



Summary

Scenography Speaks: Conversations of Jarka Burian with Josef Svoboda is a critical edition of primary archival sources that selects, annotates and comments on 72 hours of conversation between Josef Svoboda (1920-2002), one of the most significant theatre designers of the 2nd half of the 20th century and Jarka Burian (1927–2005), his American biographer and theatre scholar of Czech heritage, recorded over almost 30 years of their close collaboration.

Recorded between 1969 and 1994, during Burian's numerous research stays in former Czechoslovakia, until 1989 subjected to the totalitarian regime, and Svoboda's frequent trips to the United States, Canada and elsewhere in the "Western world," the tapes unfold Svoboda's personal account of his past, present and future: he recalls the beginnings of his career and the collaborators that have shaped it, he passionately describes productions he is working on, he explains his future visions and intentions. He clarifies the principles of his work enabling his audience to peek inside of the methodologies he used and the technologies he experimented with, revealing his thoughts on scenography and theatre in general. Even though most of the conversations are connected to Svoboda's work, they naturally unfold against the background of the wider political milieu, opening up the story of the extraordinary and internationally recognized artist whose work is marked by political ambiguity.

The selected interviews, or their fragments, are divided into four chapters and accompanied throughout by critical commentary. The first chapter exposes the initial encounters of Svoboda and Burian at the end of the "Golden 60s" that culminated in Burian's monograph *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* (Wesleyan University Press, 1971). In these first interviews, Svoboda, whose work had already become famous but has yet to be researched, consistently explains basic principles of his approach to theatre including his particular concept of scenography in the historical context of European and Czech culture. The second chapter focuses on Svoboda's collaborations on Wagner's operas, including two of his completed

Ring cycles, that also formed a topic of Burian's book *Svoboda: Wagner. Josef Svoboda's Scenography for Richard Wagner's Operas* (Wesleyan University Press, 1983). These interviews rarely capture Svoboda's creative process when devising a design concept for a production, showing the scenographer as a congenial stage partner for Wagner's immersive vision of music drama. Included are Burian's critical comments based on his spectatorial experience of the operas that provide a unique counter-perspective to the author's self-narration. The second part of the chapter points at Svoboda as a teacher by featuring his ideas about education for scenographers as well as his lectures and master classes held in the United States and Canada in 1970s and 1980s. The third chapter contains Svoboda's recurring testimonies on the crucial importance of his collaborators, such as the director and co-creator of *Laterna magika* Alfréd Radok, that are more connected to his work in his native country. This chapter also groups Svoboda's more general comments on scenography as a component of performance and an artistic field, revealing his continuous, yet unfulfilled, efforts to grant the discipline the deserved "symbolic capital". The final chapter covers the final phase of Svoboda's work and life in the period after the so-called Velvet Revolution. Finding himself towards the end of his career and life, Svoboda also opens up the controversial topic of his political affiliation.

The text of the book is accompanied by reproductions of Svoboda's designs and production as well as personal photographs that not only illustrate what is discussed in the text but also create an autonomous visual layer with its own development and rhythm that co-tells the story of Josef Svoboda's scenography.