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THE ART AND TASK OF THE ACTOR FROM STANISLAVSKI TO GROTOWSKI AND BEYOND*

Great progress was made in the art of acting during the twentieth century thanks above all to the endeavours of practitioners like Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), who were able to combine practical experimentation with theoretical reflection. It cannot be said, however, that we now possess a scientific system for acting, nor indeed that we should be satisfied with the knowledge gained. The actor's art remains to a large extent a mystery that cannot be investigated solely with theoretical tools. Scholars and students of drama can only achieve arrive at an understanding through first-hand experience; just as every actor, while benefiting from a common stock of knowledge, has to constantly start over from scratch and adapt the basics of the performing art to the specific historical and cultural circumstances in which they find themselves operating.

Stanislavski approached the question of acting and the actor's task in a new light. Whereas previously the emphasis had been mainly on expressive codes, on the profession and its secrets (one needs only think of the great volume of theoretical elaborations produced in the Enlightenment and thereafter) in the context of the primacy of texts and content, Stanislavski set out to convert the secrets of the great actors into scientific truths, into method, highlighting the inner processes, whether psychological, physiological or spiritual. He made this attempt starting from strictly subjective premises.

This is what Grotowski had to say on the subject:

Stanislavsky was looking for the possibility of creating the character starting from his inner life. However, one has to be careful with the word "inner". The term "inner" might mean all of the psychological and mental processes that to some extent exist for both archangels and cows. And there is a different notion of "inner" that concerns the inner life of the great mystics. It's not the same thing, it's a different field. The first kind of "inner" life relates to psychology, to the soul, while the second one relates to the spirit. And one should not mix up those two spheres. So, when I say that Stanislavsky tried to search for his character starting from the side of his inner structure, his way of thinking, his way of reacting to the stimuli received, his way of feeling, reacting to the others, his psychological rhythms, the colour of his energy, etc., it's clear that he decided to start not from the exterior character traits, but rather from the character itself regarded as inner structure. But, you know, Stanislavsky was not extremely gifted as an actor, his body, when he was young, was quite handsome but somewhat wooden. The simplest things other actors were capable of doing quite spontaneously for him

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meant a hell of technical mastery. He was really not gifted as an actor, or one would say, gifted on a rather primitive level. It's precisely because of this that he invented his method. The whole of Stanislavsky's method, as well as all his research in this field, was nothing else but his desperate struggle with the lack of talent. Nothing was given to him lightly; nothing could be solved by itself, through divine inspiration. He had to understand everything himself, he had to arrange everything, he had to spend a lot of time gradually approaching the essence, finally acquiring a clear understanding of everything he was doing.

What was the result of that struggle? Of course, the first result was the creation of his system, but the second result was his becoming an actor who was a genius. According to those who could see him, he was brilliant, he had a natural touch and at the same time, an astounding purity of reactions and mysterious lightness. His lightness is something that seems quite important, because physically he was rather heavy, his whole body was heavy. This man managed to surpass everything in his struggle. A rare case in the history of art, a case that proves the idea of Thomas Mann that a genius often overcomes his own illness or an eventual lack of something, in the same way Dostoevsky could overcome his epilepsy or Stanislavsky his lack of talent. That was the proof of his genius.¹

This outline of Stanislavski's original motivation is quite familiar. The fact remains, however, that people all over the world, and even most of those actively involved in theatre, have a reductive or mistaken view of the Russian actor-director because his legacy has been distorted.² This distortion derives above all from the fact that his radical innovation has been adapted to the marketplace, representing an art of acting that foregoes the pursuit of authentic research and accepts the time scale and modalities of commercial production, requiring an actor who will actively collaborate in this orientation. In fact whenever Grotowski cited Stanislavski, he never failed to insist on the need to have a thorough knowledge of his teaching, including his various breakthroughs:

Stanislavsky passed through several stages of development: at first he began to suspect that it's quite possible to recreate a process, an inner process linked to a specific character; however, at the same time that would be a process inherent for him, Stanislavsky, and for no one else. That means: that would be my own process if I found myself in the circumstances of that character. But it still means "me", my own "person", which does not become a different character! He believed that one could come to that through emotional life and so-called emotional memory. On the one hand, one had to develop the ability to direct and control the attention, and on the other, the body should become sufficiently trained to become a screen for that projection. The whole work one was supposed to accomplish was to find the relevant emotional memory in the past life. That was the first stage he indicated in his research.

¹ A. Vasil'ev, 'Cronaca del quattordici' (1999), in *Opere e sentieri*, ed. by A. Attisani and M. Biagini, 3 vols., Roma, Bulzoni, 2008, III, *Testimonianze e riflessioni sull'arte come veicolo*, pp. 81-82. The text records a conversation that took place in July 1991 between the Russian director and Grotowski, with Ferdinando Taviani as mediator. Grotowski did not revise the transcript of his answers, and would presumably have added some details. Nonetheless some of his statements are indeed surprising and throw light on his understanding of what it means to be an "actor".

² The first work we can indicate as an introduction to Stanislavski is J. Grotowski, 'Risposta a Stanislavskij', in *Opere e sentieri*, II, *Jerzy Grotowski. Scritti 1968-1998*, pp. 45-64. See also the new English translation by Kris Salata, 'Reply to Stanislavsky', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 52, no. 2, Summer 2008 (T198), 31-39. For a general introduction to Stanislavski see S. M. Carnicke, *Stanislavskij in Focus*, London, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998, and, in Italian, F. Ruffini, *Stanislavskij. Dal lavoro dell'attore al lavoro su di sé*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006.

And it was something that remained for numerous followers of Stanislavsky in the West, and not only in the West. But it only means that they grasped at something he later abandoned himself.

Very soon Stanislavsky noticed that something did not quite work with the emotional memory. One day it was there, and the next day it could not come at all, so that the actor was forced to pump up his emotions, that is, to lie. That means that something was not working. At that moment he asked himself whether actions could not help him in that whole process. From the end of the 20s he started to work on “desires”, but even here it did not go much better. One day it would function and the next day not at all. One day your will or those little elements of will would function and the emotions would appear at your doorstep when you invited them, and on the next day nothing would happen. Gradually he understood that our emotions do not depend on our will (even though the whole of our everyday experience already shows that). We do not want to love someone but we love him; we want to love someone else and we cannot; we do not want to get annoyed but we are annoyed; we want to be calm and we cannot. It is always something that comes on its own! So, it's not here we should be looking for emotions. Emotions are very important, but they do not depend on our will. We have to prepare the place for them, and we should not be too afraid and shut the door when they do come. But we cannot force them.

That is how the method of physical actions was formed. Stanislavsky no longer asked himself: What I am going to feel if I place myself into the circumstances of my character. He rather asked: What I will do in the circumstances of my character? It's only at the end of his life that he came to a real discovery. Up to that time he was framing the right questions, but only at the end of his life did he start to approach the right answers.³

The ‘right answers’ Grotowski referred to are to be found in the so-called ‘method of physical actions’ which from the 1950s he took as the starting-point for his theatrical and existential investigations. Later on we shall see how the question stood towards the end of Grotowski's life, and how it was re-formulated in the activities of the Workcenter run by Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. Now let us go back to our main line of enquiry: What does it mean to “act”? We can recall that in all the other Western languages, including Russian, acting can be expressed with the verb meaning “to play”, *igrat*, *jouer*, *spielen*. Many people regard acting as pretending, as “bringing to life” characters set down in the script and interpreting, and indeed criticising them, through the recitation. A prayer or a song are also recited, starting from a pre-existing “text”, but in this case it is not a question of bringing a character to life but rather of *doing* something according to acknowledged conventions. This requires a precision that is at one and the same time absolute – respecting the melody, rhythm, text – and also able to reveal peculiar attributes in the performer, allowing the scope for something exceptional. The doctrine which maintains that dramatic recitation should serve the text is only one idea among many, even though it continues to be the most widespread. So we can ask: What else can acting *do*?⁴ For example – as is clear in the case of a prayer or a song – it can have the function of asking, invoking or creating a common mode of feeling.

³ A. Vasil'ev, ‘Cronaca del quattordici’ (1999), pp. 82-83.

⁴ The most authoritative scholar dealing with such issues in Italy is Claudio Vicentini. See his *L'arte di guardare gli attori. Manuale pratico per lo spettatore di teatro, cinema e televisione*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2007, and, for the historical background, ‘Teorie della recitazione. Diderot e la questione del paradosso’, in *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, ed. by R. Alonge and G. Davico Bonino, 4 vols., Torino, Einaudi, 2000, II, *Il grande teatro borghese: Settecento-Ottocento*, pp. 5-47.

There may be many reasons for a particular performance. One needs only think of some masters of the theatre in recent decades, such as Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson or Carmelo Bene, as well as Grotowski himself, and it is immediately apparent that a text can also be *encountered*, that a song may be *discovered*, that the space, time and rhythm of the dramatic action are not necessarily the illustration of a text but can also be forms of *incarnation*. The text can undoubtedly constitute one of the elements that forms this process.

To appreciate that this idea is not so limited in its application, nor restricted to just one ideological domain, we can recall some remarks by Karol Wojtyła. He maintained that only by ‘giving of himself (like an actor) does the individual become fully himself’, adding: ‘The actor is a rhapsodist. This means that he does not restrict himself to reciting. But on the other hand nor does it mean that he simply “represents”. Rather, he is the vehicle of a problem’.⁵ The composition and incarnation on stage are none other than the choice of the individual elements and hence the assembly of a vibrating whole, since in practice *vibration* constitutes life itself at all levels of its organization, from DNA to the universe. The functioning of a vibrating instrument is governed by both rules and chance, score and emergency: in short, it is a stochastic whole with a specific purpose of its own. Acting, we might say, is the song of the whole body seen as a visible embodiment of life and all the invisible bodies.

This is the meaning of acting, even for those who are unaware of it or refuse to believe it. Everybody knows that a person intent on acting gives a glimpse of what he or she really is, and that during rehearsals this glimpse is particularly intense and “cruel”. Hence we should recognise that all the possible definitions of acting allude to the ideologies of their respective authors and above all to the *functions* that they attribute to the theatre, but at the same time that even the most mediocre actor in whatever branch of theatre knows that acting is something much more complex than merely pretending, illustrating or narrating. The Stanislavski-Grotowski tradition boasts no exclusive or original conception of theatre, and no weird and wonderful secrets: there is only a differentiation in awareness and a rigorous ethical-cultural orientation with respect to the tasks and resources of the actor. Only? No one can deny that these attributes actually make all the difference.

In order to arrive at a radical reconsideration of the concept of acting in light of the maxims of Stanislavski (‘Never lie when you are on stage’) and Grotowski (theatre as liberation from the fiction of everyday life), one must recognise the range of meanings implicit in certain terms and establish their new significance vis à vis the function we assign to theatre. This involves taking a more complex approach that presupposes an actor who is not condemned to lying but at the same time is not a hostage to Truth. In other words, we have to recognise that the true actor has to be able to pretend, because the ‘intrinsic falsehood of the representation is, at the same time, our most important organic safeguard’, and the seeker of truth, Nietzsche’s Dionysiac being, ‘can manifest himself only on condition that he dons the comedian’s garb’.⁶ Otherwise he is doomed to fall into the ‘chaotic movement of the

⁵ K. Wojtyła, ‘Sul teatro della parola’, in *Tutte le opere letterarie*, presented by G. Reale, introductory essays by B. Taborski, Milano, Bompiani, 2001, p. 970.

⁶ R. Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. Come si diventa ciò che si è*, ed. and with an essay by R. Calasso, Milano, Adelphi, 2002, pp. 169-170.

wish for truth, which at heart is a will to suicide', as well as the basis for all forms of fundamentalism.⁷ It is a matter of not consigning fiction to mere *make believe*, meaning manipulation, or abandoning the idea that the crux of acting consists in "how to say" and "how to show". In brief, we have to eliminate theatrical make believe whenever it tends to deny its illusionary nature, and consciously reinstate it as an element of play. Pretending, or better, acting, is in this sense a skill that knows both how to do and that it is doing – action motivated by and performed with awareness – and at the same time an *ability to do* (as for example when you sing a tune).

When Jerzy Grotowski states that *knowing is doing* he unites the two principles and maps out the quest for truth.⁸ As a practitioner of theatre he was aware that what really counts is the 'inner process', as Nietzsche remarked (see his *Unpublished Writings*). This is fundamental in being the origin and outcome of mimetic action, but it is not enough in itself, precisely because its dynamic depends on theatrical realization. While Nietzsche places the theatre at the heart of philosophy, Grotowski puts knowledge at the heart of theatre. Both view the actor as simultaneously protagonist and author of the action. The Dionysiac man works on himself and acts as – or becomes – himself. However, in order to transcend oneself it is necessary to activate the comedian's principle, meaning "to encounter others in or by playing" (or, as Nietzsche puts it in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 'change places with the other'). Thus the encounter arises out of the perception of a lack and ends in comprehension (in the sense of a catharsis, not just an understanding). In fact playing is at the same time a gnostic and a pathic phenomenon.

By focusing now on the one, now on the other element, we can analyse the great *experimentum mundi* undertaken by the theatrical avantgardes in the twentieth century. The aim is to achieve an overarching equilibrium between the two, but we have to recognise that the emphasis may vary, so that while the individual, for example, is more overtly Dionysiac, the citizen is of necessity more of a comedian. Furthermore we can suppose that the distinction between art as vehicle and art as presentation also refers to this bipolarity. And with these premises it becomes clear that, living in this day and age, our task is to unite the two links in the chain, taking our cue from Grotowski but also going beyond him (as in fact is the case in the Workcenter today). So the idea of acting can be identified as doing through mimesis, *knowledge through action* based on the comprehension of nature. And enacting/playing can be reintegrated in its complexity, in the omnipotence of the child at play, in singing and in dancing (all three elements being included in the Greek term *aion*): not allowing oneself to be traversed by time but rather to *constitute time itself*.

This said, and to return to practical experience, it should not be forgotten that the outlook adopted by Stanislavski, towards the end of his career, and by Grotowski was focused above all *on* the actor; it was not that *of* the actor. In their approach the long-standing conundrum concerning the nature of acting came to a head and achieved a breakthrough. Diderot (who paradoxically, although not altogether so, is the figure most commonly held up in contrast with Stanislavski) frequented actors and spoke on their behalf. Stanislavski came to the theatre as an actor, and in a certain sense was the first person to call attention, and give importance, to the

⁷ Ibid., p. 169.

⁸ Cf. J. Grotowski, 'Performer', in *Opere e sentieri*, II, *Jerzy Grotowski. Scritti 1968-1998*, pp. 83-88.

question of inner process. However, once he started to write on the theatre, he restricted himself to teaching and directing, merely going on for a few years reviving some of his old roles. Grotowski worked with actors, and we know with what intensity, but he was not an actor. The appraisal he wrote of Cieślak makes it clear that theirs was a collaboration between two complementary artists who depended on one another to accomplish their work.⁹ It is no coincidence that together they made use of a conventional shorthand with which other actors could not readily identify. Their language indicated the chief elements on which they relied, naming the relevant dramatic procedure. In practice, however, an actor knows that this choice does not exclude the other elements: they take on a different physiognomy and may be subordinated, but they will be used nonetheless.

We shall come back to this question and examine it more closely, making appropriate reference to individual contexts without succumbing to the siren song of historicism. For the moment we can recognise how the approach of Stanislavski and Grotowski gave rise to a new tradition that has in some respects come to an end in recent years. There has been a new departure with such author-actor-poets as Carmelo Bene and Leo de Berardinis, or the “doing persons” of the Workcenter, affecting not only what takes place on stage but also the culture of theatre in general. This new departure involves a “living stage” which displays and recounts itself, analysing its own processes and the combination of existential motivations, neurobiological phenomenology and the composition of forms. Not enough attention has been paid to this innovation to date, and the research I am outlining here is only a first step in this direction, with all the attendant risks of being schematic, one-sided, indeterminate and so on.¹⁰

Konstantin Stanislavski and Jerzy Grotowski inaugurated – and in a certain sense brought to a close – a new phase in the history of acting in the twentieth century. Thanks to them, as well as others, a new awareness began to gain ground that both theatre, a cultural institution that appeared to be extraneous to progress in communications, and the actor, considered a supreme practitioner of fiction, in fact testified to the survival of something archaic, or better of something quintessential, and what was more, that the knowledge related thereto was not to be considered the exclusive preserve of specialists.

In this essay, with its selection of audiovisual documents, we wish to focus on the two great masters of the twentieth century, and also on a rollcall of actors and actresses who represent the culmination of this art. We also allude to a possible relationship between the teaching of Stanislavski and Grotowski and some significant applications of dramatic art in the twenty-first century. The examples of acting are presented as stages in an on-going re-positioning of the two fundamental polarities

⁹ Cf. J. Grotowski, ‘Le Prince Constant de Ryszard Cieślak’, in *Ryszard Cieślak, acteur-emblème des années soixante*, ed. by G. Banu, Arles, Actes Sud-Papiers, 1992, pp. 13-21. When Grotowski renamed his centre as the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, he was simply acknowledging this historical reality; his transmission of his knowledge to two actors of the calibre of Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini was a practical anticipation of the next step forwards.

¹⁰ The volume featuring this research, *Actoris Studium – Album # 1*, is the first in a series devoted to studying actors on the basis of audiovideo documentation made partially available on the web site of the *Seminario Permanente di Filosofia delle Arti Dinamiche ‘Carmelo Bene’, Università di Torino* (<http://www.sempercb.unito.it/login.htm>).

between which the art of acting is practised. As time went by these polarities were variously referred to as ‘process’ and ‘composition’, ‘organicity’ and ‘code-based’, ‘spontaneity’ and ‘precision’, the ‘truth’ of doing and ‘artifice’ (or fiction). In his ‘Risposta a Stanislavskij’ Grotowski put it like this:

If someone started hiding in automatism and perfectionism, we would immediately look for ways to keep the details and simultaneously go beyond them; that is, to transform them into reactions specific only to that person. Therefore it was always a sort of intersection of what was still the precision of the previous work and something already moving toward spontaneity. Or the opposite: a sort of intersection of what was still in the flux of personal reactions and something already turning toward precision. When that intersection occurred, the creative moment emerged.

This opposition between spontaneity and precision is natural and organic. [...] Only when they exist together – not as a union of two things, but as one unique thing – only then are we whole. In the moments of fullness, what is animal in us isn’t only animal, it is the whole nature. Not human nature, but the whole nature in man [*człowiek*]. Then simultaneously the social heritage, man as *homo sapiens*, is actualized. But it is not a duality. It is the unity of man. And then, not the “I” does, “it” does; not the “I” accomplishes the act, but “my man [*człowiek*]” accomplishes the act. I myself and the *genus humanum* together.¹¹

One can only progress towards the objective indicated by Grotowski (the act performed by a human being acting in his or her quintessential unity) by combining practical experience and study and grasping *how* the bipolarity manifests itself in each historical and cultural context. To put this another way, one must establish which materials are being used by each of the actors under observation, and above all which techniques they adopt in order to realise theatre’s *raison d’être* in their own lives and in those of the spectators.

In our opinion this perspective is of great interest for the upcoming generations of actors and scholars, because it brings into focus a series of fundamental questions. First of all it bears out the fact that in theatre new achievements can never be considered definitive. There is undoubtedly a measure of progress which can be capitalised on and which concerns everybody. Just to give one particularly blatant instance, even the great charismatic directors of the beginning of the century were unable to control the duration of their productions. Performances varied considerably in length according to the leading actors’ inspiration of the moment, while nowadays respect for the script can more or less be taken for granted. We should add, however, that in the dramatic art each actor and director starts over from scratch, or rather from themselves, from their talent and their own existence. Moreover, and this is no less crucial, the mind-body is bound to act within language and history, however much it might wish to be free of them. Each process takes place in an unrepeatable here and now and has to contend with the conventions of the day. Thus while the documents we present here feature lofty, and in some cases sublime, examples of the art of acting, they defy imitation and can never be regarded as models. Each of these actors has solved the problem of how to act in the specific circumstance in which they found themselves working. In order to fully understand their true value (and this is the aim we set out to achieve), whenever practitioners and scholars observe an actor or an example of acting, they should learn to distinguish

¹¹ J. Grotowski, ‘Risposta a Stanislavskij’, pp. 55-56.

between what is a matter of “process” and what of “composition”. They should make a point, in short, of reading both sides of the sheet on which the actor writes.

The examples we present are taken above all from the heritage of Stanislavski, meaning that tradition of actors in the last century who placed the emphasis on “process”, on a rejection of stereotype and the pursuit of truth. Often, however, we have included alongside them actors who, at least in terms of intentions, took as their guide the idea of artifice, convention and “composition”. We have done this in order to show that – as Grotowski pointed out – at the summit of acting, whatever the ideological orientation or the *modus operandi*, ‘process’ and ‘codes’, ‘organicity’ and ‘composition’, ‘truth’ and ‘artifice’ are in fact all interwoven. Every actor knows full well that acting reunites the two poles, albeit in a precarious equilibrium. It is in fact imperative that scholars also pay sufficient attention to the historical dimension. For while each actor distinguishes between the two extremes, favours one or the other and may even nurture an ideological opposition towards them, reflecting different approaches and ways of preparing themselves and structuring their performances, the art of acting nevertheless involves combining both aspects.

As we shall see in greater detail when we consider the way actors work in the Teatr Laboratorium, Grotowski was quite clear about this matter right from the start:

Now we can ask ourselves: What was the character he was trying to create? Was it the interior or the exterior one? I think neither. When we use physical actions, I can ask myself: What am I doing? *And to “do” something is both something exterior and interior.* If someone says that he is doing something but it remains interiorized, and I am watching him and cannot discern anything, that means that he is engaged in something purely subjective, anyway, in something that does not concern me. However, if I see that he is engaged in doing something and I can believe him, I can clearly see that it is both something exterior and interior.¹²

In the world of theatre as Grotowski knew it, one could not avoid taking sides, and among the professionals, the actors of composition far outnumbered those of process. The Russian establishment had taken over the heritage of Stanislavski, and for Grotowski and his contemporaries emancipation consisted in the laborious discovery of *another* Stanislavski, opening up an alternative strategy. In his words:

In Poland the teaching of Stanislavsky’s system was even worse than in the Soviet Union. [...] When I was in the theatre school, I was not oriented towards Stanislavsky. During my second year there, my colleagues and I organized something like a parallel school so as not to lose time unnecessarily. I must say that my teachers could well understand me, no one tried to hinder that, and quite on the contrary, they tried to protect me. We were studying Stanislavsky not as a method, but as one of the possible approaches to new discoveries, our own discoveries.¹³

However, before he dealt with this problem he gave an account of the circumstances in which he chose drama as his profession:

When I came to the theatre school, I had already decided to become a theatre director, and I knew that in order to become a theatre director, I must know the work of an actor. So I entered the theatre school primarily in order to study acting. I was counting

¹² A. Vasil’ev, ‘Cronaca del quattordici’ (1999), p. 83 (italics added).

¹³ Ibid., p. 95.

on being received just because I could recite poetry well, nothing else. No theatre production has ever interested me. [...] Then why did I enter the theatre school to become a theatre director? I had three options at hand: to study psychiatry, to do Oriental studies, especially Hinduism, and the third one was that theatre school. The auditions for the theatre school started earlier than other exams, I was accepted, and so I did not try those other places. Can we regard those three directions of study as something that has a strong affinity? For me at least, those directions are absolutely linked with each other. I knew that I had to work on the inner life of man, frankly in order to be able to reveal my own inner life. Not from the psychological point of view but rather from the spiritual one. Secondly, I felt an urge to work with others. In the case of Hinduism it might have been possible through different forms of yoga. Thirdly, because of particular historical circumstances I was looking for a place where I could work without censorship interfering. Then I said to myself: Censorship can control the theatre director only immediately before the premiere; however, for several months I would be left alone with the actors, and it was during that time that we might try to do something. That is, for me something authentic was always linked to the rehearsals.¹⁴

Grotowski went on to talk about his experience of the drama academy in Krakow, and of how he found support and confirmation for his innermost motivations in three specific circumstances:

The first, almost purely theatrical interest was awakened in me at the beginning of my studies at the theatre school when I discovered the Eleusinian mysteries. I said to myself: that's it! Someone in the far away past, in Eleusis, must have experienced a similar need! The second experience – and that also happened at the theatre school – was Stanislavsky. Not through the way he was taught. [...] Vassiliev has already been talking about the notion of the objective that was imposed on the actors. He said how detrimental to the process that turned out to be. But Stanislavsky himself was aware of that. When we read the book of Toporkov about the rehearsals with Stanislavsky (I think every actor and every theatre director must read it), we can see how during the rehearsals of *Tartuffe* Stanislavsky rejects the notion of objective, how he keeps coming back to something completely opposite: to the source, to the beginning. That was the key to the whole thing, and Vassiliev brilliantly presented it here. [...] That became the second important thing, along with Eleusinian mysteries, that prompted my interest in the theatre profession. I could well see that even in that profession it was possible to see someone who would continue his search with great precision.

The third thing – and that was something really profound – was the discovery of the materials related to “Reduta”, to mystical theatre. [...] But all of that happened when I was already a student of the theatre school! Before, no particular images, no visions, nothing that I would admire. As if I had been living in prison and was looking for the smallest hole in order to escape. I imagined theatre as that kind of hole; I thought it would keep the hole open, so that through it I would escape from slavery. And I am not talking about political slavery; that would be too superficial. For me all the illusions and desires of ordinary life are nothing but a prison, all that shit on which we spend our lives. The same kind of prison, nothing else.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 94. Right from his years at the Academy there could be no mistaking his vocation. As Rena Mirecka recalls: ‘I met Grotowski when we were students, he attending the fourth year and I the first year of the Academy of Dramatic Art. He was already employed as assistant to a professor who lectured on research in the contemporary stage. In vacations Grotowski always took students from Poland’s three drama schools, and once he took me on a research experience in the forest. This took place in 1953-54’ (*La via creativa di Rena Mirecka*, ed. by N. Dentamaro, unpublished interview, Verona, 2000).

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 95-96.

Thus the theatre was seen as a place of research and liberty at which he arrived by instinct rather than through any rational process. Further on we shall see why Grotowski admired Jacek Woszczerowicz, one of the actors who, after working for a while with Reduta, moved into institutional theatre and pursued a career as a professional actor which culminated in universal recognition for his spiritual probity. He succeeded in never betraying the principles he had acquired in the time spent in the most radical company to be found in Poland in the first half of the twentieth century. For the moment, however, it is worth taking note of the reasons why the young Grotowski adopted Stanislavski as a father figure:¹⁶

Stanislavsky was looking for a different logic. He was less interested in the exterior circumstances of the character; he was searching for the transformation through the inner notion of “person”. There is no need to feel that you are someone “other”, you must just try and understand the circumstances of someone else, his situation, his psychological, physical, so-called social and interhuman, everyday elements of ordinary life, all its dangers and secret desires. All of that can start a certain process, so that the character can eventually emerge from inside the actor. Since Stanislavsky wanted to base that work on a real process, he was destined to go through a multitude of working hypotheses, searching for emotions, emotional memories, desires, physical actions, the inner logic and the effects of those physical actions, linked to their specific tempo-rhythm.¹⁷

Stanislavski as a fertile myth rather than as a monument or as an object of cult worship. The study of Stanislavski and concrete experimentation with his ideas, in flesh and blood as it were, affected every aspect of Grotowski’s work in the theatre.

Here we focus above all on the actor, or rather on the final outcome which is known perhaps improperly as “acting”. Nonetheless it is appropriate to recall that the quality of this outcome becomes possible, according to our two authorities, only when a series of conditions are realised which also concern the artist’s ethos and all the other elements of modern theatre. At this point, in order to summarise the combined heritage of Stanislavski-Grotowski-the Workcenter and to provide some bibliographical indications that will allow anyone who so wishes to verify our outline and go into greater depth, it is good to go back to the beginning. In fact, the whole story began in a very curious manner, which is all too often ignored by students and indeed by historians.

At the end of the nineteenth century, theatre in Russia was a relatively new phenomenon, an exotic import that in practice needed to be reinvented from scratch by its professional practitioners in all its aspects. In two decades, at the turn of the twentieth century, Russian theatre underwent a remarkable transformation, from being a sketchy, provincial phenomenon, somewhere between the romantic and melodramatic nineteenth century tradition and the proto-theatrical anthropology peculiar to Russia, with significant ritualistic adjuncts, to a reality that was taken as a model for theatre worldwide.¹⁸ This is the context in which Stanislavski and his contribution to theatre must be viewed, without losing sight of his personal

¹⁶ Grotowski himself talks about ‘my Stanislavsky myth’ in ‘Risposta a Stanislavkij’, p. 47.

¹⁷ A. Vasil’ev, ‘Cronaca del quattordici’ (1999), p. 84.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Lenzi, *La natura della convenzione. Per una storia del teatro drammatico russo del Novecento* (2004), Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2011.

background. Stanislavski came from a well-to-do family: acting for him was initially a hobby, which developed into a passion. His involvement with amateurs from his social class taught him that while he was perhaps a gifted actor, he was by no means exceptional. He often came up against shortcomings in his inspiration and achievement, measuring himself remorselessly against some of the foremost actors of his time, Russians and above all Italians. The real challenge came when he decided to turn professional. His historical mission and achievement consisted precisely in defining a *modern professionalism* in acting, and he embarked on this while still a young man. Although there were various different motives behind this mission, Stanislavski never called into question the function of theatre: It existed to represent drama, and was centred on the character. He confronted general and specific problems at the ethical level (which remained a constant obsession; his last essay is devoted to the ethics of the professional actor), but also at the personal level, regarding above all how to become an actor of excellence or indeed of genius. In this sense he set out not only to identify the right models but also to give a scientific expression and specific application to the know how of the actor of genius. His project was entirely rational, for he sought to define codes that could be adopted by the profession as a whole. His experience, which began at the strictly local level, soon became a paradigm for the whole world, a new branch in the history of the theatre.

It is not easy to grasp the overall sense of this story, deciding what should be explored more thoroughly and which aspects are still topical. It may be helpful to briefly outline the points of continuity and discontinuity in the tradition stretching from Stanislavski to the Workcenter via Grotowski, relying on certain key concepts such as ‘drama company’, ‘actor’, ‘psychology’, ‘yoga’ and lastly ‘music’.¹⁹ Far from wishing to reduce complexity to something simple, this recognises how the initial rigour and pragmatic modesty of Stanislavski – which have to be set in their historical context – gave rise to an experience resulting in great achievements on the part of both Stanislavski himself and his immediate successors such as Vachtangov and Meyerhold, and indeed Grotowski later on.

Of course, the first decisive break with the tradition of a “theatre of representation” grounded in the Enlightenment has to be traced back at least to Romanticism, and particularly to Mickiewicz in Poland, to Kleist and others.²⁰ At the beginning of the twentieth century several authors took up this challenge, each in his own way. However, no one can deny that Stanislavski’s formulations of practical and theoretical definitions of the theatre and the actor eclipsed all previous attempts. It is true that, as actor and director, he believed that the function of theatre was to realise the script by bringing to life the characters, but in actual fact his work went much further than this. Firsthand evidence concerning the last few years of his activity, in particular the “method of physical actions”, shows that Stanislavski conceived the theatre as a means rather than an end, and the representation of texts and characters

¹⁹ Some of the aspects touched on here are developed in the two books on Stanislavski, by S. M. Carnicke and F. Ruffini, cited above.

²⁰ For Adam Mickiewicz cf. ‘Lezione XVI. Dal III Corso di Letteratura Slava al Collège de France, 4 April 1843’, trans. by M. Fabbri, *Teatro e Storia*, 15, no. 22 (2000), 35-40. For Heinrich von Kleist cf. *Über das Marionettentheater. Aufsätze und Anekdoten. Mit Zeichnungen von Oskar Schlemmer und einem Nachwort von Josef Kunz*, ed. by H. Sembdner, Frankfurt am Main, Insel-Verlag, 2007.

meant embarking on (and was thus a way of “translating into signs”) a path of ethical and spiritual elevation for actors and community alike.

Through the idea of “company” Stanislavski defined a new model of joint activity, a sort of *demos* or college, a place of on-going formation and research. Professional practitioners would gather to work together for a lengthy (ideally unlimited) period of time, occasionally recruiting new actors. Everyone would have the same opportunities, even in terms of which roles to play. The goal was to ensure the contemporary development of ethical and artistic potential both among individuals and in the group as a whole, rejecting theatre based on the “star system” in favour of a communal activity relying on a definition of professional acting more in tune with its origins as a craft.

Stanislavski set out to transform the secret of the great actors into method, and their nature into a technique that would be accessible to the whole acting community. For him, method and research were one and the same thing. The path followed by Stanislavski, and subsequently by Meyerhold and Vachtangov, involved experiments and phases that occasionally gave rise to new concepts and went to create a new language. They engaged in a life of study that aspired to be up to date, referring to the achievements of science.

Psychology, or “psycho-technique” as it was then known, was in its infancy, but it was bound to be a touchstone for a theatre centred on characters involving an agglomeration of affects (or, we might say, serving as a vehicle for affects). This aspect is closely related to the actor’s memory, just as his approach to his art, being pragmatic, is direct and apparently contradictory. Nonetheless, as history has repeatedly shown, this can give rise to substantial developments that precede theoretical awareness. Even when Stanislavski took a wrong tack, working on the *affective memory*, he had in mind the actor’s ability to activate the *concrete memory*, meaning the sum of affects. The actor had to be familiar with psychology in order to be capable of transferring the life of the human spirit into the role. The emphasis on the actor’s feeling (involving both sentiments and senses) represented a stage in a continuous evolution which, taking into account the centrality of the body, culminated in the “method of physical actions”. This was based on the awareness that although moods cannot be decided, the actor can learn to reconstruct and perform the concrete actions that allow the sentiments to be resuscitated so that they are manifested in an exact fashion, avoiding stereotypes or anything merely generic. If “physical actions” are the manifesto of Stanislavski at the height of his powers, they also allude to a phase in which he was still substantially unrecognized. It is all too easy for us today to discuss his achievements as if they had always been appreciated and advocated, but this is far from the truth, both in drama schools and in the consensus of historians. As a matter of fact, the centrality of the affective memory can be identified in standard, everyday existence, while the bibliography dealing with its “grand finale” is anything but extensive. We can recall that Toporkov’s memoirs were not published in Italy until the 1990s, and only appeared in France, in a partial edition together with a selection of other related writings, in 2007.²¹ In his discovery of Stanislavski the youthful Grotowski was engaging in an

²¹ Cf. V. O. Toporkov, *Stanislavskij alle prove. Gli ultimi anni*, ed. by F. Malcovati, Milano, Ubulibri, 1991, and M. C. Autant-Mathieu, *La Ligne des actions physiques. Répétitions et exercices de Stanislavski*, Montpellier, L’Entretemps, 2007.

action of “counter culture”: the Stanislavski that was then on the curriculum in Poland and indeed in Russia was a bland hotchpotch of techniques based above all on precisely that “emotional pumping” that was so inimical to him. For Stanislavski the confrontation with current thinking in psychology involved above all the work of William James. This reveals both an aspect of his genius and a limitation: The American’s insight did indeed lead to modern behaviourist psychology, but it also featured a decidedly simplified idea of the body, which in practice was contradicted by the actor’s direct experience.

The same desire to broaden his horizons also led Stanislavski to take an interest in the East. Some books that made an overwhelming impression on him led him to see yoga as a possible springboard for a new approach to drama. He came to realise that the aim had to be the conquest of the self, defining oneself as a unique human being. His practise of yoga involved experiments that ended in failure or indeed ridicule (such as attempts at levitation or the transmission of thoughts), and yet they were not entirely useless because he never lost sight of his ultimate objective. Even though he had no religious propensities, Stanislavski was in no doubt as to the need to reconcile work with the soul. At the same time, he never called into question the theatre’s vocation of representing texts and characters. In fact he developed these principles in the context of a stylistic approach and naturalist aesthetic that Grotowski tended to reject. Later generations are able, and indeed are called on, to reconsider his achievements in light of subsequent developments.

In the 1920s Stanislavski settled on music as the concept that could sum up the essence and function of theatre. He himself described this decisive discovery: ‘I realized that music and singing would help me to find a way out of the blind alley into which my quest had brought me’.²² The discovery came about on meeting some opera singers, but what counts is how Stanislavski was able to turn it to account. This is what he had to say about the concept of tempo-rhythm: ‘This is indeed a great discovery! And if it really is the case, the correctly established tempo-rhythm of a play or a role, can of itself, intuitively (on occasion automatically) take hold of the feeling of an actor and arouse in him a true sense of living his part’.²³ However, this tempo-rhythm is ‘interior’ and, he added, ‘spiritual’.²⁴ Thus awareness proceeds from the outside towards the interior. In practice, as his pupil Marija Knebel’ recalled: ‘The actor has to create the music of his own encounter with the text’.²⁵ Hence the idea that good acting means first and foremost “not acting”, while the actor’s task is not limited to words, since ‘the action on stage, like the verbal text, has to be musical’.²⁶ This extraordinary discovery, which was only later given a theoretical expression, helped to clarify one of the lessons of experience and turn it to new effect.

We have already seen how during his apprenticeship Jerzy Grotowski became aware of a Stanislavski who was substantially different to the one presented in drama schools all over the world, and elected him as his “guru”, basing his own activity on

²² K. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, n. d., p. 447.

²³ K. Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, London, Methuen, 1985, p. 244.

²⁴ K. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, p. 443.

²⁵ Cf. M. Knebel’, *L’Analyse-Action*, adaptation of A. Vassiliev, Paris, Actes Sud, 2006.

²⁶ K. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, p. 443.

the idea that on stage all action, like the verbal text, must be musical.²⁷ On finishing school Grotowski was unsure what he wanted to study, whether psychiatry, the Hindu religion or drama. The choice of the latter was fortuitous, and throughout his life he considered the theatre as having much in common with the other two fields: 'I knew I had to work on the interior life of people, and to put it bluntly, that I needed to do this in order to discover my own interior life. Not from a psychological point of view but rather in the spiritual sense. In the second place, I felt the urge to work with others'. This explains his interest in 'some forms of yoga', as well as the special value attached to rehearsals, on account of the freedom of self-access they provided ('for me rehearsals were always linked to something authentic').²⁸

For Grotowski "company" meant above all 'working with others' avoiding being cooped up in solitude, and pursuing this communal activity with continuity. The need to work together for several years – without however ignoring biological rhythms and various other motives that periodically lead to the dissolution of ensembles – is a pre-condition to ensure that a small community of professionals can truly progress and not merely go on reproducing the features that ensured success when one of its productions was acclaimed as innovatory. It follows that research is to be viewed not as a sort of adolescence that precedes maturity and the definition of true form, but as the aspect of a theatrical activity whose "end product" consists not only in the performances but also in the transformation of the participants:

Art as creation invariably means discovering something unknown. Something that is already accepted, already found, is not creativity. It's the striving towards the unknown that gives art its creativity. When I say that at the end of his life Stanislavsky became a genius, it's not just because he discovered a great method, but rather because he was always in the process of searching, and nature always crowns your search. Every actor who exists in that process of searching starts to emit a wonderful light; it's nature itself that crowns his search, the courage it takes to leave something you know for something unknown. So, if we define art as the art of discovering something unknown, we should add that the art of the unknown becomes impossible in the theatre of impresarios.²⁹

As can be seen, the link between artistic necessity and ethical tension presents other fatal implications for Grotowski concerning both the professional's spiritual (existential) outlook and the political background. The references to 'light' on one hand and to 'impresarios' on the other, which recur frequently in Grotowski's writings from the fifties up until his death, were to remain topical for a long time, becoming benchmarks for any significant activity in the theatre.

Grotowski was very forthright on the subject of the ongoing work of the ensemble as a pre-condition. He denounced the commercial rationale and production times imposed by institutions as factors that destroyed the very possibility of theatre. He maintained that such an approach to drama was simply a matter of felling trees, consuming its residual traditions. It meant being doomed to entropy, loss of contact with its own roots and the inability to renew itself. The ensemble is the right place for the work that goes on prior to and beyond the productions. According to

²⁷ The most relevant writings by Grotowski are: 'Risposta a Stanislavskij', 'Dalla compagnia teatrale all'arte come veicolo' and 'Ciò che ci sarà dopo di me', in *Opere e sentieri*, II, *Jerzy Grotowski. Scritti 1968-1998*, and A. Vasil'ev, 'Cronaca del quattordici' (1999).

²⁸ A. Vasil'ev, 'Cronaca del quattordici' (1999), p. 91.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Grotowski, the actors are individuals who tackle a subject (author, text, character), but their aim is to learn to make their way in the world. He had this to say about his own experience:

only adventurers and anarchists would come to us. [...] They had that rare human temperament of the great adventurers and mighty anarchists. However, the ethical structure that we adopted in our work, something that was very close to the texts of Stanislavsky, all that structure of work, as well as the way of structuring everything through work, allowed us to keep that “wild” element among us in some kind of balance, in mutual understanding. [...] We did our work not “for” but rather “against” something. And not only in the political sense – that would always remain superficial – but in the sense of human existence. What is important in life? What is really shit? What does it mean to work, or even to die? What can you really accept, and what you should reject? But naturally that implied a terrible price to pay.³⁰

Work carried out with such an orientation (‘I prefer the expression “ensemble theatre” because it seems to me more comprehensive. “Group theatre” is only one of the possible branches of “ensemble theatre”’) requires a director who is not a *metteur en scène*, a mediator or a *deus ex machina* who makes use of interpreters, but a guide, a research chief (‘The theatrical director as we understand the term only appears in the twentieth century, thanks to the Prince of Meiningen, Stanislavski and his disciples, Meyerhold included, and all those trends which in the end went to create the theatre of ensemble’).³¹

In this form of theatre, rather than “playing” characters the actor encounters them, as we have said, and gets to know them, so that whether or not one remains faithful to the script comes to be seen as a false problem. The actors adopt a “deconstructive” approach, not in the sense that they become destructive or critical just for the sake of it; rather, they enter into an intense relationship that implies decomposing and recomposing the text. As Grotowski stated: ‘Stanislavsky believed that theatre was the realisation of the drama. [...] I do not feel that for me theatre is the ultimate objective. There is only the Act. It could happen that this Act was quite close to the text of the drama as a basis. But I cannot ask myself the question: was it or not the realisation of the text? I don’t know. I don’t know if it was true to it or not. I’m not interested in verbal theatre because it is based on a false view of human existence. And nor am I interested in physical theatre’.³² The Act close to the script is what can be seen in the film of *The Constant Prince*, above all in Ryszard Cieślak’s performance. In the early days of the Teatr Laboratorium people talked about ‘confession with the body’.

Grotowski’s renewal of drama went through several stages. At one point it was decided to do away with performances, not because of any desire to give up the trade of actors but on the contrary to enable the group to fully pursue the dictum formulated as early as 1969 that ‘the technique lies in the accomplishment’.³³ This meant that there can be no *learning* apart from *doing*, since the two things correspond exactly. This principle has been developed in the Workcenter, where the dual pursuit

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 89-90.

³¹ Ibid., p. 90.

³² J. Grotowski, ‘Risposta a Stanislavskij’, pp. 60-61.

³³ Cf. J. Grotowski, ‘Esercizi’, in *Il Teatr Laboratorium di Jerzy Grotowski 1959-1969*, ed. by L. Flaszen and C. Pollastrelli, Pontedera, Fondazione Pontedera Teatro, 2001, pp. 184-204.

of existential and professional research implies a new alliance between learning and composition, involving the choice of “music” as an attribute that *includes* technique.

For Grotowski psychology was a tool to reach an awareness of the body/life. Certainly memory is fundamental, but the actor should not merely leaf through albums of fading photos and allow himself to be overcome. It is not a matter of the “petty past”, but rather of remembering that one has a body and possibilities of one’s own. This enables you to reactivate a potential which at the outset is wholly physical, and in this sense to achieve access to a ‘memory of the future’.³⁴ This is where yoga comes into its own, or rather, as Grotowski himself said, it is beneficial to investigate some forms of yoga. For him *concrete memory* as propounded by Théodule-Armand Ribot and Stanislavski became a dance of energies performed in the context of that strategy of conscious, piloted transcendence to which he liked to refer as ‘verticality’.

Music is the last of the key terms we wish to evoke. Grotowski again:

If I watch documentaries made of the productions of the Teatr Laboratorium, like *Akropolis* [1962] for example, I realise that these performances were actually sung. I didn’t know it at the time, it hadn’t occurred to me. That production was filmed, and for a long time I didn’t want to see the film. Then I saw it, and it isn’t so bad, and I realised it was sung throughout. The same thing for *The Constant Prince*. The interest in singing gradually took shape in my work. And when I think back to it, I remember how I managed to achieve the singing quality for the text. It was only much later that I arrived at an objective realisation. Many historians speak about brusque changes of direction in my itinerary, but I rather have the impression of following a single thread, like Ariadne, one unchanging direction. And nowadays I find myself returning to topics of interest which I had before I started doing theatre, as if all the various threads were being drawn together.³⁵

The pre-eminence of “singing”, from the beginning of Grotowski’s experimentation right through to the end, reflects the twentieth century fascination with a “theatre of poetry” that Umberto Artioli showed to be the (lost) cause of Rilke and other leading figures of this century, a theatre based not on ‘contents’ but rather on ‘rhythm and the voice’.³⁶

At the end of the film *Downstairs Action* (1989), Grotowski makes a surprise appearance, saying something to the effect of: ‘Nobody, here, had previously been a singer [...] All the work on singing has been done here. And yet this work on singing is a very complex affair...’. In this case “complex” also means difficult to explain in words, but whoever encounters the Workcenter even only once can have no doubt in what sense singing for them is different, and can verify how the ‘total perfection’ of melody and tempo-rhythm only serves to ‘go beyond’, in the sense of verticality. Moreover it is clear how by capturing the ‘vibratory language’, the “doing person” abandons his body to the ‘flow of the organic physical actions’.

³⁴ ‘Grotowski: il corpo sa’, in *L’Ecole des Maîtres. Atti 1990-1994*, ed. by F. Quadri, Milano, Ubulibri, 1997, p. 20.

³⁵ J. Grotowski, ‘Ciò che resterà dopo di me’, p. 115.

³⁶ Cf. U. Artioli, *Il ritmo e la voce*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2005, chap. VIII, and Rainer Maria Rilke, *Scritti sul teatro*, ed. by U. Artioli and C. Grazioli, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1995. We should point out that the musicality of theatre has little in common with music theatre or singing as they are generally understood today.

To be properly understood, Grotowski's words should be considered in terms of the activity of the Workcenter. What is meant by the expression 'working on the bodily voice as a normal thing'? It may mean that working together makes it easier to understand that when one works on oneself, it is not a matter of concocting a garment or a piece of private property, but something deeper that concerns us all as members of the human species.

So singing – or to be more exact, that *mousikè* which Carlo Sini identifies as underlying the dynamic arts – has to be seen as both a paradigm and a metaphor, in other words *not* as a means of expression (which can lead to caricature and stereotyping), but as an instrument of 'verticality', with the performer's expression and "presence" following on as mere consequences.³⁷

Grotowski never disguised the fact that the over-riding ambition in collective work was to capture instants of "eternal life" ("catch the hole in time"),³⁸ which we can perhaps interpret as *becoming truly aware of living*.³⁹

Some ten years have gone by since Grotowski's death in 1999. The Workcenter, based in Pontedera but renowned the world over, has borne out what its founder had envisaged: Each student has to go beyond what he has learned, and any so-called "allegiance" to a method is in fact the mark of personal failure and profit seeking. Under the guidance of Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, the Workcenter is now developing an exploration of art as respectively vehicle and presentation, above all in a practical, performing dimension, but without neglecting the domain of theory, study and comparison.⁴⁰ Events are organized periodically to bring outsiders into contact with the various activities of this ensemble, which is unique in the world. In particular, up until mid-2008, the team directed by Richards put on Actions of unparalleled intensity known as *The Letter*, that among other things bore witness to the original contribution of some of the individuals who had joined the Workcenter following the demise of Grotowski. In 2009 Richards concentrated on a new work phase with a group of freshly recruited young actors, while since the spring of 2009 Biagini has been organizing the first "appearances" of the participants in the Open Program he directs. At the same time, several authoritative publications have thrown light on the historical and theoretical background of what is put on display.⁴¹

As for the other key concepts – actor, psychology, yoga and music – these are in part accessible in the comprehensive documentation concerning the tradition of the Workcenter which is now generally available. We can nonetheless reproduce some of

³⁷ Cf. C. Sini, *Le arti dinamiche. Filosofia e pedagogia*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2004.

³⁸ Grotowski used this expression in the early nineties in a conversation with Lisa Wolford Wylam, transcribed verbatim in her doctoral thesis entitled 'The Occupation of the Saint' (Northwestern University, 1996).

³⁹ Perhaps I may be forgiven at this point for introducing God in a footnote: 'God is a mental category, an idea, one cannot refer to him to find a relationship with people. Avoid any mental calculation in connection with this. I call it a *higher connection*' (from an address given by Grotowski, probably at Volterra in the eighties, for which I cannot give more specific indications). Thus in Grotowski's lexicon *higher connection* is the goal of 'verticality'.

⁴⁰ On the Workcenter see various texts by Richards and Biagini in *Opere e sentieri*, I, *Il Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards*. See also Richards's recent *Heart of Practice*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008.

⁴¹ In addition to the publications already cited we can refer to 'Re-Reading Grotowski', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 52, no. 2, Summer 2008 (T198). Monographic issue devoted to Grotowski and the Workcenter.

the formulations Richards gives in ‘Master of no excuses’. Using different words – a mark of his substantial rather than formal allegiance – Richards projects the “new tradition”, deriving from Stanislavski and Grotowski, into the present:

This is the essential aspect of our research. It’s what Grotowski confronted us with. To escape from the prison, one of the first steps is to recognize that the prison is not outside of you; it is in you, and it is you. It’s necessary to disconnect yourself from every mechanism of excuse. [...]

What takes place in our performing opuses is a fight to rise above one’s own heaviness, to recognize in oneself, in the moment, the different mechanisms that make up this trap, the prison. [...]

Something is awakened in and through you that is not just the body, not just your daily emotions, not just the everyday casino of your head. A wave of perception can appear in which your sense of I is free, moving along an inner thread, climbing, ascending, then descending back. What I’m describing calls for disciplined work. [...]

It’s what Grotowski was trying to lead us toward through work on structured actions based on ancient vibratory songs. Sometimes, among ourselves, we called it a yoga. [...]

Surely what happens in our work, even though it hardly resembles the work of Stanislavsky, is not beyond reality. It is real. But what is real for the human being changes constantly. [...]

At present there are two branches in our research. The other branch is the project called The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts. In this domain we are creating opuses of another nature, which maintain the same nucleus as the essential work, Art as vehicle, but which also have another possibility with regard to viewing; in these opuses there’s a story deliberately crafted with the spectator in mind. Two intentions are present within these opuses, one of which goes toward the doing persons and the other toward the people watching.⁴²

This shows how the Workcenter is still operating in the direction mapped out by Stanislavski and Grotowski, while at the same time developing those premises, for example by finding a new way of linking the aspect of art as vehicle with the nature of a drama company.⁴³

We can end with *music* as the concept that sums up the rationale and sense of this way of doing theatre. Theatre can be represented as music on condition that at the same time music is viewed as theatre, while of course maintaining a clear distinction between the two spheres, above all in terms of contents. In evoking the ‘spirit of music’ as the essence of theatre (as Nietzsche was among the first to do in *The Birth of Tragedy*), we map out the attitude and route for a stage action that is not restricted to representing and enacting discourses, but which instead brings into play all the elements we have briefly outlined. What we are dealing with is a theatre which has rediscovered its *raison d’être* and which, in a world of mass communications and globalization, defines a form of knowledge that can only be achieved by attaining and then going beyond an impeccable performing art.⁴⁴

⁴² T. Richards, ‘Master of no excuses’, in *Opere e sentieri*, I, *Il Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards*, pp. 109-129.

⁴³ Cf. L. Wolford Wylam, M. Biagini, A. Attisani, (eds.), *Doorways*, Calcutta, Seagull Books (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Anyone interested can refer to A. Attisani, *Smisurato cantabile. Note sul lavoro del teatro dopo Jerzy Grotowski*, Bari, Edizioni di Pagina, 2009.