

Theater: Jerzy Grotowski's 'Acropolis'

1904 Drama Is Adapted for Polish Group

By CLIVE BARNES

IT is a room, except it isn't a room, it's a church. And inside the room, which is the concentration camp Auschwitz, are prisoners. And inside the church are spectators. The spectators are mixed up with the prisoners, so that the actors and the audience are in a constant position of emotional confrontation.

The scene is provided by Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theater, brought by the Brooklyn Academy of Music for its first American season. Last night at the Washington Square Methodist Church, it gave the first American performance—only the Polish Laboratory Theater would give a premiere on Election Night—of Grotowski's most remarkable staging of "Acropolis."

Grotowski believes that the theatrical environment should have relevance to the theatrical experience—or, if you prefer it, that the physical conditions of the theater should be shaped to the play, not the play shaped to the physical conditions of the theater.

Thus in "Acropolis" the audience is grouped all around the central playing area and the actors move around and by them. To an extent, your fellow members of the audience become lay actors—not exactly invisible, but rather like the black-garbed puppeteers in the Japanese Bunraku theater. You see them, but you don't see them. Yet their presence, their common civilian status with yourself, actually adds to the immediacy of the actors.

Grotowski's purpose in "Acropolis" is to challenge the audience to see itself in the context of Auschwitz. To accept some iota, a scintilla of that horror, to be involved in that web of human choices and squalid heroism.

The staging is based upon the Polish play "Acropolis," written in 1904 by Stanislaw Wyspianski. It is apparently a symbolic play, set in the Royal Castle of Gracow (the Polish "Acropolis" in the sense of a fortified citadel) where figures from the tapestries come down from the

The Cast

ACROPOLIS, based on the text of Stanislaw Wyspianski. Staged by Jerzy Grotowski; co-realization, properties, costumes by Jozef Szajna; architecture by Jerszy Gurawski; literary adviser, Ludwik Flaszen. Performed by the Institute of Actor's Research Laboratory Theater of Wroclaw, Poland. Presented by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in association with Ninon Tallon Karlweis and the Committee to Welcome the Polish Lab Theater, Ellen Stewart, co-chairman. At the Washington Square Methodist Church, 133 West 4th Street.

Jacob-Priam	.....	Zygmunt Molik
Rebecca-Cassandra	.....	Rena Mirecka
Isaac-Troyan Guardian	.....	Antoni Jacholkowski
Esau-Hector	.....	Ryszard Cieslak
Angel-Paris	.....	Zbigniew Cynkutis
Leah-Helen of Troy	.....	Stanislaw Scierski and Andrzej Paluchiewicz

walls and re-enact the great mythic scenes of Western civilization.

The playwright—I have never encountered the actual play, so I depend for my information on the program note—described this Royal Castle as "the Necropolis of tribes." What would be a meaningful contemporary realization of this? Grotowski settled on Auschwitz, where, as Ludwik Flaszen, Grotowski's literary adviser, puts it, "the European civilization of the 20th century was put on trial."

The Laboratory Theater works on a text to provide a style and manner of performance. Grotowski is said to feel that in his first American notices too much attention was paid to him, and too little to his actors. He is probably right there, for director and cast clearly work together in a collaboration that must have something of the atmosphere of choreographic creation to it.

In "Acropolis" the Laboratory Theater has devised both this environmental setting, with the actors responding antiphonally to one another, across the audience, and a stylized playing style in which simple sculptural-like objects, or even day-to-day things like wheelbarrows, involve the spectator by familiarity into a sense of participation.

The style of the acting is singular. The actors use their face muscles to provide mask-like images of misery and acceptance, their voices are dehumanized, their entire manner represents humanity in such a condition of degradation that the humanity itself is flickering like a guttering candle.

Now they re-enact certain Biblical and Homeric myths. Without any knowledge of Polish I couldn't identify these myths specifically, although

Actors and Audience Confront One Another

the mood is clearly enough evoked, and the graven images of suffering are portrayed with a scalding yet piteous vitality. (Incidentally, I am far from certain whether a knowledge of Polish would offer any more enlightenment—I have a suspicion that many of the guttural and sonorous sounds and songs that the actors offer are gibberish.)

To say something must be seen when all the seats for the entire engagement are sold is something in the manner of gibberish itself. However, as with Grotowski's earlier "A Constant Prince," this "Acropolis" offers a strange, challenging and vibrantly beautiful experience. Grotowski really does make us look once more at what basic theater is.

Grotowski's actors are all dazzling technicians, with masterly discipline and control. They aim in technique to remove the shadow line between appearance and reality, and to take us with them on a new theatrical journey.

It is a fascinating experience. It has changed my basic thinking about the theater, and I think it will change many others also. I would stress though that this is a "laboratory" as well as a "theater." I think the importance of Grotowski is to be seen as much in his disciples as in his own work—and ultimately it may well be his role as a maverick theatrical catalyst that will be his final significance.

In the last couple of years, few things have impressed me in the theater so much as Peter Brook's staging of Seneca's "Oedipus Rex" for Britain's National Theater and Jerome Robbins's "Dances at a Gathering" for the New York City Ballet. I suspect that neither would have been the same without Grotowski.