Poor Unfortunate Theater: Crash Course Theater #48

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=9sSLz5t7a5M
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/9sSLz5t7a5M

=====Introduction (00:00) to (00:46)=====

Hey I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we're looking at two very different models of radical, transformative theater. First, we'll head to Poland for Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theater. Then, we'll zoom over to Brazil for Augusto Boal's The Theater of the Oppressed. These are pretty different movements: one is mostly concerned with personal discovery and the other is about creating broader social change. But both of them do away with theatrical conventions like costumes and scenery.

They're even kind of meh on props. Eh, yeah but I mean you're like more of a co-star so I think it's alright. And both try to break down barriers between actors and audiences, remaking the theater as a space to create real, lasting change. So, let's rise up! [Intro]

=====Grotowski History (00:54) to (02:02)=====

(00:54)Poor Theater was started by this guy -- Jerzy Grotowski. He was born in Poland in 1933 and later educated in Moscow at the Russian Academy of Theater Arts. In 1959, he settled in Opole in Poland and began to work with a group of artists who would form the Polish Laboratory Theater. In the early 1980s, he left Poland, moving first to America, where he taught at several universities and then, to Italy. (01:18)Like Stanislavski, who was both a big influence and a big rival, Grotowski was a charismatic figure who tried to create a new style of acting. While Stanislavski's style is based in psychological realism, Grotowski moved away from realism and toward something more ritualistic and elemental. (01:36)Grotowski's theater had two main phases.

Poor Theater was First. The other, which he developed after 1970, is called The Theater of Sources. (01:46)We'll mostly focus on Poor Theater, because it was the more influential of the two and because Grotowski compiled a very handy book about it, "Towards a Poor Theater," published in 1968 that was widely influential. If you have any interest in avant-garde theater, it's definitely worth a read.

=====(02:58) to (04:00)=====

(2:02) So, what is Poor Theater? Well, surprise, it is the opposite of a rich theater. A rich theater doesn't have to be all that rich, it includes everything from glitzy, multi-million dollar productions to amateur shows in church basements. (2:17) What all rich theater has in common though is lights, and makeup, and costumes, and sets. It's deliberately illusionistic.

The Poor Theater has none of that. Not a single rotating gobo. (2:31). Instead, it relies on the power of the actor to convey character and setting.

Grotowski writes: "One must ask oneself what is indispensable to theatre. Let's see." (2:43) "Can the theatre exist without costumes and sets? Yes, it can." "Can it exist without music to accompany the plot?

Yes." (2:52) "Can it exist without lighting effects? Of course" "And without a text? Yes." why exist without all this stuff well, a couple reasons: one of them is that Grotowski realized that theater was in competition with film and television and if illusionism is what you were after, then, film and television were gonna do a way way better job of delivering it, but "what film and television can't do" Grotowski reasoned is to tap back into the theater origins and ritual and myth. maybe you're thinking: hang on a second, that's sounds alot like Artaud and, you're not wrong.. although as you maybe remember from our earlier episode.

Artaud had no problem with big splashy effects. Agh, so many frogs and scorpions and (?~3:38)of blood. another reason for poor theaters that Grotowski wanted to eliminate the separation between the actors and the audience. If spectators don't get to have fancy wigs and spotlights, then neither should the actors!

In most of Grotowski's productions, the audience mingled with the actors or surrounded the actors on all sides, so that they everyone occupied the playing space. The performers were constantly exposed and unmiked. Grotowski and his actors would spend years rehearsing productions, refining every movement, every breath, every facial expression.

And yet actors still described a feeling of intense spontaneity and emotional connection to the work. Maja Komorowska, an actor in the company, said it was a "precise, meticulous composition, but there wasn't the slightest sign of artificiality… This explosion, an eruption of emotion and truth—[it] was no longer merely theater." Grotowski believed that a role should "penetrate" the actor. That's his word—well, except he said it in Polish.

Grotowski's method required that an actor open themselves to the role completely. Ryszard CieÅ›lak, for many years his lead actor, said of Grotowski's style, "It is anyhow impossible to treat it in merely artistic terms. It resulted in my fundamental transformation, not only as an actor, but also as a human being." You might say this all sounds kinda… religious.

And you're not wrong. Director Peter Brook, who observed Grotowski at work, considered Grotowski an example of holy or sacred theater. Brook called this style of acting, an "act of sacrifice, of sacrificing what most men prefer to hide—this sacrifice is his gift to the spectator." Brook wrote that in Grotowski's poor theater, actors give up everything except for the power of their own bodies and unlimited rehearsal time to bring those bodies to the role: "No wonder they feel the richest theatre in the world." … GET IT?

Richest Theater? For a closer look at Grotowski's methods and style, let's explore one of his most famous and —fair warning—most disturbing works, "Akropolis." "Akropolis," first performed in 1962, was based on a long 1904 poetic drama by StanisÅ‚aw Wyspianski. A shout-out to Western culture and a call for Polish national pride, it describes how statues, tapestries, and carvings come to life in a Krakow cathedral on the night before Easter.

But Grotowski transferred the setting to Auschwitz, not all that far away from his theater in Opole, and created a piece asking if culture could matter at all after an event like the Holocaust. Help us out, Thought

Bubble: [[[Hi. I know this will be disturbing to animate, but all of Poor Theater is disturbing. You can watch clips of the Peter Brook documentation of Akropolis, if that helps. And I know we can do this sensitively.]]] The audience is seated on all four sides of the space.

In the middle is a junk heap—pipes, nails, a rusting bathtub. Above the heap is a web of ropes, a little like barbed wire. This is a concentration camp.

At the beginning of the play, an actor drags in a headless dummy and delivers a prologue. Then the other actors, dressed identically in tunics, berets, and heavy wooden-soled shoes, enter. Their faces are frozen into grimaces.

Grotowski called these facial expressions "life masks." One observer wrote that their eyes actually look dead. They speak like a Greek chorus:

CHORUS: Only once a year, They come only once a year On the cemetery of the tribes. A SINGLE

VOICE: Our Acropolis.

CHORUS: They read the words of judgment On the cemetery of the tribes. They're gone and the smoke lingers on. Two actors become angels, and they suspend the headless dummy from the ropes in a pose like the crucified Christ. A violin plays, and several of the actors begin to work with materials from the junk heap.

They are building the crematorium where the prisoners will be burnt. Three of the actors step out. Two become guards, and the third is a prisoner whom they interrogate and torture.

There is more work on the junk pile, an unhappy sex scene between a man and a woman, and then the retelling of the biblical story of Jacob. The crematorium is completed; the action shifts to Troy. There is a scene between Paris and Helen.

One prisoner steps out to become King David, and he addresses a speech to God that ends in a wild song. And the dummy is lifted overhead, an image of a dead, starved prisoner. One by one, the actors throw themselves into a pit.

Thanks, ThoughtBubble. That whole thing took fifty minutes, and at the end, the audience was usually too upset to applaud.. By 1970, Grotowski figured he'd gone about as far as he could go in perfecting the work of the actor.

So he turned to eliminating the divide between actor and audience, creating "a meeting, not a confrontation; a communion where we can be totally ourselves." He also undertook an extensive study of ritual performance in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean: the Theater of Sources. He died in 1999. Let's turn to another theater maker interested in blurring boundaries between actor and audience.

That would be this guy, Augusto Boal, born in Brazil in 1931. Initially he studied chemical engineering, but while he was a student at Columbia University, he was introduced to the theories of Brecht and Stanislavski. Later on, he was also profoundly influenced by the educator Paolo Freire, who pioneered the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," a non-hierarchical educational method.

Returning to Brazil, Boal began to direct plays at the Arena Theater. First classics and then plays written by Brazilian playwrights. He toured his plays to poor neighborhoods.

These plays often ended with actors asking their audience to rise above oppression. But Boal began to think that, instead of just talking to audiences, he should be listening to them and empowering them. As his practices evolved, he encouraged audiences to talk back to the action—you can see the influence of Brecht here—and to suggest new actions for the characters.

Legend has it that, during one performance, a female audience member couldn't make an actor understand her suggestion. So she stepped onstage and performed the action herself. This birthed the idea of the spect-actor. [[[Yorick flies in wearing spectacles.]]] No, no, no.

The spect-actor is part spectator and part actor and all awesome. Unlike those glasses. Get out of here.

This method eventually became known as Forum Theater. A Forum Theater exercise begins with a short scene centered on a social problem—sexism, say, or racial discrimination. After the scene concludes, it starts again.

And this time, spect-actors are invited to interrupt the proceeding with their own actions. A facilitator, usually called a "joker," monitors the performance. The "joker" doesn't actually joke.

They make sure that each spect-actor is able to complete his or her action, and then asks the audience to evaluate the usefulness of each proposed solution to the social problem. If you are freaked out by participatory theater—if your idea of theater is hiding in the dark and ruffling your Playbill, perhaps at most glaring carefully at someone unwrapping a bit of candy in the dark—Theater of the Oppressed is not for you! Boal believed that encouraging audience members to step onstage was a way of empowering them.

This meant showing them that they could take action in their own lives if they felt that they were experiencing injustice. This didn't sit too well with Brazil's military regime. And in 1971, after a performance of Brecht's "Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui," Boal was kidnapped, tortured, and eventually exiled.

Boal took his participatory show on the road, eventually settling in Paris and continuing to teach. In 1979, he published his first book "Theater of the Oppressed." He also pioneered another form of political theater, "Invisible Theater," which is a kind of theater that the audience doesn't even know is theater. It could be happening anywhere, anytime—it could be right behind you right now!

But probably not. He re-relocated to Brazil in 1986, became a city councilman, and pioneered a form known as Legislative Theater. In this form, citizens were encouraged to participate in scenes that helped to identify the social problems they were facing and to brainstorm possible solutions.

Augusto Boal died in 2009. Obviously, Grotowski and Boal were pretty different dudes. Grotowski expected actors to rehearse for years.

Boal didn't need his spect-actors to rehearse at all. But both believed in theater as a means to achieve something greater. For Grotowski, that's a profound self-knowledge and exploration of the human condition.

For Boal, that's the hope of true social justice and solutions to endemic problems discovered as a community. CONCLUSION Thanks for watching. Next time, we'll make our first visit to West Africa, studying intersections of theater and ritual, and exploring Nigeria's influential postcolonial theater with a closer look at playwright Wole Soyinka.

Until then… curtain!