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The Scenic Designs of Karel Zmrzlý

Visual artist, scenographer and illustrator Karel Zmrzlý was born in Brno on July 5th, 1936; he died in the same city on December 13th, 2000.¹ After graduating from the High School of Arts and Crafts in Brno (1951-1955), where he studied under the supervision of Professor J. A. Šálek, he learnt architecture for two years at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. He later transferred to the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing and Music Arts in Prague (1957-1960), at which institution he studied scenography with František Tröster.

Zmrzlý served as chief designer at the North Moravian Theatre in Šumperk (1960-61), and at the Theatre of Victorious February in Hradec Králové (1963-1980). In the 1970s, he regularly worked for the Mrštík Brothers Theatre, and the National Theatre in Brno, and he was again employed at the Mrštík Brothers Theatre in the 1980s (1980-1988). Zmrzlý collaborated with most of the numerous Czech and Slovak theatres, creating about a hundred scenic and costume designs. In the years 1992-1996, he taught scenography to opera direction students at the Faculty of Music, Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU) in Brno. His work was exhibited at Prague Quadrennial meetings (in 1971, 1975, 1979, 1983 and

1 This article is a reworked shortened version of my master's thesis, written in the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, in 2009.

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The Original Design of K. Zmrzlý. *Frank the Fifth*, Scenes of *The Counters*.
From the Collection of K. Kerndlová.

1987). His scenic designs could additionally be seen outside the Czech context in Portugal, Germany, Norway, Austria and Great Britain.

Zmrzlý's most important scenographic work was developed in collaboration with the director Milan Pásek at the State Theatre in Brno (now the National Theatre, Brno), and at the Mrštík Brothers Theatre (now Municipal Theatre of Brno) in the same city. For Pásek's productions in Brno, Zmrzlý created thirty-six designs altogether during the period from 1967 to 1989. The form of these designs is closely associated with Milan Pásek's directing style and his dramaturgical adaptations, as well as with Václav Nosek's musical dramaturgy. Pásek had his own characteristic directorial approach, which is reflected in all of his productions. Although Pásek and Zmrzlý's collaboration achieved a phase of mutual influence and inspiration (allowing Zmrzlý's scenographic concepts and sketches to serve as a starting impulse for Pásek's resulting creation), it still followed the director's basic creative principles – which tended toward anti-illusionism, political theatre, theatre without embellishment and a deliberate effort to make operas 'less operatic' (by approaching them as dramatic performances in which the text of the play and more sophisticated acting styles were emphasised).

The fact that Zmrzlý worked for two architecturally different stage structures (with different parameters, different depths and heights, and different technical and lighting equipment) should also be taken into consideration. The Janáček

Theatre enables the scenographer to create monumental, technically demanding sets of massive size. Whereas the Mrštík Brothers Theatre has the advantage of more intimate contact with the audience, and a greater emphasis on proximity, and detail.

To examine Karel Zmrzlý's scenography, we can use his drawings of scenic designs (which themselves are detailed enough to serve as a sufficient basis for technical working drawings and set manufacture). The most significant of their characteristics is a neutral darkness in the working paper (which almost ubiquitously appears in either grey or black). When creating designs, Zmrzlý used simple drawing techniques. These mostly used combined artist's techniques, followed by coloured crayon or charcoal drawing. In his more detailed drawings, Zmrzlý needed to achieve very thin lines, and to do this he turned to the artist's technique of pen and ink sketching. In order to achieve full renderings (and in particular for colouring and creating wider strokes), he used brushes, for the most part with watercolours. However, in his illustrative drawings, he also used very small artist's paintbrushes to create detailed brushwork so as to be able to provide an element of precise detail in his coloured renderings. One of Zmrzlý's favorite techniques was spraying colour with an airbrush on the base coat of a given drawing. Using this method, he achieved impressive backgrounds for his decorations, which could then be elaborated in great detail. He also achieved an impressive effect of theatrical illumination by spraying white pigment in order to evoke streams of directional light. Zmrzlý always complied with the basic rules of perspective; and in most cases, he was very strict regarding the observer's point of view (from which an imagined ocular realism is crowned with accurate depiction of light and shadow). The object on stage always balances well within the composition of any given image, and Zmrzlý always makes sure that his renderings and sketches are aesthetically and visually attractive.

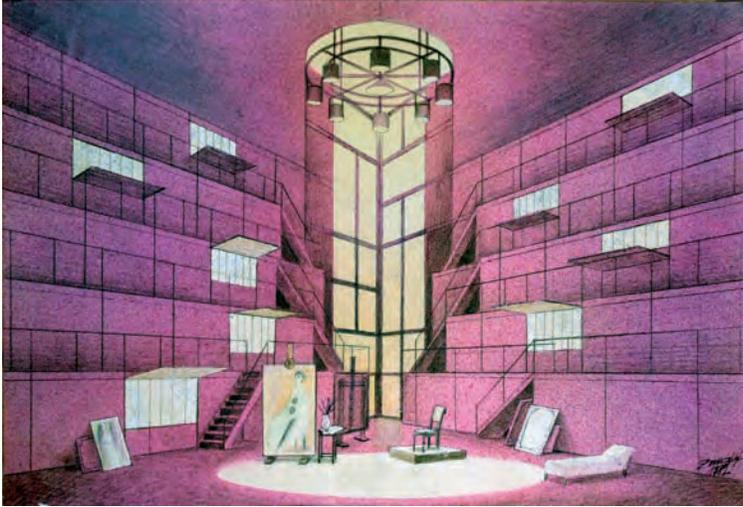
No design is an attempt to depict photographic reality, of course (even if Zmrzlý's strict adherence to perspective, and to the laws of physics and mechanics, might suggest otherwise), and Zmrzlý only applies these rules in order to create the basis of a design that can act as the construction material and tangible framework on which he can subsequently develop his imaginative vision. His designs are accordingly stylistically quite diverse: they can be inspired by Cubism, Symbolism, Surrealism or Abstraction, as well as a naïve style. In the context of Pásek's direction, they also work at times in a Constructivist fashion. Zmrzlý did not prefer a single style; but rather when designing, he took into consideration the style of the play, as well as the direction of the actors, and attempted to capture the idea of the production in the best possible way, reflecting in his design what

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he took to be the production's essential visual components. Zmrzlý minimised the colourful aspect of his drawings (even though in reality his stage designs were full of colours), in order to prevent any coloured shading from drawing attention away from his design's central scenographic elements – such as, for instance, a sailcloth occupying the centre of a design. Zmrzlý believed that when drawing, the scenographer must adhere to the visual lexicon of theatre. So, for instance, onion-like cupolas are sometimes suspended in the fly system, action might be situated on a visible revolve, and designs are generally dominated by the blackness of the theatrical panorama. Zmrzlý perfectly masters strokes made in charcoal; and he gives textiles the impression of roundness and three-dimensionality by means of classic artist's techniques (i.e. by identifying the direction of any illumination and deploying visible contrast between light and shadow). The style of his drawings is always neat and often evokes a gloomy atmosphere.

Zmrzlý had favorite scenographic elements and construction materials that he frequently used. One essential material for him was textiles, which enabled him to create abstract spatial patterns on stage, or which he used to subdivide the stage space so as to carry out particular aesthetic functions. In association with his use of fabric, we should recognise Zmrzlý's sensibility to the aesthetics and semiotic significance of costume; he skillfully managed to make this aspect of theatre arts a significant feature of many of the productions on which he worked. Among other materials, he liked to use gauze, or wooden planks. For many productions, he also separated the proscenium from the playing area with steps, emphasising the proscenium space and elevating the playing area. He often structured stage space both vertically and horizontally using a stage made of 'practicals' (movable elements of the basic design structure) and mobile elevated wagons. He also stressed the height of the stage space with the use of screens and prismatic panels. On numerous occasions, the demands of the productions on which Zmrzlý worked meant that he had to deal with frequent changes of setting.

In order to give an overview of the range and nature of his work, what follows is a brief description of several key operatic and dramatic productions on which Karel Zmrzlý worked. From these representative works, one may glean a fuller understanding of the range of techniques and effects that he deployed as a scenographer:



The Original Design of K. Zmrzlý. *Lulu*, Scene 1 (In the Painter's Atelier).
From the Collection of K. Kerndlová.

Operatic Scenography

A. Berg: *Lulu*

Premiere January 28th, 1972, Janáček Theatre, translation Eva Bezděková, direction Milan Pásek, conductor Václav Nosek, scenography Karel Zmrzlý (last performance September 7th, 1972. Number of re-runs 7).

This production of *Lulu* represented a revolution in Czech operatic dramaturgy. Zmrzlý conceived of this opera as musical-drama in a grand style. A monumental four-storied construction impressed audiences with its size. It is this emphasis on the vertical proportions of the Janáček Theatre stage that I consider to be the greatest value of the set for this production of *Lulu*. The experience of variability was brought about by a structure of cages. Opening and closing again, lighting up and switching off, the cages provided clear-cut optical division within a wider scenic image. Individual cells within a global arrangement of cages served as a functional element of the visual component to the opera and constituted one of the most original ideas of this design.

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The Original Design of K. Zmrzlý. *The Nose*. From the Collection of K. Kerndlová.

D. Shostakovich: *The Nose*

Premiere June 29th, 1973, Janáček Theatre, translation Jaromír Stránský, direction Milan Pásek, conductor Václav Nosek, choreographed by Rudolf Karhánek, scenography Karel Zmrzlý (last performance December 12th, 1973. Number of re-runs 5).

The production was mounted as a result of an aesthetic vision first articulated by the scenographer; and the stage design for Shostakovich's opera is undoubtedly one of Zmrzlý's creative peaks. He created for this project a Surrealist set design in its purest form. There is no sense of gravity in the vague and non-specific monolithic environment. All imaginatively represented objects (such as two rows of lanterns, a colourful treetop, a spiral of pink banister, fragments of a bridge, or an oversized frock coat) appear to float in the dreamy atmosphere created by Zmrzlý. The scenographer managed here to fulfil his designs as a unique artistic representation of a dream, which strongly affected the viewer and deformed their perception of reality.

One omnipresent element of this design was two rows of small round lanterns pointing into the depths of the stage as if vanishing into infinity. These small lanterns were suspended on fly lines but created a visual impression of weightlessness and levitating in the air, without assistance. Zmrzlý played with their arrangement; they could aim to the depths of the stage (stressing its perspective), curl symmetrically, or frame the playing area like signal lights on a runway.

R. K. Shchedrin: *Dead Souls*

Premiere December 12th, 1978, Janáček Theatre, translation Eva Bezděková, direction Milan Pásek, conductor Václav Nosek, choreography Luboš Ogoun, scenography Karel Zmrzlý (last performance March 14th, 1979, number of re-runs 6).

In this performance, Karel Zmrzlý's scenographic art reached another major peak, and the designer performed an unusual feat: he deliberately turned away from the lavish staging of conventional operatic scenography and instead designed a simple and sober set that proudly stood up to comparison with the work of the most prestigious Czech and Slovak scenographers (such as Ladislav Vychodil and Josef Svoboda). The entire scenographic concept for this opera was built on one rather primitive choice: a large piece of textile is hung from the fly system at nine points, for which the kinetic possibilities were pursued with significant imagination. One might accordingly say that the most significant visual components of *Dead Souls* were all created solely by this piece of cloth.

S. Moniuszko: *Halka*

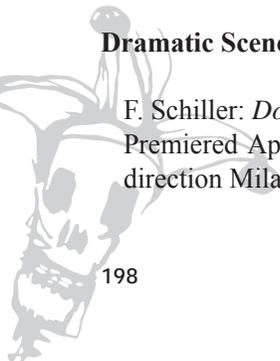
Premiered June 4th, 1976, Janáček Theatre, translation Eva Bezděková, adaptation Eva Bezděková and Václav Nosek, direction Milan Pásek, conductor Václav Nosek, choreography Rudolf Karhánek, set design Karel Zmrzlý, costume design Jarmila Konečná (last performance April 12th, 1977, number of re-runs 10).

The drawings of scenic designs for this Polish classical opera are based on a peculiar combination of balladic and Surrealist elements. A subtle line and mostly white filler stand out from the black background. The designs carry immense emotional effect, which is achieved by very detailed drawing of the objects on stage over a dark foundation. Meticulously elaborating every part of the scenography, Zmrzlý perfectly evokes in these designs the atmosphere of individual scenes. Everything is reflected on a floor that is made of mirror-like white squares, and a translucent white curtain with a rosacea-like effect looks as if it was made of delicate foam.

Dramatic Scenography

F. Schiller: *Don Carlos*

Premiered April 12th, 1969, *Divadlo bratří Mrštíků*. Translation Václav Renč, direction Milan Pásek, scenography Karel Zmrzlý (number of re-runs 29)



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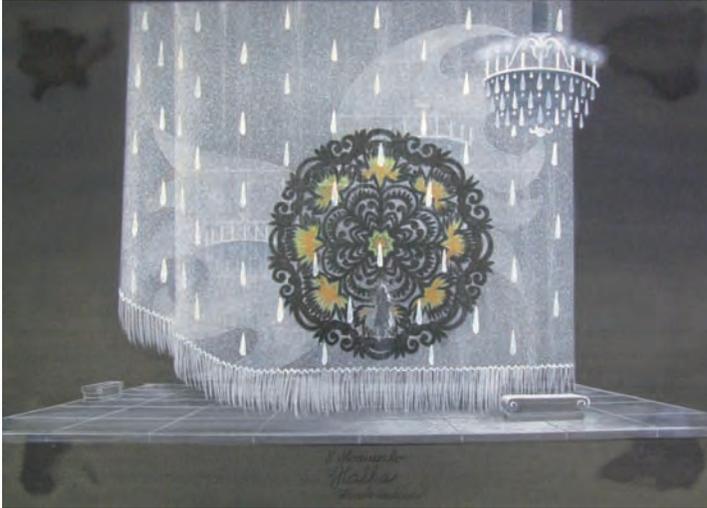
The Original Design of K. Zmrzlý. *Dead Souls*, Scene 11. *Plyushkin*. From the Collection of K. Kerndlová.

The scenography for *Don Carlos* was enchanting as a result of its anti-illusionism (which was in this case taken to its limits) and especially for its conceptual harmony and alignment with directorial purposes. Completely uncovering both space and technical equipment, the designer let the theatre space speak its own language. However, he did not simply attempt to attack the audience with the crude bareness of the stage, but also involved traditional stage equipment in the play, giving it specific functions. One example of such use of technology was a fly system with suspended lights that divided the horizontal and vertical space of the stage whilst at the same time changing the appearance of the stage with spotlights. This gave the production a certain unique aesthetic in its final images, as well as kinetic flexibility. Huge prisms that amplified the general scenographic articulation of space modified an otherwise bare stage.

F. Dürrenmatt – *Frank the Fifth*

Premiere April 4th, 1971, *Divadlo bratří Mrštíků*, translation Václav Renč, direction Milan Pásek, scenography Karel Zmrzlý, music Paul Bruckhard (number of re-runs 30).

The original designs for this production of *Frank the Fifth* are fascinating for their expressivity of colour and minimalist style. A framed structure of five images stands out from the blackness of the theatre; backdrops that are abstract in both form and

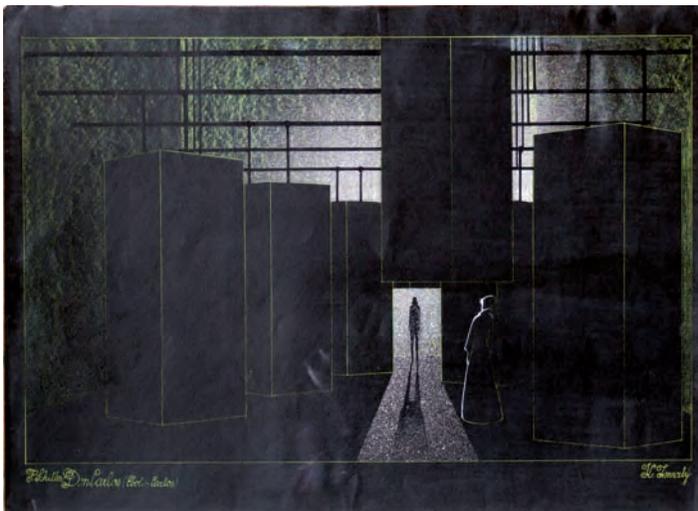


The Original Design of K. Zmrzlý. *Halka*, Scene in the Château.
Collections of the Theatre History Department, Moravian Muzeum (MZM).

content dominate the rear part of the stage. The violet, blue and green colours used seem to have nothing in common with reality and so they significantly contribute to the empty and dream-like quality of individual scenes. The Surrealism of each drawing for this production arouses one's imagination. Zmrzlý's designs seem to pertain to another dimension; accordingly, it seems that as if lying behind this scenic representation, there is something hidden, something secret going on. The ethereal impression is further amplified by allusions to infinity in the environment, together with the afore-mentioned unnatural combination of colours not commonly found in nature. Floating frames and levitating white tablecloths also create an impression of magic. However, looking at the five painted portraits of Frank the Fifth's ancestors (which resemble horrible ghosts), one is overwhelmed by the miserable and morbid feelings they evoke. One accordingly realises immediately the prescient evil associated with this play.

I have in the examples above chosen just a few examples from the rich range of Zmrzlý work that I personally find exceptional. The scenographer nevertheless conceived of other interesting designs for various dramatic works – for instance Bartók's modern one-act opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (premiered February 4th, 1875, Janáček Theatre, translation Eva Bezděková, direction Milan Pásek, conductor Václav Nosek, choreography Luboš Ogoun). Here, in an effort to transform the content of this opera into an image, Zmrzlý created a Cubist and Surrealist representation

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The Original Design of K. Zmrzlý. *Don Carlos*, Scene of *The Princess of Eboli meets Don Carlos*.
From the Collection of K. Kerndlová.

of Bluebeard's fortress. One important aspect of this representation was achieved through the symbolic use of lights, which divided the dark space whilst at the same time uncovering a mystical opacity in the set. With this production, Zmrzlý also focused on deformation of the original space. He constructed an atypical stage perspective, which moreover was 'practical' and changed numerous times during the course of the play. At times, the manipulation of perspective made it seem like the ceiling was made of blocks that would smash the characters, augmenting the sense of oppression evident in the text.

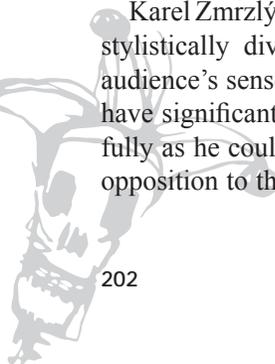
Regarding the visual aspect of performance, among other excellent designs is one for an opera production of Debussy's *Péleas et Mélisande* (premiere March 18th, 1977, Janáček Theatre, translation Eva Bezděková, direction Milan Pásek, conductor Václav Nosek). Here, an abstract style enhances the atmosphere of the opera, and the colourful battens used suggest an Impressionist style. The entire visual component of this opera was kept vague with regards to the shapes used and the non-concrete forms that were deployed in general. The space thereby created enhanced the creative play that might be effected through projection of abstract coloured imagery. I was charmed by the scenic designs of this opera, which suggest an impression of fragility and evanescence in the set – giving the impression that it might dissolve at any moment.

Each Zmrzlý production demonstrates a complex variety of spatial choices, and

significantly deals with a profound articulation of the possibilities of stage space. As far as the ground plans for his designs are concerned, the most complicated system of ‘practicals’ can be found in the play *The Night Trial* by A. B. Valejo (premiered April 18th, 1987, Mrštík Brothers Theatre, translation Hana Posseltová, direction Milan Pásek, music Pravoš Nebeský). For this production, Karel Zmrzlý dynamised the floor with different stepped layers, significantly elevating it. Swelling sheets of dark cloth and an open metal lattice amplify the verticality of the stage, whilst at the same time refining its generally Cubist construction (in a structure that itself is as playful as a puzzle for children). The Renaissance-portrait style representation of martyrs on the backdrop gives the production a philosophical and historical hallmark. On the other hand, the set for Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (premiered November 8th, 1986, Mrštík Brothers Theatre, translation Jaroslav Janovský, direction Milan Pásek, set design Karel Zmrzlý, costume design Inez Tuschnerová, music V. Werner) can be considered as an exemplary manifestation of spatial deformation. Here Zmrzlý shaped the walls of rooms in a way that allowed the perspective to seem hyperbolic and unreal. By contrast, for Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit of the Old Lady* (premiered November 11th, 1972, Mrštík Brothers Theatre, translation Otakar Fencel, direction Milan Pásek, music Ladislav Štancl) Zmrzlý designed a Constructivist set with Cubist elements. A neutral box construction allowed the actors to interact with each other without disturbing the masterly written style of this classic drama.

A box made of planks represented the poor dwellings of the inhabitants of the dejected, abject town of Gullen. A ceiling made of mesh and rummage situated at the front of the stage suggested their poor living standards. Zmrzlý also conceived of an appropriately withered environment for a suitably Epic production of Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children*, which evoked beautifully the ravaged landscape of war (premiered April 18th, 1981, Mrštík Brothers Theatre, translation Rudolf Vápeník and Ludvík Kundera, direction Milan Pásek, music Paul Dessau). Besides foregrounding the presence of the actors, a bare stage is only occupied by Mother Courage’s wagon. The principal material is mesh, covering the flies and side walls.

Karel Zmrzlý’s scenography can be characterised as inventive, visually attractive, stylistically diverse and in most cases functional. He always appreciated the audience’s senses and did his best to emphasise elements of his design that would have significant ocular appeal; at the same time, however, he strove to support as fully as he could the directorial concept. Zmrzlý never tended to place his sets in opposition to the direction; on the contrary, he aimed to create a unified theatrical



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artwork in which the visual component held one out of a variety of possible interpretative positions. Karel Zmrzlý's objective was to support the overall harmony of the combined artistic components of theatrical representation. He can therefore be judged as a typical representative of the classic school of functional scenography.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

Designs, production documents, programme notes, newspaper reviews etc. used in this article come from these archives:

Theatre Archive of the National Theatre in Brno.

Music Archive of the National Theatre in Brno.

Archive of the Municipal Theatre in Brno (formerly the Mrštík Brothers Theatre).

Private Collections of Kateřina Kerndlová.

Moravian Museum, Theatre History Department. Scenographic Collections; Collection Milan Pásek.

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