

AT WORK WITH GROTOWSKI ON PHYSICAL ACTIONS

Thomas Richards

With a preface and the essay
"From the Theatre Company to Art as
Vehicle" by Jerzy Grotowski

SWANSEA INSTITUTE
OF FURTHER EDUCATION
LIBRARY AND LEARNING
SUPPORT SERVICES
London and New York

CLASS NO:

792.0283/GRO

entered into that "Action," my score was already completely set. In this work on the "Song Action," Grotowski was trying to let me rediscover the process hidden in the work on the ancient Afro-Caribbean and African songs. It was no longer on a level of realistic actions of "daily life."

The period from the first workshops with Grotowski, through the year at the Objective Drama Program, including the first phase at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski, can be seen as one block of my work. After that, what I learned in this first block continued to be utilized, but the work itself entered a *completely new stage*, in which all of the main elements changed. The work of this new block is currently in progress, and is not the topic of this text.

GROTOWSKI VS. STANISLAVSKI: THE IMPULSES

I would like now to look at the difference between Stanislavski's "method of physical actions" and Grotowski's work on physical actions. Grotowski did not simply employ a technique created by Stanislavski, the situation is much more complex. Grotowski took "physical actions" forward from the point where Stanislavski stopped working because he died. One day, when speaking to me about his work on physical actions, Grotowski said: "It is not really Stanislavski's 'method of physical actions,' but what is after." It is rather a continuation.

In his work, Grotowski redefines the notion of *organicity*. For Stanislavski, "organicity" signified the natural laws of "normal" life which, by means of structure and composition, appear on the stage and become art; while for Grotowski, *organicity* indicates something like the potentiality of a current of impulses, a quasi-biological current that comes from the "inside" and goes toward the accomplishment of a precise action.

Concerning the question of *impulse* there is also a difference between Stanislavski and Grotowski. In his book, *The Work of the Actor on the Role (Rabota aktera nad rol'ju)*, in the chapter dedicated to the *Inspector General* of Gogol, Stanislavski writes about impulse:

"I now repeat all the actions marked down in these notes and, to avoid stereotypes (given that for now there have not yet been consolidated in me truthful and productive actions), I will pass from one task to the next without executing them physically. For now I will limit myself to stimulate and reinforce the impulses interior to the action. As regards the truthful and productive actions, they are born by themselves, nature will take care of it.

Arkadij Nikolaevic tries not to move at all, but to communicate with the eyes and the facial expression."²⁹

Here Stanislavski seems to suggest that the work on impulses is related to "the eyes and the facial expression": the *periphery* of the body.

Grotowski, however, speaking about impulse says:

"Before a small physical action there is an impulse. Therein lies the secret of something very difficult to grasp, because the impulse is a reaction that begins inside the body and which is visible only when it has already become a small action. The impulse is so complex that one cannot say that it is only of the corporeal domain."³⁰

In his conference at Liège (1986), Grotowski analyzed the question as follows:

"And now, what is the impulse? 'In/pulse' – push from inside. Impulses precede physical actions, always. The impulses: it is as if the physical action, still almost invisible, was already born in the body. It is this, the impulse. If you know this, in preparing a role, you can work alone on the physical actions. For example, when you are on the bus, or waiting in the dressing room before going back on stage. When you do cinema you lose a quantity of time waiting; actors always wait. You can utilize all of this time. Without being perceived by the others, you can train the physical actions, and try out a composition of physical actions *staying at the level of the impulses*. This means that the physical actions do not appear yet but are already in the body, because they are 'in/pulse'. For example: in a fragment of my role I am in a garden on a bench, somebody is sitting beside me, I look at her. Now, suppose I am working on this fragment alone with an imaginary partner. Exteriorly – I am not looking at this person, who I imagine – I do only the starting point: the impulse to look at her. In the same way, I do the next starting point – the impulse to lean, to touch her hand [that which Grotowski does is almost imperceptible] – but I don't let it appear fully as an action, I am only starting. You see, I move very little, because it is *only* the pulsion of touching. But I do not exteriorize. Now, I walk, I walk,

... but I am always in my chair. It is like this that you can train physical actions. Moreover, your physical actions can be better rooted in your nature if you train the impulses, even more than the actions. One can say that the physical action is almost born, but it is still kept back, and in this way, in our body, we are 'placing' a right reaction (like one 'places the voice'). Before the physical action, there is the impulse, which pushes from inside the body, and we can work on this: we can find ourself on the public bus without anybody noticing anything strange, and we are all the same doing our preparation. In reality, the physical action, if not begun by an impulse, becomes something conventional, almost like gesture. When we work on the impulses, everything becomes rooted in the body."³¹

Impulse, for Grotowski, is something that pushes from "inside" the body and extends itself out toward the periphery; something very subtle, born "inside the body," and which does not come from uniquely a corporeal domain.

Regarding this question, Grotowski said to me that impulses are the morphemes of acting. When I interrupted him to ask what a morpheme is, he told me to go and look it up in the dictionary. He continued, however, to explain that a morpheme is one bit of something, a bit which is elemental. It's like a basic beat of something. And the basic beats of acting are impulses prolonged into actions.

At the end of his life, Stanislavski was conscious of the question of impulses. He speaks of the possibility that the actor may "stimulate and reinforce the impulses interior to the action," but he associated them with the periphery of the body ("the eyes and the facial expression"), which is in contradiction with Grotowski's indications. The standpoint of Grotowski is that the actor looks for an *essential current* of life; the impulses are rooted *profoundly "inside" the body* and then extend outward. This development of the work on impulse is logical if we keep in mind that Grotowski looks for the organic impulses in an unblocked body going toward a fullness which is *not* of daily life.

Grotowski once said to me that there are clues which indicate that Stanislavski saw the work on impulse as a field of further investigation. While studying in Moscow as a young director, Grotowski heard about an exercise in which Stanislavski, already

old, had transformed himself into a tiger only with impulses. Stanislavski almost did not move at all, but only made the *impulses* of the tiger's actions: to search for his prey, prepare to jump, attack, etc. Almost without moving, through the impulses alone, Stanislavski had transformed himself into a tiger. But Stanislavski, Grotowski said, did not have the time to really work in this direction, on impulses, because he died.

According to Grotowski, impulses are linked to the *right* tension. An impulse appears in tension. When we intend to do something, there is a *right* tension inside, directed outside. Grotowski touched upon the question of intention in his conference at Liège in 1986:

"In/tension – intention. There is no intention if there is not a proper muscular mobilization. This is also part of the intention. The intention exists even at a muscular level in the body, and is linked to some objective outside you.

At the end of the nineteenth century, a great Polish psychologist, Ochorowicz, who was occupied with 'paranormal phenomena,' made some studies about 'telekinetic force,' that is, the phenomena which give the impression that an object moves by itself. Ochorowicz proved that it may be not this at all. It may be that there is just in/tension in the body. For example, there is an officer who exercises his soldiers over a long period, he exercises them almost like in dressage. Finally, he asks them to gather around a table and put their fingers right under the edge of the table. And then he gives the order *to the table*, he says: 'Table, dance!' And the table begins to dance. That which happens is in/tension in the soldiers; because they *expect* the table to dance, there is muscular mobilization in their bodies and in their hands which makes the table move in the requested way. This example is very important; here, you are faced with only one aspect of intention. Usually, when the actor thinks of intentions, he thinks that it means to pump an emotional state. It is not this. Intentions are related to physical memories, to associations, to wishes, to contact with the others, but *also* to muscular in/tensions."³²

I see a possible misunderstanding: one might understand impulses simply on the level of muscular contractions, go onto the stage and start pumping pseudo-intensity through muscular

contractions. To avoid such a misunderstanding, I quote another passage in which Grotowski speaks about muscular contraction and relaxation:

"It is not at all true that the actor must just be well relaxed. Many actors make an enormous quantity of relaxation exercises. But when they are on stage, they have two fatal results. One result is that they immediately become completely contracted. Before they begin, they relax, but when they find themselves in front of a difficulty, they tense up. For others, the result is that they become like a handkerchief, asthenic, psychasthenic on the stage. The process of life is an *alternation* of contractions and decontractions. So the point is not only to contract or to decontract, but to find this river, this flow, in which *what is needed* is *contracted* and *what is not needed* is *relaxed*.

Let's take an exercise of Stanislavski: he asked an actor to take a precise position in a chair and relax those muscles which are not needed for keeping this position. It means that the muscles engaged in this position should be contracted, but those which are uselessly engaged should be relaxed. This is really important. Using the term 'élan': in the useless contractions one loses an enormous quantity of 'élan.' The actor who knows to eliminate the useless contractions can bear extraordinary efforts without being exhausted. He engages the muscular contraction there where it is really needed. Like an old craftsman who works in a continuous way, without interruption. All the time he is *doing* something, but slowly. Imagine that your work is a rope: you don't make staccato movements, but you let this rope of your efforts come out, slowly, all the time; because to *begin* the effort always eats much more energy than to *continue* the effort. This is also linked to the *decontraction* of muscles which are *not needed* for an action.

On the other hand, Stanislavski said that the actor, because of his stage fright, has a point in the body where the useless contractions start. For instance, certain actors contract the muscle of the forehead, another actor contracts the shoulders, another the neck, another some place lower in the back, another the legs. And if you can relax your starting point of the artificial contractions, there is the

possibility that the other useless contractions will relax as well. For example, if my contractions start here, on the forehead (where the contraction appears always in my situations of stage fright), then, if I relax here, the superfluous contractions in all the body for a moment disappear. This is the decontraction aspect. But now let's take the contraction aspect. Her! [Grotowski indicates with determination someone among the public.] You see – this requires that I contract the arm and the hand. It cannot be done in a relaxed way. It is a dynamic contraction which indicates, but this contraction begins inside the body and has its objective outside."³³

A further difference between the work of Stanislavski and that of Grotowski, already mentioned, concerns the "character." In the work of Stanislavski, the "character" is an entirely new being, born from the combination of the character, written by the author, and the actor himself. The actor begins from his "I am" and goes toward the circumstances of the character proposed by the author, arriving at a state of quasi-identification with the character, a new being. Toporkov, in *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, says: "The creation of a living, *really* living person – this is the goal of high art. The artist who succeeds even once in identifying himself with the stage character he has created is aware that he has accomplished a very great thing and experiences deep happiness."³⁴

In the performances of Grotowski, however, the "character" existed more as a public screen which protected the actor. The actor *did not identify* with the "character." One can see this clearly from the case of the Constant Prince of Ryszard Cieslak. The "character" was constructed through the *montage* and was mainly destined for the mind of the spectator; the actor behind this screen maintained his intimacy, his safety. Furthermore, the screen of the "character" kept the mind of the spectator occupied in such a way that the spectator might perceive, with a part of himself more adapted to this task, the hidden process of the actor.

Grotowski told me that the fundamental difference, however, between Stanislavski's "method of physical actions" and his own work, lies in the question of the impulses. Why in Grotowski's work is impulse so important, and why in Stanislavski's work

was it not underlined? Because Stanislavski worked on physical actions within the context of the common life of relations: people in "realistic" daily-life circumstances, in some social convention. Grotowski, instead, looks for physical actions in a basic stream of life, not in a social and daily-life situation. And in such a stream of life the impulses are most important. Grotowski affirms that this is the difference between his work and Stanislavski's "method of physical actions."