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**A Journey
into Theatrical Space: The Project of
the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*
and its *Prolegomena***

This paper provides a brief overview of a unique project that evolved within the field of Czech and Slovak stage design in the former Czechoslovakia during the period of so-called ‘Normalisation’.¹ The *Scenographic Encyclopaedia* was conceived as a comprehensive treatise examining a variety of topics in Theatre Studies. My aim here is to evaluate this project from current theoretical perspectives.

More than forty years ago, Miroslav Kouřil, a Czech architect and stage design theorist, wrote in his book on the theory of scenography that the time had come for the theatre to seek new ways of expression – new words, colours, shape, light,

1 The historical phenomenon of ‘Normalisation’ in a Czechoslovakian context refers to the periods 1969-1971 and 1971-1987. During these years (initially following military intervention by Warsaw Pact armies and the replacement of the reformist Leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubček, with the more hard-line Gustáv Husák) there was a consolidated attempt to restore central Communist Party rule and to re-establish Czechoslovakia as a compliant member of the Eastern Bloc of socialist nations. ‘Normalisation’ involved five principal steps: (i) consolidation of political leadership in order to remove reformists; (ii) revocation or modification of any laws enacted by the reform movement; (iii) re-establishment of a centrally controlled command economy; (iv) reinstatement of power to police authorities; and (v) development and consolidation of Czechoslovakian relations with other socialist nations, over and above any that had been developed with the West.

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movement, and time (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 119). As Kouřil also emphasised, his contemporaries were living in the world of automation and cosmic research. People therefore needed to find answers to a number of specific questions linked to the overall progress of modern civilisation.² Like most of his contemporaries, Kouřil was probably eagerly following the ‘space race’ and was influenced by the spirit of an age of cosmic discoveries. That might have been the reason for him to mention such adventures in space; accordingly, he might also have been encouraged to look for new ways to understand his own ‘space’ – that is to explore new ways of theorising the spatial elements of stage design.

Miroslav Kouřil had become a renowned artist and stage designer before World War II as a collaborator with the outstanding theatre director Emil František Burian. Kouřil played a crucial role in the famous ‘Theatergraph’, an innovative stage design concept developed by Burian and Kouřil combining live performances with the projection of film and pictures (see also p. 174 above). He also worked for Burian’s *Theatre D*. After World War II, Kouřil became involved in the official cultural politics of Communist Czechoslovakia and, despite this somewhat problematic political engagement, his contribution to Czech scenography cannot be neglected. From a theatre historical perspective it is necessary to take into consideration his activities as Head of the Institute of Scenography, as editor-in-chief of its periodicals, as a stage designer and, last but not least, as a theatre theorist.

Miroslav Kouřil was definitely not the only person in the late 1960s and 1970s trying to find new ways of conceiving of theatrical space. Many artists and theatre theorists were trying to discover the ways in which space operated during performance and how it could be apprehended. Czech stage design was considered to be a flourishing field of art in this period; and several Czech stage designers worked abroad with great success (such as Josef Svoboda, to mention the most obvious example).

The Institute of Scenography, an organisation specialising in stage design, existed in Prague from 1963 to 1974 (VEBER 1971: 10).³ Many outstanding scholars and specialists in the field of Theatre Studies and stage design came to

2 Lormanová quotes Kouřil’s opinion: ‘cesta divadla je v rozvíjení divadelnosti a v hledání nových výrazů slovem, barvou, tvarem, světlem, pohybem a časem, jimiž by se odpovídělo současnému divákovi, člověku doby automatizace a kosmického výzkumu’ [The journey of the theatre lies in developing theatricality and in looking for new expression in word, colour, shape, light, movement and time, by means of which an answer could be given to the modern spectator, a person living in an era of automation and cosmic research] (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 119).

3 The Institute continued the work of the Scenographic Laboratory founded by Kouřil and his co-workers in 1957 under the auspices of the National Theatre (VEBER 1971: 10).

work for the Institute, and Miroslav Kouřil was its leading representative for its entire existence. In 1974, the independent status of the Institute was suspended; a year later, the Institute of Scenography was merged with the Theatre Institute in Prague. As Kouřil's ex-colleague and renowned architect Dalibor Štys mentioned in an interview (HUML 2010), the Institute's activities were most probably stopped because of a dispute between Kouřil and the Mayor of Prague. Following its abolition, there is still no specialised institution of this kind in the Czech Republic, even though some people suggest its renewal would be beneficial for Czech stage design.

As part of its operational remit, the Institute of Scenography initiated a number of interesting and promising projects; and the viability and success of these ventures should be evaluated from the perspective of contemporary theatre research and theoretical perspectives. From today's point of view, the project of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia* can be seen as one of the most ambitious and potentially advantageous theatre theory projects ever attempted. The venture was first conceived of in 1969 (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 117) when it was decided that the production of a comprehensive work dedicated to a variety of stage design topics needed to be done systematically. At first, the production team of the *Encyclopaedia* planned to introduce selected topics regularly in a periodical entitled *Prolegomena scénografické encyklopedie* (Preliminary Discussions Relating to the Scenographic Encyclopaedia). Even though the project of the *Encyclopaedia* remained unfinished and the published issues of *Prolegomena* represent its only remaining legacy, we should appreciate it as an example of the unique achievement of Czech Theatre Studies and stage design during the second half of the twentieth century. The wider project remains significant to Theatre Studies for many reasons, despite the fact that an edition of the full *Encyclopaedia* has never been completed.

The reasons for the project's importance are multiple: firstly, the journal *Prolegomena* turns out to be an important periodical for Theatre Studies scholars, who, through its output, get a unique opportunity to treat the most diverse issues of their field of study – not just the domain of stage design. Secondly, the *Prolegomena* journal project further developed the important theoretical tradition of Czech Structuralism: *Prolegomena*'s editorial team declared the field of Theatre Studies to be strictly based on Structuralist approaches (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 118) and *Prolegomena* includes numerous texts authored by key representatives of Czech Structuralism (including Jan Mukařovský, a leading figure of the Prague Linguistic Circle).⁴ The project of the *Encyclopaedia* can also be perceived as crucial for the

4 The complete bibliography of the *Prolegomena* is being prepared and will be available

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development of theatre theory in general, and – needless to say – the authors of *Prolegomena* dealt with many crucial issues in the field of stage design.

Focusing on published volumes of *Prolegomena*, it is important to consider how each issue was conceived, and what kinds of topics were treated in a typical issue. Additionally, considering the outline of *Prolegomena*, three important questions arise: (i) is it possible to imagine from the contents of this journal the planned structure of a full and finished *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*? (ii) could the project of such an *Encyclopaedia* have been successfully accomplished, or was it rather an exaggerated dream, pre-determined to fail? and (iii) is there any aspect of the project that constitutes a still-viable asset for contemporary scholars of Theatre Studies and stage design?

Prolegomena had the status of the official journal of the Institute of Scenography. It was not the only periodical issued by the Institute (it also published *Acta scaenographica* and *Interscena* amongst others),⁵ yet *Prolegomena* can be seen as outstanding in many ways, perhaps because the issues published were conceived of as preparatory groundwork for the planned *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*. *Prolegomena* was first published in 1970, which is a year after the overall concept of the *Encyclopaedia* had been developed. The last volume was issued in 1973, with a total of twenty volumes published over the four years. Each volume was available in five hundred copies. Only one issue came out during the first year, the number of volumes increasing up to eight in the following year, six in 1972, and finally five in 1973. *Prolegomena* thus includes more than two thousand five hundred pages of A4 format – with every volume comprising an average of approximately one hundred and twenty-five pages. Copies were not for sale and, according to the editor's note indicated in each volume, they were issued to selected individuals and institutions according to the needs of scholarly production of 'the writing' (i.e. the development of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*).

From the point of view of modern typography, the design of *Prolegomena* is quite simple. The cover of each volume, made of a standard type of paper, combines two colours: black and a second colour unique to each volume. The simple graphic motif on the cover evokes the image of a stage and thus can be connected to the idea of writing on stage design, or theatrical space. Miroslav Kouřil is mentioned as the chair of the editorial board in the majority of volumes. In the first issue of

on the website of the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University (<http://www.phil.muni.cz/kds>).

⁵ As editor-in-chief, Kouřil had responsibility for other periodicals and publications. For the list, see VEBER 1971: 11.

Prolegomena, the editorial team consists of: František Černý, Jan Kopecký, Přemysl Maydl, Jiřina Telcová, Vlado Hazucha, Zoltán Rampák, and Jarmila Lormanová. Artur Závodský joined the team for the second volume, and the number of team members successively increased. Contributors to *Prolegomena* were mostly Czech and Slovak scholars. Some papers were not originally written for the *Prolegomena* (it includes some re-printed papers or lectures previously presented in other scholarly fora, such as a collection of key articles by Jan Mukařovský). However, key articles written by foreign contributors soon started also to be published (including the Czech translation of a paper written in French by Tadeusz Kowzan: *Le Signe au Théâtre. Introduction à la Sémiologie de l'Art du Spectacle*, translated by Ladislav Štindl; KOWZAN 1973: 7-22). Kowzan's text presents an example of an article originally published abroad and then translated into Czech exclusively for *Prolegomena*. With deliberately chosen and translated output such as this, the journal can justifiably be perceived as an important attempt to introduce significant foreign theory to Czech scholars of Theatre Studies.

The production and editorial team soon started to cooperate with a number of other scholarly institutions. The list of cooperating institutions indicated in Volume 20 for example is rather extensive and, above all, comprises numerous university departments (such as the Department of Music, Theatre and Film at Charles University in Prague, and the Department of Slavic Literature, Theatre and Film Studies at Jan Evangelista Purkyně University (now Masaryk University) in Brno (KOUŘIL 1973: 3)). The first volume of *Prolegomena* includes Kouřil's introduction, which provides a commentary on the method and aims of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*. Kouřil is aware in this essay of many of the possible problems that might occur whilst attempting to accomplish such an ambitious project as the *Encyclopaedia*. Moreover, he finds the topic of scenography to be challenging in itself, and therefore very difficult to treat in scholarly writing. Kouřil ascertains the necessity to summarise the knowledge on the subject we already possess and, above all, to deepen and broaden current knowledge by further research. Performing this extensive research will bring, Kouřil assures, relevant solutions to the yet-unanswered questions. Kouřil claims research must be based on a Marxist aesthetic paradigm, and the general approach must respect theatre as a living and natural phenomenon (KOUŘIL 1970: 3). The *Encyclopaedia* was to be finalised in the form of a comprehensive educational dictionary; and such a challenging task needed to be preceded by thorough groundwork (KOUŘIL 1970: 4). Kouřil also mentions two structural models that the project of the *Encyclopaedia* should follow: (i) the *Czechoslovakian Encyclopaedia* and (ii) the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*.

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The general outline of the former was taken as a model that should serve for the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*; with its theoretical and methodological approach, once defined, being further developed and discussed in subsequent volumes.

Other contributors to the first volume of *Prolegomena* also tried to specify their approach to the concept of the entries of the planned *Encyclopaedia*. Jan Kopecký, for example, published an 'Essay on the Encyclopaedia Entry' (KOPECKÝ 1970: 9-21) in which he also tried to define his approach to the phenomenon of 'theatre' on the basis of Marxist dialectical and historical materialism. Here, Kopecký shows how to examine the topic of the theatre using the method specified in Marx's *Capital* (KOPECKÝ 1970: 10-11). Despite the historical context of so-called 'Normalisation' and the consolidation of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, the *Prolegomena* does not present an exclusively Marxist approach towards the theatre. As Tatjana Lazorčáková mentions in her treatise on Czech theatre historiography, *Prolegomena* presents various opinions and deals with many topics in Theatre Studies from a Structuralist perspective (LAZORČÁKOVÁ 2009: 150).

It was not only Kouřil who tried to specify the outline of the *Encyclopaedia*. Jarmila Lormanová, the secretary of the editorial board, wrote an eleven-page-long appendix to the first volume. Lormanová's article can be considered as far more specific than the general methodological outline provided by Kouřil's introduction. Lormanová makes a draft of the general areas to which particular entries of the *Encyclopaedia* should be divided. Lormanová emphasises that the outline is not firmly set and will be further developed by the realisation team of the *Encyclopaedia*. She presents six basic areas: (i) Artistic Stage Design; (ii) General Concepts of the Theatre; (iii) Staging; (iv) Stage Design; (v) Theatre Space; and (vi) Applied Stage Design (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 119-125). Lormanová also explains the overall idea and aim of the *Encyclopaedia*. It is in her appendix in which the link between Theatre Studies and the Structuralist approach is openly declared (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 118). Besides the six thematic areas of any planned entries, Lormanová also suggests dividing them into a further six categories according to their extent and general characteristic: a) keynotes, in the form of an extensive essay; b) basic explanatory entries; c) general explanatory entries; d) information entries laying outside the scope of scenography; e) bibliographical entries; and f) reference entries (LORMANOVÁ 1970: 125).

It is worth mentioning here that the contributions in the twenty existing volumes of *Prolegomena* are divided into as many as twenty different areas. Each volume treats two to eight different topics, from 'Theatre', 'Stage Design', 'Drama' and 'Staging'

to ‘National Theatre Cultures’, ‘Stage Figure’ (a theoretical concept developed by Otakar Zich), ‘Applied Stage Design’, ‘Methodology of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*’ (*sic*), ‘Theatre Architecture’, ‘the Spectator’ etc. Moreover, half of the volumes comprise of appendices treating topics that do not correspond to any specific area. In the appendix to the first volume, a typographical draft of the *Encyclopaedia* showing a two-page graphic layout is to be found (KOUŘIL 1970: 128-129). This arrangement is based on the graphic design of the *Czechoslovakian Encyclopaedia*, by Oldřich Hlavsa (KOUŘIL 1971: 94). The graphic layout shows an example of entries from the then-projected *Czechoslovakian Encyclopaedia*. It shows the headwords of the letter ‘M’ (from ‘Magnetohydrodynamika’ to ‘Makedonie’), with some blank frames left for pictures.

As we have seen, the plan for the *Encyclopaedia* was changing and the number of areas of the entries extended from six to twenty. From the third volume of the *Prolegomena* onwards, a new area entitled ‘National Theatre Cultures’ appears, dealing with theatre forms in foreign countries. The topics relating to this particular area varied significantly and included contributions to German as well as American, Chinese, and Indian theatre. Moreover, even one contribution on Arabian theatre can be found in this section. The section includes a paper on Chinese theatre by the late Sinologist and theatre scholar Dana Kalvodová and two articles on Indian theatre by the renowned Indologist Dušan Zbavitel. Several papers in this section deal with Russian theatre (such as those written by Jindřich Honzl and Karel Martínek). It is, however, worth noting that the section on ‘National Theatre Cultures’ (which is an attempt at theatre anthropology) includes papers on Czech theatre as well; such as, for instance, an attempt to analyse the famous Baroque sculptures of Matthias Braun (in Kuks Chateau) from the perspective of Theatre Studies (KAZDA 1973: 80-85). Their foreignness was thus probably historical.

Attempts to define scenography can be also found in *Prolegomena*, particularly in the first volumes. The matter of a coherent definition for the concept of scenography is still relevant today, as the recent writings of Pamela Howard clearly testify.⁶ In *Prolegomena*, the topic is treated by Miroslav Kouřil (1970: 43-47), Jiřina Telcová (1970: 48-51) and Jiří Hilmera (1970: 39-42). The approach of the latter is worth mentioning: Hilmera questions Kouřil’s concept of scenography as ‘scholarship’. Kouřil in his treatise defines scenography as a field of study consisting of three constitutive fields: artistic, technical and theoretical (KOUŘIL 1970: 43). Hilmera

6 Pamela Howard establishes the central issue of defining scenography in the title of her book (HOWARD 2001). In its contents, she includes a selection of interviews with distinguished stage designers and theorists of stage design who attempt to answer this question.

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considers Kouřil's definition to be contradictory since the artistic component of scenography cannot, according to Hilmera, be treated as scientific. Hilmera also discusses the following terminological issue: in his opinion it makes little sense to use the term 'theoretical scenography'. Scenography is a practical discipline and it is better to speak about the *history of scenography* or about the *theory of scenography*. Hilmera considers this topic to be not only linguistic but also conceptual and logical, and the wrong terminology can be misleading. The theory and history of scenography must be based on scientific methods; but scenography, by itself, cannot be treated as a scientific discipline (HILMERA 1970: 40-41). The 'threefold' concept of scenography suggested by Kouřil is also developed by Telcová (1970: 48-51), who stresses the importance of including scenography in Theatre Studies and considers scenography to be its most important subdiscipline.

It should be pointed out that although the contributions in *Prolegomena* treat for the most part topics from theatre theory that relate primarily to a general theory and methodology of stage design, a large number of papers deal with such themes from the field of theatre history, or from the perspectives of various theatrical cultures. *Prolegomena* can be considered unique in many ways. No comparable project can be found in the domain of Czech Theatre Studies since its publication. As Tatjana Lazorčáková points out, *Prolegomena* contributed importantly to the scholarly exchange within the field of Theatre Studies after the publication of the only scholarly journal *Divadlo* had been discontinued in 1970 (LAZORČÁKOVÁ 2009: 150).

From today's perspective, the personality of the chief editor of *Prolegomena*, Miroslav Kouřil, appears to have been rather ambitious and potentially controversial because of his loyal attitude towards the anti-reformist Communist regime. Setting aside these political circumstances, from the point of view of contemporary Theatre Studies, Kouřil's work deals with many inspiring topics in the theory of stage design. Kouřil tries in his writings to find answers to a variety of challenging questions.⁷ In 1969, he wrote his *Basics of Scenographic Theory* (KOUŘIL 1970b) and, according to the outline provided in this book, he intended to publish six volumes in total. The interesting thing is that the titles of the volumes he proposed partly correspond to

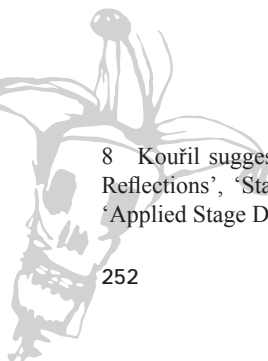
7 For example also in his works on scenography entitled *Divadelní prostor* (The Theatrical Space, 1945) or *O malém jevišti* (On The Small Stage, 1955). Besides theoretical treatises, Kouřil also attempts defining the role of the theatre in socialist Czechoslovakia – e.g. *Základy nové práce československého divadelnictví* (The Basis of New Work in Czechoslovakian Theatre, 1949) or *Úkoly československého divadelnictví* (The Tasks of Czechoslovakian Theatre, 1950).

the later outline of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia* as described by Lormanová.⁸ It can accordingly be assumed that Kouřil, as the leading figure of the Institute, became the *spiritus agens* of the project of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia* as well as of the *Prolegomena*.

The proposed project of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia*, as well as what was actually realised in the published *Prolegomena*, was accordingly one of Kouřil's most important achievements. Still, the question remains as to whether such an ambitious project could or could not have been successfully accomplished. Another question consists in the overall concept of the *Encyclopaedia*. It seems that it was to be focused primarily on topics connected to scenography; but was this possible? As *Prolegomena*'s contents show, the contributors treat various topics, not exclusively from the domain of stage design. *Prolegomena*'s thematic extent accordingly became far wider and incorporated numerous varied topics not necessarily connected to scenography. This need not, however, constitute a criticism of the project. In my opinion, the mission of the *Scenographic Encyclopaedia* and its *Prolegomena* serves as a good example of a holistic approach towards crucial issues in theatre theory, methodology, and history. Had the project been accomplished, its wide scope might have led to a general encyclopaedia of theatre rather than to a volume containing writing exclusively on stage design. Even though the contributions to *Prolegomena* have often reflected the overall context of the time in which they were written, the texts represent informative summaries of topics crucial for Theatre Studies in general. Many issues treated in *Prolegomena* are accordingly still appealing for modern scholars and deserve significant attention.

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8 Kouřil suggests the following titles for the volumes of his planned writing: 'Introductory Reflections', 'Staging', 'Scenography', 'Theatrical Space', 'Theatrical Experimentalism' and 'Applied Stage Design' (KOUŘIL 1970b: 2).



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