

About those carrying the light and getting raised

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In the context of the project Tracing Roads Across the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards is working on three different performance structures. One belongs to the project "The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts", one to the domain of "art as vehicle" and another is going to be developed in the field of "art as vehicle". The first one is called Dies Iræ¹, the second one Action and the third one is entitled The Twin: an Action in creation. Even if my impressions of these three performance structures are different, all of them appeal to me in their own way. Corresponding to the aspects, which I am going to deal with in this text, I will refer to Action and The Twin.

Time, repetition and patience

Up to this day there are nine years that Thomas Richards works on *Action*. This very long period is one of the remarkable moments of the way the Workcenter is working. At this Richards does not attend to the work again and again or returns to it after a while but he is working on *Action* since 1994 continuously. About the beginning of this work he writes in his book *At work with Grotowski on physical actions*:

I began to work closely with Grotowski alone on the „Song *Action*.” I worked alone with him on this “Song *Action*” for approximately one year, before others were chosen to join. By the time they entered into that “*Action*” my score was already completely set. In this work on the „Song *Action*“, Grotowski was trying to let me rediscover the process hidden in the work on the ancient Afro-Caribbean and African songs. It was no longer on a level of realistic actions of “daily life”.²

I would like to remind of the special way Grotowski and Richards have worked together, the way of transmission, and that the only author of *Action* is Thomas Richards. Jerzy Grotowski emphasized that in a text which was published posthumous – as he had wished:

Kann man sagen, daß *Action* eine Zusammenarbeit zwischen Thomas Richards und mir gewesen ist? Nicht in dem Sinn einer Schöpfung zu vier Händen; nur in dem Sinn der Natur meiner Arbeit mit Thomas Richards seit 1985, die den Charakter der Übermittlung

¹ At the beginning of the project *Tracing Roads Across* the title was *One breath left – Dies Iræ*, which also was a certain reference to the history of this performance structure inside the project „The Bridge: Developing Theatre Arts“ on which the Workcenter is working since 1998. In Istanbul this title turned out to be the reason for confusion with preceded works entitled *One breath left*. Therefore the title from now on is *Dies Iræ*.

² Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*. With a preface and the essay “From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle” by Jerzy Grotowski. London, New York 1995. P. 91-92.

hat, wie man sie in der Tradition versteht; ihm das zu übermitteln, was ich im Leben erreicht habe: den *inneren Aspekt* der Arbeit.
Was *Action* anbelangt, so ist Thomas Richards dessen alleiniger Autor.³

After the search for the material which took about a year, the structure of *Action* was developed. It is the same which they are still following today. I was witnessing *Action* several times and I could always see the same structure and nevertheless it was a different experience each time. The first few times I took it as an integrated whole and I noticed the chorus as supporter for the protagonists while being present repeatedly I was strongly following single actors/doers. At least, when I was there the very last time I returned to a concerted way of observing.

From all the doers who were and are involved, it is – apart from Thomas Richards – only Mario Biagini doing *Action* right from the very beginning. Mario Biagini came already in 1986 to the Workcenter; Thomas Richards had worked since 1985 with Jerzy Grotowski. To due this long time and work and experience with Grotowski which they are sharing, there was growing a certain kind of working together which could be hardly described with words. When Thomas Richards was asked to do so, he answered, “see how we speak together”, and explained that their intention was not to be nice to each other or that they would be induced to make good friends with each other. The main thing was the quality of the work.⁴

The creative and cooperative way in which Richards and Biagini work together is leading into a kind of tandem-work which is also visible outside their artistic work: I am thinking for instance of several situations of open conferences and discussions with audience which are running very smoothly. Actually for me this special way of tandem-work is in much evidence and extremely visible in this long-standing work *Action*.

When Thomas Richards appears carried by a song, by his voice, the other doers are there, they notice him and each other. And already observing this first contact of the group I got the feeling as if the power of presence which first was spread by Biagini directs towards Thomas Richards. The whole time Biagini seems to be concentrated on Richards, to support him at all his deepness which provokes images of a very old man till to a baby, of rage and aggression till joy and vulnerability. Also the group itself gives me the impression of a supporting force but more

3 Jerzy Grotowski, „Unbetitelter Text von Jerzy Grotowski, unterzeichnet am 4. Juli 1998 in Pontedera“, in *Aufbruch zu neuen Welten. Theatralität an der Jahrtausendwende*. Schriften der Gesellschaft für TheaterEhtnologie Vol. 1. Frankfurt am Main 2000. P. 207-209, here 208.

4 29th June 2003, during the International Symposium in Vienna Thomas Richards was answering a question asked by Paul Allain: „How we work together? See how we speak together.“ (Personal notes.)

diffuse. As far as I could understand, Mario Biagini stands and sings with and for Thomas Richards in a more direct line. This I could read in their posture to each other. One of the most impressive movements is the position when Biagini guided by the song settles on his back slowly, slowly till he is lying on the ground. His legs are straddled. He lays there completely open and unprotected. Richards is in front of him, between his legs. An almost tremendous familiarity covers both of them.

From Lisa Wolford's text *Action, The unrepresentable origin* I learn that right after her stay (July and August 1995) at the Workcenter Mario Biagini has started to do the text-based fragments which before were done by Jérôme Bidaux. Reading the passage of the actions done by Bidaux which Wolford calls prologue and epilogue I recognize the ones Mario Biagini is doing now. But I also can recognize him in the description she is giving about Biagini himself. Therefrom I gather that Mario Biagini has taken upon the prologue and the epilogue in addition to his own actions from the beginning and there in I read the confirmation that the structure, or maybe better the montage, has not changed since then. The doers instead were coming and going. Since I am attending the Workcenter there was a change of three persons for example. I remember that there were taking part one woman and six men⁵ in *Action* when I was seeing it the very first time and that two years later there were one woman and five men⁶. This fact did not irritate my impression and my experience as witness at all, but it kept busy my scientific collecting curiosity. And I discovered, that two men (Jori Piroddi and Eric Feldman) had left the Workcenter while one (Francesc Torrent Gironella) has come to it. I also could find out that it was not just Mario Biagini who changed his part in *Action*. There was for instance Souphiène Amiar: the sequence which Wolford describes with the expression „corpse“⁷ and which was done by one of the men, who had left, is now done by Souphiène Amiar.

Besides Thomas Richards, as main doer in and as director on *Action*, and Mario Biagini, as the tandem partner, the female doer seems to me as another constant. Again thinking of the report of Lisa Wolford which also encloses some pictures I try to understand the structure of the female

5 *Action* October 2000: Thomas Richards, Mario Biagini, Marie de Clerck, Souphiène Amiar, Eric Feldmann, Juri Piroddi, Jørn Riegels Wimpel.

6 *Action* November 2002: Thomas Richards, Mario Biagini, Marie de Clerck, Souphiène Amiar, Francesc Torrent Gironella, Jørn Riegels Wimpel.

7 „The actor [...] lies down at Richards' feet, his hands folded on his chest in the position of a corpse.“ Lisa Wolford, „Action, The unrepresentable origin“, in *The Grotowski sourcebook*. Edited by Lisa Wolford & Richard Schechner. London, New York 1997. P. 407-429, here 413.

doer Nhandan Chirco, with whom Richards had worked on *Action*. While Nhandan Chirco was wearing a floral dress⁸ and open hair, Marie de Clerck's dress is unicoloured in red and she has a plait. I have not seen her otherwise doing *Action*, which means, I have not seen her doing *Action* made up in another way but I had the most different observations of her during several times of being there as witness.

One is carrying the light

When I was witnessing *Action* the first time in 2000, I was bewildered by the impression which the female doer has left inside me. I wrote a note running as follows: “ a woman, just a woman, but she is a woman, entire, a dress and red and birth, [...] the voices, the toes, they prowl at the back, around him and around her, around both, they serve, sing, louder, a driving, in circle, again at the back, disappear, few elements, candles, a stick, a rattle, a water bowl, washing, dipping in, the woman, so high, so thin, in the front a pushing and a pushing aside, a driving, serving.”⁹ I was irritated and disgruntled. I thought to recognize “the woman” who is reduced to a minimum of a being. I had the impression that she was outside the men's group, competent for birth and light which she removed as four candles. She was responsible to provide and take away the bowl. She is a servant. And she served the male doers. Later, a lot later, three years later my first irritation calmed during a semi-public event, a seminar. The participants¹⁰ of this seminar were invited to witness *Action* in the locality of Theater des Augenblicks in Vienna. I was sitting in a position which I was already familiar with, the frontal observer, and was waiting for the beginning. As I could also feel from the others there was a certain kind of silent expectancy. Above all, my tension was pointed towards the space. Before that I had witnessed *Action* just in small and survey rooms – in Vallicelle in Pontedera and in Salvatorsaal of the church Mariahilf in Vienna. These spaces had their own atmosphere, which already offered me a special sort of support. I might have thought that in such self-contained and narrow rooms with a special sort of acoustic it would be easier for me as witness to experience *Action*: that I would be covered by

8 Lisa Wolford speaks about a yellow skirt which I cannot see on the black/white picture. See Lisa Wolford, „Action, The unrepresentable origin“, in *The Grotowski sourcebook*. Edited by Lisa Wolford & Richard Schechner. London, New York 1997. P. 407-429, here 415.

9 Personal notes of memory to *Pontedera 29th October 2000*.

10 Seminar with students (above all from the University of Kent) and scientists of theatre in Vienna 24th and 25th June 2003: Allain Paul (Documentation Team), Attisani Antonio (Documentation Team), Daniels Robert Jode, Greisenegger Wolfgang (Dekan of the Faculty of Human- and Social Science, University of Vienna), Halkidi Adriana, Hassar Tia, Julian Anna, Kova_evi_ Jelena (Documentation Team), Losert Katja, Mazur Mariah, Pakula Pablo, Parker Belly, Pfeiffer Gabriele (Documentation Team), Suner Suna, Wood Matthew.

voices which bigger rooms might disperse. I was wrong. Just by the female doer, Marie de Clerck, when her voice was heard alone. I could feel in the Theater des Augenblicks a presence that surprised me and that I had not known by then. Later I heard Thomas Richards saying that there were two male protagonists and one female in *Action*: Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, around them *Action* was structured, and that Marie de Clerck had her moments; one person was the leader, the access of giving fragments, the others were following and supporting.¹¹ And again a little later, exactly one and a half month later I could see it – through a bird’s eye view in Aya Irini in Istanbul.

In Aya Irini I had the opportunity to witness *Action* twice from the gallery. This gave me the possibility to watch actions, traces of them and a homogenous image which I had never experienced when I was sitting in the frontal way to the space. Through this view – from above, which called the concentration of my senses more to the visual aspects than to the audible ones, I saw Marie de Clerck for moments as a protagonist. I could feel her voice taking up the space which was touching me softly. Her body was turning around, showing her back – as if she would not be interested in any contact with the others. Raising her hand as her voice she disappeared in a state unseen by me. But heard, touched and felt. It was actually her telling me in a break that “you [= as a doer] have to adjust to the room”¹² and I got the strong impression that this was what she was going to do.

The often I was witnessing *Action* the stronger and more intense my impressions became and at the same time I had the feeling that the actions themselves were growing. I got to know the performance structure; I knew what would come even if I was not able to tell it in advance. Every single action, every single song, probably every single tone guided me to the next one. I knew, what would be happening next right before it happened. For me this had a certain reassurance and at the same time I found both something frightening and elements of surprise. Never ever a voice touched me in the same disposition as it did the day before (which is a very nice game on words in German: *Stimme* [= voice] and *Stimmung* [= mood, disposition, tuning]). And I thought to sense that it was not exclusively a male-female-question which decides to make the actors to serving, supporting or leading doers. Rather it is the time, in which the single doer and the group as a unity are working on *Action* and in which the relation towards their doing and towards the others are changing. Through what they went, doing there daily repeating structure,

11 Thomas Richards during the seminar in Vienna. 25th June 2003. (Personal notes.)

12 Personal conversation with Marie de Clerck about the space of Aya Irini. 29th July 2003. (Personal notes.)

that was also the history of the single human and the performance structure which they followed. Marie de Clerck was not asked to put away the candles and to bring the bowl because she was the only female member in *Action*, but because she was following the trace of Nhandan Chirco who as well had been following another trace. Would Marie de Clerck bring the bowl if she would have been there right from the beginning? “Chirco clears away the clay bowls containing the extinguished candles, which are used only in the opening fragment. [...] Chirco later placed a white metal basin full of water beside it.”¹³ And watching the documentary film *Art as Vehicle*¹⁴ I noticed that the actress there was washing the whole upper part of Thomas Richards’ body. Maybe she took the prepared water actually out of this metal basin which is also in use in *Action* nowadays. However for me the trace of washing remains in Thomas Richards’ dipping his heel in a water bowl even if it is done very inconspicuous, almost incidentally. Marie de Clerck is not washing Richards’ body but she brings the bowl, or better: She places the bowl for him. The history of the water evaporates to a trace, to an idea.

When I observed at *The Twin: an Action in creation* that besides Marie de Clerck also Jørn Riegels Wimpel carries candles, I honestly felt relieved that my first assumption could be probably wrong. It is not a female concern to carry light. Marie de Clerck brings the candles, Jørn Riegels Wimpel removes them. Of course I do not want to say that not all doers are holding a supporting function – they do – but I was irritated and possibly touched even unpleasantly that it was a female person who had stroked me. I am glad that I got several times the opportunity to witness *Action* and also other works so as to change my inner image throughout a repeating witnessing – slowly.

At this point I would like to emphasize, what actually is a precondition for this text, that it is about “my” experiences and that “what I as detached observer can comprehend of this process is [as Wolford is saying] partial and by its nature secondary”¹⁵. It is just one aspect, there are just heeded fragments of *Action* or of the work done by Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, it is just one approach and much stays unconsidered, unnoticed, unspoken.

13 Lisa Wolford, „Action, The unrepresentable origin“, in *The Grotowski sourcebook*. Edited by Lisa Wolford & Richard Schechner. London, New York 1997. P. 407-429, here 412 and 416.

14 *Art as Vehicle* is the film documentation of Downstairs Action (1988 – 1992) filmed by Mercedes Gregory 1989.

15 Lisa Wolford, „Action, The unrepresentable origin“, in *The Grotowski sourcebook*. Edited by Lisa Wolford & Richard Schechner. London, New York 1997. P. 407-429, here 412 and 419.

Witnessing a rising adept

While in *Action* there is always only one female person inside the group, in *The Twin: an Action in creation* there are more; men stay the same as in *Action*.¹⁶ About this performance structure there is to mention a particularity concerning the observers: the moment, when people get invited. They witness different stations of the development of the work and it happens for the first time that witnesses take part at a so early phase. „For the first time in the Workcenter history an opus is being elaborated, in specific periods of the opus’ creation, in the proximity with different groups of witnesses.“¹⁷

May the doers pass through *Action* every time anew and may I have the impression that they are entering afresh and noticing each other like it would be for the first time, in *Action* there is a repeatable structure. Even when Thomas Richards in the sequence with the rattle for instance seems to be a child who sees and hears everything for the very first time or when Mario Biagini crumbles away in putrefaction, fixed to the cross and then again as it would happen the first time he refuses this situation with “NO”, there is the repeatable structure composed by strict montage. This is still missing in *The Twin: an Action in creation*. At this work the search is well to the fore. As Thomas Richards explained¹⁸, he insists on the method of montage for not loosing the inner process. The team (compared to Mario Biagini for example) is untrained in not loosing the inner process. So the team has to learn to understand that there is time for special moments. It is not appeared the whole material by now, there is not felt any “why” at the moment therefore there is still to be wait for the creation of the montage.

Me as witness of both performance structures I feel changes in both of them. On the one hand these may indicate to my personal state on the other hand to those of the team. So that gives me the impression that witnessing *Action* I am more concentrated on my sensations, on the force which touches and moves me. This time I completely fix my eyes upon the centre of the tandem’s doing and become hardly aware of the supporting doers, some other time I perceive

16 Women: Cécile Berthe, Marie de Clerck, Geneviève Miella Lavigne, Elisa Poggelli, Johanna Porkola, Pei Hwee Tan; Men: Thomas Richards, Mario Biagini, Souphiene Amiar, Jørn Riegels Wimpel, Francesc Torrent Gironella.

17 Folder, which was distributed in Istanbul in July and August 2003. See also the booklet *Tracing Roads Across. A project by Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards*. April 2003 – April 2006. In seven languages. (English, Italian, German, French, Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish). Edited by Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, 2003. P. 9-10.

18 Thomas Richards during the feedback conversation in the context of Exchanges-in-work in Istanbul. 10th August 2003. (Personal notes.)

more intense the peripheral actions. I could notice at my observations that in the first instance I was attracted by the whole action and more and more by detailed little actions done by single doers. Just for example I could see my attentiveness turning towards Jørn Riegel Wimpels. I thought to notice that at a certain moment as well Thomas Richards as Mario Biagini established intensely contact with him which gave me the impression that their created field of energy was tentatively extended towards him.

At *The Twin: an Action in creation* I regard myself more or less as a “collecting witness”. Here I can see by myself how Thomas Richards is working and how each doer moves and develops into it. So for me the women were practically not existent in March when I was witnessing them in Pontedera. I was not able to create a feeling for them and there was none coming by itself. In some way they were “outside”. They were not there although they were present. I saw them on the edge. I also had the impression that they were unsure; the major part of the women (the new members) oriented themselves by Marie de Clerck. There was also another female doer who I was seeing rather peripheral than inside *The Twin*, it was Pei Hwee Tan – an already experienced member of the Workcenter team. When I was looking at her, I did not have the feeling that she was “outside” due to inexperience or intraining. Rather I had the impression, that she was present, existent but as a single doer and not inside the group. This impression got underlined by the fact that the clothes of the female doers stroke me: They were not only different to those of the male doers but also among one another. I was unable to disentangle this impression or to find out a web though. Afterwards I could only remember Pei Hwee Tan’s. She was wearing a skirt different in colour to everybody else who had similar skirts, even reconciled in double combination. Only in Istanbul when I had the opportunities to witness *The Twin: an Action in creation* several times in succession the clothes of the female doers became more conspicuous to me, more concrete.

In front of my inner eye I built up different groups: two women at a time wear same coloured skirt (beige, white, dark). The dark ones are again different from each other, one skirt is blue the other one black. Also the T-Shirts are visually nodal points for me: long-sleeved, short-sleeved, sleeveless, black – apart from one which is white. So one female doer wears a white top and another one is dressed up completely in black. I accentuate this precisely because throughout the clothes and their visual traces, drawing through the space, I have the impression to see, what I hear, what I feel and what at the same time stays invisible: the approach towards the centre, the various forces and weaknesses. A kind of net done by the doers appeared in colour. And the

dramatic sensation actually was that I thought I could recognize a growing together. I have no idea if and in which way the clothes have consequences on the function of the single doer – on me as witness there is one indeed: the clothes with their different colours seduce me in distinguishing between centre and periphery. It helps to concentrate and to abandon. Still more eye-catching was the male group though, without Thomas Richards. From my point of view he is likewise in the midst of the actions, the centre and at the same time not at all. He moves very carefully, silently, almost unseen in the space. He always is on the spot. He sings, leads, tempts, sees, shouts, pushes, and calms the doers while he is around them, in front of or behind them. Mario Biagini sings, leads, tempts and sees also, but constantly inside the songs. There is just one single moment, when Thomas Richards comes into the action as the song-leader, the chorus around him. And of course their way of tandem-work I could see there very clearly.

I remember the four men quite good. The clothes which they already had been wearing in Vienna were the same like in Istanbul. They seemed to me as a homogenous group, all in white, and nevertheless I could distinguish them into groups of two in two, who comes full circle. All of them wear white trousers and they are barefoot (as the women). Two of them wear a belt, two do not wear any, all of them are dressed with white undershirts but two take them off. Each of them is connected with a characteristic of another doer: Mario Biagini wears a belt as Jørn Riegels Wimpel who wears all the time an undershirt as Francesc Torrent Gironella does too. He does not wear a belt like Souphiène Amiar who takes off his undershirt as well as Mario Biagini does. Here the wheel comes full circle.

The belt may be a little aspect while the naked chests show obviously a stronger common signal. Mario Biagini and Souphiène Amiar are the ones who at a certain point are acting with naked upper bodies. I had already felt an intense concentration of energy growing around Souphiène Amiar. It seemed as if both Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini groom him. Doing this they get supported by the chorus of which the single doers are found in different distance and intenseness to the centre. It seemed to me in the first instance as Amiar affected me because of his shyness and tenderness while later on, in Istanbul, I discovered his actions radiating strength and cheekiness. Fundamental feelings like these, which a non socialized child considers its own, are also indications for the witnesses of *The Twin*. I see them in the actions done by Souphiène Amiar although he doesn't "play this rôle". It is actually not very clear for me, because the source seems to arise from Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini who are awakening them. As if these feeling would be at home inside them, I sometimes see Mario Biagini tempting, seducing and leading the other doers with playful lightness. And I see Thomas Richards awake, present

and patient. He is a supervising and protecting authority, by whom everybody else orients himself. And him – with lightness as if he would not feel this responsibility – moves almost gliding through the space. I also feel a chorus growing together – depending on each doer and on different speed. But I am mostly appealed to the wild, turbulent altitude flight done by the untamed. Supported by one of the few materials, a heavy, velvety, huge cloth he raises up dust and creates a sensation through space and time. And for an eternal moment everyone is awake – witnesses as well.

Instead of a final remark

A sympathetic and respectful gesture of the Workcenter Team consists in welcoming witnesses and observers and guiding them to their place. May it be Mario Biagini at *Action* who speaks introducing words and Souphiène Amiar together with Jørn Riegels Wimpel who leads to the seats; may it be Thomas Richards at *The Twin: an Action in creation* who speaks to the witnesses and Souphiène Amiar, Jørn Riegels Wimpel and Francesc Torrent Gironella who direct to the benches. The farewell of Richards and Biagini after the presentation (met with different reception by the audience)¹⁹ gives a demanding frame. Even at *Dies Iræ* Thomas Richard is behind the entrance welcoming personally the audience and the whole Workcenter Team is lighting the way.

¹⁹ Ci_dem Öztürk, translator for the Workcenter Team during its presentations in Istanbul, told me in a personal discussion about her experiences with different groups of audience. 4th August 2003. Among others she said relating to *Action*: “Some didn’t like to hear about the 2nd part, also some didn’t want to hear 1st introduction.”