The Politics of Acting, or How to stay open to this world (Theatre Academy Helsinki, 2002)

For more than a century, Americans have thought that large-scale violence was something we sent young men to engage in somewhere else: in Europe, in the Pacific, in Korea, in Vietnam, Central America, in Iraq or in Kosovo… but it was not something we could experience at home. War was a kind of theater piece to which we, at home, were a distant audience, it was not something in which we were actors.

And after 9/11 George W. Bush—perhaps believing that the way to stay safe at home is to kill people somewhere else—called acts of terror a "war," which allowed Americans to return to their accustomed relationship to violence—the kind you can participate in while sitting comfortably in a warm house.

One of the stories I heard after 9/11 seemed to me to exemplify this American relationship to the theater of violence. The story was told by one of my acting students who worked in a downtown restaurant less than a kilometer from the World Trade Center. That morning, as the buildings were burning, the restaurant telephone rang, and when she answered it, the man on the other end asked, "Can you see the disaster from the front of the restaurant?" "Yes," she said. "Then give me a reservation for eight people, for fifteen minutes from now at a front table," said the man. She told him the restaurant was closing.

I don't know about how it is here in Finland, but I think for many Americans, it is not just war but life itself which is experienced as though it were a spectator sport, something you can witness from a safe distance, but you do not really have to live through. Life is like a program you see on television, a story interspersed with commercials for products you can quickly find in the refrigerator before you return to the couch to watch the next episode.

And I would like to believe that theater is—or has the possibility of being—an antidote [*en motgift*] to this deadly idea.

The Polish director and teacher, Jerzy Grotowski, with whom I studied in 1967, believed that what made theater special was the presence of the actor and the audience, alive and together. – He thought this presence was vital to the audience and that it was vital to the actors. And, in his early work, in order to explore this special situation, Grotowski made efforts to destroy all the barriers to the complete presence of the actors and the audience. In staging plays, he experimented with placing the audience around the actors. He had his actors perform for very small groups. He avoided using lighting or make-up that might distance the audience from the actors. And he trained his actors to expose

themselves emotionally – to "sacrifice" themselves, in his words – in the presence of the audience.

In fact, the training he created with his actors was so powerful and transformative for them, that Grotowski began to wonder why such experiences should be had only actors. Why shouldn't everyone be able to experience the deep joy of creative investigation which he called, "active culture?" Why, he wondered, did there need to be any separation at all between "actors" and "audience?"

To explore this possibility, in 1970 he stopped directing plays and began instead to create a "Theater of Participation" in which he led "holy-days" for groups of untrained participants. He said:

> I think that active culture (most commonly called creativity), and above all the concomitant perception and experience, do not have to be the privilege of small groups of professionals or unique individuals, although it is they who create and will continue to create plays and performances.

In later years, Grotowski stopped directing entirely. Instead he trained actors to be audiences for themselves, witnesses of their own transformation. But at each stage of his development, one thing that drove his investigations was the idea that acting training offers a means of letting down the barriers which we and our societies have created--barriers around ourselves and within ourselves—which prevent us from actually experiencing the world and our own lives.

In their book, *Grotowski's Laboratory*, Burzynski and Oshinski describe it this way:

> One of the points of departure is an observation that 'the whole everyday world is theatre'. In conventionalized daily life, in life which is a battlefield, man …[has] … armed himself with a rich arsenal … of defense[s] and aggression which are indispensable for him …[in his] struggle for existence. This armory … consists of masks …[and] conventions which have stifled what is spontaneous in us. There remains, however … another pole beyond that of struggle, game, pretense, which reveals itself at least as a dream and a human need.

Although Grotowski did not see himself as an overtly political artist, there was in fact something profoundly subversive in his idea that the essence of theater work is to break down the everyday armor that we use to "struggle" through our lives.

Grotowski's proposition that the "masks" we wear in our daily life are in some sense less "real" than the reality of the theater seems paradoxical. For theater is clearly built out of imaginary circumstances, memorized scripts and fantastic stories. It is a dream world. And yet most actors have at some point had the experience that this "dream world" is, in some ways, more alive, more "real" than the "real" world.

When we dream at night, most of us lose our awareness that we are in bed asleep. And when we wake up in the morning, it is hard for us to hold on to our dreams. And similarly, it is difficult for actors to remain aware of the reality of the audience and the reality of the play at the same time. They seem to fear that the reality of the audience will somehow undermine or destroy the reality of the play. And so they fight against this "stage fright."

But you know, in Shakespeare's time, plays were usually performed outdoors, in the sunlight which shone equally on the actors and on the audience. So when Shakespeare's characters spoke an aside or a soliloquy, they spoke to people they could see and hear. In Shakespeare's plays, therefore, many of the characters actually treat the audience as allies. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, it seems that the Balcony Scene is an intimate love scene between two young people who are alone in a garden. But, in another way they are not at all alone.

When Juliet says:
Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse they name;
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
And Romeo responds:
Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

But when he asks this question, who is Romeo asking? In fact, he is asking *us* in the audience, we, who he treats as his most intimate friends. I have coached actors working on this scene several times, and each time, as soon as the actor playing Romeo has discovered that he can actually talk directly to the audience, the scene has come to life. For as he speaks to us as his friends, we actually *become* his friends better, more intimate friends than Romeo's "real" friends, Mercutio and Benvolio. To get the support he needs to be "alone" with Juliet, the actor playing Romeo must not be "alone" at all. In other words the actor must be "awake" and "dreaming" at the same time.

The same is true for Juliet when she is waiting "alone" for Romeo to visit her, and for Hamlet when he is "alone" with his thoughts, and for Othello when he is about to kill Desdemona. In every case, Shakespeare invites the actor to see the audience as his or her allies.

In 1967 Grotowski said that actors must always search for a "safe partner" in front of whom to perform. To transform the audience into such a safe partner, he taught an exercise he called "attribution," in which the actor "attributed" imagery to the audience, he did not block out the audience, but rather helped himself to see the audience he needed to see. Years later, when I was asked to play the part of the Biblical character Samuel, I had not acted at all for several years and I found myself filled with stage fright. But the Judge Samuel was a very powerful man, and it would not work for me to be frightened on stage. I solved the problem not by blocking out the audience, but by allowing myself to see them differently. In the front row, I let myself see the faces of little children. And since these little children were not at all threatening to me, I felt very safe acting in front of them.

In fact, Grotowski felt that establishing safety is the most fundamental element for an actor. He said:

> The essential problem is to give the actor the possibility of working "in security." The work of the actor is in danger, continuously supervised and observed. One must create an atmosphere, a working system, in which the actor feels that he can do anything, and that nothing he does will be mocked, that all will be understood…. Often, the moment the actor understands this, he reveals himself.

Grotowski felt, this act—the act of "revealing oneself"—is the most essential work of the actor. Thus, the most intimate moments on stage are not "private," they are shared with the audience—shared as one shares oneself with a lover. And this is true not only in Shakespeare or in other plays which require "soliloquies." In fact most plays contain many "private moments" of one kind or another, moments in which one character will turn away from the other character on stage to talk about a memory, for instance.

Sometimes, when I work with young actors on scene-work, they search for such private moments by turning upstage or to the side. They lift their eyes to the sky or lower them to the floor—they do anything but to look straight out to the audience. But, as soon as they dare to look straight out, to share their most intimate images and thoughts with *us*, the scene becomes much stronger, not simply because we in the audience can then see the acting but because they discover, as Romeo does, that by treating the audience as if we were your friends, your confidants, your safe partners, you can actually transform us into such allies.

The lesson of this discovery is central to acting: For in many ways it is true that one *creates* a truth by enacting it. In the physical acting training which I teach, the actor discovers that by *enacting* a certain body gesture, he can discover within himself the real emotion which that gesture evokes.

Perhaps it would be useful to note that this acting lesson also applies to the "real" world. By treating others as friends, we tend to actually *make* them into friends. And by treating others as enemies, we create enemies. One wishes George Bush could have understood that by *seeing* enemies all around, the United States quite literally *creates* enemies all around.

But it is not only leaders like George Bush and Osama bin Ladin who see life as a struggle to protect oneself from one's enemies. Most children go through a period of "fear of strangers." And for some adults this "fear of strangers" becomes the ruling condition of their lives. We call such people "xenophobes" or "racists" or "paranoid" –though sometimes, it seems, we elect such people to be der Führer, or Mr. President.

But most of us are not that paranoid, we simply find ways to avoid the strangers we fear: the poor, the old, the sick. And even actors, who are some of the most open and outgoing people in the world, sometimes protect themselves from the strangers they fear the most: the audience.

In film and television, of course, actors are completely protected from the audience. If there is a live audience, it is told when to applaud, and if a television comedy program is taped, the "laugh track" is added afterwards.

And in even in the live theater, as acting moved from the thrust stage to the proscenium, from the daylight into the court, from candles to electricity, and now from live voice to the microphone, actors have gained more "power" by creating more and more defenses against the distractions of the audience. But this power is a dictatorial kind of power, a power which actually deprives the actor of the presence of the audience, and of the energy that he might get from them.

There are even seductions toward this separation in acting training. In order to increase the depth of their own experience, actors learn to concentrate, to exclude unwanted distractions from their consciousness. Some actors learn to concentrate so hard on maintaining their character, that they cannot truly listen or react to others on stage. Other actors concentrate on playing "actions" or "objectives," and they are always putting out so much energy, that they cannot take energy in.

But acting techniques which encourage you to exclude the energy you might receive from the outside are, in the end, counter-productive. They are the theatrical equivalents of having a massive army or a strict immigration policy, the means by which nations maintain their "freedom" and their "way of life" by

holding feared people, ideas or cultures outside. And then all the energy you exclude from your work is unavailable to your creativity.

Some acting methods even teach students that their own, private personal thoughts and feelings are dangerous to them in their work. There are some acting teachers in America who teach their students to "leave their personal issues at the door," outside the work. But Jerzy Grotowski proposed the opposite. For him the work space was "sacred," but "sacred" did not mean exclusive. In fact in a way, what made it sacred was that it included everything. Grotowski said:

> If during creation we hide the things that function in our personal lives, you may be sure that our creativity will fall.

His idea was not that the actor should eliminate things from her consciousness, but that she should open her awareness to everything, adding "safe partners" to give herself the strength to work with anything that arises.

Today we live in a compartmentalized world, a world in which everyone has become a specialist and has no understanding of what others do. The auto-mechanic, the lawyer and the stock-broker each think of each other as "experts," and each thinks that he is incapable of mastering the expertise of the other. We all feel overwhelmed and insecure about our own abilities, so it is natural that all of us, including actors, should protect ourselves from each other. And so it is to be expected that in the theater, actors protect themselves from the audience and encourage the public to believe they are so high above them that they are called "stars."

But, if we in the theater can overcome our own fear of the audience, if we can demonstrate by example that it can be empowering to let go of our "power," then perhaps the theater can also help other people overcome the fears which separate them from each other.

Some of the work I have been doing during the past few years has attempted to do just that. For instance, I was one of the writers of *The Laramie Project*, a play about the people of the town of Laramie, Wyoming, in the West of the United States, where a homosexual student had been killed. The play was made by the actors who interviewed the people of the town and created a text from the townspeople's actual words. Eventually *The Laramie Project* performed in New York City and it was even made into a television movie, but for me, the most moving performances of *The Laramie Project* took place when the play performed in Laramie itself where the people who were represented as characters in the play came to see themselves enacted on stage. In those performances, the question of who was the audience and who were the dramatic

characters was completely changed. And the usual power relationship between actor and audience was altered. In those performances, it was the audience who were the "stars," for it was they who had created the story by living their lives and by speaking their own truths.

In some ways *The Laramie Project* was very "presentational," very Brechtian. But if it was a *lehrstück*, it was one in which the audience were not just students, they were also teachers. It is this possibility, that theater can actually *empower* the audience which fascinates me now.

But if theater is to empower the audience, two things are necessary. The first is that, as Jerzy Grotowski proposed, the actor himself must feel safe, safe enough to risk giving up his armor. And the second is that the actor must treat the audience not just as *receivers* of his creativity, but as creative beings in their own right and as sources of energy.

This idea lies at the heart of the work which Augusto Boal has created, the work he calls the Theater of the Oppressed the purpose of which is to empower the audience. And it is also central to the Teater Sjukhusclowner which was created last year by Lilli Sukula-Lindblom, a graduate of this program.

But as clowns all know, to stay open to the power and the creativity of the audience requires taking the risk of making a fool of oneself, which, like taking the risk of falling in love, is a gesture of self-sacrifice. When we take that risk, we demonstrate to our audiences that the act of letting down one's defenses is not so terrifying, that in fact when we let go of our self-protection, we actually become more powerful. And wouldn't it be wonderful if our audiences could learn that?

After all, who are we to criticize the violent, paranoid leaders of the world if we ourselves cannot let down our own defenses and open our borders to the audience?

Or to put it another way, to open ourselves on stage is not just an aesthetic choice, it is a public act of love and therefore a revolutionary act. For as Ché Guevera said:

Al riesgo de paracer ridiculo, déjeme decirle que el revolucionario verdadero ésta guidado para los grandes sentimentos de amór.

(At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by feelings of great love.)