

Reflections on Kantor's Death

The demise of Tadeusz Kantor was something totally unexpected and, it seemed, unnatural, because this man of unbound energy was brimming with life, still developing his potential, with undiminished originality, both as a painter and as a man of theatre. Observing him, one had the impression of seeing a volcano, whose greatest eruptions were still to come.

Kantor was a man of paradoxes, and it is on paradoxes that his theatre was based. The first paradox was that he propped his productions with theoretical manifestos calling them a theatre of death, whereas in fact it was a theatre of life. A "life" not created through external effects, as was the case with his imitators, but through his inner vision. Kantor's theatre was evolved from painting but above all evoked the subconscious, reaching far into the past to embrace himself and his roots.

The second paradox was that Kantor appeared to be the most self-centred man one could imagine. Difficult to get on with, he offended people right, left, and centre. But in fact, he simply served his integral artistic vision and demanded that his actors and all the people around him, or coming in contact with him, served it too. But that vision implied immense compassion and understanding for others: for the departed world of *The Dead Class* or *Wielopole, Wielopole*, for *people*. He tried to express this first through the texts of others, mainly those of Witkiewicz, until he discovered the full scenario in himself.

Kantor did not need to write his memoirs; they were all within him, embracing his family, ancestors, the community which shaped him, in a wider sense—humanity. Those memoirs of the soul he expressed with such power of visual imagination that he became a great poet, composer of space, not only stage space, but psychic space as well, evoking the past, both through his innovative ideas projecting into the future.

In his own country, he was not readily understood. What seemed well into the seventies, a harmless eccentricity thrilled foreign spectators from those who filled the old poorhouse in Edinburgh, where Richard Demarco stubbornly put on Kantor's performances year after year, to the crowds in Paris, New York, London, and the world's other cities.

The world of art has suffered a great loss, with the departure of an artist in the full bloom of his creative powers, one of those who simply bypassed their calendar age. His art is irreplaceable.

Bolesław Taborski

Kantor

Where will you go now Ring Master?
 Back to the circus of classroom nightmare
 Where the dummies shuffle grimly
 In between the dusty desktops?
 What will you do now Creator
 Who once breathed life into the dead?
 What use will your wand be now Magician?
 Now that the magic has been dispelled?
 Will your restless soul return to haunt us?
 Return to haunt us Master.
 For without your iron fist your Midas hand
 We stand gaping mindless
 Like hollow withering stumps
 Blasted by war and time.
 Time to go Grand Master
 Dead Master School Master
 But return to haunt us
 And our children
 And our children's children
 Like the ghosts of war
 Like the dead children
 The dead sound of the machine
 The sickening clink of time.

Anna Taborska

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Birthday

to the memory of Tadeusz Kantor

threnody on a lone cello
 how sad the sound of a single string
 to mourn the unhumble noisy
 quarrelsome man who is celebrating

an untimely birthday an astonished opening
 with a red army star someone else's infant
 and death waiting not behind the barrels of
 grotesque little cannons but where your voice

is heard telling of a bizarre dream

nothing is strange in your whirling vortex
when you deafen us with that soviet march

and we in our soul hear a funeral march
superfluous here because you live and will never be
in the past tense—it's not your threnody

Bolesław Taborski
24.8.91

"The Dead Class"

into the past they've gone with their dummies
dragging behind them their murdered stumps
to transform them into rings of smoke
—and he stands there with his magic wand
beckons with a smile urges with a nod
to recreate the dance of automatons—
these poor masks are all mankind
in their comic grin they beg for compassion
and taking pity on their weakness
we stumble round the terrible stage
weighed down by the hump of subschool memories
for a small eternity which will soon turn us to ashes
and will not let the dead ghosts return
into the hall of carefully inflicted torments
so to breathe a human seed into us dummies
to search for life's meaning in the theatre of death

Bolesław Taborski
25.8.76



Fig. 9. Tadeusz Kantor's drawing: *Veit Stoss, tout court c'est moi!* Courtesy of Anna Halczak.