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Modern Czech play (1896-1989); Between text and performance (a dictionary of works) : summary

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Summary

Modern Czech Play (1896–1989); Between Text and Performance (A Dictionary of Works)

The project *Modern Czech Play (1896–1989); Between Text and Performance (A Dictionary of Works)* is a collaborative research project of the Department for Research into 20th Century and Contemporary Literature at the Institute of Czech Literature AS CR. Its aim is to create a complex lexicographic publication containing basic information about key dramatic works (texts and their stagings), which considerably influenced the literary and theatre development and which co-created the image of the Czech literary and theatre culture. The project of a work-centred dictionary assigned to fill the gap within the concerned fields of study; to provide the scholarly public with a publication that will bring a comprehensive report of roughly one hundred years of transformation of Czech plays and the history of their staging in the form of approximately 230 dictionary entries. For this reason, the final publication will include the works in a chronological order (based on the date of the first entrance into public communication).

The dictionary will be dedicated to drama of a period (delimited by the years 1896 and 1989) that “lived and created” under the sign of a notion of “modern art”. The publication should thus capture the key lines of the Czech drama of the given period – the presented works will create a representative sample, which represents a kind of canon of the modern Czech drama. The selection will consider several various criteria: the work and its relation to a certain period or art movements, a prominent author’s works, a specific genre, a specific theatre poetics, and exile or the samizdat communication circle. The dictionary will primarily include such works that caused an unquestionable response among critics and audiences (or readers), or such that introduced a distinctively novel poetics, i.e. such texts that have left a clear trace in the Czech dramatic literature and the history of Czech theatre and have thus become crucial for our understanding of the given period and the current state of the national culture.

The inner structure of individual entries is determined by the aim of the publication, which is to analyse and interpret representative works of modern Czech dramatic literature and show them in context of development of the national literature, literary and theatre life, and critical reception. The first part of the entry will be the **HEADING**, which will be the most visible part of the entry and will include the basic data about the concerned work. It will state the name of the author, the title, the author’s subtitle,

the date of the first publication or multiplication of the manuscript and the date of theatre première. The second part will be the CHARACTERISTICS of the work, which will express the basic generic and stylistic affiliation of the work. The third part will be the DESCRIPTION of the work, which will offer the reader fundamental information about the work's composition, main characters, plot, brief spatial-temporal characteristics, etc. The fourth part of the entry will be INTERPRETATION of the work, which is the most open part of the whole entry, where the authors can prove their interpretive skills and which proves that the dictionary cannot be considered as a mere offshoot of applied research. This part should characterise the overall significance of the text, introduce its thematic and motivic background, and show ways to understand it. Here, all specific dramatic devices that differentiate the text from other dramatic works and clearly identify its affiliation with a specific line of dramatic literature. The fifth part called THE WORK AMONG OTHER WORKS will consist of information concerning the work's position among its author's other works, as well as relationship with works by other authors. It will study various lines of development of dramatic literature as a whole, e.g. on thematic and generic levels. The sixth part, LITERARY AND THEATRE LIFE, will present the reader with relevant information concerning creation and life of the given work (such as potential censorship and author's collaboration with certain theatre ensembles). This part will help to place the described work into the context of the author's life, political social and cultural context of the era of its creation, and into the contemporaneous context of literary and theatre practice. The part PRODUCTION will introduce the key points of the life of the drama on the Czech stage. It will be based on information included in journal reviews and studies, photographic material, sound and video recordings, surviving costume designs, models of the stage and – with caution – memories of direct participants on the productions (e.g. actors). It will focus primarily on première productions, on productions with innovative interpretations of the text, productions that used a non-standard productions procedure, or such where an actor made an exceptional performance. If the material requires so, this part will also deal with selected international productions (e.g. premières of authors in exile, etc.). The eighth part will be RECEPTION and it will offer a precise and comprehensive characteristics of literary and theatre reception of the work from a horizontal perspective (in various periods) as well as vertical perspective (in various journals according to their subject fields, etc.). The text of this part will note what reviewers or authors of studies appreciated in their critiques and what they considered problematic and what their position (methodological, ideological) was when evaluating the work. The last part, called BIBLIOGRAPHY, will provide the reader with a necessary bibliographical service with further readings. This part will be divided into the following seven parts that will include bibliographical details about: (1) various editions and publications of the work (including journals), (2) selected translations, (3) productions (theatre, radio and television), (4) studies, reviews, monograph chapters, etc., dealing with the work, (5) supplementary secondary bibliography (e.g., articles about the author's other works) and references to databases, where the prospective scholars will find further information. This structure of the entry will provide the reader with

basic information about the work and its position within the historical context, as well as references directed towards further relevant sources.

We will join the entries into several historical chapters, thus drawing several stages that the Czech modern drama underwent, in order to amplify the reader's notion of historical development and period context. This "higher periodisation" will be based on the periodisation defined by the present-day literary historiography. The publication will thus be divided into eight periods: (I) 1896–1918, (II) 1918–1929, (III) 1929–1939, (IV) 1939–1945, (V) 1945–1948, (VI) 1948–1958, (VII) 1958–1970, and (VIII) 1970–1989. All these chapters will include a brief introduction (c. 4–5 pp.) that will briefly present key characteristics and contexts of theatre and literary life in the given period (important theatres, directors, etc.).

This layout of the work will enable the reader to use the dictionary in various ways, because it will offer several different frames to dealing with and studying modern dramatic literature. The publication will find its use among readers who wish to become acquainted with the formal or thematic structure of a given work. Users looking for a list of relevant bibliography concerning the given work, information about its critical responses, and basic facts about the creation of the manuscript will also find necessary information here. However, the dictionary will also serve to all persons interested in the individual historical periods of modern drama and the Czech modern drama as a whole.

Czech Drama of the 1920s. Period no 2 (1918–1929)

The third supplement to the Dictionary presents six plays from Czechoslovakia's first decade, the 1920s. A wave of Expressionism reached its peak at the beginning of this era after it poured into the country from the German-speaking area. It is represented in our selection by a large-cast historical drama *Hussites* by Arnošt Dvořák, written in 1919 – the respective dictionary entry is by the literary historian Eduard Burget. Aleš Merenus have dealt with *Ravens* (Krkavci), Jan Bartoš's first full-length play from 1920, which is often considered the first staged Czech expressionistic drama, as it was produced by Karel Hugo Hilar at the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague. The third entry in the supplement was written by the theatre historian Iva Mikulová. It focuses on a very popular comedy *A Camel Through the Eye of a Needle* (Velbloud uchem jehly) by František Langer from 1923. Jiří Mahen's collection of six experimental texts (dubbed "film librettos") from 1925 called *A Goose on the String* (Husa na provázku) represents a rising avant-garde expression in our dictionary supplement; it has been covered in the supplement by the literary historian Marek Lollok. The following entry by the literary historian Pavel Janoušek also deals with an avant-garde piece, as it focuses on *The Teacher and the Pupil* (Učitel a žák), the first stage play by Vladislav Vančura from 1927. The last entry in the supplement is by the theatrologist Tomáš Kubart and it studies the theatrical farce *Imperial and Royal Field Marshal* (C. a k. polní maršálek) by Emil Artur Longen from 1929, which is well known to the public through its film adaptation by Karel Lamač featuring the star comedian actor Vlasta Burian.

The third volume of the dictionary series focusing on the Czech modern drama presents works from the 1920s, which was one of the most productive decades in terms of drama. This era was one of the key periods for the development of the Czech drama, as the process of building a subjective dramatic voice reached its peak then, which is documented in expressionistic plays – besides Bartoš's *Ravens*, there is for example *Cluck-cluk-cluk!* (Kokoko-dák!) by Lev Blatný –, and experimental texts, which finally adopted a finite shape – besides Mahen's *A Goose on the String*, there is for example *A Message on Wheels* (Depeše na kolečkách) by Vítězslav Nezval –, which turned upside-down the illusionistic drama and traditional theatrical forms as such. Vančura's *The Teacher and the Pupil* represents a new dramatic form “based on spoken action and poetic metaphors.” Czech history and history plays as a genre were very popular in this period – besides Dvořák's *Hussites*, there is for example *Boleslaus I the Cruel* by František Zavřel. Authors of history plays take the opportunity to comment on the current international standing of the newly founded Czechoslovakian state via their historical material. Yet, a return to more traditional theatre forms can be seen in the second half of the 1920s. In particular, the well-made comedy presented current social issues in a humorous way to the general public – *A Camel Through the Eye of a Needle* – and shed an ironic light on the decadence of the recently terminated Austrian-Hungarian armed forces – *Imperial and Royal Field Marshal*.