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Any breath left: what next for Grotowski after the Workcenter?

Two multilingual email communications were sent out at the beginning of 2022 within a month of each other. The first, dated 1st January, was from Mario Biagini, former Associate Director of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. This announced his departure from the Workcenter, his setting up of another organisation intriguingly titled the Academy of the Unfulfilled, and a brief explanation of the reasons for his leaving. The second came out on the last day of the same month from Thomas Richards, who declared the closing of the Workcenter, explained broadly the financial reasons for this and touched on some of the consequences. As Richards' email highlights, Covid-19 has had many negative artistic and cultural impacts. The Workcenter's model as essentially a research body with limited options for income generation, especially during a pandemic, no doubt made it even more precarious.

Both communications cross-referenced each other and were not in isolation. The first did not come as a surprise, citing reasons of personal development and divergence from the Workcenter's mission and Richards' own work. Biagini had been pursuing his own semi-independent path within the Workcenter for years, formally at least since 2007 with the creation of the Open Program. In concrete terms, the seeds of this change had been sewn even earlier in Project: *The Bridge* Developing Theatre Arts, part of the EU-funded Tracing Roads Across (2003-2006), discussed later. More intangibly, this shift probably started well before that. The second email came rather more out of the blue, announcing the end of a long-standing institution, in operation since 1986. Its opening paragraph suggested that this was a relatively quick response to some recent financial decisions and changes made by the "mothership" organisation, the National Theatre of Tuscany.

The two communications deserve further scrutiny, which I will begin to do here. Neither gave Tracing Roads Across (TRA hereafter) its full title but both described its "fundamental" (Biagini) or "defining" (Richards) nature, without elaborating

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what made it so[1]. My home organisation the University of Kent was the only British collaborator in TRA and thus had a key role in the English-language reception of the Workcenter. In early January 2005 – almost exactly halfway through the project – we hosted members of the team with Richards and Biagini for a two-day symposium or Intervention as it was called. Reflecting on this event might help us understand some of the wider implications of the changes announced in these two messages.

At the time of TRA, my own writing (including a chapter in Italian) noted how much the project consolidated a departure from the previous art as Vehicle *modus operandi*[2]. Project *The Bridge* specifically further opened up and shifted the Workcenter's practice closer towards performances for spectators, according to these terms as they are widely understood. My Italian chapter focused on and developed from my own spectatorship/witnessing of *One Breath Left* in June 2001 in an abandoned Coop store in Pontedera. This performance was innovative and challenging not only in its attempted melding of performance and art as Vehicle practices, acting and doing, but also because it incorporated into the main Workcenter team four members of Singapore's Theatre OX, including the performer Ang Gey Pin. Ang already had a long connection to Grotowski through participation in Objective Drama and had previously been resident in the Workcenter with other members of OX. She was later to become a core participant in TRA, at the centre of this performance as it evolved with a much larger group into *Dies Irae: My Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show* across the project's three years[3].

Richards spoke then about how the roots of this shift, which *One Breath Left* and

[1] TRA still exists digitally to the extent that it sits archived online. The website's design as a text-only site with no images or interactivity beyond a no longer functioning Contact section gives a sense of just how long ago TRA was. It also reminds us of the many iterations, projects and phases through which the Workcenter has passed, though art as Vehicle has run through them all as a constant golden thread. See http://tra.scharf.net/infos/ (last accessed: 31 May 2022).

[2] *Destarsi con 'One breath left'*, in A. Attisani and M. Biagini (eds.), *Opere e sentieri. Testimonianze e riflessioni sull'arte come veicolo*, vol. III, Roma, Bulzoni, 2008, pp. 129-140. This collection came out of TRA along with two other volumes by the same editors. It included scholars' previously authored texts as well as materials generated during TRA either as stand-alone pieces or adaptations from project conference papers. My *After Grotowski – the next Generation*, in «New Theatre Quarterly», 18 (1), February 2002, preceded TRA but picked up some of the same issues about the borderlines of performance in relation to art as Vehicle.

[3] A trailer for the piece is available here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gJQRcPW4Bo. This acted as an advertisement for a live streaming of the film of the performance on 11 December 2020 during the pandemic, followed by a discussion with Biagini. I supervised Ang's practice research PhD at Kent, awarded in 2017, linked to her project Sourcing Within. Other former Workcenter members have since enquired about the possibility of doing a doctorate, an interesting prospect considering that they have come from a research-centred environment. There is no doubt huge untapped potential expertise in former Workcenter members and collaborators which a PhD might well embrace.

its later versions epitomised, had in fact started many years before in 1998, the formal beginning date of *The Bridge*[4]. This new workstream in 'performance/non-performance' seemed a radical shift from Grotowski's own interests during his last 13 years in the Workcenter but it began whilst Grotowski was still alive and had his endorsement.

The tension or play between performance/non-performance was a constant in all Grotowski's later work but had manifested more indirectly earlier too. During the Theatre of Productions period, for example, it was evidenced in pragmatic ways through delayed or cancelled premieres, very long training and rehearsal periods, and a focus on acting craft and process. The subsequent phases of Paratheatre, Theatre of Sources and Objective Drama, and to some extent art as Vehicle, were more extreme and ruled out spectatorship all together, something which has troubled or confused some commentators, students and researchers since. In the last phase, the spectator was replaced by a witness. I analysed the comparatively short time period in which Grotowski was actually directing theatre productions for audiences during his career in "Jerzy Grotowski, director?"[5]. Scholars such as De Marinis have also explored in detail some of the implications of such work that straddles taxonomic borders, including in volume 3 of *Opere e sentieri.*

The Workcenter's closure makes it a good time to look back and take stock, just as we can also look forward and hypothesise. We might consider how, if at all, the relationship between contemporary practice and scholarship regarding Grotowski might be recast. What will remain of the Workcenter's activities and how might this shape the wider reception of what Grotowski did? What has actually stopped, what "closed", what breathed its last? The process of transmission was core to Grotowski's collaboration with Richards, but can this continue, if one believes it didn't actually stop on Grotowski's passing in 1999? If it can continue, how might it evolve outside institutional structures? Theatre directors have often created companies in order to forge teams who understand and can sustain their vision, collectively. Was the Workcenter ever such a group?[6] Both Biagini and Richards refer in their email communications to the burden of leadership and management which they endured. Grotowski himself called his piece that ends the book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (1995) "From the theatre company to art as vehicle", recognising the shift in his own work from a large production company, Teatr Laboratorium,

[4] See https://www.theworkcenter.org/about/brief-history (last accessed: 18 May 2022).

[5] This was a chapter in my 2018 edited *The Great European Stage Directors. Grotowski, Brook, Barba*, vol. V (London: Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama), in which I questioned to what extent we might consider him a director according to the standard model of someone who directs performances for a public.

[6] It is difficult to define Richards as a theatre director as such, for he is very much a performer or doer, as Grotowski categorised him, who has also sometimes explored directing practice. The exact nature of his role as artistic director of the Workcenter is worth examining in greater detail.

to more open-ended and personal research with a smaller, more fluid team. The Workcenter was certainly an unusual exploratory body, but one that worked productively for many years. What are the specific legacies of its research?

It is very early days for a full assessment but in order to begin to address such questions and understand what might come next (or perhaps what won't), we also need to pay attention to publishing on and, most importantly, *by* Grotowski. Like art as Vehicle, this has been a common though not constant thread throughout these 36 years. It was an integral part of TRA but was not mentioned in Richards' email. I appreciate the need for brevity in goodbyes, especially when emails are lengthened by appearing in four or five languages (though interestingly not the same four, with Biagini adding Portuguese to French, Italian, English and Spanish). Yet there was no reference to any of the non-practical aspects of Grotowski's legacy, no mention of the publishing, film and scholarly work that often ran alongside the practical research or which emerged from it.

This absence may arise indirectly from a contradiction at the heart of the Workcenter: it was both central in continuing and sustaining the legacy of a major 20th century theatre figure, Grotowski, but also marginal in that the members only rarely performed theatre pieces for a large public and were often removed from mainstream currents. It was always somehow in between, both one thing and another: a research body involved closely in the development and furthering of scholarly discourse and practices according to highly specific terms as well as a mobile and fluid group of creative artist-makers. From a UK cultural perspective, their appearance at Edinburgh Festival in 2016, although coordinated and hosted by Rose Bruford College, a UK drama school, was the closest the Workcenter ever came to the conventional beating heart of British theatre. "Edinburgh" (to which it is often shortened) has always been a cultural anomaly, with groups visiting and performing there who never appear elsewhere in the UK outside this exceptional context. At the Festival, the Workcenter led talks and workshops and showed films, their usual practice, but there were also performances for a paying public. These works were seemingly not created exclusively as performances, in the conventional meaning of this term, but were rather continuations of art as Vehicle and Project: *The Bridge*[7]. Today there is scant evidence of the performances' existence at Edinburgh beyond some reviews and basic data such as times and venues, supported by fragments of films on the Workcenter's website as well as minimal production information and programmes[8].

According to the Workcenter's website, *The Underground: A Response to Dosto-*

[7] They were not presented under the latter's auspices, though, as that formally finished in 2006, at the end of TRA.

[8] At the time of writing, these film extracts are only available through direct searches rather than linked from the home webpage.

evsky is a theatre piece which «confronts the proscenium, while remaining a frontal performance whose fourth wall is gradually blurred as the director is pulled onto the stage to become part of his own creation»[9]. The Workcenter's advance publicity spoke about witnesses and framed their pieces in terms of art as Vehicle. Most reviews overlooked this. The nuances in this "bridge" are not easily grasped, as my Italian chapter described. The conflict between presenting what might be deemed a theatre production for spectators and a performance that is as much a vehicle for the doers' "inner work" can easily lead to misunderstandings, misrepresentation. This is especially true in a commercial, competitive and touristic context like Edinburgh Festival where such work is highly anomalous, exposing the tension mentioned earlier.

The Workcenter has presented practice at many festivals and events globally but this has usually been more tightly contextualised than Edinburgh allowed. TRA, as an example, had a pan-European Documentation Team of which I was a member: «An integral and substantial aspect of the overall project will be consecrated to the creation of a body of documentation, in written texts as well as on video»[10]. Films were made, texts published, and not just in relation to the project per se, but also regarding writing by Grotowski. Antonio Attisani's 2006 *Teatro Apocrifo* (Medusa Edizioni) and Kris Salata's 2013 *The Unwritten Grotowski* (Routledge) evolved from TRA and its various encounters and meetings, as did the three volumes of *Opere e sentieri*. It was a productive time, and not just for practice.

Important amongst these "publications" were the films which TRA enabled, a significant achievement partly because production costs can be so prohibitive. These increased access to works that were otherwise seen by relatively few people outside their live context, which in itself has always involved relatively small numbers. Even then, the films were themselves also limited to "live" screenings only, their dissemination restricted and contextualised, just as *Downstairs Action* (1989) by Mercedes Gregory had always been. Richards' book *Heart of Practice* (2008) ends with a Workcenter filmography (p. 195). Of the four films listed there, two came out of TRA, both focused on *Action*: one shot in Turkey – *Action in Aya Irini* – and the other in the home base of Vallicelle, Italy, titled accordingly. The fact that they were made as documentation and not for general release or sale is mentioned in an addendum to this short list[11].

[9] See http://www.theworkcenter.org/performance-events/14-i-am-america.html# (last accessed: 18 May 2022). There are echoes of Tadeusz Kantor here, though rather than his very overt self-positioning as the ever-present creator of works derived from his past which he reforms before our very eyes, Richards' role seems to be as a performer-participant leading from within the group.

[10] See http://tra.scharf.net/infos/ (last accessed: 18 May 2022).

[11] Interestingly, this filmography does not include *One Breath Left: Dies Irae*, which was also shot as part of the project. For more on this, see footnote n. 3.

Establishing a simultaneously academic and professional (by the latter I mean filmmakers) documentation team might have been a prudent strategy to help substantiate the EU bid, which Richards announced in the TRA book's inside front cover he was "surprised" was successful. Such outputs make the inherently ephemeral transmissible, shareable, especially valuable for work not made for wide distribution like that of the Workcenter. Moreover though, it demonstrated a commitment to the further augmentation of Grotowski's legacy through publications of all kinds – as attested by the filming of *Action* twice, the last work or "opus" in which Grotowski himself was directly and closely involved.

The Kent Intervention as part of TRA typified this dual concern, as practice (in the form of films) and analysis/discussion went hand in hand. The two-day symposium included screenings of the two *Action* films, *Downstairs Action* and *Action in Vallicelle*, alongside talks by Antonio Attisani and Carla Pollastrelli, and ample discussion with Biagini and Richards. Everything was conducted in English, Richards' native language, without simultaneous translation, lending a fluency and energy to proceedings and clarity about the terminology being deployed.

This event was also notable in that it reconnected Lisa Wolford Wylam with the Workcenter after a 5-year absence. This reacquaintance led to the TDR Summer 2008 special issue *Re-Reading Grotowski* which initially was meant to be about the Grotowskian diaspora more broadly before eventually focusing on the Workcenter's place in the continuation of Grotowski's practice and theories, according to the notion of a "living tradition". Projects like TRA and other externally funded programmes allowed not only practical investigations to continue through supporting daily studio work but also provided a means (and perhaps even some funds or at least some funded time) to facilitate further publications/documentation.

Richards silence in his email on this topic could suggest that he considers that the task of maintaining and developing Grotowski's literary estate, his responsibility as the "legal heir", sits separately from the Workcenter's practical activities and research. The significance of this part of the legacy was laid out precisely from the start, as evidenced in the Workcenter website: «Grotowski entrusted Richards and Mario Biagini, a key member of the Workcenter team since its beginnings, as the sole legatees of his Estate, which includes his entire body of written work»[12]. Richard Schechner reiterates this in the aforementioned «TDR» in *TDR Comment: Grotowski and the Grotowskian*: «each phrase or word, however peculiar in English, is as crucially important to Richards and Biagini who are entrusted with Grotowski's writings as they were to Grotowski himself»[13]. Schechner attests to this not just from his own experience of working with them on this special issue of TDR

[12] See https://www.theworkcenter.org/about/brief-history (last accessed: 20 July 2022).

[13] R. Schechner, *TDR Comment: Grotowski and the Grotowskian*, in «TDR», 52, 2 (*Re-Reading Grotowski*), Summer 2008, pp. 7-13: 7.

but no doubt *The Grotowski Sourcebook* (1997) too. Is such academic, scholarly or film documentation work still possible now? What is needed to make it financially and practically possible?

The single Polish partner in TRA was the Centre for the Study of Jerzy Grotowski's Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Practices, now more simply the Grotowski Institute. As I understand it, it has no legal responsibility for managing the Grotowski estate. It does a great deal and has published extensively and continues to publish works by or on his many collaborators and those he influenced, mainly, though not exclusively, Polish ones. Much good work has been done in this regard. With their support and following on from TRA, building in part on the networks, interest and momentum it generated as well as the 2009 UNESCO "Year of Grotowski", Grotowski's collected works were later published in Polish[14]. This collection has not yet been produced in English. Given that English is, arguably, the internationally dominant mode of circulation of Jerzy Grotowski's writings and related ideas, this is a notable absence.

It is worth pausing here to understand why such a collection might be important and briefly outline what it comprises. Many individual elements contained in it remain unpublished in English, such as Grotowski's Juvenilia (including newspaper and other articles from his time as a student) as well as many key texts such as (in their translated titles) "Voice", "Training/Exercises", or "Theatre and Ritual". The book comprises 1120 pages in a main section of over 120 pieces plus two shorter annexes (the latter contains texts either where there are doubts about whether or not Grotowski had actually approved them for publication or offering different versions from those in the collection's main body). This substantial work opens up numerous possibilities for new avenues of thinking and research, as Biagini and Richards highlight in the preface, just as Polish scholars have in recent years explored fresh perspectives to Grotowski through gender and sexuality[15]. Through such texts, academic scholarship is reenergised and recast.

English-speaking academics and practitioners interested in Grotowski have to rely on an eclectic range of books, articles and other sources. At the core of this sits the problematic *Towards a Poor Theatre* (for example, it only focuses on the earlier part of the Production phase up to 1968 and notably excludes *Apocalypsis cum figuris* (1969), a piece which can itself also be considered a kind of "bridge") and the *Grotowski Sourcebook* with its strong Anglo-American emphasis in its many

[14] A. Adamiecka-Sitek, M. Biagini, D. Kosiński, C. Pollastrelli, T. Richards, I. Stokfiszewski (edited by), *Jerzy Grotowski: Teksty Zebrane*, Warsaw, Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Krytyka Polityczna, 2012.

[15] Of particular note is the English-language «Didaskalia» journal (February 2015) with an essay by A. Adamiecka-Sitek, *Grotowski, women and Homosexuals: on the margins of a "Human drama"* followed by A. Adamiecka-Sitek and L. Kolankiewicz's "Correspondence". See http://archiwum.didaskalia.pl/Didaskalia_angielski_2.pdf (last accessed: August 2022).

commentaries on Grotowski. As Richards works out his next steps, it is understandable that this large and very complex task might not be a priority, even if it is, I believe, a pressing one. Grotowski was a stickler for precise language, something he initially worked on closely with Ludwik Flaszen as literary manager/devil's advocate[16]. Publication of the collected texts would help consolidate and support such work for the future, based upon a core opus. It would demand semantic precision and enable shared ground.

Problems arise from missing materials which create gaps in knowledge. If published in English, the Juvenilia would show the steady progression of Grotowski's ideas from his polemical writings as a young Communist, reminding us that the experiments described and reflected on in *Towards a Poor Theatre* did not emerge from nowhere. "Voice" is a long, substantial text (22 pages) and significant in its focus on voice practice and training, helping to clarify the role of speech, text and sound in Grotowski's early work, something often overlooked or even ignored, perhaps inevitably especially by non-Polish speaking researchers. A comparison between the contents of *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) and the Polish *Teksty z lat 1965-1969/Texts from the Years 1965-1969* (1999) shows two partly overlapping but ultimately very different paradigms being used to articulate the Theatre of Productions phase.

Richards in his email uses the word "formation" to describe the process Workcenter members followed. Although presented in English here, formation in French is usually translated as training, a word that was not previously part of the Workcenter vocabulary. In the filmed conversation with Biagini referenced earlier, we hear his circumspection about this, though his doubt is specifically in relation to his and Richards' own development: «Thomas and I had, we had a certain training with that – it's not training – training is more for athletes. Let's say experience or apprenticeship»[17]. In his email communication, Biagini writes that the Workcenter was «marked by a pedagogical vocation» but that he does not «feel like teaching», so will not continue this line. Such familiar language as training and teaching was eschewed throughout the long lifetime of the Workcenter. It never presented itself as a school or academy, with its "students" entering through a Work Selection process rather than auditions or interviews. Practice looks different depending on whether the observer is located on the inside or the outside. It also looks different when something is ongoing and when it's finished, as former mists disperse.

These valedictory terminological shifts towards a more orthodox language away

[16] For more on their interrelationship see L. Flaszen, *Grotowski and Company*, translated by A. Wojtasik, edited by P. Allain with the assistance of M. Blige, Holstebro-Malta-Wroclaw, Icarus Publishing Enterprise, 2013.

[17] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2wYVLqyPvM, 20' 29" minutes (last accessed: 29 May 2022).

from the specialist terms used by Grotowski reveal some semantic relaxation, now that the Workcenter no longer formally exists. Carefully articulated terminology helped mark out this practice's distinctiveness, reflecting its highly sophisticated qualities. Substantial academic industry developed around understanding and clarifying notions such as the doer, art as Vehicle, verticality, witness and what these meant or involved, and not just in practice. This was an important task, the stuff of academia, but it also had (and still has) great value for practice. It provided and still does provide the air which sustains many of us, myself included, allowing us to breathe freely. These may have been simple email communications about a departure and an ending, and we should perhaps not read too much into them; but they were also formally the last word, an obituary, for now at least: can such frameworks be put to one side?

Conclusion

It could be that plans for the development of Grotowski's estate, particularly regarding publications and film documentation, are being worked out – or will be in due course. First on any list, I hope, would be the English-language collection of Grotowski's texts. It is 25 years since Schechner and Wolford published *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, and the «TDR» special issue which contained two important texts by Grotowski for the first time in English came out in 2008. One was *Reply to Stanislavski*, originally published in Polish in 1980, transcribed from a talk given in 1969[18]. This piece was important for English-language scholars and practitioners for Grotowski's precise explanation of how he continued Stanislavski's research and practice, a connection not always easily grasped. We await further insights, remembering that it is already a decade since the Polish volume was published. In addition, and hopefully easier to resolve, is the question of the Workcenter's films. Can they now be disseminated widely and freely, ideally in educational open access rather than commercially constrained contexts?

Plans which I was involved in to work on a new English-language edition of *Towards a Poor Theatre* became mired in copyright complexities. This is needed, not least for its problematic rendition of Grotowski as a "producer" rather than director, a hangover term from previous decades in English theatre circles, but clearly highly misleading today. There is much more to do besides. Grotowski's supposed "core" texts are published in English but they are not presented in as coherent a way as those of other key theatre figures such as Bertolt Brecht. We should also not forget that core texts might only be considered as such because they are by default foregrounded by the absence of other works.

[18] *Odpowiedź Stanislawskiemu*, in «Dialog», n. 5, May 1980, pp. 111-119. Published also in J. Grotowski, *Teksty z lat 1965-1969*, Wroclaw, Wiedza o kulturze, 1999, pp. 145-164.

Academics, practitioners and teachers in English-language circles have seen how much a field of practice and scholarship can change through the ongoing rehabilitation Stanislavski's work underwent when Elizabeth Hapgood's formerly standard translations were updated, questioning and to some extent remedying the excisions and errors they previously contained. There was excitement and relief when her three books were replaced by Jean Benedetti's two Routledge volumes, *An Actor's Work* (2008) and *An Actor's work on A Role* (2009), even if discussions continue about terminology and the value of these translations themselves[19]. What next for Grotowskian research and practice? Thirteen years after the "Year of Grotowski", it might be that without the Workcenter as focus or initiator, interest in Grotowski's work and legacy will dissipate. Will it be subsumed within wider interest in physical theatre, a conflation which English-language publications regularly make, with all the problematic associations this carries?[20]

Whatever conclusions we might draw from Biagini's departure and the Workcenter's subsequent closure, and whatever our concerns or desires for the future, we must recognise its many achievements and the institution's role as a fundamental reference point for 36 years. As a drama student at the University of Exeter in the southwest of England between 1983-1986, I heard about Grotowski's arrival in the then unknown (for me at least) small Italian town called Pontedera. My course was very practical and some of my teachers had participated previously in paratheatre and what is now defined as post-Grotowskian practices. From afar and with youthful naivety, to me Grotowski's move seemed shrouded in mystery and its aims puzzling, mediated mostly then through the late Peter Brook. Several decades on, the Workcenter's activities have been witnessed, read about or viewed by many around the world, and much documented and discussed. The 'transmission' from Grotowski to Richards, on which the last phase of Grotowski's work was predicated, has been in process now for over three and a half decades. Clearly the dismantling of an institutional structure does not mean that this transmission has to end. In the current transitional phase, many questions surface alongside speculation about what comes next. The main and most urgent one is how will Grotowski's oeuvre continue to breathe, as surely it must.

[19] Particularly valuable in this regard is the reappraisal of Stanislavski's language but also many other aspects of his work in M. Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

[20] An example I have mentioned previously elsewhere is in S. Murray and J. Keefe, *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2007, where it is noted on page 14 that «the term "physical theatre" first came to public attention through the emergence of DV8 Physical theatre in 1986 [...] the term is invoked as a shorthand to identify a range of practices associated with Grotowski's laboratory».