Eva Stehlíková | A Contribution to the Knowledge of Nineteenth-Century Czech Stage Art
Bořivoj Srba. V zahradách Thespidových (In Thespis’ Garden).

The author of this monumental publication has committed himself to the study of nineteenth-century Czech stage art for more than a quarter of a century. Since 1984 when his first study in the field was published, called ‘Stage Designs of Meyerbeer’s Operas on the Czech Stage’ (Hudební věda 21 (1984): 4: 376-385), Srba has written numerous articles. The present book is more than a collection of these: many of his previous publications have been reworked, augmented, or shortened; there are also several key studies that have not hitherto been published. Together, the twenty chapters of the volume form a unified whole presenting readers with a unique collection of information and analysis that cannot be found anywhere else, or would be difficult to trace in earlier scholarship.

Srba’s research revolves around the three most important centres of nineteenth-century theatre in Prague: the Stavovské divadlo (the Estates Theatre, built by Count Nostitz between 1781 and 1783), the Prozatímní divadlo (the Provisional Theatre, 1862-1883), and its continuation, the Národní divadlo (National Theatre, from 1881). His book offers detailed analysis of the scenographic collections of these individual theatres (stock décor, ad hoc decorative sets for particular productions, or decorative accessories enabling the producers to combine the holdings to form new sets), as well as information relating to the theatres’ inventories and a hypothetical identification of individual decorations. The most interesting parts of the volume are naturally those that focus on the scenographic equipment associated with specific productions, which are predominantly operas. These include: the first production of W. A. Mozart’s The Magic Flute (72-85), M. I. Glinka’s opera Ruslan and Lyudmila (239-246), a production of Bedřich Smetana’s Libuše (295-323), Antonín Dvořák’s Dimitrij (324-348) and Giacomo Meyerbeer’s operas Robert le Diable, Les Huguenots, Le Prophète, and L’Africaine (349-365).

In studying specific material, the author follows a process that leads him from a certain ‘generality’ of typified (stock) coulissen to individualised scenography, some of which brought to the stages in question realistic environments that were accurate in their localisation and historical detail. All such developments were, of course, taking place against a background of stylistic trends in European art (from Classicism through Empire style to Romanticism and, later, to Realism and Naturalism) and Srba’s volume offers a new glance at important productions of works central to the theatrical repertoire. This aspect is markedly visible in the chapter discussing the features of couleur locale (local colour) in the drama of Josef Kajetán Tyl (1808-1856). Tyl was a leading Czech dramatist of the nineteenth century, whose work may be classified on such evidence as Romantic (132-182). A juxtaposition of Tyl’s extra-dialogical and intra-dialogical stage
directions with the possibilities offered by
the Estates Theatre in productions of Czech
plays (or Czech adaptations of foreign plays) helps to identify Tyl’s method. On the one
hand, he situated the action of his plays in
settings for which prefabricated decorative
sets were available (such as the large hall or
short chamber, which were moreover easy
to create from existing stock items). On the
other hand, a different situation arises when
Tyl locates his action in exterior settings.

Apart from the existing coulisses (all of
which depict public spaces: squares, streets,
gardens, open countryside and others) there are locations in his plays that may
easily be identified with real scenery, be it
historical or contemporaneous. At times,
the dramatist even calls for specific well-
known locations, such as in his play Jan
Hus where scenes are situated in ‘an open
space in front of the Bethlehem Chapel’ or in ‘the Old Town Square, at the Týn
Church’ in Prague. Looking for evidence of
the scenographic solutions to such concrete
and specific stage directions has an almost
detective charm, especially when the author
makes an unexpected discovery among the
stage designs of the theatre collections (i.e.
those for Gotische Thor, Burgpforte etc.),
which could have served the turn. The key
discovery, however, was a commission by
the director Hoffmann for a new decoration
to the first scene of the play; the painters’
workshop was to create a bespoke special
decoration (or backdrop) described as
‘the Old Town Square with Týn Church’.
The usage of further typified decorative
sets naturally required that further
concretisations of the locations according
to Tyl’s directions had to be done by means
of acting and stage properties. Additional
stage sound from behind the stage is easily
imaginable; a more difficult issue is the
lighting arrangement; however Srba boldly
describes what he assumes to have been
the case in each instance (168-173). I have
here given one concrete example; however, it would also be possible to discuss stage
realisations of military camps, various
gardens and graveyards. Every sentence of
my account of this chapter (as well as of the
entire book) could be further elaborated,
since the author’s precision in refining every
detail is exhaustive, even in cases where the
iconographic sources are less than scarce.

Srba’s studies focus on Czech productions,
that is, productions realised in the Czech
language. It is therefore natural that the
author appreciates and values especially the
efforts made by the theatre practitioners of
this place and period to break away from
German as well as other foreign models,
and he stresses their attempts to invest the
visual arts with national flair and to stress
their ‘Czech-ness’. At the same time, the
author does not shy away from emphasising
in his conclusion that these trends had their
problematic aspects: scenography attempting
realistically to render the specifics of Czech
homeland settings ran into conflict with
those plays that were not conceived as a
realistic ‘scenes from life’, as was especially
ture with music theatre.

Among the assets of this highly useful
book are ninety-six pages of illustrations
(with 256 images), a rich bibliography (369-
417) and an English-language summary
of those chapters that the author considers
interesting to foreign readers (418-426).
What is missing, and which would enable
me to achieve perfect satisfaction with the
volume, is the current practice of referencing
in footnotes all cited or paraphrased passages
from secondary works.