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AN INTERVIEW WITH JAKUB ČERMÁK
ON *HAMLET*, DEPRESSIVE CHILDREN
AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OFFICIAL
AND INDEPENDENT CZECH SCENES

Michal Zahálka

Jakub Čermák is the co-founder and artistic chief of Depresivní děti touží po penězích (Depressive Children Yearn for Money), an award-winning independent theatre company based in Prague. He graduated with a B.A. in film directing from Prague's Academy of Performing Arts, Faculty of Film and TV. He is noted for his highly visual, unorthodox aesthetics. In addition to his work with his own company, he has directed in publicly subsidised theatres in Prague, in the regions and recently also in Poland. In 2022, he directed a production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice in a new translation by Filip Krajník.

MZ: You are mostly associated with something that might be called “avant-garde theatre.” At the same time, however, in the last fifteen years or so, you have been constantly returning to classical texts, both literary and dramatic. Is it convenient to employ such classics, including the works of Shakespeare, because they attract audiences, or do you see some special value in them?

JČ: It has transpired that, although I'm very interested in the present, I've always been gravitating towards the classical canon in some way. At secondary school, I was quite conservative in terms of theatre and art; only later, influenced by people around me, including my then boyfriend, who did abstract paintings which I didn't understand, I gradually discovered and delved into other forms, those that weren't taught at school. However, even when I started doing theatre, I always asked myself the question “Why am I doing this particular piece?” Perhaps I was even obsessive when I insisted on finding some reason, some topicality. And I haven't changed in this respect. I don't pick classical texts because they'll more likely attract audiences (luckily, with Depressive Children, we've always had audiences), but out of some pride and egotism I like to wedge or sneak myself in, and I'm always happy when

we manage to interpret the play differently or in a surprising manner. This, of course, is not the case with *Hamlet*, as there's nothing there that can be interpreted in a new way. (*Laughs.*)

When you did the production *Višňový Sade (The Cherry Sade)*, I always wondered whether the combination of *The Cherry Orchard* and the Marquiz de Sade was entirely based on the pun. (In Czech, the word “sad,” or orchard, and the name “Sade” are homophones. – ed.)

This one was co-directed by Martin Falář and myself, and I don't remember which of us made that connection. It really was based on the pun; but, at the same time, Ranevskaya lived in Paris, so we had the first part where the audience can see her enjoying indecent pleasures spiced with philosophy; and then, when the Revolution breaks out, she hurries back to Chekhovian Russia, which is a very uncomfortable and backwards place. Sometimes out of a silly idea emerges something that makes sense dramaturgically and significantly enriches the work.

Let's focus on *Hamlet* for a while. You said there's nothing that could be interpreted in a new way. However, you are a very visual director – for our readers benefit, let's mention *Maryša*, a classic of Czech realism, which you staged almost completely silent. Could you tell us in what respect you find Shakespeare's proverbial “words, words, words” attractive and inspiring?

I probably wouldn't have picked *Hamlet* – this choice came out of long dramaturgical meetings about what the theatre (*South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice* – ed.) wanted. Long ago, Martin Falář and I wanted to stage *Hamlet* at the National Monument at Vítkov, in Prague, and I wanted to play the roles of Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet was supposed to have a ridiculous number of shoes, and it was going to be a series of situations in which Hamlet is unable to make any decision, including which shoes to wear. Now the decision to stage *Hamlet* was made, and it forced me, among other things, to read the text of the play in its entirety – before that, I had seen it staged a hundred times and I had read some of the scenes, but I think I'd never read the whole thing. I was surprised how slow and lengthy the play was, as well as by the fact of how uncertain it is at moments. I understand – I hope! – what Hamlet says in the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, but I'm not sure why it is placed where it is. I even moved it to a different place in my production. And maybe it's the uncertainty that provokes the creators. On the other hand, with the closet scene, the play gathers a fast pace and becomes very thrilling before it again slowly reaches the finale (which we cut significantly as well). When you asked about “words, words, words,” whether it means the speeches or Filip's translation – let me start with the translation. I liked that it's not primarily poetic and is, in a way, very accurate. When I try

to give my obsessive instructions to the actors, I try to be as exact as possible, and I think that Hamlet, too, tries to grasp the complex and complicated reality by being accurate with his words. So, this topicality and emphasis on the detail were things that I liked very much about the translation. As for the speeches, when I said that you cannot interpret *Hamlet* in a new way, I think there might be a book describing every character (I've never seen such a book, but I imagine there very well could be one), for instance Horatio – the most boring character I have seen on Czech stages – and you'll find there how it was done in the past, all the variants that you may combine in a creative way. And I think it was this combinatorics that intrigued me most about *Hamlet*. When we had the first read-through, I asked the actors which *Hamlets* they'd seen and what they remembered, so when I recalled those I'd seen myself, I mostly remembered boredom, not being excited at all.



From the production of *Maryša (mlčí)* (*Marysha (is silent)*), directed by Jakub Čermák. (Photograph: Michaela Škvřňáková)

And is there any *Hamlet* on Czech or foreign stages that you've seen and found intriguing as an ordinary audience member?

I cannot say, off the top of my head, but I primarily attend other kinds of drama as a theatregoer, so I don't feel really competent to judge them. But it wouldn't probably happened yet that I'd fall in love with a production of *Hamlet*.

You mentioned Filip's translation. I collaborated on it as a consultant, and what intrigued me about his approach was that it opens the text to entirely new interpretations, different from the general tradition, so to speak. On the other hand, one could say that the translation of *Hamlet* by Jiří Josek from 1999 sounds somewhat less problematic and more contemporary. I don't want to say Filip's translation is bookish, but it's surely challenging to the reader. How did you cope with this on the stage?

Some of the actors, not many but some, responded to this feature of the text even during the first read-through. But then they all took a liking to Filip because they saw how he endured all my ideas and interpretations. At one point – I think it was the actress playing Rosie (*the female version of Rosencrantz – ed.*) – someone asked a question, and Filip answered it the best he could. I let him finish and then said something like, well this was the academic opinion and now I'll tell you how we'll do it for real. He was able to withstand all of this very bravely. (*Laughs.*) Maybe that was the reason why the actors no longer had any objections to the translation. It is certainly true that this is not an easy idiom to learn or pronounce. But easiness is not the value of a translation for me. Although comparing texts in detail is not really my scene, I feel that, in the case of Hilský's translation, at times the idea is crystal clear, that he is able to convey it and I never need to stop and think about the meaning. I feel that, in the case of other translations, I must concentrate when reading it or even listening to the text. From the very beginning, I knew I wanted to do a *Hamlet* that would be very contemporary – in terms of the visual aspect, in terms of the acting expression, in terms of the overall message or even the concept of the characters. In this respect, the easy flow of the speeches is not that crucial to me. It is ultimately up to the actor to convey the lines, to make them understandable to the audience.

Is there any Shakespearean material that you'd be tempted to work on?

I'm almost embarrassed to say it, because it is played everywhere and I think some of the productions are very good – *Macbeth*. For several years now I've been longing to make an all-female *Macbeth*. No male element at all – Macbeth would be a woman, Lady Macbeth as well. I've already got in mind plenty of beautiful, fantastic, wild carnal scenes that'd show that this play about machismo, or toxic masculinity as it is fashionably called nowadays, could very well work with the female element, presenting the side of women that we perhaps overlook a bit nowadays, for better or worse, that of sexuality, of combativeness. I'd really love to do that, but I'm

afraid there's no theatre in the Czech Republic that would be brave enough to put on this interpretation of the play.



From the production of *Hamlet*, directed by Jakub Čermák. (Photograph: Alexandr Hudeček)

We'll see if you're right or not. After years that you focused on independent theatre and your own ensemble, you started collaborating with publicly subsidised theatres, namely in České Budějovice, and also have one past and one future production in Jihlava, both currently being theatres with great potential. Is it a different kind of experience? Plus, in České Budějovice, you did *Hamlet*, which is a great title for a regional theatre, but staged in the studio theatre. How did this happen?

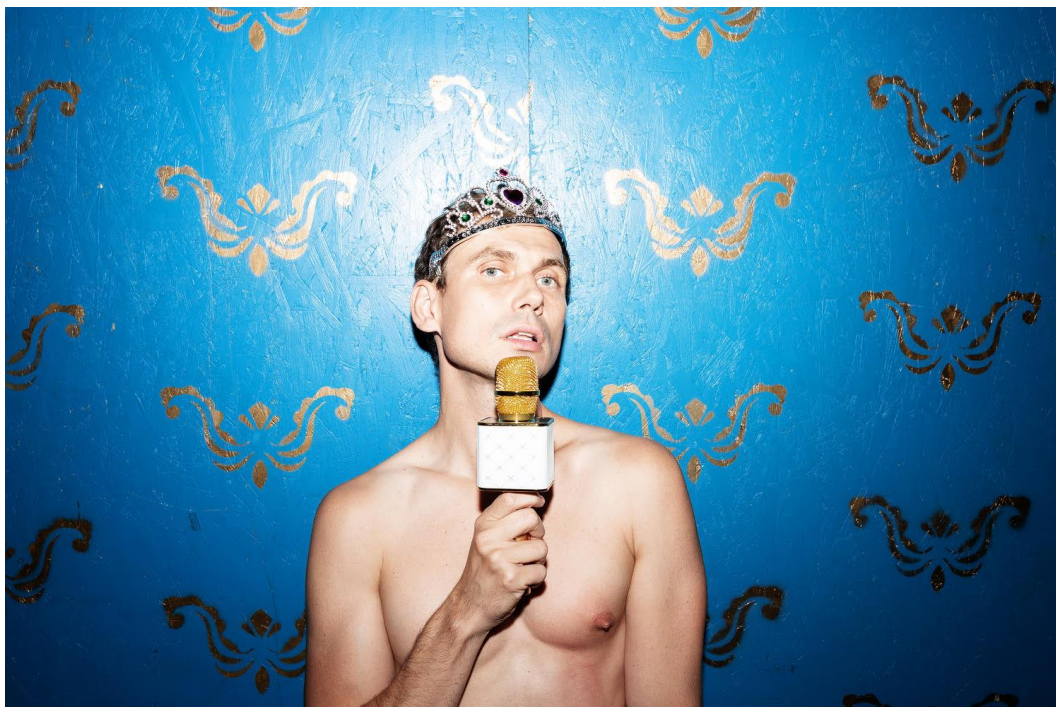
Because they're afraid to let me on the main scene. (*Laughs.*) However, this coming season, or the one after, I'll be on the main scenes both in České Budějovice and Jihlava. I didn't want to put *Hamlet* in the studio theatre. Not because of the prestige or anything like that, but because from Venuše ve Švehlovce Theatre, where I primarily work, I'm used to a big space where I'm strong in terms of composition, of placing the actors and of being able to create emotions there. I was really afraid that I wouldn't be able to create anything in České Budějovice, that the actors wouldn't even fit there, but begrudgingly I must admit that it's possible to work even in the studio

theatre. (*Laughs*) Before I went to České Budějovice, I was angry with myself that I agreed with the studio theatre, and I was telling myself that this was the last time, that I'd tell them next time that I wanted the main scene because the small one makes me nervous. The size of the scene influences me significantly in terms of what's going on the stage. I had a number of ideas for *Hamlet* that we simply couldn't realise. But working for publicly subsidised theatres is like going to a spa. When I made the first experience with Horácké Theatre in Jihlava, where I did *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, I became angry with theatre critics who write about independent theatre. They should all make a deep bow to every independent scene. When they write about these kinds of theatre, it's as if they were comparing one-legged and two-legged athletes competing. The conditions are so different and, even when the final production on an official scene turns out to be worse than on an independent one, these cannot really compare in terms of possibilities. My admiration to all people who work in the independent theatre sphere and are successful has grown massively. I love *Depressive Children* and everything we do together, but I love it that I have two or three productions in official theatres because they're incredibly relaxing for me. However, I've seen a number of cases of the director who succeeds on an official scene and ultimately leaves his original ensemble, so I need to be careful with this as I don't want to leave *Depressive Children*, and I know I need to dedicate my time and effort to them.

And what is your experience with actors in official theatres, where you cannot always work only with people whom you'd prefer? Any negative experience with a self-confident local actor?

I have never had any negative experience in terms of someone refusing my style or approach. However, my productions in publicly subsidised theatres are in some way tamer than what I do with my ensemble. It's not because of my cowardice or their incompetence, but if I see theatre as communication, there's no point in staging *The 120 Days of Sodom* or *Martyrdom or the Art of Suffering* like I do in my theatre because I'd scare the audience. I think I know methods for how to give the people something that they wouldn't expect, but my goal is not to go somewhere and make a production that'd scare them away. Rather, I want to create something that might be different from what they're used to – but that's not my primary goal, it's rather my means. I want them to have a positive experience, I want them to enjoy themselves, so both in terms of the choice of themes and forms I approach different kinds of audiences differently.

Michal Zahálka



Director Jakub Čermák. (Photograph: Michaela Škvrňáková)

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