



## INTRODUCTION

Matt Mitler is an actor, teacher, director whose primary focus now is as the founder and director of Theater Group Dzieci, an experimental theatre company exploring sacred theatre. I first became aware of him while working with his friend, Antero Alli, in San Francisco. I visited and worked with his theatre company for a short time in the winter of 2010. We caught up for this interview via Skype in March of 2012.

## PART I: **BACKGROUND AND TRAINING**

**JW:** Let's start with the personal narrative of how you came to be.

**MM:** My mother was a performer, and when I was growing up she had a radio program that was broadcast out of our kitchen, and as soon as I could talk I was on the radio with her every morning... so there was some kind of performance thing that was developed, even though I didn't know what that was. She was a comic, so she had a certain kind of timing, and she was what they call a "sick comic" (rather irreverent, and a bit diabolical) so I began to find this way of being the foil to her, to make whatever our conversation was difficult, as a way to become funny.]

**JW:** So, this was a kind of comedic pairing and you played the foil to her comedy or... ?

**MM:** Yes, so if she asked me to do something, I found that saying 'no', whether I even knew this or not, would produce a more eventful show. So, I was kind of raised with comedy. And she would listen to comedy records and I would memorize the records; Lenny Bruce in particular. I would recite Lenny Bruce at my parents' cocktail parties and

then be ushered off to bed. So, uh... so there's that, (laughter) and I don't know if I made much of it, but I liked to tell stories and act them out. But during these very early years of development, I was also involved in with art; with sculpture and painting and drawing... even as a little, little kid. And that's pretty much what I stayed with... and performing was just something that happened around the family, but it wasn't anything I thought about. I took art very seriously, but at a certain point, I think it was fourth grade or something, my mother took me out of school to go see a production of the musical Oliver. I was blown away! I was devastated because it has such a tragic ending. It has some joltingly tragic moments, but also there were all these kids on stage performing, and that was captivating and moving and strange. I didn't know what was going on, but I was totally there on the stage in a way. So, I had this influence and I saw theatre and it meant something to me, although I never thought that I would do theatre.

And then many, many years later... in high school, I was doing art therapy at a camp for developmentally challenged kids... and I was seeing how art could have this affect when working with people with psychological and physical problems. And that began to lead me to think of art as something more than just creating for creation's sake, as a sort of communicative device. While I was studying art, many people who were with me in the art programs I was in, were doing theatre as well, and so I began to hang around that, and was kind of curious about it. But I wasn't... my mother could just

perform, but for me there was a huge barrier with performing. It was terrifying for me, but somehow, I started to do it... terrified and all. And there was something magnetic about it, something attractive about that world, about the stage, about coming out of myself, although that didn't quite seem possible. Something about taking on a different persona, a different rhythm. But I still didn't go into theatre. I was still into fine art, and from fine art to art therapy, and then psychology and psychotherapy. So that was really my study. And when I went to college to study psychology, I heard about a theatre group that was supposedly employing methods of gestalt therapy. And at this time, I had been in a car accident where I was severely disfigured for a period of time, which made me fairly withdrawn... I was a fairly protected and troubled kid anyhow... and I began to see that fine art was keeping me kind of insular and I wasn't really making contact except for when art was a therapeutic agent - then I was contacting whomever I was involved with. But theatre seemed to have another possibility... so I went to see what this group was doing... and this was someone who had been involved with Schechner, and the performance group, and with Grotowski in some respects and with Peter Brook in some respects, and it was all very new to me. And as I faced what this group was doing, at some level I felt... this could be... this could be more than just helpful for me, this could be my salvation. Because I really felt that I was a person that was in a deep hole, from various things throughout my life that had happened; this accident where I had almost died, and which had left me disfigured for a time. There

was clearly some... some severe barrier in encountering life. And I stayed with this group because I felt: I need to do this. And I couldn't do it. I was not good at it. I was miserable, but they accepted me for some reason. I remember there were different times when we would jump up and do some sort of exercise, some sort of dancing, or some very large emotions, and I would just be on the outskirts ... and I couldn't breathe. Or there'd be improvisations, people would be jumping in and out and I could not move. And we worked, I think it was three nights a week, four, five, six hours a night, very intense work. And there was some point, I don't know... two, three, four months into it... that I just hurled myself into the work we were doing and had a moment of freedom. And then went back to where I was. But I had touched something, I had tasted something, and I knew... this really could have an effect on me.

So, I stuck with it, and eventually became more comfortable and more able. And as that happened, I began to see more places where I couldn't do that, but at least now I could begin to have some sense of what direction to be in... and also what parts of myself needed work. And this began to influence me a little bit away from psychology into what was then being called "experimental theatre"... and basically it's been this traveling back and forth ever since then; where I'd go into experimental theatre for a while and then I'd go into psychology for a while... and even after working with Grotowski and his company, and being invited to join his company, there was an opportunity to study with Carl Rogers in a professional program in Rome, and I went

and did that instead. Because the more I was starting to search and see, “there’s something here”, I was also seeing what wasn’t working, at least what wasn’t working for me. I mean, I was probably critical of everything I saw, outside myself as well as inside of myself, but I knew I was looking for something that I hadn’t quite found yet.

So, with Grotowski, that seemed it was going to be, in my mind, the answer to everything, and it really wasn’t. So, I went from there to Rogers. Rogers showed me something unique, which was leading by being. His program, this was something he’d been doing for years with groups that would be hmm... antagonistic... Palestinians and Jews, Soviets and Americans... and this was a group just for therapists, but they were Californians and Italians and that was enough of a conflict. And everyone came together on the first day and he said, “Nothing is planned”... and what ensued was a two-hour argument about when we should take a break. And that’s what it was like working with him for those two weeks. But that whole time Rogers had this very calm center. And he would speak when he was moved to speak, and when he was interested in what was happening; otherwise, he would just let it unfold and help set up the conditions where you might have an opportunity to be empowered... but it was up to you. And Grotowski was something a little bit like that... you really had to seize it. I began to see Rogers as more of the example of what I felt I was looking for, at least in myself.

And at this point, I was already leading workshops and had a pretty big following in Europe. People would come from different countries... I could have a hundred

people in a workshop easily. And after working with Rogers, I became less manipulative, and became instantly unpopular. So, I went from hundreds of people to maybe twenty people in a workshop... but it was more along the lines of what seemed to feel the right way for me. And then jumping ahead another ten years, I saw that... I had a lot of conditions where I was called upon to be responsible. And I could sort of rise to a certain place, but I would be exhausted afterwards. I would lead a workshop forty-eight hours long or a week long without stopping or without sleeping, almost. But I thought there was something about me losing part of myself in my work... and that there was something missing, but I didn't know what it was. And during this period of my search, this took me to Indian reservations and various other practices, and I stumbled upon the Gurdjieff work, which I had been told about probably ten or fifteen years before I ever actually entered into it. And that had a system of study that served me, served my needs, and helped me focus very specifically on parts of myself that weren't in balance; and also, in terms of finding a way to maintain an inner possibility that wouldn't be influenced by outer conditions. So, then it was a matter of putting together Grotowski, Rogers, and Gurdjieff as a kind of system and you know... you know you mentioned that I'm a Gurdjieffian... that's my... that's my practice. But it's no more my practice than what I got from Rogers in a way... in terms of the building blocks. So that's a little bit roundabout.



Matt Mitler as is character Little Hymie in his solo performance at the NY Downtown Clown Revue in 2010

## TRAINING

**JW:** So, this whole study is under the banner of working with professional actors... and I know that there are times that you do your artistic work for money, but I know that's not a primary goal for you. Some of your income, a large portion of your income, has come



from working as a therapist most of your life... is that right, or has it been equally split or done some directing, some teaching, some therapy...

**MM:** Yes, I went through a time of going on auditions. I played comedy clubs for a number of years. And for a good decade I acted in B-movies. I was the star of science fiction and horror films and that sort of stuff. And there came a time when that became less and less satisfying. And I also dreamed of some success where I would be on a TV show or get good film offers and things like that... it just never was satisfying. It was just never why I got into it in the first place. When I was first studying experimental theatre with this group I mentioned, I was exposed to the Washington Theatre Lab, the Baltimore Theatre Project, I saw *Medicine Show* and *Carlos Traffic*, I saw things that were really profound for me. Also, when I went to Poland--I was 21 when I went to Poland--I saw The Polish Theatre Lab's "*Apocalypsis Cum Figuris*", twice... and I saw Kantor's "*The Dead Class*" twice. Pieces that, I mean this was thirty-five years ago, that I can call back viscerally, images from these plays. This is what theatre was; this is what I was interested in seeing; and I really wanted to do what I wanted to see... so, I guess my lack of success is what sort of enabled me to be where I am now with *Dzieci*.

**JW:** And it sounds like even though you came in a roundabout way, and you had parallel interests, there was a period of time where you were kind of like running the circuit and working a lot and that became less and less interesting to you ...

**MM:** Yeah, there was a point, especially in directing, where I kind of got to this place... I was directing an Off-Broadway piece that was a pretty big deal... I mean it was being scouted by Disney and there were a lot of important people coming to it... and I was having a hellish time. I was being raked over the coals. The interpersonal stuff was horrible. I wanted to quit. And it involved a large orchestra, and the bandleader begged me to stay. He said, "If it's more money the whole band is willing to chip in to give you more money." That's so sweet, but it wasn't about the money, it was about being miserable. And I talked with one of my spiritual teachers at the time, who was also a psychiatrist. And I said, "I don't know, do I stay in this because I have to learn to maneuver in this world of snakes and scorpions, or do I just get away from it? Because there seems to be something of value to find a way to enter into this dungeon and still be at peace and retain some inner integrity. And he said, "Well, when I was first an intern, I worked at a hospital with schizophrenics and psychotics and I spent a year there and then decided that I'm not going to do that anymore." And I said, "That's amazing... because I love working with schizophrenics and psychotics," *(laughter)*. I love working with that kind of intense population... but that helped me to be able to turn my

back on this obviously successful route of legitimate theatre and to say, you know, I don't have to do it.

**JW:** And that's allowed you to pursue something that's deeply satisfying and creative.

**MM:** One of the interesting things about Dzieci is that most people in the group quit theatre before finding Dzieci. Most people in the group say, "That's it, I'm out of here." And then they come to Dzieci. Some of them never got into theatre, they're not theatre people.

**JW:** I know your training isn't simple...it's not like you just did a bunch of performance training. Like you said, the Rogers and Gurdjieffian work are all weaved together and are equally important in terms of how you work... as a performer and as a director teacher facilitator... I don't know what kind of title or role you consider yourself in with Dzieci... do you want to go back and touch on a few of those landmarks and touch on some of those landmarks in terms of performance studies?

**MM:** Let me go back a little bit further... so, in high school, there was a program of peer counseling that was established and they asked for volunteers, and I was already interested in psychology, especially as it related to fine art... and also I think it allowed

me to get out of Spanish class... and so I volunteered. There was a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a person from Day Top Village, which is a Hard Love substance abuse program. And this was a heavy-duty guy who had been in prison, ex-addict... and then this bearded, analytical, psychiatrist, and then this warm psychologist, who was female. And they assembled us, and the first thing we did were these "trust falls" and encounter group sessions and group therapy and it was like, "Whoa, what is this?!" It was very intense... and again, I felt fear and this inability, but I felt, Wow, there is something here that's helping me to be human. And I became dedicated to this group. I did it in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade I was able to bring in friends to be part of the program. I think the program ended up dying out... but it was very valuable in terms of what it did for me... and then we were sent to work with kids in middle schools who were problematic, and I don't know how much success we had with that, but in terms of what it was doing for me... it was already showing me something.

Then I was in this car accident that almost killed me and left me in a certain place. And then I found this group, the Holy Theatre Company, this Gestalt theatre, and I'm seeing these techniques that are similar to encounter group techniques that had opened me up in different creative ways. And this new theatre presented some even more dynamic confrontations: very, very dynamic. And, I'm seeing some people rise above these things... others obliterated by them... some standing in the middle, almost trembling. And I was one of the youngest people, so I would see these older

people and go, "Wow, how do they do this, how are they free? They take off their clothes and jump around, how can they do that? (*Laughter*) I can't do that." But knowing that I need to stay with this... you know, I had been months and months and months sort of in this physically oppressed incarnation... my jaw had shattered, my face had been crushed, my mouth was wired shut and I couldn't speak... and if I tried to speak, people couldn't listen because I was just too weird... and my eyes had been smashed and they were completely black... the whites of the eyes were deep dark red which looked black... so if you looked at my eyes, you'd just see these black balls. It was my first year in college, so I was not making many friends... and this theatre group was a way of being born again, from this pariah, this handicapped, strange person, and coming back into the world, but into the world in a different way. And I guess I began to understand, in a way that I didn't even realize with the high school encounter groups, the value of groups, what group process really meant.

The college I went to was involved with the study of group process, with Tavistock Institute studies, which is the study of the group, being in a group, studying a group, so I'm learning without knowing it, that a group has value. Which of course is the Gurdjieff work too, you work in groups, you can't do it alone. But you have to see that you can't do it alone before you can work in a group. But now I'm finding in this theatre group, that I'm being lifted, I'm being cradled, I'm being allowed to fail... and with this is a certain physical training... and I was not a particularly physical kid. So now I'm going

into things that wind me... I've got to move my body in different ways. We were called upon to act or create faster than we can think, and there is something interesting about that because we were talking about different states of consciousness. I have to be someplace different for that...

So, all these things are waking something up, and more than anything, they're waking up a question... you know, what's possible? What do I need? Where is this? I'm not arriving at something; I'm arriving at the question about something. So, I joined a professional theatre company, I worked in theatre, I did improvisation, I worked with handicapped people, created programs for handicapped people, and at a certain point I knew I had to go to the source, which at that point I thought was Grotowski. I wanted to see... what's the source of this like? Because I worked with all these different people, and I'd worked with many people before in the DC area... but I wanted to see what the source was like, particularly Ryszard Cieslak. I was interested in the training, in the physical training. By that point I was trained in mime, and mime began to open up many things, because one, it began to give me a corporeal intelligence, the knowledge inside my body of my body... a knowledge based on sensation. Again, this relates to the Gurdjieff work, but I'm developing this, I'm developing this twenty years before I got into that... this inner sense of body movement. Seeing where there's tension, where there's blocks but also where there's possibilities.

This theatre group in DC had grants to work with handicapped people, and I was the only person interested in that, so I became the person that created the programs. And I found that mime was a very good tool... just as I found years earlier that painting and sculpting could work with different marginal communities, mime, with pretty much every community except for the blind, was an amazing tool... and working without language was profound. So, this gave me a certain understanding, which was very interesting when working with Grotowski and Cieslak, because most of that work was totally non-verbal. I'm acquiring these kinds of skills and techniques without them fully being formed. I'm seeing that the training I'm doing is leading to a new level of training. So, I didn't enter into Grotowski's work and Cieslak's work as a complete neophyte, I mean I was already capable of a lot of stuff that they were doing... I had this sense of movement and ability to communicate with that. I still had no inner master, or sense that there could be any mastery of energy in terms of what I retained or what I spilled.

One of the things that interested me as I was reading your paper, one of my questions was... between change of state and change of being. Because I would think that pretty much anyone that becomes interested in pursuing performing arts, and this is acting, dancing, anything, has moments where they are transported, but that's only these moments. And maybe they find a way to get back there, and maybe they don't, and maybe conditions are such that grace descends more often than not... you know, in

comedy clubs, eleven o'clock or twelve o'clock is much better than performing at five in the afternoon... you know, different things. Like enough drinking, not too much drinking, and no drinking is terrible (*laughter*)... so, change of state vs. change of being. All I saw, and all I was interested in was change of state, for the longest time, and it was the Gurdjieff work, although Roger's had demonstrated this, I didn't understand that's what it was... but change of being is what it was all about... and then, if I pursue that... then the performance, the art, the creation isn't about some anomaly or something that only happens on the stage, it's part of a life process, and what I do before the stage and what I do after the stage is of equal importance, so that maybe what I do on the stage is maybe just to feed this other part... which I call, Life. What I saw in Grotowski's company, the Polish Theatre Laboratory, was that it was all for the stage. So that, it's possible to be fucked up at home, but on stage you are holy. But what kind of holy man is only holy in the chapel. The Zen Ox herding pictures start in the marketplace, and then he gathers wisdom and knowledge and mastery, and then he's back in the marketplace. So that became this bigger question. And that's really the work in Dzieci... is that we work in this... we agree that theatre has certain conditions, that if we apply ourselves in a certain way, that if we raise the stakes and turn up the flame, in terms of our development, in terms of eroding what needs to be eroded and in terms of strengthening what needs to be strengthened...



**JW:** You were saying that there's an agreement... that there are certain conditions in theatre that will turn up the heat on each person's individual process –

**MM:** And a group process. I mean, people that go in to fight wars, bond in certain ways, even if they may die. And they share this peak experience. And in sports, that happens too. And to us, to some extent that happens in theatre, it even happens in summer stock or something like that ... there's a bond that happens... the show must go on, and we have so many weeks and da da da...

Theatre as a vocation, theatre as something more than theatre, or as in the original line of theatre which would bring us to ritual and ceremony, is completely supportive of that experience of life or death that a group can experience in these other conditions in life without dying, hopefully. And also, so you're working on the group, with the group, and also on the individuals. And then it has, again we go back to Gurdjieff... we are working with three centers. Your physical body... now if I'm doing talking head theatre, I'm not working with my physical body, and there's a lot of theatre like that and a lot of training like that, it's just my voice. But, most theatre, there is a certain physical element to it, and when you get to experimental theatre, there's a large physical element to it... you know that, you're sweating; sweating as you train. Then there's an intellectual capacity, you have to memorize, you have to learn music, you have to harmonize, you have to hit marks, you have to find your light, there's all kinds of

intellectual things... and then there's an emotional component, and with Grotowski's work, it's about being ripped open, not just ripped open, but obliterating that which barricades emotions. So that's alive too... so there are three centers now. And now if the conditions support the growth and the inter-balance of these three centers, then you're working at something that can support change of being... at least in my understanding, in my experience.

This is change of state vs. change of being. In Dzieci we say it is presence vs. possession. And I had had, up until, I'd say ten years into the Gurdjieff work, only experiences of possession... to me that was success... tell me what I did... And it was only when I saw what the cost of that was, that it did not aid change of being, in fact it depleted me... I'd do these performances where there was a 2 hour, two act improvised play... and they would be fantastic and people would say, you were brilliant, and I'd watch videos of them because I remembered nothing, but the next day after the show, I'd be weak, I'd be gone, I had nothing. Before the shows, I'd go through such turmoil, I would get sick as a dog. The last time I did it, I did it for the sake of change of being... I meditated before, meditated during intermission, and meditated afterwards, and I went... ah, now I see something.

## **PART 2: STORIES**

SUGGESTIVE OF

**SUPERNORMAL CAPACITIES**

IN PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

### TRANSFORMATION

**JW:** That's interesting. Part of the reason I'm bringing up all three of these threads is because I want to see where they are overlapping and intertwining for people, and that's part of my interest and the point of the research... to look at where aspects are feeding each other or certain espoused values around that stuff, you know, but with you what I'm noticing is that it is all so intertwined, or it has become so integrated that... there aren't three distinct narratives. They are all overlapping.

**MM:** Yeah, and now what's interesting is that if I look back, it always was the same. What I was searching for was always the same thing although I didn't have a name for it, I didn't know what it looked like. My movement was always zigzagging... but it was putting together the pieces that are now the pieces that I work with.

**JW:** Right. Is there something we haven't touched on or a piece that we didn't get in terms of the personal transformation, or something that is alive right now.

**M:** Well, the ... what changed along the way, was becoming more acutely sensitive to what felt right and what ... or in Gurdjieffian terms, what felt harmonious and what felt disharmonious. So even working with leading workshops, when people would go to these states of ecstasy and people would be effusively, "Thanks for this workshop, I'm going to tell my friends and I'm going to come back tomorrow or next week!" ...to the workshop where people said calmly, "You didn't make me change. I mean, I feel something, but I guess that came from me, not you... and I don't know if I can even talk about this, so I'm not going to tell my friends." But that becomes the way.

Seeing what was healthy and what was not healthy... this attracts me, this repels me... I see myself... I'm suffering. This person is behaving in a way and I'm taking it on... it's my suffering; this person's behavior... and I'm just going to let them do it until they are through with it and I'll just let myself experience this ... and I did that for years... and then arriving at a place where I'd go, "Oh, you need to express something... but I don't really need to hear that, so I'm not going to suffer you." ...and finding this evolution that's, it's just being practical (*laughter*)... instead of what should be or what shouldn't be or how the right way to lead is; the right way to lead is what feels right, and if I'm sensitive to what feels right and what feels wrong, again, what

attracts, what repels, there's no template... and it's always being refined and always changing. So, there are certain things that help.

I still go to my Gurdjieff meetings, I still take Movements, for almost thirty years now... because I find that it really strengthens my attention, and attention is really what I'm looking for... a wider attention, a more encompassing attention. I sit every morning and I do various meditative things throughout the day. I try to enter my work with Dzieci coming in with already some wish for presence, and while I'm working with Dzieci, to take it as a meditation, as a work of self-knowledge... what is there to see here? What does this help me to see? What's my next barrier to face? And everything is back and forth, but in reality, Dzieci has become such a strong entity for me... the question has become what serves my work in Dzieci? So, for many years my life was about serving the Gurdjieff work... and I was there four days a week, weekends, weeks here and there... I remember I would go to a Sunday Gurdjieff work day, I would go there at 8 in the morning to do planning and sitting, and I would leave there to go work with Dzieci, and then I would go back there at the end of the day. And at a certain point, I went, you know... the work with Dzieci actually gives me something finer... so I'm not going to run back and forth, I'm just going to stay with Dzieci. But again, it's not like I'm following some book of rules, it's just a matter of being sensitive to what is real...

**JW:** And what's needed.

**MM:** And Dzieci had this practice since the beginning, of encounters with spiritual leaders and spiritual communities, from a rabbi who worked with Martin Buber, to a Peruvian shaman and his community, to Sufi Sheiks to Benedictine nuns... and we'd work with these communities and we'd meet with them and they'd always take us on as worthy disciples... and at a certain point we said, well, who do we really feel represents the highest here? And for me that's very important because I know organically that if I represent the highest in Dzieci without something being above me, then Dzieci is doomed... so there needs to be something higher, and I need to be in relationship to that as often as possible. So, we kind of looked at all these different people and communities and everyone found it very easy to say, "This is the place that provides the most consistent level of finer energy"... and right now, that's this abbey that we go to ... The Abbey of Regina Laudis... so as a group we take that on. And again, on a lawful level, on a level of the objective laws that Gurdjieff talks about... the abbey represents this larger body that we can be this smaller body within... and for them, they are in the larger body of God, that's their work.

**JW:** That's great man. Of course, that is the destination of the conversation, right there.



Photograph by Jim R Moore

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## STORIES SUGGESTIVE OF SUPERNORMAL FUNCTIONING

**JW:** So regarding this term, 'supernormal functioning"...I think what it really is for me is capacities that emerge from what I think you were calling, uh, larger states of being... or refined states of being... and my experience is that when I move up a stage in

consciousness, or I move up in terms of developmental work, there seem to be new capacities at that level... then I'm actually literally doing something different when I'm performing. And when I say supernormal functioning, what it's starting to mean to me... when the being starts to reach transpersonal or spiritual dimensions, when we start to stabilize a kind of spiritual beingness, there are different... service for example, like a consistent action of being of service to something larger than myself is a consistent faculty I'm exercising and then I find that work that I do with my body and my voice and the text... all of that starts to require different techniques and approaches.

I think that Murphy is using that term also... this supernormal functioning as he uses it, seem to emerge from people engaged in some long term transformative practice... he had a book called "The Future of the Body" that was just a massive tome which categorized and gave evidence for the possibility of all these capacities that were almost mythological... you know, Tibetan monks who could levitate, charismas of holy fragrance, and certain kinds of radiance or holy ecstasy... so he was cataloging these things in a way that people would take them very seriously and not think of them as just tall tales or myths. And then he wanted to also show that not only are these real occurrences, but they happen because people do this long term work of transformative practices... it's almost like a purely material reality seems to be quite limited in certain ways and seems to have certain constrictions, and then from a spiritual place, there's a whole lot more that is possible... and it's not so much a goal oriented thing... in fact, in



a lot of ways the Zen folks are very "don't pay attention to the flashy super powers, that's not the point" you know, but these seemingly supernormal capacities tends to be the fruit of spiritual realization... even a modicum of spiritual growth tends to result in a certain amount of freedom or ability... maybe that's controversial...

**MM:** You were just talking about service... and that for me, 'service' is a key question. You know, we work with that always... especially at the beginning when someone enters Dzieci, you know, "What do I serve?" and the only way to find that out is to remove what we "think" we might serve... so people don't perform right away when they join Dzieci, and they don't get applause when they do perform... they start to see, "Well maybe there is something else"... and it's not surprising when people just jump into Dzieci, "Oh, I really want to do this!" and then just jump out. Because some of them, they want to be an actor, but then they don't get to act or they don't get applause, so, you know, they might say, "Oh, I want to be of service, you know, I want to be a conduit."... *(laughter)* ... you can say that, you know, but what's the truth... let's find out what that is and start with that.

And it's a question you know, "What do I serve?"... and I just come back to that over and over again, and the more there is something possible on another level, the more finely attuned I am to the moment, the more possibilities I have. The finer energies I can be in touch with... I mean, not just the energies of my being... which is a

big deal, my heart beat, my pulse, the vibration on my skin, but then, James, you mention the subtle body in your writing... so, there's the energy that surrounds me, and if I begin to have an attention that can encompass that, now I'm dealing with the energies that don't just emanate from me but more toward me... so now I have the energy of gravity, I have the energy of the moon and the sun and who knows what... the energy of my partner, the energy of a group, the energy of a space, nature... and that's a lot of stuff to work with... and I also have an opening of time... because the moment becomes infinite... and if I'm acting at this level... then I have the capacity for choice, not choice in a mundane, intellectual way, but choice in an intuitive, fully participated way... and it's all like... "whoosh"... we are there. So the point with our acting in Dzieci (and Dzieci is really about a study of acting which is a study of being) is being more present, and by being more present, we mean being more present to various locations, in the heart, in the gut, in the head, above the head, and having this facility in that movement.

**JW:** So, this capacity for presence is a goal or value or intention... and if you continually increase that capacity, then at some point what develops is an extraordinary capacity for presence. I wonder if you could give some recent examples, or a particular story for you really articulates what this is about for you... how it happens and what rewards it

gives. Alternatively, maybe you could share a story of how or when you made this shift into valuing presence above all things.

**MM:** There are so many instances... and a number of them are from changes of state, possession states... remarkable things where I'm like, "Oh my god, what are we making here and what is possible here?"... things that weren't possible to replicate but were just eye openers. For example, I present "Fools Mass" every year... I've been doing it for 15 years... so I've lived in this piece. And it is a ritual, it is not a play. It was never intended to be a play anyhow. It was intended to be an investigation into what might be the meaning of the Mass... so we couldn't really even know, but could we begin to have a relationship with it in a questioning way. And that led us to approach the Mass as innocents, as innocent practitioners, which became village idiots. That was the genesis of the piece. So, I'm a village idiot... and I'm stuck in a situation where the priest has died, and for no small reason our priest is called Father Jerzy. When we created "Fools Mass", Jerzy Grotowski died right about the time that we did our first performance, he was a father for me before that... but from that first performance the priest was named Father Jerzy, so every time I do the piece I'm sort of facing the master of my lineage, his death, and I'm also facing, as in the last year I did it, my own father's death. Usually there's someone who's died, and that's a part of it... and then there's Grotowski, he's always a part of it. And the way the piece is constructed, a lot of stuff can change, there

is nothing set except a little bit of music, and then, whoever is in the piece, and that changes a little bit every year. What responsibilities they have during the piece may change... like the character Ruven is always blind, but maybe he does the gospel reading, maybe one year he doesn't. My character is Emmanuel... and every time we've done it, one of my responsibilities is to do the sermon. You know, I'm coming up to say that no one can do the sermon because only Father Jerzy can do the sermon, and he's dead. So, I enter into it with that... and I've made a pledge which I've adhered to, which is to never plan what I'm going to say, and I never have, for fifteen years.

I walk up, and the first thing that happens is this incredible... incredible feeling of lack, of this sort of help me, this cry of help me comes from inside of myself. And I take in the space we're in... which is usually a church or a sacred space, and if it's not a sacred space we've made it a sacred space with our intentions, and I take in the people next to me, my company members, who are all village idiots, but are also fellow actors that I've worked with, some of them, for fifteen years... who have seen, some of them, death close by, and that moves me and the space moves me, and the open faces of the audience, our congregation, and considering wherever Father Jerzy happens to be at that time, and considering my own questions about life and death and being... and something comes out of me. And I usually end up weeping. And I'm not someone who can cry on cue, I'm not one of those actors who cry, but I always cry during the sermon. And sometimes it's a minute, sometimes its three minutes, I try not to let it go on too

long... but usually it ends in way like, "Oh, I think it just ended." (*laughter*) ...and it leaves me feeling so, absolutely drenched by grace, and I feel purged of some part of myself, cleansed of some part of myself...

The whole performance is like that, but that one moment... and it does it for the audience usually, too... and they're often crying with me. And we've done this show for handicapped people and here I am "pretending to be one of them" which is a very powerful thing. Or we do it for... We've done the piece for nuns and priests and I'm going, "God, here I am doing a Mass and I'm Jewish!" (*laughter*) So there's something always incredibly daunting about it... you know, "Who am I?" and whoosh, this thing happens. And in that moment, there is something great and powerful that is at stake... and I can't even name it... but there is something there. And there is a transformation that occurs. And I'm looking for the conditions in all performances with Dzieci, that can support this feeling of being purified... because I know what that feels like now. I can't say, "Oh, I want to be purified." ... "I'm already purified." ... but I can sort of set things up in a way, and then sacrifice something that makes it happen. And "Fools Mass", for fifteen years, it's always a miracle, I'm always surprised by what I say in the sermon, I'm always surprised by the effect the piece has... people are repulsed by us at the beginning and they are hugging us at the end... and that's part of our intention, we want to create a gulf because we know that they'll be the ones that cross over, not us... so that they do the work, which is again, Rogerian therapy (*laughter*)... the therapist

doesn't go like that, reach out, the therapist is here, in their center and the client comes to them, crosses the gulf.

You know "Makbet" is also like that... and the thing with "Makbet" is that there is such a level of unknown, I'm really at the mercy of something, I'm at the mercy of something here. I've set the bar at this place where, "Oh my God, what have I done?!" I used to do a stunt... I used to do these solo shows like on street or in clubs or in theatres where I would jump off a ladder into people's arms or I would get ten people and do a dive roll over them, and when I would do a dive roll, I would always add one person and then add one more person... and there would always be a point where I would be like, "Shit, I think I added one person too many!" (laughter) And I'd run and jump over them... and I'd be flying over them and I'd be like, "Fuck me!" ... you know, but then I'd make it. But this thing about, "Alright, I've got to add another person." ... I mean "Makbet" was eight people, seven people, six, five, four, and three... now it's down to three people. Because that's what supports the greatest level of unknown, the greatest demand, the greatest risk. We haven't talked about developing intuition, which is another part of it... because in "Makbet" we're really working with intuition. And, I mean, in the beginning, with the audience, I'm doing psychic readings, it's not accidental. And the whole group studies that... its part of the study of Dzieci and its part of my study too.

**JW:** Is this cultivation of intuition?

**MM:** Yes, we took classes. We worked with Laura Day. I worked with her before Dzieci and then the whole of Dzieci worked with her, we studied healing work and intuitive work. And we still practice that. We go into hospitals and we do chants over people in a coma... there's these miraculous moments in the hospital... these people who are, it seems like they have nothing going on, suddenly a smile comes or a tear comes... and, that work then informs the work in "Makbet" and the "Fools Mass"... I mean, what I am doing at a hospital bed when I am chanting with a group and hearing my voice blend or suffering when it doesn't blend, and sensing that there is something moving through me that is not mine? But if I can be relaxed and without too many tensions, it can pass, and then I'm seeing what affect this energy can have as it moves through me into the rest of the group, which is somewhere else, and not to claim it, not to go for applause or anything... that facility is very much at play in all the performance work... again, everything is very much along these different lines, but they really are intertwined... so the song that I sing in "Fools Mass", that song was practiced at the bed of somebody dying... it's not going to be a show tune. How could it be? How could it be superficial? So, the more we work in these ways, where we can't be otherwise... to be put under these conditions... I mean, sure I could have a script for Fools Mass and an audience would never know.

**JW:** Yeah, but they probably would, wouldn't they?

**MM:** Well, and you know... "Makbet", there is text but it's really the same movement... especially with the Tomorrow speech, we really take that as our sermon as it were... and I've said that, "No matter what happens, the Tomorrow speech; find that empty place there, if nowhere else in the whole piece.

**JW:** That's a spot you've framed as a pivotal or focal point for presence and intuition or attention.

**MM:** And every time we sing, in "Fools Mass", every song is a "Makbet", we're doing a different experiment, which is: how far out can I go toward possible possession and still have something to come back to? So, I go out too far and I realize I have nothing to come back to, so I take on ballast and then I go out again. So, it's a back and forth, back and forth.

**JW:** Interesting, so "Makbet" is partially an exploration of this... and evolution of that idea, which is not possession not presence, and then now finding a bridge or unity or connection between the two.



**MM:** So that even at the most out, there's still some filament to lead me back... so I keep extending my reach, and adding more ballast, because I see that's what's necessary. So, I see in my work, I have to keep finding my feet on the ground even more, my connection to the ground even more... but not gravity so that I collapse into the earth, but gravity so that I can find this... strength.

**JW:** It's interesting, I wonder if maybe the three stories are going to be "Fools Mass", "Makbet", and the hospital work... it sounds as if each has its own essence and a slightly different intent... and for my purposes, behind that, I hear that there are structural choices but there are also these capacities that are being developed that are slightly different in each context...

**MM:** What's interesting is that the work on "Makbet" and how deeply we go with each other, that changes "Fools Mass"... the vulnerability of "Fools Mass" affects "Makbet". Now we have new areas of exploration in our most recent piece, "Ragnarök", and that has already had an influence on the other performances. And the hospital work we are always doing, we keep coming back to that.



Dzieci performing Fools Mass

#### DREAM PROCESS TO PERFORMANCE RITUAL

**MM:** I had done a week long workshop... it was sort of the final stage of experimental workshops I was leading where people lived in one room for a week without talking, and no light... just candles... all the windows were blocked off... just living in ritual... and at the last day, we took off all the window stuff and we stayed one more day... the idea was that someone would come at the end of the week and let us know the week was up, come to the door, a neighbor... and there was a lot of psychic communication, which there is in Dzieci now just naturally, it just happens... and I had a dream... there was a lot of stuff in between my dreaming and waking... but I had a dream, and it was one of those disembodied dreams where you're outside looking at yourself... and I was shot in the chest, I was on a staircase and someone shot me... and I had this pain in my

chest, my chest caved in and it hurt horribly... and I was sort of awake trying to pull myself out of the dream and when I woke myself up... I still had this burning pain... like I had really been shot or stabbed in the heart. And I had it for months.

I was a little freaked out about it and it was also interesting at a certain level, and I did a performance piece where I held my hand over a flame... which was something Cieslak always did (laughter) burning my hand, and sort of ... eating it, tasting it, first the pain... not capitulating... not bringing my point of attention just to the flame, my hand, but to a larger sphere of attention that could absorb the pain and absorb the heat... again I didn't totally understand what this was, but I was working like this... and I held my hand over the flame and I did a chant and I started to writhe and my whole chest started to writhe and pulsate and shake and my voice came out in some new way... which would happen sometimes, but in an explosion of emotion and different resonating chambers, and my whole body was just shaking, and then it was over... and my chest just went "Whoooh!" and just exploded open and the pain dissolved... so that was one incident.

**JW:** was there any aftermath to that, in terms of people's response...

**MM:** People had no idea what it was... they just thought it was powerful. It was mostly a movement piece, I mean, I don't think I had any text in that piece... people were sort of astonished and wanted to come study with me. *(laughter)*...

**JW:** Some of my interest right now, is that what instigated into deeper theatrical work was that I was having more profound experiences doing yoga or going on meditation retreats than I was doing my creative work, and yet I could sense that something else was possible, and I want to cultivate that and serve the possibility... not just for me... but by doing the research and possibly publishing something that... it does cultivate a culture of possibility that people can access if and when they're ready... and that's interesting and of value to me.

**MM:** That for me is what the group work serves... because, then as I grow with a group, as my attention increases, as my sensitivity increases, as I erode my habits and personality and that which prevents, that which blocks... then in a way, that message of... like in *Dzieci*, the message is that work, it's not that play or this play... it's the way we are together...and the way we are together is what people are experiencing more than anything. With *Dzieci*, everything becomes proportionate and relational in a different... so now the show is to strengthen our relationships with each other rather

than our relationships are there to strengthen the show... and now the show is such a small part of things.

### PSYCHIC CONNECTION IN ENSEMBLE

**MM:** One of the other things I wanted to talk to you about is... we've had number of very serious life incidents in Dzieci, and that's bound to happen, the older we get... and in particular, one member of the group, their spouse left to commit suicide... they left home and left a note they were off to kill themselves. And we instantly called the group together... and we got together. First we sat and meditated... and then we practiced our intuitive work... this was intuitive work about someone where we didn't know where this person would be... we had no idea... and we began to work the way we work intuitively... and we began to put together a map...each person with a piece and we began to feel on the same page... we knew it was the woods, it was upstate New York, we had a lot of specifics, we had a road name... a lot of things... and we saw a cabin. And then we sent a message, as a group, for this person to come home. And the person's spouse, who was a member of the group but not with us at the time, she was at home and she called us after this meeting we'd had...and she said, I just got a call from him, he's at this cabin at this place in the woods on this road and he just called and said he'd changed his mind and was coming home. So now, I begin to... I don't even

know what I'm working for anymore, except to be able to function in community for my own salvation... for my relationships... but for me too... whenever I might need it, however that might be...

**JW:** Thanks for sharing that. It's a great story. On the note of redemption... it's a good place to finish.

