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Voices from Within: Grotowski's Polish Collaborators ed.
by Paul Allain and Grzegorz Ziółkowski, and: *Acting with
Grotowski: Theatre as a Field for Experiencing Life* by
Zbigniew Cynkutis (review)

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(Review)



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In his autoethnography, Lemon rarely turns to the rehearsal studio. Instead, he traces the invisible and impermeable divide between black and white worlds in America: from his experience of listening to Buffalo Springfield's pop hit "On the Way Home" as a drunk teenager and being bullied by one Jeff Gunderson, to his visit to the last Family Goat Barbeque Picnic that fife'n'drum blues legend Otha Turner used to organize on his farm near Como, Mississippi. In between are the stories about lynchings, beatings, assassinations, burnings, hosings—all related in Lemon's soft and forgiving tone. Here is an ethnographic note from a blues concert at Otha Turner's final family BBQ: "In the middle of one of the last precarious sets, a young white man looks at me, smiles, and says 'Isn't this amazing!?' I nod, and walk away from the front of the stage where I've been sitting, away from the young man and the three older black men hammering out chords and changing their minds" (164). It is in moments like this one, as the invisible wall of subjectivity steeped in history goes up, that we get the answer to the question of the afterlife of racial segregation. So often, the imagined crossing of the racial barrier amounts to nothing more than a sheer privilege of forgetting.

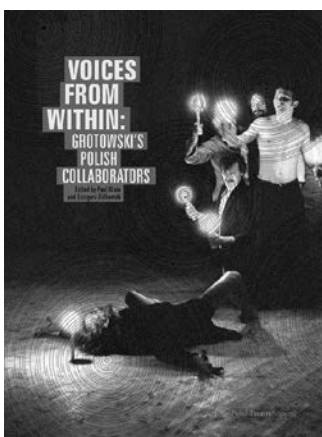
—Branislav Jakovljevic

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Voices from Within: Grotowski's Polish Collaborators. Edited by Paul Allain and Grzegorz Ziółkowski. London: Polish Theatre Perspectives/TAPAC: Theatre and Performance Across Cultures, 2015; 169 pp.; illustrations. \$22.17 paper.

Acting with Grotowski: Theatre as a Field for Experiencing Life. By Zbigniew Cynkutis. Translated by Khalid Tyabji. Edited by Paul Allain and Khalid Tyabji. London: Routledge, 2015; 220 pp.; illustrations. \$130.00 cloth, \$52.95 paper.

As Paul Allain and Grzegorz Ziółkowski point out in their introduction to *Voices from Within: Grotowski's Polish Collaborators*, Jerzy Grotowski the individual is typically conflated with what was actually a deeply collaborative history of collective laboratory research, performance practice, and evolving theory. This slippage is typical in discussions surrounding auteur directors

such as Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin, and Ariane Mnouchkine, and is a particular problem in the case of such company-based artists. Allain and Ziółkowski's casebook addresses two significant gaps in the English literature on Grotowski: first, the book provides a diverse chorus of

first-person reportage by the director's long-term collaborators (mostly translated from long-available Polish sources); second, it captures specifically Polish voices, and through them a glimpse into the larger Polish context for the work.

Pride of place is rightly given to literary director Ludwik Flaszen, the cofounder of the Laboratory Theatre and Grotowski's offstage intellectual partner in Opole and Wrocław, whose role in defining the principles of "poor theatre" and the company's complex critical engagement with Polish culture has often been overlooked abroad. Together with Flaszen, Grotowski and the Laboratory Theatre combined a radical questioning of conventional practices in acting and scenography with a dramaturgy that interrogated spiritual and philosophical questions alongside specifically Polish ones. In this phase, Grotowski and the company collectively functioned as engaged public intellectuals, expressing bitter and corrosive cultural critique through highly distilled theatrical analogy and metaphor. This dimension of their work is richly documented in Flaszen's *Grotowski and Company* (published in English in 2010). Grotowski's emigration from Poland in 1982 notably marked both the end of his collaboration with Flaszen and of his life as a public intellectual.

Actors are predictably the largest group represented in *Voices from Within*. The original actors were all of Grotowski's generation (born in the 1930s, and children or adolescents during World War II), but their individual histories and perspectives are highly varied. Ryszard Cieślak, Zbigniew Cynkutis, Rena Mirecka, and Zygmunt Molik represent actors with the highest international profile within the company. Along with Mirecka, other women representing the acting ensemble include Maja Komorowska and the younger Irena Rycyk-Brill (b. 1950; active with the company starting in 1970). Komorowska left the company in 1968 and went on to become one of Poland's best-known stage and film actors, and a professor of acting at the Warsaw State Drama School (Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna, or PWST). Komorowska's presence at PWST represented one of the rare inroads made by Grotowski's methods into the curricula of the country's drama schools. One younger contributor, Przemysław Wasilkowski, only had contact with Grotowski at his Workcenter in Pontedera, Italy, in the 1990s, and enjoys an ongoing career in Polish theatre and contemporary dance.

The actors vividly describe the intensity and challenges of the work environment at the Laboratory Theatre: physical and family stresses resulting from long hours and Grotowski's personal preference for working through the night; poor compensation and living conditions alongside the apparent privilege of working in a state-subsidized company (life as an artist in a second-world economy); performing for nearly empty houses in provincial Opole while enjoying growing renown elsewhere (cultural production in a command economy, increasingly for export). Perhaps most surprising are the accounts of serious injuries endured by the members of a company famous for physical virtuosity, with the worst stories involving Cieślak. While these accounts tend to be highly anecdotal and contain limited detail about the working process of training and rehearsal, the interpersonal and larger social context for the work is palpably evoked.

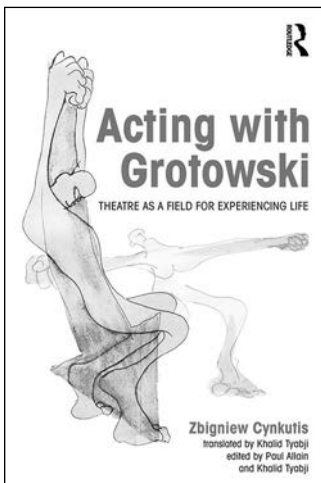
The designers Waldemar Krygier and Jerzy Gurawski are a distinct pair of voices inside the company. In addition to designing costumes for the company's best-known productions, Krygier created the Polish Lab's artisanal posters, which were handmade linoleum-block prints, and helped Grotowski with styling his minimalist personal wardrobe. Gurawski designed the "stage architecture" for the company, and his influential sketches in *Towards a Poor Theatre* document his role in the early explorations of the actor-actor and actor-spectator relationship in space.

Conspicuously missing from the book, however, is Józef Szajna (1922–2008), who designed, codirected, and functioned as a de facto dramaturg for *Akropolis* (1962). The repeated neglect of Szajna's central collaborative role in accounts of the company's breakout production has been a chronic and mystifying pattern in various sources in English. Richard Schechner noted the problem in *The Grotowski Sourcebook* in 1997 (in Wolford and Schechner 1997:496). Though not a full-time company member, Szajna was an early and influential supporter of the Laboratory Theatre in Opole, and was fully credited as cocreator with Grotowski on all five versions of

Akropolis mounted between 1962 and 1967. On posters for *Akropolis*, Szajna usually received first billing, before Grotowski's name. Szajna was the only member of the artistic team on *Akropolis* who was a survivor of Auschwitz (as well as of Birkenau and Buchenwald), and the visual dramaturgy of the production was of a piece with his other work more than with the subsequent productions of the Polish Lab. The involvement of Szajna, Krygier, and Gurawski as collaborators is a crucial reminder that the performance practice casually ascribed to "Grotowski" included such shared visual/spatial thinking around significant dramaturgical content.

In terms of meaningfully capturing the Polish context, *Voices from Within* would benefit greatly from a fuller annotation of political and cultural references in the texts included. The histories of Grotowski and the Laboratory Theatre, for example, revolve significantly around the events of March 1968 or December 1970 in Poland, and the circumstances of Grotowski's defection in 1982 in particular merit much more explanation than provided in the minimal notes found here. Grotowski's discrete defection following the declaration of martial law in 1981 was arguably the most significant of any cultural figure in Poland at the time, and took place in the context of a highly visible actors' boycott of official theatre and television. We would not know this from these sources.

Similarly, Flaszyn's eloquent testimonies to the influence of Polish Romanticism on Grotowski alongside the repeated references by collaborators to the plays by Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Stanisław Wyspiański staged by the Laboratory Theatre demand more explication for the English-language reader than the placeholder notes provide. Flaszyn's material opens the vastly neglected subject of the specifically Polish dramaturgy of the Laboratory Theatre. Cultural contextualization here requires familiarity with a deep dramatic tradition that is also inseparable from political history, censorship, and contemporaneous events. Among the hovering paradoxes of the Laboratory Theatre's work was its emphasis on interiority and the radical nonconformity of the individual as part of a self-selecting collective in the context of a conformist and potentially violent authoritarian regime. Thus, the Laboratory Theatre functioned as a vehicle for civil society at the time, as well as for Polish Romanticism on a philosophical collision course with Soviet Marxism. How Grotowski identified both as an heir to the Polish Romantic tradition and as a member of the Polish Communist Party through 1982 has yet to be adequately discussed in English. Cynkutus's book significantly includes an undated photo of Grotowski in dark glasses marching in a Polish May Day parade (50).



Acting with Grotowski is a collection of various previously unpublished, and often unfinished, writings by Cynkutus, who founded the short-lived Wrocław Second Studio (Drugie Studio Wrocławskie, or DSW) that followed the dissolution of the Laboratory Theatre in 1984 (Cynkutus was killed in a car accident in 1987, which ended the venture). The organization of the various texts is chronological, tracing the arc of Cynkutus's theatrical work with Grotowski and after. The centerpiece of the book is a collection of Cynkutus's notes on the rehearsals of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* (1969) (in which he played Lazarus), his personal reflections in an essay "Theatre as a field for experiencing life: practical ideas for actors and directors," and a long and highly detailed section with illustrations of his recommended warm-up exercises ("Conversations with the body"). The notes on the making of *Apocalypsis* show Grotowski and the company's struggle to make a truly devised work for the first time (which also proved the group's last theatrical premiere). In "Notes on Jerzy Grotowski's "Tradition,"" Grotowski's own cryptic points

are followed by Cynkutus's exegesis of each—though he only gets halfway through the list, stopping short of the section specifically devoted to tradition. Grotowski's point that "tradition

cannot be acquired; it is what the Angel was for Jacob” (155) is all we get. This is followed by Cynkutis’s director’s notes on the Second Studio’s production of Seneca’s *Phaedra* (1986), and public statements related to the launch of the new company.

What is most striking today in Cynkutis’s idiosyncratic application of Grotowski’s practice in the essays is how often he intuitively reaches for a Jacques Lecoq-style vocabulary of natural elements, childlike naïveté, removal of barriers to spontaneity, physicalization preceding speech, and humor. Cynkutis nevertheless is following an inner logic in the earlier work. Cynkutis the working actor/director/teacher also never abandoned the goal of making theatrical work to be shared with audiences. While the Wrocław Second Studio set out to be an international ensemble, Cynkutis significantly returned from the United States to do this work in Poland in the grim years of the 1980s.

We get considerably more Cynkutis than Grotowski from this book. Interesting insights alternate with undigested material—the price of publishing such unfinished and lightly edited texts posthumously. While “Conversations with the body” is excellent, its value is primarily as a document of the “dramaturgy-free” and “context-free” global marketing of contemporary Grotowski-based workshop practice. These exercises can go anywhere, and apparently could come from anywhere. But as these two books also begin to make clear, the same was not ultimately true for Grotowski, Cynkutis, or their Polish collaborators.

—Allen J. Kubarski

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Cultural Responses to Occupation in Japan: The Performing Body During and After the Cold War. By Adam Broinowski. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; 264 pp.; illustrations. \$35.96 paper, e-book available.

Adam Broinowski’s insightful book examines the evolution of the performing body in Japan’s nontraditional performing arts. As a performer himself, Broinowski brings years of experience to his research and offers reflections on his own work with Gekidan Kaitaisha (Theatre of Destruction), a Tokyo-based performance group whose work stems from the tenets of butoh, but has evolved beyond the stereotypical notions of the form, eschewing white body makeup and exaggerated facial expressions. Broinowski provides a self-reflective and thoughtful analysis