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Jan Roubal and His Complex and Complementary 'Thought' on Theatre

Tatjana Lazorčáková

Jan Roubal. *Divadlo jako neodhozený žebřík. Texty o autorském, alternativním a studiovém divadle* [Theatre as a Non-flinged Ladder. Papers on Devised, Experimental, and Studio Theatre]. Josef Kovalčuk and Jan Motal (eds.). Brno: Janáčkova akademie múzických umění, 2015. 293pp.

Very few reviews of a publication start with a personal memory; yet in case of Jan 'Honza' Roubal, I am forced to do so. I will always miss that outstanding renaissance man who was connected to Czech theatre as an author, actor, director, teacher, historian, translator, and primarily as a theoretician and expert in German and Polish theatre studies in the last years. Therefore, I truly welcomed my colleagues', Josef Kovalčuk's and Jan Motal's, effort to publish texts by Roubal, which were written during the years he spent at the Theatre and Film Department at Palacký University, Olomouc and at the Theatre Department at Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU), Brno. My colleagues not only showed their deepest respect to Roubal's work; they have also offered us a chance to make a complex idea about his diverse interests. We can therefore see how Roubal deepened and refined his thinking on theatre. His texts have inspired professionals and generations of students. In this book we have a chance to meet his creative and outstandingly complementary thoughts.

The first volume of Roubal's texts are a collection of his writings on authorial theatre, alternative theatre, and studio theatre which became the essence of his thinking on theatre itself. The texts con-

nect his enthusiasm for theatre in its different aesthetic categories. Moreover, his awareness of the metamorphosis in theatre since the 1960s made him fond of theatre as a space for meeting, mutual experience, communication and interactivity. He also perceived theatre as a place for a return to the ritual roots of theatricality plus its overlaps to non-theatrical (meta-theatrical) sphere with social, psychological, and therapeutic aspects. Roubal became acquainted with these levels of theatrical thinking as an actor, director, playwright, teacher, experimenter, and theoretician – and he reflected them all in his texts.

The first volume forms the sum of Roubal's knowledge and findings. It also illustrates his theoretical thinking and continual refining of such thinking, which always reflected the changeability and processing constantly present in theatrical phenomena/events and/or 'arte(f)acts' – to use Roubal's own term. Altogether, these texts present the variability and historicity characteristic of the thought on theatre. Roubal never found such thinking complete and did not take it as a goal of forming concrete definitions; he rather thought about inspecting and examining the theatrical space (primarily in its expansion within the last two decades), about reflecting brand new trends and tendencies, new forms,

and about re-formulating and particularizing previous thoughts and attitudes in context with the actual form of theatrical culture both in Europe and the rest of the world. As the anthology has shown, Roubal was also interested in historically and theoretically reflected poetry theatre, or in the limited chances to record a theatre production in its vividness. A number of studies written for different purposes (conference contributions, prefaces and introductions, papers from different anthologies and journals) are also included and form a surprisingly consistent part of this anthology. They show how erudite Roubal was as far as theory is concerned. He has become one of the best Czech theoreticians of past decades. These texts show Roubal's thought on theatre as a process (which corresponded to his understanding of theatre as such), and his familiarity with European theoretical thinking (Polish and German above all; Roubal translated many texts from both languages and mediated them to Czech readers.)

Due to the chronology of the included texts, one can picture Roubal as a historiographer; apart from the precision of theoretical terms, his texts precisely describe and define theatrical eras and trends present in Czech theatre in the second half of the 20th century. Roubal's texts have one quality in common, which is the creativity of thinking on theatre. Such thinking is not limited by any given definitions – at least not for Roubal; it goes hand in hand with the innovative, surprising turns and reversals in the practical world of theatre. It seems as if Roubal was climbing a ladder to the infinite space of theatricality.

The anthology is titled *Divadlo jako odhozený žebřík* (Theatre as a Flung Ladder) due to its first study ('Divadlo jako ne-

odhozený žebřík'; Theatre as a Non-flung Ladder). This paper was originally published in *Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis* (1993); two years later, the same text became part of Roubal's habilitation. In this particular text, the author comments on the 'paratheatrical' phenomenon in connection with Jerzy Grotowski's productions. His study is not only based on profound knowledge of Grotowski's works and its development; Roubal was primarily able to sense his concept of theatre as a liberating, authentic activity 'leading to the creative relation both to the world and oneself' (ROUBAL 2015: 17).

Roubal clearly distinguished between Grotowski's *paratheatre* and *posttheatre*, which was later transformed into the theatre of sources and *metatheatre*. Yet, he himself called this precise distinction 'a tendency to bring a differentiated view of Grotowski's works' (ROUBAL 2015: 24). The study itself is rich on facts and, due to its clear arrangement, this text is still, after 26 years, a readable and profound view of an important theatrical personality in the 20th century.

His study, 'Étos, poetika, praxe...' (Ethos, poetics, practise...), can be similarly perceived. The paper is devoted to the phenomenon of Brno studio theatres, written during the ten year period after 1989. After the velvet revolution, both HaDivadlo and Husa na provázku found themselves in a completely different cultural and socio-political context. Even though Roubal sympathized with both stages (and used to be part of their actual development), he comments on the results of such a contextual change in the 1990s strictly matter-of-factly. Roubal points to the shift from periphery to the centre of events which necessarily went hand in hand with a generation change.

Still, both theatres kept their aesthetics based on authorial productions, irregular dramaturgy, and characteristic directing. Once again, Roubal's profound knowledge of individual theatre productions allowed him to sum up the artistic programme of both stages much like their dramaturgical tendencies. Moreover, Roubal points to the risks these theatres would have to face: the danger of 'petrification', self-satisfactory resignation, and non-existing reflection of contemporary problems, etc. (ROUBAL 2015: 185). Once again, we can see a vitally important evaluation of Czech studio theatre in a concrete era. The text also provides us with crucial materials for a possible synthetic work of (not yet written) history of Czech theatre after 1950.

The anthology of texts and studies in which Jan Roubal spoke about authorial theatre, alternative theatre, and studio theatre provides us with valuable and highly inspiring material which is useful for theoreticians, students, and practitioners. These profound and thought-provoking texts are rich in creative language. Individual texts provide not only factuality and theoretical apparatus, they also reflect Roubal's complex and complementary thought on theatre. Simultaneously, they prove to their interactivity, creativity and longing for knowledge and context, much like Roubal himself did during his professional life.

Both editors of the first volume (Josef Kovalčuk and Jan Motal) decided on an ideal approach to Roubal's texts. As previ-

ously mentioned, the texts were published in several journals, anthologies, and other publications over several decades. Some of the texts have been rewritten and republished. These variations show the process of Roubal's thinking and his personal tendency to develop and refine his own conclusions. We can observe how both his texts and his thoughts matured (the genesis of the texts for the sake of a particular publication and their multiple variants are mentioned in the notes). Both editors primarily decided to use the most recent version of each text; they also unified the quotation norms and textual notes, adjusting them to current standards, and completed or specified the references if necessary. It is a pity that the supplement does not include more photos. Just seeing historical pictures of Jan Roubal as a student, as an amateur actor, or as a lecturer makes you feel that you have actually personally met him on the pages of this remarkable book.

Bibliography

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