

The Impact of Grotowski on Psychotherapy in the United States and Britain

David Read Johnson, Ph.D., R.D.T.

PROLOGUE

It seems I am faced with the impossible task of defining the impact of a man and his work when both were steeped in mystery from their beginning to beyond his death. Jerzy Grotowski's influence on modern theatre practice and performance theory was so extensive and at the same time so illusive, it remains today a marvel. Who is Grotowski? Where is Grotowski? And why do I, as a psychologist and drama therapist, feel it is important to know the answers to these questions?

It seems everyone but a few have learned of him through secondaries - many people assert their lineage to him and derive authority for their work from him - always to his great distress. Yet a man who at a very young age rediscovers a truth so powerful, so simple, so elegant, that it can fill an entire life's work, and influence so many people from widely divergent fields, should expect nothing less.

Grotowski committed himself to study the essence of theatre, and from there he descended underneath theatre to the essence of human experience; his work is relevant to religion, spiritual practice, morality, and science, though he declared he was not studying these fields themselves. In his descent, he confronted the conditions within us that could give rise to theatre, and each step he took he approached the edge of the unknown. Amazingly, unlike so many others who became satisfied with what they had found, he continued on.

Let me make a bold proposal: Grotowski was a psychologist. Indeed, if a psychologist is someone who inquires into the nature of human experience to determine its laws and behavior; if a psychologist is someone who remains always curious, always questioning one's own assumptions; if a psychologist is someone who conducts rigorous research into human emotions and cognitions; then Grotowski was certainly a psychologist.

Grotowski was intimidating; even those who could not decipher any meaning from his work, particularly his later work, understood that the intensity and focus of his solitude, surrounded by dedicated students, was in itself a great achievement. He said the body was the way, though he used the bodies of others to demonstrate this truth; he revolutionized theatre though he gave up theatre; he sought an acting that was not acting. These contradictions fueled him.

Grotowski descended below language; language in his view was infiltrated with society's rules, surfaces, and masks; language was an invasion by the Other. The possibility for authentic existence lay entirely in the Body. However, even the body can become invaded by the Other; a territory, rather than presence; so the Practice must involve stripping away the

banalities, fads, and propaganda limiting the body's free expression. One must descend below the surface that has been possessed by the Other.

It is no coincidence that Grotowski is Polish. I believe Grotowski's message is Poland's message. Poland knows what it is like to be occupied by the Other, to have its body partitioned into thirds and to disappear from maps; to be a royal republic ruled by foreign kings; to speak in German or Russian and think in Polish. Where was Poland during all these centuries, as Germans and Austrians and Russians moved to and fro across its surface? when Wroclaw was Breslau? Yet Poland was there, underneath the maps, underneath the foreign royalty, underneath the communist puppets, the Polish land remained, seen by the God in heaven above, the silent witness.

Grotowski: "What remains? What lives? The forest. We have a saying in Poland: We were not there - the forest was there; we will not be here - the forest will be here. And so, how to be, how to live, how to give birth as the forest does? I say to myself: I am water, pure, which flows, living water; and the source is he, she, not I; he whom I am going forward to meet, before whom I do not defend myself. Only if he is the source can I be the living water."

Grotowski's answer to the question, "Where is Poland?" would be to strike the ground and shout, "here is Poland!"

And if I ask the psychological question, "who am I?" and I answer in the usual way, what emerges in language are the possessions and territories of the Other: my family, my social caste, my profession and work, my roles, my masks; things which for the most part I look to for comfort, for they position me within the larger context, they protect me from a deeper invasion. Sometimes however, I can lose my sense of the interior; my life can become one with this surface life; during the Partition, did not some Poles cease to know themselves as Poles? During the Diaspora, did not some Jews cease to know themselves as Jews?

Grotowski's answer to "who am I?" would be to strike his own body and shout, "here I am!" I survive your definitions of me; I breathe beneath my roles.

Grotowski's vision is powerful because it reveals our nakedness; it reminds us of our shame; it awakens our witness; it strikes fear in us over the encounter with freedom that is our body. Watching Grotowski's work, at any phase, draws the observer down into a seemingly bottomless pit, causing even the most avant-garde to grab desperately for handholds, restraints, or walls on which to cling.

Grotowski's work is fundamentally psychological: first, it works with our experience of our own bodies, our somatic presence; second, it explores authentic encounter between people, either the spectator and the actor, or among the doers of his later work; third, it opens itself to the higher dimension, the spirituality of existence. The body, relationships with others, the spiritual presence, all subjects of his research over decades.

Due to its depth of exploration into the human condition, Grotowski's method has been compared to a method of therapy; his theatre to a theatre therapy. But I believe he would join me in saying that he was not a therapist. However, a number of therapists in the United States and Britain have seen how his work can be applied in psychotherapy, and I wish to report to you about our work.

It is one thing to enter the personal realms of the actor in an isolated Laboratory, where talented students work ten hours a day for months. It is another to meet with people diagnosed with schizophrenia in a long-term hospital and work with theatre; or to meet an hour a week with an individual who comes to you to help solve everyday relationship problems. This is the arena of the psychotherapist; not the Laboratory Theatre or Workcenter. How can a bridge between these two environments be made?

ACT ONE

Grotowski's work became known in the West at precisely the right time: the 1960s had led to a complete transformation of the repressive culture of postwar America, and experimentation in lifestyle and psychotherapy were taking place at a rapid pace. Action-oriented methods, marathon encounter groups, integration of Eastern yoga and meditation practices, body-oriented approaches, and creative arts therapies were challenging the rigidified practices of psychoanalysis. Grotowski's concepts of body, encounter, and simplicity perfectly matched the ethos developing in America; though for completely different reasons; for this was America, not Poland. In Poland, language had been controlled, one said what they wanted you to say, thus it is false. In America, language is relatively uncontrolled; in fact, one can say anything, thus language has become empty, a form of marketing. The body holds significance for both cultures, though in different ways. The body for Americans is a means toward joy and pleasure; not sacrifice, not the holy actor signaling through the flames. For Grotowski, the body is a means to contact a spiritual presence transcending sexual pleasure.

America is not Poland; Poland is a land that has been possessed by the Other for most of its history; America is a land possessed by no one; in America we are all the Other; that is why in America we do not really understand what Grotowski means by authenticity, or ancestors, for in America we are all orphans making things up as we go along.

In some ways, due to the wide-ranging social upheavals, Grotowski's methods were not specifically incorporated into any form of psychotherapy during this time; instead many theatre teachers used these methods to help actors achieve a more personal and deeper connection to themselves. There were some important parallels: for example, Alec Rubin developed Primal Theatre from Arthur Janov's Primal Scream therapy, which utilized powerful bodywork; similarly, Alexander Lowen's Bioenergetics sought natural body rhythms

and tension release; and Anna Halprin used ecstatic dance to achieve transpersonal connections among people.

ACT TWO

In the late 1960s, the Psychodrama method developed by J.L. Moreno was well-established and thriving. Curiously, Grotowski's work appears to have had little influence on the practice of psychodrama, which was closely tied to Moreno's role theory. Though Moreno himself had a sensibility toward intensity and spontaneity that would have nicely matched Grotowski's, he was too concerned with translating the language of the theatre into psychiatric language. Grotowski would have seen him as too entwined in surfaces, too concerned with roles.

The field of drama therapy, from which I came, was also developing at that time, 1967-1978, and in reviewing the books of the founders it is clear that every one was familiar with Grotowski's work, made reference to Towards a Poor Theatre, but few at that time appeared to have attempted to translate his methods into a therapeutic approach. Most of the work had been focused on the therapeutic benefits of participation in productions, or in improvisational play. Grotowski provided us with a basis for considering the therapeutic benefit of the process of acting. Some of us realized that acting might be used as a path for personal exploration and therapy.

In American educational theatre during the late 1960s the most influential person was Viola Spolin, who was able to show how improvisational methods could be used for personal development, education, and interpersonal skills building. Many of the early drama therapy methods in America were built upon Spolin's work.

Interestingly, Grotowski's work was often confused in America with improvisation in general, to his great dismay; the reason for this is that Americans cannot wait to find a reason for a free-for-all, and moving around making wild gyrations of the body. Thus Grotowski had to continually remind Westerners of the need for structure, limits, focus, and discipline. Spolin's work, though also appreciative of structure, was aimed essentially at fun and pleasure, not plumbing the depths. Grotowski woke us up to the deeper possibilities of improvisation, based on the bodily impulse. Similar discoveries had been made in the field of dance/movement therapy by Mary Starks Whitehouse, who developed a method called authentic movement.

Meanwhile in England, drama therapy methods were being developed out of Peter Slade and Brian Way's more contextual methods of drama in education. The British spirit is of course entirely different; the British are at their heart, colonialists; they love to draw lines on the map; they have a deeply held reverence for the text and tradition. British work is deeply historical and embodied in the power of the story; whereas Grotowski's method is ahistorical. Thus, their drama in education methods are steeped in the aim to heighten the children's

understanding of the context, to thoroughly map the territory. They are simultaneously fascinated with, and somewhat frightened of, the primitive. Thus they could easily relate to the rigor of Grotowski's work, but are put off by the unrestrained expressions of the body. I can remember as a theatre student in England in 1971 hearing my British colleagues describe encounters with the Polish Laboratory Theatre as if they had returned from darkest Africa. Not until Grotowski's Paratheatrical and Theatre of Sources work did he grab the British imagination.

By the mid-1970s, Grotowski's work had sewn seeds among a wide range of therapists, which would begin to flower as methods of therapy in the 1980s.

ACT THREE

Poor Theatre as Drama Therapy: Developmental Transformations

I arrived at Yale University in 1969 at the height of our cultural uprising. I fully believed in the idea that the usual structures of our family life should be changed, and that false, cliched, meaningless interactions among people should be replaced by more authentic, intense, intimate ones. As a theatre major there, Towards a Poor Theatre was a bible; the performances of the Living Theatre and Schechner's Performance Group were liturgy; Cieslak a demon-god. The first play I directed was an hour and a half long version of Artaud's Jet of Blood, directed the way I imagined Grotowski would direct it, with 30 spectators, a tiny bare theatre, all sets and props formed by the actor's bodies, in which the end of the play found the audience under a cloud of smoke and a pile of rubble. The most challenging moment of the play was the first line, "I love you."

I spent a year studying at the University of Manchester among a talented group of faculty and students, where among many adventures, I took two actresses out into the burned out ruins of Manchester's urban renewal to perform a version of Strindberg's The Stronger.

After graduating from Yale, I began my career as a drama therapist at the Yale Psychiatric Institute, working closely with a dance therapist. Together we developed a method of drama therapy involving physical movement and improvisation. We became fascinated by the moment when dance becomes drama, a boundary I believe Grotowski explored through much of his career. Over a decade later I had refined a method now called Developmental Transformations, which is in essence a translation of Grotowski's Poor Theatre work into drama therapy.

This work is now being conducted within the Institute for the Arts in Psychotherapy, centered in New York, by about forty drama therapists, all with strong acting backgrounds. We run a psychotherapy clinic in which clients are seen in individual and group therapy. In

addition, much work is being done in hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers.

Developmental Transformations is based on three principles, each linked with critical elements of the Poor Theatre. The first principle is encounter. The therapy focuses on the unadorned encounter between the client and therapist. Intermediary devices or objects such as masks, puppets, or costumes are not used. Instead, the therapist serves as the client's playobject, and by removing as many inner obstacles as possible, the therapist, like Grotowski's actor, attempts to reveal the client. The aim of the therapeutic work is for the client to become more comfortable being in the presence of the Other; to reduce their fear that the Other will possess or occupy them. Our efforts to hide from the Other's gaze, or worse, to deliver up our body to Him and exit it, prove fruitless. Yet how can I remain a Freedom, in my body, in connection with you; how can I allow your freedom, in your body, next to me? Grotowski investigated what he calls the human being's "solitude next to the other," searching for that true meeting. This is our fundamental aim also. Thus, the method involves playing with the transformations of spectating, or witnessing. Our work is to engage in the difficulties in this relationship.

The second principle is embodiment. The Body is seen as the source of thought and feeling, of physicality and energy. It is how we are present in existence. Of course, the Body is also how we feel pain; it can be struck, invaded, humiliated. States of disembodiment are natural responses to negative experiences: the desire to be hidden, to be immune to pain, to pretend to be another's possession. When disembodiment becomes engrained, however, strangling life, it becomes the source of ill health. In contrast, Developmental Transformations is an embodied process, in which whenever possible the Body is kept in motion, through movement, sound, gesturing, or speaking. The demand for action from the Body reveals the client's state of disembodiment, which then can be worked on. The aim is to achieve awareness of the pure impulse, prior to its formation into structures of self, person, time, location, or history.

Through our clinical experience with this method, four arenas of embodiment have been identified. The first arena to present itself in treatment is usually Body as Other, when the person experiences their body as an object for the Other to perceive. I am a thing in the Other's social landscape: so and so tall, white or black, male or female, higher or lower status, a certain kind of person, dressed well or poorly, ugly or beautiful, commanding or shy. Many of us experience our bodies in this fashion in public settings, or on first encounters.

The next arena is Body as Persona, in which I experience my body not as a member of some larger social category, but as an individual. My body is me, with a particular history, character, talents, deficits, and relationships. In my encounter with the therapist, I too view

their body as a reflection of their personality, and I look carefully for signs that reveal their individuality, their intentions, their story. I am no longer interested in whether he is a man, but what kind of man he is.

As the therapist and client become more familiar, they often enter the arena of Body as Desire. I experience my own body less as a personality or Self, than as a pathway for impulses and sensations, pleasurable and unpleasurable. I notice what I like and dislike, the smells and sights of the body or parts of the body. I wish to get away, or to get closer. I wish to be entered, or to invade or destroy. The other person's body becomes a source of tremendous danger, or relief.

The next arena is Body as Presence and here I experience my body and the other's body, not as social objects, not as personas, not as desires, but as simply present, perhaps like it would feel to be tall grass in a field. At this level there is appreciation for breath, amazement at the substantiality of the body, and awe at being with another consciousness. Here I can tolerate being intimate with the other, for the connection does not seem to constrain my freedom.

The third principle is the playspace. The playspace is the mutual agreement among all participants that what is occurring is in play, that is, pretend. The kind of play that takes place in the playspace is free improvisation, in which the client is asked to play out dramatic movements, sounds, images, and scenes based on thoughts and feelings they are having in the moment. Thus, as these thoughts and feelings change, the scenes, characters, and actions change. Similar to meditative practice, the client is asked to allow thoughts and feelings to arise, to contemplate them, and then to let them go as others arise. In Developmental Transformations, this process takes place in an embodied, interactional, and dramatic form, rather than sitting in silent meditation.

Inevitably, thoughts and feelings arise that do not seem playable to the client. The therapist's job is to help the client maintain the state of play through these moments, often by shifting away from them. Over time, the goal is for the client to be able to play with the unplayable, for it is the unplayable that blocks our way to the Source. This process is essentially what Grotowski referred to as the via negativa, the negative way, being a process of removal of blocks. The play process serves the via negativa, largely through repetition. As difficult issues repeatedly arise, are then avoided, then addressed again, the client and therapist find ways of playing with different aspects of the issue, until, with time, the issue becomes like a cliché to them, and loosens its grip on the client, who eventually lets what is to come next arise. In this way, client and therapist descend together through increasingly intimate stages of play.

Grotowski discovered that in unstructured improvisations typical "banalities" emerged: make savages, imitate trances, form processions, console a victim, etc. He found it necessary to say, "Block these practices: then maybe something will appear." He constantly enticed his

students toward the vertical path, rather than "to the side, to the side," which seemed to him to get nowhere. Yet I have found, and no doubt it is due to the different setting of therapy, that the direct approach is not always the most effective. For example, if my task were to saw a tree in half, I take the saw, and move it side to side, not directly into the trunk. I move the saw obliquely to the direction I intend. In our method, we do not block the emergence of banalities; as Grotowski found, they indeed do come; but we use them as the teeth of the saw to cut through the layers of the self. This is accomplished through repetition: the therapist reflects these banalities back to the client, who eventually tires of them. The intention of the cliché is to replace a deeper thought and to distract the person from pursuing a particular path. The cliché aims to deflect; paradoxically, by repeating the cliché, it quickly dries up, crusts, and falls away. A burst of raw energy almost always rises up at this moment, and a door opens onto another corridor. In this way, the teeth of our saw in Developmental Transformations are indirect and comedic, rather than direct and tragic, as they are for Grotowski.

In some sense our task is made easier in therapy because the individual's personal history, conflicts, and fears are explicitly known by all other group members and the therapist. The availability of these facts of each others' lives provides a powerful force to deepen the encounter.

Paratheatrical Drama Therapy: Ritual Theatre

Stephen Mitchell has developed a form of drama therapy called Ritual Theatre, based on the notions of Peter Brook and Grotowski. Mitchell is a dramatherapist in Britain, and heads the dramatherapy programme at Roehampton Institute. In the 1980's he was transformed by a summer training experience with Peter Brook, through whom he became familiar with Grotowski's Paratheatrical work. For many years he has led groups of trainees as well as psychiatric patients, inpatients and outpatients, into the wilderness of Dartmoor for exercises closely following Grotowski's Paratheatrical period.

Like Grotowski, Mitchell constructs the experience with a team of trained leaders, to facilitate a partly structured, partly improvisational journey toward authentic "meeting" among members, and between members and nature. He of course works with clients with whom he has already established a therapeutic relationship. Though occurring largely in the outdoors, the journey is deeply inward, often involving hours or days of silence. The purpose includes disarming, removing the usual crust of social expectation and interaction, to allow deeply held emotional states to arise within one, and to feel the possibility of actually encountering another person, and the earth.

To make such arduous journeys possible for disturbed psychiatric clients, many of the ceremonies and rituals are already established, and not created by the participants. Levels of

emotional arousal, such as fear, are minimized. But Mitchell utilizes the same principles. Grotowski speaks of in this work, including the plastiques, organic improvisations, and native ceremonies. The therapeutic framework surrounds the activity: the staff are therapists, the clients are there to work on themselves; and thus there are discussions throughout the journey that fall fully within the usual therapeutic discourse.

Some examples of these rituals include:

- 1). Night Walk - a silent walk for an hour into a ravine at nightfall; issues of isolation, loss of control, and emptiness are evoked.
- 2). Candle Ceremony - a candle is passed to each person who then speaks about their personal experiences.
- 3). Earth Ritual - each member searches for a piece of the earth's produce to represent an Instrument of Power; the imagery of power is then examined and shared among the participants.
- 4). Ritual of Air - each member crosses a narrow bridge over a stream blindfolded, addressing issues of trust and belief.
- 5). Walking the Water - each member is blindfolded and walks into and then crosses a deep river guided only by a rope. This exercise evokes deep feelings of connection with the earth, of letting go, and trust.

Throughout such experiences, supported by Grotowski's exercises (plastiques and voice work), the participants are allowed to encounter more authentic and true aspects of themselves, and deeper contact with each other. The power of nature, of solitude, of the unordinary, combine to strip the usual defenses, and encourage a deeper truth to be expressed.

Such treks speak deeply to the British spirit: to travel abroad to primitive lands to access embodied states not encouraged by English society and manners. To have returned to the comfort of home having known of the dark. For Grotowski, the intention arose from a Polish sensibility: not to go elsewhere, but to descend into the darkness of the traditions underneath.

The Psychotherapy of Art as Vehicle

Grotowski's last phase, Art as Vehicle, remains the most illusive aspect of his work, and though it has been perhaps the most interior of work and therefore the most likely to have implications for psychotherapy, it has not yet been directly applied in psychotherapeutic settings.

Yet, if I may make a conjecture, from what is known of Action, we know it remains on the same Grotowski path toward the Source, the bedrock of the human experience, through a largely embodied process of intense discipline, repetition, and removal. I believe that Art as

Vehicle will have the most relevance to what are known as the body and energy therapies, consisting of Feldenkrais, Alexander, Reiki, Brennan Energy Work, Hakomi and others, which are exploring direct links in energy and body communication between healer and client. It has also informed my own work on deep play, and has relevance to forms of authentic movement. I believe Art as Vehicle has tremendous potential to contribute to the development of these therapies.

EPILOGUE

The Cognitive-Behavioral Revolution

Unfortunately, in the United States and Britain, the age of the Body during the 1960s and 1970s, is over. A new dominant force has emerged, very different from psychoanalysis and encounter therapies: cognitive behavioral treatment. In many ways this is the antithesis of Grotowski's project: its aim, to heighten integration between the person and their culture. Its method: to counter irrational, unproductive thinking patterns, and to have the client practice these selected behaviors. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is the true American psychotherapy: it is practical, not theoretical; it produces results, not questions; it uses tools, not art; it is measurable, not elusive; it is about the mind, not the body.

Puritan at heart, America has recoiled from the ethics of touch, and the body is again being suppressed. Body work now refers to workouts at fitness centers; progress is defined by the relation between what one sees in the mirror and images in magazines; plastic surgeons claim powerful mental health effects. Thus I am not certain whether body-centered therapy will flourish in the future in America.

And I do not know where Grotowski's work stands in Poland now; he did not live here since 1982. I do not know the Polish view of the body now. Much has changed. Grotowski spent his life one step ahead of us, and I see no reason to assume he is still not on to another phase of study, at a higher Workcenter. As always, we remain behind, slightly confused, debating what we thought he meant. But I will presume to guess how he would answer my questions. Striking his body, he would shout, "Here I am..... this, is Poland!"

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