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# New Book on the Czech Avant-garde Theatre

Martin Bernátek

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Andrea Jochmanová a Ladislava Petišková. *Osvobozené divadlo: na vlnách Devětsílu*. Brno: Janáčkova akademie múzických umění, 2022. 363 s. ISBN 978-80-7460-191-0.

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The impulses and activities of the interwar avant-garde in Czechoslovakia are fundamental for the meta-narrative on Czech modern theatre. In the following review of the new publication on the Liberated Theatre and Czech avant-garde theatre, I will first present the general framework of avant-garde studies in the present day Czech Republic in order to be able to describe, compare, and evaluate the publication well. I understand the interwar avant-garde – at least the Czechoslovak one – as an international, not only aesthetic but also complex social phenomenon and the reference point in the history of Czech theatre. Research of avant-garde theatre therefore creates a platform where the possibilities, concepts, and methods of interpreting the history of modern culture are cultivated along with the ways in which scholarship builds upon the relationship between art, society, and politics. That is why, in my opinion, any study of avant-garde needs to define and make explicit the notions, methods, and theories that frame and connect those categories by which it constitutes the particular historical narration of this crucial period of Czech theatre culture.

The often short-lived and poorly documented activity of the Czech avant-garde theatres, with sources scattered in

various public archives and private estates, challenges both basic heuristics and ambitions for a holistic interpretation of the interwar avant-garde. The approach to avant-garde in Czechoslovakia is still mainly ‘Czechocentric’ and lacks a more sophisticated inclusion of events in Slovakia as well as the activities of exile theatre initiatives, for example German-language companies in Czechoslovakia after 1933. Not only is the research on avant-garde theatre not very extensive and coordinated among Czech theatre scholars, but the transnational approach (see KOSIŇSKI 2022: 156–168) and relativization of the national (Czech) framing of avant-garde theatre in relation to Czechoslovakia has also been lacking in Czech avant-garde research for a long time. From this perspective, the activities of Czech artists who worked abroad (such as Josef Šíma, Václav Vlček, or Ervína Kupferová), and interaction between various centres (Bratislava, Berlin, Prague, Brno, Moscow) and regions (Kingdom of Yugoslavia, respectively Central-Eastern Europe) may not only be included into the narrative on ‘Czech’ avant-garde theatre, but also transform it, with regards to the transnational network of avant-garde practices. The *Theatralia* issue dedicated to Central European Avant-garde, and especially to relations between Czech and French avant-garde,

edited by Andrea Jochmanová and Mariana Orawczak Kunešová, signal a shift in avant-garde studies in the Czech Republic (JOCHMANOVÁ and ORAWCZAK KUNEŠOVÁ 2022).

Researchers also tend to emphasise the 1920s as a time of expansion of avant-gardes in Europe which also leads to the neglect of phenomena associated with the avant-gardes of the 1930s, and creates an overly simplified periodisation milestone. Such is the case of the exhibition *Rozlomená doba* in the Museum of Art Olomouc and associated publication, edited by Karel Srp (SRP et al. 2018). However, it would be interesting to track more continuities and trace longer processes (see BERG et al. 2012; VOJVODÍK 2011: 15–28), or, conversely, to explore the possibility of a segmentation of avant-garde development that does not conform to an established division into decades or typical political and wartime milestones of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The study of the Czechoslovak avant-garde is also not only the domain of Czech theatre studies (see FORBES 2020; STROŽEK 2022). Foreign perspectives may also help to overcome the reductive understanding of the ‘influence’ from (western) ‘centres’ on the ‘periphery’ in studying the interwar avant-garde in particular. This symbolic topography of the avant-garde has already been a subject of the methodological revision (see BÄCKSTRÖM and HJARTARSON 2014; MILLER 2010; PIOTROWSKI 2009) that leads to pluralisation of avant-garde studies that goes beyond the limiting frame of national history or understanding the avant-garde through the prism of art styles or ‘-isms’. Also, the definition of avant-garde as an aesthetic category is historically

fluid and dependent on the concepts and ideologies that guide the research, as Peter Bürger already discussed in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as early as the 1970s (BÜRGER 1984: 15–34).

As part of the overall interest in the avant-gardes, in the autumn of 2022, two monographs were published in the Czech Republic that focus on key events and personalities of the Czech interwar theatre avant-garde. Both books were written by female tandems. Andrea Jochmanová and Ladislava Petišková published the book *Osvobozené divadlo: na vlnách Devětsilu* [Liberated Theatre: On the Waves of Devětsil] (JOCHMANOVÁ and PETIŠKOVÁ 2022) which focuses mainly on the relationship between the artistic association Devětsil (Butterbur) and the avant-garde theatre. They deal with the constitution of the Liberated Theatre, its activities, and personalities until the end of the 1920s. In doing so, they make use of surviving documents (especially those of Jindřich Honzl and Mira Holzbachová) that have not yet been systematically explored. Another comprehensive monograph on one of the key stage designers of the Liberated Theatre, Antonín Heythum, was prepared jointly by Vlasta Koubská and Radomíra Sedláková (2022). Heythum, like other scenographers among his peers, was devoted not only to theatre, but also to architecture, exhibition, industrial, and furniture design. The publication captures in individual chapters the aspects of Heythum’s career, including the era in the USA, where he and his wife Charlotte had worked since 1948. This period in his career is still little known in Czechia. Because it is a bilingual publication, the English version of the text could be a good

source of information on Czech theatre for those who do not understand Czech.

Both teams also draw on the results of longer-term research interests and previous work. Ladislava Petišková has been working on modern Czech dance and mime for a long time and has prepared an anthology of texts by Jiří Frejka, the essential figure of the early stage of the Liberated Theatre (FREJKA 2004). Andrea Jochmanová has written her dissertation and most of her articles on Frejka (e.g., JOCHMANOVÁ 2006) as well. Vlasta Koubská is a leading Czech historian of modern scenography. In her current monograph, she uses her detailed knowledge of inter-war scenic design and her research findings from her study trip to the USA. She collaborated with architectural historian Radomíra Sedláková, who is the author of chapters on architecture and design in the reviewed monograph. This comprehensive treatise on Heythum follows the exhibition and the associated catalogue, which for the first time in recent years introduced Heythum as a multidisciplinary artist (POLÁČEK et al. 2018).

With both new publications at hand, one can also reflect on how they expand on existing knowledge, but also what new interpretations they bring about the phenomena studied as well as Czech theatre culture. Both publications thus come with the ambition to fill in the information gap and to offer a comprehensive picture of the phenomena studied, which is strengthened by the co-authorship and sharing of expertise. In the following text I will focus on the book on the Liberated Theatre, because the authors also included a chapter on constitution and transformation of Czech avant-garde theatre in general.

Jochmanová and Petišková's publication on the Liberated Theatre was intended to commemorate the centenary of the founding of Devětsil (1920) and '[...] to shed new light on issues related to the developmental changes of Czech avant-garde theatre art' (7). They also aim to produce a survey publication on avant-garde theatre of the 1920s that is distinct from the interpretations in sources published during the pre-1989 Socialist period. This book, the structure of which the authors describe as a 'sborníkový systém' [a collection system] (7), consists of three larger parts that are subdivided into relatively autonomous chapters organised chronologically as well as according to specific problems, that oscillate between the discussion of more general issues and case studies on the Liberated Theatre.

In several chapters of the first part entitled 'Historie versus kontexty' [History versus Contexts],<sup>1</sup> Jochmanová introduces the circumstances of the formation of Devětsil and its relationship to the international avant-garde, film, and theatre.

The introductory chapter on the Devětsil presents its organisation, the aesthetic debates and polemics centred around Karel Teige, the concept of proletarian art, and its replacement with Poetism. Andrea Jochmanová also provides a valuable reflection on the contradiction between the demands of avant-garde theatre and the contemporary teaching of acting, showing the fundamental tension between the emerging generation of artists and its demands and the con-

1 It is unfortunate that this part of the book has several factual errors. The film *Entr'acte* was not made by Man Ray but by René Clair (48, 51). The International Workers' Theatre Olympiad in Moscow was held in 1933, not 1932 (150).

temporary theatre establishment. On the other hand, these postulates of the new art are repeated in the other chapters of this part, where the relationship to the international avant-garde is presented more through a survey of foreign accounts published in Czechoslovakia, with less space devoted to meetings of avant-garde artists and other platforms of their interaction. Also, the chapter on the avant-garde and film (42–52) and theatre (53–74) tend to repeat generally known facts without re-interpretation, while in the case of film it would be possible to build on the conception of the (film) avant-garde as a network, as described by Malte Hagener (2007), for example. The description of the relationship between the avant-garde and theatre is also not surprising in its listing of general theses about the new art, which can be rather useful for those who are not experts in modern theatre as these passages will provide them with a basic overview.

In the first part of the book, as well as in the whole publication, there is no comparison with other avant-garde centres and artists abroad. The book is mainly concerned with the Czech avant-garde and modern theatre and not with the avant-garde in multicultural Czechoslovakia. The claim that the Czech avant-garde functioned as a staple among European avant-gardes (33) thus seems like a cliché, because it is not as well illuminated as could be in comparison to books on transnational avant-garde cultural exchange (see HARDING and ROUSE 2006; BAHUN-RADUNOVIĆ and POURGOURIS 2006). Yet a similar dynamic could be demonstrated and compared with the Czech environment using Berlin, Trieste, or Bucharest as examples. It also might not be clear to the reader why the categories (History versus Con-

texts) from the title of the first part should be juxtaposed without any explanation.

The last chapter of ‘History versus Contexts’ is dedicated to the history of the Liberated Theatre in the 1920s. Ladislava Petišková reconstructs in detail the genesis of the formation of the theatre group around Jiří Frejka and the subsequent ‘laboratory phase’ of the Liberated Theatre, as she calls the period of 1926–1927. She discusses the split between Frejka and the other Liberated Theatre personality Jindřich Honzl, and their separate activities, until the Liberated Theatre was taken over by the tandem of actors Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich. Petišková’s account is detailed, approaching the history with new insight, for example, marking Honzl’s production of Vladislav Vančura’s play *Nemocná dívka* [The Sick Girl] as the culminating work/performance of the company. While the focus of the chapter is on the Liberated theatre, the author names it ‘K dějinám avantgardního divadla ve dvacátých letech’ [Towards a History of Avant-Garde Theatre in the 1920s], which leads, in result, to a confusingly reductive perspective. The chapter starts with a description of various theatre initiatives before the foundation of the Liberated Theatre, labelled as ‘Precursors’. Hence these ephemeral ventures do not require explanation from this *ex post* perspective, and the Liberated Theatre does need to be presented as the quintessence of theatre avant-garde, but rather as the most visible and in fact successful organisation. For example, Petišková does not pay much attention to Vladimír Gamza’s Modern Studio, which was active at essentially the same time as the Liberated Theatre.

Throughout the book, there is an absence of theory or at least some explicit

reflection on what avant-garde theatre actually is and how to define it historically and theoretically. For example, it is not clear why the mass proletarian theatre in which Honzl was involved in the early 1920s is seen as a 'precursor of the avant-garde' and not a phase or manifestation of it. My point is not to search for some kind of primacy in the genealogy of avant-garde theatre, but to foreground a conceptual question in avant-garde scholarship. For instance, we could include not only Honzl's work in the Dědrasbor Collective (Dělnický dramatický sbor Velké Prahy [Workers Drama Choir of the Great Prague], 1920–2022) in the history (and not the prehistory, as Petišková suggests) of avant-garde theatre in Czechoslovakia, but also analogous examples of János Mácza's mass theatre in the early 1920s in Košice (see KOMANICKÁ 2018), or Gamza's work. More recent publications on the relationship between artists and the cultural policy of the Soviet Union (see CLARK 2011; ŠIMOVÁ et al. 2017), or comparisons with foreign avant-garde artists (for example, from the new states that emerged after WWI), have not been used to fill in some of the contexts of Honzl's concepts. Thus, the interpretation of such an international phenomenon as Avant-garde remains 'captive' to the history of national states and even to the hegemonic region (Bohemia). The authors' repeated claim that their publication emancipates themselves from the misinterpretations of the avant-garde in the theatrical literature published during the previous regime, which is characterised by this national narrowness, is even more paradoxical. Indeed, a substantial part of the literature on which they base their interpretation comes from the pre-1989 period (repeatedly, e.g., OBST and SCHERL 1962).

The next part of the book, entitled 'Prizmata Avantgardy' [The Prisms of the Avant-garde], focuses on the unique creative approaches of three theatre artists of the Liberated Theatre, Honzl, E. F. Burian, and Frejka, and reconstructs their early aesthetic concepts. Honzl's idea of proletarian theatre and the application of Poeticism and Constructivism to theatre, Burian's foundation in music, culminating in the Voiceband Ensemble, and Frejka's views on acting are presented in turn.

The theoretical postulates are followed by a case study of Frejka's production of *Když ženy něco slaví* [When Women Celebrate Something; original title *Thes-mophoriazusae*] by Aristophanes. Andrea Jochmanová reconstructs the textual template, the scenic design as well as the contemporary response, and shows how this work foreshadows the development of Frejka's directing style (214). It is not stated, however, why this particular production, out of the whole plethora of the Liberated Theatre (or its predecessors') productions, is given such prominent attention. The part of the book 'The Prisms of the Avant-garde' is concluded by more general passages on the avant-garde and humour (with an emphasis on the satirical magazine *Trn*), eroticism in the avant-garde, and Frejka's DADA Theatre. These passages connect theatrical practices with other areas of culture and society in a way that allows us to notice androgyny, cross casting, sexual ambivalence, and in general queer moments in the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup>

2 Despite the focus on eroticism and remarks on gender ambivalence, the painter Toyen is repeatedly referred to in the feminine form, in contradiction to their own transgender identity and regardless of current critical debates (see ZIKMUND-LENDER 2021).

The third, and final, part of the book 'Složky a struktury' [Components and Structures] consists of a biographical study of the dancer and choreographer Mira Holzbachová, followed by a presentation of the work of composers and set designers at the Liberated Theatre. This specific emphasis is certainly illustrative and useful. At the same time, such a biographical overview goes beyond the time scope of the whole book. Petišková also does not explain why special attention is paid to this particular dancer and not to the dance in the Liberated Theatre in general.

After a conclusion and an English-language summary, the book is supplemented by a rich pictorial appendix, a calendar of theatrical activities associated with Devětsil, and reprinted organisational rules of Frejka's DADA Theatre.

Overall, Jochmanová and Petišková's book does capture various aspects of Czech avant-garde interwar theatre, which they look at from the perspective of Devětsil, Liberated Theatre, and general cultural phenomena such as interest in film, specific humour, and eroticism. However, the book is essentially lacking a methodological section where the authors describe and explain how they relate to contemporary Czech avant-garde research. Introductory remarks about setting oneself apart from the misinterpretations of the past regime (7) are no substitute for argument and methodological basis. Thus, in this manner, they suggest that there is a correct interpretation of the avant-garde, and in their terms: it is an interpretation that depoliticises the avant-garde. Indeed, throughout the book, the avant-garde is post-ideologically understood as a legacy,

as a source of inspiration and thought-provoking ideas (155) that need to be purged of faulty interpretations, rather than a historical problem that involves both the study of the scientific practices that shape the object of study and an awareness of one's own ideological and methodological grounding. Thus, on the one hand, the authors can laconically and flatly state that the 'past regime' misinterpreted the avant-garde (7), while, on the other, repeatedly and uncritically cite literature published under that regime. In addition, they claim that the period after the Velvet Revolution, which in 1989 ended authoritarian state Socialism in Czechoslovakia, as well as established liberal democracy and emancipated science and art from direct state supervision, 'did not offer the space for a survey publication on avant-garde theatre' (7).

The authors have essentially avoided a more substantial reflection on the foreign literature on avant-gardes, nor have they made use of the available Czech translations of canonical publications offering theoretical conceptions of the Avant-garde (BÜRGER 1984; GROYS 1992; see also ASHOLT et al. 2020). Despite the interesting insights and probes into avant-garde theatre, the publication therefore has, in my view, a major conceptual and ethical problem.

The book is to a large extent a compilation of the co-authors' older texts. The authors claim in the introduction that, with a few exceptions, it consists of original studies and that the previously published texts have been expanded (7). However, they do not indicate where these studies were previously published, and the extent and substance of the changes are also rather minimal. Thus, Andrea Jochmanová

takes some sections on Devětsil before the Liberated Theatre, Devětsil's relation to the international avant-garde, film, and theatre, as well as the section on eroticism from her dissertation without substantial changes (see JOCHMANOVÁ 2006). The section on humour was taken from her dissertation with only a short addition of a passage on Honzl's production of *Ubu Roi*. It is great that parts of the dissertation have been made into a book. Yet, this more than fifteen-year-old text has not undergone a major revision. The entire study on Frejka's production of *Thesmothoriazusae* was previously published in a professional academic journal, and now it is reprinted without any major changes and, most importantly, without stating the original source (see JOCHMANOVÁ 2004). This also applies to most of the chapter on Burian's syncopated theatricality, a substantial part of which was published as a 'Voiceband' entry in *A Glossary of Catchwords of the Czech Avant-garde* (JOCHMANOVÁ 2011). Ladislava Petišková's entire study on Mira Holzbachová was also previously published in an academic journal (PETIŠKOVÁ 2020). Such self-plagiarism without appropriately acknowledging the sources breaches the principles of academic ethic (see FALTÝNEK et al. 2020). As Tracey Bretag and Saadia Mahmud state, there may be good reasons for textual reuse, for example, for presenting updates or providing access to a larger community, but proper acknowledgement of the previously published work is still a good practice (BRETAG and MAHMUD 2009). At the same time, '[...] preventing self-plagiarism is a responsibility that extends beyond the individual author' (BRETAG and MAHMUD 2009: 195); therefore, it is quite unfortunate that

JAMU publisher and book reviewers did not provide instructions or at least add an explanatory note to make clear that some parts of the books had been previously published.

This compilation technique also has implications for the book's concept, as similar passages are repeated in different places, and the time period or general focus of the book, the chapter titles, and their content do not always properly correlate with each other. Most importantly, these overlaps and the choices that led to them are not explained. It is also a pity that the book was not published directly on the anniversary of Devětsil in 2020, and that the authors do not enter a dialogue with the collective monograph dedicated to Devětsil, which also includes a study by Jitka Ciampi Matulová specifically dedicated to theatre (CIAMPI MATULOVÁ 2019).

The publication under review shows how a new study of sources and broadening perspectives on what we understand as avant-garde is crucial. A study, however, should not be a matter of simply expanding knowledge, or compiling older findings, but of using one's research of sources to examine and possibly rethink existing interpretations. This requires a conscious reflection on one's own research assumptions and grounding in theory, as well as a more explicit dialogue with avant-garde research outside the Czech Republic. The strength of the publication is definitely the heuristics and detailed knowledge of the sources; however, it did not move beyond presentation of these facts toward their re-interpretation, re-evaluation, and wider contextualisation. The study of Czechoslovak avant-garde theatre, as with any historiographical work devoted to a crucial point in cultural history, requires, in



addition to the study of the material itself, a critical archaeology of the epistemological layers of previous interpretations and a heightened sensitivity to the theory and methods of study.

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