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Jarmila F. Veltrusky

The Background Story of the Book

In Summer 1981, Jiří Veltruský received a letter (dated June 6) from André Helbo, president of the Association Internationale pour la Sémiologie du Spectacle /International Association for the Semiotics of the Performing Arts and editor of the semiotic quarterly *Degrés*, announcing that the Association was starting a new collection, in which it hoped to include a volume, in French, on the theory of theatre of the Prague Circle, and asking if he would agree to take on the task of editor. The volume was to contain a complete collection of the Prague Circle's texts hitherto unpublished in French, dealing with the performing arts (theatre, puppets, ballet, opera), whether from a practical or a methodological point of view, together with a personal commentary (by Jiří) and perhaps some interviews. The length of the manuscript was to be approximately 200 typed pages.

Jiří welcomed the idea of making the Prague School theory of theatre known to the French-speaking world and immediately began to collect the texts to be included. However, this initial form of the project soon had to be abandoned. Not only had the most important studies by Bogatyrev and Honzl already appeared in French but the plan to get the other Prague texts translated proved impracticable. André Helbo therefore proposed instead that Jiří should write a more general introduction to the Prague Circle's theories of theatre, with the option of extending it to some 100 pages.

Jiří saw three major difficulties in this form of the project. First was the length, in that a 100 pages is neither an article nor a book. Second, the uncomfortably ambiguous position he would find himself in as one of the theoreticians he was to discuss from the point of view of a historian. And third, the linguistic difficulties he foresaw having to face since he had not written in French on any form of art for more than 20 years. Consequently, he could not tell how long writing the hundred pages in question might take him and in any event, he would be obliged to find somebody able to correct his French without changing the sense. In spite of these reservations, he accepted the proposal, just adding a reminder of the suggestion he had made earlier that two "excel-

lent studies” of the Prague Circle’s theory of theatre, one by František Deák, in English, and one by Irena Sławińska, in French, be reproduced in an annex.

Jiří started working on the text right away, gave it every moment his full-time job left him free and expected to finish it in a few months. In May 1982 he wrote to Peter Steiner that he had promised to produce “a little book (about 100 pages) in French” on the Prague School semiotics of theatre and he hoped to finish the manuscript by the end of the summer vacation and to see it published about two months later. This hope proved far too optimistic and he was still working on the manuscript in April 1986, when he wrote to Michael Quinn: “The Prague School studies in theatre are still poorly known. I am now trying to write a small book on the subject in French but that cannot fill the gap because it is to be in the nature of an a posteriori interpretation; one cannot be a participant in and a historian of something at the same time.”

But as his work advanced, its character changed, so resolving the first two major difficulties he had foreseen. It grew well beyond the problematic 100 pages and its focus shifted away from the history of the Prague School to a fuller presentation of Jiří’s own conception of the semiology of theatre, naturally backed by constant reference to the work of other members of the School. As it grew in length, the term of its completion receded. In June 1988, Jiří wrote, again to Michael Quinn: “My French book will still take some time and in the process has become something different from what it was at the outset. Its title sounds now something like ‘Esquisse d’une sémiologie du théâtre’; the reference to the Prague School will have to be accommodated in the sub-title”. And in October 1989: “My book is far from being finished; it just keeps growing.”

He was happy to devote to the project all the time and attention his professional occupation allowed, since he realized that it offered him an unexpected but timely opportunity to construct a unified theory, integrating his own and other Prague scholars’ work on all the various aspects and components of the theatrical art.

In planning how to shape the book, he soon settled on the six chapters that it has to this day:

- 1) The Prague School
- 2) Theatre and Literature
- 3) The Contribution of the Other Arts
- 4) Opera
- 5) Acting
- 6) Theatre as a Semiotic System

He made a file for each chapter and worked on one or the other as the focus of his thinking moved from topic to topic. Every subject he took up made him want to investigate it more thoroughly, with the result that the scope of his reading kept growing and so did the anticipated size of the book.

However, this promising progress came to an almost total stop in 1989. In the Spring of that year he developed a number of health problems which rapidly grew worse. In May 1990 he was hospitalized for the first time and then repeatedly until his death four years later. In spite of his declining health he kept up his full-time work, indeed more intensely than ever. The events of the Summer of 1989 and the following months, when the Communist world began to crumble, absorbed him professionally as well as personally. When he was not attending meetings, he was writing reports and articles on the swiftly evolving political and economic situation in Eastern and Central Europe.

Even during this hectic time he did not totally abandon his interest in the theatre. But in this field, too, a situation developed which prevented him from getting on with his book. In 1991, when he returned to Prague for the first time since 1948, he was invited to a meeting at the Theatre Institute and had the joy of making the personal acquaintance of several scholars whose interests were similar to his own. After hesitating because he feared it would mean another call on his already hard-pressed time, he agreed to let the Institute publish a collection of his articles in Czech, on the understanding that it would find a translator competent enough to accomplish the task without requiring his cooperation, except in questions of terminology, with which he offered to help.

He signed the contract in January 1992, in August he received the translation of the first two articles and he was very pleased with them. However, when he saw the rest of the translations he found them so unsatisfactory he felt he had no option but to revise and correct them very radically. Thus he found himself obliged to spend the little time and energy he had on this “mammoth task” as he called it (“práce pro vraha”). He finished it only a short time before his death.

In the last few months of his life, when he was already very ill, he took out the files of his French book again, one after the other, re-read what he had written and made a number of changes. He removed, transposed and added paragraphs or longer passages, placing the deleted passages at the back of the relevant file, together with other materials he meant to find a place for in the chapter at a later stage. To finish the book would have required far more time than he had but it appeared that he failed, or perhaps refused, to recognise how quickly his end was approaching.

At his death, the manuscript consisted of seven files, corresponding to the six chapters already mentioned and the bibliography. Each file contained the (provisionally) final form of the first part of the chapter, sometimes just a few pages, sometimes several dozen, mostly typed but partly handwritten and often with the sort of corrections computers have done away with: additions written between the lines, in the margins or on slips of paper pasted onto the page, circled words, phrases or paragraphs with arrows showing where they were to be transposed and so on. Besides these nearly final but still rather messy beginnings, each file contained a collection of materials of various sorts: cancelled passages evidently to be used later in the chapter, notes of points to bear in mind and so on.

About two weeks after Jiří's death, knowing how much importance he had attached to this work, I wrote to André Helbo explaining the situation and asking if he would be ready to publish the pages Jiří evidently regarded as publishable. He agreed and I retyped the passages concerned, to produce a cleaner text; it amounted some 80,000 words, not counting the notes and bibliography. I was able to assure him that no part of the manuscript had been published previously, except for the segment he himself had printed in his review *Degrés* (No. 74, Summer 1994), as an article entitled "La place et le caractère de la communication intersubjective dans la musique et la danse".

Jiří himself had pointed out years earlier that his French was not up to standard and would need to be corrected. Since Helbo was unable to help, I appealed to Danièle Monmarte who, as a French-speaking expert on Czech drama seemed well qualified for the task, and she kindly undertook it, for which I owe her a debt of gratitude. I sent Helbo the corrected manuscript in August and he replied in January 1995 that he proposed to publish it in a special issue of *Degrés* dedicated to Jiří's unpublished works, perhaps with an article by a respected semiologist setting it in perspective. A copy of the issue in question, *Degrés* No. 85–86, finally reached me in October 1996. It freed me at last from the fear that Jiří's unfinished study would find no publisher and all the work and hope he had put into it would be wasted. At the same time I realised all too clearly that as it stood, the published text presented a very incomplete version of Jiří's work.

Before the publication of the French version was decided, soon after Jiří's death, I informed those of his friends I thought would be interested about the existence of the manuscript and tried to keep them abreast of its fortunes. Several strongly urged me to try to get it published both in Czech and in English so as to make it more widely accessible. I was happy to agree, on condition that they helped me find a translator for the Czech version and publishers for both. Two Czech publishers expressed an interest in a Czech translation but

then dropped it, perhaps because my Czech was not up to translating it and they would have had to find and pay somebody to do it.

The English translation appeared to have a better chance of seeing the light of day. In response to my appeal for help in finding a publisher, Miroslav Procházka approached Jindřich Toman, who had succeeded Jiří's old friend Ladislav Matějka as Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Michigan, and obtained his promise to publish the text if I supplied the translation. I had been translating Jiří's texts, both Czech and French, into English since our very first meeting and naturally undertook to do so in this case too. I welcomed the opportunity to produce a more adequate version of his work, to correct some errors I had overlooked in the French text but more importantly to re-examine the whole manuscript, including the loose pages and fragments at the back of each file and see how far I could integrate them into the finished work. In many cases it proved possible to find what seemed an acceptable place, although clearly not the one Jiří had in mind. One of the most obvious results was an extreme disproportion in the size of the chapters, which Jiří would certainly have rearranged to make them more even. But I thought preserving as much as possible of his thought was more important than trying to give the book a better shape.

Toman distrusted my translation and decided to have it revised by a native-born English speaker. Unfortunately, the colleague who undertook to correct it evidently knew little about the subject and while emending the style often distorted the sense. Toman questioned all my objections and efforts to restore the original sense, so it took us many hours to come up with a text we could both accept. We finally achieved it in May 1999, in Paris. Before he took leave, Toman declared that the text as he now had it on his computer was ready for publication and he had only to press a button to start printing. Imagining he meant to do so in a matter of weeks, I remarked that it would be a nice coincidence for the book to come out in 1999, the year Jiří would have been 80. His reply that he wasn't sure he could publish it before the end of the year rather took me aback but I was far from suspecting that he was about to abandon the project, on which he had, after all, spent quite a lot of time and which was so near completion. He stopped communicating with me and apparently avoided contact with the academic colleagues who sought to inquire about his intentions.

In 2003, when Toman had given no sign of life for four years, Tomáš Hoskovec, who had been giving me unstinting help in sorting out various matters connected with Jiří's death, offered to publish the English version in the *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* (Volume 5 of the new series).

We both saw this as an opportunity to revise the text, remove those of Toman's formulations I had unwillingly agreed to, incorporate a few passag-

es I had meanwhile discovered in Jiří's papers, eliminate a few repetitions I had overlooked and generally make the sort of corrections that spring to mind when one re-reads a text after some time. It also meant changing the form of the many bibliographical references. As I worked on it again I liked to think that this chance to improve the text would make up for the delay. Once again I was too optimistic. The publication of this volume of the TCL was put off from year to year, with no deadline in sight.

Just as I was giving up all hope of ever seeing it in print, I learned that two friends, Eva Stehlíková and Veronika Ambros, had decided to take the matter in hand. They initiated a research project to study the Prague Linguistic Circle's work on theatre and after many discussions, the project was launched in 2011, under the title *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency*. Friends involved in the research gave me to understand that the means to publish the book were now available and, most importantly, that there was a real interest and will to see it through the press. The book is finally being published in collaboration between the Prague Linguistic Circle, represented by co-editor Tomáš Hoskovec, and the research team of the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

My warmest thanks go to all the friends who made this possible at long last.