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The Function of Irregular Space in Moravian and Silesian Theatre, 1960-1989: Experiment, Protest, Alternative

Theatre artist, director and experimenter Peter Brook considers theatrical space as a place filled with an interactive relationship between actor and audience:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. (BROOK 1988: 9)

Brook's conception is not primarily derived from any connection between theatrical performance and theatre architecture, but rather from the anthropological essence of theatre, which allows a fictive world created by the actor and spectator together to be unfolded in any empty space. In the course of theatre history, this primordial notion has been transformed by the normative conceptions of various periods and communities; and, especially in European theatre, by a binary figuration of theatrical space that first developed in the Renaissance and was taken by Realism and Naturalism to a conclusion in which theatres with closed stages created the so-called 'fourth wall'. This imagined, but powerful, barrier brought about the seclusion of the stage space (in the sense of an acting area where the actors were experiencing the dramatic situation as if it were a real one) from the auditorium (which was

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a space for the audience only, from which the spectator followed at a distance the action on stage). Such an arrangement brought – in spite of the efforts of the radical theatre reformers at the turn of the twentieth century – the hermeneutically closed theatre space of the proscenium-arch stage: a configuration that powerfully demonstrated the strict separation of theatre from reality. Theatrical space defined in this way was perceived with a sense of architectonic predetermination; theatre architecture became associated with theatre buildings, traditional houses with a proscenium-arch dominated organisation of space, and halls with a primarily theatrical function. The ‘Empty’ space as defined by Brook stands in opposition to this long-term perception of an official theatrical spatial delineation. In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, Brook’s desire for a less formalised and less rigid theatre-architectural and scenographic environment has been addressed by various terms: non-traditional, non-theatrical, experimental, non-conventional, atypical, alternative and irregular space.

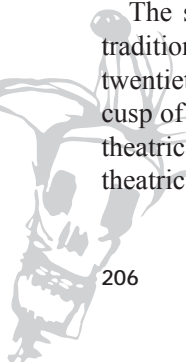
The individual notions lying behind each of these articulations of difference at first seem to be almost identical; however, not only are they interconnected with particular evolutionary stages of theatre from the latter half of the twentieth century (and their transformation and clarification of particular theoretical reflections), but also in their content: they mirror individual aspects of the so-called Second Theatre Reform and the concomitant attempts at *hierarchisation* of this key period in the history of theatre.¹ Such desires to re-form (and reform) theatrical space were driven, above all, by a desire to return theatre to its original anthropological essence, a need from theatre artists to ‘re-open’ theatre-architectural structures and to experiment with their most basic elements, thus abandoning conventional theatre attributes (such as illusionistic decoration, the use of a curtain, the separation of stage and auditorium – including the fourth wall – as well as a deliberate disavowal that aesthetic factors should dominate performance. Such abolitionary desires went along with a contrary inclination to see theatre as encounter, dialogue, shared experience, co-habitation between performers, technicians and spectators. The spirit of such an attempt to define theatrical space more simply as a place created by the existence of an actor and his action (in any locale observed by spectators) thus brought about a ‘humanistic aspect’ to any space used for theatre, be it architectonic or non-architectonic (BRAUN 2001: 7).

1 ‘The Second Theatre Reform’ is the term applied, by Braun and others, to the phase of theatrical experimentation that was particularly active in eastern and central Europe following the post-Stalinist political and ideological thaw of the 1950s and 60s. See, in particular, BRAUN 1993.

Individual linguistic terms, nevertheless, refer to the social and ideological parameters of the cultures that produce them. In this paper, I shall accordingly focus on a Czech theatrical context during the period in question (1960-1989). Such definitions are inextricably interconnected with the significance and function of theatre, with its ontological essence, and in some cases with its operational and presentational possibilities. Theoretical and philosophical resources relating to the meaning and function of theatre in non-traditional spatial parameters (including their resonance with some much wider civic activities with sociological and political aspects) are not the aim of this study (see ALAN 2001; ETLÍK 1999; DVOŘÁK 2000; LAZORČÁKOVÁ and ROUBAL 2003; LAZORČÁKOVÁ 2004; and LAZORČÁKOVÁ 2009). So let me here remind the reader of the latest contribution to contemporary theoretical discourse made by the Czech theatre scholar Vladimír Just, whose notions are derived from the irregularity in the shifted sense ‘*rubato*’ (irregular tempo) and from the analogy of meaning between: ‘unready space’ (*nehotový prostor*), ‘open space’ (*otevřený prostor*), ‘space to be shaped’ (*prostor k dotváření*) and – taking into consideration the carriers of both creation and perception – space which is ‘normative’ (*normativní*), ‘trope-forming’ (*tropotvorný*) and ‘anthropo-forming’ (*antropotvorný*) (JUST 2009).

From the notions mentioned above, associated with the perception in transformation of theatre activities in the second half of the twentieth century, one may – with regards to the historical parameters of the issue discussed – retain the umbrella expression *irregular space*. This expression represents a linguistic formulation that includes aspects of experimental and non-traditional uses of classic theatrical space (including space for the audience), as well as the semantic shift of the empty (and so primarily non-theatrical) space in the context of fulfilling the concept of ‘open theatre’ (i.e. the transformation of the theatrical experience into an event associated with co-experiencing and co-existing in a community of both actors and audience). My present study focuses on the theatrical context of Moravia and Silesia from the 1960s until 1989; and attempts, with specific examples, to account for the phenomenon of ‘irregular space’ in Czech theatre of that period as well as to consider its function.

The starting impulse for the transformation of theatrical space, following the tradition of Czech cabaret and Avant-garde scenes during the first half of the twentieth century, can be found in the theatre movements that emerged on the cusp of the 1950s and 1960s. It was in this period that stepping away from classic theatrical architecture (and the conventional frame of the proscenium-arch-type theatrical space) was first understood as a consciously undertaken experiment. In



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the ideologically suppressed atmosphere of the so-called Eastern Bloc (nowadays called central Europe) during the second half of the twentieth century, this experimentation ‘in space’ or ‘with space’ held a dual quality:

- (i) it non-traditionally transcended official aesthetic norms; and,
- (ii) it was an ideological protest against the ruling establishment

These tendencies cannot be clearly separated. Employing irregular space in the 1960s should always accordingly be perceived as both a deliberately aesthetic experiment and a form of *protest* against existing ideological norms. From a theoretical point of view, it was a deliberate re-establishment of communicative and topical theatre; theatre as a means of voicing the creators’ personal opinions; it was non-illusionistic, immediate, evolving, ‘here-and-now’ theatre. This tendency required the rejection of proscenium-arch stage space; it made the process of creation public; it was defined by non-illusionist, deliberately non-professional acting (advocating a poetics of amateurism); it rejected the use of a curtain, of flats, and it discarded the idea that the stage was a space that should of necessity be separate from the audience. On the contrary, for the practitioners of this radical wave of dramatic activity, the theatrical encounter had to take place in an integral space; creation was an act that required a sense of inter-community; accordingly, there should be an atmosphere of dialogue between spectators and players and a sense of solidarity should pertain as the essence of theatre.²

This trend in Czech theatre history deliberately hearkened back to the Avant-garde poetics of the interwar years – which *Zeitgeist* again took over from the mid-1950s thanks to Jan Werich and Miroslav Horníček in *Theatre ABC*, and, above all, the famed ‘text-appeals’ in the Prague theatre *Reduta* (1957-1958).³ The latter venue became a source for the so-called movement of ‘small stage forms’ as well as for the birth of the ‘small theatres’ of the 1960s. It was small stages at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s that represented the birth of an oppositional stream of theatre. In subsequent decades, authorial and studio theatres carried the trend forward. The principal feature of theatre originating in this spontaneously

2 The analogous development in countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia) was proven at the International Symposium *Theatre and Theatre in a Non-traditional Space in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century* held in Ljubljana, Slovenia in November 2009. See LAZORČÁKOVÁ 2010.

3 The authors of the ‘text-appeal’ were Ivan Vyskočil and Jiří Suchý, who under the title introduced authorial shows, composed of short prose and poetic texts, as well as songs in the theatre *Reduta* in Prague in 1957.

growing movement of ‘small stage forms’ during the 1960s was the emphasis placed on the spoken word (in the sense of a liberated, critical, appellative and engaging, direct speech that enabled artists to express their opinion and personal attitude). It was not a coincidence that such activities needed a different kind of space – a place liberated from theatrical conventions, from attributes of illusionistic theatre – a communicative space of revolt, in which the truth of personal opinion was expressed by immediate authorship and through the authenticity of sharing the pressing issues of the day. It was a space of both actual and metaphorical freedom that became one of the key political phenomena of the era. It was a poor space, often coming into existence in a provisional arrangement in the context of amateur, student, informal and non-official activities, which conditions became the basic deliberate strategies of ‘small stages’ during the 1960s.

At the Brno symposium of theatre anthropology (in 1995), the British theatre scholar Barbara Day discussed ‘risking by experiment’, which she considers to be one of the essential features of theatre (ŠEDIVÝ and OSLEZLÝ 1997: 67-70). This emphasis on investigation and ‘risking by experiment’ can be applied to the definition of the Czech theatrical context during the second half of the twentieth century. *Small theatres* in the 1960s experimented not only by breaking the official conventional architectural structure and layout of theatre, but above all also in the sense of a formal presentation of theatrical creation. Among the performance spaces that were used to this effect were: cellars – used by *Štafle* (Stepladder Theatre), Ostrava, 1960; halls of culture, cinemas, restaurants and adapted storage rooms – used by *Theatre X*, Brno, 1958; *Divadlo pod okapem* (Theatre under the Eaves), Ostrava, 1961; *Skumafka* (*SKUpina MAlých Forem KABaretu*, literally The Small Form Cabaret Group; the acronym is a pun on the word *zkumavka*, i.e. a test tube), 1961; *Radionka* (French Beret), 1962; *Zápalka* (Match), 1963, all in Olomouc; spaces at trade fairs – used by *Večerní Brno* (Brno Night Theatre), whose first performance at the Brno trade fair took place in September 1959. All of these examples represented a form of theatre that was conceived of and executed as a natural encounter between spectators and actors in a shared, and primarily non-theatrical, space. This decision to avoid conventional performance environments was a very important impulse that supported the perception of theatre not only as a matter of aesthetics, but also as an immediate act of communication; a dialogue aimed at dismantling the barrier between life and art; a process intended towards enhancing the awareness of theatre as a critical reflection on the real world – not the ideologically inflected and artificial world of conventional entertainment. The irregular space, fulfilling the parameters of small, chamber and non-conventional

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space, accentuated the ontological essence and desired social function of theatre, as well as supporting its intended informal character and interactivity.

Employing irregular space as a deliberate experiment also brought into Czech theatre the first reverberations of the so-called Second Theatre Reform, and above all an interest in physical theatre with anthropological elements. It was really just a different *alternative* – a way of rejecting the officially established aesthetic norms, promulgated by means of State power and promoted by the ruling Communist regime. From the perspective of theatre theory, the movement was also a rejection of the written and spoken word and the notion that the core of dramatic activity lies in interpretation of a text as the only possible form of theatricality. Theatre thus returned to its roots, to the basic principles of drama as visual perception. When looking for means of expression, the theatre artists of this movement returned to the principles of improvised theatre, drawing from the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte* as well as non-European forms of spiritually derived and socially attuned theatre. Initial experiments with physical theatre took place based on 'the seen' (i.e. what were perceived as being the visual origins of theatre in the Far East, Indonesia and Japan); there was also experimentation with open-air projects, appearing on the level of student and amateur theatre groups and often oscillating between the visual arts and theatre (such theatrical 'happenings' were often connected to conceptual art and concrete poetry). Together with the introduction of anthropological elements, when the actor was perceived as a person not playing his or her role, but being in the here and now – for example in the work of *Quidam* (Something Theatre) Brno, 1966 – the phenomenon of street theatre and performance art was also developing, associated with a return to the roots of drama in ritual, dance and movement.

This dynamic stream of risking by experiment was representative of the age; but it was severely repressed following the events of 1968, during the rise of the so-called 'Normalisation' at the beginning of the 1970s.⁴ The relatively free

4 The historical phenomenon of 'Normalisation' in a Czechoslovakian context refers to the periods 1969-1971 and 1971-1987. During these years (initially following military intervention by Warsaw Pact armies and the replacement of the reformist Leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubček, with the more hard-line Gustáv Husák) there was a consolidated attempt to restore central Communist Party rule and to re-establish Czechoslovakia as a compliant member of the Eastern Bloc of socialist nations. 'Normalisation' involved five principal steps: (i) consolidation of political leadership in order to remove reformists; (ii) revocation or modification of any laws enacted by the reform movement; (iii) re-establishment of a centrally controlled command economy; (iv) reinstatement of power to police authorities; and (v) development and consolidation of Czechoslovakian relations with other socialist nations, over and above any that had been developed with the West.

atmosphere in theatre of the early and mid-1960s drastically changed in the closing years of the decade; and at the beginning of the 1970s, the theatrical context was connected to repercussions relating to the way in which the State had violently interrupted developments in art, philosophy and culture. The amateur *Divadlo Husa na provázku* (Theatre Goose on a String) was founded as late as the end of the 1960s (1967/8) and a semi-professional *Divadlo Waterloo* (Waterloo Theatre) was also started in Ostrava in 1968. In the 1970s, however, it was much more risky to go against officially given and preferred forms of creation and representation. Ideological supervision of theatrical activities increased significantly. Physical theatre represented an at-best-tolerated and later unwanted experiment. The gradual decay of this form was also caused by involuntary restriction of contacts within the wider European theatre context. Official Czech theatre was dominated by self-consciously elaborate theatre forms and the interpretation of dramatic or other literary texts, and everything that did not comply with these aesthetic and literary-philosophical principles was repeatedly denoted as experimental and non-traditional, or as ‘generational theatre’ or ‘youth theatre’.

Here I need to mention a thesis prevailing in many historiographical studies of the 1970s and 1980s (the era of Normalisation) that came to the fore during the 1990s: it is the binary theory of polarity between ‘theatre of the margins and of the centre’ (in particular, see JUST 1995 and JUST 2010). According to this hypothesis, the ‘margin’ was represented by amateur activities (paradoxically preserving continuity with the developments of the 1960s – including free experiment with irregular space, and professional authorial and studio theatres associated with theatrical experiment).⁵ Many theatre forms and genres (such as puppet theatre, pantomime, cabaret etc.) also became marginalised. The ‘centre’, by contrast, was defined by official repertory theatres performing in classic theatre spaces (i.e. within traditional theatre architecture); however some already-established small theatres of the 1960s, eventually transferred to more traditional theatrical space, often in the process of their professionalisation.

Activities ‘on the margins’ were however, from a historical perspective, crucial for the development of Czech theatre. They were more dynamic and progressive than those ‘in the centre’. They were also characterised by a growth in visual elements, figurativeness derived from distrust of the word, a tendency to allegory

5 This more narrow expression referred to particular theatre companies: *Theatre on the Fringe* and *Studio Ypsilon*, Prague; *Theater Goose on a String* and *HaDivadlo*, Brno; *Drama Studio* in Ústí nad Labem; *Studio Meeting/Beseda* and eastern-Bohemian puppet theatre *The Dragon* in Hradec Králové. Cf. NEKOLNÝ 1992.

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and an emphasis on scenic imagery. Theatre began to employ the actor's body as a rich material for non-verbal communication, which was linked again to the escape from traditional theatrical spaces and the formation of a dimensional poetics based on non-theatrical, thus, irregular, space. This risk through experiment was used not only in the work of small, author-based, and studio stages: *Divadlo Husa na provázku* (Theatre Goose on a String); *HaDivadlo* (Ha! Theatre); *Studio Ypsilon* and *Divadlo na okraji* (Theatre on the Fringe), including many puppet theatres: *Dragon* (The Dragon) and *Naivní divadlo Liberec* (The Naïve Theatre of Liberec); but in the following twenty years, also in the sphere outside state subsidised and ideologically controlled theatres – in non-official and amateur activities, in productions introduced in clubs, youth organisations, houses of culture, community houses, peer groups (for example: in Ostrava: *Někde Něco* (Somewhere Something), 1972; *Aureko*, 1976; *Bílé divadlo* (The White Theatre), 1982; *Nepojízdná housenka* (The Immobile Caterpillar), 1979; *Ochotnický kroužek* (The Amateur Circle), 1985; in Olomouc: *AD 74*, 1973; *Malé 'S' divadélko* (Small 'S' Theatre), 1981; *Pardón* (Excuse Me), 1985; *Revolver*, 1987; in Český Těšín: *Teatrzyk* (Little Theatre), 1975 and *Teatr imenia Szmauza* (The Szmauz Theatre), 1983; in Valašské Meziříčí: *Schod* (Step), 1973).

The interest of reviewers and spectators both in the official and in the amateur sphere quickly shifted to **authorial and studio theatres**. In these venues, besides the authorial principle (in which new works were created specifically for productions in new theatre sites) and irregular dramaturgy (which was distinguished by the deliberate disruption of spatial limits) there was also a transfer to non-equipped multi-task spaces, to non-traditional exteriors – in other words, to 'empty' spaces. This movement was characterised by 'poor' scenography (décor without any of the pretension and elaborate aesthetic sophistication of mainstream theatres), through enhanced active participation by (and a notion of shared responsibility with) the audience, and, last but not least, a shift in acting style – for a different space required a different mode of acting. Thus a communicative theatre was born, based on 'authorial personality acting'.⁶

6 The concept of 'authorial acting' developed in the Czech context during this period and it is still taught in dramatic academies in the country (such as JAMU and DAMU) today. The concept involves acting and performance in a multidisciplinary manner and sees this activity as a form of creative public engagement. 'Authorial acting' encompasses conventional 'artistic' performance, but author-actors are expected to transcend traditional forms of rehearsal and performance and go beyond the limitations of 'artistic' representation in order deliberately to cross boundaries and draw on personal experiences in other social fields. Influences on the process of creating and acting 'author-actor' roles include the disciplines of: education, social work, psychology

The employment of multi-use, mostly non-technologically equipped spaces brought greater variability in possible spatial choices for any performance, because authorial and studio theatres tended radically to disrupt even this, still-too-traditional, space. Among typical examples of surpassing the expected was the use of a circular arena, in which the audience surrounded the actors on all sides, enabling closer contact. In these spaces, contact with the audience was facilitated by a dramaturgy of forms based on acting, minimal scenography, exploitation of theatrical signs and a conscious return to the roots of theatre via: histrionics, clowning, improvisation, corporality and physical action. Examples of such work can be found both in the sphere of professional theatres (such as the studio theatres: *HaDivadlo* and the *Theatre Goose on a String*), in club scenes (such as *Studio Forum Olomouc*) and in the amateur sphere (such as *Divadlo na dlani* (Theatre on the Palm of the Hand) in Prostějov; *Bilé divadlo* (The White Theatre) in Olomouc; *Nepojízdná housenka* (The Immobile Caterpillar) in Brno; *Teatrzyk* (Little Theatre) in Těšín and so on).

A typical example was also a revitalisation of travelling theatre, and a resurgence in seeking to perform in specific architectural spaces in industrial or special cultural and environmental localities (in the sense of the later term ‘site-specific theatre’). This development was also associated with the model of ‘open theatre’, which had a sense of open communication and led to international activities (such as those represented most archetypally by the creative projects of the *Theatre Goose on a String* and *HaDivadlo*). There were also various parallel activities involved in many cases. These were both ensemble-centred (with company-specific techniques of rehearsal, preparation and relaxation) and audience-centred (the theatre events of this period were often accompanied by various para-theatrical events for adults, youngsters and children – including exhibits, concerts, publication of unusual programmes, posters and other ‘non-standard’ materials and ephemera). Typical examples of the latter sort are projects such as *Divadlo v pohybu* (Theatre in Movement) by the *Theatre Goose on a String*; and the collaborative *Vesna národů* (The Springtime of the Nations) and *MIR Caravane* (MIR Caravan).⁷

and the visual arts. The idea behind the method is that by using such aspects of social-scientific, pedagogical and non theatre-related methods, the ‘author-actor’ can devise new creative spaces and situations where participants can encounter more vibrant and socially engaged themes.

⁷ *MIR Caravane* was conceived of as one of the most extraordinary travelling theatrical events ever mounted in Europe. It was planned as a tour that would last for around five months, during which a ‘theatre village’ would install itself in the centre of around ten European capitals, including: Moscow, Leningrad, Warsaw, Berlin, Copenhagen, Basel, Prague, Lausanne, Blois and Paris. Around two hundred performers, artists and technicians collaborated to create an itinerant company of performers that took twenty-eight different shows across Europe in five tents and a

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As a means of resisting and questioning the cultural and political values of the period of so-called Normalisation, irregular space became one of the principal traits of theatrical communication and was typical for non-official, dissident, underground activities such as the 'Living-Room Theatre'.⁸ It frequently gave rise to unlawful one-off performances in public exteriors, or to performances 'hidden' under the status of exhibitions, previews, weddings, or accompanying cultural programmes. Theatre in this mode held a special status. It was non-official, non-public, concealed, un-lawful. On the other hand, it was exactly this type of theatre that paradoxically fulfilled the theatrical principle of the meaningful encounter, encouraging solidarity and promoting communion. Such theatre was accordingly performed in pretty much any location in which people collectively congregated to spend social time: in pubs, in private flats, in private houses in the country, in clubs.

Sometimes theatre of this sort was a private performance for just a few invited spectators; sometimes however it was a club evening or a community house event; sometimes it was even more daringly arranged as a reported and pre-announced event of an entirely different nature. Among such significant 'Samizdat-style'⁹ activities were Vlasta Chramostová's *The Living-Room Theatre* in Prague (1976); non-official theatrical activities in Brno (for example the project *Štěpěj v okně* (Footprint in the Window), 1973-1974; Milan Uhde's authorial readings and *Divadlo U stolu* (Theatre at the Table) at the end of the 1980s (1988-1989); Richard Pogoda's *Living-Room Theatre* in Olomouc (1969); activities by the ensemble *Bernardýn* (The St Bernard Dog, 1976), and Petr Mikeš and Rostislav Valuška's *Living-Room Theatre* in Olomouc.

This stream of theatrical activity also includes events on the border between

number of caravans. The project was born of a desire by eight experimental theatre companies from both eastern and western Europe to collaborate and confront one another, and the public of Europe, through an open interrogation of the boundaries and rules of both life and theatre.

8 The 'Living-Room Theatre' (also known as the 'Apartment Theatre') movement was begun by politically dissident authors and theatre practitioners who had the means of theatrical production removed from them by the Czech authorities during the period of Normalisation and accordingly took to producing 'secret' shows in the homes of individuals in the movement. Key contributors include the playwright Pavel Kohout and the actress Vlasta Chramostová. The movement took politically inflected theatre into the real world of domestic interiors.

9 *Samizdat* (from the Russian *самиздат*) is the term used for a form of dissident communication that was used throughout the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War. In this covert form of communication, individuals reproduced censored publications by hand, and passed documents from one reader to another. The individual-to-individual based activity was intended to evade officially imposed censorship. It was, of course, extremely dangerous – because harsh punishments were inflicted on anyone caught in possession of, or in the act of copying, censored materials.

the visual arts and theatre – a phenomenon developing in particular in Moravia in this period. In Brno, the interrelation of theatrical and visual arts in a performative context has been associated with Ludvík Kundera and Dalibor Chatrný since the 1960s, with Vladimír Kokolia, Tomáš Ruller, Rostislav Pospíšil and Aleš Lamr, with the sculptor Jan Šimek, the composer Petr Váša, the artist Josef Daněk and others in the 1980s (for example from 1986-1989 then non-official artistic scene was presented under the title *Drugstore-Sales* in Brno). In Olomouc the movement is associated with visual artists Václav Stratil and with Vladimír Havlík's work (the latter of which oscillates between various genres, themes, art techniques and happenings – such as the happening *Vitání jara* (Welcoming Spring, 1979). Last but not least, the more frequent use of irregular space in official theatres – in the so-called *kamenná divadla* (stone theatres) – needs to be discussed as part of the Normalisation period. Irregular space in this context was linked above all to 'club' and 'studio' type activities and employed an atypical organisation of the theatre building (for example performances would use a club room, a rehearsal room, the foyer, or were organised in the open air). These works were prevalingly created deliberately out of the perceived need to disrupt the relationship between actors and audience generated by proscenium-arch-type theatres. It sought to enhance the immediacy of communication by means of anti-illusionist elements, or simply to introduce a chamber-theatre genre into the repertory. An example of deliberate experiment of this sort during the 1960s was *Divadlo Sklep* (The Cellar Theatre) in Ostrava (in which performances took place in the cellar of the former cinema, *Kino Blaník*); *Divadélko v klubu* (Theatre in the Club) in Zlín, from 1967 (in which performances took place in the theatre club with a central space for actors surrounded by tables for the audience), and *Malá scéna* (The Small Stage) in Uherské Hradiště, from 1978 (in which the rehearsal room was used for experiments with direction and acting style in an atmosphere inspired by its informality and intimate size). In some cases, spatial arrangements were forced and provisional – for example in the *Slezské divadlo Opava* (Silesian Theatre of Opava), but mostly it was an important form of the *alternative*, not in the sense of alternative theatre, as it is currently understood, but in a wider sense of otherness, difference, an alternative choice. These studio-type activities in conventional theatres had an effect on the repertory of the same institutions' main stages and helped to create a new communicative frame that allowed them to define themselves in opposition against the traditional proscenium-arch space. This variation can be found in the *Divadlo v klubu* (Theatre in the Club) at the North Moravian Theatre Šumperk, performing in the rehearsal room in Hrádek, that created a tradition of club performances (the

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impulse for their work came with the group of Janáček Academy of Performing Arts alumni in 1978), and above all the *Studio Forum* in Olomouc (1976), whose work was accompanied by a change in poetics, a different dramaturgy (minor genres, progressive, provocative, chamber titles), different means of direction (an emphasis on detail, on inwardness, persuasiveness, immediacy, spontaneity and anti-illusionism), a different style of acting (face to face, involving austerity, a lack of pomposity, an emphasis on intimacy, a use of *osobnostní herectví* (personality acting),¹⁰ theatrical artefact growing from a dialogue) and, last but not least, by frequent use of irregular space.

In what follows, I discuss the historical characteristics of several key theatrical engagements in irregular space, together with the importance of this concept for contemporaneous and subsequent understandings of theatre – including its social function, and any developments that are specific to it regarding our perception of the theatrical event. To do this, I use particular examples of activities in Moravia and Silesia that are noteworthy not just in this region, but in the wider theatre context of the Czech Republic during the second half of the twentieth century.

Among the most significant experimental stages in Moravia is the *Theatre Goose on a String* in Brno.¹¹ When it was founded in 1967, this was essentially a community theatre composed of students of JAMU (Janáček Academy of Performing Arts), writers, musicians and philosophers. From the beginning, the ensemble represented a form of ‘open theatre’¹² and adopted the basic principle of irregularity, in the sense of ‘opposing the rules [and] deviating from a certain steady way’ (OSLZLÝ 1982:

10 The term ‘personality acting’ refers to a style of characterisation in which the performer uses and emphasises strong and dominant elements of their own personality as a basis for the representation of others.

11 Following the commencement of Normalisation, the company had to change its name to *Theatre on a String*. The company reverted to their original name at the beginning of 1990 (following the events of the ‘Velvet Revolution’).

Although this paper refers to theatrical product created under both names, I retain the company’s original name throughout.

12 There are obvious connections here to *The Open Theater* in New York City, which was a politically oppositional and artistically experimental theatre group active from 1963 to 1973. With regards to dramatic form, *The Open Theater* sought in particular to explore post-method and post-absurd theatre acting styles and techniques. This it did through diverse collaborative processes that included investigations of skills and techniques related to fine art, politics and the wider social sciences. The group also used writing and rehearsal processes related to improvisation, and created well-known actors’ exercises in ‘sound and movement’ and ‘transformation’. There were clear links between such groups and central and eastern European Avant-garde companies, particularly the *Teatr Laboratorium* of Jerzy Grotowski in Wrocław, Poland.

2). Seeking radical alternatives to conventional theatre forms was present in all components of their performances, and above all in irregular dramaturgy (turning to adaptations of literary texts, journalism or film screenplays rather than play-texts). Irregular space was manifested in the company's performances not only as a scenic phenomenon, but also as a semantic one: space was organised according to the requirements of the particular production and as an evocation of the public sphere (such as a street, factory, or landscape). The artists sought original design choices for every production and started to perform in Procházka Hall (in the Brno House of Arts). The basic ground plan of this vast exhibition space was a square extended on two sides by rectangular spaces, divided by two massive columns, creating a natural corridor with side entrances behind. The theatre used both an arena-type arrangement, when a playing space in the round was created by performance action in the centre of the room (*Šibeniční písně Ch. Morgensterna* (Christian Morgenstern's *Gallows Songs*), 1968), defined by 'practicables' (moving scenic items: *Mysterio Buffo*, 1977), or used the space between columns to create a backdrop (*Pezza versus Čorba*, 1975), and *Vesna národů* (The Springtime of the Nations), 1980). The ground plans of some productions prove the inexhaustible variability of the space and the versatility of the creators' imagination – for example the playing area in the production of *Alice in the Wonderland* (1973) was represented by a wharf; in the production *Velký vandr* (Grand Journey), the audience was positioned in the centre and the action took place in the outer circle, much like in the 1983 dramatisation of seventeenth-century Moravian Jan Amos Komenský's (Comenius) satirical allegory: *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce* (The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart). Another example of spatial variability was *Project 1985 – A Staged Reading of Contemporary Literature by Nations of the Soviet Union* (1985) (SRBA 2010; OSLZLÝ 1999). The latter composition was a promenade performance of eight sketches, using several parallel playing areas, interconnected by narrow, dark corridors through which actors led groups of spectators to the next performance point. The 'project' was also taking place in other adjunct spaces: on the staircase, in the foyer and the whole event thus became reliant upon the simultaneous setting of events with topical content. Moreover, each acting area introduced the audience to a different genre of theatre, with different forms of performance employing: elements of puppet theatre, monodrama, political theatre, satire, aspects of physical theatre, and the 'theatre of objects'.¹³ The basic delineation of the space was given by

13 The 'Theatre of Objects' is a form of performance that relies upon the animation of utilitarian, or pre-existing 'found' objects rather than devices constructed for theatrical effect (such as the puppet). The theatrical valence of the phenomenon relies on the fact that by transforming an

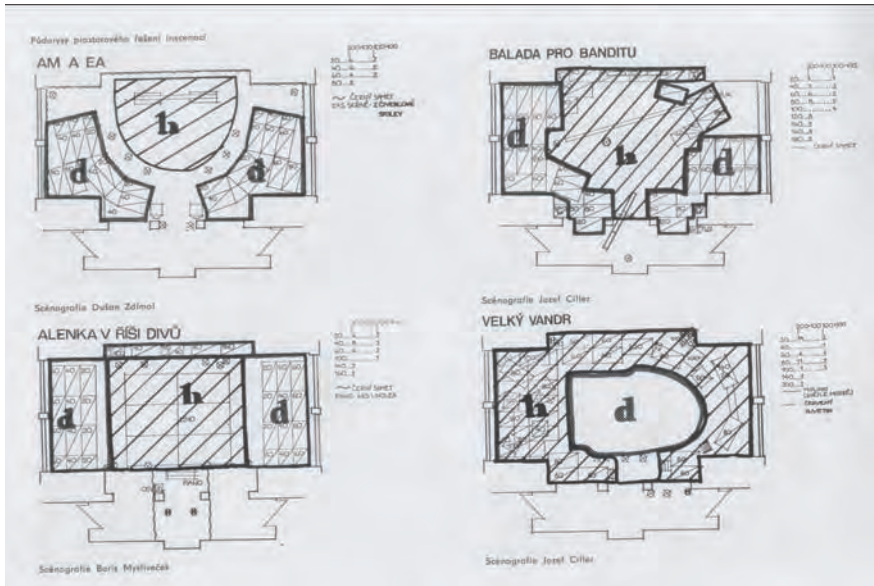
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the shape of the hall with two columns and a corridor with two entrances; however, the ground plan did not limit the scenographic choices of individual productions. It was scenographically fulfilled within the interpretation of the production, or it functioned independently, or it was completely suppressed and evoked an open, undefined landscape, as in Milan Uhde's and Miloš Štědroň's famous music theatre piece *Balada pro banditu* (The Ballad for a Bandit, 1975).

It was the *Theatre Goose on a String* that became an example of a stage deliberately abandoning ties to particular, conventionally organised theatrical space. From the beginning of their existence, this was one of a very few theatre companies capable of presenting their productions in the open air. They started to perform regularly in the courtyard of *Dům pánů z Kunštátu* (The House of the Lords of Kunštát)¹⁴ as early as in the 1970s, where they performed *Don Quijote Stories* in 1971, and carried out performances in the form of street events for *Alice in the Wonderland*, in 1973. These efforts culminated in the recurrent festival project *Divadlo v pohybu* (Theatre in Movement) produced by the *Theatre Goose on a String* in 1973, 1982 and 1987 (following the Velvet Revolution, the activity continued in 1993, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2009). Each run had its conceptual origin in the idea of space; each festival was, however, connected to the others through a tendency to leave architecture in favour of landscape, thus linking spatial freedom to an intellectual desire to open up and communicate. *Theatre in Motion II* took place in the Episcopal Garden of the Moravian Museum in Zelný trh Square in Brno, in 1982. The whole project lasted twenty-one days. Using the Museum's extensive gardens, the ensemble conceived of the event as a 'carnival of art'. A fragment of a mock-up rider with his banner and a drifty emblem of the *Theatre Goose on a String* dominated the entrance staircase. Long backdrops (each two to three metres tall) were situated on the grass, creating the entrance to a world full of colours. There were fairground booths by the entrance selling posters, programmes and books. Other stalls were 'junk shops' offering costumes, and 'bazaars' proffering production props. There were panels with photo-documentation of performances and tours by the company. There was also a visual-art merry-go-round made up of

everyday object into a defined place or subjective character (a set of screwdrivers as a factory, or a toilet brush as the head of a politician), object animators exploit everyday objects' apparent lack of emotive association (or ability to 'perform' in conventional ways) in order render them more powerful theatrical signs. With character and subjectivity forcibly imposed onto them in this way, animated objects become a possible means to point also to performers' and audiences' subjectification. The object thus adopts a complex theatrical function that it is extremely difficult for conventional actors, or for puppets to perform.

14 This venue is one of two preserved Renaissance palaces in the historic centre of Brno.

Ground Plans for the *Theatre Goose on a String*.

Deposited in the Archive of the CED (Centre for Experimental Theatre), Brno.

leftover decorations (objects varying according to the particular production), which were taken every night to the arena in which one of the company's performances had been presented that day. The arena did not serve as a performance space only; it also hosted workshops, actor training demonstrations, acrobatics, juggling, fashion shows (in costumes), and concerts (DVOŘÁK 1988).

In spite of official prohibition, the subsequent *Theatre in Movement III* took place on the terraces of the Capuchin Gardens under St Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Brno, in 1987. Subtitled *Pokusy o pohyby v kultuře a myšlení* (Attempts Towards Movement in Culture and Thinking), the aim of the event was to remind all those present of the company's twentieth anniversary. The event was truly interdisciplinary, including visual art installations (for instance Jan Šimek's sculptures); theatre performances (the message of a production of *The Divine Comedy*, transposed to the open-air playing area, was significantly intensified by means of imaginative use of street theatre); theatricalised musical productions; staged readings; and a series of nightly interviews with Jan Skácel and Ludvík Kundera.¹⁵ This was not a carnival

15 Jan Skácel (1922-1989) and Ludvík Kundera (1920-2010) were Czech poets of Moravian origin. Skácel was widely acclaimed in his lifetime as one of the best poets writing in Czech. He

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but an encounter – a way of getting people together and of sharing thoughts, artistic visions and perspectives. Greater emphasis was put on drawing both spectators and participants into the world of theatre – that is, into a realm capable of reflecting daily events and influencing people's thoughts about them.

In the 1970s, the ensemble adopted principles of street theatre and collective international work in the manner of other European alternative companies, and so they opened up their way to unique productions, performative events and international projects. With their continuous efforts to enforce the idea of the 'open theatre', the *Theatre Goose on a String* represented one of the most progressive creative flows in Czech theatre and, in spite of their critical attitude and oppositional opinions, they epitomised a paradoxically valuable 'export article' for the Communist regime. The prestigious status of the company and their efforts culminated in their involvement in *MIR Caravane* in 1989. This was a pan-European touring festival project produced in creative collaboration with other companies, including: *La Compagnie du Hasard* (Feings, France), the clown theatre *Licidei* (Leningrad/St Petersburg, Russia) *Teatr Ósmego dnia* (Poznań, Poland), Argentinian-Italian ensemble *Teatro Nucleo* (Ferrara, Italy), *Dog Troep* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) and *Academia Ruch* (Warsaw, Poland). The festival opened in Moscow and travelled through Leningrad/St Petersburg, Warsaw, Prague, West Berlin, Copenhagen and Basel to Paris. Within the festival, the *Theatre Goose on a String* performed a street version of *Svatba* (The Wedding) and *Svět snů* (The World of Dreams) and participated in the common project of all participating theatre companies *Odyssey '89*. The whole event was not only a theatre-fest but also an urgent mission that intended to pit theatre against ideological manipulation, lack of freedom and insincerity. The participants believed that they were creating theatre in its true and immediate form, with a return to its actorly roots, in the form of an open encounter, removing taboo and eliminating artificial barriers and constraints – not only between participating theatre artists but also between these performers and their audiences: 'The mission of the caravan, which is rather a caravan of Europe, is the idea of European solidarity, a common European house, a thirst for peace among nations' (OSLZLÝ 1999: 13). It is testament to the spirit of the age that the Berlin Wall fell six weeks after *MIR*

frequently manifested the fear created by the Czechoslovakian Communist regime in poetry that exploited the free syntax of modern Czech. He was also, between 1963 and 1969, the editor of *Host do domu* (Guest in the House) – a key literary magazine. Ludvík Kundera, as well as being a poet, was a dramatist, novelist, translator, editor, literary historian and member of *Sdružení Q* (Association Q) – an interdisciplinary artistic association creating and promoting music, theatre, literature and art. Kundera was linked with several Avant-garde movements, especially Surrealism.



Street Performance *Divadlo v pohybu III* (Theatre in Movement III) of the Theatre Goose on a String on the Terraces of the Capuchin Gardens near St Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Brno (1987). Archive of the CED (Centre for Experimental Theatre), Brno.

Caravane concluded its tour. Václav Havel observed that when *MIR Caravane* stopped in Prague at the beginning of July 1989 it was in the form of a rehearsal for the non-violent spirit of the Czechoslovakian 'Velvet Revolution'.

The company also made their mark with the organisation of and participation in other international projects – such as *Vesna národů* (The Springtime of the Nations) in 1979, or *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce* (The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart) in 1983, which was participated in by eleven ensembles, including *HaDivadlo* and the *Theatre Goose on a String*, an event that also took place in different European cities. In Brno, the project took place in numerous venues, including: the space around St Peter and Paul's Cathedral; the entrance to the Capuchin Gardens in Petřská Street; the House of the Lords of Fanal, in the new theatre house of the *Theatre Goose on a String*, then under construction.

Among the other remarkable ensembles experimenting with space was *HaDivadlo* (Ha! Theatre), founded in 1974. In their first years, this company resided in the lecture hall of the National House in Prostějov. It was a huge hall with a flat platform, used as a single, variable theatrical space. The scenography of their productions was functional, non-descriptive and, in most cases, space participated in the meaning making process. Artistic choices were dictated by a desire to communicate, inform and perceive attentively. Performance spaces were mostly surrounded and enclosed by the audience on three sides: for example, the

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leading titles presented in a triptych of *Ekkykléma* (The Eccyclema, 1977), *Depeše na kolečkách* (A Despatch on Wheels, 1978) and *Chaplíniáda* (The Chapliniad, 1979) were performed in a semi-arena type of space, defined by the action of performers. The productions *Život ze sametu barvy lila* (A Life of Lilac-Coloured Velvet, 1979) and *Panoptikum* (A Curiosity Cabinet, 1980) were performed in the central line of the hall with the audience surrounding the acting area from two opposing sides. The space represented a street, and invited participants to a mutual sharing of the performance. This spatial arrangement evoked a sense of encounter and created a spontaneous community, stimulating both emotional and intellectual contact. The spectator was not a mere observer of actors, but a part of the thematic content created; audience members became part of the message, participated in the metaphor, took their place in the world surrounding the characters.

HaDivadlo in the 1980s was also linked to street theatre projects, aiming at a transformation in the general public's perception of theatre and its function. Instead of creating an aesthetically normative artefact, the street projects of *HaDivadlo* offered authenticity of encounter; they sought to break down the mental barriers that exist between actors and audience, to engage in a provocation that would disrupt stereotypes as well as serving on the public an immensely important notice that theatre is not detached from reality, rather it is engaged in a permanent dialogue with it; it reflects upon it, expanding the dialogue initiated on 'stage' by the performers into the audience. In 1983, the first street project of *HaDivadlo* was launched in Prostějov (KOVALČUK 2005). Composed of 'black-outs' and songs from the company's productions *Zrcadlení* (Mirroring) and *Pout' k milosrdným* (Pilgrimage to the Merciful), the event did not make use of a particular title or script. Incorporating costumes and props from older productions, the actors moved around passers-by, shouting out their speeches, pulling a platform with a musician seated by a piano who was playing songs during individual stops when the performers became surrounded by spectators.

The notions of street, open-air as well as environmental theatre can be applied to these forms of theatrical events in the 1970s and 1980s, anticipating today's conception of site-specific theatre. The latter term began to be used in a Czech context mainly in association with works produced in the 1990s in abandoned halls and other locations with industrial architecture, in streets, squares, parks etc. Besides the *Theatre Goose on a String* and *HaDivadlo*, this form of work was clearly forerun by a number of amateur and semi-official theatre projects in the period of the 1970s and 1980s.

One such example is the productions of *Studio Forum* of Olomouc – a theatrical



A Street Performance of *HaDivadlo* in Prostějov (1983). Photo Bohuslav Pacholik.

collective founded by a group of actors from Olomouc's professional theatre in 1976. The company produced an adaptation of the Classical Greek tragedy *Medea*, for two performers in Zbrašov Aragonite Caves in 1982 (directed by Ivan Balad'a) (LAZORČÁKOVÁ 2009: 3). This was the very first theatrical performance in this underground space and, from a historical point of view, the production can be understood as one of the first truly site-specific projects. Evoking mythical space with archetypal traits of the inner world of human emotions and passions, the underground of the cave complex in Teplice nad Bečvou proved to be extraordinarily well-suited to theatrical performance. The actors sought to adjust as fully as they could to the authenticity and specificity of the space. The playing area was defined by only a suggestion of decoration on the elevated platform among the audience, bringing them a dominating sensation of common experience, intense partnership, and involvement in a defining historical narrative concerning the oftentimes-difficult interaction between man and woman. The performance in the end represented a delineation of protest against official culture, highly symptomatic of the period. The non-theatricality of space; its 'exclusion' from quotidian life overloaded with technology and ideology; the isolation and closeness of the space; the limited capacity and latency of the production – all this gave the performance aspects of non-formality. Even the entrance to the underground tunnels itself aroused a feeling of conspiracy in the audience. They were guided through a labyrinth of corridors

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A Performance of Antonín Přidal's *Pěnkava s loutnou* in the Zbrašov Aragonite Caves (1983). From the Collection of the Documentation Centre of Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, Olomouc.

into the biggest 'dome' (The Marble Cave), where they had to find themselves an appropriate place to stand, sit or lean – adjusting to the cold and uncomfortable rocky stumps. Besides expectation, the dominant emotion was loneliness in the vast space. Humbleness enforced by the cave hall was reflected in the audience's mood. Time before the start of the performance passed in silence, in spectators' whispered comments, in their looking for the most appropriate niche in which to stand, or a flatter spot on which to perch. Another production of the *Studio Forum* in Zbrašov Aragonite Caves was Antonín Přidal's balladic play *Pěnkava s loutnou* (Chaffinch with a Lute) in 1983. The performance for three actresses was built as a medieval dispute with fate and death unfolding the resonating theme of art and its liberating power, undoubtedly supported by the authentically archetypal, semantically concentrated irregular space.

Subsequent to the performances of *Studio Forum*, the space of Zbrašov Aragonite Caves became known as a convenient experimental space for other semi-official or secret theatrical projects. Among these was the production *Mysterio- Buffo*, introduced in the caves under the title *Comedian Mysteries* by Petr Oslzlý in 1984; another project represented the first non-official performance of the Japanese artist

Min Tanaka in the former Czechoslovakia: the performance *Klenba nebes* (The Arch of Heaven) in 1984.

Amongst further ‘risking by experiment’ type activities was the street project/happening of Brno amateur company *Tak-tak* (So-so) *Pocta Dostojevskému* (Homage to Dostoyevsky), in 1980.¹⁶ The theatrical event took place unannounced in Česká Street in the centre of Brno during the afternoon rush hour. Chairs with bottles of vodka and glasses on them for the passers-by to have a drink were placed along the street. Fragments from Dostoyevsky’s novels were performed with the use of symbolic props around the chairs (BERGMAN 1989). The Police closed the event down within a few minutes; the performers were arrested and taken to interrogation rooms, and the company’s activity was immediately banned.

Another company with a long-term tradition of open-air activities and happenings is *Bílé divadlo Ostrava* (The White Theatre of Ostrava), which evolved from the amateur theatre *Act Studio* (1967). This company promoted the poetics of physical and ritual theatre. The work of the ensemble was from their beginnings inspired by the conception of Poor Theatre developed at the *Teatr Laboratorium* of Jerzy Grotowski in Poland (as well as by the work of The Living Theater and The Open Theater in the United States of America). The work of the *White Theatre of Ostrava* tended to place a significant emphasis on physical action and existential means of expression, maintaining a fusion between spectators and actors, striving for collective perception and working towards clear communication and shared experience. Besides the productions mounted indoors mostly employing an empty non-theatrical space defined only by expressive physical acting style – for example, *Turnikety smrti* (Turnstiles of Death), 1985; *Tristan and Isolde*, 1986 – the company produced a number of open-air projects of physical theatre until 1989. In these events, they emphasised the authenticity of being in a common space whilst working with principles of street theatre and folk festivities. One of their first projects was *Bílé sny* (White Dreams, 1984), based on folk songs collected by Moravian ethnographer František Bartoš and by collector František Sušil. Its premiere took place in Senohraby near Prague, on the river Sázava, within a wider performance event *Senohrabská strašidla* (The Spectres of Senohraby), inspired by the landscape and drawings of typical fairy-tale characters by Josef Lada. The actors of the *White Theatre* here demonstrated a folk play with Death, represented by a three-metre-tall figurine, deliberately merging the borders between theatre and reality (NĚMEČKOVÁ 2007: 36). *White Dreams* was also performed in Ostrava

16 The company was founded by J. A. Pitínský, Petr Osolsobě, Tomáš Rusín, Regina Bittová, Luboš Malinovský and others. See HAVLÍČKOVÁ 2007 and PETLÁKOVÁ 2007.

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Street Performance *Bílé sny* (White Dreams) of the *White Theatre* in Ostrava (1984). From the Collection of the Documentation Centre of Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, Olomouc.

in the former Masaryk Square, and in other cities. Another open-air project by the *White Theatre* was *Máj* (May, 1985), based on the famous poem of 1836 by K. H. Mácha, performed on the bank and in the waters of the pond in Klímkovice park by Ostrava (NĚMEČKOVÁ 2007: 36). The typical trait of the *White Theatre* performances has always been a form of theatrical event associated with examining various possibilities of the theatrical encounter and so-called ‘public space’, where the audience together with the performers turn into authentic participants in an imaginative event.

The companies discussed here and their work do not by any means comprehensively cover the varied theme of ‘irregular space’ and its function in Czech theatre during the second half of the twentieth century. However, by focusing on both a regionally and temporally limited development of theatre, they demonstrate the semantic span of the notion of ‘irregular space’ and the complex aspects associated with it. Most significantly, these include: (i) experimenting with non-traditionally employed theatrical space; (ii) developing a form of oppositional drama and an alternative means of theatrical production; (iii) experimenting with any space that could potentially lead to variability of contact between performers and audience;

and (iv) encouraging open-air activities and para-theatrical events (including street happenings and other forms of interrogation of public space). From the 1960s to the 1980s, these forms were, in the Czech theatre context, associated not only with non-conformist artistic experiments connected to wider European theatre trends, but also with aspects of ideological and socially critical protest. The companies that explored ‘irregular space’ in this way engendered possibilities for engaged theatre; theatre with ethical and philosophical transcendence; theatre as a place for free creation and authentic sharing.

In conclusion, it is necessary to remind readers of the fact that the significance of ‘irregular space’ lies in the associated transformation in thinking about theatre and the more sophisticated perception of its function; in possibilities for the contemporary development that were opened up by its gradual promotion; and by emphasising both its theatrical and philosophical dimensions until 1989. The ‘open theatre’, a form of shared communication, the ability of making any space theatrical, theatre as an encounter and a shared event – these are, amongst others, ways to contemporary forms of theatre in the line of site-specific, performance art, new circus, street happening and open-air projects that have become a commonplace part of theatre culture in the course of the last twenty years.

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