Born: 11th of August 1933 - Rezeszów, Poland
Died: 14th of January 1999 - Tuscany, Italy

Jerzy Grotowski is best known as the innovator of Experimental Theatre, the Theatre Laboratory and Poor Theatre.

Early Influences

Grotowski was influenced greatly on his readings as a child. Grotowski’s mother bought him a book “A search in Secret India” a book about the tales of an adventurer when in India. His priest also gave him a copy of the gospels to read alone. In these days, the polish catholic church required the presence of a priest to interpret the gospels. These and many others would ultimately influence his decisions in his later life.

Theatre School

In 1950, Grotowski’s family moved to Krakow where he finished his secondary studies. He had also missed a year of school because of illness, the first of many health problems that would plague Grotowski throughout his life.

Grotowski then attended the Krakow theatre school. Despite his “satisfactory” entrance grades, his entrance paper received an A and he was accepted on probation. After theatre school he was awarded with a scholarship to the “State Institute of Arts in Moscow”. It was in Moscow that he met Stanislavsky and Artaud.

Experimental Theatre

Experimental Theatre is a broad term encompassing the various western theatre movements beginning in the late 19th century. Jerzy Grotowski was a key part of Experimental theatre.

The Theatre Laboratory

Grotowski was the innovator of the “Theatre Laboratory.” His theatre company moved around the world with him. In 1958 he directed his first play, “Gods of Rain” with the theatre company. The Theatre Laboratory produced many plays including “Orpheus” by Jean Cocteau, “Dziady” by Adam Mickiewicz, “Shakuntala” based on “Kalidasa’s” text. Their last production “Akropolis” by Stanislaw Wyspiański, was the first complete realization of poor theatre. In this play the actors, play concentration camp prisoners building the structure of a crematorium around the audience while acting out stories from the Bible. This play had particular resonance with the audience as the Auschwitz concentration camp was only sixty miles away. This play has been said to have launched Grotowski’s international career.
Poor Theatre

Grotowski was the most well-known for his notion of “Poor Theatre”. This term was associated as the style that the laboratory theater used. Grotowski called his theatre “Poor Theatre” because didn’t use many items, theatrical trappings or technological resources of rich theatre. He wanted something more than drama. He moved beyond Stanislavsky’s methods of Realism. The actors voice and body were always central to the performance. Many technological light sources weren’t used. Only stationary lights were. Instruments and musical effects were dispensed with. He used vocal effects instead. Grotowski wanted to enhance the emotional and physical responses from his audiences. “At moments of shock or terror, humans use rhythmically articulated signs” (Grotowski, J). Grotowski sought to explore more mythological and taboo moments and portray these. “In a world where myths are myths and truths are truths, we must attempt to assume myth’s “ill-fitting skin” (Grotowski, J). The aims and theories evident in “Poor Theatre” share a close resemblance with those of Artaud. Grotowski’s main aim was to strip theatre back to its bare necessities and to have a very intimate relationship with the audience. This is what “Poor Theatre” essentially is. The idea of poor theatre was and is still a very evident part of theatre as a whole today.

Exercises

Grotowski believed in a very immaculate space when working. At the start of each lesson she would commonly ask all of his students to make sure that the room was clean. That all the curtains were closed, the bags were neatly lined up and place on top of their blazers. And that all shoes were placed next to the bags. Everybody would then warm up briefly before being asked to jog around the room. Every couple of minutes or so, he would ask the students to change direction, to move in different ways. He would do this for up to 3 hours with his pupils before even beginning the practice.

Bibliography