



Franco Ruffini

Grotowski, Barba and the Actor's Identity

Abstract: *This lecture on the identity of the actor was held on 27 September 2021 in Meetings on Third Theatre and Theatre Anthropology organised in Brazil by Ricardo Gomes (Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto), Gilberto Icle (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul) and Fernando Mencarelli (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais).*

Keywords: *Identity of the actor, Third Theatre, Performances, Body-essence, Art as vehicle, Inner man, Performer.*

In this lecture I will discuss the 'identity of the actor' and the different perspectives in which Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba have carried out their research. With a necessary premise on identity and the search for identity in general.

*

The word 'identity' involves the same issue as does the word 'liberty'. 'Liberty' means nothing unless with respect to that from which it expresses liberation. Similarly, 'identity' means nothing except with respect to the context within which it expresses identification. Identity is always relative to a given context: sexual, professional, ethnic. That Miss or Mister XY seek their gender identity as a woman or man makes sense; that they seek their identity as Miss or Mister XY is nonsense, although it may be the first problem of their individual psycho-physical equilibrium.

The search for identity is carried out 'by means of taking away', by progressively excluding the distinctive elements until what remains of the individual is revealed, behind the sociological mask with which s/he presents and counters herself/himself against other individuals of the reference context. For example, in the search for gender identity, age, physical appearance, economic status, political ideas and other similar elements must be considered irrelevant. This does not mean that they do not exist and that they are not relevant. On the contrary, they exist and are relevant, but with respect to the practical exercise of identity, not with respect to its definition. A black graduate woman and a white woman with a low level of education are defined by the same gender identity, although the relative possibilities of exercising their use can be very different as they are both women.

Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski. 1988. Photo: Tony D'Urso



In the search for identity there are, in fact, two research perspectives. The one focuses on the person in oneself and for oneself searching ever more deeply in order to reveal the ultimate difference, in comparison and even beyond comparison with the set of 'similar opposites'. The other perspective focuses on the relationship of the person with other people who, within the same identity, nevertheless have different conditions of use, in order to prevent improper discrimination of a sociological nature.

Strictly speaking, the first is a kind of 'working on oneself': its outcome may be that the truly final point of gender identity does not lie in the opposition 'feminine vs. masculine' but in the coincidence 'feminine and masculine'. Equally strictly speaking, the second is a kind of 'political work'.

The two work perspectives are not mutually exclusive. They are compatibly active - and perhaps mutually indifferent - side by side. But only up to a certain point, beyond which they become incompatible. Like two currents that, after running in the same river, at a certain point each follow a separate diversion, destined to end in their own sea.

Having applied these general considerations to the particular case of the identity of the actor and the research carried out by Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski, my lecture might end here. With his Third Theatre and the premise - logical though not chronological - of Theatre Anthropology and the pre-expressive level, Eugenio Barba places himself in the perspective of political work; whereas Jerzy Grotowski, with his 'art as vehicle' and the premise - logical and chronological - of the 'total act' and the 'holy actor', places himself in the perspective of working on oneself. There is no point, here, in going over opinions from several quarters and from myself, expounded elsewhere.

*

The next part of my lecture will focus on the text *Performer*, in which Grotowski describes his work perspective in a precise way, and in an equally precise way identifies the point beyond which his perspective diverges from that of Barba. This second aspect in particular seems to me not to have received proper attention, yet.

A few facts for those who do not already know, and as a reminder for others: *Performer* was the official document of the so-called Pontedera Symposium (13-14 February 1987), with which Grotowski publicly inaugurated his Workcenter activities and the last phase of his research, known by the formula of 'art as vehicle'. The text follows, with some small variations, the version published in French by Georges Banu (in *Art Press*, 114, May 1987), with the addition ex novo of a short concluding paragraph titled *The inner man*.

Grotowski introduced it while revising the first edition in Italian (in *Teatro e Storia*, April 4, 1988), carrying out an 'author's montage' of excerpts taken - and partly rewritten - from sermons by the 14th-century mystic Meister Eckhart. In fact, the inner man - the expression is Eckhart's - is the key to reading the *Performer*, as if preceding pages had also rewritten concepts and words of the German mystic.

Almost at the opening of his text, Grotowski had declared that he was interested in 'essence' - in which

nothing is sociological. It is that which has not been received from others, which does not come from the outside, which has not been learned [...] As almost everything we possess is sociological, the essence seems a trifle, but it is ours.

The work of the Performer - actor or no longer actor - consists of a difficult 'personal transmutation', which leads to the 'body-essence'.¹

The word "body" may lead to confusion. Beyond its material dimension, the body is to be understood extensively as the outer covering - physical, psychic, cultural - of the essence. In short, like the 'ego': which manifests in the physical dimension, but does not have only a physical dimension. From a phase of separation between body and essence, the process of transmutation must end in complete absorption of the 'ego' by the essence. To describe this process, Eckhart uses the word 'detachment.' When detachment reaches perfection - says Eckhart - the 'outward man' reveals the 'inner man': what the person is, behind the sociological mask of the 'ego'.

Of Eckhart's 'inner man,' Grotowski spoke with the mediation of Theophilus of Antioch, a 2nd-century bishop later venerated as a saint. He wrote:

One day Theophilus of Antioch - to the request of a pagan: "Show me your God," - replied: "Show me your man and I will show you my God" ... Show me your man - you are, at the same time, you - "your man" - and not you, non-you as an image, as a mask for others. You are unrepeatable, individual, you in the totality of your nature [...] And at the same time, it is you who incarnate all others, all beings, all history.²

The quote comes from *Exercises*, transcription of a May 1969 encounter with foreign interns who had participated in work on *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, the last performance of the Teatr Laboratorium. Grotowski was to cite it again in *Response to Stanislavsky*, November 1969, saying that the 'total act' is not carried out by 'ego', but by

my man (the human being in me) [...] I and humankind, together. The entire human context - social and of every other kind - inscribed in me, in my memory, in my thoughts, in my experiences.³

It was, in both cases, a forewarning of the imminent abandonment of performance theatre, that is, of theatre as such.

The 'inner man' of Eckhart, 'your man' of Theophilus of Antioch, the 'body-essence' of Grotowski are, under different names, a single entity in the transition from theatre as theatre, and theatre as something different from theatre; from the performer as actor - a tiny performer, according to Grotowski's graphic representation - and the Performer with a capital P, as something different from the actor.

*

What is, ultimately, Theatre Anthropology? From a logical point of view, its internal dynamics can be seen as a process of research, conducted by the 'human being in a situation of representation' - the actor - and resulting in the recognition of identity of

1. Jerzy Grotowski, *Testi 1954-1998*, vol. 4, p.55, ed. by Carla Pollastrelli (in collaboration with Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards), La Casa Usher, Firenze 2014-2016.

2. Jerzy Grotowski, *Testi 1954-1998*, vol. 2, p. 158, *op. cit.*

3. Jerzy Grotowski, *Testi 1954-1998*, vol. 2, p. 239, *op. cit.*

the 'pre-expressive level'. In search of his own identity, the actor 'detaches' himself from the dramatic text, the acting style, the stage traditions and the poetics, and reaches the pre-expressive level of pure presence, which identifies him or her as an actor with regard to the 'similar opposites' of non-actors.

It should be noted that pure presence identifies all actors - even those who make use of text, refer to a given acting style, a certain stage tradition and/or to certain poetics. Just as female identity is shared by the black graduate woman and the white woman with a low level of education.

Up to the recognition of identity of the pre-expressive level, the paths of Barba and Grotowski developed side by side, two currents in the same river. It is beyond this point that the two currents divided. Because, when pure presence is achieved, the process of detachment is not yet perfect, as Meister Eckhart would have said. One last step is missing - detachment from that same pure presence. Grotowski decided to take this last step, to use performing as a vehicle to break out of theatre: and there, beyond the confines of the theatre, to bring to fruition his perspective of 'working on oneself'. Barba decided not to do this, but to use the performing arts as a weapon to remain in the theatre: and there, within the confines of the theatre, to bring to fruition his perspective of 'politics by other means', in defence of actors who had nothing else - no experience in the use of text, or connection with a tradition, poetics, style - other than pure presence.

Grotowski's 'total act' can manifest itself in the theatre, but it does not need spectators to bear witness to it: the Performer no longer has a theatrical identity. On the contrary, the pre-expressive presence of Barba needs the spectator to bear it witness, because it is thus that its origin and its very reason for existing are found. Regardless of from what he has detached himself or herself, the actor of pure presence still has a theatrical identity.

To separate the Performer and the actor from pure presence is the last detachment. Beyond any context - theatrical or otherwise - Eckhart calls this last detachment 'breaking through the boundary of temporality', that is, of outer reality. It implies 'breaking through' into space beyond that boundary, where there is no longer *only* 'outward man' or 'ego' or body distinct from essence but, together and beyond, 'inner man', 'your man' and 'body-essence'. Beyond any identity, of gender or ethnicity or age or profession, man and woman together, young and old together, white and coloured together, actor and non-actor together.

"In this breach - there - I am above all creatures, neither God nor creature; but I am what I was, what I must remain now and forever".⁴ They are the last words of *Performer* and, reworked, of *Beati pauperes spiritu*, which is the sermon of origin. Through the apparently abstract means of a mystic's words, Grotowski concretely, radically and definitively hands over the witness of Barba's actor of pure presence to his Performer with a capital P.

Translated by Julia Campbell Hamilton

4. Jerzy Grotowski, *Testi 1954-1998*, vol. 4, p. 57, *op.cit.*