

“Art as a Means to Encounter Oneself”

– Thomas Richards, the apprentice of Jerzy Grotowski and director of the new Italian Theatre company, *Theatre No Theatre*

Thomas Richards, the apprentice of Jerzy Grotowski, has just visited Korea to hold performances and a workshop. With his new company, *Theatre No Theatre (TNT)*, Richards presented *Songs* and *The Inanna Project* at 'Ban Jool' in Jongno on June 21st and 22nd, followed by a two-week workshop at the Seoul Institute of the Arts, starting on June 24th. The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards – of which Richards was Artistic Director for 23 years – had already accomplished performances and a workshop at the Seoul International Performing Arts Festival in October of 2015; “The Workcenter South Korean Initiative” (a workshop) in October of 2018; and has for years conducted an International Residency Program in Italy with the support of the Arts Council Korea's ARKO. However, this time was different, as Richards led his new theatre company, *Theatre No Theatre* instead of the Workcenter. We spoke with Artistic Director of TNT, Thomas Richards and co-founder and actress Hyun Ju Baek about the significance of the performances, the working process, and the company's vision.

1. I heard that while you were at Yale University, you had a dream of working on Broadway after graduation. What led you finally to wish to work with Grotowski? Thomas Richards: I tried many genres of performance: musical comedy, drama, ballet, jazz dance, modern dance, classical music, jazz music, playing clarinet and saxophone, and so on. I took them very seriously. But I always felt like some part of me was alienated, like I was getting into a box into which some parts of me fit, but others not. One day, I met an actor from Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre, Ryszard Cieślak, who played the title role in Grotowski's world-renowned performance, “The Constant Prince.” I took part in his workshop while I was at Yale. He had a special way of walking. He was like someone who had survived climbing to the summit of a very high mountain and had returned; a master of theater who had already acquired an incredible amount of practical knowledge. Up to that point, I had been educated in a Western way—sitting in a chair, thinking, speaking, with little physical engagement. I had a lot of energy at eighteen, nineteen, twenty years of age. Meeting Cieślak, I began to learn how the body could deeply engage in the performance process. Not just dancing, but becoming engaged in action, fully. Knowing that Cieślak had learned from Grotowski, I was drawn to find a way to work with him.

2. Could you tell us about the founding of 'Theatre No Theatre'? Thomas Richards: I was Grotowski's apprentice at the Workcenter, and in 1996, he included my name in the title, which became the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. After Grotowski's death in 1999, I continued to run the Workcenter, but in 2022 after the COVID-19 crisis, the Tuscan National Theater, our sponsoring institution, withdrew its support, except for my salary. Paradoxically, that presented us with an opportunity. In my early 60s, it was time for a new start. So, a month after closing the Workcenter, in February of 2022, we founded Theatre No Theatre. Financially challenging – but dedicated people joined. I had already been working with Jessica Losilla Hébrail, a founding member of TNT, for 16 years, and Hyun Ju Baek for 6 years. TNT quickly grew. We are now 7 actors. Economic difficulties can be a kind of test, we are reminded of the fact that we're not in this for the money. Of course, it's right that artists should be paid. Yes, and TNT starts to be known, we begin to tour world-wide... But, I mean, an important thing in this phase of work is realizing how nourishing this work can be beyond the financial aspect. It's a truly alive moment in the work, and in this circumstance, we have created, *The Inanna Project*.

3. I was really impressed by *The Inanna Project*. It was interesting to see the actors express the ancient Sumerian epic poems in various languages, also through nonverbal communication, and songs. I would like to hear about the meaning that each actor creates by performing based on their own cultural background. Thomas Richards: We all live in modern society but carry complex cultural heritages. For example, I am of mixed black and white heritage, with a mother from the American South and a father whose family stems from Africa, via the Caribbean. Even in less complex cases, like Hyun Ju Baek, there is a gap between her and her tradition. In other words, we can feel ourselves to be disconnected from something that is

potentially vital. These gaps can lead us to have a sense of vulnerability. So we can arrive to desire to question our identity, and as an artist we can think how art might contribute to give an answer to this situation. It's not about creating a beautiful multicultural soup, as multiculturalism has become almost a formality. What interests us is the re-connecting. For example, Hyun Ju approached *The Inanna Project* basing the epic poem on which she is working on Pansori tradition. Though not a Pansori singer, there are parts in our new composition that fit her body, mind and soul in a very subtle way. Translating her fragment of *The Inanna Project* into Korean and reconstituting it in a Pansori style, in sound and action, forms a connection between this 5000-year-old epic, Korea, and Hyun Ju.

4. What do you hope to convey to the audience through such archetypal narratives?

Thomas Richards: I believe people of many cultures might find a resonance with elements of the Inanna texts. For example, certain elements of Inanna's stories – like the serpent and the figure of Lilith – are found in Christianity 3,000 years later. Inanna is significant as a female narrative, an archetype of a fully realized woman. She wanted to and achieves everything: becoming a wife, having children, becoming a queen, receiving all knowledge from the god of wisdom, and finally becoming a goddess. Inanna was also a High Priestess. The word “priest” comes from the Latin word “pontifex” – a builder of bridges; maybe between what can be conceived of as energies of a more subtle quality and our daily lives? This performance aims to create a special circumstance in which an audience can hear a story, and we strive to be not simply actors staging an ancient story, but attempt to “build bridges,” between ourselves and our own cultures, between the present and the distant past.

5. Watching the open work-session *Songs*, I felt the rehearsal process could be a great performance. I've heard it's a 70-minute daily practice in 'Jessica's Kitchen'. Thomas Richards:

Yes, though we sometimes miss the daily practice while on tour due to our busy schedule. It's a practice I've done nearly every day for 38 years. We started in Jessica's kitchen in 2022 when financial support was cut, and the necessity of winter heating made it difficult for us to use our studio. Artists from around the world gathered in Jessica's kitchen to continue practicing.

6. What is the purpose of this work on ancient song? Thomas Richards:

We wear masks to survive. For example, in the U.S. we say “Hi, how are you?”, and we always come back with something like, “I'm soooooo great!” Over time, these masks harden, hiding our true thoughts and feelings, sometimes even from ourselves. For an actor, it might be useful to be able to go beyond the mask, to reach some kind of sources, that exists as it were within. Work on these kinds of songs serves as a tool to go behind the mask, awakening parts of the being that related to what can be called centres of energy, *chakras* in Hindu tradition, for example. Singing vibrates the body, and the specificity of these songs and their sonic vibrations can awake such inner sources, allowing a subtle and perceptible inner flow, transforming the body and not only. The singer/doer can experience immense joy, something beyond one's own perception of one's physical presence. This awakening, that I am more than just my body, or thoughts, or feelings, is ancient, existing as a potential result of practices such as meditation, prayer, incantation, dance, movement.

7. What significance do these songs hold? Thomas Richards:

The songs we use come from the Caribbean islands, where my teacher Grotowski worked for seven years, and where my father's family came from. These songs are culturally significant to me, rooted in the Afro-Caribbean traditions of people brought over as slaves. Growing up in New York, with a father who was Broadway's first black director and a dramaturg mother, I was exposed to much performance culture but distanced from African and Caribbean traditions. Grotowski's work reconnected me with my roots. These songs resonate with our international team because we select songs that can work for people coming from different cultures. The work is realised through the vibration of the voice and the precision of the performing details in the practice.

8. *Songs* and *The Inanna Project* feel highly precise yet improvisational. How much improvisation is involved? Thomas Richards:

We 'improvise within the structure.' Young actors crave freedom, but without structure, they often fall into clichés. Great directors like Stanislavski and Grotowski knew that freedom without structure leads to clichés, so they sought ways to become free within the performance structure. As an actor repeats their score day after day, they must rediscover each moment as new, realizing they and their partners change daily, with different qualities in their details, with slightly different tempo-rhythms, for example. High-level performance

requires both freedom and structure. Without structure, there is no freedom, but structure alone doesn't create living performance; that's the actor's role. Directors and actors often fail at rediscovering life within structure. Stanislavski emphasized investigating and studying oneself to be able to live in the moment on stage. Most humans aren't present, like students daydreaming in class until called upon. Freedom is the ability to be truly living within a precise structure, which is inherently tied to self-inquiry. Without exploring one's existence, this kind of freedom is impossible.

9. I sensed some vocal techniques reminiscent of Gypsy music. Is there a specific vocal method you pursue? Thomas Richards: We don't train voices; we sing. We practice embodying the song through impulse, and gradually making the body receptive to sound. Modern humans, distanced from primal survival tasks, may need physical preparation as well to embody this kind of sonic flow. It's understandable you sensed a Gypsy influence. Gypsy culture involves singing about the meaning of "home," enabling nomads to create a sense of home through sound even though they are living a nomadic life. As artists in our modern world, our identities are also not fixed to one place; through singing, we shape our identities anew. Despite suffering and burdens, we collectively remember joy through singing, and create a palpable sense of home through sound.

10. The title of this Asia tour is 'Unveiled Voice.' What does it mean? Thomas Richards: Last year, when we were in working in Hong Kong, we met young artists with incredible potential and, with some of them, we dreamed up a three-year project, "Across-Asia: Voices Unveiled." The project does not only showcase the work of TNT, but also allows us to collaborate with artists from various countries on new creations. In this, our first year, we have already collaborated with artists from Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan. The work process is based on fundamental questions like: "Why do you want to create?" We treat them as potential creators and are striving to uncover their unique ways of creating.

11. What are your future tour plans? Thomas Richards: We will return to Italy for our Summer Intensive workshop that will be attended by thirty artists from around the world. Then, we will come back to Asia in the fall. On October 17th and 18th, we will perform Hyun Ju Baek's solo piece *Han!* at the Hong Kong Performing Arts Expo (HKPAX), and in Beijing in November as well. In the fall, we will also work with Hong Kong artists, and be joined by some artists from other countries. Some of these teams will perform at a Closing Festival we are planning for 2026. We hope to hold this final Festival in Korea as well, further introducing Grotowski's legacy to Asia. We aim to assist artists, and pass on something of the practical knowledge that I learned from Grotowski.

12. What aspects of Grotowski's methods have you accepted and changed? Thomas Richards: I have not accepted all of the aesthetic aspects, but have embraced the work process and craft, precision, structure, and the need for spontaneity. Without precision, spontaneity leads to clichés. Like in pottery, the basic methods remain the same, but we must develop them, discovering what previous generations didn't. We must know the fine elements of the work, passing down discoveries. There is knowledge that Grotowski received and developed, starting off from where Stanislavski left off. Then from Grotowski to me, his apprentice, there is the passing on on knowledge, and now to my team members, like Hyun Ju and Jessica. While Grotowski and I are both directors, we have different perspectives. Grotowski did not create *Han!*; it was born from Hyun Ju's relationship with me and my creative team. Our working process is kind of like Grotowski's, but the form and some approaches are different. *Han!* is storytelling, a form where Hyun Ju thrives. In this way, forms arise within the team based on relationships, specific gifts, discovering new aesthetics based on current needs. Yet, the working process fundamentally remains strongly related what I learned from my teacher.

13. What does the name 'Theatre No Theatre' signify? Thomas Richards: It signifies that it's a performance, but not just a performance. It's about striving to encounter oneself, discovering ones' inner recourses, and letting them become resources. In the long run, it's about a special kind of potential maturation that can occur for human being through theatre. This is what we pursue: 'Art as a vehicle.'

14. Considering the changing times and media, do you worry about approaching young audiences? Thomas Richards: How to deal with today's society is very complicated. Not only social media, but artificial intelligence, which is already pervasive in our daily lives, is causing tremendous change. However, the type of work we do can make us strangely quite exceptional,

even kind of like dinosaurs. We exist as a theatre company; we work every day. In Italy, there were a vast number of theater companies in the 1980s. The number decreased in the 1990s, and by 2010, most of them had disappeared. Now, very few remain. Performances are changing to the point where it seems they can't be done without seven screens, because people are generally drawn to "new" things. Back in the 1980s, I worked with musicians together as a team, but some of us began to solve everything with four-track recorders working alone in the basement. I felt something was risky. This was one of the reasons I began to work with Grotowski. Grotowski emphasized human-to-human encounters. If seen from one perspective, it was like a laboratory resisting the temptation of technology. Nowadays, you can create thousands of songs with a single iPhone, which is, of course, amazing and helpful maybe for someone's performances. But I don't want to be a slave to technology, and I also don't want to lean on it as a crutch. It's convenient to enjoy for the time I want, what I want, while looking at my smartphone, disconnected from others. Yes, sometimes that's fun. AI can help me with what I choose maybe. However, my human reality doesn't give me only what I like, which is the tendency of the algorithms running social media. In life, we have to deal with conflicts and uncomfortable situations. Learning how to handle the complexity of relations broadens our world. I'm not the center of the world; I'm a part of it. Smartphones can reinforce my feeling of being the center of the world. But we all have different personalities. Beauty arises from striving to communicate within that diversity which involves dealing with friction. This is really important and something we need to tell young people. Some young people understand this, and feel they won't use video on stage for example just because it's trendy. This work will find its public. Human to human, voice to voice, soul to soul, culture to culture, complexity to complexity... These are the things that make our existence possible.

Co-Founder and Korean Member of 'Theatre No Theatre', Hyun Ju Baek

- 1. You worked as a musical actress in Korea for 13 years and earned a master's degree in performance studies from Goldsmiths, UK. How did you come to join the Workcenter?**
Hyun Ju Baek: From 2012 a residency program was run every summer in Pontedera, Italy, at the Workcenter, which had been founded by Grotowski back in 1986. I first participated for a month in 2017 with ARKO's support. Six months later, I joined a two-week workshop in Hong Kong with more support from ARKO, then formed a team in Korea with two other participants. We received ARKO support again, hosting a residency program for Thomas Richards and his Workcenter team in Korea in 2018. *Han!*, which began development in Pontedera in 2017, became a short 25-minute monologue at that time. Approaching forty, Thomas and Jessica asked me over coffee in Hongdae, "What do you want to do with your life?" I honestly answered that I wanted something genuine, and they invited me to join them. I never imagined joining this team, though I dreamt of it. The people at the Workcenter seemed like gods and goddesses of a Pantheon to me. It didn't seem like something someone like me could do. Moreover, because I had often struggled during the workshops, I was very surprised when Thomas invited me to join the team. I joined the Workcenter in January of 2019 after our conversation in October of 2018.
- 2. How was it working with the team? Were there any challenges?** For the first two years, I struggled with singing mechanically. With 16 team members, if someone couldn't sing well, the person would repeated it until they got it right, even if it took hours on end. Breaking old habits and beliefs was challenging. There were stages of personal growth, where I had to completely break my concept of acting.
- 3. Can you tell us about the development of *Han!*?** **Hyun Ju Baek:** In 2017, I presented an initial 10-minute version in an internal workshop, receiving six critical comments from Richards: pumping, lack of character study, unclear English pronunciation, too fast pacing, exaggeration, and showing off to please the audience. He told me not to perform to please, challenging my long-held beliefs from musical theatre. I was shocked, and thought to myself, 'Then, what is my purpose of being on stage?' Richards took me to the corner of the room and said, "You will sing the song 'Han Obeonyeon' again. Do you have a specific association with the song?" I said "my grandmother." I never said to a director that I cannot do something. You know, actors must do when the director asks to do. But, I said 'no' to Thomas for the first time. He didn't even ask why. Instead he took me to the center stage. So, I sang. That's the beginning of the Grandmother's character, which

became part of *Han!*. We developed the piece through performances in South America, North America, and other cities.

4. Did you study Pansori before? Hyun Ju Baek: No, despite being born in Jeonju, the home of Pansori. I thought it was unrelated to me. However, while researching for *Han!*, I discovered Pansori, particularly impressed by An Sook-sun's "Simcheongga." Inspired, I wrote to Thomas, who encouraged me to try it. Despite never studying Pansori, I practiced intensely and incorporated it into my work, finding it as a means to connect with my culture and also with myself. Pansori's storytelling aligns well with "The Inanna Project," which is rooted in ancient performance practices that exist within the cultures from which the actors hail.

5. Do you live communally with the Theatre No Theatre members? Hyun Ju Baek: No, I need a lot of personal time, especially as I also handle producing work. While some members thrive in communal settings, our living circumstances vary from individual to individual.

6. You seem to play a significant role in the team. What are your future aspirations? Hyun Ju Baek: I still see myself as a beginner, but strive to be an example for new members, knowing my growth impacts the team. I hope for more opportunities to introduce our work in Korea, engaging with Korean artists in diverse ways.