Saintliness is not accessible to all, only chosen people can advance in this direction. How can one generalise it?

J. G. : The term "saint-actor" should not be understood in the manner of religious saintliness. It is here more a matter of a metaphor to define a man who, by means of art, climbs on to a pyre, accomplishes an act of offering. You are certainly right: to bring together a number of saint-actors is an infinitely arduous task. It is much easier, in the sense

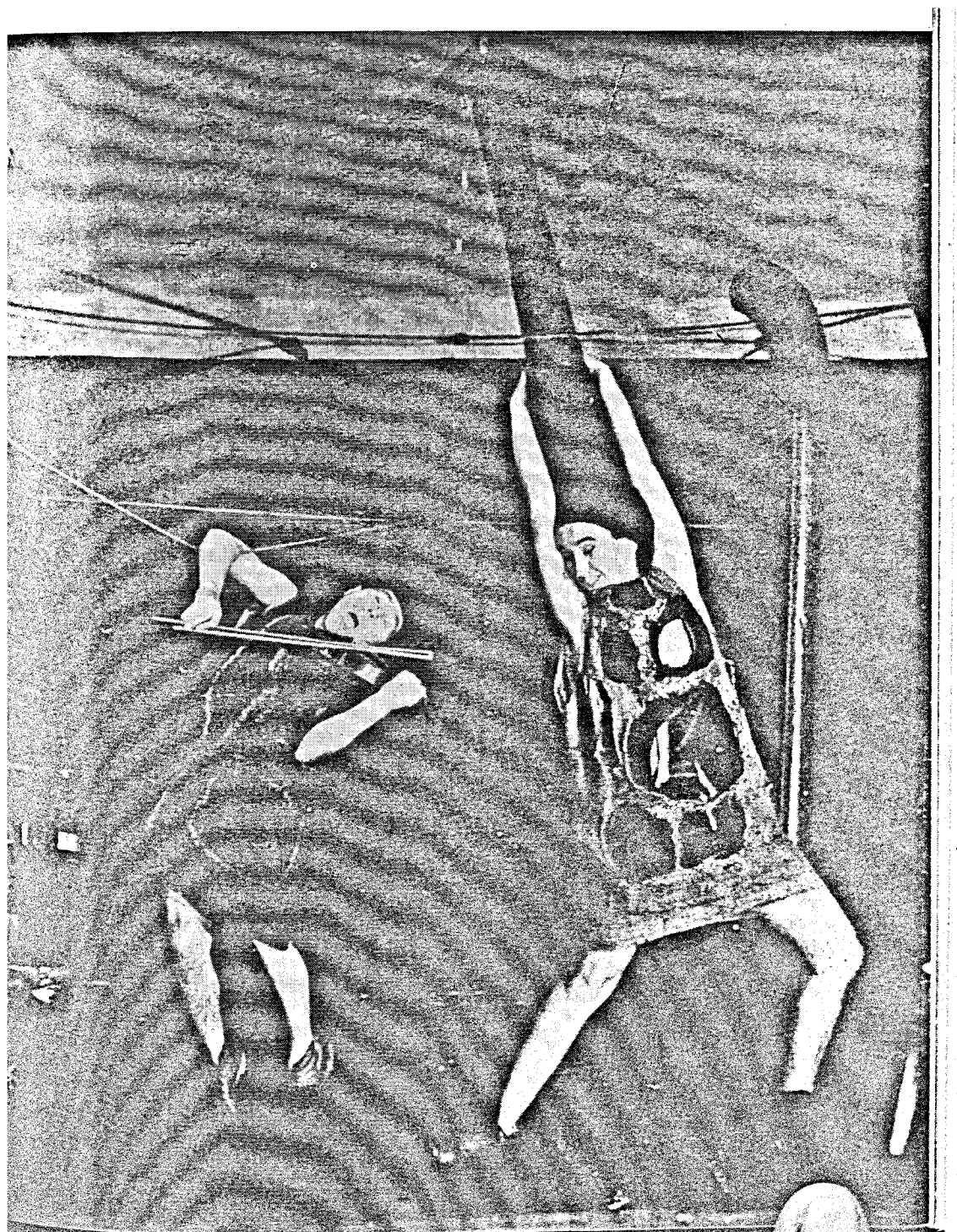
in which I understand it, to find a saint-spectator, for the latter only comes to the theatre for a moment, a short instant, to settle scores with himself, and this does not necessitate a daily painful task. Is it, nevertheless, an unreal assumption? I consider it as valid as that of movement at the speed of light, that is to say: without necessarily reaching it, we can make an effort to move towards it in a systematic and conscious manner and thus reach practical results.

Accessories of the theatre of merchants

The actor's creation is a particularly thankless job. It dies with him, nothing of him survives except the critical appreciations which, as a general rule, do not render justice to the actor, neither in what is good, nor in what is bad in his acting. Thus, the sole source of satisfaction remains the spectators' reaction. Now, in the theatre of poverty there is no question of unending applause, nor of flowers, but only of that peculiar quality of silence in which there is a great deal of fascination, but also a lot of indignation, and even of repugnance, discharged by the spectator not on himself but on the theatre. It is not easy to acquire the psychic stature which allows one to be happy with this. I think that more than once, each one of the actors playing in such a theatre, dreams of long ovations, of hearing his name shouted out, of being heaped with flowers, or of such other accessories as are inevitable in the theatre of merchants.

From another angle, the work of the actor is rendered thankless by the incessant control to which he is submitted. It is not a question of creating in an office, seated at a table, but under the eye of another, the eye of the producer who, even in the theatre based on the art of the actor and not on scenography, must put on the actor growing demands in a measure far greater than in the normal theatre, oblige him to far more painful efforts from himself. It would be unbearable if a producer of this type were not to have at his command a moral authority and if his assumptions were not, in some manner, evident; if an element of mutual confi-

Photographs: P 47. Zygmunt Molik as Jacob and Rena Mirecka as Rebecca-Cassandra in "Acropolis" P. 48. Ryszard Cieslak as the Prince and Rena Mirecka as Fenixana in "The Constant Prince." Produced by Theatre Laboratory Wroclaw, Poland.





dence were not to go beyond the barriers of the conscious. But even in such a case, he is still a tyrant, and the actor must direct on him certain unconscious mechanical reactions, as for example the student on the professor, the invalid on the doctor, the soldier on his chief, etc.

The poor theatre does not lead to a lightening career it constitutes a challenge to the bourgeois concept of the standard of life, it proposes the substitution as its principal objective of existence, of material richness by moral richness. But who does not entertain within him the secret desire to raise himself abruptly to attain social comfort? From this point of view again can be born negative resistances and reactions which are more or less unformulated. One even accepts such a status, unconsciously one searches around oneself for where to find the impossible refuge which would allow the reconciliation of water and fire, saintliness and the voluptuousness of the courtier's life. And nevertheless the attraction of such a paradoxical situation is sufficiently strong as to make insignificant the appearance of those intrigues, back-bittings, those quarrels for a role which are such a normal part of the theatre, if at all these are to be found in the theatre I am referring to. Men are men, and they cannot avoid periods of crises, of conflicts, of rancour and deprecation etc., it must be said that the satisfactions that this sort of work gives, are, in spite of everything, important. Above all, he who, in this particular process of discipline and self-sacrifice, of relinquishment of oneself and of formulation, goes right on to the end, beyond all normally acceptable limits, acquires a sort of internal harmony and peace, becomes, without this being a mere play on words, healthier, and his manner of living more normal than that of the actor of a rich theatre.

E. B.: This process of analysis is undoubtedly a form of integration, I mean by that integration of the actor and of society. Is there not a danger that the actor will work too long in that direction? I mean, from the point of view of his mental hygiene.

J. G.: That is not dangerous, if it is taken right up to the end. What is psychically painful, what breaks the balance, is the work that is half done. If we undertake only half-heartedly this process of analysis and of stripping of oneself (which aesthetically can yield rich results),

that is to say if we continue to keep on our false mask of everyday life, we experience a rending of this mask from ourselves. But if this act is performed to the end, we are no longer tied by this semi-muteness, and in all good conscience, we can then put on our every-day mask, knowing fully well what is its purpose and what it is meant to hide. It is a confirmation, which is not regressive but progressive, of that which is within us, not the poorer within us but that which is the richer within us. That generally leads to a shedding of complexes, as in psycho-analytical treatment.

Psychic struggle with the spectator

This takes on the same aspect with the spectator. The spectator who benefits from the invitation given by the actor and who, fast on his heels and a little in accordance with the same sort of score, gives himself up to the same activity, emerges from this experience in a state of greater harmony. The spectator who, at any price, fights to maintain his falsehood, leaves the performance much more unbalanced. I am convinced that, on the whole, and even as concerns the second sort of spectator, the performance is an act of social psychotherapy, whilst for the actor it is only a therapy on condition that it is not carried out half-heartedly. There exist here certain dangers. It is much more harmless to be Mr. Jourdain every day than to be Van Gogh. But it is in the full consciousness of our social responsibility that we think that there could exist more Van Gogh's than Jourdain's, although the existence of these latter would undoubtedly be a simpler thing for all. Van Gogh is an example of this unfinished process of integration. His breakdowns are the expression of a development which has not been able to flower out into a reality. If we consider great personalities such as Thomas Mann, we find, in the long run, a certain form of harmony.

E. B. : I think that in this process of auto-analysis of the actor, a great responsibility rests on the producer. How does this relationship of dependence, this unhealthy symbiosis between the actor and the producer, present itself, and what could be the consequences of an abnormal action?

J. G.: Here we come to a crucial point. In the light of what I have just said, it seems to me that my words will have a strange resonance.

The performance opens up a sort of psychic struggle with the spectators, it is a provocation and an excess, but can only be followed up by a result if there is, at the base, an interest in others, and even, more than that, a positive feeling, a form of accepting. In the same way, the producer cannot help the actor in the process of this work that is so complex and agonising, unless he is at least as emotionally and warmly open towards him as the actor in turn should be towards the producer. I do not believe in the possibility of getting results coldly. It is essential here that there exist something like a look of warmth cast on the human being, a perception of what is to be found in the way of contradictions, an encirclement around the idea that man is a being who suffers, but a being who does not deserve to be despised.

Demands of the producer

This element of warm opening out is technically seizable. This alone (if it is reciprocated) permits the actor to accomplish extreme efforts, without fear of compromise or humiliation. The sort of work in which this form of confidence is created renders possible the elimination of words during rehearsals. While working, an understanding is reached by means of the beginning of a sound, or even through silence. What is born in the actor is engendered in common, but that is much more appropriate for him in the long run than the results obtained from normal rehearsals, as one might say.

I believe that the question here is of a sort of work that it is not possible to define in a formula, nor even simply to learn. Just as every doctor cannot be a good psychiatrist, so also every producer cannot succeed in this sort of theatre. Assuredly, the principle that should be set out as a warning, is the principle: "Primum non nocere." To express that in technical language, it is necessary to suggest through sound and gesture more than to "act" before the actor or to translate intellectually for him, to act through silence, or through a simple blinking of the eye more than through instructions, to observe the stages of rupture and of psychological collapse in the actor so as to come to his help. To

be strict, but like a father or an elder brother, and not like a slave-driver. The second principle, compulsory in every profession: if one imposes on those who collaborate with oneself, a quantity of demands equivalent to X, it is necessary to impose on one self a quantity equivalent to 2 X of the same.

E.B.: The result of this would be that if one works with a saint-actor, there should exist a sort of producer who is twice more saintly than the actor, that is to say, a super-saint who surpasses in his knowledge and his science, the limits of the history of drama and of its technique, who encompasses within his person a knowledge of the most fruitful domains of the sciences such as psychology, anthropology, analyses, the knowledge of religions etc . . . How is that possible?

Courtesan-actor, pimp-producer

J.G.: All that I have said of the poverty of the actor is valid for the poverty of the producer. To stretch further this amplifying metaphor of the courtesan-actor.¹ I think that its analogy is to be found in the pimp-producer. And just as one never succeeds in effacing in the saint-actor the traces of the courtesan-actor, in the same way will one not be able to root out the pimp from the saint-producer. The position of the producer requires a certain tactical knowledge, that of the art of governing. Such a power, in general, demoralises. It entails the necessity of learning to manipulate men, it presupposes a diplomatic skill, a cold and inhuman talent for intrigue. That accompanies the producer inevitably, like a shadow, right into the theatre of poverty. What one might call in the actor the masochistic element, is the negative variation of that which is creative in the producer in the form of a sadistic element. It is the negative variation of the global process of the struggle against oneself. Here, no less than elsewhere, all that is obscure is inseparably related to all that is clear. If I am taking sides against luke-warmth, mediocrity, ease, and all that is currently prevalent, against all tautology, it is simply because we must create things that are positively directed towards light or darkness, while keeping in mind the fact that around that which is our "lighting" tendency, is created a circle of shadow that we can penetrate but not destroy.

1. See Part 1 of this Interview in "Sangeet Natak" 8 for clarification of this point.

E. B.: From what you have said it would seem that saintliness in the theatre can be attained through psychotechnique, physical exercises. In the present situation of the theatre, in schools of dramatic art, in traditional as much as in experimental theatre, we do not note any effort, any tendency, to train or to prepare for any such things. How should one go about if one wished to train and to perfect groups of such actors and producers? What are the perspectives for the creation of forward posts of the monastic type, away from the beaten path of the normal parish of every day life?

J. G.: I think that the crisis of the theatre is not separable from certain processes of crisis of contemporary culture and that, for example, one of its essential elements, that is to say the disappearance of the sacred from the theatre, and of its ritual function, is linked with the evident and probably irreversible process of the decline of religion. What we are speaking of is a proposal to create in the theatre a sanctity that is secular. The question can be asked whether the present pace of the process of civilisation lends, on the scale of society, some reality to this postulate?

From where can the revival come?

I would not be able to say. It is necessary to stretch out to attain its realisation, for a secular profundity of this theatre taking the place of religious profundity, seems to be a psycho-social necessity from the point of view of the sanity of the masses; it must come, which does not mean that it will come. I think that it is, in a certain way, an ethical category, just like saying that man should not be a wolf to man. But, as we know, these formulae are not always applied. However that may be, I am sure that the cleansing cannot come from the circles of the prevalent theatre. Simultaneously, there are, and there have been, within the normal theatre, some men who should be considered as secular saints, for example Stanislavsky. It is thus that Stanislavsky affirmed that the successive stages of awakening and renewal of the theatre were taking birth within the amateur stage, and not among professionals who have become benumbed, hardened. These affirmations were confirmed by the experiences of Vakhtangov, or then, in another cultural field, for example by the Japanese Noh theatre which, because of the

knowledge that it demands, is a sort of super-profession, but remains in its structure a semi-amateur theatre.

From where is the renewal to come? From people unhappy with their condition within the normal theatre, and who would take on themselves the work of creating laboratory groups, and who would try to transform them into a sort of institute for training of actors. Or then, amateurs, who, working by the side of professional groups, would succeed, in their capacity as self-taught persons, in surpassing the stage of compulsory training for a normal actor, but also in acquiring qualifications far superior to those required by the prevalent drama, in a word, mad persons who would have nothing to lose and who would be very hard-working.

I think it would be essential to try to organise secondary schools for the theatre. The actor starts too late to learn his profession, when he is already psychically formed, and, what is worse, morally moulded, and begins to stretch out towards what an experienced pedagogue of an institution has defined as the thirst of the newly rich, characteristic of a large majority of students of dramatic schools.

Age is important for the preparation of the profession of the actor, as it is for the pianist or the dancer, that is to say, one should not be over fourteen years old when beginning. If it were possible, I would even suggest a much younger age. One would go through a technical course of four years, with a preponderance on practical exercises, supplemented by an adequate training in the humanities which would have as its objective, not the acquisition of a certain quantity of knowledge of certain matters, but the awakening of sensitivity and contact with the most fruitful facts of world culture. Such an actor would, during the following four years, go through the stage of higher studies, which means that he would work as an actor in a laboratory group, acquiring personally the experience of acting, while continuing his studies in the literary, pictorial etc. fields, in the measure in which that is necessary to his profession, and not so as to be able to show off in drawing rooms. Such a measure of practice during four years in a laboratory theatre would be crowned by the award of a higher diploma, and it is then, after eight years of a work of this type that the actor would

be relatively prepared for his future tasks. He would not be kept at a distance from any of the dangers that come in the way of each actor, but he would be endowed with greater capacities, and his character would have been clearly fashioned. The danger of a renunciation of this paradoxical path would be much less.

Another variation, perhaps less important, but conditioned by the existence of laboratory groups, would be the creation of studios by each one of these groups, once concrete abilities have been acquired by the totality of the group. Such a studio would not have a limited existence in time, but the manner of work would be established there in terms of the actual knowledge of the trainees. Also, a professional actor coming from outside would invariably go through certain academic activities. A part of these activities should be compulsory for all actors of theatre laboratories.

All this is still only in the form of a half-measure. The real solution would be in the existence of research institutes governed by severe rules and constrained to poverty. The maintenance of an institute of this nature would cost half the sum that is sunk today in a subsidised provincial theatre. Such an institute would be composed of a very small group of learned people who have specialised in the problems that hover on the fringes of the theatre, that is to say, of a psychoanalyst, a cultural anthropologist etc. of a group of actors of a normal theatre laboratory and of a group of instructors of a secondary school of the theatre, as well as of a micro-publishing firm which would publish concrete, methodical results, for the purpose of exchange with other centres of the same type and other persons interested in allied fields. It is absolutely essential that in all research of this type there should be introduced one or several theatre critics who could analyse, from the outside, a little like the devil's advocate, and from the point of view of aesthetic situations identical to those of the theatre, the weak, missing or disquieting elements of a finished performance. As you know, this is, in our theatre, the role of Ludwik Flaszen.

E. B.: In what way would this theatre be of our time? I am thinking of the contents and of the analyses of social contemporary problems. Would it be a new type of perception of the facets of reality, of enigma and of problems that we have been, till now, used to solving by set means?

A theatre of our times

J. G.: I will reply in the perspective of the practice of our theatre. Though our theatre frequently uses classical texts, it is a contemporary theatre because it makes us confront ourselves in our very roots and in our present stereotypes, and thus permits of the consideration of our todays in the perspective of yesterday, and our yesterdays in the perspective of today. Even though this theatre goes to the extent of using an elementary language of gesture and of sound, perceptible beyond the texture of words that can be understood by anyone not knowing the language in which the performance is given, such a theatre must be a national theatre for it rests on introspection, and in the plunge into the social super-self in a national environment that is distinct and inseparable from this society. If we wish to penetrate truly in great depth, the logic of our behaviour and our thought, and to reach into their hidden layers, their secret motivations, the entire system of signs constructed by the performance must make an appeal to our experience of the present, to the reality which has overtaken us and formed us, to this half-formed language of gesture, of murmuring, of the intonation noticed in the street, during work, in the cafeteria, in short, which emanates from human behaviour-patterns meant for our observation. We speak of desecration. What else is it indeed if not a certain form of lack of tact, resting on the brutal confrontation of our proclamations and of our practices in everyday life, of our experiences of our fathers living within us, and of our search for the road leading to an easy life, or of our concept of a struggle for life, of our individual complexes and of the complexes of the totality of society. That comes down to saying that each performance of a classic is a look cast on oneself in a mirror, on our imaginations and our traditions, and not the narration of what were at one time the imaginations of man.

Each performance constructed on contemporary themes is a meeting of the superficial get-up of the present day and/or its deep roots and secret motives.

In short, it is national, for it is an absolute search of oneself; it is realistic for it is an excess of truth; it is social, for it provokes the spectator who is a social being.

Concluded

Jerzy Grotowski, eminent Polish theatre director. Eugenio Barba, critic and writer. See "Sangeet Natak 8".