

*Jerzy Grotowski*, James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta, Routledge Performance Practitioners series, Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, pp.182. Pb.

*Etienne Decroux*, Thomas Leabhart, Routledge Performance Practitioners series, Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, pp.142. Pb.

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These two texts make an important addition to the growing list now available in this series. Their common structure of biography and context, survey of the artist's writings, analysis of their practice, followed by introductory practical exercises for the student/teacher, presumably to try out in the studio, is now very familiar. The quality of the photographic reproduction continues to disappoint and their brevity is still troubling for what the books inevitably have to leave out. All writers in this series face a difficult balancing act between providing an overview and including enough substance to make valuable or illuminating what is usually a reiteration of material found in more substantial sources elsewhere. In this instance, these two contributions are broadly successful in fulfilling the series' intention to be cheap almost pocket-sized key introductory guides for students. Both are helped in this by the fact that they are written by people who had direct experience with those whose lives and work they introduce. As such they yield many important insights. But even within such tight given parameters, it is surprising how variable two books can be, the Grotowski one being much more accomplished than that on Decroux, which is sometimes hard-going, occasionally sloppy, and uneven in register. This is all the more disappointing because the dearth of materials on Decroux makes this book all the more necessary. A quick glance through Leabhart's bibliography, which comprises many texts that would be hard for the student reader to get hold of, only confirms this.

I opened *Jerzy Grotowski* with some nervousness about how the authors would succinctly represent this enigmatic artist, whose complex work moved through several phases in several countries, shifting radically from theatre as presentation to theatre as personal research, 'art as vehicle'. Would I, like the gloomy silhouettes on the series covers, also be kept in the dark? It may have been a long time coming, but I am relieved to write that this book is excellently done and well worth the wait. Cuesta worked in Theatre of Sources and then Objective Drama, whilst Slowiak was assistant for much of 'Bos's' practical research in the States and initially Italy, frequently preparing work with participants in Grotowski's absence to then

show him on his return. They continue to conduct workshops but also performance-making with their own company New World Performance Laboratory based in Akron Ohio, still deeply informed by the ethos and practices learnt with Grotowski. The significance of this contact becomes especially evident in the practical section where they present exercises that they use 'based on Grotowski's principles' (p.119), rather than repeating overfamiliar exercises from more than 40 years ago described in *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Whilst this is a sleight of hand in terms of this book's focus being Grotowski, which may confuse the less attentive student reader, in sum it is a much more honest position, and ultimately more productive than some depersonalized reduction of Grotowski's extensive practical experimentation. This is endorsed by the very personal Afterword, an addition to the book's usual format, which confirms how we should all develop rather than set in stone or sanctify influences from those gone before, even with as strong-minded singular artists as Decroux and Grotowski. This subtext is an important one and offers a way to read such materials as these books. With this premise, the authors carefully balance respect and distance, allowing them to shift quickly across Grotowski's crucial developments as a director then researcher, linked to analysis of his major writings. Their contextual background is precise yet enlivened by personal knowledge of the man. The focus on *Akropolis* in assessing his directing is sensible and pragmatic in that reasonable film documentation of this exists, and this analysis is located clearly in relation both to Grotowski's earlier and his later performance and craft-based explorations.

Few commentators know as much about Decroux as practitioner/academic Leabhart, based on four years' study with him followed by a decade of close contact. Given such proximity, his book is surprisingly hazy and often lax. It does not appear to have been edited: it is unclear why some things and not others are explained in the supplementary boxes (of which there are only 6 as compared to Slowiak and Cuesta's 45); in one instance a box appears three pages before mention of the person it describes; Craig's Super-Marionette later becomes the more familiar ubermarionette (though without the umlaut), a term that is not included in the skimpy index, which would have helped resolve such inconsistencies; there is frequent repetition, including of quotations, which irritates in such a short work; Decroux is called an 'auditor' at Copeau's school though what this role means is unexplained, as with the term *raccourcis*; Alain de Botton's name is misspelt, and his mention here is unhelpful for the intended student readership.

Such small annoyances accumulate, but the lack of an outside eye is all the more impeding when Leabhart engages with the extremely difficult task of describing Decroux's very abstract and detailed Corporeal Mime, be it in his description of two performance sequences, *The Carpenter* and *The Washerwoman*, in explaining exercises to do, or in defining Corporeal Mime's guiding principles. He makes a good attempt, but frequently his descriptions are hard to follow, even with the accompanying line drawings in the final practice-based section. These do little to help us imagine weight, speed and rhythm, let alone resistance and balance in movements such as the 'wool-carding machine'. Culturally and historically, our students are also far removed from the artisanal world of these workers whom Decroux observed and drew on for his performances, a distance that is never addressed.

Leabhart offers helpful tips to apply mime-based principles in other contexts, such as with characters or text-work, but this yields a lot less than, say, the recent translations of Lecoq's writings. And in his analysis of Decroux's own *Words on Mime*, disparate texts collated over thirty years, the 'sometimes impenetrable style' (p.39) Leabhart describes becomes his own stumbling block as he struggles to make sense. The playful contradiction in Decroux's book's title makes us all the more aware of Leabhart's difficulty in writing words *about* mime. Though the tone is at times too colloquial and familiar, he does paint a very vivid picture of this politically and artistically hard-line eccentric artist: with his extraordinary resolve, dedication and frequent near isolation except for daily contact with his dedicated students and assistants in his subterranean studio in his Paris house. A short section on the economic implications of funding in light of such ideological and pragmatic demands reveals fascinating tensions. But such insights are buried and scarce.

Leabhart frequently refers to Grotowski in his book, including a dedicated section, based on the fact that Grotowski championed Decroux in one of his College de France lectures in the 1990s. He raises several interesting corollaries: between the significance of 'inner work' in both techniques; their similar use of notions drawn from music, of vibration and rhythm; their relatively closed research presentations for invited audiences, and by extension their attempts to refocus understanding of the spectator's role in the

actor's practice; and their emphasis on craft and an often punishing work ethic, where art frequently rode roughshod over life. It is a pity that whilst these two figures stand proudly side by side in twentieth century theatre experimentation, these two testaments to their patient, rigorous research differ so radically in what they achieve.

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