Dariusz Kosiński

The chronicle of the end foretold

The news of the final closing of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, that came to me in the form of the open letter sent by Thomas, were for me not as shocking and unexpected as for some of my friends and colleagues. But despite being somehow prepared by some anticipatory signs, I still had a feeling of loss. Sometime later Aniela Gabryel, a documentary film director and my former student from Jagiellonian University who has been working for six years on the film on Workcenter, showed me the last few minutes of her document finally titled *Radical Move*. I watched Thomas standing in the empty Upstairs Room with both smile on his face and tears in his eyes. I am sure that he also knew it was coming, he probably even knew that it was necessary. But still – this is the end, beautiful friend...

After Grotowski's death in 1999 the simple fact that the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards had been still existing in Pontedera meant that his work did not stopped even if the man himself had died. The name gave him a kind of an afterlife. And this form of life, this path of work and creation was definitely finished with the noise of the doors that Thomas Richards closed leaving the Upstairs Room.

However my emotions awaken by this fragment of Aniela's film were surprisingly strong, when I am recalling my first reaction to Thomas' letter I need to admit that it was quite calm. I treated it as something rational – a logical conclusion drawn out of a chain of events and the net of circumstances. Not only the contemporary ones – I would say that both the evolution of the Workcenter and the changes in the social context it existed in had been working for a long time towards creating the set of circumstances leading to the final cut.

I will try to analyse in brief both sets of factors, presenting a kind of an outline of the Workcenter's history as I was been seeing it, first from a distance, later (after Grotowski's death) coming closer and closer to finally sit on a chair in the famous Upstairs Room and witness the Work itself. To some degree it will be of course my personal story, but telling it I will try to focus on the presentation of two chains of

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changes I witnessed – in the Workcenter and in the social and cultural environment that surrounded it and had a crucial meaning for supporting and even enabling its very existence. The main hypothesis I would like to propose is that while the closure of the Workcenter was a result of an individual or institutional choice, these final decisions were also the outcomes of the long-lasting, intertwined internal and external processes.

The myth of the Performer

The Workcenter appeared in my mind first as a myth. I studied theatre in Krakow – the same town where Grotowski studied it at the State Theatre Academy, but on the opposite side of the street and on the opposite, non-practical pole of the field – at the Jagiellonian University. Strangely enough during my studies between 1985-1990 I nearly heard a word about Grotowski. Nobody taught us about him. No courses, not even a single lecture. By the time, Grotowski who had left Poland in 1982, after the communist government introduced the martial law on December 1981, still had been working in exile. But it was not political censorship that caused the silence. Most of our professors were related to the democratic opposition and they had never respected any type of political control. It rather seems that they did not mentioned Grotowski because he was no longer doing theatre and it was the theatre they were interested in. Or maybe – they personally were simply not interested in Grotowski.

Only in the 1990s, during my PhD studies, also in Krakow, I started to discover Grotowski. By a chance I bought a small book *Teksty z lat 1965-1969*[1] prepared by him soon before his first visit in newly independent Poland in 1991. And there I read *Performer* – the text so dense and poetical that it immediately stroke me and initiated a journey that lasts until now.

It all started with the book and soon other books followed. So I was quite well-prepared for the first (and as it soon occurred – the last and the only one) chance to meet Grotowski. Maybe "to meet" is not a proper word because I was just one of few hundreds of people gathered in the big auditory of Polski Theatre in Wrocław for a all-night meeting with Grotowski on 3 March 1997. It was also the first (and luckily not the last) time when I saw Thomas Richards.

During this strange and fascinating, multidimensional meeting Grotowski and Richards presented the film version of the *Downstairs Action* shot by Mercedes Gregory. Everybody knew that no one was allowed to watch the film without Grotowski's presence so we felt privileged. After the screening Grotowski and Richards explained in length and in detail what the Action and Art as vehicle were

[1] J. Grotowski, *Teksty z lat 1965-1969*, edited by J. Degler and Z. Osiński, Wrocław, Wydawnictwo "Wiedza o Kulturze", 1990 (second corrected edition).

about. But the audience seemed to be interested in some other topics – the people asked about theatre, politics, relations between Grotowski and communist authorities. Almost no one was interested in Richards' explanations. When I later talked to my colleagues they were almost angry that "this young American" took so many time during the meeting with Grotowski.

It needs to be stressed that already in the 1990s the atmosphere around Grotowski in Poland was much different to the one he experienced in the 1970s. He was no longer a guru, a Boss. He was far both from what the country and its people suffered in the 1980s and from the wave of transformation that hit Poland at the beginning of the 1990s. The spiritual quest empowered by counter-culture that had fuelled his work was taken over completely by the Catholic church and the most important Polish hero of the time – Karol Wojtyla, pope John Paul II. On the other hand the dynamic power of the newly introduced, shiny capitalistic consumerism worked against Grotowski and his attempts to create the non-religious liturgy. Of course some old friends and former collaborators were still interested in his work, but the practice of hiding it from the general public, the mysterious and mystical atmosphere surrounding the Action that was shown only to a small group of precisely chosen people strengthen the hostile voices. What's worse, people started to mock Grotowski's "strategies" and laugh at him. Soon everybody heard the anecdote about Bruno Chojak demanding the ID from Andrzej Wajda before letting him enter the building where the Action was performed. And also many learnt with surprise that the new guru of Polish theatre Krystian Lupa was not allowed to enter at all.

The latter decision was meaningful because Lupa represented the new wave of Polish theatre that at the beginning was interested in some problems important also to Grotowski – non-orthodox spirituality, distant cultures, source traditions. But soon it followed quite different path – it became political, socially engaged and radically critical. It also started a long-lasting discussion on gender, patriarchal family and non-normative sexuality. All these subjects were somehow present in earlier Grotowski's theatre work, but the Art as vehicle seemed to have nothing in common with the "new theatre" that was in the focus of Polish audiences.

Grotowski's death on 14 January 1999 did not changed much. He was not with us before so his death simply prolonged the state of his absence. It may sound cruel, but in fact Grotowski's death removed that last obstacle disturbing the process of transformation of the real, living human being into a mythical figure that started much, much earlier.

The level of indestructible life

Around 2004 I started my research project on the tradition I called "Polish theatre of transformation". I saw it as a line of performative research developed first by romantic poets Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki in the fields of drama and

poetry, and later in theatre by Stanisław Wyspiański, Reduta and Grotowski[2]. I entered this research rather through my interest in Reduta and Słowacki, but soon need to get involved also in Grotowski. I started with studying his text by the time available mostly as they were published for the first time – in theatre magazines and newspapers. It was a real adventure to discover the texts from the 1970s – almost forgotten, but deeply inspirational, far from being outdated. This was the voice of someone who was not a guru, but a man of research far from any orthodoxy, already aware that the theatre as it had been developed in the European culture was no longer a space and medium of a real transformation. I discovered Grotowski as someone who had developed the tradition of Polish theatre of transformation to its full and final results. And it was certainly the Action that I perceived as such a result. I tried to read everything I could about the Action and though I still had not experienced it directly, I was deeply convinced that what Grotowski created within the Workcenter was the practical answer to the basic question asked in different ways by all the prophets and practitioners of the Polish theatre of transformation. The most important of them was: how by the means of performance one can achieve a state of transcending the mortal human existence – that state that usually is perceived as belonging to the domain of a religion and being a result of a ritual. In my analyses, using both Grotowski's and Richards' texts and the descriptions and interpretations of many researchers like Kris Salata, Lisa Wolford-Wylam and Fernando Taviani, I tried to prove that the Action was neither theatre nor ritual. I interpreted it as a kind of the development of the total act. Later I tried to summarize «my attempt to synthesize and state precisely what this deepening and increasing precision entailed», suggesting that while the act was a journey towards a totality, resulting in the act "releasing itself" at the point of experiencing this totality, an Action was an activity within this totality while also functioning at the level of indestructible life. Transcending death through experience and action in a realm that was not subject to mortal life, yet at the same time being present in it, seems to have been the ultimate goal of Grotowski's work[3].

In my opinion the main problem that Grotowski did not managed to solve was related to the fact that all this experiences were fully available only to the "doers". Let me again quote (this time in length) a fragment of *Performing Poland* – the book published in English in 2019 but written in Polish more than 10 years earlier:

> A particular trait of the Action, as Grotowski repeatedly stressed, was the fact that it belonged to the realm of 'art as a vehicle', meaning that its effectiveness could only be experienced by undertaking activities in the course of long and

[2] Cfr. D. Kosiński, *Polski teatr przemiany*, Wrocław, Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2007.
[3] D. Kosiński, *Performing Poland: Rethinking Histories and Theatres*, translated by P. Vickers, Cardiff, Performance Research Books, 2019, p. 104.

> difficult work that in turn revealed the form of the vehicle. [...] In the final period, he cut himself off almost completely from outsiders, creating the Actions as a form of precise activity that was accessible in full only to those involved, hence he claims that the Actions constituted a form of ritual. His final initiatives, seeking to open up the Actions to people from outside the circle of close collaborators, could be read as another attempt at including witnesses in activities, albeit without lowering the high standards of professional demands. If we accept that the Action – a dramatic (i.e. active) experience of transformation – is accessible only to those directly involved, then ultimately such opening up can be considered to be merely an invitation to engage in the hard work that results in fulfilment for only a select few. From this perspective, Grotowski's 'modern mystery' appears to be an exclusive undertaking, something thus far removed from his original intentions. [...]
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> Is there a way to escape this trap of exclusivity and the impossibility of avoiding lofty demands?
>
> Perhaps there is, but Grotowski ran out of time to find it. It seems to me that this question, which Grotowski left open, is the most important one that his officially-designated successors, Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini who continue the work of the Workcenter, have attempted to answer[4].

Destroying the roads across

The final statement of the quote shows the exact point in which I was around 2007 – the year of publication of *Polski teatr przemiany*. It also echoes a specific tensions between Poles related to and interested in Grotowski and the Workcenter. In fact it was Grotowski himself who started this disturbance by naming Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini his official and universal heirs. I am not sure if he was aware of the situation he had created by his last will, but I suppose he was. His decision deprived Wrocław – the place where his theatre reached its peak – of the position of the capital of Grotowski's world. And it happened despite the creation of the Centre for the Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Practices that was founded in 1990 with Grotowski's blessing. The last will also created a specific tension between Polish former Grotowski's collaborators and supporters and the Workcenter in Pontedera. The people who for years had been working in and with the Laboratory Theatre were in fact locked in the past because only Thomas and Mario were entitled to decide about the present state of Grotowski's tradition. For some people it was a scandal that they would never able to accept, while officially admitting that Grotowski had the right to make such a decision.

But Grotowski's right and Workcenter's activities were two different things. Quickly the former became unquestionable, while the latter begun to be perceived

[4] *Ibid.*

with growing distrust, suspiciousness and critique. The more Mario and Thomas acted like the true heirs and practical continuators of Grotowski (which in fact was their mission and obligation), the more his former Polish supporters were (mostly silently) against them.

I became to be aware of it in July 2004 when for the first time I finally had a chance to witness the Action. It happened during the Workcenter's visit in Wrocław as a part of a project "Tracing Roads Across" developed by the time in the collaboration with different European institutions, Grotowski Center in Wrocław among them.

It is obvious that I waited for the Action with very special and strong expectations. I was very aware of different circumstances conditioning my experience, together with a special one stressed by my older colleagues who saw Grotowski's performances, especially *Apocalypsis cum figuris*. Some of them even refused to see the *Action* arguing that because it was not a performance there was no point of watching. Some others were repeatedly telling me that however my experience would be my reaction was condemned to be a naïve one, created by a newcomer. I felt such comments especially strong and harmful after seeing the Action because this was one of the deepest and strongest performative experience I ever had.

I tried to describe it in an article written for an important Polish theatre magazine[5] using the perspective of the viewer retelling the performance. But I did not let myself to report the core of the experience that forced me to leave the space in Ossolineum Library in Wrocław immediately after the performance not to be followed by anyone. I cannot explain it in words but I clearly remember myself sitting in silence on a bench at a square nearby the Library and watching the ordinary people walking around, with a strong feeling that everything was in the right place. This experience did not last long, maybe ten minutes, but stayed with me until now.

During this visit I also witnessed an open presentation of *The Twin: Action in Creation*. The name said it all: this was a work-in-progress created by the new members of the Workcenter's company (I remember young Cécile Berthe among them). As Thomas informed us, the work was in the phase of collecting the material and they presented to us a three-hour long fragment of the whole six hours gathered up to this moment.

After experiencing the Action I entered the room with a very positive attitude and was quite satisfied with the long experience, though it was somehow obvious that *The Twin* was an attempt to create an Action quite similar to the Main one, created with Grotowski. The most important difference I noticed was the clear aspect of initiation. The performative structure seemed to be composed with a clear intention to introduce the new members of the company into the work led by its two leaders. And though the line of a story taken form *The Hymn of a Pearl* was

[5] Cfr. D. Kosiński, *W odpowiedzi*, in «Didaskalia», 2004, n. 63, pp. 48-51.

quite clear, the number of long-lasting sequences of monotonous dance (*yanvalou*) and songs resulted in a strong disappointment felt and expressed by many people.

So soon I realised that I was quite unique in my positive reactions. The former collaborators, supporters and simply viewers of Grotowski's theatre argued that while the *Action* created with Grotowski had a certain value introduced by his genius of editing, *The Twin* lacked it at all and was a proof of Thomas Richards's weak directing. The general opinion was that Thomas and Mario might be great singers and performers but they were not professional enough to create an interesting pieces of performance, no matter theatre or not.

This opinion, quite common in Poland, was strengthened by subsequent presentations of next performative works created in Pontedera. Especially the ones that were presented as closer to theatre like *One breath Left* or *Dies irae* that was performed in Poland in the frame of the project called "The Bridge – Developing Theatre Arts". After seeing it I did not met anyone who would say anything positive about it. All the people I talked to, no matter old or young, close or far from "Grotowskian world" were very critical and ironical. Some of them even felt happy that Mario Biagini "had not make it". For them it seemed to be another proof that Grotowski was wrong and that 'Pontedera' is not the place where his practices will survive and find a true continuation.

This widely-spread mistrust and critique was growing towards the 2009 that thanks to the new directors of the Grotowski Institute (the name was changed in 2006) was to be celebrated as the Grotowski Year under the auspices of UNESCO. Frankly speaking, both sides of the growing conflict were not doing much to minimalize the tensions. Supported by Polish theatre circles the Wrocław Institute only partly consulted the Grotowski Year with the artist's heirs, while Thomas and Mario with the support of some international, mainly American researchers interested mainly in their work (Kris Salata, Lisa Wolford Wylam, Dominika Laster) developed their own research neglecting the Polish heritage (and also some important Polish professors). Around 2009 I was not fully aware of the motivations behind the actions of each of the groups. Only later I met with representatives of both sides and thanks to hours of discussions I could understand what the conflict was about. On the Polish side it was a strong feeling of being deprived of the ability to influence the interpretation and presentation of Grotowski's work (including the one run in Poland!) by some young strangers who knew almost nothing about complicated Polish cultural history, heritage and context. The former collaborators and long-time researchers (including such important and internationally well-known figures like Ludwik Flaszen and Zbigniew Osiński) felt that their work and loyalty was not valued anymore because the only thing that became important was the Art as vehicle developed in Pontedera. All past experiences that they and many other people had highly estimated was being presented as not important, almost merely as the initial phases of the research leading to the creation of the Action. At

the same time Mario and Thomas were rightfully convinced they had a right to control all the Grotowski heritage and they tried to do it according to the only interpretations of Grotowski's past they knew – i.e. the one Grotowski had presented them with in 1980s and 1990s. In fact this was the mission Grotowski gave them (and a trap he had prepared) and they felt responsible towards their dearest mentor. Strangely enough both sides were not interested in finding a solution, a common ground, acting as only one side could "properly" interpret the heritage.

Night bus to Florence

The growing conflict was one of the reasons why the Grotowski Year, organized to celebrate the artist, became the year of disappointments and (at least in Poland) growing anti-Grotowskian critique. This is a cultural pattern one can observe in Poland on many occasions – the more somebody or something is officially celebrated, the more it is mocked, critiqued and opposed by different audiences.

I observed the Grotowski Year quite close because already in its course I knew that I would soon take the position of the program director of the Grotowski Institute. It is not a proper place and time to explain how it happened and to judge whether the decision was right or wrong. It is sufficient to say that already at the beginning of 2009 I accepted the invitation by Jaroslaw Fret to replace Grzegorz Ziółkowski after the Grotowski Year would be over. So I had enough time to watch and analyse the challenges I would have to face. I quickly realized that one of the most important one was the relation with the Workcenter.

Parallelly, Mario Biagini developed a project of finding ways and partners to develop the Polish reception of Grotowski and relations with the Workcenter outside of the Grotowski Institute. First in Spring 2009 he came to Poland to meet some important critics, researchers and activists, then in Summer a group of them came to Pontedera to witness the work and in late Autumn Thomas Richards group came to Poland to visit some independent theatre companies and cultural centers having no relation to the Grotowski Institute and the Grotowski Year.

I learned about all these activities because I had good relations both with the group of the theatre people who were in Potedera and among the off companies that hosted Thomas. Being at the same time more and more disappointed with the program of the Grotowski Year, focused mostly on celebration of the important figures from the past, I felt that I had to re-establish the relations between the Grotowski Institute and the Workcenter and work against the growing mutual mistrust. Jarosław Fret was far from enthusiasm, but he accepted my plan. Igor Stokfiszewski, an important philosopher, left-wing activist and theatre dramaturg who was a guide to Thomas Richards during his visit in Warsaw for the final event of the Grotowski Year in January 2010, introduced me to Thomas as the new program director of the Grotowski Institute. I asked for a meeting in Pontedera and

Thomas agreed, though in his voice I also found no enthusiasm. I was invited to come in February when both Thomas and Mario would be in Pontedera.

It is hard to believe it now but in 2010 there was no Ryanair, no other cheap fight from Krakow to Italy. In fact all fights I found were not very convenient, but very expensive. So I decided to take a night bus going to Florence. For me it was anything special. I always travel by public means of transport, so many times I travelled in Poland and in Europe by night buses or trains. But when I finally met Mario and Thomas who came to pick me from a hotel in the centre of Pontedera, my night travel impressed them a lot. It was by no means intentional, but the fact that I had been travelling for fourteen hours only to be able to meet them was treated as a proof of my real will to re-establish the mutual relations.

This was a good start, but it took us quite a lot of time to overcome all troubles and obstacles to finally establish the board of editors of the first edition of Grotowski's *Collected Texts* – which was my first and main goal. The realisation of this huge editorial enterprise would be probably impossible without two remarkable women: Carla Polastrelli with her humour and competence on one hand and Agata Adamiecka-Sitek with her sharp critical mind, editorial precision and organisational skills. It was Agata who convinced the Polish Ministry of Culture to finance the project of the publication of the volume in Polish giving us the strong fundament for meeting, working and talking together during our wonderful, though sometimes tiresome visits to Pontedera.

Many times our Polish team (including also Igor Stokfiszewski) had a quite opposite opinion then Mario and Thomas. Many times we had to work hard to achieve a compromise. But we had never stopped listening to each other and presenting openly our perspectives. That is why we finally build a space of trust that allowed us to finish this complicated work. The volume was published in Polish in 2012.

In the course of these meetings and travels to Tuscany I realized that the Workcenter was in the new phase of its existence and work. Already earlier the company had been divided into two groups: Open Program led by Mario and the Focused Research Team led by Thomas. Visiting Pontedera we were able to witness their work. One day Mario and his friends took us to Pisa where in a desacralized church turned into a trendy club I witnessed *The Electric Party Song*, that was a part of the artistic project built around Allen Ginsberg poems. I was impressed not only by the clear professional values of singing and action but on an attempt to insert and introduce the Art as vehicle into an environment not prepared and not formatted in any way to accept it. I immediately associated this performative event with Grotowski's work on paratheatre, especially in its late phase in the second part of the 1970s. In his talk on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Laboratory Theatre he recalled the rule that if something was working in a laboratory situation one would need to test it in such hostile environments as the

hospital or jail[6]. In Pisa I had an impression that Mario was organising such a test. I shared this observation with him and he seemed to accept. Only later I realized that what he aimed was not so much a test but an 'infection'. Open Program presented his work as a concert – an activity quite "normal" for the place the group performed in – and then slowly start to change the energetical impact of the event by inner actions of the performers imbedded inside the "concert". *Electric Party Songs* seemed the most radical of such attempts while another "Ginsberg piece" *I am America* functioned rather as a performance, presented for audiences at least partly prepared to encounter the Workcenter.

Some time later, together with some other people, I was invited by Thomas to his house near Pontedera to witness one of the first public presentations of the *Living Room* – the opus belonging to the domain of the Art as vehicle that in my opinion evolved during the subsequent years into Thomas' masterpiece proving his directorial talent and abilities. The early version I experienced differed strongly from the later one that had been presented around the world (also in Poland). I don't remember it in details – just the strongest moment that for me was the song and dance of a Chilean girl transforming herself into an ancient warrior just a few moments after she laughed at me when I was trying to impress her with Polish mountains. And that's what I remember mostly – the social situation of an unformal party suddenly transformed into a meeting with the Forces.

I also saw *The Living Room* as an opening, this time reminding rather the very last phase of Grotowski's life and work when he resigned from hiding away and tried to open the Art as vehicle to new audiences. In my eyes both Mario and Thomas, each in his own way, tried to share the inner action – the core of the Art as vehicle – not by its open presentation as such (as it was in the previous years), but by the means of a secret "implementation". Such presentations of the "opus" to theatre audiences around the world without any initial conditions or means of control meant the negation of Grotowski's practise. It seemed that after 15 years of its existence the Workcenter started to emerge from the shadow of the Master.

At hands reach

After the publication of the *Collected Texts* in 2012 my contacts with the Workcenter became quite rare, but we still had some chances to meet in Poland and in Europe. In 2014 I left the Grotowski Institute and started to work at the Theatre Institute in Warsaw, again as the program director. Here I also tried to continue the cooperation with the Workcenter, but it was not so easy: we had a lot of other

[6] Cfr. J. Grotowski, *Teksty zebrane*, edited by A. Adamiecka-Sitek, M. Biagini, D. Kosiński, C. Pollastrelli, T. Richards, I. Stokfiszewski, Wrocław-Warsaw, Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012, p. 974.

problems to be solved. Also the interest in any continuation of Grotowski's tradition was no longer strong.

In December 2016 I finally managed to help Mario to visit Poland with his group to perform their new pieces *The Hidden Sayings* and an *Open Choir*. The former may be described as a concert of the songs of tradition while the latter as a communal event in which every participant is invited to join the choir. What is very important we managed to invite the Open Program to Opole – the town where Grotowski started his quest. Together with Mario and Carla who came with the company we visited the pub established many years ago in former rooms of the Theatre of 13 Rows and had a glass of vodka to celebrate the ones that had changed this common place into a source of the new theatre.

What I remember very well beside this special moment is the new spirit I found in Mario's work – it became light and full of joy. All tones of anger and heavy rebellion vanished. Both *Hidden Sayings* and *Open Choir* shined in a dark not because of the bright dresses of the performers but because of a light and joyful tone that seemed to prevail in songs and actions. And also Mario seemed to be calm, open and friendly as never before. The performers shared their work with not a trace of elitism. It seemed like the doors were widely opened.

And in fact they were. When in February 2019 I came to Pontedera again to talk about any opportunities to continue the collaboration between the Workcenter and some Polish institutions I was hosted first by Mario's group and then by the team of Thomas. It was the first time when I was simply and directly invited to come to Valicelle to witness the work as the only outsider in the room. No doubts – I really felt honoured and privileged. And a little bit ashamed because I did not expected such a welcome.

In February 2019 I saw four performances by the people from Mario's group: *Katie's Song* by Polish performer Agnieszka Kazmierska, *E il popolo canta* by Felicita Marcelli, the three-woman performance *Dark is My Mother* and a presentation of a work-in-progress on Lebanese songs performed by the men's part of the group. I have to say I was both impressed and surprised. It looked like after the long phase of the work on performative events, of communal work (especial the one in Brooklyn that I only read about) Open Program slowly transformed into a second Focused Team working on precise performative structures composed of traditional songs and organic (should I use the word?) actions. Maybe it would be too much to say that Mario followed the Grotowski's model and that after the years of "paratheater of sources" he entered the domain of the Art as vehicle. But there was some resemblance in their paths.

The strongest experience I had during the years of my contacts with the Workcenter waited for me upstairs where Thomas and his team worked with a group of newcomers in the frames of the newly formed Open Studio. As Thomas explained this were the last days of the project after which only a few people both willing to

work with the Workcenter and accepted by him would be able to stay. This wide group was not working on something especially prepared for them but on the famous vibrational songs and on the inner energy transformation – the core of the 'mystery' that I was not allowed to witness when Grotowski visited Wrocław in 1996. Now Thomas invited me to the room, showed me a chair and told me to watch and try not to disturb. I have never experienced something like this so closely and directly but at the same time – without any atmosphere of mysticism or esoterism. It was obvious that people singing and moving through the space around me were experiencing what we used to call trance or transgression. But it was like a precise technique – Thomas was correcting small details of a position or simply touched a part of one's body and she or he entered the state of elation, of translumination. And it happened not only to a well-trained members of the group, though of course you could easily tell who had been working with Thomas longer and who had not. But the latter also entered the state on which Ryszard Cieślak had to work hard for more than a year! And they were here for two weeks! It was unbelievable but absolutely real.

Frankly speaking I was not prepared for that. All my theoretical knowledge about the vibrational songs and the way Thomas worked on and with them lost any value in the face of this incredible experience. And especially all the long debates on theatre and ritual, all this romantic notion of the "mystical" acts of transgression were of no use there. What I experienced was somehow "technical" but in the positive meaning of the word. It was clear and evident that there were no supernatural mysterious forces acting there but simply an experienced and precise professional expert who knew exactly what to do. Maybe this was my greatest surprise – that Thomas knew so well what to do. Yes, I knew he was an expert but I was not aware that he was so precise and efficient.

What I remember very well is the laughter. When the process led by a song reached its peak the person singing often started to laugh in the way that immediately reminded me of the uncanny laughter of Ryszard Cieślak in his final monologue in *The Constant Prince*. But in the laughter I heard in Valicelle there was no suffering, no catholic and Polish sacrifice, no dying. The people laughing were free and happy in their pure and absolute totality. When later somebody asked me what I had seen there in Vallicelle, I answered: "I saw twenty total acts of princess and princesses that were not constant but full of joy".

The open window and the closing doors

A year later all the plans we were discussing in Vallicelle with Thomas and Mario were destroyed by the pandemic. During the first lock-down in 2020 I heard that the Focused Team started to work online. Thomas confirmed it during an online talk I chaired in August in the frames of the Retroperspectives Festival organized

in Łódź by Tomasz Rodowicz and his independent company CHOREA. Mario also took part in this discussion about theatre and pandemic and both his and Thomas' interventions that impressed many viewers were later published in an e-book I quickly edited[7]. During the meeting Thomas mentioned that he thinks of a new way of sharing his and his company's work via streaming. So I was not so much surprised when in November a film showing the work on vibrational songs was for a few days available on Youtube (together with the registration of *Dies irae*, *I am America*, *Katie's Tale*, and even *The Action in Vallicelle*!). But still it surprised me when in January 2021 I received an invitation to join a new initiative of the Focused Team in Art as Vehicle – simply called the "Open Fridays". As it soon occurred this was not a previously prepared documentation but series of live streamings of the Singing Sessions organized on subsequent Fridays first in Pontedera Teatro (because of the pandemic rules of keeping distance) and later in Vallicelle. The streamed Sessions were followed by Thomas' comments, his corrections and, later, by sessions of questions and answers of the people watching them online. They were somehow prepared – several times Thomas mentioned previous rehearsals or rather – trainings not streamed. They also differed much from what I had witnessed in February 2019, because back then the bodies of all doers were almost constantly close to each other with a lot of touching, embracing, playful actions resembling children games. In the pandemic version the doers were far away from each other, keeping distance and only supporting a person singing with the voice, gestures or postures. But nevertheless this was the same work on songs the Team had been doing for months usually hidden from the outsiders. And now it was open and widely shared – in the Net! Each Friday new people from all over the world joined the streaming – some of them quite well-known in the "Grotowskian world", some – a fresh newcomers as one could tell from the questions they asked. There were no doubts – we participated in the most ambitious attempt to share the Work – simply with everyone.

To describe this unique situation Thomas used a metaphor of a window. As he explained, sharing the Work with others did not mean that it was changed into a spectacle composed for the viewer – simply in the room where the Work was being developed a window was opened letting anyone interested to look inside and see what was happening in the room. Of course the e-windows opened in 2021 influenced the course of the work. Some comments by Thomas confirmed my intuition that Open Fridays were a conscious experiment not only with the ways of sharing the Work, but mainly with the ways to impact the witnesses. And for us watching the streamings it was a study and a training in the art of witnessing: each week we learnt how to be a witness.

The initial curiosity and excitation, that you were invited to watch and listen to

[7] Cfr. D. Kosiński (ed.), *Pictures of the Pandemic. An Album of Voices*, Kraków, żywosłowie, 2021.

the sessions hidden for so many years, was over very quickly. Open Fridays soon occurred to be quite demanding: long-lasting (up to 3 or 4 hours), not spectacular at all, from some perspective rather monotonous – they forced the people watching to create their own strategies of witnessing. It was not an easy task especially when you consider the special conditions forced by an on-line streaming. You are not in the space. You are muted and in the most cases not seen (there were many people attending so it was better to switch of the camera). So you are tempted to start your own activities, as it happens usually during some long online meetings. To keep present, to be vigilant, you need to really stay focused, even fight against so many things that surrounds you. On the other hand the atmosphere created by Thomas and his team was far from "sacral", so any "cultish" action would be grotesque. We had to keep focused and "active in witnessing" without destroying the patterns of common life, for example not silencing the ones we were living with – families, friends, roommates. Some people were not switching off cameras, allowing (intentionally or not – hard to tell) to watch also their actions and reactions that ranged from constant attempts to sing with the team to cases of evidently lost contact – doing some other work on the computer, or simply leaving the room. On the screen of my computer I had a fascinating gallery of ways of witnessing.

During these months I perceived the Open Fridays not as a way of broadening the team recognition and catching the attention of new people. I saw them rather as another test of effectiveness, maybe the most demanding one – the test of virtuality. While witnessing the Sessions and experiencing them in my own way I was quite convinced that the result of the test was positive.

These words may sound strange when put in the light of the fact that more or less half a year after the Open Fridays stopped also the Workcenter was closed. But I see a strict relation between the success of the latter and the end of the former. Both are the symptoms of what I recognize as the end of specific, historical form of laboratory theatre, based on the closure and strictly hierarchical inner relations between the leader having the position, authority and (in the best cases) the knowledge of a "master", and the group of collaborators and apprentices. From the very beginning this was the model of Grotowski theatre – emblematic (not only because of its name) to the theatre laboratory tradition. Of course, one may argue that the scientific laboratory is nowadays only exceptionally, if ever, organised like that, but we need to remember that Grotowski shaped his idea and practices on the model of the Bohr Institute – with the strong leading figure in the centre. Also the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards was organised according to the master-apprentice model, hidden away from the world, legendary exclusive, almost not accessible.

And this is exactly this model that in recent years started to be highly problematic in the world of art. The #MeToo movement that begun in the film industry

quickly resonated in other fields of art and culture, with theatre among them. And it is hardly a surprise that some of the strongest and mostly publicized of its theatre manifestations were connected to the experimental theatre companies led by strong male leaders (with Jan Fabre as the most obvious example). Also in Poland one of the mostly publicized and discussed cases of accusations on mobbing, psychical aggression and sexual molestation were addressed towards important figures of the non-traditional theatre considered to be connected with the Grotowski's tradition. In October 2020 Mariana Sadovska, former leading actress and musician of the Centre for the Theatre Practices "Gardzienice", accused its leader, Włodzimierz Staniewski of psychical and physical violence. Her statement tellingly titled *Coming Out*[8] initiated a wave of similar testimonies and accusations. Though the formal investment had never started because according to Polish law the crimes of which the director had been accused expired, his case is generally considered a strong example of the abuse of the male leader power. In this context also Grotowski was mentioned. Some commentators reminded that in the first half of the 1970s Staniewski was a close collaborator to Grotowski. For some it was quite obvious that the way he acted as the leader was the consequence of what he had learnt from his master. All the accusations of elitism, false mystical atmosphere, and, most of all – of using people and destroying their lives to achieve the goals chosen by the leader returned in full bloom. But this time they were strictly connected to the interpretation of the laboratory theatre organisational and operational model. It was clearly interpreted as generating unhealthy relations of power that in some cases led to abuse, violence and molestation.

I am recalling this context to put in its frame a quotation from the important statement of Mario Biagini. Being an editor of the online magazine "Perfomer" published by the Grotowski Institute I asked both Thomas and Mario to publish their ideas and texts in a special issue devoted to the 35th anniversary of the foundation of the Workcenter. Beside some text published before, Mario send us a new one, called in English *Update. February 2021.* I think it is one of the most important statements of a theatre artist published during last few years:

> Personally and professionally, I don't want to be "a leader" anymore. I am grateful to all those who trusted me and gave me the opportunity to be responsible for their work and for the functioning of a group, also helping me understand that we can now invent new ways together. I am neither going to stop working nor to resign from my professional responsibilities, but I don't see how I can fulfill my public function as an actor and a director while keeping a position of leadership, nowadays: I strongly feel that the times we live in demand from me to question my own automatisms and to take steps forward, which also means

[8] Cfr. M. Sadovska, *Coming out*, in «Dwutygodnik», October 2020; https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9125-coming-out.html (last accessed: 17 June 2022).

> to step back. I can perhaps direct a performance, but I have no intention to keep exerting authority in the same old way. My companions are intelligent, well-informed, and talented people who don't need to be led, but to develop their own capacities of collaboration, to help each other, to discover their own human and professional autonomy and, above all, to decide for themselves how to follow their aspirations, individually and together. I don't have a program to propose: I can only take practical steps in my own work, to look to serve my companions' individual needs and collective potentialities. They and the people we meet are my teachers in this respect. Only being sensitive to their propositions I can perhaps find with them what I sense as a possibility, and be able to imagine together with others what I cannot yet think by myself[9].

In fact, this was a declaration of the end of the Open Program. Soon the formal decision followed. And Thomas letter informing about the closure of the Workcenter appeared as the next step.

No more center – time to work

Reading this long story without happy ending one can say that this is a tale of disappointment and failure. After 35 years of work, after a lot of efforts, tiresome hours of training and performing, after fighting (sometimes fiercely) to be considered the only ones who knew and practised a "true" Grotowski's heritage, Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards admitted that they were not able to continue the work the way Grotowski created for them. But I think that it also means a victory – victory of a living tradition over a temptation to preserve and survive. Starting from an obligation to keep the heritage "pure" and away from "profans", the two artists soon recognized a need to develop the "gift" in their own ways and to share it with a growing group of others. In the course of this development both Mario and Thomas freed themselves of the figures of "Grotowski's heirs" to become artists and important teachers on their own. It took time because the heritage they felt responsible for was undoubtedly both a treasure and a burden, and it was not easy to free themselves from it without crashing and destroying it. But I would say that finally they both managed to find their own way to close the doors of what was their professional home of birth and enter the world.

Not only from this perspective I recognize the closure of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards as one of the most important events in the world theatre of the last few years (even if a majority of the theatre world did not noticed it at all). This is really the end of the laboratory theatre. No more cruel alchemy of a master who melts people to achieve gold. But it does not mean that a

[9] M. Biagini, *Update. February 2021*, in «Performer», 2021, n. 21; https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-21 (last accessed: 17 June 2022).

quest for the "gold" is no longer possible. The Workcenter belongs to the history, but the center of the work lives on.

Closing of the doors of the Upper Room in Valicelle is not the last image of the wonderful documentary by Aniela Gabryel. The true final scene shows Thomas Richards singing alone in the woods.