
In memoriam Josef Krofta (1943–2015)

The ambition of the publication is not to be a monograph but rather a source book of key documents and glosses. The first part of the book (pp. 7–43) is dedicated to ‘Studies’ – individual critical and theoretical reflections on Matásek’s work, spanning several decades and reflecting his artistic development and the changing assessment of it. The following part (45–61) reprints period reviews of theatre productions. The pictorial core of the volume is illustrations of individual items of scenography – Czech(oslovak) (63–97), international (99–106), spoken drama (107–32), opera (133–40) – and artefacts – puppets (153–9) and posters (161–75). Inset are ‘Stage directors’ glosses’ (141–50) with personal testimonials of Matásek’s collaborators (such as a version of Joe Brandesky’s account of the aPOEtheosis project at the Ohio State University; see Brandesky’s text in this volume). The book is completed with the artist’s narrative curriculum vitae (176–81) and a list of all his scenographic works (182–4).

The material presented here documents Matásek’s concept of action scenography, which he developed especially after he came from the Alfa Theatre in Pilsen to the DRAK Theatre in Hradec Králové in 1974, where, jointly with Josef Krofta, he developed the aesthetics of objects in mo-
tion and – very importantly – their po-
etics of found objects engaged in theatre
action. These form the above-mentioned
paradigm shift in modern Czech puppet
theatre, complementing the puppet as an
anthropomorphic figure with its ‘rela-
tives’ from the world of objects and raw
matter. The free movement on the spec-
trum of object – animal – anthropomor-
phism – collage and the fluent transitions
of human features into objects (such as
skin and tissue into a bark-like struc-
ture) are distinctive elements of Petr
Matásek’s visual style.

To conclude, let me cite (in translation)
the ‘gloss’ that the late Josef Krofta wrote of
his collaborator. It is indicative of the lucky
creative synergies that met at DRAK Thea-
tre, and developed the tradition of Czech
puppet theatre into yet another, unprec-
edented quality:

Petr Matásek – schoolmate
When we studied with Petr Matásek in
the puppetry department at DAMU in the
1960s, it was animation that was mainly
taught. A whole semester or even a year
we played with one type of puppets. I don’t
know how Petr had it with Professor
Lander, but the puppet acting programme
taught walking, sitting down, kneeling
down, lying down with the puppet, and
who managed most credibly, was the best.
In other words, students learned to imitate
the live actor, who was the model.

Petr Matásek – puppeteer
We discovered the puppet’s power and
magic first-hand only later, at DRAK,
where we arrived – I from the Malé di-
vadlo in České Budějovice and Petr from
the Alfa in Pilsen. At DRAK, there were
people to learn from. We both under-
stood that the power of the puppet is first
of all in that it can walk, sit down and
kneel down in ways that the live actor can
ever dream to. Animation is far from
just a movement technique but derives
from the word anima, that is, the abil-
ity to breathe in the soul. The art lies in
uncovering opportunities for the puppet
in which it is irreplaceable. For the artist
the awareness that the puppet is an equal
partner as long as my actorly imagination
is sufficient to inspire through its faith the
un-live material with life.

Petr Matásek – visual artist
The integration of visual arts with acting
in creating the shape of the production
presupposes a mutual respect of both
artists: the scenographer and the actor.
Often respect is not enough. It has to be
admiration and reverence for one an-
other. Perhaps only in this way can one
reach the patience that this awful and
simultaneously beautiful addiction re-
quires. In normal theatre, Juliet meets the
scenographer usually through her stage
costume. That can form her character, it
can be smart, or simply just stifling. She
nips off to the wardrobe – and that’s it.
A puppet Juliet was created by the sce-
nographer, and if she wishes to complain
in the wardrobe of her tight bodice or an-
other imperfection, she also needs an ac-
tor. An expressive acting combined with
a feel for Matásek’s visual detail. That is
the mystery of Petr Matásek.

[...]

2015
Petr Matásek – cook
We have spent a long time together. On tour and at home. Abroad, he usually cooked and I took on the lesser culinary chores. Peeling potatoes, cooking pasta or rice and washing up to conclude. They never let me near meat. Petr used to have such a sharp forestry knife, a few old film cases with spices and most importantly he knew how to ‘simmer’ meat. I don’t know if he still cooks; I only wash up. As a visual artist he was, and is, always very good (144–5).

For more information on Petr Matásek, see his personal website at http://www.petrmatasek.cz

DOI: 10.5817/TY2015-2-14