

**The Dynamic 1960s, Part Two**  
**Key Productions in New Studio Theatres and Elsewhere**  
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The surge in provocative new plays in the late 1950s and the 1960s went hand in hand with new vitality and imaginativeness in their staging, as already suggested in the previous chapter. All Czech theatres, from the National Theatre to smaller regional theatres in the provinces, began to do much more interesting production work in the 1960s, but the most fresh and innovative work could be seen in a number of newly established small theatres in Prague. I saw much of the work of these theatres during extended residencies in Prague in 1965 and in 1968–1969, as well as a brief visit in the fall of 1970, by which time most of the creative flow of the 1960s had been shut off as a result of the August 1968 invasion and its aftermath<sup>1</sup>.

Before focusing on the new ensembles, some attention should be given to notable production work in established theatres, beyond the productions already mentioned in the previous chapter. Krejča's 1964 National Theatre staging of Topol's *End of Carnival* was, of course, one major example, as was his *Romeo and Juliet* in that same theatre a year earlier, with two of his strongest young actors, Jan Triska (b. 1936) and Marie Tomášová (b. 1929). In his scenography for each, Josef Svoboda worked variations on the principle of kinetic scenery, which entailed physical movement during the course of the action. The most celebrated example of this was a loggia in *Romeo and Juliet* that seemed to float upstage and downstage during the action; in *End of Carnival* three rectangular projection screens would swoop down from the space above the stage to form a full rear wall onto which projections would be cast, after which the screens would be lifted out. Two other important productions of the National Theatre in the early 1960s were *Oedipus the King* (1963) and the Čapek brothers' *Insect Comedy* (1965), both directed by actor-director Miroslav Macháček. A huge staircase filling the entire stage became the playing area in *Oedipus*, and two large tilted mirrors at the rear of a stage turntable providing a kaleidoscopic view of the teeming "insect" life on the stage floor formed the basis of Svoboda's scenography for *Insect Comedy*. Underlying most of Svoboda's scenography was a premise – both his and most of his directors' – that scenography is essentially an *instrument* that may have as expressive and dynamic a role in a production as the performers. The scenographer is the one responsible for the design, placement, and "action" of everything on stage other than the performers, which would include not only all

manner of material objects and forms – realistic, abstract, or metaphoric, of whatever material but also lighting and sound.

Beyond the work of the National Theatre, any consideration of creative work in Czech theatre during the 1960s must take into account the further distinctive contributions of Alfred Radok, who had left the National Theatre to head the newly organized Laterna Magika project in 1958. At loose ends after being dismissed from that post in 1959, he was fortunately hired by Ota Ornest for the Municipal Theatres of Prague, an established producing entity comprising several stages. In these theatres between 1961 and 1965 Radok directed seven productions, several of which were among the highpoints of Czech theatre of that decade. For example, his 1963 version of Gogol's *Marriage* produced a scathing farcical image of boorish, primitive provincial life in Czarist Russia that was a thinly veiled comment on all things Russian as perceived by most Czechs after more than fifteen years of Russian Communist indoctrination.

But Radok's greatest achievement of the 1960s, and many would say of his whole career, was his adaptation of Romain Rolland's *The Play of Love and Death* in 1964, which I had the good luck to see in 1965. Dealing with episodes from the French Revolution, the production exhibited Radok's strongest talents, an intuitive perception of the paradoxes and ironies inherent in any human social situation and the ability to embody that complex perception on stage with maximum theatrical impact. Here his central conceit was the simultaneous juxtaposition of the two worlds of the play, that of the doomed aristocracy and that of the revolutionary mob, in the brilliant physical metaphor of a rough-hewn bear pit enclosing the hapless, still posturing aristocrats while the French mob mocked and abused them from their perch on wooden benches above the enclosure. It was a scenic metaphor employed throughout the many scenes of the play, totally invented by Radok and given stage form by his regular scenographer in those years, Ladislav Vychodil (b. 1920), a Moravian who worked mainly in Slovakia. An original musical score accompanied the action, much of which Radok deliberately staged as an ironic parody of operetta conventions, with some of the leading figures occasionally singing their lines. The flow of scene after scene was arresting as the problematic pathos and "theatre" of all revolutions were played out with implicit echoes, for the Czechs, of the impact on them of the Russian Communist revolutions of 1917.

Still another memorable production by Radok in the 1960s was his adaptation of Gorky's novel *The Last Ones* in 1966 at the National Theatre, to which he had just returned. In this production, which dealt with a corrupted officer and his family in Czarist Russia, he and Svoboda employed the Laterna Magika system for the first time in the staging of a traditional play. The offstage actions of some of the characters were shown as film projections on the rear wall of the set at carefully chosen moments, in deliberate juxtaposition to the onstage action, as often to ironize the onstage action as to reinforce it. This use of dual perspective, one of

<sup>1</sup> This chapter develops material in my article "Art and Relevance: The small Theatres of Prague, 1958-1970," *Educational Theatre Journal* 25:3 (May 1977): 229-257.

Radok's signature methods, was symptomatic of his vision of human experience, a painfully learned skepticism of face values and surface ideals.

Visitors to Prague in the 1960s were also particularly impressed by the work of certain "small" theatres (*malá divadla*): relatively new and youthful ensembles that had broken away from some patterns of the permanent repertory system. The reputation of these theatres was further enhanced by their appearances abroad, for example, at the World Theatre Season at the Aldwych Theatre in London. (Prague's National Theatre had already appeared at the Aldwych in 1966 with Macháček's production of the Čapeks' *Insect Comedy*.) Beginning in 1967, three of these new small theatre companies appeared there a total of four times, making Prague the best represented capital at this international festival. The three theatres so honored were the Theatre on the Balustrade, the Drama Club, and the Theatre beyond the Gate.

These distinctive companies began to form in the late 1950s. They remained active despite the events of 1968, and two of them are still very much alive today, more than thirty years later. A consideration of their evolution, especially during their first ten years, provides insight into a variety of theatre concepts and methods familiar to us in other contexts. Theatre of the Absurd, Epic theatre, theatre as game and therapy, "engaged" theatre – such theatre phenomena assume new meanings and values when viewed in relation to the special sociocultural contexts within which these Prague theatres developed. Their choice of themes and forms as well as their special approaches to the art of theatre were, not surprisingly for Czech theatre, a reflection of the stresses shaping their society.

The small, artistically independent theatres of Prague did not emerge in a vacuum, nor did they lack prototypes. They began within the context of an extensive state-supported theatre system, although they were in strong opposition to most aspects of that system. Distinctly original in many respects, particularly in Czechoslovakia of the late fifties and early sixties, they also revived and followed a notable Czech tradition of small, unorthodox theatres most signally associated with the work of E. F. Burian, Jindřich Honzl, Jiří Frejka, and the comic team of Voskovec and Werich in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, even earlier prototypes may be found in some of the cabarets of the pre-World War I era, as described in chapter 2.

After the traumas and stresses of the war and of the new Communist regime, several needs became apparent in the 1950s, including the need for an outlet for creative talents that had been bottled up for the better part of a decade and the need to explore contemporary reality and its problems without illusions or evasions. The opportunity to satisfy these and related needs did not come about suddenly as the result of a few obvious circumstances. Nevertheless, as originally noted, conditions began to improve after the denunciation of Stalinist cult and dogma during the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union in 1956, the reverberations of which profoundly influenced not only the sociopolitical life but also the cultural and artistic life of all Communist bloc countries.

In Czechoslovakia the lid was not completely off, but it became unsealed, and the pressure of accumulated artistic energies began to be released. Moreover, although the mechanism of suppression had run down and become relatively powerless unless directly challenged, there were still enough restrictions and obstacles to freedom to provide a target and to stimulate indirect criticism and subtlety of expression in the arts. What had been feared could now – given skill and wit – be examined, probed, speculated on, and not infrequently satirized, as it had already begun to be in the National Theatre in the Krejča and Radok era of the late 1950s. It was within this climate that the significant development of the new small theatres occurred.

Fundamental to the fresh urge in theatre was a rejection of the entrenched repertory system of the permanent state theatres, which ranged from the colossus of the National Theatre to the slightly less grand Vinohrady Theatre but also included smaller state or municipally supported repertory theatres. These "stone" theatres all had in common not only monumental architecture but relatively inflexible operations. The new small theatres sought a break from the model of a large company and elaborate administrative machinery (with its inevitable internal frictions and cabals), from a fixed number of premieres and reprises each season, which in turn virtually necessitated crowded, inadequate rehearsal schedules, and from a repertoire requiring a certain universality of play selection to guarantee adequate attendance, thus forcing both actors and directors to work on many productions of limited challenge and interest to them. Instead, the ideal became a small group of kindred artists working together in small, manageable quarters with a drastically reduced production machinery, selecting works to which they could genuinely commit themselves, rehearsing until they felt the production was ready, and playing for an audience composed not of "average viewers," but of those attuned to their special kind of theatre, whatever it might be. (Actually, this comes close to describing what Otomar Krejča had already been working toward with his team *within* the grand frame of the National Theatre starting in 1957.)

In the early phases of the new movement, traditional theatrical form based on a tightly structured dramatic text was put aside in favor of a looser assemblage or montage of literature and music, consisting of "small forms" such as stories, anecdotes, songs, poetry, mime, and dialogue. Part of the rationale behind this change was the belief that such brief creations were less subject to the inflated, schematic, and ultimately hollow treatment associated with the more traditional theatre against which the movement was reacting. Implicit in many of the observations of both practitioners and theorists of the new theatre movement was a sense of theatre as a game, of theatre as play. At the very least, the creation of informal, open communication between stage and audience was vital: a shift from one-way proclamation to dialogue, to a form of mutual participation in the act of theatre, to a sharing of experience. In this, of course, the new wave of these theatres was to some extent parallel to similar tendencies in the West, especially in the United States in the Beatnik era and beyond (e.g., Caffè Cino, La MaMa).

The seedbed of the “small forms,” assemblage type of production was in fact not a theatre at all, but a wine tavern, the Reduta, which featured jazz performances in the mid-fifties. Beginning in 1957, Jiří Suchý (b. 1931), a lyricist and popular singer, invited Ivan Vyskočil (b. 1929), a psychology and philosophy major as well as a graduate of the Theatre Academy (DAMU), to join with him in a number of casually structured entertainments that became known as “text appeals” to stress their literary component as distinct from more popular nightclub or musical cabaret entertainment. The programs consisted of Suchý’s songs and Vyskočil’s witty, topical monologues, later augmented by poetry readings, brief sketches, and other informal, semi-improvised theatrical elements marked by intellectual bite as well as amiable clowning. Deliberately undidactic, casual; and individualistic, consciously cultivating a degree of imperfection and lack of finish, the small forms embodied in rather pure form characteristics long absent and sorely missed in Czech theatre.

Subsequently, the model of the Reduta “text appeals” evolved in two directions. In one (what came to be the Semafor model) it retained its essential small-forms features, and in the other (the Balustrade model) it blended with more conventional theatre elements, thereby losing its own distinct features but continuing to provide stimulus and flavor to the work of many smaller ensembles in Prague and in the provinces<sup>2</sup>.

The overlapping stories of the Balustrade and the Semafor need sorting out. In the fall of 1958 Suchý and Vyskočil, in a move to expand and provide more order to their irregular performances at the Reduta, founded the Theatre on the Balustrade (Divadlo Na zábradlí) in a former storage warehouse near the banks of the Vltava in the Old Town section of Prague. Under their leadership during that first season of 1958-1959, the productions were rooted in the Reduta pattern, but with the difference that they incorporated the small-form, text-appeal features into somewhat more conventionally staged works and laid more stress on the literary elements. The first production, in October 1958, *If a Thousand Clarinets* (Kdyby tisíc klarinetů), was essentially a fully staged text-appeal with a strong musical component as well as mime, the work of Ladislav Fialka (1931-1991) and his youthful troupe. Soon after, within the first season, a takeoff on Faust already possessed certain features of straight drama.

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<sup>2</sup> The urge toward smaller, cabaret-type literary entertainment in the late 1950s was not restricted to Prague, as the history of Kladivadlo illustrates. Kladivadlo, a pun on the Czech word for hammer (*kladivo*) and theatre (*divadlo*), headed by Pavel Fiala (b. 1937), began in 1958 in the east Bohemian town of Broumov as an amateur cabaret devoted primarily to poetry. It continued in this vein until it moved to Ústí nad Labem in 1965 and turned professional as a branch of the State Theatre in that north Bohemian city. During its peak years as an author-centered ensemble it often appeared in guest performances at Prague’s Balustrade Theatre. Kladivadlo lasted until 1971, by which time it no longer had the freshness and inventiveness of its earlier years. See Vladimír Just, “Kladivadlo,” *Divadelní revue*, 4(1994): 48f.

During the first season, however, Suchý decided that he might put his special musical talents to better use in another organization or production format. He joined with a young composer, Jiří Šlitr (1924-1969), to launch the Semafor Theatre in October 1959, leaving Vyskočil in charge of the Balustrade. Because its chief element is music, the Semafor falls outside the central focus of this study, but one or two of its features are worth noting, as discussed below. Like Suchý, Fialka split from the core group after the first season, but he and his troupe remained as a self-contained unit at the Balustrade, alternating their own series of mime performances with those of the drama ensemble. Since Fialka’s troupe toured a great deal, the Balustrade became primarily a drama theatre, with occasional musical elements.

Following Suchý’s departure and Fialka’s severance to form his own unit within the Balustrade in 1959, Vyskočil continued his experiments with original satirical, offbeat works based on an assemblage of elements and a program that focused on the actor-audience relationship: the appeal of the performance was primarily through its performers, and central to the appeal was the creation of a relaxed, playful mood between performers and spectators.

A retrospective article about the early years of the small theatre movement made a particularly astute observation about a characteristic already noted: the early efforts of the Balustrade were not a move toward increasingly polished, sophisticated work but had significance precisely in their devotion to seemingly imperfect forms. “The postulate of seeking an adequate form for an urgent message doesn’t apply, because more conspicuously than in any other art or genre the form here is itself the message – precisely in its lack of finish, incompleteness, and . . . lack of finality.”<sup>3</sup>

By the 1960-1961 season, *Autostop*, the theatre’s fifth production, revealed a relatively more unified, coherent dramatic form, though still not that of a traditionally structured play. It consisted of monologues, direct address to the audience, and satirical sketches presided over by Vyskočil and unified by a demonstration of automobile mania – grotesqueries displaying the obsession of many Czechs with possession of an automobile. It was, as Vyskočil pointed out, intended to show the unnaturalness and absurdity of such materialism from the point of view of socialist humanism. The work was done on a bare stage with black drapes, a few chairs, a table, and minimal props. The actors were advised not to play characters but to play about the characters; in short, to adopt an approach we tend to associate with Epic acting, including a frank orientation toward the audience.

*Autostop* marked the culmination of the Vyskočil era at the Balustrade, three years notable for experiments with actor-audience relationships, stemming from Vyskočil’s interest in psychology and anthropology. By 1961 Vyskočil apparently felt that he had taken his work as far as it would go at the Balustrade. Perhaps preferring the more

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<sup>3</sup> Eva Kozlanská, “Theatres That Test the Times” (Divadla, která si podrobuje čas), *Divadlo* 21:3 (March 1970): 3.

flexible, individualistic format of the earlier years, he returned to the Reduta, where he presumably felt more at home.

Meanwhile, Suchý and Šlitr's Semafor had been evolving a life of its own since 1959. The name "Semafor" is composed of the initial sounds of the Czech words for "seven little forms" (i.e., song, dance, instrumental music, mime, poetry readings, skits, dialogues), thus suggesting the essential nature of their productions, which proved to be of immediate and lasting popularity. The team of Suchý and Šlitr stayed together until Šlitr's accidental death early in 1969. Suchý has continued the Semafor Theatre to the present.

The cultural significance of the Semafor and its basic small-forms pattern was well expressed by a Prague critic describing what this type of theatre provided: "an escape from the emptiness of big words to small, ordinary ones . . . full of real life. From serious, celebrational lies to jokes that capture truth with the hook of absurdity . . . a theatre that didn't programatically insist on anything."<sup>4</sup> The theatrical significance of the Semafor lay in its implicit rejection of conventional dramatic and theatrical forms as well as in its reappraisal of professionalism in theatre. Suchý's attitude was indicative: "In the Semafor we ask for professionalism of work, not professionally trained actors . . . because they are trained for a different type of theatre and a different kind of acting."<sup>5</sup> The Semafor entertainment places special demands on the self creativity and the distinctive personality of the performer, not on skills in creating the illusion of fictional characters.

After Vyskočil's departure, the Balustrade moved more decisively toward a more conventionally ordered dramatic form accompanied by a shift of emphasis from the personality of the performer toward the theme or ideas of the total presentation, both tendencies already observable in *Autostop*. Moreover, the mixture of absurdist and Epic elements found in *Autostop* developed into the single most distinctive theatrical feature of what came to be known as the Grossman-Havel era, from 1961 to 1968.

Jan Grossman (1925-1993) who had been a dramaturg under E. F. Burian after the war (and later an important critic), became head of the drama wing at the Balustrade in 1962. Václav Havel, who became the most widely known of the Czech postwar playwrights, was first a stagehand at the Balustrade before collaborating with Vyskočil on *Autostop*.<sup>6</sup> Havel, who moved into the position of dramaturg at the

Balustrade when Grossman became head of drama, set the tone of the Balustrade's peak years, 1963-1966, with his two plays *The Garden Party* (November 1963) and *The Memorandum* (July 1965). These original works were complemented by a repertoire stressing modern Western drama with absurdist motifs: Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1964), Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* (1964), Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1964), and Grossman's own dramatization of Kafka's *The Trial* (1966). With the production of these Czech and foreign plays the Balustrade achieved international recognition, toured throughout Europe, and helped bring Prague theatre back into the mainstream of Western theatre culture.

Under Grossman and Havel, the Balustrade became program or concept centered. Grossman put it this way: a repertoire should emerge "not from a list of original, interesting, or unproduced plays, but from an attempt to analyze contemporary problematic issues and the typical conflicts and knots in which such problematics are snarled; only then ought we to search for [dramatic] material and methods of staging it."<sup>7</sup>

Central to the Balustrade's entire program were an elaboration and development of Vyskočil's concept of revitalizing the impalpable, nonverbal contact between stage and audience. Grossman and Havel referred to the Balustrade as an "appellative" theatre, meaning, in Grossman's words, "a theatre that elected a certain approach to reality, to the world in which we live and in which as its contemporaries we act – here and now for something and against something . . . a theatre that wants above all to pose questions to the spectator, often provocative and extreme ones, and it counts on a spectator who is inclined to reply to these questions."<sup>8</sup>

Implicit in these statements was a shift from the personal and psychological to the social, from interpersonal rapport between stage and auditorium to a challenging of the viewers' attitudes and values regarding the problematic relationship of the individual to society. The viewers were called upon to share an experience and at the same time to respond by comparing their frame of reference to the world presented to them by the stage. The stage presented a certain model of human social experience, more often than not a hyperbolic, grotesque, absurd one in which nonsense was juxtaposed with banality, the unnatural with the natural, the gratuitous with the logical. And the viewers were asked to confront these discrepancies, to evaluate them in the light of their own experiences. The combination of an absurd subject and the rational, purposeful – indeed, Epic – handling of it was provocative. This approach worked well with all the Balustrade plays mentioned but found its

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<sup>4</sup> Alena Urbanová, "They Had to Come (Museli přijít)," *Divadlo* 20:10 (December 1969): 29. The concept and the words are a remarkable echo of similar statements describing V + W's theatre in its early phase.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Jan Čižák, *Theatres Which Found Their Time* (Divadla která našla svou dobu), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Havel also had stagehand experience in Jan Werich's ABC Theatre in the 195-1960 season. Subsequently, Havel had the good fortune to work as Alfred Radok's directorial assistant on two productions at the Municipal Theatres in the 1961-1962 season. Both

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experiences left a lasting impression on Havel's perception of theatre and its potential impact on audiences. See Jarka Burian, "Václav Havel's Notable Encounters in His Early Theatrical Career," *Slavic and East European Performance* 16:2 (Spring 1996): 13-29.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Grossman, "The World of a Small Theatre" (Svět malého divadla), *Divadlo* 14:7 (September 1963): 18.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Grossman, "An Obsolete Invention?" (Zastaralý vynález?), *Divadlo* 18:1 (January 1967): 57.

fullest realization, understandably enough, in the plays of Havel. "I know of no dramatist more exact and rational than Havel," Grossman observed, "and at the same time no plays in which the spectator participates more and in more varied fashion."<sup>9</sup>

The curtain line was not broken, and the spectators did not become fellow actors, but they were expected to participate - perhaps emotionally, but certainly intellectually. The Balustrade productions of that time, as Karel Kraus reported, "do not draw the viewer into the play but provoke him to take a stand, do not suggest a solution but count instead on his intellectual revolt. The center of gravity shifts from the stage to the space between stage and audience."<sup>10</sup>

Havel's *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* are both social satires with primary relevance to the sociopolitical and, indeed, psychic scene of contemporary Czechoslovakia, but their relevance extends to any technocratic, bureaucratic, amoral world of presumed efficiency but no humanity or purpose, the ideal symbol of which is probably the cybernetic machine. *Garden Party* and *Memorandum* are models of this unnatural world. The Balustrade productions of these plays were not intended to suggest that life is inherently absurd, but to challenge the audience. In short, Grossman viewed Absurd theatre not as a final statement of the world's condition but as a means toward possible salvation or, at least, therapy: "Absurd theatre is analytic and, if you will, coldly diagnostic. It offers no solutions . . . not in the certainty that solutions don't exist . . . but that no solution will ever, at any place, by any one, in any way, be given to us. . . . Absurd theatre takes on the function of devil's advocate . . . in order to reveal the devil."<sup>11</sup> It was Absurd theatre with a thoroughly non-Absurd, socially concerned Brechtian-Epic purpose.

The Balustrade approach to staging *per se* was experimental only to a limited extent. Grossman's attitude toward experiment was expressed pointedly: "I believe in experimentation that is concrete, practical, technically communicable and expressible . . . the most important experiment to be done is in fact always done, but no one knows how to do it well - that is, rehearsal."<sup>12</sup> Grossman went on to explain that the Balustrade's two or three premieres a year allowed for a special approach to each play, as if it were an unknown country about which the artists had no preconceptions, about which they were uncertain. He found such moments of uncertainty, especially at the beginning of the rehearsal period, perhaps the most inspiring moments of the production work as a whole: "Uncertainty becomes a maximally long maintaining of 'open space,' which allows for the most varied sorts of

approaches and decisions."<sup>13</sup> It was not that the productions lacked an overall plan, but that such plans were themselves always subject to testing and adjustment by the action of the company as a creative ensemble that included designers, technical personnel, the composer, and, of course, the author when possible. What is particularly noteworthy about this approach is that although Grossman introduced a program of works considerably more complex, more deliberately socially oriented and critical, and more professionally performed than those of the prior years, he did not reject the fundamental openness and flexibility of performance that marked the early Balustrade.

The sheer physical limitations of the Balustrade Theatre necessitated considerable inventiveness in scene design and staging. Despite subsequent reconstruction, they still do. The auditorium seated about 200 in a narrow orchestra and small rear balcony. The stage was perhaps 18 feet wide and 25 feet deep, with limited fly-space and virtually no offstage space at the sides. On a stage that was usually bare, a few basic platforms, perhaps scaffolding, a few panels or screens, a table and some chairs, and a few other properties were placed and shifted about quite openly, to suggest various locales and to assume various functions. Grossman's description of the *Ubu Roi* set applied to most Balustrade productions. He referred to a raked floor, terminating in an irregularly cut and cracked wall:

Practically the only decorations are old brass beds, an iron fire escape ladder, three garbage cans, some crates and tin cans. All these objects are authentic, but at the same time technically adjusted for the greatest possible variations: the beds alternately change into tables, platforms for military parades, a staircase; the garbage cans also act as wardrobes . . . or serve as execution machines and armor.<sup>14</sup>

The acting at the Balustrade during Grossman's era and beyond was dynamic and competent, but it would not be accurate to refer to the Balustrade as an actor's theatre. A half-dozen or fewer gifted, skilled actors formed the core of the ensemble; others were brought in as occasion demanded. The Balustrade's priorities, certainly under Grossman, were a socially oriented concept encompassing a blend of the Absurd and Epic (the latter sans ideology), followed by the text, the director, and only then the staging and acting.

The Grossman-Havel era at the Balustrade culminated in 1966 with the production of Kafka's *The Trial*, dramatized and directed by Grossman. To present the facts of Kafka's story in a chillingly ordinary way, the interpretation avoided any suggestion of expressionistic, nightmarish distortion. On a scaffolded, cage-like turntable, the action was presented as if seen through K's eyes. The premise of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Karel Kraus, "The Balustrade as a Type" (Zábradlí jako typ), *Divadlo* 14:7 (September 1963): 41.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Grossman, "Presenting *The Garden Party*" (Uvedení Zahradní slavnosti), in *The Garden Party* (Zahradní slavnost), p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Grossman, "An Obsolete Invention?" p. 59.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Král Ubu*, ed. Jan Grossman (Prague: Divadelní ústav, 1966), p. 106.

Grossman's interpretation was that K's guilt is simply his inadvertent complicity in the process that finally eliminates him. As Grossman said, the absurd is not the basis of the action, but its result.<sup>15</sup>

After the success of *The Trial*, the Balustrade's reputation began to exceed its accomplishments. Although European tours and acclaim followed for several years, no new work of significance emerged. New productions were staged but were repetitive of earlier work; what had been fresh and relevant now seemed mechanical, clichéd, and prefabricated. Even Havel seemed to run dry. His last play at the Balustrade, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, in April 1968, essentially retraced familiar paths: the dehumanization of life in a schematic, technocratic civilization; the plight of the well-meaning but self-defeating intellectual. These were viable themes but they were by now familiar, for the Zeitgeist had evolved and the Balustrade company was left behind. Internal personnel problems of the theatre simply added to the tensions. The second era of the Balustrade ended with the departure of both Havel and Grossman at the end of the 1967-1968 season, before the August invasion. One is tempted to infer some connection between their departure and the political events of that period, but apparently the timing was purely coincidental.

The third era of the Balustrade lacked a clear outline. The new head of the drama wing, Jaroslav Gillar (b. 1942), formerly Grossman's assistant, was a young man who saw a need for a broader, fresher repertoire policy. He would have liked, he said, to work toward a more full-blooded theatricality with poetic, perhaps romantic and, indeed, metaphysical overtones without losing touch with the classic vaudeville tradition. The goal, in Gillar's words, was a *teatro mundi*.

Gillar's first production, a highly stylized, savage interpretation of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (February 1969), was clearly a response to the trauma of the Soviet-led invasion of August 1968. The production underlined the corruption, decadence, and treachery inherent in the play. Gillar introduced masks, choreographed fights, surrealistically distorted speech and movement, and a great deal of incidental business to underline the sheer morbidity of the world that Timon rejects. It was a vivid, powerful production, but it suggested a degree of excess straining after sometimes gratuitous effects, although it resonated with the dislocated times of the 1968-1969 season.

The Drama Club and the Theatre beyond the Gate (hereafter simply Gate Theatre) were the most recent of the special, drama-oriented small theatres of Prague. Both were established in 1965. To find two theatres with more radically different features would be difficult, yet both reacted against the fixed, institutionalized repertory operations of the permanent "stone" theatres and both endeavored to view people and society inquiringly and freshly, without habitualized conceptions.

The Drama Club comprised the most tightly knit "family" of artists among all Czech theatres of the time and was also perhaps the most self-contained of all Czech theatres because of its several resident playwrights and the multiple talents of its leading personnel. In its first six years of existence, it retained virtually all its key acting ensemble. Its chief actors were classmates at DAMU in Prague before going as a group to one of the regional repertory theatres (the Bezruč Theatre in Ostrava), where they worked together for several seasons. They were brought to the Drama Club by their director, Jan Kačer (b. 1936), who joined the two original founders of the Drama Club at their invitation in the first year of its existence. Ladislav Smoček and Jaroslav Vostrý (b. 1934), the two founders, had varied talents, as did Kačer. Smoček, who initiated the concept of what became the Drama Club, was both director and playwright; Vostrý both director and theorist-critic; and Kačer both actor and director. (Vostrý's wife, Alena, like Smoček, was one of the leading young playwrights in Czechoslovakia.) The three directors had been fellow students at DAMU in Prague in the mid-fifties, and they remained the guiding force behind the Drama Club for the first decade or more of its existence.

The physical quarters of the Drama Club were the most restrictive of any of the theatres under discussion. Like the Balustrade, the Drama Club was not originally a theatre; the building first housed women's club. Then as now, like the Balustrade, it also seated about 200, but in a shallower, broader seating arrangement, and had a narrow, three-sided balcony. The small stage lacked adequate fly-space and was wider than it was deep. Offstage space was virtually nonexistent, and dressing room facilities were limited. In most respects it would be thought utterly unsatisfactory as a production space, and yet its very smallness and intimacy were in complete accord with its style of performance, specifically its acting. Nothing was lost, every gesture and facial expression counted, and the acting could be low-keyed when necessary and still project clearly. Moreover, the very intimacy encouraged a kind of implicit rapport with the audience, the vast majority of whom were the theatre's long-standing devotees. Like the Balustrade, the Drama Club did not indulge in direct communication or physical contact with the audience; the fourth wall was always there. But it was distinctly permeable, and the persons on each side had an unspoken amiable relationship with those on the other. There was no mistaking the actors' alert, albeit indirect, awareness of the audience, and, in turn, the audience's agreeable acceptance of this awareness.

Of the three small theatres being described, the Drama Club performed the largest number of original Czech plays; in fact, nearly half of the fifteen plays that it produced from 1965 to 1969 were written by its own members. Smoček wrote four, Alena Vostrá two, and one of the actors, Pavel Landovský (b. 1936), one. Although one might take this as an indication of an author- or script-oriented theatre, the Drama Club was in fact an actors' theatre par excellence.

The dominant position of the actor in the Drama Club was integrally related to the conviction that a theatre ought to explore the "possibilities of man" by pre-

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<sup>15</sup> Grossman, "Presenting *The Garden Party*," p. 78.

senting “man in play” (the phrases were Vostrý’s). The term “play” was central to the Drama Club’s rationale and carried several meanings: play as action, as distinct from the static; play in the sense of game; and play with all its theatrical connotations.

The repertoire of the Drama Club reflected the actor-centered philosophy of the theatre’s operation. Plays were chosen for themes relating to questions of human freedom and responsibility, particularly with reference to the individual and society or, as Vostrý expressed it, “encounters of individual human possibilities with actuality.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Grossman’s program at the Balustrade, the Drama Club’s program was not focused on rational, ideational issues related to organized contemporary society, but on depicting people within a sphere of more generic forces, tensions, and moods and on observing their behavior patterns, their psychic pressure points. Tacitly questioning any system that accounts for human behavior on the basis of positivistic, materialistic, or economic categories (e.g., Marxism), Vostrý’s approach involved no analysis, formal critique, or even tentative conclusions, other than that people were complex, unchartable beings whose attempts at realizing themselves often conflict with similar attempts by others. The original plays at the Drama Club deliberately accentuated these motifs, and other plays in the repertoire, such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *The Birthday Party*, certainly lent themselves to such an interpretation.

The entire issue of actor-human, play, and possibilities was succinctly expressed by Vostrý: “The discovery of the actor’s possibilities is . . . the discovery of the ‘possibilities’ of humanity – and after all, that’s what theatre art is concerned with first.”<sup>17</sup> To facilitate the exploration of these “possibilities” the Drama Club addressed itself to the relation of the actors to the text. The actors’ temperaments, their egos, received priority and were valued in themselves; only then were they adapted to the demands of the text. It was not that the actors played themselves, but that they achieved a full realization of themselves in their roles. They drew upon and projected their personalities as part of the creative process.

This theoretical basis of the Drama Club’s view of theatre and of the actor most nearly found its fulfillment in the plays of Smoček and Vostrá. Smoček tended to concentrate on the interplay of distinct individuals in situations of stress. His characters are not made clear at the beginning of a play but define themselves in action, by their reactions to specific incidents. Aggression and violence are recurrent motifs in Smoček’s work, sometimes seriously (*Píkník*, 1965), sometimes in a farcical context (*Dr. Burke’s Strange Afternoon* [Podivné odpoledne doktora Zvonka Burkeho], 1966), sometimes more implicit than overt (*The Maze*, 1966), but in each case the limits of human freedom and the relation of the individual to other members of society are the center of attention.

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<sup>17</sup> Vostrý, quoted in Zdeněk Hořínek, “Činoherní klub 1965-66,” *Divadlo* 17:7 (September 1966): 11.

Even more richly provocative in their embodiment of the rationale of the Drama Club were the plays of Alena Vostrá, especially her first to be presented there, *When Your Number Comes Up*, directed by Jan Kačer in 1966. The self-conscious games the characters play on others and among themselves give them a sense of being in control, of manipulating others. The relation to the exploring of human possibilities, human freedom, and responsibility is obvious. In a joint note published with the play, the Vostrý’s offered an elaboration of the basic theme of the play. I expand on the translation (in brackets) in order to approximate the ambiguities inherent in some key Czech words and their syntax:

In this comedy we’re dealing with a play [in the sense of game] within a play . . . an activity with no purpose beyond itself. . . . In the play of people with other people, it is not unusual to have victims. In fact, the victims in this sort of play [game] may be its very own creators: the situation that they provoke may develop in a variety of unexpected ways. It is, if you will, a play-model of every human activity, the risks of which always reside in an encounter with the “counter-activities” of all the agents that become drawn into the play [game].<sup>18</sup>

The authors go on to refer to additional significances of “play” in this play, such as illusion and reality, role playing, chance and fate. Their note then concludes with the following revealing comment:

Yes, this is a play of the Drama Club, some of whose themes and principles it reveals in its own way. As the saying goes, it was written in the theatre, not for a theatre that would then proceed to adapt it to its own ends; in fact, we have here a play that was to an extent “made to measure” for certain actors - in the literal as well as figurative sense: it counts on actors who can perform not only with their souls but also with their bodies - with complete actors and their own potential motifs, not with acting in the abstract. In this sense, also, the play is inseparable from the context of the theatre in which it was realized.<sup>19</sup>

The intricate convolutions and organic relation of concept and creation, art and life, stage and world, underlying the philosophy of the Drama Club could hardly be put more tellingly.

What were the overt features of the acting style resulting from this approach? Observers tended to note its vitality and freshness, its exuberance and acrobatics, qualities most fully displayed in productions such as Machiavelli’s *Mandragora* (1965) and *When Your Number Comes Up*. But equally central was a kind of casual authority, a mastery of smaller, subtler, highly revealing physical actions. The acting was often

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<sup>18</sup> Alena Vostrá and Jaroslav Vostrý, “Dramaturgic Notes” (Dramaturgické poznámky), *Divadlo* 18:1 (January 1967): 81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

called cinematic; as a matter of fact, most of the Drama Club's actors appeared in many films, often as a group. Moreover, some of the more celebrated Czech film directors, such as Jiří Menzel (b. 1938; *Closely Watched Trains*) and Evald Schorm (1931-1988; *Courage for Every Day*), directed at the Drama Club: Menzel staged *Mandragora*, and Schorm staged *Crime and Punishment* (1966) and Landovský's original play *Rooms by the Hour* (Hodinový Hotelier, 1969).

The acting was based on a sense of inner reality, but without the curse of excessive internalization; that is, it was realized in interplay with other actors, in an unusual degree of ensemble coherence. The plays and the acting stayed within the mainstream of realism, inclining toward enrichment of character rather than any distortion of character. Each actor created a sensuously graphic, textured reality – not like a fabricated, strained mask, but like a comfortable set of old clothes, if not a second skin. At the same time, such enrichment did not preclude selectivity, economy, or a fine sense of timing.

The acting appeared to best advantage in two types of plays: those of traditional psychological realism (*Crime and Punishment*, 1966; *The Cherry Orchard*, 1969) and farces relying on colorful characterization and inventive business (*Revizor*, 1967 – a brilliant melange of secondary characters – and *Mandragora* acrobatics and rich physical by-play between the lines). The Drama Club's production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* was characteristic in several ways. In general, the emphasis was on a material, physical interpretation played on a virtually bare, carpeted stage. Gone was the traditional attenuated lyricism, the creation of a soft-focus atmosphere, muted passions, and fragile ideals. Instead, the characters were sensuously real and frequently unattractive. Ranevskaya, for example, was not unusually sensitive, but a strained, near-hysterical woman of considerable sensuality. Trofimov was here less an idealist than an impotent failure thinly disguising his bitterness. The ludicrousness of the lesser characters was stressed, and the cherry orchard itself was more a concrete piece of real estate than a transcendental symbol.

Although usually effective, the acting could sometimes encounter difficulties. For example, the obverse of the advantages gained from relying so thoroughly on the actors' distinctive attributes was that one inevitably became aware of certain personal mannerisms and idiosyncrasies not always sufficiently adapted to the character or play as a whole. In the Drama Club production of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1967), for example, the acting created a set of credible characters but ignored Pinter's carefully structured rhythms and precisely indicated pauses, thus throwing a substantial portion of the play out of alignment and generally sacrificing its elusiveness and eerie menace.

On another level the Drama Club actors, superbly adjusted to the dimensions of their small theatre and extremely effective in cameolike details, would probably have been less effective in roles demanding definition and color on a larger scale, in a considerably larger theatre, or in, say, Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. In the latter

case, no doubt, the Greek or Shakespearean work would be adapted to the Drama Club's approach and strong points, rather than the other way around.

In summary, of the three drama ensembles under consideration, the Drama Club was the least overtly engaged in or responsive to the topical issues and tensions of the world outside the theatre. Implicitly rejecting any ideologically slanted view of humanity, it was, rather, extremely responsive to what it viewed as the complex interpersonal realities of human behavior underlying that world and to the embodiment of those realities by means of actors whose distinctly personal creativity was nurtured and given priority in the total production process.

The Gate Theatre, besides being the youngest of the successful breakaway theatres, was distinctive in having its roots in the established, permanent repertory system. As previously noted, Otomar Krejča had already been moving in a direction similar to that of the small theatres during his tenure at the National Theatre from 1956 to 1964. It was a tribute to his stature and clout that, despite his sometimes controversial productions there, he was given his own theatre. Moreover, when he began production at the Gate Theatre in November 1965 he brought with him from the National Theatre several key actors, including Jan Tříska and Marie Tomášová – his Romeo and Juliet – as well as Europe's most celebrated designer, Josef Svoboda. Although Svoboda and some of the actors still continued to work with the National Theatre, they formed the core of Krejča's strong production team at the Gate, which also included Karel Kraus, a close working associate of Krejča for years, as dramaturg and Josef Topol, playwright in residence.

In striking contrast to the Drama Club, the Gate Theatre was the most director-centered of the theatres being described and the one most clearly dominated by one man's artistic vision. Krejča, who directed or supervised all seven of the Gate's premieres, was a man of strong convictions and possessed the will to make his convictions prevail. By the end of the 1960s he had become acknowledged as a leading director not only in Czechoslovakia but abroad; his Gate ensemble toured throughout Europe, and he guest-directed in such centers as Brussels, Vienna, Stockholm, and Salzburg. His productions ranged from flamboyant, large-cast spectacles to intimate, sonata-like duets, but they always provided evidence of a strongly conceptualized, many-layered interpretation as well as an inherent theatrical sensibility. The Gate Theatre, in short, produced a wider spectrum of theatrical entertainment than either the Balustrade or the Drama Club, and it carried the most theatrical voltage.

Although the Gate Theatre was a latecomer to the small theatre movement, Krejča himself had already battled long and hard to reform the "stone theatre" system. His significance was analogous to Vyskočil's in launching the Balustrade Theatre, even though the two approached the problem from radically different angles and favored radically different methods of production. In an era of dogmatic abstractions and formulas, Krejča probed the complexities of human social behavior.



Moreover, while the heavy-handed marks of Socialist Realism still prevailed in much Czech staging, Krejča encouraged designers like Svoboda to create boldly expressive scenic designs such as the kinetic, poetically evocative scenography of *Romeo and Juliet* (1963).

Krejča's reasons for leaving the National Theatre were made clear in his own words:

I don't believe in a theatrical colossus, in a theatre factory, in a theatre with several ensembles and buildings, with a dozen premieres each season, with a dozen performances a week. All of that contradicts the essence of theatre. . . . It seems to me that today's theatre ought to resemble a research institute for dramatic art rather than a production factory, a hand-craft workshop rather than an establishment for producing confectionery.<sup>20</sup>

Krejča sought a theatre in which he and others could do what they liked. A preliminary project in line with these sentiments was Krejča's guest-direction of two productions at the Balustrade Theatre in the early 1960s at the invitation of Jan Grossman: Claus Hubálek's *No More Heroes in Thebes* (1962) and Havel's *The Garden Party* (1963), with Svoboda designing both. His direction of the Havel play was particularly interesting because it was not the sort of work one associates with Krejča, yet the play's intricate, rational absurdities must certainly have appealed to him.

From its inception the Gate Theatre shared the facilities of Prague's Laterna Magika Theatre, which had opened in 1959 in a former subterranean movie theatre. Like the Balustrade and the Drama Club, it had to accommodate to quarters essentially unsuited to maximal staging opportunities. Although the theatre seated 450 in comfort, its stage was designed for the cinematic features of Laterna Magika: more breadth and less depth than is desirable for staging, and no fly space. For a director with Krejča's penchant for a broad, fully orchestrated *mise en scene*, the physical limitations of the theatre were a constant tribulation. Adding to the difficulties was the problem of scheduling performances in alternation with the Laterna Magika, a problem somewhat like that of the Balustrade, where drama alternated with mime. Easing this scheduling problem and perhaps as a result of it, the Gate Theatre toured Europe extensively. Moreover, Krejča preferred not to perform steadily. Part of his ideal theatre program was freedom from regular quantitative norms of production, freedom permitting time to work toward maturity and ripeness of production. Accordingly, compared to the Balustrade and the Drama Club, his theatre mounted fewer productions and had longer rehearsal and tryout periods — an average of at least six months for each production.

As leader of the theatre, Krejča demanded total commitment: his regular actors were discouraged from doing film work, if not forbidden to do it (quite the opposite of the practice at the Drama Club). His company consisted of a small core of actors who consistently performed the major roles, actors with whom he had worked for ten or more years; several had been students under his tutelage at DAMU. These half dozen or so were supplemented by fluctuating numbers of others. Characteristically, and in contrast to the more permanent arrangement at other theatres, every regular actor at the Gate Theatre had only a one-year renewable (and cancelable!) contract. The difference was probably traceable to Krejča's aversion to the tenure system as he knew it at the National Theatre, which resulted in a considerable amount of artistic deadwood. Krejča did not seek especially versatile actors, but rather those with distinctive traits that he could employ to maximum effect in his interpretations. He had little use for improvisation or what he would consider the vagaries of intuitive, subjective acting. It was, indeed, difficult to imagine a greater contrast than the one between his creative method and the one practiced at the Drama Club.

Krejča's belief in centralization of production under a strong director was carefully reasoned: "Every theatrical work (perhaps more than any other form of art) resists its own totality, flees from its unity, and this constant breaking away can be corrected only by the organizational power of the director. Where this is lacking, the disintegration of productions and theatres is imminent."<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly, Krejča insisted that the actor accept entirely those directions necessary for the production to emerge as an entity. According to him, such subordination of the actor's will did not limit creativity:

Extensive preparations for a production ought to be a protection against uncertainty and chance, a guarantee that the production will emerge as a whole, that it will have its own, theatrical identity, and its characters, situations, points will obey fixed relations. By a detailed system of single "points," we pin the actor in his proper place in the production. From this place he can soar to the clouds, but only from this place.<sup>22</sup>

Krejča's "extensive preparations" included hundreds of detailed notes made before rehearsals began, testifying to a long and painstaking study of the text. By the time he was ready to begin rehearsals, however, he had usually formulated and identified with a complex, many-stranded interpretation or vision of the production. His densely annotated Regiebuch became, as he put it, the text of the production. Although he denied that it was a fixed and formal chart, and although he undoubtedly made allowance for adjustments and the evolution of shading and

<sup>21</sup> Otomar Krejča, "The Actor as Trained Monkey" (Herec jako cvičená opice), *Divadlo* 21:3 (March 1970): 16.

<sup>22</sup> Otomar Krejča, in program notes to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (Prague: Divadlo za branou, 1966), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Otomar Krejča, in Jiří Lederer, *They Said . . . Come Visit* (Povedali . . . Pridte) (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo politickej literatury, 1968), p. 175.

details, the basic spine and configuration of the production were settled in advance. (Again, the contrast to both the Balustrade and the Drama Club was noteworthy, even though it was not an absolute one.)

During rehearsals, Krejča concentrated intently on every detail. Even while actors still had scripts in hand, he hovered over the slightest bits of business coaching, urging, demonstrating, asking that a given reading or action be repeated until it achieved what he felt was the necessary rhythm or form, for even the slightest errors at this stage of the work, he believed, might lead to major misinterpretations later.

Krejča's elaborate preliminary study of the text and his attention to detail were consistent with his concern for the complex relationships inherent between people as individuals and people as social beings. Krejča was, moreover, always sensitive to his times, to the world in which his work was done, as is evidenced by his involvement with the sociopolitical activities of various cultural unions and deliberative bodies. Never overtly apparent in his productions, such concern nevertheless underlay and guided his work.

All these tendencies in Krejča found embodiment in productions distinguished by their profusion of motifs, their dense scoring, their multiple layers of suggestion and implication. As he said: "I don't believe in the quality of plays and stage works that are easily described, easy to analyze and compare."<sup>23</sup> His staging was notable for its synthesis of theatrical elements, its surging, dynamic movement, its intense physicalization in gesture, color, and choreographed patterns, its sustained inner tension even in calmer moments. A production for Krejča became a theatrical metaphor of a complex human and social situation, with varied though not obvious echoes of the world outside the theatre.

Krejča's method worked superbly with pieces of broad scope and inherent theatricality. Michel De Ghelderode's *Masquers of Ostende* and Arthur Schnitzler's *The Green Cockatoo* were good examples. The De Ghelderode piece was an extended, large-cast mime-ballet dealing with the juxtaposition of carnival revelry and death. Grotesque masks and costumes, acrobatic dance, and insistent, driving music combined to create a hyperintense, ritual-like event, which Krejča intended as a theatrical warm-up for the much more inwardly oriented play following on the same bill, Topol's *Cat on the Rails*, a long one-act play for two characters. The two works formed the opening production of the theatre in November 1965.

Schnitzler's *The Green Cockatoo* (1968) is a classic example of a play within a play, with pre-Pirandellian themes of illusion and reality, set during the storming of the Bastille. It allowed Krejča to give full rein to his instinctive theatrical bravura as well as his speculative, analytical working over of multiple themes. The appropriateness of treatment to script was near perfect. At other times, however, Krejča's method could produce an effect of overdirection, as if he were reluctant to let even a moment go by

that was not loaded with significance or dramatic effect; scenes became hyperexpressive. Intensity and animation guaranteed that the result was never dull, but it might become fatiguing. With plays inherently more intimate and reflective, such as Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* or Topol's extended one-acts, *Cat on the Rails* and *Hour of Love*, the effect might be undue strain, excessive complication, or the overburdening of a fragile situation. Krejča's treatments were always challenging, but questions might arise about the balance between text and production.

Two productions that marked a culmination of Krejča's work in the 1960s, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* and Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, vividly illustrated the spectrum of Krejča's art: its masterful theatricality and challenging concepts as well as its potentially overloaded embodiment.

Krejča's production of *The Three Sisters* (1966), a profound reassessment of the play, formed an interesting contrast to the Drama Club's treatment of *The Cherry Orchard*. Allowing for the differences between the two plays, it is worth noting that both productions rejected the soulful, nostalgic accretions marking many Chekhov revivals and that neither production was concerned with making the characters attractive or appealing. But whereas the Drama Club's essentially low-keyed approach devoted itself to a close-textured, ostensibly casual study that stressed the banality if not vulgarity of the lives depicted, Krejča's Gate Theatre production was shrill, brittle, and jagged, its movement consistently dynamic and intricately patterned. The characters were presented as highly agitated, tense, essentially neurotic, and in varying states of desperation. Krejča's predilection for rich physicalization of emotion was most evident in a series of unforgettable, nearly expressionistic images that ended the play: the sisters resembled birds trapped in a cage, swooping and darting in frustration and despair. The dashing of their dreams and hopes was rendered in powerful, absolute theatrical terms. Although the interpretation was questioned as being excessive and spastic, the consensus was that it was profoundly exhilarating.

*Lorenzaccio* (1969), by far the most ambitious, demanding, and provocative of Krejča's productions at the Gate Theatre, also provided the most complex yet indirect comment on the human and political forces implicit in the tragic events comprising the birth and death of the Prague Spring of 1968. De Musset's plot of a frustrated revolutionary idealist in Renaissance Italy and his seemingly inevitable defeat in a decadent, malevolent world was a starting point for Krejča. At the top of his form, he used de Musset's plot as an armature for dense, interwoven, many-layered patterns of theatrical images that created an overpowering sense of the world's deceit, corruption, and, indeed, bestiality. It was a world suggesting a montage of Hieronymus Bosch's nightmarish monsters and the morbid elegance of a Renaissance court. It was, moreover, a world of the stage, taking on a life of its own, with, multiple levels of awareness and significance.

The total effect of the production was created by the interaction of a variety of elements, including Josef Svoboda's scenography. Even before the play began, we saw the bare stage enclosed by an irregular border of semitransparent mirrors re-

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<sup>23</sup> Otomar Krejča, "Every Extreme is a Bit Foolish" (Každá krajnost je trochu hloupá), *Divadlo* 18:1 (January 1967): 34.

flecting multiple images of the stage and also the audience, pulling us into the world of the stage and later, once the action was under way, indirectly suggesting our complicity in what followed.

The theatricality at the very beginning of the play was essentially heightened when all the actors (approximately thirty) entered in solid-colored tights and leotards, frankly comporting themselves as actors, now and then staring at the audience before dressing themselves in costumes and masks already placed on the stage. The seemingly casual action was actually intricately choreographed. The masks were of several types. At first we were mostly aware of carnival masks that presented the wearers' features in enlarged, exaggerated form and monstrous, surreal animal masks — heightened versions of what might have been figures in a contemporary court masque. Later we became aware of other masks, tightly fitting ones reproducing the wearers' faces but projecting a colorless, deathlike image.

All the actors remained on stage throughout the play, overhearing, whispering, constantly shifting with greater or lesser motion, a living, dreamlike, ominous background suggesting a totality of involvement, an interpenetration of private and public life. Each scene was demarcated by a major shifting of this background, yet an overall rhythmic flow and coherence were maintained. As we watched the protagonist, Lorenzaccio, weave around and among the figures and spectres of his real and inner world, we also became aware that Krejča had introduced a double for him. Silently observing him at a distance or hovering close by, the figure reinforced certain scenes and provided an ironic perspective on others.

The action was not easy to follow. It was a difficult yet enormously suggestive production, offering no single, clear, conveniently accessible meaning, but rather a host of partial insights and impressions. The audience was left with deeply disturbing perceptions of relationships between inhumane forces and human contingencies, of innocence and deceit, power and impotence, despair and continuity. Equally strong was the perception of a challenging, autonomous work of art and of the incredible amount of preparation and work that must have gone into the integration of its countless, often simultaneous details.

The production recalled, to some extent, the Balustrade production of *Timon*. Both seemed bent on presenting a monstrous image of the world's evil and unnaturalness, drawing on a variety of theatrical elements to underscore their vision. The profound difference between the productions was largely the difference between youthful excess and mature, conceptualized artistry: the *Timon* production was striking and inventive, but also forced, melodramatic, and strident compared with the controlled, intricately structured complexities and ambiguities of Krejča's *Lorenzaccio* production. *Lorenzaccio* was Krejča's masterwork to that time. It rekindled one's sense of the latent powers of theatre, and it stood as the Czech production bearing witness to the world that produced the events of August 1968 in Prague.

Krejča's observations on the relation between art and life (from a speech early in 1969) were especially relevant:

Art . . . detaches itself from everyday reality in order to encompass it. In its own fashion it has to ignore the present and its routine problems in order to question the very heart of the present. Hitting the bull's-eye gains significance the greater our distance from it. Art doesn't force its way, it infiltrates . . . it doesn't scream, it persuades in whispers. It works slowly, patiently, and persistently. It doesn't plead for freedom because it itself is free and radiates freedom. It expands and strengthens the realm of freedom in everyone who opens himself to it. And at the same time it immunizes him against coercion, fear, and falsehood. Against cant and demagoguery. Against closed mindedness and barbarism. Free art fills that space in each of us into which unfreedom might otherwise insinuate itself.<sup>24</sup>

The events of August 1968 punctuated the evolution of Prague's small theatres, as they did all life in the nation. Fortunately, the punctuation was more a semicolon, or perhaps a dash, than a period. Life went on, and so did the activity of these theatres. Distinctive as they were, they now became assimilated into the total theatre spectrum of Prague. Some observers, in fact, saw dangers of a new institutionalism. Ivan Vyskočil, ever a purist, denied that any true small theatres existed by the end of the 1960s, his ideal being a theatre "small enough so that those who operate it are not financially dependent on it."<sup>25</sup> Certainly the political situation after the invasion clouded the future of these and other artistic enterprises.

In retrospect, the birth, evolution, and maturity of these small theatres of Prague provided a fresh perspective on the significance of theatre as a symptom and even as a contributory cause of sociocultural realities. Just as there was ample evidence of these theatres being products of their time, there was no denying that their distinctive work had also been in the vanguard of cultural forces contributing to the shortlived but memorably democratic society being created in Czechoslovakia during the spring of 1968.

What stood out as one reflected on these theatres (as well as work such as that of Radok in other theatres) was not a singular style or approach to experimentation — neither the modish shock of theatre of cruelty nor the carnival radicalism of guerrilla theatre evident on many Western stages, for example — but a number of deliberate, independent, strongly conceptualized explorations of humans and society, of the limits of people's humanity and their freedom, of fresh communication between stage and audience, and of the power of theatrical metaphor to capture and illuminate

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<sup>24</sup> Otomar Krejča, from a speech reported in "Art and Politics" (Umění a politika), *Divadelní noviny* 12:12 (February 26, 1969): 1, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ivan Vyskočil, "Non-Memories" (Nevzpomínky), *Divadelní noviny* 12:4 (November 6, 1968): 6.

critical moments in the life of a people. Considered in this light, the small theatres of Prague represented a remarkably mature, artistically sophisticated, socially engaged art, justly comparable to the crucial work of their predecessors in the similarly challenged Czech theatres of the 1930s and wartime 1940s.