



Urban Research Theater

song • movement • action

Urban Research Theater Newsletter – December, 2008

CONTENTS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 1) Summary of the Year's Events
- 2) Membership Community
- 3) Call for Participants: Grotowski Panel and Symposium

NOTES FROM THE STUDIO

- 4) Ben: Journal Excerpt, December 5, 2004

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1) SUMMARY OF THE YEAR'S EVENTS

In 2008, Urban Research Theater worked continuously to develop our *Song Cycles* and related techniques. Our performance research developed through several phases, technical and nontechnical. We met between three and five times per week in our imperfect but comfortable midtown workspaces. We had three retreats, each of which offered a crucial step in development despite being relatively short. Our total budget remained close to zero.

We had work exchanges with a number of peers whose work we highly respect, and in the fall initiated a new round of informal showings. Ben led several short and longer workshops in New York City as well as in Washington, DC and at Yale University. He also published an article in the academic journal *Theatre Topics* on the use of song techniques by the Gardzienice Theatre Association and the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards.

In 2009, the core work will continue to follow its organic path of development, operating at the border between artistic performance and embodied practice. New developments in technique and structure are on the horizon, as well as potential transformations of the core team. The existing *Song Cycles* are expected to develop towards increasing precision, and may eventually involve one, two, or more people. It is even possible that a five-person core team could solidify.

We will continue to have monthly informal showings starting in February. In the summer, Ben will go to Europe to participate in a number of events related to the UNESCO Year of Grotowski, and to lead at least one extended workshop in Segovia, Spain.

Workshops and work exchanges in the United States are also possible, especially if we receive compelling invitations.

We are grateful for all those who have supported or engaged with our work throughout the year: supporting members; sponsors; friends who lent us workspaces; colleagues who met and worked with us; workshop participants. We are also grateful to artists all over the world, many of whom we have never met or even heard of, who are pursuing work that is in some way related to ours and with whom we feel a kind of unknown camaraderie.

To fellow travelers!

2) MEMBERSHIP COMMUNITY

Urban Research Theater eventually intends to support itself through community-based interactions rather than through ticket sales. In order to do this, we need to build a supportive membership community.

If you support the work of Urban Research Theater; if you have participated in one of our workshops or events; if you believe in our philosophy of art and practice; if you enjoy receiving our monthly newsletter... Please consider becoming a member of our supporting community.

Supporting members donate at least \$5 per month (\$60 per year) to support our continuing work. Five dollars is not very much - the price of a single cheap lunch or an expensive coffee. But we consider it a serious gesture of support. And with a large community, this small amount can add up to a lot:

- If our community had 10 members, we would receive enough income to rent a space for one Body + Song workshop each month.
- If our community had 100 members, we would have enough money to cover all our work expenses for the year and run several week-long or even month-long events.
- If our community had 1000 members, we would be able to dedicate ourselves full-time to Urban Research Theater!

Our goal right now is to build a community of 100 members. All donations to Urban Research Theater are fully tax deductible via the umbrella organization Fractured Atlas. You can also donate to us directly, if you do not require the tax deduction. Please follow one of the links on our website to become a supporting member of the Urban Research Theater community!

3) CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS: GROTOWSKI PANEL & SYMPOSIUM

Ben has been invited to co-organize a panel and symposium attached to the conference "Jerzy Grotowski: Theatre and Beyond" at the University of Kent, England in June 2009. The Call for Participants to these events is posted here:

<http://www.urbanresearchtheater.com/cfpkent09.pdf>

Please consider submitting a proposal, and please also pass this information along to anyone else who might be interested in doing so.

NOTES FROM THE STUDIO

4) BEN: JOURNAL EXCERPT, DECEMBER 5, 2004

I saw it today in rehearsal. There were eight people working on the climbing [exercises], using five basic positions, climbing and climbing on each other for 45 minutes with the *Fight Club* soundtrack playing. The four who had been in Rena [Mirecka]'s workshop were totally in it all the time. They looked like they could go on forever. The four who were not would go in and out, stop themselves, and most obviously they would start to talk about what they were doing. You could literally see them stopping themselves. It was like this all day. At one point the non-Rena people were all sitting on the side watching the others work, and it was a very literal illustration of what Grotowski said about training the actor not to "do" but to "resign from not-doing." The non-Rena people were all engaged in not-doing, even though the exercise space was open and the game continued. The Rena people had resigned from their own idea of tiredness and boredom. They weren't thinking about what they were doing and so there was no question of being bored or too much repetition or of exhausting the possibilities or of "running out" of ideas.

It was the same right in the beginning. I began the day with us just walking, nine of us in the room around a candle in the center, and the sky outside turning dark blue from black. Must have been about a half hour. The Rena people walked and walked and then ran and jumped. The rhythm changed but they were in the game from beginning to end and there was no question of anything else. The non-Rena people walked and stopped and slowed down, they stepped out to go to the bathroom or get tea and you could see their non-presence stopping them from participating. It was so clear! Of course this isn't just the effect of Rena, because the Rena-people who were here today are a self-selecting group. There were also people in Rena's workshop who did not open themselves very much. That's not important. What's important is that I now understand what it is that Grotowski did, concretely and as a skill, and I understand why on the one hand it's totally unique, transcendent, universal, amazing, and on the other hand it's a craft just like anything, like writing a play or playing jazz.

Great musicians and dancers also commit a "total act," every great performance artist does, but now I understand what this really means and how it can apply to everything — but also some of what it means specifically in the Grotowski line. And I think I understand now why Grotowski was so great. Because he honestly stripped away all of the aesthetics and replaced it with performing craft. He honestly pushed people to be constantly present. It's not a matter of ability, it's a matter of concentration, that's the essential thing, but it's a sort of concentration-in-the-body. It's not mental concentration, it has to do with having your entire body alive and responding to your instant desires, exactly like an animal. Suddenly I understand all the metaphors. And I also understand how I must have looked in the [Song of the Goat] workshop last year. Everything I did was mechanical. I would fill each action but not fulfill it. I would do each movement but my mind was somewhere else. At that point I honestly didn't realize that such a thing was visible. Did I learn that just from Rena? I don't know, but I understand it now and I will always know the difference in myself and recognize that it doesn't matter whether I am doing a cool move, it matters whether I am working. I understand now what it means to WORK. I understand what the "Performer" text is about.

I want it, but I don't know if I want it enough to get it. I love what was opened in Rena's work and I want to go further with it. I also recognized today that the only way to do serious work with people is when they are awake like that. Of course there are also different ways of being awake like that. For example, Keith Johnstone's book [*Impro*] is entirely about the same kind of awakensness but on a linguistic level. Resigning from the social face, opening the inner wildness, letting out the psycho stories and the mask work. Everything is the same only his craft is word and story and character rather than the animal body. I don't know what field I want to go towards exactly, that is still a matter of experimentation, but I know that you start doing real work only when you touch this aliveness. This is the aliveness of Miles Davis while improvising, and it's what I wanted from *neverland* and *the desert*, although of course I had no clue how to train them for it then. This could be the aliveness of a collaborative project too, but it is not the administrative structure. What [opera director] Peter Sellars does is take people who are masters of their own craft and stick them together. He is working on his level of aliveness and they are each working on their own, so that the result is striking and professional. But there is no real communication between the people because each one is speaking a different language. The Grotowski idea is to train a group to be alive this way and speak the same language. How fucking amazing. I finally understand the difference between Grotowski and Cirque du Soleil.

But what do I want to do with this knowledge? I now understand the path towards true craft. Starting this weekend we will implement a regular physical and vocal training regimen, including set improvisations that are the same each time. No more jumping around. I have chosen the elements I want to work on and we will work on them and refine and refine. But only for six months. Where do I want to go in the long run? Even now there are questions. And always we return to the same question, but now I understand it better. Now I understand why acting and directing are mutually exclusive in this kind of theater work. "Acting" in the Grotowski line is the physical discipline in which you are open to action. "Directing" is the teaching craft in which you open people.

They are helpful to one another but completely different. And as always, I want both. However, as for right now, I think I should be able to have both. I have a Fulbright, and because of that I have literally all my time free. No obligations whatsoever. I make my life from scratch. I have scheduled 30 hours per week of group rehearsal. There is no reason why I couldn't spend another 3 hours per day or 20 hours per week doing my own physical exploration.

I think up until this weekend I still didn't quite understand what "my solo work" really meant. I knew that sometimes it felt good and sometimes bad. I knew that sometimes I had concentration and sometimes not. But I always thought that this quality of concentration was a means to the end of achieving a higher level of skill in action or something. It turns out that it is the other way around. The quality of attention, the fact of WORKING, is the only goal. The practice of trying to do harder and harder things is basically just a trick to require your own attention. Once you can stand on your head easily, then your mind can begin to wander, so you try to stand on your hands because that still requires your whole being — that is still a total act. You increase the difficulty to maintain the attention, and by doing so the internal quality of attention becomes more and more visible. Now that I understand that, I think I should be able to work for much longer. Because it really isn't a question of wishing that I had two hours worth of concentration so that I could do two hours worth of work. It's just the reverse. I work for two hours with the goal of becoming able to concentrate for that long. So now I won't be frustrated when I lose concentration, because it's not as if losing concentration is a roadblock in the way of other progress. This kind of concentration is itself the only marker of progress. The loss of attention is in fact the limit. It's not a pesky disturbance but the fundamental battle itself.

As always, comments and feedback are welcome.

Ben Spatz & Michele Farbman
Urban Research Theater
New York City

ben@urbanresearchtheater.com
michele@urbanresearchtheater.com