

**Tomasz Kubikowski**

Richard Schechner – Laudatio

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**Laudatio by Tomasz Kubikowski  
for awarding the title of Doctor Honoris Causa  
from the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw  
to Richard Schechner, 16 October 2017**

High Senate, Dear Guests,  
Dear Professor,

This is a unique moment in the history of our academy: for the first time, we are awarding an honorary doctorate. For us, this is something new. This is a kind of premiere—we even have new costumes. But it is also a new ritual for us, one that anchors us more deeply in the academic world: we have new vestments for this rite. We have reached yet another station on the road that we have been following for decades, continually looking around and looking at ourselves: are we on the right track, does it lead us in the right direction, or towards a trap?

The interplay of theatre and the academic world is not simple. The resources of the world drama are full of learned pedants, funny doctrinaires, dangerous or pathetic: *dottore* has never been a role model. In a serious world of science, politics or business, to define something as ‘just theatre’—it is by no means a compliment. At the same time, however, these serious spheres long for the beauty, charm and seductive power of theatre. Theatre, on the other hand, wants for being taken seriously (though not too seriously). There are powerful energies, visible and hidden, flowing in both directions: they could be symbolically represented by the horizontal loop of infinity, a variation of the diagram on which Richard Schechner showed the relationship between the stage and life forty years ago and which grew with his name.

Founded in 1932 as the State Institute of Theatrical Arts, in the mid-twentieth century it has been recognised as a venue of higher education and at the end of that century – it became an academy. However, we have a deeper relation with the 200-year-old tradition of teaching acting in Warsaw, and when we look at these walls, we will notice that ...

... first, that they play a role. And not only these walls. All the surrounding buildings play the role of old buildings, which ceased to exist in 1944. After the war, their image was recreated on different structures; decorations were built so that we could continue to stage the same art in

them, the same drama called Warsaw. And we perform it so successfully that it has become real. Today, we seem to forget that the stage design of our 'make-believe performances' is set within the stage design serving the great 'make-belief performance'. Richard Schechner is the one to teach us how to perceive these both kinds of performance, distinguish one from the other and reflect on their deep relationship.

Let us note, however, that we are in the Collegium Nobilium theatre. Its prototype was created in the mid-18th century when the first college of higher education was established in Warsaw: an elite school for the future top ranking state officers. This theatre was the first building of this complex erected for the occasion. Education, therefore, began in theatre.

Why? Why were the serious life roles of politicians, thinkers, journalists, activists, writers, officers and diplomats educated through theatre at a time when professional acting was despised? Today, the study of human behaviour, of some particular feature of human behaviour, called by the mediaeval term 'performance', gives us an answer to this question. In life and on stage, in reality and make-believe, as citizens, scholars, activists, directors, people—we perform. We establish our world, for better or for worse. Today, we can see more precisely than ever for what stands the ancient, stoic metaphor of the world as a theatre, and we can reflect on the extent and the way in which the world is theatre and theatre — the world. Tonight, we have with us a person who we owe it to, and to a large extent.

His merits are so high and so versatile that one needs to take a deep breath even briefly to enumerate them. Director, whose productions have earned their place in any history of the 20th-century theatre. Let's mention, if only as *pars pro toto*, *Dionizos w roku 1969* [*Dionysus in '69*], since we are slowly reaching the 50th anniversary of its premiere. The founder of the legendary Performance Group, which, apart from its own achievements, later became a backstage for artists and for decades has been defining the directions for Western theatre development. Editor—intermittently for 55 years—of the most serious journal of theatrical explorations: *TDR*; hence also the chronicler and analyst of the world theatre. Teacher and scholar, Professor of New York University for exactly half a century. Writer—the author of numerous books, with his most famous work (again, as *pars pro toto*), *Teoria performansu* [*Performance Theory*], constantly reprinted as part of book series representing the most significant works of contemporary humanities. Because of all these activities, he is widely recognised as the most important founding father and propagator of performance studies—an interdisciplinary field of research on human behaviour and its cultural expression; reflections on a basic human condition and inclination to establish the world through ourselves and establish ourselves in the world. Today, the notion of 'performative turn' is commonly used in contemporary humanities. Schechner's work has greatly contributed to this turn. Therefore, as perhaps the only figure of today's theatre, he is regularly mentioned among important contemporary philosophers.

Perhaps this is the right way to describe him: a philosopher in the original sense of the word—someone who loves wisdom. Not theoretical, bookish, scientific wisdom, but the entirety of it: as Czesław Miłosz has put it: 'as mobile as the master sapiens homo'. He does not think he

has mastered it. He never speaks on its behalf, but he searches for it with his entire self, with all the means that nature and culture, theatre, mind and travel has given him. Hence the unusual colouring of his writing. Within just several sentences, Schechner can shift from impressionistic description to precise, detached discourse illustrated with a diagram and scroll through the table sternly ordering everything that has been said, and then move to a lyrical confession. Reading these texts is like riding a roller coaster. This is probably the source of their inspiring power: arduous, intoxicating and safe at the same time. Their formal variability never hides the gaps in reasoning, and suggestive images do not substitute arguments.

The author also appears in these texts, but, again, never as a sage. The seeker can sometimes be funny. Recalling how in order to study the Hindu temple theatre, he had to convert to Hinduism officially, Schechner writes: 'I wonder at the secret spectacle of my Keralan incarnation: a New York man of 42, dressed Indian-style, fretting as only an atheist Jew can over his hypocritical conversion, moving through a crowded temple courtyard', and we can see Woody Allen in this picture. But in this comic figure of an explorer-in-disguise, there are basic questions about the boundaries of the adopted role and about human identity on the deepest, religious level, how the game and the pretence turn into truth and how the rite works even when you do not believe in it. There is seriousness in this non-seriousness; elsewhere sometimes there is pure delight. Studying during the Holy Week the passion play of the Yaqui people in New Mexico, Schechner came across an unfamiliar part of the ceremony, the all-night dancing *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* without any audience. He wrote frankly: 'I stood there in the cold desert predawn and wept. The Matachinis' art was accomplished; they did not let up because there were no human spectators. Truly they were making a sacrifice, an offering.'

Fun, delight and eventually reflection. To understand human performance, Schechner studied rites and play, he created theatre manifestos, such as his old slogan of 'environmental theatre', and created a training method for actors, such as his late child: the technique of 'rasaboxes'. He tests everything on stage. Having reached the university pension, he wrote an academic textbook in which he tried to pour the fluid, anti-schematic content of his books into the form of a didactic routine. He lived to see the success of his countless students and the Schechner Center in Shanghai. What more can be said about over eighty years of such a wonderfully creative, active, colourful and hard-working life?

There is definitely one more thing. Richard Schechner has been an expert and propagator of Polish theatre for the last half a century. Beginning from Jerzy Grotowski, with whom he collaborated and whose fame he proclaimed—he was a co-editor of the most prominent in the English speaking world vast anthology of texts about this artist, *The Grotowski Sourcebook*; to all Polish achievements that have been regularly mentioned in *TDR* for decades, to assistance offered to Polish artists in the USA during the time of martial law in Poland. He has visited Poland many times for almost half a century. Above all, here are his origins.

He wrote in the preface to the Polish edition of *Performance Studies: An Introduction*: 'My father's family was Polish, though "Schechner"

sounds more German than Polish. My theory is that my father's family came to Galicia from Austria. They kept the family name and spoke Polish and Yiddish. ... My father's father left southwestern Poland around the turn of the 20th century. ... The remnants of the Polish part of my family perished in the Shoah. This sense of past is a catastrophe and future threat to my life's work. As Artaud put it, „... the sky can fall on our heads at any moment, and the theatre is there to remind us of that”. He also wrote: ‘Beyond Grotowski and Kantor, when I consider Poland, I think of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, so close to and yet so far from Hasidism.’

Ladies and Gentlemen, by awarding Richard Schechner with the title of *doctor honoris causa* of the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, we appeal to Poland of many nations and religions, open and tolerant. Here, the sky has fallen on our heads many times, and today we are also looking up with anxiety. Schechner writes about the objective power of the ritual, independent of the thoughts of those who complete it. Conducting today this essential academic ritual for the first time, we celebrate a man who does not cease to offer us wisdom he has been seeking and taught how to reconcile art with science, knowledge about theatre with practising it, seriousness with non-seriousness and, let me quote him once again, ‘playing and the most serious subjects imaginable.’