

“Each of us at Cricot-2 had their own personal Kantor”

**Interview with Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński,
renowned actors of the Cricot-2 Theatre**

EUGEN WOHL*

ABSTRACT: The present interview with Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński, actors of the Cricot-2 Theatre, has been conducted on April 8, 2015, one day before the presentation to the public of their three week workshop with the students of the Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj, Romania. The discussion is centered on the artists' collaboration with Tadeusz Kantor and the Cricot-2 Theatre, the history and stage practices of the Polish company, as well as on the artists' current and future projects.

Key words: Tadeusz Kantor, Cricot-2, Polish Theatre, theatre workshops.



Fig. 1: Teresa Welmińska (right) and Andrzej Welmiński (upper left) with actors of the production *Against Nothingness*, 2014. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński

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Teresa Welmińska is an actress and director. She is a graduate of the Higher Medical School for Nurses in Cracow. From 1976 to 1990 she worked with Tadeusz Kantor and performed in the following productions of the Cricot-2 Theatre: *The Dead Class*, *Where Are the Snows of Yesteryear*, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, *Let the Artists Die*, *I Shall Never Return* and *Today Is My Birthday*. Since 1992 she has been working on theatre productions and running theatre workshops along with Andrzej Welmiński.

Andrzej Welmiński graduated from the Faculty of Graphic Art of Cracow Academy of Fine Arts (degree at professor Kunz, 1977). He is involved in drawing, painting, photography, creates objects and installations, he is an actor and theatre director. A close collaborator of Tadeusz Kantor and member of the Cricot-2 Theatre, from 1973 to 1990 he was a part of all of Cricot-2's world famous theatre productions. Together with his wife, Teresa, he is currently giving lectures and conducting workshops on the history, theory (philosophy) and stage practices of the famous Polish theatre.

Eugen Wohl: *You met Tadeusz Kantor in 1970, but it took another three years for you to join the Cricot-2 Theater. How was your first encounter with Kantor and how did you eventually decided to join the company?*

A. W.: Yes, it was quite a distance. I was very young, at that time I was studying at the Secondary Art School in Cracow. By then, I was already quite positive I would become an artist, that this was something I was going to do for the rest of my life, and Krzysztofory and the group of artists gathered around that café represented the most radical center of modern art in Poland in that deep socialism time. It was also a window to the world; those people had the possibility to travel, to bring in new ideas from Western Europe, from other countries, from the USA, new artistic movements, and so on. Of course, as a young boy I was fascinated with all that and I used to go to all the exhibitions, all the theater performances and happenings, all the activities which were in that place. The other place was related to this one, but I learned of it only a little later, it was the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw. Those two places were connected by the same people, who were in charge of them. I soon realized that I would like to work with those people, it became almost imperative. So, one day I decided to ask Tadeusz if I could organize an exhibition of my works and he said "yes, yes, maybe". All his life he was very friendly and he advocated for a relation of partnership between artists; he never considered himself the only authority, and in conversation it seemed there was no age difference between us. Tadeusz was older than my parents, but the relation, contact and mutual understanding

between us was very simple and easy, and so was my starting point. During our first meetings and talks I was allowed to be there with the other members of the group, I was allowed to sit at the same table with them and it was really interesting, because the discussions at the table were really fantastic. So, for me it was something amazing. Very soon, me and another friend of mine, Romek Siwulak, we started working together and we made a happening. Kantor was invited, but we didn't expect him to come, because it was an outdoor location, on a huge meadow in Cracow. And yet he came and a few years later he wrote his description of that happening. The happening was called *Morning Happening or The Yellow Suitcase*. We started to make exhibitions of our own works, and in those first few years it was mainly collaboration concerning the art of painting. But of course, everything was mixed already by then, so when the performance *The Water Hen* returned from Edinburgh, I recall, I was helping with the reconstruction of some objects that were usually damaged during the tour. So, at the time, I participated in all the rehearsals. And so it is on my encounters with Tadeusz Kantor those days. You asked also how I got into the theater, didn't you?

E. W.: *Yes, please tell us a little bit about your transition to theater.*



Fig. 2: A. Welmiński: *yellow suitcase – documentation of the morning happening / 1970*. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński



Fig. 3: A. Welmiński: *documentation of the morning happening / 1970*. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński

A. W.: Some actors couldn't go on the tour to Edinburgh, and therefore my first role was in *Lovelies and Dowdies*, but before that I was designing, together with some of my friends, all the signs that were put on doors and on huge billboards during the performance. My role was "The Gipsy", I was playing the violin in *Lovelies and Dowdies* and after that I played "Sir Grant" who seduces Princess Zofia, the Duchess of Kremlin, with a very special aphrodisiac, some pills he produced himself and which proved to be deadly poisonous. So this was my first theater role.

E. W.: *Teresa, you decided to join the Cricot-2 Theater in 1976, but before that you prepared for a different career, as a student of the Medical High School in Cracow. How did you make this transition from medicine to theatre?*

T. W.: Yes, it was the Higher Medical School for Nurses. I was simply seduced by the performance *The Dead Class* at the Krzysztofory Gallery. So I started going to this café. As the stage was nearby, I had the opportunity to listen to these very interesting conversations about art, about theatre, taking place between Kantor and Kazimierz Mikulski, Zbigniew Gostomski, Janina Kraupe-Świdorska and other great artists who were working in the theater, apart from developing their own, individual artistic projects, and who were all connected in some way to the Grupa Cracowska (The Cracow Group). I also participated in those discussions mentioned. One day, in his studio, Tadeusz Kantor was talking about his work and asked me if I would like to play the role of the female sutler in *The Dead Class*. Sutlers were the women who used to follow the army during wartime. Some of them were the wives of the soldiers, others were just prostitutes, but they would always follow the soldiers everywhere and assist them with cooking and other chores. They were also wartime nurses and, when necessary, they would behave as mourners for the deceased soldiers. So Kantor wanted this character to convey the multiple facets of such a person. I succeeded in creating this character to Kantor's liking and this was the beginning of my collaboration with Cricot-2 Theater.

E. W.: *So this was the beginning of the journey... My questions from now on are for both of you. You mentioned the fact that during the Communist Regime in Poland, Cricot-2 Theater somehow had the possibility to travel abroad. How was the relationship with the authorities and how did they perceive the activity of the Cricot-2 Theater?*

A.W. & T.W.: The members of the Cricot-2 Theater and most of the members of The Cracow Group, not all of them however, – this happened in the 50s, before I met Kantor – were the few artists in Poland who totally refused to adhere to Social Realism, which in those times was an impossible task. As a

result, most of them became outsiders, nobody could make an exhibition, they were frozen. Kantor was one of them. So, when things began to liberalize in the late 50's and in the beginning of the 60s, to such an extent that even jazz could be played, they resumed their activity. But before that they had basically been a reaction group. But your question was how it was possible for them to travel? At the time these artists were already well-known, even earlier they used to travel to Paris, and Kantor himself went to Paris and New York. Of course, it was always difficult to obtain a passport because it could only be done through the ministry, and in some occasions his passport request was even denied. So it was not easy. But I think that one of the most important persons involved in Cricot's possibility to travel abroad was Richard Demarco. He wanted to invite Eastern European theatre artists to the Edinburgh Festival, artists completely unknown in the Western world, and he travelled a lot to the socialist countries in his pursuit. In Poland he visited Foksal Gallery in Warsaw and Wiesław Borowski told him he should see the Cricot Theater in Cracow. He came then and saw *The Water Hen* and he decided that he had to have this performance in the festival. But since the ministry had the final word, it said “no, we do not know of such a theater, but if you would like to have an alternative theater piece in your festival we suggest you invite Grotowski”. However, by that time he was already quite accustomed to Polish cultural life and relations and he answered “No, I would like to invite only Cricot-2 Theatre or none.” So, finally, after a lot of discussions and impediments, he managed to invite Cricot-2 and this was the beginning. After Edinburgh great many other invitations came from other important capital cities and important festivals and it became impossible for the Polish government to refuse them. Therefore, it's safe to say that the pressure from the outside made everything possible.

E.W.: So *The Water Hen* represented and international opening for Cricot-2. However, it was 1975's *The Dead Class* which represents a defining moment in the theatre company's success. While working on this production, did you have the feeling, did Kantor have the feeling, that it was going to be such a worldwide phenomenon, that it would have such an enormous success?

A.W. & T.W.: Yes, we had such a feeling. We already knew a lot of events that had happened all over the world, we were familiar with the main tendencies in art and theatre. Yes, we were absolutely conscious that it was something very new, very special, a totally different way of thinking about art, so it was not surprising when a big group of AICA (The International Association of Art Critics) members, invited to see the performance by the Ministry of Culture, asked if there was any possibility to see the rehearsals – at the time the

performance was not finished, so we presented only half of *The Dead Class* – and they were bewildered, they were shocked with what they saw and we became sure the production would be very successful. It was something different, it was not even theatre, and we presented it as something different than theatre, it was something closer to visual art, but not a *happening* which had been one of the former kantorian creative stages, it was much more like a spiritualistic séance but held in reality. And also in that séance participated persons who were no longer with us, e.g. Mózgowicz (Tumor Brainiowicz). So it was a play with them, it was not theatre, it was a different genre.



Fig. 4: A. Welmiński: *Chilled one*, from the cycle: *Fairy Tales*/1985. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński



Fig. 5: Andrzej Welmiński: *small wooden crucifix...*/1990. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński

E.W.: *And did you know then what that different genre was, or did you just feel that it was not theatre? How was the production process, did you start from the idea that "this is not going to be theatre"?*



Fig. 6: Andrzej Wełmiński: Bike from the album “trumpf, trumpf”.
Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Wełmiński

A.W. & T.W.: No, no, from the beginning and when I became a member of the company, the Cricot-2 Theatre was something different in comparison to the other theatres, even alternative theatres. Now I think it was something linked to Witkiewicz’s idea of non-representational theatre. From the very early beginnings and from Kantor’s writings we knew that what we were doing was not the representation of any characters, it was not staging literature, but something more, a very special relationship with the text – the text was not eliminated, Kantor wanted the text there – which was considered a very important element, but only that, an element equal to other elements and the performance itself. This was true from the very early beginnings, for *The Water Hen* and *Lovelies and Dowdies*, but much more so for *The Dead Class*. The production was an independent work, but very collective at the same time. As for myself all this was much closer then to what was happening in the field of Visual Arts, like Joseph Beuys’ works, like some events from the great many artistic movements of the 70’s, like *Body Art*, which later became known as the *Performance Art*, or *Conceptual Art*, which was a very important movement. It was like translating a lot of modern, radical artistic ideas into the field of theatre. You have to remember that Witkiewicz himself was first of all a painter and he was absolutely against conventional theatre. In one of his writings he opposed his own idea of theatre

to Stanislavsky's ideas, which were very well known and important even before the war, saying that he refused the idea of representation, of experienced character and, instead he was much more interested in constructing forms and in formal thinking about theatre. So, I think those ideas, related to the Dada movement and to Surrealism, were also fundamental for the Cricot-2 theatre. They developed it and declared that they were doing an independent theatre and that they were seeking for the language of independent theatre, a pure theatre language which was independent from literature, as it was not a function of literature. Kantor was a follower of this idea and he was developing it throughout all his life.

E.W.: *You have mentioned the fact that it was individual, yet still collective work, and in saying so, do you mean that each of you would work on his own character and present it at the rehearsals? How were you developing your characters, for instance?*

A.W. & T.W.: It is a little bit more complicated, I think, because this collective character didn't result just from the fact that each of us was creating his own character which he or she would present to the group. The collective way of our work also meant investigating ideas. During our talks, brainstorming sessions we would call them today, some new ideas appeared. For example, one of the first ideas of *The Dead Class* appeared from a joke, let's call it. We had been talking about a lot of theatre productions which appeared all over the world, youth theatre especially, student theatre, and one of us, I don't remember now who because we were a big group, said "but maybe, in contrast, we can make a theatre of the old". And the rest of us said "maybe very old people", "maybe dying people", "maybe already dead people", so this was the starting point. Very often jokes and such discussions used to become the starting points from which the artistic ideas started to grow up. Our work was also related to many other aspects, like creating objects. Certain objects were created by some us, others were designed by Tadeusz and still the others were found somewhere and brought in. For example, in *Let the Artists Die* the idea of changing Veit Stoss' character into a carpenter resulted from the fact that we brought from Teresa's grandfather, who was a carpenter in a small village, very old and beautiful carpenter tools which he was still using in his profession. We brought them and showed them to Kantor and he said "yes, we have to change the character of Veit Stoss, he will no longer be an artist, he will be a carpenter". So it was like that, every single element was welcomed and processed, let's say, in a different way.

E.W.: *The image that most critics see in these performances is that of an amazing effect of formlessness, the productions give the impression that they constantly change form. Of course, that's only a feeling. How much work goes behind creating such an effect of ever-changing form?*

A.W. & T.W.: We used to work on a performance for a long time. Sometimes it was several months of work. In most of those performances there were great many simultaneous actions, so when viewing the performance for the first time the spectators might be focused on some actions and the next time they would see, much to their surprise, the other actions. Very often the spectators used to come several times to see the performances, because this way, by observing more and more elements, they could acquire a deeper understanding of the performance. This is one reason. The other reason is that our work would also presuppose a kind of improvisation, which was usually on a certain topic, because this is the way it usually is at the beginning. But in the process of the performance construction with the elements more and more bound together everything was becoming much more orchestrated. So, it was an orchestration. It was very difficult and very similar to what we are going through now with our students. We are going to put together a series of individual elements. We can say that our work was similar to jazz music. In jazz bands, sometimes big jazz bands, the structure is as follows: there is solo music, the solo instrument, and there is the background. After a second there is a shift, another instrument becomes the solo and the rest represent the background, it is a kind of dialogue. We used that model of jazz band very often to make this kind of orchestration. So, it was the rhythm of all of us, because there was no score, no script, this was just like during the jam sessions, where different musicians from different countries meet for the first time, and they can play their own instruments and they can make a concerto together, an orchestration based on their common language. So it was like that, each of us with his own instrument, his own element was doing this kind of orchestration at the end. From 1977 onwards, the company had not changed, so we knew each other in almost a telepathic way, and we could anticipate the answer, the response of our colleagues in a certain situation, like a very, very good orchestration. Therefore, it was even possible to make small changes from one performance to the other, a sort of inside game, not necessarily recognizable to the audience, but which was interesting for us, the collaboration that existed between us.

E.W.: *And in this artistic dialogue, Tadeusz Kantor was always physically present. Please tell us a little bit about the importance of his presence on stage.*



Fig. 7: Andrzej Welmiński: "Apocrypha"-individual exhibition Krzysztofory Gallery, Cracow. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński



Fig. 8: A. Welmiński: *apocrypha*, 1993. Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński

A.W. & T.W.: Yes, his discovery, his decision to be present on stage was very clever and important. It started during the *Happening* period and in his theatre he was present on stage for the first time in *The Water Hen*. But in his *happenings*, he was one of the most important European *Happening* creators, as the author of his own *happenings* he was the main actor, he took part in all of them. So probably this tendency to be on stage with his actors derived from his *happenings*. In the further development stages of the Cricot-2 Theatre the purpose of his presence on stage had changed of course, but he was present on stage in all of his performances up to *Today is My Birthday*. Unfortunately he died during the rehearsals of this last performance, but his presence was still symbolically very important, because this last performance, *Today is My Birthday* was about his presence.

E.W.: Yesterday, during the public meeting at the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre celebrating the centennial anniversary of Kantor's birth, you spoke about the fact, and I thought it was a splendid image, that all the members of the Cricot-2 Theatre had "their own personal Kantor". Please tell us something about "your personal Kantor".

A.W. & T.W.: Like Teresa says, I think that each of us at the Cricot-2 Theatre had his own personal Kantor, his own image of Kantor. Because each of us, each of his friends and collaborators, understood him filtered through his own personality, depending on the relationship each of us had with Tadeusz

Kantor. These relationships varied for different people, so even today there are very different opinions on Tadeusz. Some might say that he was cruel, that he was very authoritarian, but for Teresa it was one of the greatest honors to have met him and to have had the opportunity to collaborate closely with him. We were both very close to Tadeusz and his wife Maria, and we became very close friends, spending even our free time together, going together on holidays. He was there when our children were born, he was close to our family. Even Andrzej Kowalczyk, Teresa’s brother, joined the Cricot-2 Theatre. So, we were a family inside the Cricot family, to some extent like a Circus family (*they laugh*).

E.W.: *That’s a very beautiful image!*

A.W. & T.W.: But there were other families as well, Mira Rychlicka and her husband Stanisław Rychlicki were with the company from the very beginning, from 1955. Very often their son would accompany us on tours. Also there were the twins Lesław and Waław Janicki and their wives, who used to travel together with us, Jacek Stokłosa and his wife. So it was like that.

E.W.: *You mentioned the Cricot-2 family, and I have noticed in your biographies that after 1991 you mention some productions with the members of the Cricot-2 Theatre, but never with the Cricot-2 Theatre itself. Did the activity of the Cricot-2 Theatre come to an end after Tadeusz Kantor’s death in 1990?*

A.W. & T.W.: Yes, this is a very difficult question and a difficult answer. Because we did want to continue. We were a very strong group of artists and we wanted to continue our activity. But there were some forces, I don’t know where from, some forces from institutions – as you know, Cricot-2 was never an institution – and it was also related to the political changes taking place at the time. So, the subject of political change became very important. The Ministry of Culture had absolutely no interest to continue. Previously, the original Cricoteka was called “The Center of the Cricot-2 Theatre”. Later the mention “Archives” was added to its name, but its main function when Kantor was still alive was to be a mediating institution between the terrible bureaucratic machinery and art. We had always been independent, free, not affiliated to any institution, today we would say we used to function as freelancers, without any connection to an institution, just us, independent artists. Very soon, I don’t remember exactly, maybe one year after Kantor’s death, the ministry changed the function of Cricoteka and it became a museum. As a result, it was no longer functioning as a center for the Cricot-2 Theatre. We lost all financial support. Also, the other

opposing forces emerged. There were voices saying that we shouldn't continue the activity of the theatre after Kantor's death. Regardless, without any financial support, just self-financing, the group started to work together, against those forces, against the stupidity of critics. The first thing we made was a homage for Kantor – *Lesson of Anatomy according to Kantor* - and it was a very important moment because it proved that we could work together as a group. This was followed by our first important production, *Maniacs or Their Master's Voice*, which was with twelve members of the Cricot-2 company, as well as some new members. It was a success, we received invitations from many festivals, we travelled a lot with that very important performance. Later, also without any financial support, we started working on our next production, *Amerika or Don't Look Back*, related to Kafka's *Amerika*, but adapted to our own reality. It was a new step, a very deep performance, a complex machinery, because the action was set not on stage, but on a system of balconies, a special construction with a lot of traps. After that all became even more difficult, as there was less money, there were less possibilities, and we started to work for the other theatre companies, but for us it was interesting to see how we could spread those ideas, how we could transfer them to the other theatre troupes. This was an endeavor full of surprises, but let's just say it's quite another story (*Laughs*). But we regarded it as an opportunity to share, to proliferate knowledge about Cricot-2.

E.W.: *And to this day, you and Teresa have constantly tried to share, to spread the Cricot-2 method. How do you find audiences which have not had direct contact with the Cricot-2 Theatre responding to its legacy? From your experience of working with students, how do you see them responding to this kind of theatrical experience?*

A.W. & T.W.: Like Teresa is saying, we are completely devoted to the group of people we are working with. We are at their disposal. We give them our recollections, our experience and knowledge. And we understand this work both as a collaboration with them and, at the same time, as a part of our creativity. It is like Joseph Beuys said: "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art". It's beautiful, isn't it? And he was a great teacher. Usually the results of our workshops, cannot be called productions, they are something else. To our understanding and consideration the effect of our collaboration is a part of our creativity, as well. In this respect, this relationship is very similar to the one we had with Tadeusz. Not a professor-student relationship, but a partnership, we are at the same level. At the beginning neither we nor they know what it all would be like. Our work is mainly about opening the imagination of our participants and giving them the possibility to

translate their own private images and experiences into universal images, to create a universal image. There are many different methods available, like working with metaphors, and so on. We all begin our work almost as blind men, not knowing what lies ahead, but at a certain moment we begin to understand each other and to share the common language, not a verbal one, but the one of mutual understanding. And it is a great satisfaction for us to reach that moment.

E.W.: *We are one day before the presentation of your work with the students from the Faculty of Theatre and Television of Cluj. Can you tell us a little bit about how you collaborated with the Romanian students and what we will see tomorrow?*

A.W. & T.W.: I think that just now we have reached that moment and it becomes very, very interesting. The result of our work, of our process, it would be too much to call it a performance, derives from a lot of very private stories, very often from personal stories, just like Tadeusz Kantor's *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* emerged from his childhood, but there are many such examples in universal culture, like Bruno Schulz, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, many painters, and so on. So, these stories are now coming together, are becoming a unity to some extent. The title is *Croquis from Transylvania or the Melancholy of the Black Egg*, because we are in Transylvania. This is our first visit here. There are many popular images of Transylvania, but at the same time it is still very exotic, in our point of view. Very often in our work we try to include the local particularities, the local spirit, fairy tales. In this way the result is a unique experience, impossible to repeat anywhere else.

E.W.: *Please tell us, what are the future projects of Andrzej and Teresa Wetmiński? Where will you conduct your next workshops?*

A.W. & T.W.: After Cluj we are going to work in Chişinău, in frame of the Class Fest International Festival. Then to Sofia and a few days after to Palermo. We have also been invited to La Mamma Umbria in Spoleto, Italy and Cricoteka in Cracow is planning a two week session of workshops with public presentations in the new location of the center. There we are going to work together with Andzik Kowalczyk, Teresa's brother, and some old friends from Cricot.

E.W.: *Thank you very much for this interview!*



Fig. 9: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński
Copyright: Teresa and Andrzej Welmiński

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