



ARCHIVE

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová and Barbora Příhodová Miroslav Kouřil's Theory of Scenography in the Archive Materials: a Research Report¹

Miroslav Kouřil (1911–1984) is one of the most controversial figures of Czech scenography. While his background rests in architecture, he began to work for theatre with the foregrounding director of the Czech Avant-Garde theatre, E. F. Burian. Their collaboration brought into existence several productions iconic within the Czech context as well as the lighting system called Theatergraph, combining projection and theatre. The flourishing theatre culture of the 1930s, that Kouřil was part of, was disrupted by the Second World War. After its end, Kouřil became one of the leaders of the cultural-political life in the country playing a crucial role in the post-war reorganization of the Czech theatre life (e.g. a centralized network of theatres administered by the state) in effect as long as the early 1990s. Besides his commitments within the administrative and political structures that more than artistic projects represented the core of his activities in the after-war period of his life and career, he also immersed himself in the theoretical research of his field trying to establish that scenography *is science* and as such must be treated. It was also him that served as the head of the Scenographic Institute – a state organization established in order to research scenography, both from the practical and theoretical point of view (at work from 1963–1974). Even though several of his theoretical works were published and undeniably form a substantial part of the Czech theatre studies canon, his position within the Czech theatre and scenography has not yet really been critically appropriated.

Therefore, when identifying suitable research ‘material’ under the grant project *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: context and potency*, the part of the team focusing on the field of theory of scenography² could not omit

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2 The team include Šárka Havlíčková Kysová and Barbora Příhodová. During the process of the archival research, Martin Bernátek joined the team.

Kouřil's work and took it as its first research challenge. One of the objectives of the project has thus become the reconsidering of the contribution of this scenographer and theorist to the Czech Structuralist thought on theatre.

In the first phase of the research, Kouřil's bibliography was revised and a working version of its list was created.³ Special attention was paid to the journal *Prolegomena scénografické encyklopedie* [Prolegomena of Scenographic Encyclopedia], a project of scenographic encyclopedia conceived under the Scenographic Institute. The journal proclaimed a Structuralistic approach to theatre and provided a platform for a wide range of topics published in the whole of twenty issues.⁴

Later, in 2011, a preliminary research as well as consequent analysis of the already published Kouřil's books were done. These books involved above all *Divadelní prostor* [Theatre Space] (1945) and *O malém jevišti* [Small Stages] (1955). When researching Kouřil's published works with respect to the legacy of Structuralist thought, the team looked into the ambitious series of manuscripts – “Základy teoretické scénografie” [The Basics of Theoretical Scenography] (further on referred to as “The Basics”) – that Kouřil intended to publish in the 1970s. Except for the first part of the series, subtitled “Introductory thoughts” (KOUŘIL 1970), none of the books were available. Based on the critical reading of its first part, the series was included into the research agenda. We began to consider what position “The Basics” may have had in respect to Czech Structuralism and in respect to the theory of scenography – back then or even nowadays.

In spring 2012, the research team were granted access to Kouřil's estate, stored in Památník národního písemnictví [The Museum of Czech Literature] in Prague, Strahov,⁵ as yet unprocessed. The primary aim was to find Kouřil's as yet unpublished or ‘lost’ theoretical texts, including “The Basics”.

The Miroslav Kouřil collection involves a total of 75 boxes and their contents are documented in a concise inventory (about 10 pages long). The documents involve Kouřil's both working and private life. The personal materials include insurance documentation, personal receipts, diplomas, certificates and identification cards. Several boxes (box number 6–9) contain correspond-

3 Yet unpublished. After its completion and final revision it will be one of the partial outcomes of the grant project.

4 To find out more about the project of *Prolegomena of Scenographic Encyclopedia* cf. HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2011. The complete bibliography of the *Prolegomena* is available on the website of the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University (http://www.phil.muni.cz/kds/dokumenty/files/Prolegomena_bibliografie_CZ_V2.pdf).

5 For more information about the institution, see <http://www.pamatniknarodnihopisemnictvi.cz/en/nnp-mission.php>.

ence to be made accessible only after 2014, according to Czech law. Most of the boxes, however, represent Kouřil's work documents spanning from materials concerning the project of re-conceptualization of the Czech post-war theatre life, architectural projects to his teaching materials, lecture notes, drafts and books synopses or proposals. One can find a proposal for the "Theatre Act" from 1946 (box Kouřil 2/86, D4), reports from the meetings of the "theatre commission" (Kouřil 2/86, D4), documentation of the project *Natural Theatre in Tábor* from 1956 (Kouřil 2/86, 36) as well as documentation in regards to The Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Prague (the evaluation criteria, study plans, reports from meetings and similar documentation from the Faculty of Arts where Kouřil served as the head of the Department of Theatre Studies) (Kouřil 2/86, D4). A couple of boxes contain Kouřil's stage designs (Kouřil 2/86, 41 and Kouřil 2/86, 47).

For the purpose of the project, the research team decided to focus on the boxes containing the manuscripts (above all boxes Kouřil 2/86 13–21). As it was apparent from the concise inventory of the collection, the boxes contain both the already published texts such as *Úvod do vědy o scénických uměních* [Introduction to Science of Scenic Arts] (KOUŘIL 1982b) or *Teorie scénických umění I and II* [Theory of Scenic Arts] (KOUŘIL 1981, 1982b) and papers or books never published. It became our task to make photocopies of these unpublished texts relevant for our research so that it would allow us to subsequently analyze them.

We have managed to document and assemble a manuscript called "Geneze divadla a teatrologie" [The Genesis of Theatre and Teatrology] from 1976 and some of the study manuscripts focusing on scenography such as "Malá učebnice scénografie" [Small Textbook of Scenography] and "Slabikář scénografa" [The Scenographer's Primer].

As mentioned before, the key point of our research interest rested in the work *The Basics of Theoretical Scenography* for it appears to cover Kouřil's complex concept of scenography. The first part, "Introductory Thoughts" was published in 1970 as an 86th item of the edition Divadelní knihovna [Theatre Library] and contains 209 pages (KOUŘIL 1970). The rest of the planned parts are listed on its second page: 2) Divadelní inscenace [Theatre Production], 3) Scénografie [Scenography], 4) Divadelní prostor [Theatre Space], 5) Divadelní experimentace [Theatre Experimentation], and 6) Aplikace scénografie [Applied Scenography]. Our intention in Kouřil's estate was above all to find these parts, presumably unpublished.⁶

6 This assumption has been supported by Kouřil's long-term collaborator Jiřina Telcová (phone interview with Š. Havlíčková Kysová from Aug 28, 2012) and by a major expert at Czech scenography Věra Ptáčková (phone interview with B. Příhodová from Aug 29, 2012).

So far we have discovered parts II, III and IV, the fourth books being composed of 2 parts, in the collection. They are manuscripts, some of them available in multiple versions, some of them contain hand written comments or changes – most probably made by the author.⁷ The third book and both parts of the fourth one state the year and the (assumed) place of publication/inception: 1966, Prague. The second book is yet to be reassembled as we have not been able to identify its final version. The third and the fourth books are typed in a hard-cover. They contain several dozens of black and white photographs on a thick photographic paper, also included in the copy.⁸ Unfortunately, the fifth and sixth books have not yet been found in the estate. They are presumably situated in the rest of the boxes⁹ – granted they were written. The mentioned manuscripts were gradually photographed, a substantial portion of them has now been processed and stored at the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

It is our intention to continue researching M. Kouřil's estate and documenting his theoretical works. One of the tasks is now to thoroughly study, analyze and contextualize *The Basics of Theoretical Scenography* within the theory of scenography and above all Czech Structuralist thought. The research of Miroslav Kouřil's work will then continue in the National Archive in Prague where the complete archive of the Scenographic Institute is stored and accessible.¹⁰

7 The assumption is based on the quality of the hand-writing which is identical for most of the documents in the estate.

8 The hand-written comments of the author as well as the type of the book binding show different phases of the evolution of the manuscript.

9 So far we have researched 48 out of the 75 boxes.

10 This fact was brought to Š. Havlíčková Kysová's attention by Jiří Bláha from the Nadace barokního divadla zámku Český Krumlov in an email from Oct 13, 2011. Bláha mentions the archive of the Scenographic Institute in his preface to Antonín Bartušek's book *Castle and School Theatre in Czech lands* [Zámecká a školní divadla v českých zemích] (BLÁHA 2010: 9–14).

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