



DEMONSTRATION LECTURE:

THE POLISH AVANT-GARDE THEATRE

by

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and

Students of Theatre and the Honors Program

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

Pardoe Theatre, October 27, 1977 10:00 a.m.

TOWARDS A POOR THEATRE)

We should also remember that Grotowski's use of the Gospels is ancillary to his interest in the relationship between his actors. That he and they find in the experience of Christ and his followers particular relevance to their own is itself significant. (Pasternak took similar liberties with DOCTOR ZHIVAGO, which David Lean then rendered with sufficient nostalgia for most everyone at BYU.) And if, in his own way, G is trying to "reestablish derided norms" then --even if his is not our way--we should not be so hasty to condemn or discredit his aesthetic purpose.

Grotowski's work is a striking if, for some, curious phenomenon which it has been our purpose to demonstrate to help us all better understand what a group of dedicated artists elsewhere have produced in our time.

--Thomas F. Rogers

A D V E R T I S E M E N T

Another rare example of contemporary Slavic theatre can be enjoyed, admission free, when the BYU Russian Club and its chapter of the Slavic Honor Society (Dobro Slovo) present the delightful one act Soviet satire, STRONG FEELING (Sil'noe chuvstvo) by Il'f and Petrov on November 10 and 11 at 8 p.m. in the McKay Auditorium (167 McKay). STRONG FEELING will be performed in Russian. Synopses of the plot will be provided in English. You are cordially invited

*In 1970 Grotowski announced to his cast that he would not do any more directing. Although they still offer workshops in voice and physical movement, the troupe no longer aspire to do new plays or many performances. As "a continuation of their search and of the imposition of discipline begun with physical exercises," each seems to be going his own way, pursuing a kind of meditative, animistic mysticism, called 'paratheatre.' APOKALYPSIS was largely revived last summer so that it could be filmed by Wajda.

THE POLISH AVANT-GARDE THEATRE

From prefatory remarks at the dedication of Poland to receive the restored gospel: "Plagued by war and devastation, the (Polish) people have always responded. They are good people." (David Kennedy, Saski Park, Warsaw, August 25, 1977)
From the dedicatory prayer: "Bless them to excel in the professions and the arts." (President Spencer W. Kimball, Saski Park, Warsaw, August 25, 1977)

I. ANTECEDENTS

a) Romantic playwrights during the period of partition and the insurrections against Russia (1830) and Austria and Prussia (1846-1848):

Adam Mickiewicz--FOREFATHERS' EVE (DZIADY)

Zygmunt Słowacki--KORDIAN

Juliusz Krasiński--THE UNDIVINE COMEDY (NIE-BOSKA KOMEDIA)

The above are the 'classic' plays of Poland and are still frequently performed. They were all written in exile. Their authors were young men who actively participated--in some cases led--abortive revolutions to overthrow Poland's oppressors. Their plays are as relevant to the state of affairs in Poland today as when they were first written.

b) Stanisław Wyspiański, a native of Poland's medieval capitol, Kraków, and one of its greatest painter-playwrights (1869-1907). His most important plays--THE WEDDING (WESELE), LIBERATION (WYZWOLENIE), and AKROPOLIS--are, like essentially all Polish literature and art, obsessed with the nation's tragic legacy of recurring defeat and protest. Wyspiański's style is akin to and influenced by impressionism and art-nouveau. His work is filled with historical and mythical allusions. In plastic media, pastels and stained glass, his sense of line and the emotion of his portraits is truly remarkable. In his play, AKROPOLIS, the statues and figures on the famed tapestries in the royal cathedral in Kraków come to life and pose the question of the nation's ability to survive in the future. Wyspiański died in his thirties of syphilis.

c) Stanisław Witkiewicz (Witkacy), a native of the mountain resort town, Zakopane (near Kraków in southern Poland) (1885-1939). Witkacy was influenced by the Russian futurists (e.g. Majakovsky). Though his plays were never recognized during his lifetime, he is today considered--like Kafka, Pirandello, and the German expressionists--one of the world's most eminent pre-absurdist. "He is Poland's first important dramatist who is European first and Polish second." Some of his more important plays include THE ANONYMOUS WORK, THE MADMAN AND THE NUN, THE CRAZY LOCOMOTIVE and THE WATER HEN. His theory of the stage, like that of Gordon Craig and Meyerhold, espouses a "theatre of pure form." Like Wyspiański, Witkacy was also a painter. His art, like his plays, tends toward the demoniac and surreal. It is not surprising that they were composed under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Witkacy was a brazen hedonist: for instance, he flaunted his affair with a certain barber's wife, then submitted himself to

the man's razor. His rampant individualism nevertheless has its raison d'être: he prophetically anticipated and reacted against the evils of twentieth-century totalitarianism. He argued that the perfect society for which social activists were then aiming would lack the essential features of humanity. His catastrophic vision was fully borne out in his homeland immediately after his death. (He took his life the day the Nazis invaded Poland.)

II. PRINCIPAL AVANT-GARDISTS OF CONTEMPORARY POLISH THEATRE

a) directors:

Jerzy Grotowski--Teatr Laboratorium, Wrocław

Tadeusz Kantor--Cricot 2, Kraków: Kantor considers himself the only legitimate Polish avant-gardist. His theatre is intentionally amateur and poorly subsidized. He directs performances in the presence of the audience, like an orchestra conductor. Ala Duchamp, Kantor espouses the aesthetic theory of "reality of the lowest rank." Only when an object arrives at its lowest point of degradation--i.e. when it has lost its utility and is no longer considered beautiful--does it have "the emotional possibility of becoming an object of art: a 'poor object.'" (interview with Kantor, Summer, 1977)

Jozef Szajna--Studio Teatr, Warsaw: Szajna was previously Grotowski's set designer, who created the costumes and special effects for Grotowski's original AKROPOLIS. His productions are striking visual displays--the properties and stage effects taking precedence over the actors themselves.

b) playwrights:

Sławomir Mrożek (now residing in Paris)

Tadeusz Różewicz (residing in Wrocław)

III. MOST SIGNIFICANT PRODUCTIONS SINCE WORLD WAR II

a) theatre:

Grotowski's APOKALYPSIS CUM TRANSFIGURIS (Wrocław)

Kantor's DEAD CLASS (Kraków): The actors, old men and women, relive their childhood in the classroom, wearing on their backs manikins that represent the children they once were. Konrad Swinarski's revival of Mickiewicz's FOREFATHERS' EVE (Kraków)

(all three have been or are to be filmed for a documentary record--the first two by Andrzej Wajda)

b) film:

Andrzej Wajda's ASHES AND DIAMONDS (with Zbigniew Cybulski, Poland's late 'James Dean')

Andrzej Wajda's MARBLE MAN (a courageous protest against the present socialist government's manipulation of individual lives; considered by Wajda's colleagues the most important Polish film ever made, it establishes Wajda as "the conscience" of present day Poland. It has received brief and limited viewings--itself a minor miracle)

(Wajda is one of the world's all time great film directors, whose work is yet to be fully recognized in the West. He is a true philosopher-artist. Other noteworthy Wajda films: KANAL (about the Warsaw uprising); PROMISED LAND (a remarkable retelling of the Nobel Prize-winning Reymont's epic novel about

the industrial revolution in western Poland); THE WEDDING (an astounding film evocation of Wyspiański's play); and EVERYTHING FOR SALE (a nostalgic memorial to Wajda's protege-actor, Cybulski, who, like James Dean, met an untimely violent death--beneath the wheels of a train).)

IV. SALIENT FEATURES OF THE POLISH AVANT-GARDE

- a) The predominant thematic interest--defeat and protest in the face of recurring political oppression--is justified by the Poles' historical experience and cannot be ignored in anything they do. (As Helen Muchnic observes, commenting on non-conformist Russian writers of the Twentieth Century: it is "the essential aesthetic and moral debate of modern times: the debate on the possibility of the mind's freedom, when freedom itself is conceived as an offshoot of commitment...the fighter is not free, his hand is forced by the enemy. It is a rare individual, maybe only a genius, who, driven into and fixed in the posture of defense, can still maintain the freedom of his mind and heart." (RUSSIAN WRITERS: NOTES AND ESSAYS).)
- b) The theatre is closely tied to painting and visual symbols. The following are painters and sculptors as much as men of the theatre: Wyspiański, Witkacy, Kantor, and Szajna. Both Swinarski and Różewicz were students of art history.
- c) Literary classics are extensively readapted and revised, i.e.
 - the mythical allusions in Wyspiański's plays
 - the parodies of Wyspiański's plays in those by Witkacy
 - Grotowski's adaptations of Marlow's DOCTOR FAUSTUS, Wyspiański's AKROPOLIS (its setting converted to a death camp), Calderon's CONSTANT PRINCE, and a point of departure with Słowacki's SAMUEL ZBOROWSKI and later allusions to the NEW TESTAMENT, etc. in APOKALYPSIS CUM TRANSFIGURIS
 - Szajna's adaptations of THE DIVINE COMEDY (in DANTE) (presented on tour in Florence to enthusiastic audiences); DON QUIXOTE (in CERVANTES); Goethe's FAUST; and Witkacy's plays (in WITKACY); as well as, to some extent, of Grotowski's AKROPOLIS (in REPLIKA).
 - the adaptation of Joyce's ULYSSES and FINNEGAN'S WAKE in the Wrocław Contemporary Theatre's ANNA LIVIA and of Kafka's THE HUNGER ARTIST in its production of Różewicz's THE EXIT OF THE STARVING MAN.
- d) A spirited and ongoing polemical rivalry between the various avant-gardists is frequently reflected in their work itself. Kantor disdains all the others, insisting that he coined the expression 'Poor Theatre': "Others using this term are pure plagiarists." He begrudgingly admits that he admires Grotowski, but nobody else. Różewicz and his director-collaborator Kajzar more than ridicule the ascetic artist (Grotowski) in THE EXIT OF THE STARVING MAN. (Różewicz claims to be anti-avant-garde, but his own plays are the most unconventional of them all.) While Grotowski appears indifferent to those his fame has so overshadowed, his APOKALYPSIS CUM TRANSFIGURIS is, by the admission of his literary director, Ludwik Flaszen, clearly inspired not so much by Christ's rejection as by the envious rivalry and alienation which took place in his troupe after Grotowski's protege and star player, Ryszard Czeslak, received so much acclaim (with THE CONSTANT PRINCE).
- e) Polish avant-gardists--like those elsewhere--are fanatic

megalomaniacs who, with their great self-assurance and unique personal vision, break through the barriers of conventionality and stimulate us with new concepts and new approaches. Except for Grotowski, their efforts at times seem slipshod, unsophisticated, and extremely amateur. But, together, they express what is perhaps the most imaginative theatrical art in the world today.

A WORD ABOUT TODAY'S PERFORMANCES

"The feeling of the sanctity of nature survives today in Europe (as opposed to the rest of the world), chiefly among rural populations, for it is among them that a Christianity lived as a cosmic liturgy still exists." (Mircea Eliade, *THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE*)

- a) AKROPOLIS-REPLIKA synthesizes the essential moments in two separate productions, both of which reenact the experience of the victims in Hitler's death camps. Derived from Wyspianski's play about the survival of Poland in the Nineteenth Century, AKROPOLIS was first produced by Grotowski in 1962. Its designer was Szajna, who subsequently founded his own theatre in Warsaw and produced REPLIKA, his own most significant creation. (Szajna was himself an inmate at Auschwitz.) As Peter Brooks has said of AKROPOLIS, it "imaginatively evokes the experience of the camps, as statistics cannot. It tries to make the spirit of the camps live again in the present. The audience sees with its own eyes what it would rather only know about." Whereas Grotowski posits an apocalyptic self-destructive mania that ultimately possesses his entire cast of characters, Szajna allows for a more optimistic earthly transcendence--at least for those who survived till the War's end and, when released, managed to walk away. The present performance suggests the reliance on technique and decor which marked Grotowski's earlier style. It also exemplifies the pervasive human tendency to define oneself and life's meaning through ritual, however secular.
- b) APOKALYPSIS CUM TRANSFIGURIS, considered one of Poland's three most significant theatrical productions since World War II, is also Grotowski's last. (He has produced no new plays since 1970 and is apparently not inclined to do so in the future.) The immediate inspiration for APOKALYPSIS was the envy and discord among his troupe--some were prompted to mock Czeslak: "Who is the best actor, the holiest person among us?"--which Grotowski then exploited for its dramatic emotional potential. The troupe itself then suggested the literary texts and dramatic contexts which became the material of the play. According to Flaszen, "The manner of performance was no longer technical, but personal. The performance had to be understood as constant research connected with the life of the actor, who was growing older through the run of the play. It was a search, the final outcome of which was to be an event (the performance) whose nature was yet to be discovered." The play's characters "hark back to their peasant background and tradition. The allusion to the wedding at Cana reflects very distinctive features of old Polish folk culture, as with the procession, in which a melancholy in joy and joy in melancholy make it difficult to tell if this is a

wedding or a funeral." Słowacki's play, SAMUEL ZBOROWSKI--whose theme reflects the conflict between absolute royal power and the spirit of anarchic freedom--was a point of departure. The Gospels became the "pre-text" for a subsequent revival, which was entitled EVANGELIUM. Texts were also included from the books of JOB, SONG OF SONGS, REVELATIONS; Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor"; Eliot's "Gerontion," "Ash Wednesday," and "The Wasteland"; and a work by Simone Weil on supernatural consciousness. The material collected would have required a 22-hour long performance. "The texts and 'great motifs' were not the ultimate intent but rather the actors' own personal experience, mirrored in myth." This was often "revealed by accident during the rehearsal--leading to the many cardinal points of the performance. One day Antek appeared to be looking at the rest like a priest. G told him to look for the best actor and 'holiest' person in the group. A approached Cieslak. Then Rena began to worship him and the others joined her. (It was unpleasant for C.) Someone brought in a candle, and a ritual took place. This apotheosis of a great one became like some mob frenzy among medieval crowds--on the borderline of sarcasm and worship. Then someone said 'baranek' (holy lamb) and someone else made a bleating sound. From this great improvisation emerged the scene which reenacts the crucifixion by 'ba-a-a-ing.' At the time no one thought anything would come from it because it was such a real and bad experience for the group and also probably one of the reasons for its crisis....*APOKALYPSIS is therefore an edited montage of fragments from the group's improvisations. Only at this point did G become the creator of the production." When it was first conceived in '65-'66, it was "a novelty for a group to construct its own production as a search and human adventure, a kind of life. Now this approach has become a new academism in the theatre, particularly in America, with probably not very effective results." (from an interview with Ludwik Flaszen, Summer 1977, Wrocław, Poland)

Although Flaszen insists that none of the troupe is a 'believer,' Grotowski's handling of sacred material is definitely liturgical in form. (In Poland Catholic tradition runs deep.) As such, it is surely unconventional. Some might even consider it blasphemous. But here we also need to take into account Grotowski's powerful and amply demonstrated aesthetic view that, to achieve authenticity, one must explore the unknown side of a thing, the unpopular conception: actors must avoid the banal or cliché illustration of an author's words because concrete reality is paradoxical, surprising and unfamiliar. Akin to this is the idea that "transgression of a myth reviews its essential values" and that "an element of menace re-establishes derided norms." This G calls "profanation--a kind of tactlessness based on the brutal confrontation between our declarations and our daily actions....it confronts our very roots with our current behavior and stereotypes, and in this way shows us our 'today' in perspective with 'yesterday' and our 'yesterday' with 'today'....Every performance built on a contemporary theme is an encounter between the superficial traits of the present day and its deep roots and hidden motives. The performance is national because it is a sincere and absolute search into our historical ego; it is realistic because it is an excess of truth; it is social because it is a challenge to the social being, the spectator." (from

"less is more" - Ingmar Bergman's
dictum

C A S T

AKROPOLIS-REPLIKA

Survivors: Laura Lee Cutler, Karen Martin, Joan
Oviatt, Bryant Smith, Hyrum Winterton
Victims: Liz Allison, Todd Forsyth, Rodney Mer-
rill, Marlene Starley, Debbie Taylor,
Lluvia Villalobos, Peggy Wanacott
Nazis: Glen Perkins, Karen Reid, Robert Scho-
field, Scott Woolley

APOKALYPSIS CUM TRANSFIGURIS

Messiah: Jim Mills
Priest: Doug Atkins
Man (Adam): Hyrum Winterton
Woman (Eve, Magdalene): Martie Rauscher
Peter/Lazarus: Leon Archibald
Judas: Steve Harvey

S T A F F

Costumes & Properties: Lori Prescott, Garnet
Fanin, Lydia Jones
Lighting: Richard Foote
Sound: Blaine Stewart
Assistants: Glen Perkins, Grace Rogers