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THE PARATHEATRE OF GROTOWSKI AND COMPANY AS A RADICALIZATION OF GROUP THEATER PRACTICES

PARATEATRO DE GROTOWSKI E COMPANHIA
COMO RADICALIZAÇÃO DAS PRÁTICAS DE TEATRO DE GRUPO

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Abstract: this article focuses on analyzing to what extent the paratheatrical proposals of Jerzy Grotowski and his company, Laboratory Theatre, were in tune with the phenomenon of the emergence of the so-called “group theatre,” even though they wanted to abandon the label “theatre.” Based on texts by Grotowski and reports by his key collaborators from that period, such as Jacek Zmysłowski and Teo Spychalski, this article seeks to demonstrate how these experiments from the 1970s and 1980s were centered on certain notions, such as those of encounter and active culture, thus configuring themselves as one of the most radical and unique proposals for investing in the collective dimension and human interaction and therefore being one of the most radical examples of group theatre.

Keywords: theatre; group theatre; Jerzy Grotowski; Paratheatre.

O Parateatro de Grotowski e companhia como radicalização das práticas de teatro de grupo

Resumo: este artigo tem como foco central analisar em que medida as propostas parateatrais de Jerzy Grotowski e sua companhia, o Teatro-Laboratório, estavam em sintonia com o fenômeno do surgimento do chamado “teatro de grupo,” mesmo querendo abandonar o rótulo de “teatro.” A partir de textos de Grotowski e relatos de seus colaboradores fundamentais daquele período, como Jacek Zmysłowski e Teo Spychalski, busca-se demonstrar como esses experimentos dos anos 1970 e 1980 estavam centrados em certas noções, como as de encontro e de cultura ativa; configurando-se, portanto, como uma das propostas mais radicais e singulares de investimento na dimensão coletiva e na interação humana, sendo, por isso, dos exemplos mais radicais de teatro de grupo.

Palavras-chave: teatro; teatro de grupo; Jerzy Grotowski; Parateatro.



1 Introduction: the historical moment of the emergence of group theatre

From the last decades of the nineteenth century to the present day, numerous changes have been occurring in theatrical practices, shifting and expanding the boundaries of what was epistemologically understood by “theatre.” These modifications happened (and still do) in a heterogeneous and discontinuous way throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Over this long and complex course of transformations, sometimes subtle, sometimes forceful, one observes a gradual, though not absolute, rupture with the text-centric and mimetic paradigm that has historically characterized theatrical art within the European hegemonic model.

The first great change, still at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was the advent of the director role in the way we conceive it today, and the consolidation of theatrical staging as an autonomous language in the face of dramatic literature, that is, the so-called “emergence of modern staging” (Roubine, 1998, p. 49, our translation). Thus, little by little, the director’s work became the axis of the creative process in terms of scene authorship, resulting in the “emancipation” of the scene from the dramaturgical text (Dort, 2013) and leading to what was named “director’s theatre” (Berthold, 2001, p. 529, our translation). However, as Braun (1975) analyzed, in the 1960s and 1970s, the counterculture period, a “second Great Reform” took place with the appearance of the so-called “experimental theatre” (Roose-Evans, 2008, our translation) or “new avant-garde theatre” and, also, of what Barba called “Third Theatre” (2010, p. 187, our translation). The use of these expressions, within the Performing Arts field, guides the questioning of certain tacit patterns and the execution of experiments in search of new ways of making theatrical art, which implied a historical moment marked by new ruptures and by the deepening of certain changes that, in a way, had already been underway since the end of the nineteenth century.

A greater radicalization in the “exit” of conventions from the Italian stage is an example of such deepening, a renewal that Roubine describes as the “explosion of space” (1998, p. 81, our translation), that is, it is a certain “fashion” of using non-conventional spaces or other stage models (arena, semi-arena, and others), which evidently becomes stronger from the second half of the twentieth century on¹. There is also an even greater break with the “text-centrism” of the nineteenth century (1998, p. 45, our translation), in phenomena such as the so-called “collective creation.” As described by Trotta, the use of the expression “collective creation” to define certain creative processes necessarily implied the “suppression of the playwright” (Trotta, 2008, p. 81, our translation), in which one no longer started from a dramatic-literary text to create a play. In collective creation the text is created by the actors with the director during the production. In this sense, this phenomenon can be interpreted as “steps forward” in a historical process of gradual and

¹An example is the emergence of Richard Schechner’s “environmental theatre,” and experiments conducted outside conventional spaces and by groups such as the Living Theatre and the Théâtre du Soleil, among many others.



non-totalizing transformation, which had already begun with the emergence of modern staging, both regarding scene autonomy and the exploration of new spatialities.

Regarding ruptures, the questioning of the centralization of authorship and the strong hierarchy of modern staging can be noted, which come to be relativized with the appearance of the so-called “group theatre.” The notion of “group theatre,” according to Carreira, although it varies from group to group and from era to era (1960s and 1980s-90s), presupposes the existence of an “organizational structure that produces creative work” (2010, p. 2, our translation), that is, a collective that is jointly responsible for the creation of shows, including the text. Thus, a common aspect of the multiple practices that are called “group theatre” is the more effective participation of all members of the collective in the creative process, in terms of creation authorship, and a relative de-hierarchization of roles within the group. By effective participation and de-hierarchization, it is understood that, during a show elaboration, all those involved are considered as subjects-creators of the final work (textual and scenic dramaturgy). In other words, the director’s image as someone who occupies a hierarchically superior place to the other artists tends to be overcome (or at least there is an attempt to overcome it), for a greater collectivization, both regarding the conception of the work and its execution. Thus, even if someone occupies the role of director in the process and divisions in the multiple tasks related to theatrical making may exist (scenography, costumes, acting, dramaturgy), everyone is considered artist-creators within the group and not the company of director “so-and-so.”

This is thus an important trend that emerged between the 1960s and 1970s and remains strong to this day, but which has never eliminated the “director’s theatre.” To this day, theatre groups moved by this common ethical-philosophical horizon exist, a group theatre culture from which certain forms of internal organization are executed, and may or may not have a person who officially occupies the director’s function. As Trotta (2006, p. 158) discusses, while the central aspect of the work of some groups is structured according to modern staging, the group experience and the relationship between people are valued. This can be identified as a somewhat paradoxical complexity of some contemporary theatre collectives, in which, while the show is considered a work that bears the signature of a director, on the other hand, it also seeks to value collective authorship and collaborative work.

In the specific case of the Laboratory Theatre, although Grotowski has always played a role of undeniable leadership, the work developed both in the theatrical and “post-theatrical” phases (Paratheatre, Theatre of Sources, Objective Drama and Art as a Vehicle) can be classified as “group theatre,” which means they were essentially collective artistic achievements, in which several “hands” are responsible for the conception and concrete execution. Thus, although he is undoubtedly one of theatre’s great names in the twentieth century, Grotowski was never alone in his career and his work should be seen as the result of the interaction of multiple voices and actors.



2 Grotowski and theatre as a collective/group experience

Even in the period related to the production of shows, during the 1960s, there was already a search for a scene that valued, as central elements, the actors' performance (proposition of the "poor theatre") and the encounter between actors and members of the audience. In different shows of the Laboratory Theatre, this search was processed very diversely. However, at first, Grotowski played the role of director within the classic profile of the modern director, that is, to a certain extent, as someone who considered himself the main responsible for the conception of the work and who led the creative process in a relatively controlling way. Some examples are the group's first plays still in its first headquarters in Opole. In them, Grotowski already had a kind of predefined script before starting rehearsals, which allowed him to conduct these first productions in a very short time. Between October 1959 and July 1960, the group had already staged three shows and, in the case of *Orpheus*, they had only three weeks of rehearsal². Thus, in the first productions, the "fundamental axis" was the work on the *mise-en-scène*, that is, Grotowski's scenic interpretation of the dramaturgical texts chosen to be staged.

But, little by little, throughout the first half of the 1960s, Grotowski granted greater autonomy to his actors, who became, for example, the main or co-responsible in developing the famous training and composition techniques of the Laboratory Theatre. Also, a more focused investigation on the human expression of the actors and actresses, the work of the actor/actress on themselves, the search for psychophysical self-deconditioning begins to guide the practices of the group, among other guiding issues. Such focuses were related to the premise that the center of theatrical work was the inter-human encounter, that is, a complex and profound movement of otherness-identity, which involved "revealing" and "stripping" oneself (Olinto, 2016, our translation) and which included both the relationship between actors-members of the audience, actors-director, and actors among themselves.

This process of establishing greater autonomy of the actors and of the theatre seen primarily as "Encounter," in the theatrical phase, culminates with the elaboration of the show *Apocalypsis cum figuris*, which can be classified as both "group theatre" and "collective creation." This production differs from the previous ones because it did not have a dramaturgical text as its starting point. Everything that was created to be on stage was developed collectively by the actors, from free or pre-structured improvisations (the so-called "Études"), and the lines uttered by the actors on stage were a collection of fragments of non-dramatic texts—passages from the Bible, poetry by T. S. Eliot, and excerpts from novels by Dostoevsky and Simone Weil—chosen only at the end of the process that lasted almost three years. That is, *Apocalypsis cum figuris* was produced by a creative process based primarily on the selection and collage of excerpts from improvisations/Études performed in a rehearsal room. Texts were added to be said on stage only after the score of actions created. This

² Cf. Kumiega, 1985.



grouping of diverse texts was so intrinsically related to the actors' scores that its understanding as a set was only possible if a detailed description of the actors' psychophysical actions was added. As the critic Konstanty Puzyna explains, the texts were not brought together to form a plot but simply grouped together as one of the supporting elements: "the entire fabric of Grotowski's 'stage poem' was entirely sewn from what its actors do and experience on stage" (1997, p. 88, our translation). It was for this reason that Grotowski stated that: "[...] The source of this work was the creation of the actors. I consider that in none of our shows the creation of the actors has been so evident" (Grotowski, 2007, p. 194, our translation).

Ironically, however, it was the creative process of this last production that made Grotowski decide, at the peak of his fame as a theatre director, not to do more shows. That is: the interpersonal crisis established in the creation of *Apocalypsis cum figuris* was one of the crucial factors in his decision to "leave" the theatre. It was only in 1970 that Grotowski announced a new "post-theatrical" phase and his controversial belief in the "death of the theatre"³. But, as Motta-Lima warns, this "'departure' of Grotowski was not immediate, but gradual" (2012, p. 204, our translation). In other words, before that, the lack of interest in theatre in the traditional and European sense, as a "pretense"/representation, and the interest in "real" psychophysical processes, in "real acts," had already been configured. Expressions such as "scalpel character," "holy actor," and "total act" were "practiced words" that synthesized this concrete research in terms of a non-representational performance. The techniques and issues investigated mainly from 1963 to 1964, in a way, already pointed to this need to abandon the theatre, at least within the Western model. But it was the *Apocalypsis* crisis and the realization that psychophysical processes cannot be "mastered" via a unique technique applicable to anyone that led Grotowski to see the fixation of the creative process in a "theatrical work" (show) as an obstacle to what really interested him at that moment. As Motta-Lima (2012) and Olinto (2016) analyzed, there is a whole series of characteristics of this last show directed by Grotowski, a certain "undoing of the theatrical," which makes it the link, the transition between the theatrical and the paratheatrical phase. In addition, it was the only play that continued to be performed during the paratheatrical phase (1970-1982), functioning both as an invitation to audience members for paratheatrical activities, and to keep the theatrical production of the Laboratory Theatre as officially "active" (accountability to Polish State authorities that financed the group).

Thus, if the search for the Encounter was an important guiding thread of the research that led to the elaboration of the theatrical shows that consecrated Grotowski as a director, now the driving issue led him to abandon the theatre in the traditional patterns, towards other forms of human action/interaction. This phase can be seen as a radical deepening of the group experience; a deepening that would only be possible with the denial of shows production and of the theatre itself in the European hegemonic sense.

3 In this regard, we have the lectures given by Grotowski between 1970 and 1972, compiled in the text *Holiday* (Schechner; Wolford, 1997, p. 215-225). In this text, Grotowski states that some words are dead, and among them, theater.



Grotowski's first post-theatrical phase was named "Paratheatre," with the prefix "para" adding the meaning of "alongside" as pointed out by Slowiak and Cuesta (2013, p. 60). But what exactly was Paratheatre? Defining what happened in this phase is an especially complex task, due to the small number of historiographical sources of the period, and mainly because they were relatively different experiences, which occurred between the 1970s and 1980s. However, such experiences had some principles and common denominators. A fundamental characteristic was the abandonment of the conventional structure of theatre, that is: actor-character, member of the audience, and dramatic text. It was not intended to create or improvise fictional or narrative actions, but to explore literal and non-representational actions, aiming to provide a certain type of shared experience. The paratheatrical proposals were conducted by different members of the Laboratory Theatre (the old and the new ones who joined the group only in this period). Thus, a striking aspect was the elimination of the function of the member of the audience as an observer, promoting the active participation of all those involved, necessarily being members of the group or external guests (Olinto, 2016, p. 131).

Because of this characteristic, Grotowski starts to use the expression "active culture," in contrast to what he called "passive culture." Passive culture refers to the "consumption" of works, such as attending a show, going to an exhibition or concert, or reading a book. Active culture is the very creative act: a writer when they write, a painter when they paint, a theatre group when they create a show. In general, active culture oversees artists, professionals, and amateurs, whereas passive culture oversees the public. Without disregarding the value of passive culture, Grotowski states that his experiences with the Laboratory Theatre were concentrated on expanding the sphere of "active culture," allowing more people to experience a creative act that is usually reserved for a few artists. In his words:

Participation in active culture—that kind of activity that gives the feeling of executing life, of expanding its dimension—is a need for many, but it remains in the sphere of very few people. [...] In the dimension of the laboratory, which is our own, we work in the *expansion* of the area of active culture. What is the privilege of some can, in fact, be shared by others as well. [...] Working in the Theatre field, doing shows for many years, step by step, we approached an idea of the active man (the actor) [...]. Another step forward has begun in our adventure with active culture. Its elements can be reduced to something very simple, such as acting, reacting, spontaneity, impulse, mutual trust, singing, music, rhythm, improvisation, sound, movement, truth, and dignity of the body. But also: man before man, the human being in the tangible world (Grotowski, 2016, p. 135-136, our translation, emphasis added).

The excerpt is from an interview conducted in 1976, in the middle of the Paratheatre. The notion of "active culture" as one of the master ideas, or central focus of interest of Paratheatre, corresponds precisely to the emphasis given to what was called "Encounter," with a capital "e." This idea of "Encounter" and its parallel terms, such as "contact" and "communion," are present in a



series of texts by Grotowski during the 1970s⁴. Evidently, it was not just any meeting, that is, people simply placed face to face in the same physical space, as in any social gathering. As mentioned above, it was an “Encounter” linked to “disarming” and “revealing oneself,” configuring itself as an intensive, transformative, and non-daily experience.

As Kolankiewicz writes, Paratheatre was a journey “outside the theatre, to the roots of essential culture, communication and perception” (*apud* Olinto, 2016, p. 109, our translation). From this perspective, the “Encounter” would not only be research of Grotowski and his companions, but also an ontological and primordial element of what is scenic. That is, interpersonal communion at the moment of the experience, an element that permeates the various performative manifestations of all regions of the planet, whether these scenic manifestations are socially considered as artistic or not (theatres, religious rituals, games, among other cultural phenomena).

Despite the specificities of each paratheatrical project, all of them shared as a, general and central, purpose the exploration of this ontological element via activities outside the model of already established cultural practices, especially theatre in the Eurocentric sense. Consequently, this implied other general characteristics: 1) the search for overcoming defenses that block genuine interaction, such as calculated actions or behavioral automatisms; 2) isolation, ensuring protection and privacy (absence of external observers); 3) silence, avoiding verbal communication and previous information so as not to anticipate experiences; and 4) the improvisational base, with open structures that allowed spontaneous actions and reactions among participants (Olinto, 2016, p. 130).

From these characteristics/principles of common work, we propose to think of Paratheatre as experiments that focused radically on the essence of the so-called “group theatre,” which is collective interaction, the dimension of theatre as an experience of exchange between human beings. To do so, we will first describe and analyze in a synthetic way the paratheatrical projects and experiments that took place from 1970 to 1982 and then, analyze the relation with the main characteristics of “group theatre.”

3 Paratheatre: brief description

The first document that more explicitly refers to the new work that would be developed was published in mid-1970. In this “Collaboration Proposal,” the Laboratory Theatre has some guidelines, or ideas, of what would become the Paratheatre.

The Wrocław Laboratory Theatre welcomes admission applications to work on a show. The work will focus on living human action and, eventually, music, and will appeal to those who seek to share life—that sharing which makes life possible. Non-professional groups of any kind can submit their application if they seek

⁴ Vide Olinto, 2016, p. 107-108.



their own path and not forms already defined in the amateur movement or forms that imitate professional companies [...] (Grotowski, 2016, p. 21, our translation).

In this invitation, it is possible to see important points of what would constitute the focus of Paratheatre. Although the invitation was for admission applications to work in a “show,” from what is read immediately afterwards, it would be a peculiar work. First, the focus on “living human action,” seeking to attract those who want to “share life,” not just any sharing, but that which “makes life possible.” This invitation also aimed to attract interested parties different from those with whom the Laboratory Theatre had been used to work until then, “non-professional groups of any nature.” In other words, contact was sought with people and groups whose creative experience was outside the commercial and professional sphere and was not circumscribed to theatre, or even to art. It is also worth mentioning the addendum to the invitation regarding such groups: they will be accepted “if they seek their own path and not already defined forms,” which indicates it is a work with the unknown and outside the traditional patterns.

Grotowski and the Laboratory Theatre were already internationally famous, and, at this point, it is possible that an invitation to a new work would attract many actors and people linked to the theatre, interested in exercises, training, and techniques that characterized the group’s work in the previous phase. Thus, to avoid a relationship of merely “professional” or utilitarian bias, the Proposal adds:

Applications that will not be accepted:

- minors and over the age of twenty-three;
- students of Theatre, Cinema, Dance Schools, nor professional actors, singers, and dancers;
- people with diseases that make extremely intense work impossible. [...] The work requires extreme sincerity, not in words, but directly, with the living organism; it requires revealing oneself entirely in what is vital, physical, and personal to each one. To reconcile what is necessary with voluntary adherence, we have adopted the principle that every employee of the theatre has the right to break the agreement at any time and the same right belongs to the theatre, but within the limits indicated by the regulations for defense of the employee (Grotowski, 2016, p. 21-22, our translation).

Although professionals in Performing Arts were not sought, the desired profile cannot be associated with any dilettante and uncommitted amateurism. The demands showed in the collaboration proposal indicate the opposite, such as the need for engagement and openness to the exploration type that would be initiated (“to reveal oneself” in what is vital, “extreme sincerity”). Finally, the invitation also highlights the possibility of any of the parties breaking at any time. This means that participants would choose to remain without any kind of professional bureaucratic obligation, but because of the need to explore into the proposals.

About 300 people responded to the invitation and 70 were selected to participate in meetings that involved experimentation and collective improvisation. This step lasted for four days and four nights and worked as a practical selection. At the end of this process, ten people were chosen to



work separately with Grotowski and Teo Spychalski, one of the important collaborators of that period. This work lasted about two years, when the first public opening of the Paratheatre would take place (mid-1973). After entering and leaving, this new group consists of seven people, who are joined by the former members of the Laboratory Theatre, forming a group of fourteen people who would work on the activities⁵. Jacek Zmysłowski, one of the new members of the paratheatre generation, says that:

Initially, there was no division between “old” and “new.” For example, we worked together on the Special Project and the question of who had what kind of professional preparation or already had this or that practice did not matter. This experience was linked to an entirely different kind of disposition. (Zmysłowski; Burzyński, [1978] 2015, p. 102, our translation).

In the first years Paratheatre was an uncertain exploration, not in the sense of what was really sought, but of what procedures/strategies/activities would be used in this “sharing of life,” in this “Encounter” to “reveal oneself” (Burzyński, 2016, p. 127). In other words: the ideas of active culture and encounter were already guiding issues when this new working group was constituted in 1970, but they would only become effective as systematized work proposals in the “opening” of Paratheatre from 1973 onwards. In this way, the requirement made in the 1970s invitation, the “Collaboration Proposal” mentioned above, regarding the predisposition of those interested to “tread an unknown path” is understandable.

Showing what happened in this period of more closed activities is a difficult task, as historical sources are restricted to photos by Andrzej Paluchiewicz and a few laconic comments from those who were there. However, the aspect of coexistence and the desire to form a group are highlighted points in these reports. In 1972, the Laboratory Theatre bought a small abandoned rural property in Brzezinka, Poland, and, in the same period (1972 and 1973), this group formed by new and old members began to dedicate themselves to work on site, with intense activities along with nature. Among the activities was the place renovation. When analyzing the formation of the group at this early stage, Spychalski, who led these experiments in Brzezinka with Grotowski’s approval, stated that:

This group—of which me, who was between those two generations—began to clean up the proverbial stable and the pigsty, tidying up the wreckage in Brzezinka. Later, I held a month-long work session with them and the next stage of selection followed [...] And after this session, which was in fact my first paratheatrical work, our *Boss* told me, from that moment on, I would work alone with foreigners. This was soon called ‘International Studio’ (Spychalski; Ziółkowski, 2015, p. 155, our translation, emphasis added).

In this statement, note that the activities go far beyond those strictly linked to artistic-theatrical making. Coexistence in Brzezinka required a group organization for trivial tasks, such as cleaning the place, preparing food, providing groceries, lighting the fire, fetching wood, etc. In

5 Cf. Kumiega, 1985.



a certain sense, that “sharing of life” indicated in the proposal for collaboration was not limited to creative work and was also effective in these daily tasks. Here we find a common link with most of the “group theatre”/“third theatre” collectives. Many have formed communities⁶, sharing not only the strict sense work, but the tasks of daily survival.

In addition, this type of isolated coexistence in the middle of nature operated a transformation not only in interpersonal relationships, some of which were worn out during the theatrical phase, but also an experience that would change the way of life and the participants’ own body. As Molik, one of the group’s former members, reports:

This close contact with nature also has changed our body as a whole. Not only our lifestyle, but the body has also changed. [...] We were not the same after the experiences we had with nature via the Paratheatre (Molik; Campo, 2012, p. 103, our translation).

In 1973, the first public opening of the Paratheatre happened. The event was initially called *Holiday*, which was also the title of Grotowski’s published paper, which functioned as a kind of paratheatrical manifesto. Later, the project was renamed Special Project. From that moment on, the paratheatrical activities multiply, unfolding into various experiments and workshops, elaborated and/or conducted by the different members of the group. On these occasions, the outside public could actively participate. Just to name a few activities developed in the period:

Box 1: Paratheatrical workshops

- 1- Acting Therapy, conducted by Zygmunt Molik and aimed at actors and professionals from other areas who needed vocal and body unblocking work;
- 2- Meditations Aloud, conducted by Ludwki Flaszen;
- 3- Event, conducted by Zbigniew Cynkutis in collaboration with Rena Mirecka, was a project aimed at professional actors with a focus on non-technical aspects of scenic work;
- 4- Workshop Meeting, by Stanislaw Scierski – dedicated to the exploration of various forms of human contact;
- 5- International Studio, conducted by Teo Spychalski – was a work offshoot conducted at the beginning of Paratheatre, between 1970-1972;
- 6- Special Project – This project maintained, in a certain sense, the structure and experiments of its beginning, in 1973, before the subdivisions. It was subdivided into two forms: one led by Cieslak, among others, focusing on group activities, and another led by Grotowski, Zmysłowski, Staniewski, and Koslowski.⁷

Source: prepared by the authors

These workshops were all brought together and proposed at an important event, University of Research, in 1975, which was a kind of a climax of Paratheatre. With these subdivisions, there was an even more significant increase in the autonomy of the Laboratory Theatre members, each

6 Examples: *Odin Teatret* (Norway/Denmark), *Living Theatre* (United States), *Théâtre du Soleil* (France), *La Candelária* (Colombia), *Yuyachkani* (Peru), *Teatro Oficina* (São Paulo, Brazil), *Ponto de Partida* (Minas, Brazil), *Ói Nós Aqui Traveiz* (Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), *Asdrúbal Traz o Trombone* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), among many others.

7 For a more detailed description of these projects, see Olinto, 2016, p. 132-133.



one being individually or in pairs/trios the proponents of their own paratheatrical activities. In an interview given by Spsychalski to Ziółkowski (2015), it is evident how, after 1975, the various activities conducted by the Laboratory Theatre began to be led by the members of the group with great autonomy. When asked how he knew what should be done, Spsychalski answers by saying the work occurred by “induction”: “if I knew, I knew it in my bones, by induction [...]. Yes, this happened by induction. Grotowski did not impose anything” (Spsychalski; Ziółkowski, 2015, p. 156, our translation). Still regarding independence, he states: “so, I directed a separate institution within an institution; it was independent of other activities, and I was able to conduct my ideas freely. This evolved and later they merged into the Theatre of Sources” (Spsychalski; Ziółkowski, 2015, p. 156, our translation).

Thus, from the initial work in Brzezinka, with the formation of that small isolated “paratheatrical community,” there had already been a significant break in the hierarchy established within the Laboratory Theatre since its foundation in 1959, despite many still calling Grotowski “boss.” Later, with the Paratheatre opening, an even greater autonomy of the members is evident, compared to the theatrical phase. For example, the fact that Teo Spsychalski leads a parallel group, the *International Studio*, is an important demonstration of this greater autonomy of the members, new and old, and of leadership sharing in the paratheatrical phase.

This change should not be seen as a necessity only of an ethical-ideological order. It should be understood both by an operational need of the group, since numerous paratheatrical activities were developed, and by the nature of the investigations, which opened different “doors,” having the search for the “Encounter” as a great common link. In the text/document entitled “Laboratory Institute: 1975-1976 Programme” (our translation), we find a kind of synthesis of the paratheatrical activities, showing the objectives previously outlined and developed during the practices:

- Research and practical experimentation of the various forms of expression of the human being in action, in the living relationship with others;
- Research and practical experimentation of the conditions in which the human being, interacting with others, acts sincerely and with all of himself.
- [...] – Research and practical experimentation on which forms of contact allow us to rediscover and reinforce the meaning and value of life via the living inter-human connection;
- Research and verification in practice of something that we have given the name of paratheatrical fact and that would be an art form distinct from those known so far – beyond the classic division between those who look and those who act, between man and his product, between the craftsman and the viewer (Grotowski, 2016, p. 109, our translation).

Among the activities in the document are: professional therapy laboratory, theatre studies, psychotherapeutic collaboration, in addition to the International Studio and Special Project (Grotowski, 2016, p. 110). The document also brings the information that for more than a year research programs existed in Poland, the United States, France and Australia, all projects being “open” to the external public and not restricted to the official members of the Laboratory Theatre. These programs conducted in different countries would have provided an even greater expansion



of the reach and diversity of paratheatrical practices, making clear the need for “very heterogeneous forms of expression and inter-human communication” (Grotowski, 2016, p. 109, our translation). We can understand, and the document evidences it, that to achieve the objective of “Encounter” between people, it was necessary to develop multiple types of activities, which transformed the Paratheatre into an “umbrella” concept for very different and concomitant practices, but which had a connection in terms of general objective.

This plurality and multidimensionality of Paratheatre can be understood as the result of the articulation of different factors: individual interests of each member of the Laboratory Theatre based on their subareas of expertise/specialization; the need to find different paths of experimentation in the name of the “Encounter”; the need to meet the expectations of the candidates/participants from outside, expectations that are often related to the professional interest in the strictest theatrical field, that is, in the training and techniques of the theatrical phase; in addition, of course, to budgetary issues, financing, etc. In this sense, Grotowski stressed the division of the Workshops did not correspond to something like a land subdivision with individual owners and there were no “honorary functions by decree” (Grotowski, 2016, p. 134, our translation). There were exchanges of experiences and collaborations for the elaboration of a paratheatrical workshop. Therefore, even if a person had their name registered as the creator and leader of a certain activity, it was the result of collective work. This factor is important, because the structure of the famous Polish company, at that time, was not reduced to a mechanical compartmentalization of positions and projects/workshops, but constituted as a kind of living organism, in which the parts have a relationship with each other, even though there are different roles and activities.

The *University of Research* event also marks the end and the beginning of the first and second phases, respectively, of Paratheatre. In the second phase, elements such as earth, fire, water, honey, and others that were widely used within the experiments until 1975 are abandoned or reduced. At the same time, Grotowski shifted from the general coordination of Paratheatre-related activities, starting the investigations of the “Theatre of Sources,” considered another phase, different research, while other members of the Laboratory Theatre created and led other projects classified as paratheatrical.

Thus, during the second half of the 1970s, new paratheatrical projects emerged: Mountain Project (1976-1977), Vigil (1978-1981), both created and led by Jacek Zmysłowski, and Tree of People (1979-1981), led by actors from the group (Ryszard Cieślak, Zygmunt Molik, Zbigniew Cynkutis, Ludwik Flaszen, Rena Mirecka, Elizabeth Albahaca, among others) without Grotowski’s participation. These new paratheatrical experiments were developed in parallel with Theatre of Sources, while presentations of *Apocalypse* in international festivals and re-editions of the paratheatrical workshops created before or for the *University of Research*, such as, the International Studio by Teo Spychalski. In fact, Spychalski drove his Studio with foreigners in Ostrowina, a rural region near Brzezinka, which functioned as a kind of third headquarters for the Laboratory Theatre, in addition to those in Wrocław and Brzezinka.



Between 1976 and 1977, the *Mountain Project*, properly speaking, was divided into three stages: *Night Vigils* (*Nocne Czuwanie*), *The Way* (*Droga*); and the *Mountain of Flame* (*Góra Plominea*). The *Night Vigils* were a kind of selection for the following phases in which the participants (external audience) met in a closed space for improvisation. The second phase, *The Way*, was precisely the displacement, in the woods, to the castle of Grodzie, on the mountain where the last stage would take place, the *Mountain of Flame*. The *Way* took approximately one to two nights, and it was not just a matter of walking in the woods, as it was permeated by paratheatrical actions (improvisations in silence) in contact with nature. The last stage took place at Grodziec Castle. Located in Legnica, this castle was a historical monument of the Polish state and had been temporarily ceded to the Laboratory Theatre for this project. But improvisations also took place in open spaces in the forest around the castle. The participants stayed a few days at the castle, in which they took turns in almost uninterrupted collective improvisation. It was up to each person to choose the moment to take a break to eat, sleep or other biological needs, or to tidy up and clean the space. As François Kahn reports: “if tiredness was too strong, we could collapse in place, directly to the floor, without changing clothes, without getting ready to sleep” (Kahn, 2019, p. 42, our translation). Upon waking up, the principle was to return to action slowly and directly, like a “slide from deep sleep to movement” (Kahn, 2019, p. 42, our translation). At all times, small subgroups arrived and left, changing the general composition of the collective. The proposed uninterrupted action (improvised movements in silence) crossed the group’s coexistence, so that even daily activities, such as eating or sleeping, were inserted in another logic quite different from the usual/daily one.

The Vigil, a paratheatrical project also created and led by Jacek Zmysłowski, was conducted in several places and countries (such as Poland, Italy, and Germany) between 1977 and 1981, and was basically a reduced and simple version of the *Mountain Project*, analogous to night vigils, with improvisation sessions with no fixed time to end and no verbal communication.

As a last paratheatrical project, we have the *Tree of People*. Led by different actors who are members of the group, the project was conducted between 1979 and 1981, in Poland, Italy, the United Kingdom, and France. *Tree of People* consisted of intense improvisation sessions and was configured as a kind of compilation of elements from previous paratheatrical experiments such as *The Vigil*, *Acting Therapy*, and *Events*.

4 Conclusion: paratheatrical experiences and the culture of group theatre

According to Hegel in “Introduction to the Philosophy of History” (2005), each historical epoch is characterized by a certain set of ideas and sociocultural values that configure the “spirit of the time” (“*Zeitgeist*”) of that moment, a set of historical singularities that may be circumscribed to a certain region of the planet, or that may be a relatively more global phenomenon. If we focus on the 1960s and 1970s, the spirit of the time of this historical period was called “counterculture.”



This was a relatively global socio-political-cultural movement, although stronger in some countries than in others, and characterized by an extreme libertarian character and a radical contestation of moral values, current political orders (capitalism and socialism), and traditional cultural practices. Specifically within the theatrical field, this spirit of countercultural contestation gave rise to phenomena such as “group theatre,” “collective creation,” and the “third theatre,” in the name of Eugenio Barba (2010), among others, which have as a common point the strong questioning of the entire *modus operandi* of the “director’s theatre” (Berthold, 2001, p. 529).

As already partially shown in the introduction of this article, it is possible to recognize certain aspects in common in what is called “group theatre,” despite the enormous heterogeneity encompassed in this expression and considering the specific configuration that each theatrical collective can show. Although extremely unique in their numerous specificities in the various projects and unrepeated in other groups of the period, certain nuances attuned with trends and the “spirit of the time” of the culture of group theatre can be observed. Below, we will analyze these aspects in three topics.

4.1 Dehierarchization, greater autonomy of members, and diversification of activities

As analyzed above, there is a tendency towards a mode of internal organization marked by mutual collaboration, in a relationship with greater horizontality and autonomy among the members of the group, compared to the traditional model of modern staging. It is a work dynamic in which not only leadership and authorship are purposely shared, but there can also be a rotation of functions on different work fronts (concomitance of activities that are not just shows). This type of work structure has several reasons, other than just to account for an ethical-political-ideological demand, that is, collectivization as a posture whose intention is to have a more anarchic/anti-capitalist group functioning, and which, therefore, corresponded to the critical thinking in vogue at that historical moment (counterculture). As seen in the example of the Laboratory Theatre, the motivations are various and overlapping: whether to ensure the survival of the collective (financing multiple simultaneous actions or accountability to State or private development agencies), or due to the artistic needs of the members of the collective (different research), or another reason. Regardless of the motivating reason, it is a more complex structure of operation in relation to the collectivization of work, less hierarchical, and, consequently, very different from the scheme established by modern staging, in which both functions within the collectives are more clearly distinct and separated, and there is a strong hierarchy of directors/actors/other professionals. As a main consequence, we have the fact that the creative result (shows, workshops, experiments of coexistence or any other type of “product”/experience) is more a direct result of a process of interaction of subjects-creators, than a conceived project *a priori* by a person, although very commonly there is a previously defined theme as a starting point. As



Jacek Zmysłowski said in an interview conducted by Burzyński: “it was all the creation of all the participants” (Zmysłowski; Burzyński, [1978] 2015, p. 102, our translation).

Obviously, one can and should problematize this collectivization of “everything” within paratheatrical projects and groups self-styled “group theatre”/“collective creation,” as Ary and Santana (2015) did. To a certain extent, it is a utopia motivated by certain political-philosophical visions, precisely because it is very difficult (perhaps impossible) to be 100% fulfilled in a strict sense, that is, total collectivization and dehierarchization. Certain figures would thus inevitably end up being chief leaders to some extent, with a more active role in the creative processes and, therefore, with certain authority and greater responsibility/authorship. A good example is the paratheatrical experience that have always had a leader, with or without the collaboration of Grotowski. Within this point of view, there is an “alleged inexistence of hierarchy” (Ary; Santana, 2015, p. 31, our translation). But, on the other hand, it is undeniable that from the 1960s and 1970s, groups such as Laboratory Theatre and Odin Teatret institute the “group culture,” via which theatrical making is seen and pragmatically “processed” as a collective experience and whose authorship belongs to a group and not to a single individual. In Roubine’s words: “(...) it is the set of all those who represent the text that constitutes its collective author” (Roubine, 1982, p. 66-67, our translation). Even so, nowadays, the coexistence of group culture with directors who work in the model of modern staging is undeniable, which results in specific, perhaps unique, configurations within each group/company, between the two great models: that of the centralizing director or that of collective creation.

This greater dehierarchization, greater autonomy of the group members and greater fluidity of functions reinforce the historical process of emancipation of the scene (Dort, 2013) in the face of dramatic literature, “expelling” in many cases the playwright from the process (notion of collective creation) or placing them in the rehearsal room, creating together (concept of collaborative process according to Araújo and Abreu⁸).

4.2 Theatrical practice as research and valorization of improvisation within the processes

Another howling aspect is the presence of a certain laboratory perspective, that is, that artistic work is a continuous research and practice, and not a “factory” to produce shows or other activities that follow a fixed formula. In this sense, we see the experimental attitude that justifies the term “experimental theatre” used by Roose-Evans (2008) and other authors. There is a “group culture” that governs relationships, with ethical and political implications far beyond the mere

8 According to Antônio Araújo (2008) and Luís Alberto de Abreu (2003), what differentiates the “collective creation” from what they called the “collaborative process” is the presence of the playwright role composing the text with the other professionals throughout the creative process of a show and not before its beginning. In collective creation, the text would also be created together during rehearsals, but without someone signing the playwright role.



commercial relationship. This research perspective implies an appreciation of the creative process, which is considered as or more important than the results (works or other type of creative activity). It also implies an enormous appreciation of improvisation, either as a central procedure for the composition of plays or as the focus of the creative process, as was the case with Paratheatre. As previously described, one of the common elements of the various paratheatrical projects was having improvisation as a central basis, even if there were some strategies for conducting the experiences that can be considered as ways of structuring/repeating the same universe of scores, as discussed by Olinto (2016). However, “giving up” theatre and the creation of shows had to do precisely with the belief that fixing a scenic structure and repeating it (composition of a theatrical show) would make it difficult for the participants to be open to the “Encounter,” as Grotowski defends in the paper *Holiday* (Schechner; Wolford, 1997, p. 215-225). In an analogous way, we see in the collectives of “group theatre” a kind of centrality of improvisational practices as the main engine of the creative processes, even when there is a dramaturgical text as a starting point or someone who signs the direction of the show. In this sense, we have free, structured, or semi-structured improvisations being used as techniques for composing theatrical plays or as a path to creative experience and human interaction. This does not imply improvisation was not used in creative processes or within spectacular structures. As Chacra (2007) analyzed, improvisation is an ontological element of what is scenic; an element that is sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, since it is impossible to reproduce a performance in the same way as it is done in cinema, which leads to small implicit improvisations even in well-structured scores. “There is a minimum of something ‘new’ in each show” (Chacra, 2007, p. 16, our translation). On the other hand, there are theatrical genres, some very old, in which improvisation is explicitly invested as a mechanism for interaction with the audience, creating an effect of spontaneity in the scenes and/or for humor production. The big difference in the culture of group theatre is the establishment of another type of application and even understanding improvisation.

4.3 Community Formation, problematization art X life, professionals X amateurs

Another important aspect is the questioning of the art-life separation, which is a general characteristic of the counterculture period. On stage, this meant an opposition to the representational and a preference for the performative or, in other words, it was the “performative turn,” discussed by Fischer-Lichte (2019, p. 25). It is no coincidence that, at the same historical moment, we have the emergence of Performance Art, which shows the rupture with theatrical representation as one of its main characteristics. But, regarding theatrical collectives, even if they did not radicalize as much as the Performance artists in this rupture, the aim was to rub “real” issues of a personal/intimate or sociopolitical nature with fictional stories/texts. As previously analyzed, this tendency was already present in the Laboratory Theatre since the theatrical phase and is further radicalized in the Paratheatre in its search for the “Encounter” without the “ties” of the fixed structure of a theatrical



show. Off stage, this also implied a change in the artists' way of life, which led to the formation of small theatrical communities that escaped both the logic of professional companies and the logic of amateur groups. This phenomenon is in line with Barba's analysis, with his term "third theatre": a theatre created by people who define themselves as actors, directors, theatre workers, although they rarely have a traditional theatrical training and, therefore, are not recognized as professionals (Barba, 2010, p. 187). But they are not amateurs. And this intermediate condition of amateur professionals (those who love) was provided by the formation of communities, by the creation of theatrical groups in which individuals come together not only to make theatre/art, but to coexist in a micro-society. These are groups often outside the large urban centers, where not only work, but life in general and livelihoods are divided.

This type of experience is present in the spaces of theatrical creation while reflecting a broader context of the counterculture. In a world dominated by the Cold War, art and life were mixed in a unique coexistence that was a form of existential and political resistance both to the logic of the capitalist market (structure of companies) and to the logic of standardization and control of the production and consumption of art implanted in the countries that were socialists at that historical moment. Thus, not only the way of internal organization of the collectives for artistic creation, but also for the accomplishment of tasks (from the trivial to the vital) were directly affected by another logic that constituted the foundation of the group theatre experience. In Paratheatre, although a long-term theatrical community was not formed, as was the case with Odin Teatret and other groups, one can see this same drive and coexistence not circumscribed to moments of creation and artistic work. As Molik reported, the paratheatrical experiences with nature had reverberations in the way of life and in the participants' own organism, evidencing an imbrication between art and life.



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