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Theatralia. 2015, vol. 18, iss. 2, pp. 168-230

ISBN 978-80-210-7952-6

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2015-2-5>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/134425>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Pavel Jirásek

Josef Skupa: the Birth of a Modern Artist

Spejbl! – Casperl – et toi, notre vieux Polichinelle!
 Chantez bien haut la Gloire de vos animateurs!
 Levez vos bras et agitez vos ficelles! ...
 Car c'est fête à Prague où sont vos amateurs! ...
 Les voilà tous: Veselý, Skupa, leurs amis;
 et Löwenhaupt, Puhonny, Bück, d'autres encor! ...
 Dans le Programme des Marionnettes, pas d'ennemis;
 l'entente est parfaite! ... Conservons ce trésor! ...
 (PAUL JEANNE 1929: 2–3)

[Spejbl! – Kasperl – and you, our old Polichinelle!
 Sing high the Glory of your animators!
 Raise your arms and shake your strings! ...
 For it is party time in Prague, with all your fans! ...
 Here they all are: Veselý, Skupa, their friends;
 and Löwenhaupt, Puhonny, Bück and still more!
 In the Marionette Show, there are no enemies –
 Just one perfect accord! ... Let's keep this treasure!...]

A Photograph

In the famous artistic photograph entitled *Marionnettes de Pilsner*, made by the pioneer of world journalism and art photography André Kertész (1894–1985), **there are two distinctive marionettes** belonging to the Plzeň (Pilsen) theatre company Loutkové divadlo Feriálních osad (LDFO; the Marionette Theatre of the Holiday Resorts [aka Holiday Camp Theatre]) and later to Josef Skupa's touring group. In the foreground, there is the melancholic and half-naked Dancer (carved by Gustav Nosek) with her eyes intently focussed on a point somewhere outside the image; behind her, the expressive *Kmotr Vočáhlo* (Old Codger Vočáhlo, carved by Alois Schroif); in the bottom right corner can be seen a part of Spejbl's bald head. An intimate expression and a nostalgic tone characteristic of Kertész's vision of the world inspires the photo with a certain timelessness (GREENOUGH *et al* 2005).

André Kertész's interest in this topic is also far from fortuitous. Upon arrival in Paris from Hungary in 1925, the photographer suddenly found himself in the melting pot of styles of international artists and homespun Dadaists; as a result, the late 1920s became



Fig. 1: André Kertész. *Marionnettes de Pilsner*. 1929 Gelatin silver print, 9.58 x 7.78 (24.4 x 20cm)
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

perhaps the most prolific period of his life, with Kertész taking photographs on a daily basis, almost a 'chronicler', with many of them published in journals (his photographs of puppets appeared in the *Münchener Illustrierte* and *L'Art Vivant*). Given his interest in the arts on the whole, in exhibitions as well as in the circus, the night cabaret and the revue, it was natural that he also had an interest in puppets. In 1929, he took pictures of the extraordinary *Circus* of wire figures of Alexander Calder and, in the same year, in the mountain region of Savoie, he also made photographs of the folklore traditions and the small folk artefacts from the collections of painter Jean Hugo (PHILLIPS and



Fig. 2: Josef Skupa with Hurvínek and the son of the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Paris, Štefan Osusky, at the Eiffel Tower, on 28 October 1929. © *Loutkář* 16 (1929): 4: 93.

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KERTÉSZ 1983). When he was commissioned as a photojournalist to attend the third International Puppet Congress of the UNIMA (*UNion Internationale de la MARionette*) and the International Puppet Exhibition in Liège, Belgium, in October 1930, the theme came as congenial with his own artistic leanings (PHILIPS and KERTÉSZ 1983). This gave birth to a series of outstanding photographs, documenting among others the art works of Meyer Levin (US), Ivo Puhonny (Germany), Géza Blattner (Hungary) or Josef Skupa (Czechoslovakia), the last of whose theatre 'enjoyed great success although the audience could not understand the Czech words. Apart from Hurvínek and Spejbl, the Dog, the Horse, the Jester and the Dancer presented themselves; songs were sung by a countrywoman in a Pilsen folk costume' (VESELÝ 1930: 63).

What brought the Pilsen-based puppet company to Liège, appearing in the *Salle Communale des Chiroux* on 20 September 1929 and in the *Salle de Fêtes* again, five days later? The company was led by Josef Skupa (born 16 January 1892, Strakonice; died 8 January



Fig. 3: Josef Skupa with Spejbl and Hurvínek, the director of the Pilsen Puppet Theatre of the Holiday Resorts (LDFO), the creator of Spejbl and Hurvínek, *Loučkář* 16 (1929): 3: 71.

1957, Prague), whose work is nowadays considered as a cornerstone of modern Czech puppetry; it has to be emphasised this was not Skupa's first performance abroad. A year before he became one of the 'marionettist stars' at the 2nd UNIMA Congress in Paris (26–30 October 1929). A detailed account of this can be found in the *Revue officielle de l'Union internationale des marionnettes* – in the *Loučkář* journal (Volume 16 Issue 4 of December 1929; VESELÝ 1929) that features on its cover a photograph of Josef Skupa with Hurvínek and the son of the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Paris, Štefan Osuský, at the Eiffel Tower.

At the international 'pan-puppetry' exhibition and congress held by the Masaryk Educational Institute (*Masarykův lidovýchovný ústav*) in Prague in May 1929, an international puppet organisation called UNIMA was established with its offices in Prague. The Czech delegation were asked to draft the statutes for the next encounter; the event held in Paris in October of that year was a logical continuation and consummation of the Prague

efforts to bring the new organisation legally to life by approving the statutes. A series of puppet productions presented by representative companies of individual countries were part of the week-long working meeting.

The thirty-five-headed Czech delegation comprised also sixteen representatives of Pilsen puppetry, among them Josef Skupa with his wife, his woodcarver and puppet leader Gustav Novek, Skupa's collaborator, the journalist Karel Koval (Šlais) and the bandleader Jaroslav Kuncman. On the very first night, Skupa gave a highly successful performance for the Czech Sokol¹ members in the Majestic Hotel in Paris, presenting Smetana's overture *Oldřich and Božena* and extracts from their *Tip-Top Revue*. This programme was repeated with phenomenal success on 28 October 1929 in the festive hall of *Le Journal*. Jindřich Veselý commented in his account of the event:

Individual numbers had to be repeated. [...] In the intermission everyone swarmed backstage to look closely at Spejbl and Hurvínek. The end of the show was at 12 o'clock sharp. The audience doesn't move, just stamping their feet, shouting: 'Skup! Skup! Skup!' [...] After the performance, Skupa is besieged and doesn't know who to speak to first; many people ask him for a performance; Skupa has his hands full of visiting cards. *Le Journal* requests prolonging their stay in Paris; the Champs-Élysées Theatre makes an offer. [...] Skupa is approached by a deputy of the concert directorate of world artists in Paris; a private manager wishes to draft Skupa's company as an attraction in a variety theatre. Also *The [London] Times* printed an article with photographs (photographers kept besieging the backstage after each show). On the same day, Skupa receives an invitation from the director of the *Folies Bergère* to attend a negotiation about an *engagement* for the next season. A day later, an express letter arrives from directors Lemarchand and Derval requiring that Skupa make a guest appearance from next February until February 1931 in a revue at the *Folies Bergère* [...]. Simultaneously, a Mr Boquel, well known among artists as the director of the syndicate of concert and artistic attraction managers, negotiated with Skupa, promising to organise a year-long tour through the larger cities of France and a three-month run in Paris at the *Théâtre des Champs Élysées*. Then arrived letters from many managers and businessmen, unknown to us, asking for collaboration or offering collaboration. (VESELÝ 1929: 99–100)

Logically, a crucial question arises: why did Josef Skupa never take advantage of any of these alluring professional and artistic offers? The answer is evident: just like almost all artists active in Czechoslovak puppet theatre of the time, Josef Skupa was practising his art as an 'amateur', that is, outside his main profession as a professor of mathematics and drawing at the Second Czech State Grammar School on Mikulášské Square, later

1 The *Sokol* movement was a Czech youth sport and fitness initiative founded in Prague in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner. 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. 4: Josef Skupa, a collection of glove puppets, Prague – Pilsen, 1915, a photograph.
© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.



Fig. 5: The glove puppet heads, Josef Skupa, Plzeň 1915, clay models, 7–10cm
M. Němcová-Záhořová: *Princezna Čárypíše*, LDF. © Collections of the National Museum in Prague.



Fig. 6: *The Black Bejbl (Bejbl černý)*, Josef Čejka, Brno 1919, design for a toy – a puppet of the Handcraft Workshop of Bohumil Čermák, Brno.

© Collections of the Brno Municipal Museum (*Muzeum Města Brna*), sig. 259683, 22/30cm.

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at the Lyceum for Girls and the Higher Reform Grammar School of the Royal City of Pilsen, and finally at the State Grammar School in Klatovská Avenue, again in Pilsen. He had been in these posts from April 1919 and it was essentially impossible for him to combine this commitment with an engagement in Paris. Nevertheless this experience certainly played an important role as a telling argument for him to professionalise his art in the following year and to establish a professional company in August 1930, entitled *Plzeňské loutkové divadlo prof. Skupy* (The Pilsen Puppet Theatre of Professor Skupa), sometimes appearing on posters as *‘Umělecké loutkové divadlo/divadélko’* (The Artistic Puppet Theatre) of Prof. Skupa; as early as October 1930, his company made a guest appearance in Liège.

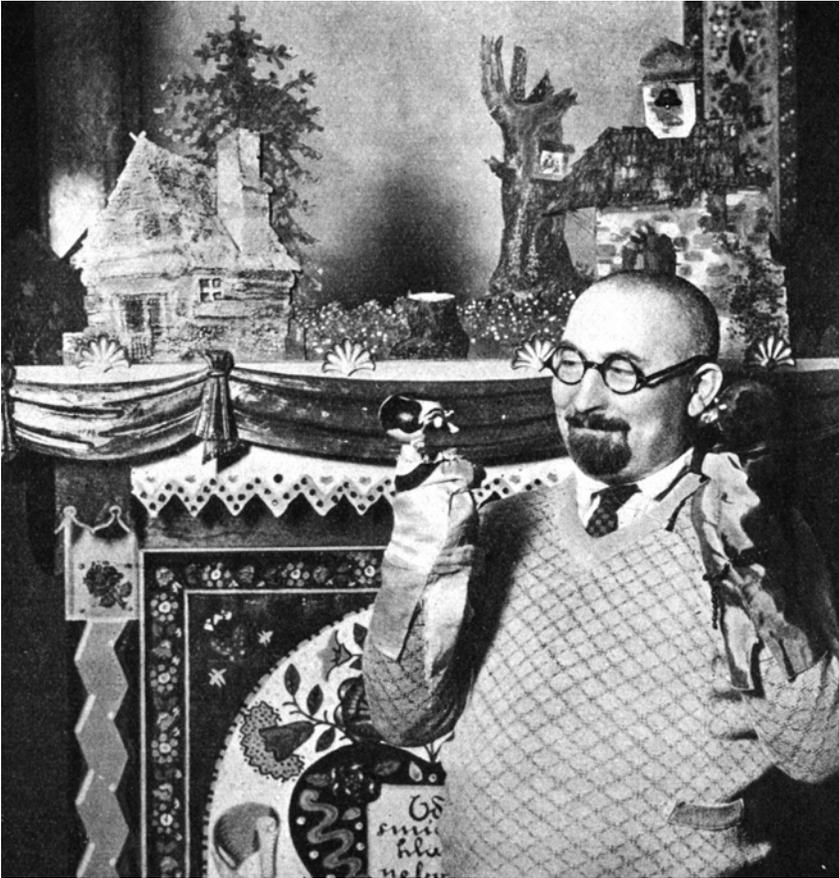


Fig. 7: Josef Čejka and his Škrholeum Theatre, *Loutkář* 16 (1930): 5: 126.

A second, more complex question is: what were the circumstances and skills that led the way for Josef Skupa and his main puppet protagonists Spejbl and Hurvínek to take their place among the leading European Modernist and avant-garde puppet artists of the late 1920s?

Glove Puppets and Cabaret

Sometime in the years 1914–1915, as a young student of the School of Applied Arts, Josef Skupa visited Jindřich Veselý, the editor of the journal *Loutkář*, and brought him photographs of his glove puppets, shaped ‘daringly and boldly’ for its time (VESELÝ 1925: 8). Although Veselý had been angered by a cabaret romp that Skupa performed

with František Fiala (aka Ferenc Futurista) on the stage of the conservative Czech Union of Puppet Theatre's Friends (*Český svaz přátel loutkového divadla*) in the Kinského sady Park, he recognised and appreciated the young artist's talent and decided to help him. In order to make Skupa's art available to the puppet-loving public, Veselý negotiated the mass production of Skupa's strikingly progressive and expressive glove puppet heads with Antonín Münzberg, the producer of the famous Aleš puppets.

Skupa originally modelled his glove puppets for Marie Záhořová-Němcová's verse fairy tale *Princess Čárypiše* (*Princezna Čárypiše*, 1912). They were clearly inspired by the well-known puppets of the sculptor Josef Šejnost and belong to the most progressive puppet artefacts of the time. These original models show Skupa's rootedness in the visual arts of the late *fin de siècle* style and the early *art deco* that surrounded him at the School of Applied Arts, led by Arnošt Hofbauer, František Kysela, Karel Vítězslav Mašek, Karel Špillar and, in the case of modelling, by Josef Drahoňovský; likewise, they appeal through their rare cabaret-like hyperbole in their modelling as well as through the pregnant and expressively stylised costumes: Princess Čárypiše's head with its nose turned up, the grinning Sprites or the acerbic Court Ladies (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: appendix).

Skupa's earliest puppets seem to reflect his artistic and puppetry standpoint: on the one hand the style of Czech *art deco*; on the other hand Futuristic and Dada cabaret. Josef Skupa studied at the School of Applied Arts from Autumn 1911 to the end of Spring 1915 and then became a recognised member of the Prague artistic youth generation. In those days, the city experienced a blossoming of the fashionable cabaret where Skupa found his place as:

reciter, actor, grotesque comedian, *chansonnier* and dancer, and there the mottled variety of cabaret tastes offered an appropriate venue for his playful as well as militant verse writing, juicy and sentimental songs, classical, exotic and caricature dance numbers, solo grotesque stand-ups and one-act sketches, humorous tales and bitter satires, ardent thematic and dramatic ideas – and, of course, many a kitsch and many a frivolity. (MALÍK 1962: 37)

In the *U Halánků* Inn on the Betlémské Square in Prague Old Town, Skupa would be the spirit of the cabaret improvisations together with his older schoolmate Ferenc Futurista, his brother Eman Fiala and the sculptor Karel Dvořák. This is where Skupa made a *début* as an outstanding glove puppet performer in the grotesque numbers for which he modelled and costumed his own extraordinary puppets. It is more than likely that it was in these years (1912–1915) and in this company that Skupa made acquaintance with the Klatovy-born visual artist, puppeteer and entertainer Josef Čejka, who returned to Prague after two years of studying at the Kunst-Gewerbe Schule in Vienna (BIRNBAUMOVÁ and ČERNÁ 1042: 62). 'Pepín' – as his friends and companions called Čejka – was a well-known and popular figure among Prague Bohemian society (FIŠER

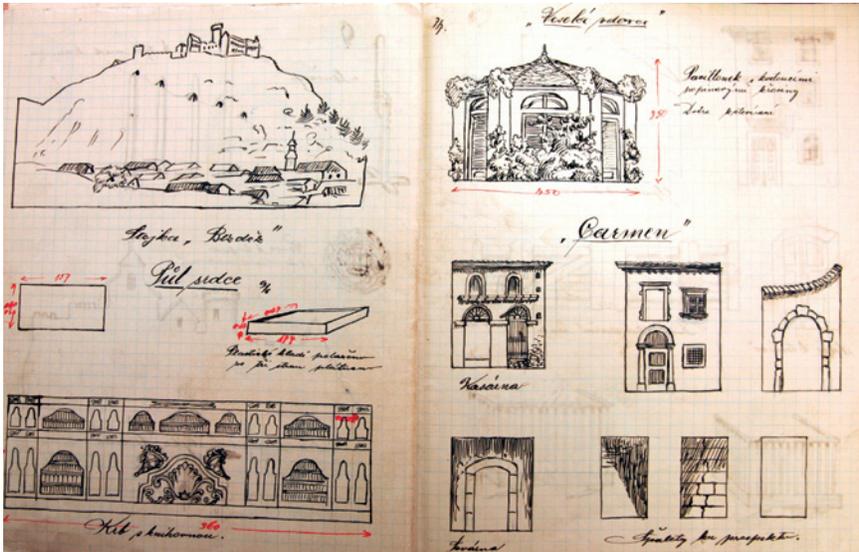


Fig. 8: Half a Heart (*Půl srdce*), *The Merry Widow* (*Veselá vdova*), *Carmen*.

Josef Skupa's pad with scenographic designs for the Pilsen Municipal Theatre, early 1920s.

© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.



Fig. 9: Josef Skupa. A curtain design for Smetana's opera

The Bartered Bride (*Prodaná nevěsta*). Pilsen Municipal Theatre, 1922.

© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

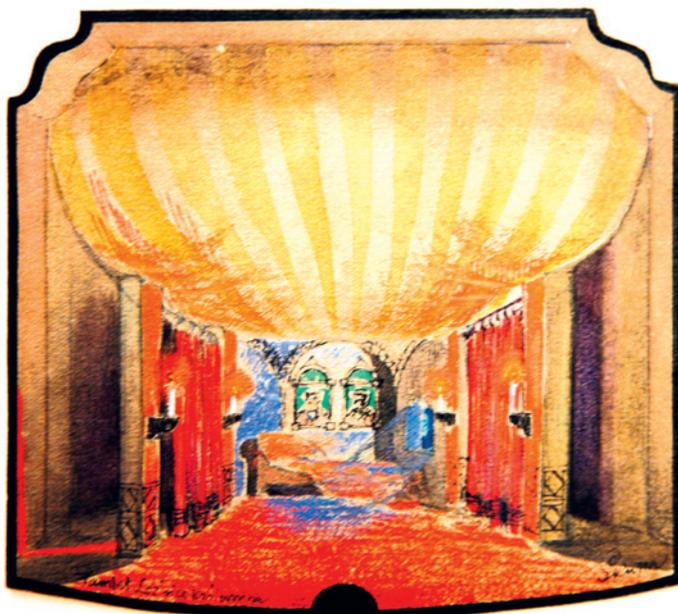


Fig. 10a+b: Josef Skupa. A scenographic design for an unrealised production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Pilsen Municipal Theatre, 1923.

© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.



Fig. 11: Josef Skupa. A scenographic design for a production of Schiller's *Don Carlos*. Pilsen Municipal Theatre, 1919.

© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

2003: 133–55). His humour, improvisation skills, storytelling and musical talent were put to use not only in the company of his friends but also, later, after the Great War, on the stage of the Červená sedma Company – one of the best Czech cabaret theatres of its time – for whom he made performances as ‘Mr Čejka’. Jiří Červený, the founder of the cabaret, remembers him in these terms:

Mr Čejka. That's how he would be presented on the posters and the programmes, and that's also how he would come onstage, generally as the opening number, and sometimes as the last number on the programme, in his walking clothes, with a hat on and a walking stick in his hand. [...] And yet he was not just any Mr Čejka; he was someone. Josef Čejka, a full-blooded artist, a creator of paintings and frescos, a designer, an artist making caricatures, book covers, illustrations, posters, a woodcarver, a maker of moving figures, most notably of the good Bejbl. [...] He had the gift of mirth and sincerity; he was an indefatigable improviser of funny ideas, and was therefore much loved in the artistic circles. [...] Čejka's speech was sometimes rough and drastic expressions weren't lacking. But underneath this Rabelaisian humour a delicate human was covered, a good man with a golden heart, a man of taste and emotion. (ČERVENÝ 1959: 218–24)



Fig. 12: Josef Skupa. A scenographic design for a production of Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride (Prodaná nevěsta)*. Pilsen Municipal Theatre, 1922.

© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

One of Čejka's best known caricature figures (that he himself accurately and stylishly mocked) was the character of 'Bejbl', a petty landlord of the west Bohemian town of Klatovy, created out of the region's folk humour. The art historian and professor of the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague Václav Vilém Štech records Čejka's performances in this way:

Josef Čejka [...] turned the usual parties into solo appearance with his anecdotes, songs, or with playing on the bagpipe. One did not talk of art with him, no solving of problems; we only listened to Klatovy-bred histories of illustrious Germans and Czechs. [...] Or he would tell children's stories or would conjure up, by means of the Klatovy dialect, the peculiar figures of country nuncles with their little stories. The most remarkable among them was the landlord Bejbl. [...] Bejbl probably gave rise to Spejbl – at least I think that Professor Skupa was Čejka's schoolmate at the Prague School of Applied Arts where Čejka would spend hours on end on his Bejbl and would entertain the society as tirelessly as he did in the Union Bar, at the *U Petříků*, the *U Brejšků* or then, during the War, in the *Červená sedma* Cabaret as a teller of anecdotes. (ŠTECH 1967: 144–5)

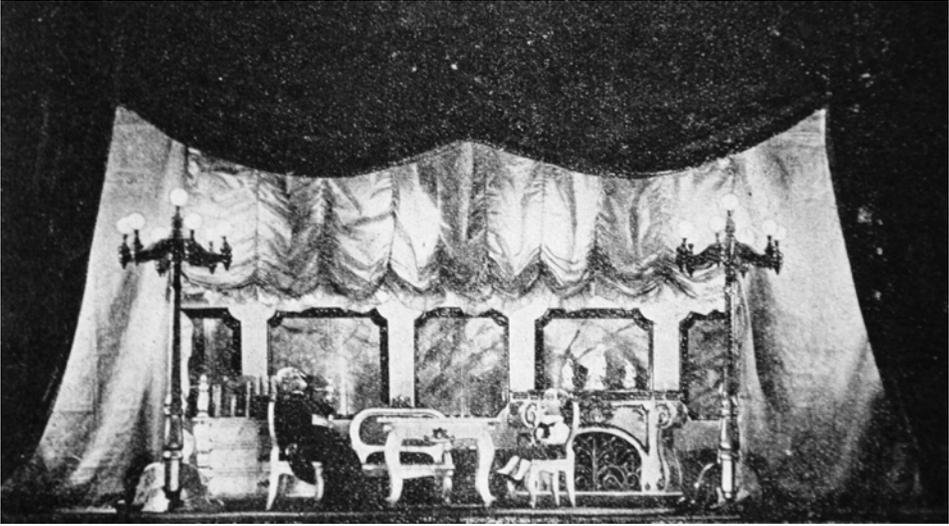


Fig. 13: An interior from Daanson – Skupa's *Jarka and his Mentor* (*Jarka a jeho vychovatel*). LDFO Pilsen. Direction and scenography by Josef Skupa; the priest puppet made by Alois Schroif; the Jarka puppet made by Josef Chochol. *Loutkář* 11 (1925): 8: 159.

After the First World War, Čejka's playful wit transposed this figure into movable puppet toys with geometrically stylised proportions. Among a range of various types of stylised toys, the most successful was this grotesque figure of 'Bejbl' made of segments of turned wood that would come 'fashioned for a button hole or even in large formats' (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 263). The designs for Čejka's turned toys, including several versions made for architect Bohumír Čermák's Art Industry Workshops (*Bürgerliche Handwerkskunst*), established in Brno in 1910 as an analogue of the Vienna Workshops (*Wiener Werkstätte*), are deposited in an exceptionally large collection in the Brno City Archive. Other types Čejka's puppet characters, such as the Hasan with a simple shape of a wood-turned head, a peg-like nose and large painted stylised eyes, are essentially visual predecessors of Spejbl. Skupa's inspiration for his dramatic character Spejbl that he could find in the folk character of Bejbl or Čejka's cabaret version of it might have some ground. Spejbl (1919) and Čejka's wood-turned puppet toys came into existence virtually simultaneously. Nonetheless, there are affinities of other types too: their visual features, the regional and social roots of the characters, the names as well as his dramatic caricaturesque puppet type. Spejbl is perhaps the most lasting of his influences; Čejka died prematurely in 1932 and his own work fell into near-perfect oblivion. It should be mentioned though that in 1929 Čejka opened a unique glove puppet theatre called *Škrholeum*, set up in Radio Palace (*Radiopalác*) in the Vinohrady District in Prague; here miniature stage sets were complemented with projections on a white backdrop.

Regarding Skupa's glove puppets it should be emphasised that Spejbl's visual features and his dramatic type have a second source of origin – in Skupa's own early glove puppets. One of them is strikingly close to Spejbl in its stylisation. Photographs of Skupa's glove puppets feature the figure of a bald Clown with distinct eyes, protruding ears and a large exaggerated grinning mouth cognate with an ancient Greek comedy mask; this character can be taken for a predecessor of the Spejbl type (JINDRA 2010: 25). The puppet theatre historian and Skupa's close collaborator Jan Malík denies any relation between Bejbl and Spejbl, taking Bejbl, as well as Spejbl, as utterly original creations, with Spejbl reputedly traced back as far as the drawings of his schooldays:

A bald head with a low forehead, fish eyes, scoop-like ears, a peg of a nose and a cowardly chin – these would be drawn by the young student Skupa on page margins and textbook covers. During his Prague studies, this visage comes back to life in the glove puppet drolleries of Josef Skupa and Ferenc Futurista [...]; during his soldiering years in the barracks camp in Székesfehérvár, there is another variant of this type appearing in the collection of Skupa's glove puppets. (MALÍK 1965: 76)

Stage Constructor, Scenographer and Designer

Josef Skupa was a Renaissance type of artist personality, talented in several fields; at the same time, he was extremely hardworking and an able organiser. Relatively speaking, the least studied part of his extensive work is his visual work, including his scenography, although it played a decisive role in the first two decades of his artistic career. After his secondary school exam in 1911, Josef Skupa headed for the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague; eventually, he had to opt for a social and economic compromise by going to the School of Applied Arts. In 1915, shortly before completing his studies, he was conscribed to the Austro-Hungarian army, and within two years, he was moved from Hungary back to Pilsen to the military censor office – with glove puppets in his suitcase.

In the same year (1916) Josef Skupa – a twenty-four-year-old soldier – received his first external scenographic commission from Karel Veverka, the head director and first stage director of the municipal theatre in Pilsen, for a production of Ludwig Fulda's play *Talisman* and an unrealised production of Hermína von Škoda's *The Dubrovnik Drama* (*Dubrovnické drama*). This was the start of Skupa's scenographic collaboration with the theatre; it culminated in Skupa becoming the head of scenography in the Municipal Theatre, for which he also received a year's leave from his teaching duties (VAŠÍČEK 2010: 208).

Shortly before the beginning of the 1922/23 season, the theatre suffered serious damage due to a fire in the stage set storage; and so, Josef Skupa was tasked with securing universal decorations for the productions that were then in the repertoire. Apart



Fig. 14: Josef Skupa, an Oriental Hall, a design for the flats of *Dekorace českých umělců pro loutky Alešovy*, 3rd series. A. Münzberg, Prague 1918. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

from renewing the stage set collection and designing new production titles, he also contributed crucially to the extensive technical modernisation of the Pilsen stage. Skupa's personal papers, deposited in the Pilsen City Archive, contain notebooks and loose technical drawings of these decoration designs – such as those for Verdi's *Aida*, Jan Voborník's *Jeroným Pražský* (*Jerome of Prague*), Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* or Bizet's *Carmen*, among others (JOSEF SKUPA COLLECTION 70). Although these little stylised designs, rather than being progressive, are closer to the historicising realism of the National Theatre's scenographer Karel Štapfer, they bear witness to the skill and quality of Josef Skupa's work in the day-to-day scenic problems of arts practice.

Experience with the construction of sets, props as well as with the technical modifications to the large operatic and dramatic stage had yet another importance. They intertwined and complemented with the creative experiences that Josef Skupa had been gaining since June 1917, during his work with the LDFO (Marionette Theatre of the Holiday Resorts) for whom he was engaged intensely in several professions. Initially, he also made his entry as a set constructor:

Skupa made a good guess that the Holiday Resorts theatre would, first and foremost, need a new stage construction, a thorough refurbishment of the stage space, an aesthetically



Fig. 15: Josef Skupa, the Vault, the Jail, the Study, flats of *Dekorace českých umělců pro loutky Alešovy*, 4th series. A. Münzberg, Prague 1920. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

designed proscenium with a curtain, and a modernised light park. And indeed – during the months of the summer holidays, in the Fan Room (*Vějířový sál*) of the Citizen Hall (*Měšťanská beseda*), Skupa oversaw and helped build a brand new theatre with a calm curtained proscenium and a simple stage that sported a shiny textile backdrop. Skupa retained the rectangular format of a proscenium arch characteristic of the traditional schema of the marionette stage – a feature he remained faithful to throughout his later puppet career – and since he had no confidence in marionettes operated by long lines from high walks and bridges, he also used the traditional gallery that would also be indispensable for a theatre company with a touring programme. [...] This liberated stage was also lit not only by the common rigs but also, for the first time, by powerful spotlights and optics as well as a range of colour filters. (MALÍK 1962: 51–2)

Skupa further developed this model of the stage space in 1920 after the ensemble moved into the Artisans' Hall (*Řemeslnická beseda*): 'the proscenium opening was enlarged to 4 x 2.5m by an original modification to the decoration arch, and so Skupa could be justly proud of solving a paradoxical task – puppets on short leads received a stage with an airy height' (MALÍK 1962: 63). Skupa conceived of the front cloth as an integral part of the stage set that, given the appropriate light, blended with the backdrop (SKUPA 1925: 194–7).



Fig. 16: *Kašpárek the Futurist and Parodist* (*Kašpárek futuristou a parodistou*), Skupa's own illustrations for the publication of his play, Josef Skupa, Plzeň 1921. *Loučkář* 6 (1922): 9: 117.

Skupa returned to this type of stage again in 1930 when his professionalised touring company needed a portable, space-saving as well as a reliable stage. The touring construction, created by Skupa together with the carver and marionettist of the company Gustav Nosek, was principally a simplified variant of the time-proven stage of the Holiday Resorts. These were elementary construction segments taken over from the stages of traditional marionettists (a rectangular format of the opening, a small depth stage and low bridge that enabled the manipulation of string puppets on short leads), but further equipped with a technological arsenal of special lanterns and sound technology, including a microphone and a gramophone. This confirmed, once again, that Skupa always preferred a modern and functionally optimal, but simple, stage construction to more complex systems.

Josef Skupa was also an important scenographer (see VAŠÍČEK 2010: 210). Between the end of World War I and the early 1920s, he proved incredible productivity in making



Fig. 17: Josef Skupa, *Dr. John Faustus as he Loses his Soul to Hell (Johanes Doktor Faust, kterak peklu propadá)*, a special appendix to the Pilsen issue for the subscribers of Issue 12 of *Loutkář* 12 (1925–26): 3–4; appendix.

dozens of set designs, both for the municipal stage as well as for the puppet theatre at the Holiday Resorts. As a guest artist in 1917 he designed for the Municipal Theatre works such as Molière's *Miser*, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* or Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*. After the war, as a guest, he undertook set designs for operas such as Bedřich Smetana's *The Bartered Bride (Prodaná nevěsta)* or Stanislav Suda's *The Blacksmith of Lešetín (Lešetínský kovář)*, as well as for plays, e.g. Edvard Heger's *Castaways* or Holger Drachman's *There Once Was a King*. As the new head of scenography he redesigned Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, followed by a series of productions, such as national operas –



Fig. 18: *Vánoce u Spejblů* (Christmas at the Spejbls). Written by Frank Wenig, illustrated by Josef Skupa. Vojtěch Šeba, Prague 1929.



Fig. 19: *Hurvínkovo posvícení* (Hurvínek's holiday). Written by Frank Wenig, illustrated by Josef Skupa. Vojtěch Šeba, Prague 1929.



Fig. 20: Josef Skupa. Book cover of the volume *Plzeň Puppets* (*Plzeňské loutkářství*), Plzeň 1925.

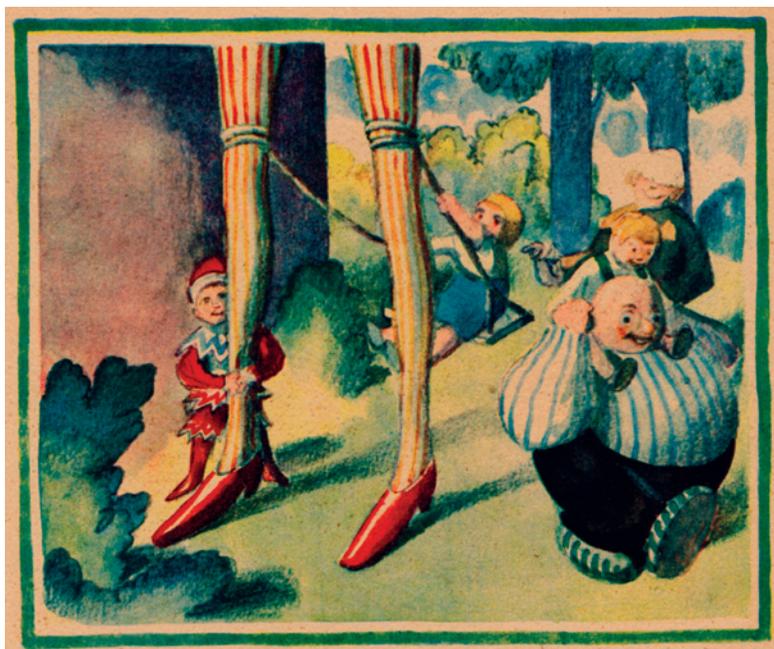


Fig. 21a+b: A book illustration by Josef Skupa; text by Frank Wenig,
In Kašpárek Town (V Kašpárkově), Plzeň 1930.



Fig. 22: Josef Skupa and Jiří Trnka with their items at the puppetry exhibition, Prague, 1930. Catalogue *Marionnettes et Guignols en Tchécoslovaquie*, Prague 1930, p. 57.

Smetana's *The Secret* (*Tajemství*), Antonín Dvořák's *Dimitry*, Zdeněk Fibich *The Fall of Arkun* (*Pád Arkuna*) and J. B. Foerster's *Deborah*. From the international opera repertoire he designed Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Gounod's *Faust* or Jean Nouguès' *Quo Vadis*. Skupa also provided scenography for Fibich's entire trilogy *Hippodamia*. For operettas, he designed Johann Strauss Jr.'s *Der Zigeunerbaron*, Imre Kalmán's *The Csárdás Princess* and Rimsky-Korsakov's ballet *Scheherazade*. His were also the outstanding designs for classical plays: Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Schiller's *Mary Stuart* and *Don Carlos*, de Ceccatty's *La dame aux camélias* as well as Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. From the Czech national repertoire, he designed Josef Kajetán Tyl's *The Bagpiper of Strakonice* (*Strakonický dudák*) and *Mistress Marianne, Mother of the Regiment* (*Paní Marjánka, matka pluku*), Julius Zeyer's *Radúz and Mahulena* (*Radúz a Mahulena*), Alois and Josef Mrštík's *Maryša*, Emanuel Bozděch's *To the Lord of the World in his Nightgown* (*Světa pánu v županu*), Frank Wollman's trilogy *The Great Moravia* (*Velká Morava*), Karel Jonáš's *Oplancia*, Fráňa Šrámek's *The Moon over the River* (*Měsíc nad řekou*), Josef and Karel Čapek's allegory *The Insect Play* (*Ze života hmyzu*) as well as Karel Čapek's *The Makropulos Affair* (*Věc Makropulos*).

Some of the designs and photographs of realised set designs extant in Skupa's papers (JOSEF SKUPA COLLECTION 70) reveal that his scenographic style developed along two principal lines. In one of them they were spacious, lucid, functional and often also somewhat symbolistically designed interiors and exteriors, marked with a delicate *art deco* colourfulness and *chiaroscuro*, especially with foreign sceneries – as in the unrealised *Hamlet*, in *Don Carlos* or in de Musset's *Don't Fool Around with Love* (*On ne badine pas avec l'amour*). The other line was a talented artist's sensitive feeling for the Czech nature of the visual style, often verging on puppet theatre stylisation (as in Tyl's *Mistress Marianne* or



Fig. 23: Stařeček (the Old Man) and Kuba, design by Josef Skupa, carved by Augustin Nosek, for the LDFO Pilsen, 1920. *Drobné umění* 5 (1924): 4: 97.

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in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*). Josef Skupa's visual theatre style, naturally informed by analyses of the structure of the theatre work of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, tended towards the stripped atmospheric symbolism, *fin de siècle* and *art deco* style that is evident in the Czech tradition of Josef Wenig's designs for Jaroslav Kvapil's productions, or of František Kysela; these scenographic forms suited the provincial stage better than the expressionistic concepts of Vlastislav Hofman's designs for Karel Hugo Hilar's productions of the early 1920s. Nevertheless, Jan Malík claims that Skupa's designs were artistically and technically so remarkable that 'Skupa became the target of interest for Jaroslav Kvapil at the Vinohrady Theatre as well as K. H. Hilar at the National' (MALÍK 1965: 91).

In the years 1919 and 1920, Josef Skupa contributed to Jindřich Veselý's legendary project *Dekorace českých umělců* (*Stage Sets by Czech Artists*) intended for family and club

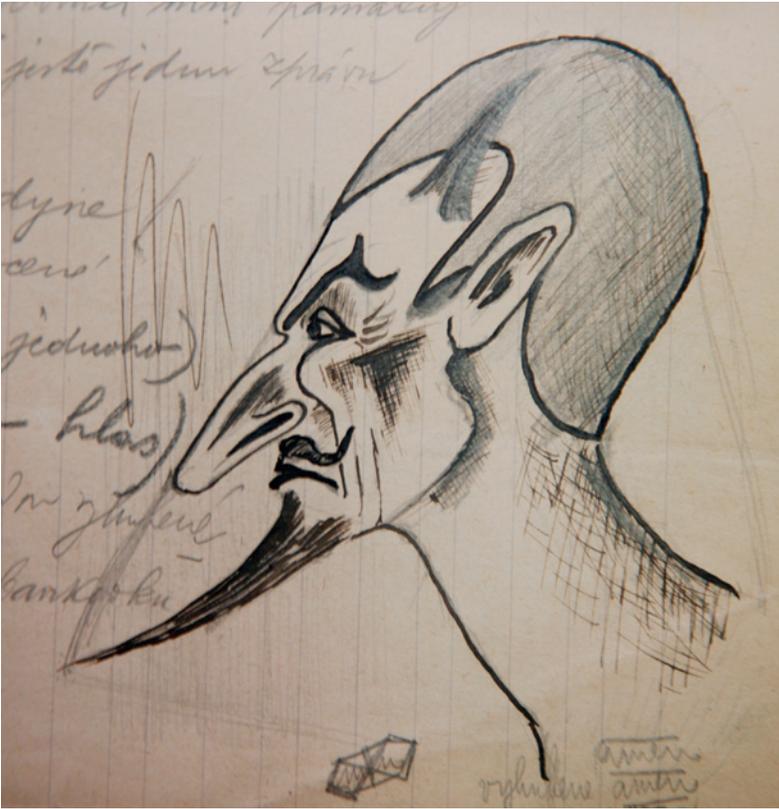


Fig. 24: Josef Skupa. A design for Mephisto's head. The 1920s. © Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

toy theatres with his lithographic imprints of the Oriental Hall, the Beamed Chamber and the Vault/Gaol. These designs correspond not only with his designs for the large stage, but are also their more universal variants in that they could be used by common marionettists. Alongside Ladislav Sutnar's design of 'Hell' of 1923, Skupa's designs, with their simplified and yet distinctive stylisation, belong to the best art works among the 146 imprints of decorations made by 22 artists (BLECHA 2011: 116–38).

Josef Skupa brought a consistent and cultivated Modernist scenographic style to the Holiday Resorts Puppet Theatre (LDFO) in 1917; from the start, his designs were characteristic for realistic shorthand as well as spacious and functional interiors based on carefully lit 'real-life' furniture and props. The LDFO's repertoire of the early 1920s was varied, comprising matinée productions of children's stories, generally deriving from the better titles of the printed series of marionette plays; the evening performances for adults were predominantly composed of classical Czech repertoire, including operas and operettas, as well as original cabaret pieces that were to bring Skupa his renown. Given

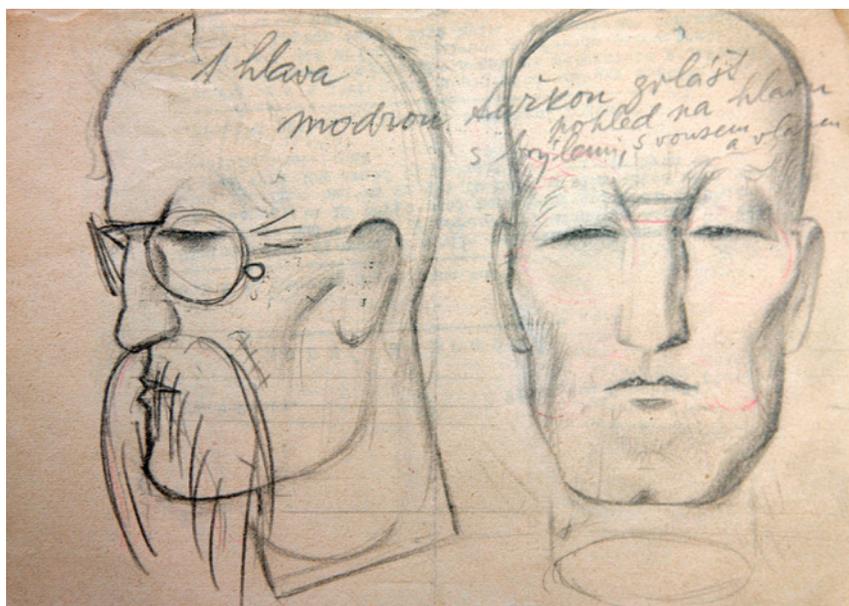


Fig. 25: Ing. Zek (Engineer Zek), designed by Josef Skupa, Pilsen – Prague 1941, a marionette head for J. Kubeš's play *Long live Tomorrow* (*Ať žije zítřek*), Prof. Josef Skupa's Pilsen Puppet Theatre. © Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

the stunning number of performances of a company that still had amateur status (on average 172 performances, out of which 100 were premières), Skupa's set designs certainly must have derived predominantly from what the theatre's collection of generic stage sets offered (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: 31–2): **these were more than 100 marionettes** of 75cm in height with 600 period costumes, 100 stage sets and a large number of props and furniture items (SKUPA 1918: 70). From 1922, the set designs were done in collaboration with Antonín Procházka (pseudonym Jaroslav Klen), the artist, head of scenography, stage director and dramaturg who continued developing Skupa's principle of functional decorative scenography in the time when Skupa was too busy with acting and directing and gradually started retreating from scenography. Skupa's final farewell to scenography came gradually from the end of the 1920s when he started giving opportunities to his outstandingly talented collaborators Jiří Trnka, Gustav Nosek and Jan Vavřík-Rýz. Unfortunately, the documentation of Skupa's scenographic work for the LDFO is incomplete; no more than a few torsos of the original designs have survived and only occasionally photographs were published, mostly in the magazine *Loutkář*.

One part of Skupa's work that has not been so far critically assessed, however, is his painterly, graphic, illustrational and commercial design art. In these spheres, he showed himself as a versatile artist who fulfilled a number of commissions for book covers – for Jaroslav Mareš's publishing house in Pilsen, for instance, his design for the almanac



Fig. 26: Ing. Zek, after Josef Skupa's design, carved by Gustav Nosek, Pilsen – Prague, 1941, a marionette head for J. Kubeš's play *Long live Tomorrow (Ať žije zítřek)*, Prof. Josef Skupa's Pilsen Puppet Theatre. Wood. 17cm. © Collections of the Chrudim Puppetry Museum, sign. L 1202.

Pilsen Puppetry (Plzeňské loutkářství), posters (for the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen), business commercials as well as remarkable book illustrations (JINDRA 2010: 211). In the early 1920s, together with Jan Konůpek, Bohumil Krs and František Pořícký, he established the Artist Group (*Umělecká skupina*) that represented a unique attempt at bringing modern artistic movements into the cultural backwater of Pilsen. Simultaneously he was active in the Club of the Visual Artists of Pilsen (*Spolek výtvarníků plzeňských*). In these year he created a noteworthy cubo-futuristic illustration for a collection of parodic texts *Kašpárek futuristou a parodistou (Kašpárek the Futurist and Parodist, 1922)* or a cycle of images with Faust motifs that met huge success during the Second Puppet Exhibition 1921/1922 in the Topič Gallery in Prague (an influential commercial art gallery and shop established by publisher František Topič in 1894). Two of these expressive drawings, *Johanes Doctor Faust as he is conjuring the evil spirits (Johanes Doktor Faust, kterak duchy citýruje)* and *Johanes Doctor Faust as he loses his soul to Hell (Johanes Doktor Faust, kterak peklu propadá)* were published by Jindřich Veselý as engravings in a special

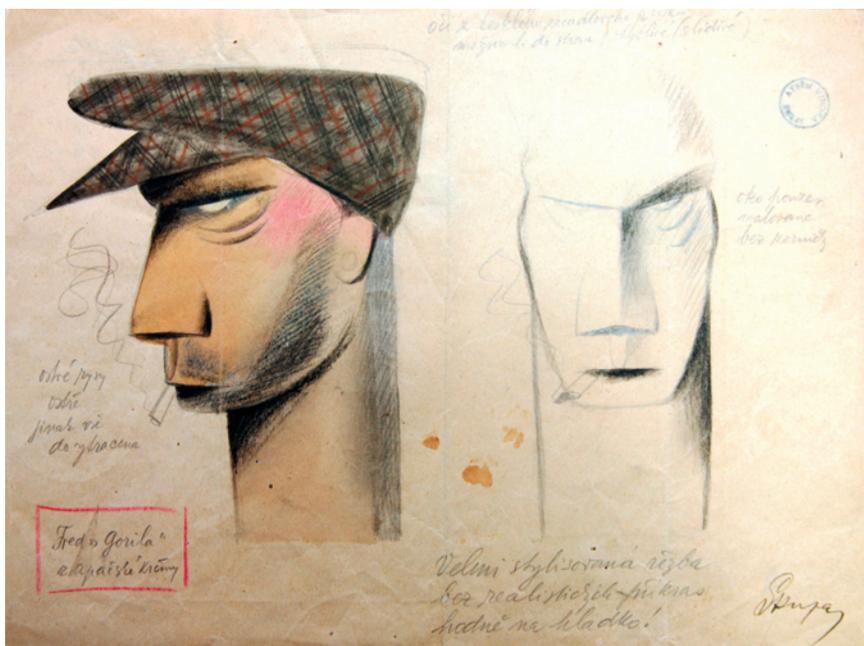


Fig. 27: Fred the Gorilla, designed by Josef Skupa for the revue comedy *The Remarkable Legacy of Marquis Chepailleble (Podivuhodný odkaz markýze Chepailleble)*; co-written with Frank Wenig), 1936. Prof. Josef Skupa's Pilsen Puppet Theatre.
© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

appendix to the *Loutkář* magazine in 1925 (JINDRA 2010: 159). The Pilsen-based literary and theatre critic, historian and poet Bohumil Polan characterised them suggestively as related in style to the spiritual world of the artist Josef Váchal:

[...] the fantastic geometry of the passionate dramatist of space and air was entered this time by the fierce element of a profoundly inward vision. Around Faust, reading from the magical script, spread mystical darkness of eternal spiritual midnight. An unearthly, or rather a chthonic power separated the black mist with a wild raid of spectral twilight from nowhere. Monsters created out of the whirling trembling light were ordered to summon around the desk of the ill-fated philosopher. Huge bulging eyes, piercing the immaterial radiation, impatiently wait for the beckoning of the gloomy master to whom hell leased its powers. Skeletal masks in aspic, goats heads, hollow spheres slit with the opening of a barking maw and drilled through with eyeholes, fish-like miscreants with an enormous egg of an eye mobbed in the chamber, yearning for employment with their rabid tentacle arms raised. The feverish breath of the spectre intensifies the rhythm and raises the heat in the plate that represents Faust's fall to Hell [...]. (POLAN 1925: 80)

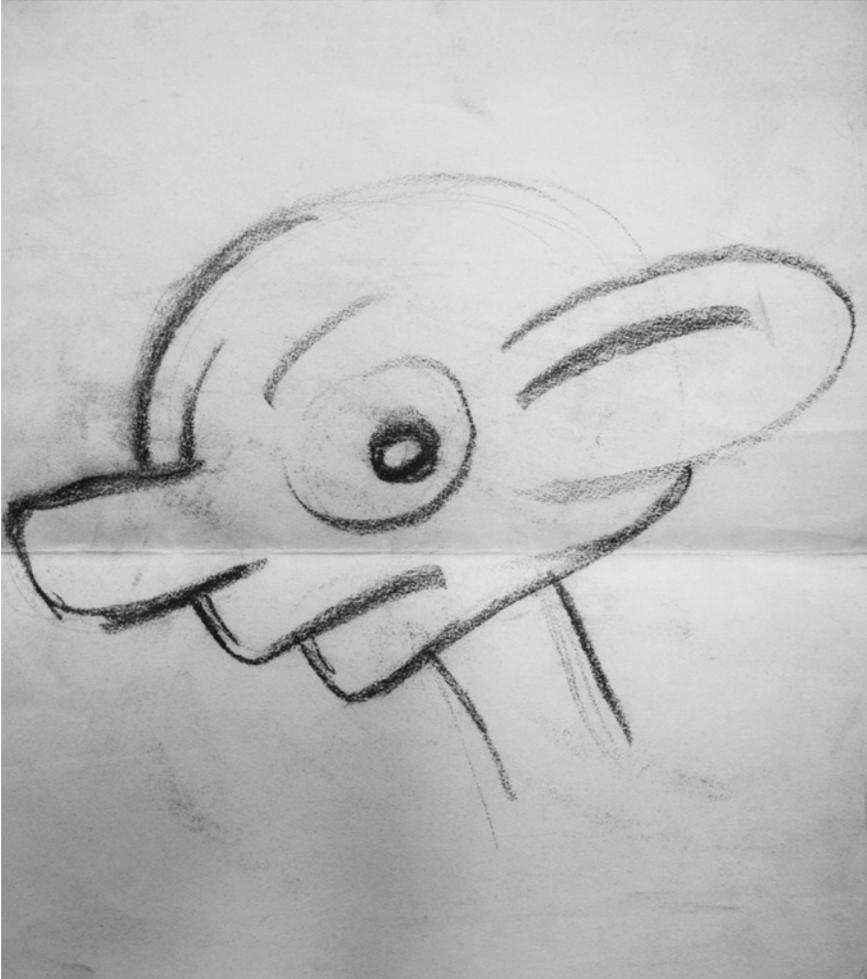


Fig. 28: Spejbl. A drawing by Josef Skupa. Plzeň, the 1920s. © Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (*Archiv města Plzně*), collection J. Skupa, 70.

Another valuable testimony of Skupa's refined, and at the same time caricaturesque handwriting as an illustrator were his drawings of Spejbl and Hurvínek made for the printed appendices of *Loutkář*, or for postcards.

In the five years from 1927 to 1932, prompted by the successfully formed double bill, Skupa created a linocut heading for *Spejbl's Illustrated Newsletter* (*Spejblův ilustrovaný zpravodaj*) and several watercolours with the generic motifs of Spejbl and Hurvínek. These exquisite, freshly colourful and skilfully composed plates never properly reached the general public; however, they received a warm welcome with the subscribers of the *Loutkář* revue that published them as separate attachments (MALÍK 1965: 122).

Besides, there were a number of original book titles: around 1930, Skupa and writer Frank Wenig published a whole series of richly illustrated books with the ever more popular protagonists Spejbl and Hurvínek – first with the publishing house Osvěta and later with Vojtěch Šeba (Prague-Strašnice): *In Kašpárek Town: 10 Scenes from the Life of Puppets* (*V Kašpárkově: 10 obrázků ze života loutek*, 1927), *The Merry Tales of Puppets Kašpárek, Hurvínek and Spejbl* (*Veselé příběhy loutek Kašpárka, Hurvínka a Spejbla*, 1928), *Merry Reading about Puppets* (*Veselé čtení o loutkách*, 1928), which also came out with the title *Kašpárek, Spejbl and co.* (*Kašpárek, Spejbl a spol.*, 1929), *Hurvínek's Holiday* (*Hurvínkovo posvícení*, 1929), *Christmas at the Spejbls* (*Vánoce u Spejblů*, 1929), *Kašpárek's Spring-time Merrymaking* (*Kašpárkovy jarní radovánky*, 1930) and *Kašpárek and Spejbl on Travels* (*Kašpárek a Spejbl na cestách*, 1930) (VESELÝ 1929b: 124). Šeba continued publishing Wenig's books later as well, but with the illustrations of other artists, for instance, *Hurvínek's Pranks* (*Hurvínkovy žertíčky*, 1931) illustrated by Ludvík Alois Salač or *Spejbl's Family Trip* (*Spejblův rodinný výlet*, 1937) illustrated by Jiří Trnka. Skupa's contemporary, Bohumil Polan, perceived his visual illustrations as:

a pioneering work [...] characteristic of a tempered feeling for the decorative effect of the lines and the mastered temperament of a lightened-up colourist. The joyful decorative sentiment, schooled with Kysela, has put to good use in the numerous book covers and illustrations to which Skupa brought a narrative lightness, a playful humour [...] and a versatile technical skill of his artistic talent. Adding to it the noble soft touch of his visual style, his [...] approach to matters of nature, namely in the classically pristine and pearly haze in the nudes of beautiful women, we have made a general sum and shorthand of the crucial artistic features of this distinguished and humanely kind personality. (POLAN 1925: 80)

The Marionettist

Before Josef Skupa launched on a solo professional career, he had worked for the Pilsen LDFO for thirteen years, during which his generously talented spontaneity pressed a distinctive character on many of its productions. In the very first season of 1917, when he started to work for the company, during František Count Pocci's fairy tale *The Owl Castle* (*Soví hrad*),

Kašpárek of Holiday Camp Theatre would modulate [...] thanks to Skupa's interpretation, into a new style, not only with its costume that wittily caricatured the government minister's tailcoat, but also with its sharp satirical lashes, foulmouthed ad-libs, frisky songs as well as additional 'muttermumbling' that started to create a special new category of theatre humour. It only took one single step to cabaret shows, especially when it transpired that apart from the well-tested and indispensable writer Josef Skupa the evening



Fig. 29: Spejbl's siesta, Gustav Nosek, Plzeň 1920. *Picture Almanac 1904/1929 of the Pilsen Theatre of the Holiday Resorts (Obrázkový almanach 1904/1929 plzeňského Loutkového divadla Feriálních osad)*. Pilsen: František Bergman, 1930: p. 45.



Fig. 30: *Spejbl's Fiesta*, designed by Josef Skupa, carved by Gustav Nosek. *Loutkář* 11 (1925): 10: 198.

productions of the Holiday Camp Theatre also started to attract other authors and collaborators. (MALÍK 1962: 53)

It became apparent that the puppet stage gave Skupa the opportunity of an organic deployment of his painterly abilities and his extraordinary acting talent for the creation of new puppet types. This led to the development of the character of *Kukuřičňák Duha* (Rainbow the Sweetcorn Man), first visually improvised from an older marionette by Allesi that belonged to the company of the traditional marionettist Karel Novák, the director of the LDFO, and later pregnantly carved by Gustav Nosek. The marionette would be led by Ludvík Novák and spoken by Josef Skupa.

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The thickset elderly old codger with menacing moustaches, armed with a weighty club and dressed in a quasi-military costume with an epaulette in the rainbow colours of Pilsen, Rainbow the Sweetcorn Man became, with his racy earthiness, an irresistible caricature of one particular type of contemporary Pilsen life. Due to staffing shortages in the police forces, the city of Pilsen was experiencing difficulties maintaining order in the queues waiting for the then-rationed sweetcorn bread; to improve the situation, the city recruited volunteers and ran a self-help department that consisted mostly of elderly harvest watchmen or mildly disabled veterans. An 'official' cap with a military-looking buttoned overcoat, a municipal ribbon, a club and a service identity card were enough to turn innocuous old men into bullying hounds – who would, in the end, bark more than bite. (MALÍK 1962: 54)

In a similar vein, in 1918, Skupa was able to update the classical figure of Kašpárek from František Nosek's workshop into a sharply parodying 'revolutionary Kašpárek' with a costume in the national colours who as early as 23 September 1918, that is thirty-five days before the actual fall of the monarchy, would 'bury Austria' – a feat that brought him a memorial plaque ten years later, made by the academic artist Bohumil Krs.

The early 1920s were the time in which Skupa and his young peers changed the generic scope of the LDFO that had until then been operating, under the directorate of the traditionalist Karel Novák, along the lines of the nineteenth-century emotive nobleness of the puppet theatre. New dramaturgy, marked with courageous searching, gradually necessitated new grotesque types of marionettes, generally to be designed by Skupa and carved by Gustav Nosek. As the handful of Skupa's later designs of marionette heads in front and side views, made for the revue comedy *The Remarkable Legacy of Marquis Chepailleble* (*Podivuhodný odkaz markýze Chepailleble*, 1936), deposited in the Pilsen City Archives (JOSEF SKUPA COLLECTION 70), Skupa showed mastery in succinctly expressing the character's type through the physiognomy of its face. Skupa complemented the stylisation's precision in shape and colour with technical instructions (e.g. a wagging chin when speaking) and detailed notes for the carver (Gustav Nosek) to achieve a modern concept of carving and polychromy: stylised smooth surfaces without any naturalistic 'improvements' or highly stylised carving without realistic embellishments – i.e. a very smooth finish, with the eyes merely painted, without the pupil, and a long neck for 'Spejbl-like' movement, to name a few.

The photograph showing the arranged display of puppets of the LDFO at the third Puppetry Exhibition at the Havlíček Park in Prague in 1924 documents a whole range of these new visual and dramatic types: left to right, the bookish Granddad (*Dědoušek*), as if taken from the ruralist novels of K.V. Rais, was designed and reputedly also carved by Josef Skupa; then, in the background, as if laterally, the puppet of Spejbl (far from a celebrity those days); behind the figure of the countryman Škrhola, we can see Švejk with his pipe, in a somewhat realistic shape of an inhabitant of the Žižkov Quarter in Prague or the 'workie' figure of Pilsen (designed by Skupa, carved by Nosek); then the bumpkin Kuba, a variant of the Škrhola (designed and carved by Nosek), the *Rainbow the Sweecorn Man* figure (carved by Nosek), the Field Curate Katz from Hašek's *Švejk* (carved by Nosek), the cunning 'bourgeois' Seeligmánek (designed by Skupa, carved by Alois Šroif), and finally, to the very right, among the rural types, the robust Old Cadger Vočáhlo on his bench (designed by Skupa, carved by Šroif).

A similar modern, inventive and visually plain stylisation can be seen in other puppets from the revues: Bajuška, Boubinka, Brouček, Slezáček and others. Although these figures generally had outstanding leaders and speakers (many of them performed by Josef Skupa as speaker and leader) and also were rather successful with the audiences, most of them vanished from the stage in the course of time. Paradoxically, only one type has survived –

the one appearing as an outcast at the back and to the side of the photograph from the exhibition, placed there allegedly by Skupa himself so as not to provoke unnecessarily – the figure of Spejbl. (MALÍK 1962: 58–9)

Spejbl and Hurvíněk

In the years 1998–2007, the Czech media and society were swamped by the protracted law suit between the Prague-based Divadlo Spejbla a Hurvínka (The Spejbl and Hurvíněk Theatre Company) and the holder of Skupa's copyright, the Municipal Institute of Social Services in Pilsen (*Městský ústav sociálních služeb v Plzni*). The issue at stake was who holds the rights to the use of the famous puppet protagonists Spejbl and Hurvíněk, and – by implication – who was their actual creator.

The court ruled to the effect that Skupa was neither the author of the puppets (Spejbl was created by the carver Karel Nosek and Hurvíněk by his nephew Gustav Nosek), nor of their names; those were invented by another member of the company, Karel Koval (Šlais). This simple and reductivist decision effectively exposed not only the incompetence but also – from a legal position – the impossibility of understanding the exceptionally complex phenomenon of creating a new theatre type, or a character as a reflection of its times; the near impossibility of attributing a definitive provenance to an artefact that was simultaneously a collective creation of supreme originality, but that also belonged in a large share to Josef Skupa. The arts and humanities as the so-called *soft sciences* are able to analyse this problem with a much more profound thoroughness and coherence – despite the fact that their conclusion will probably be rather relativistic, that is, contrary to the statement of the law. It transpired that lawyers eventually concentrated rather on the external evidence of originality (the trademark, the creation of the puppets as visual artefacts, the origin of their names) but completely ignored that which gives the puppet theatre type its true liveliness: its typological rooting, the character, the actorly realisation, the testing through its repertoire, the internal development and the dynamics of the character, the relations to other puppet characters, the history of a type as an integral component of its nature and its social existence, and other crucial nuances. In brief: the puppets of Spejbl and Hurvíněk could have had an identical visual shape and identical names, and at the same time they could have been something totally different; they could have been inseparable as well as not... First and foremost, they would have been completely forgotten today. It is exactly that which has made them survive as puppet characters and made them what they are, that ought to be attributed substantially to their true 'father' – Josef Skupa. His closest collaborators knew and respected this and none of them ever dared to make a claim to co-authorship with Skupa. The same is true of Josef Čejka, the author of Bejbl, whom Skupa used to encounter in the 1920s during



Fig. 31: Spejbl, drawing by Josef Skupa. The Pilsen issue of *Loutkář* 11 (1925): 10: front cover.

his guest appearances at puppet exhibitions in Prague, where Čejka also performed. The historian and theorist Jindřich Veselý, characteristically meticulous and critical in his judgment, made a clear point, perhaps even to the detriment of other co-creators:

The authorship of Spejbl belongs wholly to Professor Josef Skupa: the shape, the form, the name as well as the mechanism is the creation of Skupa. Spejbl's form gave rise to Hurvínek. There would have been no Hurvínek had it not been for Spejbl. His name and his soul, and eventually his great popularity was given to him by the intent of Skupa and his achievements, both acoustic and mechanical. This ought to be emphasised for the sake of truth and justice in the present (Prof. Skupa is protecting his right by law) and for history. (VESELÝ 1934: 34)

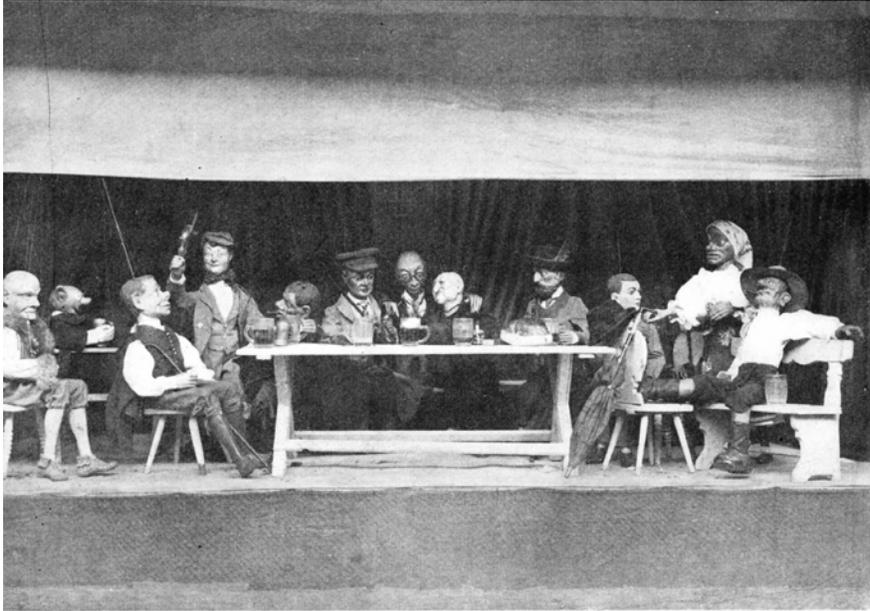


Fig. 32: A group of marionettes from Karel Novák's Pilsen theatre and the LDFO, at the exhibition in Prague (the Havlíček Park), 1924. Spejbl back left. Jan Malík, *Národní umělec Josef Skupa*. Prague: SNKLU, 1962: 58.

What were then the complexities of the creation of Skupa's new figures? The first to come, in the autumn of 1919, was Spejbl – that is, in the time when Skupa experimented with new puppet types. The carving of the new puppet, without a direct dramatic denomination, was creatively realised by Karel Nosek (of the well-known carver family of Pilsen), reputedly on the basis of a simple design made by Skupa on a piece of brown paper that has not survived. Nosek would later claim that he had to change the visuals substantially. It is also unknown whether Spejbl's bald head was an intention or a mere instance of contemporary LDFO practice of modern puppets without carved hair so that they could be easily completed with the help of wigs, hats or other costume accessories. It was only in 1920 that Skupa's memoirs refer to the puppet's presence in the LDFO.

In the same way that Josef Skupa never actually specified the origins of the figure's stylisation, he never made a clarification of the origin of its name. Consequently there are several different testimonies and interpretations of the inspirations of this puppet characteristic with its famous tailcoat, sewed by Vilemína Kubešová. Pavel Grym, in his book *Klauni v dřevácích* (Clowns in Clogs), claims that the name originated with the father of Skupa's collaborator Karel Koval (Šlais), who used to term his workman *Bejbl* or *Bejbl s Bejblem* (Bejbl with a Bejbl; pronounced 'babels bablem'), or that it was the workman himself who would use *Spejbl* or *Špejbl Špejblovatý* (the most Špejbl-like

Špejbl; pronounced ‘shpabel shpablo-vahtee’) as a term of abuse (GRYM 1988: 16). Míla Mellanová attests to this usage of the name in her recollections:

[...] many a time [Koval’s] father would cry out loudly (in one breath, as if in excited cadence): ‘Do you see him? promenading here and there, not knowing whither or wherefore, what to tackle! What a *Spejbl spejblovatej* he is, God’s bones and Holy Joseph, pardon my swearing, *Himmel Alleluia Mort Dieu*’

[[...] kolikrát [Kovalův] otec halasně zvolal (jedním dechem jako vznícená kadence): ‘Vidíš ho, báluje sem tam a neví, kudy kam, čeho se chytit, takovej je to Spejbl spejblovatej, krucifix serentíše, ať nekleju, hymn alelujá mordyje.’]. (MELLANOVÁ 1952: 32)

It could then well be that the comical character of Bejbl as well as Spejbl was a well-known contemporary type of folklore humour from the Klatovy region and the neighbouring southern part of the Pilsen region; that was were Josef Čejka and Josef Skupa would find their inspirations.

Initially, Spejbl’s deployment on the puppet stage was rather unclear exactly because the visual and structural form of the puppet preceded the creation of a true stage type. Although the puppet of Spejbl was, from the inception, informed with a Dada visual style – a tailcoat, a pair of clogs, and later a pair of white gloves, as well as the parodic Dadaist vocabulary that dominated his solo appearances – it is well documented that Spejbl’s first appearances were as an indeterminate and rather unimportant supernumerary and bit part player in the role of:

a knock-about clown, a puppet more endured than emphasised. [...] He would often get beaten, he would trip and fall; to enhance his attractiveness, his tails would have pieces of smelly cheese attached to them so that he could attract the dog of the puppet-master’s household, who would then chase and tear him, all to the tempestuous peals of enthusiasm of the children.

[otloukaného šaška, loutky spíš trpěné, než zdůrazňované. [...] Býval bit, zakopával a padal, pro větší atraktivnost mu byl pod šosy fraku připevňován i dráždivě vonící sýr, aby na jeviště přilákal psa principálské rodiny, který ho za bouřlivého nadšení dětí pronásledoval a trhal.] (GRYM 1988: 17–8)

A puppet intended predominantly for a child audience, Spejbl was often the clumsy and comical double bill with Kašpárek. It was only after 1922 that Skupa gradually started to give Spejbl a better formed character, eventually formulated in his characteristic vocal register, the puppet’s conduct and gesticulation, his way of expressing and his vocabulary. With the hindsight of two decades, Skupa commented on this:

I wanted to create a peculiar figure (since puppet theatre must needs have comedy) that would not belong to any social class but it would have the faults and lapses of everyone.

Initially, Spejbl was perhaps a type of a bourgeois who wished to look grand in his tail-coat but cannot deny his true self due to his wooden clogs. He was a half-assed bighead, a self-authorising bully, and funny since he was the only one not to see he was a block-head who interferes with everything but understands nothing at all.

[Chtěl jsem vytvořit figurku (protože komika v loutkovém divadle být musí), která by nepatřila žádné společenské třídě, ale měla chyby a chybičky všech. Zpočátku snad byl Spejbl typ měšťáka, který chce vypadat ve svém fraku vznešeně, ale nezapře se svými dřeváky. Byl to přihlouplý domýšlivec, neoprávněný autoritář, směšný tím, že jediný neviděl, že je trouba, který do všeho mluví a ničemu nerozumí.] (SKUPA 1941: 124)

Such intuitive searching for the character and the type of the new puppet character might have appeared rather uncertain and purposeless given the context of the exceptionally busy stage life of the LDFO and it would often be welcomed with a lack of understanding. From the start, many members of the LDFO, including the traditionally minded Karel Novák, treated this peculiar puppet with contempt backstage (the theatre had separate 'dressing rooms' for puppet ladies and puppet gentlemen; only Spejbl would hang on a hook all by himself...). This initial uncertainty and the complexity of finding the character type for Spejbl is also documented by Skupa's biographer Jan Malík:

Skupa himself tried on several occasions – in newspaper articles and interviews, in the programme notes of his theatre and elsewhere – **to follow, capture and express the motives** that led him to create Spejbl, in an attempt to reconstruct the creative intentions that determined the social function of this caricature type. Nevertheless – **as is ever so common** in retrospective analyses – the memories of Spejbl's early days were partly mixed with that which ripened only over the years and especially with that which grew from Spejbl's relationship to Hurvíněk.

[Sám Skupa pokoušel se při nejrůznějších příležitostech – v novinářských článcích a interview, v programových brožurách svého divadla aj. – vysledovat a zachytit i vyjádřit pohnutky, které ho vedly k vytvoření Spejbla, a rekonstruovat tvůrčí záměry, které určovaly společenskou funkci tohoto karikaturního typu. Jenomže – jak už to obyčejně bývá při dodatečných analýzách – promítalo se do vzpomínek na Spejblovy začátky leccos z toho, co dozrálo teprve lety a zejména co vyplynulo teprve ze Spejblova vztahu k Hurvínkovi.] (MALÍK 1962: 72)

All this while, Skupa also tried to find an appropriate stage partner for Spejbl. It transpired eventually that Skupa's efforts were in vain. Kašpárek, Švejk as well as other types came from a different world, both temporally and aesthetically. Still Skupa knew very well that if Spejbl was to survive, he needed to have a partner. The solution finally came from a visual artist – the woodcarver. In 1926, the carver and puppet leader Gustav Nosek, who had worked with Skupa since 1919 and would contribute to correct and



Fig. 33: Carver Gustav Nosek, Pilsen 1931. *Loutkář 27* (1931): 6: 127.

make several variants of Spejbl, 'as he would later say, had no more heart to see Spejbl on his own and made Hurvínek for him' (GRYM 1988: 41). In so doing, Nosek confirmed Spejbl's need for a more stable partner and independently carved a smaller figure that took visual inspiration in Spejbl.

The bodily proportions and especially the little legs are so faithfully copied from such a clumsy little cosmopolitan, and yet every move of this little Spejbl (Spejblátko) (they call him Hurvín now, God knows where the name came from) is expressly *like* Spejbl. And his very *exterieur*, the bald head, the nose (Spejbl wonders: Who did this chap get this knob of a nose from?), the ears and the eyes. Even the very eyes outdo the old man with their nimbleness and exaggeration. I think the Spejbl type has been brought here to the purest perfection.



Fig. 34: The first Hurvínek, Gustav Nosek, Pilsen 1927.
 Carved for Josef Skupa. *Loutkář* 14 (1927): 1: 19.

[Tělesné proporce a hlavně ty nožky jsou tak věrně odkoukány takovému neohrabanému světoobčánkovi a přece každý pohyb Spejblátka (zvou ho teď Hurvínem, bůh ví, odkud se to jméno vzalo) je vyloženě spejblovský. A vůbec celý jeho exterieur, pleš, nos (Spejbl se diví: Po kom je ten kluk, má takovou frkolu?), uši a oči. Ba, ty oči předčí starého pohyblivostí a výrazností, myslím, že spejblovský typ tu byl zdokonalen co nejčistěji.] (WENIG 1926: 19–20)

This is how Skupa's close collaborator Frank Wenig articulately expressed the substance of Spejbl's new partner in the sense that it is a creature of the Spejbl family, a type utterly cognate with him and additionally capable of developing their potential. The new marionette, just like Spejbl also led only on strings, brought with it a range of new technical achievements, such as:

The system that made it possible to rotate the eyes in the puppet's head, wobble them and turn them upwards. The new articulation of the arms that allowed the puppets to spread

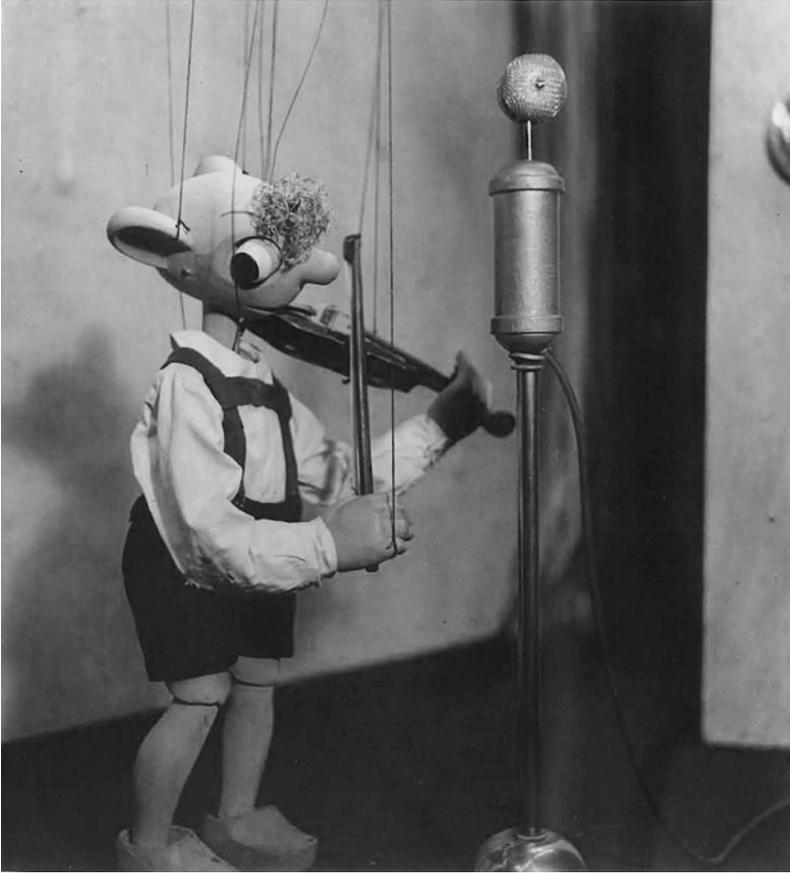


Fig. 35: Hurvínek giving a concert; the late 1930s.
© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

and bend their arms to a great extent as well as to express through movement in a much more lively way (through stamping or clapping their heels). And finally the new varieties of tying the strings that offered a wide range of gesticulation and movement in general. [Systém umožňující otáčet s očima v hlavičce loutky, kmitat s nimi i obracet je v sloup. Nové kloubové uložení paží, které umožnilo loutkám velké možnosti ohybu a rozevření rukou, ale také živější vyjádření pohybem (kopání, klapání patou). A konečně nové varianty navázání s širší možností gestikulace a pohybu vůbec.] (JIRÁSKOVÁ and JIRÁSEK 2011: 325)

At first, Hurvínek would be dressed differently but his costume gradually settled with a white shirt, knee-high shorts and braces. Just like Spejbl, the puppet initially lacked a name and a clear-cut actorly and repertoire type:

Later the puppet would be called *Spejblátko* [the little Spejbl child] or *Spejblík* (the little Spejbl). It was also termed *Hurvín*. As the creature invented and carved by Gustav Novák in 1926 was no beau, backstage it would be called *Kurvínek* (a whoreson or mongrel). But relatively soon the puppet would develop into Spejbl's son. (ČERNÝ 2000: 292)

Similarly to Spejbl's case, several variants of the origin of Hurvínek's name exist, from a diminutive of the name *Hurvín* to the puppeteers' *'skurvín'* (whoreson). The situation around the origin of the type is further complicated by the thoroughly Dadaist drawing made by Josef Skupa himself in 1923 showing a little boy with a fish's head. The boy has nothing in common visually with the later Hurvínek; the drawing shows him sitting in front of a house with a sign reading 'A. Hurvínek, manually processed pig sucklings' (GRYM 1988: 54). When carving Hurvínek, Gustav Nosek intuited that Spejbl's partner had to be someone of his own stock; combined with Skupa's prompt expressiveness, Hurvínek almost immediately became a complete dramatic type, simultaneously a cunning and cheeky son of a conservative and dim-witted father. On Hurvínek's very first stage appearance on 2 May 1926 (the existence of the puppet was kept secret till the last moment), Skupa managed to extemporise his characteristic falsetto.

Before the end of the 1920s, both characters co-defined their types (initially with Kašpárek) in a revue repertoire for adult audiences that Skupa created together with the writer Frank Wenig. It was Wenig who would become Skupa's near-exclusive literary collaborator with Wenig's original scripts characteristic of a Dadaist humour that created the sought-after opportunities for developing Skupa's puppetry art:

For years, Prof. Skupa would lead Spejbl himself [...] [Hurvínek was initially led by Ludvík Novák; note by PJ]. Skupa used the vertical control without the hanging hook, holding the loose back string in his other, free hand, even while the puppet was walking. He controlled the strings for the arms with the fingers of the hand that held the hook. The movements of the arms were no more than jerking and rambling moves. These were merely additional gestures that Skupa made Spejbl do only when he 'was upset'. Most of the action was in the movements of the head, which could be controlled precisely thanks to the holding of the counterweight and the loose back string. It was a very different way compared to earlier controlling of puppets. Previously puppets played predominantly with their arms. [...] Skupa's handling of Spejbl brought a considerable change in puppetry acting. And yet, the movements of the head [brought about by Skupa] are far from chance and fortuitous but are rather very accurate. Skupa's leading of the puppet was a masterful display of an economic, stylised puppet movement that was still carefully designed and played out in minute details. It was these details in the head movements that formed 'the liveness' of the puppet. (RAIFANDA 1957: 31)

Such were the recollections of Skupa's puppetry style as recorded by one of the best Czech puppet players Zdeněk Raifanda, who also later used to lead Spejbl (in

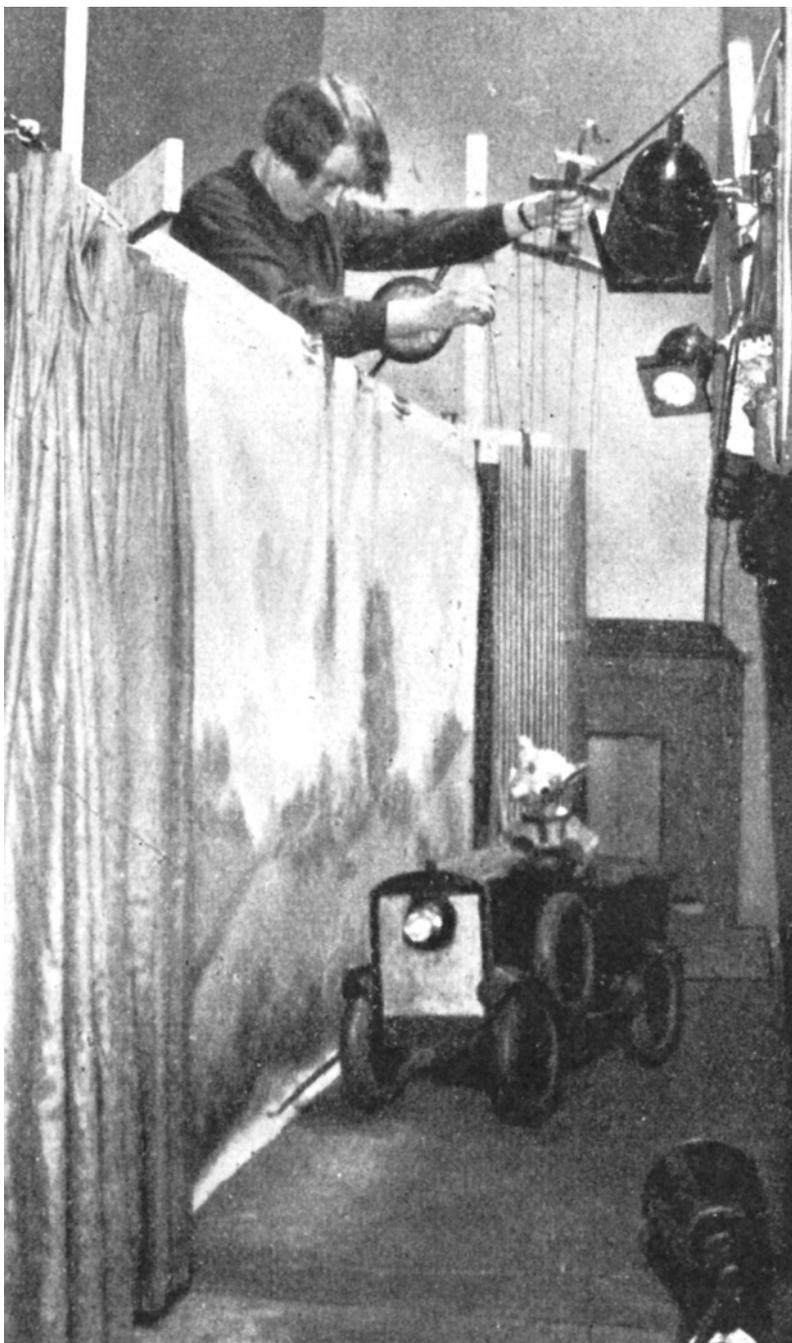


Fig. 36: Hurvínek on stage. Jiřina Skupová, LDFO Pilsen. Catalogue *Marionnettes et Guignols en Tchécoslovaquie*. Prague, 1930: 60.



Fig. 37: Spejbl and Hurvínek; the late 1930s. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

the years 1948–1953). The sudden and phenomenal success of Spejbl and Hurvínek in the adults' theatre prompted imitations from other Czech puppeteers of the club and artistic stages. Those were of two kinds. Skupa inspired a whole range of various original types of puppet MCs, cabareteers and comical types in a variety of parodies and cabarets. All of these can be taken as positive cultural processes of initiation: Kopenec's *Čumrhanzl* (1924), Rödl and Brůha's *Zindulák Pošvejc* (1927) or *Piškot and Čaplin* (1923) of the DTJ Plzeň I Theatre Company and others. Even the renowned Russian puppeteer Sergei Vladimirovich Obraztsov took inspiration from a photograph of Spejbl that he saw in the *Loutkář* magazine during his tour to Prague as member of the Musical Studio of the MCHAT (Moscow Art Theatre) in December 1925. With Spejbl in mind, Obraztsov created a new glove puppet character of the Titular Minister for his solo entry (OBRAZCOV 1955: 148).

Much less commendable were a number of attempts aiming at a direct copy of the two puppet protagonists:

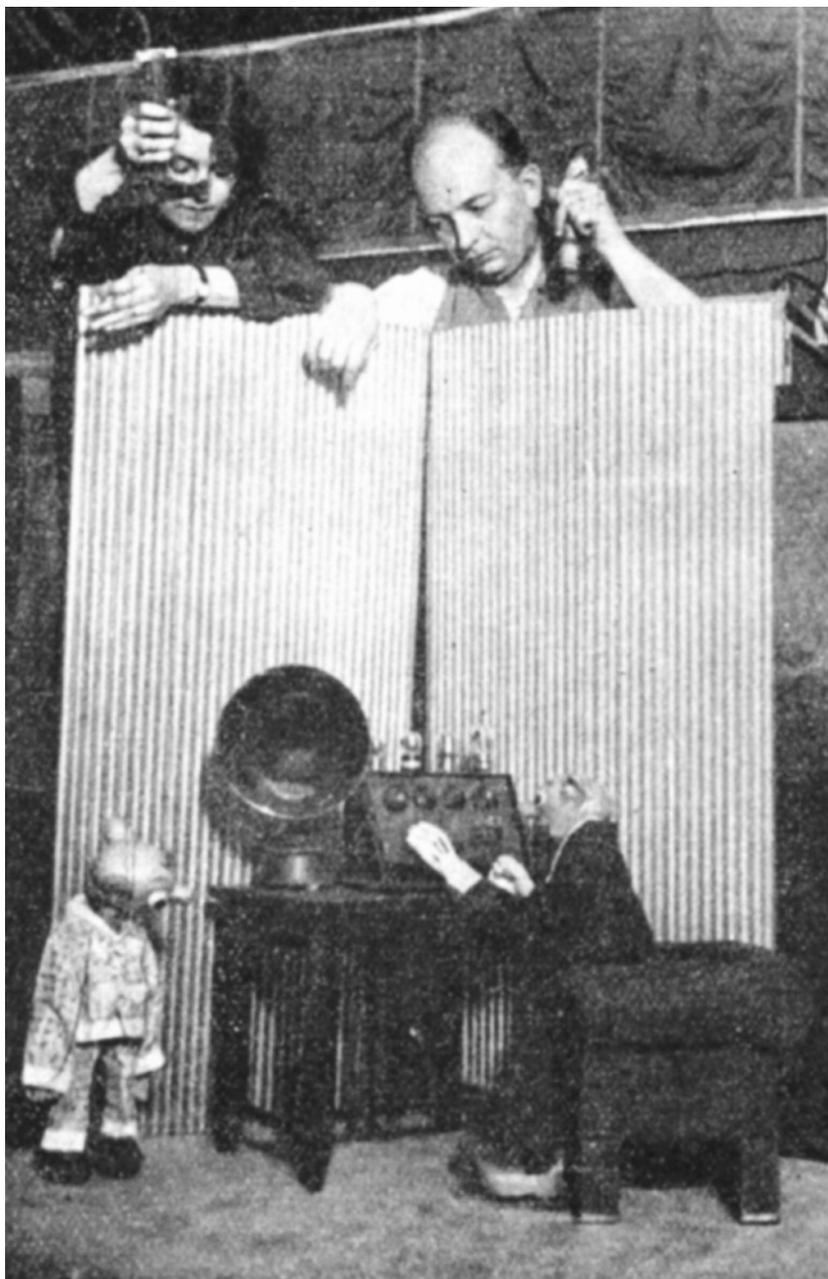


Fig. 38: Spejbl and Hurvínek, Josef Skupa and Jiřina Skupová. LDFO Pilsen. Catalogue *Marionnettes et Guignols en Tchécoslovaquie*. Prague 1930: p. 62.

In those days, Skupa generously tolerated it and even allowed a direct copying of the puppets of Spejbl and Hurvínek; later his benevolence would take its toll as the disputes of the puppets' imitation and the copyright of the S+H characters kept growing.

[Skupa to v té době velkoryse přehlížel a sám dokonce povoloval i přímé kopírování loutek Spejbla a Hurvínka; později se mu tato benevolence nemálo vymstila a spory o napodobování loutek a autorská práva na typy S+H se neustále rozrůstaly.] (GRYM 1988: 68)

The developments of the issue resulted in Skupa registering his own and original trademark for his puppets of Spejbl and Hurvínek with the Commercial Chamber of Pilsen (*Obchodní komora v Plzni*) in 1929.

It needs to be mentioned that, over time, the faces of both protagonists passed through several phases of visual 'sweetening and refining' of their expressions. While Spejbl changed minutely, the first Hurvínek sports a rather different face to the one known today, with a much more pronouncedly caricature-creating nose and more pointed ears. The proportions of his face are much more mean, his ears markedly protruding, his eyes much more bulging out, his sneer more ill-natured and his hands more robustly carved. It was only over time and in several steps that these changes were effected in the two figures, first made by Gustav Nosek and Josef Skupa, then during the 1930s also by Jiří Trnka and eventually, in the 1960s and 1970s, by Radko Haken and Zdeněk Juřena; as a result of these slowly accrued modifications, their shape today is different from that of the original figures. Starting from 1930, Spejbl and Hurvínek were teamed up dramatically and theatrically with the characters of the girl Mánička and the dog Žeryk.

An Actor and a Dramatist

Josef Skupa's first appearance as a performer in Prague was on 29 and 30 December 1921 during the Second Puppetry Exhibition in the Topič Gallery, organised by Jindřich Veselý. Skupa's programme was called *Skupičinky – žbrblaninky* (a punning play on Skupa's name and the words *pranks* and *mumblings*). Rather than with marionettes, he chose to perform with glove puppets, presenting Futuristic improvisations and parodies on the theme of the poetry of the future and the fairy tale *Princess Čárypíše* (*Princezna Čárypíše*), which he had been performing with glove puppets before the Great War too.

Skupa plays with puppets that he modelled himself. In Prague he gave thrilling performances of his improvisations, appealing most to adults when he recited and sang extracts of 'the poetry of the future' that parodied the Futurist-Dadaist [Filippo Tommaso] Marinetti. [...] It was the first time Prague ever experienced something like this and it was rightfully claimed with enthusiasm that such a programme would successfully rival the

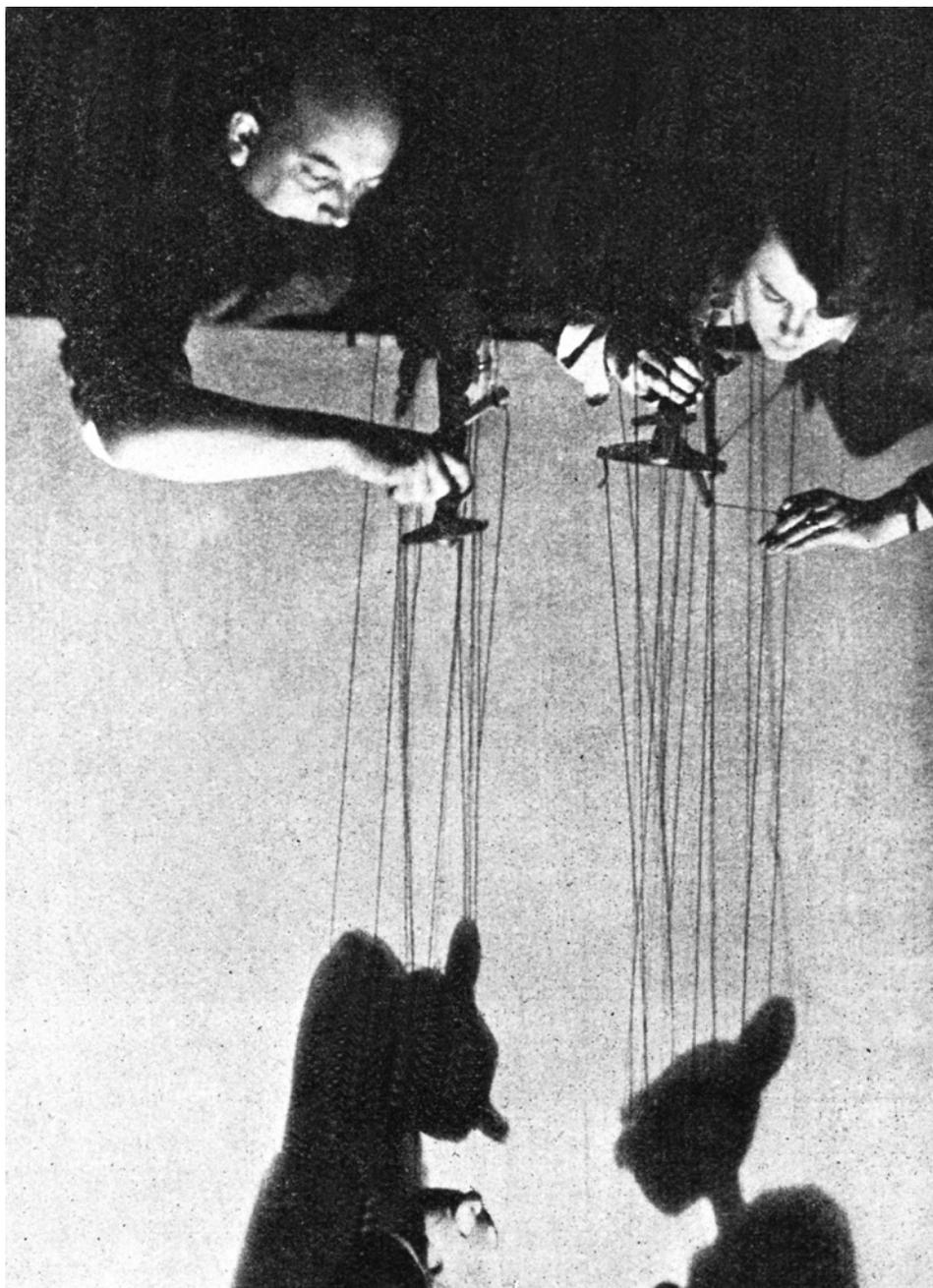


Fig. 39: The shadows of Spejbl and Hurvínek, Josef Skupa and Jiřina Skupová, Plzeň. *Loutkář* 18 (1931): 6: 123.



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Fig. 40: Jiří Trnka, a poster with Spejbl and Hurvíněk for the Artistic Puppet Theatre of Prof. Skupa (*Umělecké loutkové divadlo prof. Skupy*), the 1930s.

© Collections of the Pilsen City Archive (Archiv města Plzně), collection J. Skupa, 70.

cabarets. A proof that *Skupičinky – žbrblaninky* attracted through their novelty and immediacy was that many of the spectators of the first night came on the second day as well [...]. (VESELÝ 1921: 68)

Josef Skupa presented a style of performance and improvisation that had been, since the end of the First World War, a crucial part of his collaboration with his childhood friend Karel Koval (Šlais), who belonged to the ambitious members of the LDFO and was working towards a modern dramaturgy and puppetry style. Alongside other young writers – František Ptáček, Viktor Schwing, Emil Walter and Jan Port – they successfully tried out novel puppet acting styles to balance out the traditional repertoire of the folk puppet master Karel Novák, who had been employed as the head of the performance section. It would be wrong to say that Skupa was in direct opposition to Karel Novák; but, with his companions, they felt the need to develop the principles of modern theatre. Working with a traditional marionettist gave Skupa a respect for a theatre style that was rooted in a nobly written Czech language, an excellent craft in leading his puppets, and an overall refinement of performance; he was also able to combine it organically with his elemental acting drive that was often overwhelmingly powerful when placed face to face with an audience. Pavel Vašíček comments on the exceptionality of Skupa's talent for improvisation:

It is not accidentally that virtually no texts of the era have survived. The writers (Skupa, Koval, Schwing, Wenig etc.) would often offer mere sketched ideas that Skupa 'voraciously' developed on stage. He was capable of capturing the attention through a puppet for up to over half an hour. (MALÍKOVÁ and VAŠÍČEK 2000: 27)

Such acting towards the auditorium necessitated and played off maximum contact between performers and spectators, requiring a close and inspired rapport with the audience; as Jan Malík stated truthfully – **although with a tinge of the tendentious socialist ideology** – this was truly popular theatre, theatre that was also militant, rough and coarse, bluntly juicy, loud-voiced and full-bloodied as well as naturally simple and powerful (MALÍK 1965). On account of this comic ability, Skupa's pupil Jiří Trnka grouped him with the greatest Czech comedians of the era:

In Prague I came to know the popular comedians Vlasta Burian, Ferenc Futurista, and of course, Voskovec and Werich. I realised how great an actor was hidden in the professor whenever I compared him with those comedians. He shared their improvisation skill and the agility of wit that was born in immediate contact with an audience. (TRNKA 1967)

Witnesses repeatedly remembered Skupa's vocal range, from a sonorous bass, through a baritone, tenor, to a childish falsetto. Besides, he was able to differentiate each of them into several independent registers and was able to play up to six roles within one show

in such a convincing way that the audience would not recognise that these were the performances of one person.

Skupa was by nature an explicitly counter-literary type – especially since he had such a strong actorly individuality. His daily practice with the audience led him to eliminating anything that had merely a literary beauty but no stage liveness. This would project itself onto his entire artistic outlook. This was also fuelled by his spontaneous folk nature, his effort to be perfectly easily understood as well as his desire for audience response that is much more easily provoked by well-trying things that are practical and emotional rather than by a literary construction however sublime it may be. It should be stressed that this was not due to Skupa's literary incompetence, weakness or numbness, but rather as a result of his full appreciation of the stage and its inherited laws and rules, which led him to this approach. For years, Skupa would direct his own shows. His direction was guided by his effort for maximum simplicity and clarity of mood. Skupa's direction was conditioned by an extremely spare economy of tools that forced him to be inventive and more sensitive on a small scale with few means and little equipment. (ČESAL 1962: 31)

The recollections of Skupa's work by his contemporaries Jan Dvořák, Miloš Kirschner and Bohumil Šulc, as recorded by Miroslav Česal, suggest that Skupa's primary and strong actorly impulse influenced his handling of other components of the theatre of the day-to-day practice, directing them to maximum effectiveness with minimum means.

The Liberated Theatre (*Osvobozené divadlo*)

Before the end of 1926, the double bill of Spejbl and Hurvínek appeared on stage only in the forms of improvised cabarets and partiers after the main piece of the LDFO's usual repertoire, often in the presence of Kašpárek or Švejk. With 1928 came a breakthrough with Josef Skupa and Frank Wenig's revue *Z Plzně do Plzně* (From Pilsen to Pilsen), inspired by the success of Oldřich Nový and Vilém Skoch's revue *Z Brna do Brna* (From Brno to Brno) that not only launched the era of the modern full-length revue repertoire, but also the time of the definitive separation between the LDFO and Josef Skupa, and the family and the traditional repertoire of the long-standing principal Karel Novák. Despite the uneven artistic value of the early revue scripts whose structure still referred back to the Dadaist carelessness, the productions had a great deal of success, with for instance the revue *Páté přes deváté* (At Sixes and Sevens) enjoying a run of over a hundred performances. The positive and often enthusiastic reviews show that the audiences were fascinated by something other than the quality and the message of the script. These were certainly the new characters of Spejbl and Hurvínek and their perfect performance delivery.

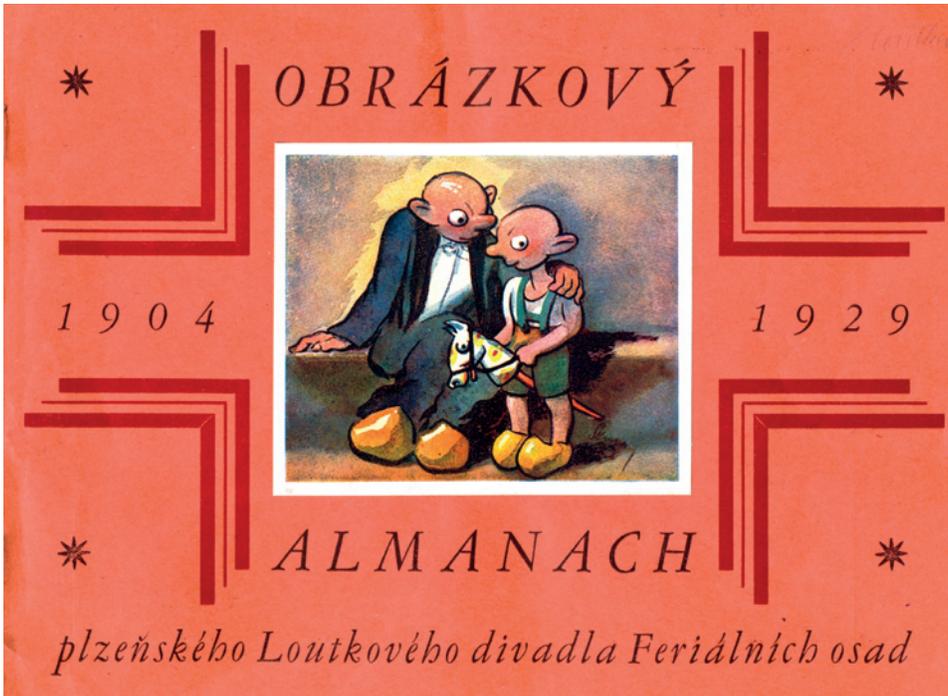


Fig. 41: Book cover, Pilsen 1930. *Picture Almanac 1904/1929 of the Pilsen Puppet Theatre of the Holiday Resorts (Obrázkový almanach 1904/1929 plzeňského loutkového divadla Feriálních osad)*. Pilsen: František Bergman, 1930.

In 1927 and 1928, after the departure of the Novák family, Skupa repeatedly toured to Prague with the reconstituted LDFO; his appearance on the stages of the LD Umělecké výchovy (The Popular Theatre of Artistic Education), the Říše loutek (The Puppet Empire Theatre) and the National Theatre at Vinohrady would attract the attention of the culture editor of the *České slovo* newspaper, the already well-known theatre critic Jindřich Vodák, who contributed to the articulation of the core of Skupa's modern artistic expression. In his view Skupa's outstanding art was not based on the quality of the repertoire, which was principally similar to the Prague cabaret stages, but lay in the fact that Skupa's modernised puppets concentrated the entire field of expression possible in puppetry, shifting all its banality and triviality to a higher and purer aesthetic range:

Skupa's puppet cabaret gives the genre a new and more gracious magic exactly by transferring it onto the puppet stage where it is heightened to a more aesthetic, purer and more charming sphere. A puppet is a quiet, humble, reserved and impersonal creature; it does not press its self-loving cunning between the delivered words and the spectator; it does not muddy and disturb the attention through various pranks; it allows one to concentrate as much as can be on what is spoken and sung. [...] Out of all that Skupa



Fig. 42: Spejbl and Hurvínek fishing, Josef Skupa, Pilsen, the 1930s. *Pilsen Puppet Theatre (Plzeňské loutkové divadélko)*, an information brochure. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

summoned for this cabaret production, nothing excites the audience as much as the tiny, big-eyed and nodding Hurvínek – and truly, this Hurvínek is worth properly looking into. He is no little chap to laugh at but rather a pitiful wretch that makes your compassion give him a long thought, a suffering and haunting child type that could only be born out of today or that only our present day could give his touching shape. [...] Skupa created him with all of his heart and soul. He gave him a thin, weak and fainting voice that keeps dropping abashedly at the ends of sentences; he gave him a wobbly, dangly way of walking that needs a scooter to get a more daring ride; he gave him a head on a stalk so that it can humbly bow down to the very ground. A sorrowful, lamentable creature! He appears between cabaret rhymes and jokes like a rebuke, like an indictment of a careless time that has no sense for its dues towards all those Hurvíneks. (VODÁK 1927)

The revue evenings *What Puppets Can Do (Co loutky dovedou)*, *Round and Round and Round We Go (Do kola, do kola, do kolečka)* and especially *Tip-Top Revue* – which was



Fig. 43: Skupa's touring company in Břeclav in 1931. Jan Malík. *National Artist Josef Skupa (Národní umělec Josef Skupa)*. Prague: SNKLU, 1962: 80.



Fig. 44: Spejbl's Wind Philharmonic, Josef Skupa and Jiřina Skupová. *Loutkář 18* (1931): 6: 125.



Fig. 45: Mánička with Mrs Drbálková; the 1940s.
© Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

later, in January and December 1929, broadcast live from the Radio Palace in Prague as far as Moravia and Slovakia – had received generally very positive press from a legion of journalists, critics and reviewers, among them Karel Koval (Šlais), Miloslav Novotný, Jindřich Vodák, Vladimír Müller, Karel Engelmüller, Karel Eysselt-Klimpély and others. A big triumph was the guest appearance of Skupa's company with *Tip-Top Revue* and *Co loutky dovedou* as part of the representative programme of the Fifth Congress of Puppet Workers and the International Puppetry Exhibition 18–20 May 1929. Among the enthused audience was the French puppeteer and poet Paul Jeane, who not only captured his fascination with Skupa and his puppets in a poem (which I cited at the opening of this essay), but whose ready intervention in those days in Skupa's presence led to the foundation of UNIMA, the first international puppeteers' union, at whose next congress in Paris in October 1929, Skupa would excel in an international context (JIRÁSKOVÁ 2012).

Shortly before, in September 1929, during a performance of the revue *The Suffering of Spejbl and of his Very Son* (*Utrpení Spejbla i syna jeho*) at the LDFO in Pilsen, in the middle of the parodic rendering of the recent hit 'The Three Policemen' (*Tři strážníci*), everyone could hear from the box the typical loud laughter of Jan Werich, one of the key protagonists of the avant-garde Liberated Theatre (*Osvobozené divadlo*) of Prague, which was in the years 1927–1939 perhaps the most remarkable and original theatre company in the country. On that night, an entire deputation of the Liberated Theatre arrived incognito in Pilsen in order to try out first-hand the experience of Spejbl's and Hurvíněk's humour, the allegorical poetics and particularly the stage qualities of Skupa's revues, with the intention of a possible collaboration – one that would eventually materialise in December 1929 and January 1930.

Voskovec and Werich had just concluded a weaker year, having hastily staged their plays *Gorilla ex Machina* (*Gorila ex machina*), *The Dice are Cast* (*Kostky jsou vrženy*) and *The Diving Suit Première* (*Premiéra Skafandr*), none of which reached the required commercial success. Besides this, it was at a time in which they had made a proclamatory statement in the first issue of their magazine *Vest Pocket Revue* in where they announced the establishment of a grand cultural organism that would comprise theatre, film as well as evening, late-night and of course children's shows for which they planned to recruit Skupa's company (CINGER 2008).

Despite the decisive success of Skupa's guest appearances in the Liberated Theatre, their collaboration did not continue. The performances of Skupa's as-yet amateur company were burdened with such an extortionate amusement tax (as the ancient puppet-master licence still grouped puppet theatre together with circuses, fairground shooting ranges and such attractions) (GRYM 1990: 26) that Skupa had to be grudgingly replaced with the financially more viable, though artistically dubious and debased Vojta Merten. Skupa also decided to protect himself from paying the amusement dues to Prague City Council through legal action; the court case would drag on between 1919 and 1932, with a negative result for Skupa at the Supreme Administrative Court in Brno (MIKOTA 1963: 270). It was this outcome that:

put paid to this eminently interesting project that would definitely combine Skupa, Spejbl and Hurvíněk with the duo of live clowns directly on stage. The very first issue of the theatre magazine *Vest Pocket Revue*, in the form of a miniature dialogue of S+H, allegedly written by Skupa himself, mentions a production of *Vest Pocket Varieté* that would be an original adaptation of Voskovec and Werich's early production... this time for puppets. Side by side Spejbl and Hurvíněk, Voskovec and Werich were to appear in the form of wooden protagonists on strings, and Jaroslav Ježek was to compose new music for this 'renewed premiere'. V+W were meant to play and sing their original roles from the puppet leaders' bridge. The hour-long show, combined with film, was to be performed daily from 2pm to 6pm to make maximum use of the theatre's capacity. However, the conflict

with the Prague City Council delayed and finally precluded this extraordinary artistic project. (GRYM 1985: 6)

All these experiences eventually led the thirty-seven-year-old Skupa to a radical decision to 'liberate' himself and set up his own theatre company in 1930. He opted for professionalisation – a rather risky but artistically concentrated path that resulted in the creation of the first modern professional touring theatre company. With this ensemble, Skupa started a series of tours throughout Czechoslovakia and many European countries, culminating after 1947 when Skupa's company refined their theatre style known all over Europe as 'The Skupa School'.

A European Artist

As early as 1932, two years into their professional independence, Skupa's theatre toured abroad again. In October 1932, in the *Arbeiterhaus* in Vienna, they performed some scenes in Czech for their Viennese countrymen, giving a children's matinée and an adult evening production. In the following summer of 1933, Skupa and his wife, with Spejbl and Hurvínek, received an enthusiastic response of their puppetry art at the representative evening of the 4th Congress of UNIMA in Ljubljana (MALÍK 1933; VESELÝ 1933) at which Skupa also became UNIMA's president for the next term, taking over from Jindřich Veselý. The culmination of Skupa's ambitions for an international profile in the interwar period was their Baltic tour, which lasted from 19 May to 18 June 1935 and consisted of twenty-five performances in Kaunas, Riga, Tallinn, Pärnu, Tartu and Klaipėda. Skupa presented a programme consisting of acrobatic, variety and singing numbers, interspersed with the ruminations of Spejbl and Hurvínek in Czech. In retrospect, Jan Malík summarised the outcome of Skupa's tour as follows:

Apart from the outstanding artistic success, this tour had far-reaching publicity importance. For Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, puppet theatre was an absolute novelty – and no wonder Skupa's marionettes inspired a number of Baltic artists to their own puppetry work. (MALÍK 1965: 130)

Other intended tours to the USA in 1936 and to Paris in 1938 did not materialise for financial and management reasons, so the only other foreign trip was a one-day stand in Vienna in May 1936, in which city Skupa repeated his former success, this time in the newly opened theatre Scala. Shortly after, the political situation in Europe deteriorated and Skupa had to wait another decade for another chance to tour abroad.

After World War II, Josef Skupa became culturally prominent, both for artistic reasons and also as a persistent and open anti-Nazi figure who was severely persecuted by the German regime – facing denigrating attacks in the Fascist press, interrogated by



Fig. 46: Theatre S+H, the store of Skupa's puppets, the 1940s. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

police as well as by the Gestapo and finally imprisoned in Pilsen and in the Matylda Prison in Dresden. The first post-war foreign tour of Skupa's company, financed by the Ministry of Information, took place in the spring of 1947 on the occasion of the Czechoslovak Film Festival in London. Josef Skupa and his wife participated in the annual show of The British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild at the Victory House on 24 April 1947 before launching a British tour on 30 April 1947 with a TV broadcast from the BBC studio at Alexandra Palace, followed by 23 performances at St Pancras Town Hall, at the Czechoslovak Institute, at The Friendship Club Lidice House and the Arts Theatre, where:

the mostly visually conceived programme featured the stars Spejbl and Hurvínek with their Czech dialogues; the clear dramatic situations and the sentence intonations, telling silences, organically deployed tempos and the suggestively realistic gesticulation guaranteed a perfect comprehension of the scenes. (MALÍK 1965: 162)

Eric Hudson gave account of Skupa's production in the British magazine *The Puppet Master*:



Fig. 47: Theatre S+H in the British studio of the BBC, London 1947. Jan Malík.
National Artist Josef Skupa (Národní umělec Josef Skupa). Prague: SNKLU, 1962: 110.

Generally speaking, apart from school performances, we are unused, in England, to so many fully manipulated marionettes appearing all at the same time in one act. This, of course, is only possible with several operators, as was the case this evening. It was a novelty, therefore, for us to behold such ensembles in various acts as a ten-piece guitar orchestra (feel I err here in description) a six-piece negro jazz band, a male vocal quintet, and five Czech wandering minstrels. It is difficult to describe individually in a short space these particular acts, but each figure was full of character, distinctive from its associates, and beautifully made and operated.

Each puppet in the musical scenes was carefully timed in performance, and in character, according to the ensemble in which it appeared. (HUDSON 1947: 138–139)

A year later, in the spring of 1948, Skupa toured England and Scotland on the invitation of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Over 52 days, Skupa's company gave seventy-two performances, out of which thirty-two were for children. This culminated in two fifteen-minute extracts from their shows being broadcast by the BBC on 2 May 1948,



Fig. 48: Josef Skupa with Spejbl and Hurvínek, Prague 1948. © Collections of Marie and Pavel Jirásek.

directed by Jan Bussell (BUSSELL and PHILPOTT 1948). The British puppeteer Jan Bussell later participated in an exchange visit, making guest appearances with his wife Ann Hogarth Bussell in Prague in September 1948.

Naturally, after the political coup of February 1948, Czechoslovakia moved towards purportedly Socialist politics, resulting in the raising of the 'Iron Curtain' between the Eastern bloc and Western Europe; Skupa's foreign tours therefore generally only brought the company to the neighbouring Soviet-controlled countries: Poland in May 1949, the USSR in September 1949 and Poland again in June 1950; this last trip became the final occasion when Skupa actively participated in the performances of his company, due to his deteriorating health. However, none of these Eastern bloc tours surpassed the British tour in audience numbers; in Britain in 1948, Skupa's shows drew audiences of 58,000 spectators. In August 1953, the company (without Skupa) toured Romania; in April 1954 they visited Hungary. For both tours, the polyglot Miloš Kirschner substituted Skupa as the new performer of Spejbl and Hurvínek, and was able to make use of his outstanding language skills. Skupa's last travels abroad were his participation in tours to Paris and London in March and April 1955. Skupa did not perform himself during these trips, but he was nevertheless present in the role of the reviewing major-domo. Similarly, he also took part in the long tour of the Eastern German Democratic Republic and of West Berlin in 1956; during these performances he appeared more as a celebrity and a renowned figure.

During his busy life, between 1929 and 1956, Skupa visited twelve countries altogether, and became not only a leading representative of the high standards of Czechoslovak puppetry abroad but also, thanks to his enormous successes and originality, he became the founder of modern Czechoslovak puppet art in a European context (MALÍK 1965: app. C, E).

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Summary

Josef Skupa was a leading avant-garde artist and puppet player with a background in visual arts and scenography. The article documents his life from his early cabaret experiments in Prague and his scenographic designs in Pilsen, through the innovative activities of his theatre company, to his international acclaim (which lasted from the late 1920s to the 1950s). The origin of Skupa's famous puppet double act: Spejbl and Hurvíněk is addressed, alongside an account of the development of the puppets as artefacts and as dramatic characters that defined a key era of Czech puppet theatre and established a style known throughout Europe as 'The Skupa School'.

Keywords

Josef Skupa, Gustav Nosek, Jiří Trnka, Spejbl and Hurvíněk, UNIMA, Czech puppet theatre, Avant-garde theatre, scenography

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DOI: 10.5817/TY2015-2-5

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2015