

Editorial note

Semiotics in Action – as diverse in thematic orientation as the pieces assembled under this general heading are, they all share three important features. First, they invariably take as their point of departure a serious and sustained interest in the work of the theorists collectively referred to as the “Prague Linguistic Circle” (PLC) which was founded in 1926. While these theorists did not put the kind of emphasis on “the sign” which was placed on it by the emerging discipline of semiotics decades later, they nonetheless paved the way for the semiotic approach: their openness to the various communicative channels of theatre conceived as a highly collaborative art form was trailblazing, and while this volume takes different directions its journey nonetheless continues a path which the PLC theorists identified and created in the first place. Secondly, the interest of this volume in the PLC is not historical (or historiographical) in nature but creatively utilitarian: how can the work done within the PLC inspire others in their understanding of various kinds of performance-based art? Last but certainly not least, all papers are written by scholars who have been in close contact, as academic colleagues and in several cases also as former graduate students, with Veronika Ambros. Earlier drafts of them were in fact delivered at an event celebrating Veronika Ambros’ work and career at the University of Toronto in March 2018 (which had been instigated by Yana Meerzon and Andrés Pérez-Simón). Her stimulating influence both as an intellectual and as a person is palpable in all of them. As a result, this volume is also a celebration of her achievements as a researcher and doctoral supervisor.

The result is a collection which considers its eclecticism of influences and topics as an asset rather than some form of liability. Analyses of lightshows, performance art, puppet theatre and Disney movies sit side-by-side with reflections on Beckett’s theatre art via a semiotic lens. This diversity of the objects of study is itself of course characteristic of the PLC and subsequent, more clearly semiotic approaches, and it remains one of their greatest strengths. Another is the flexibility in the development and application of the conceptual toolkit. While the theorists of the PLC adamantly pursued their

conviction that language had to be studied functionally and as a manifold communicative sign system, there was no rigidity regarding the concepts to be deployed in this analysis (or, indeed, on what could or could not be considered a “language”: non-verbal modes of communication in fact loom very large and are considered on par, if not often more important, than verbal ones). Take as an example the phenomena subsumed by some, but not all, PLC theorists under the term *aktualizace*.¹ What mattered much more than consistently applied lingo was the more general mindset which considered theatre (or literature or folklore or language itself) as a dynamic communicative sign system which has to be approached with a descriptive rather than prescriptive mindset. Although often inspired by avant-garde art, as observers and regularly (also) as practitioners, the members of the PLC unlike many other theorist-practitioners in the 1920s and 1930s did not aim to provoke, nor did they see their thinking as inextricably linked to a certain novel way of creating art. They wanted to *understand* art – *any* art from *any* period and cultural sphere – in better and deeper ways. It is this very openness, flexibility and malleability which has, as is demonstrated by this volume, earned the PCL approach to culture the status of a role model, an inspiring place of departure for the present-day analysis of theatre and performance art, a status which will secure its future.

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1 See further the two studies by Veronika Ambros and Eva Šlaisová on the term and its somewhat troubled reception history in *Semiotica* 168 (2008): 58 and *Theatralia* 15 (2012): 2: 154–67 respectively.