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*Reminder on Tadeusz Kantor*

The work of Tadeusz Kantor has left an indelible mark on the lives of all those who met him and it continues to produce a “lightning bolt” effect on the young artists and students who are rediscovering him today thanks to the great conservation and communications work being done by various institutions and his long-time admirers. These admirers manage to meet up from time to time and are always discovering new things, not just about the Kantor that was, but also about what he is: a source of stimulation and constant referral in the most diverse ways all over the world. Sometimes, those “marked”, now on in years, meet other explorers of the arts, as is happening here at the Academy in Venice, and the memory of emotions intermingle with new and surprising considerations. But the power of his work is still waiting for the proper “placement” along the horizon of the 20th Century. For example, confronted with the evidence of a total artist, capable of availing himself of painting, theatre, sculpture, writing, performance and pedagogy, creativity and social sensibility, both separately and together and making them converge, one usually stops in one’s tracks to consider his titanic exceptionalness. Instead, what is not highlighted, is his belonging to the tradition of “plastic art”, a lineage going back centuries and boasting names like Guido Mazzoni, Gianlorenzo Bernini, and Veit Stoss, who practiced composition in “full relief”, a tradition that the modern artist, exasperated by specialized language, has shelved. A tradition that with Kantor and other 20th Century figures has surfaced, attesting to a new and at the same time ancient conception of poetic work that finally, in modernity’s total crisis, signals something essential about the meaning of art and humanism “after Auschwitz”.

Kantor’s is a work of freedom that produces freedom, and to render it even more fertile it must confront itself with the “text” that remains, that is to say, not only with the audiovisual testimony of his plays but also with the fundamental chapter that his writings provide. They should be reread very closely, not only to understand from whence they come but also where they are going, or better still, how they respond to a persistent and profound petition. Various scholars all over the world have undertaken a great quantity of groundwork, but there is still much to do to marry the hermeneutic with a live heuristic, that is to say, the past with the present and the future.

When one of the most important witnesses of theatre’s “short century” like Ludwik Flaszen describes a Poland characterized by «a relationship, without a doubt complex, ambiguous, paradoxical, or more simply perverse, between freedom and constraint, between creative energy and the obscure recesses of creation itself», he evokes the diverse elements of a cultural anthropology unique in the world, characterized by authoritarianism of the Communist church and the Catholic church in competition with each other for the dominion of bodies and minds. But, he also has in mind the fundamental role of the peculiar Polish romantic tradition and the influence of the Jewish and Hassidic sensibility (physical though not spiritual traces erased by Nazism and then by Communism). Thus, the singularity of an oppression from which to escape, the most gifted and courageous intellectuals used what were little-known, if not foreign, references to the rest of the world. Only in light of this contradiction can we understand how a country of secondary importance on the

contemporary geo-political chessboard was able to generate so many major players in every artistic and philosophical sector. And only in this sense can we understand the emergence of two cardinal figures like Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, much less far apart than it seemed at the outset, destined to remain relevant for a long time in a world that is looking with ever-greater determination for a third route between materialistic and spiritual fundamentalisms, whose opposition risks hastening the notion of human into a bottomless pit.

The unity of life ideal by which they were oriented, confused these ideological extremes, that is, it kept in mind some of their idealistic orientations and showed a new possibility even in terms of the great novelty of the Late Modern society, that is to say, to its transformation into a society of spectacle (see G. Debord). Their knowing and fundamental materialistic pragmatism restored the centrality of art and poetry, intended as “making”, i.e. *composition*, that includes and means a trip to hell and an attack on heaven at the same time. In fact, certain allegorical foundations are central to both: think of the idea of a prison, that the artist must know his way around like his own place of work, and of poverty (poor reality for Kantor, and poor theatre for Grotowski) intended as a reference to the essential, a meeting place between authentic and infinite. On the basis of these premises, it is not important to be concerned by the controversy regarding which of the two had invented certain formulas and which one had adopted them, but rather to commit oneself to project their history on a background of still-burning problems. Only in this way can we understand their fundamental traits even further, like those that take us back to a conception of the artist that is not solely for theatre, not he who represents the work of someone else, but as an operator of the informal (Kantor) or as a creator of a stage production at 360 degrees that responds to the authors he seeks help from (Grotowski).

A new attention toward their texts will help to understand how the “new testament” of performance that both proposed -- in different ways -- to realize (and not to “write”) will be considered in a more general context of a grotesque poetic -- life, bodies, and shapes as a place and time of cohabitation of indomitable opposites -- that, like all grotesque, opposes the simplification of realisms, something the Polish situation well understands, especially thanks to the influence of Hassidism, a particular inclination towards ecstasy and irony, song and dance, on the whole, joy and a full life of the creator-craftsman. Always with Death aside.

In order to verify that which is here hypothesized requires, or so it is said, returning to the texts, and refusing to stop for incidental reasons of dispute between them, accepting the evidence and finding a rational explanation of the fact that -- and this is just one example -- Kantor is much more inclined towards metaphysics and to ontological exploration than Grotowski, always however in the context of a strengthening of composition and never in that of an unproductive theory. For both of them, theatre was, as Kantor said in *Prison* (1985): «the most dramatic manifestation of / ART and FREEDOM!». Manifestation, not representation, with all the ethical and political implications therein.

This note resumes a speech given at the Accademia di Belle Arti, Venice, 2010, actually published in *Omaggio a Kantor/Tribute to Kantor*, Archetipolibri, Bologna 2011.