

A Visual History of Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre

Michal Kobialka

Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990), a visual artist, a theatre director, a theoretician, an actor, and a founder of Cricot 2 is known to American audiences as an experimentalist of nontraditional theatre. Outside of Poland, the most widely-known productions of the Cricot 2 are *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985), *I Shall Never Return* (1988), and *Today is My Birthday* (1990). Kantor's experiments with theatre forms, however, started as early as 1938 when he staged Maeterlinck's *The Death of Tintagiles* in his puppet theatre at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts—the Ephemeric (Mechanic) Theatre.

Even though there are no production photographs, one can envision the staging of the play thanks to Kantor's essays preserved at the Cricoteka Archives in Krakow. As evidenced by his notes, at that time, Kantor was interested in exploring the aesthetic interconnections between the European avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, in general, and between symbolism, constructivism, surrealism, and dada, in particular. In *The Death of Tintagiles*, for example,

The THREE SERVANTS emerging from the dark abyss of Maeterlinck's castle were turned into three soulless DEATH MACHINES. Tintagiles, whom nothing and nobody can save,

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weeps behind the iron doors. The Moon is cut out from an IRON SHEET and NAILED to a wooden frame.[. . .] Walter Gropius, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee. . . . He [Kantor] laboured relentlessly on their strange, but seductive texts, on their metaphysical abstraction, mechanic eccentricity, ballet of triads, a human being and a machine, circus, TRIANGLES, CIRCLES, CYLINDERS, CUBES, sounds, COLOURS, SIMULTANEOUS, SYNOPTIC, SYNOPTIC-ACOUSTIC FORMS, CONSTRUCTIONS, an ideal, free, OBJECTLESS world, ABSTRACTION. But how to fit all that into the GRAND MYSTERY of short Maeterlinck pieces, or the CHARMS cast by Wyspianski, or the growing fears explored by Kafka.¹

Noteworthy is the fact that, during his artistic career spanning over half of a century, Kantor used to write the so-called *partyturas* and manifestos providing a commentary on his theories of theatre. Generally speaking, a *partytura* was a collage of notes and descriptions of concepts that surfaced during the process of putting a production together. It was not however an account of the events happening on stage. Rather, it was a compilation of texts which were the extension, the elaboration, or often the rejection of the previously accepted tenets constituting the *modus vivendi* of a particular artistic endeavour. Sometimes a *partytura* was amended by Kantor many years later after the first performance of a piece. The manifestos were the records of subsequent stages and transformations in Kantor's theatre; theatre, which for him, was both an answer to, rather than a representation of, reality and an autonomous structure constantly acquiring new dimension in the process of questioning recognized theatrical conventions and buildings.

In their stead, Kantor proposed the so-called places of "the lowest rank," a bombed room, galleries, gyms, and altered theatres. They were regarded by him as sites that could no longer be appropriated by the external order (prevailing aesthetic dogmas, for example) and were therefore the structures wherein the vision of the ever present artist could freely be executed. *The Return of Odysseus* (1944), for example, was staged in a room of a house partially destroyed by war. This depreciation of the value of a theatre building was not limited to its physical shape only. As unequivocally indicated in Kantor's manifestos, this process of depreciation led to the rejection of classical notions of representation, illusion, and text. In "The Zero Theatre" (1963), Kantor evoked on stage negative emotions such as apathy, melancholy, and depression in order to question patterns of traditional plot development. "The Theatre of Real Space" (1967) postulated that, during a performance, the

actors ought to perform activities and characters in a way which agreed with the reality of a selected performance site and its characteristics. "The Theatre of Death" (1975) introduced the impassable barrier between the auditorium and the performance space in order to create a place for the exploration of the intimate world of Kantor's memories. "The Room of Memory" (1980) presented the audience with the spatial dimensions of immaterial memory enacted by actors on stage. "The Theory of Negatives" (1985) suggested that events/memories "acted out" by the actors could not be presented in a linear fashion. Rather, these memories were interimposed as if they had been the frames of a film-negative stacked one atop another. "The Inn of Memory" (1988) created a meeting ground for Kantor and his memories/actors. "The Found Reality" (1990) explored the consequences of Kantor positioning himself in the liminal space between reality and illusion.

The following pictorial history of the Cricot 2 company documents the rupture between the traditional and Kantor's theatre. It will not include his happenings, "cricotages," or detailed descriptions of the productions. Rather, I have elected to present select photographs and excerpts from Kantor's writings to illuminate some of the shifts that occurred in his artistic journey.

Balladyna by Juliusz Slowacki (1942):

This Polish romantic drama was staged in a private apartment. Against a black backdrop, there stood "a chalk-white, ominous and indifferent FORM-PHANTOM, lifeless like a cemetery tomb-stone, an open mockery of the character of the Nymph Goplana sleeping at the bottom of the Goplo Lake. A dead object and Death took place of the legend and sentimental pastoral."²



Fig. 1. *Balladyna* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

"In traditional theatre, the world of the legend and the myth (Goplana, a nymph, and two elves) were usually depicted as a naive, banal, sentimental operatic convention. In my production, the Nymph is an abstract *form-phantom*, the Elves are two-partite mobile wheels rotating around the mother-form. They live in the world of abstraction, higher meanings, free imagination that mixes together the subtleties characterizing the whole spectrum of genres from tragedy to burlesque. The FORM-PHANTOM is the nucleus of this arrangement. Its abstract laws mould other forms and constitute the formal basis for *illusion* which is created opposite *the reality of the audience*."³



Fig. 2. *Balladyna* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

For example, in a scene in which Goplana attempted to seduce Grabiec, a factotum: "two WHITE WHEELS separate from the FORM-PHANTOM. They move away from, get closer to, and create new configurations with the FORM. Its voice is superhuman, strengthened by the echo.[. . .] A grotesque example of love between an all-powerful FORM-PHANTOM and a bare-footed and vulgar factotum."⁴

The Return of Odysseus by Stanislaw Wyspianski (1944):

Originally, there were three design variants that were similar to the abstract constructions of *Balladyna*. Variant I: the performance area was to be delineated by wings and a backdrop covered with numbers. A cube, a thymele, was to be placed in the middle of the stage.

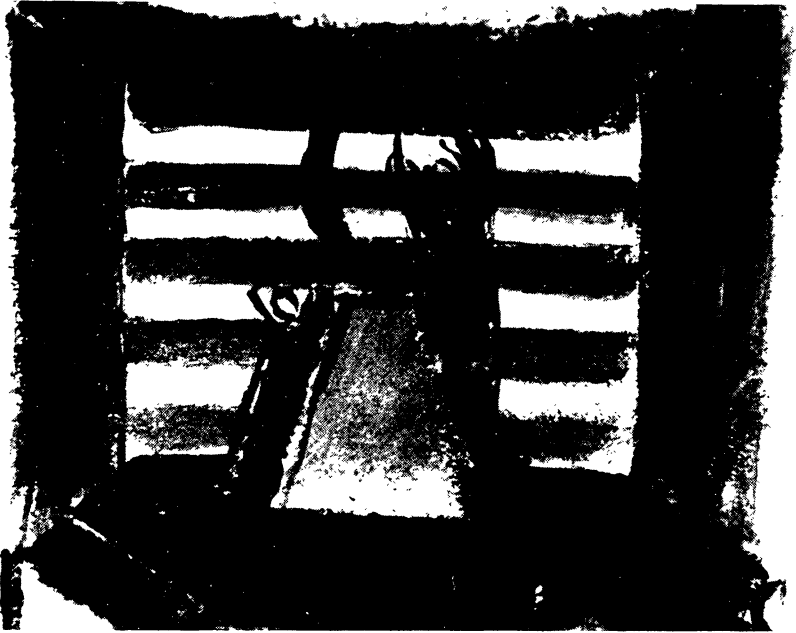


Fig. 3. *The Return of Odysseus* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

Variant II: real objects, a rock, a fence, and a house, were to take the place of abstract objects. Variant III: the stage action was to be presented amidst ladders, wings, rostra, and a white Greek sculpture.



Fig. 4. *The Return of Odysseus* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

Kantor abandoned, however, these designs due to their incompatibility with the surrounding war events. In the notes to the production, he justified his decision in the following manner:

Odysseus would appear to me more and more often; however, I noticed that he would stop at the threshold of my tiny room. I would see him disappear around the corner, or in a dark lobby, where, with his back to me, he would pretend to be extremely preoccupied with something, even though I felt that he knew perfectly well that I was looking for him.[. . .] I would see him get off the train at the station and then quickly disappear into the crowd. These half-dreams, half-mystifications, convinced me that Odysseus refused categorically to be only an image, a representation. I had to think about it. In times of madness created by man, in times of war, death and its frightening troupes, which refused to be shackled by Reason and Human Senses, burst into and merged with the sphere of life.⁵

The pathos of drama and its mythological character were thus thrown into and merged with the sphere of life, that is the times of war. Consequently, the play was staged not in a theatre building, but in a room that "was destroyed. There was war and there were thousands of such rooms. They all looked alike: bare bricks stared from behind a coat of paint, plaster was hanging from the ceiling, boards were missing in the floor, abandoned parcels were covered with dust, debris was scattered around, plain boards reminiscent of the deck of a sailing ship were discarded at the horizon of this decayed decor, a gun barrel rested on a heap of iron scrap, a military loudspeaker was hanging from a rusty metal rope. The bent figure of a helmeted soldier wearing a faded overcoat [of a German soldier] stood against the wall. On this day, June 6, 1944, he became a part of this room. He came there and sat down to rest."⁶



Fig. 5. *The Return of Odysseus* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

"The silence of the room is broken by the sharp and rhythmical tones of the *Paradenmarsch*. [. . .] Helmeted Odysseus wearing a faded overcoat, like a ghost, enters through the doors. He wanders among the audience. The sounds of the triumphant march are heard. Odysseus sits down on a gun barrel. [. . .] The actor playing the part of the shepherd [. . .] slowly gets up as if to say his lines. He is about to speak, when, suddenly, he perceives the bent figure sitting on a gun barrel. Surprised, he forgets that he was supposed to say his opening lines. Instead, he inspects the figure carefully and shouts: 'beggar'. [. . .] Bent Odysseus, with his back to the audience, constitutes a formless mass which merges with other objects in the room. The lack of answer creates a dreadful silence. Suddenly, when 'I am Odysseus. I have returned from Troy' is heard, a human face appears out of the formless mass."⁷

The Cuttlefish by Stanislaw Witkiewicz (1956):

The play was the first production of Cricot 2 founded by Kantor and Maria Jarema that year. Jarema, a Polish avant-garde artist, designed the costumes.

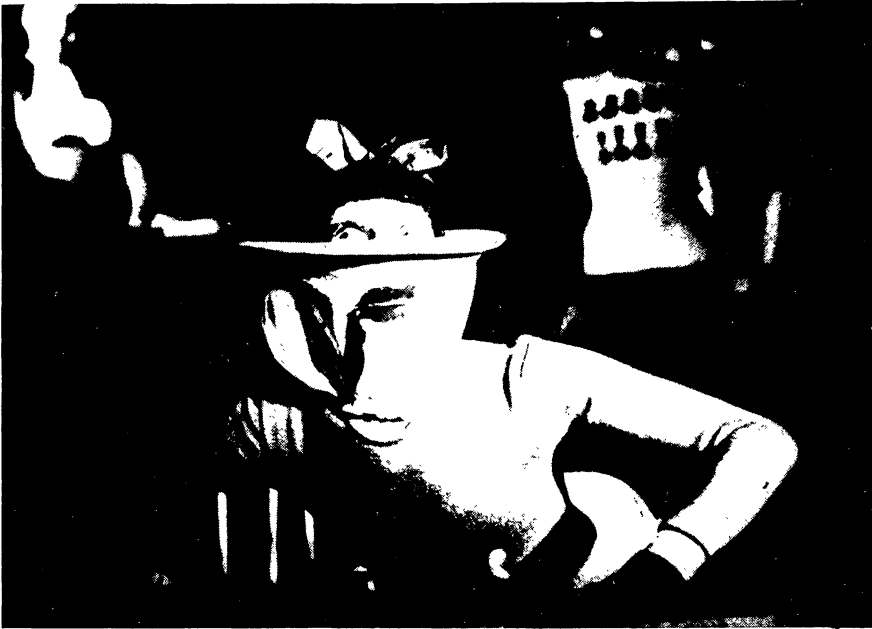


Fig. 6. *The Cuttlefish* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

The performance was staged at the Artists' Cafe in Krakow. It was built around three principle elements, the environment, objects, and actors, which were engaged in an intricate process of constituting diverse spatial formations:

The stage is bereft of its illusion.

The auditorium is the only space that matters.

The auditorium is a cafe.

The spectators are sitting at the tables.

They behave the way one does in a cafe.

A wooden floor, wedged into the middle of the cafe floor, is the stage.

1. Sequence:

The hero of the play, Rockoffer, a decadent, probably even a great artist, is sitting, on an iron stool, chained to a column.

It is a classical column whose top is cut off.

A second actor, the hero's double, is inside the column.

Only his head can be seen

A swift exchange of thoughts,
 agreements,
 conflicts,
 tensions,
 glances,
 smiles,
 whispers
 between Rockoffer and the head on a pedestal takes place.
 This action, or should we say
 "installation,"
 takes away from the hero
 all his chances
 to follow and participate in
 the play's development of the plot;
 it is a barrier between the ongoing action and its content.
 His actions, limited [by this barrier]
 do not have a logical connection with
 all the remaining elements.
 This is a way in which
 the elements and the whole
 become autonomous.
 Next to him, on an operating table,
 like a sphinx,
 Alice d'Or.[. . .]
 Pope Julius II
 appears at the pulpit which is
 located among the audience members.
 Actually, he is not a pope but a clown
 From the pulpit, he preaches about art, eternal life, art support . . .
 All these elements—
 a dialogue between the hero
 and his head on a pedestal,
 the erotic and intellectual activities of
 the femme fatale on an operating table,
 the liturgico-aesthetic speculations of the pope—
 create separate situations and events which
 increase the general tension and
 'temperature'
 by clashing with each other
 and a shocking lack of any logical explanation.⁸

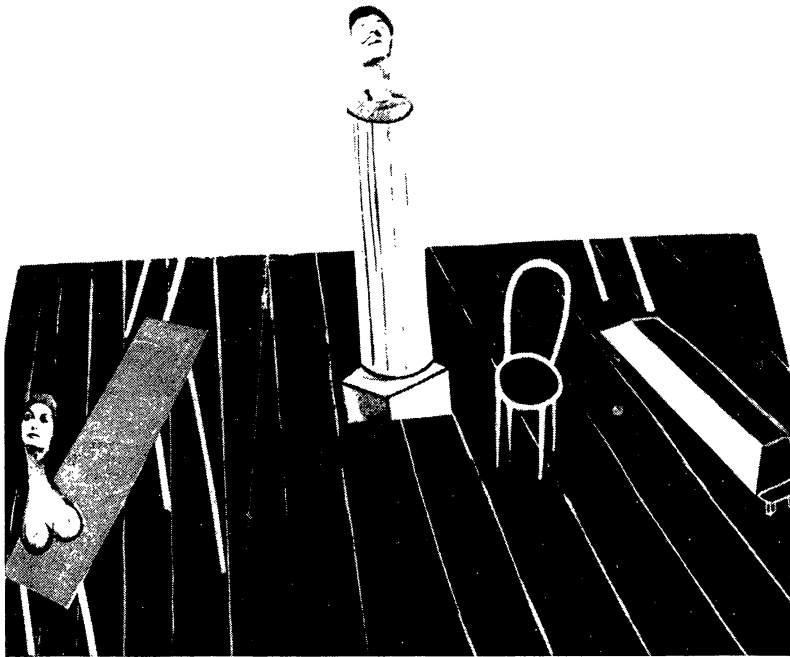


Fig. 7. *The Cuttlefish* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

Cricot 2's experiment helps to understand Kantor's concept of the autonomous theatre. The function of theatre, according to Kantor, was not to explain, translate, or interpret a dramatic text. Rather, its aim was to "crush the impregnable shell of drama" to expose the inadequacies of literary investigations which were a substitute for the intimate process of creating art. Rockoffer's actions were not logically connected either with other elements on stage or the text of the play itself. (In Witkiewicz's opening sequence, Rockoffer, Alice d'Or, a statue, and Pope Julius II discuss world-views with Hyrcan IV, creator of the imaginary kingdom of Hyrcania.) "This [was] a way in which the elements and the whole [became] autonomous." By rejecting a transfer of the elements from the text onto the stage, the artist's sphere of imagination would be liberated to "transfer 'different' messages which are guarded against by [an artist's] pragmatism and deliberation." Kantor concentrated on the process and manifestation of human activity, turning the performance into "a mill grinding the text. Does the mill 'interpret' the product which it grinds?"⁹

This parallel existence of theatrical action and dramatic action received a particular attention in Kantor's and Cricot 2's experiments between 1961 and 1973. The 1961 production of Witkiewicz's *The Country House*, for example, introduced the concept of the Informel art to theatre. In his manifesto, Kantor noted that

[The Informel Theatre] is a discovery of an unknown aspect of REALITY or of its elementary state: Matter which is freed from abiding by the laws of reality, is always changing and fluid; it escapes the bondage of rational definitions; it makes all attempts to compress it into a solid form ridiculous, helpless, and vain; it is perennially destructive to all forms, and nothing more than a manifestation; it is accessible only through the forces of destruction, by whim and risk of COINCIDENCE, by fast and violent action. [The discovery of] MATTER started a new adventure for art and human consciousness.¹⁰

In the production, these ideas were translated into theatre terms via the use of a wardrobe:

A Poor, Mildewed Wardrobe brought down from the Attic and its tiny interior, rather than a magical stage on which a sacred mystery of Illusion was celebrated, had to be a sufficient space for the actors. A Wardrobe had to replace the nostalgic country house demanded by the playwright . . .¹¹

Its doors, like stage doors, open suddenly to the deeper and deeper regions of what might otherwise be seen as a domestic Interior.

Inside, in a suffocating and humid atmosphere, the dreams are unfolded, the nightmares are born,

behaviours, which hate the light of day, are practiced . . .

It was enough to open the doors of the wardrobe.¹²

Once the doors of the wardrobe were opened the mother, "covered with a dust sheet like a piece of furniture," appeared and disappeared, the barking and howling of dogs were heard, bags mixed together with the bodies of actors fell out, a poet emerged only to disappear into the pile of bags, etc. The wardrobe was, for Kantor, a catalyst of all human matters and secrets that materialized as well as evaporated within the boundaries of its space.

Whereas "The Informel Theatre" redefined the function and the scope of the playtext in terms of the space it occupied, "The Zero Theatre" (1963) focused on the actor and his/her position in this space. According to Kantor:

The traditional technique of plot development made use of human life as a springboard for movement upward towards the realm of growing and intensified passions, heroism, conflict, and violent reactions. When it first emerged, this idea of 'growth' signified man's tragic expansion, or a heroic struggle to transcend human dimensions and destinies. With the passing of time, it turned into a mere show requiring powerful elements of spectacle and the acceptance of violent and irresponsible illusion—convincing shapes and a thoughtless procreation of forms.¹³

In the 1963 production of Witkiewicz's *The Madman and the Nun*, Kantor proposed an illusion-crushing process to be accomplished by the destruction of emotions accepted in life. Only such a process would allow actors to discard the emotions assigned to them by the text. "Having done so, he would eliminate dependence on the arrangement which exists outside of him, gain autonomy and expose only himself, and his own character which is the only reality on stage."¹⁴ The complex nature of this system was due to the fact that

On the one hand there is the reality of the text,
on the other hand, the actor and his behavior.

Two parallel systems which
are neither dependent
nor reflect each other.

The actor's 'behavior' should
'paralyze' the reality of the text,
be juxtaposed to it.

If this happens:

the reality of the text will be
relieved of its questionable ally, the actor (questionable because it is
rendered only
through him), and

become independent, (also) autonomous,
and concrete.¹⁵

In order to achieve these goals, the presentation of the text was made impossible by a construction made of folding chairs, "The Death Machine." The machine kept pushing the actors aside. Consequently, scenes were constructed not by textual reference, but by reference to the immediate events happening on stage. Rather than presenting specific mental states called for by the action of the play, the actors presented emotion, such as "apathy, melancholy, exhaustion, amnesia, neurosis, depression, frustration, boredom, and misery,"¹⁶ that described their struggle against the machine. These "negative" emotions nullified the illusionary emotions and brought the actor into what Kantor called "zero zones." The actor's "INDIVIDUALITY" could not extend beyond the "zero zones" and could not create the illusion of another character. The actors "would eliminate dependence on the arrangement which exists outside of [them], gain autonomy and expose [themselves]. [They] would create [their] own chain of events, states, situations which would either clash with those in the play or be somehow completely isolated from them" (non-acting). The actors "perform[ed] in the place which [was] the least suitable. They [were] hidden behind noisy, conventional, and stupid events which [were] brought to the fore. Actors [were] humiliated by the act of pushing them 'behind.' They perform[ed] as if 'in spite.' They [were] relegated to outlaw status" (surreptitious acting). The actors were to be "erased:" "the act of erasing could also be equated with the simple act of cleaning up, of leaving the centre of the room cleanly swept by pushing litter and other rubbish against the walls or into the corners, and thus depriving them of meaning." The actors tried "to adjust to minimal living conditions by economizing on their vital powers, by not showing their emotions" (minimalization). They were "forced, flattered, admonished, scolded, tormented, terrorized to act" (acting under duress).

The Water-Hen by Stanislaw Witkiewicz (1967):

This production was based on the ideas of the "journey" and the Happening:

Having gone through the deformed and sputtering matter of Informel and touched upon the nothingness and the zero zone, one reaches the object "from behind," where the distinction between

reality and art does not exist. . . . The object simply exists. This statement has irrevocably depreciated the notions of: expression, interpretation, metaphor, and similar devices. In my treatment of *The Water-Hen*, I have tried to avoid an unnecessary construction of elements. I have introduced into it not only objects but also their characteristics, and READY-MADE events which were already molded. Thus, my intervention was dispensable. An object ought to be won over and possessed rather than depicted or shown.¹⁷

The text of the play was treated by Kantor as a "ready-made" object "which [had] been found; an object whose structure [was] dense and its identity [was] delineated by its own fiction, illusion, and psychophysical dimension."¹⁸ The basement of the Krzysztofory Gallery in Krakow was filled with mattresses, old packets, ladders, wooden partitions, etc. A group of travellers with their bags appeared in the space.



Fig. 8. *The Water-Hen* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

"I [kept] turning them around, [re-created] them indefinitely, until they [began] a life of their own; until they [began] to fascinate us:"¹⁹

1. A man with suitcases looks around the room and says to one of the audience members, "I must have seen you somewhere." He

begins to run pulling his suitcases behind him. He stops, arranges the suitcases, rearranges them, counts them, etc.

2. Someone demands a cup of coffee.

3. A girl with a paper bag full of receipts . . . turns around and, without any interest in her voice asks: "What time is it." [. . .]



LADY Z HAKA

Fig. 9. *The Water-Hen* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

10. A man with a bucket full of water runs across the room. He will return later, but in a different way.[. . .]

12. Someone is making a telephone call.

13. The waiters serve the customers.[. . .]

17. A Jew in a black cassock runs across the stage. He is carrying a desk wrapped in black on his shoulder. No one knows where he is running.[. . .]

19. A woman counting tea-spoons screams hysterically, "One spoon is missing," and throws all the spoons on the floor.

20. Someone asks, "Do you have a problem?"

21. Someone else asks, "Has it started yet?"[. . .]

29. Someone pours hot water into a bath-tub.[. . .]

35. Someone slaps someone's face. The action is repeated dispassionately.²⁰

All these activities were suddenly mixed together with a dramatic text. The opening dialogue between Edgar and Water-Hen merged with "the reality of the theatrical space bordering on life." The actors repeated the lines from the text with different intonation, rhythm, direction, etc. For example:

Water-Hen: "Later, you will think it over . . ."

One of the actors: I will think it over, you will think it over, he will think it over, she will think it over, etc.

Edgar aims at Water-Hen.

15. A shot is fired.

16. The angry waiters were only waiting for this moment. They seize Water-Hen, drag her, and throw her into a bath-tub in her coat, hat, and shoes.

17. Someone pours a bucket of hot water into a bath-tub.

18. The actors run into the bath-tub, pull out the soaking wet body of Water-Hen, toss her into the air, and throw her back into the bath-tub. The agony of Water-Hen happens simultaneously with the conversation between Edgar and his illegitimate son. A naked child sitting on a stool suspended from a ceiling, as if he were imprisoned there, pronounces statements about life and the mystery of essence as though in a somnambulistic dream. Edgar is undecided between his creation and a bath-tub, in which, finally, Water-Hen dies.²¹

Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes by Stanislaw Witkiewicz (1973):

The experiments conducted in *The Water-Hen* and in the happenings presented in 1967, were questioned by Kantor two years later in "The Impossible Theatre." Dissatisfied with the happening's sublimation of physical reality, Kantor concentrated on the processes leading to the disruption of the Happening producing its own space and commentary. As he pointed out in "The Impossible Theatre" manifesto:

IMPOSSIBLE is the main component of the play perception.

What I regard as important here is the integration of a
great m u l t i t u d e of
s u g g e s t i o n s

so structured that they create in the audience

the i m p r e s s i o n of

the i m p o s s i b i l i t y of

g r a s p i n g

and i n t e r p r e t i n g the whole

from the audience's position.

The audience's perception is grounded in
a reflection

created by a relationship between

objects and actions,

which are not "the work of art,"

or its materialization, but

a point of reference

for cognitive and spiritual processes.

My actions go in two directions: towards the actors and the audience.

I am creating stage actions which are enclosed in themselves,

escaping perceptions, going 'nowhere,' 'impossible.'

On the other hand, I refuse to give the audience their rights and privileges. The situation of the audience is questionable, constantly corrected, and (physically) altered.²²

The play was presented in a theatre cloakroom that resembled a huge iron cage with hooks and hangers similar to those in a slaughter-house. The audience, entering, the space had to go through this cloakroom/iron cage/slaughter house, where they were forced by the actors to leave their coats. Having done so, they were allowed to sit in their seats surrounding the space between the cloakroom and a wall with a door, the entrance to the "theatre."



Fig. 10. *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

This "theatre foyer," so to speak, was the space where Witkiewicz's play was presented. The audience was also trapped in the space of the cloakroom and had to accept the forms of behaviour that were consistent with its rules. They were either squeezed together or separated by the actors/attendants. The audience's active participation was not, however, limited to those external actions. They were either asked to play parts of some of the characters in the play, or participated in physical and verbal exercises of the actors.

A stage, no matter which one, even the most
dynamic one created with the help of the audience's participation,
is always solid and passive;
it is a place where the actor
wins an artistic status,
prize and glory;
it is an artistic place.

[Our stage] must be bereft of this function.

The place for
'artistic activity'

is taken by
a utilitarian space,
by a C L O A K R O O M.[. . .]

In the theatre, a cloakroom
is a place and an institution
of the lowest rank;[. . .]

If one were to think about it
a cloakroom is shameless
in its invasion of one's privacy:
we are forced to leave there
an intimate part of us.[. . .]

A cloakroom works,
expands,
devours more and more distant spheres of the imagination.

It is continuously working. . . .

It rejects the actors and their rights,
it throws them ruthlessly beyond its boundaries,
or it appropriates, belittles,
deforms,
sterilizes,
tarnishes,
ruthlessly breaks,

and gives false testimonies
to their attempts to 'smuggle in' their artistic
activities.²³

The cloakroom "devoured and deformed" art. The character, Princess Sophia, lived in a hen-house. Her admirers, an English biochemist, an American millionaire, a Spanish cardinal, and a Russian count, were presented as characters altered by the prop-room, that is, a man with a desk on his back, a man on two wheels, a man carrying the doors, a man with an extra pair of legs. Forty assorted characters all named Mandelbaum were played by audience members vested in black costumes. An immense mouse-trap was used as a weapon in an aristocratic duel in which Tarquinius Filtrius-Umbilicus, the hero, was killed.

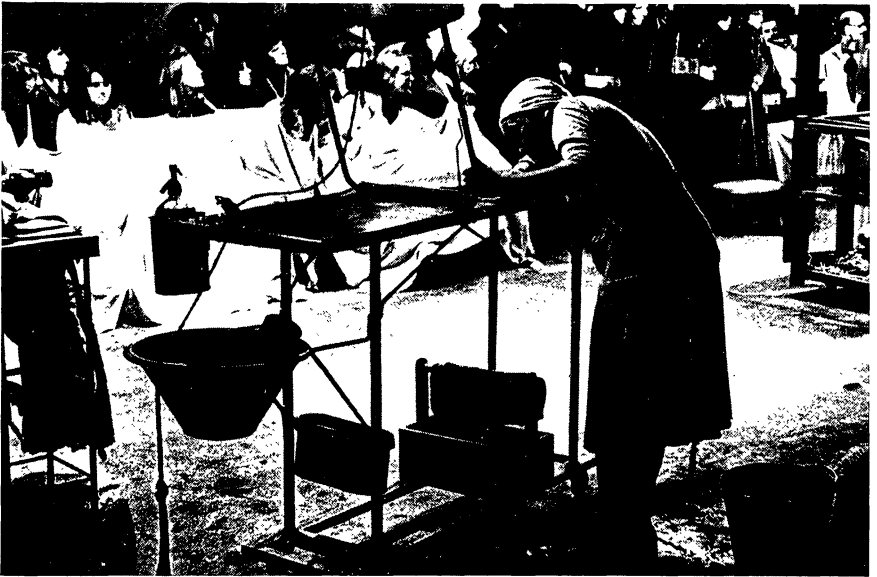


Fig. 11. *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

The Dead Class based on Stanislaw Witkiewicz's *Tumor Brainowicz*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, and Bruno Schulz's "The Treatise on Mannequins" (1975):

The production marked a considerable shift in Kantor's theatre experiments. Rather than elaborating on the processes of wrenching the theatre space/dramatic text from existing reality, it explored the processes of reconstructing memories on stage. In order to do so, Kantor separated the performance space from the auditorium. The need for such a separation was explained by him in two passages from "The Theatre of Death" manifesto:

The moment of the ACTOR's first appearance before the HOUSE (to use current terminology) seems to me, on the contrary: revolutionary and avant-garde. I will even try to compile and 'ascribe to HISTORY' a completely different picture, in which the course of events will have a meaning quite the opposite.[. . .] IT IS NECESSARY TO RECOVER THE PRIMEVAL FORCE OF THE SHOCK TAKING PLACE AT THE MOMENT WHEN OPPOSITE A MAN (THE VIEWER) THERE STOOD FOR THE FIRST TIME A MAN (THE ACTOR) DECEPTIVELY SIMILAR TO US YET AT THE SAME TIME INFINITELY FOREIGN, BEYOND AN IMPASSABLE BARRIER.²⁴

and

Despite the fact that we may be suspected and even accused of a certain scrupulousness, inappropriate under the circumstances, in destroying inborn prejudices and fears, for the sake of a more precise picture and possible conclusions let us establish the limits of this boundary, which has the name: THE CONDITION OF DEATH for it represents the most extreme point of reference, no longer threatened by any conformity, FOR THE CONDITION OF THE ARTIST AND ART.²⁵

The introduction of the impassable barrier and the condition of death irrevocably altered the parameters of Kantor's theatre. In the production, staged in the basement of the Krzysztofory Gallery in Krakow, two ropes divided the space into, to use a metaphor from the manifesto, the world of the living and the world of the dead. In the world on the other side: "in a forgotten space of our memory, somewhere in a corner, there are a few rows of old wooden school BENCHES . . . dry pages of BOOKS which are turning into a heap of ashes, a rest-room, where the first smoke of freedom was inhaled."²⁶

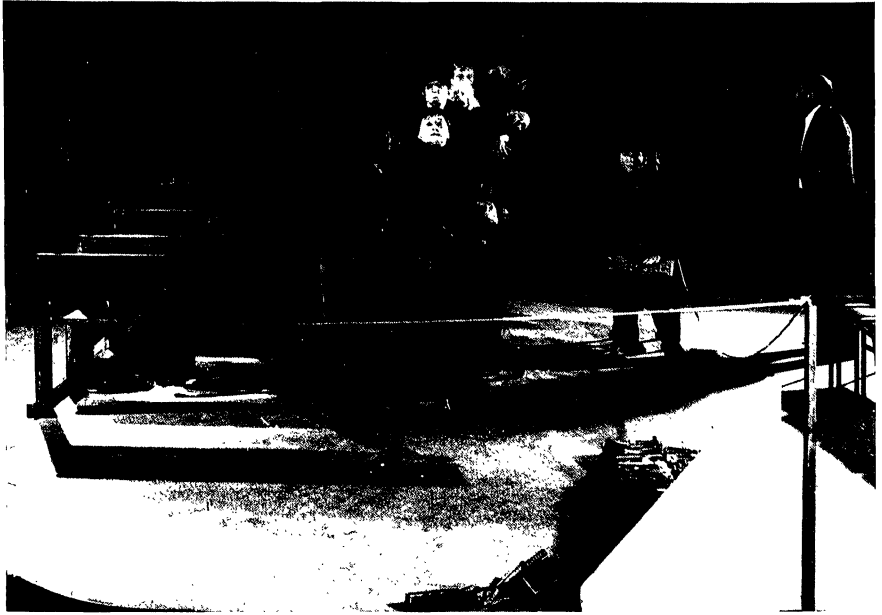


Fig. 12. *The Dead Class* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

Once a sign was given by Kantor, who was on stage,

[p]upils, old people at the verge of their graves and those who are already absent raise their hands, a well-known gesture to all of us, and keep them up, as if they were asking for something, as if that would be their last request . . . they leave; a classroom is empty.²⁷ The tones of the Françoise waltz were heard and suddenly they return. . . . the last act of illusion begins . . . a grand parade of the actors . . . all of them are carrying with them small children looking like dead bodies . . . or TUMOURS of their CHILDHOOD.²⁸



Fig. 13. *The Dead Class* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

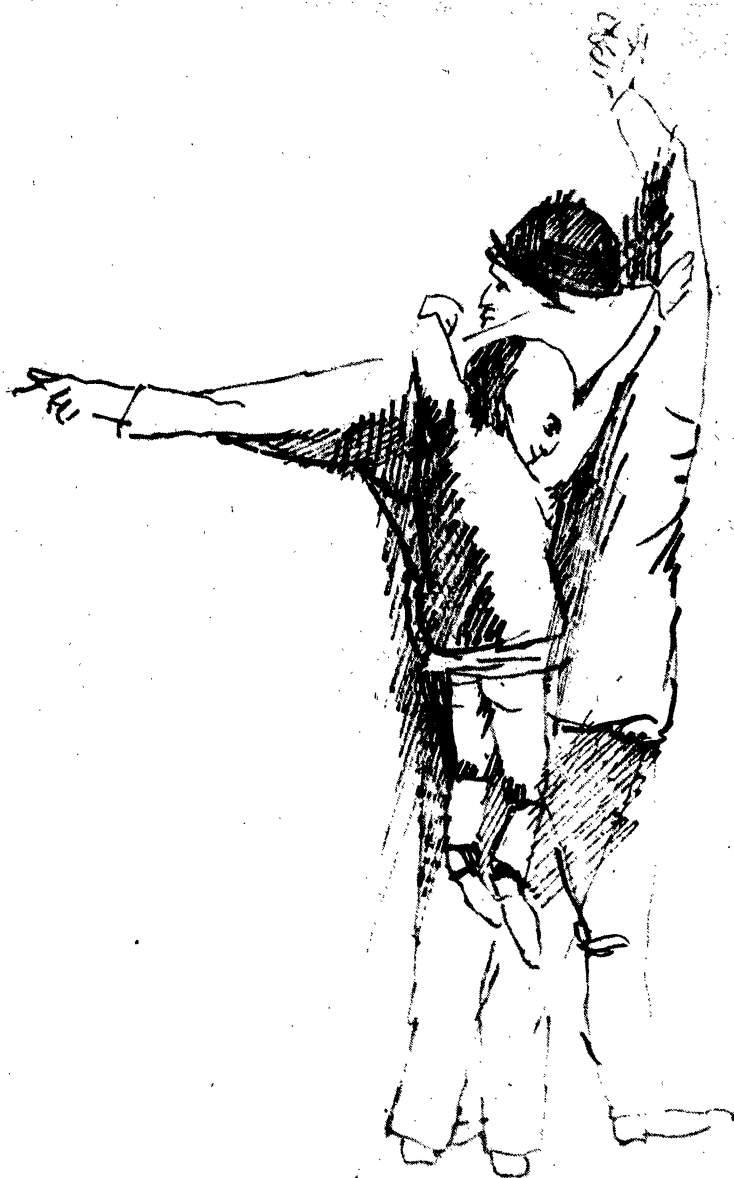


Fig. 14. *The Dead Class* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

The actions that ensued created a collage of nocturnal memories of school days, attended lessons, and historical events: "Grand Illusion," "Breakfast," "Silent Requests, Fingers," "A Sudden Entrance," "Grand Entrance. Parade. Dead Childhood," "Solomon Lesson," "Toast," "Nocturnal Lesson," "Historical Nightmares," "A Soldier from World War I," "Grammar Lesson,"

"Phonetic Clusters," "Making Faces," "Adolescent World," "War Lesson," "A Cleaning-woman," "Pedel," "Books," and "A Newspaper from 1914." Once the reality of the classroom was established, Witkiewicz's *Tumor Brainowicz* was introduced:

When I started to work [on *The Dead Class*], I felt that I was losing my fascination with the method of parallel actions and that I would have to go beyond it. The materials gathered for the production were becoming more and more substantial—the atmosphere of the classroom, attempts to bring back memories, childhood, victories and defeats, more and more clearly defined idea of the theatre of death, new territories and horizons . . . all of this pointed to the possibility of creating an autonomous production without the need to fall back on drama.[. . .] I have returned to the idea of parallel action. This time, however, its meaning is different. This time, I made use of Witkiewicz's *Tumor Brainowicz*, a creation of pure imagination which, as was the case with Witkiewicz, was grounded in the sphere of our lives. My fondness for literature returns again. This will explain the conflicts, doubts, and balancing between drama and theatre. *The Dead Class* emerges at the borderline of my indecisions. The characters from *Tumor Brainowicz*, who enter the stage and the classroom, bring with them their fate and destiny. As they contain in themselves the content of the play, the real action of "The Dead Class" is freed from the play's potent thought. They merge with the figures from the classroom, who also exist at the borderline between life and death. All hell breaks loose. We enter the world of dreams and nightmares. The characters from *Tumor Brainowicz* leave the stage. They disappear. The reality of the classroom begins to exist in its own environment. After some time, they return but different, as if changed by the events about which the audience knows nothing and which must have happened behind the doors. They return in a different moment of the plot.²⁹



Fig. 15. *The Dead Class* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

Wielopole, Wielopole (1980):

The division of space into the space of memory and the space of literature was abandoned in this production. Instead, Kantor focused entirely on the space "on the other side" where all the events would unfold:

Here, this is a room of my childhood
with all its inhabitants.

This is the room which I keep reconstructing over and over again
and which is destroyed over and over again.

Its inhabitants are the members of my family.

They continuously repeat all their movements
as if they were imprinted on a film-negative shown interminably.

They will keep repeating those banal,
elementary, and aimless activities
with the same expression on their faces;[. . .]

These DEAD FACADES

come to life, become real and important
through this stubborn REPETITION OF ACTION.

Maybe this stubborn repetition of action,[. . .]
is an inherent part of MEMORY . . .³⁰

Whereas memory was constantly challenged by the repetition of futile actions, the space of the room was destabilized by the characters who entered and disappeared behind the doors:

In front of us,
 in this poor and dusky room,
 behind the doors,
 a storm and inferno rage,
 and the waters of the floor rise.
 The weak walls of our ROOM,
 of our everyday or
 linear time,
 will not save us . . .
 Important events stand behind the doors;
 it is enough to open them³¹

Once the doors were opened, different characters entered from "an open interior of our imagination . . . where the threats of our memory are woven." *Wielopole, Wielopole* presented the following memories: part I—Family (the room of the dead), three dead photographs (Priest, Family, Soldiers), Marian's and Helka's wedding/funeral ceremony; part II—Family (the room of eternal family quarrels), Helka's Golgotha (the secrets of family life are mixed with the Passion of Christ),

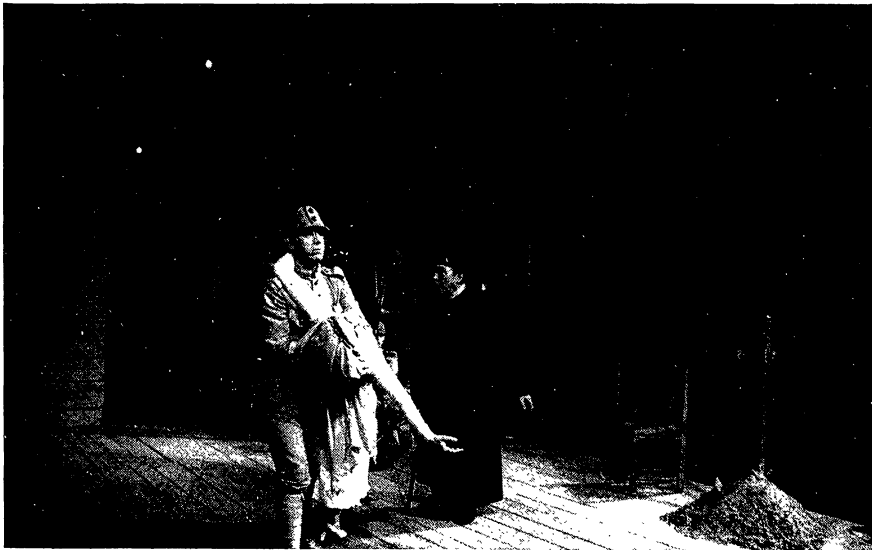


Fig. 16. *Wielopole, Wielopole* (Photo courtesy of the Crikoteka Archives)

Helka's rape by the soldiers, Marian's and Helka's second wedding/funeral ceremony; part III—Family (repetition of everyday actions), The Judgement of the Priest, The Crucifixion of Adas (the second Golgotha);

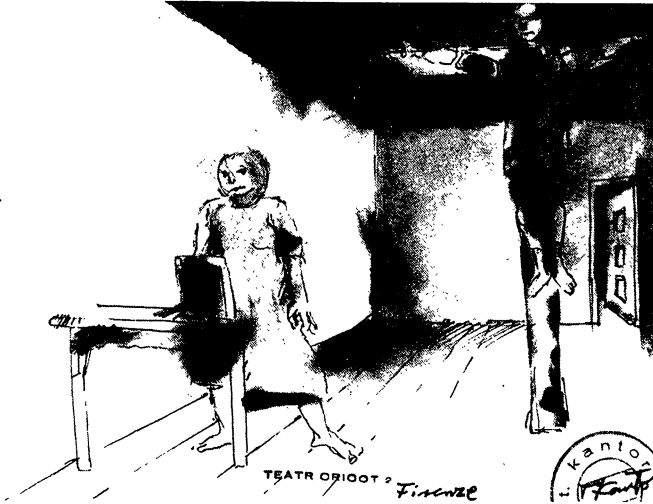


Fig. 17. *Wielopole, Wielopole* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

part IV—Family (the fear about Adas is mixed with the fear of Apocalypse), Adas' Death and Funeral, Death; part V—Family (the collapse of the image), The Priest's funeral (the third Golgotha), Rabbi's Song and His Multiple Deaths, The Last Supper, The Departure.

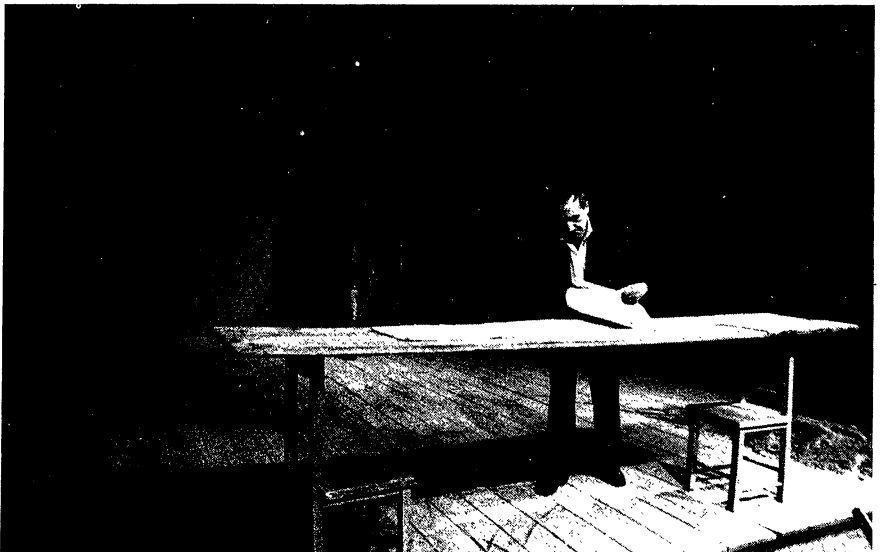


Fig. 18. *Wielopole, Wielopole* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

The appearance and disappearance of all the characters was accompanied by music (Chopin's "Scherzo," for Uncle Stasio, a Psalm, for Uncle Jozef-Priest, a Polish military march, "Szara Piechota," for the soldiers, the Rabbi's song).

Let the Artists Die (1985):

The production was an extension of the concept of the room of memory. In his commentaries on *Let the Artists Die*, Kantor indicated that

One will neither find the setting
nor the action on this stage.
In their stead, there will be a journey
into the past, into the abyss of memory
into the past time that is gone irrevocably,
but which still attracts us,
into the past time, which floats into
the regions of DREAMS, INFERNUM,
THE WORLD OF THE DEAD,
AND ETERNITY³²

Instead, there were

Negatives [which]
do not describe the place of action,
but are the NEGATIVES OF MEMORY that are interimposed
that are re-called from the PAST,
that 'slip' into the present moment,
that appear 'out of the blue,'
that place objects, people, and events together . . .
that discard patterns of logic, which are binding in every day life.³³

The space that was entered was both a childhood room and a cemetery. A bed, a night table, a door, and chairs shared the space with cemetery crosses.

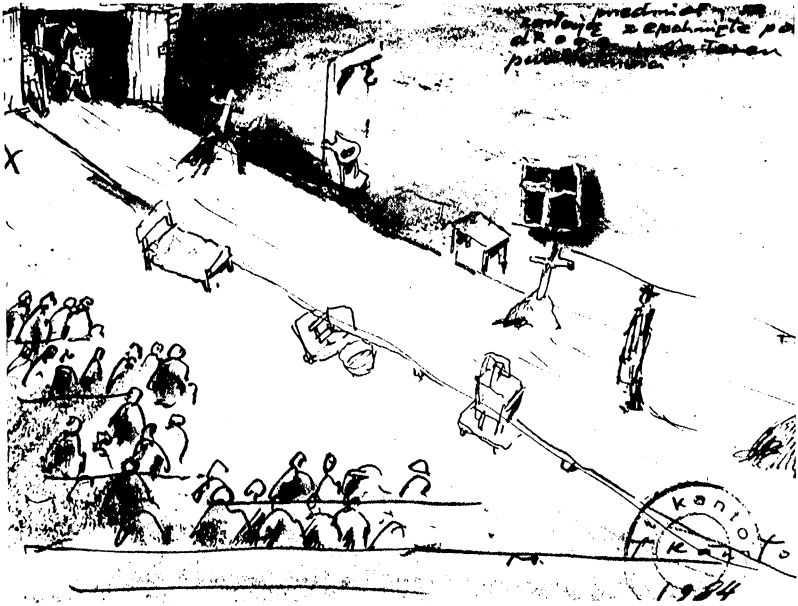


Fig. 19. *Let the Artists Die* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

The room/cemetery storeroom was a neutral space which was ready to be transformed in any direction by something or somebody from behind the doors of the room. At the beginning of "The Overture," the doors were opened by a caretaker/circus performer who was followed by his actors.

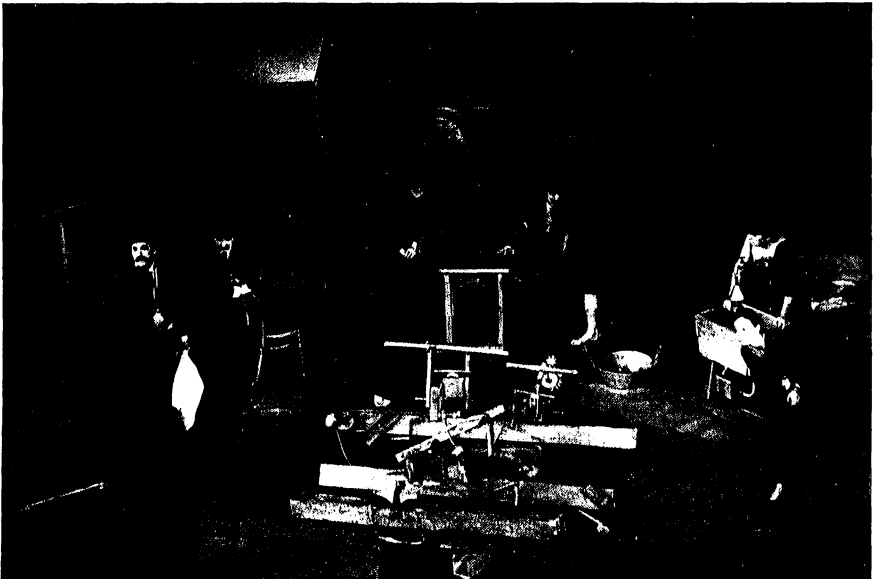


Fig. 20. *Let the Artists Die* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

The space in Act II was both a childhood room and an asylum; the space in Act IV was both an asylum and a prison cell. Similar transformations happened to the characters who entered the inn of memory. One of the recognizable characters was Veit Stoss, a fifteenth-century sculptor who created a famous altar piece in one of Krakow's churches. Upon his return to Nurnberg, a nail was driven through Stoss's cheeks as punishment for his debts. In the room of memory, Kantor created for Veit Stoss, a guest from the other side, an asylum for beggars, Bohemian artists, and cutthroats,

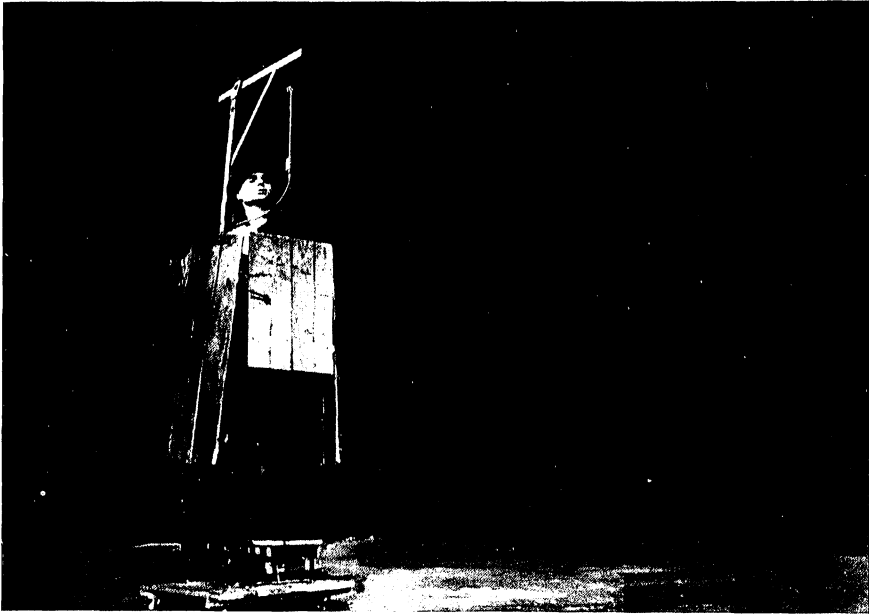


Fig. 21. *Let the Artists Die* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

where Stoss would build an Altar that resembled his Krakow masterpiece. In a world governed by the Theory of Negatives, the altar was transformed into a prison cell from which the artist tapped his message out to the outside world.

I Shall Never Return (1988):

Whereas in previous productions Kantor was the holder of discourse who would open the doors, correct the actions of the actors on stage, and close the doors at the end, in *I Shall Never Return*, he became one of the elements of his artistic creation:

Everything I have done in art so far,
has been the reflection of my attitude
towards the events that

surrounded me,
 towards the situation
 in which I have lived;[. . .]
 To express all of this,
 and for my own use,
 I created
 the Idea of Reality,
 which rejected illusion,
 that is,
 a procedure recognized as elemental
 for the theatre.[. . .]
 When I wanted to be a child,
 someone else was a child,
 not really I
 (this can still be excused).
 When I wanted to die, someone was dying for me.
 He was playing the part of me dying.[. . .]
 I understand
 this last journey in my life
 as well as in art
 as a never ending journey b e y o n d t i m e
 and b e y o n d a l l
 r u l e s³⁴

The concept of a journey that happens beyond time and all rules was Kantor's answer to the dichotomy that had dominated his artistic creations for decades. This journey was fully explained in Kantor's notes to the production in which he observed that "I have always stood by door and waited. . . . In a moment I shall enter with my 'luggage' a shabby and suspicious INN. I am here to attend a meeting with apparitions or people." The inn, "like all inns and bistros, exists somewhere in a forgotten Street of Dreams. All the events that take place there happen at the threshold of time. One more step and we can find ourselves beyond it."³⁵ The Priest from *Wielopole, Wielopole*, the Barefooted Dish-washer, and the Inn-keeper were in the inn. When the doors opened, the actors, wearing the black uniforms of the Old People from *The Dead Class*, travelling costumes from *The Water-Hen*, or costumes from *Wielopole, Wielopole* and *Let the Artists Die*, entered. They "acted out" fragments from their "plays." Those fragments were all mixed up, however. For example, characters from *Wielopole, Wielopole* used an object from *The Dead Class* (school-benches).



Fig. 22. *I Shall Never Return* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

The events on stage were interrupted by Kantor's entrance. Once having the actor's attention, he announced his desire to create the last emballage. Screaming and shouting all the character/actors, except for the Inn-keeper and the Dish-washer, left the stage. Kantor appeared a second time. So did the actors and objects. One of the objects was a Young-Kantor Mannequin dressed up for either a wedding or a funeral. Till the end of the performance, all scenes would flow between a "real" Kantor standing at the front of the stage and a mannequin Kantor standing at the doors. The characters/actors observed a wedding ceremony between the Bride and the Bridegroom-mannequin conducted by the Priest.

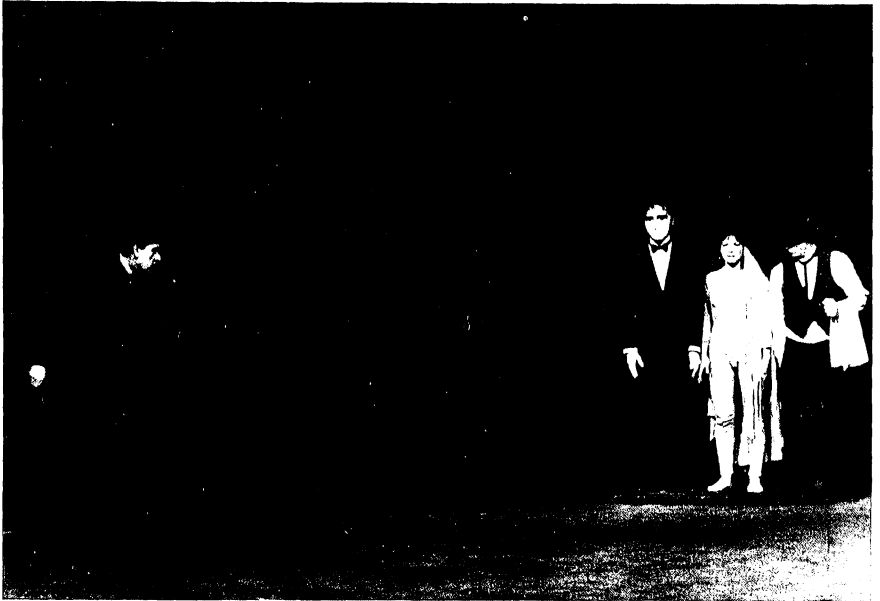


Fig. 23. *I Shall Never Return* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

This "extraordinary marriage" was followed by "few surprises" prepared by the Inn-keeper: the dance of two Bishops from *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear*, the Rabbi from *Wielopole, Wielopole*, characters from *The Water-Hen*, a parade of the "Violinists"/Soldiers. When the apparitions from the past went away, the Dish-washer pulled out "forgotten odds and ends: Odysseus's shabby military uniform," and "a mournful piece of junk the apparition of my FATHER."³⁶ The Inn-keeper was transformed into Odysseus. The story of his return was as a collage of scenes from *Wielopole, Wielopole*, *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, and *The Dead Class*. Finally, when all the lovers were killed by Odysseus with a machine-gun/photo-camera from *Wielopole, Wielopole*,



Fig. 24. *I Shall Never Return* (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

Odysseus and Kantor sat at the table. Odysseus showed him where to read in a script which Kantor had written in 1944 while working on Wyspianski's *Return of Odysseus*: "In my own homeland, I have uncovered hell. I walked into a graveyard. I killed everything. The past's happiness has fled. There is nothing before me."³⁷ The apparitions/actors returned and asked Kantor to embark on yet another journey with them, but the grave-diggers had already come on stage and started to cover all the props of the grand (Kantor's) theatre with dust-sheets.

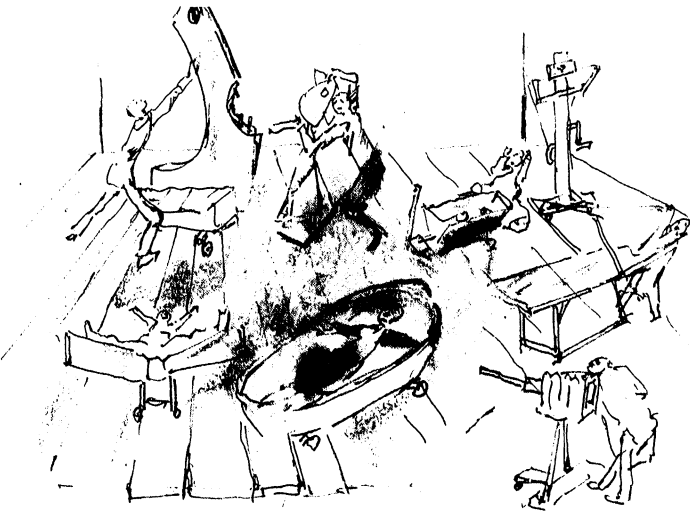


Fig. 25. *I Shall Never Return* (Drawing by Tadeusz Kantor)

Kantor and his mannequin left the stage together.

Today is My Birthday (1990):

The action takes place on stage.
 A real action. Let us assume so.
 I have decided to move in and live on stage[. . .]
 I have often imagined my room in a theatre,
 inside of the theatre,
 on stage, rather than in a hotel.
 So, my—as I call it—Poor Room of Imagination
 is placed on stage.
 I have to arrange it.
 It should not look like a stage room.
 I will assemble on stage, in this room of mine, all the object
 as though I really decided to *live* here.³⁸

The stage, a simple platform, was filled with objects and people from Kantor's artistic life. Up centre there was an empty frame. The frame stage right was occupied by Kantor's double, the "Self-portrait," who sat on a chair.

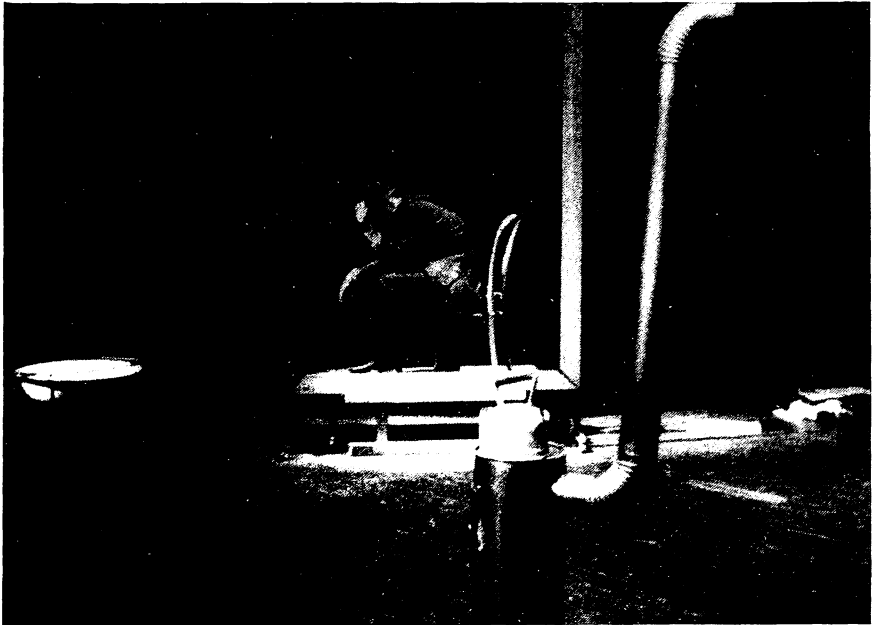


Fig. 26. *Today Is My Birthday* (Photo by Flore Wolland)

The frame stage left was empty. An emballage, human figures wrapped in sacks, was on the floor between the three frames. Down left there was a chair, a table with an old lamp, a moulding book, an old photograph, a loose piece of paper, and an iron-bed with "The Shadow of the Proprietor" on it.



Fig. 27. *Today Is My Birthday* (Photo by Flore Wolland)

An old oven with a chimney and a wash-bowl with dishes were down right.

A ROOM

Mine.

Private.

The only place
in this world,
the world ruled by the ruthless laws of collectivism,
banality,
and society;
the only place
in this world,
where the individual,
policed by society,
can hide,
be a master of his fate and destiny.³⁹

The silence on stage was interrupted by Kantor's voice from a loud-speaker. "Again, I am on stage. I will probably never fully explain this phenomenon either to you or to myself. To be precise, I am not on stage, but at the threshold. In front of me, there is the audience . . ." ⁴⁰ While the monologue was read, a figure resembling Velazquez's Infanta Margarita in a black lace dress entered the frame stage left. At the same time, the double came to life and began to repeat the words of the monologue and to imitate Kantor's gestures. "Let me tell you about the event that has happened to me." The voice from the loud-speaker stopped abruptly. The double suddenly lost his balance and fell out of the framed space into the performance space. He approached the table, touched Kantor's chair now empty, lit the lamp, took a piece of paper from the table, and began to read: "Again, I am on stage. I will probably never fully explain this phenomenon either to you or to myself. To be precise, I am not on stage, but at the threshold. In front of me, there is the audience—you, Ladies and Gentlemen—that is according to my vocabulary, REALITY. Behind me, there is the stage, that is, ILLUSION, FICTION. I do not lean towards either of the two sides. I turn my head in one direction, then in the other direction. A splendid resume of my theory." "Let me tell you about the event that has happened to me. It happened on Saturday." Kantor's recorded voice interrupted, repeated the last sentence, and continued the story.

While the voice was retelling the events of Kantor's meeting with a poor girl in Cricoteka, the doors behind the centre frame opened and the Poor Girl

entered followed by other actors, the Mother, the Father, the Priest, and Uncle Stasio:

From the dim recesses,
 as if from the abyss of Hell,
 there started to emerge
 people, who had died a long time ago,
 and memories of events
 which, as if in a dream,
 had no explanation.[. . .]
 They would emerge
 and would keep returning stubbornly
 as if waiting for my permission to let them enter.
 I gave them my consent.⁴¹

The Poor Girl came up to the frame with the Infanta, forced her out, took her place, and imitated her posture. Her actions were accompanied by the loud laughter of the Family.

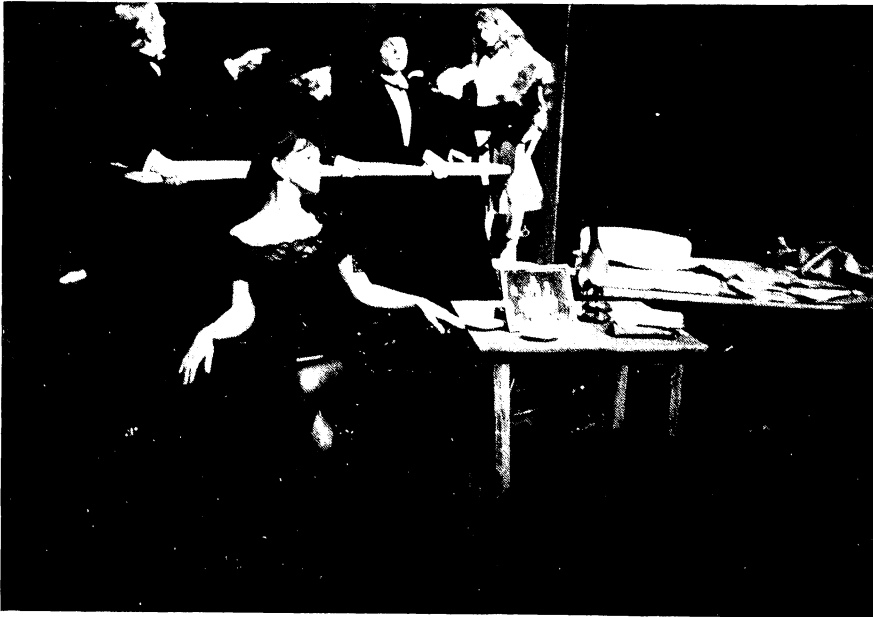


Fig. 28. *Today Is My Birthday* (Photo by Flore Wolland)

The "Self-portrait" left his frame and led the Infanta back to her picture. "It is my Infanta Margarita: Mine," he announced and returned to his own painting.

The Poor Girl approached the central frame behind which the family was now seated. "Today is your Birthday. This is the reason why I came. It is you anniversary today. You are 75. But, there is no table," she said. A Cleaning-woman appeared unexpectedly and brought in a wooden board which she placed on trestles behind the frame of the family picture. She repeated the Poor Girl's lines, first to the empty chair and then to the "Self-portrait." The double approached the photograph on the table. It was his birthday photograph. In order to complete the image represented by it, he joined the group behind the frame.

The "birthday" ceremony was interrupted by the entrance of a newspaper boy who announced the outbreak of World War I.



Fig. 29. *Today Is My Birthday* (Photo by Bruno Wagner)

The hands stretched out from the Emballage to catch the newspapers flying in the air. "My Poor Room of Imagination becomes a battlefield. The war destroys the photograph and the illusion. It bursts into the room and changes everything."

When the war and its mechanisms disappeared, Kantor's Room/Inn of Imagination/Memory was re-assembled to accommodate other "images" (Maria Jarema and Jonasz Stern), only to be invaded and destroyed once again by politicians, generals, and soldiers and their machines of power/war.

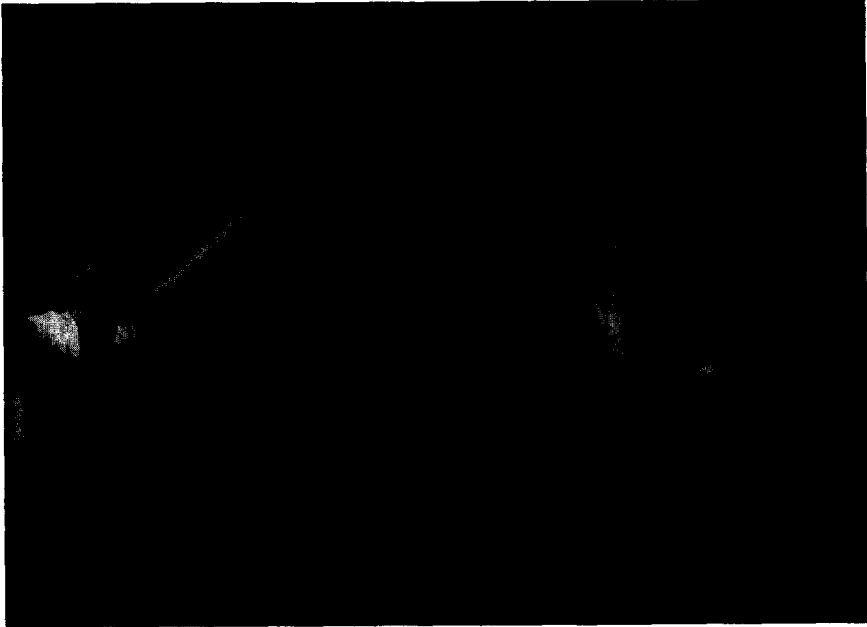


Fig. 30. *Today Is My Birthday* (Photo by Bruno Wagner)

The "Self-portrait" looked around: "My Poor Room of Imagination. My home. My home on stage, which, like a fort, defends itself against the attacks of the mob, against the governments, against politics, against all unlawful trespassing, against ignorance, against vulgarity and stupidity. My weapon is *my imagination, childhood memories, my poverty, my solitude, and Death waiting over there*, and a grand actress and her rival: *Love*."

After the nightmare, the Shadow and the Cleaning-woman tried to put the Room/Inn of Imagination/Memory back together. Their effort was interrupted by the entrance of three NKVD soldiers who pulled the "Self-portrait" out of his frame and thrust him into the central frame. Having mutilated the "Self-portrait," they left him on the floor.

The Cleaning-woman pushed the empty central frame aside. Once it was removed, a different space containing a wooden door was disclosed. While Offenbach's "La Belle Helene" was played, the grave-diggers from *I Shall Never Return* brought in the crosses from *Let the Artists Die*. They put the crosses all over the room. The Poor Girl emerged. Behind her were bio-objects, war/death monuments and machines, and circus cages with generals in them. Beethoven's "Eroica" (2nd movement). A funeral cortege appeared

from behind the doors, led by the Priest with a cross. The "Self-portrait," the Father, his Double, and Uncle Stasio carried a wooden board/table/coffin on their shoulders. The Mother followed. The board was put on trestles in front of the audience. The Family sat at it, as if they were sitting at the "Last Supper" table. The "Self-portrait" stood up: "Again, I am on stage. I will probably never fully explain this phenomenon either to you or to myself. To be precise, I am not on stage, but at the threshold." His words were drowned by Haydn's music. Universal disorder and chaos erupted. Suddenly, the music died. Everything and everybody was frozen in a final gesture. . . .

With Kantor's death, there is nobody to break that final negative *vivant*. We, now, are left alone surrounded by his life's work. We walk around the stage, as if we walked through Kantor's room, trying to find the traces/memories of this life which moved us a split second ago.



Fig. 31. Tadeusz Kantor (Photo courtesy of the Cricoteka Archives)

Notes

1. Tadeusz Kantor, "Przed wojna" (unpublished ms., 1938): 1-2. The quoted excerpts from essays and manifestoes, except for "The Theatre of Death" manifesto, were translated by the author, Michal Kobialka. "The Theatre of Death" manifesto was translated by T. Voy and Margaret Stelmazynski.
2. "Balladyna" (unpublished, ms., 1942): n.p.
3. "Uwagi do scenariusza Balladyny" (unpublished, ms., n.d.): n.p.
4. "Balladyna," n.p.
5. "Ulisses" (unpublished ms., 1944): 3.
6. "The Infamous Transition from the World of the Dead into the World of the Living," *The Drama Review* T111 (Fall 1986): 168.
7. "Powrot Odysa—Partytura sztuki Stanislaw Wyspianskiego 'Powrot Odysa.' Teatr Podziemny 1944r." (unpublished ms., 1944): 1-2.
8. "Partition, 'La Pieuvre'" (unpublished ms., n.d.): 11-5.
9. "The Autonomous Theatre," *The Drama Review*: 115-23, 120.
10. "The Informel Theatre," *The Drama Review*: 123-4, 123.
11. "Reality of the Lowest Rank" (unpublished ms., 1980): n.p.
12. "Szafa," *Ambalaze* (Warszawa: Galeria Foksal, 1976): 13.
13. "The Zero Theatre," *The Drama Review*: 125-34, 125.
14. 129.
15. 130.
16. All the quotations referring to and describing the style of acting are taken from "The Zero Theatre" manifesto.
17. "Theatre Happening," *The Drama Review*: 135-6, 135.
18. 136.
19. 136.
20. "Kurka wodna—Partytura" (unpublished ms., n.d.): 1-5.
21. 7-10.
22. "The Impossible Theatre" (unpublished ms., 1969/73): n.p.
23. 'A Cloakroom,' "The Impossible Theatre," n.p.
24. "The Dead Class," *The Drama Review*: 137-48, 144-5.
25. 145-6.
26. "Umarla Klasa—Objasnienia" (unpublished ms., n.d.): n.p.
27. Ibidem.
28. "Umarla Klasa—Partytura" (unpublished ms., n.d.): 1.
29. 122-3.
30. "The Room. Maybe a New Phase," *The Drama Review*: 170-2, 170-1.
31. 171. The text of this essay can also be found in *Wielopole, Wielopole: An Exercise in Theatre* by Tadeusz Kantor, trans. Mariusz Tchorek and G. M. Hyde (London: Marion Boyars, 1990). The book also contains Kantor's *partytura* to *Wielopole, Wielopole*, his notes on rehearsals, and a selection of theoretical writings.
32. "Guide to the Performance *Let the Artists Die* (Krakow: Cricoteka, 1985): 3.
33. "Program Notes to *Niech szczeszna artysci* (Krakow: Cricoteka, 1985): n.p.
34. "The Real 'I,'" *Performing Arts Journal* 38 (May 1991): 37-42, 39-40.
35. "Program Notes to *I Shall Never Return* (Milano: Cappelletti & Riscassi, 1988): 4.
36. 8.
37. 'Epilogue,' "Program Notes to *I Shall Never Return*."

38. "My Room," "Program Notes to *Today is My Birthday*" (Milano: C. R. T. Artificio, 1990): 6.

39. 6.

40. All quotations come from the unpublished partytura of *Today is My Birthday*.

41. "The Silent Night" (unpublished ms., 1990): n.p.