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Evaluation of the
PhD dissertation *Farm in a Cave – a Laboratory Theatre* by Krystyna Mogilnicka MA

The dissertation by Krystyna Mogilnicka is a complex attempt to analyze European artistic laboratory theatres from the second part of 20th century. In her own words: “This study is about particular way of making theatre and its interests (...)”, (p.6). It consists of two parts: Part I – *Laboratory Theatres* and Part II – *Farm in a Cave*. In the first part the author presents different theatre ensembles connected with the idea of laboratory theatres. She creates a connection starting with Jerzy Grotowski Laboratory Theatre (Chapter 1: *Grotowski – a Visionary and a Craftsman*), leading through Grotowski's collaborator Eugenio Barba and his Odin Teatret (Chapter 3: *Odin Teatret - a Thick Description of Theatre*) to Włodzimierz Staniewski and Gardzienice Theatre (Chapter 5: *Gardzienice – Anthropological Inspiration*). Into this line Ms Mogilnicka weaves in a more theoretical chapter about the notion of laboratory theatres in general (Chapter 2: *Theatre as a 'Liminal' Place – About Laboratory Theatres*) and introduces an unknown Czech theatre group that also worked as laboratory theatre (Chapter 4: *White Theatre – a Laboratory and the Politics*). This part creates a background for second part which is completely devoted to a main subject of Ms Mogilnicka's thesis, that is the theatre ensemble Farma v Jeskyni (Farm in a Cave).

Ms Mogilnicka did not write a monograph of the group but analysed how, through artistic procedures, Farma is inscribing itself into a stream of theatre groups that treat their work as an anthropological laboratory of art. Thanks to this we can trace the flow of certain artistic ideas and methods. First chapter of the second part is dedicated to foundations of the theatre group, that is to the first theatre project *Lorca* that led to the performance *Dark Love Sonnets*. Here the author presents also the vita of Viliam Dočolomanský – the founder of the company. Next chapters are dedicated to the analysis of consequent theatre project undertaken by Farma v Jeskyni. This part of the dissertation gives valuable and interesting insight into the artistic practice of the group,

showing how different performances were born out of „artistic research”, which methods were developed according to the needs of the theme and subjects that were explored. Ms Mogilnicka very carefully traces the spores, recalls contexts of Farma's work. She shows very convincingly how, through separate performances, different training methods were created and how their artistic methods were changed under the influence of the subjects that were presented.

Introduction plays very important role not only in composition of the dissertation but also explains the perspective from which Ms Mogilnicka writes her thesis as she was collaborating with Farma v Jeskyni for many years, which gave her very unique inner perspective into the work of the group. She combines this perspective of personal attachment with well-grounded methods of solid scientific research which saved her work from being apologetic and sustain traditions of scientific objectivity.

This personal, inner perspective explains the methodology Ms Mogilnicka uses in her dissertation as – while presenting separate laboratory theatre groups she uses the same „inner perspective” but presented by the artists she evokes in the first part of her dissertation. So consecutive groups are first and foremost analysed by artists-followers, or as Grotowski would named them - „brothers in arms”. From a researcher's point of view this is a very interesting perspective as it enables to confront the theoretical assumptions and artistic practices of one artist with his „participating observer” who later „took after” and developed in his own way some motives of the first one. So Grotowski is partly introduced by Barba. Narrative in this chapter is led by Barba and latter Grotowski's collaborator Thomas Richards with some supplements from Ryszard Cieślak and Grotowski himself. As it comes to Barba he is almost the only one who gives the readers insight into his work and its methods. This is also the case of White Theatre which is presented only by former members (in this case it can be explain by lack of other sources). Gardzienice of Włodzimierz Staniewski are presented by Dočolomanský, so „Grotowski line” seems to be present in artistic practise of Farma via Staniewski, whom Ms Mogilnicka consider to be a „key collaborator” of Grotowski in the 70. (p.84). In this way Ms Mogilnicka quite convincingly draws a line of certain laboratory theatre tradition whose origins she trace in Grotowski artistic practice. Although I value the work done by Ms Mogilnicka very highly some questions arise with regard to her dissertation.

As some say, the value of scientific research lies in its power to create polemic. My questions grew out of the idea of “laboratory theatre” presented by Ms Moglinicka. The first sentence of her dissertation goes as follows: “Laboratory theatres grew out of the need to seek out the truth through the body – a need to find something primal and essential for humanity” (p.6) This is true

for some “particular” groups but not for all laboratory theatres. Ms Mogilnicka seems to be aware of that when putting in the footnote on the same page an explanation why she uses the term “laboratory theatre” and not “theatre laboratory”: “I use the term 'laboratory theatre' and not 'theatre laboratory' consciously, referring primarily to Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre that created 'a model' for modern laboratory theatres, influenced by previous, historical theatre laboratories.” (p.6). Establishing by this her starting point she seems to underestimate the influence that these “previous theatre laboratories” had on Grotowski model of “laboratory theatre”. The basic form of distinction between old ones and the new ones seems to be for her an attitude towards the human body, as it is stated in already quoted sentence and also here: “In laboratory theatres, the body is the essence of human existence and a manner of experiencing the world is presented as something universal to which everybody has access.” (p.6). This statement sends us to an anthropological perspective of theatre research which is presented here as “universal” in the context of “laboratory theatres”. By making this generalisation the author seems to ignore the fact that at the same time as Grotowski Laboratory Theatre there existed laboratory theatre groups that searched not only through the body and were e.g. laboratories of social and political change as the group evoked in the thesis - The Living Theatre of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, who, by the way, did not die in 1983 (p. 279) but in 1985. This is also the case of polish Teatr Ósmego Dnia, which on one hand search new artistic meaning not through the body, but with the body, partly inspired by Grotowski's practice and fits the definition quoted by Ms Mogilnicka after Mirella Schino: “laboratory is a theatre which doesn't want to be art” (p.42). Aren't these groups “modern laboratories” in the sense that is used by Ms Mogilnicka? Both of these groups can be named laboratory theatres and also “alternative theatres”, that are – according to Ms Mogilnicka - “by definition (...) theatre [that] communicates with smaller groups of spectators” (p.39). My questions are: who says so and why - for example in the context of street performances that were given by both these groups?

Specific features of “modern laboratory theatre” “in general” are given in Conclusions through the example of the analyzed group: “Farm in the Cave's methodology carries specific implications for laboratory theatre in general: they taking inspirations from anthropological approach using 'expeditions' – trips undertaken for artistic inspirations; their searching for non-textual strategies for crafting the visual text, their non-linear way of building a story-line composed as a music of physical images and vocal intonations and their creation of character types based on improvisation” (p. 246). This list makes the picture of laboratory theatre a bit unclear for me: what is the distinction between “historical” and modern ones? Not all laboratories “were taking

inspirations from anthropological implications”, also the idea of “trips undertaken for artistic inspirations” is a bit older than the groups presented by Ms Mogilnicka. Similar approach for example can be traced in the practice of Konstantin Stanislavsky, who in search for “the truth” on the stage was taking his actors to Khitrovyy Square during the rehearsals for *Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky or trips to Novogorod and Tver during rehearsals for *Tzar Fedor Ioannovich*, and also in Leopold Sulerzhitsky trips with *duchoborcy* that influenced his idea of MkhT First Studio.

The figure of Stanislavsky appears several times in the dissertation but his role, as a person belonging to “historical laboratory theatres” is underestimated. Grotowski did not “introduce a certain model of theatre-group based on a strong working ethos of discipline and precision and as-long-as-necessary creation process; in this way he successfully presented effects of his research into the theatre craft” (pp.14-15), it was rather Stanislavsky. This model has a long history of theatre studio from the beginnings of 20th century. More ideas connected by Ms Mogilnicka with Grotowski comes from Stanislavsky, this inspiration Grotowski never denied. Grotowski in this context would be rather a kind of *pontifex* – the one that created a bridge between traditional studio-laboratory theatre aim at the development of the art and new model where artistic methods and means are used for something else than art itself.

Such a model of theatre group, described by Ms Mogilnicka on pp.14-15, was rather connected with experimentations of Russian artists and other modernist theatres with the strong position of director, so this is not a distinctive feature for “laboratory theatre” versus “theatre laboratory”. History of “theatre laboratory” is well analyzed in a book by Katarzyna Osińska *Klasztory i laboratoria. Rosyjskie studia teatralne: Stanisławski, Meyerhold, Sulerżycki, Wachtangow*. According to Osińska, in laboratory theatres “research and artistic experimentation are supreme goals” (p.8). The juxtaposition of Osińska’s explanation with this given by Schino more clearly shows the existing difference between “historical” and “modern” laboratories.


Ms Mogilnicka comes around this, in my opinion, fundamental distinction treating historical theatre laboratories as some misty subject. Although she evokes the tradition of Russian studios (p. 45), does not develop the reflection how they influenced Grotowski’s practice. It is even difficult to establish when she sees the origins of “theatre laboratories”. On page 30 she writes that: “From a historical point of view the first 'laboratory' was Studio created by Stanislavsky in the early 1930s to educate actors and develop the method of physical actions”. A page earlier we can read that “one of the very first European laboratories” was “Theatre Workshop of Joan Littlewood” founded in 1945. The author seems to ignore the fact that different Studios were created around MkhT (and later MkhT) already in 1905 (Studio on Povarska Street, led by Vsevolod Meyerhold),

1911 (by Yevgeny Vakhtangov), 1912 (First Studio by Sulerzhitsky). Around 1920 Jean Jacques Copeau created his laboratory. On page 34 the author evokes "Reduta – Polish theatre laboratory (1919-1939) founded by Mieczysław Limanowski and Juliusz Osterwa as a commune that traveled to the most remote places in Poland". This collection of quotation shows how unclear the idea of "theatre laboratory" is and that this historical movement is treated by Mogilnicka as negative for laboratories she is interested in. She seems to secure herself quoting Barba: "Even if Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov or Copeau used exercises to prepare their actors, this practice did not spread and get popular in the mainstream theatre" (p. 253), but one can argue with Barba, especially in the case of Stanislavsky, whose "method" became very popular (or even obligatory) in mainstream theatres in Eastern Europe, but also was the basic acting method for American actors (in both versions – Stella Adler's and Lee Strasbergs'). Barba is first of all an artist, from a researcher one can expect more critical thinking. That is why I can not agree with conclusion driven by Ms Mogilnicka from Barba's quotation: "Even if laboratory theatres existed before Grotowski, his theatre proposed an actor's method and Barba's theatre group proposed 'a model' that could be repeated" (p. 253). Such a model – drama-repertory theatre was created by Stanislavsky and Nemirovych-Danchenko and was obligatory (and still is popular) for mainstream theatres in Eastern Europe.

It is quite obvious that the author has to assign her field of research. I totally agree that the line that Ms Mogilnicka draws from Grotowski, Barba, Staniewski to Dočolomanský presents a certain attitude toward theatre and creative process, but establishing own field of research does not mean to depreciate the achievements of previous laboratory artists-researchers.

Conclusion

My critical remarks do not change my high opinion on dissertation by Ms Mogilnicka. The thesis submitted by her meets the standards required for a doctoral dissertation. I recommend the dissertation *Farm in a Cave – a Laboratory Theatre* for public defense. The assessment of the dissertation is "pass".


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