

AGNIESZKA KOECHER-HENSEL*

WAYS TO APPROACH THE AUTEUR THEATRE.

Edward Gordon Craig – a great reformer of the theatre and, practically, the creator of the idea of the auteur theatre, argues in his book, *Towards a New Theatre*, referring to the etymology of the word “theatre” in French which comes from the Latin word “Theatrum”, that it indicates... *a place for watching spectacles, which comes from the Greek word “theáomat” – I can see. Compare it with “theá” – a view. Caution! Nothing is said that the theatre is a place where you listen to 30,000 jabbered words in two-hour-time.*¹

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After the year 1956 and years of the socialist regime, rationalism and materialism, predominant in Poland, came a period of complete retreat, of artistic exploration and grand discoveries in the theatre where the creators were young visual artists. It was the time of the formation and of an international success of the “Polish School of Stage Design” and the “Polish School of Posters” - the names given by the world critics.

The turn of the 1960s and 1970s brought forth the victory of the idea of the autonomic theatre, liberated from the primacy of a playwright; the victory of the auteur theatre. After decades of exploration and experimentation, the following premieres are considered to be the culmination point in the process of the theatre development: Jerzy Grotowski’s *Apocalipsis cum figuris* (1969, The Laboratory Theatre), Józef Szajna’s *Replicas* (the first version – environment 1971 Göteborg; the forth, full version – Theatre Studio 1973). In 1972 Leszek Mądzik’s *Supper* was created with the Artistic Stage of KUL – the first wordless spectacle by this theatre. 1975 was the year when Tadeusz Kantor’s *The Dead Class* premiered – the first auteur performance by the Cricot 2 Theatre.

* AGNIESZKA KOECHER-HENSEL – historyk teatru, krytyk, wykładowca scenografii na Wydziale Scenografii i Sztuki Mediów Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie.

¹ E. Craig, *Ku nowemu teatrowi*, “Pamiętnik teatralny” 1956, No. 1, p. 59.

Artists of different generations and provenances co-created then the face of the contemporary Polish theatre. Without their achievements which caused many revaluations, the process of a further development of the Polish stage art, i.e. the theatres by Jerzy Grzegorzewski, Krystian Lupa, Janusz Wiśniewski, and many others, would have probably been impossible.

However, let us move back in time to the beginning of that process, to *Cricot – the Theatre of Artists*, founded in Cracow in 1933 by Józef Jarema. From an experimental stage that was close to a cabaret, Cricot was transformed into a total theatre in a short period of time. In its spectacles, it did not limited itself to the illustration of a text, but gave its theatrical transposition. The visual plan played a major role: a modern mask and costume, a new gesture, movement and situation.

Cricot was not at all an ally to dramatic literature, but only to the new, avant-garde one. Among the most famous spectacles were the premieres of: *The Death of a Faun* by Tytus Czyżewski², *The Cuttlefish* by Witkacy³, and, later, also the staging of *Liberation* by Stanisław Wyspiański⁴. However, the most innovatory in its form was the last auteur spectacle by Henryk Wiciński⁵, *A Triangle and a Circle*, from 1939.

The premiere of *The Cuttlefish* largely owes its success to his stage design. The visual design imposed the interpretation of the whole play. The stage figures were regarded not as characters, with a specified biography and psychology, but as notions, sicknesses, obsessions or abstract arguments. For example, the costume of Pope Julius II resembled a cross, whereas his character was presented dually the costume and the face along the profile were painted in yellow on one side and in

² T. Czyżewski, *The Death of a Faun*, a narrative poem for the stage; directed by W. Dobrowolski; decorations, costumes and announcements by T. Cybulski; music by J. Ekier, choreography by W. Haburzanka; dances by B. Kaufman and J. Puget; performed by Cricot – the Theatre of Artists, Dom Plastyka, Cracow, 15. XI. 1983.

³ S. I. Witkiewicz, *The Cuttlefish*, directed by W. Dobrowolski; decorations and costumes by H. Wiciński; music by L. Goldfluss, (Arten); dances by J. Puget; actors: M. Bulicz, W. Dobrowolski, J. Dobrowolska-Miklaszewska, Z. Dywińska, B. Szelest. The performance was preceded by the staging of *The Death of the Maharaja*, performed by Zespół Żywego Słowa from the Jagiellonian University, Cricot – the Theatre of Artists, Dom Plastyka, Cracow, 8. XII. 1933.

⁴ S. Wyspiański, *Liberation* (part I and III), text compiled by A. Polewka and W. Woźnik; directed by W. Woźnik, staging by J. Jarema; costumes by Wolff-Bogucka, decorations by Klimek, Marczyński, Stern; musical arrangement (Chopin, Szymanowski, Strawiński) by L. Arten. The director of the musical recording- K. Osiejewski (The entry according to a poster reproduced in: J. Lau, *Cricot – the Theater of Artists*, op. cit., p. 162.

⁵ G. Ribemont-Dessaignes, the stage performance of *A Mute Canary*, directed by W. Lrzemiński; decorations and costumes by M. Jarema, Cricot – the Theater of Artists, Dom Plastyka, Cracow; the premiere in November 1935. For the first time Cricot presented a new, experimental performance in Warsaw, in the IPS Artist's café, 14th Feb., 1939 at 6p.m.; directing, staging and stage art by H. Wiciński. See also: the poster to Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes' *A Mute Canary* (performed as *A Triangle and a Circle*). Copy in: J. Lau, *Cricot – the Theater of Artists*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 1967, p. 193.

white on the other. The right hand was finished off with an element of a cross. For the stage designer, a puppet, a mannequin without any psychological insides, was the best messenger for the dramatic metaphor.

The performance of *The Cuttlefish* in the Cricot Theatre gave birth to one of important traditions when it comes to the interpretation of Witkacy, as well as to the development of creative stage design after 1956. An example of this way of thinking was, i.e. Kantor's artistic performance of Shaw's *Saint Joan*⁶. Kantor placed three figures of unnatural size upstage, which, easily recognizable thanks to their emblems: a crosier, a sceptre and a shield, represented the three powers reigning over the world: the church, the monarchy and the chivalry. They constantly dominated over the stage through the whole play. The remaining, simplified and spare decorative elements suggested a change in the place of action, for example, a gothic window and a table – a living space, a solitary column – a cathedral in Reims. They were not solid architectural elements, but fragile constructions, frames basically. Kantor also used (probably for the first time in the Polish theatre) the effect developed by the French symbolists (Paul Fort and Lugne Poe) of separating the created reality from the real one with a tulle curtain. For Kantor, a net was also the screen on which magnified medieval miniatures were displayed, which illustrated a given event from the life of the Maid of Orleans. Such an artistic staging solution determined the way of reception: it transferred the audience into the dimension of dramatic thoughts, a grand intellectual discourse. It was a very important spectacle in the Polish theatre; a sort of a turning point at that time (1956).

Wiciński was, undoubtedly, an incredibly interesting, albeit now forgotten, individuality in the Polish art and the Cricot Theatre. He consequently forced the implementation of the idea of the artistic theatre in which all the elements – decoration, costume, movement and word – would have the same rank in creating a performance. Younger by a few years than Józef Jarema, Czyżewski or the Proszko brothers, he belonged to the second wave of Cracow's avant-garde, placed in a certain opposition to the first, formistic or futuristic assumptions. A pupil of Xawery Dinikowski, he was considered, next to Maria Jerema and Katarzyna Korbo, the main representative of the Polish avant-garde sculpture movement of the interwar period.

The accounts of few participant in the performance of *A Triangle and a Circle*, gathered by Jerzy Laua, show that almost all the elements of synthetic decorations were set into motion.

A ladder was the central axis around which the whole space of the stage was organized. During the play, the actors had to climb, jump, which required nearly acrobatic skills – almost like in Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre of 13 Rows.

⁶ G. B. Shaw, *Saint Joan*; directed by W. Krzemiński; stage design and costumes by T. Kantor; music by A. Malawski, The National Old Theatre, The Theatre of Poetry, Cracow, the premiere on 12th Feb., 1956.

*During the rehearsals, Wiciński required that the actors' means of expression – movement and, gesture, were different than in everyday life. The costume underlined the individuality, the autonomy of a stage figure. In his understanding, the stage figure rather resembled a puppet, a sculpture living its own life in the world of art. Its every movement and gesture – everything needed a functional explanation; it had to result from the logic of the whole artistic composition of blocks and spots, oval and rectangular forms. An actor on the stage had to oppose himself, contradict himself, in order to become a stage figure. Wiciński tried to work even the actor's voice into the artistic plan – as an autonomic element of the theatrical performance. He demanded a different kind of acting from the performers, a technique taken from the medieval primitives, in order to oppose the naturalistic movement of our bodies, of gestures and facial expressions. Tadeusz Kantor, and Maria Jeremianka even more so, will later refer to many of Wiciński's thoughts, developing his certain stage ideas in *Cricor 2*, after the war – in *The Cuttlefish* or *In the Little Manor-house* by S. I. Witkiewicz. However, at that time, they were individual attempts and, it seems to me, not fully understood by the contemporary people⁷ - writes Lau.*

At the same time when Wiciński was working on the performance of *A Triangle and a Circle*, Kantor, also fascinated by the ideas of the constructivists, was preparing, with a bunch of his friends, the spectacle of *The Death of Tintagiles* by Maurice Meaterlinck⁸.

The drama of a kidnapped child was played out in almost abstract decorations. The figures – marionettes: the Queen, the Nanny, the Knight, Tintagiles, were limited to symbols of simplified geometric figures, triangles and rhombuses, usually in black and grey; golden rims on cloths expressed wealth or dignity. The moon was a very important stage prop – movable and cut out from tin foil. However, the most important were the words repeated in a particular key: m-oon, m-oo-n... Maciej Markiewicz recalls:

It was performed, and patiently repeated by Tadeusz Brzozowski, according to Kantor's demand, for whom this word should just ring. Other characters in the play also had their own manner of speech and intonation. The play was not really understandable for the audience, but it was probably not what Kantor had in mind. Built from contrasting forms, which, according to the script, moved and changed the whole composition, it provided artistic emotions⁹.

⁷ J. Lau, op. cit., pp. 193-194.

⁸ "On 23rd March, 1938, T. Kantor borrows, for the duration of three weeks, from the library of The Academy of Fine Arts, a copy of *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* printed in Munich in 1925, which included, i.e., texts by O. Schlemmer, L. Moholy-Nagy, F. Molnar, and many reproductions." See also: the note in *Kalendarium 1924-1944*. Ed. By J. Chrobak, J. Michalik, Cracow 2009, p. 156.

⁹ M. Makarewicz, *O Tadeuszu Kantorze*, (in:) *W kręgu lat czterdziestych*, part III, ed. By J. Chrobak, Wyd. Grupa Krakowska, Cracow 1991, pp. 20-23. Quoted after: *Kalendarium 1924-1944*, op. cit., p. 141.

The artistic adventure of the students in Bratniak, even though it did not achieve a spectacular success, was undoubtedly an important experience for Kantor and his colleagues. It also brought different, interesting effects in their further explorations.

In 1942, when Wiciński fought tuberculosis in the hospitals in Cracow (he died in 1943), Kantor organized a new troupe and continued their previous search. Despite the German occupation, the idea of an artistic theatre developed in the years 1942-1944 in the underground Independent Theatre.

In its performances (*Balladyna* according to Słowacki and *The Last Return of Odysseus* by Wyspiański), he strived for – just like his predecessors - an integrated impact of the word, the gesture, the music and the forms that were surrounding the actor. According to his words, the ideal of the stage director was to compose a piece on one dominant, on one form, which becomes the key to understanding the whole drama and which, thanks to its contents, blows up the drama, exposing its vivid, pulsating interior, all its fibres and nerves.¹⁰

In *Balladyna*, against the black background of the walls, there was a big abstract form centrally placed - chalky white – assumedly made of metal, though, in fact, of plywood. That decorative element or object was Goplana – a figure dominant above the stage. In *The Last Return of Odysseus*, the focal form was a gun-barrel. Modern accessories, specific objects and costumes, destroyed by the war, referred to surrealism through unusual juxtapositions and particular symbolism. A fragment of reality, a “ready-made object”, an unconstructed matter, became part of the stage design.

After the war, after his first extended stay in Paris, Kantor returned in 1947, but in the first half of the 1950s he was not able to announce his opinions and his knowledge of modern art. After his second voyage (1955), in the time foreshadowing the thaw, he already vigorously promoted the newest achievements in the art of painting. He gave unofficial lectures. Among the audience – still as students – were the future most prominent Polish stage designers: Krystyna Zachwatowicz, Andrzej Majewski, Kazimierz Wiśniak, Krzysztof Pankiewicz.

What ideas could Kantor impart at the turn of 1955-1956?

It seems that the article written at that time, entitled *Abstraction is dead, long live abstraction. On the informal art*¹¹, may give us a hint. Kantor, starting with the main postulates and achievements of art at the beginning of the XX century, which were guided by a belief in rational thinking and in the artist's intellect, arrives, through his persuasive and logical reasoning, at the conclusion that the role of the intellect, a rational control over the real world as well as the imaginary one, came to an end and even became compromised. According to him, the ideas and expe-

¹⁰ See: J. Kydryński, *Krakowski teatr konspiracyjny*, “Twórczość” 1946, no. 4-5.

¹¹ T. Kantor, *Abstrakcja umarła, niech żyje abstrakcja. O sztuce informel* “*Życie Literackie*” 1955, no. 50, reprinted in: T. Kantor, *Pisma*, chosen and edited by K. Pleśniarowicz, Part I *Metamorfozy. Teksty w latach 1934-1974*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich- Wydawnictwo, Cricoteca - Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor, Wrocław- Cracow 2005, pp. 167-169.

riences of the Surrealists are sort of a borderline example in the process of showing the mechanism that manage the artist's mental and cognitive process. He wrote:

*...art came into contact with the forces and phenomena that lie beyond the sphere of intellect. Dark and elementary forces, striking with absurdity and non-sense, exploding with rebellion and negation, seamless, that cannot be put under rigor, capricious and unpredictable [...] The imagination, freed from the limiting intellect and experience, became an instrument capable of exploring and revealing this world*¹². Kantor propagated intuitive, accidental action, the artist's uncontrolled gesture. However, he also stressed that the term "tachisme" does not cover the latest art of painting as a whole, as it also takes the name of "expressionistic abstraction" or "lyrical abstraction." The broadest term is l'informel – "formless painting," the art with no form.

Both Majewski and Wiśniak admitted that they indeed understood little from these theories. However, a certain influence can be noticed, especially of the expressionistic abstraction, matter painting and the collage technique, on the stage design projects from the end of their university years and the work from the 1960s.

When they began their work at the theatre (1959), abstractionism had already been creatively processed by Józef Szajna. They all mention in accordance that his experiences became most crucial for them. The stage designs from Nowa Huta or, actually, artistic productions, were an evidence of the strength of a pictorial image on stage.

In the works of those stage designers, we will find no trace of the solutions characteristic for all the previous –isms, especially the variety of realisms from Leon Schiller's school.

Their stage designs did not clearly mark the time and place of action. First of all, ambiguous spaces interpreted the drama and made it more universal; they built the atmosphere, the aura, suggested an inner drama. An so, for example, in the stage designs to Greek tragedies or the plays in which the action – according to the text – takes place in ancient times, they did not use the architecture suitable for the given epoch: stone palatial courtyards, columns and chambers. They created metaphysical spaces from ambiguous symbols. They often enlarged a chosen symbol – it could be hanged over the stage, painted on the horizon, or as a dimensional form, or be placed on the floor. They keenly played with proportions, scales. They created an atmosphere the way painters do - with different materials, textures and colours.

Designing costumes, they worked similarly – they created a stage figure not from fashion journals, but from their imagination, their own fantasy. They made it more or less human, deformed the silhouette of a human body, disturbed the proportions or dressed the actors in tricots and looked for signs – emblems, props that symbolically identified the character, its psyche or significance.

¹² Ibid., pp. 167-168.

They were all united by the conviction that theatre means art which does not reproduce reality, but creates new distinct words, born from imagination. They were close to poetry, symbolic thinking, an artistic shortcut and a grand metaphor, surrealistic collisions, absurd humour and irony, as well as existential reflection which expressed the feeling of loneliness, danger, confusion and anxiety. They were also united by the conviction that art of the theatre is a space for thinking and feeling, as well as intimate, emotional, often intuitive communication with the audience.

Among the young friends – stage designers – graduates from the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, the strongest individual and a total artist (painter, stage designer – producer, sometimes a director and a poet) was Andrzej Majewski who used the name Kreutz Majewski since 1995. From 1965, until his retirement, he was the main stage designer at the Grand Theatre, who co-created its artistic face for forty years and, at the same time, cooperated with many opera theatres in the world. Being highly respected, he was able to impose his own visions on co-executors and express himself through art in the theatre. That is why he could partially realize his auteur “theatre of a cruel miracle.” Despite those possibilities, in the last years of his life, he felt an inner necessity to create a piece that would be absolutely his own. Between 1992 and 1994 he was writing and perfecting his script, a drama actually, an ironic self-portrait, *Narcissimo vel Lotczyk*. It is an attempt to create a literary dramatic form with romantic and surrealistic roots, in which the poetic world is complemented by an image or constitutes the background for the stage action, a sequence of images. Until the end of his life, he kept thinking about the staging of his script. He did not succeed. And so he remained the creator of auteur theatre *in statu nascendi*.

Leszek Mądzik, the most radical and the youngest creator of auteur theatre and of the Artistic Stage of KUL, which 45th anniversary we are celebrating, in the first half of the 1960s, when the experiences of abstract art were incorporated into the theatre, was still attending a secondary school of art in Kielce. He learnt weaving which, as he admits himself, has given him sensitivity to fabric and texture. His first “drama”, expressed with the means of structure painting, was created as his graduation work in 1965. He wove pieces of rusty wire into his fabric, which unsettled, disturbed its structure. Abstract thinking was, in a way, already in his blood. Resigning from the use of words and the means of expression of an actor as a stage figure who communicates thoughts and feelings, he was able to establish a strong, gripping emotional contact with the audience. In his spectacles, the visual narration, the inner dramaturgy of the performance, is built entirely through asemantic means of expression – movement of the matter, light and music.

“Abstraction is dead, long live abstraction” – as Kantor would say.

Mądzik had his predecessors – artists experimenters. In the circles of young visual artists, already at the beginning of the 1950s, there was a need to set an image into motion, to depart from the traditional way of painting and exhibiting. An idea was born to substitute pigmentary painting with the shaping of light and

“light pictures” that is photograms made without the use of a photo camera, by putting the light directly onto photosensitive paper. In Cracow, Andrzej Pawłowski, a pupil and assistant of Kantor, experimented with the light, the mirror, the epidiascope and other devices for several years. He constructed an auteur optical machine equipped with a system of movable lenses and reflectors, with the use of which he created spectacles of kinetic art – spatiotemporal forms in motion. Music gave rhythm to the projections. Thus, *Kineforms* were created and the first public screening took place during the second premiere of Cricot 2 Theatre, next to Kazimierz Mikulski’s *Circus* (1957).

At the same time – independently from Pawłowski – Jerzy Krechowicz experimented with photograms in Gdansk. In 1961, together with his colleagues, visual artists and musicians (they were still students), he established the Gallery Theatre. In his first spectacle, *Penal Colony*, he was still inspired by literature, but already in the following one, *Dog, and the Absence of the Dog* (1963), he abandoned the word, increasing the meaning of the visual and sonic layer. At first, the light images were projected onto the surface of movable screens, but later the surfaces were expanded. In *Termitary* (1964), a white cube was created and, on its walls, images were projected simultaneously. They were the background for the dance of termites – blocks. The animators, hidden in abstract forms, not only moved the figures, but also illuminated them from within. In the last spectacles: *Treaty* (1966) and *Invasion* (1967), black canvas was used, which made the screen invisible during the spectacle. The deformations appearing on its surface were dependent on the canvas animation techniques, the way in which it was moved and the creation of a dynamic configuration of convexities and concavities. A dynamic, multiscreen multimedia gallery was created on the movable projection surface.

Leszek Mądzik did not know the performances of the Gallery Theatre, but he knew about their existence. Despite the fact, that they were united by the idea of creating an image in motion and of painting a sphere with light, their ways of looking for technical solutions and constructing the language of artistic narration were different.

Martyna Goth writes further and more profoundly about the achievements of the first, now forgotten, Polish experimenters in her article, *From the Bauhaus experiments to the Gallery Theatre*, published in the latest fascicle of “Pamiętnik Teatralny” (2015, No. 2), devoted to Kantor. It should shortly be available in the EMPiK stores.

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Streszczenie

W artykule opisano rozwój polskiego teatru awangardowego w okresie lat 50, 60 i 70 XX wieku. Omówione zostały główne nurty artystyczne w twórczości teatralnej tego okresu. Twórczość teatralna Leszka Mądzika zaprezentowana została jako naturalna kontynuacja i zwieńczenie wielu teoretycznych koncepcji i poszukiwań eksperymentatorów artystycznych tego okresu. W artykule omówione wspólne poszukiwania twórców opisywanej epoki, które w sposób bardzo wyrazisty zogniskowane zostały w plastycznej formie teatru Leszka Mądzika.

Słowa kluczowe: teatr, scenografia, sztuka, Leszek Mądzik

Summary

The article describes the development of Polish avant-garde theater in the 50s, 60s and 70s of the 20th century. The major artistic trends in theatrical art this period were discussed. Leszek Mądzika's

theater was presented as a natural continuation and culmination of many theoretical ideas and explorations of artistic experimenters of this period. This article discusses the exploration of the theater authors of the described epoch which in a very expressive way were focussed in the plastic form of the Leszek Mądzik theater.

Key words: Theater, stage design, art, Leszek Mądzik