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Karel Novák

Theatre Director (1916–1968)

The monograph is concerned with the life and work of Czech theatre director, Karel Novák (1916–1968), describing his theatre activities in different theatres all around the country between 1941 and 1968.

Novák acquired his first acting and directing experiences in theatres in Jihlava and Kladno during the World War II. In Jihlava, he profoundly influenced the repertoire in the season 1941/2 when he directed half of the productions (mostly comedies) released in the theatre. He collaborated there with directors Antonín Kurš and Otomar Krejča, the latter of whom Novák followed to work with in Kladno in 1943/4. Although still at the beginning of his career, Novák had already attained the directorial style typical of his post-war theatre work, characterized especially by presentational and expressive modes of delivery. One of Novák's emblematic productions of this period is *For the Welfare of the Nation* by Ivan Cankar (1945, Theatre D 46), appraised by critics as the greatest success of Kladno Theatre in the season 1945/6.

From 1946 to 1949, Novák worked in the State Theatre in Brno where he proved his sensitivity to the talents and limits of the individual actors in the ensemble, especially with respect to the dramaturgy of the repertoire. Hence, in the respective seasons, collective productions with large casts outnumber chamber pieces that require more compact and profiled actors group than Novák had at his disposal in Brno. He started to pick his core actors in another employment of his other theatre position in Pardubice – Blanka Bohdanová, Anna Ferencová, Jan Štěpánková, Karel Urbánek, Josef Elsner, and others – introducing plays with strong leading roles for them to star in (e.g. *Manon Lescaut*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Don Carlos*). In Olomouc, he added Věra Bublíková,

Slávka Budínová, Zora Rozsypalová, Ilja Racek, and Radúz Chmelík among his prominent actors; in his last employment in the E. F. Burian Theatre he let these core actors (Bohdanová, Budínová, Racek) star in popular, yet at the same time socially relevant productions, such as *The Three Sisters*, *Frank the V*, *The Bathhouse*, and *The Vichy Case*.

Novák saw the main problem of the post-war Czech theatre in the lack of contemporary up-to-date dramatic texts; as a result, he staged mostly older Czech drama, mainly the inter-war playwrights such as Vladislav Vančura and Karel Čapek. The contemporary foreign stage plays (e.g. by George Bernard Shaw, Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, etc.), on the contrary, fulfilled his idea of relevant dramatic production with poignant timely statements or inspiring personal stories. During his Brno period, two parallel dramaturgical lines can be distinguished in his theatre work: grotesque parables criticizing the current politics and society (Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Pirandello's *The Man, the Beast and the Virtue*, Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Krechinsky's Wedding*), and large poetic tableaux in the style of magical realism (O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed*, Girardoux' *The Madwoman of Chaillot*). When Aleš Podhorský became the managing director of Brno State Theatre in 1948, he made Novák to change his directorial style and conform to the newly-introduced poetics of Social Realism. This attempt at controlling his artistic work might have prompted Novák to leave the Moravian metropolis for cultural periphery, the Beskydské Theatre in Nový Jičín.

Although he could not evade the so-called progressive Socialist dramaturgy altogether in Nový Jičín, Novák nevertheless managed to find a way of staging these plays so that they were at least tolerable by using video projections in the intermissions illustrating the plot and supporting the comparably weak momentums in the dramatic structure (e.g. in *The New Fighters Will Arise*, or *Prague Will Stay Mine (Be Awake!)*). The most important of his directions in the Beskydské Theatre were the productions of Shakespeare's plays, which he adapted to the needs of the audience unaccustomed to sophisticated dramatic and directorial techniques. Radúz Chmelík starred there as Hamlet in an outstanding Novák's production of the eponymous play, later alternating the part with Ilja Racek in the production in Olomouc in 1957.

The requirement of comprehensibility was dominant also in Novák's directions in theatre in Pardubice, e.g. in *Manon Lescaut* starring Blanka Bohdanová and Karel Urbánek, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and *Don Carlos*. He, thus, managed to raise the attendance considerably in comparison with the previous period, when the audience tended to ignore the theatre (or at least its Soviet and "progressive" repertoire). Novák based his productions there on strong stories, often with prominent love theme, competent actors (see above), functional stage design (Jiří Vopršal), and spectacular costumes. He was similarly successful with this

concept in Olomouc, e.g. in the timely poetic parable *Ukerveve Lake* by Vladislav Vančura; he abandoned there the grotesque stylization and large tableaux of previous periods of his work, replacing it with thorough exploration of the inner self of the characters depicted by well-thought-through acting (e.g. in *Cousin Bette*, or *A View from the Bridge*). He also found another scenographer with similar opinions on theatre as were his in Olomouc, Oldřich Šimáček.

In the E. F. Burian Theatre, Novák developed Burian's legacy not only by his proclaimed turn to stage poetry but also in following the progressive steps of the Avant-Garde, especially in satirical productions criticizing the contemporary society (Czechoslovak premiere of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, *Frank the V* by Dürrenmatt, Ostrovsky's *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man*, adaptation of Mayakovsky's *The Bathhouse*, *Tarelkin's Death* by Sukhovo-Kobylin, etc.). Besides these satirical dramas, Novák favoured chamber plays and plays with prominent acting parts in this period, such as *The Three Sisters* (starring Viola Zinková, Blanka Bohdanová, Marta Kučírková/Milena Dvorská), *The Rose Tattoo* (Slávka Budínová), *Anna Christie* (Milena Dvorská), and *The Chalk Garden* (Jiřina Šejbalová, Klára Jerneková).

