

Extended Essay Submission 2010

**Actor Training of Jerzy Grotowski and the Psychosomatic
Connection**

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Abstract

The psychosomatic connection within an actor plays a dominant role in the theories and training methods of Jerzy Grotowski. He believed that the actor, along with the audience, was the only aspect of the theatre it could not do without and that the theatre lay in the actor exposing their most deepest and honest selves. One can ask how this objective can be achieved through Grotowski's theories and training and its connection to the psychosomatic connection. Therefore, this paper examines:

How can Grotowski's theories on acting and theatre be applied in order to influence the psychosomatic connection in an actor's training and preparation?

As a means of approaching this question, it was vital to carry out in-depth research upon Grotowski's theories and training methods, both from his own writings and from interviews with practitioners whom have trained or worked with Grotowski or his training method. This was in order to gain the level of insight needed to truly discover the significance of the psychosomatic connection examining both the biological and theatrical significance of 'impulse' in acting. The theories and training exercises were broken down and examined through looking at three overall aspects of Grotowski's actor training: physical, mental and emotional. Through interviewing practitioners who have directly applied this method as preparation for a performance, I was able to gain an understanding of the practical application of Grotowski's theories. From this research I concluded that Grotowski's theories and training revolve around honing and strengthening the psychosomatic connection within an actor. It does so by stretching and challenging the physical and mental aspects of the actor's training in order to release their most raw and honest impulses, bringing them to the state of focus where they are able to truly lose him- or herself in the living moment of theatre.

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I. Introduction

During the early 20th century, an actor and director by the name of Stanislavski posed the question, “What is the art of acting? Can I make this into a system?” and spent his life answering these questions. After his time, another developing director and actor from Poland had decided to continue the same journey that Stanislavski left after his death. He set up a group called the Theatre Laboratory solely dedicated to the “research” of the art of acting and soon after that Jerzy Grotowski became one of the most influential theatre practitioners of the 20th century. His theories revolved around training the actor in order to strengthen their psychosomatic connection. Thus, this investigation addresses the question:

How can Grotowski’s theory on acting and theatre be applied in order to influence the psychosomatic connection in an actor’s training and preparation?

Peter Brook sums up Grotowski’s true impact upon the development of acting and theatre as a whole in the preface for *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski’s main publication that articulates the findings of his research at that point,

“Grotowski is unique.

Why?

Because no-one else in the world, to my knowledge, no-one since Stanislavski, has investigated the nature of acting, its phenomenon, its meaning, the nature and science of its mental-physical-emotional processes as deeply and completely as Grotowski.”
(Peter Brook, Preface for *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968)

As Peter Brook mentions in his preface, Grotowski investigated “[the] nature and [the] science of [acting’s] mental-physical-emotional processes”, which revolve around the psychosomatic connection. The following essay examines the impact of these three processes as aspects of the psychosomatic connection within an actor’s

training and preparation and how Grotowski's research supports these ideas. Beginning with a breakdown of what the psychosomatic connection is, the investigation goes on to examining the physical, then the mental and lastly the emotional aspects of an actor's training. The psychosomatic connection was chosen explicitly because of the constant developments of the importance of physically training the actor, as well as mentally, in many different acting methods of a diverse range of cultures. What significance does the psychosomatic connection have in the art of acting? In the process of answering this question this essay will also look deeper into whether to hone the psychosomatic connection is to release the innermost hidden impulses of the actor who becomes, as Grotowski writes,

"...an act engendered by human reactions and impulses, by contacts between people."
(Grotowski, 1967, 58)

II. Psychosomatic Connection

The word psychosomatic is directly translated into mind-body, *psycho-* meaning mind and *-somatic* meaning of the body. The connection between mind and body is called the psychosomatic connection. It is present in all humans, in all animals, and the actor studies this connection in order to discover how their body can affect their mind and how their mind can affect their body. They then can use this connection to react to events or experience relationships that don't exist in real life. Grotowski and his research are commonly associated with the term "psychosomatic connection" as he pursued the investigation of what essentially was theatre (Shevtsova, 2004, 39). He went about this *via negativa*, which meant rather than adding in order to discover, he took away all that was not essential. He deduced that the theatre could still exist without elements such as lighting, costume, music, set and text; however, it cannot exist without actors and audience.

"But can the theatre exist without actors? I know of no example of this. One could mention the puppet-show. Even here, however, an actor is to be found behind the scenes, although of another kind.

Can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance. So we are left with the actor and the spectator. We can thus define the theatre as "what takes place between spectator and actor". All the other things are supplementary – perhaps necessary, but nevertheless supplementary."

(Grotowski, 1964, 33)

Thus, the concept of "poor" theatre was created where the Theatre Laboratory performed with little to no production elements leaving only the actor/s to be the sole focus. Grotowski's intentions were to expose the actor through their most honest and raw impulses.

The biology of the impulse is specifically linked to the hypothalamus and the medulla oblongata, which control the most primitive and crucial functions of the human

body for survival (Allott, 2001, 137). They are also the source of aggression and emotion (Farr, 2002). Psychosomatic diseases involve the mind deliberately manipulating these primal areas in order to control or change sub-conscious processes and it is hard to tell whether a disease is psychosomatic or not. They are closely linked to emotional states such as depression and stress, however, they must be deep, strong emotions to affect the body in such a way (Walker, 1956, 265). In other words, they must be your deepest, most honest desires. Our sub-conscious is physically hidden and protected by our conscious and as an added layer of pressure, society's conventions condition or train humans to control and suppress their natural instincts and emotions. The psychosomatic connection is intervened by the conscious "thinking twice" and the impulse is suppressed. Grotowski wished to, as part of *via negativa*, strip away this barrier since his research revolved around an actor revealing their most honest and raw impulses.

"But the decisive factor in this process is the actor's technique of psychic penetration. He must learn to use his roles as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself..The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask – the inner most core of our personality – in order to sacrifice it, expose it."

(Grotowski, 1964, 37)

Grotowski wanted his actors, and his audience, to take the theatre and use it as a scalpel to peel away all those outer layers that hide the basic parts of ourselves that keep us a) alive and b) human. The importance of Grotowski's research in the psychosomatic connection of an actor was that he brought the actor and spectator back to being human. 'Throughout our work we dealt with a search around the human being' (Grotowski, 1977),

III. Physical

Grotowski's training "prepare[s] the actor's body and voice to a much more open state than [is] normal and also [gets] actors very physically fit and physically confident" (Wallace, 2010, Personal Communication). This is one way of eradicating any blocks or restrictions for the theatre. When the body is healthy and rid of any ailment the actor is free of any restrictions in terms of movement. The psychosomatic connection is instantly improved from this freedom. Grotowski's training exercises in *Towards a Poor Theatre* all focus upon training the body and voice to its peak condition. Actor Graeme Rhodes experienced this training in preparation for Impulse Theatre's 2003 Grotowski workshop production of *Oedipus the King*, directed by Stephen Wallace.

"[The] exercises [are] designed to strengthen and free the actor's body and voice and ultimately their natural impulses. These exercises are difficult and can sometimes seem repetitive and banal, this can present a challenge when trying to get an uninitiated group to commit to the process. It is my belief that the exercises lead participants into unfamiliar physical, vocal and therefore emotional territories resulting in an increased potential for expression."

"It's my impression that Grotowski believes a professional stage actor should be a bit super human; emotionally raw, physically strong, impulsive, alert, generous, ready to make a sacrifice of themselves for the audience's sake."

(Rhodes, 2010, Personal Communication)

This means that being in peak physical condition and extending the actor's physical and vocal abilities, whether that is gymnastics, martial arts or singing, can directly extend emotional exploration and the potential for this to be externally manifested into performance. Grotowski, along with Ryszard Cieslak, developed two specific exercises called The Corporals and The Plastiques, which directly address this issue for the actor.

Corporals & Plastiques

The Plastiques and the Corporals are a set of physical training exercises developed by Grotowski in collaboration with Ryszard Cieslak, a prominent actor in the Theatre Laboratory, and a key partner in Grotowski's research. The Plastiques is an exercise used to train the actor's instrument – the body – the same way a piano player exercises his fingers by doing scales before playing (Cieslak, 1975). These exercises are physically very strenuous and consist of a series of actions, which are broken down into smaller parts to maintain specificity.

The Corporals have very much the same purpose as the Plastiques but unlike the Plastiques, which focus on singular parts of the body at a time, it involves the whole body. Precision and specificity is key to learning these exercises but once they are learnt, they then allow for improvisation and imagination to stream into the exercise. In a 1975 interview with Ryszard Cieslak, footage is shown of the Plastiques in practice. In the exercise, Cieslak displays the exactness and specificity of a seasoned actor, but lets the imagination of a young child seep into his actions. What was a simple movement of the hand become two butterflies attached to the ends of Cieslak's arms. The imagination is manifested through the body and, more specifically, through these rigid exercises. Grotowski believed that form was essential to letting the actor transcend into the "trance". 'You use the details as a trampoline to jump to your reaction for somebody or something. You play.' (Cieslak, 1975)

Voice work

The training of the voice, like the body, is approached in the exact same way. Freeing the natural 'movements' of the actor's voice creates a new territory for the actor to explore. Singing, specifically, trains and extends the voice and thus it is used often in Grotowski's productions. However, the rule of thumb for Grotowski is that the body comes first and only then voice.

"The human voice seeks resounding elements. The body, and especially those parts of it already mentioned, is the first and right place for the resonance of the voice...The most elementary fault, and that in most urgent need of correction, is the over-straining of the

voice because one forgets to speak with the body...My main principle is: Do not think of the vocal instrument itself, do not think of the words, but react – react with the body. The body is the first vibrator and resonator.”
(Grotowski, 1966, 153)

Voice becomes a part of the psychosomatic connection through changing the perception of the voice being a separate entity to the body. It could be that the reason the body always comes before voice is that the body carries the voice, it is a part of the body. Therefore, in terms of the psychosomatic connection, the voice is treated in the exact same way the body is. Train it to its peak condition to free the actor’s voice to his or her inner-impulses.

Physical Actions

In the publication *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Action* by Thomas Richards, Richards writes of his experience with Grotowski and the development of physical action as a way of creating performance. Leaving off from Stanislavski’s research of his latter days, Richards retells many stories where he could not trust in the simplicity of physical action.

“I should understand that physical actions meant to do, simply to do without adding anything. Don’t make it more intense. Know what you’re doing – and do it. It seemed to me, then, that the subject of my ‘individual structure’ had some possibility; the problem lay in my approach. I should just remember what Stanislavski had said: ‘We cannot remember feelings and fix them. We can just remember the line of physical actions...’”
(Richard, 1995, 60-61)

From the training of Grotowski the freeing of the body and, as a result, the freeing of the psychosomatic connection, the simple physical action, when done with specificity, may then bring up an emotional response. In performance, the actor cannot recreate emotion from last night’s show, they can only repeat the physical actions and let the psychosomatic connection create a new moment, a new emotion.

Grotowski maintains that the physical always precedes the mental and the emotion. The technique comes from physically training the body in order to let the raw energy from the actor externally manifest. The body's connection with the mind and emotion is strengthened as if through improving one aspect the actor improves the connection's strength as a whole. If the actor aims to constantly improve this, he or she become closer to reaching the state of the holy actor. When he or she reaches the stage where there are no physical restrictions upon his or her body, in performance, the actor is able to become slightly superhuman as they transcend the average human body and through the actor-spectator relationship they bring the audience along with them. Arguably the ultimate example of this is Ryszard Cieslak's performance in Grotowski's 1965 production *The Constant Prince*.

“The essence of this does not in reality reside in the fact that the actor make amazing use of his voice, nor in the way that he uses his almost naked body to sculpt mobile forms that are striking in their expressiveness; nor is it in the way that the techniques of the body and voice form a unity during the long and exhausting monologues which vocally and physically border acrobatics. It is a question of something quite different...

...A sort of psychic illumination emanates from the actor. I cannot find any other definition. In the culminating moments of the role, everything that is technique is as though illuminated from within, light, literally imponderable. At any moment the actor will levitate...He is in a state of grace. And all around him this “cruel theatre” with its blasphemies and excesses is transformed into a theatre in a state of grace.”

(Kelera, 1965)

IV. Mental

Grotowski's training methods directly deal with the body end of the psychosomatic connection so as to directly influence the mental and emotional state of the actor in performance. However, the psychosomatic connection is a two-way street where, like the physical aspect, the mental aspect can be trained. It would be rudimentary to assume that Grotowski's training methods mainly focused upon the physical with the mental and emotional connections being secondary results. Although this essay deliberately separates the three, it is important to keep note that because they are aspects to a connection they still are a whole entity, which is the psychosomatic connection. Grotowski, when developing these methods, looked at these physical exercises as exercises of the mind and soul as well (Wallace, 2010, Personal Communication).

Imagination

The imagination is directly linked to the concept of physical actions. The more vivid the imagination of the actor, the more specific the action will be and therefore, the more likely there is for the actor to have an emotional response to the action.

“One danger for each type of actor is that the actions, after they are structured, ‘die’, and what were once physical actions become empty movements or gestures. This is the biggest danger and must be fought actively all along the way. One must remember: What was I doing and to whom? Or even, for whom? This for whom or to whom is key.”

(Richards, 1995, 81)

Therefore, the way to prevent physical actions from become empty is the detail of the imagination. It is then the next challenge to give into the imagination to allow inner-impulses to flow through the actor. This is where the concept of the meditation and trance comes in.

The Motions & The Trance

Going back to the biological definition of the psychosomatic connection, it was said that the psychosomatic connection sat with the sub-conscious processes of the body. The mentality, the conscious, only gets in the way of this instant connection between impulse and body. Through *via negativa*, the conscious is stripped back. This is accomplished through entering a state of trance. Grotowski's exercise The Motions directly addresses this for the actor.

The Motions are a set of exercises Grotowski had developed for stretching the body but, more importantly, testing and developing mental endurance. This exercise is practiced only at sunset or sunrise and the reason for this lies in the natural beauty of this event. As the actor practices the Motions, he or she is in a state of mediation or "trance" and acutely aware of his or her surroundings and body, but the actor is not to let any of this information affect him or her emotionally (Lendra, 1986, 157). Another requirement of the Motions is that the eyes are set in panoramic vision and the ears are to pick up every sound, although the exercise, in words, seems easy, 'to perform the Motions precisely – physically and mentally – is extremely difficult' (Lendra, 1986, 161). Through honing the awareness of both the mind and body, the psychosomatic connection, in theory, is more likely to reach higher levels of awareness and the lapse-time between inner impulse and outer reaction is minimised. So, as the actor is tempted both mentally and physically to react to the picturesque sunset or sunrise, he or she becomes more aware of physical impulses through trying to control these. In other aspects of Grotowski's training, mainly the Corporals and Plastiques, the actor is to surrender to his or her physical impulses, however, the Motions are the initial step in first becoming *aware* of these physical impulses.

When the actor is aware of his or her impulses, along with the physical training of body and voice, they have the choice whether or not to follow through with their impulses. 'The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not "want to do that" but rather "resigns from not doing it"' (Lendra, 1986, 157). This is the state of the trance.

The ‘holy’ actor, a term used commonly by Grotowski, is a metaphor, he says, for someone who is willing to stand publicly and sacrifice him- or herself (Grotowski, 1964, 43). The actor is to sacrifice him- or herself to the art and ‘makes a total gift of himself and this is a technique of the “trance”’ (Grotowski, 1964, 16). The trance is the state of being superlatively aware of your surroundings (Lendra, 1986) through being consumed by your own task, and at the same time being able to sense and incorporate your environment without it affecting you.

When the actor is in a trance, he or she no longer “thinks” and instead the body of the actor is left to “think” for itself. Here, the mind is not switched off; just the parts responsible for analytical thinking and *planning* and the body is left to take in information from all senses. By channelling all his or her energy into this task, he or she becomes highly aware of everything around them and within their body.

The trance and the imagination give the actor the ability to surrender to their inner impulses. Training their mentality and physicality allows them to *choose* to give into their inner impulses. The importance of mental training is reflective of the rigour of the physical training. As Graeme Rhodes recalled of his preparation for *Oedipus the King*,

“This was very tough physical stuff that had some actors leaving the room in frustration and anger, repetitive to the point of trance inducing, painful and confronting (particularly some of the spatial relationship exercises) I think it made the group braver, stronger, more disciplined and ultimately more focused.”

(Rhodes, 2010, Personal Communication)

The ability to reach the state of trance is the ability to transcend the superficial results of the physical training, for example pain or fatigue. To be in a trance is not to switch off, but rather to be in tune with the moment rather than what’s coming up next. When the mentality is open and free, the psychosomatic connection is able to act without intervention of the actor’s analytical mind. Through “stripping away” the outer-

parts of the brain, there is an open and exposed pathway to the inner-workings of the human brain – the actor is exposing their hidden selves.

V. Emotional

Emotion is the final stage of the psychosomatic connection. After clearing the physical restrictions and the mental restrictions the inner workings – emotion and impulse – are free to externally manifest. “Emotion is independent of the will” – Grotowski called this the key to the actor’s craft (Richards, 1995, 59). It is possible to train, control and improve physical and mental states, however, there is no way to control human emotion. Emotions are a form of impulse. They are a form of instinct. The psychosomatic connection is the vehicle for impulse to externally manifest. Raw emotion is the result and the transcending soul becomes manifested in the body and voice. It is interesting to find that emotion and impulse are not separate beings, they are the same and so impulse, nor emotion, cannot be controlled and through the honing of the psychosomatic connection they can become stronger and much more raw. What manifests into the external world through the body are not the actor’s “thoughts” but his or her inner, most private impulses. Grotowski breaks down the word into ‘In/pulse’; the impulse, as oppose to the reflex, is a push from the inside. This is very similar to what Stanislavski was looking at, but, due to his death, did not get to pursue this further.

Grotowski’s objective in the stripping down of the theatre form and the intensive training of the body and mind is to reach a state where there is a ‘freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator see only a series of visible impulses.’ (Grotowski, 1968, 16)

VI. Conclusion

The psychosomatic connection is an essential part of acting. The ability to free the actor of restrictions creates this sense of a heightened human, the ‘holy actor’ and in performance the actor must be highly disciplined and focused both physically and mentally and from their specificity and fearlessness, their inner-impulse, which can also be called emotion, is released in its purest form. Through constantly improving the actor’s physical and mental stamina, flexibility and range the connection is strengthened. Therefore the inner-impulse has a stronger, faster ability to externally manifest. Without interruption, the actor exposes him- or herself to the spectator fully and truthfully.

However, this has only been investigated through the perspective of Grotowski’s theories and other practitioners who have experienced the training; had I the opportunity to see a live performance or participated in Grotowski training workshops a deeper understanding may have been gained. However, although I have not personally trained in the Grotowski method, as an actor this investigation has given me a deeper understanding of training methods studied in my IB Theatre course. Having trained in the physically strenuous Suzuki training of Japan as well as the mentally challenging methods of American Mesiner technique, there is still the universal objective of giving a performance of honesty and of raw impulse through honing the psychosomatic connection. As a means of further extending this investigation one could compare Eastern and Western actor training methods, where traditionally Eastern focus deeply on physical and Western on mental, could be a way of going deeper into the significance of the psychosomatic connection in the universal art of acting and theatre.

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