

The **Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards** and **Action**

The **Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski** was founded in 1986 at the invitation of the **Centro per la Sperimentazione e la Ricerca Teatrale** of Pontedera, Italy, its director Roberto Bacci and Carla Pollastrelli.

In 1996 Jerzy Grotowski decided that the name of the Workcenter changes into: **Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards**, because, as he specified, the direction of the practical work already concentrated itself in the hands of Thomas Richards.

Between these two dates, Jerzy Grotowski realized with Thomas Richards the process of transmission in the ancient, traditional sense of the word.

In 1987, Thomas Richards was at the same time the main doer and the leader of **Downstairs Action**. This opus, called thus simply because of its placement at the downstairs floor of the work building, was filmed in 1989 by Mercedes Gregory. Several other creations followed, under various forms but at the time most often without exterior observers. From 1994, Thomas Richards directs **Action**, the opus which he created and on which he carries on a continuous work.

Action structures, in a material linked to performing arts, the work on oneself of the doers.

The opus is composed of lines of actions elaborated in detail, constructed with and around ancient vibratory songs. Most of these songs are African and Afro-Caribbean in origin, and therefore are in the languages practiced by those cultures.

In **Action**, there also appear, often under the form of incantations, fragments of a text in English translated word by word from Coptic. This text comes from a very remote source of the Judeo-Christian tradition; one cannot say anything with certitude about its arising.

In theatrical performances strictly speaking, that is in art as presentation, normally one of the indispensable elements is the story, the narration. A story is told,

even if the essential may be something else. For the observer of **Action**, however, it would be more pertinent not to look for a story - the analogy would be rather poetry than narrative prose.

The fact is that in **Action** we do not look to tell a story. It's not an opus in the domain of art as presentation, but in the domain of art as vehicle. Since we can see the performing arts as a chain with numerous links, where at one extremity one finds art as presentation (theatre in the strict sense), and at the other extremity, art as vehicle.

It's something very ancient, rather forgotten. In art as vehicle there are opuses, but they do not necessarily demand the presence of exterior observers, since this work does not orient itself towards the spectator as an objective. Because of that, witnesses may be present or not.

For the persons doing, the doers, the opus is a kind of vehicle for the work on oneself, in the sense that, as in certain old traditions, the attention for art goes together with the approach of the interiority of the human being.

If we speak in terms of qualities of energy, in **Action** the work on the ancient vibratory songs becomes a sort of itinerary starting from the vital, the biological even, to go towards the subtle: the ascent towards the subtle and the descent of this subtle towards the level of more ordinary reality.

From the point of view of technical elements everything here is almost as in a normal theatre work of long duration. We essentially work on the songs, but we also work on the impulses, the score of reactions, the logic of the minutest actions, archaic models of movement, the word, so ancient that it's almost always anonymous. Everything depends on the artisanal competence with which we are able to work, on the quality of the details, the quality of the actions and rhythm, on the order of elements. So, we look to be impeccable from the point of view of craft. In **Action** as much as in a performance of art theatre, the structure is repeatable; it has a beginning, a development and an end, where each element should have its technically necessary logical place.

Fairly often exterior observers are invited to see **Action**. In the beginning, this involved a very small number of people, but now after all these years there have been in total thousands of witnesses - but always in little groups.

When from time to time a theatre group comes to visit the team of the Workcenter, each observes the work of the other, opuses and exercises included (however, with no reciprocal active participation). Up to the present more than 120 groups have taken part in this kind of exchange of work.

These meetings with theatre groups were more frequent some years ago; now it's more a question of groups of individuals, persons who are interested in investigations in the domain of arts, often with a prevalence of actors.

The team of doers of **Action** is formed by participants who are selected from among numerous candidates, many of whom are actors. The work takes many hours by day, six days a week, and does not leave time to have an outside job, and the Workcenter does not have the means to pay and house the participants. Since the minimum duration of permanence at the Workcenter is one year, the participants should have the money to support themselves during their time here. Selections take place at the interval of one year or more.

Thomas Richards, therefore, works with a team of doers whose composition can vary. An intense practice of apprenticeship is thus necessary which allows to integrate the new doers in a basic structure, and to continue always to deepen that structure. The individuals, the particular members of the group are bringing their different potentialities. And within the group there is, permanently, the presence of Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, who, as doers, are working in creative tandem.