

## On the Limits of the Actor's Craft

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**Abstract:** The present work aims at discussing the problematics of the actor who, throughout his career, experiences dilemmas marked by several questions about the limits of his own craft. In this regard, two of the three major choices that an actor can make at the beginning or along his professional path are analyzed, choices that leave their definitive mark on his work and that lead us to ask ourselves, again, *who/what an actor is*. William Shakespeare and Richard Burbage, Samuel Beckett and Billie Whitelaw, Jerzy Grotowski and Ryszard Cieślak tell us about the colossal work of the actor, who for the encounter with characters such as Hamlet, Winnie, Don Fernando, enters a process of (re)discovery of his own being, of investigating his own self. Moreover, Jerzy Grotowski, in his work with the actor, experimented with techniques of deconditioning, techniques of probing the unconscious, techniques of control, because, in his vision, the actor, through the character, goes through a process of knowledge and self-becoming. Due to the strong influence exerted by Jerzy Grotowski on the way of making theatre, today, in the third millennium, we can talk about numerous actors who devote time to research, treat their craft as a lifetime study.

**Keywords:** dilemma, choice, limit, self-knowledge, play

A dilemma can be seen as a *state of being* of the individual, manifest within a given interval, caused by a necessity for choice. The process at the end of which an individual comes to choose one of two or more options that are at his disposal is one of reflection, recalling experiences relevant to the dilemmatic situation in which he finds himself or figuring projections about possible consequences of his choice in the future. We note here that many actors, at different professional stages, end up oscillating between three choices capable of shaping their personal and professional path: a choice is to get a job or remain employed in a theatre institution / independent company and implicitly to accept the obligation to build and interpret a certain number of roles in a theatre season, sometimes, waiting for years for the chance to play a big

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role; another choice is to work in a theatre that does laboratory work, sometimes exploited in performances, aiming at achieving self-knowledge, getting out of the daily routine, escaping the trap of personal and professional habits, getting rid of mannerisms by reconnecting to the vital sources of being, rejecting *the bureaucratization of the spirit* and the third choice is to dedicate oneself to theatre research as a pedagogue prepared to transmit knowledge to his disciples / pupils / students. In fact, the second choice is the most difficult, the one that requires considerable cognitive and physical efforts, the one that involves a constant observation of both the inner world and reality as such, a necessity to perform extraordinary acts by going beyond the clearly drawn lines of the ordinary.

There are actors who don't feel fulfilled at the theatres they work precisely because they come to feel the discrepancy between what they wanted to experience as actors and the status of actors who provide services to the community, just as there are actors who declare themselves satisfied with being employed in a theatre and are not interested at all in struggling to surpass their own mental, psychical and physical limits. The motivational process of an actor is in close relationship and directly dependent on the socio-professional climate in which he works and which influences the way of creating a role / performance. In this respect, Peter Brook's observations in *The Empty Space* are as valid today as they were at the time when he formulated them: "The dilemma of the actor is not unique to commercial theatres with inadequate rehearsal time. Singers and often dancers keep their teachers by them to the end of their days: actors once launched have nothing whatsoever to help them to develop their talents. If this is seen most alarmingly in the commercial theatre, the same applies to permanent companies. After he reaches a certain position the actor does no more homework. Take a young actor, unformed, undeveloped, but bursting with talent, full of latent possibilities. Quite rapidly he discovers what he can do, and, after mastering his initial difficulties, with a bit of luck he may find himself in the enviable position of having a job which he loves, doing it well while getting paid and admired at the same time. If he is to develop, the next stage must be to go beyond his apparent range, and to begin to explore what really comes hard. But no one has time for this sort of problem"<sup>1</sup>. This self-satisfaction equivalent, after all, to a stagnation in the profession is enough for the actor to keep his job in a theatre, but, at the same time, it is a major obstacle in a real process of self-knowledge and self-change. In this regard, only by expanding and diversifying the means of appropriation of the fictional reality called

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 32

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character, clarifying the nature of the relationship with the character, rediscovering the meaning of expressing himself through the theatrical language, the actor could reach the possibility of getting in touch with the organic sources of his creativity, of increasing his capacity of establishing relationships with both the stage partner(s) and the spectators, reliving his own experiences and studying them with his body and voice.

Some of the actors who do not find satisfaction in a theatrical institution are tempted to follow, in a sense, the path of Jerzy Grotowski, that of paratheatrical meetings, of research exploited in performances, of work in the theatre laboratory centred on the exploration of limits, *study on the body, on the organism itself*<sup>2</sup>, and this is because “Grotowski rejected the notion of theatre as entertainment, seeking instead to revitalise the ritualistic function of performance as a site of communion (with others, with transcendental forces), a function he attributes to the ritual performance traditions of tribal cultures and to the archaic roots of Western theatre”<sup>3</sup>. Laboratory work is the one that aims to focus on harmonizing the mind and affect, rediscovering the deep sources of creativity, creating a *real encounter with the other*. Thus, besides the actor of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries prepared to perform his service in institutionalized or independent theatres, Grotowski reveals to us the actor, who, discovering himself through *theatrical-spiritual* exercises, achieves astonishing performances.

From the dawn of his research, Jerzy Grotowski leaves behind the *rich theatre* being interested in exploring the possibilities of the actor-centred theatre. Thus, from the *Period of Productions*, he operates the distinction between the *courtesan actor* and the *holy actor*: “The actor is a man who works in public with his body, offering it publicly. If this body restricts itself to demonstrating what it is something that any average person can do - then it is not an obedient instrument capable of performing a spiritual act. If it is exploited for money and to win the favour of the audience, then the art of acting borders on prostitution. It is a fact that for many centuries the theatre has been associated with prostitution in one sense of the word or another. The words *actress* and *courtesan* were once synonymous. Today they are separated by a somewhat clearer line, not through any change in the actor’s world but because society

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2 Giuliano Campo with Zygmunt Molik, *Zygmunt Molik’s Voice and Body Work: The Legacy of Jerzy Grotowski*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 134

3 Lisa Wolford, “Ariadne’s Thread. Grotowski’s Journey Through the Theatre” in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, edited by Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 1-2

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has changed. Today it is the difference between the respectable woman and the courtesan which has become blurred”<sup>4</sup>. We note here that some actors feel themselves fulfilled as actors only in the *total act of the holy actor* who, in Grotowski’s vision, performs a ritual of self-revelation in front of the spectators. The exercises assumed and practiced by the actor are to give him the opportunity to access the hidden self of his being, to experience in/through the body archetypal actions relevant for the timeless character of the experiences and limit situations.

Peter Brook concludes *The Empty Space* with an iconic assertion: “To play needs much work. But when we experience the work as play, then it is not work any more. A play is play”<sup>5</sup>. It happens, however, when work is no longer experienced as play, to witness the performance of a mannered actor, devoid of thought and emotion. The mannerization or stagnation of the actor in technique/form comes precisely from his renunciation of overcoming his limits, from the incapacity of recreating the state of being a child with all that it implies, intensity of experience, amazement, curiosity, spontaneity, naivety, gratuitousness, generosity: “When I talk about return to the state of the child, I have in the background of my mind some indefinable memory: plunging into the world full of colors, sounds, the dazzling world, unknown, amazing, the world in which we are carried by curiosity, by enchantment, experience of the mysterious, of the secret. We are drifting then in the stream of reality, but our movement, even if full of energy, is in point of fact a repose. We forgot about this state through the years of taming our body and with it our mind. It is necessary to refind this hypothetical child and his *ecstasies*, which, long ago, we *abdicated* [...]. It is something tangible, organic, primal”<sup>6</sup>. But for this, the actor should, first of all, during the play, detach himself from his social ego, abandon himself to the pleasure of acting, open up to the other/stage partner, perform an *act of sincerity*. Unfortunately, as Peter Brook notes, the actor no longer has the capacity of overcoming his condition as actor engaged in an institutionalized theatre, and, in this sense, of going through a living process of becoming and thus often finds himself in the position of allowing himself to be manipulated, like a puppet, by the director. Both Grotowski and Brook treat acting outside the utilitarian function which is present in the institutional theatre where the

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4 Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, edited by Eugenio Barba, preface by Peter Brook, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 33

5 Peter Brook, 1990, op. cit., p. 157

6 Jerzy Grotowski, “Theatre of Sources” in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, op. cit., 2001, p. 260

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actor is supposed to fulfill his work obligations in order to be paid. What stands out, in this context, is the fact that the *courtesan actor* never reaches the condition of an artist who has the freedom and courage to transpose both personal and societal turmoil into artistic forms and who takes care of the child within himself. We note here that, for the artist, there is only one way, revealed by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that of not adapting to the demands of society in order to manifest his freedom of creation, to provoke novelty. The actor whose inner nature is that of an artist does not let himself fall victim to the professional routine, fighting against mannerism through a continuous search for the new in his work.

Regardless of age or occupation, family or educational environment, the individual maintains throughout his life the desire to play, and this is because play involves getting out of everyday space-time; we refer here to the child's play, which also for adults brings with it a suspension of diurnal thoughts and manifestation in a space-time of the gratuitousness of any action as *play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it*<sup>7</sup>. This play of exacerbated senses, of total engagement of the being in action, reminds of the experiences of rediscovering the *originary harmony and unity* of which Antonin Artaud speaks to us, and also of the observations of C.G. Jung that lead to the idea that in the artist, voluntarily, involuntarily, consciously, unconsciously, there is a *regression to the infantile mnesic material*. In this regard, Jung speaks of a possible *parallel between the mythological thinking of Antiquity and the similar thinking of children, primitives and dreams, highlighting that archaic thinking is a peculiarity of the child and primitives*<sup>8</sup>. The definition that Huizinga gives to the *play*, namely that "It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow"<sup>9</sup>, contains elements that are to be found in the process of discovering the actor's self. The feeling of exaltation can occur with the dissolution of inner blockages, the change of respiratory rhythm, the experience of the state of body

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7 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London, Boston and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949, p. 13

8 C. G. Jung, *Dezvoltarea personalității, Opere* vol. 17, traducere din limba germană de Viorica Nișcov, Cuvânt înainte de Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu, București, Editura Trei, 2006, passim

9 Huizinga, Johan, 1949, op. cit., p. 132

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imponderability, the elimination of mental residues. After all, the actor experiences a liberation of the body from the invisible chains of the daily routine, because he, the actor, like the child, immerses himself in a play of energies, of the elemental, of the unaltered, a play of the primitive for which *rituals are repetitions of archetypal acts*<sup>10</sup>. Undoubtedly, Grotowski's actor, like the primitive, performs a ritual whose elements are *fascination, suggestion, psychic stimulation, magic words and signs, and acrobatics which compel the body to go beyond its natural, biological limitations*<sup>11</sup>. Today the theatre laboratory is the place where the overcoming of the actor's limits takes place, where questions about the states experienced by the actor before and after mental-psychical-physical efforts are raised, a place of the exercises, improvisation and innovation, exploration of the associative language, body memory, discoveries, revelations, serendipity, mistakes treated as ways of eliminating mannerisms, automatisms, routine, a place of self-giving, that once again highlights "The difference between the *courtesan actor* and the *holy actor* [which] is the same as the difference between the skill of a courtesan and the attitude of giving and receiving which springs from true love: in other words, self-sacrifice. The essential thing in this second case is to be able to eliminate any disturbing elements in order to be able to overstep every conceivable limit. In the first case it is a question of the existence of the body; in the other, rather of its non-existence"<sup>12</sup>.

The laboratory, a place conducive to research, is a place where the creative process itself and the forms of stage representation are investigated or where the transition to the transposition into stage action of the metamorphoses suffered by the actor is made, a predominant place of corporeality, training, but also of observation, analysis, discussions about the functions of training, techniques for exploring the actor's potentialities, the binomial of *being in and being out*, the immersion and critical distancing necessary in investigating the *sources of techniques, the deconditioning techniques, the techniques of awakening the body and the mind, the techniques of control*. Thus, a *work on the self* takes place in continuous training / a space-time necessary for the actor to explore in depth the nature of his being, his

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10 Eugenio Barba, "Theatre Laboratory 13 Rzedow" in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, op. cit., 2001, p. 74

11 Ibidem

12 Jerzy Grotowski, 2002, op. cit., p. 35

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creative potential, to experience *the state of a child*. The actor / individual's attempts to rediscover himself are under the sign of rediscovering the child in himself: "In every adult there lurks a child - *an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed, and calls for unceasing care, attention and education*. That is the part of the human personality which wants to develop and become whole. But the man of today is far indeed from this wholeness"<sup>13</sup>. At the opposite pole, the actor employed in a theatre puts an end to his training when he finishes school. The training that during school was not only a space-time for vocal-physical exercises and building stage behaviour, but also basis and source of inspiration in the creation of roles, is felt as a waste of time, as the period in which the actor employed in an institutionalized theatre has the obligation to prepare his role is short. In this context, training, which should be a constant in the actor's life, is felt as an obstacle in the construction of the role, a burden that the actor must get rid of once and for all from the moment he works at the theatre. When the actor has the chance to play one of the great characters of dramaturgy, for example, Oedipus, but does not have the space-time necessary to explore the abyssal personality of Oedipus or rather to discover Oedipus in himself and reveal him in front of the eyes of the spectators, he ends up feeling a deep personal crisis, which can lead him to choose *self-change, change of his own status*. This space-time necessary for the elaboration of the role is that of the laboratory in which mistakes are a source of creation and not wasted time. Undoubtedly, the lifetime training leaves its mark on the work and personality of an actor who only in this way becomes master of his art, *the ideal actor who unites instinct and control, discipline, who combines nature as inspiration and craft as mastery of an artistic form that has its laws*<sup>14</sup>.

In conclusion, we note that, undoubtedly, Grotowski's research arouses the interest of researchers, university professors, theatre practitioners who aim to experiment with concrete ways of balancing the intellect with the instinct, the conscious with the unconscious, of becoming aware of complexes, blockages, traumas of the actor / individual in order to eliminate them. On the influence of Grotowski's research on theatre practitioners, Schechner states that *it can be found everywhere in today's theatre* emphasizing the ideas that *powerful acting occurs at a meeting place of the personal and archetypal, and that the most effective theatre is the 'poor theatre'*

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13 C.G. Jung, 2006, op. cit., pp. 187-188

14 Monique Borie, George Banu, „Orizontul teatrului” in Craig, Edward Gordon, *Despre arta teatrului*, traducere de Adina Bardaş și Vasile V. Poenaru, București, Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, Revista Teatrul azi (supliment) prin Editura Cheiron, 2012, p. 27

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– *one with a minimum of accoutrements beyond the presence of the actors*<sup>15</sup>. Grotowski's research brings to surface the original spontaneity of the actor's act or, in other words, the manifestation of his *living presence* which evokes, or rather, carries with it the *ritual action*. The actor's act is not an end in itself, but a means to explore the inner world of his own being and because of this numerous theatre practitioners choose the way of Jerzy Grotowski.

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15 Schechner, Richard, "Preface" in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, op. cit., 2001, p. XXVII