THE YEAR 2009 WAS BOUND TO BE CHOSEN BY SOMEONE
to commemorate the life and work of Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish direc-
tor and theatrical guru whose famed notion of a “poor theatre” is only
a small part of his far-reaching legacy. Two-thousand-and-nine marks
the 10th year since Grotowski’s death in Pontedera, Italy, the 50th since
his graduation from the State Institute of Theatre Arts in Moscow, and
the 25th since the official closing of his legendary Laboratory Theatre in
Wroclaw, Poland. It is a neat constellation of dates that understandably
prompted UNESCO to proclaim this the Year of Grotowski.

While the bulk of Grotowski’s most influential work took place in
Poland and Italy, America and Americans played a prominent role in his
biography. He first came to the United States with his leading actor Ryszard
Cieslak in 1967 to lead a workshop at New York University’s School of the
Arts. For three years, from 1983 to 1986, he based his operations at the
University of California–Irvine. And when he headed for Italy in 1986
to create his famous Workcenter in the city of Pontedera, he took with
him Thomas Richards, a young American who studied acting at Yale
and went on to become Grotowski’s spiritual heir. But that is all history,
and if history is all there were to it, few would worry now about what an
intense Polish maker of theatre did 20 or 30 or 40 years ago. The fact of
the matter is that Grotowski left a living legacy—those who knew him
and collaborated with him continue to be shaped by the experience, as
new generations are inspired by reading the books, seeing the films and
hearing the stories.

“I fell in love with the idea of training and the whole idea that the
entire being could be involved in theatre rather than just the mind,” reports
Stacy Klein, the founder of Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, Mass., and
a participant in the “Grotowski in the Americas” panel discussion at the
Tisch School of the Arts at New York University in March. Klein heard
Grotowski speak in person once in Poland in 1977, and in the 1980s she
worked closely with Rena Mirecka and Zygmunt Molik, actors who were at
Grotowski’s side as he built the Laboratory Theatre into a world-renowned
mecca. “Their work, including Ludwig Flaszen’s amazing lectures, has
been instrumental to my idea that the actor is the key to theatre, and
therefore the imagination of the actor is the key. As designers take over
theatre work, I believe more and more I am right to keep thinking that
the actor must be the center of all the work,” Klein elaborates.

“Grotowski was the indie band that we theatre geeks whispered
about,” Mark Russell remembers. “On the other side was the part of our
versus Fosse. We were looking for the real thing, not ‘showbizness’ but
theatre.”

Russell, the first artistic director of Performance Space 122 in New
York and currently the artistic director of the influential Under the Radar

From left, Stanislaw Scierski, Jerzy Grotowski and Ryszard Cieslak in Hostelbro, Denmark, in 1970.
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In this, his designated year, artists inspired by Jerzy Grotowski gather to celebrate his legacy in Poland and the U.S.

Matej Matejka, left, and Ditte Berkeley in Teatr ZAR’s Cesarean Section.

festival, traveled to Poland frequently between 1977 and 1980 to participate in the capacity of what he calls a “test pilot” for many of the Polish director’s paratheatrical or active-culture projects. And, although he soon realized he could never reconcile the work he did in the “forests of Poland” with life in the concrete jungle of New York, the effect those years had on him was profound.

“Grotowski provided a compass to what I was after in my work as a director of a theatre, P.S. 122. As he set up paratheatrical situations for meetings where some sort of magic could happen, I also shaped a place for creative meetings. To this day that is my work; it now takes the form of festivals, where the meeting is the thing and the art is the vehicle that focuses it and transforms it from the ordinary. What Grotowski helped me find is my own path in theatre,” Russell concludes.

The bulk of commemorations during the Year of Grotowski are taking place in New York City, where performance studies specialist Richard Schechner, a participant in that first workshop in 1967, is curating a vast, six-month program called “Tracing Grotowski’s Path.” It involves nearly two dozen discussions, panels, lectures, exhibits and film screenings organized by the Polish Cultural Institute and the Performance Studies Department of the Tisch School of the Arts. Through the efforts of Joanna Klass—a dual-Polish-American citizen based in Los Angeles who is the director of Grotowski Year events organized by Wroclaw’s Grotowski Institute—people in Chicago and Los Angeles will also have the opportunity to join the festivities. Furthermore, at the invitation of Philip Arnoult’s Center for International Theatre Development and Arden2, Klass’s nonprofit cultural organization, approximately three dozen Americans will travel to Wroclaw June 14–30 to participate in a U.S. artists’ initiative during the World as a Place of Truth international theatre festival.

The geographically diverse group will include J. Buck Jabaily, artistic director of Single Carrot Theatre in Baltimore; Rob Melrose, co-founding artistic director of the Cutting Ball Theater in San Francisco; Bryan Brown and Olga Petakova, co-founders of the American Russian Theatre Ensemble Laboratory (ARTEL) in Los Angeles; and Rubén Polendo, artistic director of Theater MITU in New York. While attending workshops, roundtables and performances directed by Schechner, Eugenio Barba, Pina Bausch, Krystian Lupa, Peter Brook and Tadashi Suzuki at this, the biggest event of the Grotowski Year in Poland, participants will keep journals of their experiences, and the results will be published in the U.S. by Arden2.

The summer months will bring several culminating events in the Year of Grotowski in New York. On May 4 a conversation about similarities and differences between Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor will be held at the Tisch School of the Arts. Also at Tisch, on July 10, a two-part evening entitled “Paratheatre, Theatre of Sources, and Objective Drama” will explore some of Grotowski’s most esoteric and least-understood work—his experiments with social and cultural rituals, and theatre evolved from anthropological studies. Panel members that night include numerous people who worked with Grotowski in Poland during the intercultural research years from 1976 to 1982, and in Irvine and Pontedera between 1982 and 1992.

“Grotowski and His Legacy,” a three-day event at Lincoln Center July 11–13, will be conducted in partnership with the Jerzy Grotowski Estate, and the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. Planned for the first night is a film exploring the Theatre of Sources period, which grew out of the director’s travels to India, Nigeria, Haiti and Mexico in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second night will feature a film investigating Grotowski’s final period in Italy. The concluding night at Lincoln Center will offer a discussion featuring Richards and Mario Biagini, the two men who continue to run the Workcenter in Pontedera to this day. (Exhaustive information about these and other events in New York is available on the website of the Polish Cultural Institute at www.polishculture-nyc.org.)

The efforts of the Grotowski Institute (known as the Grotowski Center from 1990 through 2006) will be centered in Wroclaw. However, the institute’s resident company, Teatr ZAR, will undertake a brief tour to

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Chicago and Los Angeles that will bring echoes of Grotowski’s living spirit to the U.S. ZAR is a multinational troupe that, since 1999, has participated in fact-and-material-gathering expeditions in a manner that draws inspiration not only from Grotowski but from Peter Brook and such Grotowski spin-off companies as Odin Teatret and Gardzienice. ZAR’s first trip to Georgia, Armenia and Iran had long-range repercussions. The company is only now completing a trilogy of works—Gospels of Childhood, Caesarean Section and Anbelli. The Calling—which draw upon studies it conducted during excursions to the Caucasus and Middle East, as well as later expeditions to Greece, Spain, Ukraine, Egypt, Sardinia and Corsica.

The theatre’s name of ZAR is taken from the word that the inhabitants of Svaneti, in the high regions of the Caucasus, use to describe the songs they sing at funerals. These Eastern Orthodox laments and other ancient hymns, lullabies and songs have been molded by the troupe, led by Jaroslaw Fret, into a series of musical, visual and boldly physical performance pieces that occasionally push actors to the limits of endurance and challenge spectators to abandon common expectations about what they expect to happen in a theatre. The themes of the works are nothing less than birth, death and resurrection, although not necessarily in that order.

Fret, ZAR’s artistic director, who was named director of the Grotowski Institute in 2004, tells in an e-mail how he and his troupe turned for inspiration to Eastern Christian religions “as a complement” to the Catholic tradition, which is so strong in Poland.

“I attended a presentation of ACTION in 1997,” he writes. “It was given in Wroclaw by the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards (I also organized that presentation). The quality of the energy there struck me as nothing ever had. But that focused me on my own inner experience more than on any concrete, external material related to any given tradition. Much later, in 2005, I was struck by reading something Grotowski said during one of his lectures as a professor at the Collège de France. This was in response to a question about the possibility of theatrical work being synthesized as presentation and as vehicle. He said that such a possibility was most likely to be found in working with Orthodox songs and chants.”

ZAR begins its two-city tour in Chicago, performing Gospels of Childhood and Caesarean Section at Millennium Park Nov. 15–22. While in residence in Chicago, the company will conduct workshops for students and theatre professionals. Events in the Los Angeles area involve lectures, workshops, an exhibit and film screenings at numerous locations, including the Los Angeles Central Library (Nov. 18), the Pomona College Department of Theatre and Dance (Nov. 19) and the Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club (Nov. 21). The Southern California activities culminate with the American premiere of the full Gospels of Childhood trilogy as part of the UCLA Live series, beginning Nov. 23. (The full schedule for Chicago and Los Angeles is still in the process of coming together and will be updated on the websites of the Grotowski Institute, www.grotowskiyear.pl, and Arden2, www.arden2.org.)

What can a series of events dedicated to the memory of a dead man really hope to do? “The hardest part of Grotowski to capture is his trickster sense of humor, his joy and his passion for real contact, and his distaste for acolytes and fools,” Mark Russell suggests. But that doesn’t stop us trying to work our way back to the source. Arguably, the performances by ZAR are the most fitting of the tributes being offered in memory of Grotowski this year. There is nothing academic or abstract about these pieces, created by a company of 12 actors whose average age is 30 and who never worked with the great director. They are, however, touched by an inspiration that one can imagine Grotowski would recognize. This is where the past, the present and the future meet—in the minds and the works of artists taking chances.

Grotowski’s contribution to world theatre—and to American theatre—was profound. If there are any doubts left at this point, just consider what Schechner wrote in his curator’s notes to the booklet describing the Year of Grotowski in New York: “Oh, what I learned!” Schechner says about that 1967 workshop he attended. “About artistic discipline, performer training and Grotowski’s famed ‘via negativa’—where one stripped away all externals physical, psychological and even metaphysical. Leaving...what? I won’t say, can’t say—‘essential’ is much too weak a word.”

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