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V4@Theatre

Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz

KANTOR DOWNTOWN

realization: Jolanta Janiczak, Joanna Krakowska, Magda Mosiewicz, Wiktor Rubin

Kamila Łapicka (Poland)

He was fantastic...

Tadeusz Kantor, the Polish director, painter, scenographer and theatre reformer was one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. In 2015, in honour of the 100th anniversary of his birth a wide variety of events took place in Poland and all over the world: performances inspired by his work, exhibitions, scientific conferences and books about his artistic life. An important example is the performance „Kantor Downtown” directed by Wiktor Rubin in the Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz. I would also like to mention the book „The Room of Imagination. A Tadeusz Kantor Dictionary” written by Katarzyna Tokarska-Stangret (with definitions in English and Polish), because it is an excellent aid to understanding this performance (or rather this installation, to be more precise).

Kantor experienced both World Wars and, in the words of the visual artist Theodora Skipitares: „I believe ghosts of those two wars hang like a cloud over all his work. The military, the parades, all those things, they really are of another time, time the Americans did not experience in the same way”. The American background is a key to the installation from Bydgoszcz. During the performance we can hear reminiscences of American artists who were a part of the avant-garde scene in New York in the 70s and 80s. Kantor`s most famous play „The Dead Class” was presented at the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club on Broadway at that time. How did they remember him? What impressed them the most? „Kantor Downtown” is an attempt at answering those questions.

„*The Dead Class* takes places in a classroom to which elderly-dead people return. (...) The play cannot be locked within one all-encompassing interpretation. It was intended to touch the emotions of the audience, related to the notions of passing and the modes of existence of memory” – so describes Kantor`s performance Katarzyna Tokarska-Stangret in her Dictionary. The American artists (shown on the screens) describe their encounters with Kantor`s work and with his personality as a „total experience”, which „affected them very deeply”. Even though the majority of the Broadway audience did not speak Polish, this made hardly any difference, because the images were very powerful and the performance „was speaking to human memory, to something that we all knew, that we all felt” – in the words of Ozzie Rodriguez, the La Mama Theatre Club archives director.

Tadeusz Kantor was present on stage during his performances as a director-conductor. The audience could observe at close range the way he controlled the rhythm of the play and the actors' behaviour, as well as the moments when he was smiling or irritated. His outfit (black suit, white shirt, scarf, black hat) became legendary as did his gestures. In consequence, he is now regarded as an element of his own performances (we can read more about this under the headword „I” of Tokarska-Stangret's Dictionary). From my point of view as a Polish critic, the „Kantor Downtown” installation is especially interesting because of the foreign perspective. Only someone who lives outside Poland could say about Kantor: „He was fantastic. What a great clown”.