

Havlíčková Kysová, Šárka; Příhodová, Barbora

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Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Barbora Příhodová

Archaeology of Concepts and Ambitions: Performing Structuralism through the Field of Scenography (Czechoslovakia, 1970s)¹

One of the most prolific authors dedicated to the visual component of performance is, in the Czech environment, Miroslav Kouřil (1911–1984), scenographer, founder and leader of the Institute of Scenography, who claimed allegiance to Structuralist thought on theatre. Even though his theoretical work,² mostly untranslated,³ and with a substantial portion of it remaining unpublished, does form a part of Czech Theatre Studies culture, it has not really been critically reconsidered within the Czech context and it stands virtually unknown outside of it. Building on the primary research in Kouřil's estate, stored in The Museum of Czech Literature in Prague, Strahov,⁴ this paper is composed of two distinctive parts. The first one introduces Kouřil's Institute of Scenography with its organizational structure as an institutional framework for a specific concept of scenography.⁵

1 This paper presents some of the outcomes of an ongoing research of scenographic theory that is part of the grant project *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency*, GAP409/11/1082.

2 See Bibliography.

3 All quotations from Kouřil's work are translations of the authors of this study.

4 The estate is yet unprocessed. We would like to thank the staff of the Museum of Czech Literature for giving us the opportunity to access and research the material. The materials were researched and processed by Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Barbora Příhodová and Martin Bernátek; the research report can be found in (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ and PŘÍHODOVÁ 2012).

5 The complete archive of the Institute of Scenography is stored at the National Archive in Prague, which was kindly brought to our attention by Jiří Bláha from the Foundation of the Baroque Castle in Český Krumlov. The archive is vast; some of its parts were under our supervision researched by students of the Department of Theatre Studies, Masaryk University in a two-semester research seminar on Selected Topics in Czech Scenography. Several of the students continue with the research to this day as a part of their bachelor and master theses. Even though it is not the aim of this article, or our research on M. Kouřil within the grant project, to consider these archival sources, our understanding of Kouřil and his contribution to Czech thought on theatre was inevitably refined in the numerous discussions we had with our students during the two semesters. We would like to thank them for their hard work, curious questions and observations, and the overall enthusiasm for the research they shared with us.

The second part reconsiders two examples of Kouřil's theoretical work in their relation to Prague School thought on theatre.

It should be noted at the beginning that Kouřil represents a highly ambivalent persona in the history of Czech theatre. His long career was severely marked by the many upheavals in the history of 20th century Czechoslovakia and can be roughly divided into three different, yet interconnected, periods. In the first period, before the Second World War, Kouřil, formally trained in architecture, worked as scenographer with a major figure of the Czech Avant-Garde theatre, director Emil František Burian. Their highly metaphorical, lyrical productions incorporated the lighting system Theatregraph, combining live and pre-filmed action on stage to express inner thoughts and feelings of the characters and/or emphasize various aspects of the plot by focusing on particular elements, represented mostly visually.⁶ It was in the environment of Burian's Theatre D, conceived not merely as a place where plays are staged but as a cultural institution with communal and educational functions (including hosting lectures by personalities such as Jan Mukařovský, a leading representative of the Prague School) where Kouřil began to cultivate his interest in conceptualizing the subject of his professional focus, e.g. scenography.

The second period of Kouřil's professional life opened up after the end of the War when Kouřil became a state official playing a crucial role in the after-war reorganization of Czech theatre life, i.e. creating a centralized network of theatres administered by the state, that lasted until the early 1990s. His steep political career in the newly formed socialistic Czechoslovakia, granting him significant powers in many areas, involuntarily ended in 1952 when Kouřil had to step down from his position of the Deputy to the Minister of Information (RAU-CHOVÁ 2011: 164–5). After a short period, he reinvented himself as a theatre theorist with a special interest in scenography in the second half of the 1950s. This focus dominated the rest of his career during which Kouřil produced an impressive number of writings (many of which were never published). Ambitious as ever, he framed and strengthened his restored interest in theory by establishing a specialized institution: the Laboratory, later the Institute, of Scenography (1957–1974). The late phase of his career is connected to the Faculty of Arts, Charles University of Prague, where he lectured until 1980 (for a certain period of time serving as the Head of the Department of Theatre Studies).

(I) Kouřil and his Institute of Scenography

When looking into Kouřil's theoretical work, it is impossible to ignore the institutions he had initiated and platforms he had created. It was in 1957 when Kouřil helped to establish the so-called Laboratory of Scenography. He did so claiming allegiance to the heritage of the Inter-war Avant-Garde, and above all to the so-called Studio D35 – which was never

6 On E. F. Burian, his directing method, including the collaboration with Kouřil and Theatregraph, in English see e.g. (BURIAN 2002).

fully realized project of an experimental studio of E. F. Burian's Theatre D among whose planned activities was practical and theoretical research of scenography (HILMERA 1962: 21). In 1963, the Laboratory, until then falling under the National Theatre, was transformed and changed its status into the autonomous Institute of Scenography (now with its own building), lasting until 1974 when it was shut down, with a part of its agenda transferred under the Theatre Institute in Prague (GABRIELOVÁ 2007: 32). Kouřil was a leading representative of the institution for its entire existence.

Origins and objectives of the Laboratory of Scenography and the Institute of Scenography

The first phase of the enterprise, The Laboratory of Scenography was conceived as a reaction to the work of Czech renowned directors and designers of the time and so at first drew on the international success of artists such as Josef Svoboda and his directors Alfréd Radok, Otomar Krejča and Jaromír Pleskot. It was felt that the newly emerging stage forms that they promoted, innovatively working with movement, space and light, called for new approaches in theory. Besides the necessity to document, analyze and theorize the new trends in stage design, it was the poor technical and technological conditions of theatre houses in Czechoslovakia that provoked the inception of the Laboratory (KOLAŘÍK 1967: 1).

From the beginning of the Laboratory of Scenography, scenography was understood as an artistic, scientific and technical discipline involving areas of visual arts, stage technologies and theatrical space. These were areas that were to be researched by specialists with the focus being first put on the technical development of theatre houses and technologies. Another primary objective was to educate specialists in the field of designing and realizations of stage designs – the Laboratory of Scenography organized open seminars and workshops for model makers, make-up artists, lighting technicians, stage designers.

The subsequent project of the Institute of Scenography, started in 1963, went well beyond the original interest in scenography and stage technology: according to its official 'Status' from 1963, it was supposed to serve as a research and development institution for theatre, culture and educational facilities, and create a scientific basis for a detailed knowledge of the "situation in our theatres and cultural needs of society as a whole" (KOLAŘÍK 1967: 1). It is also the phase when the 'theory' began to be emphasized with a bigger intensity in the Institute. First among four areas of interest defined by the Institute of Scenography was "cultivating theory of scenography as a conceptual background"⁷.

The Institute was a state-subsidized institution with 40 per cent of its budget being provided by the state, the rest had to be secured by the Institute itself (KOUŘIL 1972: 65).

⁷ Other areas included developing new means of expression for creating dramatic environment, developing theatrical space (as a synthesis of stage and auditorium spaces), cultivating auxiliary disciplines such as criticism of scenography, creating technical terminology and technical norms in the field of scenography (KOLAŘÍK 1967).

Its organizing principles were rather complicated and highly hierarchical: they rested in several departments, (working) groups and sub-groups. The exact structure that differed over the years is yet unclear as some of the archival materials reveal contradictory information. Suffice to say, the research interests of the departments and groups included not only practical areas such as stage lighting or stage machinery, but also scenographic psychology, physiology and medicine, and the history and theory of scenography. The tasks and activities of each group were meticulously defined, the aims and objectives regularly published.

The Institute had its own library and archive and in fact one of the few areas of activities whose tangible results are easily traced is the numerous editorial activities. Kouřil himself had established an editorial platform called Library of Theatrical Space as early as the 1940s with one of the first publications being a translation of Vitruvius's thoughts on theatre architecture (1944, transl. Jaroslav Pokorný) and this platform then continued as a part of the Institute of Scenography.

There were several periodicals issued by the Institute of Scenography that focused on scenography. Among them was *Prolegomena to the Scenographic Encyclopaedia*, the official journal of the Institute⁸ and *Acta Scaenographica* that cultivated the new genre of 'scenographic criticism' publishing very detailed (often more than one page long) and well-informed reviews – or rather analyses – of selected productions and mainly their stage and costume designs. These were supposed to serve as a starting point for further critical reflection of theatre work and up till today represent a vital source of information on many important performances.

The quality of many of the published works comes as no surprise given many recognized scholars and specialists in the field of theatre studies and scenography came to work for the Laboratory and Institute. Even though some contemporaries describe Kouřil, himself closely affiliated with the Communist Party, as an unscrupulous, dreaded person, others suggest he in fact created space and opportunities for people who could not work and publish elsewhere.

Definition of Scenography promoted by the Institute of Scenography

As suggested before, the Institute of Scenography promoted a specific concept of scenography, developed by Miroslav Kouřil. The first draft of his definition first appeared in his book *Small Stages* (1955), intended for amateur theatre makers, and Kouřil outlined the definition in many writings, often explaining the work of the Laboratory and the Institute. The comprehensive definition of what scenography is can then be found in the first volume of the above mentioned *Prolegomena to Scenographic Encyclopaedia* as well as in the first part of the ambitious series of manuscripts on scenography called *Basics of Theoretical Scenography* that Kouřil intended to publish in the 1970s.

8 More on the journal in (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2012: 246).

For Kouřil, scenography is a complex discipline involving constitutive sub-disciplines: visual/fine arts scenography – a branch of artistic work from the area of applied visual arts; technical scenography – the study of application of technical sciences in the field of stage arts; and theoretical scenography – the study of creation and realization of stage design (KOUŘIL 1970b: 43; cf. *Prolegomena* 1970 [1970b]: 43). In his view, “scenography is science”, which is an assumption that Kouřil emphasized frequently, almost using it as a motto and his trademark.

It is also worth mentioning that even though Kouřil at first understood scenography as one of the branches of theatre studies, he later defended the highly privileged position of scenography reaching far beyond the world of theatre. In 1972 he wrote: “Scenography is a field that has a crucial significance for culture in its entirety and its technical development; its principles and rules can be applied in many other areas of culture. Things ‘related to theatre’ can be applied in other fields.” (KOUŘIL 1972: 65–6) This was, however, towards the end of the Institute, and so perhaps more than anything else, the grandness of his vision shows his political ambitions and fear of losing power.

(II) Kouřil’s theoretical work and its ‘Structuralist’ heritage

As mentioned before, Kouřil is usually seen as one of the heirs to the Prague School.⁹ The questions that this assumption brings are: what is Kouřil’s methodology of analysis? Is the ‘Structuralist method’ even traceable in his work? If it is, then how can we describe it – how can Kouřil’s Structuralist argumentation be identified in the texts? Finally, did the method change over the long thirty years of Kouřil’s extensive theoretical work on theatre? To answer these questions, we compare two of his theoretical works from two very different periods of his career: the monograph entitled *Theatrical Space*, published in 1945, and the multi-volume treatise *Basics of Theoretical Scenography* that Kouřil intended to publish in the 1970s, but they were written – or at least part of them – during the 1960s. In the end, only the first volume was published.¹⁰

9 Here it is worth noting that *Prolegomena to the Scenographic Encyclopaedia* declared the field of theatre studies to be strictly based on Structuralist approaches and republished numerous papers authored by key representatives of Czech Structuralism such as the already mentioned Jan Mukařovský.

10 The first part, *Introductory Thoughts*, was published in 1970 as the 86th item of the edition *Divadelní knihovna* [Theatre Library] and contains 209 pages (KOUŘIL 1970a). The rest of the planned parts are listed on its second page: 2) “Divadelní inscenace” [Theatre Performance], 3) “Scénografie” [Scenography], 4) “Divadelní prostor” [Theatrical Space], 5) “Divadelní experimentace” [Theatre Experimentation], and 6) “Aplikace scénografie” [Applied Scenography]. They are stored, unpublished and available in several versions, in Kouřil’s estate.

Theatrical Space

Theatrical Space was published in 1945. In this book, influenced by the still reverberating Structuralist climate, Kouřil attempts to follow the Structuralist method. In general, his texts include well-established terms and categories, which are commonly used in Structuralist discourse: they are standard terms such as *structure*, *component*, *sign*, *system*, *function*, *form*, etc. In this particular text, he uses them to discuss theatre space. Attempting to clarify scenographic notions, concepts and their relations, the monograph appears to be a scenographic contribution to Structuralist discourse – thus a scenographic application of Structuralist thought on theatre.

Kouřil deals mostly with theatrical space and its relation to dramatic space. According to him, theatrical space is a synthesis of the auditorium (or the space for the audience) and the stage space and it is inferior to the dramatic space. Furthermore, Kouřil remarks that we can – theoretically – examine theatrical space separately but we cannot forget it is “only one pole of the synthesis”, only one of the forces in a “complex interplay and rich structure” that cannot be “separated without damaging the whole” (KOUŘIL 1945: 35). He defines theatrical space as an inseparable static component of the dramatic space (KOUŘIL 1945: 41) that is not “something distinctively independent but only a force in a complex structure” (KOUŘIL 1945: 41).

Dramatic space then consists of – according to Kouřil – stage, auditorium with the spectators, actions of dramatic characters, lights and sound: “it is theatrical space filled with events of dramatic work but not yet with dramatic life and time” (KOUŘIL 1945: 35). It is the specificity of dramatic space to be filled with dramatic life and time (41). It is also noteworthy that Kouřil uses the concept of the so-called ‘dramatic work’, in other words a production, coined by Otakar Zich.

Kouřil’s conscious orientation towards Structuralist method is probably most obvious in the passage dealing with the essence of theatre. He describes the essence of theatre as ‘Structural’ (KOUŘIL 1945: 33), resting in that it is a synthesis of arts (KOUŘIL 1945: 33) formed by components, which are equal, none of them superior to the other. However (as Kouřil adds), the components should not be equal in the ‘mechanical’, ‘absolute’ sense of the word (KOUŘIL 1945: 33). Further on, he claims that,

the complexity of the relations and transformations does not allow for any part to be groundlessly put above; the emphasis that is placed on a particular component of the work in a particular moment of dramatic time does not justify claiming for priority, for in the following moment or in a different work this component may be the last one to fulfill the objective and the purpose. (KOUŘIL 1945: 33)

In this text Kouřil also mentions quantitative relations of components which are – according to him – ‘changeable’ (KOUŘIL 1945: 32). However, he does not explain or develop this assertion further than claiming that each component stands in relation to every

other component of the work and when analyzing the work of art all those relations need to be considered (KOUŘIL 1945: 51).

When Kouřil discusses scenography of a particular production, he often uses examples from the D Theatre where he worked with E. F. Burian. For instance, when discussing the production of Maeterlinck's play *Alladina and Palomid*, he comments on the dominance of a particular component in a particular moment of the performance, or their hierarchy in the given moment:

Burian's conception retained the original division of the drama into five parts: analyzed in greater detail, the first part was characterized predominantly by the visual component [...] just because the introductory text requires such balancing. The second act and the first scene of the third act were defined by the dramatic component (thus the acting and directorial components). The second and third scene of the Act III act were supported by the visual component that multiplied the effect [...]; the fourth and the first half of the fifth act is again dominated by the dramatic component and the conclusion involves the already mentioned juxtaposition of visual and acting components. (KOUŘIL 1945: 32)

This writing thus works with the Structuralist concepts, however, it does not really develop them and applies them rather mechanically. Kouřil does not go beyond a mere observation that the structures, especially the structure of theatre and theatrical space, are complex, and that the relationships between their particular components are important to consider. Moreover, on one hand Kouřil meticulously tries to define the notions and categories, but on the other one he often discusses them rather vaguely. Some issues are left un-explicated or further undeveloped.

The Basics of Theoretical Scenography

More than twenty years later, Kouřil starts to write his 'opus magnum' - the already mentioned *Basics of Theoretical Scenography*. The work seems to represent the "waning of Structuralism" that Pavel Drábek mentioned on several occasions.¹¹ The ghost of the Prague School can be traced throughout it in the used terminology, in some parts of the manuscript perhaps by the style of thinking, and even in applying O. Zich's conception of theatre.

With this work, Kouřil intended to establish the theory of scenography as a scientific discipline. According to him, for theory of scenography to become a science, it is, first and foremost, supposed to be objective (KOUŘIL 1970: 40). The effort to 'objectify' scenography can be seen in Kouřil's obstinate tendency to use formulas as a means of explaining its

11 E. g. in his paper entitled "Launching a Structuralist Assembly: Convening the Scattered Structures" (DRÁBEK 2012: 15).

objects of interest and its processes. For example, his long-term research topic, the theatrical space, can be *scientifically* expressed as:

Theatrical Space: A [a + o] + B

with A standing for stage, B – auditorium, a – acoustic component of stage action, o – is the optic component of the action (KOUŘIL 1970a: 27). The nature of Kouřil's logical operations can also be detected in his bold and further undeveloped observation that the above stated formula not only captures the theatre space but at the same time, it is in fact the “definition of a performance” (KOUŘIL 1970a: 27). It is worth noting that this example also shows the influence by O. Zich and his conception of theatre arts as an audio-visual perception.

The efforts to ‘scientificy’ art, according to Kouřil, can be traced back in the general history of theater and progresses in time. In the third part of the *Basics*, he states:

[...] a movement, from today's perspective clearly seen as a great reformist wave of scenography – thus the world Avant-Guarde (1917-1941) became a cradle of contemporary scenography (1966) throughout the world. Therefore it is appropriate today to speak about experimentation in theatre because the reasons – though formally perhaps closely related and similar – for the inception of contemporary productions rest in the effort to make theatre art more scientific; however, the synthesis of art and science only reaches such a degree that the aesthetic, creative, inspirational and emotive values of theater, including scenography, are maintained, because the objective knowledge of laws in the theatre art and scenography has moved on substantially in comparison to the time of the Avant-Guarde. (KOUŘIL 1966: 40)

With the requirement of objectivity and scientific quality in mind, Kouřil tries to go ‘back to *the basics*’ and reconsider particular phenomena, such as theatre, scenography, production and theatrical space. Throughout their four parts, *The Basics* appear to have the Structuralist framework – and titles of chapters, such as “The Spatial Structure” (KOUŘIL 1966: 32–40) suggest that – but its content is not consistent. If one hopes to find a more elaborate discussion of the visual component in performance, perhaps by drawing on works by Mukařovský, Honzl and Veltruský, they will be very disappointed. The whole work is, in fact, nothing but a rather chaotic survey of the history of theatre from the perspective of scenography. Kouřil uses many quotations and paraphrases from the wide range of mostly theatrical literature to describe certain notions and events. His argumentation is rarely reliable, however, and often with no clear point.

And the method? In an attempt to unify different ideas touching upon scenography, put them in order and create the grand theory serving as a homogenous umbrella concept, Kouřil tends to create clear cut definitions, looking for essences. He rarely questions how things work, and in what relationships they are positioned. The frequent formulas, enumeration of

features of scenography or related phenomena, and classifications is very far from the functional approach inherently present in the writings of the older generation¹² but attest more to the modes of thought supported and promoted by the totalitarian regime.

Conclusion

Examining Miroslav Kouřil's theoretical work and its relation to the Prague School thought on theatre is an effort not only similar to chasing ghosts of the past, but also, to use yet a different metaphor, climbing up a volcanic crater: each step up is followed by two steps down in the liquid mass of dust. Kouřil did touch upon Structuralism in his many works in several different ways, and especially his early work, both artistic and theoretical, was clearly affected by its representatives and their ideas. However, he did not crucially influence Czech Structuralist thought on theatre (and nor did he probably intend to). His goals gradually grew into a very different project, ambitious and determinate in its setting: Kouřil's intention became to establish the theory of scenography as a scientific discipline and so endorse the field of his personal interest. The grandness of his ambition is also visible from the fact that he even managed to establish a state-subsidized institution – the Institute of Scenography – that would legitimize his vision. Looking at his work more pragmatically, he brought together specialists, created opportunities for them to research and publish on scenography within a very wide context, and opened up a larger mental space for discourse on theatre. All this is underlain by the fact Kouřil was, with changing degrees of intensity, an active and forming component of the power structures.

Whether we believe his work, theoretical or organizational, was still beneficial or not, his legacy, including his relationship to the Prague School, should not be overlooked, as it can serve as key for our understanding not only of the internationally admired Czech scenography of the second half of the 20th century, but also for bringing new perspectives on the society of that time as whole. That is, however, a different story.

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¹² See a poignant discussion of the *functional* mode of thought exemplified in Jacobson's writing in (DRÁBEK 2012: 17–21).

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Summary

This paper presents the partial results of the ongoing research of scenographic theory. It discusses the institutionalized support of the Structuralist approach to scenography that culminated in Czechoslovakia in the first half of the 1970s under the auspices of the Institute of Scenography. Its head, Miroslav Kouřil, repeatedly claimed allegiance to Structuralist thought. Particular attention is paid to the methods and strategies through which Structuralism was performed within the SI, its projects and platforms. The topic is also treated from the historical perspective.

Key Words

Miroslav Kouřil, theory of scenography, Institute of Scenography, Laboratory of Scenography, Structuralism

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová (sarka.havlicek@centrum.cz) received her M.A. in theatre history and theory and in Czech language and literature from Masaryk University in Brno in 2007. She continued her graduate studies and received her PhD in 2010 (doctoral thesis *Hastabhinaya. Hand gestures in traditional theatre art of India*). From 2009 till 2012 she taught theatre theory at Palacky University in Olomouc. Since 2011 she has been employed at the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University as a researcher and teacher. Her research focuses on Asian – mostly Indian – traditional theatre, with special interest in Sanskrit theatre Kootiyattam. In her research and courses she also deals with theatre theory, and staging of opera (focused mostly on scenography).

Barbora Příhodová (bprihodova@mail.muni.cz) is Assistant Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Masaryk University. Her research interests include Josef Svoboda's work and collaborations, theory of scenography, modern and contemporary direction and scenography and transatlantic influences in performing arts.