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Modern Czech play (1896-1989); Between text and performance (a dictionary of works) : summary

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Summary

Modern Czech Play (1896–1989); Between Text and Performance (A Dictionary of Works)

The project *Modern Czech Play (1896–1989); Between Text and Performance (A Dictionary of Works)* is a collaborative research project of the Department for Research into 20th Century and Contemporary Literature at the Institute of Czech Literature AS CR. Its aim is to create a complex lexicographic publication containing basic information about key dramatic works (texts and their stagings), which considerably influenced the literary and theatre development and which co-created the image of the Czech literary and theatre culture. The project of a work-centred dictionary assigned to fill the gap within the concerned fields of study; to provide the scholarly public with a publication that will bring a comprehensive report of roughly one hundred years of transformation of Czech plays and the history of their staging in the form of approximately 200–250 dictionary entries. For this reason, the final publication will include the works in a chronological order (based on the date of the first entrance into public communication).

The dictionary will be dedicated to drama of a period (delimited by the years 1896 and 1989) that “lived and created” under the sign of a notion of “modern art”. The publication should thus capture the key lines of the Czech drama of the given period – the presented works will create a representative sample, which represents a kind of canon of the modern Czech drama. The selection will consider several various criteria: the work and its relation to a certain period or art movements, a prominent author’s works, a specific genre, a specific theatre poetics, and exile or the samizdat communication circle. The dictionary will primarily include such works that caused an unquestionable response among critics and audiences (or readers), or such that introduced a distinctively novel poetics, i.e. such texts that have left a clear trace in the Czech dramatic literature and the history of Czech theatre and have thus become crucial for our understanding of the given period and the current state of the national culture.

The inner structure of individual entries is determined by the aim of the publication, which is to analyse and interpret representative works of modern Czech dramatic literature and show them in context of development of the national literature, literary

and theatre life, and critical reception. The first part of the entry will be the **HEADING**, which will be the most visible part of the entry and will include the basic data about the concerned work. It will state the name of the author, the title, the author's subtitle, the date of the first publication or multiplication of the manuscript and the date of theatre première. The second part will be the **CHARACTERISTICS** of the work, which will express the basic generic and stylistic affiliation of the work. The third part will be the **DESCRIPTION** of the work, which will offer the reader fundamental information about the work's composition, main characters, plot, brief spatial-temporal characteristics, etc. The fourth part of the entry will be **INTERPRETATION** of the work, which is the most open part of the whole entry, where the authors can prove their interpretive skills and which proves that the dictionary cannot be considered as a mere offshoot of applied research. This part should characterise the overall significance of the text, introduce its thematic and motivic background, and show ways to understand it. Here, all specific dramatic devices that differentiate the text from other dramatic works and clearly identify its affiliation with a specific line of dramatic literature. The fifth part called **THE WORK AMONG OTHER WORKS** will consist of information concerning the work's position among its author's other works, as well as relationship with works by other authors. It will study various lines of development of dramatic literature as a whole, e.g. on thematic and generic levels. The sixth part, **LITERARY AND THEATRE LIFE**, will present the reader with relevant information concerning creation and life of the given work (such as potential censorship and author's collaboration with certain theatre ensembles). This part will help to place the described work into the context of the author's life, political social and cultural context of the era of its creation, and into the contemporaneous context of literary and theatre practice. The part **PRODUCTION** will introduce the key points of the life of the drama on the Czech stage. It will be based on information included in journal reviews and studies, photographic material, sound and video recordings, surviving costume designs, models of the stage and – with caution – memories of direct participants on the productions (e.g. actors). It will focus primarily on première productions, on productions with innovative interpretations of the text, productions that used a non-standard productions procedure, or such where an actor made an exceptional performance. If the material requires so, this part will also deal with selected international productions (e.g. premières of authors in exile, etc.). The eighth part will be **RECEPTION** and it will offer a precise and comprehensive characteristics of literary and theatre reception of the work from a horizontal perspective (in various periods) as well as vertical perspective (in various journals according to their subject fields, etc.). The text of this part will note what reviewers or authors of studies appreciated in their critiques and what they considered problematic and what their position (methodological, ideological) was when evaluating the work. The last part, called **BIBLIOGRAPHY**, will provide the reader with a necessary bibliographical service with further readings. This part will be divided into the following seven parts that will include bibliographical details about: (1) various editions and publications of the work (including journals), (2) selected translations, (3) productions (theatre, radio and television), (4) studies, reviews, monograph chapters, etc.,

dealing with the work, (5) supplementary secondary bibliography (e.g., articles about the author's other works) and references to databases, where the prospective scholars will find further information. This structure of the entry will provide the reader with basic information about the work and its position within the historical context, as well as references directed towards further relevant sources.

We will join the entries into several historical chapters, thus drawing several stages that the Czech modern drama underwent, in order to amplify the reader's notion of historical development and period context. This "higher periodisation" will be based on the periodisation defined by the present-day literary historiography. The publication will thus be divided into eight periods: (I) 1896–1918, (II) 1918–1929, (III) 1929–1939, (IV) 1939–1945, (V) 1945–1948, (VI) 1948–1958, (VII) 1958–1970, and (VIII) 1970–1989. All these chapters will include a brief introduction (c. 4–5 pp.) that will briefly present key characteristics and contexts of theatre and literary life in the given period (important theatres, directors, etc.).

This layout of the work will enable the reader to use the dictionary in various ways, because it will offer several different frames to dealing with and studying modern dramatic literature. The publication will find its use among readers who wish to become acquainted with the formal or thematic structure of a given work. Users looking for a list of relevant bibliography concerning the given work, information about its critical responses, and basic facts about the creation of the manuscript will also find necessary information here. However, the dictionary will also serve to all persons interested in the individual historical periods of modern drama and the Czech modern drama as a whole.

The Sixties. Period no 7 (1958–1970)

Since the work on this mammoth dictionary is to continue for the next few years, we decided to publish the selected entries first in a scholarly journal, so that the professional public could see some partial outputs of the project and, if necessary, evaluate it critically. The present digest opens with entries covering plays written in 1960s, a crucial period which has determined and informed the Czech drama and theater also in the years to come in many respects, and is still embedded in cultural memory even nowadays.

The opening text of this Supplement is the entry written by the literary historian Michal Přibáň, devoted to the notorious piece of the Czech musical theater, *Kdyby tisíc klarinetů* (If a Thousand Clarinets) by Jiří Suchý and Ivan Vyskočil from 1958, which to a large extent preceded the appearance of the so-called small scenes whose importance for theater poetics of the 1960s and the further development of Czech theater in general is undeniable. The entry by the literary historian Aleš Merenus attempts to set into historical and cultural contexts the first drama of Milan Kundera *Majitelé klíčů*

(Key Owners, 1961), which mirrors to some extent the dramatic technique of the 1950s drama, but surpasses it considerably in its structure and unique poetics, as demonstrated by enthusiastic acceptance of the play not only in the theatres of the whole Eastern Bloc, but also in the then democratic world. Next, there is the entry of the literary historian Eva Formánková, which focuses on Ivan Klíma's first dramatic work, the *Zámek* (Castle, 1964). The play hides its political criticism behind intertextual references to Kafka's works, representing a typical so-called model play, framed by detective story and strongly informed by dramatic writing of Friedrich Dürrenmatt. In contrast, the well-known play of the same period written by Václav Havel, the *Vyrozumění* (The Notice, 1965), draws more on the tradition of the theatre of absurd. The main theme of the *Vyrozumění* is, according to the theatre historian Libor Vodička, the depiction of the mechanism of "deconstructing the identity of the individual and the whole society through the establishment of a totalitarian Orwellian newspeak". Literary scholar David Krocha wrote another entry which presents a piece of dramatic work that is the typical example of the dramaturgy of the Činoherní klub theatre, the play by Alena Vostřá *Na koho to slovo padne* (Who is the name, 1966); its characters depict in humorous cameos the lifestyle of the youth in the 1960s Czechoslovakia. The final text is the entry by literary historian Mark Lollok dealing with in many respects visionary play *Kosmické jaro* (The Cosmic Spring) by Ladislav Smoček, which originated at the very end of the decade, but was only staged at the beginning of the 1970s. The play, hence, represents the particular stage Czech drama had reached before the onset of the so-called Normalization at the beginning of the 1970s, which brought hard times not only to Czech drama and theatre but to the whole Czech culture.

Although the companion certainly can not cover the chosen period in its entire complexity and diversity, it draws attention to some of the decisive moments of Czech drama at that time. It shows the advent of studio theaters, heralded by the initiate productions of Divadlo Na zábradlí theatre, and presents the outline of the development of model play as a specific genre and Václav Havel's dramatic writing, uniquely Czech branch of the absurd drama. The digest is concluded by two texts that seek to describe the theatre poetics of one of the most important drama theatres of the second half of the 20th century, the Činoherní klub theatre. Through the narrative told by the selected six dramas, the reader of this dictionary Supplement, as we hope, will get a grasp of the general development of Czech drama in the 1960s with regard to the issue of mutual relations between dramatic text and theatre production.