

When I was a child the word "retreat" had a special meaning for me. If someone in our household went on a "retreat" it meant he would leave home for a short period of time, stay in a secluded place operated by nuns or priests and engage in a series of unusual activities and meditations. The purpose of the "retreat" was simple: to strip away non-essentials and return to the basics. The person returning from the "retreat" always looked somewhat changed; and I would joke about it saying his "retreat was really an "advance."

I never had a chance to participate in such a structured experience until January of 1969 when I went to Poland to study with Jerzy Grotowski. I was ready for a "retreat." For seventeen years I had been working at the Goodman Theatre and School of Drama and I was tired and bored. Tired of the realistic theatre so tied to behavior and psychological motivations and bored by the avant-garde's substituting cleverness and shock for rich human experience. New theatre training techniques irritated me; they seemed to lead the actor to exhibitionistic chaos, reducing the theatre to little more than fun and games. Sadly enough, I lost interest in actors. Their unjustified satisfaction with half-committed work almost made me want to change my profession.

I was ready for Grotowski.

When I arrived in Poland I didn't realize I would be entering a period of work in a monastic theatre with rules and disciplines as hard as any in the religious world. Peter Brook said Grotowski puts one through a "series of shocks." I soon discovered what he meant.

My first shock was to discover a test was in process for a week before my arrival. The test would determine who would be chosen to study with Grotowski for the next six months. I mistakenly assumed, after meeting with Grotowski in New York, I would be admitted without hesitation. Commitments at the Goodman prevented me from arriving sooner and I had missed seven of the ten days of testing. Grotowski's

bird-like secretary, though sympathetic, tried to assure me my trip to Poland was in vain and urged me to return to the states. I was, of course, furious and insisted on seeing Grotowski personally. I waited for three days in the cold and depressing city of Wroclaw before he would see me.

During that time I tried to discover something about the nature of the test. His staff answered my inquiries with a shrug of a shoulder and an enigmatic "It's just a test." I finally met some of the people who were taking the test; they looked pale and drained of energy. They had been subjected to four hours of mercilessly grueling physical exercises daily! Only a dozen of the thirty five people who started the test concluded it. I was told that on the first night an Egyptian after unsuccessfully attempting a high dive roll went to Grotowski, who was sitting on the other side of the room watching, bowed low and said: "Thank you Mr. Grotowski but I am going back to Egypt where I'll be safe." Four of the twelve remaining were chosen to stay on. I was fortunate NOT to have been tested; I wouldn't have survived.

My meeting with Grotowski was successful; I was allowed to join the chosen four on a trial basis. After a month an evaluation would be made concerning my continuance. A month passed, nothing was said - so I stayed!

The day after I was admitted my "baptism" into the monastic theatre began. I entered the room which serves as a rehearsal hall and theatre, wearing black shorts and slippers. The room was black. Two large flood lamps placed on the floor were focused on the white concave ceiling. That eerie reflection was the only source of light in the room. Since I hadn't had the "benefit" of the ten day exercise period I was given extra sessions to "catch up." Two of Grotowski's actors worked with me that first day. They served as a "tag match team" in wrestling; when one tired, the other relieved him. I remained working, drenched in perspiration. I was exhausted. When I tried a hand stand against the wall and fell to the floor cutting my head, I cursed-"damn!" I was told not to comment on my work. My complaints that they were working me too fast and too hard were met with stony silence. When the session ended I was near a physical collapse.

I hated Grotowski. The work was hard and uncompromising. But when I saw that through the work, Grotowski challenged the actor to extend his limits, I was determined to go on.

After two weeks of exercises which included somersaults and high springing dives onto a thinly padded mat., my body was a rainbow of colors. In order to be able to continue I was subjected to body massages, pressured water beating and baths in what I swore was carbonated water. They brought little relief. Soon afterwards however, I began to experience some of the positive shocks Peter Brook claimed the exercises produced on the actor:

The shock of confronting himself in the face of simple irrefutable challenges.

The shock of catching sight of his own evasions, tricks and cliches.

The shock of sensing something of his own vast untapped resources.

The shock of being forced to question why he is an actor at all.¹

The effort, pain, and commitment demanded of the work in that ominously dark room ultimately had merit.

Exercise sessions were scheduled three times a week with each session lasting between two and four hours. They would begin with a warm-up featuring Grotowski's "cat" - a stretching and rotating exercise used to stimulate all muscles in the body. Torso turns, high jumps, knee bends, hand stands and other exercises were included in the warm-ups. Until you got used to them the warm-ups alone exhausted you.

The bulk of the work was divided into two categories; the "plastics" and the "physicals."

The "plastics", executed while moving about in an upright position, focus on every area of the body: the head, neck, shoulders, chest, elbows, wrists, hands, fingers, hips, knees, legs and feet. Each point of focus is called a "detail." Thrusting the head forward and pulling it back sharply is referred to as a "detail," rotating the pelvis is a "detail," etc. Approximately thirty six "details" make up the "plastics." Though the focus was on a "detail" the entire body was engaged to give it necessary support.

The physicals, which are executed while rolling on the floor, consist of a variety of back bending and balance exercises. Each exercise is referred to as an "element."*

The first phase of the work lasted six weeks and was purely technical: the mastery of the details and elements through the application of the following steps:

- Step One: Articulation. Working toward a clean execution of detail and elements including the accents which occur when an attempt is made to go beyond the point of the body's resistance.
- Step Two: Body support. Adaptation of the body so that it helps support every detail and element.
- Step Three: Moving. Retaining everything in the first two steps and using all possible vectors and directions while moving about in space.
- Step Four: Rhythm. The use of contrasting and changing rhythms in executing the details and elements.

Grotowski's leading actor Ryszard Cieslak led the exercise sessions. Until they were called on to assist, the six other members of the Lab Theatre sat on crude wooden benches and silently observed. But no matter who was the leader the intense concentration of our instructors never weakened. When we refused to extend ourselves in our work Cieslak seriously admonished us:

"What's the matter with you are you sick? You all are doing the details like sleeping fish! How can we work when you resist--when you are not really here but elsewhere? Today your work is tragic and I'm disappointed. More energy please or we'll never progress."

When we willingly gave ourselves, no longer resisting but exploring with vigor he would say:

"Good! Now you are pushing your body to extreme limits. Can you tell how it feels to go to such limits as we do? How can you return to half commitment now. Never "save" yourself. Do what you are doing now and you will never again fool yourself into thinking you are committed. The work is good, I am pleased."

* FOR A more detailed description of the exercises, see TOWARDS A POOR THEATRE by Jerzy Grotowski.

On the last session in the sixth week Grotowski suddenly appeared to watch us. Although we had been meeting with him in "acting sessions" three times a week he had never before attended the exercise work. He wore his usual clerical garb; black suit, black tie and a highly starched white shirt. During the most gruelling session of our stay he sat in the corner calmly smoking his pipe - and said nothing. The session lasted over three hours. We left the room exhausted and bruised; the floor was wet from our perspiration. "How much longer can this "excess" continue?" one of my colleagues asked. He got his answer the next day.

Cieslak began the next exercise session with a twenty minute lecture. He paced as he talked and looked like a new man. With an enthusiasm that was almost child-like he said:

"We are now entering the second phase of the exercises. In this phase we go beyond the "details" and "elements." Now we enter into a phase called THE LANGUAGE OF THE BODY. The body is the language and the "details" and "elements" are the words.

Why did we do the exercises so often and work so hard? To get in shape? No. We had to go through this phase so that you could get the "details" and "elements" clear. So that you could master them to use them in this second phase.

Now the great battle is over. Now the boring part is behind us. Now you can create. You are quite free - quite free."

Never again were we to do the exercises just as exercises. They were to be our means of communication, our words. A limited vocabulary to be sure but one that would engage us completely. Now, we would always work with a partner, either with one of our co-workers or with someone we would evoke and place in the room. Doing the "details" or "elements" without connecting with a partner (real or imaginary) is now considered nonsense. All the work previous to this phase was preparation for this most important step: connecting and communicating with others! The exercises no longer seemed like drudgery. When used as a means of connecting and communicating they are liberating and personally revealing. Because no words are used the impulses the exercises uncover can be explored with confidence. An extremely personal situation revealed with words could be considered exhibitionistic - but that same personal situation revealed with the language of the body -

with "details" and "elements" - would be free of that stigma.

The remaining exercise sessions were comprised of improvisations with partners; dialogues without words. The freedom of movement resulting from partner contact rarely led to undisciplined chaos. When we grew careless with the execution of the "details" and "elements" we were forced to return to purely technical work to "articulate clearly in order to be understood." Unrestricted freedom could be practiced but only within well defined boundaries. Improvisations were focused on the use of the self. Acceptable concepts of "character" were an anathema at the Lab. Self search was the base of all the work and that search was conducted not in the head but in the body. The search was of prime importance and often alarmingly personal.

Acting sessions, scheduled three times weekly, were conducted by Grotowski alone. They consisted of scene work, lectures, impulsive improvisations and vocal exercises. Because his purpose was to explore the unknown world of the actor the sessions were never hurried and often lasted more than four hours. Grotowski seemed to forget himself completely and become totally concentrated on the actor, always able to discover the "blocks" which prevented ^{the Actor} ~~him~~ from doing. Through a technique sometimes boring and sometimes riveting Grotowski would slowly strip away all the actor's impediments.

Before I knew anything about his approach I was scheduled to present a monologue in class. I prepared the "Now I am alone" soliloquy from Hamlet, breaking it down into actions, beats, sensory work, etc. At one point I planned to look toward heaven as if Hamlet were apologizing to his dead father for postponing the murder of his uncle. Grotowski's response to the piece was in form of a question:

"Why did you look skyward?"

"To talk to my father."

"God the father or your flesh and blood father?"

"My flesh and blood father."

"Is he still alive?"

"No."

"Do you often talk to him in real life?"

"Yes."

"When you talk to him, do you look up to the sky?"

With that last question Grotowski stripped me of a communicative trick.

" Now do the scene again and sense the presence of your father in the room. Remember he knows you and knows when you are lying (being theatrical). Think of him. Sense his presence.

I repeat the soliloquy and feel slightly moved. Grotowski coaches as I work :

" Your father is behind you.
Now he is on the floor.
Now he is in your chest.
He sees you! He knows you!
He knows when you are lying to him.
Don't lie.
Do it simply.
Now you want to go - but you don't- you remain.
Your body remains but you have gone."

The piece ends.

" Now sing a song for your father."

A smile crosses my face as I think of a Polish song my father used to sing to me. " Umar Macek Umar". I sing it.

" Walk while singing, but not with a mechanical rhythm."

Grotowski leaves his seat and grabs me.

" Sing as if the voice were coming out through your back. Hear the echo behind you as it bounces against the wall."

He pulls me down to the floor and sits behind me cradling me to his chest. He instructs me to relax and keep singing while he places his hand on my neck. He tells me I don't let out enough breath. He grabs me by my waist and pushes in my stomach telling me to sing as if the motor were in my chest but my lips were on top of my head and then he clasps both hands over the top of my head and pushes downward. He begins singing with me. We are both perspiring freely. After a few minutes he hurriedly urges me to get up and do the scene. I do.

My father seems with me in a new and curious way. He seems to be part of my body. The soliloquy is a far cry from what I consciously prepared. My responses felt immediate and personal. I was expressing myself through the piece giving it more relevance and life.

Later he privately told me:

" You are a civilized, cultured person who responds within that framework. You do not respond organically. I had to break you till you fell. With you consciousness controls - as it does with most actors. I work until I destroy consciousness so that the subconscious can take over.

It is very very brutal work, it takes you to total exhaustion. But my purpose is not to exhaust but to get to the subconscious. This isn't the only method of breaking down actors -- there are others. But actors should know that I'm not repressing them but am working toward something. I'm telling you this so that you understand why we don't pause when people are exhausted. It is in these moments we often find subconscious freedom. ... we go beyond fatigue."

To break down the actor's consciousness is to disarm him, to strip him of his protective skin so that the minimal stimulus will touch him. Grotowski pursues that goal tirelessly.

That pursuit never ends. "Apocalypsis Cum Figuris" his final production before he abandoned the theatre, opened after more than a year of exploration and rehearsals. After only six performances Grotowski cancelled all acting and exercise sessions while he rehearsed his actors for twenty three straight hours! The performance after the marathon rehearsal was physically unchanged but the actors played with less strain and more honesty. A week later Grotowski told me: "the last two performances were forced, I shall have to rehearse them again!"

At the base of all his work is the concept of contradiction. His comments after watching a scene from Romeo & Juliet indicated he thought the scene uninteresting because the actors told us what we already knew. Simply playing the text, with which we were all familiar, was banal. The real interest in the scene lies in it's perversion- it's other side. To be perverse, to say things which are normally unspoken and to justify those perversions by searching for personal motives takes great courage. But the structure of all the work at the Lab helps the actor to focus on contradiction. It is present everywhere, beginning with the exercises which require two sets of muscles pulling in opposite directions.

When a visiting professor lectured us on Hindu theatre Grotowski elaborated on the western world's relationship to the theatre of the East, by pointing out that both theatres share the concept of contradiction. Contradiction is indeed the element that binds all mankind. We all

live in a world in which opposites co-exist. Grotowski summed up that duality with the thought:

" In T.S. Eliot's play 'Murder In The Cathedral', the Archbishop delivers a sermon on Christmas morning in which he tells of the closeness of the most joyous church celebration, the birth of the Christ child, with martyrdom the following day of the first Christian saint. I expect in order to really make this graphic, both Good Friday and Christmas should be celebrated on the same day."

It was evident toward the end of the sessions that Grotowski was searching for something other than "theatre." The focus on self search was so penetrating, performance seemed of secondary importance. Even the touted exercises seemed limiting. His quest for the "pure man" would make him abandon the theatre, in which he was a master, to confront an unknown road before which he stood as a beginner. ^{IN} This excerpt from his appearance at New York University in December, 1970, Grotowski reveals the kind of thinking that eventually caused him to search in other directions:

" In our production of Apocalypsis Cum Figuris we use bread Bread which is at one and the same time the body; in accord with a long tradition in our world which states that bread represents the body. I saw a production of the Bread & Puppet Theatre where an actress walked among the audience giving pieces of bread. The following question occurred to me: why do we wish to share our bread. Bread is a material thing which is necessary. When we have nothing to eat it has great significance. I know it because I remember certain years during and right after the second world war, when we had such misery that a piece of bread to me was something fantastic. But now it's different. There are many people who have no bread but that's not where we go with our production and it's not to them we give our bread. We give these pieces of bread to ourselves who all have enough bread. Then maybe we really want to give something else. Perhaps we want to share with people something living, which for people who are believers is the body of God. But I ask myself, is it possible to share with God's body? And in the depths of my heart I must say no- it's impossible, it's an abstraction What can one share as one previously shared God? I found it's not bread in the sense of being God; but bread as being man. Man who is bread!

I go to the actor and ask myself why can I almost never say that the actor is bread, even if he is to reveal something of great importance -- even if he did something very important from his own life. Even in that case he is not bread because he waits to be accepted. Even in giving himself he wants to be accepted, he wants to be taken. Then he's a piece of cake.

It's the cake that invites. It's decorated and must look pretty. It must be well packaged in order to attract people.

But bread is at it is. It doesn't hide itself. It doesn't ask to be accepted and puts up no defense to being taken.

If the actor could be the bread then people could share man. Man could be shared with one's life, with one's experience, with one's entire presence, with one's entire skin, with everything that's under one's skin, with all the traces that life has left on you. Then the actor will no longer be an actor. That's our dilemma: how to make theatre that will no longer be theatre - how to be an actor who will no longer be an actor but who will be a human being!