

**Krakow, Saturday, December 8, 1990.**

**Loriano Della Rocca**

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Kantor is dead. He died this morning at five o'clock in a hospital bed here in Kraków. None of us actors knew, and there has been no time to evaluate the situation. Today was to be the last day of rehearsals.

I leave the house as usual at 9:45. The taxi is waiting for me. It is a gray morning with a disconsolate sky. The sun shines strangely behind the clouds over the city, as it does here in winter. Even the taxi is strangely half-hidden at the corner in a way I have never seen before. I make haste to get in, but my "Dzien Dobry" (Good Morning) is greeted by silence. Eros, a member of the troupe, is already inside and replies simply and seriously, "Kantor is dead."

I freeze in my place at the sound of these words. I try to understand but fail. At first I think it might be a bad joke, but I know this can be no joke, especially in this situation, at this hour of the day. The taxi drives through the streets. I search for meaning in the words, "Kantor is dead," but I find nothing. The details, as I hear them, become part of the "unreal reality" of the streets; everything real seems to pose the question, "What is real?" Tadeusz had not been feeling well. Yesterday afternoon he was brought to the hospital, where the doctors kept him under observation. During the night he suffered a heart attack and was drugged for the pain. He died quietly in his sleep.

We arrive at the theatre where the rest of the troupe is waiting. Some have been informed; others know nothing. We wait together like we would on any other morning, as if Kantor were to arrive momentarily. We search each other's faces for answers. A few women are crying, and some of the men fight back their tears. We all gather around as usual, but this time nobody knows what to say, what to do. Luigi, one of the actors, looks upon the empty stage where only yesterday cries and shouts rang out. He stands there as if waiting for an answer.

An old family photo sits on Tadeusz's small table. In this photo Kantor had smudged out in black and white all the figures which could not serve him for models while leaving those few who could serve for inspiration. Next to the photo is Kantor's empty coffee cup, with the dregs still at the bottom. His absence has left even these objects in the lurch, and we are not accustomed to the unexpected significance of ordinary things. We leave the theatre, our presence meaningless without Kantor. We still have time to see his body at the hospital.

We make our way to the Cricoteka. At the Cricoteka, the logic of the everyday is undone by the heaviness of Kantor's absence . . . the thread

connecting us to the outside world, which Kantor held with all the other threads, begins to loosen and even though we hold it tight in our hands by simply refusing to accept his death, it begins to dissolve. There is still time to see Kantor at the hospital. We rush straight away in two cars, hoping, and yet still wanting to see this death all the way through, to see it up front straight in the face. The air outside is cold but not bracing.

The hospital is old, terrible, made of stone like an army barracks, neither comforting nor efficient. We wait in back by a door to the morgue. Then the eight of us squeeze into an anteroom that offers a partial view of the room where Tadeusz is finally brought. A faceless orderly pushes the old, rusted gurney into the room and leaves immediately. Tadeusz lies there under a gray, wool blanket, his head tilted back at a strange angle, his hair disheveled and white with death. His complexion has already turned a cadaverous yellow. I see Tadeusz there before us, but it is not he. Perhaps he has gone somewhere else—inside us, above us, perhaps to heaven (if there were such a place!), but here, displayed before us, is nothing but an empty body. Later, with this experience still fresh in our minds, we will try to relieve our depression and helplessness. With Jean Marie, we will joke that GRANDPA (Kantor) has gone to hell, as do all the great actors and directors, those blaspheming manipulators of emotion. There Kantor will find all the human and artistic material he needs to create his performance of the universe.

On this narrow cot is merely the prison of a great spirit. We can do nothing for Kantor, who can do nothing for us. We want to say, "All right now, that's enough. Return to your senses. Get back to shouting and crying as you did at rehearsal yesterday." Death is too powerful. It silences, demanding awe and respect. And that power remains a mystery. We can do nothing but pay our last respects and leave. Spontaneously, I go up to Kantor and touch his cold brow. I realize later that I had hoped to console him, to make him feel less lonely in death, but who knows how the dead want to be treated? What kind of appreciation do they have for the affection and presence of others?

Back in the car, our agitation begins to fade. Tadeusz's body has given death its "realness." The physical presence of the dead, however, signifies nothing but an absence, a cruel and ironic absence. Death becomes the finale of a performance that must end, but nobody knows the when or the how. Kantor reserved for himself the ultimate *coup de théâtre*. The day before had been the final rehearsal of his final work for the stage, and now Kantor is alone, on the other side of that "frontier" about which he always spoke

We too are alone, abandoned by the departure of a giant, a genius, and a tyrant. Kantor was an artist of many contradictions, a man logical in his folly and passionate for his work. We had lived and worked together for ten years, sharing a love-hate relationship, and I cannot believe that he shall never return.

*Addio*, Tadeusz. All my love and respect—Loriano.