

**Practice/Theory/Practice/Theory: Excerpts from an
Extended Interview/Dialogue with Zbigniew
Cynkutis (1938-1987), 26 May 1982, Lawrence,
Kansas**

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The premise serving as the basis of this essay/interview/dialogue is that theory follows practice follows theory follows practice follows theory follows practice *ad infinitum*—and not vice-versa. In other words, theatrical/dramatic theory does not exist without first the existence of practice. A theoretical pedant might argue the seemingly plausible but ultimately tiresome premise that practice can *only* follow theory, that something cannot exist before the “idea” of it exists. But this argument is only a debator’s point that disregards what most true theatrical practitioners already know: that real art comes only from discovery. One *finds* art in the materials—the life—with which one is working. One strips away what is not art, thus revealing that which is. One does not make art by adding something to the materials at hand, but rather like a sculptor, one cuts away materials to reveal the art inherent in the *material*. It is Grotowski’s principle of *via negativa*. One supposes that even an artist such as Racine knew this principle, despite the theoretical confinements of his theatrical era. Can it be imagined that Shakespeare did not know this?

To “posit” an art work ultimately is to produce non-art. One might produce an aberration, something intellectually interesting and even stimulating perhaps, but one will not produce art. The argument that theory serves as a primal force in the creation of art—that one conceptualizes art before making it—may seem logical but is ultimately absurd. Even to consider the premise is to argue how many actors can stand on the head of a pin. Practitioners laugh at such pedantry and resent being slowed down in their artistic discovery by such inessential considerations. For practitioners, such concerns are non-points, non-arguments, nit-picking absurdities: a waste of time, life, and creative energies. . . .

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Zbigniew Cynkutis (1938-1987) was a practitioner *par excellence*. He was one of Grotowski's actors, having joined the Laboratory Theatre on 1 June 1961, when the group was still called the Theatre of 13 Rows and based in Opole and then later Wrocław. He was the actor who performed the title role of Kordian in Grotowski's 1962 production of the Polish classic by Słowacki. He was also the actor who played Faustus in Grotowski's treatment of Marlowe's *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. It was this production (1963), in addition to the production of Wyspiański's *Akropolis* (1962), in which Cynkutis also performed, that first brought Grotowski's group to attention outside Poland. It is even possible that Cynkutis was the actor first designated to play Don Fernando in *The Constant Prince*, a role in which ultimately Ryszard Cieślak, through his luminous performance, gained international acclaim and even critical deification. In the period 1964-65, when Cieślak was developing the role of Don Fernando with Grotowski and the group, Cynkutis (along with actor Zygmunt Molik) left the Laboratory Theatre, only to return a year later at Grotowski's invitation.

In 1969, after Grotowski and his actors had gained international reputation and acclaim, Cynkutis, as a part of that enterprise, first came to the United States to perform *Akropolis*, *The Constant Prince*, and *Apocalypsis cum figuris* over a two-month period in New York. Later in the 1970s, though the group continued to perform *Apocalypsis* on a regular basis, Grotowski and the group began to move toward post-theatrical or paratheatrical forms. As Grotowski moved from paratheatrical work toward *Theatre of Sources* and thus less connection with the original company, Cynkutis was named vice-director of the Laboratory Theatre, serving as the administrative center of the acting company and of the various paratheatrical experiments. In 1979-80, for example, Cynkutis was the organizer of the paratheatrical event called *Tree of People*.

During the period of Solidarity in Poland (August 1980 to December 1981), Cynkutis was abroad frequently doing workshops and directing. In 1981, for example, he directed a production at the Theaterhaus in West Berlin based on Thomas Mann's *Faust*, a myth that seems always to have intrigued him, perhaps particularly since his performance of Faustus in Grotowski's production of Marlowe's *Tragical History*.

When martial law was declared in Poland on 13 December 1981, Cynkutis had just arrived home in Wrocław from Berlin and was preparing to leave in two weeks with his family (his wife Jolanta and daughters Magdalena and Anna) to teach the spring semester at the University of Kansas. It was difficult to leave Poland at this point. Cynkutis drove back and forth from Wrocław to Warsaw several times, talking with authorities, attempting to gain permission to leave Poland. As vice-director of the Laboratory Theatre, he had more freedom than most Poles to travel back and forth in this way. Indeed, as administrator of the group, he always had to travel from Wrocław to Warsaw to get permissions for the troupe to leave Poland. During the period of martial law, international telephone connections to Poland were cut off, but by telephone through "underground" means in Berlin, I got a message to Cynkutis telling him to come to Kansas if he still could, even though he might be a few weeks late. An adventure he later described as "something like a



Zbigniew Cynkutis and Jolanta Cynkutis in Lawrence, Kansas, spring 1982. (Photo by Andrew Tsubaki)

movie" ultimately brought him and his family via railroad from Wrocław to Prague and via airplane to the United States in late January 1982.

Cynkutis conducted two classes at Kansas: one designed essentially for actors and another focusing on acting but also on techniques of direction. In addition, he and I conducted together a two-hour paratheatrical event, *120 Minutes of Activity*, involving people attending a conference and festival of Latin American theatre held that spring at Kansas. The participants in the paratheatrical experiment were a mixture of critics, scholars, actors, directors, et al.

Following his tenure at Kansas, Cynkutis taught for two years at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York before returning in August 1984 to Poland. The Laboratory Theatre after twenty-five years had officially disbanded on 31 August 1984, and the Polish government gave Cynkutis the former space in Wrocław (27 Rynek-Ratusz) and custodial control of all documents, photographs, films, videotapes, etc. relating to the twenty-five-year work of the Laboratory Theatre. He formed a new group, the Second Studio of Wrocław, using both young Polish actors and a number of young performers from other parts of the world. The first production in 1985-86 was based on Seneca's *Phaedra*, in which Stacey MacFarlane, a University of Kansas graduate, performed the title role in the international version. Also in 1986 emerged two other productions, one based on the myth of Prometheus and the other based on the biblical "Song of Songs." Both productions received good notices in the Wrocław newspapers.

On the morning of 9 January 1987, Zbigniew Cynkutis died on the highway an hour outside Wrocław in an automobile accident while driving alone in difficult winter conditions.

What follows are brief excerpts from an extended taped discussion with Cynkutis conducted through one afternoon and early evening (26 May 1982) at my house in Lawrence, Kansas. It was a warm spring day, and I had just mowed my lawn that morning, the image of “cut grass” being alluded to by Cynkutis in the discussion that follows. The sounds of my neighbors’ children playing in their yards and my cats begging to go outside are still on the tape, along with the sounds of clinking spoons and coffee cups. Very late in the tape is the ring of a telephone call from Cynkutis’ wife Jolanta, who wonders good-naturedly if he is ever going to come home for dinner. But these details are only the trivialities of life and have nothing to do with art. . . .

What was it [in the early days] about Grotowski as a person and artist that made him such a theatrical revolutionary?

I need to make a distinction first. The term “theatrical revolutionary” [as applied to Grotowski] usually is used by people more concerned with the theoretical than the practical. When they speak of revolution, they are usually talking of style or form, something coming from the production, the epoch, the time. And Grotowski fits very well within this definition. But I must say that this meaning is much better understood among people who watched us from the outside [rather] than from me who was inside. For me, the meaning of “theatrical revolutionary” is much more practically concerned with how the acting was developed, how the processes were stimulated, how we searched the way to create, how was the investigation to find the form, how was the work with voice and body? And it [this work we did] was *real* revolution.

I think I’m talking about it [the revolution] in this double sense. Here we have something that seems to come almost out of the blue. I first read about your work in 1965. There was that issue of TDR in which Tragic History of Doctor Faustus was discussed. And then a little later, another issue, in which Ludwik [Flaszen] and [Eugenio] Barba had articles on the work and on Akropolis.

Yes, yes—this is exactly what I mean. Here is nice, for me, interesting possibility—to confront with you, let’s say, our work. Because it is also, somehow, your work. Your study about us makes you one of us. You are not an indifferent person. As everyone who has given certain attention or [has] given [a] certain part of his life to know better our work comes to be our friend. Even if he is against us. This is okay. To be “against” is to be able to see things we are not able to see. Attack sometimes is good help. You are outside; I am insider. Some things that are known about our work are better known by those outside than by me. . . . A simple example: I am in the process of creation and I am, for instance, very involved with my song I am going to sing. But my real motivation has nothing to do with the time I am in or the time I am thinking. The motivation can come simply from what is the feeling of the smell of cut grass. I am singing the song. You are listening to my song. For you my song expresses [the feeling of] *war*. For me the motivation is to feel the smell of cut grass. The smell of cut grass makes the song I am singing more rich. I’m not fighting to express anything about war. And later

you say to me, for instance, “It was a beautiful song. I felt the stupidity and tragedy of war in your song.” I say, “Man, I didn’t know about what I was doing. I was totally involved in smelling cut grass.” So I’m not able to say anything about war but I know how the feeling of the smell of cut grass is important to repeat [when I sing my song] if I want to make a form. . . . It has everything to do with associations. . . .

When I come to see your work, I’m bringing myself to your work. What your work becomes is what I am in the presence of your work.

Yes. And I can try to change your presence or I can make your presence more rich. Or I can somehow stimulate you to follow my imaginations or associations. But still, you are you, and I have to accept that.

And you are you, changing as well within the context of the work you are creating at that moment in my presence.

Yes. . . .

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Let’s dispense with the term “revolutionary.” From an historical standpoint, I can continue to think that what Grotowski did in 1959, and has continued to do since then, was revolutionary. But whatever it was that was done was very different. And it’s very difficult in this day and age to be truly different. . . . Grotowski has always impressed me as being tied to tradition, and, as a consequence, I can understand why this is not revolution but simply rediscovery.

Yes, I believe that is true. Tradition was very important to him at the beginning of our work—to “name” what tradition means. And the main meaning—and how he did educate us—I think it was not from him that it came. He only took it from philosophy. The “tradition” means to work with the same courage as the big discoverers did in their developments many centuries ago—to do the same now. It is not a way to continue the knowledge or practice of the eighteenth or seventeenth centuries or even earlier. But it is necessary to remember the person or persons who opened new possibilities in their time—that they risked a lot. So, it took this courage. They were courageous. They often did something difficult to accept by society, but they did it. And they often lost their lives trying not to betray the development done by themselves. Today is the same because the masses are always late. [The work of discoverers] becomes common, popular, accepted, usually after their deaths. So, with the same courage like them, where they were “against” society or not accepted, we learned to not be afraid that it would be against society. You can stay alone totally with great consequence to go as deep as you can as long as you feel it is leading you toward values. Even if you will give your life.

Your life then as an artist becomes a continual quest, doesn’t it? . . . a search, not necessarily a search in which the direction is clear: never quite satisfied with the present, no

matter what your accomplishments have been. In the present moment always going further, always searching more.

Or deeper.

Or deeper.

The better word is "deeper."

And maybe without knowing the direction of what that quest or search is. One of the things, it seems to me, in the work I've done with you is that it tends to be based upon the same principles: don't look for results; don't have expectations about what will happen. And you know in a sense, psychologically, to do that is to find things.

Yes.

The minute one defines one's goal, one can only go that direction. But if one's goal simply becomes a continual quest, a continual search, to find things along the way or "by the way," then I begin to get something of a sense of what Grotowski and the group was willing to commit itself to back in 1959, the early 1960s. Does that make any sense?

Yes. Only honestly at this time we have to make a big distinction between Grotowski and the group. There was only one person who knew or who felt or who was constant or who was like a fighter or who was responsible or who was competent to make this investigation. It was only Grotowski. And we were more or less ordinary actors on a little bit funny boat. Or sailors—not on a big cruiser, but a funny boat. . . .

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The dialogue continues for several more hours into what it was like to be a young actor working with Grotowski in the early 1960s, and what it was like for the group to become world famous in 1965. There is discussion of each of the major productions: *Akropolis*, *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, specifically Ryszard Cieslak's performance in *The Constant Prince*, and finally *Apocalypsis cum figuris*. Eventually the dialogue turns to the beginnings of the experiments with the paratheatrical work, Grotowski's idea of "meeting," Cynkutis' own work as the organizer of *Tree of People*, etc.

Zbigniew Cynkutis must be dead. Those of us who knew him certainly mourn him. But I still wonder if he's really gone.

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