

# *Profile* *Dzieci Theatre*

*Elizabeth Cawns*



*Fool's Mass Company 2007  
Cathedral of St. John the Divine  
Photo by Fred Hatt.*

*Life is also an art, and the man who would become a consummate artist in living must follow, on all levels of his being, the same procedure as that by which the painter or the sculptor or any other craftsman comes to in his own more limited perfection.*

*Aldous Huxley*

When Matt Mitler left Europe to come back to America in 1981, he thought it was impossible to have a theatre company that worked in the same way that Jerzy Grotowski's company did. But in the late 1990s he was teaching a theatre workshop that developed the actor and the work in the same way that he had learned in Poland, and elsewhere in Europe, and a student told him that she wanted to work like that all the time. "So do I," he responded—and challenged her to start a company that would do just that. Yvonne Brecht replied that she would only do it if he would lead it, and so they began an odyssey that has led through curious paths to the Dzieci<sup>1</sup> Theatre in New York—a company that is rooted in Grotowski's poor theatre and closely linked to Grotowski's ideal of the holy actor.

Mitler's background does not at first suggest a career in theatre. Trained in humanistic and existential psychology, he found that the professionals in the fields of psychiatry and psychology were not "working on themselves," as he puts it, which would

make them truly effective in helping others. He describes going to conferences with humanistic psychologists and being appalled, not by the inherent brokenness of the individuals, but by their refusal to acknowledge or investigate their brokenness before turning outwards again to those they were supposed to be aiding. Mitler was always interested in the potential for healing implicit in theatre, and took that interest to Europe, where he studied with The Polish Theatre Laboratory, among others, and had his own company in the late 1970s. He was eventually invited to join Grotowski's company, but by then had discovered that some of the company members were not unlike the humanistic psychologists he had encountered. He felt that their personal lives were less than healthy, which begged the question as to the transformative nature of the theatrical act, as envisioned by Grotowski.

*The difference between the "courtesan actor" and the "holy actor" is the same as the difference between the skill of a courtesan and the attitude of giving and receiving which springs from true love.*

*Jerzy Grotowski*

When Dzieci was eventually founded, Mitler was determined that it should stay rooted in the essence of poor theatre, and that company members were to "work on themselves" in a way that would allow them to be truly effective in carrying out their mission. He and Yvonne began by inviting others to participate in workshops. They started with twelve to fifteen people, and after working for some time, the group winnowed down to a dedicated core of seven. Mitler felt that they had a company and began to work toward developing a repertoire. Their first venues were street performances, but they soon moved into what Mitler describes as the marrow of their work—performances in hospitals. His group in Europe did hospital work, and he found then, as he does today, that it was the most rewarding aspect of the mission. All performances are directed toward service—there are no curtain calls, no bows, and no applause. The company works in groups of two or more, going bed to bed in a hospital or hospice, surrounding the patient and singing chants that they have developed from European medieval sources as well as diverse international folk and traditional songs. Among those seriously or mortally ill, the response is subtle, but definite. Erratic breathing becomes less so; expressions of pain become more peaceful. Those who are more alert often make eye contact and often there are tears. If possible and the patient is able, Dzieci members lift the patient, cradling him or her, sometimes carrying him around. In one particular instance, a dying Puerto Rican man, after being cradled as Dzieci sang around him, said he was with the angels.

Dzieci keeps conversation to a minimum when working with patients, and all their work is predominantly non-verbal. Talk gets in the way of the direct interaction between company members as holy actors, and audience members as active participants in the healing process. It has been an ongoing task to work toward the complete vulnerability poor theatre requires. Thus, not only talk, but also any kind of character work or masking is antithetical to Dzieci's aims. Grotowski considered it shameful to put on a mask because it separated audience from actor in a way that led to something akin to prostitution.

Dzieci's work is not solely limited to elderly and the dying, although they have

developed long-term relationships with several institutions such as the Cabrini Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation in the East Village. They are also regular guests of a psychiatric hospital for children, where they work as much with staff as they do with patients—sometimes it is the staff that needs the work of Dzieci even more than the children do. Mitler says that in many instances the staff has built up a wall between themselves and the patients, especially in the psychiatric hospital for children, where the patients are seen not as individuals with individual journeys to make, but as problems for the staff to fix.



*Dzieci at service in the Cabrini Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation. Photo by Jen Petrashock*

*Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potential liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death.*

*R.D. Laing*

Dzieci introduces the idea of healing as an alternative to curing, which may not be possible. When the staff begins to fully participate, it changes the entire ethos of the staff-patient relationships. Mitler is adamant about not knowing a patient's "diagnosis." One of his teachers and mentors, R.D. Laing, believed that there was a process in mental illness that led towards a catharsis. Michel Foucault also noted in his own work on language that medieval thinking considered mental illness as a journey that deserves respect and space in which to fulfill itself. In many medieval works characters went mad, but did not necessarily stay mad. The fool, or a mentally ill person, was considered to be touched by, and in the special keeping of, God and therefore holy and not to be interfered with. The work of Grotowski's holy actor, the intense self-scrutiny and the constant demand that the actor be without a mask, always vulnerable and offering her whole self to the audience, is very much in keeping with the vulnerability of those holy fools of the Middle Ages.

*We are concerned with the spectator who does not stop at an elementary stage of physic integration, content with his own petty geometrical, spiritual stability, knowing exactly what is good and what is evil, and never in doubt.*

*Jerzy Grotowski*

Dzieci is active outside hospitals as well. There are a number of religious

communities that have developed long-standing relationships with Dzieci, including the Institute for Clergy Excellence, St. John the Divine Episcopal Cathedral, Second Presbyterian Church, the John Street Church and, most recently, the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, where they are currently Artists in Residence for the 2008-2009 school year. Each religious group they have been involved with has its own unique ethos, and Dzieci has adapted its workshops, performances, and interaction to the particular needs of each community. At The Abbey Regina Laudis, where the company goes on retreat on a regular basis, they have been asked to develop sacred rites for various feast days. The rite they developed for the Feast of the Ascension, for example, involved a procession to an outdoor location, where a member of the company carrying flower petals stood on a rock and at the climax of the ritual, threw the flower petals into the air and fell backward off the rock to disappear from view, being caught by other members of the company. It was so realistic for the sisters that Dzieci had to change the staging so that those doing the catching were in view of the audience.

Dzieci's work in seminaries and religious communities focuses on the audience as the true actors. Much of the work they are able to do with those not bed-ridden or otherwise immobile involves a great deal of interaction. Mitler has found that with a gradual growth in trust, members of the community permit themselves to be lifted up and carried around, all in the context of song and silence rather than conversation, and relationships in the community shift. Faculty and staff become more open to clients and each other, so that the community itself is offered a glimpse of what living in daily vulnerability to each other might accomplish. Out of this experience has come their *Cirkus Luna*—a circus where no one is particularly good as a performer and, as Mitler says, whatever can go wrong, does at the funniest and most tragic possible moment.

Dzieci's work is by no means limited to workshops. They have a repertoire of performances that they are regularly called upon to offer, the most-often-performed of which is their "Fools Mass." This piece actually grew out of the company's desire to stage Aldous Huxley's novel *The Devils of Loudun*, which is based on a true event in which nuns in a convent became convinced they were possessed by the Devil. They involved a priest in their delusion, and he was eventually burned at the stake by the order of Cardinal Richelieu. The company decided that the best way into the work was to first explore the Mass, especially as it was performed in the medieval period with the full liturgical panoply. They found the closest thing to a medieval mass at St. Mary the Virgin in Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> Dzieci, in the tradition of its name, first tried to envision the Mass as it would be understood through the eyes of children. They then took the child-like lens and brought it to the sensibility of an adult, but an adult who had remained a child in mind: in other words, the fool or madman of medieval Europe. They were helped by a member of the company at that time who was an early music historian, so the music was rooted in the chants of the medieval church. The priest's name in the piece is Fr. Jerzy, an homage to Grotowski, who died as the company was beginning development of the piece. Mitler found that he was more shaken by Grotowski's death than he had expected. Thus the "Fools Mass" became a rededication by the company to Grotowski's vision of poor theatre. In keeping with the way Grotowski intended his company to work, the piece is always evolving and in its interaction with the audience is always a new creation.

Surprisingly, although the company does so much work with religious

institutions, it does not consider itself to be necessarily “religious” or “Christian” theatre. Instead, Dzieci seeks to place itself as the “secular holy” of Grotowski’s vision of theatre. This inevitably will lead to interest in spiritual matters, but the company’s best relationships are entered into with groups that recognize spirituality as not confined to one specific religion or denomination within that religion. The most fruitful collaborations within the Jewish/Rabbinic community, for example, have been with two rabbis who are each unusual in his own right—one a Jew who considers himself a practicing Hindu, and the other who calls himself Buddhist Jewish. Others that have welcomed Dzieci’s broad sensibility of the spiritual are a Sufi community, a Peruvian Shamanic community, and an Advaita Vendantic fellowship. Other communities whose leaders have expressed interest in Dzieci, bringing them into the congregations for workshops and performances, have been more resistant to the unorthodox means and modes that Dzieci practices.

The company did eventually develop its *Devils at Loudun*, and performed it publicly, although it has not been performed nearly as often as the “Fools Mass.” The Rev. Dr. Daniel Meeter, Pastor of the Old First Reformed Church, said of the piece that it was “a brilliant and sympathetic interweaving of late medieval, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist elements.” Besides the “Fools Mass” and *Devils at Loudun*, Dzieci has one other production in its current repertoire. The company began to work toward a production of Ragnarok, the Norse version of Armageddon and Gotterdammerung, some years ago. Though still embryonic, Ragnarok has spawned a preliminary project, a unique production of *Macbeth*, entitled *Makbet*, rooted in the gypsies of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. The development of the work has occurred over a long period of time. Each company member has learned all the parts by oral transmission only, along with improvisational work, so that the piece is constantly changing, since any company member could play any part in rehearsal, and that process carries over into their performances as well. On one memorable occasion, the company was asked to bring an early version of *Makbet* to a juvenile detention center, before they had really prepared anything. The play ended with all the boys joining the actors to enact a massive death scene at the hands of Macbeth.

*One must not take the word “holy” in the religious sense. It is rather a metaphor defining a person who, through his art, climbs upon the stake and performs an act of self-sacrifice.*

*Jerzy Grotowski*

In keeping with the sense of “poor theatre” in its most basic form, no one in the company earns her living from being an actor with Dzieci, even part time. For each member, participation is a commitment that comes outside of the hours that earn paychecks. This is not to say that the company members do work that is completely divorced from the intent of Dzieci. Some of the company come from theatre backgrounds, and work outside Dzieci as actors, teachers, and storytellers. But many of the company come from service professions, or have gone back to graduate school in psychology, divinity, and fields of therapy because of their profound experiences as witnesses to the difference Dzieci has made in the lives of others. Mitrer does not think of his life as being especially self-sacrificing, for he finds that the rewards of giving of oneself in the Grotowskian manner far outweigh any kind of material sacrifice that might be involved in Dzieci. The sacrifice is more one of the mask—the safe way of interacting with an audience must be given

up in order to achieve real interaction, and it is in the real interaction that a spiritually enriching moment occurs.

This is not to say that Dzieci Theatre is somehow obscure, unknown, or keeps only to venues that are too far out of the way for most of the public. The “Fools Mass” will be performed publicly at LaMama in April 2009, the first time it has been performed in such a public venue, and the company was involved in the very public rededication of St. John the Divine Cathedral in late 2008. Dzieci Theatre is singled out for special mention in the “Drama: Modern Western Theatre” section of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* and was featured in Retta Blaney’s *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors*. The company continues its work on *Ragnarok*, as well as performing *Cirkus Luna*, *Makbet*, and, of course, its ever-popular “Fools Mass.” Mitler looks forward to future possibilities, such as being able to develop work to be used in adult detention facilities, and for new works that will develop through the group’s ongoing spiritual exploration. Dzieci Theatre will also be working with the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education at its upcoming meeting in New York.

*. . . in art there is no final goal. There is always further to go. It is a voyage of unending discovery, and as in all such voyages, what is gathered by the wayside is often as valuable as what is found at the destination.*

*G.I. Gurdjieff*

As long as the company stays true to Grotowski’s intent, as long as they continue to “work on themselves” and through that work continue to turn a refreshed self out to be vulnerable to the world, Matt Mitler sees many years of fruitful work to come.

### *Notes*

1. “Dzieci” means children in Polish, and the company members work to bring a child’s wondering, uncomplicated, and vulnerable outlook to each project they undertake.
2. Since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic church has changed its own standard rituals to such an extent that services in most Catholic parishes of New York bear no resemblance to the mass that would have been standard at the time the incident at Loudun took place. Affectionately (or disparagingly) known as “Smoky Mary’s” because of its use of a great deal of incense, St. Mary’s conducts its services according to the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer at its highest interpretation perhaps in the entirety of the Episcopal Church in America.