

Justyna Michalik-Tomala

TADEUSZ KANTOR'S THE DEAD CLASS

A monograph of the play



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I dedicate this book to my son, Antoni.

1.

‘BUT, SIR ALFRED, IT IS ALL TOO SOON...’

The idea behind this book emerged many years ago, when I was just beginning my studies in Krakow and knew very little about Tadeusz Kantor. By chance I found my way to Cricoteka on Kanonicza Street, where a recording of one of the Cricot 2 Theatre’s performances was being screened. It was a rainy November evening. What I saw that time made an enormous impression on me, and I knew that I absolutely had to find out why. It was the first time I asked myself this question about *The Dead Class*.

After completing my studies, I began a collaboration with Cricoteka which lasted several years, and Kantor’s work became one of the primary areas of my research interests. Nonetheless, it was still too early for me to answer that original question about *The Dead Class*. Paradoxically, I encountered more and more frequently the opinion that Kantor was no longer worth writing about, since there was virtually nothing left to delve into, especially when it came to the Theatre of Death. I was made to feel I was too young, told I had not seen the play performed live, warned against putting forward ‘all-too radical theories’. On the other hand, in academic teaching practice, I met more and more students who admitted that *The Dead Class*, presented to them as a masterpiece, comes across to them as incomprehensible, unavailable, and therefore downright embarrassing to them.

My question about *The Dead Class* returned when, in 2020, I received a grant for young (sic!) scholars with the purpose of conducting research and writing a book about the play. Even after years of scientific exploration I still felt uncertain. How to describe this performance? How to tackle the legend of *The Dead Class*? Is there anything left to be said? What would others find interesting? How is one to write a book on Tadeusz Kantor’s key work fifty years after its premiere? I admit that I still do not know if the answers I found are satisfactory.

It is no coincidence that I began these reflections with a personal story. The years-long process of considering the phenomenon of *The Dead Class* made it clear to me that an effective way to approach its core is through directness and sincerity resulting from assuming and revealing a subjective outlook in one's overviews and descriptions. This method of scientific practice is becoming increasingly common and popular in the Polish humanities.¹ An open and direct stance of the researcher, aware that objectivity is a myth and all is subject to interpretation, is close to the concept of situated knowledge proposed by Donna Haraway.²

In her 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988), Haraway takes up one of the key issues of contemporary feminist epistemology — the issue of objectivity and of the position of the researching subject in the context of the production of scientific knowledge. Her paper is both a critique of traditional models of objectivity and an attempt at developing an alternative which would be at once adequate, politically engaged and reflexive. A key element of this proposal is the concept of situated knowledge, which refers to an embodied, socially and politically rooted form of cognition.

Haraway begins her analysis by reckoning with the prevalent understanding of objectivity within the tradition of the philosophy of science, where it is seen as cognition that is neutral, divorced from the body and context. This type of objectivity, represented by the so-called 'god trick', assumes the possibility of knowing the world regardless of the cognizer's perspective, from the position of a privileged, unmarked

¹ This type of practice has been established by Dariusz Kosiński in his book *Performing Poland: Rethinking histories and theatres* (Performance Research Books, 2019). The idea has been further developed by Joanna Krakowska in her project *Teatr publiczny. Przedstawienia 1765–2015* [Public Theatre. 1765–2015 Performances], which resulted in a series of publications, see the project website: <https://www.teatrpubliczny.pl/>

² Haraway, Donna. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575–599, <https://commons.princeton.edu/hum583-f21/wp-content/uploads/sites/283/2021/08/Haraway-Situated-Knowledges.pdf>. Accessed 17 November 2025.

subject. She points out that such a model of cognition not only ignores the subject’s corporeality and sociality but also serves to legitimise existing power structures, especially in the context of the science and technology spheres, dominated by masculine, Western and capitalist perspectives. Instead, the researcher proposes an alternative understanding of objectivity, which relies on a responsible recognition of one’s own epistemic position instead of assuming illusory universalism. In other words, objectivity does not necessitate disengagement, but a reflective consideration of one’s respective position, together with its cognitive limitations. Haraway, therefore, mainly proposes the recognition that there is no knowledge beyond the body, location and power dynamics. Situated knowledge is knowledge that recognises its particularity, rootedness and historicity. Situated knowledge requires both the awareness of one’s location and the readiness to contest, engage in dialogue and deconstruct preconceived assumptions. In this sense, it is an epistemology that is relational, dynamic and political. The cognizing subject is not just an ‘observer’ of reality, but an actor responsible for the way in which they construct and represent that reality. Haraway’s proposal, however, does not represent a turn towards relativism — this distinction is crucial for her. Relativism, much like totalising objectivism, is in her view a strategy for evading responsibility; both positions deny that location, embodiment and partial perspective have real epistemic and ethical consequences. Haraway is equally critical of radical constructivism, which, by reducing reality to the effect of social and discursive practices, loses sight of the materiality of the world — its concreteness, corporeality and the resistance it poses to our conceptual categories. Situated knowledge therefore does not imply freedom of interpretation; on the contrary, it commits us to pay attention to what is discernible and definite. Haraway suggests that it is precisely partiality, rather than universality, that constitutes the condition for reliable knowledge: ‘only partial perspective promises objective vision. [...] Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.’³

³ Haraway, p. 583.

Adopting a methodological perspective assuming an embodied view of the phenomenon of *The Dead Class* from a specific place and time solves many encountered research problems. It provides the freedom to conduct reliable research regardless of its subject and scope. It goes beyond the accepted and conventional. It demolishes the age barriers and boundaries of what is allowed and to whom, as well as what is not to be critically analysed. Similar issues have been raised by theatre researchers of the 1970s. Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz wrote:

Whether we like it or not, whether we even want to notice it at all, in this theatre we are dealing with non-representational art... The conventions of representation (in relation to the world at large) have been replaced by autotelic conventions (in relation to the theatre's relationship with itself). The spectator is no longer a witness, subjected to the emotional impact of the vicissitudes of a character acting on his behalf. Both the nameless, silent spectator and the critic, with his right to vote, were condemned to participate in creating an endless spiral (of possible context). The metaphor that most accurately and profoundly reflects this state of affairs is Kantor's Theatre of Death itself, a perfect theatre of emptiness to be filled by all of us, by our myths, obsessions, fears...⁴

The endless spiral of possible contexts into which we are drawn, as it were, by Kantor, justifies research subjectivity and invites us to treat his theatre as a tool for describing and analysing our present, anytime and anywhere, whatever it may be. It also allows us to face our own myths and the resulting traumas.

Other than Haraway's ideas, an important element of my research methodology is Arnold Berleant's proposal of the extended aesthetic field.⁵ This American philosopher of aesthetics developed an original idea of 'aesthetic engagement', questioning the established, modernist understanding of art as an object of contemplation. In the classical

⁴ Pleśniarowicz, Krzysztof. *Teatr nie-ludzkiej formy* [Theatre of Non-Human Form]. Universitas, 1994, pp. 127–128.

⁵ Berleant, Arnold. *Re-Thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*. Routledge, 2016. I would like to thank Katarzyna Wielechowska for drawing my attention to Arnold Berleant's proposal for a new aesthetic.

aesthetic tradition — from Kant to the 20th-century formalists — it was assumed that aesthetic experience must be ‘pure’, separated from interests, emotions, action and context. The recipient was supposed to stand aside, ‘contemplate’, and not be involved. A work of art was to be treated as an object to be viewed, not as a situation to be experienced. Berleant advocates a complete change of perspective, as in his view art occurs above all between a work and its recipient. In his concept of aesthetic engagement, the recipient enters the space of a work of art through immersion, feels its rhythm, and almost physically resonates with it. Multi-sensory engagement becomes the prominent factor; an aesthetic experience does not rely on sight and hearing alone, and Berleant emphasises the role of touch, kinaesthetics, temperature, smell, that is — everything that creates a complete perception. We are not ‘neutral minds’, our bodies become ‘embodied perception’, reacting with muscle tension, breathing, accelerated heart rate; these physiological responses are a part of aesthetic reception. In Berleant’s concept of participatory aesthetics, the aesthetic experience is not a one-sided process in which the recipient ‘passively’ observes the finished work of art. On the contrary, it is a dynamic, bilateral (or even multilateral) relational process in which the work of art and its recipient co-create the aesthetic situation (through senses, emotions, attention, space and social context).

I was born too late to make use of my own memories of experiencing the performance live in answering the question concerning *The Dead Class*. The event passes — what remains is its record. However, I do not treat the archives of *The Dead Class* as passive documentation. Rather, I see a possibility of a new aesthetic situation in its usage, which can also trigger participation in the spirit of Berleant. I believe that a new form of experience is possible in this case, which engages the senses, emotions and imagination, although on different principles than a ‘direct’ experience; that through an analysis of the performance’s documentation, I can still participate in it in a way that is no less complex. In this work, I will therefore analyse *The Dead Class* as a sensual and social experience, combining the perspective of Haraway’s situated knowledge with Berleant’s participatory aesthetics, recognizing that my body and emotions are equally viable tools of cognition, and that reception, even mediated, can be a legitimate area of research.

Another interpretative tool I draw on in the final chapters of the book is Roland Barthes's concept of myth as a second semiological chain.⁶ It serves to analyse *Wielopole, Wielopole* — a performance that occupies a special place in this book devoted to *The Dead Class*. I treat the two performances as a diptych, mutually complementary parts of a single whole, certain that only by viewing *The Dead Class* from the perspective of *Wielopole*... can we see the place the performance takes within Tadeusz Kantor's oeuvre, as well as what it sets in motion within it.

The nature of my work is, above all, historical and theatrical, with its starting point being detailed archival-documentary queries and research. I analyse the collected documents (taking into account the critique of sources) and propose their interpretation. This allows me to further examine the creative process, course and presentation of the performance after interpreting its message within a specific historical and theatrical context. In line with the traditions and contemporary achievements of theatre studies, in this research I use a variety of methods, including those developed within related fields: performance studies and performance anthropology, as well as adjacent ones: art history, literary studies and cultural studies.

⁶ See Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. The Noonday Press, 1991.

2.

THE PARADOX

In the case of *The Dead Class*, we encounter a paradox related to the issues of reliable description and analysis of the performance. Contrary to the commonly held belief, the Krakow-based artist's most eminent work, widely known and commented on many times both in Poland and around the world, is yet to receive a critical monographic study. The need for a comprehensive historical description of *The Dead Class* has been pointed out time and again.⁷ It has been repeatedly subjected to scientific analysis and interpretation, but usually as a part of more extensive reflections on the entirety or selected aspects of Kantor's theatre. Due to the sheer number of such works, it is impossible to list them all here. It is, however, worth mentioning the most interesting ones, which provide a new cognitive and interpretative quality — Katarzyna Fazan's *Projekty intymnego teatru śmierci. Wyspiański Leśmian Kantor* [*Intimate theatre of death projects. Wyspiański Leśmian Kantor*] (2009), as well as *Kantor. Non/Presence* (2019; English ed. 2024) and Grzegorz Niziołek's *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust* (2013; English ed. 2019).⁸ *The Dead Class* has often

⁷ See Niziołek, Grzegorz. *Polski teatr Zagłady* [The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust]. Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013, p. 411 [passage omitted from the English edition — TN]: 'The history of the various variants of *The Dead Class* still awaits a comprehensive documentation.'

⁸ Among English-language studies devoted to Tadeusz Kantor's theatre particular attention should be paid to the works of Michal Kobialka, including *Further on, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), a study that combines translations of Kantor's writings with critical analysis grounded in the theory of representation and memory. Also noteworthy is the collection *Theatermachine: Tadeusz Kantor in Context*, edited by Magda Romanska and Kathleen Cioffi (Northwestern University Press, 2020),

stood as the context for ruminations on other questions and issues, unrelated to theatrical matters.

Critical to my reflections is Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz's 1990 book, *The Dead Memory Machine: Tadeusz Kantor's 'Theatre of Death'*⁹ (English ed. 1994), which is the first and, so far, the only book providing a thorough analysis of *The Dead Class*. A close associate of Kantor and a long-serving director of Cricoteka, Pleśniarowicz writes about this performance chiefly in the context of the 'theatre of impossible presence'. He tackles 'clichés of a dead memory', 'absent history' and finally 'superfluous literature' in *The Dead Class*. He follows the course of the séance, analysing the 'spirals of return', 'poles of memory' and 'models of aphasia' revealed through the alternating 'rhythms of continuation and negation'. With all the novelty and insightful observation, the author, for the most part, utilises, repeats, and, therefore, sanctions Kantor's own language and method of description, at the same time introducing them into the space of scientific thought.

Nevertheless, now, fifty years after the performance's premiere, the work of Pleśniarowicz deserves a critical rereading. Most of the theses contained within remain valid, at times requiring some degree of clarification or supplementation. I am certain that the distance (generational, too) between the author and myself will allow me to see and outline certain matters in a slightly different light. However, I find in that study areas which, in my view, need to be presented from a completely distinct perspective than the one used by Pleśniarowicz; such as his thesis on the redundancy of literature in *The Dead Class*, or the related issue of an oft mentioned but never fully explained concept of 'playing with Witkiewicz', which Kantor was allegedly doing in most of his works.

One of the results of my collaboration with Cricoteka is a dozen or so released books, which I had the pleasure of co-authoring with Józef Chrobak. Most of them are very detailed timelines, providing in-

a multidisciplinary compendium of essays analysing Kantor's work from the perspectives of postdramatic theory, memory studies, and posthumanism.

⁹ Pleśniarowicz, Krzysztof. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora* [The Dead Memory Machine: Tadeusz Kantor's 'Theatre of Death']. Verba, 1990.

formation about events in the artist's life and activities on each date (mostly on a day-by-day basis). Records of the performances of each work, both in Poland and abroad, can be found there, together with numerous mentions of people in Kantor's circle and their activities, either witnessed or participated in by him, which naturally influenced him. Remarkable events from the cultural world are also noted. These timelines are an excellent guide to Kantor's very intense professional life. One of the volumes in the series is devoted exclusively to *The Dead Class*¹⁰ and will serve me as such a guide or a map of sorts to the history of that performance, at times confusing and difficult to reconstruct.

In a sense, Kantor's curse and great misfortune is that he wrote on both his own theatre and art in general at such length and so convincingly, that he effectively prevented others from critical reflection on his work. Of course, studies and analyses heralding a new perspective and even a complete separation from Kantor's language do exist. Most often, however, they end up flawlessly repeating that same language and resulting interpretations. The way out of this impasse, in my opinion, is to attempt to read and use Kantor's discourse with full awareness of its performativity and inherent persuasiveness. Then, to make this very persuasiveness and performativity a tool for examining, among others, the contemporary impact of *The Dead Class*. In other words, I propose a critical reading of *The Dead Class*, its deconstruction (as understood by Jacques Derrida),¹¹ an implementation of a process of

¹⁰ 'Umarła klasa'. *Seans Tadeusza Kantora 1975–1979* ['Dead Class'. Tadeusz Kantor's Séance, 1975–1979]. Edited by Józef Chrobak and Justyna Michalik. Cricoteka, 2011.

¹¹ By deconstruction I understand here not a method in the traditional sense — Derrida consistently rejected this understanding of the term — but rather a practice of reading-writing: the active production of meaning in response to the event of the text, which assumes that reading is always a performance, a singular and unrepeatable event of an encounter between the reader and the work. Derrida described this process as countersignature — the confirmation and simultaneous transformation of the author's signature by the signature of the reader. This concept will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7, *Un/necessary literature*. See: Burzyńska, Anna. *Dekonstrukcja, polityka i performatyka* [Deconstruction, Politics and Performativity]. Universitas, 2013.

intellectual and textual performance as a response to the experience of this play. Tracing (obviously to the extent possible) the process of creation, formation, and operation of the performance, combined with an attempt to simultaneously reflect on what was actually occurring on a performative level, as well as what occurs upon its analysis. This type of performative deconstruction practice was also utilised by Kantor, which I will attempt to present in this book.

One more methodological caveat needs to be included. The success and effectiveness of the research method outlined in this way, which is to lead to an attempt at a comprehensive presentation of the history and phenomenon of *The Dead Class*, requires treating the performance as a series of very specific stage productions, changing and evolving. Researchers very rarely, and commentators almost never specify which version of the play they are reflecting on, let alone which of its specific stagings, relying overwhelmingly on the two records most often used for this purpose: the text of the play as written by Kantor and its film recording by Andrzej Wajda from 1976.

Paradoxically, Kantor's score of the performance corresponds to a never-existent version of *The Dead Class*, as it is partly based on the premiere variant and partly on a later revision. The text, composed by Kantor on the basis of his notes and video recordings of the finished work at the express request of Denis Bablet, was completed only in 1981, so as many as six years after the play's premiere. In turn, the film directed by Wajda is essentially his own, extremely subjective vision of Kantor's work. This leads to a situation in which what is analysed or recalled is not the performance of *The Dead Class* (or rather its specific implementation), but its constructed image, a phantasm present in cultural memory.

On one hand, this is probably due to the specific and, unfortunately, still quite common approach to the research subject in theatre studies, which results in the fact that when writing about a work, a generalized synecdoche of a number of its stagings is what is most often actually being described. On the other hand, this state of affairs is also influenced by the lack of reliable and complete documentation of individual performances of *The Dead Class*.

A way out of this situation may be to adopt a perspective determined by the concept of an affective archive, which assumes that there is

not so much one form or variant of a theatrical work, but that there are as many of them as the work's recipients, as each produces their own shape of the work. In an affective archive, we are not dealing with an ordered and finite set, but with programmatic instability, multiplicity, and the resulting diversity.

Giulia Palladini, a curator, researcher, and co-creator of the international performative project *Affective Archives*,¹² says that a theatre performance is an event that does not disappear, but leaves traces. It is an archive in constant motion, within which the event is constantly transformed. To explain what this process is, Palladini uses the example of an attempt to reconstruct a past performance based on remaining archival materials. She claims that the result of such action is only a 'narrative fantasy lacking the original',¹³ constructed here and now, by a specific researcher in a specific situation and context. In fact, it never had this original because, following this line of reasoning, as researchers, too, 'we only have access to what is subject to constant transformation'.¹⁴

An archive', explains Palladini later on, 'recreates, in a sense, a theatrical situation that consists of a meeting. It is always directed at someone, aims to be seen, demands to be received. Theatre does not archive itself. It exists thanks to several subjectivities responsible for its archiving: the artists, the audience and those who discover the performance a few years later, creating a new archive'.¹⁵

This type of 'continuity in discontinuity' is the essence of the 'affective archive' postulated by the researcher, which is subject to constant transformation, which has never been and will never be just one resolved whole. This makes the category of affect a full-fledged tool of

¹² Palladini, Giulia, Marco Pustianaz, and Andrea Sacchi. *Affective Archives. A Catalogue*. EM—Edizioni Mercurio, 2010.

¹³ Semenowicz, Dorota. '#Afektywne archiwum. Rozmowa z Giulią Palladini'. *Dwutygodnik.com*, 2013, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/4809--afektywne-archiwum.html>. Accessed 17 November 2025.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

cognition. The essence of the affective archive is that it is unstable, disordered and dominated by emotional tonality. And that is where its strength lies.¹⁶

¹⁶ I write more extensively about the concept of the affective archive in the context of Kantor's documentation in the article 'Between Memory and Affect: Tadeusz Kantor's Affective Archive' (forthcoming).

This study does not draw on the proposals of Rebecca Schneider (*Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Routledge, 2011) or Diana Taylor (*The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003) — two key concepts in the field of archiving and performance. Both scholars are referenced, among others, by Dorota Sosnowska in her article devoted to *The Dead Class* ('Żywy teatr, martwe oko, umarli w piwnicy i buty trupa – wokół Umarłej klasy Tadeusza Kantora w zapisie filmowym Andrzeja Wajdy'. *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, nos. 87–88, 2014) and by Dorota Sajewska in her concept of 'body-as-archive' (*Necroperformance: Cultural Reconstructions of the War Body*. Diaphanes, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2019). In my research perspective, approach towards the archive of *The Dead Class* is deliberately grounded in a different tradition: on the one hand, in Palladini's concept of the affective archive, focused on the instability and noncentrality of the archive as a structure without an original; on the other hand, in the Polish reflection on theatrical documentation developed by Zbigniew Raszewski. The most intense period of this reflection coincided with the creation of Kantor's performance and the start of the process of building his archive (the 1970s), which makes it a particularly apt historical and methodological context.

3.

‘SEASIDE. IN A SMALL VILLAGE...’

Józef Chrobak’s timeline devoted to *The Dead Class* opens with a rather curious entry stating that from 4 January to 5 February the 13th Exhibition of the Krakow Group took place at the Krzysztofory Gallery. Exhibited were works by Jerzy Bereś, Julian Jończyk, Alfred Lenica, Jadwiga Maziarska, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Andrzej Pawłowski, Marek Piasecki, Erna Rosenstein, Karol Pustelnik, Jerzy Skarżyński, Jonasz Stern, Janina Kraupe, Bogusław Schaeffer, Jerzy Tchórzewski, Jan Tarasin, Daniel Mróz. Tadeusz Kantor presented a piece titled *29 Days*,¹⁷ a stretcher frame divided into squares corresponding to the days of the exhibition, successively filled in by the artist with appropriate entries. In his commentary, Kantor explained (and, in a way, justified) this work by writing that ‘one should, above all, count on wholly unexpected solutions resulting from being constantly reminded of this extraordinary object, forcing unsettling functions. Whether it is an expectation of what’s coming... grasping... or moving forward... or a memory, attempting to hold on to what is continuously being lost forever’. This starting entry for a timeline of Kantor’s work may be treated as purely utilitarian; a structurally excellent, relatively neutral opening of a certain narrative. It can, however, be seen as a deliberate, although perhaps not entirely conscious, action on the editor’s part, drawing attention to some important issues regarding *The Dead Class*.

What is the significance of Kantor taking part in another exhibition of the Krakow Group? Nothing much, it would seem; at the time, he was already the Group’s long-standing member. His project was fiercely conceptual, emphasising the processual nature of a work of art and almost equating it with life itself, a view that stood in perfect

¹⁷ ‘Umarła klasa’. *Seans...*, p. 17.

harmony with his previous interests and artistic practice, as well as reflecting the prevailing tendencies in art at the time, both in Poland and abroad. A discerning reader of the calendar is already aware, however, that soon Kantor will abandon the ways of the prevalent avant-garde, reject the belief in the annexation of reality and turn to completely different subjects, primarily towards death and memory 'attempting to hold on to what is continuously being lost forever'.¹⁸ Thus, the entry takes on a tone that is both slightly ironic and slightly prophetic.

The note on the Krakow Group's exhibition, which opens the timeline devoted to Kantor's most important work, has yet another meaning. It shows him not as an isolated artist, *un artiste maudit*, a lone genius that many would like to see him as even today, but someone with a defined place, operating within a specific society, in various relations (also artistic ones) with others. It should be noted that Kantor was a production manager (as we would currently say) in the Krakow Group Artistic Association, where he conducted his theatrical ventures for several years, and the Association handled all the formal and organisational matters.

In a sense, that entry also draws attention to the fact that the creation of *The Dead Class* was a process in which the mature artist¹⁹ was not alone. We may assume that the preparatory work for the performance (different from the process of specific rehearsals) began much earlier, before the period covered by the timeline. In fact, it is difficult to identify a specific starting point, some kind of inciting incident, which we could say with certainty lies at the foundation of *The Dead Class*. Such an event simply does not exist; if it did, it would certainly have been recorded by Józef Chrobak, known for his accuracy and inquisitiveness. He established and published numerous details regarding that venture. He noted, for one, that on 8 January 1975, '150,000 Polish Zloty have been marked for the premiere of Cricot 2's new play, initially announced to be S. I. Witkiewicz's *Tumor Brainiowicz* [of which 60,000 Zloty was intended for the Association's impersonal account]'. In the preliminary estimates (from the end of 1974), Kantor planned

¹⁸ Hniedziewicz, Małgorzata. 'Plastyka. Grupa Krakowska.' *Kultura*, no. 9, 1 March 1975, p. 13, quoted in *ibid*.

¹⁹ Kantor celebrated his 60th birthday on 6 April 1975.

to make 12 women's and 3 men's costumes, 12 heads and 24 hands of children's manikins, and '6 old-type school desks, wooden, foldable, easy to transport'. Two days later, on 10 February, 'Kantor informs the Management Board of the Krakow Group that the theatre company is already put together and meeting for rehearsals'. On 12 March, he confirms that 'the theatre's rehearsals are carrying on as planned'.²⁰

In March, too, 'child manikins were completed ("rehearsal props") along with four makeshift desks shortly after'.²¹ The presence of these at an early stage of the preparations is confirmed by Andrzej Wełmiński:

One of the first objects to be present for the rehearsals were the desks. They determined the actors' behaviour, their performance, and placed them within a specific structure. The stage space was virtually limited only to them and a tiny bit of surrounding floor, separated from the rest of the world by a rope suspended from posts, similar to the one used to fence off the more valuable museum exhibits. The desks stood in the corner, so the entire action of the play was pushed to the side and turned unofficial, one might even say degraded.²²

In April, during the meeting of the Krakow Group, 'Kantor discusses the work of the theatre company and announces intensive preparations for the premiere of a new play in June, along with frequent rehearsals which may interfere with the exhibition program of the Gallery'.²³ This announcement even resulted in a temporary closure of the neighbouring Krzysztofory café until September.²⁴

²⁰ 'Umarła klasa'. *Seans...*, p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²² Wełmiński, Andrzej. 'Początki Umarłej klasy'. In *Wojtek Sperl. Fotografie z seansu Tadeusza Kantora 'Umarła klasa' 1975–1976* [Wojtek Sperl. Photographs from Tadeusz Kantor's Séance 'Dead Class' 1975–1976]. Edited by Józef Chrobak. Cricoteka, 2007, p. 7.

²³ 'Umarła klasa'. *Seans...*, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Rehearsals took place in the gallery space. The gallery and the cafe occupied two adjacent cellar chambers connected by quite wide passages with a small vestibule where the stairs from the ground floor ended. The entrance to the gallery had no doors, only a grate.

Kantor did not focus solely on preparations for the performance, but was occupied just as intensely by his painting and exhibitive ventures. During that time, Kantor's two major solo exhibitions took place. In April, 'Rezerwat ludzki' ['Human reserve'] opened in Desa Gallery.²⁵ In May and June, Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz presented the renowned 'Emballages' retrospective,²⁶ later on (from October 1975 to January 1976) made available in Stockholm's Galleriet Kulturhuset as an exhibition titled 'Tadeusz Kantor. Emballages'.²⁷

At the end of June, at the meeting of the Krakow Group, Kantor announces that rehearsals for the new premiere will take place during the holidays, and in the first half of September the theatre will show a part of the performance during the AICA Critics' Meeting.²⁸ At the next meeting of the Association, on September 10, Kantor clarified that 'the theatre will aim to hold a premiere, which should take place in November or a little earlier. The title of the play has not yet been determined.'²⁹ The previously announced performance for AICA was to take place the following day. And indeed, as noted in the timeline, on 11 September, in Krzysztofory Gallery, an excerpt of *The Dead Class* (still in rehearsal and under the working title of *Tumor Brainiowicz*) was presented. The audience consisted of approximately 140 participants of the 11th AICA International Congress. It was at this time, in

²⁵ The following series of works were presented: *Nosorożce* [Rhinoceros], *Ludzie-Atrapy* [People-Dummies], *Ludzie-Ambalaze* [People-Emballages], *Wędrowcy i ich bagaże* [Wanderers and their luggage], *Maniacy i ich ceremonie* [Maniacs and their ceremonies], *Maszyny i przedmioty* [Machines and objects], *Rysunki* [Drawings], *Gwasze* [Gouaches], *Collages* and *Emballages*, over 100 items in total.

²⁶ On 25 May, as part of 'Niedziela w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi' [Sunday at the Museum of Art in Lodz], right after the opening of his exhibit, Kantor conducted an experimental lesson (a group motion presentation) with pupils of the higher grades of the 19 stycznia XXIX LO in Lodz.

²⁷ Consisting of 15 series of works, the exhibition was a very demanding undertaking, undoubtedly consuming the artist's time and energy. A full list of the exhibits can be found in 'Umarła klasa'. *Seans...*, pp. 24–26.

²⁸ 'Umarła klasa'. *Seans...*, p. 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the materials of the Congress, that Kantor published for the first time *The Dead Class Manifesto*.³⁰

Jacek Woźniakowski, who was in the audience that day, wrote in *Tygodnik Powszechny*:

In the Krzysztofory basement, at Kantor's, a Schulz-Witkiewicz-Gombrowicz-esque performance, men in bowler hats, dressed in all-black (again with that funerary elegance), return to the school nightmare, each under the yoke of his own childhood; but the action does not rise. The scenes, rhythms and music return with persistent refrains, drawing the viewer into a grotesque circle of obsession (the tradition of the final dance from *The Wedding*³¹ lives on!); the risk lies in that it is enough for this wheel to rotate for one second too long, and it starts to act as a centrifuge, spinning the viewer away. Fortunately, this is counteracted by Kantor himself, whose role as the continuously present director is a display of acting brilliance, a commentary and a kind of binding agent for the performance.³²

This is essentially the first review of *The Dead Class* to be published in press, even before the official premiere, which quite accurately outlines its aesthetics and atmosphere while pointing towards the influence of Witkiewicz, Schulz and Gombrowicz,³³ as well as anticipating the crux of Kantor's latest work.

On 20 October, the Krakow Group obtains consent from the Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Events in Krakow for the Cricot Theatre 2's staging of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's

³⁰ Ibid. In November 1975, the same text was published by the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw as *Manifest Teatru Śmierci* [The Theatre of Death Manifesto].

³¹ *The Wedding* is a 1901 symbolist drama written by Stanisław Wyspiański, full of ghosts and demons, in which he brews a powerful distillate of Polish identity and soul.

³² Woźniakowski, Jacek. 'AICA z przyległościami'. *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 40, 5 October 1975, pp. 4–5.

³³ In the program for *The Dead Class*, Kantor noted that Witkiewicz and Schulz were among the participants of the 'séance', without including Gombrowicz. Only later did he 'admit' to the otherwise obvious inspirations of his work.

play *Tumor Brainiowicz* and a few weeks later, on 15 November 1975, at 10.30 p.m., in the Krzysztofory Gallery, the first version of Tadeusz Kantor's 'dramatic séance', *The Dead Class* premieres, with the following cast: Woman with the Mechanical Cradle (Maria Stangret-Kantor), Somnambulist Prostitute (Zofia Kalińska), Old Man with a Bicycle (Andrzej Wełmiński), Woman Behind the Window (Maria Górecka), Stranger (Bogdan Grzybowicz), Old Man in the Loo (Mira Rychlicka), Old Man Exhibitionist (Zbigniew Bednarczyk), Old Man Podophilist (Roman Siwulak), Ordinary Old Man (Wojciech Łodyński), Old Man Absent from the First Desk (Lila Krasicka), Old Man Absent from the Last Desk (Jan Książek), Old Man Repeater (Zbigniew Gos-tomski), Beadle in the Past Perfect Tense (Kazimierz Mikulski) and Charwoman (Stanisław Rychlicki).

Likely no one at the time realised that a new chapter in both Polish and world theatre was about to begin.

On the occasion of the performance's premiere, a poster and a playbill were released (sold for 20 Złoty), both designed by Tadeusz Kantor. *The Theatre of Death* manifesto was also available for purchase. The materials accompanying *The Dead Class* are of great importance because, among other reasons, it is in them that Kantor defined and explained the principles of his art and the artistic ideas implemented through it. The exact terms used within these materials will keep appearing later on, including in numerous critical works describing and analysing his work. In addition to the manifesto mentioned above, *Mały Manifest* [*A Small Manifesto*], written three years later, and two texts on the genesis of *The Dead Class*: an essay titled *1955–1957* and *School class* [*1971 or 1972. Seaside*] are also significant for the Theatre of Death.³⁴ The first text identifies *The Dead Class* and, effectively, the Theatre of Death in general as one of the many 'discoveries' made throughout the development of Cricot 2. The second text is much more interesting. In it, Kantor describes in a poetically suggestive way the moment of supposed epiphany he experienced somewhere by the

³⁴ See Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz's 'Editor's Note' in Kantor, Tadeusz. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984. Tom drugi pism.* Compiled by K. Pleśniarowicz. Cricoteka—Ossolineum, 2004, p. 477.

Polish seaside one summer while looking through a dirty windowpane into the interior of an old, abandoned classroom out in the country. It was then that he was to 'somewhat quite vividly' become aware of the 'existence of a memory', an essential formal element of the entire Theatre of Death.

The question that arises naturally after reading this passage is: did the described event really take place? This fragment, frequently invoked and quoted in a multitude of contexts, is so suggestive that it somewhat invalidates the query. It turns out, however, that already at the outset of a new stage of his career Kantor performs his own mythology, to be later bolstered with a number of similar, performative tales. The search and research efforts aimed at locating the described school did not yield the intended results. Paradoxically, they unearthed other possible inspirations and events which could be related to the origins of *The Dead Class*. Michał Rogalski, while conducting research on the *Panoramic Sea Happening* (1967), was led to a school in Bielkowo near Osieki:

The first concept that Kantor considered was to prepare a happening inspired by the space of a school classroom, with Wiesław Borowski as a teacher. This idea was inspired by one of the trips around the area, during which the artist came across the building of a former German one-form school, probably located in Bielkowo near Osieki. Kantor abandoned this idea and started drawing up a happening which was to finally take place on the beach in Łazy, a seaside town about 3–4 kilometres away from Osieki.³⁵

Jerzy Bereś claimed that this was when the concept of *The Dead Class* was born:

...it happened when we reached a closed-down school, and Tadeusz, just like that... We looked through the window into that kind of a school, and I even think that was... [...] There were empty desks because it was the holidays, and Tadeusz's first idea was to hold this kind of a school-inspired

³⁵ *Panoramyczny Happening Morski i Tadeusz Kantor w latach 1964–1968* [Panoramic Sea Happening and Tadeusz Kantor, 1964–1968]. Edited by Józef Chrobak, Michał Rogalski, and Marek Wilk. Cricoteka, 2008, pp. 15–16.

happening. [...] I think that it was generally all born at that moment. It was the first such idea. Wiesio Borowski didn't really want to approve, but he said, fine, I can be a teacher and call them all out, and the pupils were to be members of the plein-air workshop: artists and art historians. That's why I say it was a sort of the earliest vision of *The Dead Class*.³⁶

Yet another story is told by Andrzej Wełmiński, who points out that *The Dead Class* may have had its origins in the so-called 'Hel symposium', arranged in 1971 by the Foksal Gallery.³⁷ It was a meeting devoted to ongoing topics and problems of contemporary art, primarily of conceptual art, in which participated artists and critics associated with the Foksal Gallery. Wełmiński adds:

The subject was the latest currents and trends in global art. Art was becoming more and more visibly detached from objectivity, from matter, and moved towards the area of pure thought, concept, idea. Impossible, conceptual, land art, 'art and language' were concepts that had been thrown around on the beach, in the terraces of seaside cafés, but above all while sitting on tiny chairs at tiny tables, having previously carefully hung outerwear on a hanger with a toadstool, a cherry or a duck. A local kindergarten was assigned to the symposium participants as a debate venue. Not a proper school just yet, but...³⁸

There is also a known anecdote claiming that the initial stage preparations for the concept of *The Dead Class* took place during the rehearsals for *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (1973), at the time still under the working title of *Lekcja gramatyki, czyli 40 Mandelbaumów* [*The Grammar Lesson, or 40 Mandelbaums*]. During one of the first rehearsals of the play, the actors were sat in rows of wooden desks, with their work focused on a grammatical dissection of Witkiewicz's text and subjecting it to the art of syllabification.³⁹ Ultimately, Kantor's

³⁶ Bereś, Jerzy. *Panoramiczny Happening Morski...*, p. 53.

³⁷ The symposium took place in September 1971 in Kuźnica, on the Hel Peninsula, on the shore of the Baltic Sea.

³⁸ Wełmiński, Andrzej. 'Początki...'

³⁹ This is the story included by Kantor in the score of *The Dead Class*. See *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, pp. 73–74.

play took its name from that drama, and the grammar lesson scene was transformed into the Mandelbaum drills, to which audience members, dressed in Jewish smocks and hats, were subjected on orders of the lead Mandelbaum (Zbigniew Gotowski).⁴⁰ Visually, this image directly corresponds to the aesthetics of *The Dead Class*.

All these accounts confirm that the impulses and inspirations used by Kantor in the process of composing *The Dead Class* arose in various circumstances, and that the process itself was spread out over time and constituted a collective work. Andrzej Wełmiński, when asked directly what the rehearsals for the performance were like,⁴¹ admitted that the work on *The Dead Class* was a result of various, sometimes even spontaneous, meetings and conversations that Kantor had for a variety of reasons with people around him. He enjoyed having such talks, especially with younger people, treating them as an opportunity to collect and verify or confront his own thoughts, ideas and plans with those of others. This was the case here as well. Wełmiński specifically recalls one such conversation, noting that he may not remember the exact words or course of the discussion, but he is certain that it took place and was a direct impetus for the new performance.

The conversation concerned the numerous theatre festivals taking place in Poland and worldwide. Someone observed that most of these events were about the young, made for the young and organised by the young. Another person therefore proposed, as a joke, creating an old people’s theatre — but ones old enough to have passed away already. Kantor apparently took a liking to this idea.

Confirmation of this version of events can be found in the entry from the director’s notebook, included as part of the score of *The Dead Class*, in which Kantor considers the ‘inversion method’ used in the performance:

⁴⁰ I write more extensively on this happening in *Idea bardzo konsekwentna. Happening i teatr happeningowy Tadeusza Kantora* [A Very Consistent Idea. Tadeusz Kantor’s Happenings and Happening-based Theatre]. Universitas, Krakow, 2015.

⁴¹ Based on a conversation with Andrzej and Teresa Wełmiński, which took place in their home in Sobolowo near Krakow on 1 June 2025.

The actors cannot play children's roles. They must either be old themselves or play the roles of old people who return to their childhood state in an unhealthy way. My unrealised plans from a few years ago, when the spirit of student and youth theatres reigned supreme, helped me solve this problem; when the admiration of the human body reached the level of ritual, initiation, celebration and finally quackery. At that point, contrary to the general drive, I decided to start a company of old people. Now this has somehow naturally coincided with the problems mentioned above. It became clear to me that the roles of children had to be played by old people. [...] The all-but-dead elderly, already one foot in the grave.⁴²

And so, contrary to common belief about Kantor and his working method, the preparatory period for the staging of *The Dead Class* was characterised by community and collectivity, despite the fact that Kantor would later end up appropriating the solutions and ideas developed through co-being, co-thinking and co-operation.

Kantor refuses to participate in the universal avant-garde of the 1970s. Perhaps he feels tired, perhaps he cannot keep up with the ever-changing ideas and trends, perhaps he is not particularly interested in them. Or maybe he is simply afraid of competition, aware that, at his age, he is no longer capable of certain things? Or maybe this is a completely skewed view of the situation and Kantor is, in fact, still part of the avantgarde — only no one knows it yet, since the humanities are only beginning to take an interest in new subjects?

Welmiński admits:

We have already talked about the dystrophic processes, all the irreversible changes taking place in living matter which are a function of time, we have talked about the impermanence of systems and the organisation of matter, about the decay and the rot. Schulz, Gombrowicz, Maria Janion with her recently published *Colloquia Gdańskie, Romantyzm, rewolucja, marksizm* [*Gdańsk Colloquia, Romanticism, Revolution, Marxism*]⁴³ and *Man's Con-*

⁴² Kantor, Tadeusz. *Partytura 'Umarłej klasy'* [Score of 'The Dead Class']. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, pp. 81–82.

⁴³ Janion, Maria. *Colloquia Gdańskie, Romantyzm, rewolucja, marksizm* [*Colloquia Gdańskie, Romanticism, Revolution, Marxism*]. Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1972.

cern with Death by Arnold Toynbee⁴⁴ were works which introduced new, unknown concepts and terminologies, but above all they confirmed another, different direction. Distinct from the official avant-garde, distinct from the contemporary mass youth movements and their proclaimed ideals of youthfulness, vitality and modernity. We felt that we were on the right track.⁴⁵

In *The Theatre of Death* manifesto, Kantor writes about the new foundations of his theatre:

We must reconstitute the essential meaning of the AUDIENCE — ACTOR relationship. WE MUST RESTORE THE ORIGINAL SHOCKING FORCE OF THE MOMENT WHEN A MAN (ACTOR) APPEARED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FRONT OF OTHER MEN (AUDIENCE), EXACTLY LIKE ANY OF US AND AT THE SAME TIME INFINITELY STRANGE, BEYOND THE BARRIER WHICH CANNOT BE OVERCOME.⁴⁶

Such a ‘metaphysical shock’ is caused primarily by the meeting of ‘those who had remained on this side’ with someone who is ‘DEAD.’⁴⁷

Answering a question about the idea of the Theatre of Death, Kantor said:

The manifesto was born in 1975 and constituted the starting point for *The Dead Class*. I don’t go to the theatre very often, since deep down I hate it, but one night during a performance I suddenly felt that the actor who was walking towards the audience, from darkness to light, was actually coming from death. I understood at that moment that, in art, life

⁴⁴ Toynbee, Arnold. *Man’s Concern with Death*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1968. A philosophical-historical treatise in which Toynbee explores how people of different cultures and eras have understood death, the afterlife, and the meaning of existence, analyzing ideas, beliefs, and customs related to death — from primitive tribes to modern Western civilisation.

⁴⁵ Wełmiński, Andrzej. ‘Początki...’

⁴⁶ Kantor, Tadeusz. *The Theatre of Death*. Translated by Piotr Graff. Galeria Foksal, 1975.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

can only be expressed through the absence of life, rejecting Brecht's didacticism and Shakespeare's mirror, and choosing a metaphysical shock. Death is man's most tangible and closest reality. When we see a dead person on the street, hit by a car, we experience a two-fold feeling of curiosity and disgust. This man, now dead, stopped being anonymous; death individualised him, made him transcendent. This mystery, at once so simple and so profound, is exactly what I want to express in my theatre.⁴⁸

The consequence of these assumptions was the presence of the manikin in Kantor's theatre, at once a model for the living actor and their perverse double, setting off an almost endless spiral of meanings and references.

Kantor did not conceal his tendency to draw on, and to be inspired by others. However, these references always had to be justified, resulting from an ongoing artistic or intellectual process. He would often state that it was not so much the influences themselves that were important, but the reasons behind them. Critics of his work have long been aware of this, but I believe Kantor's name has never been associated with the ideas of Maria Janion. Reading her book mentioned by Welmiński makes us realise the importance of this omission. *The Gdańsk Colloquia...*, published in 1972, raises themes and issues that later appeared in *The Dead Class* and which would be considered innovative and revolutionary by its audience.

Janion's book is a collection of lectures and essays that examine the connections between Romanticism, revolution and Marxist thought, mainly within the context of Polish culture and history. The author proves that Romanticism is not just a collection of lofty poems but a powerful ideological movement which combined art with politics and revolutionary aims. It analyses revolution as a myth and a cultural experience; not merely a political event, but something that shapes a collective identity. If we look at this publication in the context of Kantor's work as its serious inspiration, the book's part four seems the most intriguing, as it concerns, as the title suggests, 'Bandits and ghosts'. Ja-

⁴⁸ Odóñez, Marcos. 'Tadeusz Kantor: Las culturas española y polaca, unidas por la Muerte.' *El Correo Catalán*, 9 March 1983.

nion writes about Romantic artists fascinated by the world of darkness, death and night, crossing the boundaries of morality and convention, sometimes debased by dark obsessions. This type of poetics is suited to an eerie atmosphere, a duality of existence, and the presence of 'doppelgängers'. A special place in the researcher's considerations is occupied by German literature and culture, which uses the demonic as a curtain (screen) between reality and the world of imagination, of the supernatural. The author states that this convention functions as a moral mask, allowing one to show immorality concealed by mystery and terror, while at the same time exposing socio-religious hypocrisy. A special place in her considerations is occupied by Expressionism and expressionist film which she sees, following Siegfried Kracauer, as a diagnostic tool for collective psychology, national psychology, in this case — the psychology of Germany before the rise of Hitler. According to this idea, it was a response both to the trauma of the First World War and to the contemporary crisis of values, resulting in the portrayal of the outside world in terms of decay, fear and helplessness in the face of society, technology and fate. And while Kantor's interest in expressionism is known, no one has yet considered neither the causes of the expressionist style seen in *The Dead Class*, nor how that aesthetic affects the work's reception.

4.

THE NON/EXISTENT ARCHIVE

An analysis of a theatre performance that occupies an important place in the history of Polish theatre, yet which one did not have the chance to see live, poses many research and methodological problems. The first step in such a situation is always to collect as many archival materials as possible, on the basis of which, at least in theory, it would be possible to reconstruct the performance. Ultimately, this means creating one's own version of it, both for the purpose of the research and as its consequence. What is most often sought are previously unknown records that might shed new light on matters already widely known and recognised.

In the case of a work as significant as *The Dead Class*, one might assume that its archives form a very extensive and diverse collection, as exceptional as the performance it concerns. After all, Kantor, who was very particular about archiving and documentation, took care to maintain an utmost-extensive and detailed (in terms of the creative process as well) archive of his work, freely available to all. At this point, it is necessary to determine what this archive and, consequently, the archive of *The Dead Class* actually comprises.

The survival of Kantor's efforts was to be safeguarded by Cricoteka, which he founded in the 1980s as a centre for the documentation of his art. Designed and set up in detail and with great care as a 'living archive', it was intended to ensure the continuation of the memory of this 'artist of memory' in the minds and imaginations of generations to come. Initially fulfilling its role well, over time it became — especially after Kantor's death — its own caricature, exposed to the influence of affect by an array of more or less conscious acts of appropriation and exclusive relations.⁴⁹ The Kantor's archive can (and

⁴⁹ I write more on this subject in 'Between Memory and Affect: Tadeusz Kantor's Affective Archive' (forthcoming).

should) therefore be thought of in slightly different categories, going beyond the spatial and institutional framework. That is because the documents and other materials related to his work are located in many different locations, only somewhat systematised and often inconspicuous. They belong to larger archival collections in possession of institutions and private individuals (researchers of Kantor's legacy), or they are found in arbitrary, unexpected locations, both in Poland and abroad. Such dispersed, discontinuous, fragmentary and internally dynamic 'Kantor leftovers' are creations of a decidedly performative nature.⁵⁰ Activated at the moment of their use and arranged in unorthodox constellations, they sometimes reveal to us surprising areas of research potential.

A theatrical archive or documentation, according to principles put forward by Zbigniew Raszewski, ought to be used by researchers primarily to reconstruct the work, as reconstruction is the foremost duty of a theatre historian. By 'theatrical work', Raszewski understood staging, or the artistic conception of a work realised during performances i.e. individual presentations.⁵¹ When it comes to theatrical documentation, the scholar distinguished two basic types of archival material: process records and product records. The first category includes documents created before the premiere for the exclusive use of the theatre during rehearsals and performances: director's, stage manager's and prompter's copies, as well as set designs, sheet music, and so on. The second category includes documents created after the opening performance, which either testify to its reception or shape it; this includes

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Czarska, Karolina. 'Performatywność archiwum Tadeusza Kantora.' In *Performatywność reprezentacji: widzialne/niewidzialne* [Performativity of Representation: Visible/Invisible]. Edited by Karolina Czarska, Joanna Jopek, and Anna Sieroń. Księgarnia Akademicka, 2013. I wrote on this subject myself in 'Performatywny wymiar Multipartu Tadeusza Kantora', *Forum Poetyki*, nos. 33–34, 2023.

⁵¹ Raszewski, Zbigniew. 'Theater Documentation Past and Present'. *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1991 (Translated by Maciej Mahler, 2023), <https://czasopisma.ispan.pl/index.php/pt/article/view/1510/1029>. Accessed 16 September 2025.

press materials, reviews, descriptions, personal accounts, together with photographic, phonographic and film documentation.⁵²

What kind of documentation is available regarding *The Dead Class* and what does its nature tell us about the performance itself? The most prized objects in Cricoteka's archive are undoubtedly the original school desks (the ones used in the performance), which constituted in effect the entire set design, as well as the manikins of the children and the Beadle, which, among other props and costumes, have acquired artwork status and are therefore exhibited both domestically and abroad.⁵³ The archive also contains photographs of costume and set designs, allowing one to trace their creative evolution to some extent, as well as photographs of subsequent (but not all) performances of *The Dead Class*, grouped under the photographers' surnames. There are also recordings of the performance and of the music and sounds used within it (Kantor utilised sound recordings to enhance the acoustic effect of a given sequence or scene). What undoubtedly distinguishes the Cricoteka collection is a trove of the performance's reviews, made available as digital files grouped in fifty-six folders, containing from a few to a dozen or so reviews from a given year and location (some folders additionally include Polish translations of selected reviews). Informations on *The Dead Class* can also be found in documentary films and in interviews conducted with Kantor in various circumstances (sometimes constituting an essential part of these materials, sometimes appearing only as brief mentions). A key part of the collection is, finally, the memoirs and testimonies of actors and others involved in the creation and subsequent run of *The Dead Class*, as well as those of audience members, including researchers and interpreters of Kantor's

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Over time, while the show was still in production, Kantor created several other works closely related to the concept of *The Dead Class*. These included the installation *School Class — a closed work*, first prepared for a 1983 exhibition in Paris, revised and supplemented with new elements before reaching its final version in 1985; for exhibition purposes were also created an installation *Children at the Desks from "The Dead Class"* (1989) and several versions of the sculpture *A Boy at a Desk from "The Dead Class"*.

work. An important, perhaps crucial, portion of the archive comprises theoretical texts written by the artist (expounding the idea of the Theatre of Death⁵⁴), and the play's score; let us add that all were published during his lifetime.

An analysis of Cricoteka's archival collection dedicated to *The Dead Class* shows that practically (with few exceptions), it does not contain 'process records', using Raszewski's terminology, gathering primarily 'product records'. One may get the impression that this is a conscious and intentional omission, and that, when preparing and selecting his archive, Kantor deliberately did not include material from the process of creating his most important theatrical work.

An example of what a potential collection of documents related to the work on *The Dead Class* might look like is provided by digital copies of two unrealised graphic projects found at Cricoteka.⁵⁵ In one, as the title suggests, we see Two Figures — it is unclear whether they are boys or old men. The characters remain fused in an unprecedented

⁵⁴ Kantor published a selection of theoretical texts in each performance's multilingual programs. 'For almost every tour, a program was published, often in Krakow, always containing the same texts [...]. Above all, it was the cast — or more precisely, the author's emphasis on the duality of the world of the performance ("Actors and Characters") and a list of its sequences ("Content"). Both of these texts appeared in two fundamentally different versions, associated with two iterations of the performance — from 1975 and 1977. There were also numerous variations of the first text, as the cast of the second version often had to change for different tours.' Alongside them, Kantor 'would also include three of his own commentaries: "Klasa szkolna [Na ostatnim zapomnianym skrawku naszej pamięci]" ["School Class (On the Last Forgotten Stretch of Our Memory)"]", "Ostrzeżenia" ["Warnings"], and "Postacie Umarłej Klasy" ["Characters of *The Dead Class*"]. These commentaries were often reprinted in Polish and foreign periodicals, as well as various selections of Kantor's writings published abroad.' See Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz's 'Editor's Note' in Kantor, Tadeusz. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, p. 479.

⁵⁵ Original copies can be found in Muzeum Górnośląskie in Bytom, see Tadeusz Kantor. *Zbiory publiczne* [Tadeusz Kantor. Public Collections], edited by Anna Halczak. Cricoteka, 2003, p. 206.

union, an everlasting joining of hands, or rather whole arms. The figure on the right is triumphantly holding a hat (a bowler hat?) in his raised hand, and both figures are walking in either the same or opposite directions. Perhaps it is an outline of an unrealised idea, or a drawn variation on the concept for the performance (the signature suggests 1975 as the date of the work's creation, which supports this theory).

The second project is equally intriguing. It presents a 'Tiny Entertainment Machine' (as the ironic title suggests), a rather simple yet brutal construction that allows for ingenious torture, evoking the image of human flesh being passed through a grinder on one hand and roasted on a grill on the other. The project forms part of a collection of torture machines in Kantor's theatre, of which the 'Family Machine' (a combination of a stirrups table and a medieval torture device) is especially prominent in *The Dead Class*. The sketch illustrates how Kantor incorporated violence and brutality into his work, almost every time neutralised by the simplicity or peculiar banality of each construction, often reminiscent of childish, infantile toys, as is the case here. 'It should be noted, by the way,' Kantor wrote, 'that in this theatre all psychological and biological processes are usually "reified" in a scandalous way. This is usually done using various types of "Machines"; rather childishly primitive, with negligible technical worth but extensive imaginative powers.'⁵⁶

An opportunity to become acquainted with the process of creating *The Dead Class* is provided to some extent by the score composed by Kantor, in which he claims can be found selected fragments from his director's notebook used during the rehearsals. Raszewski emphasised a score's importance and particular gravity as early as 1970:

Director's score should undoubtedly be considered one of the most important records of a theatrical work. Until documentary films began to be made, a score was the only way to present the general outline of a performance as a distilled, easily readable synopsis. It did not lose

⁵⁶ Kantor. 'Postacie Umarłej klasy'. *Teatr Śmierci, Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, p. 35. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Kantor's texts are by Mikołaj Kosiński.

any of its usefulness after film, even once it adopted colour and sound, became more widely-used. It does not seem at all likely that, in the future, theatres will decide to give up compiling such records, which allow for the study of a theatrical work in any place, at any time and in any manner. Until a new kind of film is invented that can be contemplated at home and, additionally, in a way that allows for taking notes on its margins, printed director's scores will certainly continue to arouse the interest of theatre artists, theatre lovers and theatre researchers. When it comes to past performances, the director's score seems to be the most appropriate form for a full reconstruction as carried out by a theatre historian.⁵⁷

Notably, Raszewski makes a clear distinction between a director's copy and a director's score, drawing the distinction on the basis of their intended use. The director's copy is 'a manuscript [...] used for work during the preparatory period and later on during performances',⁵⁸ while the edited and published score 'appeals to the reader's imagination rather than to the expertise of a stage manager or stagehand'; through it, the director 'addresses [...] a viewer wanting to recall his work, a reader who has never seen it, not his collaborators'.⁵⁹ Raszewski also noted that, in the case of a particularly exceptional or distinguished production which had not been documented in this way, it is necessary to create a score. It is therefore for a theatre historian either to edit the instructions contained in the director's copy or to reconstruct them based on preserved documentation of the performance, before publishing them in the form of a documented, critical edition of the score. Importantly, if the director were to alter their staging concept, introducing even minor changes, the researcher 'should commit to a single version [of the performance] and, if possible, recreate it consistently. Otherwise, the result might be a reconstruction of a work that doesn't presently exist and never existed to begin with'.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Raszewski. 'Theater Documentation...'

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 539–540.

Kantor believed that a 'true documentation of a performance' is not feasible, since it would effectively 'immobilise' the work which, in the case of his theatre — striving for autonomy, 'possessing a language that is untranslatable into any other' — was admittedly undesirable.

That's why it's incredibly difficult for me to write the score of *The Dead Class*, which I still haven't done', he admitted two years after the premiere. 'I think,' he added, 'that you can write a poem about it, a literary essay, a novella, but you can't really note it down. Notes may only concern discovering those layers which make up the preparation for a performance during rehearsals. *The Dead Class* cannot be recorded in literary language, cannot be recorded in film language, cannot be recorded in any language. It exists only within this structure and this code, which is the performance.'⁶¹

Kantor, however, did finish the score for *The Dead Class*, albeit only in 1981, six years after the premiere of the performance. As he said earlier, most of the text consists of excerpts from the 'director's notebook', concerning mainly the course of the creative process throughout rehearsals.⁶²

It can therefore be assumed that Kantor intentionally and somewhat subversively incorporates his own notes (process records) into the product records, which primarily aim to create an intended image and atmosphere around the performance, to influence its reception and

⁶¹ Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Trafic do światowego muzeum (zapis wypowiedzi, lipiec 1978 rok)'. *Kultura*, no. 30, 1997. Quoted in Pleśniarowicz. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora...*, p. 147.

⁶² The score of *The Dead Class* was written primarily at the request and urging of Denis Bablet, who published it for the first time in French in Volume XI of *Les voies de la création théâtrale: T. Kantor*, edited by Denis Bablet, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Kantor used his own notes and video recordings of the performance. In 2004, an Italian translation was published; on the same year, a long-awaited Polish version of the score was included in the three-volume edition of Tadeusz Kantor's writings, compiled by Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz.

interpretation: 'I also include a number of notes I made while working on the play: there are director's memos, doubts, conflicts, everything that might be of interest to those who wish to study how the performance was created.'⁶³ This changes the status of those notes, leading to Kantor effectively falsifying and, in fact, concealing the true, authentic rehearsal process.

Such conclusions are further supported by an analysis of another document, not included by the artist in the official, public archive of Cricoteka. We are referring here to Kantor's notebook kept in the private archive of Lech Stangret, located currently at Spokojna Street⁶⁴ in Krakow, in the former home of the artist and his wife, Maria Stangret.⁶⁵

At first glance this document does not stand out in any way from others found in that archive. It attracts little attention, especially since it receives no special care or attention from the archive's owner. Bound in a rather worn black cardboard cover, the notebook runs to about eighty pages. It appears that Kantor made it himself by hand, as he sometimes did. It is quite an eclectic object, with some pages pasted with strips of self-adhesive tape, some glued onto thin pieces of black cardboard of various sizes. Most entries are in black, red or purple felt-tip, with some passages written in pencil. A few pages are typescripts with handwritten corrections and additions. Certain leaves are marked: some words are underlined, some crossed out, some in frames and, in places, small drawings and sketches by Kantor can be found. The notebook has no title pages, nor is it dated; essentially, we do not know exactly what we are dealing with. Only a closer look and a full reading reveal that we may be holding a form of Kantor's authentic director's notebook from the time of preparing *The Dead Class*.

⁶³ Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Jedynym żywym człowiekiem w teatrze jest widz. Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Kantorem.' Interview by Tadeusz Deszkiewicz, *Ekran*, 22 November 1981.

⁶⁴ When the Kantors occupied this flat, it was located on Elbląska Street, later renamed.

⁶⁵ The Kantors lived there until their separation in the 1980s. The couple never divorced and Kantor never took all his belongings and documents.

On the first page can be found a description of the start of the performance:

PROLOGUE

The audience gradually take their seats in the middle of the auditorium like a shipwreck, *The Dead Class*, a few rows of desks, at the desks, actors sitting like wax figures, motionless frozen like the DEAD. from the very first moment there has to be an ambiguous and repulsive, but at the same time attracting DIVISION between the audience and actors through the terrible endurance of motionlessness.

Someone raises his fingers (two), a well-known gesture, somewhere at the back of the class another does the same, a third sees it and, encouraged, also decides to raise two fingers, then another one follows his lead, then still one more, now the entire class raise their fingers and they remain with their fingers raised for quite a long time painfully, old, as if they were asking for something, something final.... it lasts for quite a long time and it's quite embarrassing. . . in the end someone gets up, slips away from his desk, carefully as if he were in a strange and unknown place (out of his desk), sneaking, he moves to the door, another follows his lead, the same way, these same careful movements, creeping anxiously, passing someone by he gives a puerile bow and removes himself in a hurry. . . then a third from the back row hastily follows, then others, sneaking out, disappear out the door, no one remains. . .

an empty class. . .

waltz. . . actors' grand entrée
carrying corpses of little children, their 'EGOS'

from their CHILDHOOD
important at this point: determine the mental state of each individual, above all, the actors' attitude towards the children.

The children are not alive, rather they're little corpses
 some hang loose, clinging with a final movement,
 slung, dragged along as if they're a burden,
 a remorse, a dead weight, as if they're 'infesting' these
 emerged specimens, the latter with different stances
 and reactions, some as if nothing happened,
 others like criminals, escaping
 the pangs of conscience
 others dull, with blank faces,
 others finding in this waltz a final
 illusion of youth, a last chance
 animated with familiar old age excitement
 one last waltz
 bobbing figurines
 manikin-like
 they put down their feet, move their arms
 lift up their heads
 throw out their chests...
 like tragic automatons...⁶⁶

The 'Prologue' quoted above with its description of a row of school desks and Kantor's further commentary at once brings to mind the Krakow-based artist's work, even if we are not well-versed in his art and only know *The Dead Class* from school lessons, books or photographs available online. This is the opening scene of the play. The score of *The Dead Class* also begins with a similar description but, importantly, the two are not identical. The entries from the *Elbląska Notebook* are shorter, livelier, more concise. They are written as if in a hurry, trying to halt the pace of thought and the creative process, to record the transient moments of rehearsals. They also seem more authentic than the descriptions included in the score, which were written from a distinct temporal distance, with full knowledge of the

⁶⁶ *Elbląska Notebook*, page one, kept in Lech Stangret's private archive. Original underlining retained. The document's coined name refers to the former name of the street where the Kantors' flat is located.

completed work and reformulated several times. It also turns out that the score and its division into 'text proper' and excerpts called 'From the director's notebook' are, too, Kantor's artistic creation, intended to give the score a specific 'authenticity effect'. Quite often passages from the *Elbląska Notebook* can be found in the main text of the score or in the 'From the Director's Notebook' segments. The opening of the fragment quoted above, although edited and slightly altered, constitutes the first part of the score, specifically the following sequences: 'An Illusionary'; 'Mute Entreaties. Fingers'; 'A Sudden Departure'; and 'Grand Entrée/A Parade. Dead Childhood'.⁶⁷ The second part of the text (starting with the words 'from their CHILDHOOD') forms, together with another fragment of the *Elbląska Notebook*, a part of the 'From the Director's Notebook 1974', segment, beginning with the words "I call it the MAIN IDEA".⁶⁸

It may also be that the entire *Elbląska Notebook*, or at least a portion of it, is some (another?) variant of the published score — a space for experimenting and seeking its final shape. However, this does not change the fact that at least some of the entries (especially those written by hand) seem to have been prepared during rehearsals and, despite their arbitrary use by Kantor, retain their authenticity.

Other fragments of the notebook are an ongoing record of what took place during rehearsal and, as was Kantor's custom, what would be included (or not) in some form in the final performance. From those notes one can learn much about the artist's intentions and the feedback he likely gave his actors. In the passage on 'games by the void' (what would eventually be named 'collusions with the void'), a sequence involving the actors' pantomimed enactment of an ambiguous situation of 'looking for a victim', we read:

content presented
must be v. complicated
undecipherable
filled with cryptic half-smiles

⁶⁷ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 46–51.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–53.

understatements
 unfinished gestures,
 musings —
 considerations for and against,
 sudden choices,
 doubts,
 notions,
 putting above —
 talking into —
 tragic farewells,
 passionate wraths
 fear
 everything simplified like
 children playing
 enigmatic
 some pleas
 confessions
 attempts
 deliberations
 pained face behind glass
 some
 fear
 they flee
 run by
 some warning gestures
 knowing
 —
 Freezings

Elsewhere, Kantor notes:

other than that, this division can be achieved through a certain reference
 to the state of a cadaver, The features of a dead man can be seen in posi-
 tions in which a living person would never allow themselves to be in
 comedic in surprise

revelation of similarities

REMEMBER

desks

hollow wreck

lesson-wreck-rot

characterisation — wreck

cradle-wreck

ACTOR — DEAD

dead man's body allows

to be handled

unceremoniously — violently

straddling — dragging

the most intimate and shameful poses

shamelessness

bodies rolling over

putting on display

SHAMELESSNESS

CIRCUS

crotch

armpits

neck

stomach

fight

dream

dragging Tumor

Green in the toilet

the unimaginable

emotion full of division

of terror

the premonition of death

'uncanny resemblance'

/ physical identity with the species

handling

unceremoniously

exposing to shame

suffering
humiliating others
shame
the actor brings upon themselves
contempt
and through that debasement restores
dignity to the people

grotesque exhibitionist
puerile
somehow quietly
embarrassed
painfully
and seriously
veiled with seriousness and
furrowed faces
undressing
in vile uproar

MAN NOTICES MAN [Kantor's comment: 'V. important!']

actor
reflecting a person
duplicating it
a fraud
a fraud is
impossible
since the living actor
imitates
behaviour
of the viewer in a
natural way
and in situations that are
'embarrassing'
the viewer sees himself
'for the first time'
man sees
man

that is
the demonstration
of the human aspect

How to perform it?
semblance of life
fraud — trickery
illusion
surpassing
more important than life

a fraud
e.g. he promised to pay out but didn't
he promised to handle a v. important matter on which everything de-
pends
– but he didn't
?
methods considered a dirty move

the elderly
absent
have to be
'v. active'
display
their rigidity
others act quite
unceremoniously
towards them

ACTORS BEHAVIOUR

explain to the actors
clearly the reasons for this
acting method instead of another

e.g.: actor with a status below that of
a human
like an animal (in the zoo)
humiliation,
public exposure,
shame! a division is being constructed:
'on the other side'
like a dead man -
emphasise it all the time
where?

Explain to the actors the reasons
for this kind of decision
so that there is no mechanical performance

DESKS

Desks
always the desks
sitting on those desks
as a symbol
of ennui
constantly remind
for what purpose all these
people have gathered here
THIS IS REALNESS
desks — constantly
emphasised
finally become
a memory machine

THE DEAD CLASS

keep reminding of this
make-up
washing the bodies
coffin cradle
an ambiguous charwoman
elderly states

forgetfulness
deafness
loosening of the logical elements
morgue-like atmosphere

remember the class's story

SHOCK

Death

glitz

ostentation

profanation

profanation of the aesthetics

CIRCUS

even

vulgarity

(and provided that) but

simultaneously

removal

of expression

lack of message

void

le vide

REMEMBER ABOUT

EXPRESSIONS! animal lust

perversions

rape

clashing with...

cruelty

define this precisely

VOID

APPEARANCES

LACK OF LIFE

appearances in art are the only

realness

a fraud
a trick

Repeat phonemes and expressions in different parts of the story (which ones?)

return to the wreck
no idyll
Wreck
the cosmos of sleep
pogrom
saving oneself
from the carnage
thrashing around
in a trap

no flowers
morgue-cosmos
washing the bodies
perfection

rot + sex

REMEMBER ABOUT
DREAM
arrange carefully
venturing DEEPER
into DREAM
turning absurd
and then
into a nightmare
at first logical
after that
incomprehensible
illogical
devoid of logic

after that
nightmare

at first
level-headed
after that
unknown reason
(plot doesn't justify)
wrath
laughter
despair
fear
cruelty
this gives us confusion
communication
disruption

PROFANATION
HOLLOW WRECK
a memory machine
past tense
past perfect

ostentation
glitz
vulgarity
removed

VOID
DESKS
STRANGENESS Division — nightmare — dream
washing the bodies
rot SEX

Repeating like 19th century toys
cradle — Battle of Trafalgar at Mme Tussaud

Prostitute
limper carrying obituaries
2 Elderly
Playing Triomphe

Toilets
Corners

FORMS

Dream score plot dream rules
beadle in the past perfect tense
limp REPEATER

CHARWOMAN DEATH

shame

in contempt
obscene
ass, cock, tit

nudity

sadism

anthropological specimens

ZOO

CREATURES

PROSTITUTE

Toilet initiation

 persuading themselves

BIRTH

DEATH

Cradle

machine

sleeve

ear cleaning

war-history

THE DEAD CLASS

clothes supposedly festive, and yet tacky, ambiguous, funereal, circus-like

Death

CIRCUS

spectacle
public exposure
shame

shame = butt, breast, nudity rot + sex

brief moments of illusion
past REVIVED tense

Excitement — animation (geriatric)
some immensely URGENT REASONS for this animation — but this
animation, this urgency (maybe even panic) revolves around a horrendous
VOID (onstage: no punch line!!!!)
Liveliness around the void
RETURN TO THE WRECK
[...]

class atmosphere
joint existence
coexistence / it's strange
 that it remains
 compulsory
 for life
 i.e. that this
 coexistence
 is v. strong

solidarity
community
closure
(prison)
discipline like
in prison
after all
sitting
in a desk row
gives some

assurance

there's apparently a restricted area
 one has to know how to
 behave.

GLOOMY
 ROOM

picture
 arranged yesterday
 from dolls (only)
 + constriction
 Poverty
 poor classroom
 rural
 dim light
 gloomy /lugubre/⁶⁹
 dreary interior
 gave
 an impression
of time past
 past tense
= waxworks
 in such a mood!
– that's what was missing until now!
 gloomy light
 and terrible disorder
 Dust!!
 maybe the toilet and corners
 could be spruced up
 made disgusting!!
 lamps /covered with fly shit! — Jasio⁷⁰
 like kitchen ones

⁶⁹ Lugubre — gloomy, dismal (French).

⁷⁰ Note on the person responsible for the task — most likely Jan Książek.

memory
they entered
the
GRAVE
desk rectangle
rises from the floor
like a
pathetic
wreck

MOOD
that which
on that day
struck me in that
arranged image
of the stage — is
a gust of death —
that's what I meant
theoretically
– i.e. after all

MOOD
we need to
bring this term
back —
Not realness
but mood!
yes!!
other than that: manikins
children like tiny corpses
bunched-up, huddling around
one another
pathetic — !
arranged in a specific
situation
some children cower behind their desks
two are kneeling in the corners

the corners are not where they should be
 one in the toilet
 ripped-up books
 (obviously — such is their
 fate)
 actually this
 dreary room
 does not
 remind
 of a happy classroom
 from childhood days —
 this past is a grave!!⁷¹

I quote here this extensive passage from the *Elbląska Notebook* for several reasons.⁷² Above all, to demonstrate how distinctive in style and tone these notes are in comparison with the score. How the score's language is suppressed, devoid of colloquial, vulgar, or unseemly expressions. How it lacks authentic intensity and creative anxiety. Only now do we see that the score, written from a position of temporal and emotional distance, attempts to convey the atmosphere of the performance — an aim which, as Kantor himself aptly observed, is largely unattainable. The *Elbląska Notebook* retains this potential to some extent. It reveals, simultaneously, how difficult and intense the work on *The Dead Class* was, and how deeply it engaged with profoundly intimate — and indeed shameful and concealed — aspects of human life: with childhood, which at times proved dark and violent. Much like school experiences themselves. Only much later *The Dead Class*, hailed by the critics as a masterpiece and by audiences and commentators as indescribable and inexpressible, entered (or, rather, was shoved inside) the national pantheon of greatest works. Ostensibly saying something essential about ourselves and our lives, yet in practice rendered

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² For the purposes of this publication, I have selected fragments not found in the score, both as exact quotations and slightly altered and re-edited fragments.

inaccessible and distant through their ineffability and its avoidance of directness. Ungrasped. As if *The Dead Class*, once it happened to Kantor, quickly slipped away from him and started to live its own life, becoming our Polish — our national — myth.

5.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO TRANSCRIBE A MASTERPIECE?

The score of *The Dead Class* constitutes an authorial attempt to transcribe and, in a sense, to describe the performance. In many passages, Kantor discusses his intentions and directorial decisions, explains selected staging techniques, and offers interpretations of his own work. Paradoxically, however, it is a description of a work which, in the words of Raszewski, 'doesn't presently exist and never existed to begin with'. The performance, staged (though not continuously) for almost fifteen years, changed and evolved over time, both as a result of modifications and corrections introduced by the artist himself (creating successive versions in the process⁷³), and through recasting prompted by practical considerations (primarily related to performances abroad and the need to replace actors who were unable to leave the country). Kantor himself stated that he only wrote down the score 'when all the fundamental changes had already been made.'⁷⁴ The vision of the performance presented there is, therefore, rather ephemeral; not a staging in Raszewski's sense, but something more akin to Kantor's own 'phantasm', an imagined screenplay never intended to be staged. On the other hand, the descriptions or literary transcriptions of the performance⁷⁵ written

⁷³ Officially, there were two versions of the performance. Ten months after its premiere Kantor changed part of the cast and introduced text alterations, adding and modifying certain scenes. This topic will be elaborated on later in the book.

⁷⁴ Kantor. 'Jedynym...'

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz's description found in his *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora* (based on the second version of the performance, as presented at the Rotunda Jagiellonian University Culture Centre on 20–24 and 27 November 1978) or Jan Kłossowicz's piece published in *Dialog*, no. 2 (1977), which records the first version of *The Dead Class* (this description was later reprinted in his *Tadeusz Kantor. Teatr*, pp. 132–147).

while it was still being staged and undergoing changes were written by Kantor's acquaintances and, frequently, also collaborators, which significantly affected the character and quality of these texts.

In my description of the performance, written fifty years after its premiere and based primarily on surviving archival documents and other existing accounts, I discern, depict, and analyse all the alterations and modifications that can be found, as well as to subject the entire performance to interpretation, seeking an answer to a seemingly rather mundane question: what is Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* really about? In my view, only now — when *The Dead Class* is already a part of the history of Polish theatre, when its story is definitively closed, when the memory of this performance has also become an archival document — does an attempt at the most complete (though inherently subjective) description stand a chance of success. A description which includes an interpretation taking into account the broad context of the work and the reality in which that work functioned. My reading of *The Dead Class* for obvious reasons does not claim to be the final and only correct one. That is due to the strong subjectivity inherent to it, which I do not conceal, and which results from the methodological assumptions I have adopted and outlined above. This, in essence, is precisely the process described by Palladini in the context of the affective archive: every reconstruction of a past performance is someone's rendition, produced in a specific place and time, from a specific position, rather than — as it might appear — a reproduction of an extant original. According to Palladini, such an original never existed to begin with.⁷⁶

In this reconstructive process of *The Dead Class*, video documentation — records of the performance prepared at various stages of its run by various people and institutions — plays a key role. So far, nine complete recordings have been traced. These are:

1. *The Dead Class*, directed by Andrzej Wajda, colour film, produced by TVP, 1976 [1977], shot at the Krzysztofory Gallery, with some outdoor photography in Krakow's Kazimierz and at the Krakus Mound.

⁷⁶ I discuss these issues in the second chapter of this book.

2. Recording of the performance presented at Théâtre National Populaire in Lyon, 25–29 October 1977, Groupe de recherches théâtrales et musicologiques du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris, produced by Denis Bablet.

3. Recording of the performance presented at Spazio Culturale Il Fabbricone in Prato near Florence, from 25 September to 2 October 1980, directed by Jacquie Hanich, Denis Bablet, production of L'Equipe 'Théâtre et moyens audiovisuels' du Groupe de recherches théâtrales et musicologiques du Centre national de la recherche scientifique.

4. Recording of the performance presented in Tokyo, at Parco Space Part 3 (one of the stages at Seibu department store chain) from 4 to 12 August 1982, direction unknown.

5. Recording of the performance presented at the Teatro Maria Guerrero in Madrid on 30 March 1983, direction unknown.

6. Recording of the performance presented at Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari, as part of the 'Tadeusz Kantor. Teatr Cricot 2 1975–1985. L'attesa molto importante' ['A very important anticipation'] festival on 3–4 May 1986, direction unknown.

7. Recording of the performance presented at the Palais Chaillot, Théâtre Gémier in Paris, during the Cricot 2 Theatre Festival 'Return. Theatre of Love and Death — Cricot 2', 23–27 May, 1989, directed by Nat Lilienstein, produced by Caméras Continentales, La Sept, Fr 3, Le Théâtre National de Chaillot, in collaboration with the Centre National de la Cinématographie.

8. Recording of a performance presented after Kantor's death at Teatro Goldoni in Venice, July 1991, direction unknown.

9. Recording of a performance presented after Kantor's death at the La MaMa Theatre in New York, June 1991, direction unknown.

All existing video recordings of *The Dead Class* are cinematic in nature, shot with multiple cameras positioned in different parts of the auditorium, they include close-ups of the actors' faces and details of the set. As a result, none of these recordings provides a complete picture of what was happening on stage, nor of the order and pace of events; these remain to be determined. The close-ups create an effect of proximity between the viewer and the actors. It may even seem that we are sitting beside them at the desks, allowed to experience their emotions and

mental states; in this respect, the recording from Bari (1986) distinguished by its exceptional image quality, is particularly striking. These recordings are mostly in colour, with the exception of the Prato footage (1980), whose substandard quality renders the image not black but grey, and the technically superior Lyon version (1977). This unique recording consists largely of close-ups, and its intermittently darkened image, at times evoking the visual grammar of a nightmare or hallucination, has a much more powerful impact on the viewer's imagination. Also worth noting is the 1989 Paris recording, shot by Nat Lilienstein and highly valued by Kantor himself. Unfortunately, likely due to technical issues, it appears as though it was put through a blue filter, giving the image a cold and unnatural feel.

In addition to the above-mentioned, there is also a rather bizarre film, a montage of selected scenes from four different recordings of the performance, which its creators (Anna Halczak and Franco Laera) intended to be an 'integral reconstruction based on the score of the performance.'⁷⁷ It is worth mentioning that this alleged reconstruction is not identical to Kantor's score (for example, the grammar lesson scene, present in the score even though it was omitted from the second version of the performance, is missing).

I am well aware of the specific nature and the resulting shortcomings of filming a theatrical performance, as well as the mediating role of the camera, which distorts and to some extent falsifies the original image. However, this does not change the fact that the recordings of *The Dead Class* are of extreme importance to my work, almost indispensable. Their critical and conscious observation, which I attempt, provides a source of knowledge for the onstage events of *The Dead Class*, the actions of the performers' seen in the footage, the positions and actions of other performers, as well as the position and actions of Kantor himself. The film material (and, to some extent, also the photographs of

⁷⁷ This description appears in Cricoteka's inventory list, in whose archive the material is held. Prepared and produced for the exhibition *Tadeusz Kantor. 'La classe morta'* in Palazzo della Triennale di Milano in 2005, produced by Change Performing Arts, Milan; coorganised by Cricoteka, Krakow and CRT Artificio, Milan.

the performance) also makes it possible to identify latent or previously unarticulated images, as well as references to existing paintings or theatrical works that served as more or less conscious points of inspiration for Kantor, and which can often be discerned only through these media. Kantor himself made use of existing recordings while working on the score; their significance should therefore not be underestimated.

However, the danger of recording a theatrical work can lie in the fact that at times the recording, by virtue of its material permanence and apparently inexhaustible durability, subsumes and displaces the work itself. That is what happened with Andrzej Wajda's film. The popularity of this recording (combined with access to other footage being significantly limited), further sanctioned by Kantor's official institution, the Cricoteka, means that when we think of *The Dead Class*, we almost automatically, unconsciously, recall Wajda's film (at least in the Polish context). Since Cricoteka's release of this recording on DVD in 2007, it has become the 'official' recording, the official version of Kantor's performance.⁷⁸ At present, it is difficult to determine the reasons behind this decision. The director's renown? The good technical quality of the footage and, above all, of its editing?⁷⁹

What undoubtedly sets Wajda's film apart from other recordings are its individual shots, close-ups, and editing, which reveal the filmmakers' professionalism. Another distinguishing feature are the quite controversial outdoor shots, absent from the other recordings. It was

⁷⁸ The event gained remarkable status and several promotional meetings were held. The DVD, in addition to Wajda's film, included carefully chosen extras: a selection of onset photographs; sixty photographs by Wojciech Sperl from the 1976 rehearsals; a memoir article by Wajda titled 'Byłem asystentem Tadeusza Kantora'; Kantor's text 'Klasa szkolna'; drawings by Kantor from the *Umarła klasa* folder; a few sketches made by Wajda during the film's production; correspondence between the artists and early press reviews of the film footage. See Chodzewicz, Filip, Małgorzata Dziewulska, Piotr Kłoczowski, Agnieszka Morawińska, Janusz Palikot, Maria Stangret-Kantor, Andrzej Wajda, and Natalia Zarzecka. 'Umarła klasa Tadeusza Kantora w filmie Andrzeja Wajdy i Kadysz Jana Kotta.' *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, no. 2, 2008.

⁷⁹ The footage was shot by a professional film crew during a break in filming of Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1977).

Wajda's idea to film selected scenes in Krakow's Kazimierz and at the Krakus Mound. As he explained later, 'I may have made a mistake, but I persuaded Kantor to shoot three outdoor scenes. I was selfish and wanted to see how he would direct outdoors. At the time I thought that it was for the sake of the film, because we thought this film might find its way into cinemas as well, not only on television, for which it was made, and that for a film intended to be shown in cinemas, it wouldn't be a bad thing if that basement was given a bit of breathing space at some point.'⁸⁰

Kantor also had a conflicted attitude towards this idea. He admitted:

[Wajda] is a great director and he did a great job in terms of filmmaking. However, I had some reservations both towards him and myself, because we had thought it up together. I agreed to his idea to move the action from Krzysztofory to the open air, I also suggested the idea that some of the scenes take place at the Krakus Mound and some in another location: a Kazimierz slaughterhouse, an old building with a circular, basement-like closed corridor, where characters from *The Dead Class* were placed on the floor and other spots. This is a very good cinematic idea. But when I showed Wajda's film in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, at the BITEF⁸¹ festival, the audience, who had already seen the theatre performance, reacted negatively, shouting that it was not the same. I have a short temper, so I ended up shouting right back, blaming Wajda and myself for our ideas since, for example, the shots in Krzysztofory were fantastic.⁸²

In the context of the myth of *The Dead Class*, which undoubtedly persists in Polish historical and theatrical narrative to this day, there is something extraordinary and at the same time supporting of this myth in the fact that it is Andrzej Wajda who created the most famous of the film recordings, made, moreover, during a break in filming the equally mythical *Man of Marble*.⁸³ The mere fact of the meeting and collabora-

⁸⁰ Chodzewicz et al., p. 49.

⁸¹ This screening took place in September 1977.

⁸² Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Jak Kantor inscenizuje kino'. Interview by Władysław Cybulski, *Film*, no. 47, 25 November 1990.

⁸³ *Man of Marble* — Polish political film directed by Andrzej Wajda (prem. 25 February 1977). The film was featured at the Cannes Film Festival.

tion of two outstanding personalities of Polish culture is very momentous and undoubtedly influences the reception of that meeting's result.

Reportedly, after seeing *The Dead Class*, Wajda wished to capture what he called 'an incredible work' on film. For this to happen, specific formalities had to be fulfilled (a fact that is often wilfully overlooked in the context of Kantor's art). On 12 April 1976, in Warsaw, 'Citizen Andrzej Wajda' signed an agreement with the Film Production Enterprise 'Zespolny Filmowe', with headquarters in Warsaw at 62 Puławska Street, the subject of which was a 'participation in the production of a film under the working title *The Dead Class*.⁸⁴ The responsibilities of Andrzej Wajda, 'hereinafter referred to as director', included 'in particular, the production [...] of a film based on an approved spec script, agreed-upon shooting script, requirements for production and a detailed film plan.'⁸⁵ Regardless of how one may assess Wajda's stance as a director — despite his repeated claims that he was merely 'the author of a film recording of Kantor's performance' — it must be acknowledged that he created a work fundamentally different from *The Dead Class*, one whose premises were clearly and explicitly articulated in advance. In the shooting script mentioned in the contract, we read that

the premise of the film is not only a documentary recording of Tadeusz Kantor's play titled *The Dead Class*, but also a presentation of the man who created this performance, who is its direct participant, conducting the events taking place on stage. The intention of the creators, then, is to show the performance through Tadeusz Kantor, through his face, in which the performance is reflected. Therefore, the action of the play will be shown alternately with shots of Tadeusz Kantor's face, filmed throughout the performance.⁸⁶

Perhaps the author of this note was Wajda himself, who wrote in his director's notebook during preparations for the project, 'on screen

⁸⁴ The document is a part of the Andrzej Wajda Archive at the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology.

⁸⁵ See above.

⁸⁶ Shooting script, part of the Andrzej Wajda Archive at the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology.

essentially only Kantor's face; his hands. Calling — threats — stirring — repulsion. He's the focal point of the entire performance. Because, as he himself says: "the final expression of each actor is created by other actors... or perhaps I convey their expression to the audience myself..."⁸⁷ We can therefore venture to say that the views and verdicts on Kantor appearing in the press and scientific studies — the image of a demiurge and manipulator who, with a raise of his hand, with one performative gesture, brings to life the entire world of a dead class and, at the same time, condemns it to death and oblivion — are the work of Wajda and his film. This significant, but quite subtle difference was noted by Aleksander Ledóchowski, who wrote in *Film*:

Kantor, a painter and theatre practitioner, staged the performance for a stationary viewer; in the film, camera movement and editing change the perspective of the performance, change its form and content. On stage, Kantor seems like a private individual, something akin to a silent Greek chorus, but also an animator and the ark of the covenant between the viewer and the actor; finally, a creator in a world of his own creation. From time to time, Wajda shows a close-up shot of him. He exaggerates, but simultaneously puts down, in any case: changes relationship and the meaning of presence. He took the action outside of the theatre three times: a scene in the street/corridor, on the hill and in the market square in Kazimierz Dolny [sic!]. Very Wajda-esque sequences, but so alien to Kantor's play. Finally, the film is monochromatically pompous, while the performance pulsates with various moods, it has its own unique humour.⁸⁸

This is an important diagnosis that cannot be dismissed outright, particularly when one takes into account other film recordings of the performance, in which such close-ups of Kantor's face and figure are largely absent. These recordings, too, despite their equally cinematic character, appear to be more objective, striving simply to convey what is happening on stage.

⁸⁷ Andrzej Wajda's notebook, part of the Andrzej Wajda Archive at the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology.

⁸⁸ Ledóchowski, Aleksander. 'Komentarze. Klasy'. *Film*, no. 5, 29 January 1978, p. 11.

This does not, of course, change the fact that the undeniable value of Wajda's recording of *The Dead Class*, despite all the above-mentioned reservations, is that it is the only (currently known) preserved recording of the first version of the performance, and therefore constitutes invaluable research material which is to be approached as such in subsequent analysis.

6.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE A MASTERPIECE?

In my description of *The Dead Class* I will rely primarily on the score written by Kantor, considering it as a starting point to be later supplemented and amended with notes and comments resulting from the analysis of other available sources, in particular the recordings of the performance. In interpreting the work I will take into account its subsequent versions as well as alterations introduced by its creator. Such a perspective will, in my view, make possible an attempt at capturing the phenomenon of this performance in a holistic manner.

Although the play is divided into three separate parts, it was performed with no intermissions.

PART ONE

The staging area is clearly separated by a rope, enclosing it in a rectangular shape. The audience seating is arranged along the front and the longer right-hand side.⁸⁹ On the left stands a wall, while at the back there is an entrance used by the actors. Within this rectangle, a second

⁸⁹ During the premiere performances the audience was sat on chairs. It was only in March 1976 that wooden folding risers and benches for the Cricot 2 auditorium were made: 140 × 140 × 160 mm (4 pcs), 140 × 140 × 120 mm (4 pcs), 140 × 140 × 80 mm (4 pcs), 140 × 140 × 40 mm (4 pcs), benches 240 × 45 × 30 mm (10 pcs). When presenting the production in other spaces Kantor ensured the stage layout remained the same (for example by using special screens or other structures) and that there was good sightline from every seat in the auditorium. This is shown by the materials held in the Elbląska archive — Kantor's detailed sketches, drawings and notes.

one is formed by several rows of school desks.⁹⁰ On the left side, a bit to the front, stands a pit toilet made with the same wooden boards — the Lavatory. Next to it, slightly in front of the desks and with her back turned to the audience, stands a mysterious hatted figure — the Charwoman. In a chair on the other side of the desks sits a black-clad, wax manikin — the Beadle. The room is dimly lit, the staging area illuminated by three ordinary light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, giving off a white, uniform glow throughout. Behind the desks the actors, the Old People, sit or stand. Everyone is dressed in all-black, as if for a funeral, the women in dresses, the men in bowler hats. Their faces are white and greyish. They're staring straight forward, blankly, with empty eyes. Silence. Kantor can be seen somewhere to the side, pacing. The audience enters this arranged space and slowly — usually in profound silence — takes their seats.⁹¹

The initial image of the dead class frozen in expectation, had a very specific purpose. The intention was to evoke surprise and shock in the audience, akin to Freud's concept of the 'uncanny', arising from the realisation that, before them, alive, stood figures confusingly similar to

⁹⁰ In the first, premiere version of the production there were four rows of desks with eleven pupils seated on them; in the second version a fifth row was added, made especially for the brothers Lesław and Waclaw Janicki. It is also worth noting that Kantor's desks resemble church pews more than school desks.

⁹¹ On several recordings (Tokyo 1982, Madrid 1983, Paris 1989) the situation is different — the audience enter the space where the actors are not yet seated at the desks. I have not been able to establish the reason for this change, nor do I know whether it was introduced permanently. It does not, however, appear to have been made for technical reasons or to adapt existing layout. Crucially, the description of the performance opening with actors already waiting for the audience behind their desks, motionless, became so firmly embedded in the myth of *The Dead Class* that the actors Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński did not believe it could have ever been done otherwise. They only changed their minds after watching several recordings of the production that show this altered opening — I report this information on the basis of a conversation with Andrzej and Teresa Welmiński conducted for the purpose of this book on 1 June 2025.

themselves and yet alien, existing beyond an impassable boundary. Unreachable. This was one of the concepts of the Theatre of Death. 'I wish to achieve a degree of strangeness that would be acutely felt by the audience', wrote Kantor in the score.⁹² He added: 'From the moment the audience enters the room, a sense of division should become a fact. An ambiguous feeling, both repulsive and attractive through the terrible persistence of this inhuman motionlessness. Like the dead!'⁹³

It seems that this intention of Kantor has been realised. This is attested by audience recollections and reviews of the performance (primarily in foreign periodicals), which recall and describe this opening scene as shocking, extraordinary, possessing an enormous potential and emotional charge that effectively sets the tone for the entire performance, evoking a peculiar feeling of estrangement throughout its duration.⁹⁴

At some point, when the audience has already taken their seats, the actors frozen behind the desks gradually begin to move. At first imperceptibly, over time they shift their positions with increasing boldness and confidence. They raise two fingers in a widely-known gesture, as if volunteering to answer, they lean from their seats and even leave them. Initially, they do so one at a time, timidly; then, with growing insistence, one after another, until almost all are gone. Only the Old Man Absent from the First Desk remains among the deserted desks. After a while, however, the Old Man Exhibitionist returns and drags him away as well. 'The two of them, glassy-eyed, one listless and the other supporting him, both retreat and disappear...'⁹⁵

Suddenly, all the Old People appear as a tightly packed crowd at the rear entrance. Each of them carries a manikin growing out of, or growing into their body, with an almost-white, slightly terrifying, childlike face, dressed in a black school uniform and black dress shoes. They remain still for a moment, then move rapidly forward, circling the

⁹² Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 47.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁹⁴ I analyse selected reviews of the production later in the book. I also return to the matter touched upon here.

⁹⁵ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 51.

desks three times. 'At the same time, the sound of the WALTZ comes in with full force.'⁹⁶

These few bars of the 'François Waltz'⁹⁷ (a melody once well-known throughout Poland) constitute not only a recurring musical background of *The Dead Class*, but also something of a hallmark for Kantor and his theatre. Kantor is said to have heard this piece in one of Krakow's cafés. Maria Stangret recalls: 'a melody was quietly flowing from the speakers [...] Tadeusz didn't know it, while I knew it very well, since it was my mother's favourite song. Quietly, I sang the part of the chorus that I knew the lyrics to [...] [Kantor] stood up and, beaming, said: I have the music for *The Dead Class*!'⁹⁸

This is not, however (as one might assume, given the recognizability of this motif) the first use of the melody in a Polish postwar work of art. It also appears in one of the scenes of Aleksander Ford's acclaimed 1948 film, *Border Street*, which tells the story of a group of Warsaw children, both Polish and Jewish, set against the backdrop of dramatic events beginning in the summer of 1939. Living with their parents in a tenement building on the titular street are Jadzia, the daughter of Doctor Bialek (who conceals his Jewish heritage); Wladek, the son of a bank clerk, Wojtan; Bronek, the son of a cabman, Cieplikowski; Fredek, the son of restaurant owner, Kuśmirak; and little Dawid, the son of an electrical engineer, Natan, and grandson of the impoverished tailor Liberman. War comes and the German occupation begins. The children's characters become a parable, as they clearly adopt the roles and views of their parents. The director himself described *Border Street*

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ A Polish waltz composed by Adam Józef Karasiński was written for a social reception in 1905 as a piece dedicated to its host, musician Franciszek Brzeziński. It was the first work in the history of Polish popular music to gain international notoriety, published in London and Vienna. After the composer's death the piece was reworked by his son, Zygmunt Karasiński. The song's lyrics were written by Andrzej Włast, who dedicated them to Tola Mankiewiczówna, one of the most popular actresses and singers of the interwar period.

⁹⁸ Stangret-Kantor, Maria. *Malując progi* [Painting Thresholds]. Cricoteka, 2016, p. 133.

as 'a film about little people living against the backdrop of a colossal era'. It showed various attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust; from open support for the Germans in their horrifying actions against the Jews, through indifference, to risking their lives to help the ghetto's residents. The film did not end on a positive note; this was the intention of the director, who wanted the viewer leaving the cinema to feel that the fall of fascism does not have to be synonymous with the disappearance of hatred and racial persecution.⁹⁹

In one of the initial scenes, when the inevitable war is still just a premonition, Jadzia, Włodek and Broniek go for a horse-drawn cab ride. They take with them a hand organ player they happen upon on the road, who offers to tell them their fortunes in exchange. When Jadzia reads that she will find happiness with a fair-haired young man with blue eyes [sic!], to whom she will give the ring attached to the fortune, the sound of the 'François Waltz' can be heard in the background. There is something haunting about this scene. As if that musical motif were a prophecy of what is to come, but a prophecy completely at odds with the one read by Jadzia in the cab. As if the desks of *The Dead Class* were already waiting for the *Border Street* children. It might be a coincidence, but what is striking is the fact that in two completely different works the same musical motif appears, introducing a very similar (even if not even identical) atmosphere, a blend of nostalgia, extraneity and a peculiar, tragic sense of horror.

The first appearance of the waltz in *The Dead Class*, as noted by Kantor in the score, is accompanied by a comment in which he ad-

⁹⁹ The screenplay was being written from mid 1946, but its production — in the face of anti-Semitic incidents in Poland — was moved to Czechoslovakia. Ford's film was initially not cleared for distribution, with officials accusing the director of emphasising themes of Polish anti-Semitism. The final version of *Border Street*, which sanitised Poles' image, was released in June 1949 and received favourable reviews from critics. At the 9th Venice Film Festival *Border Street* won the Golden Medal, gaining fame as one of the first Polish films about the Holocaust on Polish soil. See Włodek, Roman. „Ulica Graniczna. Film pod specjalnym nadzorem”. *Pleograf*, no. 2/2022, <https://pleograf.pl/index.php/ulica-graniczna-film-pod-specjalnym-nadzorem/#post-4034-footnote-34>. Accessed 18 July 2025.

mits that the actions described constitute the ‘MAIN IDEA. The foundation of the entire performance.’¹⁰⁰ Into this very image — the old people circling the school desks to the rhythm of the ‘François Waltz’ together with childhood manikins — other actions will be inserted, as if into a mould, creating new meanings and connotations that will gradually and consistently build the drama of the performance until its conclusion. Kantor quite clearly defines the emotional charge contained in this integral motif:

Human miscreations enter, fused with corpses of children. [...] These ‘tumors’ are THEIR OWN SELVES [...] entering [...] ...like ZOOLOGICAL SPECIMENS, with children’s corpses, a bit like criminals, stranglers, child murderers... like people fleeing the pangs of their conscience... animated with old age excitement... one last waltz...bobbing like manikins... they set down their feet, move their arms, lift up their heads, throw out their chests... flashily, to prove that they yet live! Tragic automatons...¹⁰¹

That is due to the actors’ actions being almost ‘natural’ to them, stemming, as described by Kantor, from the substance of their characters, a drive towards violence. This aspect will be revealed with full force in the subsequent part of the play: ‘The “Solomon” Lesson’.

After the parade, everyone returns to the desks, stuffing their manikins¹⁰² into the seats as well. The pupils start being quizzed. The Teacher¹⁰³ asks: What do we know about King Solomon? Others repeat.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 52–53.

¹⁰² That is how it appears in the score and likely how it was in the first version of the production (or at least in the one filmed by Wajda). In later versions and runs, after the parade and before the ‘The “Solomon” Lesson’ sequence, the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle (Maria Stangret-Kantor) and the Old Man in the Loo (Mira Rychlicka) put down their manikins, throwing them into the book-filled corner. Later, other actors put their dolls in the same place.

¹⁰³ Although no such character appears in the cast list, Kantor included and marked it in the score. From the second version of *The Dead Class* the Teacher role was assumed by the Old Man with a Bicycle, played by Andrzej Welmiński.

Further questions: 'What do we know about King Solomon? What do we know? King Solomon? Who did King Solomon love? King Solomon loved... many foreign women. What women were these? Moa... bites...'¹⁰⁴ And so on.

This sequence provides a useful means of demonstrating the differences between individual iterations of the performance. In Andrzej Wajda's film, the role of the Teacher is played by Bogdan Grzybowicz (appearing also as the Stranger). At the beginning of the sequence, before he utters the words, 'What do we know about King Solomon?' he raises the index finger of his right hand, with which he condemns his 'victim', the Old Man Exhibitionist (Zbigniew Bednarczyk). He gets up quite timidly; one can assume that he doesn't know the answer. But then all the other pupils start acting like the teacher. They all point fingers at the Old Man Exhibitionist, echoing the question endlessly. They squabble, make faces, groan, lean over each other, they drive the solitary Old Man into a corner, tormenting him with strange, sadistic ecstasy. As if wanting to humiliate and hound him. Suddenly, two other pupils — the Old Man with a Bicycle (Andrzej Wełmiński) and Old Man Podophilist (Roman Siwulak) — run up to the tormented Old Man and, humiliating him even more, take off his pants. Everyone can see his bare rear.¹⁰⁵ However, a moment later, the situation changes, a 'coup d'état' takes place, and the Old Man Exhibitionist becomes the tormentor, ominously pointing his finger and asking questions about the biblical king of Israel. Then, 'the whole class takes up this moanful litany of women with whom Solomon fell in love. The pupils wail, sway, wring their hands over their heads, make convulsive, desperate movements.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ A reference to 1 Kings 11. Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotes come from the New King James Version — TN.

¹⁰⁵ According to Andrzej Wełmiński, in several early performances he and Roman Siwulak would briefly illuminate the Old Man Exhibitionist's bare buttocks with two lit candles, creating something like a perverse tiny 'altar'. Kantor, however, quickly abandoned the idea. I obtained this information in a conversation with Teresa and Andrzej Wełmiński on 1 June 2025. I found no confirmation of it in other sources.

¹⁰⁶ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 57.

This wailing smoothly turns into a *nigun*, a Jewish song without words — AY NA NYNA AY NA NYNA AY NA NYNA NYNA NYNA.

Everything gradually turns silent and still; in place of the Jewish wailing the sound of the waltz seeps in, and the Old People stand behind the desks with their hands raised ‘as if making a toast.’¹⁰⁷ The scene is repeated twice.

What disturbs in these sequences is the overt violence and the ease with which the Old People interchange the roles of tormentor and victim. Ultimately, it matters little who actually serves as the teacher, as this function is successively assumed and relinquished by almost all the characters. What does seem significant is that this abusive relationship stands as the very basis of the class community’s existence. References to the Holocaust and to the humiliation experienced by Jews during and immediately after the Second World War are also powerfully and explicitly articulated here.

In the aforementioned book on Romanticism, in the chapter ‘Władza i hipnoza’ [‘Power and hypnosis’], Maria Janion writes, among other things, about Siegfried Kracauer’s research on the psychology of German cinema. Kracauer posits that ‘the German consciousness, or rather lack thereof at the time [before Hitler — JMT] was vacillating between tyranny and chaos. These were the persistently recurring alternatives. Either ‘a reign of tyrants’ or ‘instinct-driven chaos’. No other options seemed conceivable.’¹⁰⁸ Janion clearly implies that this is what made the Nazi dictatorship possible. She is also endorsing the view that ‘the sadism of tyrants has at its source an underlying inferiority complex and this explanation of tyranny finds its evidence in the character of the German nation.’¹⁰⁹ She writes:

In Erich Fromm’s analysis of the psychology of Nazism (in his *Escape from Freedom*), we find [...] a piercing image of ‘this kind of character structure to which Nazi ideology had its strongest appeal.’ By that he means the sadomasochistic or authoritarian character. This personality

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ Janion. *Colloquia Gdańskie...*, p. 319.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

structure constitutes 'the psychological basis of Nazism'. Justifying his terminology (somasochistic = authoritarian) Fromm argues that 'the sadomasochistic person' is always characterised by his attitude toward authority. He admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time he wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him.¹¹⁰

It seems that in *The Dead Class*, particularly in 'The "Solomon" Lesson', mentioned above, we have an example of 'a character that is binary and only seemingly contradictory, that is both sadistic and masochistic, a character that strives for power and to submit to it; a character that is degraded and degrades, submissive and demanding submission.'¹¹¹ 'These problems have become the domain of German expressionist cinema',¹¹² Janion concludes. Suffice to say that reviews of *The Dead Class* often (not just in Germany) emphasise its expressionistic character. However, these observations are content to stop at reflecting on the formal-aesthetic character of the performance, which, as it turns out, is likely a significant oversight.

In this context, the scenes of *The Dead Class* taken by Andrzej Wajda out of Krzysztofory and into the Kazimierz Rotunda¹¹³ take on

¹¹⁰ See Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart, 1941 — TN.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Janion. *Colloquia Gdańskie...*, p. 320.

¹¹³ The *Wirtualny Sztetl* portal has this to say on this building's history: 'The former ritual slaughterhouse is located on Kraków's Kazimierz, in the middle of Plac Nowy. The building, now known as Okrągłak or Rondel, was designed in 1899 by Jan Rzymkowski as a market hall and opened in 1900. It was a masonry structure on a dodecagonal plan of brick and stone. In 1927 the building was leased by the Jewish community and renovated according to a design by Józef Weinberger. A new roofed structure for a separate poultry slaughterhouse was built in the courtyard of the old building, and the complex began operating in early 1928. Since that year, the Okrągłak has therefore consisted of two parts — the central hall and the ring of small shops surrounding it. From the outside it is not apparent, but the buildings are separated by an uncovered corridor giving access to the shops. Two entrances lead to the main building from the west and east. Above them are segmental

a completely different meaning. Rotunda becomes the stage for the sequences that follow ‘The “Solomon” Lesson’: ‘The Night Lesson’, ‘The Night Lesson Continued’, ‘Night Promenades of the Old Man with a Bicycle’ and ‘The Night Lesson Continued. Historical Delusions’.¹¹⁴

These scenes are essentially short, repeating etudes performed by some of the actors around the desks. The Old Man with a Bicycle simply circles them on his clever contraption, the Somnambulist Prostitute follows behind while ostentatiously flashing her breast, the Old Man in the Loo keeps ‘reading, counting, adding something up’, all of which is commented on by the figure towering above the class like an all-knowing deity — the Woman Behind the Window.

Here is also introduced the text of Witkiewicz’s *Tumor Brainiowicz* in a conversation between the Old Man with a Bicycle (who delivers Józef’s lines) and the Old Man in the Loo (who responds as Tumor).¹¹⁵

Wajda interpreted these sequences in cinematic terms. The viewer is guided by the narrator (voiced by the Woman Behind the Window), while the actors wander through dark hallways, bumping into each other and into the manikins scattered throughout the corridor surrounding the building. Are we in a prison? A death camp? Or maybe in yet another, peculiar panopticon? Undoubtedly, we are in an enclosed,

arches with a double-pitched stone roof in the form of a pediment. Rectangular windows sit in the niches. The outer building is covered by a multi-pitched roof, while the inner building’s is topped by a dodecagonal lantern with rectangular windows. During the Second World War the slaughterhouse was shut down by the Germans. After 1945 the space served as a market hall. It now houses small shops, butcheries and food outlets. In 2008 the Okraglak was entered on the register of historic monuments under number A170/M.’ Source: <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/miejscowosci/k/512-krakow/113-zabytki-kultury-materialnej/28837-rzeznia-rytualna-tzw-okraglak-w-krakowie-plac-nowy-11>. Accessed 21 July 2025.

¹¹⁴ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 63–72.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67. Despite the commonly held belief that the fragments of the drama used in the production were chosen at random, the lines of specific Witkiewicz’s characters are always spoken by particular Kantor characters. I will return later to the question of how Witkiewicz’s text was used in the production.

claustrophobic space, in which even the Woman Behind the Window is unable to see all of what is taking place within.

These scenes take on a completely different character in the second version of *The Dead Class*. In September 1976, a significant and radical change in the cast took place,¹¹⁶ prompting Kantor to introduce several alterations and to add entirely new scenes. 'The "Solomon" Lesson' was among those modified. The Teacher's role would be taken over by the Old Man with a Bicycle and he would be the one to point at his chosen victims one by one, each felled 'as if shot dead'¹¹⁷ during this 'carnage'. Kantor introduced two new characters as well: the Old Man with a Double and the Double (played by the Janicki twins), around whom the drama of this sequence would be built. Prompted by the Teacher, they alternately appeared and disappeared, crudely deceiving him,¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Various reasons are given for the now almost legendary cast change in *The Dead Class*, which stemmed from actors simultaneously employed at the Bagatela Theatre — Zofia Kalińska, Maria Górecka, Bogdan Grzybowicz, Zbigniew Bednarczyk and Wojciech Łodyński — leaving the company. The most likely and commonly cited explanation is that, faced with increasing offers of foreign trips and tours, Kantor feared that actors' concurrent fulltime employment at a public theatre would create real organisational issues. To avoid this he gave his actors an ultimatum, demanding full loyalty and exclusivity. Cast of the second version of *The Dead Class* (from 1977): Maria Stangret-Kantor (Woman with the Mechanical Cradle), Celina Niedźwiecka (Somnambulist Prostitute), Teresa Welmińska (Camp Follower), Andrzej Welmiński (Old Man with a Bicycle), Zbigniew Gostomski (Woman Behind the Window), Mira Rychlicka (Old Man in the Loo), Roman Siwulak (Old Man Podophilias), Waclaw Janicki (Old Man with a Double), Lesław Janicki (the Double), Lila Krasicka (Old Man Absent from the First Desk), Jan Książek (Old Man Absent from the Last Desk), Jacek Stokłosa (First World War Soldier), Michał Krzysztofek (Deaf Old Man), Kazimierz Mikulski (Beadle in the Past Perfect Tense), Stanisław Rychlicki (Charwoman). It should be noted that cast changes occurred later as well, resulting de facto in further 'versions' of the production, but these were mainly due to individual actors' indispositions rather than the director's deliberate intent.

¹¹⁷ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 54.

¹¹⁸ This was made possible by using a slightly altered desk construction. In the production, Kantor recreated desks found in Galician schools, charac-

until finally one of them bared and thrust out his rear — mistaken by the Teacher for the pupil's face, with which he attempted to continue the conversation. Light in tone, exaggerated and pointed, these simple physical gestures created a kind of puerile, absurd slapstick comedy. Although the performative nature of the finger-pointing gesture, calling upon and simultaneously sentencing the pupils to death, was somewhat emphasised, the mood of the entire scene utterly changed. The more 'serio-' violence of the original version of the performance turned decidedly '-comic' here — however, while exaggerated and grotesque, it remained consequential.

A similar atmosphere (in both versions of the play) is introduced by another question from the Teacher, this time regarding 'What did King David do?' The class remains silent, so the teacher tries to give the pupils a hint: 'King David shaaa...'. This triggers a joint recitation of a vulgar poem¹¹⁹ and a series of increasingly noisy shouts, evolving into a chant of the Hebrew alphabet, and then an almost trance-like *nigun*.

Writing on the historical and mythical references used by Kantor in the play, Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz suggests that by subjecting them to the onstage process of an 'almost infinite' repetition, these references are invalidated, at times even erased: 'History becomes less significant or even wholly absent. All the more so since the "historical delusions" don't chart a true Past, provoking the pupils to instead explore sensual corporeality.'¹²⁰ Further: 'Behind the grotesque games with corporeality, eagerly reduced to the physiological level, there are more consequential matters to be found [...]. Among the degraded, humiliated

teristic combo desks adapted to communal teaching. They were solid, simple and typically made of wood. Each comprised a seat (a wooden board, often fixed to the rest of the structure) and a desk — a workspace placed in front of the seat, usually fixed and slightly inclined to facilitate writing. To allow the Janicki brothers to hide easily underneath and 'pop out', the seat was replaced with two movable stools and the workspace could be lifted. Kantor's technical drawings of the Janickis' desk are held in the Elbląska archive.

¹¹⁹ 'M'tata M'tata zeszał się twój tata' ['Tit-tat, tit-tat, your dad his pants has shat']. Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 58 — TN.

¹²⁰ Pleśniarowicz. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora...*, p. 51.

people-objects, shadows from the fringes of memory and the dustbins of history — there is no reflection, but there is emotion: fear and pleasure, animation and pain.¹²¹

Pleśniarowicz seems to imply, that the 'moments from History' found in *The Dead Class* lessons are a random selection, lacking dramatic significance, and serve merely as pretext for a universal and timeless reflection on human nature.

The sentences, words and questions echoed by the pupils, which are 'often blurred in this memory, soaring as if in a desert, they grow large in this dream, stun with fear, turn monstrous [...] no longer expecting an answer'.¹²² The term 'historical delusions'¹²³ suggests that, considering the medical context, we are dealing here with a specific disturbance of the mind, which may be accompanied by illusions; visual, auditory, tactile and other hallucinations; as well as anxiety, psychomotor agitation, and sleep disturbances. These symptoms correspond closely to what we observe in this context, including the fact that delusions occur more frequently in the elderly.

Kantor was a pupil of the Kazimierz Bródziński Junior High School in Tarnów, which was still operating under the former, Austrian-style classical curriculum (in force since 1849 and focused on classical philology) and was among the few schools in the country to maintain it. 'It was a very respectable and a very ancient school'.¹²⁴ Moreover, 'for the whole eight years since the first grade Tadeusz was a *celer*, or honour pupil (in Austrian days, they used to be called "honourably talented")',

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 69.

¹²³ The 'Historical Delusions' sequence is essentially split into two segments — first is a part of the 'The "Solomon" Lesson' and the other is the 'The Night Lesson Continued. Historical Delusions' sequence. See Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 53–60, 69–72.

¹²⁴ Krakowski, Piotr. 'Szkolne lata Tadeusza Kantora'. In *W Tarnowie i Krakowie. Szkolne lata Tadeusza Kantora 1924–1939 wraz z uzupełnieniami do roku 1944* [In Tarnów and Kraków. Tadeusz Kantor's School Years 1924–1939 with Supplements up to 1944]. Edited by Józef Chrobak and Justyna Michalik. Cricoteka, 2009, p. 9.

specialising in the humanities, particularly Latin and Greek.¹²⁵ In this context, the notion that the sentences used in the ‘Historical Delusions’ were chosen aleatorically appears highly questionable. Kantor, who possessed an excellent knowledge of classical literature, could not have been unaware of the context of the passages employed, their potential meanings, the associations they might evoke. One might even argue that their selection was deliberate. This conclusion is further supported by the content of these dream utterances and the references they contain.

The first of these appears in ‘The “Solomon” Lesson’. The phrase ‘King Solomon loved many foreign women’ is a biblical quotation¹²⁶ referring to the king’s numerous loves, which brought God’s wrath upon him and led to his doom. Solomon’s transgression of divine law caused the kingdom’s division upon his death, the withdrawal of blessings from his descendants, and the appearance of numerous enemies who disturbed the previously prevailing peace.

The story of Solomon’s predecessor, King David, is then recalled. A reverse chronology is employed here, as we first learn that ‘King David was old’,¹²⁷ followed by several lines delivered with marked expressiveness by the Teacher:

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ 1 Kings 11.1–3: ‘But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites — from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart.’

¹²⁷ Most likely a reference to the beginning of 1 Kings 1.1: ‘Now King David was old. . .’. Later on we also read: ‘For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods’ (1 Kings 11.4). It is highly likely that Kantor intended to emphasise David’s advanced age and that his successor was the aforementioned Salomon, perhaps following the achronological dreamlogic, characteristic of the ‘Historical Delusions’ sequence. It is worth noting that the full verse of 1 Kings 1.1 reads: ‘Now King David was old, advanced in years; and they put covers on him, but he could not get warm.’

The crown of David...
Absalom insulted David!
Where's the Ark, where's the Ark...?
Across the Kidron... Across the Jordan...
Absalom insulted David...
Across the Kidron, Across the Jordan, Where's the Ark, where's the
Ark...

The scene continues as follows:

He is interrupted in these commandant lamentations by
The Old Man Podophiliast

THE OLD MAN PODOPHILIAST

And who thrust his spear in Absalom's heart while he was still alive in
the midst of the terebinth tree???

The class jumps at the question:

ONE OF THE PUPILS

Shouts:

They cast him into a large pit in the woods!

TEACHER

Continues, undeterred:

O Absalom, Absalom!!!

FEW OF THE PUPILS

with indignation:

They cast him into a pit!!

ONE OF THE PUPILS

Demanding the truth:

Who threw him into a pit??

ALL PUPILS

in unison

David!!!!

On David's orders!!!

TEACHER-DAVID

continues to sob and call out his son's name:

O! Absalom, Absalom!

ALL PUPILS

mockingly:

O! David's crying!

TEACHER-DAVID

O! Absalom, Absalom!

ALL PUPILS

O! David's sobbing!

But the teacher is fed up with this spectacle.

He shouts:

TEACHER

Hush! Hush!

And tames the class with the dull alphabet.¹²⁸

The passages used by Kantor come from the second biblical Book of Samuel, which records the tragic tale of the conflict between father and son — David and Absalom. Kantor does not recount this story in detail, perhaps relying on the audience's familiarity with it. Even so, quotations found in the score provide clear and unambiguous clues that enable its quick recognition. In the actual performance, however, the situation is more complex; even fewer fragments of the tale are presented (not all the lines in the score were featured onstage), but nonetheless it remains possible to reconstruct, in general terms, the nature and focus of the narrative. It is, after all, a largely universal story.

¹²⁸ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 58–60. That is how the scene unfolded in the performance, as evidenced by film footage.

The conflict between King David and his son, Absalom, led to rebellion and war. Absalom, was exiled after killing his half-brother Amnon for the rape of their sister Tamar, before returning and partially reconciling with his father. Later on, however, spurred by his advisers, Absalom declared himself king in Hebron and captured Jerusalem, forcing David to flee — passing, among others, the Kidron Brook. During his flight, David initially intended to take the Ark of the Covenant with him, but changed his mind, believing that, if it were God's will, he would see it again. Absalom, meanwhile, sought to humiliate the king — including by openly laying with his father's concubines in order to consolidate his position in the eyes of the city's inhabitants.

Ultimately, David's forces defeated Absalom's army — the decisive battle took place in the forest of Ephraim, which Absalom reached by crossing the Jordan. After his defeat, Absalom fled on a mule, but his long hair caught on the branches of a terebinth tree. Trapped, he was found by the commander of David's armies, Joab, who — against king's explicit orders — killed Absalom by thrusting three spears into his heart. Absalom's body was then thrown into a large pit in the forest and covered with a great heap of stones.

Shortly after this scene we see a very significant sequence of actions. the Old Man in the Loo suddenly comes alive and 'takes out some dirty and crumpled paper scraps from his pocket. He's reading, counting, adding up something. . .'¹²⁹ In his calculations he's helped, as Kantor indicates in the score, by the Bible, as subsequent rows of numbers are interspersed with verses from the Old Testament — mostly from the Book of Lamentations, consisting of five poems prompted by the siege and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem:

...in a pillar of fire...¹³⁰
 my bones...
 my sinews...¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

¹³⁰ A reference to events of Exod. 13–14 — TN.

¹³¹ KJV, Job 30.17: 'My bones are pierced in me in the night season: and my sinews take no rest' — TN.

in my blood...

0 0 0 0

24 67 97

7 7 7 7

...in my blood....¹³²

0! 0! 0!

...you have filled me with bitterness

you have made me drink wormwood...¹³³

I have put my mouth in the dust...¹³⁴

...O, the scoundrel!

42 43 47 65 5 6 7

0 0 0 0 0

...because my people have forgotten me...

...make their land desolate

and a perpetual hissing...¹³⁵

...Fraud!

Let their skin cling to their bones

and become as dry as wood...¹³⁶

...2 2 2

0 0 0

our days are fulfilled....¹³⁷

8 13 18 22 28

8 8 8¹³⁸

¹³² Most likely a reference to Ps. 30.9: 'What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit?' — TN.

¹³³ Lam. 3.15 — TN.

¹³⁴ Lam. 3.29: 'Let him put his mouth in the dust — There may yet be hope.' — TN.

¹³⁵ Jer. 18.15-16 — TN.

¹³⁶ Lam. 4.8: 'Their skin clings to their bones, it has become as dry as wood' — TN.

¹³⁷ Lam. 4.18: 'They hunt our steps, that we cannot go in our streets: our end is near, our days are fulfilled; for our end is come' — TN.

¹³⁸ Kantor. *Partytura*..., pp. 64–65.

The passages mentioned above — as, in fact, all those selected by Kantor — fundamentally concern the possibility of change and invariably contain an announcement of a watershed moment or an inevitable catastrophe. Solomon's transgressions and downfall, the end of David's life, and Absalom's death are all events that radically and brutally transform reality; the new order that emerges from these ruptures is uncertain, dark, and terrifying. Nothing remains as it was before. Watching the recordings of *The Dead Class* while following the score, we can see that the verses Kantor uses speak to yet another, much closer reality. It becomes clear that references to the Holocaust and pogroms are not included merely as a part of the aesthetic sphere,¹³⁹ as is commonly assumed; they are also very much present in the textual layer of the play, commonly overlooked in its analysis. After all, the dramatic story of Absalom speaks of brother killing brother, father killing son. It speaks of the violence and betrayal brought upon us (under certain, rigidly defined conditions) even by those near us. Upon the Polish Jews — by other Poles. The answer to 'And who thrust his spear in Absalom's heart while he was still alive in the midst of the terebinth tree???' is, therefore — a perpetrator no one expected, as the divine law commands that 'thou shalt not kill'. Not a stranger. A neighbour.

For a brief moment, the immobilised Absalom is a part of no order. He is suspended between heaven and earth. Spears are driven into his body before burial — one might be tempted to call him Christ-like. Except this grave is simply a pit in the ground, same as those into which bodies were thrown during pogroms. Same as those dug under force by the victims, prior to their own executions, carried out by the Einsatzgruppen, mainly in the territories east of the 1939 demarcation line, after June 1941, during the Nazi invasion of Soviet Union. Same as those dug up few years later during the Sonderaktion 1005 in a strive to exhume all the bodies and burn them to destroy evidence. Dozens, hundreds of murdered victims are now being counted by one of the pupils, an elderly Jew who may have also been in these massacres. Killed and then burned in these pits: 'in a pillar of fire... my bones... my sinews... in my blood...' But then nothing in this story seems unambiguous.

¹³⁹ See, e.g., Niziołek.

We could therefore say that Kantor is setting a theatrical and textual trap for us. In supposedly insignificant, randomly chosen references to other works, he draws attention to details that clearly and simply allow us to trace their sources, whose analysis reveals ever new, hidden meanings and connotations that are close to us. At the same time, Kantor subtly misleads the audience and muddles straightforward interpretation. We immerse ourselves in subsequent layers of meaning and emerging connections. The performative power of the play's analysis makes us a part of the 'historical delusions'.

Following up the scenes described above, the old people at first sleepily (as emphasised by the duvets brought onto the stage — the sole possible reason for their presence), then increasingly lively and loudly shout out memorized, well-known school phrases. But, once more, proper reflection on their meaning leads to the conclusion that here, too, there is no randomness.

The phrase: 'In what year did Capet's head?' refers most likely to the death of Louis XVI, executed with a guillotine on January 21, 1793 in the Place de la Révolution in Paris. It was a key event of the French Revolution. The execution of the former king of France followed the trial of Citizen Capet (as the monarch was ironically called) in December 1792 before the National Convention, in which he was accused of treason and acting against the state.

The cry 'And the Capitoline geese?' is an unambiguous reference to a well-known legend from ancient Roman history, telling how geese, sacred animals of the goddess Juno, saved the city during the Gaulish invasion of 390 BC. Their cackling awakened the Roman defenders, thwarting the enemy's surprise attack. The next line, 'Hannibal ante portas!' ['Hannibal at the gates!'], is closely related as a Latin maxim warning of approaching danger (originally a cry of fear uttered by the Romans after their defeat by Carthage at the Battle of Cannae).

The next phrase repeated by *The Dead Class* pupils — 'Alea iacta est' ('The die has been cast') has a similar tone. These were likely the words said by Julius Caesar after crossing the Rubicon with his army, an act tantamount to declaring civil war against Pompey, with whom Caesar was competing for primacy in the Republic.

After the conquest of Gaul, Julius Caesar enjoyed great fame and recognition. He had a loyal army and a fortune in spoils of war. After

the death of Marcus Crassus in 53 AD and disruption of the balance between the then triumvirs, Pompey, previously overshadowed by Caesar, suddenly gained a powerful ally — the Senate, which, seeing Caesar's growing power, feared for the future of the republic. The senators decided that Caesar would not be allowed to remain in office and introduced a law that forced him to report to Rome in person. Caesar was faced with a choice: he could resign from his command and enter Rome as a civilian, or he could oppose the Senate's decision and act according to his own plans. He decided to defy the law. Crossing the Rubicon became one of the most pivotal moments of ancient history. On the one hand, it was the culmination of an existing process, and on the other — it heralded a new era. Shortly after this event, the Republic gave way to the Empire, which soon became the centre of Roman culture as an amalgamation of Greek and Latin influences.¹⁴⁰

The 'Ides of March' are, as is widely known, the midpoint of the month — 15 March. It was a day of pompous celebrations in honour of the Roman god of war, Mars, with military parades and inspections taking place. Its particular historical weight derives from the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC by a group of about sixty assassins, among them his friend Brutus. To this event is related the next sequence repeated mechanically by the pupils: 'Et tu Brute contra me...'

'Galia [sic] est omnis divisa in partes tres' ('Gaul is a whole divided into three parts') comes from Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*. It is the opening sentence of the work detailing the Roman conquest of Gaul. This sentence aims to introduce the reader to the geographic and social context of Gaul, which Caesar divided into three main regions: Gallia Belgica (to the north), Gallia Celtica (in the centre), and Gallia Aquitania (to the south). In a broader context, this quote is a symbol of precise analysis and systematization.

Meanwhile, the phrase 'I am not of salt nor soil...' is attributed to Stefan Czarniecki, a military commander immortalised in the Polish national anthem, Crown Hetman, one of the most successful command-

¹⁴⁰ See Delsol, Chantal. 'Kryzys migracyjny, czyli wnioski z upadku Cesarstwa Rzymskiego', <https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/pepites/alea-iacta-est-decyzja-ktora-zmieni-la-bieg-historii>. Accessed 22 July 2025.

ers of his time, and a rival to other renowned hetmans — Stanisław Potocki and Stanisław Lanckoroński. When Lanckoroński died in early 1657, the brave regiment leader seemed to be a natural candidate for his post. However, King John II Casimir, under the influence of the majority of senators, awarded it to Jerzy Sebastian Lubomirski. ‘I am not of salt nor soil, but of my own injury’, commented the disappointed hero, alluding to Potocki’s vast estates and salt mines, on which the Lubomirski family had built their position.¹⁴¹

Among these rather serious sentences and phrases referring to significant historical events, which are always, to some extent, related to a change in the existing order, there are also those that stand out for their lightness, humour, or even irony, such as the repeated announcement that ‘Queen Bona is dead.’ In Polish, this expression functions as an ironic or joking phrase, used when someone says something trivial, obvious or outdated — some fact that has been widely known for a long time.

The conclusion of this oneiric counting rhyme are words spoken by the Old Man Absent from the First Desk, usually silent: ‘Eheu fugaces Postume Postume.’ These are, of course, lines from one of Horace’s odes: ‘Oh, Posthumus, my Posthumus, alas! The nimble-footed years, they pass, they pass...’¹⁴² In the context of the performance, this words seem to emphasise its atmosphere and ambience.

¹⁴¹ These words were preserved in collective memory by Henryk Sienkiewicz, who quoted them in *Potop* [English edition: *The Deluge*. Translated by W.S. Kuniczak, Copernicus Society of America / Hippocrene Books, New York, 1991]. In the context of the antisemitic motifs present in *The Dead Class*, e.g. in the verbal layer of ‘Historical Delusions’ discussed in detail in this study, the reception of the Czarniecki myth in interwar nationalist discourse is particularly telling. The author of an article published on the occasion of the transfer of the hetman’s remains to Czarnca explicitly calls for the appearance of a ‘new Czarniecki’ as a defender of Poland against Jews and ‘traitors’. See: T.G. ‘Jam nie z soli, ani z roli’. *Nowiny Codzienne*, no. 331, 15 October 1937, https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/Content/428189/PDF/NDIGC-ZAS007289_1937_331_0001_2283268.pdf. Accessed 12 March 2026.

¹⁴² Horace. ‘Eheu Fugaces.’ Translated by Maurice Baring. *Horace’s ‘Eheu Fugaces’*. A Collection of Translations. Compiled by Isaac Waisberg, 2023.

The sequences of *The Dead Class* discussed thus far function as a kind of introduction to the subsequent events, which constitute their continuation. Kantor introduces at the outset virtually all the key rules that will govern the drama for the remainder of the performance. Individual gestures, their constellations, actions, and meanings found in the textual layer will appear and be developed with much greater intensity in later parts. The governing principle of the performance is the smooth and quite natural intertwining of actions and sequences, whose distinctiveness, were it not for the notes and divisions found in the score, might have gone unnoticed. One of the signs marking the boundaries between scenes is certainly the waltz, which can be heard in select, usually profoundly significant moments of the performance and after which the onstage reality is frequently altered. Pupils circle their desks in a mad procession to its rhythm. In the sequences mentioned thus far, they are always 'wearing' the manikins. It could be said that the classroom is in a state of organised chaos during the initial 'night lessons'. Everything seems to be in disarray, everything seems to be falling apart, yet each actor's movements are precise and in sync with the others'. In the first part of the performance, we have an introduction (or self-introduction) of the key characters and the key inciting incidents of dramatic action. Each of the protagonists performs specific actions, while the rest of the group watches, adds to them, or comments on them. The class almost always freezes when someone delivers their lines. And what's important in the performance is both what is said and what is done.

The character introductions, shaped almost like personalised études — primarily those of the Old Man with a Bicycle and the Somnambulist Prostitute, shamelessly exposing her breast — flow seamlessly into the 'Historical Delusions'. The uttered phrases and sentence fragments herald a change of order, foreshadow the coming catastrophe. Another sign of the impending disaster is the advent of the figure of the First World War Soldier, who 'appears as he died, roused by an order from the trenches [...] with fever and madness in his eyes, and runs screaming in a bayonet charge.'¹⁴³ All this takes place to the sound of the waltz, which alternately

¹⁴³ Kantor. *Partytura* . . . , p. 72. The Soldier appears in the second version of the play.

grows louder and subsides. Following its rhythm, the pupils, tirelessly lugging around their manikins, circle their desks several times, as if taking part in some 'savage hecatomb ceremonial',¹⁴⁴ as if after a catastrophe 'they gather the fallen, carrying them on their backs, dragging themselves with the last of their strength, falling, crawling, clinging to one another, like remnants of a defeated army.'¹⁴⁵ When they return to their desks, another wave of violence against the manikins they carry surges within them. They shake them, bang them against the desks and against one another, before finally brutally tossing them into a corner — methodically, as if into a mass grave. To the same spot in which, before 'The "Solomon" Lesson' began, several of the Old People had already quietly abandoned their own dolls, setting a precedent for this action.

It seems that it is in the context of this scene that Zygmunt Greń will write in his moving review that 'every acting action is logical, sensible and . . . utterly painful', that 'the manikins thrown onto the pile are the destruction of a nation.'¹⁴⁶

This interpretation is reinforced by a small but very poignant change introduced by Kantor, presumably in 1980. A recording of the Prato performance from around that time shows young Lech Stangret, who played one of the manikins.¹⁴⁷ This was a nonspeaking role, and for the most part he would be seated behind a desk as a living doll. In this sequence, before the actors begin throwing the manikins onto the pile, Stangret very slowly and calmly walks across the stage in almost complete silence, at once regal and tragic, accompanied by the gazes of the pupils, tense and frozen in place, before lying down on the two manikins tossed there earlier.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Greń, Zygmunt. 'Nie pogrzebani'. *Życie Literackie*, no. 1326, 26 June 1977, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Lech Stangret's inclusion in the cast of *The Dead Class* was likely due to organisational reasons. In 1980 the premiere of *Wielopole, Wielopole* took place, in which Stangret played the role of Adaś. The two productions were often presented together on foreign tours. Slightly earlier — during presentations of the *Where Are the Snows of Yesteryear* cricotage — Dominika Michalczuk also joined *The Dead Class* as a living manikin, having played the role of the Little Rabbi in that cricotage.

The manikin in Kantor's theatre was intended to serve as a model for the actors' presence on stage. The artist aimed to create a liminal atmosphere based on the uncertainty as to what is living and what is non-living, which in turn was meant to evoke in the audience a feeling bordering on fear and unease, but also curiosity and fascination. These tensions were evoked and intensified by the presence of a live actor — Stangret, who, after all, exists in the performance as a lifeless manikin.

In the first version of the play these sequences were followed by 'The Grammar Lesson', which was removed by Kantor¹⁴⁸ from the second iteration. It was quite a spectacular scene: during the 'Historical Delusions', the Lame Repeater appeared in the classroom with a cane and a school bag on his back, kept by one of the Old Men on a rope like a dog. The 'delusions' subsided, and the class calmed down enough for the Repeater to deliver his lines, which were essentially a rather detailed description of the workings of the speech apparatus. Throughout his speech, the Repeater was tormented, pushed, and humiliated by his tormentors — the other Old Men. At the climax of his monologue, he would fall to the ground, suffocated.

This scene was connected to the succeeding sequences, labelled as 'Phonetic Blots' and 'Faces and Insults'.¹⁴⁹ Carefully analysing and interpreting these scenes, in particular their textual layer — the language used by the characters — Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz writes about the models of aphasia to which, he believes, they are subject. 'The lack of actual dialogue, the gravitation toward the automatism of pure repetition or phonetic transformations signifies an ostentatious renunciation of actual communication'¹⁵⁰ and constitutes an attempt to

¹⁴⁸ According to Andrzej Wełmiński, this modification was also a result of cast changes. After actors from the Bagatela Theatre left the company — including Zofia Kalińska, who had played the Woman Behind the Window — Zbigniew Gostomski was cast in that role; having previously played the Lame Repeater, the principal figure in 'The Grammar Lesson' scene. Kantor reportedly tried to find a replacement for that sequence, but these attempts mostly failed and he eventually abandoned the entire segment.

¹⁴⁹ The description of these sequences in the score is identical to what took place during the performances.

¹⁵⁰ Pleśniarowicz. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora...*, p. 72.

return to infantile pre-linguistic awareness. This use of language may also be driven by the belief that not everything can be described and contained by language, that there are events and experiences that escape it. The Holocaust can be counted among them without a doubt. Perhaps for this reason Kantor also invalidates the entirety of grammar, as that which ‘contains within itself all possible literary artistic forms, all [...] the world’s literature, remains, as it were, a reservoir of an infinite number of potentially possible situations.’¹⁵¹ In his work, Kantor demonstrates that in the face of the inexpressible and indescribable experience of Auschwitz, all rules, all arrangements — in fact everything that has previously shaped the world — becomes null and void, while every created form — like the memory clichés he evokes — is impermanent, insufficient, and inappropriate. Once established, it falls apart at once.

Into the deserted classroom, in which only the seated manikins remain, the Beadle is brought in, together with his chair. A new sequence begins, in which the centre stage is taken by the Charwoman, who until now remained on the sidelines, waiting motionless for this very moment. Jan Kłossowicz described this scene perfectly:

A huge, narrow broad (played by a man [Stanisław Rychlicki]), wearing a ragged black dress and a drooping, not-quite-a-woman’s, not-quite-a-soldier’s hat. She starts cleaning up. This involves scattering rotting books and notebooks around, deepening the decay of this classroom of the dead. She also tidies up the manikins — picking up the few that were lying on the left-side floor and seating them in the desk benches.¹⁵² Sweeps. Scattering papers and garbage, she raises a cloud of dust. Finally, she sits herself on top of a desk, picks up a newspaper from 1914 [which the Beadle had been keeping on his lap] and starts to read:

‘Konstanty Wiśniewski’s pharmacy recommends tablets of its own production...’¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵² In the version of the performance in which Lech Stangret appears as the live manikin, he is the one to be seated behind the desk.

¹⁵³ Kłossowicz, Jan. ‘Próby zapisu. *Umarła klasa*.’ *Dialog*, no. 2, 1977, p. 125.

Later on, we hear that 'on the streets of Sarajevo, a Serb named Princip Gavrilo shamefully murdered Archduke Ferdinand and his wife'. And that, in response, 'the German Emperor Wilhelm II¹⁵⁴ ordered a mobilization throughout the German Empire'. After a short pause comes a comment: 'Well! We have a war!'.¹⁵⁵

At this, the Beadle jumps up from his chair, stands at attention, sings a fragment of the Austro-Hungarian anthem in the original German and leaves. The Charwoman remains alone and begins to wash the classroom floor, anxiously and with considerable fear. In the background, 'Historical Delusions' can be heard coming from the speaker. Only now do these lines show their full force. The catastrophe they predicted, or merely intuited, is materializing — becoming a fact. The presence of the First World War Soldier is now fully justified and understandable. Words have power, one can act through them — one might echo John Austin.¹⁵⁶ We are dealing here with the aforementioned technique of repetition and simultaneous reinforcement of the meaning of specific actions, because sentences that initially seem rather random turn out to be a consistently pursued process of constructing meaning.

The Beadle is an interesting example of how Kantor's performance was created. In the *Elbląska Notebook* an entry by Kantor can be found, which is most likely an initial variant of the anthem-singing scene:

¹⁵⁴ In later, postpremiere performances of *The Dead Class*, the Charwoman adds the phrase 'Kaiser Bill' after those lines (Kantor notes this in the score). It was a colloquial, often derogatory, name for Emperor Wilhelm II (1859–1941), the last German Emperor, particularly common in Britain and the USA during the First World War. It had a propagandistic character and was used in songs, posters and the press, often to mock Wilhelm as an aggressive, authoritarian ruler responsible for the outbreak of war.

¹⁵⁵ In later, postpremiere performances of *The Dead Class* — possibly because of the numerous foreign presentations — the Charwoman would add in English 'The war is declared' after those words to add to the effect.

¹⁵⁶ Author of the classic 1962 *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he analyses the performative aspects of language.

THE BEADLE

in the past and perfect tense
 stiff manikin
 dead DEAD beadle
 sitting on a chair
 newspaper on his lap
 holds buns
 20 grosch each
 the buns are 25 years old

from time to time livens up
 the buns scatter
 then he rings desperately

leaves his cage
 bends down, tries to pick up
 makes some movements, absolutely ineffective
 rings as if for help

someone helps him
 takes him back into the cage
 calms him down

when he notices that no one is paying attention to him
 that something is happening behind the desks
 completely apart from him as if he wanted to attract attention
 the beadle interjects
 not wanting to allow false comments
 hands his newspaper
 sings the Austrian anthem
 tries to convince
 points finger up
 sings the Austrian anthem¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ A note by Kantor recorded in his director's notebook from the time the production was created, held in Lech Stangret's private archive.

Perhaps the idea for such a scene arose from a loose association of 'Kaiser' with 'kaiser rolls'. A kaiser roll is a wheat roll, very popular in Poland (particularly in the south and in Lesser Poland), with a hard crust and a characteristic, five-pointed star shape on top. Its name comes from the German *Kaisersemmel*, which can be translated as 'imperial roll'. According to one of the stories of its origin, this roll was baked in honour of Franz Joseph I and was intended to symbolize his majesty — hence the imperial form and the aesthetic incision resembling a crown. It became popular in the Austro-Hungarian Empire proper before spreading to Central Europe, including Poland.

Reality undergoes a drastic change in the subsequent part of the performance as well. The text of Witkiewicz's play, heralded at the beginning by just a few lines spoken by a handful of characters, this time appears on a much larger scale. The scene, explicitly named 'The Family Scene' in the score, is essentially a theatrical (or rather artistic) synopsis of the first act of *Tumor Brainiowicz* which, to put it shortly, portrays a spectacular breakdown of rather complex familial relationships. The head of this family, Tumor Brainiowicz, is a brilliant mathematician, suffering from an inferiority complex stemming from his plebeian birth — 'there is something absolute about it, about the whole racial issue',¹⁵⁸ he'll tell his wife. Kantor will describe him in the score as 'riddled with genius, lust, and wanton poetry'.¹⁵⁹ He has a Father, an old sclerotic man, and a pregnant wife of aristocratic descent, whom he publicly humiliates and cheats on with her own daughter (and his stepdaughter), Izia, who conceives avant-garde futuristic poems. Then there are his wonderful children: Alfred and Maurycy — one, too, a mathematician, the other a poet. As is typical with Witkiewicz, the play is rife with events occurring in quick succession, full of surprising, absurd, and not entirely logical twists. There is a method to this madness, however, as despite all the eccentricities we bear witness to the family is loving, keeps together, and shows a great deal of forgiveness for one another. That is, until Professor Alfred Green — Delegate of the Mathematical

¹⁵⁸ Witkiewicz, Stanisław Ignacy. *Tumor Mózgowicz. Dramaty I*. Edited by Janusz Degler. PIW, 1996, p. 227.

¹⁵⁹ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 42.

Central and General Office — enters the stage. Kantor will dub him the Stranger. Green comes to arrest Tumor, who threatens the safety of mankind with his revolutionary discoveries, capable of permanently altering the fundamental laws of mathematics. The Stranger's arrival completely transforms the situation on stage, disrupting all plans and, as it turns out, all temporary arrangements as well.

All the situations described above are reflected in the events of *The Dead Class* and, even not knowing the text of Witkiewicz's play, we as viewers are able to infer what the plot referred to by Kantor is about, even though the chosen scene is staged in an abridged version. Let it be known right away that the fragments of *Tumor Brainowicz* selected by Kantor are (as expected of him) very well thought out — they concern specific details of the plot of Witkiewicz's drama while at the same time possessing considerable semantic capacity.

The way in which Kantor incorporates Witkiewicz's text into his stage aesthetic is also notable. This is not, of course, a realistic rendering of Witkiewicz's concept, but a clever, highly modernised staging in which the combination of stage action and text creates an image of profound evocative power that simultaneously defies clear interpretation. One such example is the scene in which the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle — Rozhulantyna (Reveline) — is placed on a peculiar 'Family Machine', a visual and functional combination of a gynaecological chair and a medieval torture device. After learning of the depravity committed against her by Tumor, she confesses in a conversation with him:

'Don't think about it. It's all fixed now. I wish I could give birth every month so that there would be more people like you. I wish for an Ocean island... and to have just you and our children there... [...] I don't think I'll be able to live that happiness. Why, oh why can't I be a doe rabbit!'¹⁶⁰

Just before the end of this exchange, the Charwoman brings onto the stage the Mechanical Cradle, resembling a small coffin with two wooden balls inside which, when set in motion, emit a hollow, terrifying clatter. Birth and death — two complementary circuits. However,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 100–101.

the ambiguity and incongruity inherently present in this coexistence and its symbols are horrifying. Even a child's cradle, an utterly natural thing usually associated with warmth, peace, and security, is characterised in Kantor's work by a mechanical and lifeless quality. And the child's cries we expect to hear from within are replaced either by terrifying silence or the dull, empty clatter of two wooden balls.

After this, to the sounds of the mechanical cradle, the Charwoman-Death (as Kantor calls this character in the score) begins to take her toll. In her hands — like a scythe — she holds her broom by its iron rod and... reaps. 'Mechanical movements, more and more relentless. [...] The classroom floor littered with Old People's bodies.'¹⁶¹ Thus comes the first attempt at changing the existing order. Next, there is another pass at salvaging the family situation. Izia — with whom, as it turns out, Tumor is in love — recites her futuristic poem, after which the Charwoman once again strides through the classroom, wreaking havoc. And, once again, Reveline tries to calm everyone down since, according to her, 'There's still time to fix everything.'¹⁶² But then Green appears, and it becomes clear that it is already too late to 'fix everything.'¹⁶³ The catastrophe occurs once more, and again it is symbolised by throwing all the manikins onto a pile. Pupils return to their seats, and 'The "Prometheus" Lesson' begins.

Structure-wise, it is a repeat of the framework previously seen in 'The "Solomon" Lesson.'¹⁶⁴ Teacher again calls upon individual pupils to answer seemingly absurd questions. And once again this is almost synonymous with a death sentence. This time, however, the questions asked and the phrases uttered in response concern, to a much greater extent

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 102–103.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁶³ In the first version of the performance Green was played by Bogdan Grzybowicz, listed in the programme as the Stranger. In the second version the role was taken by the Janicki brothers — rather comically doubling the part and restoring a slapstick quality to the play.

¹⁶⁴ Even the casting change for the Teacher is identical — in the first version he is played by Bogdan Grzybowicz (Stranger–Alfred Green), and in the second by Andrzej Wełmiński (Old Man with a Bicycle).

than before, physicality and sensuality, with specific parts of the human body being mentioned. At times, these phrases prompt an almost somatic reaction in others, like in the case of the Prometheus' liver, with which the lesson opens. The next question concerns Cleopatra's nose — and, as is often the case with Kantor, it may carry a much deeper meaning. 'The nose of Cleopatra: if it had been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have changed' — this aphorism by Pascal underlines how small details can have enormous consequences in a broader context, and how significant even the slightest differences can be. The fortuitousness of history, the irony of fate — all of this comes to mind when we use this phrase. But within the space of *The Dead Class*, Cleopatra's nose could have much more far-reaching implications, especially if its 'unpleasant appearance' were to reveal, for example, Jewish origin. Perhaps this is what Kantor had in mind when he noted in the score:

'The Woman with the Mechanical Cradle, clearly mad with fear, comes up with a wild idea. Pointing to the Teacher's prominent nose, she shouts, pointing her index finger: It's your nose!!! The Teacher, suddenly transformed into a Pupil, loses his Teacher's stance and, overcome with fear, repeats: Nose... Nooooo...'¹⁶⁵

Erotic excitement, escalating almost to ecstasy, is aroused in the pupils by subsequent terms — 'the Navel of the World', to which the Woman Behind the Window succumbs, and 'Achilles' Heel', which defeats the entire class. These two scenes, modestly called by Kantor 'moments of weakness', full of perversion, erotic rapture and violence, are often omitted in interpretations. They seem to embarrass scholars. Their nature is incongruous with sublime eschatological reflections on *The Dead Class*.

Let us recall, then, what Kantor writes about this first sequence in the score:

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE WINDOW

stands up, cowering in fear.
She keeps repeating:

¹⁶⁵ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 110–111. This sequence was also present in the final performance.

The Navel of the World.

she's glancing at the TEACHER
 dragging out words to delay judgement,
 she slips from behind her desk stealthily,
 constantly repeating: the navel... the navel...
 making it known that she's close
 to the correct answer,
 she inches imperceptibly forward, trying
 to be as far away as possible from her tormentor,
 she keeps eyeing him, unable to look away,
 as if hypnotised, on her way she keeps
 asking the audience and the old people for help,
 ...the navel... the navel...
 at last she's at the front, in front of
 the desks, and that's where she has an epileptic
 seizure, twisted as if dancing
 the St. Vitus' Dance, she falls on the pile of books
 scattered earlier by the CHARWOMAN,
 writhes in a kind of holy ecstasy,
 inhumanly shattered within and shouts:

The Navel of the World!!!

Face contorted in a pang of illness
 and inner rapture.
 Suddenly, as quickly as it came, the
 attack passes, cuts off,
 The Woman Behind the Window stands up, 'as if
 nothing happened', grimaces at the audience,
 who witnessed her moment of weakness
 and, flirtatiously shaking her butt, this unhappy
 old woman returns to her desk.
 Still 'as if nothing happened'.
 Sits down.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 111–112.

This sequence is built on stark contrast, a mismatch resulting from the juxtaposition of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane. In ancient Greece, the temple at Delphi was considered ‘the navel of the world’ (*omphalos*) — a place which, according to myth, lies at the centre of the world. Similar notions existed in other cultures, where ‘holy centres’ were designated as symbolic points connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. Thus, the idea of ‘the navel of the world’ directly relates to the sacred; it represents the divine ordering of the world, endows it with meaning. In the scene described, this sacrum is quite brutally brought down to earth through an erotically-charged performance of the Woman Behind the Window.

A similar principle can be found in the next scene, in which, in a state of extreme arousal, the pupils together with their teacher throw themselves at a bared leg, ‘which protrudes provocatively [...] like some living, throbbing bodily organ’, shamelessly fondling, groping it ‘with increasing passion.’¹⁶⁷ These scenes realize the intentions and aspirations Kantor outlined in the *Elbląska Notebook*. The immense excitement, shameless licentiousness, at times bordering on erotic ecstasy, the complete immersion in carnal pleasures are also, to some extent, an outpouring of the national condition suggested by Kantor in his performance. His diagnosis also points to our nation’s intense brutality, since, as in the previous lessons, we have a typical school situation: a rather brutal barrage of questions and, consequently, humiliation of the pupil in the middle of the class, whom the rest of the group, more or less successfully, tries to direct to answers forgotten or wholly unknown. Kantor seems to say that we are made to practice this kind of violence, humiliation, and desecration from a very early age. That we adapt to its rules over time and, moreover, treat it as unquestionable and necessary. After all this, the class rises once more for a posthumous toast to the sounds of the waltz, repeating three times the memorised poses and gestures.

Referencing the universal experience of the classroom is a common artistic practice, implemented in a similar manner and spirit across a variety of art forms. This concept was successfully employed, for one,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

by Federico Fellini in his film *Roma*,¹⁶⁸ which premiered in March 1973. In portraying the inhabitants of Rome, Fellini resorted to several techniques — embellishment, exaggeration, deformation, caricature, hyperbole, and intensification — thereby expressing a truly extraordinary visual creativity, which proves to lie very close to the aesthetics of Kantor's performance. As Iwona Kolasińska-Pasterczyk writes:

The portrait of the inhabitants of Rome is comprised of a multitude of components: the educational model of monastic schools; the image of a model traditional family; mundane scenes of the past connected with the cultural heritage of antiquity; but also of the present, marked by the crime of fascism under the guise of contrarian trends (made in USA), customs related to the pleasures of the palate and the body (street feasts of excess and brothel visits) or of the eye (the tradition of revue theatre and cinema), local colour (connected to places with a rich history) and two spheres of influence — the brothel and the Church.¹⁶⁹

In the first scenes of the film we see a group of boys from a church school, dressed in black uniforms, capes and caps, accompanied by a rather eerie pair of teachers, who, during a school trip, 'repeat the act' of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon and uttering the words 'Alea iacta est'. It is important to note that the mythical Rubicon is visualised here as a rather puny, narrow rivulet, which can be interpreted as a deliberate irony on Fellini's part, intended to exaggerate and thus expose the myths of Rome. In another scene, the same pupils listen to the tale of the Capitoline geese, which, as it turns out, can be seen from the windows of the classroom they are in. Everyone joyfully runs to the windows, shouting and making faces — exactly as in one of the sequences in Kantor's play. In yet another scene, the pupils are shown a presentation, beginning with a slide of the Capitoline she-wolf 'cast in bronze' and ending with 'the chief temple of the

¹⁶⁸ I would like to extend my thanks to Karolina Czerna for pointing out this aspect of Federico Fellini's work in the context of *The Dead Class*.

¹⁶⁹ Kolasińska-Pasterczyk, Iwona. 'Grzechy po włosku według Federica Felliniego. Rzymski tryptyk zatracenia i zanikanie świętości'. *Załącznik Kulturoznawczy*, no. 9, 2022, pp. 369–370.

Christian world', which turns out to be a shapely bottom of a half-naked woman wearing a thong. In response to this random slide exposing the truth of the moral double standards of the clergy, one of the priest-teachers shouts: 'Turn it off, cover it up, turn it off! Shut your eyes, don't look. This is Satan. Anyone who looks goes to hell. Shut your eyes, it's the devil, it's sin'.

The atmosphere of mysterious eroticism, combined with superficial sanctity and perversion created in Fellini's film is also present in the aforementioned scenes from *The Dead Class*, after which lines from Witkiewicz's text return. Suddenly, the Stranger (Green) breaks away from the group, shouting, 'A moment longer and it will be too late!' before rushing to the toilet.¹⁷⁰ The Charwoman follows him and attempts to drag him out by the hair. At last she succeeds and then puts the man in the correct position — stretches his hand out with his index finger extended (in a teacher-like gesture). On her signal, the Stranger begins to speak, standing on the toilet, leaning against the upper edges of the walls like a speaker at a podium or a 'dictator-criminal' — as Kantor himself calls him.¹⁷¹ His speech appears nonsensical:

Ma'am, you must, you must, you must, you must choose, the entire universe, you must, he can't, he can, he, he, he can change, he can't change the existing, he can, he, he, he can't change the existing mathematics, you must, you must, he can, I know, I don't know, I can't, he can, he can't from the alephs, his omnipotence, he, he, he can do anything, he can't, in the name of, he, for the entirety of culture he can, he must, you must...

The class interrupts him from time to time:

'We've been through all this before.

We're spinning in circles.

We can't do this anymore'

¹⁷⁰ In the second version of the production these lines are spoken by the Old Man with a Double. As before, a cast change alters the entire scene's character. Janicki plays the scene as a comic reference to a pupil who urgently needs to use the toilet.

¹⁷¹ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 124.

The Somnambulist Prostitute chimes in, shouting commandingly:
Get this man away from here!!!
Get this man away from here!!!

The Stranger, however, carries on unperturbed:
He can't, you have to, ma'am,
we have to,
he can't,
and we can, we must,

the anger almost makes you pop:

for the sake of
this GIRLIE'S fancy!!!
we can't,
for the sake of culture!!!!
in the name of all the cultural ideals,
in the name of all existing ideals
of culture!!!!
we have to..... stop it!!!!

a short dramatic pause.
In a different tone:

I am Professor Green
of the Em. Cee. Gee. Oh.
the Mathematical Central
and General Office.
Green!
Alfred Green!!!

The PUPILS are stunned.
Only the SOMNAMBULIST PROSTITUTE
goes into inexplicable
righteous frenzy:

THE SOMNAMBULIST PROSTITUTE-
IZIA

Get this man away from here!
Get this man away from here!!!!

But the SPEAKER by now has complete command
of the crowd.
He becomes a dictator-tormentor:

THE OLD MAN WITH A DOUBLE-
GREEN

points at the SOMNAMBULIST PROSTITUTE:

Get her on top of a car!
Then put the car into overdrive!!¹⁷²

In Maria Janion's *Romanticism, Revolution, Marxism*, the insert between pages 320 and 321 includes, among other images, a photograph of Adolf Hitler. When looking at the Stranger's posture and gestures, it is difficult not to sense an intentional similarity. The speech delivered in *The Dead Class* is a semantically decomposed version of the Stranger's words to Reveline in Witkiewicz's drama: 'You have to choose between him and your daughter. [...] He can't go around changing existing mathematics for the sake of this girlie's fancy. [...] He can do anything [...]. But for the sake of the entirety of culture, in the name of all the existing ideals of mankind, we have to stop him.'¹⁷³ Of course, *The Dead Class* employs no simple, straightforward staging techniques. Characters and meanings intertwine with each other and even time becomes artistically looped. This is precisely the case here. The pupils' assurances that they have been through all this before, that they are spinning in circles, that they cannot do this anymore, become a dramatic and almost tragic reflection on the cyclical nature of history. As if all the children, and even the Stranger himself, knew what is to come. As if they knew that the eternal laws of humanity and humanism might once again be negated, and that evil might come that would

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 126–127.

¹⁷³ Witkiewicz, p. 231.

destroy and cross out what we call modern cultural ideals. Just like before. And that we should be able to stop it. But can we, really?

'And you, children, go for a walk', encourages the Woman Behind the Window, concluding the first part of Kantor's séance.¹⁷⁴ 'It's a wonderful day. Spring is in the air. Green shoots are popping up on the trees. I even saw two butterflies, brimstones, which have left their chrysalises, awakened by the warmth... They don't know, poor critters, that there are no flowers out there yet, and they'll just starve to death!'¹⁷⁵

PART TWO

Part two begins with a rather peculiar scene dubbed 'Collusions with the Void' in the score. This title reveals the nature and purpose of the actions — collusion is, after all, a 'secret agreement or cooperation especially for an illegal or deceitful purpose.'¹⁷⁶ In a terrifying silence — described by Kantor as 'lethal' — a pantomime of facial expressions, gestures, and movements unfolds, aimed at finding and pointing

¹⁷⁴ In Wajda's film the sequence takes place outdoors, on Krakus Mound. Actors in wearing their costumes and school backpacks run across the mound's green grass on a sunny day beneath a blue sky. From today's perspective the image looks rather bizarre. However, this is not, as might be supposed, merely a consequence of the aesthetic or nature of the medium. Wajda was also dissatisfied with the effect. He said: 'Unfortunately, I will tell you what the real problem was. Many theatrical films were made — Laurence Olivier made *Henry IV*, splendid stagings, interiors, everything in the studio, with the style of very tasteful miniatures. But when the battle began everything suddenly... that whole cinema collapsed, and real cinema appeared, because the sky appeared. Because the sky is real. You can do whatever you like, but the sky is still real.' (Chodzewicz et al., p. 58). The reality of the sky also destroyed the theatrical scenes of *The Dead Class*. One could even say, paradoxically, that it was precisely the reality Kantor sought in his art that ruined the recording of his most important performance.

¹⁷⁵ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 129. This ominous prophecy is delivered by Balantine at the end of Act I of Witkiewicz's text.

¹⁷⁶ 'Collusion, N.' *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, International Edition*, 2016.

out someone who does not fit in with the rest for one reason or another. Someone to be accused. The guilty one.

This scene in the first version of the performance differs in detail from its course in the second. In Wajda's film, the first to exchange ambiguous whispers and glances between each other are the Old Man Podophiliast and the Old Man with a Bicycle. One attempts to order the other, but no agreement is reached. The tension rises. The Old Man in the Loo watches closely and, clearly ruffled, suspects some foul scheme. He directs his suspicions at the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle, snorts, huffs, puffs himself up and then spits in her direction. The situation remains unclear. Suddenly, the Woman Behind the Window steps in, pointing at the Old Man Exhibitionist and shouts: 'It's you! It's him! It's all you! Disgusting!' The man in question begins a leisurely jog around the desks — as if to demonstrate his innocence. The Woman Behind the Window retreats, confused and babbling something. Both exit the classroom. Then, the Stranger jumps up and throws one of the pupils out. After a moment, he returns and speaks with the Old Man Exhibitionist. They both kick the Old Man Absent out of his desk and take his place — on either side of the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle — before taking turns whispering something in her ear, as if trying to convince her to pick a side or seduce her. She leans first towards one, then the other, smiling and staring straight into the distance. Then the Old Man Absent, observing the entire scene from his spot by the wall, steps forward and says in a trembling voice, 'Just a moment, Mr. Executioner!'¹⁷⁷ In Wajda's film, at this point, there's a close-up of his face filled with unimaginable terror, after which we see the Old Man Absent throw his hands up in resignation and leave. Nearly everyone leaves the classroom at this point — the only ones remaining are the Ordinary Old Man, the Somnambulist Prostitute and the Old Man Podophiliast. We now bear witness to interaction between the latter two. She turns

¹⁷⁷ These words were allegedly said by Jeanne du Barry, French courtesan and mistress of King Louis XV Bourbon; guillotined during the French Revolution: 'Citizens, free me, I am innocent, I come from the people, like you!' She pleaded with the crowd to commute the sentence and delay her execution.

towards him and bares her breast with a sinister yet sensual smile. Terrified by this outburst of erotic sensuality, he reaches under his desk, grabs his school bag and flees in panic. The Charwoman then storms in, ruthlessly seizes the Ordinary Old Man and throws him out of the classroom. Silence. The only sound remaining is the clatter of wooden balls inside the cradle.

The actions that make up this scene are saturated with violence and depravity. However, this is no longer hierarchical violence taking place between a teacher and his pupils, as was the case in the previous lessons. Now we see violence revealed in the relationships between the pupils themselves, who have finally learned that they, too, are capable of harming and killing. Who have discovered that they possess agency. This is emphasised in the second version of the play with a sequence in which one of the Janicki twins tests the 'agency of his finger' — a gesture that, in earlier lessons, had the power to 'kill' pupils. Here, it takes three attempts for the Old Man Absent, designated — or rather denounced — by Janicki to fall dead at his desk.

The difference between the two versions of the play results from the presence of the twins, which Kantor seems to use to cleverly introduce a slightly comic, almost slapstick-like atmosphere. This happens at the end of the scene, when the Charwoman, attempting to tidy up the classroom, falls victim to a conspiracy of Doubles: immediately after one Janicki is expelled from the classroom, the other unexpectedly appears at his seat. This seemingly light and humorous sequence is also full of aggression and cruelty. The alternating appearance and disappearance of the twins, consistently thrown out of the classroom by the Charwoman, is a conscious, deliberate, and downright perverse form of torture. It is also a quite successful attempt at cheating death, which in turn offers yet another example of inversion — and even negation — of the principles of reality we are faced with throughout the performance. In the recording of *The Dead Class* in Paris (1989), we see Rychlicki, rendered destitute by the futility of his actions and on the verge of tears; helpless, he throws up his hands and looks expectantly at Kantor. He, however, merely shrugs in response, distancing himself from the situation, unwilling to take any responsibility for what is happening, leaving the 'final matters' to run their course.

The next scene is 'Intentions' ('Wypominki'), or, as Kantor explains in the score, the practice of reading out the names of 'those who passed away that year' on All Souls' Day.¹⁷⁸ The Old People, white handkerchiefs in hand, form something akin to a funeral procession and recite these remembrances like an eerie litany, accompanied by the sound of the wooden balls clattering in the cradle. After the 'prayer verses', and before the joint recitation of specific names and surnames, the Old People are handed large black obituaries with the name 'Józef Wgrzdągiel',¹⁷⁹ before covering their faces with them as if in an act of despair.

The litany of names seamlessly turns into the subsequent scene.

The Old People, abandoning their obituaries, begin to scurry about at their desks, throwing themselves at each other [...]. And again, as in all the previous scenes, it becomes a movement composition where nothing is incidental, in which the apparent chaos (continuously observed by Kantor, who keeps strolling around) is in fact a simultaneous action between the individual performers (characters), which gradually, as if from a school brawl during recess, transforms into a scene from Act II of *Tumor*,¹⁸⁰

wrote Jan Kłossowicz, but in his description he makes one fundamental error. The rest of the performance is not so much a scene from Act II of *Tumor*..., but essentially the entire act — artistically reworked, but only to a minimal degree. In the Polish edition of Kantor's writings,

¹⁷⁸ All Souls' Day, also called the Day of the Dead or The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (Latin: *Commemoratio Omnium Fidelium Defunctorum*), is a liturgical observance in the Western Churches dedicated to the dead, celebrated annually on 2 November and thematically linked with the preceding Feast of All Saints. All Souls' customs coincide with popular rites honouring the dead that derive from pagan or preChristian beliefs.

¹⁷⁹ According to Andrzej Wełmiński, this name was chosen to avoid any resemblance to a real person. In the first version of the performance the obituaries were distributed by the Lame Repeater; in the second by the First World War Soldier or, occasionally, the Camp Follower. Based on a conversation with Andrzej and Teresa Wełmiński conducted for this book on 1 June 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Kłossowicz, p. 130.

in the section devoted to *The Dead Class*, there is a summary of Witkiewicz's play accompanied by the annotation: 'Abridged text prepared for the audience by T. K.'¹⁸¹ Interestingly, this 'abridgement' of the second act perfectly corresponds to the events in the second part of *The Dead Class*. Let us quote here the relevant passage, in which Kantor expounds on the meaning of the play:

Between the first and second acts, Izia seduces Green, who in return frees Tumor from an unspecified prison. Tumor leaves Europe for Malaya. This unexpected shift into exoticism echoes the author's own Australian expedition, a dissent against culture, a 'search for origins', a longing for the primitive; the 'colonial' aspect of this European escapade is mocked as well. Tumor makes it to Timor and defeats its ruler, Patakulo — naturally, with the ever-present Izia at his side.

1. A perverse love dialogue between Tumor and Izia takes place. Everything seems to be going well under these fictional tropical skies.

2. Unfortunately, after Izia's guileless confession that she has given herself to Green, an inevitable argument ensues, with mutual tongue-lashing mixed with wild outbursts of passion, insatiability and hatred.

3. Indignant and in a state of utmost fury, Tumor takes a shot at old Patakulo he ordered brought before him. But this senseless crime solves nothing.

4. As the enraged Tumor still wants to continue dealing with the unfaithful Izia, Patakulo Junior appears, prostrates himself before him and begs Tumor for Izia's hand in marriage, having most likely already reached a prior agreement with her.

5. Meanwhile, the capricious and unpredictable Izia states with disgust at the least expected moment that the breath of the beautiful Malay stinks of raw meat. Suddenly, she's over everything. And so is Tumor. Abandoned, the unhappy Malay commits hara-kiri, cursing everyone around him.

6. Suddenly, a ship is spotted in the bay. Tumor recognises Green's cruiser.

Green enters. It seems he has come to the conclusion that he was too hasty in releasing Tumor and now wants to rectify his error.

Green's men rush at Tumor and tie him up. Green announces his steadfast decision to marry Izia.

¹⁸¹ Prepared by Kantor for foreign audiences.

Tumor struggles in his bonds, crying out.

Green plants the British flag and takes Izia, who fainted from the overwhelming emotions — backstage.¹⁸²

Comparing this abridgement with the text of Witkiewicz's play, the score, and the performance notes, one can see that Kantor's alleged 'playing with Witkiewicz' was a far more complex affair,¹⁸³ and that once again we are dealing with a very modern staging. Two aspects of these scenes are particularly striking. First, they are full of sex, violence, perversion, and debauchery. Kantor states so explicitly in the score¹⁸⁴ and it should be emphasised that this violence and perversion are much more intense and far-reaching than in the preceding acts. Here, there's no exploration, no testing of the agency of criminal gestures. Now this agency has become an inescapable fact. We are also witnessing a clear intensification of previously used staging techniques. In the 'Phonetic Blots' scene, the pupils created their own language — child-like, incomprehensible to the adults, a kind of primordial communication (as Kantor described it),¹⁸⁵ which now turns into the 'language of the Malay' attempting to seduce Izia. The structural principle of 'organised chaos' is also retained to some extent, before it is disrupted by the sudden and unexpected entrance of the Stranger/Green, shouting like a mantra: 'Hip, hip, hooray!!! We're taking this country into our possession!'¹⁸⁶ This entrance, of course, radically changes the status quo.

There is also a scene added by Kantor that perfectly fits the idea of Witkiewicz's drama, providing an apt commentary of sorts. The waltz plays again from the loudspeaker, and the Old People, carrying naked Malays to whom enormous wooden phalluses have been attached, pose as if for a photograph. The Old Man with a Bicycle appears carrying a large, old-fashioned camera, from which extend black harmonica bellows,

¹⁸² Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Fabuła (skrót) sztuki S. I. Witkiewicza *Tumor Mózgowicz*'. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, pp. 42–45.

¹⁸³ I will return to this subject in later reflections.

¹⁸⁴ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 144–155.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–79.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

resembling a long elephant's trunk, stretching overhead toward the group of the Old People at the back. The Old Man with a Bicycle shouts 'Attention!', and takes everyone's photo by shooting a gun in the air. This is repeated three times. Considering the phallic references (additionally provoked by the shape of the camera), this scene takes on the dramatic character of 'a rape of an Other's culture', opening a discussion on the colonial tendencies and practices, culturally conventionalised, performed, as in this case, 'in good faith' and under the pretext of preserving that culture in a posed photograph. The previously barely hinted-at difficult relations and internal quarrels reach their apex as well. 'And you, children, go for a walk' — encourages the Woman Behind the Window once more. 'It's a wonderful day. Spring is in the air. Green shoots are popping up on the trees. I even saw two butterflies, brimstones, which have left their chrysalises, awakened by the warmth. . . They don't know, poor critters, that there are no flowers out there yet, and they'll just starve to death!'¹⁸⁷

PART THREE

The transition between the second and third acts of *The Dead Class* is also almost imperceptible. During the procession of the Old People around the desks, led by Green carrying a black flag, and with the Woman Behind the Window towering over the scene, the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle appears without notice amidst the scattered books. Wearing only a pale-pink, scruffy dress, she huddles over the cradle at the front of the stage, clutching a bundle to her chest. Moments later, again without notice, she becomes an object of ridicule and persecution: the Old People spit on her, throw scraps of books at her, 'hurl silent insults',¹⁸⁸ exclude her from their community. This is a clear continuation of the actions taken against her during the 'collusions with the void', as if the momentary reprieve that the Old Man Absent had pleaded for in an act of desperation had already passed, and the executioner may now freely carry out his duty.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 164.

The class falls silent and still, and the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle begins to sing a Jewish lullaby, full of tenderness, but also pain and terrifying despair.¹⁸⁹ The scene is haunting in its message when we realize that it actually depicts a desperate mother who, while singing to her little child a song about a wonderful future that awaits them, is deliberately lying; she knows perfectly well that no future will ever come.

We also see here the instantiation of the excluded — the enemy. A Jew. And not even an unknown Other, whose exclusion would be to some extent comprehensible. A Jew who is also one of them. A part, after all, of this dead class commune.

The sequences that follow show a very modern approach to staging. The reality of Witkiewicz's text returns; Reveline has given birth to Izydor (hence the bundle held by the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle), yet her marriage is falling apart, as we learn during her conversation with Tumor — who, as we know from Witkiewicz's play, intends to divorce her. The 'stormy and, as always, scandalous dialogue' between Tumor and Reveline is described by Kantor as a 'dummy dialogue'. And indeed, it turns out that under the guise of a marital quarrel, with movements and gestures carefully crafted to reinforce this façade, Maria Stangret-Kantor's lines touch upon matters of far greater importance:

Someone might say,
that it doesn't look like it,
but it's better not to say too much,
because if by chance,
but there is no certainty here,
since actually
there is nothing to hide here,
although one might suppose...
but it's better if it's earlier,
because you never know,

¹⁸⁹ Act III of *Tumor Brainiowicz* also begins with a lullaby sung to the newborn Izydor by Reveline.

if it came to light,
 no one will know
 and only then...
 once you mentioned it,
 no matter how much
 and then nothing can be done.
 So it was like this,
 so that you know,
 but it's better not to repeat oneself,
 because someone might say,
 but no one can accuse of anything
 and there is no certainty here,
 once you said it,
 no matter what
 won't learn the truth
 and nothing can be done...
 and so that you don't blame me,
 for repeating myself,
 and so it doesn't seem,
 because you see it's not that certain,
 and actually nothing can be done
 anymore,
 and what if someone,
 but there's nothing,
 and there...
 neither here nor there...
 no one knows where...
 nothing can be done
 neither here nor there...
 won't learn the truth...
 and... and... and... and and and...¹⁹⁰

In the score, Kantor desperately tries to downplay the meaning of these lines, as well as the entire marital dialogue scene. He writes that

¹⁹⁰ Kantor. *Partytura...*, pp. 167–168.

the text of the play is inconsequential, that following it would be petty-town naiveté. He misleads, calling Stangret-Kantor's monologue mere whinging. Yet does the visual layer of the play and the ambiguously constructed scenes we have seen thus far not indicate that this monologue concerns, in fact, the crimes and pogroms committed during and after the war?¹⁹¹ Isn't this a poignant testament to the dilemmas and doubts of those who committed them, and those who allowed them, if only through their evident passivity? Maria Stangret-Kantor shifts from the position of a victim to that of an executioner. Let us just add that, during this monologue, the Charwoman-Death performs the act of washing the corpses, beginning with the Old Man in the Loo-Tumor. So, aren't we once again confronted with a kind of delusion that — if taken seriously — proves surprisingly accurate and blunt in its message? And worse still, one that remains relevant even today, perhaps even more so, in a time when identifying an enemy and excluding them from a community has become so easy and commonplace. And when responsibility for anything has become so blurred that 'actually, nothing can be done anymore' and 'there is no certainty here'.

Afterwards, the plot picks up speed and all the threads that had been initiated come to their climax. Once again, the principle of organised chaos is applied, as seemingly absurd actions are carried through to the end and constitute a fairly faithful presentation of the events from Witkiewicz's text.

The Old Man with a Bicycle and the Ordinary Old Man are eavesdropping on the married couple's dialogue. The Stranger and the Somnambulist Prostitute (until now simply strolling around the desks) act out a scene of negotiations regarding sexual services. At the same time, the Stranger attempts to wheedle Tumor out of the scientific secrets of his theories — to no avail. The Old Woman-Reveline at the end of the marital quarrel 'kills' her unborn child, prompting outrage and shouts from other characters. The Deaf Old Man brings woeful tidings: 'Tumor Brainiowicz fell victim to his own

¹⁹¹ In Wajda's film Maria Stangret-Kantor sings her lullaby while seated in front of the Okraglak market hall on Plac Nowy in Krakow's Kazimierz, the city's Jewish district before the war.

weakness.¹⁹² Two of the Old People seize him and start cleaning his ears — the action is shown through dragging a piece of string under his hat. After a while, the Old Man performs the act himself and then runs off. He runs with commitment. The Old Man with a Bicycle comes and goes. The bodies continue to be washed. The cradle rumbles. The waltz resounds. The Beadle sings a fragment of the anthem. Finally, the Stranger,¹⁹³ crawling on the ground with the black flag in hand, turns to the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle: 'Would you care to become the fifth Marchioness of Maske Tower?'¹⁹⁴ She replies: 'But, Sir Alfred, it is all too soon.' The pupils chant a well-known Polish counting rhyme:

TRUMPF TRUMPF
 MISIA BELA
 MISIA KASIA
 KOMFACELA
 MISIA A
 MISIA B
 MISIA KASIA
 KOMFACE

and so on without end... And then there's the Charwoman. 'The CHARWOMAN, who at some point quietly disappeared from the stage, returns in a new role. The subsequent stages of this classroom broad's metamorphosis, from a repulsive and menacing CHARWOMAN, gradually revealing the sharp features of DEATH, end with the only possible profession in this theatre of graves — the profession of a vulgar BROTHEL OWNER¹⁹⁵

The final metamorphosis of this — apparently most important — character in *The Dead Class* may seem surprising. It may mean that

¹⁹² Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 178.

¹⁹³ Since the second version of the play the sequence is performed by the First World War Soldier (as noted in the score).

¹⁹⁴ Question taken from Witkiewicz. See Witkiewicz, p. 263.

¹⁹⁵ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 183.

the world we have just been a part of, the school classroom — an emanation of discipline and moral principles — is in fact a world gone mad, in which virtually no rules apply and where almost everything is permitted. It is a ‘brothel world’, destined for inevitable calamity. This tone is shared by the works of the aforementioned Fellini. There is something extraordinary about the visual and aesthetic character of the *Charwoman-Death* resembling Saraghina from the 1963 film *8½*,¹⁹⁶ performing an erotic dance before the young pupils of a church school. We can, after all, interpret *Rome* shown later as an image of the end of the world:

Fellini portrays Rome as the most important city in the world, the cradle of civilization disappearing along with its frescoes, a strange place of eternal corruption and decay, a modern metropolis heading towards a catastrophe. It is a subjective vision of the Eternal City, shown across nine scenes encompassing the past and present while foretelling a possible disaster. To Fellini, Rome is the ‘symbol of the eternal, of the lasting, while simultaneously portending death, annihilation.’¹⁹⁷

The Dead Class can be understood in a similar vein — the performance ends with the image of the Automaton Theatre, or rather does not end, since in Kantor’s vision this theatre continues indefinitely. And it seems that it will do so for a long time, given the poignant finale. As usual, Green/Stranger appears, and judging by the previous appearances of this character, some kind of breakthrough is expected this time as well, some change in the existing order, a shift in the stage reality. This could happen, for example, if the marriage proposal made to the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle were accepted. But that does not happen. It is all too soon. This ‘all too soon’ takes on a completely different meaning in the second version of the play, in which Green asks: ‘Would you care to become the fifth Marchioness of Nevermoore?’ As the context of the Holocaust makes clear, the term

¹⁹⁶ I intend to take up and develop the topic of aesthetic similarities and converging motifs in the works of Fellini and Kantor, in another work in the near future, as it falls outside this book’s methodological scope.

¹⁹⁷ Kolasińska-Pasterczyk, p. 365.

'Nevermore'¹⁹⁸ (never again) is used as an appeal to never allow such a tragedy to reoccur. It is a powerful call to remember and oppose all forms of hatred and genocide. And it is this aspect of Kantor's play that is the most disturbing.

"Auschwitz" did not fall from the sky', reminded Marian Turski during the 75th anniversary of the camp's liberation. 'Don't be indifferent' — he added.¹⁹⁹ The same message is found in *The Dead Class*. And unfortunately we can still say, 'But, Sir Alfred, it is all too soon...' It is still too early for a change in reality that would allow us to say with full conviction: 'never again'.

¹⁹⁸ 'When we commemorate the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz it is natural to use more often the phrases: "Never more", "never again", "never again Auschwitz" — Marian Turski in his speech delivered at the United Nations Holocaust memorial ceremony in January 2019, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2020/09/papers_by_marian_turski_and_inge_auerbacher.pdf. Accessed 17 November 2025.

¹⁹⁹ Turski, Marian. 'Auschwitz nie spadło z nieba. Nie bądźcie obojętni.' *Polityka*, 27 January 2020, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1940080,1,marian-turski-auschwitz-nie-spadlo-z-nieba-nie-badzcie-obojetni.read>. Accessed 17 November 2025.

7.

UN/NECESSARY LITERATURE

Kantor's use of dramatic text and consequently its function in his theatre, is a highly ambivalent matter. To explain and understand the essence of this ambivalence, several points should be recalled. Well before developing the concept and aesthetics of the Theatre of Death, Kantor — during the German occupation — founded the Underground Independent Theatre in Krakow. Although he produced Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna* (1943) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Powrót Odysa* [*Return of Odysseus*] (1944), he emphasised these performances' independence from their literary prototypes. This independence was specifically understood and expressed as proclaimed opposition to the traditional, illustrative function of theatre in relation to the dramatic text. Kantor claimed that artistic activities undertaken by him and his company were not a 'stage production of the play' or, colloquially speaking, its 'staging'. He wrote:

A theatrical work is built AROUND A SINGLE FORM. Its discovery becomes a revelation. Perhaps it is the idea itself, or the key to understanding the play. With its internal charge, it makes the entire drama burst, revealing its living, pulsating interior, all of its fibres and nerves. It attracts all other compositional forms. Its aptness is tested when every situation finds within it its own explanation. Other scenic forms are arranged and commented upon in relation to it. In every dramatic work, theatrical forms pulsate; they only need to be felt and expressed. The arrangements of forms are governed by the laws of contrast and conflict. And it is the contrasts — only the contrasts, essentially incapable of a peaceful coexistence, forcibly linked together — that can create a new worth and completeness necessary for a work of art to come into being. Creating 'scenic forms' is equivalent to 'presenting' a dramatic work.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Teatr Niezależny. Eseje teoretyczne.' *Metamorfozy. Teksty o latach 1934–1974. Tom pierwszy pism.* Compiled by K. Pleśniarowicz. Cricoteka—Ossolineum, 2005, pp. 67–68.

This would explain the practice of the subsequent stages of the Cricot 2 Theatre, focused around a selected drama by Witkiewicz, within which individual concepts were created and developed: the Zero Theatre, the Happening Theatre, the Impossible Theatre, etc. Kantor seemed to meticulously and with full commitment extract from a drama the form that organised it, before implementing it through the use of ideas and solutions drawn from the field of visual arts.

In the manifesto of the Complex Theatre (*Komplexes Theater*),²⁰¹ Kantor writes that the dramatic text is only one of the components of the performance, it is 'found' (*trouvé*), 'ready-made' (*prêt*), a closed and indivisible element, it constitutes a reality of great 'density', with its own separate perspective, its own fiction, its own psychophysical space; it is a foreign body in the newly emerging reality that is the 'PLAY'.²⁰²

Kantor considered the playwright to be a partner in this theatrical play, as his concept of theatre was to be developed on two levels: on the one hand, there was the action of the (spoken) text, and on the other — the actions performed on stage by the actors. These two elements could not work in tandem, could not illustrate each other; on the contrary, they were to remain in constant conflict with one another. Pleśniarowicz wrote that 'Kantor intended to make the incompatibility of words and actions the key principle of his theatre.'²⁰³ This kind of "playing with Witkiewicz" in a dual model of theatrical work', Pleśniarowicz admits, 'was, however, a utopian program, as during the performance connections would naturally arise between the fiction of the drama and the illusion of the stage, between the dialogue being reduced to nothing and the theatrical equation of actor and object. Even a rudimentary illustrativeness in the word-gesture relationship, in the actors' linguistic contact, was inevitable.'²⁰⁴ Let us add here that

²⁰¹ It was essentially a Preface—Manifesto published in the programme for Kantor's *Der Schrank* [*The Cupboard*] (based on S. I. Witkiewicz's play *W małym dworku*), staged in 1966 at the Theater der Stadt, Staatliche Kunsthalle BadenBaden.

²⁰² Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Komplexes Theater'. *Metamorfozy...*, p. 213.

²⁰³ Pleśniarowicz. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora...*, p. 38.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

this type of aesthetic technique, based on an intentional, apparent incongruity between what is said on stage and what is done on stage is a quite common practice, used extensively by contemporary directors.

Pleśniarowicz claims that in Kantor's theatre dramatic text would not directly influence the performance work. Practical activities dominated, such as selecting (or defining) the theatrical location, creating and testing objects, and so on. The text would be incorporated in the final preparatory stages, as if it were *seeped* (as Kantor himself put it) into an essentially complete performance.²⁰⁵ According to the scholar, 'playing with Witkiewicz' was a consistently conducted process, evolving from the two-track principle to an escape from Witkiewicz through the Theatre of Death. There, he argues, literature becomes redundant, and its place, or rather function, in constructing the performance's framework is taken over by memories and memory clichés.

In the Theatre of Death, literature creates the possibility of a momentary, even ostentatiously vicarious existence for the dead pupils in the moments when the classroom comes alive and memory clichés disintegrate. It is then that the literary motifs — taken from Witkiewicz, Schulz, or Gombrowicz — sneak into the séance.²⁰⁶ But at the same time — and this is one of the principles of the Theatre of Death — literary roles and motifs prevent the rebirth (in reconstructed memory) of characters and events long dead, or rather, they lose such reconstruction in the trap of impersonation...²⁰⁷

However, the issue of the presence and status of literature in the Theatre of Death becomes more intricate if we take into account Kantor's own words on the matter. Three years after the premiere of *The Dead Class*, when asked what the literary text means to him, he replied:

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁰⁶ Kantor was undeniably inspired by Gombrowicz during his work on *The Dead Class*, but it is impossible to point to a single work to which Kantor would clearly refer (apart from the obvious allusions to the ideas seen in *Ferdynand*). A detailed analysis of such interrelations falls outside the scope of this book and requires a separate study.

²⁰⁷ Pleśniarowicz. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora...*, p. 53.

I treat it as a charge that has to explode. However, for me it has no philosophical value, only semantic. I see it as a collection of condensed facts that might come into existence again. And, therefore, if we consider theatre a work of art, it must also be an autonomous one. Consequently, Cricot 2 does not reproduce the text, does not interpret it, does not deform it, does not stage it, i.e. it does not do what normal, professional theatre companies do. This does not mean that we allow any and all action in our performances. Our actions are accompanied by the element of tension determined by the dramaturgy of the text.²⁰⁸

This statement all but confirms the claims of Pleśniarowicz and shows that Kantor was in fact aware of how utopian the principle of play and performance running in parallel really was. After all, it clearly points to the emerging connections and dependencies (despite, and contrary to, all measures that would stand against them) — 'the elements of tension' — between the performers' actions and the drama resulting directly from the literary text. But Kantor also had a habit of conscious misdirection, at times even contradicting his own opinions and self-interpretations expressed in various contexts. Let us quote an extensive fragment from an interview with the artist conducted by Anna Grzejewska:

Anna Grzejewska: But in theatre we are dealing with a literary text which contains some clearly defined ideas. The work of stage director usually consists of finding an original staging idea for the given text. But, whatever the case, the director is always restricted by the 'textual' matter, given final form by its author.

Tadeusz Kantor: I am not a director. My first rehearsals with the actors are conducted without the literary text; my task is to form certain ideas as theatrical situations and stage action. Only then do I refer to the text, which must, however, adequately suit the already developed situations. [...]

AG: Still, at times the 'predispositions' within the text are not used the way they should be...

²⁰⁸ Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Jedynym żywym człowiekiem w teatrze jest widz. Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Kantorem.' Interview by Tadeusz Deszkiewicz, *Ekran*, 22 November 1981.

TK: Very often, when one is dishonest... If the pre-existing text that I introduce into the stage action is not consistent with it, it has to be abandoned. The 'play's action itself' is abandoned. This happened, for example, during the preparations for *The Grammar Lesson*, a project that was never finished, but which became the foundation for the ideas formulated later in *The Dead Class*. In my opinion, grammar contains all possible literary artistic forms, all the world literature, it is like a resource, a collection of countless potentially possible situations. I tried to realise them through theatre. It was quite a fascinating idea. After two months of work, when I wanted to apply the text of Witkiewicz's play *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* to the sketched stage situations, it turned out to be impossible. So I gave up on *The Grammar Lesson*. Not on the play itself, but on the theatrical tone, purely theatrical situations, and even established conflict ideas which did not correspond to the text.

AG: I see an inconsistency here. You give up on the — let us emphasise this — purely theatrical effects after two months of rehearsals, during which you worked without the textual matter, but you retain the dramatic text which turned out not to suit your intentions. So what do you need it for?

TK: The text assures me that what I do will be neither pantomime nor ballet. There are theatres that do without text, they consider it an unnecessary element and treat theatre only as a movement-based field. [...] Theatre is a strictly defined domain and while it may lean towards ballet or pantomime, the moment it becomes one of these two things it ceases to be theatre.

AG: So you start with an independent theatrical genre, and then you look for the text. Do you never work the other way around?

TK: Never. Even if these are Witkiewicz's texts, whose work is closest to me because of certain elements: the process of destruction, devastation, decomposition of classical syntax, breaking down the classical forms of expression.²⁰⁹

The text in Kantor's theatre — including in the Theatre of Death, contrary to popular belief — is of immense importance, even more so than the action itself. Although Kantor would not begin working

²⁰⁹ Kantor, Tadeusz. 'Dzieło sztuki jest zamknięte'. Interview by Anna Grzejewska, *Miesięcznik Literacki*, no. 10, 1978.

on a performance with a text, but rather with a search for an autonomous stage action, it was the text and its semantic weight that determined whether the previously developed concept and attempted actions would be adopted and developed in the subsequent artistic work. What were the requirements necessary for the text to 'adequately suit the already developed situations' and what this entailed, will likely never be known. By examining specific examples, however, we can attempt to establish such criteria. We can attempt to interpret the form constituting the dramatic text and reconstruct it in relation to the given performance.

Kantor valued Witkiewicz for 'crafting a situation that has all the appearances of reality, and then destroying it with all the humour imaginable.'²¹⁰ And it is precisely this mechanism of action that creates the dramatic form of *Tumor Brainiowicz*, a form later adopted and implemented by Kantor in *The Dead Class*. Each of the three acts relies on situations which are only superficially realistic — in both the text and the performance. What disrupts this seemingly permanent, newly constituted reality each time is the entrance of Green — the entrance of the Stranger, the Other. His appearance is tantamount to another rupture, resulting from the disintegration of the current (even if only apparent) order of things. The world must be restructured anew. Significantly, the final, third act of *The Dead Class* suspends the implementation of this principle. Green's entrance does not result in change, since — as the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle puts it — '...it is all too soon.' The performance ends with this oft-repeated statement, which renders Kantor's work truly open-ended, awaiting completion. Perhaps it will come in future performances? Perhaps it will never come at all.

In *The Dead Class*, Kantor maintained almost exactly the course of events from Witkiewicz's drama. Through far-reaching abbreviation, he selected critical moments in the text, those constituting its narrative structure. He knew the text well (as evidenced by the plot synopsis he prepared for the audience), and the scenes he chose effectively structure the dramaturgy of *The Dead Class*. The immense significance of

²¹⁰ Piergiacomi, Enrico. 'Kantor profeta dell'avanguardia.' *Sipario*, no. 383, April 1978.

the scenes adapted from Witkiewicz can be seen in an analysis of the performance footage recorded in 1982 during Cricot 2 performances in Tokyo. The film is missing two lengthy sequences, both constructed on the basis, and with the use of, the text of *Tumor Brainiowicz*. First is 'The Intricate Explanations of the Secret Executor' from part one, and the other is 'A Simultaneous Orgy' from part two. The footage is edited in such a way that, at first glance, nothing seems amiss; the absence of the sequences will only be revealed to those familiar with the performance or through a comparison with the score.²¹¹ 'The Intricate Explanations of the Secret Executor' is a monologue — or rather a gibberish speech — of a character stylised as Hitler, who talks about the coming possibility of 'changing the laws of mathematics', which should probably be read as an announcement of a change in the eternal order of the world and of humanity, and thus, essentially, an unimaginable disaster. This omen is complemented by 'A Spring Outing', which completely loses its tragic sense of a metaphor evoking World War II and Nazi death camps in the absence of the preceding sequence.

The same applies to 'A Simultaneous Orgy', i.e. the events taking place between Izia, Tumor and the two Malays on the island of Timor, without which Green's later cry of 'We're taking this country into our possession', an attempt at destroying the old and developing a new order on the island, also becomes devoid of sense and dramatic logic. All the sequences which create *The Dead Class*, in particular those based on the selected scenes from Witkiewicz's drama are essential components of the whole. If one of them is missing, as in the Tokyo footage, we are faced with a completely different work — deprived of the meaning found both in subsequent scenes and in the performance as a whole.

The question then arises: what are the principles under which Witkiewicz's text functions in *The Dead Class*? How did Kantor put it to work and for what purposes did he use it? In attempting to answer such questions, the reflections of Jacques Derrida prove helpful. In his

²¹¹ These omissions were probably not intentional; I found no evidence of such changes being deliberately introduced by Kantor. The incomplete recording of the production is most likely due to chance or possible technical problems with the recording.

philosophical ideas on engaging with literature, he postulates the need to respond 'with the event of reading to the event of the text'.²¹²

Anna Burzyńska, a renowned commentator of Derrida, demonstrated the relevance and utility of his philosophy when considered from the perspective of contemporary performance studies.²¹³ She presented Derrida not only as the author of a distinctive style of reading philosophical and literary texts, which he termed deconstruction, but above all as a pioneer of performance studies and a precursor of contemporary research on experiencing literature. Describing and analyzing his 'textual performance', that is, the way he 'transfers' the properties of performance to the 'reading-writing' practices that interest him, she demonstrated that his performance vocabulary is composed of terms essentially identical to those that have successfully functioned for many years in contemporary performance theories: eventfulness, iteration, production, materiality, mobility, effect, enactment, scene, action, and — connecting them all — experience.

According to Derrida, then, reading — like performance — always occurs within a space of repetition of the 'exceptional', in a process of constant 'repetitions with difference'. Reading therefore had to acknowledge this exceptionality and account for it. To do so, however, it was necessary to repeat the text being read within the confines of its own, equally unique idiom, that is, to essentially 'create' it anew. This re-creation presupposed the emergence of a reader who actively participates in the process of creating meaning in literature and, in a sense, assumes the role of a creator rather than just a passive re-creator. This was not, of course, intended as a reproduction of the meaning contained in the text, but rather as an 'endless creation', a transformation of the very process of meaning-making. As Burzyńska comments:

This opposition between the product-process and reproduction-production, expressed in the formula of 'text'/'writing', also entailed further consequences. The process of production, as understood by Derrida and

²¹² Derrida, Jacques. 'This Strange Institution Called Literature.' In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge. Routledge, 1992.

²¹³ Burzyńska.

others, was never intended to lead to a 'final' production. It was, therefore, radically unfinished. This also resulted from the 'differentiating' potential of 'writing', whose main 'principle' was defined by Derrida as 'the work of *différance*' — that is, a never-ending '(active) process (of production)' reflecting the 'movement of meaning' itself.²¹⁴ 'Reading literature', as Burzyńska clarifies Derrida's position, 'should not consist of 'reproducing' the meaning deposited in the work and presenting it as a 'product' (the result of the process of understanding), but, correspondingly, should take the form of the active production of meaning in the creative 'lecturographical' process. The stakes of this entire undertaking were therefore clear: writing about literature was to become creativity (on par with literary creativity), while literary commentary (if it was to emerge unscathed from its own crisis) had to become a 'literary' text *par excellence*, and, in Derrida's opinion — also a 'theatrical' one.²¹⁵

In the described process of textual performance, interaction was extremely important, i.e. the basic feature of performative activities. Of particular interest to Derrida was the interaction between the writer (the author of the text) and the reader. In Derrida's readings, the Other, the Signatory and the owner of the text was almost always present or referenced by name. Burzyńska explains:

During the reading, they repeatedly signalled their presence, constantly reminding that it was their text being read — their own 'idiom', which, for the duration of the reading, became the reader's 'property'. Very often, they also addressed the author of the text directly, but not as a hypothetical authorial consciousness or a 'sending instance', but as an individual. The Other appeared here as a specific (or rather — specified in every way) person who signed the text with their own name and surname. [...] The creator of the text thus became a full-fledged partner ('protagonist') of the 'performance' arranged by one writing about their text and participated in it throughout. [...] They appeared as themselves. The reader, too, spoke exclusively 'in their own name', 'engaging their own singularity' and standing against the 'singularity of the Other'. This was not, therefore, a 'Derridean reader', but a reader-Jacques Derrida, whose

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 390.

²¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 393–394.

reading would not establish any pattern of the act, would not claim objectivity and was itself also singular in nature — it 'happened' through a one-off, unrepeatable interaction — an 'encounter' — between the writer and the reader.²¹⁶

Derrida called the interaction between reader and author 'countersignature' (that is, joint signing of both parties). Derrida will say: 'I wrote a text, which in the face of the event of another's text, as it comes to me at a particular, quite singular, moment, tries to "respond" or to "countersign," in an idiom which turns out to be mine.'²¹⁷ A signature meant to him a change of singularity, a 'trace' left by another, and reading someone else's text a 'meeting' of two equivalent singularities. Putting one's signature alongside the writer's meant that both processes — the writing of the text and the writing of the reading-text — occur on absolutely equal terms, constitute a partnership in the full sense of the word, or even, as he put it, 'a duel of singularities.'²¹⁸ He spoke of this process as follows: 'a countersignature comes both to confirm, repeat and respect the signature of the other, of the "original" work, and to lead it off elsewhere, so running the risk of betraying it, having to betray it in a certain way so as to respect it, through the invention of another signature just as singular.'²¹⁹

From the perspective of Derrida's presented concept, *The Dead Class* appears as Kantor's differentiating repetition of Witkiewicz's *Tumor Brainiowicz*. It is, as Derrida intended, a re-creation of this text, but realised in a completely distinct idiom and, moreover, in a completely distinct medium.²²⁰ This change of medium can in turn be understood as a 'betrayal' stemming from Kantor's inevitable need to give Witkiewicz's drama his own countersignature. The event of *The Dead Class*, understood as a response to the event of Witkiewicz's text, may thus be seen as

²¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 396–397.

²¹⁷ Derrida. 'This Strange Institution...', p. 62.

²¹⁸ Ibid, p. 69.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Paradoxically, Kantor's use of a different medium stems in part from the nature of the referenced work — after all, Witkiewicz wrote his drama with the intention of staging it for the theatre.

a particularly radical fulfilment of the French philosopher's ideas. Since, as Burzyńska argues, Derrida describes reading-writing in terms of performance, Kantor makes this process literal, realizing his reading as a theatrical performance — that is, nominally the most radical form of performance. Derrida's reading-writing is turned into Kantor's play-writing.

This would provide a completely new rationale for the Krakow artist's reluctance to 'perform the dramatic text on stage', something he strove to avoid at all costs in his directing practice. The aim was not to recreate the meaning deposited in the work and present it as a product — that is, as a result of the process of understanding — but to engage in the active production of meaning, open to the possibility of another countersignature being added by someone else, so that the entire process might be repeated. After all, as Derrida explained, 'It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element and allowing his attitude towards the future element to leave its mark on him.'²²¹ Theatrical performance is an ideal medium for enabling the described work of *différance*, which Derrida to some extent sensed when he placed his concept in the performative context.

Kantor's treatment of the author — Witkiewicz — as a rightful participant in the séance of *The Dead Class*, as noted in the program, thus also becomes understandable. The almost mythical presence of Kantor on stage likewise takes on a different meaning. This would again be a literal realisation on a theatrical stage of the need for interaction or confrontation between the author — Witkiewicz — and the reader — Kantor — resulting from the principles of reading-writing and made possible to the greatest extent by that very stage.

In the early 1980s, during a conversation with the editors of a Spanish magazine,²²² Kantor pointed out the existence of a phenomenon

²²¹ Derrida, Jacques. 'Différance.' In *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

²²² The interview was conducted in Madrid in 1982 by Juan Carlos Vidal; a scan of the typescript with a Polish translation is held at Cricoteka (no inventory number assigned).

of the 'total artist' in Polish culture, that is one who is simultaneously a playwright, a literary writer, and a painter. In this category he counted himself, alongside Stanisław Wyspiański, Karol Frycz, Witkiewicz, and Schulz. Kantor expressed his belief that Polish culture constitutes a unique singularity, a universe created and simultaneously drawn from by outstanding artists. He explained this by referring to the root of his avant-garde experiences: 'The issue is as follows: one should not oversimplify by claiming that something influenced me. I was the one within it all. I do not share the opinion of many artists, pretentious artists, who claim that the Holy Spirit comes upon them in the moment of creation. I don't belong to that sort. I just think that mutual influences exist and must exist constantly.'²²³

Artistic inspirations and drawing from this universe, referring to what is common and known, constitutive for a specific place and region, sometimes occurs unconsciously, in a completely natural way. Perhaps it is the result of generational identities, perhaps it is related to the community of individual 'little homelands', representing a certain community of individual artists' birthplaces. Perhaps it is caused by a world view particular to a specific time and place.

Undoubtedly, this process occurred in Kantor's theatre. In the aforementioned conversation, the artist once again points to the period of the German occupation and the Underground Independent Theatre – which shaped virtually his entire theatrical oeuvre – and which is linked to his experience of staging Wyspiański's *Return of Odysseus*. It was then that 'the idea of a reality of the lowest rank', fundamental to Kantor's artistic theory, was born, which would return like an artistic echo in all the subsequent stages of his theatre's development. It turned out that this concept, stemming directly from artistic dreams and war-time circumstances, belonged to the Polish cultural universe and had already been previously explored by other artists. Kantor openly admits:

This came together with Schulz as a starting point for *The Dead Class*. By then, I already had a very solid concept of reality. When I began preparations for the first performance of the Theatre of Death in 1975, I discov-

²²³ Ibid.

ered a certain guy who shared those views. I discovered Bruno Schulz. To find my own predecessor in the Polish cultural tradition was a strong support. I realised that my idea was not a whim, that it existed within the tradition of Polish art. The influence was not superficial and the two paths converged. It was a very poetic thing.²²⁴

Bruno Schulz was, as is well known, a peculiar participant in Kantor's séance alongside Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz, mentioned, or rather alluded to, in the programme for that production. Elements drawn from Schulz's prose are evident across many of Kantor's performances. However, as with Gombrowicz, the artist never selected a specific text to be performed on his theatre's stage.

Today, it is relatively easy to identify commonalities between the ideas of Schulz and Kantor: the framing and function of space and time; themes of childhood and memory; and the particular understanding of the physicalness of a degraded reality. What undoubtedly connects them is the sophisticated humour and irony that permeate their works. Schulz and Kantor also seem to share common fears, obsessions and the related (at times fiercely) erotic fascinations. Such connections, references, and intertwinings have often become the subject of academic analysis but, paradoxically, they have never managed to exhaust this subject — vast, fascinating, and yet difficult to grasp unequivocally.²²⁵

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Several of the most important publications can be mentioned here: Ciechowicz, Jan. 'Bruno Schulz w teatrze'. In *Teatr pamięci Brunona Schulza* [Bruno Schulz's Theatre of Memory]. Edited by Jan Ciechowicz and Halina Kasjaniuk. Władze Miasta Gdynia — Teatr Miejski — Wydział Filologiczno-Historyczny Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 1993, pp. 116–117; Király, Nina. 'Schulz i Kantor'. In *Teatr pamięci...*, pp. 132–141; Marinelli, Luigi. 'Kantor w cieniu Schulza'. In *W ulamkach zwierciadła... Bruno Schulz w 110 rocznicę urodzin i 60 rocznicę śmierci* [In Fragments of a Mirror... Bruno Schulz on the 110th Anniversary of His Birth and the 60th Anniversary of His Death]. Edited by Małgorzata Kitowska-Lysiak and Władysław Panas, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2003; Owczarski, Wojciech. *Miejsca wspólne, miejsca własne. O wyobraźni Leśmiana, Schulza i Kantora* [Common Places, Own Places. On the Imagination of Leśmian, Schulz, and

Katarzyna Flader-Rzeszowska, aware of the impossibility of a comprehensive and unambiguous assessment, notes that 'Kantor's artistic strategy consisted of referencing the images or atmosphere of another artist's work, using only fragments of that work, select motifs, exchanges, individual sentences. Taking his cue from Schulz, he constructed his own concept of the manikin, his own version of the reality of the lowest rank.'²²⁶ As a result of this process, the scholar continues,

Kantor's work on a text can be called a strategy of remnants. The creator of the Theatre of Death allowed on stage only fragments of the action, detached situations, events, acts, remnants of speech and movement. That's because he argued that only remnants of the past reach the present. To recall memories on stage, one can refer only to traces, fragments, afterimages. Kantor drew on emotional memory, which makes images — not action — as its object. In *The Dead Class*, there appeared remnants of memories, of childhood images, remnants of private and public history, as well as remnants of works read in his youth.²²⁷

Kantor]. słowo/obraz terytoria, 2006, pp. 36–49 (most importantly 'Traktat o manekinach'); Vido-Rzewuska, Marie-Thérèse. 'Kantor, Schulz, Malczewski, Wyspiański: Some Paradoxes'. In *Tadeusz Kantor Today! Metamorphoses of Death, Memory, and Presence*. Edited by Katarzyna Fazan, Marta Bryś, and Anna R. Burzyńska. Translated by Anda MacBride. Peter Lang International Academic Publisher, 2014. A compilation of key facts and analyses on the presence and impact of Witkiewicz, Schulz, and Gombrowicz on Kantor's work can be found in Romanska, Magda. *The Post-traumatic Theatre of Grotowski and Kantor. History and Holocaust in 'Akropolis' and 'Dead Class'*. Anthem Press, 2012. The author devotes a separate chapter to each of the artists: 'Witkiewicz's Tumor', 'An Age of Genius: Bruno Schulz and the Return to Childhood' and 'Conversing with Gombrowicz: The Dead, the Funny, the Sacred and the Profane'. As addressing those aspects would inevitably repeat known facts, I do not pursue them in my analysis, instead focusing on a slightly different treatment of the subject.

²²⁶ Flader-Rzeszowska, Katarzyna. 'Bruno Schulz w *Umarłej klasie* Tadeusza Kantora. Realność artystyczna i koneksje literackie'. *Załącznik Kulturoznawczy*, no. 8, 2021, p. 283.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

Moreover, if we accept Kantor's aforementioned idea of a Polish — and likely not only Polish — artistic tradition as a cosmos of national aesthetics, specific philological comparisons and juxtapositions become of limited use, or even unfounded. The question of priority that so often arises in such analyses, focused solely on identifying sources of influence or inspiration, should instead be reformulated as a question of purpose: the rationale for employing a given artistic solution. Attempting to examine the actual effects of particular references thus appears far more justified and epistemically interesting.

Reflecting on *The Dead Class* in this context, I turn to yet another artist, this time a filmmaker — Wojciech Jerzy Has, who drew from the same cultural resources as Kantor, was interested in similar issues, including those of non-artistic nature.

Two years before the premiere of *The Dead Class*, in 1973, *The Hourglass Sanatorium* is released, a film that constitutes a rather loose adaptation of Schulz's prose, based primarily on the title story from *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* and the short story 'Spring' from that collection. Jan Nowicki plays the lead role in this half-poetic, half-psychological, surreal story about a young man arriving at the eponymous sanatorium, suspended in time and space.

It is astonishing today that in the context of *The Dead Class* Has's film is mentioned only once in the surviving archival documents, in a conversation between Konstanty Puzyna, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Andrzej Wajda.²²⁸ When the question of the particular atmosphere evoked by the presence of Schulz in Kantor's play arises, Puzyna confesses:

I was fascinated by the school atmosphere at the beginning, the atmosphere of a *cheder*, which, in Schulz's case, is brilliantly captured, even though it's not literal. It is easy to compare it to Has's film, *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, where the environment of a Jewish town is incredibly elaborate in terms of description, costumes, and so on. You could feel all the consultants, advisers, and God-knows-who, but I didn't feel Schulz in it. It was all dead to me. But here, with Kantor, the atmosphere is fantastically

²²⁸ 'O Umarłej klasie. Rozmowy'. *Dialog*, no. 2, 1977, <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/11678/o-umarlej-klasie-rozmowy>. Accessed 11 September 2025.

captured — I don't know why, it's hard to pinpoint. There's something in the visuals: in the silhouettes, maybe the costumes, those shades of black, a bowler hat, a flat cap, a particular din, the crowded desks...²²⁹

Puzyna's comparison is quite striking; on the one hand, he appreciates the efforts of Has's crew in attempting to capture the atmosphere of a Jewish town; on the other, he thinks that they failed to achieve the intended results. This is particularly puzzling in the context of *The Dead Class*, which aesthetically seems to allude not so much to Schulz's prose itself, but to its cinematic portrayal by Has. There can be no doubt that Kantor was familiar with Has's film.²³⁰ It should also be noted that the set²³¹ and costume design were the work of Jerzy Skarżyński and his wife Lidia — artists belonging to the Krakow Group and friends of Kantor. Suffice it to say that the film's Józef (played by Jan Nowicki) is shown most of the time wearing a black suit with a black bowler hat, the same attire as the elderly pupils of *The Dead Class*. This hardly seems to be a mere coincidence.

The unanimity between the original titles of Has's film and Schulz's short story collection suggests a faithful adaptation. This, however, is a trap — there is some similarity between the two works, but no homogeneity. A certain looseness in the treatment of Schulz's texts resulted in the film receiving many unfavourable reviews. Has's work has generated the greatest opposition among literary scholars. Artur Sandauer, although highlighting the cinematic nature of Schulz's prose, firmly rejected Has's adaptation which, in his view, transformed Schulz's stories of a 'cosmic' dimension into grotesque folklore.²³² There were also dissenting voices that understood and appreciated the fact that the director sought not so much to adapt Schulz's work literally as to capture its eschatological ambience, noting that '*The Hourglass Sanatorium* is

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ This fact was confirmed to me in a conversation with Jolanta Janas, who knew Kantor well and worked at the Cricoteka for many years. According to Janas's account, Kantor also held Jan Nowicki in very high regard, describing him as an outstanding actor.

²³¹ Andrzej Płocki co-created the set design.

²³² Sandauer, Artur. 'Czy Norwid polował na niedźwiedzie?'. *Dialog*, no. 10, 1973.

not only faithful to the specific atmosphere of that prose [...] but also masterfully directed.²³³ According to Marcin Maron, ‘this work is the result of a thorough reading not only of Schulz’s prose, but above all an attempt to decipher the mystery of human life and history.’²³⁴

It has been frequently pointed out that Has overstepped the mark, that he went too far in his interpretation by inserting the Holocaust into Schultz’s work. This motif is made clear in the very first scene of the film, in which a prisoner on a camp bunk appears among the passengers on a train (or rather a cattle wagon), as well as in the scene in which Józef watches through a basement window as a crowd of people flees in panic with all their belongings in tow. Konrad Eberhardt attempts to explain that Has adds something in his film that was not even suggested in Schulz’s stories. He writes:

Wojciech Has, in his decision to adapt Schulz’s stories for the screen, had to address a fundamental fact: the cataclysm of the last war annihilated the small towns of the Eastern borderland and their inhabitants. There are no longer attics, basements, or shops that would allow one to safely immerse oneself in the still harbours of time; the chain of metamorphoses has been irrevocably broken. There is no continuation. Everything ‘was’; ‘is’ and ‘will be’ can no longer be found. As we know, Has decided to make a film adapting Schulz — but also to some extent refuting him; over the brilliant writer’s dream city he spread a horizon of irrevocable destruction. [...] This concept is not an expression of unbridled individualism, but the result of rational thinking: is it possible to imagine a way of reading Schulz’s prose that would eliminate our knowledge of ‘what happened next’? Is it possible to erase from our present consciousness the tragic death of the writer, crushed in the cogs of the genocidal machine? Can *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* be made as if nothing had happened, as if those shops, streets, and their inhabitants still existed? I think not.²³⁵

²³³ Garbicz, Adam. ‘Review of *The Hourglass* (*Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*).’ *Film Quarterly*, no. 28 (3), 1975, pp. 59–62.

²³⁴ Maron, Marcin. *Dramat czasu i wyobraźni. Filmy Wojciecha Jerzego Hasa* [The Drama of Time and Imagination. The Films of Wojciech Jerzy Has]. Universitas, 2010, p. 87.

²³⁵ Eberhardt, Konrad. ‘Sny sprzed potopu.’ *Kino*, no. 12, 1973, p. 15.

What's surprising is that, despite Kantor's almost identical approach, his work didn't provoke the same kind of opposition among the audience. On the contrary, the Holocaust inherent in *The Dead Class* (and thus, in a sense, also 'appended' to Schulz's prose) was regarded as fully justified and acceptable.

Returning to the question of the relationship between Kantor's and Has's works and Schulz's prose, Derrida's concept of reading-writing once again proves useful. These works express an active, artistic response to Schulz, his prose, his imagination, his sensibility. We are faced with two performative responses, somewhat identical, based on the same process, yet performed within a completely different medium — film in Has's case and theatre in Kantor's.

8.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO REVIEW A MASTERPIECE?

In 1975, *The Dead Class* was performed thirteen times. After a fragment of the performance was presented during the AICA Congress, it was staged at the Krzysztofory Gallery and subsequently at the Lodz Centre of Art Promotion. The first post-premiere reviews attempted to describe the performance, to capture its content and meaning in words. Critics undertaking this task utilised, in their own ways, Kantor's own accompanying materials and texts, clearly taking inspiration from them and generally following the interpretative paths outlined therein. Some also sought to situate the performance within the broader context of Polish culture, linking it to existing phenomena and other artists — the names of Witkiewicz, Schulz, and Gombrowicz would be the most commonly mentioned. More unorthodox references were noted as well, such as to Stanisław Wyspiański's *November Night* or Emil Zegadłowicz's²³⁶ novel *Zmory* [*Nightmares*].²³⁷ There were also interpretive proposals that either ignored Kantor's 'guidelines' or outright challenged them. Marian Sienkiewicz, writing in *Przekrój*, drew attention to the specificity of the literary references present in the performance:

²³⁶ See Szybist, Maciej. 'Z Teatru, *Umarła klasa*'. *Echo Krakowa*, 18 November 1975, p. 2.

²³⁷ The novel is a *Bildungsroman* set in the grammar-school milieu of the provincial town of Wołkowice (modeled on Wadowice). The protagonist, Mikołaj, dramatically experiences the departure from the family home, his education at the grammar school, and the petty-bourgeois social conventions of the town. Because of the naturalistic descriptions of the protagonist's first sexual experiences, the novel was originally published in a censored form; the first complete edition appeared much later, in 1957.

It is a paradox that *The Dead Class*, an ostentatious and provocative non-narrative theatre, breaking away from the traditional method of conveying a writer's text, is Kantor's most literary theatrical work. The artist has never before managed to create a performance whose power and beauty would be derived from such a vast assemblage of meanings and literary associations, borrowed — this time — from the writings of Gombrowicz, Schulz, Witkiewicz. [...] [Kantor] proved that he is capable of constructing a performance from meanings alone, without a ready-made authorial text, and that the dramaturgy is found simply in the finished performance. At the same time, however, with this performance he confirmed the belief that it is indeed possible to create fascinating theatre without dramaturgy, but not without literature! Nor without literary creation! Kantor's success lies in his creative reading of writers who inspire and nourish the imagination. Especially Witkiewicz.²³⁸

This confirms, in a sense, my notions about Kantor's deconstructive (in the Derridean sense) practice of reading Witkiewicz's work.

Just three days after the premiere, *Echo Krakowa* published a short review by Maciej Szybist, who — as he admits — had thus far 'combated' Kantor's avant-garde work in the press, accusing it of being academic (sic!), doctrinaire, and detached from the problems of human existence. *The Dead Class* was a breakthrough in this regard, because Kantor, as the author emphasised, 'managed to use the language of avant-garde art to say a few tentative sentences about the world at large.'²³⁹ Long before Greń's diagnoses, Szybist clearly indicated that *The Dead Class*, among other things, 'is a class of a dead nation, a nation of people similar to one another, who are no longer here, who perished along with the old ideas of humanism and culture.'²⁴⁰ And although he does not explicitly mention the Holocaust, the allusion is quite clear. Especially considering that, according to Andrzej Wełmiński's account, this subject was of incredible importance to Kantor already during rehearsals. Jewish people were discussed openly during work, and every-

²³⁸ Sienkiewicz, Marian. 'Demiurg z Cricot 2, Seans Tadeusza Kantora'. *Przekrój*, 14 December 1975.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

one was perfectly aware of the context of individual scenes and their meaning. There was no fear either of the authorities' or the audience's reaction. References to the Holocaust in *The Dead Class*, as Wełmiński maintained, were clear to everyone and fully accepted.²⁴¹

Elżbieta Morawiec described the spectacle in a similarly catastrophic tone, treating it as a manifestation of a dying world, an ending era in which nothing is as it should be; the Charwoman-Death, ambisexual, ambiguous, masked, 'suspiciously resembles a man' and virtually everything else in the performance 'has its echo, its dummy, its distorting mirror: a man — a manikin, a living voice — a recording, the horror of death — the figure of a hermaphrodite, a circus freak' — in short, it is the 'Apocalypse of Kantor'.²⁴²

The performance made a similar impression in Łódź. Piotr Słowikowski wrote:

Even the books lying on the desks are drenched in tomb-dust. The stage movement, in this collage of difficult-to-describe scenes, is characterised by a 'puppet-like' quality, mechanised to the point of absurdity. However, these steps, gestures and movements are unequivocally human. Accumulated in their inane multiplicity, they bind the characters, puppetise them. Entire parts of the performance are also repeated many times. As in school, slogans, keyword-symbols of knowledge are being recited. During one of the scenes, the actress reels off a wall of numbers. Each number is differentiated by intonation, so that at one time it is a threat-number, a demand, a request, a fright, an order, a surprise, an outrage, and a hundred other shades. [...] All this creates a message on lifelessness.²⁴³

From January to mid-May 1976, *The Dead Class* was performed 20 times in Kraków, all performances taking place at the Krzysztofory Gallery. The performance also entered full production, along with

²⁴¹ A conversation with Andrzej and Teresa Wełmiński conducted for the purpose of this book on 1 June 2025.

²⁴² Morawiec, Elżbieta. 'Apokalipsa wg Tadeusza Kantora'. *Życie Literackie*, nos. 51–52, 21–28 December 1975.

²⁴³ Słowikowski, Piotr. <Marionety i aktorzy>. *Odgłosy*, no. 3, 15 January 1976, p. 10.

a rather extensive 'accompanying program,' which included lectures on topics related to the work and exhibitions of photographs documenting individual performances. For Kantor, by then a mature artist, *The Dead Class* became a turning point in his work and a catalyst for projects aimed at summing up and reckoning with his artistic endeavours to date. From October 1976, the Krzysztofory Gallery hosted an exhibition titled 'Żywa dokumentacja: 20 lat rozwoju Teatru Cricot 2' ['Living documentation: 20 years of the Cricot 2 Theatre's development']. 'In a small space, rich factual material: photographs, manifestos, documents, posters, press articles from around the world. Suspended from the ceiling on ropes and strings, presented in display cases. Next to that, Kantor's theatrical objects [...] create a certain atmosphere. And almost all of it on Cricot 2 — one of the most interesting phenomena of contemporary art.'²⁴⁴ The spatial arrangement brought to mind 'Anti-Exhibition, or Popular Exhibition' ['Antywystawa, czyli Wystawa popularna', 1963], which was also conceived as a summary of sorts. This time, the project gained a distinct performative aspect, as Kantor made the process of creating this exhibition public. He built it 'incrementally,' through meetings with artists associated with the Cricot 2 Theatre, which were held on location and open to all interested, together with daily interventions enriching the exhibition with new commentary and exhibits. All of this culminated on 23 October with a ceremonial opening reception.²⁴⁵

Among the first reviews of *The Dead Class* were also those that attempted to capture the ambience of the performance and bring out its depth and universal message. In his description of the opening scene, Andrzej Górny noted:

The seated characters begin to stir in complete silence, leaning out of their desks, rising or, in the back rows — outright standing on top of them (a typical group photo). Of course, each with an outstretched hand, as befits pupils volunteering to answer. Voluntarily, although with some undisguised fear. They have experienced what life has to offer, they

²⁴⁴ peg. 'Cricot 2 — okruchy jubileuszowe'. *Echo Krakowa*, no. 9, 1976.

²⁴⁵ The exhibition was open until 14 November 1976. Since 24 October, 763 tickets had been sold.

finally know a lot, and they can be quizzed. They can be called on, exist at this desk like never before. If once they could account for what they have learned, and it was never what it could have been in their lives — now it is their own knowledge, not just learned; now they are giving account of something utterly personal, inextricably linked to them. No one has much right to deny this, if only they can express it. This knowledge is already their sign — it is simply themselves. Therefore, they are just waiting to be called upon by an invisible teacher, to see when and to whom he will say: you answer.²⁴⁶

There were many more such poetic descriptions of Kantor's production. They often expressed the impressions sparked by the opening sequences and actions. The image of motionless old people frozen behind their desks and watching the audience enter would be the most frequently cited and described scene in both Polish and foreign reviews. However, it is futile to look for any attempts at an exhaustive description and explanation of the whole. Rather, one finds reports on selected fragments of the stage action, gestures, and objects which evoke a wide variety of emotions and associations. This widespread inability among reviewers to provide an exhaustive description is not merely proof of the work's exceptional nature — it is a structural feature of immersive experience as described by Berleant; when the spectator is drawn into the space of a performance with all of their body and all of their senses, the language of criticism, utilising distance and analytical observation, proves insufficient.²⁴⁷ As one such review writes: 'The spectacle is breathtaking in its clash between the flat literalness of the details of this monstrous cacophony of actions and the tragic fate aspect to which all of it is attributed.'²⁴⁸ The end of this review is also symptomatic in that it focuses on the viewer, their feelings, and their role in the entire undertaking:

We are facing the performance in circumstances similar to those of the Woman Behind the Window, who constantly observes, scrutinises

²⁴⁶ Górny, Andrzej. <Bez końca powtórka>. *Nurt* — *miesięcznik społeczno-kulturalny*, no. 132, 1976, p. 30.

²⁴⁷ Berleant's idea is also brought up in the second chapter of this book.

²⁴⁸ Górny, p. 30.

through a dirty, smudged window. Likely various school nooks and crannies, places of boyhood initiation — this life in progress, never fully accessible to those who do not participate, who remain Others, strangers as they look on, even though they would like to know and understand everything. And such is probably the case with us, watching the ritual dances through smudged glass. The role of such a witness seems to be the best possible one here.

After the performance, many people remain. They stand against the wall in the shadow of the basement alcoves — the foyer — or move on to the café. Kantor and the actors come out. The only person you hear is the waitress running around, upset that she can't handle her workload. It's after midnight. If anyone speaks up, they do it as quietly as possible. And that's how it goes for a while. Silence and peace, and the overwhelming feeling that you're waiting for a confirmation of something unformulated within yourself. You want to remove this dirty pane. Now that it's gone, see clearly and sharply. Or at least be aware of this desire.²⁴⁹

The symptomatic nature of this description lies in the fact that the inability to understand and explain the essence and meaning of Kantor's performance is treated precisely as a realization of its concept. As if Kantor had deliberately and consciously prepared a performance that cannot be understood or analysed in traditional ways. This aura of esotericism and of an extraordinary community centred around the mystery contained within the work was strengthened by the circumstances in which the performances of *The Dead Class* took place. Krakow, the legendary Krzysztofory, late autumn, evening, almost night. All this, particularly within Polish culture, strongly, almost affectively influenced the specific atmosphere and aura of all artistic endeavours. Especially ones that, like Kantor's work, were part of the tradition of the Polish theatre of death, a foundation of Polish culture — initiated by Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* and continued in Wyspiański's works.

He 'conjures up ghosts', he, in front of a dense crowd of spectators surrounding the staging area in the Krzysztofory basement — creates the

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

whole performance. An ordinarily dressed man of this world seems to bring to life the ghosts of the past. Or maybe the ones that lie dormant in everyone's subconscious? [...] The 'mysterious meaning' of Tadeusz Kantor's new play is ambiguous. It can be interpreted differently by each viewer, striking a different chord in each — of memories, emotions, intimate experiences,²⁵⁰

wrote Krystyna Zbijewska.

In May 1976, *The Dead Class* was presented in Wrocław as part of the 17th Festival of Contemporary Polish Drama. Although Kantor's production did not participate in the competition, it was awarded an honorary prize. These performances constituted an unprecedented event in the history of *The Dead Class*, as they took place in the unique space of the former Church of St. Bernardino of Siena, which still houses the main exhibition hall of the Wrocław Museum of Architecture. Participants would recall their exceptional aura and energy:

Zygmunt Greń: I saw *The Dead Class* [...] in rather unusual conditions. Night. Wrocław Museum of Architecture in some old church by an Evangelical congregation. The surroundings alone created a singular and fascinating atmosphere.²⁵¹

Konstanty Puzyna: Kantor performed [*The Dead Class*] in the Bernardine Church in Wrocław by the Museum of Architecture. In a large, empty church, in which despite the vast space everything was still 'tucked in the corner'. That 'François Waltz', played from multiple speakers, sounded superbly. The musicians sat far, far away, behind the audience. The waltz came and went. It disappeared somewhere in the far-off distance, then grew, came upon us, before receding again. In this ebb and flow a vast space opened up and, at the same time, this being tucked into a corner.²⁵² It was magnificent. In terms of musical and spatial

²⁵⁰ Zbijewska, Krystyna. 'Seans Kantora'. *Dziennik Polski*, no. 22, 1976, p. 3.

²⁵¹ Greń, Zygmunt. 'Teatr zamknięty. Kantor'. *Życie Literackie*, no. 36, 1984, p. 6.

²⁵² Puzyna's description records precisely that dimension of aesthetic reception which Berleant identifies as 'immersion' — a situation in which the perceiving subject does not occupy the position of an external observer of the

imagination, Kantor revealed himself to me here in a way I had never expected from him.²⁵³

Cricot 2's first international outing with *The Dead Class* was a six-week tour of England and Scotland, arranged primarily thanks to the efforts of Richard Demarco, who was fascinated by Kantor. As might be expected, the performances were a resounding success, as evidenced by the numerous press reviews meticulously collected by Kantor and the company. *The Dead Class* was written about in the most widely read publications, including *The Guardian*, *The Scotsman* and *The Times*. Again, the opening scenes of the performance were the ones most frequently cited and described. The form, music and acting received praise. Kantor's presence on stage delighted. Michael Billington argued that the greatness of this work lies in the universal meaning of its image and proclaimed directly: 'If *The Dead Class* is not a masterpiece, then the word has no meaning.'²⁵⁴

Not all reviews were so uncritical and enthusiastic, however. There were also those who, while praising the work, did not fail to point out its weaknesses.

Irving Wardle, while highlighting and appreciating the universal message of the performance, which shows 'a truth about human life' or the 'contrast between what we were and what we become', also pointed out that for 'Kantor and his Cracow audiences there is clearly more to the work than that. Like his other recent productions, it is based on Witkiewicz's text, and also reflects his own early memories of Habsburg Poland. That side of the production is closed to me; likewise, its mobile sculptural props which require the attention of an art critic.'²⁵⁵

work, but is drawn into its sensory space as a participant. The undulating waltz, the church space, the distance of the musicians — all these elements function not as separate stimuli being analysed, but as an integrated field of experience in which the spectator's body becomes an instrument of perception.

²⁵³ O „Umarlej klasie”. Rozmowy...

²⁵⁴ Billington, Michael. 'Fringe on top'. *The Guardian*, 30 August 1976.

²⁵⁵ Wardle, Irving. 'The Dead Class. College of Art'. *The Times*, 30 August 1976.

Richard Cork, in turn, wrote bluntly that ‘the main flaw of *The Dead Class* is its failure to grasp the simple truth that an hour and a half of intense emotion leads to progressing indifference. The viewer’s engagement quickly begins to wane, particularly if the emotions and effects that follow are not opposite but similar — and the direction of the play has not shielded it from a series of repetitions.’²⁵⁶

Interestingly, criticisms showing a lack of understanding of the performance (among other things) were also voiced by Poles, which may indicate that the reason for this lack of comprehension was not necessarily a language or cultural barrier. Tamara Karren wrote in her account:

Schulz once wrote that the ideal is to arrive, by some circuitous route, at a repeated childhood, that the sign of true maturity is an arrival in which the deadness of forgotten feelings, images, and experiences is only apparent. I read this ‘apparency’ as the basis for Kantor’s ‘séance’, as he calls the spectacle *The Dead Class*.

Still, it is likely no good when such reflections arise after watching a performance and, as it were, ‘having learned’ it, while when sitting in the audience, one is lost in its meaning or lack thereof, its sincere or feigned symbolism. I do not deny that there are several scenes in *The Dead Class* that made an impression on me — above all, that procession with puppets to the sounds of the ‘François Waltz’, along with its second part, in which the elderly, joyfully running around their desks with schoolbags on their backs, fall on the ground half-dead, or dead once more. Perhaps I understood something of the symbolic functions of the charwoman, who sweeps everything in her path with a scythe-shaped broom — scattered textbooks, the bodies of fallen pupils, and all manner of other items. It becomes a kind of a ritual for removing the dead. Still, I do not understand the meaning of the scenes of the old men sitting in the toilet, the meaning of their lowered pants and bared buttocks. It is not due to any puritanism or aesthetic sensibilities; I honestly do not know what these scenes were supposed to convey — just as I do not understand many of the other scenes.

²⁵⁶ Cork, Richard. ‘Enter the hollow men.’ *Evening Standard*, 23 September 1976.

Overall, I have to agree that Kantor brings many new elements to the theatre (if it can be called a theatre), he is visually expressive and original (Kantor is a painter, so visual expression is his forte). But it is no good when one has to label the painting for the viewer to understand it or feel its impact.

Despite the enthusiastic reception from the predominantly young Riverside Studio audience, I sat through this showing of *The Dead Class*, cool-headed, unable to internally absorb what the author of this spectacle seemed to be trying to convey. Only my mind was stimulated. And I wanted to shout, like the child in Andersen's fairy tale: 'Look! The Emperor has no clothes!'²⁵⁷

After returning home, the play was presented at the 12th Warsaw Theatre Meetings. Several reviews appeared in the press, but all struck a similar tone, expressing admiration for Kantor without adding new critical insight. They became, in effect, showcases of their authors' verbal agility rather than acts of analytical engagement.

Outlining the activities of his theatre, Kantor noted:

The plans of the Cricot 2 Theatre for 1977 include the continued production of *The Dead Class*. Following national successes in Krakow, Wroclaw, and Warsaw, along with the high praise for this performance by the entire Polish press, the Cricot 2 Theatre has received a number of concrete offers and invitations from various circles [...]. Following the success of the Cricot 2 Theatre in the UK last year, invitations are being received from many countries.²⁵⁸

Already in March the company would give 12 performances of *The Dead Class* at the Mickery Theater in Amsterdam. The production was enthusiastically received, with reviewers comparing it to the 'surreal humour' of Roland Topor²⁵⁹ and the puppet ballets of Kurt Jooss.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Karren, Tamara. 'Umarła klasa Kantora'. *Tydzień Polski*, 1976.

²⁵⁸ 'Umarła klasa'. *Seans Tadeusza Kantora 1975–1979...*, p. 72.

²⁵⁹ Heijer, Jac. 'Dodenklas van Tadeusz Kantor: emotioneel en uniek Pools theater'. *NCR Handelsblad*, 2 March 1977.

²⁶⁰ Van der Waals, J. C., *Financieele Dagblad*, based on a scan of a typescript with a Polish translation held in the Cricoteka (no inventory number assigned).

Interestingly, commentators wrote on the macabre humour and obscene imagery of *The Dead Class*, going as far as to claim (citing also Grotowski, Szajna, and Gombrowicz) that Poles were creating a theatre 'that is haunted and mortifying'.²⁶¹

In turn, the staging of *The Dead Class* in Nuremberg was likely an emotional experience for both the company and Kantor himself, given both the play's references to the Holocaust and Kantor's earlier performances in the region, which had also addressed the Second World War and issues related to the reckoning with Nazism.²⁶² Audiences and critics there likely also had certain preconceptions and expectations regarding the new production: Kantor had been known in Germany since the mid-1960s, first as a painter, and then as an author of high-profile happenings. And although no surviving review makes direct reference to the Holocaust, a certain air of national self-reflection can be sensed in almost every single one through their emphasis on nihilism, a world forgotten even by God. Walter Fenn's text 'In der Hölle des Lebens' ['In the Hell of Life'] is particularly noteworthy:

For Tadeusz Kantor, the world is an eternal Good Friday, an endless martyrdom that constantly leads to death, yet finds no end even there. Life, the world, all of this constitutes to Kantor a terror of infinity, but this terror ultimately also contains something funny [...] though beneath this laughter lurks a primal fear. This schoolroom, in which his spectres [...] bully and torment, deceive, provoke each other, is a kind of secularised Satan's den, where sadism is the supreme law. Here, everyone is their own inquisitor, everyone is their neighbour's inquisitor. Everyone is their own hell; hell is always in the others. [...]

We are the ghosts of Kantor, we who drag with us our unfulfilled dreams, our guilt and our shamelessness, we who step on our dreams in ecstatic hopelessness bound to a despair that finds no way out.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Rutten, Andre. 'Dodenklas: een beangstigende bezetenheid'. *Trouw*, 3 March 1977.

²⁶² See notes on the movie *Kantor ist da* in *Idea bardzo konsekwentna...*

²⁶³ Fenn, Walter. 'In der Hölle des Lebens'. *Kultur*, 17 March 1977. The significance of these observations is evidenced by the fact that Fenn's text was used as the introduction to the album of photographs by Günther Kühnel,

One can, of course, treat these words as a result of the reviewer's individual sensitivity, but it is hard to resist the feeling of their remarkable aptness in a city where the Nuremberg trials took place and which therefore stands as a symbolic site of the triumph of law over the brutal power of the Nazi death engine.

Kantor was probably well aware of the reception of his performance, and the issue interested him deeply, since when asked about it, he replied directly: 'We spent two weeks in Amsterdam, giving twelve performances on the stage of the Micky Theatre, where the most renowned avant-garde companies perform. The hall was so packed that after two or three performances, the chairs had been removed from the amphitheatre podiums. The audience sat directly on the podiums. [...] The Dutch audience proved sensitive to humour and enjoyed themselves. The Germans primarily perceived the second, tragic layer of *The Dead Class*.²⁶⁴

Nancy, Shiraz, Belgrade, Paris, Lyon, Lille, Brussels, Ghent, Milan, Warsaw, Krakow again, a tour of Australia: Adelaide, Sydney, then Zurich, Geneva, Caracas, Rome, Berlin, Stuttgart, Graz, Krakow, and finally New York, Mexico City, Milan and Stockholm — these cities would be visited by *The Dead Class* in the following three years.

Accounts of these visits, included in theatre reviews and the recollections of their participants, demonstrate that wherever Kantor appeared with his production, it almost immediately became an event of unprecedented standing. And the successes reported at subsequent press conferences after the artist's return to Poland were not the result of his megalomania — they were genuine. Notably, however, foreign (and sometimes Polish) performances of *The Dead Class* were frequently accompanied by exhibitions and lectures that presented its premise and explained its main ideas, and that the press frequently published previews which also aimed to prepare potential viewers for what they were about to experience, the production proved to be somewhat dif-

Tadeusz Kantor: Theater des Todes, published six years later (1983) by the Institut für moderne Kunst in Nuremberg.

²⁶⁴ Jakubiec, Danuta. 'Nowe sukcesy Cricot II. Rozmowy *Dziennika*'. *Dziennik Polski*, no. 73, 31 March 1977.

ficult for both its audiences and reviewers. A careful reading of the reviews reveals that the vast majority were quite conventional and vague. One gets the impression that they barely touched on the crux of the issues present in the production. Faced with an ineffable mystery they remained silent and helpless. Tragedy, Polishness, universalism, shock, cruelty, perversion, pain, visual perfection, rhythmic perfection, complete stage integration, a symbol of the dying world of European culture, an apocalyptic dance of death, Kantor as a demiurge, a conductor, the one who presides over the realm of death — these are some of the most frequently used terms. Reviewers often described selected (usually the opening) sequences or even scenes, openly admitting their inability to understand and analyse what they were seeing. They usually attributed this to cultural differences and divergent national experiences.

Among *The Dead Class* reviews, there are also some that manage to capture and articulate its meaning and message. Such is the case with Roman Szydłowski's text, 'Lęk i ostrzeżenie'²⁶⁵ ['Fear and Warning'] from 1978. The author admits that even though three years have passed since its premiere, the performance still deeply impresses and fascinates. According to Szydłowski, Kantor wants to shock the audience, stimulate their emotions and imagination, so that the message he brings becomes not only intellectually understandable but also emotionally experienced.

As an artist, but above all as a human being, as a resident of a country that has experienced the most tragic war to date, I must add my voice of protest against the new plans for genocide. [...] Thousands of people react similarly to the news of planned production of a neutron bomb. This opposition is something natural and obvious', Szydłowski recalls Kantor's words and adds: 'Just as natural was for [him] that voice of caution with which he spoke in *The Dead Class*, he who survived the era of the furnaces...'²⁶⁶

Elsewhere, Kantor says bluntly: 'My generation has never managed to free itself from certain elements that define Polish national

²⁶⁵ Szydłowski, Roman. 'Lęk i ostrzeżenie'. *Trybuna Ludu*, 25 April 1978.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

tradition. That is why war is always present in my works. The Nazi invasion, nightmares, fear, and many other things are born from this spirit in which I also find myself. I still have these scars. They will never leave me.²⁶⁷ And indeed, when only any specific matter appeared in the reviews of *The Dead Class*, it almost always concerned the war and, above all, the Holocaust.

Reviews that similarly specify the issues raised by Kantor's performance were published in the Venezuelan press after the 1978 staging in Caracas.

Symptomatic among these is the voice of Leonardo Azparren Gimenez, who wrote:

The word that the audience almost unanimously used to describe T. Kantor's play *The Dead Class* is 'shocking'. How and why does it shock us? Kantor is a poet of death. The problem here is that we probably lack the knowledge necessary to understand it all. We realize that the play touches upon the deepest issues of the Polish spirit, and it seems to us that it was received this way in Europe.

Kantor moved us deeply, confronting us with a fair-like world, alien to any known visual convention. This world belongs to Auschwitz, with a terrifying sense of a cosmic madness that grows by narrowing the horizons of art, culture, and humanity.

Let us recall the photographs of those redeemed in 1945, the diabolical dampness of the walls leading to the crematorium ovens, [...] the clothes of the little ones, piles of shoes, fabrics woven from human hair, a collection of prosthetics, the suitcases with which they expected to return, the notes of a mortal symphony.

Almost thirty years have passed since then, during which Kantor must have reflected on much. And that is precisely why he is present on stage throughout the performance, to watch over his actors, over every word and sentence of his verse. A verse that is not improvised, in which one can feel the full scope of the content of a culture burdened by an excess of life and an excess of death.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Mazas, Luis. 'Tadeusz Kantor, un niño perplejo'. *La Nación*, 16 September 1984.

²⁶⁸ Gimenez, Leonardo Azparren. 'Jo especial del Teatro de las Naciones'. *El Nacional: Caracas*, 16 July 1978.

This apt reading of Kantor's message, which here boils down to a painful reification of the concept of death, likely stems in part from the fact that in Venezuela, as in Spanish culture, death is not treated solely as a painful and taboo subject. On the contrary, it serves as a crucial point of reference for both religious and philosophical reflection, as well as for art, literature, and daily practices. It is treated not merely as the end of biological life but also as an element of the dynamic relationship between the world of the living and the spiritual realm. This is confirmed by Mara Comerlati's words: 'According to Kantor, the theme of *The Dead Class* is one very near to our countries, the descendants of Spanish culture. The idea of death, he reminds us, was very much alive in the past, for example in the Middle Ages, and in certain countries, such as Spain. However, for the rest of Europe, it is a terrifying concept.'²⁶⁹ Perhaps it was the fear of this death that, at an affective level, prevented not so much an understanding of the message of *The Dead Class*, as speaking about it directly.

Among the stagings of Kantor's performance, there were some in which one might expect cultural differences, rather than similarities, to be particularly prominent. In July and August 1982, *The Dead Class* was presented at the Togamura Festival and then in Tokyo. The Togamura performances were extraordinary, as they took place in a theatre space erected specifically for the purpose of the festival, based on the stages of one of the oldest performing arts in the world — Nō theatre. And yet the play's reception was similar to that in other countries. Professor Takahashi from the University of Tokyo wrote:

One of the most important elements that contributed to the threatening, painfully poignant atmosphere of the performance was the fact that the audience — this is clear to me — had to notice the bitter history of Poland superimposed upon it. The characters in the play are a group of Polish Jews from areas occupied by the Austrian Empire. While it cannot be unequivocally stated that the anger and bitterness of the nation that repeatedly fell prey to the barbaric ambitions of great powers were embedded directly in the play, examples can be found that attest to this: a standing figure singing the Austrian national anthem or an elderly

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

couple getting up, hurrying to dance a waltz, within which *la belle époque* is symbolically concealed. In these scenes, it is difficult not to hear and see the voice of suppressed anger and bitterness with which the soul of this country cries out, keeping in mind the contemporary situation in Poland.²⁷⁰ [...] However, one need not guess what painful and bitter feelings Kantor experiences during this period of martial law in Poland; he who, in this performance, created in 1975, placed the emotions, rancour, and anger of his own homeland on the pedestal of autonomous art.²⁷¹

The following months brought further visits and reviews of the performance. And, it must be said clearly once again, the reviews were quite conventional. Very enthusiastic. Speaking in generalisations, more or less formally and stylistically well-done. This collection of reviews is essentially a spectacle in its own right, with almost the same terms reused and repeated, which in effect amount to little more than an expression of enormous and undoubtedly sincere appreciation and admiration for the creator of the performance and the entire theatre company.

Still, there are voices that stand out for their unconventional approach to *The Dead Class*, so different from the accepted critical perspective of understanding it in terms of solemn eschatological themes. Even if such message is laced with irony.

On September 1, 1984, *Polityka* published a text in which we read:

The Polish Press Agency has just reported that after nearly ten years of success, Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2 Theatre in Krakow has decided to retire the excellent production of *The Dead Class* from its repertoire, and that the final performances of this play took place in June this year, during the Olimpie [sic!] Arts Festival in Los Angeles.

This release coincided with a series of articles about this performance in the American press. Ironically, the final performance of *The*

²⁷⁰ Martial law, which brought to an end the so-called 'Solidarity carnival' and dashed hopes for the democratisation of the communist regime enforced by the Soviet Union, was imposed in Poland on 13 December 1981 and lifted on 31 December 1982.

²⁷¹ Takahashi, Yasunari. *Yomiuri*, 6 August 1982.

Dead Class, a universal story about the human condition and a pinnacle of Polish theatre in recent years, was interpreted in sunny California as a satire on Polish education.

Ed Kaufman of *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote: 'The play takes place in a schoolroom: desks, books, etc. But this is no ordinary place of learning, absolutely not. The pupils who enter are dressed in black — they are all dead. Grotesque, caricatural, unfit for life, not ready to die. All the pupils reenact the anxieties of childhood and early education. [...] Although each of the black-clad characters tries to understand themselves — they fail. All are victims of the Polish education system, which stifles creative imagination, simplifies everything to a living death. Other than that, there's Polish sensibility: a mixture of ritualistic, careless patriotism and bygone romanticism.'

It is hardly surprising, then, that Tadeusz Kantor withdrew *The Dead Class* from Cricot's repertoire. A few more such interpreters, and it would soon have been revealed that the use of the 'François Waltz' in the performance was Kantor's polemic with the wave of rock music promoted in Poland by the official mass media.²⁷²

The Dead Class was performed from its premiere until the end of the Cricot 2 Theatre's existence, presented a total of approximately 386 times. These were not daily, regular performances; rather, the play was presented in cycles (usually consisting of several, less often a dozen or so performances) mostly during the theatre's tours abroad. On August 6, 1984, the press again officially announced that 'the management of the Cricot 2 Theatre has decided to discontinue further presentations of Tadeusz Kantor's production of *The Dead Class*.'²⁷³ And indeed, the performances were put on hold. Kantor admitted that he was tired of the production, that its potential had simply been exhausted, and that the company itself was occupied with other, newer works — performances of *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* had already begun, while rehearsals for a new venture, *Let the Artists Die*, were simultaneously taking place. In December 1985, an exception was made and *The Dead Class* was

²⁷² tor. 'Kantor i system polskiego szkolnictwa.' *Polityka*, 1 September 1984.

²⁷³ 'Umarła klasa Tadeusza Kantora schodzi z afisza.' *Życie Warszawy*, no. 186, 6 August 1984.

staged in Tel Aviv-Jaffa (probably owing to the unusual venue of the performance, the Jaffa Harbour Theatre). The next two performances of the play took place in 1986 in Bari, at Teatro Petruzzelli, during the 'Tadeusz Kantor. Teatr Cricot 2 1975-1985. L'attesa molto importante' festival.

The final (during Kantor's lifetime) performance of *The Dead Class* took place in 1989 in Paris (Palais Chaillot, Théâtre Gémier) as part of the Cricot 2 Theatre Festival 'Return. Theatre of Love and Death — Cricot 2', which was a retrospective consisting of T. Kantor's four latest performances: *The Dead Class*, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, *Let the Artists Die*, and *I Shall Never Return*. Perhaps as a result of a three-year hiatus, the version of the performance presented at this event differed significantly from the previous ones. New manikins were made, less distinct from one another than in previous versions (one gets the impression that the casts of their faces came from a single mould) and with the black dress shoes absent. Perhaps this was the result of Kantor's artistic preoccupation; over time, he began to eagerly incorporate (mostly male) bare feet into his paintings. After Kantor's death, revivals of *The Dead Class* took place in Pamplona, Zaragoza, Montreal, New York, Venice, Krakow, Prague, and Brno.

9.

‘...FOREVER IMPRISONED WITHIN THEM’

After *The Dead Class*, Kantor’s subsequent theatrical productions were the 1979 cricotage *Where Are the Snows of Yesteryear* and the play *Wielopole, Wielopole*, which had its premiere the following year. Kantor made no secret of the difficulties and problems he faced as a result of ‘the success of *The Dead Class*’. How was one to cope with the expectations audiences and reviewers had of the subsequent work? How could one meet one’s own artistic expectations and dreams? Such questions likely accompanied the creative process. It seems Kantor decided to continue and develop the themes that had occupied him up to that point. The plays that followed constituted thus a certain continuity and can be viewed as successive parts of a larger whole. This also allowed him to present these performances almost simultaneously during Polish and international tours.

In 1986, after one such trip spanning Bari, Turin and Milan, during which *The Dead Class*, *Wielopole, Wielopole* and *I Shall Never Return* were presented, Kantor stated directly during a meeting with the audience:

I wanted to share my impression of these performances... because I saw all three in one go for the first time. I mean, not all at once, but back-to-back. *The Dead Class*, *Wielopole, Wielopole*, ...and somehow it came around. I was just [surprised — JMT] by the critics who claimed it’s a trilogy... I say — and if there’s a fourth performance, right, God forbid, then... it all will be a bit ruined. It was... Seeing these three performances together must have made a great impression on everyone, everyone would say it, after all. For me personally... I was amazed by one thing and then I tried to analyse it, but didn’t come to any conclusions... *The Dead Class* — finished such a long time ago... I was convinced it would be more like... remnants, right... a corpse. It was as fresh as in 1975 [...] at the Krzysztofory. [It] was so fresh. It was better. It was better. [...] Besides, at the symposium, I was asked, “Were there any rehearsals?” We

had no rehearsals, since there was no time for that, only... So they asked me, 'What kind of techniques are you using to keep it alive after so many [...] tours with *The Dead Class*?' Because usually, after three tours, it's all dead, right. I said that it was my secret. I couldn't, I couldn't explain [...] the content, the content, it absolutely applies to our times. Then came *Wielopole*... Even better still.²⁷⁴

This never-before published statement, with its emotional tone and consequently rather unimpeded expression, is a testament to the (perhaps consciously performed) discovery Kantor makes at the moment of uttering these words. It is as if he were realising that the successive performances of the Theatre of Death are indeed, as critics would have it, arranged into a triptych and that they share a common theme.

Kantor held the first two productions of the Theatre of Death in particularly high regard — which is understandable, given their success and the profound impact they have had on the history of Polish theatre. The artist viewed these productions as the culmination of his artistic search, as he explained in an interview with Krzysztof Miklaszewski:

Krzysztof Miklaszewski: Two particularly important points of entry for the global reception of your art are *The Dead Class* (1975) and *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* (1980).

Tadeusz Kantor: Indeed, these 'points of entry' — as you put it — are so important that my dream is — for the first time, in fact — to preserve them. They have achieved such widespread reception that they should remain after my death. That is why I have asked the Ministry to consider these works protected in the form of national cultural parks. I would like them to be able to exist in the future, after I am gone, through the actors' actions. This is the assumption *sub specie aeternitatis* [from the point of view of eternity], the dream of all people who have taken their theatrical art seriously. This dream is: art must outlive our lives.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ A meeting between Tadeusz Kantor and the audience following the Bari—Turin—Milan tour at the Cricoteka on 27 May 1986; audio tape no. IV/001757, held in the Cricoteka.

²⁷⁵ Kantor, Tadeusz. 'O wiele ważniejsza od sztuki staje się kultura życia.' Interview by Krzysztof Miklaszewski, *Gazeta Krakowska*, 17–18 June 1981.

Kantor's desire to have his art continue in a living form even after his death, from today's perspective, seems rather bizarre and practically impossible to achieve. We know perfectly well that Kantor's theatre simply does not exist without Kantor, and any attempt to directly continue his art will usually end in spectacular failure. An analysis of the recordings of *The Dead Class* performances which took place after 1990 (at the Teatro Goldoni in Venice and New York's La MaMa) clearly demonstrates this as well. They clearly lack the tension generated by Kantor's presence on stage. The actors show a completely different, weaker energy and, it seems, less commitment. They also sometimes lose the rhythm of the performance — in some group scenes, only recordings played off-screen (e.g., the wailings of the 'Historical Delusions', or the Hasidic *nigun* recordings which in effect repeat what the actors are saying or singing at a given moment, and which Kantor intended as a reinforcement of the message of these scenes) allow them to return to the intended pace and maintain the rhythm of the production. Performances without Kantor are lighter, more comic than tragic. There are also prosaic reasons — over the years, the actors simply aged, and their costumes also succumbed to the natural process of deterioration, fading, wear and tear, which inevitably affected the aesthetics of the performance. Kantor's presence was therefore essential to his works; it constituted their core and primary impetus.

The presence of other participants is a slightly different matter. Although Kantor, as mentioned above, tried to maintain a permanent ensemble, the long run of the production and the numerous trips naturally necessitated minor and sometimes substantial cast changes. As a rule, however, these changes were not intended to involve an attempt to literally recreate a role already created by another actor.²⁷⁶ Rather,

²⁷⁶ An exception may be found, however, in Lech Stangret's performance of the role of the Charwoman-Death during the 1991 performances at La MaMa in New York. The surviving recording of the production clearly shows Stangret making a conscious effort to reproduce Stanisław Rychlicki's behaviour, gestures, and even facial expressions, contributing virtually nothing new to the role. It remains unclear whether this was the result of the strength of Rychlicki's original creation or Kantor's intention.

the aim was to maintain a certain onstage energy, a certain form, and a certain structure of the actions. A good example of this approach is the relationship between two characters — the First World War Soldier and the Camp Follower. Due to Jacek Stokłosa's indisposition, which prevented him from participating in one of the tours abroad, a replacement had to be found. The director decided to give this role to Teresa Welmińska. As it turned out, she wasn't to play the Soldier, but rather take on the role of a new character, the Camp Follower, whose task was to recreate Stokłosa's actions — at the appropriate moment, after the 'Historical Delusions' scene, entering the classroom with a rifle in hand before falling dead at the front of the stage. Stokłosa, a portly man in his prime, performed these actions with incredible energy and vitality, almost as if in the heat of a frenzy (that is also how Kantor described this part in the score — likely based on Stokłosa's performance). Welmińska, a woman of very slight build and almost girlish beauty, initially could not even conceive a way of recreating Stokłosa's performance. Kantor gave her no guidance. Welmińska, however, knew that copying his behaviour was simply impossible. She decided to build her character on a completely different emotional spectrum. At the right moment, she would enter the stage very slowly, even majestically, barely making a sound, dressed in a slightly oversized soldier's greatcoat and carrying a heavy iron rifle in her hands, her hollow gaze directed towards an indefinite distance. Everyone froze and silently watched her movement. Upon her fall, even the waltz stopped. Welmińska's Camp Follower was, therefore, a completely different character from Stokłosa's First World War Soldier. Yet their function in the dramaturgy of this scene and the entire performance was the same. Both characters became, in a sense, a materialisation of the historical events foretold in the 'Historical Delusions'. Both introduced an uneasiness of change.²⁷⁷

Kantor's idea of enabling an almost infinite continuation of *The Dead Class* was for each actor to find and train their successor — us-

²⁷⁷ Teresa Welmińska spoke of her role in these terms during a conversation I conducted with her and Andrzej Welmiński on 1 June 2025. In describing this scene, I also drew on a recording of the performance made in 1986 during its presentation at the Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari.

ing a similar principle to the one described above. The aim would be to convey a certain idea, a certain acting energy, that would allow the performance to continue after the death not only of Kantor, but even of all the actors. This rather bizarre idea, however, was never realised. Interestingly, Kantor was aware of the impossibility of replacing himself. He designed a chair with a wooden plaque attached, bearing the inscription ‘Kantor’, intended to symbolise his non/presence in the future life of *The Dead Class*. This chair, on the basis of a similar principle, was used in *Today is my birthday*, in which the need to mark this non/presence became reality.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ A photography of this chair is also featured on the cover of Katarzyna Fazan’s *Kantor. Non/Presence*.

10.

A MYTHOPOEIC DIPTYCH

The uniqueness of *The Dead Class* and the success of this performance raised questions about its place and significance within the whole of Kantor's oeuvre. This question is made even more relevant given that the artist himself, beginning in the 1980s, meticulously documented his work. In this Kantor archive, *The Dead Class*, as the first production of the Theatre of Death, marked the beginning of a new phase of his work and set a direction for further theatrical exploration. Grzegorz Niziołek, while framing Kantor's work within the project of the Polish Theatre of the Holocaust, simultaneously suggested a revision of this chronology, proposing that the boundary be shifted, considering *The Dead Class* not as the beginning of a new phase, but rather a certain closure of an earlier one. He wrote that it brought Kantor's previous artistic strategies, consisting of (to allow for necessary simplification) indirect reconstructions of scenes of the Holocaust, to their 'extreme, final form', thus exhausting them.²⁷⁹ That is because the images of the Holocaust embedded in this performance were correctly read by audience, named and located — integrated into the historical and symbolic order.

Niziołek argues that it was between *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* that a profound, radical transformation in Kantor's theatre took place, particularly in the context of its 'artistic language, theatrical strategies, its positioning within social space',²⁸⁰ as well as in the role (or position) occupied by the artist himself in these performances. He writes that, starting with *Wielopole...*, Kantor's performances 'no longer utilise so uncompromisingly the mechanism of post-traumatic anxiety, fruitlessly revolving around a temporal gap, a place of lost experience, a void left by an event.'²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Niziołek, p. 409.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 408–409.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 410.

Repetition, so clearly embedded in the structure of *The Dead Class*, is meant to be a specific exemplification of this fear, which ‘finds no place in the order of representation, but becomes the affective basis of acts of perception.’²⁸² At the moment when ‘the object of fear gains its symbolic expression’²⁸³ — which, as he convincingly demonstrates, happened precisely in the process of perceiving *The Dead Class* — repetition fundamentally changes its nature and purpose. From then on — that is, from *Wielopole*... onward — it is used to rebuild ‘symbolic bonds, counteract disintegration, affirm the alliance between memory and consciousness.’²⁸⁴ In other words, it becomes ‘the capacity to recombine not just the memory traces, by definition subconscious, but the memory symbols that represent them in consciousness.’²⁸⁵ In Kantor’s case, the researcher writes, it amounts to ‘a mournful ordering of Polish symbolic space.’²⁸⁶

Whether so radical a change did indeed occur between these two performances remains, at the very least, open to question. Especially considering the above-cited remarks by Kantor, which emphasise their similarities rather than differences. Asking once more about the place of *The Dead Class* in Kantor’s theatrical oeuvre, I treat these two performances as a whole, as equal parts of a diptych — supplementing and complementing each other. In my opinion, to understand the place and the de facto essence of *The Dead Class* within Kantor’s body of work, one must view it from a certain distance, from the perspective of the poor little room of imagination created on the stage of *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*. I therefore include reflections on the second performance of the Theatre of Death in a book devoted to *The Dead Class*.²⁸⁷

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 411.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 419.

²⁸⁷ The following discussion is a shortened and revised version of the article ‘Nie można bezkarnie ważyć się powtarzać czegoś, co było już raz w życiu. Czas zamącony się mści. Rzecz o spektaklu *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* Tadeusza Kantora’, published in *Didaskalia*, no. 153, 2019.

Wielopole, *Wielopole* premiered in Florence in June 1980, and then, over the course of nine years, the production was performed in forty-three cities — mostly abroad. It comes as no surprise, then, that just like *The Dead Class*, it had to undergo some alterations over time,²⁸⁸ but it was the initial, post-premiere performances that were fundamental to the artist — therefore, they should be the primary focus, or rather the starting point, for any deliberations on *Wielopole*. . . . Especially since footage of the performance made by Jacquie and Denis Babet in Florence just three days after the world premiere is available. This recording, as it turns out, differs in key scenes from those best-known in Poland, made by Andrzej Sapija and Stanisław Zajączkowski in 1983, a full three years later. The most striking, almost fundamental difference between these stagings is the stage lighting — the Florence recording is significantly darker and much more sombre.

The stage actions visible in the Florence recording are significantly more brutal and violent than their 'Polish' counterparts. This is particularly evident in the behaviour and gestures of the Military — they are much more determined and aggressive in their actions. Perhaps the fact that the performance lost some of its original momentum over time, becoming noticeably gentler in its reception, stems from the actors' diminishing emotional intensity and engagement, rather than from the creator's intentions. Nevertheless, of all the existing recordings of the performance, this 'gentler' colour footage by Stanisław Zajączkowski from 1983 has become much more deeply ingrained in cultural memory, and it is this recording that is far more frequently used as a basis for research and analysis.

The premiere version of *Wielopole*. . . is very close to the aesthetic of *The Dead Class*, which leads one to hypothesise that the performance (or at least its early versions) also shares other characteristics with the earlier work. A study of surviving reviews reveals that *Wielopole*. . . was usually discussed as Kantor's attempt to make his childhood

²⁸⁸ An analysis of these changes in Kantor's production, which, like *The Dead Class*, underwent changes to its stage form, would constitute an interesting subject of research. This issue, however, lies well beyond the scope of the present study.

memories present and materialised — an impossible task. At the same time, clearly highlighted was the universality of these ‘memory clichés’, stemming primarily from direct references to biblical themes, giving the family history presented in the performance an air akin to a miracle play. The apologetic and communal dimension of the performance was also emphasised, accentuating Polishness and the associated national values and traditions above all.

In Poland, *Wielopole...* was presented during two tours — in 1980 (16 performances) and in 1983 (14 performances). Writing on the earlier Polish performances, Teresa Krzemień put forward the following thesis: ‘The success of *Wielopole...* is a harmonious synthesis of the universal with the Polish, Polish to the point of being gaudy, too much so... [...] The success of *Wielopole...* is a vision of homeland as seen from the adult perspective, but also a vision of the European fate, which is above all — invariably — a Polish fate...’²⁸⁹

Three years later, during the second tour of *Cricot 2*, she recalled the first one once more, adding that at the time

Kantor [...] found himself in a heated, if not euphoric, atmosphere in the country. Any ‘patriotic word’ — and *Wielopole, Wielopole* undoubtedly is one — was received with enthusiasm, as Polishness, the uniqueness of our national existence were basked in. The artist of *The Dead Class*, until then universal, far from ‘lifting hearts’, suddenly emerged as the spokesman for emotions, moreover — emotions of Polish origin. Critics were at a loss for words in amazement, handed to them in the end by the audiences — moved, utterly conquered, shaken up. People said then — a new Kantor, supposedly the same, but at once referring to the tradition of the heart, the faith, and the flag.²⁹⁰

There were more voices of the sort.

²⁸⁹ Krzemień, Teresa. ‘*Wielopole, Wielopole*’. *Kultura*, no. 50, 1980, <http://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/46733/wielopole-wielopole>. Accessed 16 September 2025.

²⁹⁰ Krzemień, Teresa. ‘Otwieranie grobów’. *Tu i Teraz*, 14 December 1983, <http://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/46926/otwieranie-grobow>. Accessed 16 September 2025.

Those who had seen this spectacle will never forget this army, marching among the dead. They will never forget this extraordinary world, and they will know that as they march and march, as they 'for our Poland go to fight' something extraordinary is happening in the order of our individual memory and something extraordinary in terms of our national memory, evoked for this moment in the audience. Because they walked, they walk, and they will always walk — 'with deathly hails shot at their feet'^{291, 292}.

Jerzy Adamski meanwhile argued that 'this family ritual of humble people's memories, although it happens as if unwittingly, shows with even greater force the fate of Polish generations: the common Polish historical fate, inherited by all of us and extended into our present.'²⁹³

This reading seems somewhat understandable. The turn of the 1970s and 1980s brought a wave of communal movements in Polish culture, attempts at building new political projects — in which, importantly, the presence of the Catholic Church was very prominent, even essential — as well as a restoration of the entire independence tradition. The first performances of *Wielopole...* in Poland took place from mid-November to early December 1980, during the 'Solidarity Carnival'. Suffice to say that, at Kantor's express request, the performances from 3 to 6 December were presented in the auditorium of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. On 6 December, the long-awaited ceremonial laying of the cornerstone of the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers of 1970 took place, with an equally ceremonial unveiling held ten days later.

²⁹¹ The two lines quoted here refer to the lyrics of 'Szara Piechota' ['Grey Infantry'], a popular Polish military song associated with the Polish Legions — TN.

²⁹² Obserwator [Jan Paweł Gawlik]. 'Universum Kantora'. *Gazeta Krakowska*, 16 December 1983, <http://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/46724/universum-tadeusza-kantora>. Accessed 16 September 2025.

²⁹³ Adamski, Jerzy. 'Z ducha awangardy'. *Rzeczpospolita*, 30 September 1983, <http://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/112250/z-ducha-awangardy>. Accessed 16 September 2025.

To get to the heart of this performance's theme, it is worth asking — what exactly can be seen on the *Wielopole*... stage? Let us start with the set, which remains largely unchanged throughout the performance. The acting space is defined by a low, rectangular platform, the back of which is formed by sliding partitions — from which the actors enter the stage. There are also a sliding door and a window on wheels, a simple table and chairs. To the right, a mound of earth with a cross and a shovel stuck into it, along with a dozen or so miniature crosses. To the left, a bed. All of it is made from dingy wood. The lighting is white and uniform.

We essentially have two distinct groups of actors: the Family — consisting of two Uncles, two Aunts, Mother Helka, Grandma, Uncle Stasio and little Adaś, as well as Father Marian and the Priest — and the second group, the Military. Aside from them, there is also the Widow of the Town Photographer, and Kantor himself. The play's action — if the term can be used at all — consists of a series of (at times simultaneous) sequences, comprising five parts or acts. These are: I. 'The Wedding', II. 'Degradation', III. 'Crucifixion', IV. 'Adaś Goes to the Front', V. 'The Last Supper'. However, the play has no plot in the traditional sense; individual scenes are connected on the basis of relatively loose associations. Let us assume, however, that the subsequent stage images contribute to Kantor's consistently constructed dramaturgy, rich in a range of important and — both then and now — relevant meanings.

Let's take a closer look at that *Wielopole* Family. Let us, however, commit a slight profanation of Kantor's postulates and view these characters through the lens of the so-called traditional realistic theatre, which will emphasise their function within the play. Such a perspective leads to the conclusion that the family is profoundly dysfunctional, even pathological — in the score,²⁹⁴ written after the premiere, Kantor often calls it a family of comedians, complete fools, idiots. All of its members repeat embarrassing, degrading actions without apparent reason or meaning. Engrossed in almost constant quarrelling, mainly

²⁹⁴ The score of the performance was first released in Italy in 1981; the Polish edition did not appear until 1984, when it was published by Wydawnictwo Literackie in Krakow.

over material issues, it remains in constant motion, continuously on the move — as if searching for a safe haven, even a mere semblance of home. However, it never reaches that goal.

The Family members are the driving force behind the events on stage. For nearly the entire duration of the performance, some or all of its members are at the centre of events. Only this group of characters speaks — specifically, only the Uncles, the two Aunts and the Priest; there is also, of course, Helka, whose lines are limited to repetitions of her marriage vows, and Marian, who either babbles or curses. However, the Family is not a driving force at all. It is characterised by complete indecision and the absence of any real agency. Its members resemble manikins — as seen, for example, during 'The Wedding', where the newly married are essentially two helpless puppets, dragged onto the stage and 'animated' by the Priest.

The only consistent action of the Family is its relentless self-contradiction. This is the case, for example, in the 'Degradation', in which the focus is on the married couple. The situation is quite comical: Marian, presumably returning from the front, is quite violently attacked by the Family, who accuse him of having married Helka for purely material reasons. After a moment, however, the situation abruptly changes for no apparent reason, and Helka becomes the target of everyone's attacks. The sequence ends with her symbolic 'crucifixion'.

A similar inconsistency can be seen in the conversation about the alleged heroism of Adaś. To better illustrate this point, I'll cite a slightly longer excerpt from the score, which is a precise transcript of what the characters say in this scene:

UNCLE KAROL
 Adaś has been drafted!
 Mobilised!
 Not a hero yet,
 But that's already heroic!
 A hero!
 Our pride!
 [...]
 Adaś!
 our pride,

our glorious, invincible,
 our emperor,
 our monarch,
 fatherland,
 we, who have fed,
 we, at our breast,
 we are the first...²⁹⁵
 we...

UNCLE OLEK

Have to take care of this,
 have to take care of him,
 bail him out,
 pull some strings,
 let him stay home,
 let him just stare out the window,
 let him just do whatever in the yard,
 but best stay home,
 lay low...

AUNTIE JÓZKA

Best find an ailment,
 maybe haemorrhoids,
 he has haemorrhoids!
 They're telling him to die!
 Who's telling him to??
 Tell him to die?
 Who? Who?
 [...]

UNCLE KAROL

Haemorrhoids are of no matter on the battlefield!
 We are all under the banners!

²⁹⁵ This line directly quotes 'My Pierwsza Brygada' ['We Are the First Brigade'], one of the best-known patriotic marches of the Polish Legions — TN.

On the pages of history!
We won't give it up!
Followww... me!!!

UNCLE OLEK
...best stay home,
or
at a hospital!
yes at a hospital!
to a hospital!
to bed!
maybe a disease,
or an amputation,
typhus!
save him with typhus!

AUNTIE JÓZKA
Amputation?
Maybe with no head?
No leg?
Or no nothing at all?
All?
All dead?
Fallen?
Mixed with the dirt???
Our Adaś!²⁹⁶

On the one hand, the drafted Adaś is a hero, a source of undeniable pride for the entire Family, which at times even takes credit for his achievements. At the same time, however, the Family anxiously wonders how Adaś can be 'bailed out' of combat, saved from the horrors of war and his likely imminent death. Regardless, we will never learn what ultimately killed Adaś, who is crucified in one of the sequences — whether he fell on the battlefield or died as a result of the Family's 'protective' scheming.

²⁹⁶ Kantor. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, pp. 253–255.

It is also significant that the entire structure of *Wielopole...* dispenses with any form of moral reflection (at least seemingly). To paraphrase Marcin Czerwiński, who, in the introduction to Mircea Eliade's collection of essays, writes about the contemporary era: 'it has already been said that of all religiosity — as a universally felt reality — only ethics remains',²⁹⁷ one could say that in the world of the performance, so rife with Passion-adjacent symbolism, ethical considerations are, apparently, the only thing missing from the entire sphere of religiosity.

Another important observation is that all the crucifixions and acts of 'biblical violence' experienced by the Family are performed or carried out exclusively by the Military. Each time, it is the Soldiers who seize the Family members — almost as if treating them as votive offerings. Interestingly, however, in performing these 'biblical scenes', the Military very clearly reproduces gestures and situations drawn directly from its own familiar army order. Let us cite here a few examples.

In the sequence Kantor calls 'Father and the Patient Lesson in a Type of Walking Known as "Marching"' the Priest, swaying under the weight of a wooden cross, marches while being accompanied by Marian, who moves at the same pace, a step behind him, to his left. This action can be associated with an inspection of the guard of honour during a state visit or official ceremony.²⁹⁸

At another moment, a column of the Soldiers approaches the Priest, who faces away from the audience, and symbolically plunges bayonets into his body. It is likely no coincidence that this scene is titled in the score as 'Military Killing Exercise', as it is an almost literal illustration of bayonet fighting exercises in the army setting I am interested in here.

There is also a sequence in which a tight-knit group of Soldiers rushes onto the stage at a rather rapid pace, carrying a wooden cross.

²⁹⁷ Eliade, Mircea. *Sacrum. Mit. Historia* [Sacrum. Myth. History]. Introduction by M. Czerwiński. PIW, 2017, p. 20.

²⁹⁸ It should be noted that in the footage from 1983 this scene appears entirely different: the Priest does not carry the cross, which is probably prevented by the hip injury incurred by Stanisław Rychlicki, who plays that role, and the overall effect is diminished.

The dramatic nature of their movements, however, evokes associations with setting up a cannon or a howitzer — in order to establish an artillery position. And then there's the scene in which the Soldiers dismantle the cross on which Adaś had been crucified just moments earlier. While some of them are actually dismantling the wooden structure, the rest move quickly across the stage, nervously looking to the sides and up — as if securing the others, conducting reconnaissance during urban combat.

Crucially, in situations lacking the Passion attributes — whether symbolic objects or actions — the Military either remains passive in a corner or moves aimlessly around the stage in utter chaos, disintegration, disharmony. Without these attributes, the Military in *Wielopole...* simply does not function. It can therefore be argued that religious symbols and gestures serve as a framework for the Soldiers, organising them and imbuing their actions with meaning — not necessarily a transcendental one. This creates a kind of conglomerate, or a military-religious complex, uniting two seemingly contradictory orders, which, however, mutually condition each other's existence in the performance. This is further emphasised by a subtle but significant change in the Soldiers' uniforms: in certain scenes, instead of military caps, they wear priestly birettas.

The outfits of the *Wielopole...* Soldiers are particularly intriguing, being an almost exact reproduction of Austrian uniforms from the Great War era. This is probably the only example — in Kantor's entire body of work — of a costume being such a precise, specific, and unambiguous realisation of a historical model. Of course, the reference here is not to the Austro-Hungarian army, but to the Second Brigade of the Polish Legions, in which Marian Kantor fought from 1914, and which wore — at least in part — Austrian uniforms and distinctive caps with ear flaps fastened with two buttons at the front. One might conclude that the artist wanted us to know precisely which army he was referring to. Therefore, we are dealing here with a certain paradox. On the one hand, the Military, which brutally kidnaps and crucifies the members of the Family, appears as a destructive force, a staged exemplification of evil. On the other hand, we know perfectly well that these are Polish soldiers. This ambivalence is crucial, as it introduces the issue of responsibility and guilt, which is usually associated with the figure of Odysseus from Kan-

tor's theatrical performances of the occupation period. Researchers link the subsequent fate of Kantor's *Odysseus-Criminal* with Father Marian, and often even with the artist himself.

The analysis of *Wielopole, Wielopole* presented above allows us to propose that the performance constitutes an artistic diagnosis of the Polish national state of mind, which is unable to free itself from the continuously replicated and reproduced national or messianic myth that controls it. In attempting to explain the mechanisms of its creation, which are embedded in Kantor's imagery, I will draw on Roland Barthes's concept of myth together with Mircea Eliade's reflections on the subject. I will not be focusing on the anthropological sources and ideological assumptions of these two, largely divergent, concepts. I want to utilise these theories, which I perceive as somewhat closed structures, firmly rooted in a broadly understood cultural framework, as tools for understanding both what is happening on stage and what it might signify — and their peculiar ideological opposition will, paradoxically, prove helpful.

We can, as some do, see on the *Wielopole*... stage a Passion play, which is even to some extent justifiably performed by the Soldiers — after all, it was the Roman legionaries who crucified Christ. Therefore, in searching for the signified of this image, we can draw conclusions centred on Kantor's attempt to achieve some form of 'salvation'. However, the artificiality and violence of these scenes, their separation from the spiritual order, and other 'flaws' presented above seem to cast doubt on such an interpretation. We can — *a contrario* — accuse Kantor of blasphemy. Substituting the Polish Legions for the Romans, who naturally appear in this 'story', allows us to hypothesise that we are seeing here the signifier as part of the mythical structure which, as Barthes writes, 'is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it [...]. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second,'²⁹⁹ and further: '[...] in the meaning [of the first semiological chain], a signification is already built, and could very well be self-sufficient if myth did not take hold

²⁹⁹ Barthes, p. 113.

of it and did not turn it suddenly into an empty, parasitical form. [...] There is here a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations, an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier.³⁰⁰

The operation of the myth mechanism results in a kind of invalidation, an elimination of the original meanings of the signs. This would, as noted by researchers, justify the emptiness of the religious staffage³⁰¹ and consequently lead to the conclusion that in *Wielopole...* there is no blasphemy, indeed, there is no God at all.

The actions carried out in the play by the above-mentioned military-religious complex, i.e. the multiple crucifixions carried out by the Polish Legions, appear as signified of the second semiological chain in Barthes's mythical construction, that is — the meaning of myth: a salient tapestry of symbols referring to the prominence of the dogma of the idea of the 'bulwark of Christianity', hailing back to the Sarmatism period, or — through the association with regained independence — the belief that, as Jan Sowa writes, quoting Janusz Tazbir, 'Poland will always exist, provided it is able to fulfil the tasks entrusted to it by God',³⁰² and later to the Romantic tradition that followed this line of reasoning. This myth, constantly expanding into ever new areas of life, simultaneously obscures everything that has been repressed in the national consciousness, including as a result of that very myth, or, to put it another way, it is a symptom — as Sowa writes, this time quoting John Mills — of adopting the position of a 'paranoid subject', that is, acting 'as someone who actively desires not to know [emphasis — JMT], who defends against knowledge through a desire for ignorance.'³⁰³

To trace the mechanism of this repression, or an 'active desire for ignorance', one must think of the space of *Wielopole...* in the context of Eliade's concept of the festival in primitive religions. The mechanism

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

³⁰¹ See, e.g., Fazan. *Projekty...*

³⁰² Sowa, Jan. *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* [The Phantom Body of the King. Peripheral Struggles with Modern Form]. Universitas, 2011, p. 280.

³⁰³ Ibid., p. 354.

of Kantor's performance appears, in fact, as a near-perfect illustration of the Romanian scholar's theories. The first scene can be successfully read as establishing the space of such a celebration — 'establishing the world', It is a literal shaping of the performance space. On stage, we see almost all of the characters frozen in strange poses. The two Uncles begin to move, rearranging objects and characters, searching for their proper positions. They try to remember. However, they get confused. It turns out they remember little — perhaps even nothing. They rush from item to item, from character to character. They gradually clear the area, finally realising that 'They weren't here either', as Kantor writes. "They disappear. Empty stage."³⁰⁴ As Eliade claims, 'What is to become "our world" must first be "created," and every creation has a paradigmatic model — the creation of the universe by the gods.'³⁰⁵ This could actually be the reason for Christ's Passion being present and repeated by the Family — a kind of *illud tempus*. Following the thought of the Romanian scholar: throughout a festival, temporality is suspended, time and the meaning of all other events are nullified. Moreover, the 'annual repetition of the cosmogony' brings about a kind of 'purification', as 'it is not a matter merely of a certain temporal interval coming to its end and the beginning of another [...]; it is also a matter of abolishing the past year and past time. [...] the sins and faults of the individual and of the community as a whole are annulled.'³⁰⁶ The following sequences, these 'memory clichés', are arranged by Kantor achronologically; they are subordinate solely to the dramaturgy of the Passion, the dramaturgy of 'this time', as the titles of the subsequent parts of the play clearly imply. Eliade also writes that the 'eternal return to the sources of the sacred', that is, the repetition of divine gestures, the 'sanctified life', gives humankind hope for salvation — 'human existence appears to be saved from nothingness and death.'³⁰⁷ However, in the opposite situation, when the 'religious meaning of the repetition of paradigmatic gestures is forgotten', this repetition becomes 'emptied of its religious

³⁰⁴ Kantor. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, p. 214.

³⁰⁵ Eliade, p. 31.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

content'. Time is 'desacralised' and 'it is seen as a circle forever turning on itself, repeating itself to infinity'.³⁰⁸ In Kantor's performance, such desacralization occurs. There is neither salvation nor hope for salvation. After all, the Last Supper — the finale, supposedly concluding the play — is the beginning of the Passion. A peculiar twisting of events occurs, their looping. During rehearsals, considering various options for the entrance of one of the characters, Kantor says bluntly: 'I came to the conclusion that this character should appear alone in the finale, or better yet, at the "non-end" of the play [emphasis — JMT]'.³⁰⁹ The artist's very actions — the final moments of his presence on stage — also suggest the cyclical repetition of the performance. Kantor, left alone, meticulously folds the tablecloth that has been placed on the boards that are to constitute the table for the Last Supper. He does this for a long time, smoothing out the edges and ensuring it is folded exactly as it was before being unrolled — as if it were to be used again, in the very same scene, or perhaps reused in it indefinitely. Thus, the *Wielopole... Family* — and, therefore, all of us — are marked by the curse of myth. They must repeat the Eliadean festival, which invalidates the inconvenient elements of history that contradict the myth, because otherwise they would have to deconstruct that myth — truly remember their history and face it.

*Wielopole... does not, of course, stop at the mere depiction of a mythologised reality. Kantor, in my opinion, tries to do what Barthes describes: 'the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth [...]. All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth.'*³¹⁰ Citing Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* as examples, the scholar elaborates on this method of destruction: 'it consists of their natively ineffectual inclinations, their inability to feel satisfied, the panic succession of their apprenticeships [...]. The

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Passega, Luisa. 'Dziennik z prób'. In *Kantor. 'Wielopole, Wielopole'. Dossier. Dziennik z prób Luisa Passega* [Kantor. 'Wielopole, Wielopole'. Dossier. Rehearsal Journal by Luis Passega]. Cricoteka, 2007, p. 69.

³¹⁰ Barthes, p. 134.

power of the second myth lies in the fact that it subjects the naivety of the first to critical scrutiny.³¹¹ This is how we can interpret the Family's quarrelsomeness and pettiness, or even their tendency to betray, as shown in the scene titled 'Court Martial'. Kantor notes in the score:

[...] the uncles position [the Priest] at the front of the stage, like a convict. They sit on chairs on either side of You Know Who [interpreted and portrayed by Kantor himself as Himmler] — each of them holding [...] wooden clappers. [...] This Gentleman casually strikes the clapper once, while the two Uncles shake the clappers with great zeal. They do this and repeat it several times. Each time, the Priest shrinks, bends down, and finally falls to the ground.³¹²

This could explain, for example, the 'moral liminality' of the play's Family in the previously mentioned conversation on the heroism of Adaś, which allows them to quickly move from patriotic pride, through deviousness intended to protect him from being drafted, to the cryptic and ambiguous finale. This could also be understood as the complete inability of the Military — after all, it is a Polish army — to function in situations other than a repeat of the Passion. That is how, finally — and perhaps crucially, as it directly relates to the sphere of repressed memory — 'The Last Supper' scene can be interpreted, in which manikins are seen behind the Family seated at the table — as scholars unanimously point out, they are an image of murdered Jews. One might feel tempted to say that the Family feels them 'breathing down their necks'. For it is the Holocaust that is chief among these discomfiting parts of history, at least within Kantor's theatre. It is a representation of the Lacanian Real, which can (or rather must) destroy the Imaginary upon which the nation's identity is built. As we already know, the intrusion of this Real took place twenty years after the premiere of the play,³¹³ and the struggle to maintain the coherence of the Imaginary continues to this day.

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 135.

³¹² Kantor. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984...*, p. 249.

³¹³ I refer here, of course, to Jan Tomasz Gross' *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, published in 2000 (English edition: 2001).

There are practically no living Jews to be found in *Wielopole*. . . . They cannot exist, for they threaten the cosmos of the 'poor little room of the imagination'. If they did (and they should exist in Kantor's supposed recollection, as he himself wrote and spoke often about the town's peculiar cultural symbiosis, remembered from his childhood days) the viewer would immediately feel compelled to ask: 'What happened to them?' Let us recall what Eliade said in the context of the 'city-cosmos': 'Since "our world" is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos.'³¹⁴ Therefore, everything that threatens it must be annihilated, just as 'at the beginning of time' the gods annihilated the 'primordial dragon'. Moreover, this act 'must be symbolically repeated each year, for each year the world must be created anew.'³¹⁵ The first moment at which a Jewish figure appears — literally and without ambiguity — on the *Wielopole*... stage is the shooting of the Little Rabbi³¹⁶ at the play's close.

However, the Little Rabbi can only 'legally' enter the stage because he is almost immediately absorbed into the myth, annexed by it, subordinated to it. To be accepted, he must repeat Christ's three-fold fall beneath the cross. He must be shot three times by the Second Brigade. Only then can he put on his *tallit* and play his role in the play. This will change nothing — one is tempted to say: 'The Little Rabbi is already ours.'

Interestingly, according to the score, during this scene the Little Rabbi sings a 'mournful, tingle-tangle song' in Yiddish, beginning with the words 'Sha, sha, sha, der rebe gait' ['Sha, sha, sha, here comes the Rabbi'].³¹⁷ We can hear it in the recordings of the 1983 performance. In the Florence version, meanwhile — which was also recorded — the Little Rabbi sang 'Rebeka' — one of the most popular Jewish songs in

³¹⁴ Eliade, p. 47.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

³¹⁶ The role of the Little Rabbi was performed by Maria Stangret-Kantor, who in *The Dead Class* appeared as the Woman with the Mechanical Cradle, a character who in one of the scenes is abused, spat upon, and humiliated by the rest of the class.

³¹⁷ Kantor. *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975–1984*. . . , p. 262.

pre-war Poland, which after the war became a song recalling the times when Jews lived among us.

So does *Wielopole*... offer any solutions? In the musical layer of the performance ‘Grey Infantry’ and the vespers Psalm 109 (110) — ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool”³¹⁸ — contribute to the military-religious complex. The only two other melodies heard are the aforementioned ‘Rebeka’ and the heavily distorted Chopin’s *Scherzo in B minor* based on the melody of the Christmas carol ‘Lulajże Jezuniu’ [‘Sleep, Little Jesus’], played by Uncle Staś, who returns to the stage several times. As I mentioned, the Jew is very quickly annexed, harnessed into the mechanism of the myth’s vicious cycle. The appearance of Uncle Staś, on the other hand, sometimes causes the world to ‘pause’, as if spurring a moment of reflection or contemplation among the Family members. He is, nonetheless, quickly met with disregard or even chased away by Father Marian, muttering curses under his breath. I believe that while the sight of a Jew would obviously break the endless chain of reconstructions, which serve to repress his existence, Christmas — as an element of the same order as the components of the Symbolic, the driving forces behind myth-making in Kantor’s imagery — poses a threat to the continuation of this chain of infinite repetitions precisely in a purely symbolic layer. Salvation cannot be the result of crucifixion alone. For God to die, he must first be born. His birth, in turn, could prevent this repetition, interrupt the vicious, chain of dramatizations that leads essentially nowhere, offering hope for an alternative, a hope for change. Therefore, Uncle Staś attempts, through his appearance, an ‘attack from outside’ — and he, too, must be neutralised.

The Priest is a distinct character, clearly separated from the rest of the Family. Watching the recording of the performance,³¹⁹ one gets the

³¹⁸ The version of the psalm used in the performance, sung by the inhabitants of the village of Niedzica in Podhale (recorded expressly for Kantor), is identical to the version included in *Śpiewnik Kościelny* by Father Jan Siedlecki: http://spiewniksiedleckiego.pl/?page_id=3610. Accessed 16 September 2025.

³¹⁹ I am referring, of course, to the footage from Florence; however, these scenes can also be clearly seen in the recordings made in Poland.

overwhelming impression that the Priest understands — perhaps as the only one present — what is really happening around him. Around him — in the literal sense, since as a 'dying man', he is, on the one hand, 'rooted' in the underworld; on the other, by virtue of his profession, he remains in contact with Heaven, thus constituting the 'centre of the world'. This centre — it has to be emphasised — is completely subordinate, one might say powerless, and at the same time inevitably contributing to the military-religious complex. The tragedy of the Priest's character lies in the fact that, on the one hand, as a member of the Family he is forced to passively participate in the endless repetitions as their (somewhat natural) participant. On the other hand, however, the distinctive authenticity of his gestures and, above all, his facial expressions bear witness to this character's profound self-awareness. Moreover, only the Priest (played by Stanisław Rychlicki) has actual contact with Kantor, also present on stage. The recording shows moments in which the two exchange knowing glances and small gestures. Similar situations can also be observed in *The Dead Class*, in which Rychlicki plays the Charwoman-Death. The Charwoman, moreover, wields power in that performance, initiating and ordering the events on stage — both literally and metaphorically.

The aforementioned tragedy of the Priest is made complete in the finale of *Wielopole...*, when the character is found under the table of the Last Supper, visually bringing to mind a bouquet of white and red flowers placed in front of the high table. Myths, even the 'second myths' that serve to deconstruct other ones, are, according to Barthes, 'nothing but this ceaseless, untiring solicitation, this insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognise themselves in this image, eternal yet bearing a date, which was built of them one day as if for all time.'³²⁰

Let us return to the problem of the relationship between *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole...* Although in terms of the actors' performances and its use of objects the former is decidedly closer to the Cricot 2 Theatre's earlier productions, and, like them, is based on a kind of 'collision' between the finished dramatic text and autonomous stage actions, the relationship between *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole...* involves a cer-

³²⁰ Barthes, p. 156.

tain reversal. Simply put, *Wielopole, Wielopole*, is the inverse of *The Dead Class*. As if the stage had rotated 180 degrees, and what was happening in the space of *The Dead Class*, in *Wielopole...*, found itself behind the sliding door. If *The Dead Class* is an image of a murdered nation, the Jews, dramatically symbolised by manikins, then in *Wielopole...* we have essentially the same problem, but presented from a different angle, from a different perspective. A Polish perspective. As if Kantor was asking why we situate ourselves in the position of a bystander, and why coming to terms with the Holocaust, remembering it, remains so difficult — almost impossible. And are we not ourselves ‘guilty’ as well?

In this context, a conversation between Kantor and Krzysztof Miklaszewski conducted in January 1980, before the premiere of *Wielopole...*³²¹ is very telling. Asked about the title of the new performance, the artist reveals that its working version was *Wspomnienie umarłego* [*A Memory of a Dead Man*], which, one might assume, was a reference to *The Dead Class*. More interesting, however, is the fragment in which Miklaszewski asks about the change in the artist’s role in the space and the course of the performance’s action in comparison with the earlier production.

Kantor admits, ‘My role has changed — I’m sitting right there in the middle of all this’, and after a moment’s reflection, he adds, ‘... among the performers.’³²²

Perhaps this ‘sitting right there in the middle’ was also the reason for Kantor’s explicit wish for *Wielopole...* to be presented at the Gdańsk Shipyard. These performances were certainly not a resounding success; they were even interpreted as a kind of provocation. During the opening performance, the play was even interrupted by an audience member, and the viewers either cried with emotion, reacted with

³²¹ Excerpt from the television programme *Pegaz*: a conversation between Krzysztof Miklaszewski and Tadeusz Kantor at the Cricoteka, ul. Kanonicza 5. Directed by Krzysztof Miklaszewski, produced by TVP DTV Polska Kraków, January 1980.

³²² Mlekicki, Dawid. ‘*Wielopole, Wielopole* Tadeusza Kantora przedstawione w kościele parafialnym w Wielopolu Skrzyńskim. Medialny obraz wydarzenia’. *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, nos. 1–2, 2015, p. 108.

shock and anger, or felt disappointed and duped, not understanding any of what they had just seen.³²³ Regardless, I believe it was not a provocation based on — as Paweł Sztarbowski claims — undermining what the Tricity workers 'showed in genuine impulse' or an attack on the sacred values they professed, 'the importance and authenticity of which had been renewed only a few months earlier as part of their opposition against the authorities'.³²⁴ Perhaps, however, at that moment in history, for those who shaped it, such a deconstruction of the Polish habitus, dependent on the creation of ever-new myths that essentially replicate the chief, overarching one, whose workings it is neither capable of realising nor, still less, freeing itself from, this exposure and warning against the 'skeleton in the closet', all the more difficult to conceal in the system of democracy and freedom of speech in which so much hope was placed, was unbearable. Or perhaps it still is, since, as Kantor writes at the end of the score of *The Dead Class*: 'The automaton theatre continues, everyone repeats their suspended gestures, words they will never finish, forever imprisoned within them...'³²⁵

³²³ Sztarbowski, Paweł. 'Wspólnota euforii. Rzeczywistość — teatr „Solidarności”'. *Didaskalia*, nos. 121–122, 2014.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ Kantor. *Partytura...*, p. 184.

11.

THE UNCANNY

15 November 2025, marks the 50th anniversary of the premiere of *The Dead Class*. A premiere that made Kantor and his company a globally recognisable brand. A premiere that, almost immediately, garnering universalistic interpretations, transformed into a theatrical myth; a socially constructed narrative organizing the collective imagination of the theatrical community, stemming from the ideological need for a model, a template, or confirmation of the validity of effort.³²⁶ Finally, a premiere that continues to hold an important place in the history of theatre, and not only Polish theatre.

The stage of *The Dead Class*, featuring old people in worn-out clothes, sitting at school desks next to manikins, soulless replicas of their childhood selves, created a shocking return to the past. Kantor's actors, reiterating memorised gestures and actions, participated in a ritual of eternal repetition from which there was no escape. The props and objects used in the performance were transformed in Kantor's mythology into symbols of memory, loss, and death. From Barthes's perspective, these images were not a story about a specific school class, but about the human condition in which the past constantly haunts the present. Kantor's presence, sitting at the sidelines and directing the actors like a demiurge, created the myth of a creator-god who animates and mortifies his characters, determining the time and rhythm of their existence. The scene in which the old people carried their childhood manikins on their backs became a visual symbol of memory as a burden that people carry throughout their lives. Time in the performance did not flow linearly — events looped and characters returned to the

³²⁶ See Kosiński, Dariusz. 'Hasło: mity teatralne'. *Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego*, <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/hasla/110/mity-teatralne>. Accessed 5 November 2025.

same situations again and again, which naturalised the vision of the world as an eternal cycle of death and rebirth. Thus, Kantor — like Barthes — transformed history into nature, presenting the tragedy of the individual and the nation as an inevitable, 'natural' rhythm of existence. *The Dead Class* has thus become a myth about human beings trapped between life and death, memory and oblivion, who, through a theatrical ritual, attempt to find meaning in the constant return to lost time. This mythical aspect of *The Dead Class*, found in its reviews, was also present (to varying degrees and intensity) in the stories created later about the performance. The perspective proposed in this book was intended as an attempt to break free from the mythical cycle of universal meanings of *The Dead Class*. It was conceived as an attempt to address the question of the play's timeliness, but not its mythical significance; its very specific impact 'here and now'. Whether this goal has been achieved remains for the reader to judge.

One November day, time seemed to have looped, and I found myself at Cricoteka once again; this time it was no accident. The reason for my visit was 'The (Un)Dead Class',³²⁷ an exhibition which, in its description, promised to present the legendary work in a way that serves to re-establish an emotional connection between the artwork and the viewer.³²⁸ Driven by the promise of such an opportunity, I was also curious about how and to what end the exhibition used the category of the Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*),³²⁹ popularised by Sigmund Freud. As

³²⁷ 'The (Un)Dead Class' exhibition was open from February to December 2025 at the Cricoteka in Krakow. Curated by Małgorzata Paluch-Cybulska.

³²⁸ Paluch-Cybulska, Małgorzata. 'The (Un)Dead Class'. Cricoteka, 2025. A companion pamphlet to the exhibition.

³²⁹ The category of the Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*) appears in the English-language reflections on Kantor in the work of Mischa Twitchin (*The Theatre of Death – The Uncanny in Mimesis: Tadeusz Kantor, Aby Warburg, and an Iconology of the Actor*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), where it is analysed as an ontological dimension of actor and representation, grounded in Warburgian iconological tradition. This chapter, however, uses it for a different purpose: as a description of a reception effect produced when the spectator confronts the archive of the performance and, more precisely, the structural absence of the performance within that archive.

the curator rightly noted, it was strongly present in the performance itself.³³⁰ My interest in Paluch-Cybulska's proposal stemmed from having grappled, in my own work, with similar questions, primarily concerning the mechanisms governing the performance and the ways in which it impacts and is received. I hoped, then, to see a modern and intriguing exhibition that would visually relate to the aesthetics of the Theatre of Death. I was hoping for broad contexts with which to confront those I refer to myself. I wondered how the performative power of the presence of the child manikins, desks, and other works related to the performance, which I had encountered in the past while preparing exhibits on Kantor, would play out this time.

Aesthetically, the exhibition was very sparse, even minimalist. The first object to appear upon entering the exhibition space were *Children at the Desks from 'The Dead Class'* — as is known, created by Kantor later and primarily for display purposes. Perhaps this arrangement was an attempt at achieving the shock experienced by audiences entering Krzysztofory before the performance, seeing the actors waiting at their desks, frozen in anticipation. The central area of the hall attempted to recreate the staging space of *The Dead Class*. The two classroom corners and school desks (this time, their performance iterations) were set up to delineate it, each containing a few child manikins. The rest found their place in a pile nearby — almost as if in a scene from the play. Old, worn books and a few pupil backpacks were also scattered there. A manikin of the Beadle 'in the Past Perfect Tense', seated on a chair, kept watch over it all.³³¹ Manikins in their desks watched themselves in a film presented on the opposite wall — a collage of several recordings of *The Dead Class* prepared by Anna Halczak and Franco Laera. Visitors could also join in on this unique experience — special stools with soft foam seats were prepared for them. In the exhibition space, slightly to the side, the sculpture *A Boy at a Desk from "The Dead Class"* was also placed, the one which served as the visual prototype for the artist's grave monument. The third, dominant object was *The School Class* — a closed work, Kantor's late variation on the idea of the performance, created for the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

³³⁰ Paluch-Cybulska.

³³¹ As Kantor would at times refer to the character.

On one wall was a small selection of photographs from the performance, on another hung six of Kantor's drawings and one painting directly referencing *The Dead Class*. Four versions of the performance poster were also on display, presented in the original wooden frames in which Kantor himself had placed them. There was one more wall, which was practically completely covered with black-and-white print-outs of *The Dead Class* reviews. This concluded the selection of works presented in the exhibition, which, as its creators informed us, represented essentially all the artefacts from the performance in Cricoteka's possession. This was not a comprehensive or diverse collection, which may be somewhat disappointing; still, it clearly confirms my theory on the non-existence of *The Dead Class* archive, Kantor's deliberate erasure and removal from public view of the performance's process records, as well as the impossibility of its full documentation.

The exhibition's title, 'The (Un)Dead Class', suggests a certain ambiguity and raises questions about the performance itself and its continuing impact today. It turns out, however, that *The Dead Class* — perhaps contrary to the wishes of the exhibition's creators — is dead. It died each time the performance ended. It died for good in June 1989 in Paris, when it was performed for the last time with Kantor's participation. All subsequent attempts at its revival have been more or less spectacular failures. This is sadly also the case with this exhibition. After all, even the projected footage is merely a usurpation of the (already insufficient) visual documentation of the theatrical work. The exhibit, therefore, does not allow for the performance to resonate with the senses of its recipients, because the performance is simply gone. And always will be. Neither is it present at the exhibition. Instead, we are dealing with some kind of fantasy, construct, or a projection of *The Dead Class*, which each of us — the audience — can create based on our own memory and the artefacts gathered in the exhibition space. For ourselves and according to our own rules. In some respects, therefore, the experiences of the exhibition visitor and the viewer of *The Dead Class* appear formally similar, albeit at a different level of mediation. This is certainly an interesting case for the researcher, though one might doubt whether it will be appreciated to the same extent by the general public. This also confirms the thesis of (already repeatedly invoked) Palladini, who made the case that a theatrical archive is only

brought to live, or even to sole existence, by the one who visits and engages with it, and above it, that each such person in fact produces a new archive of their own in the process, unique and inimitable. Just as Krzysztof Garbaczewski did in the interactive installation *Ani żywa, ani umarła* [*Neither Alive nor Dead*] presented at the exhibition along with the AI-generated film of the same title.

The installation, which utilises a motion capture system, was clearly intended to be participatory in nature — the viewer's movements were to affect the avatars visible in the projection, placed in an empty, almost laboratory-like space, reminiscent of the space of *The Dead Class* — at least according to the creator's intention. The one question that arose was the purpose and merit of such an undertaking. 'The new media tools used by Garbaczewski build content that aligns with the key concepts of the Theatre of Death, such as: liminality, the poetics of darkness, and existence on the brink of catastrophe',³³² we read in the curatorial text. Meanwhile, the AI-generated film accompanying the projection became, in the exhibition's author's interpretation, 'a fictional documentation of a performance that was never recorded — a virtual archive of death and memory, in which the past and future of Kantor's theatre unfold simultaneously'.³³³

These descriptions — themselves seemingly generated by artificial intelligence — offer nothing that adequately explains or justifies the presence of this installation at the exhibition. Perhaps its inadequacy is the result of the still-imperfect technology and lack of sufficient hardware. However, for me, this inadequacy is a manifestation of the power and uniqueness of *The Dead Class* phenomenon and its continued strong presence within the Polish universe of national memory. This Freudian *Das Unheimliche*, this uncanniness that Paluch-Cybulska writes about, stems not from the exhibit's design (which, as the curator intended, was to 'accumulate this mystery [resulting from the category of the Uncanny — JMT]; attracting, even hypnotising, the viewer while simultaneously repelling them'³³⁴), but from the fact that *The*

³³² Paluch-Cybulska.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

Dead Class itself is so conspicuously absent from an exhibition about *The Dead Class*. In other words, the viewer's sense of the uncanny arises from the confrontation of their perception of the performance with what they find in the exhibition room, or rather, with what they don't find there, because it is simply not to be found. It is as if the cultural phenomenon of Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* were what was hidden and repressed in our subconscious. A phenomenon that we must create by ourselves, for ourselves.

APPENDIX

TIMELINE OF *THE DEAD CLASS* PERFORMANCES (WITH THEIR APPROXIMATE NUMBER) AND A LIST OF THEIR REVIEWS

11 September 1975 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, fragment of the performance presented to 140 participants of the AICA Congress

15 November 1975 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, premiere of *The Dead Class*

16–17 November 1975 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, 2 premiere performances

22–24 November 1975 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, 3 performances

30 November–3 December 1975 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, 3 performances

Morawiec, Elżbieta. 'Apokalipsa wg Tadeusza Kantora.' *Życie Literackie*, nos. 51–52, 21–28 December 1975

Sienkiewicz, Marian. 'Demiurg z Cricot 2, Seans Tadeusza Kantora.' *Przekrój*, 14 December 1975

Szybist, Maciej. 'Z Teatru, *Umarła klasa*.' *Echo Krakowa*, 18 November 1975

15–17 December 1975 — Lodz

Centre of Art Promotion, 3 performances

Słowikowski, Piotr. 'Marionety i aktorzy.' *Odgłosy*, no. 3, 15 January 1976

17–19, 24–26, 31 January 1976 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, 7 performances

1–2, 12–14, 16 February 1976 — Krakow

Krzysztofor Gallery, 5 performances

27–29 March 1976 — Krakow

Krzysztofor Gallery, 3 performances

3–4 April 1976 — Krakow

Krzysztofor Gallery, 2 performances

14–15 May 1976 — Krakow

Krzysztofor Gallery, 2 performances

17 May 1976 — Krakow

Krzysztofor Gallery, 1 performance

27–29 May 1976 — Wrocław

17th Festival of Contemporary Polish Drama, Museum of Architecture, 3 performances

Burski, Tadeusz. 'Festiwalowe nagrody.' *Gazeta Robotnicza*, no. 123, 31 May 1976

Greń, Zygmunt. 'Teatr zamknięty. Kantor,' *Życie Literackie*, no. 36, 1984
Klem, Katarzyna. 'XVII Festiwal Polskich Sztuk Współczesnych.' *Wieczór Wrocławia*, 29–30 May 1976

Wróblewski, Andrzej. 'Festiwal Wrocławski.' *Argumenty*, no. 25, 1976

9–10, 13–14 June 1976

Andrzej Wajda partially completes his film shoot at the Krzysztofor Gallery

15 August–22 September 1976 — Cricot 2 Theatre's six-week tour of England and Scotland

26 performances of *The Dead Class* at the Edinburgh Festival (Edinburgh College of Art, 18 August–4 September), in Cardiff (Wales Sherman Theatre Arena 8–9 September) and in London (Riverside Studios 11–18 November)

Edinburgh

A. W. 'A painting comes alive.' *Scotland's Newspaper. Glasgow Herald*, 23 August 1976

Ascherson, Neal. 'The Artist as Traitor.' *The Scotsman*, 28 August 1976

Barber, John. 'Digging up our burried fears.' *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 1976

Barron, Brian D. 'Fringe Atelier '76 at 61 High Street. *The Dead Class*. *Festival Times*, 25 August 1976

BDB. 'Cricot'. *Festival Times*, 17 August 1976

Billington, Michael. 'Fringe on top'. *The Guardian*, 30 August 1976

Massie, Allan. 'Theatre of Death'. *The Scotsman*, 20 August 1976

McFerran, Ann. 'The Dead Class'. *Time Out*, 10 September 1976

Miklaszewski, Krzysztof. 'Kantor is coming. Kantor extended. Teatr: w XX-lecie istnienia Cricot 2'. *Kultura*, 7 November 1976

Nightingale, Benedict. 'Proper Stuff'. *New Statesman*, 3 September 1976

Oliver, Cordelia. 'Teatr Cricot'. *The Guardian*, 23 August 1976

Overy, Paul. 'Surrealism without surfeit'. *The Times*, 31 August 1976

Parson, Gordon. 'Fringe Benefits'. *Morning Star*, 11 September 1976

Riddell, Alan. 'Troy still falls'. *Sunday Telegraph*, 29 August 1976

Taborski, Bolesław. 'Korespondencja własna z Edynburga, Wielka Brytania i reszta świata'. *Życie Literackie*, 17 October 1976

Wardle, Irving. 'The Dead Class. College of Art'. *The Times*, 30 August 1976

Young, B. A. 'Picking at the Fringe'. *Financial Times*, 31 August 1976

Cardiff

Elwett, Julia. 'Puppets on the string of life'. *Echo*, Thursday, 9 September 1976

London

Bajork, Andrzej. 'Sukces teatru Cricot 2 nad Tamizą'. *Echo Krakowa*, 17 September 1976

Billington, Michael. 'The Dead Class'. *Arts Guardian*, 13 September 1976

Chambers, Colin. 'Experiments in the Polish experience'. *Morning Star*, 20 September 1976

Cork, Richard. 'Enter the hollow men'. *Evening Standard*, 23 September 1976

'Cricot 2 at Riverside Studios'. *The Financial Times*, 8 September 1976

Esslin, Martin. 'The Dead Class'. *Plays and Players*, 27 October 1976

Grzegorzczak, Elżbieta. 'Teatr, który wciąż stawia nowe pytania, wciąż szuka nowych odpowiedzi'. *Echo Krakowa*, 23–24 October 1976

A. H. [Hoffmann, Anna]. 'Witkiewicz i teatr Tadeusza Kantora'. *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza*, *Środa literacka* supplement, London, 6 October 1976

'Invitation only'. *Evening Standard*, 13 September 1976

'Kantor's Tragic Theatre'. *Architectural Design*, November 1976

Karren, Tamara. 'Umarła klasa Kantora'. *Tydzień Polski*, 1976

Marcus, Frank. 'Foreign Bodies.' *Sunday Telegraph*, no. 811, 19 September 1976

M. A. M. 'The Dead Class.' *The Stage and Television Today*, 23 September 1976

19–22 December 1976 — Warsaw Theatre Meetings

exhibition pavillion of the Association of Polish Architects, 4 performances

Bieniewski, Henryk. 'Festiwale. Krok naprzód.' *Teatr*, no. 17, 1976

Borowski, Wiesław. 'Umarła klasa.' *Literatura*, no. 17/219, 22 April 1976

Burzyński, Tadeusz. 'Festiwal, który zwodzi i zawodzi.' *Scena*, no. 9, September 1976

Czartoryska, Urszula. 'Kantor. Nowe Propozycje.' *Projekt*, no. 4, 1976

Czartoryska, Urszula. 'Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora.' *Dialog*, no. 5, May 1976

Fik, Marta. 'Kantora Teatr Śmierci.' *Polityka*, 14 August 1976

Gieraczyński, Bogdan. 'Awangardowy nurt w teatrze. Na przykład Critcot 2.' *Tygodnik Demokratyczny*, no. 38, 1976

Henkel, Barbara. 'Teatr. Niezależna rzeczywistość.' *Sztandar Młodych*, 9 December 1976

Hniedziewicz, Magdalena. 'Czas przeszły, czas żywy teatru Kantora.' *Kultura*, no. 12, 21 March 1976

Jasińska, Zofia. 'XII warszawskie spotkania teatralne.' *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 5, 30 January 1977

Jodłowski, Marek. 'Seans Kantora.' *Opole*, no. 9, October 1976

Klossowicz, Jan. 'Galwanizacja Teatru.' *Literatura*, no. 24/226, 10 June 1976

Miklaszewski, Krzysztof. 'Przejmujący seans Tadeusza Kantora.' *Teatr*, 2 May 1976

'Ryszard Smożewski uczestniczył w seansie Tadeusza Kantora.' *Szpilki*, no. 3, 18 January 1976

Skrodzki, Wojciech. 'Sztuka i awangarda.' *Literatura*, no. 12, 18 March 1976

Szczawiński, Józef. 'Tadeusz Kantor — epitafium dla epoki.' *Teatr*, 11 March 1976

1–12 March 1977 — Amsterdam

Mickery Theater, 12 performances

Granath, Olle. 'Var inte pessimist!.' *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 March 1977

Heijer, Jac. 'Dodenklaas van Tadeusz Kantor: emotioneel en uniek Pools theater.' *NCR Handelsblad*, 2 March 1977

Rutten, Andre. 'Dodenklas: een beangstigende bezetenheid'. *Trouw*, 3 March 1977

Spierdijk, Jan. 'Poolse krachttoer in mimische *Dodenklas*'. *De Telegraf*, 3 March 1977

Van den Bergh, Hans. 'Pool vond nieuwe vorm'. *Het Parool*, 2 March 1977

Van Leeuwen, Ko. 'Dodenklas blijft lang op je netvlies staan'. *Haarlems Dagblad*, 2 March 1977

15, 18–19 March 1977 — Nuremberg

Messehaus, 3 performances

Fenn, Walter. 'In der Hölle des Lebens'. *Kultur*, 17 March 1977

Roeder, Gustaw. 'Poetisches Trippeln über den Abgründen'. *NZ*, no. 63, 17 March 1977

Schneider, Helmut. 'Zerstörung der Illusion. *Die tote Klasse*, eine Collage aus Fragmenten'. *Die Zeit*, no. 14, March 1977

Stoll, Dieter. 'Oma schneidet Grimassen zur Toten-Sinfonie. Tadeusz Kantor mit seinen "Theater Cricot 2" in Nürnberg und Erlangen'. *AZ*, 17 March 1977

Thieringer, Thomas. 'Jetzt muss das Kunstwerk geschlossen bleiben. Zum Nürnberger Gastspiel des Cricot-Theaters aus Krakau'. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 61, 15 March 1977

16–17 March 1977 — Erlangen

Theater in der Garage, 2 performances

'Gastspiel Tadeusz Kantor *Die tote Klasse*'. *Theater Zeitung*, March 1977 g. r[rühle]. 'Die schweren Treäume des Tadeusz Kantor. *Die tote Klasse* — Gastspiel in der Bundesrepublik'. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 65, 18 March 1977

Jakubiec, Danuta. 'Nowe sukcesy Cricot II. Rozmowy Dziennika'. *Dziennik Polski*, no. 73, 31 March 1977

27 April–4 May 1977 — Nancy

12th Festival Mondial du Théâtre, 6 performances

dj. 'Cricot II — po Nancy, przed Paryżem'. *Dziennik Polski*, no. 114, 21–22 May 1977

Drossart, Andre. 'Le Festival mondial du théâtre de Nancy. Un événement considérable: *La Classe de mort* par le Cricot 2 du Polonais Tadeusz Kantor'. *Le Soir de Bruxelles*, 5 May 1977

- e. 'Dziesiątki zespołów i jedno wydarzenie — wielki sukces teatru Cricot 2 na festiwalu w Nancy'. *Echo Krakowa*, no. 114, 21–22 May 1977
- Janowicz, Leon. 'Teatr, jakiego jeszcze nigdy nie przeżyliśmy. Sukcesy Cricot II'. *Kurier Polski*, no. 113, 1977
- Marcabru, Pierre. 'Trois visages du théâtre contemporain'. *Le Figaro*, 4 May 1977
- Mingalou, Jean-Louis. 'Du monde entier et déjà un événement'. 2 May 1977
- Poulet, Jacques. 'Festiwal à Nancy. Coulais, Cricot 2. Squat'. *L'Humanité*, 2 May 1977
- urb. 'Po festiwalu w Nancy. Mówi Tadeusz Kantor'. *Kultura*, 20 May 1977

8 June 1977 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, a performance of *The Dead Class* for the participants of the 'Film Symposium' held as a part of the 17th National and 14th International Short Film Competition in Krakow

17–26 August 1977 — Shiraz

11th Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Art, University Gymnasium, 5 performances

- L. M. 'La Classe morte de Tadeusz Kantor, par le groupe Cricot 2'. *Journal de Teheran*, August 1977
- Saikali, Soumaya. 'A pleasing and petrifying play'. *Kayhan International Edition*, no. 6037, 25 September 1977
- 'Shiraz Arts Festival'. *Teheran Journal*, 23 August 1977
- Sourrouille, Michel. 'Toute la memoire de la Classe morte du Polonaise Tadeusz Kantor'. *Journal de Teheran*, 26 August 1977
- 'Young puppets and old people'. *Daily Bulletin*, 24 August 1977

12–14 September 1977 — Belgrade

BITEF — 11 Festival, Pionirski Grad, 3 performances

- 'Bazlamačin senzibilitet u korneru'. *Studio, Beograd*, September 1977
- Fetahagić, Sead. 'San o smrti'. *Oslobođenje Sarajevo*, 16 September 1977
- Foretić, Dalibor. 'Nesentimentalni valcer'. *Vjesnik. Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Hrvatske*, 15 September 1977
- Franić, Severin. 'Svet bez alibija'. *Mladost, Beograd*, 23 September 1977
- Husić, Dž. 'Klasično, na nov način'. *Oslobođenje Sarajevo*, 10 September 1977

Husić, Dž. 'Realnost bez imitacija.' *Oslobođenje Sarajevo*, 14 September 1977

'Postavangarda 77'. *Sarajevske Novine*, 12 September 1977

Prijčić, Želimir. 'Mrtvi Razred'. *Novi List, Rijeka*, 28 September 1977

Puljizević, Jozo. 'Poraz na kazališnoj pobjedu'. *Večernji List, Zagreb*, 30 September 1977

11–23 October 1977 — Paris

Festival d'Automne, Théâtre National de Chaillot (Grand Salle), 12 performances

Alexander, Caroline. 'La danse macabre de Kantor'. *L'Express*, no. 1370, 16 October 1977

Andare, Béatrix. 'Ce Théâtre dont les comédies sont des marionnettes. Un entretien avec Tadeusz Kantor'. *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, no. 2606, 13–20 October 1977

Bielski, Nella. 'La Classe morte de Tadeusz Kantor. L'émotion immédiate'. *Le Matin*, 17 October 1977

Gastellier, Fabian. 'Vent d'est, vent de mort. Au-delà théâtre zéro il y a La Classe morte de Tadeusz Kantor'. *Tribune Socialiste*, no. 758, 20–26 October 1977

La Bardonnie, Mathilde. 'Tadeusz Kantor, le maître'. *Le Monde*, 14 October 1977

Léonardini, Jean-Pierre. 'L'écureuil sur sa roue. Le Polonais Kantor gère l'économie de la Mort'. *L'Humanité*, 18 October 1977

'Tadeusz Kantor, *La Classe morte*. Interview par Philippe du Vignal'. *Art Press International*, April 1977

TEM. 'Cricot II w Paryżu'. *Kierunki*, no. 46, 13 November 1977

25–29 October 1977 — Lyon

Théâtre National Populaire, 5 performances

Fiolle, Patrick. 'La Classe morte'. *Le Progres-Soir*, 27 October 1977

L. H. 'La Classe morte'. *Metropole*, October 1977

Lerrant, Jean-Jacques. 'Le Théâtre de la Mort et *La Classe morte*', *Le Progres de Lyon*, 23 October 1977

Roos, E. 'La Classe morte de Tadeusz Kantor'. *Le Journal. Quotidien Rhône-Alpes*, no. 229, 27 October 1977

Vernay, M. C. 'La classe morte: le manifeste de la mort ou la mort manifeste'. *Dernière Heure Lyonnaise*, 27 October 1977

2–4 November 1977 — Lille

Théâtre Populaire des Flandres, 3 performances

‘Lille, Carrefour international du théâtre.’ *Le Metro*, November 1977M. D.-F. ‘Le Teatr Cricot de Cracovie en ouverture du carrefour du théâtre à Lille.’ *Liberté*, 8 November 1977Piau, Jean-Claude. ‘Le carrefour international du théâtre. *La Classe morte* par le Teatr Cricot 2.’ *Nord Éclair*, 3 November 1977Sourgens, Jean-Marie. ‘Une danse mavcabre polonaise ouvre le Carrefour international du théâtre, à Lille: “*La classe morte* de Tadeusz Kantor”’. *La Voix du Nord*, 26 October 1977**7–12 November 1977 — Brussels**

Théâtre 140 (Halles de Schaerbeek), 6 performances

Drossart, André. ‘Une maison bombardée, une gare au bout du monde, un glacier, des bancs d’école, c’est l’itinéraire du Cricot: hallucinant!’ *Le Soir*, 10 November 1977Honorez, Luc. ‘*La Classe de mort* aux Halles: un cauchemar de choc.’ *Le Soir*, 9 November 1977J. S. ‘*La Classe Morte* par le Cricot 2.’ *La Libre Belgique*, 9 November 1977**15–17 November 1977 — Ghent**

Academie, Zwarte Zaal (Academiestraat 2), 3 performances

De Roeck, J. ‘Tadeusz Kantor, en teater van de dood.’ *De Standaard*, no. 318, 1977**11–13 December 1977 — Warsaw**

Stodoła Club, 3 performances

Boska, Anna. ‘*Umarła klasa*.’ *Kobieta i Życie*, no. 8, 20 February 1977Greń, Zygmunt. ‘Nie pogrzebani.’ *Życie Literackie*, no. 1326, 26 June 1977Janowicz, Leon. ‘Teatr jakiego jeszcze nie przeżyliśmy. Sukcesy Cricot 2.’ *Kurier Polski*, 1977Kazimierczyk, Barbara. ‘*Umarła klasa* w teatrze i na taśmie.’ *Kierunki*, no. 23, 5 June 1977‘*O Umarłej klasie*.’ *Rozmowy, Dialog*, no. 2, 1977Piasecki, Jan. ‘Spotkanie z Kantorem.’ *Sztandar Młodych*, 29 December 1977Wysińska, Elżbieta. ‘*Od Wesela do Umarłej klasy*.’ *Kultura*, 9 January 1977

7 January–4 February 1978 — A tour of Italy

The Dead Class presented in Florence, at Teatro Rondo di Bacco (11–16 January 1978) and in Milan, at Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro (via Ulisse Dini 7, 18–31 January 1978). 18 performances in total

Florence

'Dalla Polonia con surrealismo'. *Paese Sera*, 9 January 1978

'*La classe morta* al. Rondò'. *L'Unità. Organo del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 10 January 1978

Lapini, Lia. '*La classe morta* orologio senza tempo'. *Paese Sera*, no. 12, 13 January 1978

Mamone, Sara. 'Uomini e manichini sull'ultima spiaggia'. *L'Unità. Organo del Partito Comunista Italiano*, n.d.

Pioll, Giampaolo. 'Una scuola senza tempo'. *Liberta*, 14 January 1978

Poesio, Paolo Emilo. 'Il prodigioso Cricot 2'. *La Nazione*, 13 January 1978

Milan

A. A. 'Shock metafisico. Presentiamo un'intervista a Tadeusz Kantor realizzata da Radio Canale 96 e la prima traduzione accurata dall'originale del suo manifesto poetico Teatro della morte'. *Scena* 1, no. 1, February 1978

Bertani, Odoardo. 'Affascinante spettacolo del Teatro Cricot 2 di Cracovia — Il grottesco, l'orrore, la tenerezza'. *Avvenire*, 21 January 1978

Bonino, Guido Davico. 'Tornano in classe i morti nel grande teatro di Kantor'. *La Stampa*, no. 17, 21 January 1978

Borelli, Sauro. 'Il teatro della morte o la morte del teatro?'. *L'Unità. Organo del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 21 January 1978

Brusati, Carlo. 'La classe meravigliosa'. *Informazione*, 20 January 1978

Cirio, Rita. '*La classe morta*'. *Vogue*, no. 322, 15 March 1978

De Monticelli, Roberto. 'Sulla scena passano fantasmi d'avanguardia. A colloquio con il polacco Tadeusz Kantor autore dello spettacolo *La Classe morta*'. *Corriere della Sera*, 29 January 1978

gi. piac. 'Vecchi a scuola fra manichini. *La classe morta* col Cricot 2 al Centro di via Dini'. *Il Giornale*, 21 January 1978

Gregori, Maria Grazia. 'Tra attori e manichini. Intervista con il regista polacco Tadeusz Kantor'. *L'Unità. Organo del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 19 January 1978

L. L. 'La lezione di Kantor. Nel grande vuoto recita la morte'. *Paese Sera*, 19 January 1978

- Piergiacomini, Enrico. Kantor profeta dell'avanguardia'. *Sipario*, no. 383, April 1978
- Righetti, Donata. 'È bella questa storia di morti e manichini'. *Il Giorno*, no. 16, 21 January 1978
- R. P. 'Sui banchi di scuola la fanciullezza dimenticata'. *Corriere della Sera*, 21 January 1978
- Serenellini, Mario. 'La morte fa lezione nella classe lager'. *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 21 January 1978
- s. m. 'L'estremo slancio di Kantor'. *L'Unità. Organo del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 19 January 1978
- Valentini, Chiara. 'L'ora di Kantor'. *Panorama*, no. 616, 7 February 1978
- Volli, Ugo. 'La vita non si vede, il teatro sì: solo la morte è teatro'. *La Repubblica*, 19 January 1978
- Volli, Ugo. 'Nei gesti dei vecchi manichini il ricordo dell'infanzia lontana'. *La Repubblica*, 21 January 1978

18 February–19 March 1978 — Cricot 2 Theatre's tour of Australia

participation in the 10th Adelaide Festival of Arts. Thirteen performances of *The Dead Class* at The Space in Adelaide (25 February–11 March) and five at the Sydney Opera House, Recording Hall (14–18 March)

Adelaide

'Cricot 2? Well what's the aim of art?'. *The Advertiser*, 21 February 1978

e. 'Sukcesy Cricot 2 na odległym kontynencie'. *Echo Krakowa*, no. 68, 24 March 1978

'It's a play with some challenges'. *The News*, 27 February 1978

Kirby, John. 'Accepting the new challenge'. *Sunday Mail*, 5 March 1978

Lloyd, Tim. 'Bewildering play that's well worth seeing'. *The Advertiser*, 27 February 1978

'Look who's coming to the festival'. *The Australian*, 29–30 October 1978

Oakley, Barry. 'Sunstruck in Adelaide'. *The National Times*, 6–11 March 1978

Pulvers, Roger. 'Insatiability is what Kantor is really personifying'. *Theatre Australia. Australia's Magazine of the Performing Arts*, May 1978

Radic, Leonard. 'No fanfare for *The Dead Class*'. *The Age*, 27 February 1978

Radic, Leonard. 'Traveller into unknow'. *Age Arts*, 4 March 1978

Sykers, Jil. 'The man in black'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1978

'Umarła klasa w Australii'. *Teatr*, 23 lipca 1978

Ward, Peter. 'From the crucible — a new Theatre'. *The Australian*, 27 February 1978

Wordley, Milton. 'Repeating a revolution'. *Arts Australian*, 10 March 1978

Sydney

Constantino, Romola. 'The Dead Class — something different'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 1978

'The Dead Class: a profoundly shattering performance'. *The Bulletin*, 14 March 1978

8 April 1978 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, 1 performance

11–14 April 1978 — Krakow

Krzysztofory Gallery, 3 performances

Szydłowski, Roman. 'Lęk i ostrzeżenie'. *Trybuna Ludu*, 25 April 1978

23–26 May 1978 — Zurich

Theater 11, 4 performances

Müller, Peter. 'Herrschaft und Unterdrückung. Das Krakauer Theater Cricot 2 gastiert im Theater 11'. *Tages Anzeiger*, 26 May 1978

'Polnische Totentanz-Faszination im Theater 11'. *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten*, 25 May 1978

'Träume und Albträume. Die tote Klasse — Tadeusz Kantor mit dem Krakauer Theater Cricot 2'. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 25 May 1978

30 May–2 June 1978 — Geneva

Salle Communale de Plainpalais, 4 performances

Jeannet, Daniel. 'Tadeusz Kantor et son Théâtre de la mort à Genève'. *Journal de Genève*, 27 May 1978

Perros, Christiane. 'La Classe morte'. *Tribune de Genève*, 1 June 1978

Unger, Catherine. 'Eschyle, Kantor, Dard et d'autres'. *La Suisse*, 28 May 1978

Unger, Catherine. 'La Classe morte'. *La Suisse*, 31 May 1978

1–16 July 1978 — Venezuela

participation in the 4th Sesión Mundial del Teatro de las Naciones in Caracas, Sala José Félix Ribas, *The Dead Class* presented

Comerlati, Mara. 'Tadeusz Kantor y su Cricot 2. En la Frontera Entre la Eternidad y la Risa.' *El Nacional*, 7 July 1978

E. B. 'Kantor: yo soy la Vanguardia.' *El Mundo*, 7–8 July 1978

Gimenez, Leonardo Azparren. 'Jo especial del Teatro de las Naciones.' *El Nacional: Caracas*, 16 July 1978

Miranda, Julio E. 'Teatro: Noras Salvadas del Torbellino.' *El Universal*, 16 July 1978

Monasterios, Ruben. 'Primera fila. *La clase muerta*.' *El Nacional — Caracas*, 10 July 1978

P., Javier Vidal. 'Polonia de Muerte.' *El Universal*, 12 July 1978

Szydłowski, Roman. 'Cricot 2 w Caracas.' *Trybuna Ludu*, 20 July 1978

Szydłowski, Roman. 'Po sezonie Teatru Narodów. Cricot 2 — zwycięż-cą.' *Trybuna Ludu*, 21 July 1978

Szydłowski, Roman. 'Triumf Kantora w Caracas.' *Trybuna Ludu*, 13 July 1978

24–29 July 1978 — Rome

Teatro Tenda, 6 performances

Chiaretti, Tommaso. 'In un valzer asburgico la vita a porte chiuse.' *La Repubblica*, 27 July 1978

Cordelli, Franco. 'Affascinante spettacolo di Tadeusz Kantor al Teatro Tenda.' *Paese Sera*, no. 205, 26 July 1978

De Chiara, Ghigo. 'La vita di piccolo-borghesi tra ricordi patetici e comici.' *Avanti!*, 26 July 1978

Giammusso, Mauricio. '*La classe morta* al Teatro Tenda. Con Kantor sui banchi di scuola.' *Corriere Della Sera*, 26 July 1978

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Teatro dell'Arte (on invitation from Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro and Prof. Sisto dalla Palma), 12 performances

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Kulturhuset, 5 performances

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- Franzén, Lars-Olof. 'Posklt gästspel Skön mardröm.' *Dagens Nyheter*, 13 May 1979
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Spazio Culturale Il Fabbricone, 8 performances

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- Lapini, Lia. 'Ancora Kantor con *La classe morta*.' *Paese Sera*, 25 September 1980

15–21 June 1981 — Krakow

'Sokół' Polish Gymnastic Society hall, 7 performances

- Jędrzejczyk, Olgierd. 'Znak i znaczenie w teatrze T. Kantora czyli spektakl *Umarłej klasy* w sali dawnego Sokola.' *Gazeta Krakowska*, 22 June 1981
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29–31 July 1982 — Togamura

Toga Festival 8210, Theatre Hall, 2 performances

4–12 August 1982 — Tokyo

Parco Space Part 311, 8 performances

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Riverside Studios, 16 performances

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23–27 March 1983 — Cagliari

Teatro Pierluigi da Palestrina, 5 performances

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Podda, Giuseppe. 'Cagliari, dopo le proteste dei giovani le autorità aprono il teatro a Kantor.' *L'Unità*, 26 March 1983

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25–29 May 1983 — Krakow

'Sokół' Polish Gymnastic Society hall, 5 performances

Kydryński, Juliusz. 'Kantor w Krakowie'. *Dziennik polski*, 29–30 April–1 May 1983

5–12 September 1983 — Paris

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16–30 September 1983 — Geneva

Théâtre Plainpalais, 5 performances

D. J. 'Le retour de Kantor'. *Construire*, no. 34, 24 August 1983

F. F. 'La Classe morte de Kantor'. *Tribune de Genève*, no. 216, 20 September 1983

Gaillard, Roger. 'La danse de la mort'. *L'Hebdo*, 15 September 1983

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21–25 March 1984 — Murcia

Teatro Romea, 83/84 season, 6 performances

29 March–1 April 1984 — Las Palmas

Teatro Pérez Galdós, 6 performances

5–7 April 1984 — Sevilla

Sala Municipal San Hermenegildo, 3 performances

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Jaffa Harbour Theatre, 6 performances

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The work (...) is based above all on a very careful and thoughtfully developed analysis and interpretation of a variety of sources connected with *The Dead Class*, including its pre-texts, con-texts, and cultural epitexts. The author shows an excellent command of the scholarship on Kantor and *The Dead Class*, while convincingly demonstrating how much remains to be discovered by turning one's focus to different sources (and contexts) in such a way as to view them anew and identify relationships between them that have previously gone unnoticed. Of fundamental importance to the book's thesis is the fact that it presents for the first time sources that have until now remained unpublished, the *Elbląska Notebook* (...) chief among them.

Ewa Partyga, DSc

The author successfully looks at the mythic performance from a new and fresh perspective.


Katarzyna Flader-Rzeszowska, DSc



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