

## Topic Exploration Pack

### Practitioners: Grotowski

<b>Practitioners: Grotowski.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Introduction .....	2
Grotowski’s purpose and practice .....	2
Artistic intentions.....	3
Innovative nature of Grotowski’s work.....	3
Working methods and theatrical style.....	3
Grotowski’s influence .....	3
Preparing to teach this unit .....	4
Suitable texts .....	4
<b>Suggested activities .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Corporal exercise 1 .....	5
Corporal exercise 2.....	6
Movement with sticks.....	6
Partnered stick work .....	7
A score of physical actions.....	7
Creating Plastiques.....	8

### Practitioners: Grotowski

#### Introduction

Jerzy Grotowski lived from 1933 to 1999. He was born in Rzeszów, Poland. He was a theatre director, writer and teacher. Grotowski believed that the role of the actor was of great importance in theatre and the relationship with the audience or spectator should be of prime importance. Grotowski wanted to create a 'poor' theatre where the actor was at the heart of the theatrical experience not the set, lighting, sound, costumes or special effects. Much of Grotowski experimentation with drama and acting was at the Laboratory Theatre.

Grotowski wrote *Towards a Poor Theatre*, published in 1968 which lays out his vision for theatre and actor training.

This exploration pack will explore Grotowski and his work on actor training. The exercises towards the end of this resource will explore how you as actors can use Grotowski to work on yourselves and when devising.



#### Grotowski's purpose and practice

Grotowski studied acting in Poland where the Stanislavski system formed the basis for training; this gave Grotowski a grounding in the system which had an important impact on his work throughout his life. In his later years, Grotowski acknowledged that Stanislavski had been the primary influence on his work.

Like Stanislavski, the key to Grotowski's work was the idea that acting should be truthful on stage. Where Grotowski differs from Stanislavski is in the way he went about finding and achieving that truth.

*'The experience of life is the question, and the response is simply through true creation. It begins from the effort not to hide oneself and not to lie.'*

Grotowski, J. (1968) *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Methuen. London. Page 193.

For Grotowski, acting was a journey of discovery that would then be shared with the audience, by stripping away everything but the actor whose mind, body and soul must guide him in the creative process.

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

## Teacher Instructions

### Artistic intentions

Grotowski's actors saw the rehearsal process as a means to connecting with their own 'self' and physical exercises helped the actor to discover what lay beneath the often tense exterior. Grotowski believed there was a 'holy' relationship between the actor and the audience and it was through training that the actor stripped away the mechanics of technique to deliver a real and truthful performance that created a spiritual connection with the audience.

### Innovative nature of Grotowski's work

Grotowski saw his work as a road of discovery in the craft of acting; he experimented to discover the 'truth' in acting. Theatre became an exchange between the actor and the audience and rather than trying to compete with cinema and films, theatre should play to its strengths and the relationship between actor and spectator. With this relationship at the heart of theatre, the actor must be capable of extraordinary feats; for Grotowski, theatre was not the retelling of daily life but the exploring of the spiritual world.

### Working methods and theatrical style

With the actor at the centre of theatre, Grotowski created a training programme that physically and mentally challenged the actor. Grotowski's training took the actor on a journey that transcended the mundane so that the performer gives himself up to the performance, putting the actor's self above the character, role and given circumstance. Grotowski continued Stanislavski's work on the psychophysical and impressed upon his actors the need to train on movement and vocal exercises daily. Grotowski explored the impulses that an actor had that led to physical action and that then created the truth in performance. For Grotowski his work developed the actor's imagination, an awareness of the use of space and relationships with others in the space, all combined with a rigorous physical training.

For Grotowski training was not the teaching of skills to the actor but allowing them to be free or 'via negativa', the process of eliminating anything that got in the way of acting truthfully.

### Grotowski's influence

Grotowski took Stanislavski's work with action, the psychophysical, free body and communicating through invisible rays and, through exploration and experimentation, he created a way of working that puts the actor at the very heart of the theatrical process. His influence is felt very strongly across the theatre world with his ideas permeating our understanding of how we should approach acting today.

### Preparing to teach this unit

The key resources to use when exploring Grotowski as a practitioner would be the text:

Grotowski, J. *Towards a Poor Theatre (1975) 2nd edition. Methuen Drama.* London.

ISBN:978-0413349101

### Suitable texts

Much of Grotowski's work is concerning how the actor creates and the process the actor goes through psychophysically which can prepare you to work on most texts. You could stage the play in a simple blacked out space, with the actor dressed in simple black clothing and allow the actors to explore the journey they go on to achieve a connection with the audience. Similar to how Brecht would take a scene and use Freeze and Gestus to work on creating epic theatre, you can strip everything back put the actor at the heart of the scene and psychophysically explore the story.

When devising, you can use the exercises below as a springboard to creating the theatre with the actors impulses leading to action and working as your compass through the devising process.

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## Suggested activities

In this section are five examples of exercises to use with your students when exploring Grotowski. There is a homework for you to set your devising students to help them along the path to creating theatre. Grotowski used yoga and many exercises that came from yoga as a starting point for his work, changing the dynamic from the focussing inward during the yoga exercises to directing the focus outward.

Towards the end of his life, Grotowski was anxious that students and actors were using his exercises as a kind of recipe for success rather than working on oneself as an actor to enhance the creative process. With this in mind this guide contains exercises that are based on Grotowski's exercises and are suitable for the post 16 student whilst fitting the demands of the specification.

Students should ensure they are wearing suitable clothing for physical exercises and are aware of the health and safety requirements of physical activities.

### Corporal exercise 1

- Using suitable mats on the floor, one by one starting from a standing position complete a simple forward roll.
- Complete the forward roll a couple of times each.
- Now work on displacing your balance as you do the forward roll, moving your spine in different ways and seeing how the body reacts.
- Explore how your balance works when you perform the different forward rolls.
- Working in a circle, all stand and use the forward roll as a starting point for an improvised sequence. You can start at different times with your forward rolls and add movement sequences in between the rolls to start up a nonverbal dialogue.
- Use the rolls where your balance is displaced to help create a nonverbal communication.

While you work on this exercise aim for complete focus as you communicate with others.

Allow any impulses you feel to create physical action that determines the direction of your sequence.

### Corporal exercise 2

For this exercise we will be using a hand stand as the starting point, follow the steps below to practise your handstand. Work in pairs so one person is spotting the other and helping them in the handstand. Make sure you both have enough turns to feel confident.

- Stand up straight with your feet comfortably apart. Start with arms straight above your head.
- Kick with your dominant leg and as you kick fall into a lunge with your dominant leg bent and in front and your other leg straight.
- Tip your body forward. As you fall into a lunge, let your body tip over your lunged leg. Hold your arms straight and move your head towards the ground.
- Keep your arms straight as your hands approach the ground. Your shoulders should be tight in towards your neck.
- Straighten your legs and torso towards the sky.
- Keep your head tucked in, your legs tightly together and balance your weight on your hands.
- When you are ready to come down, split your legs and drop your dominant leg to the ground.
- Now you have practised your handstand, work in your pair to destabilise the handstand by moving your spine slightly and see how this affects your body.
- Try to control the movement as you destabilise yourself, remember your partner is there to help.
- With the help of your partner try to slowly spin 360 degrees in your hand stand, slowly moving your hands around on the floor.
- Using your handstand with your partner create a movement sequence that comes from your handstand focussing on the nonverbal dialogue between you and your partner.

This may take a bit of practice to work on the hand stand, for those more comfortable with the hand stand you can add the handstand going into a roll to your movement sequence.

### Movement with sticks

- As a group hold a stick (bamboo or broom handles are best) and stand in a triangular shape leaving enough room between you to swing your stick.
- With the person at the front of the triangle acting as the leader, mirror how they are standing and holding their stick.
- The leader starts to move their stick in hand slowly with the rest of the group following.

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

## Student Activity

- Start to build a rhythm as a group working as an ensemble.
- Slowly start to move around the room working in time and keeping the same shape.
- Run this several times until you are all working together in time.
- Now allow the movement to have a life of its own, allowing nonverbal communication to take place.
- Start to move more freely as your impulses decide to see what form your movement sequence will take.

You can use this as a springboard for your devising work as often by doing this exercise a narrative can start to take shape.

### Partnered stick work

- In pairs, holding your sticks, start to move around the space.
- Move carefully on the balls of your feet.
- You will now run a sequence of slow motion attack and defend, where one partner will move the stick into an attacking position meaning the other person will be led to defend.
- Now one person will aim to just above their partner with the stick with the defender having to duck when they think the attack will come.
- Make sure you swap the role of attacker and defender.
- Using the whole space and the psychophysical connection you have built up, create a sequence of moves and counter moves all played out at different speeds that come directly from your actor impulses.

Make sure you are careful with the sticks using your psychophysical ability to communicate to build up your sequence.

### A score of physical actions

- Using a scene you are working on, for each character work out a sequence of physical actions that fit the character for that scene.
- Explore the psychophysical nature of each action giving yourself a reason for each action.
- Work through the scene moving from one action to the next action.
- Now run the scene as a series of physical actions focussing on how what you are doing affects the others in the scene.

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

## Student Activity

- Remember that your score of physical actions is not just movements but actions with reasons and impulses behind them.
- When you go back to rehearse the scene at a later date allow the movements to spark your spiritual impulses guiding you through the scene.

### Creating Plastiques

Grotowski worked on a series of **plastiques** with his actors, exercises that stemmed from the articulation of the spine that then moved through the body.

- Stand in a space and freely start to move from the spine allowing it to move into the body.
- Explore different movements and then decide on three movements.
- Set the exact movement and then practice each one individually.
- Put all three movements together as a sequence making sure to follow the same precise structure each time.
- Now create a sequence using these three movements that becomes spontaneous and grows organically.
- Change the rhythm of your sequence to match the spiritual impulses that come from you as an actor.
- In the studio, combine your sequence with a partner's and see how each of your sequences affects the others and how your ability to work together changes as you run the sequences.

Grotowski saw a balance between discipline in the exercise with the spontaneity that comes from the soul. It is from discipline that we get creativity.

When devising, you can use the first few exercises to work as a springboard for the devising process which will help you and your group to create a psychophysical performance.