

PLAYING WITH KANTOR: BELGIUM. DOUBLENESS

At the centre of this year's Playing with Kantor Festival is a relatively young country (having achieved independence in 1830), one with difficult history and complex identity, one that fosters its separateness seeing it as a wealth in its own right – Belgium.

The theme of the festival, “doubleness,” is present at more than one level.

Three languages and three communities make Belgium; two of the communities make a point of underlining their separateness: (Dutch-speaking) Flanders and (mostly French-speaking) Wallonia. The small German-speaking group remains under the shadow of internal conflicts. The late nineteenth century witnessed a debate that took place in Belgian art press surrounding the “Belgian soul,” whether it existed, and – if so – whether it was a synthesis of the German and Latin souls, a peculiar amalgamation of the attributes of two significant cultures which were, at first sight, mutually exclusive: mysticism and rationalism.

Bilingualism and double identity are among the main points of reference for *Far from Linden*, based on Veronika Mabardi's play. Part a documentary, part a chronicle, the play depicts an impossible conversation between two Belgian women, the playwright's “dear departed” (to use the phrase from Kantor's theatre) grandmothers divided by language, culture and social class.

The complex, double identity is true also about two great figures in Belgian theatre – Maurice Maeterlinck, a Nobelist and creator of Symbolist drama, and Michel de Ghelderode (born Adhémar Martens) whose plays are evocative of painting. The first was a Fleming, the other did not speak Flemish but was brought up in a family that cherished Flemish folklore to the point that it played a formative role; the aura of the region of “northern fogs” significantly affected the literary output of both writers, even if both wrote in French. An ingenious conflation of the French language and Nordic nature largely determined the originality of their work. Significant in the context of this year's Playing with Kantor Festival is the phrase “the theatre of death” that was frequently used by critics in reference to Maeterlinck and Ghelderode's plays, while their works occupied a prominent role in the “Belgian school of the bizarre,” a trend in Belgian literature and art. The parallels with Tadeusz Kantor's theatrical work are quite striking.

The choices Kantor made at turnings points of his theatrical career were informed by the Belgian playwrights' plays and ideas about theatre. Here doubleness re-emerges: the creator of the *Dead Class* staged Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles* twice. Shortly before the outbreak of WWII, when he was about to finish his education at the Academy of Fine Arts in

Kraków, Kantor and his friends gave (possibly) one performance of the play as the Ephemeral Puppet Theatre. In the first production ever staged by the future theatre giant the roles were played by puppets animated by actors, and the Symbolist text was “clothed” in an avant-garde form inspired by Bauhaus. In this early work, Kantor pointed at the possibility for marrying Symbolism with avant-garde, a path that was followed in theatrical tradition, significantly by the Nouveau Théâtre. Almost fifty years passed before Kantor revisited Maeterlinck’s play in his cricotage called *The Machine of Love and Death* where actors were accompanied by large wooden marionettes. Thus a frame was formed connecting the beginnings of Tadeusz Kantor’s career in theatre with its final period. The Polish artist was familiar with Maeterlinck’s other plays and theoretical essays on theatre and greatly influenced by the Symbolist.

Both double and prominent will be Maeterlinck’s presence at this year’s Playing with Kantor Festival. Light will be shed, on the one hand, on his “theatre of androids” which, in this day and age can benefit from technological progress and take a highly advanced form within the theatre, and, on the other hand, on his concept of the “tragedy in everyday life.” When his Symbolist theatre first emerged towards the end of the 20th century, both these concepts were equally innovative. At the Festival we will be able not only to see the impact of Kantor’s both productions of Maeterlinck’s play on theatre, we will also discover how contemporary artists draw on Maeterlinck’s ideas, how his thought is rendered into virtual reality, and witness his ongoing influence on performative arts.

Kantor never staged any of Ghelderode’s plays although he intended to do so – in the early days of the Cricot 2 Theatre, in the second half of the 1950s before he chose Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz to be his fetish for years to come. Kantor got in touch with the Belgian writer and obtained his consent for putting on the play *The Actor Makes His Exit* – on condition that no cuts would be made in the original text. No wonder the play was not performed – Kantor’s approach to the text of any drama was anything but reverent.

Kantor’s fascination with Ghelderode’s theatre is by no means surprising, considering its Flemish explicitness, perverter corporeality, the aura of carnival that reverses the existing order, the mingling of the sacred with the profane, and unexpected transformations of space.

The existence of parallel worlds appears natural in Ghelderode's plays, and the plot tends to unfold at the intersection of reality and dream, which seems very much akin to Kantor's idea of theatre. Ghelderode's theatrical work, like Kantor's, directly references paintings – old Dutch and Flemish masters (Pieter Bruegel, Hieronymus Bosch, Jacob Jordaens) to contemporary compatriots (James Ensor).

The connection between theatre and painting is still a characteristic feature of the work of many significant figures in Belgian theatre, including those drawing inspiration from Kantor.

The Belgian version of the Playing with Kantor Festival follows a bidirectional path: we wish to highlight the influence that Belgian theatre exerted on Kantor's work, and to present how his theatrical achievement affected Belgian artists. In Belgium, Cricot 2's productions – especially *The Dead Class* (1977 in Ghent) and *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1984 in Louvain-la-Neuve) came as an aesthetic shock. They left an imprint on several generations of Belgian artists, starting from the so-called Flemish wave which set trends in the theatre from the last decades of the 20th century, including Jan Lauwers, Jan Fabre, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Luk Perceval. It is worth mentioning that the first two, like Kantor, were educated in fine arts and active in the art world not only as theatre creators but also as visual artists.

Some of the events in our programme will reintroduce the Polish public to the specific and unique nature of Belgian theatre, others will elucidate the connections between Tadeusz Kantor's theatre and Belgian culture. Apart from live and screened performances, the Playing with Kantor programme offers meetings with Belgian and Polish theatre artists and Polish researchers of Belgian culture, lectures on eminent Belgian playwrights, and a possibility for immersing oneself in virtual reality inspired by Kantor's ideas for the stage, while being an implementation of one of Maeterlinck's key concepts.

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