Havlíčková Kysová, Šárka

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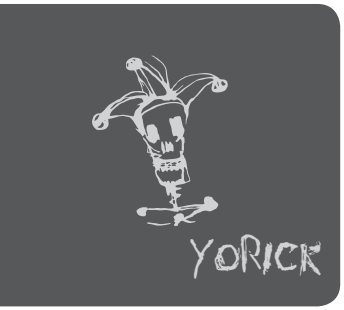

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová

‘Asian’ Theatre Sign: Its Potential and Its Limits in the History of the Czech Structuralist Thought[1]

Among other issues, the Czech Structuralists were also interested in Asian theatre. They examined the Chinese, Japanese and Indian traditional theatre to describe the principles of their sign systems. Karel Brušák’s work, published in 1939, is considered to be the first Stucturalist attempt to describe the issue (BRUŠÁK 1939b).

More than two years ago I published a paper on the topic entitled “Znakové systémy asijských divadelních forem v českém myšlení o divadle” [Sign systems of Asian theatre forms in the context of the Czech thinking on theatre] (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2010).[2] The paper discusses the resources of various forms of Asian theatre available to the Czech Structuralists and semioticians. The paper discusses the availability of written resources, their accessibility, and also the authors’ personal acquaintance with ‘Oriental’ or ‘Asian’ theatre. The article also provides information on the texts on Asian theatre written by Czech theoreticians, pointing out their relevance to the Czech theoretical discourse. Among others, the work of Karel Brušák can be considered as a representative example. Buršák’s two papers on the Chinese theatre pub-

1 The paper is supported by the grant *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: context and potency* (Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, 2011–2015; funded by the Czech Grant Agency, grant no. GA409/11/1082).

2 This text further develops some topics from the paper “Znakové systémy asijských divadelních forem v českém myšlení o divadle” [Sign systems of Asian theatre forms in context with Czech thinking on theatre] (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2010). This paper represents an extended and considerably updated version of the paper submitted to *Slavica Bruxellensia* (to be published in French).

lished at the end of the 1930s and the context of their origination are worth examining. My paper from 2010 on Brušák's work deals with the question of where he and other Czech Structuralists could possibly have got their information on the theatre forms of Asia. My conclusion was that most of them had no personal acquaintance with the Asian theatre.

Nowadays we can still ask the fundamental questions: why were the Czech theoreticians actually interested in the topic? And how did they use the descriptions of the Asian theatre sign system in the Czech theoretical discourse?

In my paper from 2010 I also found out that in the history of the Czech (or rather Czechoslovakian) theatre culture, we can observe several important influences of Asian theatre traditions. It can be surprising that these influences appeared quite frequently. The knowledge of various theatre forms of Asia had been slowly increasing but the study of Asian theatre was not systematic until later years since the first systematic accounts on the topic were written e.g. by Vlasta Hilská in the 1940s (HILSKÁ 1947) and later by Dana Kalvodová (e.g. 1980; 1996). Although the contacts between the East and the West existed in the past, and the Czech theatre had already accepted some Oriental inspiration as early as in the 19th century, the theoretical reflection on the Asian theatre appeared much later (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2010).

At the beginning of the theoretical reflection of Asian theatre in the former Czechoslovakia, we can find some accounts by travellers and orientalists. The first accounts describe e.g. Chinese or Japanese theatre in layman terms. The authors themselves admit their poor knowledge of local theatre practice (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2010).

The first outstanding scholarly work in this area – the paper considered as the fundamental study – was published in 1939 by Karel Brušák. Brušák's paper entitled "Znaky na čínském divadle" [The signs in Chinese theatre] represents the first theoretical attempt to describe the issue based on the Structuralist approach. Since its publication in the periodical *Slovo a slovesnost* (1939) the study was regularly quoted by Brušák's colleagues – e.g. by Jindřich Honzl (1940), Jiří Veltruský (e.g. 1940) and by other authors.[3]

It is worth noting that in 1939 Karel Brušák actually published two accounts on Chinese theatre. The first paper entitled "The signs in Chinese theatre" was published in *Slovo a slovesnost* (BRUŠÁK 1939b)[4] and the other one, "Čínské divadlo" [The Chinese theatre], in *Program D39* (BRUŠÁK 1939a). The latter paper provides an overview of a typical Chinese performance and tries to find a connection between Chinese and Avant-Garde theatre, especially be-

3 I will concentrate on the topic later.

4 The paper is also available in English (BRUŠÁK 1976).

tween their sign systems. Brušák discusses Burian's methods of work in "Theatre D", while underlining the application of the sign in Avant-Garde theatre practice. But the general aim of the paper probably consisted in showing the Czechoslovakian spectators how the traditional Chinese theatre worked.

The other (and probably most notable) Brušák's work, the paper published in *Slovo a slovesnost*, treats the topic more theoretically. Brušák develops his own classification of the Chinese signs and attempts to explain the sign-base of performing practice in China. In accordance with Zich's work (ZICH 1931), Brušák suggests dividing Chinese signs into two categories: the visual and the auditory. Brušák uses the examples from Chinese theatre to describe how the sign in the theatre works, or how the actor in Chinese theatre uses sign language to communicate the meaning, the emotions and so on. Brušák also deals with the conventional way of producing and perceiving the meaning in connection with the art of the actor. Brušák's study can be considered the first step towards understanding Asian theatre cultures as the cultures that provide us with a different, particular theatrical language. The language, or rather the very principles of its functioning, can be studied and applied by our (Czechoslovakian) actors. In general, Brušák's work represents the important attempt to describe the principles of theatre sign, using the model of the distant theatre culture. From my point of view, Brušák perceives the Chinese traditional theatre as the representation of the ideal model of theatre sign communication. He probably wants to demonstrate the ideal way that the theatre sign can be produced – even though he does not express this intention explicitly.

But the question remains of *where* could Karel Brušák and his colleagues get the information on Asian theatre, since at that time, mostly in the 1930s, they had no personal acquaintance with Asian theatre.

Brušák's famous study in *Slovo a slovesnost* does not include any references and contains only some explanatory footnotes. They give no evidence of the author's direct knowledge of the Asian theatre, and they do not provide any reference to the secondary written resources relevant to the topic. This paper from *Slovo a slovesnost* entitled "Znaky na čínském divadle" [The signs in the Chinese theatre] is more known and more accessible than the other Brušák's work on Chinese theatre published in *Program D39*. Considering both Brušák's works published in 1939, we may assume that both papers are based mostly on English and French secondary resources.

The article published in *Program D39* provides more information on Brušák's resources. In footnote no. 1 he expresses his thanks to "Mme Esther Lévy, librarian from Musée Guimet in Paris" (BRUŠÁK 1939a: 97) and in the bibliography attached to the paper he provides references to ten scholarly works on the topic of Asian theatre. Most of them were published in Eng-

lish or French and deal with the Chinese theatre. According to the list of books he was familiar for instance with the monograph by E. Jacovleff and Tchou-Kia-Kien *Le Théâtre Chinois* (1922) which offers an overview of Chinese theatre describing its origins and the theatre practice. Brušák probably found a more detailed outlook of the Chinese theatrical conventions and sign system in the book *Secrets of the Chinese Drama* by Cecilia S. L. Jung (or "Zung" in Brušák's spelling). According to the sub-title of Jung's book, its aim consists of providing the "complete explanatory" guidance "to actions and symbols as seen in the performance of Chinese dramas" (ZUNG 1937b). The book includes numerous descriptions of theatre symbols and explains their meaning. It focuses for instance on the symbolic of the make-up, costumes, postures, and puts stress on the sleeve movements. Moreover, it also includes many illustrations.[5] It is worth noting that some of the pictures show the well-known actor Mei Lan-fang (Méi Lánfāng) in his most famous roles. Furthermore, the treatise contains also fifty synopses of popular Chinese plays (ZUNG 1937b).

Among the titles listed in the bibliography of Brušák's paper in *Program D39* there is only one single work by a Czech author. It is the paper by Jaroslav Průšek, a Czech Sinologist who published a short article on Chinese theatre in the newspaper *Lidové noviny* a year before the publication of the two Brušák's treatises. Průšek's paper appeared in the issue from the 6 February, 1938 (PRŮŠEK 1938). Jaroslav Průšek briefly describes the typical Chinese performance trying to explain its specifics. He puts stress on its differences from 'our', Czechoslovakian, theatre. Průšek, however, does not examine the topic from the point of view of theatre theory. His intention consists particularly of introducing the common Czech readers to the topic of the distant theatre practice. Nevertheless, Průšek pursued his studies of the Chinese theatre and his later monographs on Chinese culture include some chapters dealing with the theatre (e.g. PRŮŠEK 1947a). It is worth noting that Průšek's studies remain descriptive and do not provide any theoretical reflections of the topic. Průšek simply missed its potential for semiotic or Structuralist analysis. However Průšek's work apparently represents the crucial resource for Brušák's own work.

5 The version published in New York (Benjamin Blom) contains more than two hundred pictures. According to the bibliographical records available to me, the version published in London in the same year probably includes a bit fewer illustrations. Nevertheless, the numbers provided by the bibliographical records can be confusing due to the fact that the book contains many images divided into smaller parts within its text. Unfortunately, I have at my disposal the New York (ZUNG 1937b) edition while Brušák refers to the other, published in London (ZUNG 1937a). As far as I can say on the issues, there are only slight – if any – differences between both versions, since even the numbers of the page are equal (it is 299 pages for both versions).

It is worth mentioning that there were other Orientalists that examined, or rather described in simple terms, what they had seen during their voyages to China and to Japan where they witnessed the theatre performances so different from the European theatre tradition (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2010). The writings of the Czech Sinologists and Japanologists played an important role in the development of the knowledge of 'Oriental' theatre. Průšek's work remains largely on the level of a simple travel account, but his descriptions of Chinese theatre probably contributed to the knowledge of the Czech Structuralists who used them to handle the topic of their scholarly interest.

It is also worth mentioning that Průšek's wife, Vlasta Průšková-Hilská, contributed considerably to the knowledge of Asian, especially of Japanese, theatre in the former Czechoslovakia. Průšková-Hilská, the well-known Czech Japanologist, contributed to the theatre studies by her famous work on Japanese theatre published in 1947. In 1941, two years after Brušák's two studies were published, her article on Japanese theatre appeared in *Program D41*. Her description of the Kabuki theatre performances she witnessed in Japan also remains simple, 'laic' and fundamental. It may be considered as not very well informed:

> [...] [T]he movement and the speech of the actors are stylised. Their voices are unnatural – they speak as they would normally never do – they half-sing, half-recite. The movement is unnatural, like a dance. The movements are appropriate to the character and they have to be beautiful. [...] A foreigner has to search for the affection in this kind of theatre. The song-like speech of the actors is annoying to him, the music un-melodic, disharmonic [...], the stage seems motionless. The performance seems to a foreigner superficial and formalistic. But for the Japanese this kind of theatre grows out of their inner needs, and is in harmony with their distinguished sense of the beauty and form.
> (PRŮŠKOVÁ 1941: 269)
> [(...) (P)ohyby a řeč herců je stylisovaná. Mluví nepřirozeným hlasem, jak se nikdy nemluví, napolo zpívají, napolo recitují. Pohybují se nepřirozeně, tanečně. Jejich pohyby odpovídají charakteru role a zároveň musí být krásné. (...) Cizinec si musí dlouho zvykat (,) než najde v tomto divadle zalíbení. Odpuzuje ho zpěvavá řeč herců, nemelodická, disharmonická hudba (...), statičnost scény, zdá se mu, že je to divadlo jen vnějškové a formální. Ale pro Japonce toto divadlo vyrůstá z jejich vnitřní potřeby, je v souhlase s jejich neobyčejně vyvinutým smyslem pro krásu a formu.]

Six years later Vlasta Průšková-Hilská published a monograph on Japanese theatre (HILSKÁ 1947) quoted until today – e.g. in Ivan Rumánek's recent work on the Noh theatre (RUMÁNEK 2010).

In the late 1930s and in the 1940s, other reports on Asian theatre were published – e.g. Bohumil Mathesius's article on "Čínský Romeo a čínská Julie" [Chinese Romeo and Juliet] in *Program D40* (1940).

In 1940 Jindřich Honzl publishes his paper entitled "Pohyb divadelního znaku" [Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre] (HONZL 1940).[6] Honzl uses the example from Japanese traditional theatre to support his claims and he employs the highly stylized Asian acting style to describe his understanding of the way in which the theatre sign works. In his paper, Honzl treats the sign as being able to change its "material", to quote his own term. According to my opinion, the "material" of the sign can be understood as the "vehicle", as the supporting substance conveying the meaning. In Honzl, the sign changes its material and passes from one aspect to another. Honzl supports his claims by the examples from Asian theatre forms. He points out the Japanese Kabuki theatre and describes four stages of acting that represent the leaving of the castle. The meaning of "leaving the castle by character Yransuke" is expressed by four different "materials":

1) The *step* made by the actor (representing Yransuke),
2) the *change of painted decoration* (with the image of the castle),
3) veiling the view by the *curtain* (conventional sign), and
4) the *sound* of *shamisen* (while Yransuke is already on the *hanamichi* bridge after he has made another couple of steps). According to Honzl, the sign changes here its "material" or vehicle four times.

(HONZL 1940: 182)

Jiří Veltruský also uses the examples from Asian theatre even more frequently (e.g. VELTRUSKÝ 1940, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). Veltruský in his papers on theatre theory also often deals with the Japanese, Chinese and Indian traditional theatre. He regularly supports his claims by examples borrowed from Noh, Kabuki, Bunraku, Beijing opera, Kathakali, etc. His aim consists of describing and analyzing the principles of the acting style, the actor-space interaction, and the principles of performing and also perceiving the theatre sign.

As I recently found out,[7] during his emigration in France Jiří Veltruský attended many Asian theatre performances that took place in Parisian theatres

6 The paper is also available in English (HONZL 1976).

7 I would like to express my gratitude to Jarmila Veltrusky who kindly allowed me to carry out the research in her husbands' personal archive in January 2012. As Jarmila Veltrusky informed me, her

mostly during the 1970s and the 1980s. Moreover, he even did not miss the opportunity to see the 'Asian-style' performances while travelling abroad for his business trips – for instance, in New Delhi in 1968 where he attended a Kathakali performance.[8]

It is worth asking why the Czech Structuralists in their writings use so many examples from Asian theatre. I think that the reason why the theoreticians consider the Asian theatre forms to be attractive consists in the complexity of their sign systems. Nowadays many scholars write numerous treatises on *mudras*, Indian hand gestures, conventional movement on the stage in Noh theatre, etc. And, of course, we can assume that observing and analysing a sign system from a foreign culture is easier or more effective than attempting to describe the theatre system in which the scholars are directly 'involved' or which they are more familiar with.

Czech Sinologist and theatrologist Dana Kalvodová represents a new generation of scholars that are interested in the topic. Kalvodová contributes to the research of Asian theatre cultures in many ways. She connected the Orientalist point of view with the approach of theatrology. Kalvodová co-authored, e.g. with Dušan Zbavitel, the well-known Czech Indologist, a treatise on Indian theatre (KALVODOVÁ and ZBAVITEL 1987). Kalvodová also contributed to the Czech research on the concept of sign in Asian theatre, developing her research in two main areas:

1) Kalvodová deals with the Asian theatre sign in several works – e.g. in the paper entitled "Znakové systémy na jevišti Dálného východu" [Sign systems on the stage of the Far East] (1980). In the study Kalvodová provides a detailed description of several signs that are performed in Chinese and Japanese theatre. The work shows her deep knowledge of the issue and is based on the semiotic background. In contrast to the Czech Structuralist works on the topic, Kalvodová provides a reflection that is more informative than theoretical. Indeed, Kalvodoová explains the principles of the sign systems very intelligibly. But it seems that her aim consists of providing a useful description of the Asian theatre practice rather than in giving a more general theoretical concept of the theatre sign. It is worth noting that Kalvodová in her study mentions

husband was seriously interested in Asian theatrical productions. According to Jarmila Veltrusky's information, Jiří Veltruský in the last years of his life preferred Asian theatre performances over 'Western-style' productions.

8 Jarmila Veltrusky also provided me with the list of the performances that Jiří Veltruský attended from late 1960s to early 1990s (1968–1992). Among many performances on the list there are 35 'Asian-style' performances. Veltruský's archives also contain programme leaflets or newspaper articles to 24 of them. Jarmila Veltrusky kindly allowed me to take copies of the archive materials.

only one of the Czech theoreticians that contributed to the issue: she writes about Jindřich Honzl and his "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre" (1940). But Honzl's work is not directly quoted in the text and Kalvodová only mentions it in the section suggesting "further reading" on the topic.

2) The second area treated by Kalvodová contains the reflection of Czech semiotic approach to the issue. In 1996 Kalvodová publishes the paper "Znakovost v divadle Východu. Poznámky k českým sémiotickým statím" [Semiocity in the theatre of the East. The commentary on Czech semiotic works]. In this paper she briefly summarizes the works of Karel Brušák, Jindřich Honzl, Jiří Veltruský, and other authors, and she tries to rectify some claims of the Czech authors. For example, she points out a mistake in a text by Veltruský, where he refers to Karel Brušák's study (KALVODOVÁ 1996). In this context Kalvodová expresses her observation that both theoreticians based their works rather (or maybe exclusively) on the secondary written resources than on their own acquaintance of Asian theatre performances.

It seems to be probable that this claim of Kalvodová is not quite correct. Both authors, Brušák and Veltruský, had the opportunity to personally witness the Asian theatre performances – at least after their emigration from the former Czechoslovakia. There were many Asian groups performing in Europe, for example in Paris, where Jiří Veltruský attended several productions, as I mentioned above.

Indeed, Dana Kalvodová represents a younger generation of theatrologists and her works on Asian theatre are not based on semiotics in the proper sense. Nonetheless she obviously uses a semiotic approach to explain how the Asian theatre sign works. Kalvodová probably did not even want to contribute openly to the development of the semiotic approach. Rather, she attempts to specify and deepen the knowledge of Chinese, Japanese or Indian theatre in the Czech (or Czechoslovak) theatrology.

In conclusion, I think that Czech Structuralist treatises on Asian theatre provide an important contribution to theatre theory in general. They could also provide some initial knowledge on Asian theatre to Czechoslovakian spectators and scholars. Nevertheless, the treatises should not be seen simply as descriptive scholarly works on particular Asian theatre forms. In my opinion, their purpose can be seen as more ambitious: to describe and analyze the theoretical aspects of the theatre sign on the example from distant, Asian theatre cultures. The theoretical concept they developed on the topic is worth being further examined.

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From the left: Herta Schmid, Patrice Pavis, Veronika Ambros, Jarmila F. Veltrusky
Photograph © KDS FF MU

Mgr. Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Ph. D. received her M.A. in theatre history and theory and in Czech language and literature from Masaryk University in Brno in 2007, and continued her graduate studies and received her Ph.D in 2010 (doctoral thesis *Hastaabhinaya. Hand gestures in traditional theatre art of India*). From 2009 till 2012 she taught theatre theory at Palacký University in Olomouc. Since 2011 she has been employed at the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University as researcher and teacher. Her research focuses on Asian – mostly Indian – traditional theatre, with special interest in Sanskrit theatre Kootiyattam. In her research and courses she also deals with Intercultural theatre – with special interest in 'Asian' theatre sign, Orientalism in Czech theatre, and theatre theory.

Summary

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová: 'Asian' Theatre Sign: Its Potential and Its Limits in the History of the Czech Structuralist Thought

The paper deals with the influences of Asian theatre forms on Czech structural thought on theatre. The text is based on the author's former paper "Znakové systémy asijských divadelních forem v českém myšlení o divadle" [Sign systems of Asian theatre forms in context with Czech thinking on theatre] and develops some of its topics – especially the question of possible resources of theoretical inspiration of the Prague School. Considering the essays by e.g. Jindřich Honzl, Karel Brušák, Jiří Veltruský, and also Dana Kalvodová, the paper is focused on the means of describing the process of creating a sign in Asian theatre. The study deals with the development of the crucial ideas of the topic. It also provides an overview of the articles written by Czech Orientalists, travellers and artists on the given topic, and describes their first encounters and experiences with Asian theatre.