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Regarding Kantor

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Paweł Huelle's 1987 novel *Who Was David Weiser* (*Weiser Dawidek*) portrays a group of middle school students playing elaborate forms of hooky in Gdańsk in 1957. The enigmatic Jewish boy David Weiser emerges as the group's leader in various forbidden games, which reach a new high with the discovery of a cache of guns and unexploded ammunition from World War II in an abandoned brickworks. Weiser's discovery inspires him to stage a series of pyrotechnic "happenings," which dazzle his adolescent friends, after which he vanishes from their lives.

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Set in 1957 just after the founding of the Cricot–2 theater in Cracow, the novel captures the restless *zeitgeist* of the period following the liberalization of cultural life in Poland after 1956. Huelle's descriptions of the abandoned brickworks and bunkers in which David and his friends play recall the arched brick vaults of the cramped Krzysztofory Gallery in Cracow where the Cricot–2 performed for decades. This space is effectively captured in the film of the company's 1973 production *The Cloakroom* (*Szatnia*), freely inspired by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's 1922 play *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (*Nadobnisie i koczkodany*).* Kantor's presence in the performance was very much like a sly and delinquent schoolboy in spite of his sixty years, and the dynamic between him and the Polish audience clearly that of adult co-conspirators playing theatrical hooky. As with David's friends in Huelle's novel, Kantor's audience seemed to be enjoying a guilty pleasure in the temporary absence of "parents"—be they priests, professors, or party hacks.

In 1982, Tadeusz Kantor and the Teatr Cricot–2 brought *Wielopole, Wielopole* to the U.S. for the first time, performing at LaMama and eventually winning the company's second Obie Award for best production. Among the reviews of the production was one by Gordon Rogoff in *The Village Voice* entitled "Kantor Seen and Not Heard":

> Idle to pretend that *Wielopole, Wielopole* . . . can be understood as total theater by anyone who doesn't know Polish. Not that Kantor's Cricot Two Theater is concerned with language or narrative. Born in 1915, Kantor came to directing by way of stage design, a route common to many—perhaps too many—theater directors in Europe. . . . As an artist, [Kantor] can't be boxed into theater or painting alone. Similarly he can't be confined to Poland. Yet his theater and his manifestos are in Polish. . . . Kantor's non-linear scenes are not in gibberish or [like Grotowski's work] derived from great echo chambers buried in the actor's gut. Many words and phrases are deliberately repeated—that much is clear—but presumably the actors are saying something that adds dimension to the experience of the work. . . . Kantor's work is not dance, mime, or music; and even "pure" theater makes connections with words, so it would be presumptuous to respond as if it were a work by Brook, Chaikin, Foreman, Wilson, or even a Chekhov play performed by the Moscow Art [Theater]. A theater audience cannot live by images alone (Rogoff 223).

Rogoff was plainly aware of being a dissenting voice in an emerging consensus among critics that the director's Artaudian theatrical idiom required no knowledge of Polish—a view prompted by Kantor's own statements and practice of not providing translations of his scripts for foreign audiences. This denial of the need for translation for audiences has paralleled a tendency in writing about Kantor outside of Poland to separate the theoretical and critical discussion of his work not only from its spoken text, but also from its original cultural and political context.

My first experience of Tadeusz Kantor's work in live performance was in Los Angeles at the Olympic Arts Festival in 1984, where I saw *Wielopole, Wielopole* in a converted television studio with an audience of perhaps 1500 people—a quite different venue than the Krzysztofory Gallery. The experience was extraordinary in many ways. I had been a student of director-designer Józef Szajna in Warsaw, who practices his own style of image theater, and seen several of his major pieces, which were always utterly original in their theatrical means and impressive and absorbing in performance. Yet *Wielopole, Wielopole* was ultimately unlike—and surpassed in impact—anything I had seen before. I cried through the piece's twenty-minute standing ovation, not yet aware that this was precisely Kantor's intended effect with the piece. What I felt was nothing like nostalgia or sentimentality, it was instead shock, anger, and bitter recognition—all mixed up with the undeniable excite-

ment of Kantor's images, music, *lazzi*, deep sense of theatrical rhythm, and, yes, use of the spoken word and the actors' voices.

In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, those voices spoke in Yiddish as well as Polish. I later asked a colleague at Swarthmore College to translate the Yiddish song sung by the Rabbi in the piece (which is untranslated in the published English version of the text), and discovered it was a suggestive Yiddish cabaret song about the flirtations of a Rabbi's attractive wife. These lyrics heighten and color the complex ironies of the scene, in which the so-called "Little Rabbi" (Rabinek), played by Kantor's wife Maria in male rabbinical garb, sings the song before being shot by the play's chorus of unidentified dead soldiers—a sequence mechanically repeated several times before the next scene begins. In *The Dead Class* (*Umarła klasa*, 1975), Polish and Yiddish were mixed with Hebrew and German. How many audience members did Kantor ever find who would understand all four languages? Yet this was precisely the polyglot voice of Poland (particularly Cracow) before 1939—in both the mix of languages and the frequent lack of mutual comprehension. Is this mix of languages a postmodern deconstruction of dramatic text, a dadaist denial of linguistic logic, an Artaudian use of the actor's voice as pure sound, a concrete evocation of prewar Poland, an alienation device, a political statement or provocation—or all of the above? The language in Kantor's posthumous piece *Today Is My Birthday* (*Dziś są moje urodziny*, 1990) continued this confounding pattern, combining Polish, French, German, and Russian.

Wielopole, Wielopole arrived in New York in 1982 and Los Angeles in 1984 while Poland was under martial law. In 1982, Kantor's company had trouble obtaining the visas needed to perform at LaMama because of American sanctions against Poland. In Los Angeles, the Cricot–2 was the only artistic or athletic representative of the communist world at the Olympics that year. Martial law in Poland seems like a long time ago, but it is important to bear in mind how dark the cultural and political scene was in Poland in 1984, a time captured in Krzysztof Kieślowski's political film *No End* (*Bez końca*), whose ending appalled both the communist party and the Catholic hierarchy—and perhaps would have appalled Kantor, as well—by suggesting that the only possible transcendence of Polish reality at the time was suicide.

I attended the performance of *Wielopole, Wielopole* with three friends—a painter, a composer, and a fellow graduate student in theater from Berkeley—who did not speak Polish and had never before seen any theater from Poland. They did not cry, but responded as I had earlier to Szajna's work—surprised, impressed, and even moved, but not to tears. Complicating the experience was another part of the audience. Behind us sat a half dozen middle-aged men in three-piece suits, their speech alternating between Polish and a fluent but clearly accented English. In the piece, a recording of a Polish military marching song, "The Grey Infantry" ("Szara piechota"), is repeatedly played to sharply ironic and clearly Brechtian effect. Every time the song played, these men enthusiastically sang along in chorus—they not only recognized the song, they knew all the words. They were no longer regarding the play, they were now part of it, unselfconsciously joining the chorus of dead soldiers onstage who rape, crucify, and kill the other characters with a strange mix of schoolboy glee and mechanical indifference—only in turn to be killed repeatedly themselves. Given the distanced nature of Kantor's acting style, these men were perhaps more subjectively identified with the world of the play than the actors themselves.

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Though anecdotal, this experience illustrates three quite distinct responses to the same performance—after which, nevertheless, we all joined in one standing ovation. Yet to what degree was the ovation for "The Gray Infantry"—or for Kantor's ironic use of it? The Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival was a triumph for Kantor's company, expanding and consolidating their reputation with non-Polish audiences—such as my three friends from Berkeley. Yet the experience of Kantor's theater outside of Poland was unquestionably *other* than in its original cultural and political context, and in important ways perhaps diminished. This diminishment is most apparent in the realm of cultural politics, where Kantor always played for very high stakes. Kantor never openly identified with an ideological position, but from his work and manifestos the implicit politics were consistently those of pacifist anarchism. Judging from the response of the Polish men in Los Angeles, Kantor's choice of music was clearly high stakes for Polish audiences, but no less clear was that the director's battle for pacifism, anarchism, or the popular acceptance of theatrical *Verfremdung* was far from won.

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For those who are not Polish or students of Polish culture, it is certainly useful, appropriate, and even essential to approach Kantor's work through the history of the modernist avant-garde in the visual arts (dadaism, constructivism, surrealism, the Bauhaus), twentieth-century performance theory and practice (Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Happenings, Robert Wilson), critical theory (Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes), classical theater and opera (Nōh, Greek tragedy, Wagner's theory of the *gesamptkünstwerk*), or even the Taziyeh rituals—or so-called "Persian passion plays"—of Iran (a possible inspiration for Kantor's own presence onstage as director). But to do so is to risk overlooking Kantor's acute

awareness of art and theater in relation to politics, both in how political ideology can impinge on the artist's work and how the artist in turn is inevitably a political player. Kantor was both identified with the Marxist-inspired modernist avant-garde (the Russian contructivists and the German Bauhaus) and subject to its suppression under Nazism and Stalinism in Poland. It is telling that his last piece, *Today Is My Birthday*, included an homage to Meyerhold in the form of the staging of the Russian director's murder by the KGB—among the most politically taboo of theatrical subjects in the Soviet era.

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Within Poland, Kantor's life and work seem to beg comparison with his compatriot Jerzy Grotowski, as both earned international recognition in the context of communist postwar Poland—with Kantor's greatest fame coming in the 1980s, after Grotowski's defection from the country a year after the declaration of martial law in 1981. Kantor's open disdain for Grotowski and the work of his followers such as the Gardzienice Theater Association suggests the differences on this score are more significant than the similarities. Kantor and Grotowski each practiced a version of "poor theater," but Kantor's was a director-designer's "poor theater," as precise and sincere in its own way as Grotowski's work with actors. Both claimed Meyerhold as an inspiration, but in different ways and for different reasons. Grotowski drew on Meyerhold's bio-mechanics, Kantor on his concrete work with stage image and space. Grotowski was fascinated by the movement of the Meyerholdian actor, Kantor by the wax dummies in *The Inspector General*. Grotowski was a communist party member, Kantor was not. Grotowski had to give up his theater and seek political asylum in the 1980s, Kantor did not. No one familiar with Kantor's work and the Polish theater could be blamed in seeing a fateful symbolism when he died on Dec. 8, 1990—the eve of Poland's first free national elections since the interwar period. A theatrical as well as a political era had clearly come to an end.

Wyspiański's work in *Akropolis* and other plays laid the foundations for a tradition of image theater in Poland that Kantor built upon and acknowledged

Within Polish theater, Kantor saw himself in the tradition of Wyspiański. Grotowski's company first won international recognition in the 1960s with its production of Wyspiański's *Akropolis* set in a Nazi death camp and designed by Józef Szajna, himself a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The production exemplified Grotowski's principle of the dramaturgical violation of the text in both content and theatrical embodiment. Wyspiański's symbolist play was intended to be theatrically spectacular, set in Cracow's historic royal castle known as the Wawel and inspired by a story told to Polish children that on Easter eve the mythological and Biblical figures in the tapestries that decorate the castle's walls come to life and re-enact their stories. The play culminates with the nationalistic merging of Christ's resurrection on Easter morning with the rebirth of an independent Polish nation. In Grotowski's spare and revisionist production, the Christ figure was the dead body of a concentration camp prisoner, and his failed resurrection a foreshadowing of the deaths of the other players.

Both Kantor and Grotowski have unequivocally disowned the spirit of messianic nationalism in Wyspiański's work, yet many of Kantor's most famous theatrical images follow from Wyspiański's scenic devices in the play. In *The Dead Class*, Kantor theatrically animates both the prose and the drawings of the interwar Polish experimental writer and artist Bruno Schulz, and in *Wielopole, Wielopole*, the entire ensemble wears costumes and make-up designed to suggest a World War I black-and-white photograph come to life and later form a grotesque tableau inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Kantor's posthumous piece *Today Is My Birthday* as a whole can be seen as a paradoxical homage to Wyspiański's *Akropolis*, with its set portraying Kantor's studio surrounded by empty frames for paintings which are filled by actors and used for both entrances and exits. In ironic contrast to the mythic rebirth of the Polish nation, much less Christ's resurrection, we have the ageing Kantor's lonely birthday party set in his shabby studio, where he is visited by dead family and friends and animated figures from paintings by both himself and other artists. In place of Wyspiański's mythic apotheosis of Western culture in Cracow's Wawel Castle or Grotowski's pitiless "cemetery of the tribes" in Auschwitz, *Today Is My Birthday* ends with an image of panhistorical anarchy flooding into the artist's studio/stage. The sardonic and Beckettian treatment of Wyspiański's theatrics and mythopoetics in the piece were uncannily extended by Kantor's death during dress rehearsals—with performances of *Today Is My Birthday* becoming the theatrical equivalent of a wake or sitting shiva in his absence. But just as there was no resurrection at the end of Grotowski's *Akropolis*, the dead Kantor could not join the other re-animated dead in *Today Is My Birthday*. Beckett—and death—were vindicated by reality. Wyspiański's *Akropolis* remains largely unknown outside of Poland, untranslated into English, at once a unique manifestation of the Symbolist theater in Europe and a play still fraught with problematic cultural and political content. Yet Wyspiański's work in *Akropolis* and other plays laid the foundations for a tradition of image theater in Poland that Kantor built upon and acknowledged, and in part explains the larger practice of image theater by Szajna and a diverse younger generation of artists including Leszek Mądzik, Janusz Wiśniewski, and Stasys Eidrigevicius.

The myth of Kantor in Poland is partly inspired by a pair of productions that only Poles could attend. In Cracow in 1942, the same year as his estranged father's death in Auschwitz, Kantor staged another Polish play unknown outside the country, Juliusz Słowacki's romantic fantasia *Balladyna* (1839). This was followed in 1944 by a staging of Wyspiański's neo-classical play *The Return of Odysseus* (*Powrót Odyssa*, 1907). These productions were staged in secret in defiance of Nazi edicts forbidding unauthorized performances in occupied Poland, under penalty of imprisonment, deportation to concentration camps, or death. Kantor's underground productions were not unique in occupied Poland. According to Kazimierz Braun,

> During the war, close to 200 significant clandestine productions were prepared [in Poland]. . . . Most productions were held in private homes, artists' studios, parish or convent halls, and sometimes in mountain cabins. The productions followed a strictly secret routine: The spectators received invitation by word of mouth; windows were blacked out, lookouts were posted, and people came and left individually (Braun 16).

Kantor's family name and mixed parentage put him in double jeopardy under these circumstances, but nevertheless he persevered in presenting something seemingly as frivolous as *Balladyna* (which could be described as a Polish *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)—and others took the risk of offering their homes and attending as audience members. The picture is a bit less paradoxical in the case of *The Return of Odysseus*, a play overtly about war and staged in the last months of the Nazi occupation.

The questions about theater, ethics, and politics raised by these productions are unsettling. Given the circumstances of Poland under the Nazi occupation, was underground theater-making an appropriate activity, regardless of the play or the Nazi edicts? Were other forms of resistance a better use of people's time and energy? Given a comparable political crisis, who among us would choose to put on a play, much less risk the lives of our collaborators and audience through the project? Yet this is precisely what Kantor did, when it would have been more sensible to hide, flee, or simply do nothing—or instead join the armed resistance. Jan Kott, for example, was in Cracow at the same time as part of the underground People's Army, with his wife in hiding from the Nazis and *szmalcownicy* (the Polish term for collaborators who, in spite of possible reprisals by the Polish resistance, turned in Jews for money) in a nearby village.

I am again reminded of David Weiser. Was Kantor and his audience only playing hooky during wartime, during the Holocaust? David Weiser used real guns and ammunition to stage a spectacle for his friends in peacetime. Kantor, always the pacifist anarchist, presumably saw the spectacles he staged during the occupation themselves as a kind of weapon—but of a nature he could justify using.

How was Kantor different from the many other theater artists who took equally strong political stands during the war and after—and often paid more dearly for them? Kantor's paradoxical strategy after the war was to strike an aggressively anti-heroic attitude onstage, to have his company perform disreputability, cynicism, impoverishment, the hawking of inferior theatrical goods. He understood how many people—both as performers and audience members—are drawn to the theater precisely because it appears to be a form of playing hooky. He cultivated a carnivalesque persona for his company of flagrant irresponsibility and unpredictability—including the precisely crafted illusion of being slapdash and amateurish. Yet to get involved with Kantor was always to be playing *very serious* hooky.

Unfortunately, there is very little published information concerning *Balladyna* and *The Return of Odysseus* and the circumstances of their performances in Cracow during the occupation. I have no doubt, however, that this early work deeply informs issues as diverse as Kantor's relationship to the communist party, his dismissal of Grotowski, his choice of music in *Wielopole, Wielopole*, his appearance at the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival, his staging of Meyerhold's murder, and why instead of committing suicide or going into exile in the 1980s (or the 1960s, or the 1950s, or the 1940s) he worked on the very unlikely series of theatrical projects that became the Cricot–2.

In Kantor's case, the better you know Poland, the further from school you get to run.**

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* Available on video tape in the theater collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

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