



Eva Stehlíková |
Divadlo Svoboda
(Theatre Svoboda)

A feature-length documentary
 film by Jakub Hejna.

Premiere: Prague, April 7th, 2011

Producer: Jiří Konečný (for Endorfilm);
 Director: Jakub Hejna; Screenplay: Jakub
 Hejna and Barbora Příhodová; Photography:
 Jiří Chod; Music: Antony Phillips.

After two short celebratory films – *Josef Svoboda očima Juraje Jakubiska* (Josef Svoboda through the Eyes of Juraj Jakubisko) in the *Gen* series of 1994, and *Josef Svoboda* in Rudolf Adler's *Evropani* series of 2000 – a radical change has come. Jakub Hejna's feature-length documentary brings more than mere enumeration of Svoboda's dazzling successes and phenomenal inventions, which have, after all, become the property of the entire theatrical world. This new film rather raises important questions that have started to appear since Svoboda's death: What was he like? How did he achieve his successes? What price did he have to pay for them? Hejna has made use of the opportunity he has as a family member (he is Svoboda's grandson) with much more intimate access to Svoboda's life, as well as his knowledge of film-making as a professional editor in order to produce a well-made, well-researched and highly effective film. Many of the materials used in the documentary are already known (having been used in several documentaries of the 1960s); however, there are also numerous new excerpts from unknown

family films here, as well as photographs, archival documents, and slides from the scenographer's personal collection.

A static portrait of a graceful old man with the well-worn hands of a carpenter, creating magic in his famous workshop, is interspersed with a series of portraits drawn from the life of the artist at various times before old age: we see a black-haired youth of twenty-six formulating the revolutionary programme of the *May 5 Theatre* after the Second World War; a man of forty who acts as an equal to several great Czech stage directors (Otomar Krejča, Alfréd Radok, Jaromír Pleskot, Miroslav Macháček and Václav Kašlík); a self-confident globetrotter of fifty, traversing airports, heading for the great world, which will finally appreciate him. We see him at work as well, as with the example of a funny group warm-up on a sea shore, with his children, as well as with his professional collaborators.

Hejna does not suffer from a misplaced reverence for his famous ancestor; he is obstinately looking for answers to his questions. He summons Svoboda's collaborators (some of whom, like Jaromír Pleskot or Otomar Krejča, have since passed away) as well as his students; he interviews specialists on Svoboda's scenography; he travels abroad to meet Henning Brockhaus and Gabrielle Bellingeri. Hejna does not shy away from giving space to his own mother either, Svoboda's daughter; to Svoboda's long-term lover; as well as to Svoboda's greatest scenographic contender Jaroslav Malina. Nor does he hesitate to study the sometimes difficult materials documenting Svoboda's collaboration with the Secret Police. However, no shocking discoveries are made.

The audience become eye-witnesses to Svoboda's methods. We hear how a single sentence (in Brockhaus's production of *La Traviata* it was the director's 'I would like the story to open up like a book...') develops a scenographic idea whose realisation is stunning. We learn how difficult it was to oppose Svoboda (namely Václav Havel's tragi-comic account of 1963, when Otomar Krejča, Jan Grossman and he secretly smashed the scenography to the production of *A Garden Party*). At the same time, we are able to see the admirable quality that Svoboda had of being able to accept a director's different conception of the stage, and accordingly how he often radically reworked his own design – as in the case of Jan Kačer's production of Brecht's *Mother Courage*. The documentary confirms what has been stated already: Svoboda created congenial scenography wherever he found an equally talented and creative theatre director. It was in such circumstances that he became a true co-worker and co-author capable of redefining the limits of scenography.

We learn at which point Svoboda became a candidate for collaboration with the State Police and when he became documented as an agent; we also learn the approximate number of reports he filed. This is naturally a sensitive point of the film and I appreciate greatly the fact that the younger generation, represented by the scriptwriters Jakub Hejna and Barbora Příhodová, address the past head on, without sentiment or pathos, trying to understand without condemning. In the end, this is not an issue of this particular human case, but one relating to the ethics of artistic work, albeit in a particularly difficult political context, which is an issue that they will also

be confronted with in their own work. It is gratifying to learn that the production team have uncovered how Svoboda viewed his own activities: calmly but mercilessly. He knew that he was cowardly and that he would sell his soul anytime for a chance to do theatre, since that work was the essence of his life, it was one he could not exist without. Those who claim he stood above the situation may indeed be right; we may have doubts about it; nevertheless, his work is always able to fascinate and disarm us by the sheer radiation of love and joy with which he created it.

I cannot help but think that Svoboda was simply in the right place at the right time, and that he happily had the genius to respond to the call for new technologies. Moreover, he was invited to work; and one should not forget that the scenographer has to be chosen by the director. Svoboda was lucky to have been chosen by the greatest directors of his age. If anyone takes him for a cold virtuoso it should not be forgotten that Svoboda was capable of turning the most sophisticated technology into sheer theatrical poetry. Towards the end of the documentary, the grandson returns to the National Theatre the borrowed bust of his grandfather with which he toured to the witnesses of Svoboda's life. I am in no doubt that it belongs there. As time passes, the man Svoboda will be forgotten, as all those who have remembered him in this film will pass too. But the Svoboda low-voltage footlights will keep illuminating stages around the world as long as the theatre needs them.

Further technical information regarding the film is available at the following URL:
<http://www.divadlo-svoboda.cz>