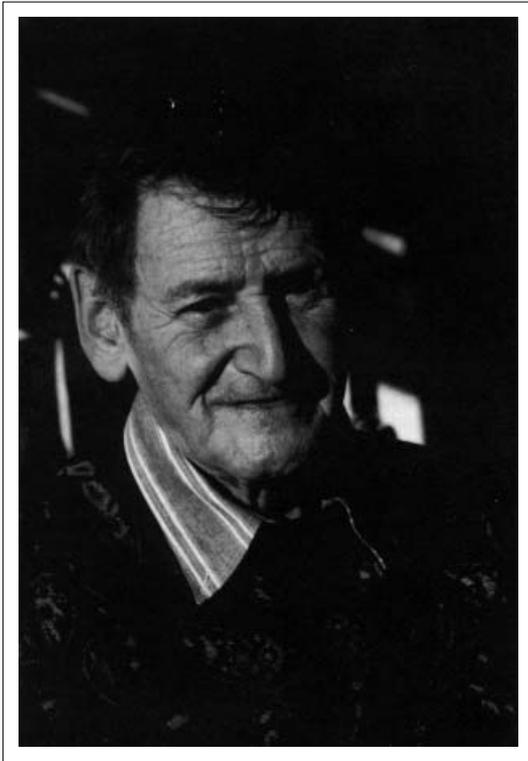
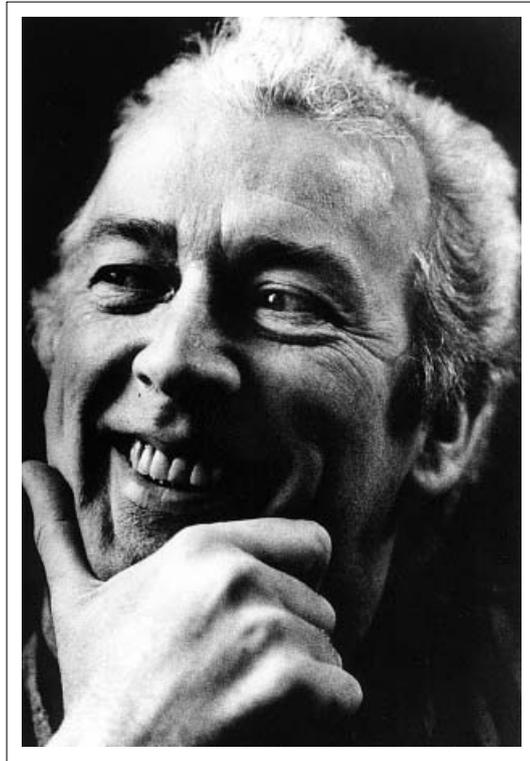


In Memoriam



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 rejiggered 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 spaswaters. 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.