

Brandesky, Joseph E.

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REVIEWES



Joseph E. Brandesky |
Kateřina Miholová. Reproductions of Twentieth Century Czech Theatre in Context: *The Coming to Wisdom of Don Quixote (1914)* and *Julius Caesar (1936)*

If the first two in a series of ten DVD-Roms covering masterworks of twentieth century Czech theatre are any indication, theatre scholars are going to have a new appreciation for the processes and reactions surrounding historically distant productions. For the majority of non-Czech language speakers, this series represents the first comprehensive treatments of landmark theatre productions in Prague dating from the last century. Until now, individual monographs translated into English, such as *František Tröster – Artist of Light and Space* (Vlasta Koubská, et al., Prague: Obecni dům, 2007) were one of the few sources of quality insights, images and information about great Czech theatre artists, mainly designers. With these bi-lingual DVD-Roms, technology and theatre historians have united in an effort to contextualize significant Czech pro-

ductions in a much more comprehensive and inclusive manner.

The series is entitled *Czech Theatre: Interactive Reconstructions of Productions – 1900–1950*. The principal author of this project is Kateřina Miholová and it is her interdisciplinary approach to the productions that makes the DVD-Roms worthy of careful examination. Sections on each of the disks are devoted to the directors, designers, actors, composers, authors and translators for each production. Historical background concerning the record of previous performances of older plays and the connection between Czech audiences and newer or seldom performed works helps to establish a more complete recreation of the milieu out of which the performances developed. Additionally, all available contemporaneous reviews are cited, along with comments written at later times. Political and social concerns are carefully explicated to place the productions in as full a context as possible. All of the abovementioned traits would make this project worthwhile, but what truly makes them special is the archival material included on the disks.

All references and notes can be highlighted to reveal their source in the indices. The most important quotations come from Czech authors and artists who saw or worked on the productions. A click on the title listed in the index will bring up a copy of the actual entry, providing those with a working knowledge of Czech an op-

portunity to compare translations. Another index includes other sources of information about the productions, including Jarka Burian's English language books on Czech theatre. Production photos, sketches by designers, director's notes and music from the productions are also provided in separate sections. A few select audio and video items help to make these disks very useful in attempting to recreate a full sense of each production. It should be noted here that the platform used in this disk for navigating from texts to images to indices is very fluid. Readers should have no problem exploring the multiple information sources. The main essay can also be converted to a PDF if such twentieth century luxuries such as reading the text on paper, in the garden, is desired.

NB: The production of a disk containing numerous essays, indices, audio and visual material is a very large task, a fact that most using the disk may not recognize. This reviewer has in fact generated several projects in the past and fully understands how many hours are represented in the product. The fact that the disks are utilizing Czech language sources and that, indeed, the essays were written in Czech and translated later may account for the substantial number of spelling and grammar errors on both disks (*The Coming to Wisdom of Don Quixote* disk is the more problematic). Additionally, some translations of original Czech reviews and com-

mentaries are almost indecipherable. These problems do not diminish the overall value of these disks to theatre inquiry, but they do indicate a need to bring publications using technologically sophisticated delivery systems up to the standards required by scholarly presses. Review of translated texts by English speaking theatre colleagues in future efforts would reduce the occurrences of these kinds of errors and increase the likelihood that non-Czech speaking students and scholars will more completely understand the prodigious amount of information provided.

The disk featuring the recreation of *The Coming to Wisdom of Don Quixote*, performed in 1914 at the "Vinohrady Theatre" in Prague, is particularly interesting because it is farther removed from us, almost one hundred years, and is less well known to theatre scholars outside the Czech Republic. The sections describing the three driving forces for the production, author Viktor Dyk, director František Zavřel and designer František Kyšela were illuminating. Zavřel emerges as a dynamic and charismatic force, fresh from associations with Max Reinhardt and directorial successes in Germany. His efforts to rid the stage of realistic illusionism culminated in a production exemplifying his version of expressionism – an aesthetic absorbed and pushed to farther limits in the productions of K. H. Hilar (one of the next DVD-Roms scheduled for release will feature K. H. Hilar's and

Vlastislav Hofman's 1926 production of *Hamlet*). The connections between expressionist visual techniques and Kysela's design for the production are easily explored in two versions of the reconstructed production. Contemporaneous reviews, later memoirs, extant production photos and newly rediscovered shop sketches provide the rationales for each version of the setting. All sources and texts combine to provide multiple insights and elucidations.

The first disk in the "Interactive Reconstructions of Productions" sets a tone and standard that is continued by the subject of the second: the 1936 production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* directed by Jiří Frejka and designed by František Tröster. This production generated spirited discussion in its time because of the political climate both in Prague and the world. The dramaturgical analysis of the 'elisions' made by Frejka in the name of making the production relevant to contemporary political realities is fascinating, along with the volume of supporting documents and quotations alluded to in the main essay. Frejka's working methods as well as his tempestuous, but successful working relationship with Tröster is carefully laid out. Pages from Frejka's director's book, including sketches made before and during rehearsals for the performance are included and illustrate gestural inspirations originating in sculpture by Michelangelo. The fine points of Frejka's "hyper-

bolic realism" and Tröster's "scenic urbanism" are compared in very useful ways in the main essay. However, the development of the visual elements for this production, both sets and costumes, is laid out as a complete and satisfying totality.

It is interesting that when productions are being developed, artists frequently wish to create a "total work of art" but theatre historians are faced with discussing past works with a paucity of *residua*. These disks represent an attempt to reconstruct the totality of historically significant productions on a platform that can be viewed by international audiences. These "Interactive Reconstructions of Productions" are important first steps in making Czech theatre history accessible and relevant to international audiences. In addition to the 1926 Hilar/Hofman *Hamlet*, future disks will include *Spring's Awakening* (1936), directed by E. F. Burian and designed by Miroslav Kouřil, as well as *Esther* (1944), directed by Nora Frýd and designed by František Zelenka. Five more Czech productions from 1950–2000 will be selected to finish the twentieth century series. For those interested in Czech theatre, at home or abroad, these "Interactive Reconstructions of Productions" central to Czech theatre history are a welcome addition to existing scholarship on the subject and a step forward in an interdisciplinary, total response to past productions in general.