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Joseph E. Brandesky

**Permanent
Interaction: Reflections on the Paintings
and Designs of Jaroslav Malina**

Sometimes the best ideas take time to develop. That is my only excuse for waiting twenty years to mount an exhibition of paintings and designs by Czech artist-scenographer Jaroslav Malina (b. 1937). Malina began his professional career as a scenographer and fine artist in the mid-1960s after attending Charles University and the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) in Prague. Since that time, he has produced over four hundred and fifty set and costume designs for theatre, film and television, mounted thirty one-man exhibitions (scenography, paintings, graphics, posters) and participated in dozens of group exhibitions, for which he has won numerous awards. Another illustration of Malina's immersion in the fields of painting and scenography was his service as Chair of the Director General's Art Board at the National Gallery and Rector of the Academy of Performing Arts (both in Prague). Over the years, Malina's work has been seen in Finland, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Poland, Russia, Spain, and the United States of America. His work has been the subject of numerous articles in various journals. Suffice it to say, Jaroslav Malina's *oeuvre* has had an international impact. However, very few exhibitions have included both his paintings and his stage designs. In 2004, I resolved to organise a comprehensive exhibition of Malina's paintings and designs with the goal of illustrating the overlap of techniques and perspectives visible in these works.

PERMANENT INTERACTION



Jaroslav Malina. *Vojna* (War, 2002).

Before I proceeded with an exhibit about Malina, I developed my own sense of perspective concerning the interpenetration of fine art and theatre design by concentrating on exhibits featuring the work of other Czech and Russian artists who were also scenic designers. Two of the five exhibitions focused on Boris I. Anisfeld (1879-1973). Of those two, one was seen only in Russia whereas the other was shown at three sites in the United States. Anisfeld was a Russian painter, trained at the Imperial Academy in St Petersburg, who subsequently joined the *World of Art* movement. He did so at the invitation of Sergei Diaghilev, the famous impresario best remembered for his *Ballets Russes*. So it was that Anisfeld the painter actually executed the scenery for several of Leon Bakst's best-known designs, including *Scheherazade* (1911). Anisfeld immigrated to the United States in 1918 and there designed settings for the Metropolitan Opera in New York, as well as the world premiere of Sergei Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges*, in Chicago (1921). Throughout the remainder of his life, Anisfeld taught painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Anisfeld's designs for the theatre, notably for the great ballerina Anna Pavlova's productions, have a clear relationship with his paintings. They share a sense of the exotic and symbolic that was in the air in the early twentieth century. The paintings and designs of Jaroslav Malina also have a relationship, but it is sometimes



Jaroslav Malina. *Podzim* (Autumn, 1973).

more difficult to fathom than Anisfeld's. This is due, in part, to Malina's desire to keep his painting, what one might term his 'free work', separate from his designs for the theatre. One is a reflection of an individual point of view; the other is the result of collaborations with directors and actors, and is constructed for public consumption as part of a wider spectatorial phenomenon, by audiences. Nevertheless, Malina acknowledges himself that his paintings and designs are inextricably linked.

Tony Davis' book *Stage Design* (2001) named Jaroslav Malina as one of the top scene designers in the world (along with Ralph Koltai, Ming Cho Lee, Richard Hudson, Adrienne Lobel, and seven others). The title of the section devoted to Malina's work begins with the artist's admission: 'There is a permanent interaction between my painting and my design' (62). In both fields, one finds Malina expressing his abundant sense of abstraction, eroticism, contradiction, and humour. Like another Czech artist who worked in multiple media and fields, Art Nouveau master Alfons Mucha (1860-1939), the interaction between Malina's painting and design work can be clearly seen in his posters for productions. Details from Malina's paintings leave the realm of free work and are employed as the dominant sign in posters. A clear example of this process can be found in a comparison of the poster for E. F. Burian's opera *War* (National Theatre of Moravia and Silesia of Ostrava,

PERMANENT INTERACTION



Jaroslav Malina. *Oidipús vladar* (Oedipus the King, 1996).



Jaroslav Malina. *Weselohry* (Comedies, 1995).



Jaroslav Malina. *Cesta do ráje* (The Way to Paradise, 1973).

2002) and the painting *Autumn* (1973). Both works focus on an image of a pale, young girl with vacant eyes. The sense of recent or impending death is contrasted in the works with flowers – poppies in *War*. The mixture of a youthful figure and a smiling skull framed by sabres renders a rather concrete association to the title depicted in the poster design, whereas *Autumn* conveys Malina's ambivalence towards a season of both plenty and decay. The painting is not entirely inscrutable, but it keeps the viewer at a discreet distance regarding any specific meaning.

Two more examples of the overlap between Malina's paintings and posters are to be found in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (National Theatre, Prague, 1996) and V. K. Klicpera's *Weselohry* (National Theatre, Prague, 1995) and the corresponding works *The Way to Paradise* (1972) and *Signs* (1994). Both posters contain quotations of the paintings in the images used as well as the titles. The brutal, hollow-eyed figure from *The Way to Paradise* is descriptive of both the themes and the fate of Oedipus, while the fanciful, layered images in *Signs* are utilised in more specific ways for Klicpera's comedies. It exemplifies one of Malina's favourite techniques: the layering of multiple colours and images in an effort to produce intricate structures. The work is an homage to his painting teacher, Zdeněk Sklenář (1910-1986), who greatly inspired Malina. There are many other similarities between Malina's poster



Jaroslav Malina. *Znaky* (Signs, 1994).

designs and his free work that may easily be seen on the surface, but the most significant insights require more careful consideration.

Jaroslav Malina is a child of the twentieth century: he witnessed firsthand the trials and tribulations of war and the Communist regime in his country. He studied with several eminent Czech artists and teachers, among them Zdeněk Sýkora, at Charles University in the early 1960s. Eventually, his life and educational experiences melded to produce an artistic perspective that embraced Modernism and Existentialism. Nad'a Řeháková, Malina's longtime Czech curator, cites a revealing statement by Malina:

Painting, or the creation of any kind of visual art, is for me a mode of existence [...] It is through expressing myself visually that I overcome the crises of my loneliness and limitation. (BRANDESKY 2008: 7)

The principal of self-revelation through art absolutely applies to Malina's free art, posters and theatre designs. He is perfectly capable of painting and drawing in a realistic style as is evidenced by a number of maritime paintings, landscape drawings of southern Bohemia and nude drawings produced mainly during the



Jaroslav Malina. *Krajina v červenci* (Landscape in July, 1970): Tetrptych I.



Jaroslav Malina. *Krajina v červenci* (Landscape in July, 1970): Tetrptych II.

PERMANENT INTERACTION



Jaroslav Malina. *Krajina v červenci* (Landscape in July, 1970): Tetrptych III.



Jaroslav Malina. *Krajina v červenci* (Landscape in July, 1970): Tetrptych IV.



Jaroslav Malina. *Spící* (At Sleep, 1976)



Jaroslav Malina. *Barokni krajina* (Baroque Landscape, 1997).

PERMANENT INTERACTION



Jaroslav Malina. *Così fan tutte* (2006)

early part of his career. Malina has also expressed his appreciation for the ‘big Realist’ French and Russian painters; but ultimately, such forms did not satisfy his imagination.

[...] During the time of my youthful internal and spiritual struggle I was drawn to other styles such as Cubism, Surrealism [...] in short, Modernism. I liked the French and Russian movies made between the two world wars [...] all the layers and multiple meanings [...] I think my generation is affected deeply by Modernism. Everything is about the internal law of things and that is what I always respected whether I pushed things a bit further by shifting the rules all the way to slight destruction or experimented with Postmodern approaches. I am not interested in things haphazardly put together – a bit of this, a bit of that, things that lack structure. (BRANDESKY 2008: 21)

Abstraction has been the dominant mode in Malina’s paintings since at least the early 1970s; but each work has a specific structure, or set of structures that convey meaning. Two examples of his free landscapes illustrate his very particular perspective concerning painting natural scenes: *Landscape in July* (1970) and



Jaroslav Malina. *Uražení a ponížení* (Insulted and Injured, 1985)

Baroque Landscape (1997).

Both paintings take their inspiration from South Bohemia, but neither depicts specific locales. Instead they suggest feelings and provoke viewers to consider a less-than-quotidian response to the works. *Landscape in July* is a four-part visual ode to the Czech countryside in summer. It is replete with suggestions of music, through flying *f*-holes;¹ of topography, through the undulating lines and country Baroque wayside crosses; of fruit and flowers, through the vibrancy of the colours applied; and of variance in weather patterns, through the opposition of blue ‘skies’ and Baroque scrolls in clouds (indicating potential agitation). Colours, lines, masses and shapes, as well as signs and ornamentations govern this individual depiction of summer in the country. The spectator’s point of view is shifted as well; the lower right quadrant may indeed refer to a structure in an environment (a horizontal view), yet it also suggests a plate of colourful food laid on a table (a view from above). *Baroque Landscape* is more opaque than *Landscape in July* in terms of easy-to-identify abstractions. On close inspection, many layers of paint have been applied

1. These are the long *f*-shape holes cut into the arched tops of instruments from the violin and guitar families, in order to improve acoustic resonance.



Jaroslav Malina. *Slečna Julie* (Miss Julie, 1988)

to achieve a pale landscape with minimal symbolic intrusion. The image could be a bird's-eye view of snowy countryside, or the hazy view outside a frosted window in winter; or perhaps the title is a pun based on the source of the word Baroque (which is Portuguese for a malformed pearl). The latter explains the gentle, but careful colour application and suggests a connection with the abundance of Czech Baroque structures scattered throughout southern Bohemia. The careful and deliberate use of colour, line, shape and signs in Malina's free work is not designed to produce immediate understanding, but rather to suggest possible meanings. He is similarly disposed to use open-ended metaphorical associations and abstractions when creating stage environments. However, by serving the intentions of a script through partnership with a director, the resulting designs are more obviously decipherable.

Two designs that clearly indicate Malina's frequent use of abstraction, contradiction and humour are an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Insulted and Injured* (Theatre of West Bohemia, Cheb, 1984) and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (National Theatre, Prague, 1988). Throughout Malina's career, he has often used fabric and textiles, frequently painted, to add layers and texture in his designs. Occasionally, as in *Insulted and Injured*, the fabric setting extends beyond the proscenium opening, into the auditorium; it thus breaks the formality of the



Jaroslav Malina. *Červený polštář* (Red Pillow, 1964)



Jaroslav Malina. *Dívka* (The Girl, 1972)

PERMANENT INTERACTION

'stone' theatre and leads the fictive world of the play towards the audience. The fabric 'cave' attached with clearly visible lines to the gilt edges of the boxes in the theatre at Cheb produce contradictory impulses concerning texture (hard and soft) and colour application (blended paints and metallic effects). More importantly, two highly disparate worlds are brought into conflict in the design: the mottled basement of the play and the ostentatiously decorated theatre. Very few 'real' objects are seen in the design. Rather, door, chairs, tables and beds are abstractions of things, removed from their real world counterparts by layers of painted fabric. The setting has become a work of visual art that extends beyond the frame – much in the same way that Malina's paintings do. The single instantly recognisable item that provides a link to the modern world is a solitary incandescent light bulb, suspended above the action. It suggests a contradiction in this stage world through its anachronistic presence, but also an irony that borders on mordant humour. *Miss Julie* shares some of the afore-mentioned characteristics, but differs in its execution. The stage in question, *Nová scéna* in Prague, was built to house Josef Svoboda's *Laterna Magika* and was filled with what was then state-of-the-art technology. Notably, it has no boxes or discernible proscenium arch. The contradictions, both for the space and for traditional approaches to the play, lay primarily in Malina's choice to insert painted flat scenery in a Baroque style around this modern stage. Scenic wings, lusciously painted like lilacs on steroids frame the space. Once again, very few 'real' items are seen: an iron kitchen stove, a rough-hewn table, a speaking tube, and a single, classically adorned doorway – the sign for the world of Julie and the count beyond the world of Jean and Kristen's kitchen. The depiction of the lilac bushes in the rendering come close to the decorative qualities found in the work of the Viennese Secessionist artist Gustav Klimt. Yet, two contradictory images (one visceral and serious, and another ironically comic) are key images in the design: a crimson stream meanders from upstage towards the audience and dominates the floor of the stage. Meanwhile, above the stage amidst cloud painted fabric, Cupid aims his arrow. It is important to note that these two unique, painterly depictions are appropriate to the world of this play: blood flows in the text of Strindberg's drama along with all the passions associated with fatal love. Malina's designs for settings of *Insulted and Injured* and *Miss Julie* thus show clear connections to the contradictions, abstractions and humour seen in his free work, but they have been extended and adapted for the stage.

Finally, in his depictions of the erotic, Jaroslav Malina is the descendant of a long line of central European artists, such as Egon Schiele, Alfons Mucha and, again, Gustav Klimt. The erotic is an aspect of his work that extends from the

1960s with *Red Pillow* (1964), through the 1970s with *The Girl* (1972) and *At Sleep* (1976) and has been incorporated into his theatre designs at various times over his entire career. Malina uses a limited, almost monochromatic palette for *The Girl* and *At Sleep*. That fact, coupled with the recumbent positions of the nude subjects, suggests the aggressive perspectives that may also be seen in Schiele's paintings and Klimt's sketches. Both Malina's paintings display details and ornamentation, but *At Sleep* comes closest to Klimt's penchant for decorative details in the upper left and lower right quadrants. The erotic, humour, and Klimt converge in *Red Pillow*. This is one of Malina's earliest fully rendered nude paintings, and surely one of his most whimsical. The painting is dominated by the horizontal figure of a woman, slightly elongated in the style of Modigliani, resting on a reddish, rust-coloured floor. Yet, the title of the painting refers to a small, rectangular pillow located in the top right centre of the painting. On close analysis, it can be noticed that the pillow is decorated with delicate patterns and structures. The pillow is almost strong enough as an image to distract the viewer from the woman – almost, but not quite. The playful title appended to what is clearly an erotic painting is an example of Malina's sense of humour.

In recent years, both eroticism and humour have been abundantly utilised in a number of opera productions designed by Malina for the National Theatre of Moravia and Silesia in Ostrava. Malina found a willing and talented collaborator in Luděk Golat, former artistic director at the theatre in Ostrava. Their production of W. A. Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* (2006) exemplifies a candid and playful approach to the subject matter. Malina explains his use of the erotic, both onstage and, I believe, in his free work, in this excerpt from an interview conducted by Míla Pravdová in 2008:

MP: [...] why did the concept for the set for *Così fan Tutte* remind audiences of a museum of female and male erotic symbols, as you called it, in a documentary film?

JM: Why not? Mozart was not a saint and the music is anything but prudish. Love, betrayal, cheating and exchanges of partners, and recruitment into the army: those were themes often depicted in visual art. That was our starting point and then we took it further with irony and humour. Those set pieces were oversized, stuffed, colourful things. When Despina bent the humongous phallus with her little finger and kept brushing it with a feather duster while giving advice to Fiora and Dora how to deal with men, even old blue-haired ladies enjoyed the scene. It was not too aggressive and was not meant to do any harm, and it didn't. (BRANDESKY 2008: 27)

PERMANENT INTERACTION

The interactions between Jaroslav Malina's various artistic endeavours are multiple and palpable. They have been appreciated in galleries and theatres around the world over the last forty years. With over four hundred and fifty designs for sets and costumes, thirty one-man shows and numerous group exhibits, both Czech and international audiences have had the chance to trace the development of Jaroslav Malina's career. Most recently, the *Jaroslav Malina: Paintings and Designs* exhibition finished a two-year run in the United States, and an exhibit of his erotic drawings entitled *Women, Women* concluded at the Paměť Gallery in Prague. Malina has opened the eyes and minds of international viewers to a unique artistic perspective in the same way that Boris Anisfeld did. There is still much to be learned and savoured in the discovery of the interpenetration of Jaroslav Malina's paintings and designs. A book-length study of his career is underway and a documentary by Dutch filmmaker Hans van Seventer entitled *Jaroslav Malina: Master of Dramatic Space* was awarded the Best Short International Documentary at the Garden State Film Festival (USA) in April 2011.² Malina himself continues to paint and design from his home in the Czech countryside. The interaction, it seems, has not yet ended.

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2 The film is reviewed by Professor Brandesky in the reviews section of this issue, p. 263.