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On behalf of the nation? (More than) a nostalgic wandering through the Czech lands : book review of Jiří Valenta (ed.) Malované opony divadel českých zemí (Painted theatre curtains in the Czech lands)

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českých zemí* (Painted Theatre
Curtains in the Czech Lands)
Praha: NIPOS, 2010. 412 pages.**

Painted theatre curtains are part of Czech cultural heritage. However, this specific field of what is essentially an intersection of scenography and the visual arts has long remained outside the interest of theatre scholars and art historians, until today. A study in the field therefore entails demanding heuristic work.

Towards the end of 2010 the NIPOS (National Information and Advice Centre for Culture) issued a book entitled *Painted Theatre Curtains in the Czech Lands*. In this volume, more than four hundred pages present the findings of a four-year research project entitled *Uchování a prezentace kulturního dědictví českého i světového divadla* (Preservation and Presentation of the Cultural Heritage of Czech and Foreign Theatre). The team leaders of the project were Vítězslava Šrámková and Jiří Valenta. The volume is interlinked with the electronic *Databáze českého amatérského divadla* (Database of Czech Amateur Theatre) – a project launched in 2005 that has collected visual and textual material relating to the outstanding phenomenon of

Czech amateur theatre (available at: <http://www.amaterskedivadlo.cz>).

The general editor of the volume, Jiří Valenta, sums up the objectives of the publication in the introduction: the stated aim is to ‘document the phenomenon [of painted theatre curtains] from the smallest theatre ensemble performing on a collapsible stage in a small village, to the [Czech] National Theatre’ (7). It is a project with a historical range covering the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Accordingly, over three hundred curtains, representing a wide range of types, have been collected here. They include: curtains from aristocratic theatres in chateaux; those of professional and marionette theatres; curtains of amateur groups in villages and towns; iron curtains; and a variety of others. The breadth of the material consequently had to be dealt with by a team of researchers and required specific methods of processing and presentation.

The documentation is discussed in two parts. In the first section, Jiří Valenta characterises the project and presents the central problems of the study of theatre curtains. Přemysl Rut then provides an account of the function of curtains in both a technical and an artistic sense; Tomáš Vlček undertakes a study of the iconography of painted curtains (in the context of Czech history and society since the eighteenth century); and finally, Jiří Hilmera outlines the history of the rise and usage of the curtain in world theatre.

The second part of the book consists of thematic chapters. These are entitled: ‘Allegorical Scenes’; ‘Myths of Czech History’; ‘Nationalism and Patriotism’; ‘Iron Curtains’; ‘Aristocratic Theatres’; ‘Curtains with a Scenographic Purpose’; and

‘Marionette Theatres’. The chapters each list curtains in the form of catalogue and present items in chronological order. This is where the methodological limitations of processing such a disparate selection of material first appear. Sometimes the thematic delineations of the chapters are ambivalent; rather than consistently presenting chapters that are unified in content, there are instead a number of overlaps and instances of blurring (such as in the case of the Kladno Theatre curtain, pp. 260-261). Conversely, the final chapters devoted to marionette theatre (written by Alice Dubská and Jaroslav Blecha; see also Blecha’s article on family marionette theatres in this volume) form a compact unit with a clear system of subchapters.

Such a conception is ideal for random perusal of the book; readers can easily be guided by their own nostalgia, by curiosity, or by the simple pleasure of discovery – and easy reference is made possible by a careful index of places and names. However, catalogue items might have been arranged in a less ostentatious but more effectual manner had curtains been arranged alphabetically (according to their locations) and listed together with the introductory chapters in the first part of the book.

The specifics of the material and the early phases of the research are made apparent in the form of the catalogue items. Here, the optimal variant contains: (i) an illustration of the curtain; (ii) information on its theme; (iii) facts relating to the circumstances of its creation; (iv) a description of the activity of the theatre group that commissioned it; and (v) a glimpse of the wider historical context. Such an approach frequently attempts to uncover the complexity of the issues of iconography and compositional schemes, as

well as the function of the theatre in question in the context of its historical era. Appended also are brief biographical notes on the artists involved in the curtain’s production (these are written by Bronislav Pražan and Jaroslav Blecha); bibliographical references are also included, as is technical data relating to individual curtains. The standard of textual commentary for each curtain varies as a result of the disparate nature (and quality) of the sources and material available. Sometimes this is excellent, at other times it is more meagre (as with the case of the *Divadlo na Veveří* curtain, where half of the commentary simply recounts the artist’s biography, pp. 58-59).

The publication does not offer a sense of sentimental satisfaction to its readers and it is importantly not simply a panegyric to past generations. In his introduction, Jiří Valenta calls instead for collaboration and further mediation of the available information. It is an appeal not too distant from the nineteenth-century slogan: ‘*národ sobě*’ (On Behalf of the Nation). *Painted Theatre Curtains in the Czech Lands* is, in principle, a material version of the electronic *Database of Czech Amateur Theatre* and it is in that digital resource that readers may find further materials. From this perspective, the book is above all a call for further research, and a mapping of a hitherto under-explored field, so that this laudable initial phase does not remain without continuation.

