



Eva Stehlíková |
***A Contribution to
 the Knowledge***

of Nineteenth-Century

Czech Stage Art

**Bořivoj Srba. *V zahradách
 Thespidových* (In Thespis'
 Garden).**

Brno: JAMU, 2009. 440 pages.

The author of this monumental publication has committed himself to the study of nineteenth-century Czech stage art for more than a quarter of a century. Since 1984 when his first study in the field was published, called 'Stage Designs of Meyerbeer's Operas on the Czech Stage' (*Hudební věda* 21 (1984): 4: 376-385), Srba has written numerous articles. The present book is more than a collection of these: many of his previous publications have been reworked, augmented, or shortened; there are also several key studies that have not hitherto been published. Together, the twenty chapters of the volume form a unified whole presenting readers with a unique collection of information and analysis that cannot be found anywhere else, or would be difficult to trace in earlier scholarship.

Srba's research revolves around the three most important centres of nineteenth-century theatre in Prague: the *Stavovské divadlo* (the Estates Theatre, built by Count Nostitz between 1781 and 1783), the *Prozatímní divadlo* (the Provisional Theatre, 1862-1883), and its continuation, the *Národní divadlo* (National Theatre, from 1881). His book offers detailed analysis of the

scenographic collections of these individual theatres (stock décor, *ad hoc* decorative sets for particular productions, or decorative accessories enabling the producers to combine the holdings to form new sets), as well as information relating to the theatres' inventories and a hypothetical identification of individual decorations. The most interesting parts of the volume are naturally those that focus on the scenographic equipment associated with specific productions, which are predominantly operas. These include: the first production of W. A. Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (72-85), M. I. Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (239-246), a production of Bedřich Smetana's *Libuše* (295-323), Antonín Dvořák's *Dimitrij* (324-348) and Giacomo Meyerbeer's operas *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète*, and *L'Africaine* (349-365).

In studying specific material, the author follows a process that leads him from a certain 'generality' of typified (stock) *coulissen* to individualised scenography, some of which brought to the stages in question realistic environments that were accurate in their localisation and historical detail. All such developments were, of course, taking place against a background of stylistic trends in European art (from Classicism through Empire style to Romanticism and, later, to Realism and Naturalism) and Srba's volume offers a new glance at important productions of works central to the theatrical repertoire. This aspect is markedly visible in the chapter discussing the features of *couleur locale* (local colour) in the drama of Josef Kajetán Tyl (1808-1856). Tyl was a leading Czech dramatist of the nineteenth century, whose work may be classified on such evidence as Romantic (132-182). A juxtaposition of Tyl's extra-dialogical and intra-dialogical stage

directions with the possibilities offered by the Estates Theatre in productions of Czech plays (or Czech adaptations of foreign plays) helps to identify Tyl's method. On the one hand, he situated the action of his plays in settings for which prefabricated decorative sets were available (such as the *large hall* or *short chamber*, which were moreover easy to create from existing stock items). On the other hand, a different situation arises when Tyl locates his action in exterior settings.

Apart from the existing *coulisses* (all of which depict public spaces: squares, streets, gardens, open countryside and others) there are locations in his plays that may easily be identified with real scenery, be it historical or contemporaneous. At times, the dramatist even calls for specific well-known locations, such as in his play *Jan Hus* where scenes are situated in 'an open space in front of the Bethlehem Chapel' or in 'the Old Town Square, at the Týn Church' in Prague. Looking for evidence of the scenographic solutions to such concrete and specific stage directions has an almost detective charm, especially when the author makes an unexpected discovery among the stage designs of the theatre collections (i.e. those for *Gotische Thor*, *Burgforte* etc.), which could have served the turn. The key discovery, however, was a commission by the director Hoffmann for a new decoration to the first scene of the play; the painters' workshop was to create a bespoke special decoration (or backdrop) described as 'the Old Town Square with Týn Church'. The usage of further typified decorative sets naturally required that further concretisations of the locations according to Tyl's directions had to be done by means of acting and stage properties. Additional stage sound from behind the stage is easily

imaginable; a more difficult issue is the lighting arrangement; however Srba boldly describes what he assumes to have been the case in each instance (168-173). I have here given one concrete example; however, it would also be possible to discuss stage realisations of military camps, various gardens and graveyards. Every sentence of my account of this chapter (as well as of the entire book) could be further elaborated, since the author's precision in refining every detail is exhaustive, even in cases where the iconographic sources are less than scarce.

Srba's studies focus on Czech productions, that is, productions realised in the Czech language. It is therefore natural that the author appreciates and values especially the efforts made by the theatre practitioners of this place and period to break away from German as well as other foreign models, and he stresses their attempts to invest the visual arts with national flair and to stress their 'Czech-ness'. At the same time, the author does not shy away from emphasising in his conclusion that these trends had their problematic aspects: scenography attempting realistically to render the specifics of Czech homeland settings ran into conflict with those plays that were not conceived as a realistic 'scenes from life', as was especially true with music theatre.

Among the assets of this highly useful book are ninety-six pages of illustrations (with 256 images), a rich bibliography (369-417) and an English-language summary of those chapters that the author considers interesting to foreign readers (418-426). What is missing, and which would enable me to achieve perfect satisfaction with the volume, is the current practice of referencing in footnotes all cited or paraphrased passages from secondary works.