Hidden Territories: The Theatre of Gardzienice (review)

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This is an insightful source on the Gardzienice Theatre Association, a Polish experimental theatre group of international reputation that resides in the village of Gardzienice (near Lublin) and has been led by Wlodzimierz Staniewski since 1977. Unlike previous English-language publications on Gardzienice, this volume presents Staniewski’s work in his own words and is complemented by a user-friendly CD-ROM, featuring unique archival material such as video footage of the company’s major productions, rehearsals and training sessions, director’s notes, and performance scripts. It also includes excerpts from selected critical writings on Gardzienice by Halina Filipowicz, Alison Hodge, Albert Hunt, Leszek Kolankiewicz, and Bronislaw Wildstein.

In the opening scene, Staniewski explains the principles of *musicality* and his nostalgic appreciation of nature. These principles govern the group’s research and productions (held mostly in the multi-ethnic rural areas of Poland’s eastern border) as well as workshops offered abroad. Staniewski’s recorded commentary supplements and illustrates various phases of the group’s activities, while the printed text offers further accounts of his practice and principles.

The opening section, “Origins,” elucidates the group’s artistic, philosophical, and literary roots, but, surprisingly enough, Staniewski (a former pupil of Grotowski’s) gives no credit to other theatre practitioners, as if his findings were exclusively associated with nature, religious and pagan rituals, folk art, and literature. In the next section, “Practice,” Staniewski shares his thoughts on *expeditions* and *gatherings*, which form the group’s pre-performative process, involving local people and gifted outcasts (*God’s fools*). Detailed rules of expeditions and various incidents that occurred during these meetings provide more insight into this practice. To Staniewski, the traditional gatherings in the village are sources of theatricality and dynamism, because “they are richer and more developed than many dramas done on stage” (52). It appears that their “fermenting dramaturgy,” energy, and natural space co-design and inspire future performances. Staniewski elaborates more on *musicality* in the section “Technique,” where he also discusses detailed elements of *musicality training, inner sounding*, as well as *first harmony* (*harmonia prima*) and other fundamental categories of his original work. The observations on *actors and acting* are cogent, sometimes mystical, often puzzling, but richly illustrated with photographs and CD-ROM film clips. Morning exercises, night running, the phenomena of *the third actor* (“a creator of destructive dissonance”) and “*the multiplied actor* whose ability of metamorphosis is so strong that he himself is not visible, and disappears” present further examples of Staniewski’s...
continuously developing technique (100). Section four, entitled “Performance,” outlines various stages of the productions Avvakum, Carmina Burana, and Metamorphoses, offering reflections on dramaturgy and text and explaining how literary prototypes shaped various versions of their staging. All these specific examples provide an excellent illustration of what Gardzienice’s practices involve and what constitutes the major creative forces behind them.

The group (with its director/gatherer – zgromadziciel in Polish, as Staniewski explains) creates a curious model of life whose inner workings are never fully explained. As this mysterious model seems much easier to admire than to imitate, Staniewski is paradoxically certain that it is precisely because of this imprecision that the future awaiting the Gardzienice Association in democratic Poland looks promising. After pointing out the feeling of alienation that the orthodox bureaucratic type of theatre evokes in its audience, he asserts that “a genetically different kind of theatre […] offers a deeper way of hearing, of seeing and experiencing the world. This theatre deals with the chemistry between people, with material which is prohibited by orthodox society. This theatre is an oasis, a cave, an asylum. I believe it will survive” (143).

Alison Hodge, whose introduction sketches a brief yet informative context for Staniewski’s achievements, tacitly reinforces this optimistic outlook. She emphasises the predominantly positive and admirable aspects of the company’s work, leaving aside doubts, paradoxes, and questions posed by other Gardzienice scholars such as Paul Allain, Kathleen Cioffi, and Halina Filipowicz. Hodge explains that the volume is a result of her many discussions with Staniewski, conducted between 2001 and 2003, but she has decided to present them as a monologue in order to provide “a greater fluidity to the text” (viii). She has also kept Staniewski’s idiosyncratic English “to retain the sense of his voice” (viii), but, as a result, the reader is often confronted with the appropriation rather than the clarification of Staniewski’s ideas. Thus, while the text’s ambiguity can support numerous interpretations, the CD-ROM offers astonishing results of the group’s work. It is clear that these achievements are the outcomes of great mutual effort, yet Staniewski (as much as he emphasises various forms of mutuality) rarely names individual group members who contributed to his own understanding of the processes he analyses and describes. If it were not for the credits on the CD-ROM’s video clips, one would not learn too many names of these excellent performers. This omission is one of many curious paradoxes about Gardzienice.

Overall, the volume presents a valuable and unique addition to (experimental) theatre scholarship and a timely record of Gardzienice’s achievements, one that curiously enough does not exist in Polish. It is strongly recommended to all theatre lovers, practitioners, students, scholars, and critics but essential for any theatre library collection.