



Urban Research Theater

song • movement • action

Urban Research Theater Newsletter – May 2009

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1) CURRENT EVENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Urban Research Theater has just finished a season of informal showings. Between October 2008 and April 2009, we offered six showings in three different locations. This period was marked by rapid changes in the group – changes that were reflected in what was shown.

10/26/08 @ Dance Theater Workshop

Michele Farbman - Song Cycle fragment

Ben Spatz - Song Cycle

11/26/08 @ Dance Theater Workshop

Ben Spatz - Song Cycle

02/22/09 @ Dance Theater Workshop

Michele Farbman - Song Cycle fragment

Maximilian Balduzzi - physical work

Ben Spatz - Song Cycle

03/29 @ Chez Bushwick

Maximilian Balduzzi - physical work

Ben Spatz - Song Cycle fragment

Ben Spatz & Maximilian Balduzzi – “Meeting #1”

04/12 @ Dance Theater Workshop

Michele Farbman - Song Cycle fragment

Maximilian Balduzzi - physical work

Ben Spatz - Song Cycle fragment

Ben Spatz, Maximilian Balduzzi & Michele Farbman – “Meeting #1”

04/26 @ The Center for Performance Research

Michele Farbman - Song Cycle fragment

Maximilian Balduzzi - physical work

Ben Spatz - Song Cycle fragment

Ben Spatz, Maximilian Balduzzi, Michele Farbman & Jonah Dill-D’Ascoli – “Meeting #1”

Some of these showings were documented fully or partly on video.

About 40 guests attended this series of showings. We are grateful for the gift their presence and attention, and we look forward to seeing them again during the next round of presentations.

URT has begun to plan a project for the fall of 2009 that may lead to the creation of a performance piece in 2010. This would be a distinct avenue of investigation dedicated to creating a theater piece with a directorial perspective. The Song Cycles and other aspects of internal training and research may be further developed in parallel.

Ben will travel to Europe this summer, where he is a co-organizer of the symposium “Grotowski: After – Alongside – Around – Ahead” at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England; and a guest of the U.S. Artists Initiative at “The World as a Place of Truth” festival in Wroclaw, Poland. Ben will also lead workshops in Segovia, Spain and Torino, Italy, and will have a brief work exchange with Mario Ruggeri’s Centro Indipendente Ricerca Teatrale in Milan.

Lane Pianta’s “Changing the Space: An Interview with Ben Spatz” and “Performing the Soul: An Introduction to the Interview” will be published this month in *New York Theatre Review 2009*.

2) AN ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION TO GROTOWSKI

On April 15th, the Philadelphia Society for Art, Literature and Music (PSALM) screened two documentary films on Grotowski: Grotowski: An Attempt at a Portrait and With Grotowski: Nienadówka, 1980. I was invited to introduce the first film at this event.

This was the first time I have spoken about Grotowski in public. Rather than address his theatrical work or take an academic or historical approach, I decided to speak frankly about my own interest in Grotowski and why I think his research is important today. The result is a kind of “alternate” introduction and contextualization of Grotowski, one that prioritizes the contemporary relevance and usefulness of his work from a practical and strategic point of view.

- Performance and Practice -
An Alternate Introduction to Grotowski

Understandings of Grotowski are often too small or too large. To call him a “Polish theatre director” is far too small, because some of his most important work took place outside Poland and outside theatre. On the other hand, Grotowski was a human being. He may have been a genius, but he was not a god. Therefore it is useful to look also at the boundaries of his work, at the ways in which his explorations were defined by his times and circumstances.

Grotowski’s work cannot be comprehended within the field of theatre. At the same time, his work cannot be understood at all without reference to theatre. This is not a paradox, it simply means that when we approach Grotowski we approach the borders of theatre, and if we follow his path, we transgress those borders. With the substance and effort of his life, Grotowski drew a line from theatre to ritual – or, in more contemporary terms, from performance to practice.

The documentary you will see today is useful because it shows this line. It was made in 1999 and 2000, just after Grotowski died. Using photographs, video, and interviews, it shows the line or “trajectory” that Grotowski traced in his work: from theatre to ritual; from performance

to practice; or, in Grotowski's own terms, from "theatre of production" to "art as vehicle." At the beginning you will see video clips of the theatrical productions that made Grotowski famous. In those days, the 1950s and '60s, he really was a "Polish theatre director." But you will also see how Grotowski's trajectory took him out of theatre and towards something else. At the time of this documentary, that "something else" was still quite mysterious to outsiders.

In mainstream culture in the United States, there is a strong separation between performance and practice. This makes the line Grotowski traced with his life particularly difficult to see. At this moment our culture emphasizes performance over practice to an enormous degree – perhaps more than any culture has at any time in history. And we are continuing to see an acceleration of this trend with YouTube and other forms of new media. The distance from personal investigation to public performance has now become almost nonexistent. Private actions become recorded performance just seconds after they are done – or even simultaneously. As part of the same trend, we see the disappearances of all forms of embodied craft related to art-making. So, conceptual art replaces drawing and painting; visually focused composition replaces techniques of acting; mass production replaces techniques of hand-craft.

Of course, embodied techniques have not disappeared. Human beings cannot live without embodied techniques. So we are simultaneously seeing an explosion of embodied techniques as personal practice: an obsession with fitness, the mass-marketing of yoga, the spread of martial arts studios across the country. Every day there is a new, trademarked "method" of physical healing or self-help. Embodied techniques for health and for relaxation are all around us. But they have nothing to do with artistic creation or performance.

So we have art-making on one side and personal embodied practice on the other. That which is public is disembodied, conceptual, mediated and mediatized. That which is embodied, personal, and crafted over the long term is private, small, invisible. A powerful dichotomy of public and private on which our society is built.

Grotowski's work, throughout his fifty-year career – from theatre of productions to paratheatre and theatre of sources to art as vehicle – was an endless, restless, determined search for a unity between performance and practice, theatre and ritual, public and private.

At the moment it appears he was unsuccessful. His most public work, the Polish Laboratory productions, is usually understood entirely as theatre, and its ritual aspect is consistently misunderstood. His later work in Italy, which succeeded in creating a genuine ritual event that could be witnessed by outsiders, has not yet succeeded in shifting public discourse about art and practice, although it has greatly influenced a large number of individuals and small groups. Until the dichotomy of practice and performance is bridged, such groups will continue to struggle with the same issue that faces all ritual practitioners in the modern age: Namely, in the absence of religious infrastructure, how to achieve financial stability without selling the work as art.

My hope is that the ripple effects of Grotowski's work have not nearly come to an end. In order for Grotowski's work to be truly understood in the United States, we would need to completely shift our thinking – and build up a new infrastructure to support work that lies on the border between practice and performance. In fact, I think it is still too early for this to happen. The political, cultural, and economic environments are not yet ready for this shift. The entrenched systems that support the "arts" on the one hand, and embodied practices on the other, cannot yet be integrated. Thus Grotowski's work cannot yet be understood.

I look around at the Year of Grotowski events and I see this limited understanding very clearly displayed. All of the events organized by NYU, for example, involve senior practitioners who worked with Grotowski for extended periods of time. Of course, the lines of personal contact and direct transmission are essential. But there is no sign at any of these events of the broader significance of Grotowski's work. There are many people who feel deeply indebted to Grotowski even though they never met him. (I am one of these.) What is the meaning of these younger generations? The question is not whether these younger people are doing work of quality. The question is what Grotowski means to them. Why do people feel drawn to this work that at present has no name or definition apart from a historical connection to Grotowski? Why do these same people feel out of place in theater, in dance, and in religious contexts? Answering this question has the potential to place Grotowski's work in a larger context. Otherwise he remains, if not a Polish theater director, then a Polish mystic – a historical figure bound to the twentieth century. His work remains stifled by the confines of what we call "theatre," since we cannot understand what else it was.

There is another way to approach Grotowski's work. One that takes into account the trajectory he traced across the borders of theatre. One that does not confine our understanding of his work to the theatre. We have the possibility to understand Grotowski in relation to theatre and to ritual both. But in order to do this, we need to cross the line between art and practice that is so studiously drawn and policed in North American culture. We need to create spaces in which a line can be drawn that connects rather than separates art and practice. Spaces that support a slowing down of artistic process and, perhaps, a speeding up of embodied practice. Spaces in which ritual practice is not thought of as ancient or static but as creative and constantly evolving, while artistic creation is understood as a slow and deeply personal process.

We can think about this in terms of time. In our society, embodied practices are constantly being explained and validated with reference to ancient time frames. So, we talk about yoga and martial arts as if they come from the distant past, hundreds or thousands of years old, and as if this is what makes them powerful. On the other hand, we talk about art and theatre in terms of constant innovation. A new show each year, each month, each week! A festival of shows created in a single week! An evening of one-minute performances created in 24 hours! Greater and greater emphasis on speed and innovation.

The time-span we ought to pay more attention to is that of the human lifetime. This is the time-span according to which Grotowski's work becomes fully visible. An approach to art and practice based on the length of a human life. Not an ancient practice that goes back thousands of years, next to which an individual human being is tiny and insignificant. But also not a new, innovative performance that will last just a week or a month and then be discarded. Instead, a creative practice developed over a lifetime.

In the theatre, we usually call works of this magnitude "training methods." They take two or three or four decades to be developed. Unfortunately, we still think of these practices as preparation for performance – rather than thinking of performance as a way to share a developed practice. To fully understand Grotowski, we need to situate his work in relation to yoga and martial arts as well as theater. Then we can talk about creativity on the scale of a lifetime, of a generation.

To my knowledge, there are no institutions in our society that support the development of these kinds of works. There are institutions to preserve so-called "traditional" practices, and there are institutions to support the invention of new disposable art-compositions. But there are no institutions to support what has most recently been called practical research, or practice-

based research, or practice-as-research – that is, the slow transformation and development of embodied techniques on the scale of a lifetime.

Maybe the name “Grotowski” can help us build such institutions. If so, then the ripple effect of his work is not yet finished. Or maybe the name of Grotowski can be of no use to us in this struggle. For a lot of people, that name simply calls up the image of a Polish theater director – in which case there is no reason to hang onto it.

I hope that in the future there will be institutions that can house works of art, works of practice, and works on the border of art and practice. Such an integration could also be an important step in finding common ground between religious and secular cultures worldwide, by detaching practice from doctrine and performance from commerce. For now, I hope that an encounter with Grotowski’s work will inspire some people to question the binary division between art and practice that defines our present society.

3) AN INVITATION TO SUPPORT CREATIVE RESEARCH

Urban Research Theater continues to fund our own research. We invite you to join us at our ongoing showings and workshops, as well as to propose other kinds of meetings and exchange. We also invite you to become a supporting member of Urban Research Theater. At present, donated funds go entirely to space rental costs. In the future, we hope that they will be sufficient to support us as professional artists, so that we can pursue our work full-time.

Every penny donated goes towards opening spaces dedicated to patient and rigorous creative research in the heart of the metropolis of New York City. These spaces are small gardens of song and action, in which the loud materials of civilization are rendered secondary and the whole history of humankind can be read in the subtle vibrations of an unknown muscle.

Our current goal is to build a community of 100 members. So far there are eleven, as listed on our website. You can become a supporting member of URT by donating \$60 (or \$5 per month) or more in support of our work. Donations made via the umbrella organization Fractured Atlas are fully tax deductible – just follow the links on our membership page.

Thank you.

As always, comments and feedback are welcome.

Urban Research Theater – New York City

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