

What is the process of the actor in achieving Grotowski's "total act", and how did this theory influence the development of the Dzieci experimental theatre ensemble in their rehearsal process and performance of "Makbet"?

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One could refer to the development of the Dzieci ensemble as a constant process, a never-ending question as to what is organic in human reaction. Through a continuation of personal struggles, the Dzieci ensemble focus on “psycho-physical”(rtjournal) development, as a lifestyle, a search to find truth out of life experiences. This truth is carried by the actors to be released in performance. It is through discovering what is necessary, that the “total act”(Grotowski, 125) is born. When the actor “commits an act of sincerity, when he unveils himself, opens and gives himself, in an extreme, solemn gesture and does not hold back”(Grotowski, 124), one knows that this actor has achieved the “total act”(Grotowski, 125). In developing this method, Grotowski pushed his actors to follow their natural instinct, no longer to attempt to pre-edit their inner selves, as a safety from failure, for ultimately this tactic was relatable to imprisonment. Grotowski used his knowledge from limitless theatre forms and ancient philosophies to concentrate a true theory. Theatre in his eyes needed to be reduced down to its purest form, leaving the actor to reveal their raw self to the spectator prompting the same in return. The theory up to now has been relatively unknown, but the process of the actor in achieving Grotowski’s “total act”(Grotowski, 125) can be seen through the process of the actors in the Dzieci ensemble by getting a closer look into their personal application in a current, revolutionary theory. “Makbet” is a performance by Dzieci that has been in the works for over five years, constantly being developed and explored. The show itself is a gypsy inspired adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth where the full text was compressed into one 80-minute act. The performance is a whirlwind of constant flux where which actor who plays which character is unpredictable, and can change at any moment, characters only identifiable to the spectator through the actor’s use of a particular prop. An actor may offer a character to another however this offer can be

accepted, ignored or refused. This element of unknown, fuels the energy of each actor, who has to be in the moment with a constant fear of failing. The preparations for this performance are more internal, through a series of questioning and evaluating relationships and behaviors. It is through this process where characters are formed, not through stereotypical associations, but through analyzing and experimenting with organic emotions through the core of the actor. What is the process of the actor in achieving Grotowski's "total act", and how did this theory influence the development of the Dzieci experimental theatre ensemble in their rehearsal process and performance of "Makbet"?

**A Search for Total Presence: An Exposure of what is Natural vs. what is "Superfluous" (Grotowski, 19)**

For a "total" (Grotowski, 125) actor no other aspect of Grotowski's theory can be achieved without the "act of laying oneself bare, of tearing off the mask of daily life, of exteriorizing oneself" (Grotowski, 210). The capabilities of the total actor develop greatly overtime, as long as the actor stays organic in his reactions, eventually he would have the ability to be fully present in himself while remaining true in his reactions and behaviors. The first step is to dive deep inside one's self psychologically, to question one's behaviors, emotions and reactions. Once the actors recognize these aspects of their selves, the next step is to explore and question them. "The question is: what is necessary? We want to be in a place where there are no needs that have to be fulfilled in an egoistic way." (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) This "egoistic way" (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) is where the actor may turn when receiving positive feedback from a spectator to the point where the actor behaves artificially to receive a similar response out of vanity. In these sorts of situations, what originates as a natural reaction quickly turns artificial. The "total act's" (Grotowski, 125) purpose is to turn

the actor away from these habits, and the theory begins through the actor's discovery of what is needed. In the process of wanting to know what is necessary, Grotowski asked himself, "What is the theatre?"(Grotowski, 18) What he found was that theatre could not be without the actor, the spectator, the space itself and the relationship between those three elements. The rest of the "rich theatre" (Grotowski, 19) elements such as lighting, make-up and costume were all unnecessary and trying to compete with the "mechanical" (Grotowski, 19) advantage of the film industry. By stripping away all of the purely aesthetic elements, the actor is then provided further opportunities for creation, broadening the possibilities of his imagination. The actor then turns to himself. What are my personal habits? First one focuses on the physical, then the psychological. It is through the recognition of these habits that the actor can decide whether or not they are necessary. According to Grotowski,

"Theatre – through the actor's technique, his art in which the living organism strives for higher motives – provides an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance: a totality of physical and mental reactions."(Grotowski, 255)

The Dzieci ensemble explained, "You could call it a mask, there are all sorts of behavior that we create for ourselves to get by in the world, and here we try to eliminate everything that is not essential, that is not needed and what we find is that very little of it is needed". (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) Once these habits are "exposed" (Matt Mitler, Dzieci), it is then up to the actor to "struggle" (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) with them. These habits are most commonly self-created as a result of society's influence, what the most commonly accepted reaction may be. The purpose of the "total act"(Grotowski, 125) is for the actor to break down all that is artificial and to make the choice as to what is necessary for themselves personally through questioning one's own reactions. The goal is to get to an organic state where the actor reacts naturally, instinctually. "Theatre only has meaning if it allows us to transcend our

stereotyped vision, our conventional feelings and customs...so that we may experience what is real...in a state of complete defenselessness unveil, give, discover ourselves.”(Grotowski, 256) When discussing this idea with the Dzieci ensemble Matt described how it is challenging to allow one’s self to get to the state of complete vulnerability. What it comes down to is the actor’s strength to commit to his practice, to be completely aware of his body and to recognize the desire to act in a certain way but then to stop one’s self and rethink that action. Matt from Dzieci expressed, “I see a wish to, I see a need to, but I don’t follow that” (Matt Mitler, Dzieci), it is about “going against habits” (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) and then questioning why they are there. This in theory is known as “Via Negativa” (Grotowski, 18), where the actor trains not through “a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks.”(Grotowski, 17) A common exercise for the Dzieci ensemble is to simply breathe together while making eye contact. Through stillness, the actors can further recognize that very little is needed and it is through personal choice why actions are made rather than to act in a way that is mechanical, unconscious. Grotowski describes this “external” (Grotowski, 251) silence element as being a “stimulus” (Grotowski, 251), a way to ignite one’s “internal” (Grotowski, 251) silence, bringing back the actor to “his entire nature” (Grotowski, 251). “So the important thing is stillness, knowing that we have all other sorts of possibilities...if you watch the Olympics and you see someone prepare for gymnastics, you do not see them jumping all over the place.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) What Grotowski discovered, was that there are specific connections between the body and the mind. Through the kind of “psycho-physical” (rtjournal) recognition found through stillness, the core within the actor can be found and what this core possesses is truth. Matt from Dzieci explained,

“There’s a place where I feel that I’m not doing anything but something’s being done to me...and almost what comes out is a surprise. You could call it grace. And that’s

a place where you want to be but you can't use muscle to get there. It's a certain kind of letting go...so that's an interesting effort, an interesting task. It seems to require trust more than anything else.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci)

The Dzieci ensemble finds this “trust” (Rebecca Sokoll, Dzieci) not only as individuals but also in their ensemble members. Rebecca from Dzieci stated, “We have to trust that if we are doing something that looks ridiculous, somebody will tell us.”(Rebecca Sokoll, Dzieci) It is through trial and error, the experimentation of ideas that the ensemble finds the organic characters they are searching for.

### **Psychophysical Training: Discovering the Connections of One’s Body to their Internal Core.**

In order for the actor to have the capabilities to express the “total act” (Grotowski, 125) without physical limitations, the actor must train in both vocally and physically. There are a series of physical exercises, which are used to allow the actor to become more in tune with their bodies and their internal presence. Grotowski was influenced greatly by oriental theatre including yoga, leading to the creation of what are known as plastiques. These exercises include a series of different positions, gestures and tumbles. Grotowski was greatly influenced by the Indian philosopher Patanjali who believed that “yoga removes the impurities from the body creating one being able to clearly notice their true self.”(Grotowski, 252) It is through the learning of physical techniques that in performance, the actor has the capability to physically move organically through almost a kind of improvisation. However what appears externally is the structure learnt through technique. The purpose of the exercise plastiques is to challenge the actor, not just physically but psychologically. Grotowski had developed these exercises following much experimentation. Originally, yoga was used to test whether or not the exercises could improve an actor’s “concentration” (Grotowski, 252) skills. Eventually what Grotowski found

was that Yoga was the worst training an actor could possess, for it induces a lack of “thought”(Grotowski, 252) and slows the “breathing”(Grotowski, 252). “That means all life processes are stopped and one finds fullness and fulfillment in conscious death, autonomy enclosed in our own kernel.”(Grotowski, 252) However what Grotowski did find to his advantage, was that “the associations of the body are also the associations of the feelings” (Grotowski, 253). At the same time, Grotowski recognized what yoga did do, was allow “a natural adaptation to space” (Grotowski, 253). Therefore he decided to modify these exercises to involve human interaction. By involving a partner in these exercises, the actor’s creativity loses limitations and can benefit further psychologically. From here, more and more physical exercises were developed most commonly through the actor’s desire to search for meaning, for presence. Dzieci similarly use these plastiques as a tactic to resolve a problem or to answer a question. For “Makbet”, the actors rehearsed specifically for certain physically demanding scenes, as Rebecca explained as “being present to what’s happening in my body.”(Rebecca Sokoll, Dzieci) In specific exercises, the Dzieci actors would learn a series of actions and once these actions became easy, they would increase in difficulty. “We are always increasing the demands, once we get really good at one thing, we are always increasing the difficulty.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) Through the addition of further challenges, what is most interesting is the struggle or the process to achieve such actions. Dzieci is constantly learning more about themselves through their bodies and through their physical and spiritual presence. Matt describes the struggles he personally faces and how he attempts to resolve them: “I would put it in a way that I have to ask for help, I need to be in a place of deep question and I have to ask for help. Where I ask for help, what I ask for help, becomes something more interesting.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) This process is a never-

ending one, for the body is constantly changing as are the experience that the actor faces. However what is constant is the actor's insight into their internal core.

Specifically an example of a plastique in which Grotowski personally uses when training actors in his Laboratory involves the activation of the vertebral column.

According to Grotowski,

“The vertebral column is the centre of expression. The driving impulse, however, stems from the loins. Every live impulse begins in this region, even if invisible from the outside” (Grotowski, 191)

This clarifies the connection between an actor's physicality and emotion, being that energy first starts from within and the ability for it to be pushed into expression is found through a level of psychophysical awareness.

The exercise is known as “Slow Motion” (Grotowski, 188), as described in “Towards a Poor Theatre” involving the actor to:

- “Start from a standing position”
- “From a headstand, change to a shoulder stand”.
- “With the legs still in the air, transfer the weight of the body from the shoulder to the back of the neck, the arms and hands on the ground for support.”
- “Rolling – still in slow motion – with legs outstretched”
- “Return to original standing position” (Grotowski, 188)

“This exercise must be done with a certain imaginary force. You must imagine you are in constant contact with someone in order to give the exercise a definite direction. The great expressive force of this exercise lies in the control of the leg muscles. The toes are constantly stretched in a fixed direction. When one of the legs reaches the point at the end of the movement on the ground, the arm takes over. Here coordination is essential. Just before the leg movement finishes, the arm starts moving in the same direction and in the same way.”(Grotowski, 189)

It is important to highlight the necessity for the actor to be present in his body as



though he is interacting with another. This is significant since the body is physically reacting to another, and through these reactions brings “truth” (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) to the movement.

**Developing a Character through One’s Self: A look into a total actor’s approach of a character utilizing personal experience.**

Once actors find their core, the question is then how do they then develop a character? “Makbet” involves certain elements of both discipline and chaos. The discipline for Dzieci is the use of a text. Since every actor needs to be prepared for each role, it is very important that the entire text would be discussed. Very little is planned or staged, due to the possibility of losing the surprise factor. This factor allows the Dzieci ensemble to start from “square one” (Rebecca Sokoll, Dzieci). The importance of this unknown is crucial because it allows the actor to stop relying on the filtering of behavior and to act in the moment through natural instinct. The element of surprise naturally unveils the actor’s truth in their reactions. Therefore it is important to manage how much of the performance is previously rehearsed. Matt explained, “What we do discuss are the relationships in the play, we discuss certain meanings in the text, we discuss the full text.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) At times the ensemble just rehearses one or two lines by saying them repeatedly, experimenting to find a way where the delivery of the line is organic. The script itself is learnt through “oral transmission” (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) allowing the actor to then take those lines and experiment with them, “always going back and forth, re-finding our centre.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) The structure of the script is ultimately being used as a tool, a point of experimentation where the actor can release bound up energy. This energy represents the “release” (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) of internal chaos to outside of the body. The

Dzieci ensemble always needs to be “present” (Matt Mitler, Dzieci) both psychologically and physically so they ask themselves “How far can I go before losing complete control?”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) Matt is very interested in “How can I be absolutely in myself and quiet and then all of a sudden - bam! I can go to a maximum that’s beyond.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) A balance between the chaotic and structural elements of a performance is very crucial to “stimulate the audience” (stageplay). However, even if this balance is achieved, and the “actor does not express “the total act”, if he does not reveal all of himself... action is prevalent but it is not a living action” (Wolford, 86). According to Grotowski, if a performance “grows spontaneously and organically, like live impulses, finally mastered, it will always be beautiful.”(Grotowski, 204)

### **The Driving Force: The internal development of the total actor.**

A performance for a “total” actor involves releases of energy. But specifically what is the drive behind this energy? For Dzieci, a performance can be used to deal with one’s immediate personal experiences that they may be struggling with. “These personal associations are another essential vehicle by which, the actor can engage in the act of self revelation towards absolute presence.”(rtjournal) Grotowski believes that in order to achieve the “total act” (Grotowski, 125) one needs not to separate character from one’s self. The Dzieci ensemble share many experiences through their variety of performances in different locations. But these performances have a greater purpose. A lot of the Dzieci work goes towards giving back through performing their music for the ill at hospitals. Matt expressed the amount of significance that these experiences hold:

“We have practiced this music in hospitals, making a mistake on somebody’s bedside who’s sick and dying is agony...it’s really suffering. So these experiences are very,

very real and very profound for us...creating meaning in the actual moments of our lives together...is all part of the work.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci)

The development of “Makbet” is a constant process and every show differs to the next since the actor’s experiences will be different. The Dzieci ensemble pays close attention to their experiences to be present psychologically to what they are feeling in the moment. Through being present in one’s self, this gives the actor an ability to connect with the other members of their ensemble. Matt describes that in performance, “I am dieing and being born moment to moment to moment”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci), which explains to what extent an actor changes. Once the personal experience is let go, the actor moves on. But between letting go and moving on to the next experience, comes a new teaching for the actor. “Makbet” involved dramatic scenes of murder and combat, but it is during these actions, Matt describes, “Maybe something will happen to us performers, maybe some act of purification that may protect us from being violent in our lives. So then it seems like there is a purpose to live again.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) It is through acting and “reacting”(Grotowski, 249) in the moment that this form of “grace”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) is found. However what is important to recognize is that this “grace”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) is found passively. If an actor pre-plan’s his “confession”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci), his release his most internal feelings would succumb to no meaning. “But if he resigns himself “not to do” this difficult thing and refers himself to things that are truly personal and externalize these, he would find a very difficult truth.”(Grotowski, 249) Through expressing one’s utter most internal emotions “externally”(Grotowski, 249), the actor can learn more about the driving force providing a kind of psycho-spiritual healing, generating complete presence.

**The Spectator-Actor Relationship: A transmitting of total presence.**

The “total” actor can not only almost therapeutically deal with their own personal struggles but can also connect with the spectator to the extent that the spectator may feel as though they could personally come closer to their own core, to be more present with themselves. In the actor’s perspective, the audience to the Dzieci ensemble, provides “us another sort of dimension, where something more is at risk, the more of us are exposed, our mistakes are exposed, and we feel again the sort of level of demand increases to the point where we are daunted by it.”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) The audience creates pressures, which cause further immediacy for the actors to be aware of themselves and in their core because ultimately more is at stake. When attending the performance of “Makbet” one could not help but be involved into their act. When approaching the performance space, Rebecca, greeted the audience outside in a gypsy inspired, minimal costume, smoking a cigar. She acted as herself, however in an Eastern European inspired accent. The environment was almost that of a social event, each audience member was offered a share of bread, kabalsa, wine and vodka. Many refused at first, however once one accepted, the rest followed suit. And although most refused to drink wine straight from the bottle, the idea was to allow the spectator to make the choice of whether they wanted to accept or not. This refers back to the psychological struggles the actor faces when achieving the “total act”. As Matt described: “We are looking to be in a place where we have a choice”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) and this is what is offered to the audience. Through the duration of the performance was a series of emotional and physical releases and just as this may heal the actor in releasing these experiences, it may also help an audience member who has experienced a similar emotion in their own life. Matt explained that through the performance of “war and combat”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) in “Makbet”, this can be “used to purge unbalance in the community”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) through making that connection with the spectator.

The “total act” proves to require immense dedication by the actor not only as a practice, as a lifestyle. It is a search for one’s personal meaning, a way to “free”(Grotowski, 256) one’s self from “the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily for ourselves and for others”(Grotowski, 256) As a result what occurs may be something the actor did not expect, a possible personal healing, not only for themselves but also for the spectator to begin to unveil their own “masks” and heal their own struggles. “The actor’s act – discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up – is an invitation to the spectator.”(Grotowski, 256) Through every performance, the actor offers all of their self, entrusting their core within. Every immediate moment of the actor’s life holds intense personal significance and is brought to each performance. No performance is the same just as one day’s experiences would never be the same as the day before. Therefore the actor always needs to start again, for that would be the only way in which the “grace”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) these actors passively strive to achieve would be found. The Dzieci’s performance of “Makbet” was a further exploration, a further challenge for the Dzieci ensemble to experiment and become more aware of their selves. This is an ensemble that has witnessed tragedy, performing in hospitals for very sick individuals struggling to survive. After a performance the actors ask themselves, “Does this change me? Does this make me more able to handle intense situations?”(Matt Mitler, Dzieci) The script of “Makbet” itself is simply a tool for the actors not to build a character but to find themselves through a character. The “total act”(Grotowski, 125) involves a constant questioning of one’s self to allow every moment of reaction to be chosen and to be organic. As Grotowski personally stated, “This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings – this is just a comparison since we can only refer to this “emergence from oneself” through analogy. This act, paradoxical and borderline, we

call a total act. In our opinion it epitomizes the actor's deepest calling."(Grotowski, 256)

This reinstatement of the validity of arriving at a state of complete presence out of the inner depths of one self, substantiates how profound the Dzieci ensemble's findings of their own personal vulnerability is to their state of being.

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