

About ASHES
Report of the theatre workshop
by Andrzej and Teresa Welminski
in School of Arts/Luca Leuven, Belgium
September 1st – till September 11th 2014

In the first 2 weeks of September, *Andrzej and Teresa Welminski*, famous actors of Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre Cricot 2 in Cracow (Poland), held a workshop at Luca, the theatre school of the Lemmens Institute in Leuven, Belgium.

This workshop ended with a performance, entitled 'Ashes'.

From October 1st till November 26th the actor/director *Johan Knuts* will direct a spectacle, based on the results of this performance.

Both the performance and the spectacle fit into a large project, entitled *Melancholy*, in which is also involved *Johan de Boose*, a Belgian/Dutch author who knew Tadeusz Kantor personally, wrote a book with translations of Kantor's manifestos and made his phd (doctorate) on the Theatre of Death at the University of Ghent.

The workshop started from texts, images, obsessions, dreams, films, works of art and ideas, brought by the students on the first day. Andrzej and Teresa asked them explicit to bring only ideas, that are stucked in the memory. The students were already introduced in Kantor's concept of art and they had seen several dvd-recordings of his spectacles. Very soon the idea of war became crucial, inspired by the commemoration programs on Belgian television about World War I, which had a long and cruel history in the so-called Flander's Fields. During this war the library of Leuven was destroyed by the German army. It became clear that images of marching and dying soldiers and of burning cities would play an important role in the performance. Also in Kantor's art war was omnipresent.

All ideas were carefully elaborated in separate scenes, prepared by the students, using film fragments, (poor, lowest ranked) objects (some of them built by the students themselves), music, literary texts etc. Not all of the scenes found their way to the final script, off course, but nevertheless they were necessarily in the working process and they helped the students to understand how every element can be translated into Kantor's large concept of the Theatre of Death.

As some students were also gifted dancers, Andrzej and Teresa invited them to introduce certain ballet movements into the spectacle. These movements were intended to expose the concept of physical beauty, but at the same time they gave the opportunity to show the vulnerability of the human corps during wartime.

Next to classic ballet, there were also references to biomechanics, a dance technique which was introduced by the Russian constructivists like Vsevolod Meyerhold and which served as one of the most important and initial sources of inspiration by Tadeusz Kantor. But likewise Oskar Schlemmer's triadic ballet (from Bauhaus) was used. One of the essential elements of this ballet is the analysis of movement, as Marcel Duchamp did in his early, cubistic paintings (like *Nude descending a staircase* or *The coffee mill*): the motion of the body is divided into separate steps.

One of the most interesting and inspiring 'objects trouvés' was an old film camera, stocked in the cellar of the theatre school. The students attached it on a (primitive) wagon with a chair. On this chair sat a man with a bowler hat, like on a René Magritte surrealist painting, playing the famous film director who films the dying of the soldiers. Surrealism was very important in Kantor's esthetics. According to his idea that you can only use illusion in order to destroy it, this film director interrupts the emotional moments (the dying of the soldiers on the battle field), asks them to replay and repeat it. This has a 'Verfremdung'-effect (in Russian *ostranenie*), but it is at the same time comical.

This is a fundamental aspect of Kantor's work: creating an imaginary that is simultaneously comical and tragic.

The 40 minutes lasting spectacle, which was the result of this two-weeks-workshop, contained the following scenes:

-*Street view*: images as seen through windows, while walking on the street, e.g. a barber's shop where a female hairdresser combs the hair of a woman, three women who are preparing (counting, rolling) bandages in a hospital for an unknown purpose (but of course we'll know it very soon), a woman playing with sand (which turns out to be ashes) in a small sink container that is normally used to draw lines on a football field, and finally a miniature house, moving from left to right. All these images are allegories of the passing time. Important is that they are not shown once, but three times, and during the third repetition the essence of the allegory is slowly changing.

-*Heavy sacs*: the actors enter (as tragic clowns) with heavy sacs, walking rhythmically, and finally they will pass the sacs to their neighbouring fellow, till

they are exhausted. The action is absurd, it has no logical purpose. This 'absurd' idea was one of the main elements of Kantor's 'happenings'.

-*The girl with the ashes*: in this exhausted world appears the girl with the ashes. She walks on a straight line and returns, while she is singing one melody, one tone, simultaneously with Karkowski's music through the loudspeaker, going up and down, from very loud to barely hearable. She represents Death. At the end the girl quotes a text by Tadeusz Kantor about the condition of the actor. It underlines and punctuates the idea of the workshop, the 'étude', which is the starting point of this project.

-*Gaz war*: from the exhausted world erase three soldiers with gaz masks. They show a Schlemmer-like, fragmented, snatched dance and then they dye. Dying is essential in Kantor's theatre. It draws the line between the spectator and the actor's space, a line which cannot be crossed (as Kantor wrote in his manifesto of the Theatre of Death in 1975). At the same time two girls dance the classic ballet. They change into birds, overlooking the corpses of the soldiers.

-*The watch tower*: the actors/clowns/circus artists enter with a high ladder. They move from one place to another, and at every spot they standstill and they support the ladder so that one of them, a energetic man with binoculars, climbs to the top and overlooks the surroundings, but each time he sees (and says) 'NO-THING!' If another man tries to climb to the top, there is a tragical/funny competition between them. Finally they go off, and off-scene you can hear them once more moving, climbing, shouting 'NO-THING'.

-*The war movie*: the filmmaker enters and starts turning the old film bobbins/spools. The actors take their fake guns, preparing themselves are going to war, supported auditorily by powerful emotional music. They enter the battle, encouraged by the film director. And off course they have to die, but they are encouraged by the director to replay, to repeat. Kantor's ideas on reality and illusion are essential.

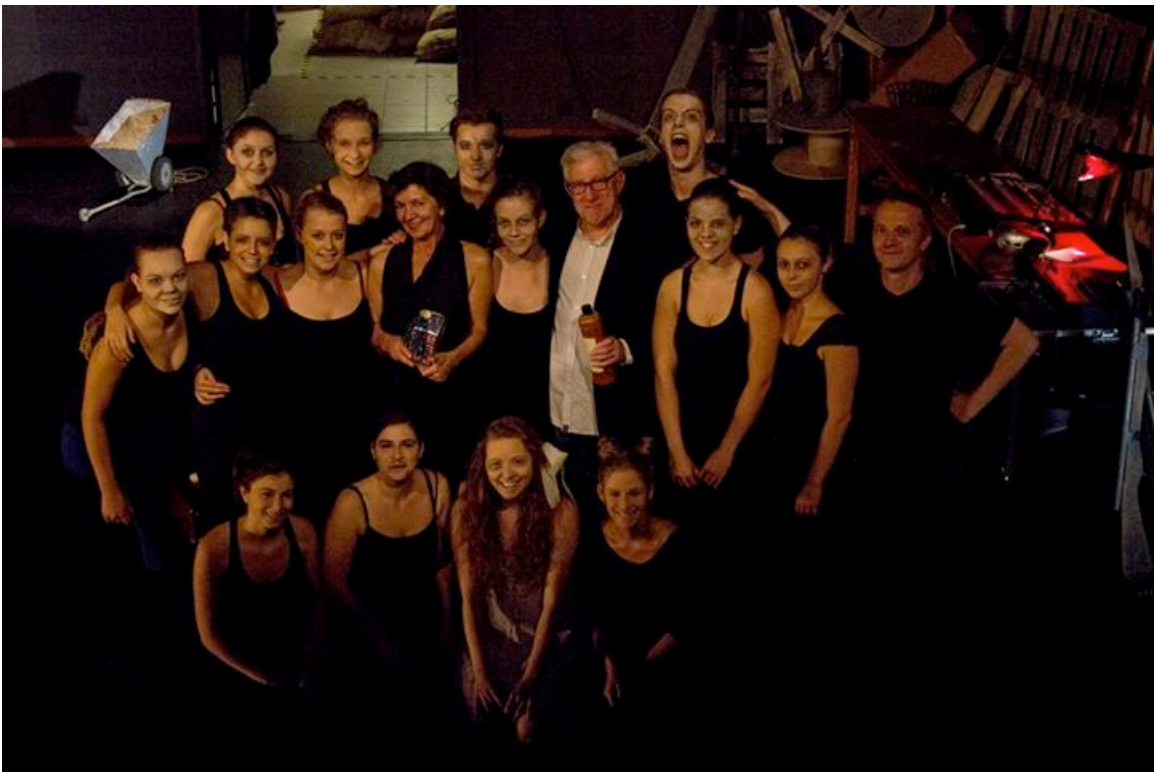
-*The library burns*: finally the sound of a collapsing building is heard. Ashes and papers fall down: the library burns. The theatre room is filled with ashes and destroyed books.

-*Students*: the last image: the actors who were playing the dying soldiers turn into students again, who read fragments from literature, newspapers, texts by Kantor.

According to Kantor's principles, light and music are very important. They are used in an equal way as the actors.

In the back of the stage lay some objects of the – so called – ‘lowest rank’; they are not used in the performance. But they served as a source of inspiration. They were all brought by the students (e.g. barbed wire). These objects are signals, symbols, they tell their own story.

*Noted by Johan de Boose
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This project is realized by: Kris Cuppens, Johan Knuts, Geert Kestens, Pascal Poissonnier, Stefanie Lambrechts, Kristof van Perre, Jos Verlinden, Johan de Boose and the students of Luca Drama Leuven. Many thanks to Andrzej and Teresa Welminski.