

Kantor's Legacy

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It is June 30, 1989, at Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the second day of a conference dedicated to Tadeusz Kantor. There are over twenty participants from several countries and an audience of about five hundred young artists and students. This creates a solemn but tense atmosphere. Kantor comments on every presentation, answers numerous questions from the audience, moves around and gesticulates, giving a one-man show more important than any other performance at that conference. But people wait for something more, that is, for an inevitable Kantor's "brawl." Yesterday they got one. Jan Kott, who presided over the session, interrupted Michal Kobialka's presentation as formally too long (over 15 minutes). Kantor abrogated his decision and called Kott a Stalinist oppressor of art and free speech. Kott left the conference. Later Kantor publicly apologized.

Then my turn came. During a part of the conference devoted to Kantor's present and future influence on the theatre, I gave a paper with a provocative title: "*Le Theatre de la mort doit-il mourir?* (The *Theatre of Death*, Must It Die?)." It was too provocative.

I spoke about a paradox in Kantor's attitude towards theatre and art as a whole, his embracing of an art of theatre "condemned to death" that exists only during the performance and, on the other hand, his strong opposition to theater's fate, his constant efforts to preserve his theatrical works, especially through photo and video documentation. But even the best, most modern and sophisticated documentation is nothing but documentation. Much more important are, in my opinion, his scenarios of the performances, *partitions* or "plays" as he calls them. Part of his theatre is preserved in texts that may be performed in the future by other directors, even by those with ideas contrary to Kantor's. . . .

With my closing words a roar was heard. Kantor rose, strongly gesticulating, and shouted in French with his very Polish (similar to Scottish) pronunciation of "r": "*Mon theatre ne mourira pas! Mon theatre est immorrrrtel! Immorrrrrrtel!*"

Kantor was wrong. He and his theatre died next year. The premiere of his last production: *Today Is My Birthday*, performed by the Cricot 2 company three weeks after Kantor's funeral, may have been nothing more than an unfinished, crippled work. Now, even the company ceases to exist.

He was right, because his theatre remained alive. It continues as an idea of the performance and of the theatre in general, as a number of signs, of indications and warnings left for his successors. If Kantor's unique style and the characteristic structure of his performance can be found in the works of contemporary directors, it means that his ideas still exist in the "genetic code" of the theatre.

Tracing his marks in the works of others is not easy. After discarding some plagiarists and naive imitators who have tried to appropriate the external shape of Kantor's performances, treating their visual aspect and acting style like a collection of tricks and gadgets, we can rarely find evident structural affinities or direct continuations.

It becomes necessary to extract the strongest from Kantor's genes, to say which of his ideas and experiments are important enough for the approval and use of future artists.

I am convinced that in Kantor's theory and practice the most important idea is that of a theatre based on contradictions, revealed in the peculiar dialectic of his performances where conflict never leads to resolution, where the inner struggle never stops, and where there will be no point at the end.

For Kantor, the primary opposition was that between "Reality" and "Illusion." As we know, Kantor used these terms to explain the difference between a traditional theatre dependent on literature and his new, autonomous theatre which he considered an independent work of art. Traditional theatre is created in order to "cheat" the audience, to make people believe the story shown on stage, to create an "Illusion" meant for spectators and make the "Illusion" grow in their minds.

Although it may use motives, scenes, characters, and dialogues taken from particular literary works, the Autonomous Theatre is established to create a work of art, that is, the performance itself. For Kantor, the performance is a "Reality" born in the artist-creator's memory and imagination, established on stage and witnessed by the audience. Actors, characters, objects, "machines," lighting, and music are created or shaped for the benefit of the performance, and all belong to its "Reality."

In Kantor's theory and practice we can find so many references to Marcel Duchamp. Various elements of his performances are "ready-made," not created or shaped, but simply chosen and put into performance. No less important are his experiments with happenings. But Kantor, who identifies some situations, objects, actors as "real" (that is, "ready-made" or taken directly from life), never says the same about the performance as a whole. He maintains a distinction between the concrete reality put to use in a performance and the reality of the performance itself. He places the performance between life and art, near the line not to be crossed. As Kantor once said: "For me, approaching the border is the most important thing. At the point when I cross the border between art and life—it is practically no longer a question of art."¹

In general, the primary opposition determining Kantor's theatre is that between "Illusion" and "Reality." It serves as a cornerstone of his performance, because, as Kantor recalls a hundred times, "Illusion," or the "false reality" of a story shown on stage and perceived by the audience as "true," cannot be totally eliminated. Kantor, moreover, does not want to eliminate it since the theatre means for him a place where the artist is always "playing with reality in order

to crush illusion."² The playing never ends, illusion is never crushed, and neither reality nor illusion triumph.

Such a vision of performance based on two opposing factors and composed of essentially different elements seems to be original and inspiring enough to become part of the "genetic code" of the theatre.

But there remains something more in Kantor's legacy. There remains an element which is essential to the struggle between reality and illusion: that is, Kantor, the artist-creator himself.

"The role I accomplish while being among actors during the performance, consists among other things, in controlling the borders of illusion. When I see that an actor 'overacts' that means when he leaves the plane of concrete reality. [. . .] I come up and stay by him. It is enough [to crush illusion] because I am a spectator not an actor. If someone was intelligent enough to talk to me (it happened sometimes that actors got furious and literally abused me. [. . .]) the results would be much better. Those were the best moments—to see actors playing and loosing illusion at once. The forgery was multiplied as if in mirror-like reflections, in infinite perspectives."³

Because he was "a spectator and not an actor," Kantor defined his presence among actors during the performance as "illegal," and he was well aware of the significance of such a decision. He also invaded the stage as a director who conducted the spectacle, controlling music and lighting, modulating the movements, gestures and expressions of actors.

Already this practice has inspired some directors, even those in distant places. At the Theatre Festival in Cairo last year, I watched a director who "conducted" his otherwise good performance, trying at times to provoke the audience. My English colleague pegged him at once: "Kantor from Bahrain. . . ." It is hard to say whether the essence of Kantor's role was present in the Bahraini director's behaviour. Only his "conducting" was clearly visible, but the active participation of a director in the performance itself may be an idiom linked solely to Kantor.

In my opinion, the "illegal" presence of the "director-creator" among actors during the performance is Kantor's own invention and practice, but it also has an aesthetic and semantic significance that makes it valuable and inspiring in a profound sense.

After waging his war with illusion on the border between the reality of life and the reality of art, Kantor concluded that he himself is the only veritable and concrete "Reality" in his performance. In *I Shall Never Return* (1988), he decided to abandon his "illegal" status and entered the stage as an integral element of the performance, as a "character" in the play. Later, in *Today Is My Birthday*, perhaps he meant to show another aspect of his already "legal" presence on stage through the confrontation between himself as the "Proprietor of the Room of Memory" and "His Self-portrait," played by Andrzej Wełmiński. Even if this interpretation may not be highly appreciated, I uphold my opinion that the

former, ambiguous presence of Kantor in the performance is of incomparable value, and remains the most intriguing and provocative part of his legacy.

What more? His idea of a self-made theatre is "*immortelle*" and his formula for "emotive constructivism," a bold and cynical declaration of a director who builds the machinery of his performance to play with spectators' emotions, to manipulate his audience—"il ne mourira pas." At last comes Kantor's definition of a "poor" and refined theatre, different yet similar to that of Grotowski's: "In *The Dead Class* there are some desks made of wood, black clothes, waxy faces and hands, and nothing more. Look at Velázquez's painting, there is only black there and the white faces of the *Infantas* and their white hands and perhaps a rose stuck in hair, and nothing else. I am sure that grandeur is inherent in limitation of means. I think that acting is the main element in the theatre; through acting I express all emotions I want to raise in spectators. . . ."⁴

And yet there is more.

Notes

1. This quote is from Tadeusz Kantor's speech: "My Way Towards the Theatre of Death," 1977. Also published in the English translation in the *International Theatre Yearbook*, Warsaw, 1978.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.