

Blecha, Jaroslav

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Jaroslav Blecha



## The History and Scenographic Influence of Czech Family Marionette Theatres

This article is dedicated to an important aspect of Czech amateur theatre that has hitherto been neglected by theatre historians: *Family Marionette Theatre* is an important artistic phenomenon of the early twentieth century, especially with regards to its uses of visual art. The present study summarises documentary evidence relating to, and curatorial understanding of, surviving artefacts – focusing in particular on extant printed designs and stage sets. Marionettes themselves are omitted from this text, as they will be treated in a separate study. The text of this article is redacted from selected chapters of the monograph: *Rodinná loutková divadélka: skromné stánky múz* (Family Marionette Theatres: The Humble Playhouses of the Muses. Brno: Moravské zemské muzeum, 2008). This volume contains a detailed catalogue of published Czech set designs and marionette theatres from the end of the nineteenth century until 1947, at which point the family marionette theatre in its original form and function faded out.

### **Family Marionette Theatre as a Phenomenon**

*Family Marionette Theatre* represents a specific part of the history of Czech amateur theatre during the first half of the twentieth century, and it is testified to by the

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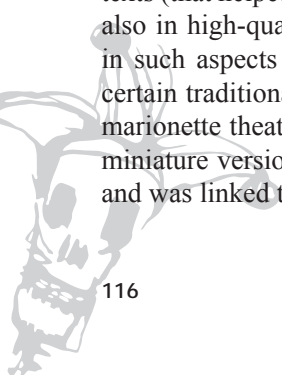
Svatopluk Bartoš: *Münzberg's Stage Decorations from Czech History. A Winter Landscape (Říp Mountain)*. Folio no. 11a-11b. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1928. Lithograph, 77x50.5 cm.



Svatopluk Bartoš: *Münzberg's Smallest Stage Decorations for Marionette Theatre. The Water King's Realm*. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1929. Lithograph (original folios unnumbered), 51x39 cm.

outstanding popularity of manufactured as well as homemade table-top marionette theatres and marionettes. On the one hand, these were predominantly commercially exploited serialised products, sold with the aid of massive advertising campaigns; on the other hand, they constitute part of a profoundly culturally and aesthetically specific and localised phenomenon, unique in a European context for its popularity and social impact (as well as for the influence of an amateur art on the dissemination of marionette theatre to a wider public). This is theatre in the real sense, with numerous attributes of genuine marionette art; its origins are to be found within a sincere, nationally motivated interest from a group of marionette enthusiasts, especially Jindřich Veselý (1885-1939). Veselý, as a historian, theoretician, teacher and organiser, is to be thanked for initiating modern Czech marionette theatre through his scholarly, public and pedagogical activities. He established and edited the journal *Český loutkář* (The Czech Marionettist – the first scholarly journal of its sort in the world); he promoted the establishment of the international marionette organisation UNIMA (becoming its honorary president); he chaired other organisations in the field; he authored a number of groundbreaking books, studies and articles on marionette theatre; he published several editions of marionette plays; and he conceived of and curated numerous marionette exhibitions. Veselý also managed to persuade several outstanding Czech artists to collaborate with him in the task of establishing high-quality commercial production for marionettes, marionette theatres and corresponding stage sets destined for amateur use. Thanks to Veselý, the phenomenal *Alšovy loutky* (Aleš's Marionettes) and the early series of *Dekorace českých umělců* (Stage Sets by Czech Artists) came into existence. Through his wide-ranging activities in the field of amateur marionette theatre, Veselý also helped to foster a related burgeoning in professional marionette theatre, eventually resulting in what was almost a movement. One unique educative aspect of the programme that Veselý fostered was its encouragement of wider creativity in and engagement with the visual arts, and greater interaction with theatre from numerous sections of the Czech public.

The impact of the wider movement manifested itself not only in new performance texts (that helped to reform the wider dramatic repertoire of marionette theatre) but also in high-quality professional visual designs, anticipating scenographic trends in such aspects as character typology and fairy-tale scenery (and this despite a certain traditionalism in the practice of orthodox proscenium staging that typified marionette theatres and their stage sets). Conventional staging took the form of a miniature version of the proscenium opera stage with its archetypal scenography, and was linked to the popularity of the somewhat static staging practices of public



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theatre Italian opera marionette companies (*commedia de burattini in musica*) as they had been established in the early eighteenth century by rich theatre devotees. Such theatres had high social standing because renowned philosophers and authors often collaborated with them, and equally because itinerant Italian theatre entrepreneurs popularised this type of theatre by means of touring marionette theatre companies that had a defining impact on later styles of marionette theatre throughout Europe.

A certain level of rising interest in amateur theatre supported the birth of family marionette theatre. This trend had been forming since the mid-eighteenth century as a result of the increasing popularity of private, non-professional theatre groups among the aristocracy as well as the bourgeoisie and, subsequently, in the lowest social classes. Theatre groups were established by a variety of organisations. In the Czech context, this was first undertaken by the *Sokol*<sup>1</sup> movement, subsequently by the Workers' Sports Union (*Dělnická tělocvičná jednota*) and the Catholic sports organisation *Orel*, before eventually being taken up by individual schools. One of the first *Sokol* theatres was founded in Kouřim in 1874 and, by the 1920s, hundreds of these theatres (run by Czech organisations and schools) were in existence. However, amateur theatre activities had an ambivalent reception. On the one hand they were welcomed as tools of education, admired for their apparent cultivation of manners, and seen as a noble form of entertainment; on the other hand, they were criticised as immoral and unruly activities, or as improper competition with professional theatre companies. In reality, they helped the gradual progressive formulation of professional theatre, using both marionettes and human actors.

One important moment in the development of marionette theatre was the great interest and favour of educated and culturally active patrons, which elevated the prestige of the discipline among other artistic specialities. Gradually, in the systematic development of culture (or the arts) for children, amateur marionette theatre specialised as children's theatre with a predominantly didactic function. This was a new phenomenon deriving from the 1860 Education Reform Act (which established compulsory school attendance for children between the ages of six and fourteen). Amongst other important influences was the legal establishment of equality between Czech and German languages, and the ensuing exponential increase in Czech-speaking and culturally orientated schools. The theatre (including marionette theatre) became a welcome educational tool. What became known as

1 The *Sokol* movement was a Czech youth sport and fitness initiative founded in Prague in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner. Whilst it began as a fitness initiative, the *Sokol* developed to include education through lectures, debates and field trips. It also engaged with the arts as part of a programme intended to provide for the physical, moral, and intellectual life of the nation.



Josef Wenig: The Knights' Hall. Folio no. 5b. *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs], 1st series. Praha: A. Vitek, 1913. Lithograph, 75x50 cm.



Josef Váchal: Hell. Folio no. 13. *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs], 2nd series. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1916. Lithograph, 75x50 cm.



Josef Skupa, Bohumil Vágner: The Oriental Hall. Folio no. 20a. *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs], 3rd series. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1918. Lithograph, 75x52 cm.

children's theatre (*dětské divadlo*) was performed by children themselves, under teachers' guidance, and teachers became the principal originators of both literary and dramatic works for children.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, theatre for children gradually penetrated more institutionalised stages thanks to its nature and to specific forms of expression that were close to youth culture. These productions were even reflected upon by professional theatre reviewers. However, even to this day, marionette theatre has not been seen as equal to theatre for adults; on the contrary, it is often perceived as an artistic lapse. The focus on junior audiences gradually required a radically new repertory and this, in turn, gave birth to what has become the tradition of Czech marionette drama; coincidentally, this was also the time of a rebirth of interest in the fairytale as a literary and theatrical genre. The first Czech marionette plays for children appeared in the 1850s; however, none of them survive. Early plays were predominantly translations from German. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a growing number of Czech authors also started to contribute scripts and scenarios to the amateur marionette tradition. In 1852, the first Czech-language edition of plays for children appeared. It was the *Divadlo pro děti* (Theatre for Children) series (now lost), published by Christian Felix Weiss

(from 1852-63). The earliest surviving texts come from the *Divadlo s loutkami* (Theatre of Marionettes) series, published by A. Štorch and Son in Prague (various imprints from 1887). During the early twentieth century, a significant number of key editions and collections of marionette plays were published widely throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to innovative trends in the literary development of a new dramatic repertory for amateur marionette theatre, however, production practice itself remained mostly unchanged, both at the larger club stages and in family theatres. For the most part, these practices retained the traditional forms of itinerant marionette theatre companies (which had by this time replaced actors' theatre and the theatre of stock characters in Czech dramatic history). Whilst itinerant marionettists were losing audiences and their era was also coming to an end, the legacy of their performance practice survived in the outstanding popularity of marionette theatre *per se*. The box set remained in use, with a proscenium arch, curtain and illusionary, stereotypical stage décor. The prevailing type of puppet used was the marionette (suspended on wires and controlled from above). Indeed so close were the connections in performance techniques that some of the newer club stages inherited and used the equipment of former itinerant marionettists – as was the case with the amateur *Loučkové divadlo Feriálních osad* (Marionette Theatre of the Holiday Camps) in Plzeň. Here, the group were trying unsuccessfully to perform with their own inventory until 1913, when they were forced to call on their principal Karel Novák and use the equipment of his travelling theatre. A similar and rather conservative way of staging was retained throughout the entire existence of the phenomenon of family marionette theatre. The approach was fuelled by a strong affinity with tradition, as well as by the popular appeal of essentially nostalgic

2 The editions include: *Štorchovo národní loutkové divadlo* (Štorch's National Marionette Theatre), *Radovo loutkové divadlo* (Rada's Marionette Theatre), *Národní loutkové divadlo* (The National Marionette Theatre), *České loutkové divadlo* (Czech Marionette Theatre), *Divadlo s loutkami* (Theatre of Marionettes), *Národní divadlo naší české omladiny* (The National Theatre of Our Czech Youth), *Dětské loutkové divadlo pro školu a dům* (Children's Marionette Theatre for Schools and Homes), *Štorchovo loutkové divadlo pro malé loutkoherce* (Štorch's Marionette Theatre for Junior Puppeteers), *Švábovo loutkové divadlo* (Šváb's Marionette Theatre), *Výzkoušené hry pro Alšovy loutky* (Tried-Out Plays for Aleš's Marionettes), *Sborník Alšova loutkového divadla* (The Collection of Aleš's Marionette Theatre), *Knihovna vzorných loutkových her* (The Library of Paragon Marionette Plays), *Loutkové hry Uměleckých snah* (Marionette Plays of the Artistic Efforts Society), *Loutkové hry B. Beneše Buchlovana* (Marionette Plays of B. Beneš Buchlovan), *Malé divadlo Globe: loutkové hry ze Shakespeara* (The Little Globe Theatre: Marionette Plays from Shakespeare), or *Výbor loutkových her F. hr. Poccioho* (A Selection of F. Count of Poccio's Marionette Plays).



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public events organised by Jindřich Veselý: such as the *Národopisná výstava československá v Praze* (The National Czecho-Slavic Exhibition in Prague) of 1895, the famous marionettist Matěj Kopecký's anniversary (1905), and, especially, the marionette exhibition at the *Národopisné muzeum v Praze* (Ethnographical Museum of Prague), in 1911, and guest performances by Arnošta Kopecká in the Merkur Theatre (Prague) in 1912 and 1913. Despite the general conservativeness of marionette theatre as a wider artistic phenomenon, however, there were arguably some progressive trends visible even in this period.

### The Pre-History of Table Theatres

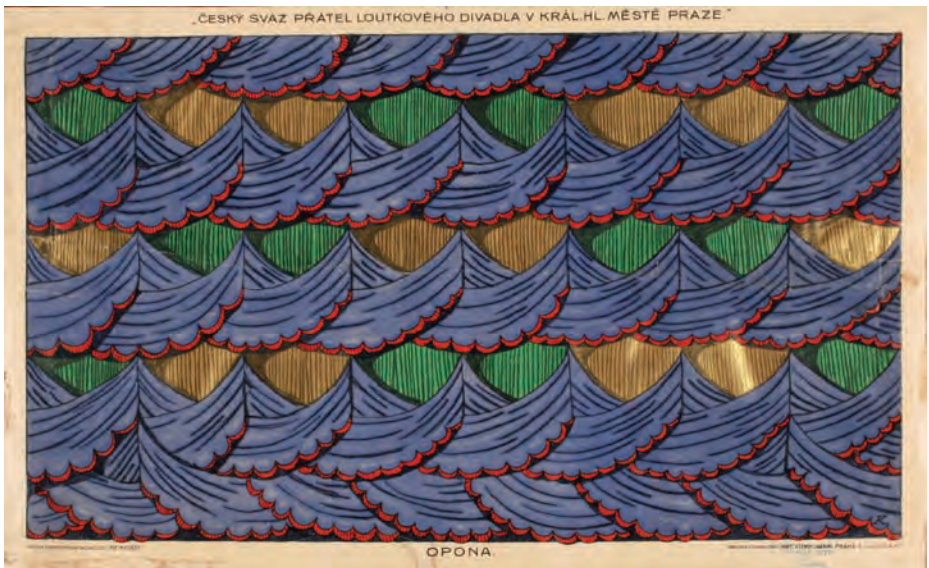
The beginnings of table theatres are connected to the general romantic popularity of theatre among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It was especially in the Biedermeier period (during the first half of the nineteenth century), with its emphasis on family life and domesticity, that interest arose in miniature theatres made of paper cutouts. Produced as xylographs, lithochromes or lithographs, paper-cutout sets began to be published on the occasions of 'big' theatre or opera premieres. Their original purpose was to be a decorative, static souvenir of a specific theatre production and it was to this end that individual sheets represented not only the stage (proscenium arch, curtain, orchestra pit and stage sets) but also the characters of the play in question. In time, however, with a view to the widespread performative usage of such prints, publishers provided instructions for each collection – including the provision of dramatic texts and dramaturgical or directorial advice.

The sudden popularity of the new phenomenon – known in western countries under the names *Papiertheater*, Juvenile Drama, Toy Theatre, *Modeltheatre*, *Théâtre de papier*, *Petits Théâtres*, *El Teatro de los Niños* or *Dukketeatret* – led to serial production of printed theatres. The earliest known prints of this sort come from Germany and France, produced respectively by: A. Schmid sel. Erben (Augsburg, 1760), J. M. Will (Augsburg, 1780), and Jean-Charles Pellerin (Moselle, 1796). The person reputed to have been the inventor of 'paper theatre' (but most likely the inventor of the name only) is the London graphic prints merchant W. West. His first theatre print is dated 1811, and from thence until 1831, he published some one hundred and fifty paper theatres. Between 1820 and 1890, in some twenty German cities, there were as many as fifty commercial publishers of printed theatres.<sup>3</sup> Starting

3 The most prominent of these being: Gustav Kühn (Neu-Ruppin), Oehmigke & Riemschneider (Neu-Ruppin), Robrahn & Co. (Magdeburg), Schmidt & Römer (Leipzig), J. F. Richter (Hamburg), J. F. Schreiber (Esslingen), J. Scholz (Meissen) and F. G. Schulz' (Stuttgart).

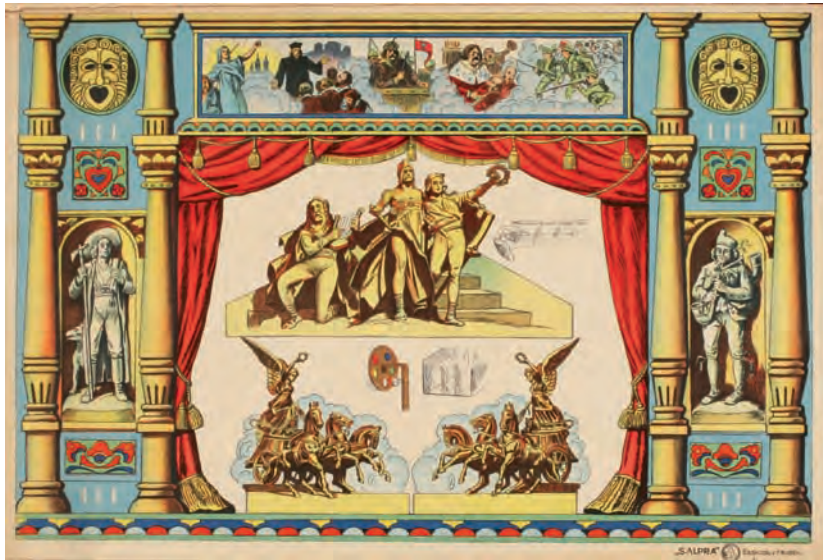


Miroslav Kolář: *České loutkové divadlo* [Czech Marionette Theatre]. Snow-covered Birches, Summer Spruces. Unnumbered folio. Brno-Husovice: Moravský papírový průmysl, 1920. Lithograph, 54x40 cm.



František Kysela: The Curtain of the so-called Aleš Theatre. *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs], 1st series. Praha: A. Vitek, 1913. Lithograph (original folios unnumbered), 81x50 cm.

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Antonín Ladislav Salač: Proscenium. From the 'Nationalist' folios, 76x51 cm.  
Published by SALPRA, the 1920s.



Artuš Scheiner: *Artuš Scheiner's Marionette Theatre*. A Castle Chamber. Unnumbered folio. 1st series.  
Praha: Jos. R. Vilimek, 1932. Photolithograph (a six-coloured offset print), 52.5x37 cm.

in 1811, printing activities also grew significantly in other European countries.<sup>4</sup> To document the size of the publishing activities, late in 1830, the Viennese publishers Matthäus und Josef Trentsensky offered around one hundred decorations and thirty-two marionette ‘cupboard’ (theatres). German historians have counted the production of the two prominent German publishers, Gustav Kühn, and Oehmigke & Riemschneider of Neu-Ruppin: over the eighty years of their existence, they printed around twenty thousand sheets of paper theatre decorations.

The Czech market offered such imported goods at first, predominantly of German, Austrian and French origin. Czech ‘reformists’ in a time of rising patriotic sentiment were, however, uncritically prejudiced against German products (which they refuted as technically insufficient, naïve, tasteless, or artistically retrograde). Though there must have been examples of such flaws among them, there were also undeniably several series of prints of outstanding graphic as well as artistic quality, as Karel Fišer, somewhat untypically, testifies:

Far and away superior to the Neu-Ruppin decorations are those of Schreiber... Most of the designs were made by the painter Th[omas] Guggenberger. They are, however, just like all the others, German, and their German origin and nature is visible in them. I cannot conceive how such a German village green could give the background to *Pan Franc ze zámku* [Master Franc from the Chateau (a popular folk play)], or how content Škrhola [a stock character of a Czech villager] would feel in [such a] Bavarian room... Nevertheless, it must not be denied that these decorations suit the Germans perfectly, being in their spirit, and we also have to admit that most of the sheets are excellent on the point of drawing and painting, since their author, Th. Guggenberger, is a time-proven specialist. (Fišer 1917: 25)

Foreign theatres retained a certain historicising style, which was also true of most Czech products. The more conservative styles used a traditional stage with several tiers of wings, flats and arches. For performances in this type of theatre, press-out or cut-out flat puppets were mostly used (printed on sheets alongside the proscenium

4 In London these included: J. K. Green (1811), B. Perkins (1812), G. Anderson (1815), W. Clarke (1821), J. Bailey (1830), J. T. Wood (1845), Mayers and Co. (c.1850), B. Pollock (1876), H. J. Webb (1890); in Austria, most prominently: J. F. Kaiser (Graz), Matthäus und Josef Trentsensky (Vienna) and G. Freytag & Berndt (Vienna); in Paris: *Mon Théâtre* (Paris); in Italy: Lebrun Lit. Arte (Milan); in Denmark: Ferslev & Co. (Copenhagen) and A. Jacobson (Copenhagen); in Spain: Seix & Barral (Barcelona).

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and scenic decorations).

In the West, toy theatre has had a strong tradition that has been revived in recent years. Along with collectors, a number of professional puppeteers currently actively practise it. One such prominent enthusiastic practitioner is Alain Lecucq, a French collector and puppeteer, and founder of the *Compagnie Papierthéâtre*. Similar toy theatres are Ulrich Chmel's *Papiertheater* in Vienna or Frank Mindermann's *Lamiak-Papiertheater* in Bingen, or *Papiertheater INVISIUS* in Berlin and *Svalegangens Dukketeater* in Aarhus. Annual international festivals of toy theatre take place in Germany, France and Britain, the largest being *Preetzer Papiertheatertreffen* in Preetz (Schleswig-Holstein). Several German and Austrian theatre museums and private collectors specialise in the phenomenon, namely the *Hanauer Papiertheatermuseum* in Hanau (Germany), the *Schreiber-Museum* in Esslingen, the *Sammlung Walter Röhler* in Darmstadt, Pollock's Toy Museum in London or the *Gripemuseet* in Nyköping (Sweden). The journal *Das PapierTheater* specialises in toy theatre, and several monographs have been published on the topic, as well as new (though historically informed) theatres, decorations and cut-out puppets now being available.

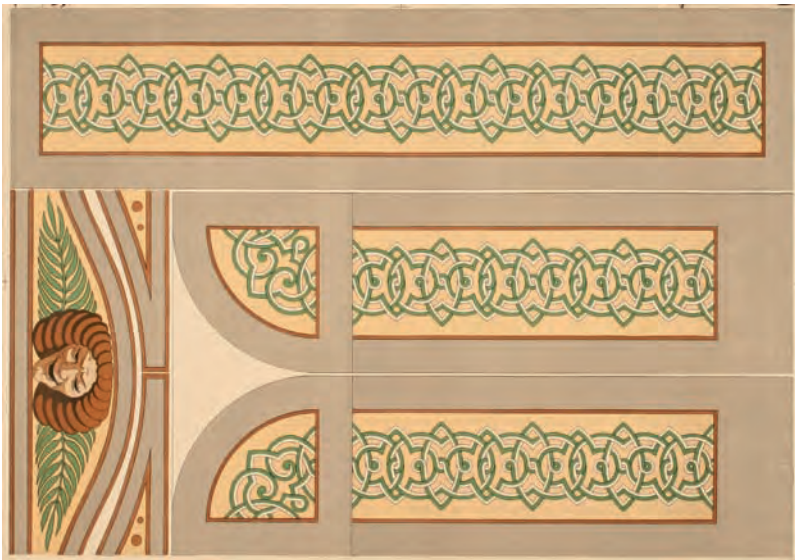
The earliest known Czech edition of printed decorations for a small format toy theatre (i.e. with an A4-paper-sized backdrop) was published by Josef R. Vilímek in Prague in 1894. Designed by Karel Štapfer, this décor had a patriotic name: *Národ sobě* (On Behalf of the Nation) – a motto taken from the proscenium of the National Theatre in Prague. The print consists of four sheets with a proscenium, a decoration for a village green, and five figures for performance of the traditional marionette play *Pan Franc ze zámku* (Master Franc from the Chateau). The print was in black instructing the buyers to 'cut out and colour' the theatre. One of the inscriptions says:

Colours are not prescribed. You know best how all these things look, and if you request the advice of your dad or your schoolmaster, he will certainly direct you. Most meticulous work will be required on the front part, the portal of the theatre. You may write *NÁROD SOBĚ* in gold, not only onto your theatre but also into your heart.

Although the theatre was simple in its details, its visual form was refined. In the same year, the publisher complemented this print with pen-and-ink designs by Karel Ladislav Thuma. Sadly, the entire print run of both Štapfer's and Thuma's decorations was destroyed by a fire in Vilímek's stocks and the collections were



Vít Skála: A Winter Landscape (74, 75). From *Skálovy velké dekorace MLÚ pro loutky 35-50 cm* [Skála's Large Stage of Masaryk's Educational Institute for Marionettes 35-50 cm]. 2nd series. Praha: Masaryk's Educational Institute (Edification Union), 1929. Lithograph (original folios unnumbered), 100x71 cm.



Vít Skála: The Proscenium. AKA Skála's Proscenium to the Recent Series of *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs] (V.-X.). Praha: A. Štorch syn, 1928. Lithograph (unnumbered folio), 101x70 cm.

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Karel Štápf: *Štápf's Czech Stage Decorations for 25 cm Marionettes. The Knights' Hall (47-50). Folio no. IXX. A reedition of 1925 with minor changes. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1946. Lithograph, 100x70 cm.*



Jaroslav Šváb: *Šváb's Stage Decorations for the Marionette Theatre. A star, starry columns, clouds, the Moon. Folio XXVII. Praha: Jos. R. Vilímek, 1946. Offset print, 70x50 cm.*



Artuš Scheiner: *Artuš Scheiner's Marionette Theatre*. Cover of the 1st series. Praha: Jos. R. Vilimek, 1932.

never reprinted; the original blueprints for the two paper theatres seem also to have been lost. The only incomplete copy of Štapfer's designs (cut out, coloured and stuck on cardboard) is in the holdings of the Theatre Department of the National Museum in Prague. What Thuma's decorations looked like is unknown; the only detail known is that the contents of the print mentioned a list that was memorially reconstructed. In 1905, an attempt was made to publish a collection of prints (with designs of interiors by Karel Štapfer and exteriors by Ota Bubeníček) that provides a speculative foretaste of the ongoing commercial production of Czech printed theatre decorations. The project, however, did not materialise; reputedly because it could not find a publisher.

One specific group of family marionette theatres is the original, private theatres initiated by individuals, be they visual artists, literary figures or even theatre enthusiasts and patrons, mostly in bourgeois families. As early as the mid-1830s, marionette theatres were made in the artistic Mánes family, and, later, by many other artists, such as Mikoláš Aleš, Adolf Kašpar, Ladislav Šaloun, Karel Štapfer, Liběna Odstrčilová or Marie Hilbertová-Aichelburgová. In this artistically elite milieu, a more ambitious theatre by the Scheiner brothers appeared in the 1890s. The Scheiner theatre had its own original repertoire and performed for children and family friends regularly on Sundays until 1907. It was initiated by the agile amateur painter Artuš Scheiner, but used in the family of his brother, Josef





The Cover of *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs], 1st series. Praha: A. Vitek Jr., 1913.

Scheiner, President of the Czechoslovakian *Sokol* Association (*Československá obec sokolská*) and the Slavic *Sokol* Union (*Svaz slovanského sokolstva*) in Prague. Artuš Scheiner created a complete stage design with proscenium, curtain and sets; and the design was later replicated in a series of successful prints known as *Loutkové divadlo Artuše Scheinera* (The Marionette Theatre of Artuš Scheiner), published by Josef R. Vilímek. Scheiner also woodcarved and painted the heads of most of his marionettes. A similar case is the initial equipment used by the Prague-based Avant-garde club theatre *Umělecká výchova* (Artistic Education), originally created by the sculptor Hanuš Folkman for his family in 1910. Such an interest in marionette theatre on the part of highly skilled and well respected artists (and their contribution to the designs for commercially produced theatrical prints) resulted in the high quality of Czech marionette theatre stage designs and its increasingly progressive aesthetic tendencies, which eventually prepared the ground for the establishment of professional marionette theatre.

The dominance of the ocular over other components of marionette theatre triggered dubious debates considering marionette theatre as a form of visual art, not of the performing arts. This is, in essence, a paradoxical moment since the high quality of several amateur marionette theatres (and of commercially produced theatrical ephemera) played a crucial role in establishing marionette theatre as an independent form of art in Czech-speaking lands.



Eduard Christián: *The Theatre of Stage Decorations for the Family Theatre* (originally Štapfer's).  
The Proscenium Arch (128-132), 110x90 cm. From folio no. I, 114x73 cm.  
Hell (1-7). From folio no. V, 103-73 cm. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1943. Offset print.



Miroslav Kolář: *České loutkové divadlo* [Czech Marionette Theatre]. Brno-Husovice: Moravský papírový průmysl, 1920. Lithograph; the proscenium arch 75x60 cm.

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František Kysela: aka *Aleš Theatre*. *Dekorace českých umělců* [Czech Artists' Set Designs]. Praha: A. Vitek, 1913. Lithograph, 110x85 cm.



Rudolf Livora: aka *Aleš Enlarged Theatre*. Stage Decorations by Josef Skupa and Bohumil Vágner: The Oriental Hall. *Dekorace českých umělců*, 3rd series. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1918. Lithograph, 140x102 cm.

### Czech Artists' Set Designs

The boom of printed marionette theatres and set designs in the Czech milieu started only with publication in 1913 of the first series of *Czech Artists' Set Designs for Aleš's Marionettes* (*Dekorace českých umělců pro loutky Alešovy*). The beginnings of commercially produced Czech family marionette theatres and equipment relate to the efforts of Prague intellectuals for the most part, and artists captivated by what they saw as the charm of marionette theatre. These individuals attempted to raise the prestige of this theatrical art form and emancipate it so that it stood side by side with other visual arts, especially the actors' theatre. Table theatres and their mass dissemination became tools for social education. With such intentions, foreign products naturally could not serve the turn for several reasons. Czech works were meant to differ from foreign ones radically, and the attempts to ensure the 'Czech-ness' of marionette theatre began rapidly to play an important role. In 1911, on the instigation of Jindřich Veselý, the *Český svaz přátel loutkového divadla v královském hlavním městě Praze* (Czech Union of Marionette Theatre Friends in the Royal Capital City of Prague) was established. The president of the organisation was Dr Václav Durdík and the committee was composed of leading figures in public life, such as the historian Jindřich Veselý, the painters Adolf Kašpar and Jaro Procházka, the painter and graphic designer Josef Váchal, the sculptor Josef Šejnost, the writer and dramatist Karel Mašek, and the academic and dramatist Bohumil Schweigstill. The objectives of the Union were the emancipation of the marionette (in both national and international contexts), and the support of industrial production of marionette theatres. Its key objective, however, was:

[t]o build, in the near future, a large marionette theatre in its own house in the Royal Capital City of Prague, in which a museum of old Czech marionette theatres, literary works and other collectibles would be placed. (*Articles of the Český svaz přátel...*, §9)

Publishing the *Czech Artists' Set Designs* series under the aegis of the Union was an outstanding and unique feat on Jindřich Veselý's part in that he mustered for the project leading professional artists (including those who worked with large theatres), including several Avant-garde artists who were simultaneously helping to shape modern Czech scenography. Their designs were printed as lithographs for table theatres. Between 1913 and 1931, altogether ten collections were issued containing one hundred and thirty-eight sheets and four double sheets (a total of one

hundred and forty-six original sheets). Twenty-two renowned artists contributed to the project. The most valued of these works are the first four series of *Czech Artists' Set Designs for Aleš's Marionettes* (published by A. Münzberg, from the second series).

Issues of The *Czech Artists' Set Designs* series were highly popular. They spread both in families and in club and school theatres. Decorative sets listed in the catalogues were recommended for particular plays, and vice versa. Moreover, some dramatists writing marionette plays made recommendations for a particular selection of scenic decorations (or combinations of different items) for their plays. Side by side, *Aleš's Marionettes* and the *Czech Artists' Set Designs* series started a new historical era of Czech marionette theatre. They prepared the ground for the 'scenographic' and 'production-specific' character of an entire era of family marionette theatre – introducing an array of progressive innovations and experiments. In so doing, they were crucial in developing the scenography of modern Czech marionette theatre. Another project of similar breadth, of such consequence, and of such artistic value (as well as commercial success) has never been repeated.

Between the two World Wars, the standard product of marionette manufactures accordingly transformed into a prestigious commercial production of applied arts in printing toy theatres, stage equipment of various formats, and an array of marionettes. The constructions and formats of the theatres reflected prevalent domestic housing conditions and the limitations of performing on tables; but such theatrical realisations always counted on a chest, a proscenium with a curtain, a backdrop, and side-wings. The layout of original printed décor sheets uniformly complied with these generic restrictions. The only exceptions were products aimed at theatres for clubs and schools.

### **Family Marionette Theatre as an Evolutionary Trend**

The phenomenon of family marionette theatre belongs to the first half of the twentieth century – a period crucial for the development of Czech marionette theatre as such. Theatre historians divide the era into two phases: the first is referred to as the Marionette Renaissance (until the end of WWI), characterised by the intellectual and patriotic efforts of artists (namely painters, sculptors and writers) to give rebirth to Czech marionette theatre as an educational tool. The second phase is the Amateur Era, notable for the great number of non-professional companies, which played a crucial role in the formation of modern Czech marionette theatre. Though often sidelined as a mere children's pastime, it also transpires that family



25 cm Marionettes, aka *Aleš's Marionettes* (the serially produced marionette types). Modelled by Karel Kobrle, authorised by Mikoláš Aleš. Produced by Antonín Münzberg. Praha, 1912. Made of 'massa'.



*Stréček Křopal* (Gaffer Munch) from the *Moravian Comical Types*. Design Ondřej Sekora. Serial produce by JEKA. Mifetice, 1931. Hardened gypsum.



25 cm Marionettes of the Antonín Münzberg Company. Modelled by R. Livora and E. Christián. Praha, c.1930. Made of 'massa'.

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25 cm Marionettes of the JEKA Company. Design J. Král (the company owner). Praha, from 1919; Mířetice, from 1925. Sold by J. R. Vilímek. Hardened gypsum.



The *Dupák* (Stomper) Marionette of the APAS Company (Anna Preclíková and Sons). Modelled by J. Preclík. Josefov, c.1934. Sold by Večeřa Josefův, Vála Praha, later by A. Štorch Jr. Originally gypsum, later 'massa'.

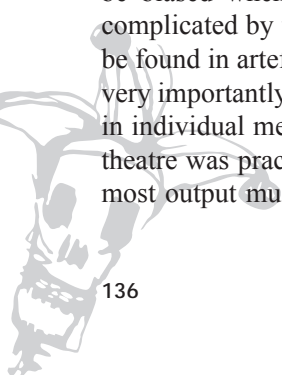
marionette theatre (fuelled by active advertising and the commercial production of marionettes, theatres, décor and other equipment) was a decisive evolutionary force in promoting theatrical creativity and in creating new conventions for Czech marionette performance styles.

A systematic classification of family marionette theatre is problematic, given the heterogeneous nature of its elements. Specific critical perspectives and contexts tend to foreground features that are secondary or, vice versa, that neglect more progressive elements. Notwithstanding this, the crucial manifestations of family marionette theatre are the following: (i) intellectual effort towards mass appeal; (ii) systematic publicity and education; (iii) patriotism; (iv) proclamations concerning artistic methods and aims; (v) encouragement of creativity; (vi) predominantly industrial production of table theatres, décor and marionettes (designed mostly by professional artists); (vii) high artistic and manufacturing quality for most commercially produced ephemera; (viii) predominantly amateur performances; (ix) artistic ambition and enthusiasm by amateur marionettists; (x) adult rather than child performers; (xi) a focus on a youth audience; (xii) disproportionate emphasis between visual and performative standards; (xiii) conservative performance methods; and, lastly, (xiv) efforts at creating a new marionette repertory – resulting in broad and varied dramatic product.

The purposes and aims of amateur as well as family marionette theatre were initially stated by the Czech Union of Marionette Theatre Friends. Among these aims was one to establish marionette theatre as a performing art publicly as well as institutionally. Among the objectives quoted in §10 of the articles of the Union was industrial production of:

all products and merchandise of Czech marionettes and marionette theatres as well as their appertaining objects, without impeaching on legal enterpreneurial regulations.

Assessment of family marionette theatre in the early twentieth century may be biased when modern criteria are applied; an objective approach is further complicated by the fact that the only surviving vestiges of the phenomenon are to be found in artefactual visual materials. Performance standards and methods (and, very importantly, audience reception) are lost, with the exception of brief mentions in individual memoirs. Given the mass nature and passion with which marionette theatre was practised by families, performance practice was doubtless varied, but most output must have erred towards more mechanical and reproductive activity





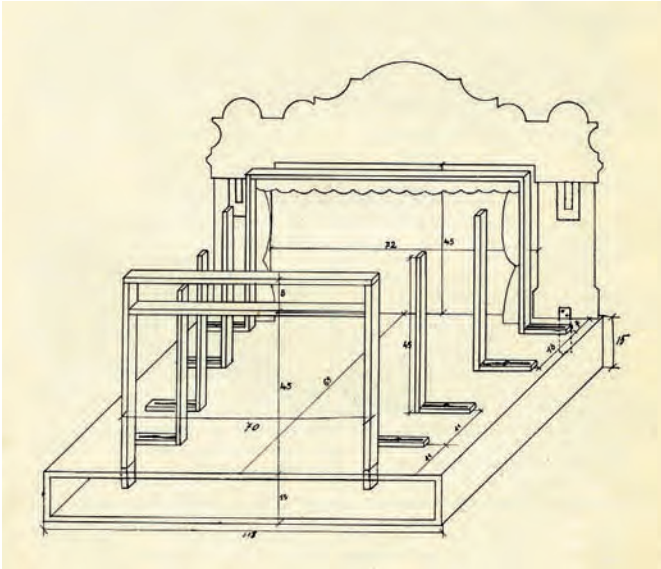
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rather than true theatrical creativity. Nevertheless, numerous theatre amateurs had artistic ambitions, as the demand for high-quality dramatic texts testifies. A different degree of artistic invention and technical sophistication must also have pertained to family theatre productions performed by professional artists (such as painters, theatre makers, or writers).

The formation of a modern repertoire (with more sophisticated and socially and intellectually rigorous themes, reflecting the specifics of marionette theatre) eventually became the turning point of the tradition. Among the numerous series of marionette drama, there were not only quality translations of French or German material, but also valuable Czech originals, which was one consequence of the total shift from an adult audience to performing marionette theatre for children. When a junior audience was recognised for the first time, marionette theatre turned out to be intellectually and emotionally close to its spectators by its very nature as well as through the toy-like aspect of its expressive tools. Although children's marionette theatre is sometimes seen as an artistic lapse, there is no justification for such prejudice; child audiences may have different needs and criteria to those of adult spectators, but that does not imply a lack of demand made on artistic and dramatic quality.

The Amateur Phase of the early twentieth century was crucial in that it formed a new dramaturgy, overcoming the traditional repertoire of itinerant marionettists. Although traditional marionettist techniques were still retained, the Amateur Phase started a new era of marionette drama, with progressive themes (albeit initially in a primitive form, full of moralisms, preachifying, sentimentality and naïveté). Plays written in the early years of the twentieth century took a simple form and had schematic characters. Subsequently however, more elaborate and artistically adventurous texts were created, with concomitant scenographic developments, reaching their culmination between 1910 and 1930. Among the most important authors of marionette plays during this period were Karel Mašek Fa Presto, Bedřich Beneš Buchlovan, Bohumil Schweigstill, Jaroslav Průcha, Eugen Stoklas, Josef Žemla, Vladimír Havlík, Karel Driml, Vladimír Zákřejs, Zdeněk Schmoranz, František Čech, František Langer, and especially Václav Sojka, Vladimír Vojíš, Zdeněk Schmoranz, Josef Skupa, and Jan Malík.

It seems that even the amateur nature of family marionette theatre gave occasions for the realisation of artistic ambitions, starting from the do-it-yourself assemblage of the theatre to the enactment of performances themselves. It is important in this respect that family theatres were not considered to be children's toys; adults performed exclusively. An important novelty also was the contribution of trained



A Construction Plan for the Complete Theatre of Štapfer's Family Stage Decorations for Marionettes of 18 and 25 cm. Praha: A. Münzberg, 1923.



Jaroslav Šváb: The Theatre of Šváb's Stage Decorations for the Marionette Theatre. Praha: Jos. R. Vilímek, 1946. Offset print; the proscenium 100x60 cm.

painters to the industrial production of marionettes, marionette theatres, and stage décor. Although scenic designs were predominantly traditional in most typical settings, the influence of significant visual artists on the prestige of marionette theatre cannot be underestimated. In time, some of the changes introduced (such as a circular backdrop, decorative components, plastic decorations, or visual stylisation) turned out to be very important in a historical context. Although they first emerged in the context of family marionette theatre, these were undoubtedly also the first steps towards a modern conception of scenography as an aspect of theatrical aesthetics that fulfilled a dramatic function – leading eventually to what is nowadays termed ‘action scenography’. In short, it should not be underestimated that it was in this period and through the medium of family marionette theatre that the visual components of drama (until this period merely suggesting formally the location of the action) were gradually developing into an expressive instrument capable of amplifying the performative potential of dramatic texts, or of theatrical production itself.

The designs of renowned artists were an inspirational element too; surviving records document how the technologically elaborate artefacts designed by professionals provoked creativity among amateur performers. Although producers offered ready-made theatres too, there was a greater call for semi-complete products, which could be finished and perfected by buyers. For this purpose, there were also numerous manuals containing theatre plans with instructions detailing how to stick stage sets on cardboard and how to build marionettes and produce costumes. Such manuals also offered scenographic, dramaturgical and directorial advice. Mass creativity was thus instigated in many respects, from stage construction through to performance practice and including scenic design, play-writing, musical composition as well as stage direction. This sometimes resulted in successful experiments. Most importantly, indelible traces of these activities have survived in youth audiences.

The mass nature of amateur marionette theatre had its negative aspects too. The industrial production of theatres enforced unification on the physical form of the stage, as well as its scenography and marionettes. The all-but-aggressive promotion of, or propaganda for, the medium favoured traditional performance styles. In doing so, it also derogated the genre proper. The disproportionate polarisation between designs guaranteed by professionals and amateur performance practices became more and more pronounced. Industrial production had two different impacts: whilst in family theatre making, commercial production could and did inspire, in club theatres (where artistic potential was more wide-ranging), prefabricated theatre

designs often dampened creativity. If club theatres were the principal platform for the formation of modern professional marionette theatre, limitations imposed by commercial production played a negative role in reinforcing certain inhibitory conventions. This is particularly important in the case of scenography, which, despite the introduction of certain technical elements that could have radicalised theatrical visualisation, was predominantly fixed in an illustrative mode, with little opportunity given to the realisation of the medium's full dramatic potential.

It is necessary to consider and assess the phenomenon of family marionette theatre within the context of theatre history in order to avoid underestimating its impact on the development of Czech marionette theatre. Sadly, such a lack of recognition has often taken place in the past. As an integral part of the Amateur Phase of the first half of the twentieth century, family marionette theatre has contributed to the modern understanding of marionette theatre as a sovereign art and equally helped to develop many of the progressive tendencies that have contributed to forming its modern shape. The vitality and overwhelming variety of marionette theatre (including its present-day revival, artistic imagination, communicative potential, intimacy, experiments with traditional performance techniques and frequent reminiscences into and quotations of archaic forms of marionette art) all testify to the perennial and endlessly inspiring nature of family marionette theatre.

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Carved Marionettes: Animals of the Antonín Münzberg Company. Praha, c1930. Wood.



Marionettes Produced by the Karel Blank Company. Design Bohumír Suchomel. These functionalist marionettes developed the artistic efforts of the Artěl Union and the original produce of the company from the 1920s. Ústí nad Orlicí, c.1940. Coloured wood.

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Wood-turned Marionettes of the Schowanek Company. Design J. Schowanek.  
Albrechtice v Jizerských horách, c.1940-1950. Coloured Wood.



25 cm Marionettes of the TOFA Company (originally the Schowanek Company,). Design František Tvrdek.  
Albrechtice v Jizerských horách, c.1948. Turned wood.

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