

Subjectile

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KANTOR

THE DEAD CLASS

Kantor, *The Dead Class*, 1975

Introduction by Marie-Thérèse Vido-Rzewuska

Photographs by Jacquie Bablet

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KANTOR, *THE DEAD CLASS*
INTRODUCTION BY MARIE-THÉRÈSE VIDO-RZEWUSKA

The Dead Class is one of the main pillars of Tadeusz Kantor's theatrical oeuvre. It was first performed at the Krzysztofory Gallery, in Kraków, on November 15th, 1975. *The Dead Class* owes its importance not only to its content and subject, but also to its place in the Kantor corpus. A pivotal work, it is the culmination of earlier experiments and lessons learned by Kantor since *Credo* in his Clandestine Theatre, and up until his research into the Informal Theatre, the Zero Theatre and the Impossible Theatre. The play also shows the artistic influence of *Emballage* and *Happenings*, and forges a new direction, towards a realm at once vast but narrow, universal but also intimate, that of the Theatre of Death, the last threshold to cross for Kantor, always seeking to push the barriers of transgression.

A PERMANENT FOUNDING PRINCIPLE

The Dead Class ends a work cycle on the plays of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, nicknamed Witkacy, started in 1955 with *Octopus* and followed by *Country House* (1961), *The Madman and the Nun* (1963), *The Water-Hen* (1968), and *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (1973). It also includes *The Shoemakers* staged in 1972 at Theatre 71 in Malakoff with a cast of French actors.

With each play, Kantor had used, in his own personal style, only fragments of the original work. In his own words, this meant not *playing Witkacy* but rather *playing "with" Witkacy*. This distinction stands as a fundamental principle of his theatre, not meant to illustrate a written text: "besides the action of the text must exist the action on

stage"^[1], he writes in his Clandestine Theatre notes^[2]. Authentic emotion and drama may only arise from confrontation and the spontaneous and unexpected actions of the characters. Then, the mise-en-scène evolves in parallel to the action set out in the play. While the words or intentions exchanged by the actors are actually those written in the initial script, the actions and gestures performed on stage have nothing or very little in common with the playwright's original intention. Sequences in succession governed by no apparent logic resonate with the audience's experiences, triggering the exact reactions, emotions or questions that would be inspired when reading the play in written form. Both forms are dominated by the world's absurdity with an infinite repetition of the same words or senseless gestures, the inability to communicate sincerely with one another, and the inevitable decline of civilisation as dark and barbaric forces inevitably prevail.

In *The Dead Class*, Kantor uses fragments of *Tumor Brainiowicz* (1921), cautioning audiences that any familiarity with Witkacy's play will provide no help in understanding the performance: "It would be the best way to destroy the important realm of FEELING"^[3], he declares in the foreword to the score.

[1] Kantor, T. 2015b. *Écrits 1 - Du théâtre clandestin au théâtre de la mort*. Translated by Marie-Thérèse Vido-Rzewuska. Les Solitaires Intempestifs. Besançon. P. 22.

[2] Clandestine Theatre covers a period spanning from 1939 to 1944. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, Tadeusz Kantor writes fundamental theoretical texts and stages two performances: Julius Słowacki's *Balladyna* and Wyspiński's *The Return of Ulysses*, both performed in private apartments.

[3] Bablet, D., ed. 1990 [1983]. *Tadeusz Kantor*. Vol. 11. Les voies de la création théâtrale. CNRS Éditions. P. 71.

Indeed, aside from a few lines and the general staging, there is very little in common between the performance and the initial script. Maria Stangret, *A Woman with a mechanical cradle*, only utters a few fragments of Rozhulantyna's lines; Tumor Mózgowicz, *An Old Man in the Toilet*, incessantly repeats the same phrase, etc. Most words or lines retained from the original script seem to emerge out of nowhere, often as mere repetitive monologues not even acknowledged by other characters. The focus is on the rhythm and resonance in the actors' voice, setting the pace of the dynamics of the action on stage as performers modulate or inflect the tone of their speech. As a response to Kurt Schwitters^[4] German *Ursonate*, Kantor introduces this auditory space as a Slavic *Ursonate*^[5]. Henceforth and with each future performance, musicality will become increasingly important.

THE SUM OF EARLIER PERFORMANCES

The *dramatic séance* shares a number of its characteristic features with the rest of Tadeusz Kantor's theatre, developed, studied and sometimes reworked through earlier performances.

[4] Kurt Schwitters (1887-1940) is a painter, sculptor, graphic artist and writer associated with the Dadaists, founder of the Merz movement and author of essays, poetry and theatre. He worked for nearly ten years on abstract poetry based on the structure of the sonata, with symbol and sign fragments. The full score of the *Ursonate* was published in 1932.

[5] "Phonemes in *The Dead Class* are a response to Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* (of Germanic sounds). I use Slavic sounds, they are my Slavic *Ursonate*." *Le Journal des Cheyennes*, Magazine Kanal 6, October 1984 - Kantor à Grenoble FIAC 1984.

One of those features is the absence of bright colours and the predominance of greys, dirty white, dark grey to off-black, pervading the entire performance, unfinished-looking props and bleary characters. The gloominess is that of life in Poland, as the performance is set to reflect daily life in a People's democracy, furnished with worn, sad and used objects, handled by men tired of the schizophrenic absurdity of administrative rules and arbitrary political and police decisions. This poverty, gloominess and deformity are also reflected in the costumes. While actors in earlier performances were shrouded in shapeless textile forms or barely covered by tattered clothing, those of *The Dead Class* are ceremoniously dressed in dark funeral pageantry that lets them easily blend into the shadows of the setting.

Lighting is dim, diffuse and uniform, highlighting no specific element and remaining unchanged throughout the performance. Light is used as a featureless atmosphere marker to enhance the general tone of the mise-en-scène without clashing with the dominant mood.

Items on stage are not mere props. Borrowed from daily life and mainly made of wood, they are sometimes activated by simple mechanics, and impose their presence like cumbersome partners, but essential to the action they cause, neutralise, shape or defer. These objects construct and delineate space, a metaphor for freedom, as it expands and contracts within the action itself. Its potential variations form a major part of the performance. School desks both bring together and hem in the pupils; the window to the outside allows spying and mischief while still closed off; the cradle symbolises both birth and death; the birthing machine bears close resemblance to a torture device, and the broom transforms into a scythe of death in the hands of the *Char Lady*.

**PHOTOGRAPHS
BY JACQUIE BABLET**

The following photographs were taken by Jacquie Bablet
during the performance of *The Dead Class*
at Prato in 1980 and the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1983.

They appear in chronological order of the performance.











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