

the Open University of Cyprus, led by Vayos Liapis and Avra Sidiropoulou, and the creation of a new Deputy Ministry for Culture complete the picture of a small island which, during the last twenty years, has experienced an unprecedented cultural flourishing that has driven its theatre from adolescence to adulthood.

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CZECH REPUBLIC

David Drozd

Context: Cultural politics in the Czech Republic and the unfinished transformation

It is hardly possible to underestimate the role of theatre in the events of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 (⇒ Chapter 43). Symbolically, the role of the theatre was confirmed by the election of dissident and playwright Václav Havel as president in December 1989 (Savin 1999). The late theatre scholar, dramaturg, and former minister of culture Milan Lukeš summed it up concisely:

In 1989, the concept of theatre based on national revival came to its end; this is a general shock that theatre must experience and draw conclusions from... . From November to December 1989, this was particularly evident: in order to fulfil its function, the theatre had to cease to be a theatre – it turned into a public forum and a centre of political struggle.

(Lukeš and Porubjak 1994, 40, my translation)

Even at that moment, theatre was entering a deep crisis. Around 1992, there was a significant drop in audience numbers, and discussions on the meaning of culture were held, especially practical debates about the transformation of the theatre network. Lukeš remained optimistic: 'The situation of the end, or rupture, does not depress me: it involves a great liberation' (Lukeš and Porubjak 1994, 40). After thirty years, it can be said that the 'great liberation' took place only partially.

Until 1989, Czech culture, including theatre, was managed centrally, de facto monopolized and to a greater or lesser extent censored. The effort to democratize and decentralize society went hand in hand with a deep resistance to any intervention by the state in culture, especially in the 1990s. A negative feature of this tendency has been a strong neoliberal pressure. In the 1990s, one of the culture ministers asserted that 'the state should not produce art' (Nekolný 2006, 14). The unresolved issue of the last thirty years is how to set up systematic support to stimulate artistic quality, ensure access to culture, provide space for change, and at the same time, enable commercial enterprise in this area.

As part of the reform of public administration, theatres were devolved to municipalities (or regions) at the beginning of the 1990s. As of today, the system is even more decentralized, but the issue of funding remains frustrating. Some of the local bodies lack the budget to sustain the theatres. Theatre representatives (especially the Association of Professional Theatres) have been trying to propose multi-source financing by state, region, and the municipalities, but such cooperation is almost impossible due to the lack of an explicit cultural policy. A number of strategic documents have been introduced since the 1990s (Černá 2011, 14), but often with no practical effect. A shift happened with the Czech Republic joining the EU in 2004 – many administrative barriers for cooperation disappeared and funding opportunities proliferated, but the absence of an articulated cultural policy by the state authorities became even more evident. While the EU recommends that one per cent of GDP should be dedicated to culture, this amount has never been reached in the Czech Republic, despite many political proclamations. The real budget is around 0.5 per cent (with the share dedicated to live culture and theatre being relatively small).

Theatres funded by regional bodies are dependent on local political structures. Politicians often interfere in artistic matters as they provide major financial support and so have a right to control the institution. Theatre at the same time has difficulties to raise politically controversial issues and tends to be loyal and politically conformist. Proposals for a different legal footing of theatres have been around for a decade; they include co-financing and also a certain level of independence and transparency of public theatre institutions, but they have not been adopted. This is because the notion of theatre as a public service is still not generally accepted. Such state of affairs has a significant impact on independent theatre companies, with local governments only reluctantly introducing grant schemes for independent, project-based theatre groups (for complete overview of the Czech system of funding culture, see Černá 2011, 15–19).

Cultures of theatre-making: Transformations of practices and sensibility

The first cultural task of the early 1990s seems to have been the re-establishment of broken ties to overcome forty years of relative cultural isolation. Many expectations were associated with the return of personalities who had shaped Czechoslovak theatre in the 1960s.

The return of director Otomar Krejča, who was not allowed to work in Czech theatre between 1975 and 1989, was symbolic. His Theatre Behind the Gate (closed in 1972) was restored by a ministerial order in 1990 as Theatre Behind the Gate II. Unfortunately, audience interest gradually declined until the Ministry of Culture closed it down in 1995 (see Machalická 2000, 45–46). In retrospect, it can be said that the restoration of the Theatre Behind the Gate was inappropriately timed: the transformation of a rigid, state-run theatre network was only slowly underway, and a complementary system of grant support for independent groups was not yet established. Finding a solution for Krejča and his demanding programme of artistic theatre within that context was practically impossible.

The second area of great comebacks has been playwriting. For a while, previously banned plays by Havel, Pavel Kohout, and Josef Topol dominated the stages. But around 1992, an audience crisis arrived – and one of the responses was to search for new drama.

In 1992, the Alfréd Radok Prize was established to encourage new playwriting. Authors were submitting a wealth of plays (in some years more than fifty) with ambivalent results. The expectations of the juries often clashed with the attempts of the new generation, whose poetics carried distinctly postmodern features. These were not appreciated by the juries, who

somehow hoped for a new Havel, Kohout, or Topol to arise. While some plays were awarded prizes and published, only very rarely did they find their way to the stage, as repertoires were dramaturgically programmed by the older generation. The attempts of the National Theatre in Prague are telling in this regard (see Zemančíková 2020).

A change in drama came with the arrival of a new generation of directors and playwrights. In 1999, dramaturg Lenka Havlíková ostentatively planned a season of new Czech plays (by Jiří Pokorný, Zdeněk Jecelín, Markéta Bláhová, and others) in the Drama Studio in Ústí nad Labem, followed by a season of truly contemporary foreign drama (by Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Marius von Mayerburg). Contemporary drama, whether Czech or foreign, gradually became an essential part of every theatre repertoire. Havlíková later applied this approach as dramaturg of the National Theatre in Prague (2002–2012) (⇒ Chapter 68).

In 2005, the Letí Theatre was established, self-declaring as a company 'with a passion for new plays,' producing new writing exclusively. This theatre initiated the founding of the Mark Ravenhill Prize (2010), awarded annually to the best productions of contemporary drama. Nominations include many notable productions of new writing. The new play category of the Alfréd Radok Prize has also changed substantially. Since 2013, the prize has been awarded for the first production of a new play. Both these prizes evidence a fundamental change in the position of new Czech dramaturgy.

In the last decade, Czech drama has become more stratified and richer. There are still new plays by living 'legends' who had established themselves in the 1960s (e.g., Milan Uhde, Kohout, and even Havel, who returned with *The Leaving* in 2007), while Karel Steigerwald might represent the so-called normalization generation thriving in the 1970s and 1980s. The generation starting in the 1990s was ignored for a long time and has now become a 'middle' generation (for example, Petr Zelenka, David Drábek, Roman Sikora, Iva Volánková, Lenka Lagronová, and René Levinský). They are followed by the youngest generation (Petr Kolečko, Tomáš Dianiška, and Anna Saavedra).

The rise of postmodern theatre?

The postmodern director Petr Lébl was the most prominent figure of the 1990s. His untimely death in 1999 marked the end of the first stage of postmodernism in Czech theatre. The appointment of Michal Dočekal, another postmodern director of the same generation, as artistic director at the National Theatre in 2002 could be also read as a symbolic moment. Dočekal (joined by Havlíková as dramaturg) worked towards incorporating postmodernism on the Czech Republic's first stage. He transformed it into a modern European stage, which did not build its legitimacy on the legacy of the 1960s or the counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s, but on reflection on contemporary society and culture alongside its tradition (see Zemančíková 2020).

Simultaneously, with the changing grant support system, an independent theatre scene has developed. The plurality of poetics grew – the simple opposition of classical and traditional versus alternative and postmodern was no longer valid. Postmodern sensibilities did not disappear but ceased to be a controversial topic. Between 2002 and 2010, it became apparent that another generation of directors arose, including Jan Mikulášek, Anna Davidová, Daniel Špinar, Jiří Adámek (known more recently as Austerlitz), Jan Frič, Štěpán Pácl, Jiří Havelka, Petra Tejnorová, Viktorie Čermáková, and SKUTR. Jiří Adámek/Austerlitz (b. 1977) immediately caught attention with his first production *Tiká tiká politika* (Tick tock politics, 2006), a show in which performers just by using the word 'politika' (politics) and its syllables explored gestures and intonations of politicians, creating funny and subversive

image of politics as such. Adámek/Austerlitz also developed his original version of sound and sonic theatre (inspired by theatre musical of Heiner Goebbels or Georges Aperghis). He stages montages of (non-dramatic) literary, poetic, or documentary texts and uses musical and rhythmical stylization of speech and action (⇒ Chapter 57). For example, in the production *Bludiště seznamů* (The Infinity of lists, 2016) inspired by Umberto Eco's book of the same name, different lists of things were spoken, whispered, or sung by four performers and a countertenor singer on an empty stage transformed only by abstract stage design to create intensive images evoking the complexity of our world (for more info, see biographical entry at the web site PerformCzech). Anna Davidová (b. 1984), in turn, is one of the brightest young (women) directors of her generation. Her work spans from classical drama to new writing or devised performances (⇒ Chapter 54), but always has a strong visual touch. She creates poetic, surreal, and sometimes grotesque theatre images. She is 'a director with strong visions who nevertheless allows her actors to shine. Coherent, and yet never quite predictable' (Zahálka 2013).

Davidová and other directors listed above have worked across independent and state-funded companies, collaborated with established ensembles, and took part in one-off projects. Their work demonstrates a postmodern sensibility, often uses postdramatic principles, and emphasizes the visuality (⇒ Chapter 53). It includes devised, documentary, and immersive theatre, elements of performance and movement, a new circus, and often results in shows that are explicitly critical of politics. In 2015, Daniel Špinar became artistic director of the National Theatre in Prague and provided space to this generation. A similar generational change in the key positions has taken place in many other companies. For instance, Davidová has become the artistic director of a famous, experimental theatre Goose on the String in 2019.

Institutional structures: Houses, ensembles, groups, and festivals

The Czech theatre network is historically very dense: in 2019, there were 39 state-funded theatres (including twelve opera houses!) and more than 200 other theatre companies. The non-state companies include commercial theatres (popular theatre and musical productions), small community groups, and experimental (mostly project-based) companies. In terms of genre, drama ensembles dominate (with a high percentage among the state-funded theatres), but other genres, such as opera and musical theatre, puppetry, and various forms of movement theatre and ballet, also have a significant presence.

The independent (i.e., non-state-funded) theatre scene has grown so significantly in the last decade that it established its own representative body (The Association of Independent Theatres) in 2016. Historically, theatre practitioners' professional status had been associated only with theatres organized by the state. However, professionals within the independent project-based system also deserve statutory recognition and acknowledgement. The Association now works alongside the Association of Professional Theatres. The importance of both organizations came to light during the pandemic, when they exerted a joint pressure on the state to provide adequate support to both employed and freelance professionals during the closure of theatres.

Czech festival culture is another crucial presence with some sixty events taking place annually (⇒ Chapter 69). The first theatre festival to be established after 1989 was the *Divadlo/Theatre Festival* in Plzeň (Pilsen), followed by the *German Language Theatre Festival* (1996), recently joined by Polish Theatre at *Palm Off Fest* (2016), both in Prague, the *European Regions Festival* in Hradec Králové (1994), and *Theatre World* in Brno (2009). There are also prominent festivals dedicated to special genres, such as festival of puppet theatre (*Skupa's Pilsen* or *Spectaculio Interesse*), dance theatre (Tanec Praha), or biennial *Opera* (see Černá 2011, 26–27).

Conclusion

From the institutional point of view, Czech theatre constantly renegotiates its position with the Ministry of Culture and local authorities. The lack of a clear cultural policy causes instability in the field, with often painful consequences. The situation has been further aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis with a looming threat of radical cuts to funding (⇒ Chapter 50). In fact, Czech theatre culture has never been really depoliticized after 1989. The development of Czech theatre as an artistic space can be described by two basic tendencies – diversification and stratification. The diversity of practices, styles, and institutional forms often leads to tensions, but these tensions also seem to provide necessary creative and existential impulses for the field.

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