

# art

## & BUSINESS

POLISH ART AND ANTIQUES

SUMMER '95

1995  
POLSKA

ART BIENNALE  
IN VENICE

**OPAŁKA**

in Polish Pavilion

**KULON**

Talking with Wood

**TARASEWICZ**

Just Painting

**SADLEY**

Rediscovered



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Our cover: a poster by Waldemar Świerzy,  
designed especially for ART & BUSINESS



# On the OTHER Side

by Piotr Gruszczyński

Leszek Mądzik may be said to treat theatre instrumentally. Although this might sound like an accusation, indeed it is not one. Instrumental treatment of theatre is the only way for the theatre not to become art for art's sake. Mądzik uses theatre to aim for the highest goal: he makes of theatre an instrument of cognition and a vehicle with which to transgress the boundary of the unknowable. Via the crevice which theatre provides for him and with increasing determination and resolution, Mądzik is trying to see through the mystery of death, or life.



Leszek Mądzik



on the right:  
The Crevice,  
fragment of the performance.  
Première: 1994

Gambling with the ultimate, and every challenge to death is a gamble with its almighty and limitless power, requires immense courage from the artist and his agreement that in the existential area no compromise shall be made on the route of artistic search. Theatre is the perfect medium for grappling with death. Operations and experiments are performed here on a living body. Constantly, daily, incidentally, and even inadvertently, in theatre the living body of the actor and his personal concerns, clash with the torpor and artificiality of the theatre's dead body.

In his theatre, Leszek Mądzik has made the actor of equal value to all other elements of production. However, failed to eliminate the deadly confrontation. To the contrary, he made it ever more

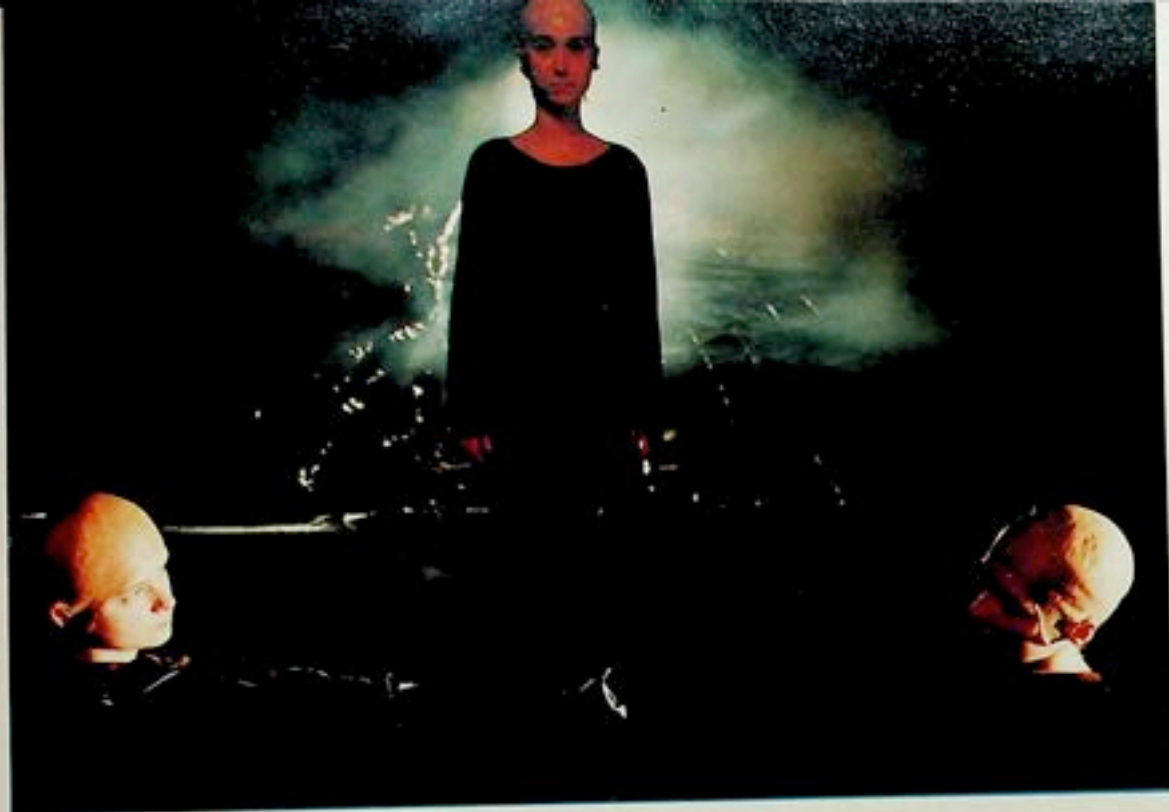
apparent by stripping the actor of naturalistic behaviour. As early on as in 1972, in his third production entitled *Supper*, Mądzik silenced the actors. Since then the only words in this theatre have been the titles of productions. They are nouns, sometimes gerunds. Speech has been substituted by action; the word has become too vulgar a means of communication to be used when the most fundamental things are at stake. *One theory of art says that characters in opera, in their attempt to render adequately the content which they personify, may not utter words, but must sing them. Likewise, the reality which the Scena Plastyczna performances are concerned with, reveals itself in its idiosyncratic world of light, rhythm and mood. This is the most profoundly human reality. It embraces certain ultimate passion and existential*

*states, of which man is not always conscious and whose mind may not always comprehend, is how Mądzik put it in his own words.*

The next stage in Mądzik's theatre was the stripping away of colour. Mądzik's theatre is called *Scena Plastyczna Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego (KUL)* (Visual Stage at the Catholic University of Lublin). Decoding the name is as informative as it is troublesome.

Let us work backwards: from the theatre Catholic University of Lublin. Since the onset of Mądzik's theatre the KUL was his host and the provider of a roof over this head. Interestingly, KUL students made up the ranks of Mądzik's performers, hired for a short pre-determined, period of time, so that the theatre had a constant inflow of young blood. *Scena's* activity within the univer-





The Gateway,  
fragment of the performance.  
Première: 1989

below:  
The Breath,  
fragment of the performance.  
Première: 1992

sity was classified as 'open' or 'alternative' student theatre. However, from today Scena Plastyczna's individuality stands apart from other fringe groups, which results from a total absence of the contemporary, and an unwillingness to politicise. Mądzik may be said to treasure the *space of eternal works* over daily reality. The academic aspect of Scena Plastyczna is even more complicated, as it is a Catholic university. This does not mean, however, that Scena Plastyczna is religious theatre. It speaks, nonetheless, for a certain world outlook. The outlook is Christian and it defines the mode of perception of things ultimate.

The visual aspect of Scena is of the greatest complexity, however. The Polish language does not use the expression 'performing arts', which allows for dull speculations whether visual theatre is theatre at all, or maybe it does not deserve the name 'theatre' and is a separate artistic discipline. In Mądzik's case, the decisive factor seems to be his own decision, naming the art which he practices a 'stage'. Inviting actors who contribute to their creation, the works may be repeated, and, most impor-

tantly, evolve in and transform time freely, thereby giving it a density thickness. Mądzik applies a similar treatment to space in his theatre, transforming it freely. Frequently, he does not reveal the real structure of the space until the end of performance. Mądzik's works are not immobile, like a painting or installation, and are not by design instantaneous, like performance art. Moreover, they require witnesses, i.e. viewers. When describing the theatrical factor in Mądzik's work, Irena Sławińska mentions *agon, or contest. Amongst the antagonizing couples she mentions light and darkness, silence and an obtrusive invasion of sounds or noise, moving up and gravitating down, the struggle of the elements, relentless turns of the wheel and attempts to stop its motion, to stop the destructive power of time.*

The basic agon in Mądzik's theatre, however, is the *ultimate clash with life, doomed for disaster*. Mądzik's theatre is permeated with a profoundly existential concept of life as migration towards death.

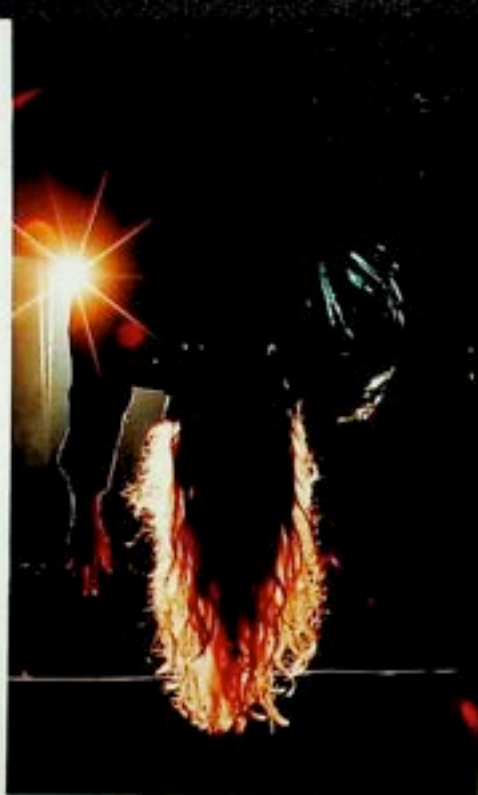
*I lived with my parents and brother in Kielce, in a cul-de-sac*



*closed by a hospital. It wasn't so much the hospita which was important, but a detached morgue nearby. I lived just three hundred metres away, and we played most*



The Moisture,  
fragment of the performance.  
Première: 1978



on the right:  
The Herbarium,  
fragment of the performance.  
Première: 1976



*of our games in the surrounding area and in the unguarded building itself. We would run around one, two, or even three open coffins and look up the dead bodies' nostrils. Fear mixed with curiosity drew me there to have a peek every afternoon. I went to the morgue every day, in fear but mixed with some kind of mania.(...) The window of the room in which we dined, talked and played with my brother or parents gave on to the street, where funeral processions would pass every day. The bottom of the window frame was level with the base of the passing black hearse, ornamented with four silver angels at the corners and drawn by two black horses. They would pass twice, sometimes three times a day; after all the hospital was big and so was the town. You could hear the clanking of the hoofs, and then a coffin would float through our room.(...) Like a clock, the coffins told the time of day.*

Tadeusz Kantor had his Wielopole, his chamber of memory, of which he said, perhaps not without reason, that it shaped his imagination and which he later attempted, with great acumen, to bring back to life in theatre. The above quote by Mądzik is

a good illustration of what is the foundation of his chamber of memories. Early fifties' Kielce lost its real shape and was transformed into a land surrendered to death's sway. Saying the hospital was big and so was the town sounds harsh. There are no such harsh moments in Mądzik's performances. Institutionalised daily routine was eliminated. Only the mysterious dullness of existence remains.

One of the methods by which Mądzik tries to penetrate the impenetrable, to transgress the border of visibility is to create images which verge on the limits of human visual perception. Objects which emerge from the darkness are so dimly lit as to take on phantasmagoric shape. They lose their real shape and size, and the viewer loses the ability to place them in space; he cannot even judge his distance from the stage. Dim light is tiring to the eye. He has to strain to stare at objects disappearing into darkness. Maybe just for once, the eye will just overcome its physical limitation and see in the dark. Then, surely, we would approach a solution to the mystery of death. By making the visible invisible, Mądzik attempts to make the invisible visible. In particular,

two recent performances, *Breath*, and *Crevice*, are treatises about what happens to man after death. The first one shows the life of a soul after death, the second one focuses exclusively on the posthumous fate of the human body.

And finally anniversary though, to contradict all those, who believe, that Mądzik's theatre is merely repetitious. Luckily, art is beyond the reach of ideas of progress and does not recognize the category of novelty, which motivates so much of the art market. 25 years of Mądzik's activity is one process, a long, creative, uninterrupted experiment. Every now and then, there is a report containing latest research results. The report takes the shape of a performance. Mądzik himself claims that he has been working on just one performance. This is not to say, however, that every performance is identical, or treats of the same issue. Only those are right who maintain that Mądzik's search will never yield a final and singular answer, or show what is on the other side.

*Translated by Jarosław Król*