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Theatre and performance as healing forces – saving the Open Society? A case study of *The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards* and *Subpoetics* performative endeavours as ways of enhancing empathy and building intercultural dialogue in the light of critical pedagogy**

Summary

In the various versions of democracy's orientations around the world nowadays, we can discern cracks, but still not a crucial break from the project of (an) open society. The inner reality of this phenomenon can be deciphered and dealt with in many ways. The two case studies (The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards as well as Subpoetics International) analysed in the article, present theatre as healing and pedagogical forces, which can save the core of Open Society. Generally speaking, this can be achieved by strengthening intercultural dialogue and empathy while applying strict rules of the craft and technique. The two mentioned theatre-performance groups present high-functioning varieties of open society and also focus on the threats and obstacles which may be encountered in contemporary society. Beyond varied activities, the Workcenter and Subpoetics also carry out educational and workshop-based work connecting people from all paths of life and all around the world, creating an international network, which is both healing and creative. In both cases they are groups producing works of very powerful physiology and intensity, which seek the human truth in troubled times.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, empathy, intercultural dialogue, performance, open society

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Introduction

In the many permutations of democracy around the world today, we can discern cracks, but still not a critical break from the project of (an) Open Society. The inner reality of this phenomenon can be hermeneutically deciphered in many ways:

A sane and liberal system is not an easy thing to sustain, either in theory or in practice. For everyone knows that man is a flawed giant: a creature who stumbles absurdly and cracks his skull just as he is about to cross the threshold to paradise. Remedies for his defects of character are as various as they are disagreeable and range from doctrines which preach the extirpation of wants as the sovereign cure for disappointment, frustration, grief, and pain to panaceas which would turn man into an ant in an ants' nest in the interest of social tranquility (Bridbury, 1972, p. 137).

It seems that the crucial idea, which is still to be examined with regard to the analysis of an open or closed society, is that of happiness. When we take a closer look into our forefather's thoughts on the concept, we will see that Plato's treatment of happiness is analogous to his treatment of justice and based upon the same belief that society is by nature divided into classes or castes. As Karl Popper (2013) writes:

True happiness, Plato insists, is achieved only by justice, i.e. by keeping one's place. The ruler must find happiness in ruling, the warrior in warring; and, we may infer, the slave in slaving. Apart from that, Plato says frequently that what he is aiming at is neither the happiness of individuals nor that of any particular class in the state, but only the happiness of the whole, and this, he argues, is nothing but the outcome of the rule of justice (pp. 161–162).

The case studies I will present, concern theatre and performance as healing forces, which can pertain to save the core of Open Society using different expressions of art and approaches thereby enhancing empathy and building intercultural dialogue. Both of the theatre collectives which will be discussed use the dramaturgy of empathy and dialogue, critical pedagogy and promoting pro-democratic attitudes.

The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards was founded by Jerzy Grotowski in 1986 in Pontedera in Italy (see: The Workcenter, n.d.). At the Workcenter, he carried out the last phase of his life's research, which has come to be known as Art as Vehicle, in which, as in ancient traditions of performance, the attention paid towards art goes together with the

examination of the human being in general. Grotowski entrusted Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, key members of the Workcenter team since its genesis as the sole legatees of his Estate. Since 1999 Richards (Workcenter's Artistic Director) and Biagini (Associate Director) continue to develop the Workcenter's line of performance research with two teams: the Focused Research in Art as a Vehicle Team and Open Program respectively. Today, the Workcenter is comprised of eighteen artists from nine countries.

Subpoetics International (see: Subpoetics International, n.d.), established by Seth Baumrin in 2014, with Madelaine Bongard and Eva Goldenberg as other founding members, is a human rights theatre collective which provides theatre creation for communities in need around the world. The founding members all received initial training from Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, but each of them moved forward and created their own methodology. The fruit of these transformed and inherited theatrical techniques is a new form of storytelling, called "subpoetics". The group addresses healing the wounds of war and migration and renounces xenophobia through its performative work. Humanity's struggle to pursue daily life and find joy during periods of poverty, war, disaster, and cultural isolation are instruments of saving and preserving the core of the open society. Subpoetics International has a sub-entity, known as the Gershom Theatre Laboratory in Lviv – the first theatre research collective in Ukraine since 1933. It operates as an independent and autonomous unit, although it is nurtured artistically and financially by Subpoetics.

It seems that these two entities: The Workcenter and Subpoetics might show a version of what open society should be in the perspective of theatre and performance art, as well as to highlight the points of contention which might arise in today's changing world. It is my hope that by juxtaposing their works of powerful physiology and intensity – each in its own kind, one might begin to discover a human truth in these troubled times.

In both cases the root of the matter is not the question "who am I" but "what am I making of my life and can my practices save me", which would seem to be an expansion, not an abdication from the main subject in the humanities. Let us look more closely at these two case studies of theatre and performance as healing practices, where the attention for art goes hand in hand with the approach of the interior life of the human being.

The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards – The (romantic) fragment of the Grotowski legacy and its performative aspect reflected in modernity.

Theatre is an encounter – Jerzy Grotowski

Having re-read Grotowski's "On the Practice of Romanticism", one might postulate that the (romantic) fragment as a philosophy, ethical and moral systems are reflected in the performative aspect of modernity. When talking about estradas for the 21st century, the fragment might be one thread leading us to a deeper understanding of the human condition in general and its expressions in contemporary theatre in particular.

The idea of the fragment as one of the main strategies of the official heirs of Jerzy Grotowski seems still valid although it is not an established criticism. Despite grand discourses, it seems to me that the work of Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini apart from the recognition of their uniqueness and very individual stamp in the history and anthropology of performance – still deserves more attention from scholars (see e.g. Salata, 2013). I can only talk about my own experience of their work and I think it is interesting to bring it up in this context. We might be able to understand through their work how the internal becomes external, how the subconscious becomes conscious, and how this corresponds with the idea of an open society.

In March 2009 – in the UNESCO Year of Grotowski, I had the honour of taking part in a very interesting endeavour. Mario Biagini had invited me, along with a group of young Polish scholars, to work on a project analysing the texts of Jerzy Grotowski, which also involved a trip to Italy to see the state of the work of those who continue the Master's ideas. The main question posed by the project was: "Do the texts of Jerzy Grotowski contain anything living, still current and still significant for young people today?"

With this question in mind I had the opportunity to visit Pontedera in the spring of 2009 and witness the work of Biagini's Open Program team. Alongside Richard's Focus Research Team in Arts as Vehicle, together these make up the two working ensembles of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, which reflect the personalities of the two directors in charge. In the successive years I stayed in touch with these groups – in their shape at the time, and on different occasions (mostly through bonds of friendship I believe) although now there are only a few familiar faces remaining, the ensemble has been completely reorganised. Another significant professional encounter I had with the ensemble was the Zero Budget Festival (Wrocław, 29th October – 12th November, 2009), a two-week event organised within the frame of the project "Tracing Roots Across". However, nothing could really compare to the first experience I had when I arrived at Vallicelle.

Aside from a natural curiosity of discovering the *spiritus loci* of the place where the theatre legend worked on his last projects, it was of my academic and human interest as to what extent Richards and Biagini continued the work of Jerzy Grotowski. The grand master would have wanted them to develop something new and true for themselves:

I dedicated a thread of life to contact with such persons, direct contact, and without hiding that it was a matter of the conquest of knowledge, and not in some Romanesque way, like in the beautiful novels, but through real confrontation, when an actual transmission is received or stolen – as almost every true teacher is looking to be robbed by somebody of the next generation (Grotowski, 2006, pp. 255–256).

Was it possible to recreate the performative desire of Grotowski to reach the human truth and accomplish the act of fighting for freedom? Or was it just a slogan, which was supposed to give way to a new quality, too shy however, to shine on its own. The route of artistic development of the heirs of the great Grotowski was of crucial value to me, not just lasting in the transmission of Grotowski, but as individual work which is alive in every human being, even if they were not as extraordinary a genius as Grotowski.

I was allowed into the rehearsals of The Open Program. Sitting on the ground of the wine barn in Vallicelle, where Grotowski also had rehearsed – was itself quite a magical experience. What was presented to me were fragments of a larger, unidentified entity, combined together to form a more consistent structure of a performance, as I later found out, entitled *I am America*. This piece was also performed on other occasions during my stay in Pontedera in the most unusual venues, such as cafes, or private apartments.

The actors were all young (in their twenties and early thirties), men and women of different ethnicity, women wrapped in clothes, men bare chested – all carrying a strange beauty. They casually (it was meant to be received like that?) performed songs of African slaves, poems of the Beat generation, broadcasting angry words of revolution and the need for a global change with a gospel-operatic expression, unlike anything I had ever seen before. What stayed with me was the way they looked at each other – in a certain manner of innocence, as if they had abdicated from all defences, with absolute trust – almost inhuman. The spirit of the songs they sang emitted a subtle radiance which permeated the room, drawing the threads of energy from each of the doers and channelling them through the few audience members.

Jerzy Grotowski (2006) wrote that all art is deeply rebellious: “Bad artists talk about the rebellion, but true artists do the rebellion. They respond to the

consecrated order by an act” (p. 295). Was this the total act I saw in front of my eyes? Whilst listening to the actors I had a feeling that what they were doing was incredibly staged and that the songs were not simple chants. When you inhaled the vibration of the multinational voices, together with the power of the songs it had an almost trance like effect. Their melodies had the capacity to lift and fill up the entire space with something unknown. The polyphonic voices (all speaking English with different accents including Spanish, Polish, French, Jamaican, American, Portuguese etc.) were combined together to resemble a single person who told you his own story, which was universally existential despite your background, state of mind, age, religion, or ethnicity.

While listening I had asked myself: do they believe that they are merely only singers, or was this an act of a different nature? And if so, what was it? Was it part of the enquiry into the question: “Who-am-I?” or in a wider perspective Grotowski’s ever present question derived from the Gospel: “are you a man [człowiek]?” Why have these people decided to leave society, isolate themselves in the Toscana countryside and spend their most beautiful years singing songs, and being committed to work, which would never be presented to the outside world¹?

Of course, in many cases, the creation of the purest form of art does require dedication and often sacrifice. However, great art is often on the contrary the result of a submersion in the struggles of (everyday) society, the truth of the other – and to isolate oneself from this can actually be a mistaken vanity. What I saw in front of me – and later what was confirmed in my future research was rather a group (I fear the term sect as we were initially warned not to use it) under the burden of very strictly and prohibitively dictated set of secret internal rules rather but also – but also which emerged later rather mysteriously – a group of free individuals in search of something new. Again, they listened to Grotowski’s (2006) confession in: ‘Tu es le fils de quelqu’un’:

Art as rebellion is to create the *fait accompli* which pushes back the limits imposed by society or, in tyrannical systems, imposed by power. But you can’t push back these limits if you are not credible. Your *fait accompli* is nothing but humbug if it is not *fait competent* (p. 295).

¹ This policy is changing – the Workcenter is opening up to different audiences and viewers around the world. However, in 2009, the group I was with was one of the first people to ever witness their work. The work had been going on for almost ten years with no confrontation with an outside audience.

There were moments when I watched the rehearsals and after the primary praise for their external beauty and effective body movements – a second thought came – followed by the writings of Grotowski – are they not just dilettanti, whose rebellion is about refusing responsibilities, not credible in their craft, with no mastery. Of course, Grotowski (2006) knew the banalities of group improvisation – the Workcenter has committed some of them:

Here are some examples of clichés of group improvisation: to make “savages”, to imitate trances, to overuse the arms and hands, to form processions, to carry someone in a procession, to play a scapegoat and his persecutors, to console a victim, to perform simplicity confused with irresponsible behaviour, to present one’s own clichés of behaviour, social daily-life behaviour, as if they were naturalness [...]. So in order to come to a valid improvisation, we should begin by eliminating all of those banalities plus several others. We should also avoid stomping the feet on the floor, falling and creeping on the ground and making monsters. Block all these practices! Then maybe something will appear: for example, it will appear that contact is not possible if you are not capable of refusing contact. It’s the question of connection and of disconnection (p. 296).

My stay in Pontedera was full of meetings and conversations with the Open Program participants as well as scholars and artists in their orbit. Mostly we discussed the meaning of their actions and its relation to the work of Grotowski: the way they understood and felt Grotowski’s ideas. According to the Open Program group, Grotowski was searching for the “grain of humanity” through a certain kind of sincerity, or truth. They themselves perceived it as looking for who I am, what is mine and what is not mine. The unanimous conclusion was that the song, and the vibration it emits makes you a vehicle of something so much older than yourself.

The performers absolutely had an almost religious attitude towards Grotowski’s legacy and I felt that a conversation about the more discursive ways of understanding Grotowski was out of the question. The issues of gender, sexuality, or other “postmodern” topics – were rejected by responses such as “we are all humans, there is nothing to discuss here, and these divisions do not matter”. The Workcenter team members seemed to be under a kind of spell, which is beyond comprehension for someone who had never experienced this kind of conditions of life and work. Perhaps is the same spell Grotowski was under when he decided to devote his life entirely to art. The Workcenter artists were definitely credible and real in their social reality, which does not have to be everyone’s reality at all. Even though the result was yet again admitting that your truth is not my truth but I will support you in the freedom to say it – that is the core foundation of open society.

That was the deeply anthropological lesson for me. Talking to the Pontedera performers, as well as having the opportunity to “participate” (although I was actually admonished for even using such an expression – I was a mere observer – also any humble attempts to sing along by other observers were immediately quashed. It seemed the declared openness of participation had its own rules as well) in their work made me return to source ideas of theatre – also present in Grotowski’s writings.

Theatre is the most romantic art because it only exists in the now; which Grotowski (2006) wrote a lot about: “the present moment”, the “*hic et nunc*” (p. 257). What is that present moment? This *hic et nunc* exists when looking at the older plays directed by Grotowski – e.g. *The Constant Prince*, *Apocalypsis cum figuris* or when one is exposed to the later works, such as *Downstairs Action* or *Dies Irae* – all accessible only through recordings and photography or finally the work of The Open Program as well as the Focused Team – which I could see live and capture this *hic et nunc* for a bit longer.

As I understand it, the most alive and real moment connected to the work of Jerzy Grotowski, and those who continue his legacy is the idea of understanding the other as a process only existing in the present *hic et nunc* and relating only to the present eternal moment. This is however impossible without the past – not annihilated but reinforced:

It is impossible to create if we destroy the bridge to the past. Myth or archetype links us to the past. The past is a source of our creative efforts. To be sure, our life is individual and personal; we live in the present, but we are the result of something larger – a greater history than our own personal one – an interindividual and interpersonal history (Grotowski, 2006, p. 85).

It’s most perfect manifestation is the song as, according to what the Open Program participants told me, it is a vehicle, which is a danger but also a potential. This unwritten substance revealed in cultural and performative practice oscillates between metaphysics and phenomenology. My feelings and thoughts from eleven years ago, starting out as a rookie dramaturge, someone easily influenced and intimidated – today make me realise how my reception of the phenomenon of the Workcenter has changed thanks to an increased awareness of the mechanisms surrounding the creation of art and the politicisation of theatre.

Thanks to the “human acts” of the Workcenter, it is possible to look Jerzy Grotowski the way he looked at Słowacki, Calderon or Mickiewicz – as great-grandfathers, and the performance and theatre – as a process of dialogue

with our ancestors, not necessarily in agreement with them, but in search of their secret – because if we understand their secret, we will understand our own.

After 2007, when the last “selection” in Vallicelle took place and, from the hundreds of people who applied, a mere two, ten-person groups were formed and seven “dramatical structures” or performances were created. Those are: *I am America*, *Electric Party*, *Electric Party Songs*, *Not History's Bones: A Poetry Concert*, *The Hidden Sayings* and a solo performance *Katie's Tales* under the guidance of Mario Biagini and *The Living Room* directed and co-performed by Thomas Richards. The narrative line touches on research of the power of the poetic word and through its exploitation – the possibilities of expressing of our place in the social, economic, and cultural reality of the 21st century. Performers face texts and songs from the scriptures of early Christianity, interweaving them with songs from different traditions: Latin, African-American, and also Eastern European.

The “Opus”, which is built on the dialogue of “America” and its voices, is supposed to show the discovery of the world in its ethical, religious, sexual and political differentiations as well as exploring the ways in which we – the people – can actually shape this reality. There is also no fear of using the codes from mass culture or the aesthetics from the concert hall. At the same time there is a poignant attempt to create a community of people who act and who remain in opposition to the world, which they describe with Allen Ginsberg's lyrics.

The Workcenter is a community with highly developed mutuality and empathy. There is, furthermore, a significant bond created by the aforementioned performances – a bond between the performers and the audience. This bond is often missing from both social reality and also from other forms of art, which may only be able to describe it.

From the perspective of the preservation of the open society, we may conclude with another precise and lucid thought of Jerzy Grotowski (2006) which is also in the agenda of the Workcenter:

Real rebellion in art is persistent, mastered, never dilettante. Art has always been the effort to confront oneself with the insufficiency, and by this very fact, art has always been complimentary to social reality. Don't focalise on just one thing as limited as theatre. The theatre is all the phenomena around theatre, the whole culture. We can use the word theatre as much as we can abolish it (p. 296).

In social reality, this can be translated into the necessity of noticing the other, learning how to play his melody and tuning up to him without losing

your own inner song. Those drives are inextricably connected to those they are opposed to – the individual and collective, internal and external, open and closed.

Subpoetics International

In a civilisation accustomed to thinking that “all the world’s a stage” and all the people are actors, the history of theatre and the history of politics are bound to unfold as interlocking narratives. Especially when it describes a competition fundamental to Western society: the competition between art (the realm of the aesthetic) and politics (the realm of law, convention and right) for justice (the realms of morals).

“If we are a political theatre, then we take only one position. We renounce xenophobia. From this point of departure our journey continues” – says Seth Baumrin (2017), the founder of Subpoetics. My most recent encounter with the Subpoetics International Theatre Group took place at a Symposium with Performances “Estradas for the 21st Century: Global Theatre in Opole” between 25th November and 4th December, 2016. I was at that time already familiar with the subpoenaetics method (thanks to participating in Baumrin’s workshops in Warsaw in 2011) but it was my first viewing of their performance work *Nomansland* in addition to a second piece performed by the Gershom Lviv Group a theatre group facilitated by Subpoetics – *A Stranger in a Strange Land* also directed by Seth Baumrin. Gershom is an endeavour to create a group for post-Maidan generation coming of age that offers alternative theatre in a region steeped in tradition and creative stagnation.

Seth Baumrin is a professor of theatre and chairman of Communications and Theatre at John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York. He trained as a director with Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski. For over thirty years, Baumrin has worked on and off in detention facilities using creative drama in therapeutic work for non-actors. After being confronted with the human truth of the most vulnerable and challenging members of the society, Baumrin devised the methodology of “subpoetics”.

Baumrin (2013) defines the “subpoetics method” by explaining:

for the actor the prefix “sub” exists because beneath the surface of the actor, the skin, something else is alive, and that “something” is more durable than a single performance or a moment on stage. All moments on stage disappear quickly. Underneath the skin (sub-

performance) many levels exist. "Sub" implies more than one thing, like a building with many basements – so it can mean many things, and for each actor its meaning differs.

Subpoetics is a method to search through these many lower levels for durable parts of the actor's inner self that will persist longer than any single project. For some actors it is a story – quite often a story of a childhood memory or the memory of their first love – its goal being to motivate *inner action* – that is also referred to as *inner poetry*.

Baumrin (2016a) keeps exchanging the terms, moving between *inner action* and *inner poetry*, or even *inner song*, driven by the belief that 'something' lies deep beneath the surface of each of us, which differs from person to person:

Perhaps it is unnamable or perhaps its name is none of my business. Maybe it is a secret. However my job as a director is somehow to simulate this inner part and allow it to rise to the surface, so that it enlivens performance while protecting this inner part so that it may continually enliven future performances.

The actors face a very difficult task. Supposing the inner part is a story with its own logic and singular truth, the actors are to connect the movement of the body with all the segments of the logic of the story so that each movement is endowed with the life of that story. The movements, unlike the story, can change. If the sub-element is a song, it also should be aligned with the actors' physical movement.

Subpoetics' director stresses that the inner logic of a personal story/song/poetry is *not* the same as the performance text. The performance text is the outermost skin of the performance. The sub-element connects to movement to transform it into a volitional action (doing something for a purpose), which precedes the text itself. For the director, almost all training is a search for this connective tissue between the body and the intimate deepest levels of the self. This connection between the inner self and the outer performer sits deeply within the core of each actor, so unlike most theatre directors Baumrin leaves actors free to train independently as he understands training can remove psychic blocks that prevent most people from gaining access to their inner poetry. Following the tradition of Tadeusz Kantor, he watches and listens to the training looking for raw material that could be transformed and shaped into performance.

There are similarities between Subpoetics and the method of Jerzy Grotowski and his Workcenter in Pontedera in Italy. Creating a singular reality especially by song (but also texts) in all possible languages is a very powerful

tool. Songs have a natural ability to reveal the presence of the moment in the unfolding destiny of form, particularly when displaced by means of venue and time. Everything immediately becomes more direct and simple through song. It is as if the inner man suddenly awakes and the gap between the factual and the symbolic ceased to exist for a transient moment.

Subpoetics operate as a laboratory theatre performing in workshops all around the world – the workshop is understood as a process of elaboration. In this process actors create physical actions associated with a particular piece of text. These physical actions are stripped from that text and perfected with precision. They are then attached to a second text even though the actions and the new text are unrelated. The actions are then justified so that they function as appropriate physical actions for the new text. The process of adaptation and justification of actions to different texts involves the arduous task of reducing, magnifying, or changing the rhythm of the original physical actions. In order to reduce or magnify a physical action, its original impulse in the torso must be located and retained. The extremities of movement, the external movements of the limbs or head, can be augmented by percentages – they could use less space, or more, or can be executed at a different tempo, but the initial impulse to action remain the same.

Through elaboration and reduction, participants give entirely new meaning not only to the original score of physical actions, but also, by justifying their actions, the new text is transformed, gaining a unique new meaning. Most importantly they imbue the text with a personal meaning discovered through individual means. Through this process, the participants develop subcores that stand behind the actions and have sources in the participants' impulse and imaginations. A subcore differs from a subtext. A subtext's sources are buried in the text and their author's imagination, usually beyond recovery whereas a subcore is personal to the performer. A subcore is located within the performer's body/mind in the linkage of internal image and impulse to external action.

Example of texts, which I identified being used in the Subpoetics work include: Biblical passages, Gerard de Nerval, Blaise Cendrars, Peter Handke, Georges Perec, Shakespeare, Jack Kerouac, Chekhov, Herta Müller, in addition to songs such as Jamaican folksongs, farsi blues, and psalms. Words and melodies from all times and all cultures, as if the whole human experience was encompassed in one rehearsal room.

Subpoetics functions in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (learning plays). In Brecht's usage a learning play is not necessarily limited to the

instruction of the audience but of equal importance to the players themselves for whom participation in the work enables the realisation of ideas, perspectives, and facts previously unknown or unavailable to them. This is the purest form of intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the Subpoetics project has an additional level of learning through performance, which is that the participants are expected to be in the position to teach the dramaturgical techniques and strategies to other groups of teaching artists so that the work develops a life of its own in other regions. That is how Gershom's piece *A Stranger in a Strange Land* was created, which started its own life in Ukraine and continues to reform and develop even until today.

Briefly stated, the expected long-term effects of the project, are that the Subpoetics Project embodies a training/performance regimen that has the propensity towards enabling participants to learn how to learn; learning to teach; auto-didactic methodologies for self-realisation; group dynamics that engender cultural awareness locally and globally – and entirely through the arts. Weaning young people away from stereotypes promoted by electronic and popular media (virtual reality replaced by the authentic truth) and constructing their own identity is crucial during a period of potential cultural erasure as borders both real and artificial shift and mass uprisings obscure and devalue the struggles of the individual from every stratum of society.

Subpoetics International continuously conducts an intercultural dialogue, which is the language of knowledge and non-knowledge at the same time. It is therefore the inner experience of each individual, which permits no authority to rule over it, save from the necessity for the concept of the “revealed man”, as a result of the performative endeavours of Subpoetics. The sincere effort to exchange and give and approach the inner work – the sub poetry – without necessarily giving in to the narrative of mysticism, spirituality, religion, or even science.

Like with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, the question of purpose remains. Baumrin (2016a) says:

I have tried though not succeeded in answering why I do Subpoetics. I have never voiced why I believe in the Subpoetics educational program. I think for me this is a lifelong pre-occupation with changing the world. That sounds strange even to me. Is the world changeable? The world does seem to be changing all the time. And of course we hope some things remain the same. Global warming tells us this. If for example the atmosphere changes significantly then we will all be in trouble. The notion of the static variable is at the core of my method. Things that are fixed are continually changing according to their own laws of variation. So we can create that “fixed” thing such as a structure for performance with its

own logic and laws, and continually change it according to the situation. Thus the structure of the performance has a liberating impact, provoking people towards honest community interaction according to the truths that make them individuals who can change the world according to their desires. And I hope their desires are good in and of themselves. Just to go one step more, I ask, how dare we change the world?

This desire seems to be at the core of the ever-changing *Nomansland* piece. The seven languages spoken and sung together function as a meta-language, a liberator of emotional content which is universal. This raises the question of community – what is it in today's world where millions of people continually join new communities and boundaries are redrawn. As the dramaturge Magda Cirillo (2016) says in her statement:

Our community of actors is comprised of individuals who claim no affiliation to a singular identity, like color of skin, gender, religion or nationality. Although everyone is a historical being with her/his persona, individual characteristics, cultural habits, as in Agamben's proposition, we are all singular, not universal; we are who we are and try to create a communicable body. And all these traces we bring along with us, our little gestures, our songs, our memories, our languages can be transmitted as a possibility to keep memory alive; to keep our 'vestiges of humanity' alive. Not in a decadent Babel, but in a creative *Allofusland*.

The work of Subpoetics is anchored in the personal experience of its actors – in their own subscores to use Baumrin's term. The stories they tell in their songs echo the basic facts and stages of life, albeit not in chronological order, which might serve as a metaphor for the crude beauty of the break of the 20th and 21st centuries. The work holds a black mirror up to the totalitarian realms of oppression that indeed define the need for a more open society. As light is only made real by the presence of the encroaching dark, the open society is bordered and defined by its opposite, and thus the two areas are intertwined like the roots of a tree which have grown together.

The dissociation, disembodiment and depersonalisation that these performative collages arise from highlight trauma – they are often direct depictions of the repressive conditions in the 21st century. The result of an overwhelming experience that cannot be overcome, this trauma is often characterised by a feeling of numbness or separation and produces the experience of the self as other. Trauma cannot be integrated into a narrative memory and exists only as a vacuum or blank spot; it therefore cannot be articulated or expressed directly but emerges through flashbacks or inassimilable images. It underlies what is often seen as postmodern images of strategies, of fragmentation, alienation, and disruption. The performative quality

of the Subpoetics performances may be seen as fragmentation and represents the contingent nature of immigrant life:

If I had to choose any other map it would be a painting by Kandinsky. And when I am in a port, in a theatre, cornered and asked what *Nomansland* is about I say: *Nomansland* is about the inner turmoil of displaced souls who find themselves in the perpetual purgatory of a detention encampment. The performance examines the complexity of lives lived through and with trauma. In this dystopic landscape, the performance is a celebration of language, culture, and dignity, told by characters at a crossroads they did not choose (Baumrin, 2016b).

What is indeed striking is that this international amalgam indeed celebrates the diversities and richness of traditions, as the only antidote to fear and ignorance. According to Subpoetics, the main problem of modernity is xenophobia: I have said that Subpoetics is theatre against xenophobia because we are of no nation more powerful than our vocation as artists. We originate in cultures so diverse that were we to respond only to cultural imperatives imposed upon us by our surroundings we might all fear one another. Instead we practice autonomy by understanding others and self, and teach autonomy to others as an alternative to external enslavement by the dogma of stigmatization according to race, religion, gender, and ethnicity. We must not retreat into fear. We have but one home: ourselves (Baumrin, 2016a).

Dramaturgy of empathy, critical pedagogy and intercultural dialogue

Both the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards and Subpoetics International are “open projects” and work in constant progress. Their work seems to be a response to the notion of liquid modernity, as coined by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). The condition of constant mobility and change in relationships, identities and contemporary society in general means there has been a transition from solid modernity to a more “liquid” form of social life. It can most easily be seen in the contemporary approaches to self-identity. According to Bauman, we have moved from a period where we understood ourselves as “pilgrims” in search for deeper meaning to one where we act as “tourists” in search for multiple but fleeting social experiences. I would firmly state however, that neither the Workcenter, nor Subpoetics International could not be labelled as a group of “tourists” in Bauman’s sense. There is rather a correspondence with the concept of a just and open society, with the body of the actor as the seat of justice and the temporary centre of the universe.

The great achievement of the two laboratory groups is the curing of the contemporary philosophy of the modernist disease by resituating questions of truth and being within the realm of human experience. As if they were following the thought of Gianni Vattimo (1991), who introduces the notions of “weak thought” and “weak ontology”, which, he argues, offer a way of “going beyond” metaphysics precisely by this kind of action.

The main issues these groups are postulating for the Open Society of the 21st century would be – how to save the human community, which is being deconstructed in front of our eyes? With the current political atmosphere in the world this question is more significant now than ever before. The discrepancy between the imagined, mythic, open community and the image of community as it exists is striking and it is a common belief that theatre has the capacity to perform it so there is space for change.

The philosophy of the romantic fragment, may serve to express the juxtaposition between eternity and temporality, infinity and the finite, wholeness and fragmentation, and seems to be accurate to describe our social reality. Another vehicle for expression may indeed be the human body as an archive, not only as a seat of justice.

These two perspectives (the human body as archive and a seat of justice) combined together create something that Dorota Sajewska (2016) called “the body-archive”². There is room both for the memory of the body, which allows for the creation of an idea into the “incorporated history”, as well as a visual or verbal reference. All fragments, remnants, and debris, both organic and artificial such as visual memory, including photographs, or fragments of films enable us to reconstruct the experience of the performative body.

Another thread that needs to be revisited is the idea of semantic chaos and its sources in Jerzy Grotowski’s theatre, which inspired both the Workcenter and Subpoetics. The mechanisms of the destruction of chaos have been skilfully placed and hidden and as such, still have the power to strongly influence the audience. In Mircea Eliade’s (2017) comparative religious interpretation, myth has the power to “close” reality, to grant it with a symbolic wholeness – in other words to replace the fragment with an entity. Ascribing the un-solved historic experiences into the structures of myth may be viewed as a symptom of the vast field of repression or displacement,

² “Necro-performance”, according to the author, is the cultural spectacle of Polishness, which is based on revitalising historical remnants and metaphors of the chopped and decaying body in Polish literature, Polish collective memory and cultural texts.

a therapeutic gesture of liberation from the poisons of history, as shown, for example, in Grotowski's *Akropolis*.

Art is one of the forms of maintaining a cultural archive, an archive preserving the memory of the past. I believe this should be read along with elements of economic, historic, and social memory, and not just solely as an autonomous result of the genius of the artist. Even when the artist does not realise it, or when it is not intentional, the creator and the performer are still in some ways plunged together in the historical reality.

Theatre is a very unique place, ready for the ever-present comeback of death. It is a medium, which works on and with remnants, and fragments. Theatre is waiting for other languages to constitute themselves, for other organs to fade and give way to a new form of life. In the same way as the body of man is composed of head, heart, intestines etc., the body of theatre consists of all the other forms of art such as music, poetry, literature, and the visual arts. It works best when it feasts on their passing – all of these separate organs combine and merge together to form the body of theatre and chaos is then satiated – at least for a short while. Theatre takes over what is dead, so that it can be alive again.

These ideas are all fused through the many faces of human truth. The modern search for meaning, and ultimately the resolution of these questions is a subject at the very heart of the humanities, and could ultimately lie in the modern retelling of the ever-present human truth told by the Workcenter and Subpoetics. Does that mean that theatre progresses us as humans? Karl Popper (2013), the architect of the “open society” concept, believed:

If we think that history progresses, or that we are bound to progress, then we commit the same mistake as those, who believe that history has a meaning that can be discovered in it and need not be given to it. For to progress is to move towards some kind of end, towards an end which exists for us as human beings. ‘History’ cannot do that, only we, the human individuals, can do it; we can do it by defending and strengthening those democratic institutions upon which freedom, and with it progress, depends. And we shall do it much better as we become more fully aware of the fact that progress rests with us, with our watchfulness, with our efforts, with the clarity of our conception of our ends, and with the realism of their choice (p. 483).

Whether art stands above reality to gaze on the current situation from the heights, or engages actively in shaping that reality, it is concerned with vision. As Joseph Conrad wrote, “it makes men see”. What we can see after encountering the performative endeavours of the Workcenter of Jerzy

Grotowski and Thomas Richards and Subpoetics International? A very strong message – performance is not a mere artistic practice, but also an existential necessity.

Art in open society challenges or complements political vision, reinforces or spurns public mores, enjoins social integration or promotes social alienation. Art in the open society celebrates or defies, rejoices or despairs. It is neither detached, nor impartial, nor isolated, nor pure.

Both theatre groups, but perhaps Subpoetics International to a greater extent, have opened up to the audience by giving it access to the very birth of a performance. The audience is once again assimilated into the theatrical event, abolishing as a relic the idea of theatre as a space showing the mere creation of an illusion, outside of reality (see: Svetlina, 2010). They have both opened new doors by revealing the acute solitude of a human condition. The hundreds of echoes of the suffering, placed in the work have the power to create bridges in a world where the open society has been put at risk.

The unconscious force that draws us towards performance art has the power to transform, if only we allow it to be seen and heard. Theatre debates the capacity of art to stimulate social change and incite revolution, the temptations of social control of culture and of political censorship, and the uncertain relationship between art and history.

The voice of the Workcenter and Subpoetics are an integral part of the continuing dialogue about art, politics, and human nature that is at the heart of the European tradition. My contention is that both the Workcenter's and Subpoetics performances are exercises in the dramaturgy of empathy and critical pedagogy, which enhance intercultural dialogue and promote the concept of open society in action.

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