

## Tadeusz Kantor's Artistic Theatre

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When I first came into contact with Tadeusz Kantor and the Cricot 2 Theatre in 1979, as a young man just out of secondary school, I hardly suspected that my flirtation with the theatre would last twelve years and so radically change my interests and fascinations.

My understanding of theatre had until then been confined to traditional, institutional examples. I had never been particularly attracted to the magic of the stage and what happened there. I preferred the cinema, with its greater technical potential.

Above all, I was interested in the works of art where the spirit of the epoch expressed itself. Wrapped in an aura of mystery and hidden behind a screen of symbols and history, they liberated the imagination and encouraged recognition. The architecture, sculpture, and painting of Florence, Vienna, or Kraków had always spoken to me more directly than even the best costume drama. I also assumed that contemporary painting and contemporary theatre were two diametrically opposed artistic disciplines, drawing on completely different sources of inspiration. After all, modern painting had already negated all its important ingredients. Ha! Conceptualism had renounced visual realization itself! Could theatre go that far? Could it renounce actors and the audience? I had never seen any of Kantor's productions. I had read in the Polish press about how unusual they were, but these were generalities and empty phrases. That is why, when I found myself in the Cricot 2 troupe rehearsing the Florence production of *Wielopole, Wielopole*, all my preconceived notions about the theatre were demolished. Hypnotized by Kantor's style of rehearsing, and afterwards by his presentations, I began poring over his manifestos and statements about art and the theatre. Later, in order to know the issues in contemporary painting better, I began to study art history at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

Although my article takes the form of a memoir, I do not want it to be a description of my impressions of working in the Cricot 2 Theatre, or a comparison with other companies whose work I had seen at major festivals. I want to concentrate above all on showing the "methods" of Kantor's work (methods that are impossible to teach or apply mechanically) and his concept of the "artistic theatre."

When he was beginning work on the production of *Wielopole, Wielopole* in 1979, Kantor formulated the "Artistic Conditions for the Participation of Actors in the Florentine Program of the Cricot 2 Theatre." In the form of a letter-manifesto sent to the actors, the document indicates with extraordinary precision the "methods" and procedures of this great magus of the theatre. As the first condition, Kantor set for the actors a system of disinterested and spontaneous work that he defined as follows: "The system of *disinterested and spontaneous*

*work* has been the basic idea of the structure of the Cricot 2 theatre since its inception. It was the principal factor facilitating and conditioning the realization of the boldest and most radical ideas, a risky and 'impossible' solution that was an ideal barrier protecting the theatre from officialdom and institutionality. In short: it has been the condition of authentic creativity and a high working intensity."<sup>1</sup>

He went on to explain: "The goal and essence of the system of disinterested and spontaneous work is the *internal need* for artistic expression, which in the activities of the Cricot 2 theatre is multiplied by *the consciousness of the ambition of changing the face of the theatre and of art*. [ . . . ] Ideally, the system of disinterested and spontaneous artistic work should be the result of *an inborn gift*, which nevertheless remains meaningless and ineffective if the artist cannot form and develop it—through unceasing, constant involvement in a certain kind of exercise that depends not on artificial practice, which is pure sleight-of-hand, but on the acceptance of a *way of life* in discipline dictated and determined by creative work—*throughout the whole period that the actor is working on the production*."<sup>2</sup>

In the next part of the letter-manifesto, Kantor specified the resulting consequences and principles of behavior:

THE ACTOR'S CREATIVITY IS NOT LIMITED TO REHEARSALS AND DOES NOT END WITH REHEARSALS! Rehearsal is only a practical condensation of the actor's behavior. [ . . . ] THE HEATED ATMOSPHERE CREATED DURING A REHEARSAL CANNOT BE EXTINGUISHED WHEN THE REHEARSAL ENDS. IT MUST BE CONTINUED AFTERWARDS. THE CREATIVE RHYTHM IS UNBROKEN. IT DEMANDS THE TOTAL, UNRESERVED PERMANENT INVOLVEMENT OF THE THOUGHTS, WILL AND IMAGINATION OF THE ACTOR. [ . . . ]

States of 'attractive' relaxation of a personal type, the dispersal of thoughts and attention on banal and silly matters break up the rhythm of work in a catastrophic way.

THE TIME OF CREATIVITY AND THE TIME OF WORK MUST BE REGULATED NOT BY THEATRICAL CONVENTION OR TRADE UNION RULES, BUT BY THE RHYTHMS AND PULSATIONS OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS! Behavior in a contrary spirit, frequently encountered, unceremoniously and barbarously destroys the working atmosphere. [ . . . ]

The actor's involvement applies not only to his own role, but to the whole of the production, to all the plans and the whole 'territory' of the theatre. Attitudes by actors of the type: "Let the wardrobe master,

stage manager, tailor or director worry about the rest" are hideous customs accepted in commercial theatres. IN THE ARTISTIC THEATRE, THERE IS NO DIVISION OF WORK AND RESPONSIBILITY!<sup>3</sup>

Kantor formulated the scope of his responsibilities towards the actors as follows:

I make the choice of actors answering the demands of the conditions formulated in the foregoing contract:

—my principal obligation is *work with the actors*

—together with the actors, I take responsibility for maintaining in force all of the artistic assumptions, principles of procedure, and fulfilling the agreements contained in the contract.

On the other hand, I will not be able to concern myself with any kind of affairs lying outside the field of artistic actions.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Kantor avoided any more precise specification of who has the right to join the Cricot 2 troupe, or of the schools or institutions of higher education whose diplomas entitle a graduate to take part in rehearsals. Of the choice of actors, he wrote: "In a conventional theatre, the director chooses the actors on the basis of (1) the existing permanent troupe of the theatre, (2) a given play, and (3) a given role. The working structure of the Cricot 2 theatre does not allow for these helpful features. The sketched-out IDEA of a production does not provide sufficient hints and criteria in this regard. I am thrown back upon INSTINCT, an exceptionally sensitive apparatus which, in order to work accurately, cannot be subject to any external suggestions or pressures. For this reason: I MUST POSSESS COMPLETE FREEDOM IN THE PROCESS OF SELECTING AND ENGAGING ACTORS FOR A NEW PRODUCTION."<sup>5</sup>

He went on to write somewhat more precisely about the choice of actors, specifying the process through which a production is created:

A new PRODUCTION is also a new STAGE in the development of the Cricot 2 Theatre. It is a STAGE enmeshed in the general, current problems of art. For me, the creation of a performance is simultaneously the definition of these problems, and arriving at a correct answer to them. That is why the work of the actors who are members of the troupe is not exclusively a matter purely of acting. [The actor] is engaged in general, significant problems in current art. This is why: THE CHOICE OF ACTORS IS DETERMINED EITHER BY THE ARTISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS THAT THEY HAVE ALREADY ACQUIRED, OR BY THEIR READINESS FOR FULL INVOLVEMENT IN THE VICISSITUDES. NOT: BY A NARROWLY-CONCEIVED ACTOR'S CRAFT, BUT BY THE

WHOLE OF CURRENT ART. THIS IS THE SPECIFIC QUALITY OF THE CRICOT 2 THEATRE. AND IT IS THE CONDITION FOR THE CHOICE OF ITS ACTORS. [. . .]

The process of creating the troupe is parallel in time with the creation of the production. My method for forming the production is very loose. In the first phase, the CLIMATE, SPACE, SURROUNDINGS and IDEAS emerge. Only in the next stages do ROLES and the COURSE OF ACTION become precise. In the final phase: EDITING and LINKS.

THE CHOICE OF ACTORS IS MADE NOT ACCORDING TO THE NATURE OF THE ROLE, BECAUSE THIS DOES NOT YET EXIST, BUT ACCORDING TO THE GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE CONCEPTION OF THE PRODUCTION, ABOVE ALL, HOWEVER, ACCORDING TO THE DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT AND PURELY ARTISTIC SPONTANEOUS RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY OF THE CRICOT 2 THEATRE, AND TRUST IN MY METHOD OF WORK.<sup>6</sup>

Kantor concluded his artistic "contract" with the actors by making several remarks on the nature of the work, writing:

I firmly reject the restrictive conventions of the professional theatre, which have become so natural that it never even occurs to us to question them, which demand that the entire process of creation proper, in other words rehearsal with the actors, serves exclusively for the *manufacture* of productions. This habit, born in the factory-theatre-institution, reduces the whole work of the theatre to practical procedures serving the requirements of only one goal, the premiere performance. Despite the fact that, as we are assured, the goal is the work of art (the performance), the creative process itself ceases to be spontaneous and disinterested; it becomes a practical procedure.

This convention avoids everything that it cannot justify or explain in terms of practical results, that seems absurd, naive, leading 'nowhere,' 'for its own sake,' that reaches into the farther regions of the imagination. In my conception of the theatre, I am more concerned with creating a broad platform for the things I do, which might lead to the discovery of new theatrical forms. I am less concerned with immediate, 'short-term' means of preparing premieres. The performance should result from such wide plans and ambitions.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that Kantor's formulation of the conditions for the participation of actors in the Florentine Program also explains both the way that he prepared

productions and his method of work in which the main emphasis was placed on something completely different from acting ability. Therefore, when I obtained this unusual "contract," I began to ask myself: Why is it so important for Kantor to engage his actors in the problems of contemporary art? Has the spirit of painting triumphed over the spirit of theatre in him? How does he understand theatre? How does he understand a painting? When did he come up with the idea of the artistic theatre? And, finally, which ideas and trends in contemporary art inspire his work?

To give an exhaustive answer to these questions, it will be necessary to go back many years. I will not, however, describe here the beginnings of Kantor's work in the theatre or in painting, or the development of the idea of the Cricot 2 (the reader can find this information in the source materials). Nor is it my intention to answer the foregoing questions. I wish only to call attention to a little-known, yet important sphere of his interests, that is, Kantor's familiarity with art criticism.

When the *Grupa Krakowska* (Kraków Group) Artists' Association, to which Kantor belonged, was given premises in the Krzysztofory cellars, Kantor justified the choice as follows: "It seems to me that the only future for Kraków is the combination of old landmarks with the ultra-modern, as the Italians now do it with outstanding bravura. That bravura is also a kind of tactfulness. And the Italians have a not inconsiderable ballast of history to deal with. Thus we have the permanent but always changing exhibit of contemporary art in the cellars of the Krzysztofory, as well as the modern theatre with 140 seats, as well as the café and the dance floor. Whether this will lead to the formation of a *bohème* ('nothing new, sir, please'), the sort of environment so necessary to artistic life—time will tell. A very simple conception. We introduce modern equipment and modern ideas into an old interior with several hundred years of history and splendid barrel-vaulting, like yeast dough into an old oven. Let it rise."<sup>8</sup>

And although the Cricot 2 theatre had started earlier, in the Painters' House on Łobzowska Street, it was only in the Krzysztofory with its atmosphere of the authentic artistic *bohème* that Kantor created his own artistic theatre, inspired by current trends in art. If we analyze the Cricot 2 Krzysztofory productions, we find many threads linking them to Kantor's clandestine Independent Theatre of the 1940s. But it is also easy to see that the successive stages of development—the Informel, Zero, Happening and Impossible Theatres that accompanied Kantor's manifestos of the same titles—referred clearly to new tendencies in painting.

It is worth taking a somewhat wider look at the position of art in Poland in those years. Thus, after the "night of Stalinism," when socialist realism had been the only officially-sanctioned form of art, there was a certain liberalization in 1956. While harsh censorship and a ban on any criticism of the ruling party still existed, certain independent forms of artistic activity were nevertheless permitted. Tadeusz Kantor had "survived" the socialist-realism period by working as a stage designer in professional theatres and took no part in official artistic life. His pictures, treated as examples of borrowing from degenerate Western art, were

rejected by gallery selection committees as incomprehensible to "the working people of cities and villages."

This is why Kantor spoke out so strongly on the need for artistic freedom in 1955. Later, he wrote in a newspaper article that "there must be something fascinating and irreplaceable in this word 'freedom,' something ultimate that answers to the absolute values of art. Freedom is a very high-sounding concept, but it also has the most intimate of senses, it is the most profound possession of the artist and a great privilege of society. The history of culture, with its summits and its depths, is written along the two axes of intolerance and freedom. The destruction of the delicate tissue of artistic freedom has fatal and irreversible effects on the culture of a society. Twentieth-century art, modern art, has elevated artistic freedom to the highest rank of human affairs."<sup>9</sup>

To return from this digression to my theme, already in the 1940s, Kantor had defined his attitude towards art as an elementary need. At first he referred to painting when he wrote in a newspaper: "The fundamental attitude to art does not depend on knowledge about it, but on feeling a need for it. One more term exists: feeling art. These terms are not unambiguous. We know very well that knowledge can be limited to a sterile cataloguing and classifying of works of art. Feeling is sometimes a variety of psychoses or various hysterias of a religious, nationalist or erotic calibre. Yet the spontaneous need to create art and live alongside it, the sort of natural human desire to add something to reality, is the one important fact and it alone can lead to living, contemporary painting. Under the influence of various conditions, this need either develops or disappears, in individuals, ethnic groups, or periods. It prevails on every level of culture. On it alone depends the appearance and development of art."<sup>10</sup>

It was therefore natural for Kantor to regard the theatre as art. He expressed this most clearly and succinctly when he wrote in the *Teatr Niemożliwy* (Impossible Theatre) manifesto of 1972 that: "*Theatre is, above all, art.* If we examine its development, we cannot confine ourselves to the purely professional domain and search there for the 'purity' and specificity of the theatre. This always leads to particular and dubious experiences. It is necessary to go 'beyond' the theatre, not in order to create some sort of 'anti-theatre,' but to *encounter the art as a whole*, in the general current of ideas."<sup>11</sup>

How did Kantor view the mechanism of the development of art? What was his attitude towards the theatre? Is it accurate to call the Cricot 2 a "painter's theatre"? It was certainly not a painter's theatre in the usual meaning of the word. Kantor did not shape a theatre based on the associations of sounds and movements, creating "living pictures" that emerged from the play of colors, light, and shadow. Nor did he introduce formal painterly techniques on stage. He thought that theatre and painting were separate artistic disciplines linked by the mechanism of creation.

He understood art as a process of unceasing revolution, of permanent protest, and of perpetual turmoil. In this sense, each rehearsal and each performance was the realization of the artistic act—comparable to painting a

picture. In 1956, he wrote: "No one can convince me that the cathedrals in Amiens or Beavais are humble prayers. If we are to use the vocabulary of their time, they are satanic protests. Creativity that begins at a high intensity is always a protest. The artist absorbs nature and everything that happens and lives around him, but he also protests against that nature. From protests are born life and man, the thinking being, with his vertical backbone opposed to the worn-out customs of nature—he is most clearly protesting."<sup>12</sup>

Writing about Kantor's work, we cannot neglect the unique role that he played in Polish modern art. The quick acceptance of his painting in Paris led to invitations to France and the United States. During the 1960s, he participated in the birth of new trends in European and world art. He was also an unusually receptive artist. After each of his journeys abroad, he organized a meeting of artists in the Krzysztofory, where he shared his knowledge and reflections. It was only thanks to Kantor that many painters and sculptors could keep up with international trends in art. He was aware of the difficult situation of independent Polish artists, many of whom could not travel abroad, for political reasons or for a simple lack of money. So he took copious notes, like this description of Claes Oldenberg's *Indian* happening, which I quote in its entirety:

The audience gathers in the lobby of the museum. An Indian appears with a long rope. People take hold of the rope, forming a sort of procession, and the lights in the lobby are turned off. The procession with the rope goes out. Outside, they find: a garage, a shed, a house. In the house are rooms: a living room, dining room, bedroom, hallway, bathroom, toilet, porch; beyond this is the yard, and the roof of the shed, cars, windows, doors. The people holding the line experience the house inside and out by walking through it several times—a succession of actions—boxes and packages fall from the garage roof. The headlights of the parked cars shine on this strange procession, people are moving in bags—a form sways on the veranda, perhaps a hanged man, and voices are heard in conversation. Something that cannot be seen is happening in the garage, perhaps a murder, perhaps the sounds of the birth of a colt. Legs stick out of the roof of the shed and human bodies lie in the yard. Various strange objects fall from the window, and from inside the house come laughter, crying, the sound of a radio. The procession goes inside. They move very slowly, as if they were feeling their way, as if they were examining an alien and strange terrain. The people move this way through the rooms, the hallway, the kitchen and the bathroom. They return. Every so often, the lights go out. Someone pounds on the windows, and some sort of singing is heard clearly from some of the rooms. A door is closed. Someone is knocking from behind it. The door opens. In the bedroom, a man covered with bricks is lying on the bed. In the bathroom, another man is using toilet paper to smear mud on the walls. A girl lies on the

kitchen table under a pile of old clothes and rags. Somewhere else a man leans over, working hard on something—but the point of his work is unfathomable. A woman is dancing in the dining room. In the hallway, a man is making movements that are clearly monkey-like. A girl lies on the hay in the shed, while a man patiently and industriously turns in circles next to her. People go out and come in. The movement in the house increases. Someone pounds on a window. A black Cadillac drives up. There is gunfire. A body is thrown out, and someone is running. In the end, the museum lobby again. The neighbors are anxiously calling the police, who arrive with sirens blaring to become one more object. The pounding on the window has also evoked the added effect of breaking glass.<sup>13</sup>

These descriptions were accompanied by Kantor's remarks and analysis, for which I will quote these short fragments: "There is much false information concerning happenings. They are compared to plays without scripts or texts. It is said that they have no plans, control, aim or rehearsals. The reason for this is that there are few people who can give first-hand information. The audiences at happenings number 50-100 people. Happenings are rarely repeated. [. . .] Happenings have many common elements, for example rawness, a roughness of texture, objects are not made but taken in a raw state from the surroundings. [. . .] The verbal element exists but it is applied in a different way than usual, and in general does not have a decisive meaning."<sup>14</sup>

After each lecture there was a discussion, which enabled the gathered artists and art historians to learn more about the work of artists like Judd, Rauschenberg, Pollock, Dine, and Beuys, and to become familiar with issues in the new realism, happenings, or pop-art. Kantor's talent for communicating with his audience, the esteem he enjoyed as a painter, and his ability to see the problems of art as a synthesis twice inspired the Kraków Fine Arts Academy to make a teacher of him. Both times, he was dismissed after a year of "academic" lessons. He was incapable of being a pedantic lecturer or of subjugating himself to rectors and ministers. But there was another reason—the hostile opinions held about him by some "artist-professors." In many parts of the Polish art world, communist-Stalinist indoctrination had been effective. Accepting a subordinate position within prevailing ideological structures, the party's critics and artists were incapable of appreciating the worth of international modern art. Thus, they attacked Kantor and his theatre, charging that their productions (enthusiastically received by young audiences) were not the result of "natural development," that they were not a part of "national art," but were rather "cosmopolitan," accepting the results of foreign developments and experiences. Kantor replied to these charges in an interview: "The development of art is by nature uncontrollable, and it cannot be lined up on one string or reduced to some sort of scholastic order. Reactions occur very quickly, oppositions spring up alongside each other, they combine, extend, one sinks and another rises to the surface. All this creates the

impression of chaos and exuberant growth, but this is the nature of living creativity. Only time brings a hierarchy and classification. But by then, it is already history. Let us recall only the post-war period. At almost the same time that Picasso was reaching the peak of his deformed expressionism, surrealism was triumphing at the scandalous 1947 exhibition, geometrical abstraction was creating an unyielding formal rigor that was supposed to subsume the whole world, and the lyrical abstraction of Wols was being born, and Fautrier's material, and the spontaneism of Mathieu and Pollock. Some problems became unattractive, others surfaced and gained acceptance, mad careers mixed with fanatical work, and sometimes with poverty or a tragic ending. Despite accusations about the mercantilism of new art, I am certain that today it is the same. We simply do not yet have all the data. There must be influences in such a monstrous cauldron. There must even be a basic fermentation. The fact that it is not feared allows individualities to crystallize rapidly. And this is not only in France. The French have a large influence on the Italians, and vice-versa. It's the same in America, Japan, and, most recently, Spain. It seems to me that the fear of influences leads to psychological complexes, which in turn produce weakness."<sup>15</sup>

These statements indicate the importance Kantor attached to the problems of art as an immediate, ongoing concern of his actors. The statements also suggest why so many painters, critics, and art historians were associated with the Cricot 2 troupe. To conclude my reflections, I will raise one final question: Did the perception of Kantor's theatre by the audience correspond to his own assumptions? Again, I rely on a quotation, the words of the *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow. When the Cricot 2 troupe performed *Umarła klasa* (The Dead Class) in New York in 1991, just after Kantor's death—and therefore without the presence of the Master on stage—Gussow wrote in his review: "His presence added an immeasurable dimension to the theatrical experience. It was almost as if we were looking at *Guernica* while Picasso was painting it."<sup>16</sup>

Kraków, April 6, 1995

## Notes

1. Tadeusz Kantor, *ARTYSTYCZNE WARUNKI UDZIAŁU AKTORÓW W PROGRAMIE FLORENCKIM TEATRU CRICOT 2* (Artistic Conditions for the Participation of Actors in the Florentine Program of the Cricot 2 Theatre), 1979.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Kantor, "Krzysztofory," *Zdarzenia* 13 (August 4, 1957).

9. Kantor, *Jak pojmuję* (As I See It) 141.

10. Kantor, "Po prostu sztuka" (Simply Art), *Dziennik Literackie* 22 (65), 1948, 3.
11. Kantor, *Teatr Niemożliwy* (The Impossible Theatre), Gniezno, 1974.
12. Kantor, "Z pracowni plastyków" (From the Painters' Studios), *Życie Literackie* (September 30, 1956).
13. Kantor, "Happening," ms.
14. Ibid.
15. Jerzy Madeyski, "Czy nowa awangarda? Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Kantorem" (Is There a New Avant-Garde? A Conversation with Tadeusz Kantor), *Życie Literackie* (November 1, 1959).
16. Mel Gussow, "Tadeusz Kantor's Troupe Carries On," *The New York Times* (June 14, 1991).