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# Czech Puppet Theatre Dramaturgy as a Specific Phenomenon

## Introduction

This essay primarily seeks to answer the question of whether the dramaturgy of puppet theatre is in any way special and different from that of live actors' dramatic theatre. It is based on a historiographical-literary analysis that partly capitalises on my own original research and partly on the current state of existing published research. It explores in detail the works of Czech puppeteers and puppet theatres (traditional, amateur and professional) from the point of view of dramaturgy; it deals with the specifics of puppet theatre dramaturgy and lays out its development from the late eighteenth century till the present. A historical study constitutes a crucial part of this paper, explaining period theatre practices and presenting the social role of puppet theatre in a given stage of its development. It demonstrates the prevailing aesthetic idea and the shape of puppet theatre, based on components of the repertoire as well as individual plays. To a large extent, this essay also deals with a key distinctive feature typical of works of puppetry – the performance genre still does not have its set of 'classical texts' or, better put, this developing set is not all that extensive. My essay tries to explain how and why this discrepancy has emerged, and how it affects contemporary theatre practice. It also mentions several dramatic texts that have become classics of puppetry, and the rare successful authors whose plays have been staged both in the Czech lands and internationally. Towards the end, the essay presents the state of contemporary Czech puppet theatre dramaturgy in theatre practice (i.e. it maps the situation after 2000 in greater detail) and outlines the topics that are most often chosen by practitioners, and those that are completely missing in contemporary puppet theatre.

The current state of research in puppet theatre is, in general, rather unsatisfactory. Earlier periods are covered in the greatest detail; but such accounts are relatively poor in their evidence bases – **there are problems with surviving sources and scholarly conclusions** necessarily remain speculative and hypothetical to a certain point. In my study, I capitalise on publications by Jaroslav Bartoř, Zdeněk Bezděk and especially the recent *Two Centuries of Czech Puppetry (Dv stolet českho loutkřstv)* by Alice Dubsk, who revised and analysed the preceding research studies; Dubsk's works are among the most important sources of knowledge about the history of Czech puppetry before 1945; however, the development of Czech puppet theatre since WWII has not been comprehensively covered. There are only partial studies and serial reflections published in the journal *The Czechoslovak Puppeteer (eskoslovensk loutkř)*, which became simply *The Puppeteer (Loutkř)* from 1993. This periodical remains a seminal source of information. The historian Miroslav esal is a key figure of the more recent history (between 1945 and 1989) and, with some reservations, so is the director Jr Středa, who authored strongly personal texts about the history of folk puppet theatre. The most recent history of Czech puppet theatre has not been comprehensively reflected upon, merely at random and in partial materials; that is why methodologically the concluding part of this paper is dominated by an individual empirical reflection rather than rigorous research of sources.

## I A Historical Study

### I.i. The Period of Travelling Companies

The traceable beginnings of the Czech puppetry reach back to the late eighteenth century. However, there is no specifically Czech art at the beginning of this period. Evidence proves that the oldest puppeteers playing in Czech learned their craft from a foreign, most often German, puppeteer, and later continued with their own practice both in Czech and, of course, German. The fact that puppeteers played in Czech had already been overestimated in the heyday of the Czech National Revival (during the late nineteenth century), and the myth of marionettists' conscious activities aiming at a national awakening has been present ever since. However, the reality is much more down to earth: given the official ban on playing in large towns and spa resorts, puppeteers were left with no other choice than to restrict themselves to the small-town and village (i.e. to not-so-cosmopolitan, less-polyglot and more Czech-speaking, audiences). Their repertoire therefore corresponded to a standard offer of international travelling companies operating through the lands of the Czech crown mainly in directions leading from Germany to the east, or from Italy and Austria to the north (DUBSK 2004).

It is important to bear in mind that European travelling theatre was standing at an imaginary crossroads in the eighteenth century. The idea of the Enlightenment, which saw

theatre as an educational institution, was taking root, new texts were being written and permanent theatres established. Reforms of dramatic theatres were gaining strength in the 1840s, such as those carried out by Caroline Neuber and Johann Christoph Gottshed, who tried to banish Hanswurst<sup>1</sup> from the stage, or attempts at cultivating decorous and erudite stage speech (yet it took a long time before they became successful, see BROCKETT 1999: 371–3). The Enlightenment also brings a completely new view of the theatre as an educational and nation-uniting institution, as formulated for example by Friedrich Schiller in his 1784 essay ‘What a Stage of High Standing Can Actually Enact (redaction ‘A Consideration of the Theatre as a Moral Institution’)’ (*Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken* (red. *Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet*); this essay was introduced into Czech in a reworked version by Prokop Šedivý under the title *Krátké pojednání o užitku, který ustavičně stojící a dobře spořádané divadlo způsobiti může* [literally, ‘A Short Essay on the Expediency that a Permanently Standing and Well-Organised Theatre Can Effect’] in 1793; for more, see KAČER 1969: 51). The social status of actors in permanent theatre buildings was gradually improving, but this did not include puppeteers. If we simplify the situation a bit, we can say that dramatic theatre was developing significantly from the late eighteenth century onwards, whereas puppet theatre was stagnant.

While before this time period, puppets served primarily as a means to finish off performances with a trick and an entertainment of para-theatrical character (e.g. *theatrum mundi*, *laterna magica*, puppet peep-shows, panoramas, and so on), and as it seems, they were used when theatre troupes found themselves in financial crises, such uses of marionettes, relate primarily to their highly anthropomorphic look; but now the time has come to separate live actors’ and puppet theatres. It is clear that the repertoire of these two performance forms was overlapping till this time or, in other words, that marionette theatre was an imitation of live actors’ theatre. But marionette theatre did not only conserve titles popular throughout Europe (such as *Don Juan*, staged as *Don Šajn* in the Czech puppetry tradition, the pan-European story of Faust(us) and others), it also conserved archaic declamation and the proscenium arch space of the Baroque period, which were both out-dated in actors’ theatre by this time.

Puppeteers of this period also adopted the dying-out sung recitation mannerism of the Baroque stage, with characteristically longer vowels and explicit gestures; and it was not an exception that this cliché histrionic kind of delivery was passed from one generation to the next till the twentieth century. In Czech puppetry texts, this mannerism

1 Hanswurst (or Hans-sausage) was a popular but vulgar comic figure of German-speaking improvised and non-literary, popular comedy. His dramaturgy was elastic and lent opportunities for virtuoso performance in skilled interpreters of the role – like many *zanni*, he lacked psychological substance and was rather a series of incongruous contradictions, played on for comic effect: ‘a half doltish half cunning partly stupid partly knowing enterprising and cowardly self indulgent and merry fellow who in accordance with circumstances accentuated one or other of these characteristics.’ Pischel, Richard. *The Home of the Puppet Play*. Luzac & Company, 1902: 22.

is also connected with 'German' word order in sentences (which add a special melody), garbled words and unique lexical phenomena. It is also very important that it was the company actor-manager that played most characters, seconded by his helpers (usually his family members). Texts of plays are usually simplified and composed so that not too many characters meet on the stage, mass scenes are missing completely, and there are signature lines which characterise individual characters so as to make it easier for audiences to identify who is currently performing an action on the stage.

Comical characters had great importance in productions of travelling actors' companies. If a company was travelling through Europe, it made contact with its audiences precisely by means of 'crier' performances from the repertoire of its comical character, often performed by a hired actor, who was a native speaker and had knowledge of the locals. The position of the comical character therefore slowly got stronger – but equally importantly, it acted as a kind of translational mediator communicating everything of importance, often glossing the action and frequently using coarse humour. This comical character naturally moved on to marionette stages and gradually became the principal character of the puppet show, indispensable in any play.

## I.ii. Traditional Puppeteers' Repertoire

Puppeteers knew all of their texts by heart and their topics were different: motifs from the lives of the saint and martyrs (e.g. St. Dorothea (Dorota), St. Genevieve (Jenovéfa)), plays about topical events (e.g. Horea and Closka (*Horia a Gloska*)),<sup>2</sup> personalised versions of dramatic repertoire *Faustus*, *Don Juan* (*Faust*, *Don Šajn*), adaptations of originally German chivalric romances *Knight's Tales* (*Ritterspiele*) and the Baroque 'High and State Dramas'<sup>3</sup> (*Haupt-und-Staatsaktion*) were very popular, too. The mass production of dramatic works begins in the late eighteenth century, with a large amount of new plays for the theatre being written at this time. Puppeteers in Czech territories, however, stood apart from early revivalist activities and they still performed old and proven texts (DUBSKÁ 2004).

The popular play about John Faustus can serve as an illustrative example of how this legend changed its form till it became a puppet play. If we simplify the whole process (see LEŠKOVÁ DOLENSKÁ 2009), we find out that Faustus the Renaissance philosopher eager for knowledge, as presented by Christopher Marlowe, becomes a Baroque man (through English, Dutch and later also German travelling troupes), desiring exclusively worldly pleasures and money. He is a negative character deserving the just

2 *Horia and Gloska*, was a popular puppet tragedy by Matěj Kopecký (1892) about the trial and death of Romanian rebels one hundred years earlier. The play was staged at a time of another rebellion in the Zarand region of Romania.

3 A German dramatic form developing from the late middle ages onwards, and dealing with 'noble characters in high social positions and refined or important places'.



Fig. 1a+b: Forman Brothers' Theatre (Divadlo bři Formanů). *Freak Show (Obludárium)*, 2007.  
Photograph © Irena Vodáková





Fig. 2a+b: Forman Brothers' Theatre (Divadlo bři Forman). *Freak Show (Obludrium)*, 2007.  
Photograph  Irena Vodkov

punishment for his offence and deviation from the faith. Out of all puppet versions, the Czech one is particularly interesting for its final sentinel scene (called the *vartovačka* scene in Czech), in which Faust's guards are paid off by the comical character of Pimprle (popularly known as Kašpar) – the scene constitutes a satyr afterlude that is not found in versions surviving in other languages. Faust's story has therefore been seen as a comedy in the Czech theatre world, as is evident from a frequently quoted text, signed in the manuscript version by 'A.B.', an as yet unknown author, with the self-explanatory summative subtitle 'A Horrific Comedy with the Devil and, Even More Horrific, Faust's Disappearance into Hell Accompanied by Horrendous Fireworks and a Frightening Thunderstorm' (*Strašlivá komedie s čertem a ještě strašlivějším do pekla zmizením Fausta při strašném faierverku a hrůzoplňném hromobití*). Clearly the original play with its richness of ideas was simplified over time into an image of a damnable man deserving no compassion from the audience. And moreover, the same actions are mirrored by a comical character who belittles all that Faust does. Don Juan, the character of a relentless womaniser that was very popular among puppeteers, was similarly transformed, too; in the puppeteers' version, Don Juan's character lacks psychological depth and is an ordinary philanderer and murderer. A character of his comical servant also has a large part in this story.

The puppeteer's Faust nevertheless went through another change with time. A growth of Czech national self-awareness, which culminated in the building of the National theatre in 1881, brought a crucial turning point: an interest in travelling marionette players. At the same time, the first prints of plays,<sup>4</sup> and attempts at cultivating puppeteers' repertoires, appear. Puppeteers understood in the second half of the nineteenth century that Faust's legend remained very attractive for audiences; so, for example, the travelling puppeteer Jan Nepomuk Laštovka (1824–1877), **who belonged to the first generation of educated and self-confident artists, played *Faust* in a version that 'combined Goethe's *Faust* in Josef Jiří Kolár's translations with passages from traditional puppet plays'** (DUBSKÁ 2004: 125). After Laštovka, several authors followed (e.g. Arnošt Kraus (1859–1943), Jindřich Veselý (1885–1939) and **Kamil Bednář (1912–1972)) – who tried to raise puppeteer's *Faust* with alterations to a more serious text; however, it is rather symptomatic that their versions were not successful and they seem very artificial.**<sup>5</sup> By way if incident, it was Jan Nepomuk Laštovka who became famous for his satirical couplets on topical issues (a source for his nickname the Puppeteer-Politician); but he also observed de-

4 For example, a two-part *Comedies and Plays by Matěj Kopecký as Recorded by His Son Václav (Komedie a hry Matěje Kopeckého dle sepsání syna jeho Václava)*, Prague 1862, in a re-worked edition by Josef Richard Vilímek, Eduard Hunst and Heřman Přerhof.

5 Data from the electronic database of the Arts and Theatre Institute (ATI) in Prague show that the play remains popular even in the twentieth century. There were in total of thirteen productions by professional and independent companies in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Available online at <http://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx>. The database does not include data about amateur theatre, where the play is still very popular. The number of performances would be several times bigger in this case in the considered time period.



velopments in dramatic theatre and played its repertoire. Lařovka was also an author of several historical plays from Czech history (e.g. two plays dealing with the Hussite movement, *Jan Źiřka at Rb Castle* (*Jan Źiřka u hradu Rb*) and *Jiř Poděbradsk*; for more, see ESAL 1991: 78). Lařovka was not an exception among travelling puppeteers, as a majority of them still ran their fathers' and grandfathers' plays as going concerns, with few dramaturgical or artistic ambitions.

### I.iii. The Amateur Era

In the period of a gradual ossification of the style of traditional marionette puppeteers, a new phenomenon of Family Puppet Theatres emerged in the Czech lands, which then resulted in a unique movement of amateur community theatres with no counterpart in a European context. There were regular shows in almost each street; and after the sport movement Sokol<sup>6</sup> was established in 1862, which also dealt with cultural activities in accordance with its Ancient Greek ideal of the *kalokagathia*, a network of puppet theatres organised by Sokol developed in the 1870s. Industrial production of puppets and stage properties for these purposes was begun by excellent artists of the time, and was truly magnificent in volume (for details, see DUBSK 2004: 143–50).

The repertoire and acting style changed together with the development of new puppet theatres – **the originally imitated traditional puppeteers reciting old texts were becoming obsolete and laughable**. The character of Pimprle, or Kařprek, underwent a crucial transformation when this moustached, apolaustic and cheating servant who only cares about his own profit, became a likeable friend to the children. This was so because the target audience transformed in a crucial way and children became the main consumers of puppet shows; even travelling puppeteers changed their orientation to children, as they were not able to draw the attention of adult audiences in competition with the modern Czech dramatic theatre. In addition to the highly sought after fairy tales, traditional puppeteers still played their old repertoire, and thus became the thorn-in-the-sides of many teachers and educators (ESAL 1991: 78–9).

Demand for new plays, especially fairy tales with Kařprek, was huge. The shows were on each week, usually for the same audience, so it was necessary to play new titles all the time. More or less talented teachers usually began writing for small puppet theatres, some of them with no practical experience with puppets (for example Bedřich Beneř Buchlovan, Bohumil Schweigstill, Vojtěřka Baldessari Plumlovsk, Ludmila Tesařov and others); these payers most of all routinely invented and varied schematic stories with the popular Kařprek (BEZDĚK 1983). This category of educative and not-very-well-

6 The Sokol movement was a Czech youth sport and fitness initiative founded in Prague in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrř and Jindřich Fgner. 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.



Fig. 3a+b: DRAK Company. *Dr John Faustus (Johanes doktor Faust)*, 1971.  
Photograph from the archive of the *Loutkář* journal.



Fig. 4a+b: DRAK Company. *Dr John Faustus (Johanes doktor Faust)*, 1971.  
Photograph from the archive of the *Loutkář* journal.

made plays also includes somewhat later works by the physician Karel Driml, mostly promoting the topic of preventative medicine and hygiene, such as the play *Germ-boy (Bacilínek)*. These texts are virtually unplayable today, although a conservative amateur company, usually run by the Sokol, sometimes still produces one of the grand works by Bohumil Schweigstill.

Still, we cannot yet speak of a systematic dramaturgy even in this time period, which was approximately between the 1890s and the 1910s and lies in the times before the beginning of attempts to make puppetry more artistic. The rudiments of dramaturgy, or rather thinking seriously about the composition of the repertoire and its artistic effects, can only be found a few years later.

#### I.iv. The 'Puppetry Renaissance'

The most important change that took place in the first half of the twentieth century was a step towards professional puppetry (the first professional puppet theatre was founded by Josef Skupa in 1930 – see the article by Pavel Jirásek in this volume). From the re-

spectable number of 2,000 active companies in the Czech lands (and some authorities refer to as many as 3,000 companies; see DUBSKÁ 2004: 170), several first-class artistic puppet theatres emerged (e.g. The Realm of Puppets (*Říše loutek*); The Puppet Theatre of Artistic Education (*Loutkové divadlo umělecké výchovy*); The Artistic Puppet Theatre (*Umělecká loutková scéna*), The Puppet Theatre of the Holiday Resorts (*Loutkové divadlo feriálních osad*) – aka Holiday Camp Theatre; and The Puppet Theatre of the Sokol in Prague-Libeň (*Loutkové divadlo Sokola Libeň*)). These companies had real ambition to cultivate and elevate a despised theatrical genre, whose practitioners were legally on the same level with fairground managers and shooting-range owners (at this time, puppeteers even belonged to a different taxation mode). In the beginning, it was especially academically trained artists who participated in these emancipation attempts (performers such as Ladislav Šaloun, Vojtěch Sucharda, Anna Suchardová Brichová, Ladislav Sutnar and others). Later, they were replaced in their struggle to find new possibilities for puppets by – in today's terms – dramaturgs and directors recruited from those company members who realised that the final production needed an aesthetically effective design, as well as the interaction and harmony of all stage components, including the components of text and acting. These programmatically artistic puppet theatres often collaborated with professional actors (the Czech National Theatre actresses Liběna Odstrčilová and Marie Hilbertová significantly contributed to the development of puppet theatre, for example); such well-trained and respected performers taught puppet companies the basics of stage speech and more cultivated, or culturally highbrow performance.

Transformation of performance style and repertoire was accompanied by the emergence of 'divided' interpretation (i.e. the separation of manipulators and speakers). This way of work was first used in the Czech lands in a production of *The Tinker* (*Dráteník*), produced by the members of the Puppet Theatre of Artistic Education in 1914. Divided interpretation was supposed, 'according to period ideas, to improve actors' performance and at the same time relieve manipulators of puppets on long strings'; the creators additionally expected 'to find a suitable vocal expression that would substitute the pathetic recitation of folk puppeteers' (DUBSKÁ 2004: 162). Besides these high-minded and aesthetic developments the pragmatic possibility of hurling on a new performance each week, because it was not necessary to learn lines by heart, also allowed some more ambitious companies to choose a more demanding repertoire.

Classic titles of the dramatic theatre could thus appear on a puppet stage to show that possibilities of puppet theatre were equal to those of the actors' one. Miroslav Česal (ČESAL 1991: 82–92) is among those who point out this paradox when he notices that puppets conformed to the dramatic canon and imitated a completely different theatrical aesthetics (something similar was practiced by travelling puppeteers a long time ago), and that this was in a direct conflict with the declared search for new possibilities for a modern puppet theatre. There is evidence of performances of, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (both were staged before 1918), of plays by Jaroslav



Vrchlický and the Čapek brothers, of Goethe's *Faust* and of several comedies by Molière, Plautus and Goldoni. The audience of the time highly praised a performance of Sophocles' *King Oedipus* (1933) directed by Jan Malík (1904–1980), who used large-scale silhouettes of several figures to represent the chorus, taking advantage of puppets' different possibilities of expression, and thus avoiding directly copying actors' drama (for more details, see DUBSKÁ 2004: 216).

The director and talented painter and playwright Jan Malík was the one who wrote probably the most successful piece of the Czech puppet dramatic literature in its entire history, a modern fairy tale for very young audiences with the title *Speckles the Ball* (in Czech, the onomatopoeic *Míček Flíček*, 1936 ; in 1968, the play was published in an English version by Jenny Dennis under the title *Roly-Poly*). This was based on a classical Czech fairy tale *Budulínek*, yet in the modern-world settings. In this tale, the main character is a personified thing – a small ball – which belongs to grandpa and grandma, but is taken away by the vicious dragon *Mrak* (the dragon's name means *cloud*, which rhymes in Czech with the word for *dragon*; thus this has become a generic name of a multitude of fairy tale dragons (*Drak Mrak*). 1936 was not the first time that personification had appeared in a puppet play (we can find, for example, animated shoes in Charlotta Habersbergerová's play *Vašík's Decision* (*Vašíkovo rozhodnutí*) and an inflatable ball in her *Devil's Castle* (*Čertův zámek*); for more, see BEZDĚK 1983: 61), yet in the case of *Speckles the Ball* we have finally a text of high quality that accentuates what is the proper to puppet theatre: animating a lifeless mass. Malík moreover very craftily used repetitiveness, which is dear to children – a principle of 'a triple repetition, a triple variation of the same situation. This principle in Malík's play leads to almost word-for-word lexical and compositional repetitions in the dialogue' (BEZDĚK 1983: 110). *Speckles the Ball* was translated into seventeen languages (PAVLOVSKÝ 2013: 57).

Besides Jan Malík, a lot of playwrights appeared, often amateur practitioners with necessary stage experience and knowledge of the specifics of puppet theatre, whose texts were often produced even in the early years of puppet theatre professionalisation after WWII (Karel Mašek alias Fa Presto, Václav Sojka, Zdeněk Schmoranz, Vojtěch Cinybulk and others). Amateur companies are almost exclusively the only ones who sporadically return to them.

### I.v. Professionalisation

After WWII, time was ready for the culmination of emancipation attempts by pre-war puppeteers, who strived to make puppets equal with other dramatic art-forms and 'artistic'. There were two legal Acts (in 1945 and 1948)<sup>7</sup> that put these attempts into practice

7 The decrees of summer 1945 dealt with a transformation of a theatre network, nationalising of theatres and abolition of concessions; the National Assembly passed the Theatre Act (no. 32/1948 Coll.). (For more, see JUST 2010: 155 and 194).



Fig. 5: The Led Theatre (*Vedené divadlo*). Photograph from the archive of the *Loutkář* journal.



Fig. 6: Karel Makonj's production of Michel de Ghelderode's *Hop, Signor*. Vedené divadlo Theatre, 1970.





Fig. 7: Karel Makonj's production of Albert Camus's *Le Malentendu* (*Nedorozumění*).  
Vedené divadlo Theatre, 1969.

although so far, it was just on the formal level. On the other hand, the new purportedly Socialist social order, which was against private business, also discontinued the activities of travelling puppeteers, whose families had passed their craft down through several generations. Traditional marionette puppeteers were already seen as a fading curiosity by artistic circles in the early twentieth century, but a forced and complete discontinuation of their activities, including activities of families with clear artistic qualities, and a radical turn from the most typical Czech marionettes to stick-puppets, which were not unknown but definitely non-traditional, was proven to be a short-sighted decision over time.

A network of permanent, 'stone-building' (official, formal, civic) statutory theatres was planned for all bigger county towns, also to 'serve' their surroundings, according to a Soviet model – and of course, with great help from Czech puppeteers, who contributed to organisation, personnel issues and enthusiasm. The aim was clear: to form a new spectator, a future citizen, with appropriate and often also ideological education. Theatres were established in the following order (with one exception) between 1949 and 1958: Joy Theatre (*Divadlo Radost*, in Brno, 1949); The Naïve Theatre (*Naivní divadlo*, in Liberec, 1949), The Small Theatre of České Budějovice (*Malé divadlo České Budějovice*, 1949); The Chinese Lantern Theatre (*Divadlo Lampion*, in Kladno, 1950); The Central Puppet Theatre, Prague (*Ústřední loutkové divadlo*, Praha 1950) – today The 'Minor' Theatre, Prague (*Divadlo Minor Praha*), The Alfa Theatre, Pilsen (*Divadlo*

*Alfa Plzeň*, 1951); Ostrava Theatre of Puppets (*Divadlo loutek Ostrava*, 1953), Dragon Theatre (*Divadlo DRAK*—note that DRAK is an acronym that stands for *Divadlo Rozmanitě Atrakce a Komedií* [Theatre of Diverse Attractions and Comedies] in Hradec Králové, 1958); and the last one was The Theatre of Diversity (*Divadlo rozmanitosti*, Most, 1987).

The original concept was for five theatres, all copying activities of a model stage: The Central Puppet Theatre in Prague; this idea collapsed, however;<sup>8</sup> and so, when it was finally possible to get rid of the manacles of Socialist Realism, the situation was perfect for a further development of Czech (and Slovak) puppetry. Theatres, formerly full of enthusiastic amateurs, began to fill in with first graduates of the Department of Puppetry at the Academy of Fine Arts founded in Prague in 1952. It must be stressed that these artists were the world's first puppeteers with a university education that was specialised in puppet acting, directing, dramaturgy or scenography and many of them attempted innovative and progressive work. At the same time, members of the emerging ensembles had the opportunity to work in long-term teams and specialised professions.

#### I.vi. The 'Eastern' Model of Theatre and its Specifics

Despite the existence of the Czech independent scene that arose after 1989, there is still a difference between what can be called for the sake of simplicity, 'Western' and 'Eastern' European models of theatre. In relation to puppets, theatres with permanent (or just slightly changing) ensembles of actors, management and repertory production style are dominant in the former Eastern bloc, which opened just three or four new productions each year, accompanied with the concomitant number of closings after approximately a three year run of each production and its 'playing out' (there are, of course, shorter exceptions and long-standing star shows on the repertories, too).

Given the number of 'Eastern' ensemble members (and the dominant concept of theatre education), this kind of practice in the theatre naturally distinguishes between individual professions co-creating productions. In the 'West', one-off productions dominate, or chamber-scale groups of theatre practitioners that expect versatility from their members. The performer becomes the director, dramaturg, designer and often puppet technician, and provides for all technical necessities from lighting and sound design to the simple building and striking of the stage. Of course, there are solo puppet performers and small (often agency-run) companies in the Czech Republic now, too, who work

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<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the so-called communist period, there was a resolution by the Dramaturgical Committee of the Ministry of Education to establish a Central Puppet Theatre 'first with three venues, later extended to five. [...] Only following the government's February 1950 decision to establish puppet theatres, the road opens for establishing new theatres founded by county or municipal 'people's committees' (i.e. local governments). And so the CPT keeps the 'collectivist' name and its branches gain independence after 1950' (STŘEDA 2000: 208).

in the independent scene, yet only a few of them have any distinct impact on the development of puppetry as such; these are often small traders, who have been called with a slightly negative connotation 'kindergarten artists,' often balancing at the verge of, and sometimes stepping over, the boundary of incapability and kitsch.

The fact that specialists and trained professionals work in Czech statutory theatres brings – if the constellation is favourable, of course – quite exceptional artistic results, because these practitioners need only to focus on the artistic elements of their work. A number of great directors have established themselves in the period of professional Czech puppetry, figures who pushed the development of theatre forward in collaboration with dramaturgs and designers (let us mention, for example, the 'triumvirate' of Josef Krofta, the director; Miloslav Klíma, the dramaturg; and Petr Matásek, the scenographer (the musician and actor Jiří Vyřohlíd could belong here possibly, too, whose contribution to DRAK's productions has remained great); or the team consisting of the director Tomáš Dvořák; the dramaturg Pavel Vašíček; and the scenographer Ivan Nesveda. This approach of long-term continuous collaboration also leads to a natural harmony within ensembles and ripening of all their members' talents and practices.

### I.vii. The Repertoire of Puppet Theatres during the 1950s

As has been said, Socialist Realism ruled theatre in the 1950s. In the case of puppet theatre, it took the shape of illusionistic productions performed with stick-puppets with divided interpretation (one performer articulating and another voicing the puppet). Mainly fairy tales, both Soviet and Czech, and classic works of Czech realism (by Josef Kajetán Tyl, Václav Kliment Klicpera, and Alois Jirásek) made it onto the bill; outspokenly tendentious, ideological texts of course belonged to repertoires, too, but by no means did they make a majority of the productions in theatres repertoires in the period.

Erik Kolár (1906–1976) who was a dramaturg, director and university teacher, and also the secretary of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, caused a significant qualitative change of new texts. It was he who urged the prominent authors of this time period (such as Jan Vladislav, Ludvík Aškenazy, Milan Pavlík, František Pavlíček, Václav Renč and above all, the excellent poet Josef Kainar) to write original plays for the puppet stage. A number of these texts were produced throughout the whole of the country and, for example, the fairy tale in verse *Goldilocks* (*Zlatovláska*, 1952) has been produced ever since and it is one of the few that undoubtedly belongs to the canon of puppet theatre literature.<sup>9</sup>

The theatre historian Miroslav Česal sees the reason as being that the text does not give any clear indication of how to interpret the play – whether with marionettes,

9 Kainar's *Goldilocks* was produced 39 times since 1952 (there are 21 puppet and 18 actors' productions in the database); this is a really unique number, which can only be compared by the success of *Speckles the Ball* by Malík. The difference is, however, that *Goldilocks* was staged in the Eastern bloc countries only. Available online at: <http://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx>.

stick-puppets, or a combination of live and puppet acting numbers; it can even be played as pure live actors' theatre. Česal also notes that the first version of the fairy tale was created in a direct collaboration between Kainar and Erik Kolár, then the dramaturg of CPT, who largely influenced and changed the final shape of the text, so that it would fully conform to the ensemble's theatrical style and could be easily played with stick-puppets. The poet however reworked the play and made it 'more epic' several years after the first production, making it thus more universal and available for a variety of theatre styles. Česal notes that other producers (perhaps except for Krofta who, according to Česal, 'made radical, and in a way barbaric' cuts in *Goldilocks* together with Miloslav Klíma in 1981; ČESAL 1991: 99) chose the newer version for their productions (ČESAL 1991: 100–5).

The most valuable contribution of the fairy tale (which has remained hardly possible to overcome) is the beautiful, colourful language of Kainar's lyrical verse, which has rendered it immortal. Kainar's *Goldilocks* has returned to the stage, unlike other plays by his contemporaries mentioned above (such as the formerly popular fairy tale *The Princess with an Echo* (*Princezna s ozvěnou*) attributed to Vlasta Pospíšilová, but probably written by the playwright Václav Renč (PAVLOVSKÝ 2013: 64; this text, by the way, was a winner of a competition for a puppet play, for more, see MAKONJ 2003: 48); *Mr. Fairy Tale's Fairy Tale* (*Pohádka pana Pohádky*) by Jiří Středa; *The Old Frowning Hag's Treasure* (*Poklad baby Mračnice*) by Ladislav Dvorský; *Trouble with the Moon* (*Šlamastyka s měsícem*) by Ludvík Aškenazy; *Nightingale* (*Slavík*) by František Pavlíček and others). These latter plays were produced many times in the whole of Czechoslovakia (even as living actors' productions) before 1989, but professional theatres practically stopped producing them after the Velvet Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

### I.viii. 'The Golden Sixties'

The following decade, commonly associated with the epithet of my subtitle, meant a certain relief for puppet theatre as well as other arts, as it was now possible to leave the binding Socialist Realist canon and give way to a new view of art. Fresh graduates of the Department of Puppetry at the Theatre Academy in Prague contributed to this very significantly when they more or less rebelled against their teachers and began to produce theatre in direct opposition to the preceding illusionist style (for example, there was an outcry at a seminar in Karlovy Vary in 1959 at which Miloš Kirschner and Jan V. Dořák, who both later became very important puppeteers, spoke out against the academic style of the CPT in Prague – at that time directed by their teacher Jan Malík; there were also a dynamic and innovative development of Czech theatre initiated by students and fresh

10 In writing this essay, I used a list of premiere productions between 1989 and 2014 available in the digital database of the Arts and Theatre Institute. Available online at <http://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx>.



Fig. 8: Jindřich Halik's ground-breaking production of Jan Malík's *Speckles the Ball* (*Míček Flíček*).  
The Central Puppet Theatre (*Ústřední loutkové divadlo*), now the Minor Theatre, 1964.  
Photograph © archive of the Divadlo Minor.

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graduates around Jiří Srnec, or original work emerging from Jan Švankmajer and his Theatre of Puppets at the Semafor Theatre (Švankmajer had already called attention to himself with his student work). The era of studio and experimental theatres brought an opportunity to invent new variations of a coexistence of the living actor and the puppet – a meeting and a direct confrontation, which had been unthinkable just a few years earlier, now ceased to be a taboo. New interpretative possibilities were opening for the potential of communicating with a puppet as well as for it. The repertoire was, of course, also changing alongside this new view of the possibilities of expression.

It was approximately in the 1960s that the question of ‘double dramaturgy’ was raised for the first time (PAVLOVSKÝ 2013: 46). This meant either strictly distinguishing between addressing children or adults, or aiming at mixed audiences. The Theatre of Spejbl and Hurvínek in Prague followed the former concept, as it had had two separate lines of production since the era of its founder, Josef Skupa. Productions aimed at children and those for adult audiences were usually performed in the same setting for practical reasons, while ‘the play for children was written in a way that handily used the scenery and puppets from the adults’ production’ (DUBSKÁ 2014: 204). Skupa’s successor Miloš Kirschner continued in the same division of the repertoire. Separate productions for children and adults can be found in the theatre’s repertoire till today. A much younger theatre Cakes and Puppets (*Buchtý a loutky*, founded in 1991, see below) works with the same division of the repertoire.

The second line, which is now more common and which was mainly represented by DRAK theatre led by the above-mentioned Jan V. Dvořák in the 1960s, was practicing what we now call a ‘family address’ of productions. This concept entailed the interweaving into children’s puppet shows of a thread aiming at adults, in such a way that children do not understand it, but it does not belittle their impression of what they see. On the contrary, according to the proponents of this concept, it has the effect that parents do not leave the hall to wait in the lobby for the performance to finish, which is what teachers accompanying their school classes allegedly do, but rather that parents share a cultural moment with their children.<sup>11</sup>

### I.ix. The ‘Normalisation’<sup>12</sup> Years

As in live actors’ theatre, the activities of experimental studio companies were suppressed or even discontinued by a directive issued after an occupation of Czechoslovakia by armies of the Warsaw Pact, which in August 1968 brought about a violent end to events of the Prague Spring. One example of this suppression came in the case of The Led Theatre (*Vedené Divadlo*, 1969–1972) at which the original and demanding dramaturgy

11 This fact was pointed out to me in private by a long-standing dramaturge of the ‘Minor’ Theatre in Prague, Petra Zichová (Zámečnicková). After all, it was the Minor that changed its slogan from ‘A theatre of the actor and puppet’ to ‘A theatre for the whole family’ in 2002.

12 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.



for adults and children's productions, created by a team working under the director and theoretician Karel Makonj, was abandoned, with the company returning to old comedies of Kašpárek, played using marionettes.

The way to a so-called 'Normalisation' of the situation in theatre dramaturgy again led to stricter control and censorship (including authors' self-censorship); but as had happened several times before, it turned out again that supervisors and censors are less alert in the case of puppet theatre than in live actors' theatre. It is worth mentioning at this point what has been omitted so far: puppet theatre had a long tradition of profound political interest and intervention; for tangible examples of this, it is worth considering the widely known claims that Josef Skupa buried the Austrian-Hungarian empire with a couplet in the mouth of 'revolutionary Kašpárek' as early as in 1917 (DUBSKÁ 2004: 166); and that he produced several anti-Nazi productions during the Nazi occupation. These were, for example, a social-critical play *Changing Ourselves for the Better (Jdeme do sebe*, premiered in September 1937) and, most importantly, the production *A Three-floor Merry-go-round (Kolotoč o třech poschodích*, premiered in February 1939) – which was a direct allusion to the Munich treaty of September 1938 that 'surpassed almost all similar attempts of this period with its aggressive political satire' (DUBSKÁ 2004: 240). Skupa was arrested for these activities and sent to a concentration camp in 1944.

Despite occasional realisations of the power of puppet plays, and actions against their creators, such as that mentioned above, it is clear that only very few people have historically looked for provocative topics and treasonous activities in puppetry, which is seen by the majority as intended for children. This is also why it was possible to 'hide' several unwanted directors and dramaturgs in puppet theatre during the Normalisation period (e.g. Miloslav Klíma and Jan Kačer, who could not work in Prague, or in more important regional live actors' theatres).

The intended compulsory production of Soviet and Russian plays was avoided in (not only puppet) theatre at that time in a similarly witty way – **theatres often chose allegorical texts**. For example, a dramatised version of the short story *Ditch* by Leonid Leonov (also produced under the Russian title *Buryga*), which has for a topic the ridiculing and bullying of a defenceless individual, was produced several times. Many practitioners agree that a suggestive production of a play by another Soviet author, Yevgeny Shvarts' *Dragon*, produced under the title *The Song of Life (Píseň Života)*<sup>13</sup> and directed by Josef Krofta, was an accurate expression of life in a totalitarian country; and its version by the DRÁK theatre in Hradec Králové was one of the best productions of this time. It is paradoxical to a certain degree that Czech/Czechoslovak puppetry experienced its greatest era, connected unequivocally with the director Krofta, during un-free times. Krofta's use of metaphor, secret messages hidden in between the lines and often in archetypal stories, were understandable both to Czech and to international audiences.

13 The production opened in the East Bohemian Puppet Theatre DRÁK in Hradec Králové, directed by Josef Krofta, on 6 May 1985. The annotation says that it is a 'collective work based on the play *Dragon* by Yevgeny Shvarts, translated by Eva Sgallová' (see the Art and Theatre Institute database).



**Fig. 9:** Jan Jirků's production of *Bruncvík and the Lion* (*Bruncvík a lev*).  
Scenography by Robert Smolík. Minor Theatre, 2006. Photograph © Kateřina Dolenská.

To a certain point, the activities of the Naïve Theatre from the 1970s onwards could also be seen as an escape from the censor's overseeing eye – the theatre systematically explored productions for the youngest age group between three and five years old.<sup>14</sup> Productions for the smallest children in Liberec have been connected with two practitioners from the beginning: the director Pavel Polák and the designer Pavel Kalfus.

<sup>14</sup> Today's phenomenon of theatre production for children of 0 to 3 years was invented in the 1990s and it slowly comes to our knowledge also thanks to a specialised festival, the biannual *Nursery-age* (*Mateřinka*); this name, evoking a mother's loving care, is also used as a name of the genre of plays for the smallest children organised by the *Naïve Theatre* in Liberec since 1973.



Fig. 10: Michaela Homolová's production of *Budulínek*. Scenography by Robert Smolík. Naïve Theatre Liberec, 2012. Photograph © Josef Ptáček.



Fig. 11: Radek Beran's production of *Rocky IX*, with the subtitle 'Boxing, kissing, loutking'. Cakes and Puppets Theatre (*Buchty a loutky*) Theatre Company, 2004. Photograph © Michal Drtina.

## I.x. Conclusion to the Historical Part

If we summarise the main features of the development of Czech puppetry, we must finally answer the question, why do puppeteers, unlike actors of drama, lack a canon of secure and classic plays they could choose from at any time when compiling a dramaturgical plan?

The core of the problem probably is that puppet theatre has undergone a radical transformation in the last hundred years, which is utterly incomparable to what has happened in dramatic theatre. Puppet theatre changed from its old shape, which had been conserved for two hundred years, into a copy that was at first derived from regular theatre, but reduced in size and intended for children in the shape of a family theatre. The rhetoric changed and the moral messages of the plays changed; but the productions were still performed with marionettes in a Baroque proscenium arch stage, and with Kašpárek. Puppeteers who experienced a lack of success turned to plays written for dramatic theatres in order to show that they were also able to produce them in an era of artistic emancipation – although they often had to suppress the puppet-based character of their theatre, which is based on animated matter. Puppet theatre after the war therefore emphasised realistic imitation and the chosen or commissioned playwriting conformed to this mimetic aspiration. The 1960s brought a time of relief and experimentation with puppets; but plays written for an illusionistic theatre began to become out-dated – not to mention Kašpárek shows dating from the post-1918 Czechoslovakia. The next wave of plays brought about a freer approach to work with a puppet, but they are not produced today because puppets are not attractive for contemporary practitioners<sup>15</sup> – they search for and study their overlap with *Cirque Nouveau*, dance theatre, design theatre and so on (these new forms are sometimes labelled with the misleading term ‘alternative theatre’). Moreover, the originality of productions of individual creative teams has been gaining importance in puppet theatres since the 1960s. These teams often produce texts in accordance with the poetics of a particular theatre company, for a particular set of actors and for a given intention in a specific production. This way, texts or mere scenarios, which are hardly transferable to other companies, are produced. It is also symptomatic that the practice of adapting popular children’s books has been widespread since the 1960s (PAVLOVSKÝ 2013: 64) and no wonder – plays from post-1918 Czechoslovakia could not be performed, there were only a few historical

15 It is clear from my own meetings with the Department of Puppetry students at the Theatre Academy in Prague that there is also another reason why older plays are not produced – it is partly due to the laziness and unwillingness of nearly all students to deal with history and to get acquainted with older playwrights and texts. Certainly, this is in turn caused by a radical reduction of the number of hours devoted to theatre history in the curriculum, leading to the disappearance of an educational continuity for theoretical subjects, and space for a contextual interpretation of new and old forms, as well as experiences with historical texts.



ones, and imports from the USSR and wider Eastern bloc<sup>16</sup> countries could not satisfy the demand. The themes of plays thus became much more diversified (for more on this topic, see KLMA 2003: 49–51).

Moreover, a puppet play text has its specific characteristics: it must respect puppets' limits regarding expression and technology, and each type of puppets requires a different style of text. For example, marionettes express themselves differently to glove puppets, which are designed for more expressively action-based spectacle, and whose speech must be economical, because their performative possibilities cannot bear long dialogues. There are differences in play texts for shadow-puppets, mannequins (this is perhaps most civil) and 'Muppets', to mention just the most common varieties. Addressee audiences are also more important than in live actors' theatre – **there are radically different requirements for a pre-school children's play than there are for a play aimed at older infants, for example.** A certain universality is therefore typical of the plays mentioned above, which have become permanent components of dramaturgical repertoires.

It may thus be generally stated that timeless pieces survive (shows that are not strictly connected to the time and theatrical practices of their creation – remember the unplayability in our contemporary theatres of texts written before 1945, not to mention the ideological plays from the 1950s about miners and collective farmers). Texts that are too much connected with the poetics of a specific ensemble are not viable, either. And last but not least, of course, top writers only rarely deal with playwriting for puppet theatres – puppets are on the fringes of their interest, they are not a prestigious (and therefore adequately remunerated) area, and they therefore easily absorb untalented dilettantes, who are often convinced that plays for children can be written by just about anybody.

For example, an anonymous competition for a new children's play was organised as a part of the nineteenth *Mateřinka* Festival in 2007, which did not turn out so successfully. The committee stated in its verdict, among other observations, that: 'Given the lack of renowned authors for children's theatre, the committee could choose between the works of graphomaniacs, and of writers in love with texts from pre-war Czechoslovakia; first and second places were not awarded, third place belongs to the text by Milada Svěřáková, *A Prince Who Loved Animals*' (LOUTKŘ LVII (2007): 5: 199). *Plus a change*: Josef Skupa encountered the same problem as early as in the 1930s, when he 'tried to address some well-known writers also through a competition call, but [found that] some of the resulting works were not satisfactory at all. Out of sixty-three plays and outcomes sent to the competition, only one could be used' (DUBSK 2004: 205).

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16 E.g. *Peter the Tiger* by the Polish playwright Hanna Januszewska became a smash hit on puppet stages; the short play *Blue Puppy* by the Hungarian playwright Gyula Urbn was also produced many times. Among Soviet plays, the most produced were *The Secret of the Golden Key* (Jelena Borisova), *Magical Galoshes* (German Matveyev) or *Unseen Love* (Yevgeny Speransky).

## II. The Transformation of Czech Puppetry after 1989

After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, not only puppet theatre found itself at a crossroads once again. Recent times of freedom have finally brought about an opportunity to play all texts with no limitations, so previously banned Czech plays, and those by Western authors, have been produced to catch up with the past. Also, the topic of religion can nowadays be shown (especially Christmas, Easter and hagiographic plays). On the other hand, in 1989 Czech theatre suddenly faced a series of seasons of dropping audience numbers and it has had to redefine its role and stance in society (KÖNIGSMARK 1991). Since the Velvet Revolution, it has no longer been necessary to wink one's eye at the audience in an unspoken conspiracy during allegorical lines; simultaneously, the theatre has also begun to fight for the interest of audiences with other kinds of entertainment. Lastly, competition for renowned ensembles grew among private commercial theatres and newly formed independent venues.

With regards to puppet theatre, the network of statutory theatres mentioned above, which guarantees a long-lasting artistic continuity, survived the arrival of the new democracy without any changes, except for changes in names, which usually dropped the adjective 'puppet'.<sup>17</sup> It seems from developments over the last two decades that the worldwide trend is to dissolve the concept of the puppet, which begins to be seen as rather out-dated and insufficient. New expressions arise, such as, 'a theatre of objects', 'design theatre', and 'figurative theatre' when in fact these are still puppet theatres. This is by no means only typical of the Czech Department of Puppetry at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, which became (under the director Krofta) the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatres in 1993, and the programme of studies lost its rigidity at the expense of puppetry subjects. It must be added that unfortunately, together with obfuscation over the term 'puppet' and an untying of study plans, the precise, masterful skill of operating puppets of various types – known as the 'Czech Puppetry School' – began also to vanish (although this mastery used to be the pride of graduates and their standard equipment). A whole generation of theatre practitioners have thus been trained to view puppets as just one idiom of a larger grammar of expressive possibilities within the wider language of theatre – and they accordingly only use the 'principles' of puppet theatre in their productions. In other words, to prepare readers for what follows: all of the productions outlined in what follows do not need to be puppet shows, despite the fact that they were all produced by puppet (or puppet-related) theatres.

17 For example Puppet Theatre 'Joy' (*Loutkové divadlo Radost*) in Brno, which changed its name simply to 'Joy Theatre' (*Divadlo Radost*) in 2010.



## II.i. The Emergence of Independent Puppet Venues

Six years of the festival Theatrical Pilgrimage (*Divadeln pouť*), which took place at Střeleck Island in Prague during the late 1980s, can be seen as a prologue to the emergence of a Czech independent scene. Freelance artists, among them many puppeteers, took the opportunity to return nostalgically to the old times of broadside ballads and marketplace theatre, and created an illusion of a free world for their audiences for at least a while (PANTKOV 2011).

The new regime finally brought about the possibility to create freely in the theatre, without the necessity of patronage from an official organiser or agency. Dozens of theatres emerged on the Czech theatrical landscape, which set off on a very uncertain operational road and led to dependence on a grant funding system. Due to a different structure of taxation, a functional model of the Western type (i.e. private subventions by a broad spectatorship) is missing in the Czech Republic – for example, the Czech tax system does not allow levying a certain percentage of the tax for the non-profit sector (which is possible at up to two per cent in Slovakia). Corporate sponsorship is not much widespread in the Czech culture either, and if it does exist, it takes on a form of barter and demands *quid pro quo* relations. Furthermore, projects seen as socially more prestigious are more likely to find support than what has become a minority puppet theatre (i.e. it is easier to fund drama productions with star actors, commercial musicals, operas, and so on).

Three important theatre ensembles have established themselves in the last twenty-odd years since the Velvet Revolution: The Forman Brothers Theatre oriented at magnificent site-specific projects, The Continuo Theatre working as a theatre-laboratory, and the ensemble Cakes and Puppets (*Buchty a loutky*) professing post-Modernism. Each of these ensembles has an unshakeable position, and a characteristic, unparalleled theatrical style that has influenced the future development of Czech puppetry and opened new possibilities for the discipline. They are respected by specialist critics and draw the respect of large audiences. In order to give a complete idea of the current situation, however, it is necessary to add that besides these ensembles and statutory theatres, there are about eighty additional professional companies that are fully or partially connected with puppets (VOJTSKOV 2013: 152–4, the author does not claim the list is exhaustive) and one cannot forget about the three hundred active amateur ensembles, which makes the Czech Republic a ‘superpower of puppetry’ (RICHTER 2013: 103).

## II.ii. Puppet Theatre in the New Millennium

Contemporary productions in Czech professional theatres could be briefly characterised as ones of quality and a high level of craftsmanship; but, at the same time, not really innovative. Practitioners do not experiment (with a few honourable exceptions);



Fig. 12: Pavel Štourač's production of *The Eighth Day* (*Den osmý*).  
Scenography by Helena Štouračová. Divadlo Continuo Theatre, 2014. Photograph © Jiří Pasz.

they rather rely on proven theatrical methods – which could be demonstrated through the example of using elements of *Cirque Nouveau*: this form has appeared in statutory theatre only recently (i.e. at a time when *Cirque Nouveau* rather belongs to the theatrical mainstream). One example of this is the production *Will there Be Circus?! (A cirkus bude?!)* by the Minor Theatre,<sup>18</sup> which rides on an ephemeral wave of popularity for the Czech company *Cirk La Putyka*, founded by Rostislav Novák Jr. (a direct descendant of the legendary nineteenth-century Czech puppeteer Matěj Kopecký) who directed the production at the Minor Theatre.

Compared to international practice, which is less narratologically focussed, Czech puppetry is still based on telling stories; these tales are often well-known ones, because these 'sell better' than unknown topics; productions work as complete wholes, with design as a substantial component; and plays for children make an absolute majority. Apparently, this is a 'managerial necessity'; the cliché still survives that puppets are exclusively for children, and most importantly, statutory theatres are both founded and funded in order to play to children's audiences. It nevertheless follows from the equally child-focussed practice of independent ensembles, that playing for children is their existential necessity too – and only a few such companies more or less ignore children's audiences (such as the above-mentioned Continuo, the Forman Brothers, and the Aqualung).

This situation of 'betting on certainties' is also fostered by pressures from officials to minimise financial risks, and to maximise sales of productions; so it must be noted as

18 The production premièred at the Minor Theatre in Prague on 25 September 2011.



Fig. 13: Josef Skupa. Photograph from the archive of the *Loutkr* journal.

a compliment to Czech companies that they manage to do this without a dramatic inclination towards appealing kitsch, or pandering to audiences.

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### II.iii. Dramaturgy in Theatres for Children and Young Adults

The fact that productions are primarily for children naturally influences the dramaturgy of ensembles, which is usually built around fairy tales. This situation is paradoxical – although future puppeteers are usually guided towards original work during their studies, new adaptations of classic fairy tales or dramatisations of popular works by the ensembles' dramaturgs or directors still dominate in repertoires.

Recently, staging 'titles' has been a strong competition to classic fairy tales (the same practice is present in dramatic theatres, in which adaptations of film scripts or popular books become extremely popular). Dramaturgy based on adaptations of generally known literary, televisual or filmic originals is widespread (and not only in the Czech Republic, one must add). Popular books for children and young adults thus get their theatrical shape. Among the evergreens, there are popular modern classic Czech children's books:

*I Had a Dog and a Cat (Měl jsem psa a kočku)* by Josef Čapek, *The Garden (Zahrada)* by Jiří Trnka, *The Little Beetles (Broučci)* by Jan Karafiát (this play was also performed before WWII), stories of *Mikeš the Cat (Kocour Mikeš)* by Josef Lada, and also English language classics: *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling and several Jules Verne's stories.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are also other types of originals that are adapted for the stage, such as short televisual fairy tales called *The Sand-man (Večerníček)*;<sup>20</sup> – episodes becoming puppet entertainments include: *Mach and Šebestová (Mach a Šebestová)*,<sup>21</sup> *Žofka the Monkey (Opice Žofka)*,<sup>22</sup> *Pat and Mat (Pat a Mat)*;<sup>23</sup> or adaptations of well-known films, such as *The Girl on a Broomstick (Dívka na koštěti)*,<sup>24</sup> *Long Live the Ghosts (Ať žijí duchové)*,<sup>25</sup> *The Planet of the Apes*<sup>26</sup> and *Lemonade Joe (Limonádový Joe)*.<sup>27</sup> Even graphic novels make it to the stage: Vladimír Němeček's *The Quatrefoil (Čtyřlístek)*,<sup>28</sup> which is a cult children's comic book in the Czech Republic, made it to the stage for a second time; there have also been adaptations of *Vlas and Brada (Vlas a Brada)*<sup>29</sup> by Skála, *Vavřinec the Cat* stories,<sup>30</sup> stories of two mice *Anča and Pepík*,<sup>31</sup> *Popeye the Sailor*,<sup>32</sup> *The Swift Arrows Club (Rychlé šípy)*<sup>33</sup> and others.

19 Children's books that have appeared recently in puppet theatre include: *The Mammoth Hunters (Lovci mamutů)* by Eduard Štorch, *Vinnetou* by Karel May and *Klapzuba's Football Team (Klapzubova jedenáctka)* by Eduard Bass – all at The Minor Theatre; *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* by Sue Townsend – DRAK and Ostrava; *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, *Closely Observed Trains* by Bohumil Hrabal – Alfa; *The Maid of Orleans* by Voltaire, *Red Orm (Zrzavý Orm)* by Frans Gunnar Bengtsson and *A Fairy tale about Raška (Pohádka o Raškovi)* by Ota Pavel – The Naïve Theatre, or *Dracula* by Bram Stoker – The Theatre of Diversity.

20 Ten-minute long, usually animated or puppet series of a variety of stories have been broadcasted by Czechoslovak (later Czech) television since 1965. They are broadcasted every day and are popular stories for several generations of Czech and Slovak children.

21 Première 11 April, 2008, The Lampion Theatre, Kladno, directed by Andrej Lážnovský; Première 27 September, 2013, The Radost, Brno, directed by Vlastimil Peška.

22 Première 5 February, 2010, The Lampion, Kladno, directed by Ondřej Lážnovský.

23 Staged under the title *A bastařidli!* Première 4 December, 2009, The Lampion, Kladno, directed by Andrej Lážnovský.

24 Staged under the title *Saxana – Dívka na koštěti*, première 6 November 2010, The Theatre of Diversity, Most, directed by Jiří Ondra.

25 Première 11 February 2012, The Theatre of Diversity, Most, directed by Jiří Kraus.

26 The full title was *The Planet of the Apes, or the Kaplan Siblings among Hairy Creatures (Planeta opic aneb Sourozenci Kaplanovi mezi chlupatci)* première 19 November 2006, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by David Drábek.

27 Première 14 January 2012, The Radost, Brno, directed by Vlastimil Peška.

28 Première 28 November 2004, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by David Drábek; première. 22 March 2013, The Theatre of Puppets, Ostrava, directed by Marek Zákostelecký.

29 *The Great Pilgrimage of Vlas and Brada (Hair and Chin) (Velké putování Vlase a Brady)*, première 15 April 2007, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by Apolena Vynohradnyková.

30 *Vavřinec the Cat, a Detective and Athlete (Kocour Vavřinec, detektiv a sportovec)*, première 12 May 2006, The Theatre of Puppets, Ostrava, directed by Simona Chalupová.

31 *Anča and Pepík (Anča a Pepík)*, première 29 November 2008, The Cakes and Puppets Theatre (*Buchty a loutky*), Prague, directed by Vít Brukner.

32 *Popeye the Sailor, or a Made-up History with almost True Facts (Pepek námořník aneb Smyšlená historie s téměř pravdivými fakty)*, première 15 January 2011, The Radost, Brno, directed by Vlastimil Peška.

33 Staged under the title *The Swift Arrows Club, or Where Have All the Gentlemen Gone? (Rychlé šípy aneb Kam se podělí gentlemani?)* 12 April 2003, The Radost, Brno, directed by Vlastimil Peška.

## II.iv. Original Works

There are now only a few original dramatic works in the Czech theatre. Iva Peřinová (1944–2009) was undoubtedly the most important playwright during the last quarter of a century, writing mainly for the Naïve Theatre in Liberec, and called the ‘first lady of the Czech puppet play’ (TICHÝ 2014: 5). Originally an actress, Peřinová gradually became a lecturer of dramaturgy and later a resident author of the ensemble. Her work is primarily for the puppet theatre; her texts and dialogues are structured and characterised in a way that suits puppet – most often marionette – theatre practice. She became famous as an author of fairy tales with a local colouring, both original and adapted – for example, her adaptation of *The Garden* by Jiří Trnka called *A Gate Locked with a Button* (*Branka zamčená na knoflík*) is very successful. Her works for adults either vary traditional puppeteers’ topics – such as *The Headless Knight* (*Bezhlavý rytíř*), *The Highwaymen of Chlum* (*Loupežníci na Chlumu*), rework old plays – such as *Alína, or the Petřín Hill in Another Part of the World* (*Alína aneb Petřín v jiném dílu světa*) based on a play by Jan Nepomuk Štěpánek, or grotesquely stylise moments from Czech history – such as *O, Gee, the Dog-Heads!* (*Jéminkote, Psohlavci!*); and *A Handsome Fire Chief, or the Fire of the National Theatre* (*Krásný nadhasič aneb Požár Národního divadla*).

With regards to Iva Peřinová, one cannot speak of a single title that became a smash hit. As the database of the Arts and Theatre Institute in Prague shows, she has authored several successful plays that still return to repertoires – such as the above-mentioned *Gate Locked with a Button* and *The Highwaymen of Chlum*, but also *Ten Little Indians*, *The Swaying Whale* (*Kolíbá se velryba*) and *Dragon Fairytales* (*Pohádky na draka*).<sup>34</sup> Iva Peřinová, despite the fact that she wrote for a particular ensemble and collaborated with a director of a production on changes to her texts, managed to write plays which have a literary quality, linguistic splendour (her plays are full of wordplay, puns and linguistic jokes, which even small children understand) and they can be universally transferred to any other theatre. This is not the case with most other playwrights.<sup>35</sup>

Iva Peřinová’s heritage has been fully followed by her son, and the current dramaturg of the Naïve Theatre, Vít Peřina – who has managed to become famous with his original fairy tales (such as his version of the classic fairy tale about Budulínek, which even received the 2012 *Theatre Press* (*Divadelní noviny*) award, although it competed with drama written for live actors’ theatres, and also with more-or-less parodic texts (*James Blond*,

34 There are only professional productions in the database of the Institute, however Peřinová’s plays are produced by amateurs, too; real numbers are thus much higher. *Ten Little Indians* were produced 6 times (1977–2008), *The Highwaymen in Chlum* also 6 times (1983–1998), *Dragon Fairy Tales* also 6 times (1980–1987), and *The Swaying Whale* 4 times (1988–2008).

35 From my own experience as the editor of *The Puppeteer* (*Loutkář*) a journal publishing puppet play texts, I can say that only a few of these plays were published without huge editorial changes. Current playwrights prefer writing ‘scenarios’ to writing regular texts and they count on extensive alterations during rehearsals. In some cases, the journal receives recordings of the final versions of these ‘scenarios’.





Fig. 14: Tomáš Dvořák's production of Iva Peřinová's play *The Handsome Fire Chief, or the Fire of the National Theatre* (*Krásný nadhasič aneb Požár Národního divadla*). Scenography by Ivan Nesveda. Naïve Theatre Liberec, 2005. Photograph © Josef Ptáček.

*Puppets Got Talent!* (*Loutky hledají talent*), *Standing by the Cannon* (*U kanónu stál*). For example, his authorial version of the classic fairy tale *Cook, Mug, Cook!* (*Hrnečku, vař!*) from 2006 was produced three times by three different theatres, which is utterly exceptional in the present context.

Among other authors with an original authorial style, the director Petr Vodička must be mentioned. Vodička has recently attracted attention with his original 'hip-hop' fairy tale set in an environment of city suburbs *Babu and a Parrot* (*Babu a papoušek*).<sup>36</sup> This play has even been adapted for radio this year. He also wrote a science fiction play, *Cosmo – the Great Fight* (*Kosmo – velký boj*)<sup>37</sup> a few years ago. Works of recent graduates from the Puppetry Department in Prague have also been promising, such as that of the dramaturgical and directorial team, working in tandem: Tomáš Jarkovský and Jakub Vaříček, who have produced *A Camel, a Fish and a Hen* (*Velbloud, ryba, slepice*),<sup>38</sup>

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36 Première 18 February 2012, The Naïve Theatre, Liberec, directed by Petr Vodička.

37 *Kosmo – velký boj (přiběh z vesmíru)* (*Kosmo: the Great Fight (A Cosmic Story)*), première 22 February 2004, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by Petr Vodička.

38 *A Camel a Fish and A Hen, or A Navy History* (*Velbloud, ryba, slepice aneb Námořnická historie*), première 22 October 2011, The Naïve Theatre, Liberec, directed by Jakub Vaříček.





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Fig. 15: Michaela Homolovás production of Vít Peřina et al.'s *The Lamb who Fell from the Sky* (*O beránkovi, který spadl z nebe*), based on Fred Rodrian's story. Naïve Theatre Liberec, 2014. Photograph © Ivo Mičkal.

*Hamleteen*,<sup>39</sup> *The Devil Take You! (Čert tě vem!)*,<sup>40</sup> *Icarus (Ikaros)*,<sup>41</sup> *Ask Me Why (Ptej se proč)*,<sup>42</sup> and others.

The Theatre of Spejbl and Hurvínek is a special case of an author's theatre in the Czech context. This company devotes all of its original creations to the two popular characters in productions for both children and adults. From the perspective of the development of theatre, however, this venue anachronistically breaks away from the Czech theatrical context and has not brought about any interesting productions or impulses for future development as it used to in the late 1950s – at which time a production team called 'Salamander' was established at the Theatre of Spejbl and Hurvínek, which subsequently substantially influenced the later boom of Czech Black Light Theatre.

Experimental work for children is absolutely exceptional from the dramaturgical point of view – Jiří Adámek's production *From the Jungle Book (Z knihy džunglí)*<sup>43</sup> received international recognition with its story supported by a voice-band's melodic recitation verging on singing. Another production of this theatre may be seen as experimental, director Jiří Jelínek's *Anežka Wants to Dance (Anežka chce tančit)*,<sup>44</sup> which accentuates the acoustic component of the production to a seemingly exaggerated level as it is being created in front of audiences. The reason is simple: Anežka is blind, and thus the world of sounds is a natural environment for her.

Similarly, there is almost nobody in the Czech Republic who would focus on theatre for very young children (of 0–3 years), which is still a rather experimental form in the central European context. Among the 'early birds' this year, there were the Naïve Theatre's production *About a Lamb That Fell from the Sky*, whose producers lowered the age addressed to two years of age, and the production *Toddledream (Batosnění)*<sup>45</sup> from the Damúza Studio aiming at children from a mere ten months of age.

Sparse musical productions for children designed rather as concert or cabaret shows are on the border of theatre, such as the popular *Kašpárek in a Bun (Kašpárek v rohlíku)* – now in a third re-run,<sup>46</sup> *The Dustmen are Coming (Popeláři jedou)*,<sup>47</sup> *Concert-Joke (Konžert)*,<sup>48</sup> the

39 Première 27 February 2012, The Alfa, Plzeň, directed by Jakub Vašíček.

40 Première 10 December 2012, The Alfa, Plzeň, directed by Tomáš Dvořák.

41 Première 9 March 2013, DRAK, Hradec Králové, directed by Jakub Vašíček.

42 First produced under the title *Why? (Zakaj?)* première 3 March 2011, The Puppet Theatre, Maribor (Slovenia), directed by Jakub Vašíček; for the second time as *You ask Why? or the World According to a Hamster (Ptej se proč aneb Svět podle Křečka)* première 30 March 2013, The Alfa, Plzeň, directed by Tomáš Dvořák.

43 Première 11 May 2007, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by Jiří Adámek.

44 Première 15 May 2014, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by Jiří Jelínek.

45 Première 31 August 2014, The Damúza Studio, Prague, directed by Monika Kováčová.

46 *Kašpárek in a Bun (Kašpárek v rohlíku)*, première 24 March 2007; *Kašpárek in a Bun 2 – Kašpárek Forever (Kašpárek v rohlíku 2 – Kašpárek navždy)* première 20 March 2009; *Kašpárek in a Bun – We'll Rock It Today (Kašpárek v rohlíku – dneska to roztočíme!)* première 19 June 2010, The Puppet Stage of the South Bohemian Theatre (in the past and today again The Small Theatre (*Malé divadlo*) České Budějovice, directed by David Dvořák.

47 Première 23 October 2009, The Cakes and Puppets Theatre (*Buchty a loutky*), Prague, directed by Vít Brukner.

48 *The Conjest, or The Education of Children in Bohemia (Konžert aneb Výchova dětí v Čechách)*, première 4

above-mentioned *Anežka Wants to Dance* and *Hansel and Gretel (Perníková chaloupka)*,<sup>49</sup> which serve rather to give some variety to repertoires.

## II.v. Puppet Theatre for Adults

A much more ambitious dramaturgy can be found in work for young adults and adult audiences, which, however, makes a minority of the total Czech annual production for puppets. As follows from Section I of my paper above, puppet theatre was historically aimed at adult audiences first and foremost. This is not to say that children never watched it, but rather that they were not intended to be its primary recipients. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that children were not seen as mere small adults anymore, and specialised children's literature and new toys began to be developed. Czech teachers then primarily made use of puppet theatre as a means of offering 'cultured entertainment' to children, which was in a direct contrast to the despised marketplace productions of period puppeteers. These puppeteers used to play for adults, but as they were not able to compete with actors' companies, so they slowly began to aim at children (ČESAL 1991: 79). Ambitious amateur companies appeared in the 1920s that were mostly managed by designers and focused on aesthetics and the development of an artistic education for children's audiences. They aimed parts of their repertoires at adults, too; Prof. Josef Skupa's puppet Theatre in Pilsen was probably the most successful in this field, with its revue featuring Spejbl and Hurvínek (a form of puppet theatre that often echoed popular avant-garde and cabaret productions of the era, such as productions by the Liberated Theatre of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, who even negotiated with Skupa about possible theatrical collaboration) (DUBSKÁ 2004: 204). So it can be said that between the two World Wars, it is evident that puppet work for adults was emerging as a minority, yet it still existed.

The development of puppet theatre after WWII attributed puppets to children as a directive, and all performances for adults were deemed to fall outside the normative conception of what puppet theatre was. The existence of some adult shows is understandable – a sporadic 'evening' of work intended for adults brings different styles and methods to the company – **the most famous 'sidekick' of a puppet theatre history is probably Studio Ypsilon, which was established in 1963 under Jan Schmid in the Naïve Theatre in Liberec – which surely has a positive effect on a development of theatre and its mental condition, too.** It is also necessary to realise that puppet/children's theatres operate differently to other companies. Productions take place in the morning, often without the walls of a theatre building that has specialist equipment (this is usually the case with regional theatres and independent ensembles playing for the youngest audiences), it is therefore

October 2009, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by Jiří Jelínek.

49 Première 19 October 2012, The Minor Theatre, Prague, directed by Jakub Vašíček.



Fig. 16: Josef Krofta's production of *The Song of Life* (*Píseň života*). Scenography by Petr Matásek.  
The DRAK Theatre, 1985. Photograph © Josef Ptáček.

necessary to travel to the venue in advance, and rehearsals of new productions only follow after performance of the show(s) that is/are in the current repertoire has concluded (puppet performances are often composed of a double bill); not to mention the effects of specific, spontaneous reactions to a show by children's audiences.

Josef Krofta's famous productions usually conceived with a family audience in mind, also had a strong impact on adult audiences:

Josef Krofta expressed his opinion about the world regardless of whether he was producing Czech folk fairy tales – *Goldilocks (Zlatovláska – DRAK, 1981)*, *Grandfather Know-all with Three Golden Hairs (Tři zlaté vlasy děda Vševěda – DRAK, 1998)* or fairy tales from a universal repertoire such as *Cinderella (Popelka – DRAK, 1975)* or *Sleeping Beauty (Šípková Růženka – DRAK, 1976)* – Although he produced many of them twice or three times, we never felt that he would not express his own care about the future of the world; it seemed that with his productions, he was affirming human stances he valued the most. (JURKOWSKI 2003: 21)

Besides fairy tales, Krofta also produced classical plays from live actors' theatre (Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream – DRAK, 1985*, Josef Kajetán Tyl's *The Bagpiper of Strakonice (Strakonický dudák – DRAK, 1989)*, an opera libretto (Smetana's *Bartered Bride, DRAK, 1986*), or literary works (the classical poem of Czech Romanticism, Karel Hynek Mácha's *May (Naïve Theatre of Liberec, 1976)*, Karel Jaromír Erben's *A Bunch of Flowers (Kytice – DRAK, 1973)*, by Czech or other European folklore, Cervantes' *Don Quixote (DRAK, 1996)*, and *A Mill from the Kalevala (Mlýnek z Kalevaly – DRAK, 1987 – a production that was inspired by the Finnish epic poem)*; these productions obviously aimed and youth and adult audiences and, in fact, they helped Czech puppeteers to emancipate their craft; the change of its status in the 1940s was then only formal.

The concept: 'the title sells' holds for contemporary work for adults perhaps even more than for children, and theatres are metaphorically flooded with adaptations of literary works and films; an original work for adults does thus not take place in Czech theatres all that often. Film titles can be found in abundance in repertoire of the Cakes and Puppets company (*Buchty a loutky*), for whom such adaptations have represented a strong line of dramaturgy since the company's beginnings: recently, there has been the 2011 'Reloaded' cycle of productions, directed by Radek Beran, such as: *Psycho Reloaded, The Fly Reloaded, Barbarella Reloaded* and *Jaws Reloaded*. These were preceded by such productions as *The Magnificent Seven (2005)*, *Rocky IX (2004)* or *Lynch (2009)*; it is a tradition that culminated in *A Film Vending Machine (Automat na filmy)* in 2007, which consisted of playing the content of any film selected by the audience in two-minute sketches. The independent *Aqualung Theatre* also includes silver screen smash hits into its repertoire. *Aqualung* produced, for example, two 2010 theatre versions of popular Czech films: *The Poacher's Foster Daughter (Pytláková schovanka)* and *Four Murders Are Enough, Dear! (Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku!)*, both directed by Ondřej Láznovský.



The Naïve Theatre Liberec (*Naivní divadlo*) also has its line of productions for adults; recently, they produced works by the writers Daniil Charms, Karel Šiktanc, Ivan Wernish, and Marian Palla; likewise The Radost Theatre, The Minor Theatre, Prague (Jan Jirků's 2004 dramatic version of *The Song of Songs* was probably the most ambitious title in this context), the Alfa Theatre in Pilsen, which attracted attention mainly with its parody *James Blond* (directed by Tomáš Dvořák, 2009), a dark production *Amberville* (directed by Radovan Lipus, 2011) and the oriental inspiration in Hubert Krejčí's *The Demon's Well* (*Démonův pramen* – directed by J. A. Pitínský, 2010) and Krejčí and Pavel Huml's *Prince Bhadra and Princess Vasantasena* (*Princ Bhadra a princezna Vasantaséna* – directed by J. A. Pitínský, 2013), the Ostrava Theatre of Puppets (*Divadlo loutek Ostrava*) that collaborated with an anonymous but legendary blogger on a dramatic version of his *From an Ostravian's Diary* (*Z deníku Ostravaka* – directed by Radovan Lipus, 2007); they also premiered Israel Horowitz's *Lebensraum*<sup>50</sup> (directed by Marián Pecko, 2011) and based two productions on Jostein Gaarder's literary-philosophical works, *Sophie's World* (directed by Lucie Málková, 2012) and *The Orange Girl* (directed by Václav Klemens, 2010) and others.

## II.vi. Reflecting on the Past and the Present

Given the lack of original works, it seems that present puppet dramaturgy does not have its own topic. It rarely deals with the contemporary world, it basically does not open new topical issues, it is not socially active, nor critical. Only scarcely does a hint of settling with the past appear in repertory theatres – **for example a project by the Continuo Theatre**, which focused on collecting authentic materials from the time of WWII and after the war in the region, and based on acquired materials of this sort, then produced, for example, Pavel Štourač's productions of *Scars in Stone* (*Jizvy v kameni*, 2010) or *The Neighbours* (*Sousedí*, 2012). A similar topic can be exceptionally found in statutory theatres, too, in such theatres' titles aimed at children – such as the Minor Theatre's production *Unicorn Hunting* (*Hon na Jednorožce* – directed by Jan Jirků, 2009), which reconstructs the authentic life story of Luboš Jednorožec, who escaped from a Communist jail in the 1950s and tried to cross the border illegally. The era of 1970s and 1980s Normalisation was reconsidered in the *Minor Theatre's* 2014 production of *How Roosters Coloured the World* (*Jak kohouti obarvili svět* – directed by Jakub Vašíček). This production consisted

50 The doctrine of *Lebensraum* was the main reason for the Nazi expansion into its neighbouring countries and much Nazi political philosophy was built upon the principle of *Lebensraum* for the German people. Even though it translates literally to mean only 'living space' *Lebensraum* carried with it the desire for the Nazis to expand into other countries to provide room for the growing German race. The German concept of *Lebensraum* holds a particular significance for the Czech people, given that the invasion of the Sudetenland in 1938 (the northern, southwest, and western areas of Czechoslovakia which were inhabited primarily by German speakers, specifically the border districts of Bohemia, Moravia, and those parts of Silesia located within Czechoslovakia).





**Fig. 17:** Jan Malík's production of Josef Kainar's *Zlatovláška* (Goldilocks). Scenography by Vojtěch Cinybulk. The Central Puppet Theatre (*Ústřední loutkové divadlo*), now the Minor Theatre, 1952. Photograph © archive of the *Divadlo Minor*.

of works by underground authors and it is structured around the story of a dissident family. DRAK Theatre's staged reading called *24 October 1942* (which opened on 24 October 2012, directed by Marek Zákostelecký) could be grouped with these too, its title being a reference to the day of execution of civilians connected with the assassination of the Nazi *Reichsprotektor* Reinhard Heydrich. The latter cannot be called puppet theatre at all, as was the case with a student production at the Puppetry department of DAMU in Prague, entitled *I, the Hero (Já, hrdina* – directed by Jiří Havelka, 2011) a play that dealt with a topic that remains controversial in a Czech context: the activities of the Mašín brothers, who broke out in armed violence against the Communist regime of the 1950s.

There are also three parodic plays, which are related to reconsiderations of a totalitarian past – the *Story??? of a Human (Příběh??? Člověka)* of the Cake and Puppet theatre (*Buchty a loutky*) directed by Marek Bečka, 1996; the *Gagarin* of Athlete's Theatre (*Divadlo Športniki*), directed by Jakub Vašíček, 2012); and, most recently, the *Masaryk Recalls (Šaryk vzpomíná)* of The Ostrava Theatre of Puppets (*Divadlo loutek Ostrava*), directed by Radovan Lipus, 2013. These production in contrast show a developing perception of the importance in puppet theatre dramaturgy for topics relating to the past. Cake and Puppet theatre (*Buchty a loutky*) dealt with the story of the Soviet hero Alexey Merseyev<sup>51</sup> in their 1990s production with a strong grotesque dimension. The production seems to be an attempt by members of the company to work through personal experiences marked by growing up in 'real' socialism. Another Soviet hero, Yuri Gagarin, made it to the stage sixteen years later. The creators of this production lived the last years of Communism as small children, and were only briefly affected by the propaganda and hopelessness of Normalisation and post-Normalisation periods. Their hyperbolic story of Gagarin is not burdened with sour memories and it makes for a frivolous and flippant style of treating the subject. Puppeteers from Ostrava turned to a once-popular television Police series *Four Tank Men and a Dog*. Their production *Sharyk Remembers* turned out to be a mistake. This Polish television series had left the general consciousness a long time prior top the production was mounted, and so the show did not resonate amongst its younger audiences at all.

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51 Alexy Merseyev was a was an industrial machine turner, then construction worker before training at the Bataysk Military School of Aviation and becoming a fighter pilot ace of the Second World War. He was shot down over Nazi occupied territory and severely injured in April 1942; but he made his way back to Soviet territory unaided by means of an eighteen day journey. Upon his return to the motherland, he had to have both legs amputated. Merseyev struggled for a year to learn how to use his new prosthetic limbs and finally returned to his role of fighter pilot in 1943. He was awarded the *Golden Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union* (24 August 1943); it was the highest military decoration of the former USSR.

## Conclusion

It seems that contemporary Czech puppetry currently rides a wave of uncontroversial adaptations of well-proven topics, in both children's and adults' repertoires, with characteristic humour and elevation. We cannot in our own period find a serious and brave analysis of the social, political, ecological or gender-political present. Solitary productions of this kind are perhaps *A Household Requiem (an Evil Play) (Domovní requiem (zlá hra))*, directed by Pavla Dombrovská in 2003 at the Líšeň Theatre – which depicted a brutal breakdown of social conventions and morality – **then the rather weak production** *KaKa Cabaret (Kabaret KaKa)* of The Cake and Puppet Theatre (*Buchty a loutky*), directed by Tomáš Procházka in 2007; and finally the much more poignant satire of the Naïve Theatre of Liberec: *Puppets Got Talent! (Loutky hledají talent)*, directed by Tomáš Dvořák in 2012. Both latter productions try to point to the 'tabloidisation' (dumbing down) of the media, and of public spaces and culture, and an overall depreciation in human values.

Czech – not only puppet – theatre presents entertainment to its audiences, but with a few exceptions: such as the increasingly topical production of *Putin is Skiing (Putin lyžuje)* of the Líšeň Theatre, directed by Pavla Dombrovská in 2010. This production was based on published diaries of the murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and was unlike the normative model of Czech puppet theatre, which does not reflect upon the world around us at all. Perhaps, this is so because the Czech theatrical environment has at deep roots in a tradition of parodic plays, mystifications (see the phenomenon of the popular Theatre of Jára Cimrman) and bittersweet comedies full of irony and black humour. Looking at the history of Czech literature, we would look in vain for a world-class tragedy; heroes and heroines with a sense of pathos, sacrificing their lives for ideals, are absent too. This literary lack is, of course, also expressed in theatrical culture and its dramaturgy.

In conclusion, it must be noted that Czech puppetry has been radically changing in recent decades. The puppet theatre canon has all-but dissolved, which is naturally related to the aforementioned reform of the Department of Puppetry at DAMU (the Prague Theatre Academy of Performing Arts) during the 1990s. There are currently more theatres based on design, movement, physicality and documentary, which sporadically use puppets. Dramaturgy has loosened up, too – students in the Department of Puppetry are led towards a 'dramaturgy of topics' and a theatre method based on the principles of devising – **which means that a topic is their starting point and they arrive at final productions** through collective authorial work, using the most appropriate forms to express and communicate their topic. This transformation of working practices is also why smash hits of our past puppet theatres are produced only occasionally, or not at all. Moreover, the situation in relation to performance practices has become increasingly intermedial, because ensembles belonging to the realm of puppet theatre quite often use live actors,



**Fig. 18:** Tomáš Dvořák's production of *The Three Musketeers* (*Tři muřetěři*).  
Scenography by Ivan Nesveda. The Alfa Theatre, Plzeň, 2006. Photograph © Michal Drtina.

which is particularly confusing in the context of specifically puppet-theatre-oriented competitions and festivals. In such a historical moment as our own, it is very difficult to predict the next developments of the craft; but one thing is almost certain: new pieces will continue to join the canon of classic puppet plays only very slowly.

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## Summary

The article addresses Czech puppet theatre dramaturgy in its historical development from the late eighteenth to the present. Apart from the historical overview, it also analyses recent trends in Czech puppet theatre – an aspect that has not yet been concisely addressed. It also points out opportunities that puppet theatre could explore in future productions.

## Keywords

Czech puppet theatre, dramaturgy, modern Czech theatre

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