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art

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## The Ukrainian Surprise

**Grotowski Festival 2009, Wroclaw, Poland**

By Guy Zimmerman

The process by which a child learns how to navigate the world is, from beginning to end, profoundly theatrical in nature. The child imagines herself into the world of pencils, bookshelves and full-moons-in-the-sky by embodying them in the eyes of another, making the felt experience of the object personal, direct and surprisingly immediate. Watching this kind of “imaginative play” is completely engaging (“baby TV, Eliza channel,” my wife and I used to call it) and there is never any doubt that your witnessing presence is allowing the learning to take place. When a piece of theater is very, very good it attains a similar kind of startling immediacy, the performers drawing on the attention of the audience to travel into the vibrant, unnameable mystery of the real as it emerges from a gap in the veil of appearances.



No theater I have ever seen brought this more fully to mind than ***On Sunday Morning*** by the Ukrainian company ***Maisternia Pисni***. It was my fourth night at the ***Grotowski Festival*** in Wroclaw, Poland. Along with two dozen other Americans I boarded a bus near the main square in Wroclaw and drove out into the Polish countryside to see this new work directed by ***Sergey Kovalevich, featuring Natalka Polovynka (also the music director), Ulyana Horbacheviska and Olena Kostyuk***. We drove out through summer fields and into the beginning of a forest...and then the bus pulled over at the head of a muddy path into the trees. In the quickly fading light the group of us walked a hundred yards or so down to a clearing, where an old water mill had been converted to a performance space. The company welcomed us into an antechamber and, a short while later, into the theater space, an open brick-walled enclosure with the kind of vaulted ceiling that must be typical of that part of Poland. We sat on risers against the near wall and the three women began to perform.



*On Sunday Morning* is organized around a sequence of traditional songs. Movement and some spoken text are drawn “from Ukrainian woman’s rituals...paying special attention to the role of women.” The piece, which seemed thoroughly ***Grotowski-an*** in its rigor and its approach to movement and vocal work, included several sequences that easily rank among the most remarkable experiences I’ve had in the theater. A description of the elements of the piece - a pile of earth, a basin of water hurled out onto the floor, three dancers

moving in the deep, vaulted space spinning like dervishes, an episode of conflict with the two lead actresses facing off against each other in anger, a change of costumes toward the end, the performers now appearing in elaborate crimson headdresses - will not account for the powerful effect on the audience. The moments that had the strongest impact came during intensely present interchanges, the performers in a state that was at once completely relaxed but also hyper-energized by contact with the audience. The engagement was direct, immediate, electric and effortless all at once, and it didn't matter at all that few among us could understand the language in which the performers were speaking. In between these moments were longer sequences of movement and singing, the women moving throughout the large, dimly lit space with a total command of their art.

The immediacy with which the performers engaged with our attention produced the kind of vivid surprise that is, in my view, the heart of artistic experience - the nourishing soul of it. We turn to art in order to be jolted back into the present moment by the encounter with the art work, which must be perfectly convincing and also perfectly surprising. Watching *Maisternia Pisni* it felt as if we were being tricked into presence where we hung for a while, sustained by the collective awareness that had formed between us in the room. Again, I thought of my daughter before the onset of language, immediately connected to the revelation of the world through the act of embodying it before a witnessing presence.

What is it about language that complicates the picture? Being a writer as well as a director, this was interesting to ponder while at the Grotowski Festival. Interesting too how many of the performances, assuming they featured a text at all, were based on the Greeks, Shakespeare, Beckett and, joining the canon, [Sarah Kane](#). One way to understand the prominence of these writers is to think about how they manage to defuse the alienating effects of language by combining it with *something else*... Beckett, certainly, worked long and hard to find a way out of a fundamental impasse with language. His solution resembles [Grotowski's "via negativa,"](#) which is about taking away, stripping back so that the word never loses touch with the silence it rose out of. Part of the relief we feel while hearing his texts has to do with an imbalance being temporarily redressed, returning us for a few moments toward the open present that once fully embraced us.