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**JERZY GROTOWSKI'S ACTOR TRAINING
AND ITS IMPACT ON THE TAIWANESE
SEARCHING THEATRE. THE CASE OF LIU
JINGMIN'S EARLY EXPERIMENTS**

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Słowa kluczowe: Teatr ruchu, Liu Jingmin, U-Theatre, Taiwan, teatr tańca, Jerzy Grotowski

Abstract: Izabella Łabędzka, JERZY GROTOWSKI'S ACTOR TRAINING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE TAIWANESE SEARCHING THEATRE. THE CASE OF LIU JINGMIN'S EARLY EXPERIMENTS. "PORÓWNANIA" 1 (24), 2019. Vol. XXIV, P. 175-194. ISSN 1733-165X. The paper is a result of several years' research conducted in Taiwan. It presents the early years of one of the most interesting theatre groups from Taipei, You Juchang/U-Theatre/Youren Shengu, which was established in 1988 by Liu Jingmin (Liu Ruoyu). Liu Jingmin was much inspired by Jerzy Grotowski's idea of actor's training presented by him in Irvine (California) in the mid-eighties. The article shows how Liu Jingmin started from imitating Grotowski's physical exercises and later she focused on understanding her native culture. She rethought many Chinese and Taiwanese forms of theatre, meditation and breathing techniques, music and dance traditions, culture of masks and religious rituals. The aim of this paper is to describe how Liu Jingmin for more than three decades had been working on a comprehensive development of the actor through perfecting his technical skills along with their spirit. Her goal was the internal/spiritual and external/physical transformation of a performer and finally creating a beautiful person.

Abstrakt: Izabella Łabędzka, TRENING AKTORÓW WEDŁUG JERZEGO GROTOWSKIEGO I JEGO WPLYW NA TAJWAŃSKI TEATR POSZUKUJĄCY. NA PRZYKŁADZIE WCZESNYCH DOŚWIADCZEŃ LIU JINGMIN. „PORÓWNANIA” 1 (24), 2019. T. XXIV, S. 175-194. ISSN 1733-165X. Niniejszy artykuł jest efektem wieloletnich badań terenowych prowadzonych na Tajwanie. Przedstawia on jedną z bardziej interesujących grup teatralnych w Tajpej, You

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Juchang/U-Theatre/Youren Shengtu, która została założona w 1988 r. przez Liu Jingmin (Liu Ruoyu). Liu Jingmin zainspirowała idea treningu aktorskiego zaprezentowana przez Jerzego Grotowskiego w Irvine, w Kalifornii, w połowie lat osiemdziesiątych XX w. Artykuł pokazuje, jak Liu Jingmin, zrazu zainspirowana ćwiczeniami aktorskimi Grotowskiego, w późniejszym okresie działalności skupiła się na głębszym poznaniu własnej kultury. Przemyślała i przestudiowała wiele chińskich i tajwańskich form teatru, technik oddechowych i medytacyjnych, tradycji muzycznych i tanecznych, bogatą kulturę maski i rytuałów religijnych. Celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie, jak przez ponad trzy dekady Liu Jingmin pracowała nad wszechstronnym rozwojem aktora przez doskonalenie jego umiejętności technicznych i jego ducha. Jej celem było wewnętrzne, duchowe oraz zewnętrzne, fizyczne przekształcenie performerera, a ostatecznie stworzenie pięknego człowieka.

Liu Jingmin at the Beginning of her Theatrical Road

You Juchang (U-Theatre) was established in 1988, soon after Taiwan began its slow but systematic process of democratic, social and cultural transformations after the abolition of the Marshall Law in 1987. It was founded by Liu Jingmin (also Liu Ruoyu, b. 1956)².

Liu Jingmin – a daughter of settlers who came to Taiwan from Mainland China together with Chiang Kai-shek's army escaping the Communists – was born in Taiwan. After graduating from the acting faculty of the Taipei University of Culture (Wenhua Daxue) she worked for a number of years in Lan Ling Theatre Workshop (Lanling Jufang), one of the most experimental theatres of the 1980s. Lanling Jufang was established by Jin Shijie (b. 1951)³ at the end of the 1970s with the assistance of Wu Jingji (b. 1935)⁴ who worked there as an artistic instructor. Wu Jingji, a psychologist who graduated from the University of Minnesota, spent a number of years working at North American universities before his return to Taiwan. In Lanling Jufang, he was in charge of physical and vocal training, improvisation and group creativity. The training pursued at the workshops aimed at expanding the knowledge of the theatrical traditions in the West and in the East, including traditional Chinese visual performances and Western experimental theatre of that time. It was recommended to actors to watch the Beijing opera performances (*jingju*)⁵,

2 In 2004 Liu Jingmin changed her name to Liu Ruoyu.

3 Jin Shijie came from Hefei, Anhui province; after graduating from an agricultural department in Taiwan he was involved for some time in animal husbandry, and later focused on theatrical work. For more information consult: Tian Benxiang, *Taiwan xiandai xiju gaikuang* (Outline of modern Taiwanese theatre), Beijing 1996, Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, pp.161-165.

4 For more information about Wu Jingji see: Tian Benxiang, *Taiwan xiandai xiju gaikuang*, pp.155-160.

5 *Jingju* (also *jingxi*, *pihuangxi*) – a type of music drama typical of Northern China. Dominated Beijing's theatres at the end of the 19th century. It is a highly conventional theatre form, operating with symbols and stylization. Actors use heavy make-up, stylized costumes and their movement includes plenty of acrobatics. Scenery and stage props are reduced to an absolute minimum and

Taiwanese opera (*gezaixi*)⁶, Taiwanese puppet theatre (*budaixi*)⁷, local temple processions, modern dance performances, mime shows, music concerts and art exhibitions. As Zhong Mingde noted: „The first characteristic of Wu’s philosophy was an open eclecticism. What was required of the workshop participants was to open themselves to any theatre related arts, human knowledge, everyday life, to the native and the foreign, to the traditional and the avant-garde. The second characteristic of Wu’s workshop was the emphasis on spontaneity and creativity, based on his deep-rooted conviction that individual experience was the well of creativity.” (Zhong 32). He also mentioned that the group was characterized by a unique combination of individualism and collectivism: „(...) it is the ‘I’ who would spontaneously and creatively decide which art, knowledge or experience was true and acceptable. Based on this modern/Western concept of individualism, Wu extolled a certain collectivism and amateurism that allowed every member to participate and contribute.” (Zhong 32). The openness to diverse cultures and theatrical traditions and the combination of individualism and collectivism which Liu Jingmin absorbed during her years spent at Lanling Jufang influenced her later independent work with her own theatrical group.

He Zhu’s New Match (*He Zhu xin pei*), one of the most innovative and renowned performances by Lanling Jufang, was an experimental performance based on a comical Beijing opera *Zhu’s Match* (*He Zhu pei*). Liu Jingmin played the main female character, and the performance became a part of the history of modern experimental Taiwanese theatre of the 1980s, due to a skilful combination of the conventions of modern Western and traditional Chinese theatre. The creators of the performance used many solutions typical of traditional Chinese music drama. First of all, they avoided realistic decorations in favour of empty stage and but a few stage props,

are usually symbolic. *Jingju* performances can be civilian (*wen*) or military (*wu*). The actors’ parts are divided into four basic categories: male (*sheng*), female (*dan*), painted faces (*jing*) and clowns (*chou*). For more information about the Beijing opera see: C. P. Mackerras, *The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770-1870. Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China*, Oxford 1972, Clarendon Press; W. Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama*, London 1976, Paul Elek; Wu Tongbin, *Jingju zhishi shouce* (Beijing opera handbook), Tianjin 1995, Tianjin Jiaoyu Chubanshe; Xu Chengbei, *Jingju yu Zhongguo wenhua* (Beijing opera and Chinese culture), Beijing 1999, Renmin Chubanshe.

6 *Gezaixi* (literally „song theatre”) is a local variety of Taiwanese music drama which first developed in Southern Fujian. Transplanted to Taiwan in the second half of the 17th century, it absorbed elements of Taiwanese ballad singing and the Beijing opera conventions. Banned during Japanese occupation, revived after 1945 and presently is one of the most popular Taiwanese forms of traditional theatre (Brandon, 233). See also *gezaixi* entry in: Li Hanfei (ed.), *Zhongguo xijuzhong shouce* (Handbook of Chinese theatres), Beijing 1991, Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, p. 556-559.

7 *Budaixi* is a Taiwanese puppet theatre which developed in Longxi, Fujian Province. Two puppet animators operate hand-puppets which are approximately 30 cm big. The acting style, accompaniment, part categories and screenplays refer to the Beijing opera. The narrative and dialogue have typical Taiwanese characteristics. Puppet animation is highly sophisticated (J. S. Brandon, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, p. 233). See also Hsieh Chun-Pai, *The Taiwanese Hand-Puppet Theatre: A Search for Its Meaning*, Brown University, 1991 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation).

similarly to the Beijing opera where all the decorations consist only of "a table and two chairs" used to create most extraordinary and sophisticated imaginative spaces. Similarly to the Beijing opera, the space was called into existence with gestures and movements of the actor, with words or with using a stage prop which would stimulate the viewer's imagination. In addition to that, the artists used acting techniques typical of traditional music drama: the characters would introduce themselves to the audience while entering the stage for the first time and they would make side remarks on the events or describing their emotions. Typical *jingju* division into role categories was also retained⁸. Liu Jingmin's He Zhu part was well received in reviews. In 1982, Liu Jingmin went to study in the US, but two years later she left her studies to take part in Jerzy Grotowski's⁹ workshops at the University of California in Irvine.

Meeting Jerzy Grotowski: Objective Drama Project

During Liu Jingmin's participation in Irvine workshops, Grotowski was developing his Objective Drama project. According to a definition provided in a brochure of that research project of March 1984, the objective drama – a term created by Grotowski himself – incorporated those elements of the ancient rituals of various world cultures which have a precise and therefore objective impact on participants. The project was developed in the summer of 1983 and aimed to examine foundations of performance arts and cultural interaction, opening new prospects not only for theatre and other arts, but also for social sciences. Grotowski's primary goal was to extract elements of performative movements, dances, songs, incantations, language structures, rhythms and the use of space from ancient rituals of past cultures, and then to research them thoroughly (Ścisły program badawczy Dramat Obiektywny prowadzony przez Jerzego Grotowskiego. 404-405). The initial materials were to be provided by traditional practitioners or performers of ancient ritual plays. The basic training sessions were monitored by four technical experts. It is worth noting that three of these experts were of Asian origin¹⁰. Du Yee Chang was a Korean actor,

8 See a detailed description of the performance in Zhong (51-61).

9 Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), a Polish stage director, founder of Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław. The most renowned performances by the Laboratory Theatre include: *Akropolis*, *Książę Niezłomny* (*The Constant Prince*), *Apocalypsis cum figuris*; the group performed them during many foreign tournees in 1960s and 1970s. „Trained in theories of Stanislavsky, Grotowski saw the actor as paramount, using all his physical and mental powers to achieve a close fusion of meaning and movement. He envisaged a theatre stripped of all such inessentials as scenery, costume, lighting, and music (...).” (Hartnoll and Found 200).

10 The fourth expert was Jairo Cuesta Gonzales of Colombia, trained in acting at Colegio Calazanz of Medellin and at the University of Paris. Since 1976, he studied with Grotowski and led acting workshops.

dancer, stage director and playwright. He had thorough knowledge of Korean mask theatre, shaman dances, martial arts, modern dance and ballet. Wayan Lendra of Bali was a musician, dancer, expert in Balinese mask theatre, and dance ethnologist who collaborated with University of California (Los Angeles) on ethno-musicological projects and ethnic dance. Chen Weicheng, a dancer specializing in modern dance, ballet, traditional Chinese dance and gymnastics, danced in renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (Yunmen Wuji). He studied dance and theatre at the University of Chinese Culture (Zhongguo Wenhua Daxue) in Taipei, at New York University School of Education and Chinese Opera Academy¹¹. Grzegorz Ziółkowski emphasized that Asian people were an important part of the multicultural team of the Objective Drama project, adding that thanks to their participation Grotowski was able to discuss differences and similarities of working with Eastern and Western artists (164).

The research on the morphology of the performative phenomenon during the phase of Objective Drama consisted in studying archaic rituals in accordance with their tradition, in reaching advanced stage of the training through the interaction of performative movements, dances and songs, in exposing subsequent layers of the ritual in order to reach primitive performative techniques („Ścisły program badawczy *Dramat Obiektywny...*” 406-407). For Ziółkowski, those presumptions seemed to constitute a reference to Grotowski's work from the time of the Theatre of Sources which “consisted in reaching elements common for various ritual practices, using them as a reference for developing his own actions exerting a foreseeable psycho-physiological influence. Grotowski sought in such elements as primitive impulse constituting a nucleus of an action that directs man towards transcendence and leads him towards the fullness of his existence. Grotowski sought the core, stripped of symbolic paraphernalia of a religion or labels of any particular philosophical system.” (Ziółkowski 159).

Considering later explorations of Liu Jingmin and her group, the idea of alertness through movement described in the project also seemed to be of considerable importance („Ścisły program badawczy *Dramat Obiektywny...*” 407-408). Another important element of the Objective Drama project was the exploration of space and study of changes in performative movements in relation to the changes in the surroundings, the discovery of interrelations between movement, visual perception and climatic conditions, landscape etc. („Ścisły program badawczy *Dramat Obiektywny...*” 408). Philip Winterbottom, one of participants in the Objective Drama project, mentioned in his diary a series of exercises which sought harmony with space and attempted to sense various sources of energy in natural space (Winterbottom 496). The natural space, exercises in natural environment, physical experience of space through one's own body played an important role in Liu Jingmin

11 See the footnote of „Ścisły program badawczy *Dramat Obiektywny ...*”, pp. 415-416.

and You Juchang's later work. It was not limited to building an open air theatre and to training and acting outdoors, but embraced also a confrontation with natural space in the course of the group's numerous pilgrimages and trekking. In her teaching and theatrical practice Liu Jingmin often referred to another outdoors exercise performed during the Objective Drama explorations, which consisted in fast and slow walking at different hours of day and night. Various styles of walking taught participants to regulate their internal energy and encouraged readiness and alertness.

It seemed quite significant that in mid-1980 Liu Jingmin needed Grotowski to teach her the art of alertness, attentiveness and internal observation through his system of slow and fast walking, although she herself was a heir of one of the richest cultural, philosophical and theatrical traditions cultivating exactly such skills. The sense of internal and external observation formed the foundation of Daoistic thought, *chan* Buddhism¹², numerous meditative techniques and martial arts, not to mention traditional Chinese forms of music drama where concentration and attention determine the mastery of acting technique. Lisa Wolford was right to remind that physical exercises developed by Grotowski and his team for many years drew inspiration from many sources and cultures: from Stanislavski's physical actions¹³, Meyerhold's biomechanics¹⁴, Delsarte's system¹⁵, Vakhtangov's works¹⁶, Indian

12 *Chan* Buddhism (Japanese *zen*, from Sanskrit *dhyana*, „meditation”) – one of Mahayana Buddhism schools established in the 6th century in China. A form of awareness training developed as a combination of the spiritual essence of Dhyana Buddhism and Daoism. The VI Patriarch of *chan*, Huineng (638-713) and his Southern School which focused on sudden enlightenment laid foundation for the many centuries' long development of this school during Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties in China (Schuhmacher and Woerner 403-405).

13 Konstatin Sergeivich Stanislavsky (1863-1938), Russian actor, director and teacher of the art of acting. „Rejecting the current declamatory style of acting, he sought for a simplicity and truth which could give a complete illusion of reality.” (Hartnoll and Found 480).

14 Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold (1874-1940/43), Russian actor and director. Joined the Moscow Artistic Theatre in 1898 r. „Meyerhold was developing his theory of actor-*cabotin*, a combination singer-dancer-juggler-tumbler, whose precise physicalization and mask-like presence would unite primordial and contemporary forms in a new, universal theatre.” (Golub 663]. With respect to biomechanics, see fragments devoted to Meyerhold and biomechanics in: Odette Aslan, *Aktor XX wieku. Ewolucja Techniki. Zagadnienia etyki*, tr. by M.O. Bieńka, Warszawa 1978, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

15 François Delsarte, (French) emphasised the relationship between mental states and physical attitudes/actions noting that emotional states are communicated by physical actions. He recorded his observations which were used by non-professional theatres of mid-20th century. Delsarte's discoveries, developed later by numerous philosophers and psychologists, became a separate area of research, focusing on interactions between body and mind (Encyclopaedia Britannica CD version 2002).

16 Yevgenyi Bagrationovich Vakhtangov (1883- 1922), Russian director and actor, student of Stanislavski in the Moscow Art Theatre. Together with actors of his studio „he evolved a strongly non-realistic, expressionist style of production, the first fruit of which was his production of Maeterlinck's *The Miracle of Saint Anthony* (1918), in which he combined a strongly formalistic attitude to

*kathakali*¹⁷, Beijing opera, Japanese *nō* theatre¹⁸ and *hatha-yoga*¹⁹. However, a lot of time passed before Liu Jingmin became aware that many of Grotowski's exercises had equivalents or were modelled after those proposed by the Far Eastern traditions and that many problems which Grotowski failed to solve could find a solution – sometimes surprisingly simple one – in Eastern movement techniques.

Presenting the essence of physical exercises used at a late stage of the Objective Drama project (when Grotowski moved to Italy and visited Irvine for short spells of time during subsequent years and Liu Jingmin returned to Taiwan in 1985 and was unable to participate in the project) Lisa Wolford said that participants in the workshops performed basic physical exercises similar to the ones described in *Towards a Poor Theatre* which summed up Grotowski's knowledge and reflections concerning theatre and acting at the end of 1960s. First of all, the instructors focused on correctness of the positions and on exploring the possibilities of the body with respect to balance, and then the participants improvised sequences of bodily dialogue without words, with a view of making these sequences fluent and organic, while maintaining precise positions (2000a, 201). The participants developed their individual exercises to overcome their own psycho-physical limitations. They worked on their own but under the supervision of a technical assistant. When they mastered the technique, they moved over to another stage of their work: „(...) we were instructed to develop a score of associations in conjunction with each segment of the training, and to explore these associations each time we performed the training. Such associations might involve relation to a person or object in the room, an image, or a specific memory.” (202). Wolford stressed that the instructors focused, among other things, on the motivation of the movement, its intended purpose, improvisation in the flow of associations and on reciprocal interactions in the group of participants. „Charac-

the structure and design of the production with a careful regard for the actor and the creative contribution he could make (in contrast to Meyerhold's tendency to treat actors as puppets).” (Taylor 285).

- 17 One of the main forms of traditional Indian dance theatre. *Kathakali* was created in the 17th century and is a theatrical form typical of Kerala region in South India. „It has gained a considerable international reputation in recent years for its vigorous masculine style of physical movement, bold super-human characterizations and vivid emotionalism. Dance, music and acting blend in dramatizations of stories adapted from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics and the *Purana*.” (Brandon 92).
- 18 *Nō* (or *Noh*) means “talent” or “skill”. A traditional Japanese theatrical form which developed from ancient forms of dance drama, created by Kan'ami Kiyotsugu (1333-1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443). „Rather than being actors or ‘representatives’ in the Western sense, *nō* performers are simply storytellers who use their visual appearances and their movements to suggest the essence of their tale than to enact it. Little ‘happens’ in a *nō* drama, and the total effect is less that of a present action than of a simile or metaphor made visual.” (See entry “*Nō* Theatre” in: Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002.)
- 19 *Hatha-joga* (*hatha yoga*), sanskr. “unity of power” – one of Indian philosophical schools, focusing on exercising the body in order to achieve spiritual perfection. Attaches great importance to purification exercises, breathing regulation and body postures (*asana*). Popular in the West as a form of relaxation exercises (See entry „Hatha yoga” in: Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002).

teristically, participants could adjust exercise, allowing the tone or tempo – rhythm of their movement to be influenced by contact with another actor in the space, allowing improvised 'dialogues' to emerge." (202).

The *Watching* exercise was, according to Wolford, an example of less restricted, improvised form of structured physical actions. However, the exercise was by no means passive observation, as it combined active involvement and objective alertness. It allowed participants to explore their own limitations with respect to attention and resistance. It was based on responses and reactions to team leaders. The physical activities included running and dancing in a variety of sequences. The rhythm and tempo of activities were dictated by the leader, and the exercise culminated in a physical dialogue between pairs of participants (Wolford 2000b, 444-445). According to Grzegorz Ziółkowski, the *Watching* exercise was developed by Jairo Cuesta from *Wake* exercises created by Jacek Zmysłowski, an actor of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre and from experiences acquired in the Theatre of Sources (173-175). These physical games, consisting of ten sequences, aimed to seek organic movement and non-falsified communication between partners. "One may assume that the *Watching* exercise used for the California project was to serve as a counterbalance for *Motions*, which was much more formalized" Ziółkowski said (174). *Watching* required watchfulness, observation skills, the ability to react to changes within oneself and the partner. Its purpose was to free oneself from mental and physical stereotypes and to meet the partner in the exercise. According to Winterbottom, the point of the exercise was the use of space and the awareness of everything which was located in it; another purpose was awakening the sensitivity to the flow of energy which was to be explored whenever present, but without exerting any pressure on the partner. The movement of the participants was to be organic instead of mechanical, light and silent, free from stereotypes and learnt patterns, following the impulse and non-calculated (510).

The Objective Drama project was for its participants a time for systematic, thorough work under strict, severe discipline, for training concentration and honing their observation skills. Liu Jingmin tried to ingrain the work ethics principles of that time in the actors of her own group, throughout two decades which came afterwards. Observers of everyday work at You Juchang mentioned the ban on reading newspapers at the place where exercises were performed and the ban on driving motorcycles up the hill to reach the theatre building (walking was preferred), the requirement to keep quiet and focused during exercises and to arrive on time for rehearsals (Quintero 192-193). Liu Jingmin undertook the work of Grotowski and his team and passed it on, also in another sense: not as an inventor of things which are new, but as a discoverer of those which are forgotten. However, it seemed that she did not care for copying or reviving a forgotten tradition but she focused on using it for the sake of the present day. The Youren (literally: people of You [Theatre]) were the innovators developing the best traditions of the theatre of Far East, and also ideas of Grotowski, emphasizing that there was no art without craft / skill" (*meiyou jishu jiu meiyou yishu*).

Traditional Chinese theatre – as it is commonly known – has always relied on perfect skills and ideally trained bodies and/or vocal apparatus. The teaching of theatrical craft consisted in transferring the knowledge by imitating the masters and repeating gestures or sounds until absolute perfection was achieved. Grotowski was well aware of the differences between Eastern and Western actors. He discussed the issue in his text “Around Theatre: The Orient – The Occident”, which was his re-edited speech from “Theatre East and West Congress” which was held in the University of Rome in September 1984 – during the Objective Drama project. The source of his ideas described in this text was Grotowski’s long-lasting work with actors with various cultural backgrounds and theatrical traditions. He discussed therein the differences in presenting simple actions, such as walking or swimming. He reflected on diverse methods of building a character or using internal energy. According to him, Western actors focused on the purpose of their actions: „If I am a Western actor in the most conventional sense, the utility of my action is: to open the door, size up the situation, and ask for silence. So the utility of the action of walking does not lie in the action itself.” (3). Actors from the Far East, representing classical theatrical tradition of China or Japan presented a different attitude, as they would focus on the very process of walking: “Only now the function of ‘walking’ will be a study / demonstration of how walking is done: the passage from one small element of walking to another. Element-stop-element-stop. The question is now: How do I walk? How does ‘walking’ function? What is the manner of walking?” (Grotowski 3). An actor from the Far East would strive for reflecting the essence of walking:

The line will be made of quanta – not waves as in Stanislavsky’s process of physical actions. In Theravada Buddhism, there even exist specific techniques for observing how one moves, also by separating one element of movement from another. Thus, roughly speaking, *the action is witnessed*. This is deeply rooted in Oriental classical culture: you must see the action at the same time as you do it (as in the old Hindu image of one bird watching while another acts) (Grotowski 4).

The issue of the self-observation of an actor performing a specific action in the traditional Chinese theatre had been noticed by Bertolt Brecht (91-99 and 136-147). The effect of self-observation was often emphasized by performing the movement with exquisite precision, slowing it down or even halting – as if it would be a hieroglyph suspended in space. Grotowski was aware of the importance of cultural conditionings of such presentations of the essence of actions. „It seems to me that in cultures where there is habitual transition from perception to hieroglyph, or from vision to sign, the mentality becomes used to reducing the image of an action to its *modus operandi*. The study of an action by separating it into elements of movements produces signs for actions in place of actions,” he said (4). He offered a more detailed explanation on the phenomenon while discussing the “swimming in the riv-

er" exercise performed by an Eastern and Western actor. According to Grotowski, the latter would unerringly ask: "How to swim without water in the studio? Should I perform the same motions that I would actually do in the water? An actor trained in the Oriental theatrical tradition would behave differently. He would ask: 'What is the sign which shows that I am swimming?'" (5). According to Grotowski, it would be ideal, instead of reaching for a fixed and culturally decipherable sign, to find a swimming impulse, to discover the essence of the swimming movement and to find its *modus operandi*, and then its form, as in the case of walking (5).

In the same text, Grotowski also pointed to other differences in Western and Eastern theatrical traditions, including different understanding of improvisation, using different breathing techniques and different location of the „centre" in the actor's body. He concluded that both approaches are complementary and therefore the only sensible solution is not to create the form of performative syncretism, but to strive to overcome the limitations of both these approaches (Grotowski 8). Stronger emphasis on acting (*zuo*) than on abstract thinking (*xiang*) was as important for Grotowski as for traditional Chinese theatre, although their goals differed significantly. Grotowski was seeking organic movement which would be free from stereotypes, while the classical theatre in China strived for achieving movement of absolute perfection and beauty, which would be a harmonious element of the rich language of movement and gesture characteristic of this theatre. A Chinese actor used his body to tell complex stories and therefore he had to master the signs of this bodily speech/writing thoroughly, as a good craftsman would. The Youren are well aware that there is no point in copying this language in contemporary theatre, but one has to know it in order to create one's own, modern theatrical idiolect. And for this reason they started their tedious exercises every morning, and continued them until late in the afternoon. These exercises consisted of various movement techniques including *taijiquan*²⁰, martial arts, meditative practices and drumming.

Towards the U-Theatre

Liu Jingmin's reception of Grotowski's practices seemed to consist of three stages. The first of them was the fascination with the exploratory work of the Polish

20 *Taijiquan* (literally „Fist of the Supreme Ultimate") is a type of meditation in motion, called also the Chinese boxing. Developed from ancient self-defence techniques. A type of martial art. As a physical exercise improving the condition and as a defence art was practised by monks of the Buddhist Shaolin monastery in the 5th century AD. Consists of sequences of soft, slowly performed movements. The harmony of breathing and movement in the practice reflects the harmony of *yin* and *yang* forces, that is the passive female and active male elements. The harmony reached in the process is conducive to health and removes tensions and blocs in the body. *Taijiquan* can be performed individually, with partner or with weapons (spears, knives and swords). (See entry „Taijiquan" in Schuhmacher and Woerner (329) and in Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002).

director and reformer of theatre. This stage, between years 1985-1987, was characterized by consistent attempts to transfer to Taiwan – with varying success – typical training techniques used by Grotowski. The second stage of absorbing Grotowski's teachings started in 1988, when U-Theatre / You Juchang was established. Prior to this, Liu Jingmin participated in Grotowski's workshop staged in November 1987 in Italy. She confessed that she underwent an internal breakthrough at that time, noticing a change in the exercises proposed during the workshop. She realized then that there was no point in standing guard over Grotowski's training methods any more, because Grotowski changed his own exercises himself. She also understood that things which she learnt at the workshops were a part of another culture and that her work in Italy lost its purpose; she had to begin her own exploration within her own culture (Liu Jingmin quoted after Ye (33)). After 1993, which marked another radical breakthrough in the artistic life of Liu Jingmin, she seemed to depart from Grotowski's practice. In fact, her understanding of what Grotowski was doing and searching for became much deeper. The Youren turned into a formation playing ceremonial drums. Thus began another, third stage of searching for Liu Jingmin's artistic identity. However, it was preceded by a few years of intensive work in the spirit of Grotowski.

In the autumn of 1985, Liu Jingmin and Chen Weicheng (working earlier as one of the four technical experts at Irvine), returned to Taiwan and started to work with Lanling Jufang, pursuing a project which was to end with a ritual performance of *Nine Songs*. However, the project was never completed. Liu Jingmin was not successful either in her co-operation with students of National Taipei University of the Arts (Guoli Taibei Yishu Daxue) which focused on physical and vocal training based on exercises proposed by Grotowski, which Liu Jingmin learnt while participating in the Objective Drama project. She reverted to popularizing Grotowski's concepts in 1987, after a series of personal problems (also health related). After long-lasting attempts to gather and train a group of young actors and enthusiasts of experimental theatre, she finally presented to selected audience her *Medea on the Mountain* (*Medea zai shanshang*) project. The event was performed in the mountains, at the coastal area of Badouzi, near Jilong port. Zhong Mingde, Taiwanese researcher of recent local theatre said that it was not only an attempt to follow Grotowski's method, but also an example of environmental theatre²¹ – a new theatrical trend attracting young Taiwanese people by proposing a different type of participation in a theatrical event and a different manner of engagement with space, not necessarily of theatrical character (198).

21 The term „environmental theatre” has been coined by Richard Schechner to describe theatrical practices aiming to establish new, more direct relations between the stage and the audience, by removing the clear boundary between the actor and the viewer. To achieve this, actors can work from between the audience or to invite the spectators to participate them in actions on stage. The environmental theatre attaches more importance to space, as the material for artistic creation.

Actually, *Medea on the Mountain* was not a theatrical performance but rather a combination of acting exercises with elements of happenings and an outdoor installation. The structure of the event heralded the different type of contact with space, new to modern Taiwanese art and theatre. The departure from the box stage model, characteristic of Taiwanese experimental theatre of the end of the 20th century occurred during a period of rampant development of performance art on the island. Another significant stimulus for the new understanding of space, particularly that of You Juchang, was the new ecological awareness. People became more and more aware of the detrimental effect which the progressing industrialization of the island exerted on the environment. Intensive development of industry and new technologies increased prosperity and comfort of the Taiwanese on one hand, while on the other it alienated them for good from their natural environment which suffered degradation progressing at terrifying speed.

Since *Medea on the Mountain*, it became a regular element of You Juchang's activity to acquaint participants in the para-theatrical activities with the surroundings of their actions/exercises; later, this procedure focused mostly on the actors. You Juchang conducted rehearsals and exercises in natural environment of the mountains or beach, not only to familiarize actors with new space and variable landscape or changing weather, but also to let them acquire broader and deeper knowledge of the natural environment of man who was uprooted from the order of nature with increasing brutality. In 1990, You Juchang's philosophy began to prioritize the notion of unity of man and nature (*tianwen heyi*). At that time, the group started to build its theatre, exercise hall and dormitory at Old Well Mountain (Laoquan Shan), at the old house of Liu Jingmin's parents. The box stage space was rejected in favour of outdoor theatre, perfectly fitting into the natural landscape, with breathtaking panorama of Taipei spreading across the valley below. This modern metropolis seen from the mountaintop permeated with silence and peace, with its bird songs, cicadas and lush subtropical green, seemed unreal and absurd to some degree. Down there you could experience all the dubious and indubitable achievements of civilized world: comfort, cosiness, and perhaps even the temptation of easy and light existence. Here, on the mountainside you had only the promise of painful severity and ascetic life without facilities and electricity, cold and wet when the weather was bad, and difficult to reach, as the only way to reach the exercise / performance site was to climb a stony path. Ten years after *Medea on the Mountain*, this very site hosted another para-theatrical project: Growing Flowers which consisted in planting various flowers around the theatre. According to Craig A. Quintero, "Growing Flowers served as a vehicle for self-cultivation, heightening the company's relationship with their natural environment." (182). The purpose of the project was clearly educational. Participating members of You Juchang were supposed not only to plant the flowers, but also to nurture them. „Growing Flowers altered the company's perception of their mountain space, personalizing the environment and making them more aware of its intimate details." (183).

The act of building their own theatre, an enclave for everyday exercise, an attempt to tame the space, also by planting flowers around the theatre, seemed to express a desire to own their own place to which they can always return, to achieve stabilization and to settle down. Yi-Fu Tuan thus discussed in his *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience* man's ambivalent attitude to space, his desire to get rooted down and the love of unlimited space. This unlimited space attracted man, tempted him incessantly, prevented him from settling down for too long, and finally made him leave his place, if only temporarily, and hit the road. Those who had settled for too long risked torpor and insensitivity. As Anna Wieczorkiewicz wrote:

When one hits the road he opens to new opportunities; various things may happen to him and he himself can change as well. "The road", which originally was enforced and inevitable, becomes liberating and allows for openness. On the other hand, stabilization can be perceived as a condition which enslaves man, not only by tying him down to a particular location, but also by immobilizing his thoughts, by restricting the freedom of experience, by closing the world in general. A traveller/hobo seen from this perspective constitutes a hypostasis of a dream about freedom (155-156).

You Juchang artists confirmed this perennial ambivalence of human attitudes: the desire for setting roots and the fear of dead stillness which could result from excessive attachment to a place which symbolizes unchanging values incorporated therein. One could always revert to them, but at the same time one was driven by the desire to move forward, to overstep boundaries, to expand one's world and continue one's internal development. *Medea on the Mountain* of 1987 heralded this nomadic philosophy of the group, incorporating not only the new understanding of space, but also the actor's body located in such space.

Medea on the Mountain was performed at chilly winter nightfall and at night, on a cliff, about forty meters above sea level. A fire was built in the centre of a flat, grassy area size of a football pitch. Wooden supports with paper lampoons were placed between the fire and the cliff edge. The performers were not allowed to enter the central space. Their tasks, among others, consisted in circling the performance space a number of times, walking or running in silence along a path leading along the cliff edge (Zhong 198-205). After some years, Zhong Mingde described the event in the following manner:

In the darkness, some core members lit the fire and slowly beat jazz drums. The chorus, formed from members of the Contemporary Taipei Theatre Laboratory and the student actors of Lan-ling Theatre Workshop, began a rhythmic recitation alternately covering their eyes, mouths and ears with their hands. Two core members then opened up a white 8mx8m tarp and spread it on the ground. Then on it they made an energy-exhausting movement by rising their right arms high in the air, rolling down on the

tarp and then leaping back into the initial posture. From slow to fast they repeated this movement over and over. When a member could no longer move, a chorus member stepped in to replace him. This ritual of exhaustion continued as long as there were people leaping and rolling on the tarp. Besides the core members and the chorus, several spectators impulsively walked onto the tarp as replacements for those who were 'dead with exhaustion' (203).

Afterwards - according to Zhong Mingde - Liu Jingmin signalled to circle the fire and to throw in the flames white shirts which were worn by performers and small personal items (toys, letters and poems) brought by everyone invited. According to Zhong Mingde, *Medea on the Mountain* did not have much in common with the myth of Medea. However, Valerie Doran proposed a different view on the issue, although one may harbour some doubts concerning the precision of her report: "In the U Theatre rendition, the actors drew a parallel between Medea's flight to a foreign land and Chinese mainlanders' flight to Taiwan in 1949. Medea's gold cloak became a metaphor for injustices done to Taiwanese people by the newcomers. After the play, the actors built a huge bonfire and invited the audience to help them burn the gold cloak and other symbolic items in a ritual ridding of ill-will on Taiwan." (Doran 68).

In his description, Zhong Mingde emphasized the free bond between the audience and the initiators of actions who did not exert any strict control over other participants. „The relationship was more like and impulse and a reaction," (203) without enforcing anything. After burning the personal items, flutes and drums sounded and participants began to dance and eat together. In this manner, a sort of loosely-related community developed. At dawn, all participants returned to the place from which they entered the cliff a couple of hours earlier, faced the rising sun and repeated Watching exercises which marked the beginning of the para-theatrical event at dusk (204).

Medea on the Mountain was the first Taiwanese attempt of local actors aiming to use Grotowski's exercises performed during California workshops and earlier. Participants in the projects realized that the theatre of exploration which was just arising would force actors and spectators to re-learn their relationship with space of non-theatrical places, to give up the passive attitude of observes, to re-think the essence of creating a community in the theatre and of participating in the event. For the future group and for its spectators alike, the journey to the cliff became a symbolic beginning of travelling in real, geographic space and of a pilgrimage through performative traditions and forms.

However, unusual non-theatrical places were not a safe guarantee of immediate success of new experimenters. In October 1987, Liu Jingmin and Jairo Cuesta Gonzales whom she invited to Taiwan to lead an acting workshop, arranged *The First Action of Body* (*Diyizhong shenti xingdong*) in Zheng Chenggong temple in Taipei sub-

urbs. Zhong Mingde provided an intriguing description of the temple: „The main hall of the temple is about forty meters high and is made of concrete. Deserted and architecturally incomplete, the temple does not have the colourful, glorious look of a typical Chinese temple, but it does have a raw and wild grandness about it... sometimes dubbed ‘Taipei’s Parthenon.’” (206). However, he did not think that the performance was a success. He said that „Because of the noise, the crowds, and the many hours of performance, *The First Action of Body* seemed more a bizarre temple festival for urban youth than anything else.” (208). Nevertheless, he considered the event to be a significant stage leading to the formation of Liu Jingmin’s theatrical group. *The First Action of Body*, a performance lasting for about seven hours, was divided into four parts with an intermission between two initial and two latter parts. The first part consisted of a stories about Gilgamesh, the second was a set of body and vocal exercises designed by Gonzales, the third featured episodes narrated and played by actors, while the fourth consisted of the “Wake” exercise. The third part included the largest amount of strictly theatrical elements. Actors performed in the basement of the temple to which the audience, divided into four groups, were ushered by Liu Jingmin and Gonzales. The performances and the surroundings were truly impressive, as the Taiwanese researcher admitted, but the alien and complicated character of the story was tedious for Taiwanese audience (208). Nevertheless, another step was made towards Liu Jingmin’s own theatre.

In Search of the Roots – In Search of Taiwanese Identity

As it has already been mentioned, in 1987 Liu Jingmin took part in Grotowski’s workshop in Italy. She left for Italy intending to stay in Europe for good. However, it did not work. She changed her original intention after a conversation with Grotowski. „Grotowski helped me realize that in order to make any real progress, I had to explore my essential self, the one who had been ‘dreaming about the butterfly’” (Doran 68). Grotowski supposedly called Liu Jingmin a Western Chinese. “What does it mean to be a Western Chinese? It means the lack of organic reaction, and also the loss of the ancient form, turning into something “betwixt and between” (Liu Jingmin 1989: 32-39 quoted after Liu Changrang 71). Naturally, she meant the loss of form of traditional Chinese theatre. She added also: “I realized that I didn’t want to be a Western Chinese; I wanted to be a Chinese Chinese. I had to start from my own roots. That meant going back home instead of staying in Europe.” (Doran 68). Her re-encounter with Grotowski stimulated Liu Jingmin to seek essence of Eastern spirituality. She admitted herself that she did not bring from abroad any Western performative techniques, but the intention to penetrate her own culture and search for the essence of Far Eastern spiritual power. She started to ask herself: what did it mean to be a Chinese? What did it mean to be Taiwanese? (Liu Jingmin 1993: 75).

Pilgrims of the New Theatre

The first image which greeted visitors of You Juchang's website in 2009 was boundless blue sky covered by cumulus clouds. Under this boundless sky, a group of anonymous persons walked in a single file, turning away from the viewer, heading towards the hilly horizon. The panorama stirred deep emotions with its beautiful deep blue, associated with limitless freedom and liberty, but the ascetic landscape was frightening, with stones scattered here and there, shallow water and blue and grey silhouettes of the hills looming in the distance. Bent figures of travellers who painfully trod on made one ponder on the human fate and on the condition of an artist. The travellers walked in the group, but nevertheless they were surrounded by an unsettling aura of loneliness and dejection – they seemed to be in a company yet were strangely alone. The image was a metaphor of Youren's life, but also of the life of Everyman. All of us are pilgrims, always on the road, never settled for good, always passing by, temporarily here and now. Only we can decide what to do with this fleeting moment, whether to make it beautiful, meaningful and valuable or not.

After establishing the theatre, You Juchang's artists set off for a number of walking trips which helped them to search for the roots of their native culture and specific body techniques. In mid-June of 1989 a dozen members of the group went for a more than ten days' trek from Taipei to Yilan. They reached their destination after four days and spent next eight days doing intensive physical exercises. Before setting off, they sew and dyed their own shirts in which they travelled the four days. They went in a single file, in total silence, trying to keep eye contact with the preceding walker. The silence, similarly to *qigong*²² concentration and breathing techniques, enhanced their focus on the essence of the movement and on their own body. They usually walked for eight to ten hours, and then performed intensive physical exercises. Morning exercises on the sea coast were supposed to teach them how to function in new space and also to adjust their movement techniques to new surroundings (Quintero 127). Lin Tubing described the trip to Mingshan in the following way:

It was a quiet group. Every person watched things with eyes wide open, turned his or her ears to listen, trod carefully on forest paths. They passed the part of Nagang poisoned by factory fumes, they passed morning-scented forests, they faced plenty of questioning and surprised looks. They walked by day, under the blue-indigo firmament; they sped

22 *Qigong* (literally „to work on energy“) is a type of health-enhancing exercises which combine Daoist and Buddhist elements. *Qigong* includes physical, breathing and spiritual exercises, divided into passive and active, internal and external ones. Passive internal exercises are performed while standing and sitting; they aim at relaxing the body, regulating the breath and turning the spirit inside. Active, external exercises consisting of movement sequences aim at coordinating the awareness and breath with body movements. See entry „Qigong“ in Schuhmacher and Woerner (266-267).

under the starry sky by night. They stopped for the night at schools. After four days and three nights they reached the Mingshan Temple in Yilan; many had sore feet and aching bodies, but on the next morning another stage of the journey awaited them: it was eight days of exercise! (quoted after Liu Changrang 27)

Exercises performed during subsequent days on the sea coast included physical exercise with weapons, vocal exercises and acting. The last day, consisting of twenty-four hours of incessant physical training was the greatest test. „At four in the morning the ‘watching dance’ (*guankan wudao*) started at the sea coast, with various exercises performed afterwards: theatrical ones, running and meditation, until late in the night and then until four thirty in the dawn of the next day, when the session ended again at the sea coast with the ‘watching dance’ when the sky began to brighten.” (Wu Tongbin 48-49 quoted after Liu Changrang 29).

The purpose of the trip was to achieve internal (mental) and external (physical) peace. The clothing, sewn and dyed by participants were to underline their status of wanderers (loose clothes, bamboo hat), and also their participation in the wandering community, by resigning from individual features of the clothing. This form of wandering was similar to meditation in movement (or through movement), which was additionally emphasized by walking in a single file. Every walker had to focus his eyes on a single, selected point on the back or head of the person walking before. According to one of the participants of the trip to Mingshan, the focusing on a single point of the body of the preceding person resulted in liberating the mind and body. Things reflected themselves in one’s eyes on their own, and ideas appeared in the mind and passed through it without involving the consciousness in order to retain balance (Wu Weicui quoted after Liu Changrang 30).

Before Youren set for the Mingshan temple, they completed a half year’s practicing *qigong*. *Qigong* uses a variety of breathing techniques, both spontaneous and trained. In addition to natural breathing, sighing which cleanses the system or the in-breath which activates energy, it uses the post- and pre-natal abdominal breathing which differ by the degree of complexity. The most advanced breathing techniques allow to generate immense energy which can be used for medical or martial purposes.

One could ask, why do You Juchang artists need to suffer fatigue and physical pain while wandering? What is the point of exploring the resilience of one’s own body and mind in extreme conditions of June heat and murderous air humidity? The trek to Mingshan taught its participants to overcome the limitations of their bodies by subjecting them to a withstand capability test. As a result, the discipline enforced on the body by yielding to the joint rhythm of stepping along developed in them a better awareness of the environment. The extreme physical effort and incorporation of *taijiquan*, *qigong*, animal movements and vocal training into the training routine not only strengthened the body but also changed the soul.

You Juchang's group experienced another internal transformation through the body during another trek, arranged in 1991, when the actors participated in annual religious pilgrimage from Baishatun to Beigang and back, carrying the Mazu Goddess²³ venerated in the area since the 17th century. One of the participants, Craig A. Quintero, provided an interesting report of the pilgrimage. This time the distance was much longer; it approximated four hundred kilometres and the pilgrims were not required to maintain undisturbed concentration; similarly, nobody expected any special religious experiences. Quintero pointed out that this pilgrimage was special due to the lack of pre-planned route or fixed stops for short rest and overnight stops. As a result, the participants experienced the sense of instability, insecurity and improvisation. As the pilgrimage had no foreseeable rules, the participants could only focus on the movement, on physical relocation in space. Actually, their bodies were unable to relax during the day, they were continually on standby, tense and expecting action (142). What is more, it was a suffering body: „Experiencing and overcoming blisters, bloody feet, heat, exhaustion and strained muscles were the vehicles for self-transformation.” (137). All this happened in a country fair atmosphere, where tradition merged with modernity and glimpses of religiousness were accompanied by the desire for comfort, as hardly any pilgrim walked the whole way; most of them travelled in air-conditioned vehicles. The pilgrimage was accompanied by traditional lion dances²⁴, firework displays, construction of altars and the presence of shamans-exorcists and karaoke woman singers. High and elevated motives intertwined with low and earthly ones, *sacrum* mingled with *profanum*. However, Youren were not desiring any deep religious experiences, but were rather interested in exploring one's physical limitations and perhaps seeking a fleeting sense of creating a community with other pilgrims, who probably had different goals.

In subsequent years, You Juchang's actors took part in many other pilgrimages, only of different character. In 1996, they arranged a walking trek from their seat in Muzha to Ximending, a trade district of Taipei. The characteristic feature of the event was the requirement to move in slow motion, but paying full attention to sounds, smells and shapes passed by along the way. In 1996, the group went also for a six hundred kilometres' trek from Kending Park to Taipei (Walking the Heights of Taiwan). Along the way, the actors performed “barter trade” of a kind with residents of the areas through which they passed. The Youren played drums for acci-

23 Mazu (called also Tianhou, the Empress of Heaven) is a goddess worshipped particularly on the southern seacoast of China and in Taiwan. Her assistants: Qianli Yan - Thousand-mile Eye and Shunfeng Er - Wind Tracking Ear, help her to save fishermen in trouble on sea. See entry „Mazu” in Eberhard (149).

24 Lion dances (*shizi wu*), or actually dances of people dressed as lions have been known in China for two thousand years. Lions, which do not live in China at large, were introduced in ancient times to imperial gardens as exotic gifts. Related to Buddhist mythology, their stone sculptures acted as guardians of temple gates. The lion dance, popular in China and Chinese diaspora all over the world, performed to celebrate the New Year, have retained their beneficial and exorcising character until now.

dental audiences, while local residents performed local shows for them in return. At the end of the 1990s, the Youren arranged a trek through aboriginal villages at the eastern coast of Taiwan,

Throughout all these years the group embarked simultaneously on a metaphorical trek through a variety of Chinese and Taiwanese forms of theatre, musical, religious and holiday traditions, particularly those which were forgotten and neglected, being a part of local village and country culture. They also cherished foreign traditions, such as Japanese *no* theatre and its culture of mask, Sufi dances, zen meditation practices and breathing techniques. With the passage of time Liu Jingmin's understanding of Grotowski's idea of theatre and actor's training was gradually more and more deep. She had started from imitating Grotowski's exercises but later she had focused on understanding her native culture. For four decades she had been working on a comprehensive development of the actor through perfecting his technical skills along with his spirit. The point of departure was intensive, hard physical training, exploration of the possibilities of one's body, careful observation of the surroundings, deeper understanding of one's own cultural tradition. The destination was internal/spiritual and external/physical transformation. The process of transformation shaped a new kind of artist: a more sensitive person, who was wiser, aware of his/her limitations and creative potential – that is a fully-fledged artist and man.

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