

The Diaries, February 1 - December 8, 1990

Wacław Janicki

I started keeping this journal in Florence, where Kantor was staging *Wielopole, Wielopole* with Italian actors and the CRICOT 2 group in 1969.

The last entry is from December 8, 1990.

That was the day Kantor died.

The fragments of my diary that I would like to share with you come from the period when Kantor was working on his last production, *Today Is My Birthday*.

Kraków Thursday, February 1, 1990
From today on we will continue rehearsals in the Krzysztofory of a new production we began in the Cricoteka. Last year we met with Tadeusz in the cellars of the Cricoteka several times. Tadeusz was rehearsing the first scene of *Today Is My Birthday*. From January 23 to 28 we performed *I Shall Never Return* in the Stary Theatre. It played well and the house was full, but there were no reviews. Today there is a note in *Gazeta Wyborcza* that ends with the phrase, "a forced success." We're not letting it bother us. We're putting on a new production. The theme is a birthday or a saint's day. Tadeusz showed us his old family photographs. In the photo, the father sits at the table, the mother pours a glass of wine from a carafe, Kantor sits to the left with his uncle behind him, and there is a priest behind the uncle. Andrzej Wełmiński plays the part of Kantor. Here is how the situation will look: Kantor speaks to the audience at the beginning and then exits. A moment later Wełmiński, dressed as the Master, takes his place. That is the scene we rehearsed today. Kantor was satisfied.

February 20, 1990
The Master was in top form today. Rehearsal at 11. Kantor walks in and looks at the group crowded around two tables. He clearly doesn't like what he sees. Upset, he starts arranging the scene. "Do something, please!! It can't go on like this!! For God's sake!!" He is shouting. We get to hear that expression of his that we know so well: "I'm begging you!!" And he starts setting up the tables. The room is rectangular, seventeen meters by seven. A beautiful Gothic cellar with a vaulted ceiling. We place three tables on one side and some other tables opposite. Tadeusz decides how many. He says, "No more than two people per table!!" He explains, "At Maurycy's [a famous turn-of-the-century café on the Kraków Market Square] there were never more than two people at a table." Then he notices a loudspeaker in the corner. "Get that out of here!!" he orders, threatening "to introduce a reign of terror." Then he starts arranging the entrance to the rehearsal space. The area has to be screened off so that people coming

into the café do not see what is going on. A bar, coffee, drinks, and so forth also need to be provided. We set up the lights. Tone it down here, brighten it there, place the microphones. Tomorrow there will be lamps on the tables, since we are going to be writing. After an hour of hard work, Tadeusz begins the rehearsal. Ewa Janicka will play Jaremianka (a friend of Kantor's and a painter from the group of artists that founded the first CRICOT), Zbigniew Gostomski will play Janusz Stern (a painter and member of the Kraków Group, whose headquarters are here at the Krzysztofory). There is a text on tape: Stern describes how he survived being shot by the Germans. He stood on the edge of a ravine with a large group of Jews. After a salvo that missed him, he jumped. He managed to escape under the cover of night. Kantor himself writes the text for Ewa, who plays Jaremianka. There are no surviving tapes with the voice of Maria Jarema. Jonasz Stern's description of how he saved himself, spoken in an indistinct voice and accompanied by Zbyszek's [Zbigniew] slightly mad acting, comes out "a little sarcastic," as the Master himself observes. Leszek [Janicki] and I will play the character of the Father. As Kantor remembers it, his father had strange moments, speaking to himself as if he were seeing himself face to face. Besides the theme of the birthday or saint's day based on Kantor's old family photographs, there are also many props. Hay-stuffed mattresses, blankets, a tank, a cannon, a lectern.

Saturday, February 3, 1990

The first quarrel. The reason: an article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* which says that the Master is repeating himself. The author argues that Kantor, tired and old, is saying farewell to the actors and audience. And then there is that fragment, already noted, about a "forced success." Tadeusz condemns the author of the article, and he has a few unkind things to say on the subject of politicians. Only Wałęsa and Mazowiecki are intelligent. "Mazowiecki is an extraordinary character among world leaders," says Tadeusz. "Have you ever seen a prime minister, here in Europe or anywhere, with such a poetic face?!" You have to admit that the faces of Kantor and Mazowiecki are vaguely similar. We go back to rehearsing. How are the two of us supposed to play one Marian Kantor? What will the poor girl, played by Marie Vayssière, be like? And Ewa as Jaremianka? More and more questions.

Monday, February 5, 1990

More searching. More vagueness. Andrzej Wełmiński as Kantor is still a puzzle.

Monday, February 12, 1990

We rehearse from the beginning. We are lying under blankets. Kantor delivers his tirade about the poor girl sitting on the threshold "all gray from poverty." Marie, who plays the girl, should interrupt his text. Then Ludka (Ludmiła Ryba) enters, carrying a plank. She lays it down to form a table and says, "Today is your birthday. You are 75." Kantor stalks off in a fury, and then Andrzej

appears immediately, imitating Kantor. We eventually get to our scene. The performance is still a long way from being interesting. All the more so since Kantor has his double in the person of Andrzej. Our text has not been finalized, but it's along the lines of "Where is my face? Someone has taken my face." Kantor tell us, "You have to learn the text by heart! Unless you've got some brilliant ideas of your own!" He shouts at us and we can tell that it's not very good yet, but he doesn't give us much of a chance to make suggestions. Why he behaves that way is still hard to understand, but everything will become clear eventually.

Tuesday, February 13, 1990

The day begins with a rage. The floor has been washed, but the janitor was drunk. He hadn't noticed that whitewash was in his bucket of water, and then he started mopping. The cement floor is now covered with grey spots. Kantor starts screaming and then runs out. He returns an hour later. He says it will be necessary to call the mayor and send a letter to Izabela Cywińska, the Minister of Culture. A letter to describe the state of our theatre. Other addressees are named. Prime Minister Mazowiecki, President Wałęsa. "Polish culture is being ruined by this situation. I will denounce these men before the eyes of the world!! I have my prestige and they will never travel abroad again." Then we begin rehearsal. Kantor says, "What we've done so far is worthless! It can't be used!! This is not the reality we want." Kantor brings picture frames on stage. They are two meters by three and the actors will create pictures in them. I rehearse a scene with Andrzej. Kantor, as a painter, is sitting at a table. Andrzej sits in the frame to create a self-portrait. Kantor wants to give his character a different, more attractive look. This rehearsal is important; we have touched bottom. Now we might be able to go in the right direction.

Wednesday, February 14, 1990

Before rehearsal, there was an experiment with the cannon. It smoked after being fired. Kantor is enraged. This time the targets are the technicians and the administration, which is irresponsible, destructive, criminal. Roland Rappaport listens. He is an attorney associated with the CRICOT 2 Theatrelovers' Association and is visiting from Paris. Kantor asks Andrzej Sapija, who is making a documentary film about our rehearsals, for his opinion. He does not answer. On the other hand, the production manager of the film promises to be there first thing next morning to guard the set. Kantor and Andrzej are playing doubles. We suggest that only one is on stage, but he is played by two actors. This has never been done before in the Cricot. Today Kantor accepts our suggestion. We are satisfied. This is the only solution for the scene in which Andrzej becomes Kantor's self-portrait.

More than half a year passes before we resume rehearsals for *Today Is My Birthday*. Now the rehearsals will take place in the Garonne Theatre in Toulouse.

We arrived on September 16.

Toulouse

Thursday, September 20, 1990

Andrzej and Kantor take turns playing the role of the Master. This is something new for the CRICOT. Dressed like Kantor, Andrzej sits in a two-meter by three-meter picture frame as Kantor's self-portrait. Then he exits the picture and takes Kantor's place. Then Marie enters. Unfortunately, she does not yet feel the subtlety that Kantor wants in her character. At this point, the rehearsal comes to a stop. That afternoon, the scene with Marie continues. Kantor tries to direct Marie for the effect he wants, a girl "gray with poverty," sad, tragic, quiet, enigmatic, weak, fragile. Marie is not yet able to enter those "regions." Other scenes and characters are already taking shape: the people lying in the straw mattresses, the family at the table, the entrance of the paperboy, and the so-called "Organs of Authority" (the belt, the tank, the cannon). Rehearsal lasts two hours. Kantor does not have the strength to work longer.

Monday, September 24, 1990

There are reports that on Sunday afternoon Kantor stopped taking phone calls. It started when he told Lila Krasicka over the phone: "my stomach ulcer has started acting up again." Piotr Chybiński, the director of PAGART (the Polish Artistic Agency), the theatre manager Jacqui Ohayon, Ludka and Marie were immediately informed. Ohayon called the doctor who treated Kantor two years ago. The latter interrupted his weekend and waited for an hour, only to be told that Kantor did not wish to see him on Sunday, but rather the next day. When Marie called him, he hung up on her. He had never done that to Marie before. At rehearsal Ewa played Maria Jarema and Zbyszek played Jonasz Stern. The texts were established. Ewa is developing her character. There are three themes—space, abstraction, and thought—around which Jarema's ideas will be grouped. She will talk about abstraction while describing the picture of Velásquez's *Infanta*. At the end, Ewa sits on a box and delivers high-sounding slogans on the themes of space and thought. Then Zbyszek as Jonasz Stern comes out of the box. Stern's monologue plays from the loudspeaker and Zbyszek searches for the appropriate movements. This is Zbyszek's solo number. After the scene, Tadeusz says, "I'm tired and we'll take a break." Then he complains about his stomach and that nobody is taking care of him, that Ohayon, Chybiński and the whole Cricoteka are indifferent. The group will have to arrange his dinner, and he leaves for the hotel. "Let's go, Stasiak" (Stanisław Dudziński, a young technician from the Cricoteka and Kantor's "guardian"). A moment later, Janusz Jarecki (at the time director of the Cricoteka) calls the hotel. Kantor has calmed down. He requests that someone make sure that the meat being sent from a restaurant recommended by Ohayon will be edible, and then Stasiak will bring it to him. He also says that he will see the doctor at four o'clock.

Wednesday, September 26, 1990

Everybody can breathe easier after today's rehearsal. It's a rehearsal like in the old days. Marie was absent yesterday. She could not cope with the character

and was thinking of giving up. Today she arrives with Kantor. Apologies and a reconciliation. On stage, the platform under the central picture is ready. This is where Meyerhold's torture and death will take place. Kantor begins the rehearsal with that scene. His remarks are precise as he sets up the three torturers, their movements and gestures.

Then, Kantor has one of his famous "inspirations" that drives the action forward. We are all caught up in the excitement. Kantor orders everybody except for the NKVD officers, Stern, Jarema, and the Self-Portrait to go backstage and form a crowd, which turns into a funeral procession. We walk as if in a trance. Kantor to Ewa: "Speak Russian!" Taken by surprise, Ewa starts improvising a text, and there is a wave, a tension released by her action. We are caught up in the moment. Kantor is delighted, and so are we. We applaud spontaneously after the scene. It lasted about 40 minutes. This is the high point of the production!!

Tuesday, October 2, 1990

"Let's sit down at the tables," Kantor says. "I want to talk about something theoretical." And he starts from the beginning. The people lying on stage in bags, Andrzej as the self-portrait, the stage as a painter's studio, and that all-important fact: once, walking down the stairs to the exhibition space in the Cricoteka, he found a girl, "gray with poverty," sitting on the steps. She asked Kantor, "Why is everyone here so sad?" Then she disappeared. "For me," Kantor says, "that was the beginning of the new play." The theoretical reflections go on until 11:30. Then Tadeusz decides to rehearse. The scene with the Self-Portrait goes well. It is almost ready. Now Marie enters. It is hard to say why, but each rehearsal of her entrance doesn't work. This time she wears high-heeled shoes and the sound of their clicking instantly destroys the mood (it is always a matter of nuances). Kantor: "Marie, not yet!!" And then it starts—an attack on the technicians! When will the bed be ready? And this, and that! And the seamstress—where are the NKVD uniforms? Tadeusz starts to smolder. Where is the dressmaker's studio? When will the caps be ready? There should be a sculptor to model heads for the NKVD caps! He turns on Ohayon—the hotel should be informed that a great man is staying there! And the cleaning women should not clean at two o'clock "when I am having dinner." His rage grows. He finally complains that the group sits around lifelessly and nobody cares about anything "except those shitty dollars." Then the Master leaves the theatre.

Monday, October 8, 1990

The final part of the Toulouse rehearsals. In the morning, we begin with the scene in which the Family is seated at the table. We are supposed to play the moving of the table nervously, but the motions of looking for the audience, of coming to life, the goal of these changes are not explained. After a break, we do the Father-Marian scene. Kantor tells me, "Wacek, you will speak part of the text in French." We select the appropriate fragments. Break. We rehearse from

the beginning. The relationship between Tadeusz and Andrzej. A fine-tuning of the action. We reach the moment when Marie enters. She looks at Tadeusz. A grimace of dissatisfaction on his face. He stops the run-through. In a slightly raised voice, in French, he explains the essence of the character. "I saw her sitting on the stairs outside the entrance to my Museum. She has remained in my memory." Marie enters again. Kantor sits so that he can't see her, and Marie must act, invisible to Kantor but visible to the audience. This is too much. Marie can't take it, she's helpless, she breaks down and cries in the middle of the stage. Kantor does not notice this or pretends not to notice. He keeps the rehearsal going and slows down the tempo. He thinks things over. Marie is still crying but continues to act; her crying can now be heard clearly. Kantor, thinking this is part of her performance, says, "Good, good, now change it a little, don't overdo it." Marie is unable to control her crying. She has lost it. Kantor often said that, apart from him, her character will be the most important one in the play. We reach the scene where Ludka enters. Marie says, "There is no table" and Ludka comes back carrying a table. We end there.

Saturday, October 12, 1990

This morning is our last meeting. We receive our timetable for the upcoming months. January 4 to 17, Toulouse, then January 25 in Paris and a tour of France until February 19. A week's break and then Berlin, Milan, and Rome. We play in Kraków, the Festival, then Montreal and New York in June. In July, Munich and someplace else. August is free. In the autumn we go back to Paris, and then we tour Italy. In the evening, we say farewell to the theatre. The personnel from this theatre are splendid people; they understand our Master and have become great friends of ours. It is rare to meet people so dedicated to art.

Kraków

Monday, November 12, 1990

The last stage of rehearsals will be in the former meeting room of the district communist party headquarters on Grunwaldzka Street. After the excellent working conditions we had in Toulouse, we find ourselves in a meeting room with a small platform, no backstage, and hopeless theatrical conditions. Kantor is right when he says that political changes have contributed nothing positive to the relations between the Kraków Department of Culture and the CRICOT 2 theatre. Rehearsals are short—about two hours a day. For the moment, no progress can be seen. On Saturday, Leszek, Ewa, and I left Kraków. We missed rehearsal. Unfortunately, we neglected to inform Kantor, and he shouted that he could fire us or replace us whenever he wants to. On Friday he was upset in any case, probably irritated by Ania (Anna Halczak, a Cricoteka employee closely associated with Kantor). Today he throws down his coffee cup, saying "I hate you, I'm ready to explode with hate." He calls our absence a boycott. We begin. Whenever Marie enters, Tadeusz loses his patience. He starts to explain something to her and muddles things up even more. Marie is completely at a loss. Zofia Więclawówna is at the rehearsal today. She is an old acquaintance

of Kantor's and a professor at the Kraków Fine Arts Academy. Perhaps we will do the scene with the *emballages*.

Wednesday, November 14, 1990

Another tantrum. Kantor holds nothing back and sets the dogs on the technicians, whom he once praised so highly. We've seen this all before—it's typical. It happens at a certain stage of rehearsal. Tadeusz has to put the pressure on. Because we know each other so well, the attack has to be all the more fierce, in order to get the "freeloaders" moving, to provoke them. He attacks ruthlessly, until he hits his target. His naming as technical director of a young man, who had never been in the CRICOT, and his decree that this young man is now the most important person and that "You have to obey him like you obey me!" is one example of Kantor's tactic.

Thursday, November 15, 1990

After yesterday's rehearsal, Kantor worked at home and wrote everything down. He established the order of the scenes. After the "family at the table" scene, the paperboy comes in and passes out newspapers to the *emballages* lying in bags. Eight actors are hidden in the bags. They take the newspapers and read about the murder of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. The cannon appears in the center picture frame. Three soldiers with rifles run diagonally across the stage, as if attacking. The Austrian national anthem plays through the loudspeakers and the Beadle—the same one that was in *The Dead Class*—stands next to the cannon singing a hymn. Everybody on stage freezes in that enormous frame, like a photograph. Dr. Klein—The Messiah (Maria Rychlicka) comes out into the center of the stage, and the Jewish Water-Carrier (Jan Książek) enters opposite, from the front. Chassidic music plays from the speakers. The Jew starts to dance and then Dr. Klein spins around and all the figures from the picture join the dance, forming a circle. At the end, the family wheels in the cannon, the tank, and other weapons, forcing the dancers to retreat. Another confrontation at the end of rehearsal. Wetulani (the newly-appointed director) realizes that he has been manipulated and asks Kantor for permission to resign. Kantor curses the whole group, especially the technicians. "They want to get rid of Wetulani in order to leave me in total isolation!" Wetulani himself negates Kantor's suspicions. Seeing no other way out, Kantor asks the group, "Does this mean that I'm to blame?" He moves off into the distance, disgusted.

Monday, November 26, 1990

Franco Leara, the impresario from Milano, came on Saturday. We started with the Jarema-Stern scene. Gostomski had to go back to Warszawa on Sunday. Kantor complained to Franco about how hard it is for him, how difficult it is to work, that he is surrounded by bureaucrats at the Cricoteka. The technicians made themselves scarce so as to stay out of the firing line. At one point Kantor noticed Mira holding her head too high. He jumped on her: "I don't need you

making faces like that! Please leave. Immediately!!" Mira went out in tears. Marie Colin, a sponsor from the Paris Autumn Festival, arrived today. We rehearse again from the beginning.

We do not attempt the Stern scene, because Gostomski is not here. Many scenes, but the connections are still missing.

Wednesday, December 5, 1990

We have been working on the last scene since Tuesday. The funeral procession. The priest at the head of it. The plank as the coffin. In his notes Tadeusz describes the exact placement of the characters. We feel, to put it delicately, strange. It is "funereal," as Kantor would say. We will have to use a lot of makeup, I can barely keep from saying, so that the audience will not see how we blush from shame. Kantor is forcing us. The days of cooperation are over. Now a command: "Please get everything off the stage so that nobody's there!" It should be as empty as it was after the Meyerhold scene. We all hide backstage. After a couple of minutes Tadeusz screams, "Where is the group? You don't give a damn about me! I'm not interested in you, either! But I have to finish my play! My play!" We come out from backstage. Kantor continues: "Don't you gentlemen even think about it!" The "gentlemen" are, among others, Leszek and I. A break. Mira asks if I'm taking notes. She is playing a doctor who took care of Kantor when he went to a sanatorium in Germany. Tadeusz identifies Mira with Doctor Klein. Her white smock upsets him. Mira is standing among the stage decorations. Kantor says, "Please move away, yes, move over to the right there." "Aha, I'm dressed in white. Is that why you're moving me?" Mira asks. After all, that was the explanation Tadeusz had been giving for his treatment of Mira. Now he answers, "No, it's not a matter of the color white. I happen to have a special kind of vision—I can't stand the sight of a mess." Most of us have been with Kantor for 20 years. He knows us inside—out. In this play, he is looking for something new. Today he even shouted: "I will be a dictator. I will introduce a military regime!!" His "brilliant insights," as he puts it, were beyond all comparison and he was going to give the orders. He wasn't about to have "some little shit" doing whatever he felt like. So when Staszek Michno stepped back from the cannon to see if he had enough room—that was wrong, of course. The Master said: "You walk away, and the most important thing is to enter and exit, and you step back and look around like a little shit."

Friday, December 7, 1990

We rehearse from the first scene. We are supposed to go through four acts today. The beginning. New arrangements with Andrzej. Then Marie's entrance. A brief holdup, but we move on. The scene with the Family around the table. Then, a scene with Father Śmietana from Wielopole follows. Tadeusz screams at Zbyszek Bednarczyk, who plays that character: "You don't know the text. If you didn't learn the text at the Stary Theatre or the Bagatela, they would fire you!!" Then he directs his accusations to the whole group and to the Cricoteka:

no one is helping him. He goes backstage. He returns after a long while. Zbyszek begins his speech. Kantor interrupts him. "Again, please." And then he works on the Priest's speech in detail. Ludka takes notes. We proceed. Leszek and me perform our scene. Kantor remarks: "Please look at me and speak to me." Then comes the scene with the paperboy and the *emballages*. Tadeusz gets upset. Again he goes backstage. He returns. We continue the rehearsal. Mira as Doctor Klein, the Messiah. A break. Then the scene with Maria Jarema and Jonasz Stern. Kantor is angry again and goes back to talking about how he is alone and no one is interested in him. "You go back to your comfortable homes and I could die alone at night." After the Stern scene, it is one p.m., Tadeusz says, "We're finished for today." He speaks only briefly about our meeting on Sunday. A rehearsal on Sunday, the day of elections, is inconvenient for everybody. Lila Krasicka says, "Let's just have a short rehearsal, from ten until one." But as far as Sunday goes, we still have no official word.

Saturday, December 8, 1990

On Friday, Ewa, Leszek, Piotr Chybiński, Marie, and I are at Eros's (an Italian actor's) for dinner. We learned that Kantor had felt ill in the evening after rehearsal. Doctor Korombel took him to the hospital. Teresa Wełmińska, in tears, called this morning at 8:40 and said: "Kantor is dead."

As I kept this diary, it never occurred to me that I would ever write this short and tragic sentence.

