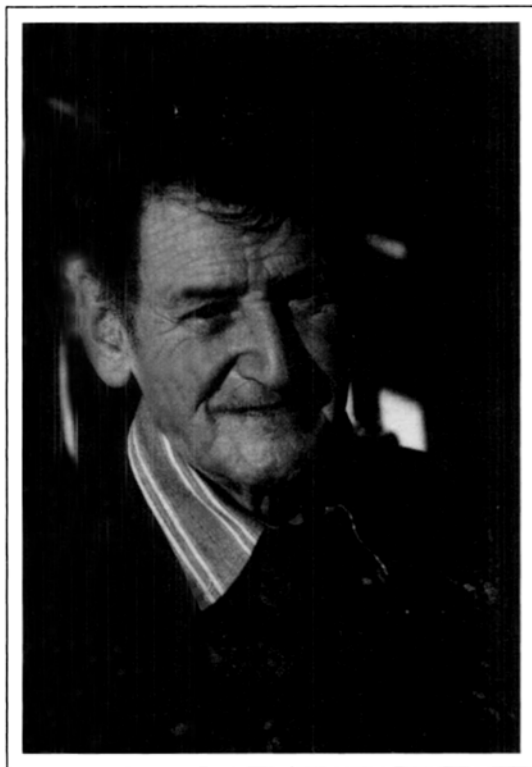
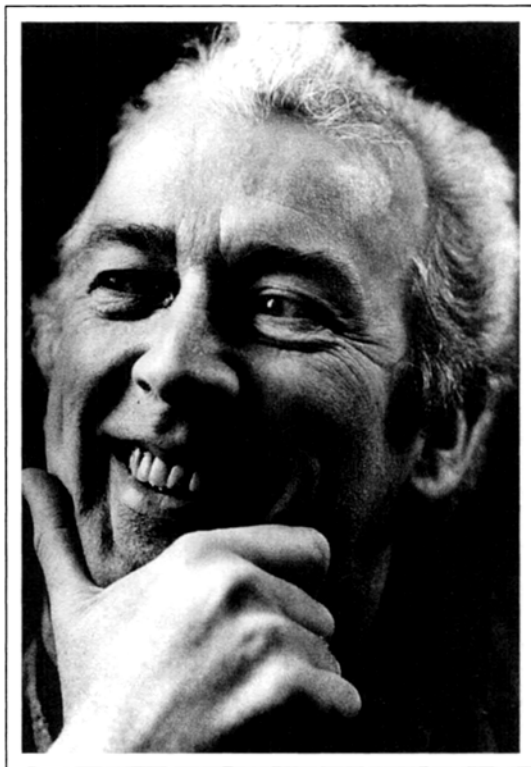


In Memoriam



Jan Kott
1914–2001



John McGrath
1935–2002

Simon Trussler

Grieving

UNDER THE TITLE of 'Old Friends', Clive Barker mourned in the first issue of NTQ the passing of two men who, in very different ways, had devoted their lives to the service of the theatre – the American director Alan Schneider and the Scottish scholar who gave academic drama an international dimension, James Arnott. Both had been good friends and contributors to the old *Theatre Quarterly*.

And now, two more old friends to mourn, yet whose lives and achievements must also be celebrated. Jan Kott died, after a long

illness, on 22 December, at the age of eighty-seven. He was the only one of our original advisory editors still on the masthead after one hundred and ten issues of the two journals. John McGrath died of leukaemia one month later, on 23 January, at the age of sixty-six. Though never formally associated with either journal, his contributions lent vigour to our pages, and in many ways his vision of theatre and its potential for generating social change was one we shared.

We plan a fuller consideration of the life and achievements of John McGrath in a future issue, but meanwhile include here one of the last extended pieces he wrote, aptly entitled 'Theatre and Democracy', in which he sets out his vision of theatre for the new

century. We are able to pay more immediate tribute to Jan Kott because, sadly aware that he did not have long to live, Jan gave to Allen Kuharski a final interview with the express wish that it should be published in *New Theatre Quarterly*. In that, we take great pride, as we do also in the number of major pieces of his work which first saw print in the journal, which we record on page 120.

Strangely, or maybe not, in the interview Jan talks of all those parts of his life which he excluded from the autobiographical *Still Alive*, but says little about the wartime years which are the shifting frame for that book. The interview will thus provide a valuable context for readers of the autobiography; but for the moment it is enough just to hear again the voice, to share the memories – and to reflect on the variability of memory itself, which was a recurring theme of *Still Alive*.

Though almost a generation separated Jan, ripe in years, from John McGrath, taken prematurely in his mid-sixties, war or preparations for war shaped the lives of both. John was one of those children of the 'thirties who not only lived through childhood in the shadow of the war, but who then had two more years of youth blighted by National Service at the height of the Cold War.

Yet John McGrath's social awareness was shaped and honed by that experience. And he became one of the politicized writers of the late 'fifties whose work made the theatre a magnetic force for many who were (like me) only a few years his junior. While some contemporaries slid into middle-aged comforts and compromises, John forsook the secure future that would surely have been open to the co-creator of *Z-Cars*, and took up the struggle to bring a popular theatre to the working class. His understanding of other sources of traditional working-class entertainment led to disputes with those such as Arnold Wesker whom he believed to treat popular culture with condescension. Yet their approaches were in truth complementary, for both were rooted in the recognition that ordinary people were being deprived of their cultural inheritance in ways which threatened to enervate the soul as other deprivations once sapped bodily health and strength.

While John McGrath took his theatre to the people in the face of an institutional disinterest or outright hostility that now seems almost criminal, Jan Kott had long withdrawn from a public arena in which institutional hostility could criminalize its outcasts. But his very different genius was also rooted in the recognition that the culture of the past is no dead thing, but connects vibrantly with our concerns. From the Greeks to the Elizabethans to the absurdists, he made connections of astonishing pertinence from a conviction born equally of erudition and experience.

Only once was I privileged to see Jan as a classroom teacher, when, during my decade of academic respectability, I persuaded him to come and talk with a group of students who were clearly awed at the prospect of meeting with so renowned a scholar. In the event, they were charmed by this gentle, twinkling, quirkily humorous figure, slightly hunched, whose very hesitancy in English made him the more anxious to be sure he had grasped a student's point – and which also betokened that special humility born of a life fully lived. If he twinkled a little more brightly at the prettier questioners, it was with the charm of one for whom flirtation was part *politesse*, part performance art.

For all that gentlemanly flirtation, his life was built on the rock of his sixty-year marriage with Lidia, and I suspect that he lost something of the will to live when her own death came just over a year before his own. My last glimpse of Jan was of his taking Lidia's arm to mount the stairs of the little Polish-run hotel in Covent Garden where he stayed when in London. Few casual observers of this frail, devoted couple could have guessed through what fires of war and conflicts of ideology their marriage had endured.

And John would this year have celebrated forty years of marriage with his partner in the fullest sense, Elizabeth MacLennan. To be thus reflecting on two such different theatre artists is a sad accident of chronology; but to recognize connections is to celebrate the faith in humanity which, despite cause enough for disillusion, they shared, and expressed in contrasting but equally valuable ways. Their work and their spirit will endure.

Robert Brustein

The Lived Experience

JAN KOTT was a seminal critical mind of the twentieth century and one of the last of its theatre intellectuals. I mourn him as a friend and colleague. It is now almost half a century since this Polish expatriate first published *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, a book that exploded our thinking about how Shakespeare could be produced on stage. It was Kott's habit to urge contemporary parallels on the classics, not through specious updating but through lived experience – in his case, a life under the Nazi occupation and later under Communism.

Kott thus opened up new possibilities for hundreds of classical directors, first with his insights into Shakespeare and then with all his subsequent work on the Greeks and the French classical dramatists. To him, every great playwright was our contemporary, and it was the obligation of the theatre to make every play as startling and unpredictable as it was on the day it was written. Artaud's battle cry, 'No more masterpieces', might very well have been Kott's. But whereas Artaud wanted to return the theatre to a ritual of blood and cruelty, Kott continually tried to rejuvenate great drama through deeper imaginative probes, fresher intelligence, and more vital scholarship animated by genuine experience.

We have all been the beneficiaries of his incisive, profound, original thinking. To speak personally, Kott had an immense influence on our work at Yale during the year he was in residence there in the mid 'sixties. His heavily accented voice with its comically rising inflections was sometimes a subject of parody, but it was the medium of extraordinary insights, both in the classroom and on the stage. His inspiration continued, not only at the Yale Repertory Theatre but later at the American Repertory Theatre – and everywhere that classical theatre was practised. There are scores of European, American, and Irish directors – Peter Brook, Andrei Serban, Robert Woodruff, JoAnne Akalaitis,

Marco Martinelli, Charles Marowitz, Declan Donnellan, Ariane Mnouchkine, Yuri Yuremin, Elizabeth LeCompte, Des MacAnuff, Adrian Hall, Bob McGrath, François Rochaix, Marcus Stern (the list is too long to be completed here) – who owe a creative debt to Jan Kott's unique work.

The twentieth century has often been called the century of the director. What is often overlooked is that it was also the century of the classical playwright, in that a host of neglected or overlooked plays of the past were brought to public attention by interpretive artists under Kott's influence. All those interested in a more penetrating, more serious, more daring theatre art owe a debt to this unique man of the theatre.

Charles Marowitz

Remembering Jan

EVERY SO OFTEN, usually on a weekend, I would meet Jan Kott in Santa Monica for a coffee and a bagel. Having been weaned in the seedier cafés of Paris and Warsaw, this was a cosy reminder of the bohemian life he led before becoming an academic, a critic, a Resistance-fighter and an *émigré*.

The conversation would usually embrace a critique of contemporary events, the glaring absurdity of certain clownish politicians, the pomposity of public figures who were promoting personal agendas which should have been grossly embarrassing to them but clearly were not. His contempt for these things was invariably free of rancour. In its place, there was a kind of twinkling tolerance of man's worst behaviour predictably living up to its lowest expectations. Where I might rail and vituperate at some gross injustice or corrupt practice, Jan would smile and brush it aside with an indulgent shrug that would imply: 'What do you expect? After all, these are human beings.'

It was the philosophic detachment, I later realized, of someone who, during and after the war, had seen the grisliest sights, the most bestial atrocities, and had managed to

assimilate them. With Jan, when you got past the most egregious examples of man's inhumanity to man, you reached a kind of absurdist plane where things became, if not exactly forgivable, at least not surprising.

Towards the end, I had lost contact with him. I'd been told he had gone back to Poland; others reported he had moved in with family members in the East. All queries at Stony Brook, New York, where he had spent over twenty years, led nowhere. When I returned from England in January, I finally found him in an obit in the *New York Times*.

Craving contact, I sat down and re-read his autobiography, *Still Alive*, and for a few hours he *was* still alive. I remember when I first read the book how I had kicked myself for obtuseness. In my meetings with him in Santa Monica, I would always excavate that endlessly fertile mind for insights and perceptions about Shakespeare. But we almost never alluded to his personal life – the subject of this book. Instead of discussing gender theories or medieval pageantry, I should have been quizzing him about the Polish Resistance movement, the reality of living under Nazi and then Soviet occupation, of being displaced from one corner of Europe to another. Instead of learning first hand about what had been really vital in his life, I contented myself with critical *aperçus*.

And so, for me, the autobiography served a double purpose. It opened up a dimension of the man that I knew virtually nothing about and, in so doing, gave me a Jan Kott who was even more precious than he was before. Secondly, it took the abstractions and clichés of the war years and translated them into vivid, unforgettable terms. What made *Still Alive* such a compelling read was that Kott had, from his earliest days through the rigours of some sixty years, always been bristlingly, electrically, dramatically 'alive', and it was the quality of that liveliness that conferred such magnetism to the book. He is to be celebrated not for his essays or his criticism, his scholarship or his erudition, but for the dynamic quality of his life, for 'the dangers (he) had passed' and the unquenchable sense of irony which had seen him through the worst days of the last century.

Preparing the book on which we were collaborating – *Roar of the Canon: Kott and Marowitz on Shakespeare* (Applause Books, 2002) – I went often to his almost barren flat in Santa Monica, and with the tape-recorder perched on a plastic table between us dredged up gold dust from the canon. Jan knew that temperamentally we came from very different worlds and that our approach to Shakespeare was, in some ways, diametrically opposed. He had inculcated the collected works into his bloodstream and saw them as a gushing river with innumerable tributaries. He knew that I had rejigged them, bust them apart, refashioned them in ways that, had he been still around, might have sent Shakespeare round the bend.

But opposed as he was to deconstruction, Jan accepted my collages as yet another permutation that the plays were capable of; and our dialogues, although probing and provocative, were predicated on his conception of the canon. I wilfully subdued any ideological opposition that might be welling up in my breast or agitating my brain. Gradually, I found myself drawn into his proprietary passion for the plays, coming to see them entirely from a Kottian viewpoint, which almost shamed my tinkering and recensions. For hours at a time, I was diverted from rough seas into a cove inhabited only by Shakespeare and Kott, becalmed and beguiled, ultimately disarmed. Swimming in a Kottish inlet was like luxuriating in medicinal spawaters. You always came out refreshed.

He had been fragile since by-pass surgery in the 'nineties, and one early morning, after a particularly close call, when I went to see him at St John's Hospital in Santa Monica, I remember him saying to me, 'Charles, it is so easy to die.' It was the observation of a man who, with the same critical detachment that scanned classical texts, was informing me of some shrewd nuance he had gleaned about the human condition. It was impersonal, wholly dispassionate. Having lost his treasured wife Lidia in 2000 after a marriage of over sixty years, I hope that, at the end, he still found it 'easy'. It is a passing that will never be 'easy' for those who knew him and loved him.

Jan Kott

in conversation with Allen J. Kuharski

Raised and Written in Contradictions: the Final Interview

Jan Kott invited me to conduct this formal 'final interview' early in 2001, after I shared with him a draft of the essay 'Arden and Absolute Milan' that follows. The essay and the interview were the culmination of over fifteen years of friendship and intermittent writing about Kott, which had extended to the translation of his works. I first met Jan and his wife Lidia at Berkeley in 1986, when they travelled from Los Angeles to see a production of Tadeusz Rózewicz's *White Marriage* that I had directed and designed there, which proved the start of a long personal and professional relationship. I interviewed Kott at his modest apartment in Santa Monica, California, over the weekend of 31 March to 2 April 2001. Lidia had passed away the summer before, and his own health was extremely frail, requiring twenty-four-hour care by a group of charming and attentive Polish-speaking women. He shared his apartment after Lidia's death with an energetic black-and-white kitten, whose energy and mischief amused him greatly. Born in the Chinese Year of the Tiger, he had a cereal box decal of Tony the Tiger stuck next to the name-plate on his apartment door (the name Kott also means 'cat' in Polish). He was not able to move about without a nurse and a walking frame, but he nevertheless insisted on inviting me out to dinner in a local Polish restaurant, where he heartily ate a meal of steak tartar and *flaczki* (Polish tripe soup), accompanied by a shot or two of vodka. His nurse, who was with us, seemed amused but not at all astonished by this performance. Afterwards, he admitted this was his first meal out of the house in months – it was possibly his last. In spite of his physical weakness, Kott's mind remained lucid, and he had clearly rehearsed the interview extensively before our meetings in person. Most of the questions I had prepared proved unnecessary. What is published here is culled from approximately five hours of taped material, which Kott later edited along with myself. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my Philadelphia colleague, Helena Morawska White, for her time and energy in transcribing the taped interviews in Polish, and to Michał Zadara for his careful work in translating the unedited text into English.

ALLEN J. KUHARSKI

Can we begin the interview?

One . . . two . . . three. . . You only live once!

I still cannot come to terms with my age. Very frequently I get the feeling that I have far too many years behind me. Sometimes it seems to me that I am still eighty years old, only to have someone remind me that I am eighty-seven. That is a big chunk of time. . . . The past is immense. Where should I begin with this long life?

The year I was born, 1914, the First World War began. My father was not a devout Jew, and did not have me circumcised. In 1920, when I was about six years old, Poland reappeared. At that point my father, who was very wise, said: 'In Poland, a boy will not

have a future if he is Jewish. He has to be baptized.' So my father said to my mother: 'Let's baptize the boy. And you convert to Catholicism.' So from the beginning, I had a father at home who stayed with his old religion and a mother who was baptized.

During religion classes at school at that time, Jews would stand on the side (there were three or four Jewish boys in my class). A person of the Jewish religion was considered a Jew. People who were baptized were seen as Poles. . . . During this period, there was no anti-Semitism of the sort that began later, based on race. That began after Hitler. Only later, when I began to study at the University of Warsaw (in 1932), did the gradual influence of Hitlerism begin to move

the traditional right-wing views towards a racist and nationalist orientation. There was a huge group of young people called the 'Great Poland Camp' [*Obóz wielkiej Polski*], who carried small old-fashioned swords and took over the university. Two or three days a year, there were 'Days without Jews' organized at the university. Young people would shout: 'Beat the Jews, and screw their girls!' That's when I realized that I was a Catholic. Unto myself. For others, I would remain a Jew.

There were two academic groups at the university then without the *numerus nullus*.¹ One was the Polish literature group, a very strong group, and very vibrant academically, which formed me in a certain sense. And the other academic group, a group that did not have the *numerus nullus*, that was the Positive Sociology Society directed by Professor Czarnowski, who was very radical.

University and Intellectual Influences

My university education was rather strange. I was officially in the Department of Law, where I passed all of my exams easily since I had the gift of perfect recall. But something else actually interested me. I was interested in the humanities, in the broad sense: in literature and literary criticism.

This group of Polish literature scholars first introduced me to the modern theoretical problems of literary language. The Russian formalists were starting to be influential then, and that influence reached us as well. We resisted all of the methods that we were taught, that is to say biographical methods, along with traditional literary history. We were going in the formalist direction, like our Russian role models.

The Polish literature group was my first intellectual formation, mainly as a result of the influence of Stefan Żółkowski,² who remained my closest friend until his death, and whose long life was so incredibly interesting. The literature group's governing body was eclectic; there were democratic students, centrists, socialists, people from the Communist Youth, and students who leaned towards communism. The second group had a clear Marxist orientation. And so, from the begin-

ning, I was subjected to very strong influences: formalism, Marxism, and I began to brush up against existentialism, as well.

When I was still at the University, in the Polish literature group, the communists were one of the organizations that shaped the group. I began to be more connected to them, support them, I even thought about joining the Communist Party, but they decided that I still had to wait. But I did participate in one of the first communist demonstrations in Warsaw anyway, for the day of the three L's: Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Liebknecht. We hung some kind of red sheets up on wires, and at a certain point the police broke us up, of course, and I was arrested. They took me to prison, where I only spent a short time, but in this prison there was a special cell, just for communists. And in that cell we sang 'The Internationale' once again. And I became even more saturated with that revolutionary opposition.

In 1936, after finishing my studies, I received a scholarship to study in France. I had a law degree, and took part in doctoral seminars in sociology, philosophy, and the history of literature. So I was allowed to write my doctorate in whatever subject I wanted to. That was from the end of 1938 and the first part of 1939, right up until the start of the war in September. In terms of my life and my intellectual and literary formation, that year in Paris was the most important year for me. I was still a young man, hungry for everything.

During that Paris year, I came into contact with three intellectual schools. I had letters of recommendation to Jacques Maritain, the great Thomist philosopher.³ His wife, Raissa, a converted Jew from Vilnius, was the only woman in my life whom I regarded and saw as holy. I learned a different way of describing formalism, or formism, from Raissa Maritain: form as a 'metaphysical flash', a flash full of the beauty of metaphysics. For me, in some way that related to how I understood poetry, because at that time I had already begun to write poems.

I had some romantic troubles then. . . . I had just been rejected by someone very close to me, and Maritain said: 'Go to the

monastery for a trial period. And then you will know what you want to do with yourself.' I kept repeating to Maritain: 'Life is finished for me already, I know everything, I've seen everything.' Maritain only smiled.

They sent me to a Dominican monastery in central France, in the Massif Central. It was a special monastery that was supposed to educate the future Catholic elite. The monastery received two boys from every country, educating them to be future dignitaries of the church. Never in my life did I have such intelligent colleagues. I was happy there. There was a typewriter in every cell. Until evening, nobody was allowed to speak, and then only during dinner. Texts were read to us aloud, usually from St Augustine, and there were also many lectures in Latin.

I learned a great deal in the monastery. Including art history. It is hard to imagine, but in fact one of the lectures at the Dominican monastery was on the Marquis de Sade. This in a Catholic monastery – as an example of a specific type, a deviation, a threat, and a certain defeat. Only then did I read de Sade for the first time. It was a very eclectic place.

Once a week there was a mass for the Basques in this monastery. The Spanish Republican resistance to Franco's Fascists was drawing to a close. The Basques were revolutionaries and Catholics at the same time. Another contradiction: the Spanish Republic, the Basque Catholics defending their nationality against Franco, but allied with the Spanish Republicans. And once again I was permeated with what turned out to be the most intense contradictions of the twentieth century. Such contradictions dominated my experience in France.

My girlfriend at the time was a Trotskyite. We had already met in Poland. She waited for me at the Gare du Nord in Paris. She took good care of me. She was against any kind of tourism, so when we passed Notre Dame she insisted that I close my eyes. At the same time, she took me to see all these Trotskyite friends of hers, somewhere in the suburbs of Paris. Sometimes she told me to stand outside in the hallway, on account of important party secrets. There were usually Serbian

Trotskyites, along with Bulgarians and Africans.

I arrived in France in September 1938 and I was in Paris until June or July 1939 – two months before the war. My first strange experience in France was with the Thomists. The Trotskyists were my second. The Surrealists were the third and eventually the most significant and influential meeting on my literary path. The Surrealists accepted me very quickly. It was mainly Surrealists who came to Apollinaire's funeral, to the Père Lachaise cemetery, and they somehow began to trust me very quickly.

Encounters with Surrealism

André Breton was the leader of the Surrealists then, a strange writer and a staunch Surrealist theorist, who divided the Surrealists into good and bad. At one point, he invited me to his house. There was an immense photograph of a naked woman in the hallway. Breton said to me: '*Voici ma femme*' – this is my wife. I was very embarrassed by that. I had, after all, been raised in puritanical Poland, in a totally different environment, where even when we began our own lives, we were still, despite everything, very constrained in terms of social behaviour. When my girlfriend, a French girl, took me into the shower and stood there naked, I was shaken, because never in my life in Poland would I have imagined that I would end up in the shower with a naked girl. For a young man, even an intellectually very developed one, that was still quite a bit to take.

Paris at that time was profoundly formative for me. Artistically and intellectually formative, as well as for my life in general, because I also met and married my wife Lidia there just before I left in 1939. Before that, I had also translated some Surrealist poetry.

What poetry?

Mainly Eluard. He became my master, we were very close. I also befriended Tristan Tzara. He and I would take walks through Paris at night, through Montparnasse. He

would say, 'Look at her, she was Apollinaire's lover once.' He would also show me other women who had been lovers of French writers, or American *émigrés*. I could not believe they were part of those famous romances – they were all old crones.

Many years later something strange happened to me in Paris: I went to see Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*. One of the three heroes in the play was Lenin, and Tristan Tzara was another. I was at the theatre, seeing a play in which the theatrical hero was someone I knew very well, with whom I had walked around Paris. Once again, history rolled right through my head.

Was your own, pre-war poetry in that Surrealist style?

No. It was, to a certain extent, influenced by the so-called 'Skamandrites'.⁴ I wasn't a very good poet, even though I did publish two collections of poetry. But I slowly left that kind of traditional poetry for Surrealism, which I hardly knew at all. I began to translate the Surrealists. As always, everything was unified and in opposition at the same time. Everything was knotted up, and kept on rolling over, like a boat that is chased from shore to shore, but which is still the same boat.

You did not write any more poetry after the war? At all?

After the war I wrote one or two poems, but I stopped thinking of myself as a poet, and my poems were maybe a sign of something to come. Perhaps they were interesting, but it certainly wasn't good poetry.

War and the Return to Poland

In August 1939 it was clear that war would break out, and I decided to return to Poland. Three weeks later I was drafted. I said goodbye to Lidia in the south of Poland. There were crying women at every train station, saying goodbye to those men who were called up for service. I went to Warsaw. I was among those who defended Warsaw. After Warsaw capitulated I was taken prisoner.

At the prisoner of war camp I started to have a fever, I was unconscious. They took me to the hospital. During this time, a Jewish doctor was the head of that hospital, and after a few days that entire military hospital was supposed to pass into German hands. I was able to send a message to Warsaw. My uncle, my mother's brother, Ludwik Werternstein, came and took me away. My wife then was in Lwów (today known in Ukraine as L'viv). I decided to go join her. I crossed the new border – Poland being already divided into German and Soviet zones. That was the end and the beginning. As you see, all that began to trouble and interest me before I even began to write, really, and before I had really got to know Shakespeare, and before I really joined any literary circles.

After that short stay in German Warsaw, I crossed the border and was in Lwów. Lwów was then under Soviet occupation. My wife and I lived there with her parents. We spent those two years looking at the Ukrainians and the Soviet army. In this time period, my interest in communism faded, though not entirely, like everything in me – it leaves a little, it stays a little.

Lidia's father Hugo Steinhaus [1887–1972] was a famous professor of mathematics and exerted a great influence on me. I began to think about a university career then. I took my exams for beginning my doctoral work in French literature. The exam on French literature seemed quite easy to me – grammar, which I did not know so well, was worse. But I did just fine in grammar and in the history exam, and I passed everything with the highest marks. But the last question was about the history of the Communist Party, according to a then-famous book – the bible of the WKPb. Though I was pretty well read in Marxism and I had my experiences, I failed in Marxism. As a result, there was no hope of being accepted as a doctoral candidate.

Do you think that there is a paradoxical logic in your life that always places you between different worlds?

Only in my later years did I realize that. I am reaching into those various pasts of mine,

I remember so much, they are continuously being played out before me in such a way that they contradict each other. It is possible to say that everything in my life began in contradictions that at times tore each other apart, and at others coincided, but to some extent were always in opposition. I was raised in contradictions, wrote in contradictions for a long time, and at the same time, I was just – Jan Kott.

After the war you began your career as a writer, an academic, a professor of literature in Poland. Mythology and Realism was the title of your first book after the war.

The title already contains those two opposites: mythology and realism. Mythology, which is the invocation of myths and the existence of mythical elements (I had this semi-mythical interpretation of Conrad), and at the same time I was more and more under the influence of realism, to the point of so-called Socialist Realism. I believed that in communist Poland the realist path was the path that leads to literature. Unfortunately, I very quickly became a kind of ideologue for Socialist Realism. I belonged to the party and I was a very active member for a long time. On the other hand, the things I wrote reflected my French theatrical experiences, because I had seen many wonderful performances, both traditional and avant-garde.

Early Involvement with Theatre

When did the theatre become important in your thinking? In France, did you already think that theatre would be the subject of your writing?

No. My wife and I went to the theatre frequently. Amazing theatre, there were great premieres . . . Jean-Louis Barrault's, for example. I saw the great French actors, Jouvet, for instance, in *Doctor Knock*, and I would go to traditional productions at the Comédie Française, as well. So once again, as is always the case with me, from the beginning to the end, there were these surges within me, fighting and supporting each other, and forming a new unity, different

literary influences. It was the same in the theatre.

What about the theatre in pre-war Poland? Was that an important influence on you?

That's hard to say. I was a very young man in pre-war Poland. Of course I would go to the theatre, but it did not seem to be the most fascinating thing in my life. But nevertheless the production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Teatr Polski made a huge impression on me, and at the same time it made me want to protest. While still in high school, I wrote a review of *Romeo and Juliet* for the school paper. It was my first theatre review. I was fifteen years old then, I think.

During that time, theatres in Warsaw were, to some extent, traditional, but good; especially the Teatr Polski, under the artistic direction of Arnold Szyfman [1882-1967], where I saw Leon Schiller's landmark production of Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefather's Eve*.⁵ The great playwrights were all in its repertory, and they even had several world premieres of plays by George Bernard Shaw, even before England itself. Other theatres already played Giraudoux's plays, and Molière, of course.

While I was still at the university, in my third or fourth year, I got an offer to write reviews. Those first reviews were very biting, very aggressive. So theatre began to interest me more and more. From the personal standpoint too, I began to befriend actors and theatre people, mainly directors. Slowly, I began to understand that theatrical criticism was my future. That was what engaged me most, that was what I was most passionate about. And shortly afterwards, I had a regular column in one of the Warsaw literary journals, the *Literary Review* (*Przegląd Kulturalny*), under the Shakespearean rubric of 'As You Like It'.

I often went to the theatre two or three times a week. Warsaw was a very theatrical city, there were many premieres, and not only did I begin writing, but also entered into theatrical circles. I was interested in the theatre also as a reflection of that which is happening outside the theatre, on the streets

and the squares, in the midst of political life. I wrote that the 'reviewer's place is not in the third row, but on the main square of the town, that is the place from which one should look at the theatre'. Not from a seat in the audience, but from there. And political themes got mixed into those theatrical reviews that I wrote, and gradually my theatrical ideology began to form itself more and more, a picture of a theatrical critic began to appear. And this critic was inclined more and more towards the modern theatre, towards innovation.

But did you aspire during this time to be a reformer of the theatre or of criticism?

Not yet, but slowly. It's all tied together inside of me. When I began, I was a theatre critic with Parisian experiences, and I saw many performances that were avant-garde. So that my taste was, on one hand, refined and defined, but eclectic on the other.

I was very successful as a theatre critic – I was very severe, all the actors feared me, because I wrote ruthlessly. I would say to my wife, 'I wrote a review today, and I managed to insult only five people.' I began as a kind of reformer within the traditional theatre. Of course my temperament and my feelings continually directed me towards certain extremes, or what was then considered innovation. I hated everything that I considered ossified. In many performances that ossification was perfectly obvious. So slowly I emerged as a critic who was oriented towards the new, towards innovation, towards new directorial achievements, and towards the introduction of new plays.

Encountering Shakespeare – and Brook

Around the world, you are mainly known as an essayist on the subject of Shakespearean drama. When was your first contact with Shakespeare? Did you encounter him first as literature or in the theatre?

It was a long path. One of my very first reviews was the one I mentioned of *Romeo and Juliet*. Then, later, of course, I read a lot

of Shakespeare, at first largely in Polish, because it was too difficult for me in English. Everyone has their fate in life. I never expected Shakespeare to be the most important thing in my biography.

I think that my point of entry into the Shakespearean world was the actor Jacek Woszczerowicz's performance of *Richard III* in Warsaw in 1958. In that *Richard III*, the theatrical experience, the Shakespearean experience, coincided with my political experience. To some extent, at some comparative or metaphorical layer, it was of course a play about Stalinist crimes. And Woszczerowicz was a great actor, one of the few actors with whom I was a close friend. A good couple of years after *Richard III*, I asked him: 'How is it that an actor can cry on stage?' – 'Oh, it's very simple.' He looked at me for a while and tears were running down his face.

When my son recently took my granddaughter Lidia to visit the Polish director Erwin Axer, she asked him: 'How do they do it, how does an actor cry on stage?'

What was new and opened up many countries around the world to my vision of Shakespeare was the result of the fact that I first saw Shakespeare on stage. I saw what Shakespeare could be on the stage, and not the text itself. After Woszczerowicz, the second great experience was when Peter Brook came to Warsaw with his *Titus Andronicus*. I did not know him before that, but he already knew my book in part.

The performance was a great success. Once more I saw a predatory Shakespeare, incredibly edgy. I saw what a theatrical Shakespeare could look like. Olivier played Titus – it was a huge production, with a great set, a modular one, inspired by Shakespeare's theatre – a two-part unit set used for all the performances. Peter Brook knew about me, and my friends sent a letter so that I could meet him. But Brook was very busy with the show. Of course he was celebrated in Warsaw, invited everywhere, etc., etc.

In the end, after one of the last performances of *Titus Andronicus*, there was a huge reception for Peter Brook, Vivien Leigh, and the entire company. It was probably given by the Minister of Culture in a palace on