

## TO BE OR TO PERFORM

### ANDRZEJ T. WIRTH AND TRANS-CONTINENTAL GARDENING

Krystyna Lipinka Illakowicz

How to draw a portrait of someone constantly in motion, in transition between Europe and the United States, inhabiting the space between three languages (German, Polish, and English), whose thought traverses vast areas of culture, including literature, philosophy, theatre, performance, and film? This figure in round, black rimmed glasses (formerly white); a red hat; and white linen jacket (a bit crinkled) is nonchalant, laughing, sociable, warm, playful, sometimes cynical, directorial, conversational, always engaging, always attracting people to him, and always involved in a new project. He is familiar to many theatre people. They know him as a theatre critic, a theoretician, a teacher, a professor keeping in touch with a large international community of his former students and collaborators who form a special "world garden" which he visits and revisits in his incessant travels.

Andrzej T. Wirth, often hidden by the acronym ATW, which he likes using playfully as his signature (ATW also indicates *Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft*, the Institute of Applied Theater Studies he started in Giessen in 1982) emphasizes the ephemeral nature of theatre art, and he reenacts this ephemerality in his own life. He is everywhere as an inquisitive observer of the surrounding reality, reflecting and interacting with it: performativity is a stamp of his presence. In the preface to his book *Teatr jaki mógł być* (Theatre: As It Could Be) published in Poland in 2002, Jan Kott wrote that "Andrzej Wirth has achieved one of the most difficult things: he created Andrzej Wirth."

ATW perceives himself as a ceaseless traveler who somehow managed always to be at the right place at the right time.<sup>1</sup> In the 1950s when Bertolt Brecht was in his final creative phase of life, Wirth was in Berlin and took part in Brecht's rehearsals at the Berliner Ensemble. In the 1960s, when Grotowski was conducting his memorable experiments and performances in Opole and Wrocław, Wirth worked as a theatre critic in Poland. In the late 1960s and 1970s, when American theatre was bursting with novel forms of expression, he managed to be in San Francisco, and later in New York.

#### Observer of History

The essays collected in *Teatr jaki mógł być* (Theatre: As It Could Be) capture the multiplicity of planes on which ATW operates. A captivating autobiographical sketch, which opens the book, presents him as a very perceptive reader of Eastern European history through the lens of numerous inflections of migration (territorial, political, and mental). ATW reminisces about World War II when Poland was doubly occupied—by the Germans and the Russians—and he was attending an underground high school and later studied under two eminent philosophers Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Tadeusz Kotarbiński, whose ideas were formative for his later aesthetic and theoretical views. This first introductory chapter familiarizes the reader with the motif of migration as a basic biographical factor influencing identity formation and operating as a broader cultural, aesthetic, and cognitive category. ATW approaches the question of territorial movements in the context of tangled Polish historical trajectories of expatriation, exile, and repatriation caused by long-term Russian colonization, and both Nazi and Russian occupation during World War II.

The histories of his parents' lives represent a traditional Polish ethos marked by exile, separation, loss, emigration, and the ongoing struggle against political oppression.<sup>2</sup> ATW rejects the necessity to take sides and to anchor himself in one (Polish) culture, which was the traditional choice dictated by the demands of Polish patriotism. He perceives himself as a cultural migrant, or expatriate—that is, someone who chooses to live between two or more cultures because of cultural rather than political reasons. Calling himself an expatriate, ATW, as a true Brechtian, distances himself not only from the Polish heroic tradition espoused by his father, demanding an unconditional service and sacrifice to his father-land (*patria*),<sup>3</sup> which, although differently gendered in different languages (feminine in Latin,

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<sup>1</sup>My conversation with Andrzej Wirth, December 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Andrzej Wirth's mother returned to Poland from Russia after 1918 where she lived in exile after the 1863 rising against the Tzar. His father never accepted the Stalinist colonization of Poland after World War II, choosing instead to live in England and support the struggle against communism. ATW defines an émigré as someone who leaves the country primarily for political reasons. *Teatr jaki mógł być* (Theatre: As It Could Be), Krakow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2002, p.16.

<sup>3</sup>Such an attitude is not uncommon among Polish intellectuals. One of the most famous is Witold Gombrowicz, who used to repeat that his aim is "to take the Pole away from Poland, to expel the Pole from Poland so that he turns into a human." ("Wydobyć Polaka z Polski, żeby stał się po prostu człowiekiem") Gombrowicz postulated distance to norms and values of the patriotic discourse and its overt display (often pompous and pathetic) which he called the "national form." ("Ta sama myśl. Zawsze to samo. Dystans do formy. W tym wypadku - do formy

Polish, or French and neuter in German), has strong patriarchal connotations. The decision to intermingle with more traditions, languages, and landscapes allows him to move beyond the territory-and-state constricted notion of identity, reposition himself in the world, and restructure his image in the flickering, changing light of the self-directed performance of multiculturalism: a truly Brechtian move.

### Enter Theatre

ATW's first fascination with the theatre and the work of Bertolt Brecht came through his contacts with the Kameralny Theatre in Łódź and the director Erwin Axer. After experiencing the atrocious reality of World War II, the artificiality of the theatre milieu had a therapeutic effect on him. His early interest in Brecht has to be seen in the perspective of Polish cultural situation. The perception of Brecht in Poland in the 1950s, a time of rampant socialist realist propaganda, was a bit paradoxical and perplexing. Brecht, as an East German Communist, who moreover had a good relationship with Moscow, was fully accepted and even propagated by the Communist authorities in Poland, yet his theatre had nothing in common with the ideas of socialist realism that was an officially accepted form of artistic expression. Young people like ATW were attracted to Brecht's theatre by the power of its revolutionary program and ideas, which were paradoxically perceived as a "Western" openness and "freshness," absent from rigid and formalistic socialist realism.<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Wirth experienced Brecht's theatre first in Poland, during the visits of the Berliner Ensemble in 1952 and 1954, and in 1956/1957 as an assistant at The Berliner Ensemble. These were most artistically fruitful years when the pronounced Brechtian style of acting established itself in its canonical form.<sup>5</sup>

These visits to Berlin left a deep imprint on ATW's own view of theatre and his future work with his students. He studied Brecht's work on voice production: pronunciation of long German words with characteristic pauses, screaming outbursts (in German, *bruelen*, known as "bellowing" or vocalization), and artificial voice-overs. Spontaneous interjections (so-called *Zwischenrufe*) characteristic for German audiences, inspired ATW to speak of the dramaturgy of interjections and to develop its theory. A forceful even violent manner of speaking, interwoven with speedy, flat articulation, were elements of the Berliner Ensemble stage language, which Andrzej Wirth transferred to his prominent students, such as Rene Pollesch, Tim Staffell, Tiell Mueller-Klug, Hans Werner Kroesinger, and Joerg Laue, now household names of the new theatre in Germany.

*Teatr jaki mogłoby być* (Theatre: As It Could Be) familiarizes the reader with various aspects of ATW's work with Brecht's texts. He was especially fascinated by Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (learning-plays) because of their revolutionary concept of performative space and the actor's agency. ATW conceives of *Lehrstücke* as a theatre model that replaced substituted both an audience in the traditional sense, or an audience as an encounter group, with the concept of "intelligent interaction matrix," thus equally engaging all participants.<sup>6</sup> One of his most spectacular endeavors was a production in Stanford of the so-called *Fatzer-Material*, the learning-play script of the unfinished play about a dissident Communist by the name of Fatzer. ATW found the microfilm version of the *Fatzer-Material* deposited in the Houghton Library at Harvard, got permission from Stefan Brecht to study the material, then translated the text with Leslie Wilson and David Ward. Finally he staged this version of *Fatzer* with his students at Stanford in 1977, which was also the world premiere of the learning-play version of *Fatzer-Material*.

In Brecht's learning-plays the boundary between the actor and the audience, and between the performance and audience space, disappears. The actor becomes also a spectator, and the spectator becomes an actor; all parties actively participate in the enactment of the play's "events." The main event, however, and the core of the performance, as ATW points out, foregrounds the confrontation of the players with the text's thesis: the tension created by this confrontation and the performance itself come to be the main "event" of the *Lehrstück*.

Thus the contacts with the Berliner Ensemble in the 1950's grounded ATW's orientation toward theatre, which he continued in Poland in the 1960s. He was actively participating in Polish theatre life and wrote as a theatre critic for the Warsaw-based cultural weekly magazine *Nova Kultura* (New Culture) and *Polityka*. Again he was at the right place at the right time. At the beginning of the 1960s, Polish theatre started recuperating and brought to life a world caliber theatre phenomenon, Jerzy Grotowski, who was beginning his great theatre adventure in the provincial 13 Rows Theatre (Teatr 13 Rzedow) in the town of Opole. ATW's reaction to Grotowski's early repertory theatre productions of *Orpheus* by Jean Cocteau and Byron's *Cain* was mixed and in general not very enthusiastic. He found the early productions of

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narodowej"/Always the same. Distance to form. In this case, to national form). Witold Gombrowicz, *Testament*, Warszawa: Res Publica, 1990. p. 66 (my translation) and *A Kind of Testament*, trans. Alistair Hamilton. London: Calder&Boyars, 1973, p.104.

<sup>4</sup>See, *Teatr jaki mogłoby być* (Theatre: As It Could Be), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> ATW maintains that the last seven years of Brecht's theatre work were the most artistically stimulating and mature. (My conversation with ATW, December 2004.)

<sup>6</sup>My conversation with ATW, December, 2004.

Grotowski's small, unknown, provincial theatre pretentious and doctrinaire.<sup>7</sup> But he was also "the first critic who signaled in Western Europe the birth of an innovative aesthetics in Opole (*Svenska Dagbladet*, Stockholm, 1962)."<sup>8</sup> He called Grotowski's early experiments a kind of theatrical "detox therapy . . . when the actors already stopped being 'good' actors in the conventional sense, but had not become Grotowski's actors yet."<sup>9</sup> It is in the full-fledged productions of *Dr. Faustus*, *Acropolis*, *The Constant Prince*, and *Apocalypsis cum figuris* that he discovered Grotowski as one of the greatest theatre innovators, and a continuator of Brecht, Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, and Artaud. In the eulogy written after Grotowski's death in 1999, ATW admitted his equivocal relationship with Grotowski's work, especially at the beginning, but he also pointed out that this "utopian mystic"<sup>10</sup> remained one of the most influential figures shaping his own thinking about theatre (Brecht and Robert Wilson, in a different manner, are the other two).<sup>11</sup>

Grotowski attracted Andrzej Wirth by foregrounding the liminality of theatrical practice and experience; at the core of his theatre aesthetic was the minimizing of stage scenery (embedded in the idea of a "poor theatre") and the maximizing of the actor's engagement, focusing on the actor's body. Grotowski's work integrated rehearsals and rigorous training—engaging the actor's physical body, voice resonators, and mental energy—into the performance process. He also reinvented the dynamics between the actor and the audience and changed the concept of theatrical/performative space engaging the audience's emotional potential and thus expanding the physical and mental boundaries of a theatrical event. ATW points to a characteristic architectonics emanating from Grotowski's work with actors, which he admired and compared to the creation of gothic cathedrals solely by the use of the actor's voice and body: "the vocal potential of the actors, amplified by the training, create in the spectator's imagination an architectural construction and become the elements of the decor."<sup>12</sup> As long as Grotowski remained within the boundaries of the theatre and the performative, his work was close to ATW's own preoccupations, but when he left that space for the sake of para-theatrical experiments (the Theater of Sources, Objective Drama, and Art as Vehicle) their roads parted.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Grotowski left the theatre in search of a deeper interhuman bond, and a lost non-verbal and non-representational essence of all humanity, ATW remained connected to theatre practice or *praxeology*,<sup>14</sup> as he called it, and engaged in exploration of the performative operating within theatrical space. His interests focus on the dynamics between the outer and the inner space, the intersections between language and action, reality and illusion, communication and mediation, and the disintegration of the dialogic mode within the performative space. All these preoccupations resurfaced in his work as a teacher and theatre theoretician at the Institut Fuer Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft which he founded in 1982 at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany.

## United States

But before he started his teaching career in Giessen in 1982, preceded by his visiting professorships at the Technische and the Freie Universitaet in Berlin, ATW had already gone through another formative period, namely the late 1960s and 1970s, in the United States. He arrived in the United States in 1966, and after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the growing repression of freedom by the political regimes in all Eastern Block countries, he decided to stay in the United States. He was teaching for a few years at Stanford and from 1970 until 1982 at Lehman

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<sup>7</sup>*Teatr jaki moglby byc* (Theatre: As It Could Be), 124.

<sup>8</sup>My conversation with ATW, December, 2004.

<sup>9</sup>*Teatr jaki moglby byc* (Theatre: As It Could Be), p. 124.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 135

<sup>11</sup>"Grotowski's work, which throughout all my life I treated critically became—apart from Brecht and Wilson--one of the denominators of my own thinking. But always as a liminal experience." *Teatr jaki moglby byc* (Theatre: As It Could Be), p. 134.

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.*, 126.

<sup>13</sup>ATW makes a very interesting comment about Grotowski's connection to the Polish romantic tradition, which inadvertently lead to mysticism. He sees an analogy between the leading Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz who at the end of his life left literature and completely devoted himself to occult practices and mysticism.

Grotowski got involved in the performative experiments which explored ritual and group interaction, and finally completely departed from theatre, focusing on elements of movement and meditation leading to the exploration of some esoteric experience connecting all humanity.

<sup>14</sup>This term comes from Tadeusz Kotarbinski's examination of the parameters governing human agency. It combines the process of thinking and its logic (theory) with its purposeful implementation in practice. Kotarbinski was one of the most prominent representatives of Polish analytical philosophy. Andrzej Wirth was Kotarbinski's student.

College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Contact with the US added one very important component to ATW's biography: theatre practice. He came to the United States as a Brecht scholar (his Ph.D. dissertation introduced a concept of stereometric structure to Brecht studies in 1957), and theatre critic, but had never tried directing. As soon as he put his foot on an American campus he noticed a certain performative energy: all campuses had theatres and undergraduates, as well as graduates, were interested in performing outside of their class work. They were all open and unconstricted by any sense of professional exclusiveness that would make acting available only to professional actors. This atmosphere of freedom and openness made him see a chance for himself in directing.<sup>15</sup> Thus America opened a chapter in ATW's life in which he began to perform as a director and a teacher. In 1968, still at Stanford, he created a memorable American premiere of Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Crazy Locomotive*. Donald Fanger, one of his colleagues, and later a professor at Harvard, called it "an astonishing spectacle which became history," and Daniel Gerould mentioned that "no professional production of Witkiewicz had as much verve and energy as that one."<sup>16</sup>

I have to note at this point that ATW's choice of Witkiewicz not only reveals his aesthetic position and theatrical conceptions, but in many ways highlights his relation to Polish tradition and the political situation at that time. It clearly expresses his passion for novelty and inventiveness manifest in the work of the Polish playwright who anteceded the concept of the theatre of the absurd by at least thirty years.<sup>17</sup> But the choice of Witkiewicz also exposes ATW's own intellectual and artistic heritage, and very importantly, his own attitude to the cultural politics of the time. In 1968, as paradoxical as it may sound, Witkiewicz was not revered as an outstanding, avant-garde artist in his native Poland. Labeled as anti-communist, he had been erased from the literary canon: his texts were not taught at the universities, his plays had trouble with the censor, and his books were hard to get. In this context, staging Witkiewicz was a bold cultural and political statement against censorship and the restraining of the human right of free expression. ATW also brought to Western attention two other important names in Polish culture equally downplayed by the communist authorities: Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz. He wrote the introduction to the translation of Schulz into German, and recommended Gombrowicz to the editors of Neske Verlag.<sup>18</sup> His two volume anthology *Modernes Polnishes Theater* (Luchterhand, 1967) introduced to the repertory of German speaking theatres—besides Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz—Tadeusz Rozewicz, Slawomir Mrozek, and Jerzy Szaniawski. His edition and introduction to Tadeusz Borowski *Die Steinerne Welt* (Hanser Verlag, 1959) had many reprints in Germany, and in consequence established this author in Western Europe and the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Using Leszek Kolakowski's playful metaphor of philosophical gardening,<sup>20</sup> I see Andrzej Wirth as a highly unusual gardener. He plants, replants, and transplants across nations, continents, and cultures, creating his own hybrids. He planted in his US garden a variety of theatrical seeds/grfts he brought from Europe: the Brechtian model, Grotowski's theatre training, Polish tradition including Witkiewicz's crazy experiments, and numerous European avant-garde theatre ideas and personal contacts. His practice appears as a perfect example of vibrant interculturalism which promotes cross-pollinating exchanges and a re-examination of cultural practices and traditions. Such was, for instance, his work on Philip Oxman's *Intermission*, which contrary to the prevailing opinion about American devotion to realism, demonstrated that the United States, too, had its "theatre of the absurd" represented by an American expatriate from England whom ATW had known for many years. The 1972 world premiere of Oxman's *Intermission* in Stanford made this refreshingly original text available to American theatre audiences.<sup>21</sup>

The American climate (climate is always an indispensable element in gardening) was conducive to ATW's experiments. At the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the United States produced very innovative theatrical

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<sup>15</sup>My interview with Andrzej Wirth, December 2004.

<sup>16</sup>*Teatr jaki moglby byc* (Theatre: As It Could Be), p. 317. My translation. Commentaries about the performances.

<sup>17</sup>*Crazy Locomotive* was published in 1924; the plays of Ionesco started appearing in the early 1950s, and Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd* which proliferated the term of the theatre of the absurd, was published in 1961.

<sup>18</sup> Gombrowicz archive, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Correspondence with Neske Verlag.

<sup>19</sup>My conversation with ATW, December, 2004.

<sup>20</sup>See "The General Theory of Not-Gardening: A Major Contribution to Social Anthropology, Ontology, Moral Philosophy, Sociology, Political Theory, and Many Other Fields of Scientific Investigation" in *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 240- 241.

<sup>21</sup>Stephen Rosenfield cooperated in the Stanford production. The text was ATW's arbitrary selection from Oxman's stage scripts which were also analyzed during his seminars with CUNY students.

vibrations and attracted artists from all over the world. This climate was probably an important factor in ATW's own decision to stay in the United States. He was drawn to the creative, free, all-inclusive cultural crosscurrents in California and New York where, as he comments, you could meet and have a meaningful conversation on the street with people like John Cage, Meredith Monk, Twila Tharp, Lee Breuer, Stefan Brecht, or Richard Foreman. It was the time of the Living Theatre and the golden age of US political theatre, such as *The Bread and Puppet*. It is interesting that Grotowski too, who arrived in the United States in 1967 at Richard Schechner's invitation, owed a lot to the lush US cultural climate of that time.<sup>22</sup> The US soil, in turn, accepted the seeds and grafts Andrzej Wirth brought from Europe, which bore fruit and, it seems, in a very substantial way enabled him to consolidate his own theatrical vision. Apart from Witkiewicz's *The Crazy Locomotive* and Oxman's *Intermission*, he started his very important work on Brecht's *Lehrstücke: The Measures Taken* (*Die Massnahme*), and *Fatzer Experiment*.<sup>23</sup>

### Giessen

ATW's work in Giessen was informed by his vision of a post-Brechtian theatre which explores the performative potential of the speech act and de-dramatization of the dialogue. In this type of theatre, the dialogue ceases to function as a structural element of the performance which in the "dramatic" type of performance prompts the interaction between the actors and produces the action. In the post-Brechtian theatre, the dialogic exchanges (if they survive at all) exist in their phatic function, in the Jakobsonian sense, enabling contact, but not participating in developing the cause-effect, logical sequence of events, as is the case in the traditional theatre. The programmatic statement for the Giessen Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft (an oxymoron as ATW comments) is contained in his essay "Vom Dialog zum Diskurs: Theaterkonzeptionen nach Brecht"<sup>24</sup> (From Dialogue to Discourse: Post-Brechtian Theatre) which highlights the idea of the theatre as a primarily epic form in which speech becomes integrated into the performative including also movement, light, and setting. In other words, speech becomes only one of the many, but not the primary element of the theatrical performance.<sup>25</sup> This conception of the theatre continues the Brechtian *Lehrstück* model in which meaning is constructed through the speech act stripped of the dramatic component. In this type of performance the boundary between the actor and the spectator collapses into one shared semantic space in which the roles are interchangeable.

Hans-Thies Lehman, who conducted seminars with ATW in Giessen, describes him as a charismatic teacher who in 1982 transplanted back to Germany his experience of an innovative, "living" theatre stemming from the work of Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Philip Oxman, and George Tabori. His return to Europe makes me think of him again in terms of his transcontinental, global gardening and hybridization of theatre discourse and practice by transplanting, implanting, cross-breeding, and cross-fertilizing his nursery—always ahead of his time and ready to plant a different variation and try it with his students. His theatrical gardening put Giessen, a small, old, university town on the theatre map of Germany as the home of *The Giessen School*, and made it known in the American theatre departments and theatre circles. Prominent teachers of theatre and artists such as Richard Schechner, Michael Kirby, Leon Katz, Karl Weber, Emma Lew Thomas, John Jesurun, Molly Davies, Henryk Baranowski, and others were visiting professors at Giessen.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>My interview with Richard Schechner. "Był medcem: o Jerzym Grotowskim z Richardem Schechnerem rozmawia Krystyna Lipińska-Illakowicz" (He was a sage: an interview with Richard Schechner) *Polish Daily News (Nowy Dziennik) Literary Supplement*. February 26, 1999.

<sup>23</sup>*The Measures Taken* was presented at Lehman College and at the Goethe Institute in New York in 1973. Hannah Arendt was one of the guests at the Goethe Institute performance. *Fatzer Experiment* was produced several times, in Stanford in 1976, in Bedford College, University of London in 1977, in Oxford, 1978 and later in Berlin, 1978, and Sydney, 1994. *Theatre as it Could Be*, (320-322).

<sup>24</sup>*Theater Heute*, 1980, 1. This text is also translated in the book *Teatr jaki mogłby być* (Theatre: As It Could Be).

<sup>25</sup>In some post-dramatic performances, speech can occupy a dominant position but not in the traditional sense where the sequence of exchanges drives the action. It is rather the aporias of signification—the incongruity between the speech act and other signification practices such as movement, body language, and the setting—which are at the core of such experiments. Richard Foreman's, or Richard Schechner's work are very good examples of such theatre.

<sup>26</sup>The list of his former students and now prominent theatre professors and professionals includes such names as: Peter Sellers, Bonni Maranca, Gautam Dasgupta, Tim Wiles, Eleanor Fisher, Jim Leverett, Rita Linz, Frank Hentschker, Arnd Wesemann, Helena Waldmann and many others.

When the work on *Lehrstücke* was just beginning in Germany he had already produced them a few times in the US, *Fatzer Experiment* in 1976 and *The Measures Taken* (*Die Massnahme*) in 1973, as well as in England, and Berlin.<sup>27</sup> All his experiments with the Giessen students, as Lehman notes "were changing the very concept of the theatre"<sup>28</sup> and remain unforgettable experiences for his former students. Such was the post dramatic staging of the passages from the philosophical work of Odo Marquard titled *Sommernachtsklage über Sinnverlust nach dem Rezept des Hausphilosophen Marquard* (Midsummer Night's Complaint Upon the Loss of Sense According to a Local Philosopher Marquard). The performance--grounded in the collage technique, including different media, the multiplicity of acting places, voice-overs, changing rhythms of readings and movement--was for Frank Hentschker, one of ATW's former students and a participant in that event, one of the formative performances that created the Giessen style.

ATW's students and collaborators like Hentschker and Lehman stress his devotion to individualism, his sense of performativity, and aesthetic radicalism. At the same time they perceive him as a charismatic, fatherly teacher, equipped with an unusual sense of structural novelty and freshness contained in all possible manifestations of art, always willing to share his discoveries with his students.<sup>29</sup> This dedication to tracing novel forms of expression clearly stems from his philosophical and theoretical grounding in *theatre praxeology*—his own term—which perceives theatre as a space for testing theory and practice.<sup>30</sup> ATW describes his work with students as a programmatic experiment driven by the students' diverse interests and their creativity, and framed by their reflection on the craft of theatre. Such a philosophy of teaching implies a sensitivity to formal elements of the spectacle and openness to the performers' input, which in ATW's own words can be rendered as "providing a structure for the students' own ways of expression."<sup>31</sup>

### Flaneur

Whenever something artistically and performatively important is taking place, Andrzej Wirth shows up immediately to inspect, experience, and reflect on the event, which can always be a possible new "graft" for his nursery. No wonder that when in February 2005, Christo and Jeanne Claude dissected Central Park with the miles of orange fabric of their Gates project, the first person I met among the thousands of people strolling through the saffron gates was the familiar red-hatted figure of Andrzej, who came from Berlin to participate in this event. In a short essay inspired by the installation, ATW approaches the Central Park installation from a truly hermeneutic perspective noticing multiplicity of registers (ecological, architectonic, sociological, ritualistic, religious to name only a few) which commingle into an interpretative polyphony, "a multi-layered pageant that bears an artistic double, even triple code."<sup>32</sup> The historical "text" of the park, the atrium of the city with its free-flowing movement, is inscribed into the context of the orchestrated actions of the participants of the "magic megadance." This "publicly choreographed discourse" delighted ATW who persistently follows and theorizes the events disclosing the performative nature of our reality. Such was the installation of Christo in Central Park, and such is the reality that became the focus of his recent film project--an outcome of the collaboration with his former student, the filmmaker, Thomas Martius--about Las Vegas and Venice, Italy entitled, *Las Venice*.

Since the late 1990s Andrzej Wirth added Venice to his yearly peregrinations and spends about of a quarter of each year in *Serenissima*. The film offers a reflection on international tourism, and in a slightly Baudrillardian manner, muses about the nature of reality, but even more so focuses on our perceptions and contacts with the "real," with the image, with the simulacrum. The camera in Martius's hand zooms on the hordes of tourists traversing the famous sites, laughing, smiling, and taking pictures. The realities of Venice, Italy and Venice, Las Vegas become reduced to an image on a digital screen producing the "real," and desired reality of and for the picture-takers whom ATW calls in his film commentary *vactors*, that is, visitors/actors. Andrzej's playful intermingling with the objects of his "study" (his *vactors*)—by positing himself in front of the camera, inside his "model," also as an object of seeing—collapses the subject/object and performer/observer distinction. The film captures the moments in which the imaginary, the desired, and the performative intersect: the picture takers are being manipulated and at the same time transformed by the space of Venice or Las Vegas. Their movements, body language, smiles, and looks simulate the reality which they constitute and simultaneously de-constitute by constantly relating to some other imaginary reality.

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<sup>27</sup>See *Teatr jaki moglby być* (Theatre: As It Could Be), 320-321.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 310.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 311.

<sup>30</sup>See footnote nb.11.

<sup>31</sup>My conversation with ATW, December 2004.

<sup>32</sup>*An Urban Choreography: Christo's and Jeanne Claude Virtual Actors in Central Park (or, The Temporary Death of a Flaneur)* (unpublished essay).

The film purposefully mixes both Venices, so that the viewer is often confused whether he/she is watching the "real" Venice or its Las Vegas imitation. What remains the same, what bridges both realities, is the omnipresent reality of the camera clicking and the registering of poses and smiles on the desired set, be it the real or fake Rialto, or Academia Bridge. Reality turns into a photographic set, and even the locals transform themselves into a part of this set. For the *vactors*, it is quite insignificant whether the picture is taken in Venice-Italy, or in Venice-Las Vegas, what really matters is the very act of picture-taking that engages the imaginary and the performative and creates the possibility of another performative moment, when we look at the photograph recreating the past experience and expand the performative (in fact the performative and the imaginary interact again). Thus *Las Venice*, explores the trans-active communication in which everybody is constantly entangled in the performative.

On another level, the transactions captured by Martius's and Wirth's film show the commodification of the performative agency itself (again regardless of whether it is Venice Italy or Venice Las Vegas) for strictly economic purposes. The propensity of the tourists to freely enjoy the interaction on the set (here Las Vegas seems more pertinent) is manipulated--by the designers of the hotel and casinos, hotel managers, and other entrepreneurs--into making them treat their experience as an object of transaction: they "buy" and store the images mostly for exchange purposes (even when they watch the photographs back at home). Sadly, the tourists-as-performers commodify their experience and at the same time become commodified as the tools in the million-dollar business machine. As a result they turn into *vactors*, signifying also void and empty actors.

Is it possible to retain a distance and the aura of the Baudelairean flaneur in this reality? The film seems to suggest that on the set of our reality, everybody is designated to play a role, only some are more self-aware actors than others. Andrzej Wirth ascribes to himself the role of a "super actor," but like a true Brechtian, a meta-performer, and a practitioner of philosophical gardening, he knows how the puppeteer's strings work, and sometimes he pulls them, but he also allows himself, always playfully, to be pulled into the garden.