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Martina Musilová

Jindřich Honzl's Texts on Acting – Between Convention and Spontaneity

In this paper, I will deal with two concepts that have opposite meanings, *convention* and *spontaneity*, and the transformations of their definitions in Jindřich Honzl's theoretical texts. In my view, understanding these transformations is crucial for grasping the use of these two concepts in Honzl's texts on acting, especially in his studies from the late 1940s – “Mimic Sign and Mimic Symptom”¹ (*Mimický znak a mimický příznak*, 1947–1948), “Actor's Inspiration” (*Herecká inspirace*, 1947–1948) and “The Definition of the Mimics” (*Definice mimiky*, 1946–1947).

In these studies, Honzl puts the term ‘convention’ against the term ‘spontaneity’ and this contradiction is their central idea. But we can also find two different concepts of spontaneity here – Honzl uses the first to describe spontaneity based on psychology, which he attributes to Stanislavski's system, and the second is spontaneity that arises from an actor's body, which is a concept of spontaneity inspired by surrealism. It provokes us to ask a basic question – how does Honzl understand the terms ‘spontaneity’ and ‘convention’?

Thorough research of Honzl's use of these terms in his theoretical studies over twenty years not only shows that both terms were interpreted by Honzl in different ways, but also an artistic change within Honzl's approaches. Metaphorically speaking these changes show us ‘the dynamics of the meaning’ in Honzl's theoretical thinking. This dynamism was not only determined by Honzl's artistic development but also by his political attitudes.

Honzl borrows the term ‘convention’ from modern Russian theatre, namely from Valery Bryusov's essay “Unnecessary Truth” (1902), Alexander Tairov's book *The Unbended Thea-*

1 The word ‘*příznak*’ has connotations to the term ‘*příznakovost*’ = ‘markedness’ in linguistics. German enables a more adequate translation of the title of this study: “Mimisches Zeichen und Mimisches Anzeichen”.

tre – *The Director's Notes* (1921; published also in German as *Das Enfesselte Theater*, 1923), Vsevolod Meyerhold's text "On the Theatre" (1912) and Nikolai Evreinov's collection of texts *Theatre as Such* (1912).²

In 1902, Bryusov wrote in his polemic with the Moscow Art Theatre, and its realism and naturalism, that the stage "is conventional by its very nature" (BRYUSOV 2008: 57) and "wherever there is art, there is convention" (BRYUSOV 2008: 57). In his book *The Director's Notes*, Tairov followed Bryusov while criticizing Stanislavski for his realism, dilettantism and refusal of theatrical conventions. It is well known that in his book, Tairov signed up for the Diderotian tradition of *acting as representation*, which was then practised by the French actor Benoit-Constant Coquelin the Elder. He refused realistic theatre and *acting of experiencing*³ that wants the spectator to forget that he or she is in the theatre, which led to the negation of theatre conventions.

For a better understanding of Honzl, it is necessary to mention that Tairov published his text in 1921 when the conflict between realistic/naturalistic and stylized theatre was out of date in Russia. The book served Tairov rather as a platform for explaining his theatrical visions than as a reflection of a real conflict in the Russian theatre (LINDOVSKÁ 2012: 74). Honzl had adopted Tairov's critical attitude (especially towards Stanislavski) in the early 1920s and insisted on it even in the 1940s, after the Stalinist repressions in the Russian theatre in the 1930s. That may partly serve to explain Honzl's constant criticism of Stanislavski, which is, however, superficial on many occasions as it disregards Stanislavski's artistic development after 1906⁴ and overlooks new approaches and improvements of Stanislavski's system by Michael Chekhov that were very close to Honzl's ideas.⁵ Naděžda Lindovská also points out that Tairov misinterpreted Stanislavski when said that the final aim of Stanislavski's actor is to achieve an emotion, while Stanislavski counted on an active character of emotions that should transform into the scenic actor's activities (LINDOVSKÁ 2012: 86–7). Therefore, for Stanislavski, the aim is the actor's activity, thus the dramatic and not the emotional, as Tairov claims.

It is necessary to add another explanation of Honzl's critical attitude to Stanislavski and uncritical reception of Tairov's ideas. We have to look for it in the ideology of the Czech leftist Avant-Garde. The Russian futurist and constructivist Avant-Garde rejected all art joined with the bourgeois epoch of which Stanislavski and Moscow Art Theatre (hereafter MAT) were the main representatives. The ideology of the Avant-Garde could fully develop

2 It is not certain that Honzl had read all of these studies but he was very well informed of their principle ideas.

3 Using these terms, I capitalize on the English translation "represent – experience"; see (CARNICKE 1998, 2009).

4 For example, Honzl did not know about the incorporation of yoga exercises into Stanislavski's system in the 1910s or about the discovery of the method of active analyses in the 1930s. Honzl entirely ignores interventions by the authorities in the Russian theatre practices and later collaboration between Meyerhold and Stanislavski in the 1930s, as well as their possible mutual influence on their work.

5 More about the affinities in (MEERZON 2005).

after the revolution of 1917. Honzl⁶ and other Czech left-oriented artists and intellectuals received this ideology which in consequence meant unifying the artistic approaches with political ones. That explains why Czech Avant-Garde artists later ignored Stanislavski and his pupils (Chekhov and studios of MAT) and why they adored those who programmatically devoted themselves to the revolution and the creation of a new world, new society and its new art (Tairov, Meyerhold, Vachtangov).⁷

The ostracism of non-Avant-Garde theatre is evident when we consider the fact that the government of the new Czechoslovak Republic offered asylum to Russian immigrants after 1918. Plenty of Russian actors and parts of theatre groups made the Czechoslovak Republic their new home for some period of time.⁸ During the civil war in Russia, Czech spectators could see Stanislavski in productions of MAT (1922),⁹ and Michael Chekhov in a production of the First Studio (Malvolio or Erik XIV, 1922). Czech non-Avant-Garde critics noticed the dismissal of the aesthetics of Realism in new Russian acting, for example, in Richard Bole-slavsky's – who was a member of MAT's first studio – production of *Hamlet* (1921, Prague).

The reviews of Czech critics that visited the Soviet Union in 1924, 1925 and 1927 are equally significant. We can read positive reviews on productions of the Avant-Garde theatre (including Meyerhold's propagandist performances "*Window*" to the village or *Trust D. E.*) and negative ones on 'old-form' theatres that are considered 'nonsense' (MAJEROVÁ 1925: 207). Czech left-oriented critics were surprised that old-style opera, MAT and MAT-studios productions were amusing enough for the new Soviet public (TILLE 1929: 190–1; MAJEROVÁ 1925: 207).

Description of non-Avant-Garde performances are missing in the reviews and books from the trips to Russia; either that, or they are prejudiced. This disproportion reveals the writers' political stance. The most frequent references point out the fact that the new audiences of workers enthusiastically welcome old forms of the theatre, too. The authors subsequently try to explain in a political manner why, for example, the young audiences are enthusiastic about a realistic or naturalistic performance of an opera in Stanislavski's Music studio. Tille reminds the readers of the similarity with MAT's first production in 1898, but does not reflect upon the change of the cultural politics in the Soviet Union or the official inclination towards Ostrovsky's Realism in 1923.

6 Honzl was a Communist, a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party from its founding in 1921 till the end of his life.

7 Honzl also mentioned the work of N. N. Evreinov in the years 1925–1927. One essay from the book *Modern Russian Theatre* is fully devoted to Evreinov's concept of theatricality. Evreinov was considered as a persona non grata by the Czech Avant-Garde after his emigration and is not mentioned as the main source of inspiration of Tairov, Vachtangov and Meyerhold in Czech theatre studies till today. We can see that the Avant-Garde, too, alternated history.

8 For example, the immigrant M. N. Germanova founded the Prague group of MAT in 1921. V. I. Kachalov's group of MAT found an asylum in Prague the same year. The group could not return to Moscow because of the civil war and is not considered as immigrant group. Russian artists preferred Czechoslovakia to Germany and Austria, countries with more prolific theatre milieu at that time, because of Czechoslovakia's favourable economic situation. While the latter countries were burdened by raging inflation, the former offered considerably safer and more stable living conditions.

9 The first tour of MAT to Prague took place in 1906.

Convention of scenic constructivism

Honzl was fully devoted to the idea of proletarian art in the years following the end of WWI in 1918. His texts include a requirement of collectivism, i.e. to interconnect the stage with the auditorium into a unified collective. Similarly to other leftist authors at this time, he promotes crowd-scene drama and unanimism. The first mentions of Russian constructivism become present in his theoretical thinking in the 1923/24 season and onwards. In 1924, he writes the first article on new acting, “The Actor” (*Herec*), that he defines under the influence of the American film slapstick comedy (Charlie Chaplin) and the Russian constructivism of Tairov and Meyerhold.

The strong impact of Russian constructivism together with the Czech programme of the Avant-Garde art called “Poetism and the new art of cinema” mark Honzl’s first book *The Spinning Stage* published in 1925. In this collection of studies from 1922–1925 he defined and called for new acting that should be an external manifestation. This vision refers directly to Tairov’s ideas: his refusal of randomness and improvisation, naturalism in acting, and acting of experiencing which according to him forfeits the external acting technique. Another of Tairov’s ideas which Honzl adopted is the objective conception of an actor’s body that is turned into an instrument (e.g. an actor’s body as an instrument of the actor’s work). Honzl also adheres to Tairov’s claim that, “[a] dramatic character is a synthesis of emotions and form [...]” (TAIROV 1927: 131). According to Honzl, an actor should aspire to produce “an actor’s conscious and objective word and gesture” (HONZL 1925: 63) and should refuse any accidentality. We can find further references to Tairov’s book in the following statements:

An actor is a manifestation of the external. (HONZL 1925: 63)

An actor is primarily an instrument of emotions of forms¹⁰. (HONZL 1925: 74)

A gesture has its own poetry. There must be no improvisation, arbitrariness or coincidence in it. (HONZL 1925: 81)

Additionally, Honzl’s conceptions of new acting also relied on Meyerhold’s Taylorism of his biomechanic period. This influence can be traced in Honzl comparing physiological regularities of a muscular movement in the actor’s body to a machine and directly adhering to Meyerhold’s concept of an objectivized actor’s movement. Thus, Honzl called for a mechanical actor’s body and gestures when he said that, “[w]e have to convert the actor’s gesture into elementary, distinctive and exact movement of body’s mechanism” (HONZL 1925: 81).

This requirement corresponds to Meyerhold’s definition of the actor: $N = A1 + A2$, where N is the actor, A1 is the initiator or the constructor that designs a task, and A2 is the

10 In Czech, ‘*tvarová emoce*’.

one who performs the task. In this definition, A2 is viewed as a material or a machine to fulfill the task (LINDOVSKÁ 2012: 76).

In the mid-1920s, Honzl had no understanding for an actor's *spontaneity*, he looked for objective manifestations that could fulfil the concept of theatrical convention. Honzl declared himself a follower of the Diderotian tradition when he wrote that an actor *represents*, not *experiences* the role. In this way he adheres to the Diderotian tradition of *acting as representation* practiced by the Russian Avant-Garde artists Tairov and Meyerhold.

After visiting the Soviet Union in 1925, Honzl published a book *Modern Russian Theatre* (*Moderní ruské divadlo*, 1927) where he introduced the most recent trends in Russian theatre – from Stanislavski to agitprop theatre. The largest space is inscribed to the Avant-Garde directors – Tairov, Meyerhold, Vachtangov and Granovsky but the book includes the chapter “Theatricality of the Theatre” (*Zdivadelnění divadla*) that introduces the basic ideas of N. Evreinov's concept of theatricality and theatrical manifestations in everyday life. Honzl adopted Evreinov's term of theatricality for social contacts and social life but he criticized him for his subjectivism. For Honzl, “the true theatricality always has an objective meaning: to let others experience an artificial impression of scare, sorrow and joy by the artificial means” (HONZL 1927: 35). In his study “The Definition of the Mimics” from 1946, Honzl assigned semiotic functions to these social *conventions, norms* and contacts (for example sorrowful facial expression at the funeral ceremony, merry facial expression when meeting a friend, etc.)

There is another considerable book discussing the concept of convention in Czech theatre, *A Man that Became an Actor* (*Člověk, který se stal hercem*, 1929), which was written by the leading Avant-Garde director Jiří Frejka in the late 1920s. The book contains the study, “Theatre Grows out of the Convention and Yet It Fight Against It” (*Divadlo roste z konvence a přesto proti ní bojuje*), in which Frejka defines his concept of the term ‘convention’. Unlike Honzl, whose opinions are programmatic and thesis-based and whose concept of new acting is significantly mechanical, Frejka's concept connects a vision of new acting with his experience from the theatre practice. This allows Frejka to preserve an actor's creativity in his concept and leads him to draw his concept as paradoxical: “It [theatre] is a new and creative world, it is an anti-conventional world – but at the same time it is built on conventions.” (FREJKA 1929: 86)

In the late 1920s, Frejka was closer to a semiotic position when he described ‘convention’ as a symbol “thanks to which the spectator will understand that some movements mean drunk person as he saw them as drunk people” (FREJKA 1929: 87; cf. also ZICH 1931: 123, 139). A similar dialectic can be found in Honzl's later studies from the 1940s after he had incorporated the idea of an actor's spontaneity into his thought. In “The Definition of the Mimics” in 1946, for instance, the oscillation between conventional and anti-conventional expression helps Honzl to define the dynamism between mimic sign and mimic symptom.

Surrealistic spontaneity after 1932

The concept of ‘spontaneity’ in Honzl’s thinking had transformed radically in the 1930s under the influence of surrealism. In the early 1930s, Czech Avant-Garde artists were shocked by the development in the Soviet culture. Rejection of constructivist Avant-Garde and proclamation of Socialist Realism as the leading aesthetic approach in 1934 and state policy drove them to an insoluble situation.¹¹ It partially explains the turn of artists to another Avant-Garde movement. Czech constructivist architects – the group PASS, Jiří Kroha and Karel Teige “begin to call for demands of the human unconscious under the influence of surrealism” (ŠVÁCHA 2002: 47)¹² and we can hypothetically suppose that Honzl’s turn to surrealism in the 1930s sprang from the same conflict.

In the study “Inspired Acting” (*Inspirované herectví*) from 1937 Honzl described the acting of Jan Werich and Jiří Voskovec from Liberated Theatre. Their acting style was based on improvisation, spontaneity, liberated unconsciousness like dada and surrealist revolution and *écriture automatique*. Honzl co-operated with them as a director. He was part of the rehearsing process and could see how the ‘spontaneity’ was involved into the actor’s creative process. This experience has changed Honzl’s attitude to ‘convention’ and ‘spontaneity’ which is suddenly contradictory to the meanings of puritanical constructivism and poetism.

In this study, Honzl referred to ‘spontaneity’ and ‘inspiration’ in an opposite sense than in his constructivist/poetistic period.¹³ Inspired by Werich and Voskovec, Honzl left the idea of ‘acting of representation’ when he wrote about these two actors “To put it briefly: they live their humour. They do not act, do not demonstrate, do not represent. In them we have a humour that is not suppressed by a machine and an exertion, without convention and boredom.” (HONZL 1937a: 43)

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The Sign and the Symptom

In the study “Mimic Sign and Mimic Symptom” (1941, first published 1947) Honzl turns back to the out-of-date conflict designed by Tairov, conflict between realism and theatre based on conventions. There can be at least two reasons for this return. Honzl as a disci-

11 How confusing the situation was, we can read in Honzl’s text “15 January 1935 in Moscow” (*15. ledna 1935 v Moskvě*, cf. HONZL 1937b) that was published in *The Fame and Misery of Theatres (Sláva a bída divadel)* in 1937. Honzl was describing Moscow theatre productions and criticizing them for different kinds of realism – the biological and the naturalistic of B. Zachava in the Vachtangov Theatre, inspiring one of N. Ochlopkov in Realistic Theatre, naturalistic of K. S. Stanislavski etc. Honzl’s artistic and political attitudes got into a conflict.

12 Surrealism was acceptable for its leftist orientation as well as its grounding in a scientific interpretation of dream-work (Freud), which made it suitable for rationalistic inclinations of the originally constructivist architects.

13 Karel Teige described Honzl’s development from *The Spinning Stage (Roztočené jeviště)* in 1925 to *The Fame and Misery of Theatres (Sláva a bída divadel)* in 1937 as “process of transformation from poetism to surrealism” (TEIGE 1937: 69).

plined Communist had to deal with the official doctrine of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union and the return to MAT Realism in Russian theatre. On the other hand he had to deal with the violent death of adored Vsevolod Meyerhold and his wife Zinaida Reich (*Note to the article undat: unpag.*).¹⁴

In 1940, Stanislavski's book *My Life in Art* was translated into Czech and published.¹⁵ It is necessary to be reminded that it happened during the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (*Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren, 1939–1945*) but before Hitler broke the German-Soviet pact in 1941. During the war time, Honzl's possibility to work in the theatre as a director was very limited and after 1941 it was reduced to almost zero.

As said above, Honzl turned back to the old conflict from 1902–1905. Following Tairov who criticizes naturalism and 'acting of experiencing' as psychopathological as it is based on physiological reactions, he criticised Stanislavski's realism for its 'spontaneous' and biologically based production of expression.

And this seems to be the reason why in his study "Mimic Sign and Mimic Symptom", Honzl had attributed Darwin's concept described in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*¹⁶ and why he attributes reflex reactions by which an individual responds to changes in the environment, to Stanislavski's system (HONZL 1963: 28).

It is interesting how Darwin's theory occurred in Honzl's theoretical thinking in the early 1940s and we can find other two influences that are well hidden due to the Protectorate (or later Communist) censorship. Honzl was acquainted with Karl Bühler *Ausdruckstheorie* (published in 1933) and quoted Bühler in his own study.¹⁷ In *Ausdruckstheorie*, Bühler criticizes Darwin's concept of individual performing of subjective expressions as incomplete and supplies it with the expressions that originated in social – convention (Eвреинov's concept of theatricality) that influenced Honzl at the beginning of his career¹⁸ and also, – which is substantial for Honzl's political stance – it corresponded to the Marxist concept of a human being as a social being. In the introduction to his study "Mimic Sign and Mimic Symptom", Honzl connects social and theatrical conventions, which he calls the norm: "The normativity of mimics puts a mask on an individual's face. People wear this mask in social intercourse and an actor needs it when he speaks to the audience." (HONZL 1963: 29)

Bühler's *Ausdruckstheorie* is one answer to the question why Darwinism occurred in Honzl's late texts and why he did not study the psychologist Ribot or the biologist Spencer

14 In Honzl's personal archive there are clippings announcing the execution of Vsevolod Meyerhold and the violent death of Zinaida Reich (*Meyerhold's Wife a Crime Victim 1939: unpag.*)

15 In 1939, J. Rapoport's book *An Actor and His Work* was published by the Union of Czechoslovak workers amateur actors, which is an abridged version of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*. Honzl thus could confront Tairov's and Meyerhold's programmatic texts and visions with a proponent of Stanislavski's system of acting, which he does not (however, Rapoport was an actor in the Vakhtangov Theatre which strayed from the Stanislavsky method to some extent).

16 In fact, Honzl ascribes the features of the German realistic theatre that had the strongest impact on the Czech drama theatre to Stanislavski, which is a huge misunderstanding.

17 A note of a quote from Bühler's *Ausdruckstheorie* (page 103) is in the manuscript of the study in Honzl's personal archive (*Notes to the study "Mimic Sign" undat: unpag.*)

18 "Chekhov credits Vakhtangov for the invention of the idea that an actor should rehearse with an imaginary audience in mind." (MEERZON 2005: 62)

that corresponded to Stanislavski. In the post war years young Honzl attended, as an extraordinary student, lectures of the Czech biologist and philosopher Emanuel Rádl at the Prague Faculty of Arts (1920–1921). In his lecture notes, Honzl in fact copies Rádl's *History of Biological Theories*.¹⁹ Rádl criticized Darwinism and evolutionist theories of the 19th century as a mechanical approach and accepted vitalism of the German biologist Hans Driesch. In the study "Mimic Sign and Mimic Symptom", we can find the interpretations of the mimic norm (social mask) that correspond to Honzl's notes from Rádl's lectures (*Notes undat.: unpag.*).

In the studies "Mimic Sign and Mimic Symptom", "Actor's Inspiration" and "The Definition of the Mimics", Honzl divided mimetic expressions into the **mimic sign** (*znak; Zeichen*) and the **mimic symptom** (*příznak; Enzeichen*). Mimic signs are based on *social convention*. They can be considered to be a *social norm*, *mimic communication* and *message*²⁰ that is originated and determined in social contacts. The mimic symptoms are produced automatically, unawares and spontaneously and they are a *spontaneous manifestation of individual subjectivity*.

Body-based spontaneity

Honzl's understanding of the terms convention and spontaneity was under a constant transformation over a twenty year period. He abandoned the rigid constructivist understanding of the convention. Under the influence of surrealism, he presents them as dynamic poles of an actor's expression in his studies from the 1940s. Honzl's view of an actor's spontaneity is innovative. According to him, spontaneity grows from the actor's body and not his soul. Honzl puts the actor's inspiration in the field of body spontaneity and comes up with new terms: 'muscle memory', 'muscle spontaneity' and 'muscle inspiration' (HONZL 1963: 35) which are near to Zich's concepts of 'muscle' memory, interior haptic sensations and bodily sensations (ZICH, 1931:135). By connecting an actor's spontaneity with bodily impulses, Honzl escapes the obsolete conflict proposed by Tairov in 1921.

In his Structuralist studies from the 1940s, Honzl extricated himself from the concept of spontaneity as naturalistic and psychological reaction. His definition of spontaneity as *mimic symptom* allowed Honzl to dynamically connect it to the *mimic sign*, which is tied to *convention*, an earlier used concept. He managed to define the mutual relationship of the 'sign' and the 'symptom' in his study "The Definition of the Mimics", where he characterizes the 'mimic symptom' as a manifestation of "spontaneous, non-conscious and often uncontrollable motions of the spirit, to the emergence of which there was no need for imitation or influence of the society upon the individual" (HONZL 1963: 23), and the 'mimic sign' as one's ability to,

19 First published in German in 1905–1909; English 1930, Czech 2007.

20 In everyday life as well as in the theatre art.

realise – even if consequentially – spontaneous, unintentional, unwitting and natural manifestations of one's own face and body, and [one] also has an ability to observe these manifestations on one's self, as well as on other people. Moreover, one can also *repeat* these spontaneous, natural symptoms of the inner and physiological motions, i.e. one can *imitate* oneself [...]. (HONZL 1963: 23)

In his prime studies from the 1940s, Honzl delimits the relationship between the *sign* and the *symptom* as one of dialectic opposition, permanently supplementing itself in oscillation and interaction. The concept that Honzl proposes in these works influenced the following generation of Avant-Garde artists.

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Summary

The terms 'spontaneity' and 'convention' obtain different meanings in Honzl's texts devoted to issues of acting. The dynamic in the interpretation of these terms is influenced by Honzl's artistic development and also by political changes in the period of 1920s–1940s. The paper is based on the research of Honzl's personal archive that includes variations of texts, proof-read versions and notes. These enable us to gain an insight into Honzl's strategy of writing the programme and theoretical studies.

Keywords

acting, mimics, spontaneity, convention

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