

Pompeii Effect: The Indelible Memory of Kantor

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There are remnants of memory more enduring than the dust of time. The remembrances of childhood are so remote, so muddled and vague. They do not, however, refrain from emerging again and again. So as not to sink into oblivion, they cling to more recent memories; they permit themselves to be embedded in metaphors.

Pompeii, August 1967. I am barely six years old when my mother takes me to Pompeii. Six years of childhood games, fantasies, of a life filled with love and caresses. Face to face with that ancient Roman civilization petrified by the Vesuvian lava, I experience my first 'metaphysical shock.' A strong emotion, sudden and violent, shakes my childish certainties and makes me look at the world in a new way, with a different consciousness. Death frightens me: I knew it from my grandmother's face, through my father's absence, but those petrified bodies, congealed in the final moments of life, are absolutely terrifying. They appear as Golems waiting for the divine breath. Yet, they are human beings imprisoned in a horrible shell that compels them to mimic life after death. I am only six, I cannot say these words. I just grasp my mother's hand.

Bologna, October 1984. A balustrade over the parterre depth, a cold hand-rail under my elbows, and upon me a strange feeling, disquieting, upsetting. I am standing on the lower balcony of the Duse Theatre as annihilated as I was such a long time ago, at the excavations. The title of the piece is *Wielopole, Wielopole*. For me, those ninety minutes are Pompeii effect smuggled into the theatre by a man dressed in black, more energetic than a volcano. Never leaving the stage, he directs without respite the actions and gestures of a strange platoon of 'dead-alives,' all intent on embodying the memories of his childhood. A distant childhood, faded, creased like a family photograph from which the beloved dead return, covered with dust, terrified, awkward, and untimely. Later there are objects, machinery, puppets, and dummies, irreverent doubles always ready to take the place of the actors, to steal their breath and their life. But, at the center of the play, it is he, the man in black intent on marking the intermittent and repetitive flow of his music of memory. Only several days later, at a conference, I discover that he who orchestrates this tragi-comic commerce with the afterlife stands on stage 'illegally,' as it were. He is not an actor, but the author and director of the play. His name is Kantor, Tadeusz Kantor.

Bologna, Waiting Time. "Polish artist born in 1915 in Wielopole. After completing his studies at the Fine Arts Academy in Kraków, he becomes a painter, scene designer, director, creator of *emballages* and happenings. In 1955, he founds the 'Cricot 2' Theatre. A rebellious soul, independent, decidedly non-conformist, he is one of those contemporary artists to whom the word 'avant garde' could be applied without misuse." Here is Monsieur Kantor, depicted by Denis Bablet in his introduction to *The Theatre of Death*, a collection of manifestos, theoretical writings, poetic commentaries, performance texts, interviews, and critical essays. I read it all in one sitting. I read it again, searching for the meaning of this Pompeii effect. Finally, I understand: Kantor has led me to discover the true theatre, a theatre both meaningful and disturbing because it is real, concrete, as vital as life itself. Simple like the memories of a child born in Poland in 1915: "The church was a kind of theatre. We attended Mass to watch the spectacle. For Christmas, we prepared the Nativity scene with its figurines and, at Easter, a Holy Sepulchre where real firemen stood with their gilded helmets. I imitated all that on a small scale. I confused the theatre with a train and a railroad station. With empty shoe-boxes, I constructed various scenes: each box formed a different scene. I linked the boxes together with a rope, as if they were wagons; then I made them pass through a large cardboard box with an opening (that could be described as a theatrical proscenium arch). This is how I got changes of scene. In my opinion, this has been my greatest achievement in theatre."

I am terribly excited by the book, but it contains only words, black ink on white pages. I must know Kantor himself.

Bari, May 1986. I rush to Petruzzelli Theatre, still dazed by my travels on the night train. I do not want to miss even a second of the 'kantoriana': a press conference, two exhibitions, films, videos; and above all the three 'death plays.' Kantor is in the foyer of the theatre, seated at a small table covered with notebooks the same color as his black suit. The actors of the Cricot 2, his interpreter, and theatre students from Italy, Poland, and France gather around him. The atmosphere is that of a literary café at the turn of the century. Kantor, speaking either Polish or an antiquated French, has a cordial demeanor, eyes of fire and a stubborn disposition—the disposition that compels him to the stage every evening, to control the gears and levers of his work, its gestures, movements, and rhythms. It is Kantor who breathes life into the spectacle, who creates for his actors a situation of perpetual risk, forcing their performance to be as vivid, vital, and vibrant as their debut. *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985), these productions have the freshness, energy, and intensity of works newly-born, or perhaps on the threshold of birth. For me, they are the triumph of the Pompeii effect, the renewal of that extreme attraction-repulsion for a world hovering between life and death, poised between the "garbage and eternity." And that intermediary wearing a black suit, always standing at the threshold to prevent the public from facing the performance

directly and, simultaneously, preventing them from clinging to their certainties. On the last evening, I shake his hand.

Milan, Excavations. I am so nervous that I feel paralysed, unable to breathe. I am in Kantor's "Room of Imagination," which has been moved for that occasion into the foyer of the Teatro Litta. I am in direct contact with Kantor's creative alchemy. It is 1987. Kantor and the Italian branch of the Cricot 2 are preparing *Machine of Love and Death*, a cricotage for actors, objects, puppets, sculptures, and machines. Just a few steps away is a small wooden table, *his table*, covered with notes, drawings, sketches, many empty coffee cups, an ashtray filled with stubs, cigarettes, lit two at a time. I do not feel as if I am at the rehearsals of a play but, rather, as if I were in a workshop cluttered with materials, objects found here and there, sketches for costumes, music undergoing a perpetual modulation. Kantor knows what he is aiming for, but he gives no hints. The objects accumulate, sounds and rhythms intertwine, the actors put Kantor's suggestions to good use and produce a continuous flow of actions, exchanges, and movements. Kantor is extremely alert, very amused, almost like a child watching a big mechanical toy. Then, suddenly, something strikes him. Only then does Kantor begin to elaborate space and matter, to isolate the dramatic knots, to indicate the points of tension in the work. Yet 'the garbage of the past' continues to emerge, claiming again and again its right of citizenship within the new work, creating disorder till the end.

Sometimes after rehearsal we go 'au café': the place where we can chat about the play and, above all, the place where we can listen to Kantor's anecdotes. Only seldom do the actors join us, while there is a whole swarm of students, friends, and 'aficionados.' Kantor sips yet another cup of coffee, lights yet another cigarette. With self-irony, he tells stories from his life and listens with curiosity to the tales of others.

As the opening night approaches, however, he grows irritable and impatient with any opinion whatsoever. He becomes agitated by the presence of other people. He yells at the actors, leaves the theatre, then he returns to continue the work. The work is his alone.

Milan, April 1988. Memories of memories, indelible, overwhelming, truer than life itself. This time, in the Piccolo Teatro Studio, Kantor puts on stage not only the remembrances of his "individual life" but the characters, the objects, and the emotions that he encountered during his artistic journey. He invites the ghosts of his family and those strange, disquieting characters from his plays to a shabby tavern, half-way between a brothel and a graveyard, to preserve from oblivion all he cannot forget. This is a personal confession, a kind of posthumous autobiography, in which he appears not as the 'fortress guard,' but rather as his real self, or, more precisely, as a personage of his imagination, an object of his memory. The title is a commitment and an omen: *I Shall Never Return*.

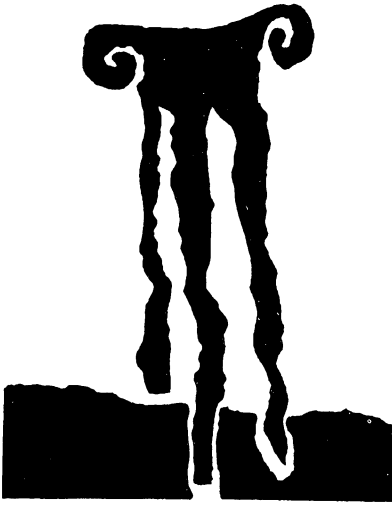
During rehearsals, I am struck by the exuberance with which Kantor digs his bare hands into himself, exhuming fragments of his life and art. He enjoys travelling his long existence back and forth, superimposing memories, mixing situations, persons, and characters. But I feel anguish when I see those sinister figures coming to life then petrifying, fading like intermittent bursts of light. I press myself against the wall of the small and narrow rehearsal hall so as not to be swept away by those messengers of death. They have returned from another world, restlessly flowing in and out of the memory of the uncontrollable Master. And I get a lump in my throat when he walks across the stage with that long, black coffin under his arm: his "last emballage," his final pass into the "next world."

Charleville-Mezieres, August 1988. By now, I am on rather intimate terms with Kantor. Sometimes we spend hours at the café talking about theatre, art, and life. It is an even exchange that never becomes an indoctrination or a blind acceptance of Kantor's point of view. Here, in the town where Rimbaud was born, our dialogue delves deeper, becomes more natural, spontaneous, and frequent. The atmosphere is right. Kantor is creating a new work at the Institut International de la Marionette, attended by about twenty artists, more or less young, from all over the world. I am one of the few privileged observers. Actors, directors, dancers, painters, and sculptors have come to discover the secrets of the Polish genius. Yet, he provides no recipes. He will not divorce theory from practice. In a matter of days, he will transform these artists into a new group of wandering actors. He begins to create a 'cricotage.' Its title will be *A Very Short Lesson*, not to disappoint the group's pedagogical expectations. The atmosphere is intense. We work together all day long, and the contagion spreads. Kantor creates a new chapter of his 'unfinished tale' in less than a month, with people he had never met before, with few explanations, aided only by sittings "*au café*." That short performance has all the charm and harmony of the masterpieces of Cricot 2. Kantor, as usual, strove for the impossible, and "when one strives for the impossible, one always gets a result."

Venice, July 1991. I am at another 'kantoriana,' a six-day long celebration organized by the Venice Biennale. Like the other participants, I am here to pursue a phantom, to traverse Kantor's '*voies de la création théâtrale*' illegally. My heart is filled with sorrow and anger. Kantor died last year in Kraków, after having written his artistic will on stage: *Today Is My Birthday*. The premiere occurred without him. Prophetically, he has organized his absence and the abrupt end of his work. He even wrote in the Program: "Suddenly, everything is frozen in a final, unfinished gesture that will never be completed." Precisely, there is no completion. When I watched the show in Milan in May, it appeared to me somewhat like *The Last Days of Pompeii*, extremely painful. But now, for all my brooding, I realize that the play is Kantor's usual 'circus,' full of irony, light, and vitality. The "Grandfather" succeeded in playing with death till the end. Perhaps

he left before death's coming by, taking his 'things' with him into a different hereafter, the one beyond the double doors of Wielopole.

Bologna, Eternity. Here we are, alone, still, and helpless, face to face with that threshold we may not cross. Through Kantor's art, we learned to court death, to suffer the intrusive charms of eternity. However, the "hour of victory" is not yet upon us: the "next world" will be a bitter prize attained only at the end. We must continue our journey, continue "believing, creating, and fighting." Kantor taught us this lesson. Through the cracks in those old, unhinged double doors, he keeps his eye on us, his fiery stare at 'this world.'



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