Divadlo Husa na Provážku and the “Absence” of Czech Community

Dennis C. Beck

What profound intellectual and moral impotence will the nation suffer tomorrow, following the castration of its culture today? I fear that the baneful effects on society will outlast by many years the particular political interests that gave rise to them.

—Václav Havel, “Letter to Dr. Gustáv Husák,” 1975

A new generation of Czech small theatres emerged at the beginning of the 1970s in response to the political and cultural conditions imposed after the Warsaw Pact’s suppression of the Prague Spring. Known as autorská divadla (authorial theatres), these five companies led the Czech theatre in innovation and political engagement for the next twenty years. Petr Osrlý, artistic director and dramaturg of the most important of these theatres, Divadlo Husa na provážku (Theatre Goose on a String), has pointed out that the autorská divadla sustained “a community of the intellect and the spirit with their audiences at a time when society was being atomized and people were withdrawing into the security of their own homes.” As they developed increasingly effective dramaturgical techniques to avoid the effects of censorship and hence to speak outside the officially condoned ideological framework, these alternative theatres began to serve as “small islands of relative spiritual freedom,” surrounded by a sea of totalitarian authority (101).

Carefully maintained during the years of Soviet occupation, this role later allowed the autorská divadla to perform an equally decisive role during the “Velvet” Revolution of 1989. As Osrlý notes,

[t]he community of theatre people and spectators, formerly an enclave of moral freedom, now became the center of the struggle for freedom. The human ties and mutual trust created over a long time between actors and public now paid off, ensuring efficiency among those making the revolution.

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Dennis Beck is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently a Fulbright Fellow in the Czech Republic conducting dissertation research on the history and dramaturgy of Czechoslovak theatres during the period from 1968 to 1990. He serves as coeditor of the journal Theatre InSight.


2 The five theatres were Divadlo Husa na provážku and HaDivadlo, both in Brno; Studio Ypsilon, which began in Liberec but was pressured by the government to move to Prague in 1978; Divadlo na okraji, in Prague; and Činohermi studio Ústí na Labem, in the northern industrial town of Ústí on the Labe river. As we shall see, it’s important to note that four of these five theatres originated outside Prague.

The Czech small theatres realized a dream shared by many theatre radicals of the 1960s—to establish communion with their audiences and to help change the world outside the theatre. But then, having fulfilled the purpose for which they had developed their dramaturgy, the autorská divadla found themselves faced with a crisis of purpose. They also saw the communities they had helped to forge dissolve in response to a very different political and cultural situation.

The past history and current circumstances of these theatres raise several significant questions. Is the vital role played by theatre during the years of Soviet occupation from 1968–1989 and during the “Velvet” Revolution itself one that can be sustained under democratic circumstances? Did communist rule inadvertently recreate a communal social dynamic that Robert Corrigan has called “anachronistic” in modern, capitalist, societies? I will consider these questions by tracing the history of Divadlo Husa na provázku—(Theatre Goose on a String), then the most influential of the autorská divadla in pre-revolution Czechoslovakia and now one of the most important theatres in the Czech Republic.

**Death of the Author/Birth of the Authorial**

In 1968, Czechoslovakia became a unified community once again. During the Prague Spring, which lasted from 5 January to 21 August 1968, the state (stat, collective) began to join with the nation (narod, community) in a way unequaled since the formation, following 298 years of foreign domination, of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. However, although the community’s “social homogeneity [gave] rise also to a certain ethical democracy,” it was still ensconced in the wider political collective of the Soviet bloc. In August, that collective decided that the Czech communist party had gone too far in surrendering its “leading role”—its role as the author of society’s text.

Soviet tanks helped install a new government, which began a four-year period it dubbed “normalization.” Under the leadership of Gustáv Husák, who became party First Secretary in 1969, hierarchical order and structure were reimposed. Carefully timing its actions to avoid arousing attention in the world outside, the government closed some theatres and brought the rest under centralized control. By mid-1971 the individuals who had been most responsible for the artistic flowering of Czech theatre in the 1960s—writers like Václav Havel and Pavel Kohout, and directors like Otomar Krejča and Jan Grossman—had been banned from working in the theatre or exiled to the provinces. Moreover, the conditions that prevailed after 1968 did not inspire new writing talent attuned to the issues of the day to write for a medium from which any accurate reflection of contemporary conditions would be excluded.

As in 1948, the Czech theatre faced a break in its development. Unlike 1948, however, no wave of popular opinion supported the new power structure and helped enforce its policies in spirit as well as letter. Conditions more closely resembled those of the Nazi occupation, in which the populace joined its artists in resisting and circumventing the power of the ruling structure.


Theatre artists were able to find limited ways to express their views through such non-verbal statements as set designs depicting depressing and destroyed environments. For the most part, however, performances were allowed to express only the party line or at most what seemed an innocuous universalism. Although never declared as an official policy, censorship was strongly exercised.6

In the 1960s, Czech theatre had again embraced pluralism, freedom of expression, deferred interpretations, and the theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein (upon which Czech absurdism is based).7 The theatre moved into a realm of poststructural semiotics, which can be defined briefly as a semiotics that shuns French structuralism’s privilege of the universal or collective and its tendency to assume a single and determinable relationship between signifier and signified—qualities visible both in communist political practice and in its aesthetic counterpart, socialist realism. In contrast, poststructural semiotics opens up a space in which the free play of signifiers is bounded not by determinable biological, psychological, or intrinsic constraints but by extrinsic social or communal and, therefore, ambiguous factors—factors whose saliency is determinable only through a type of sympathy or understanding but whose “code” can be comprehended only through metaphors and metonyms. Within an interpretive community, such metaphors have definite and varied signifieds.8 Poststructural semiotics, therefore, refuses to close meaning, to privilege a single ideology, to totalize. As such it stood in ideological and practical opposition to post-Leninist communist perspectives; it threatened to undermine the “leading role” of ideological and structural totalitarianism.

Though normalization’s bans and censorship largely ended poststructural experimentation by playwrights, the autorská divadla carried on the tradition’s spirit, if not its form, by developing a dramaturgy thoroughly grounded in poststructural thinking.

Like all the autorská divadla, Divadlo Husa na provázu (Prováze in the nominative case) was founded and operated on the physical and Derridian margins—or what Provázek director Peter Scherhauser calls the “borders.”9 The original Husa na provázu began in 1967 as an open association of professional theatre artists, theatre students, and young practitioners of other arts. The group took its name and symbolic departure point from a collection of six experimental scripts written for theatre, film,

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6 As Oslzý has noted with bitter irony, this left Czech theatre creators envious of Poland, where censorship was official and theatre people could at least distinguish the rules and the reasons behind closures and bans. Petr Oslzý, interview by author, Horní Dubenky, Czech Republic, 27 July 1995. Subsequent references to this interview will be included parenthetically in the text. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

7 Such ideas, however, were not new to the Czechs. Before World War II, the Prague School had developed a structuralist theory that, in contrast to the French “school,” allowed for multiple meanings, social contextualization, and the existence of an interpretive community. Nascent poststructural thought, therefore, had become part of the Czech intellectual and aesthetic heritage by 1968. See, for example, Peter Steiner, ed., The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–46 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); F. W. Galan, Historic Structures: The Prague School Project, 1928–1946 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).


9 Peter Scherhauser, interview by author, Brno, Czech Republic, 21 August 1994. Subsequent references to this interview will be included parenthetically in the text.
and circus in the early 1920s by Jiří Mahen, a Brno writer and dramaturg of the National Theatre. The group adopted the artistic attitude of Mahen’s Husa Na Provázku (A Goose on a String), which was composed of open works combining differing genres, forms, fine and popular arts, each pushing the boundaries of accepted representation. Out of the larger association, students of Bořivoj Srba formed the theatre company, Divadlo Husa na provázku. The core company included the directors Eva Tálská, Zdeněk Pospíšil, and Peter Scherhauber, and the actors Boleslav Polívka, and Jiří Pecha. They were soon joined by composers, writers, designers, and later theatre graduates from the Janaček Academy of the Fine Arts and from Masaryk University. The company is not exclusive, but maintains a close relationship with a number of artists who work regularly with a core group which, in turn, is not regularized into a single entity but branches into divisions of pantomime, informational lectures, children’s theatre, theatre for youth, and the work of a handful of distinctive directors.

The cross-fertilization Provážek encouraged between the various arts and theatrical arts was a bone of contention with a regime that sought, through strict licensing and compartmentalization, to keep interaction and the flow of ideas to a minimum. Nonetheless, three factors helped the company to stay just at the periphery of official vision. It began in Brno, the capital of Moravia but removed from the tightly controlled political center of Prague, birthplace of all Czech revolutions. It was formed by students a generation younger than the individuals who challenged the system during the 1960s. And it remained an amateur-status theatre for its first four years; since it did not require attention-provoking government subsidies, it remained unimportant and uninfluential in the official view. Provážek was able continue functioning on the margin for twenty years despite growing international attention, however, due primarily to its dramaturgy.

Bořivoj Srba, who taught the Provážek members dramaturgy at the Janaček Academy, helped the company articulate a dramaturgical program designed to fight with the censors and not, as was the case in more visible theatres, with its own conscience. Srba’s own teacher, E. F. Burian, had helped shape his view that the greatest threat and the Achilles heel of authoritarian government is its strict regulation. Srba reckoned that if censorship’s job was to regularize thinking into safe, accepted channels, then its goal could be subverted by developing a method that, by its very nature, defied regularization, and hence control. He outlined not only what he called “irregular dramaturgy” (nepravidelná dramaturgie) but also a full program of irregular theatre that included Provážek’s structure and extra-dramaturgical practices.

The most salient characteristic of irregular dramaturgy is its avoidance of conventional, dramatic texts. Because such texts are subject to prior censorship, they have been the traditionally preferred focus of theatre regularization. Censorship that

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10 Burian had suffered under and worked to circumvent Nazi and communist control over his thinking in the 1940s. His student Srba, then, constitutes a direct link between Czech interwar/postwar traditions and Provážek. Moreover, for Provážek’s program, Srba took as his inverse inspiration the Czech experience of strictly enforced cultural “regularization” under the Austrian Prince Metternich in the early nineteenth century. During this phase of Hapsburg occupation, the theatres sustained Czech communal consciousness by defying the official language (German) and culture of the Hapsburg Empire.

precedes the staging of a theatrical work remains effectively invisible to the public at large. In this, it shares qualities with self-censorship— their temporal priority delimits the growth of the possible so deeply because they deform the child at the moment of conception rather than at birth. Provážek sought to avoid this conceptual censorship by beginning with an idea or theme outside the textual reach of the censors and developing it through improvisation and the importation of whatever material—be it music or fictional, historical, and poetic texts—suited the evolving creation. As Scherhaufer notes in his interview, “when censorship wants our text, we have none, because we’re creating our own text.”

“At the time,” according to Oslzly, “we were not aware that we were taking the torch from the writers.”12 As “normalization” silenced the playwrights of the 1960s with increasing effectiveness, however, irregular dramaturgy helped companies like Provážek assume responsibility for creating texts and public commentary on communal, spiritual, and political realities.

Provážek couched its commentary in performance styles that departed radically from the regularity of socialist realism. The departure was more than just aesthetic. As Miklós Haraszti has pointed out in The Velvet Prison, there was for the party

in fact, only one taboo: the recognition of a variety of realities is forbidden, including any separate reality of one’s own. “Realism” operates this way not because it does not wish to know about reality. You do not need much theoretical training to realize that there can be no “real” reality where there are many realities.13

Realism, therefore, was redeployed as a governmental weapon against pluralism. Stylistic regulation and textual censorship allowed for the policing of plurality, the suppression of multiple realities. Aesthetics were not a mere formal correlative to the message, but directly influenced the content and ramifications of what could be said as well as the depth or forcefulness with which it could be expressed. Aesthetics came to signify political and moral (“pre-political,” in Václav Havel’s definition) content.14

Provážek’s marginal position, however, allowed it a degree of freedom in the use of style; it was the larger, more visible, state-subsidized theatres that came under the strictest aesthetic pressure. Provážek consistently explored the border separating the ideal of freedom and the concrete, performable limits of freedom possible in the Czech totalitarian system. In his interview, Peter Scherhaufer stresses that the company created and continues to create a position “on the border between what is possible, what is not possible; what is permissible, not permissible.” In opposition to realistic determinism, poststructural indeterminism became one of Provážek’s most seaworthy ships for exploring previously uncharted and forbidden waters.

It required sensitive sailing, however, to “develop a theatrical language for our productions that would be very clear to sympathetic spectators but unintelligible to the totalitarian watchdogs of culture.”15 In fact, the relationship between the censors’ and spectators’ understanding was much more subtle and multi-faceted than Oslzly’s

words suggest. The censors were rarely stupid, though they were often blinkered by strict mandates to follow orders and shun independent thought and by the ideology they served. It was precisely their lack of sympathy for an expressed idea that often kept them from realizing the resonance a moment could create within the community of sympathetic spectators.

Prováček’s production of Theatrum Anatomicum (1973) illustrates the dynamic of comprehension as well as the way in which the company used indeterminism as an endgame strategy to counter the censors’ moves. The piece’s outer frame was the projection of a body (politic), a story about the illegal dissection and display of human bodies in the anatomical theatres of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Inside this frame was nested another piece drawn from a more recent history—the tale of Rudolf Höss, which allowed the company to consider the Nazi concentration camps. At the piece’s core, however, was a criticism of Czechoslovakia’s contemporary political anatomy. As Oslzlý explains in his interview, “there were not, from our point of view, any differences between fascism and communism. . . . Two very similar socialistic ideas. . . . Extreme Left, extreme Right, it’s the same.” Observing spectator reactions to this popular piece, the censors understood that its actual subject was the contemporary situation and communist rule. However, because the regime was officially anti-fascist and because the anti-fascist theme replayed a common and popular communist theatrical motif of the immediate post-war years, the production was, ostensibly, in the best interests of the Husák leadership. Therefore, the censors had no justifiable reason for forbidding the Höss sequence. Oslzlý happily relates the censors’ visible anguish during the meeting following the special rehearsal meant to determine the production’s fate. Each side knew that a demand to cut the sequence would be tantamount to admitting parallels between the Czech experiences of fascist and communist rule. The section remained.

The example also suggests how much Prováček’s dramaturgy depended on its community to empower its articulation of the unspeakable. To the autorská divadla, in fact, the two “practices” became mutually supportive, if not dependent. Prováček’s theatrical language was far from incomprehensible to the watchdogs of culture, but the effectiveness of this language depended on the learned and shared understandings of a particular interpretive community. Dramaturgy depended on community. True membership in this community, in turn, could be gauged by the personal, emotional, even spiritual involvement with the true but hidden subject of performance. Such communities cohered through emotional understandings—through historical, moral, and spiritual identification. And these communities depended on dramaturgy, in turn, to bring such understandings and identifications into the open, where they could be recognized as communal.

Community versus Collective

In 1973, just as the Czech autorská divadla were beginning to come into their own, Robert Corrigan undertook an explanation of why remarkably similar ideas of community visible in the work of such leftist US companies as the Living or the Open theatres were doomed to failure. Speaking of the first world without making much attempt to distinguish it from the second, Corrigan suggested that the kind of “communion” for which contemporary practitioners searched “cannot exist in the
modern world; it is a lingering phantom." He reasoned that due to the "self-sufficient finitude of man" stressed since the Renaissance, modern individuals live in a collective society rather than in a communal world. Members of communities were linked together by common origins and enjoyed relationships that tended to be personal, "because those forces which bind men together—values, attitudes, customs, traditions, rituals, and habits—are handed down as a common heritage from generation to generation" (192). Modern collectives on the other hand—that is, political parties, labor unions, large corporations—do not derive from the past. They are, in contrast, directed toward the future by their members’ and leaders’ designs. As a result, individuals in modern collectives have only ideas, projections, and imposed collective goals, to link them—tenuously and unemotionally—to each other. Collectives do not foster personal relationships; these would reduce efficiency and make governing difficult due to conflicting loyalties. Instead, collectives identify their members by function—leading to the standardization, anonymity, and ultimate alienation of individuals. Reduced to representing only a specialized function within the larger collective, the individual undergoes a transformation in which "human qualities tend to atrophy and his personality undergoes severe psychic and moral changes, and eventually he comes to lose all sense of his own identity" (195). Identity and identification, therefore, appear related to, if not dependent on, a sense of community. By undercutting communal bonds, collectives also severe cords that nourish identity.

Behind the Iron Curtain, dissident Václav Havel recognized a similar contrast between the communal and the collective, but he considered it anything other than historically inevitable. In his 1975 "Letter to Dr. Gustáv Husák," Havel argued that the demands of technological civilization and the declining awareness of forces beyond humanly constructed systems had led to a "crisis of human identity." This tendency, moreover, was severely exacerbated, Havel argued, by the type of society that the Husák government had restructured and centralized from above. Community, which had begun to break through the official crust during the 1968 Prague Spring, had been replaced by a concrete structure, functioning in ways that echoed Corrigan’s description of collectives—a standardized system in which individuals were expendable and interchangeable. The automatization of the system had had a "deeply injurious influence on the general spiritual and moral state of society" (22). Organizations that over decades had developed into communities with shared values, attitudes, and customs—such as the Writers’ Union, of which Havel was a member—were replaced by new organizations directed from above and forced to express the party view. Such a mechanistic system was opposed to the organic structures of life in Havel’s view: "Life rebels against all uniformity and leveling; its aim is not sameness, but variety" (23–24). Life itself, therefore, gives rise to multiplicity and pluralism. Constructed systems foster collective uniformity.

Organic structures cannot be stamped out completely, however. Havel and others helped nurture a Czech community that had slipped underground, represented by samizdat publications, autorská divadla productions, and the offhand remark. Havel’s experience had taught him that collectives and communities were not mutually

exclusive; collectives and communities coexisted and even helped create one another. Enshrouded in a different social structure and an intellectual context that tended to privilege progressive historiography, on the other hand, Corrigan held to the idea that one form—the collective—must evolve from and replace another—the community. This difference in understanding underscores a difference in the definition and function of community in the Czech and Western (particularly US) contexts.

This difference in understanding also generated contrasting interpretations of the relationship between society and the state. Conditions in Czechoslovakia were, of course, far from democratic. As a result, Czechs generally did not regard the state apparatus as being in service to societal needs; rather, they perceived the state (collective) to be the enemy of society (community). Community, therefore, was not an ideal lost in the mists of history, but a living presence in active political and moral opposition to an imposed collective structure. Another key difference between Czech and Western conceptions of community lay in its association with the Czech idea of narod (or “nation”). According to this concept, the nation stands less for a physically bounded country than it does for a people—its culture, heritage, values, and history. As such, narod has served as the conceptual barricades from which Czechs have fought off cultural erasure by colonial powers since 1620.18

The relationship between communal and collective forces inevitably influenced the role and alliances of the Czech small theatres. The same year in which Havel sent his open letter to Husák, Czech art historian Ivan Jirous theorized the existence of a “second culture” in Czechoslovakia, which he characterized as “a community of mutual support” composed of people “who want to live differently. . . . [and as] a culture not dependent on official channels of communication, or on the hierarchy of values of the establishment.”19 By 1978, philosopher Václav Benda was calling for Czechoslovakia’s hidden but isolated social structures to organize themselves into a “parallel polis” capable of “supplementing the generally beneficial and necessary functions that are missing in the existing structures, and where possible, to use those existing structures, to humanize them.”20 In response to Benda, that same year Havel wrote “The Power of the Powerless,” in which he raised the stakes into the realm of morality and ethics: “These parallel structures, it may be said, represent the most articulated expressions so far of ‘living within the truth.’”21 Havel defined living within the truth as any method by which a person or group revolts against manipulation and resists the abdication of his or her reason, responsibility, and conscience to a higher authority. In a system that demands such abdication, with its inherent rejection of multiple views and pluralism, living within the truth works as a kind of “bacteriological weapon” (58), the effectiveness of which derives from its small beginnings but

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18 In the Czech context (and the context in Poland, where a similar concept functions), the concept of narod has not served the purposes of a blind, genocide-justifying nationalism such as that affecting the former Yugoslavia as much as a return to Czech traditions of free intellectual endeavor, democracy, a free market, and non-violence. Today, however, having outlived its overt political usefulness, Czech “nationalism” has transformed into concern over a less militant kind of cultural erasure.
growing, indirect engagement with the regime and with the totalitarian system inculcated within individuals. 22

Havel saw culture as "a sphere in which the 'parallel structures' can be observed in their most highly developed form" (101). Certainly, the autorská divadla provided the parallel polis a place in which its constituency could gather together—and gather as more than just a theoretical community. In an environment that Milan Šimečka has called "the most repressive and ideologically conservative in all of Eastern Europe," in a country where freedom of assembly was forbidden, the autorská divadla provided space institutional in which a public forum could take place, as well as political/aesthetic content for the forum to consider. 23

Institutional Deconstructions

In 1972, Divadlo Husa na provázku—or rather, Divadlo na provázku (Theatre on a String), as it had been forced to rename itself—found a home, government subsidy, and professional status in Brno’s House of Art; thereafter, it fought the system from within. 24 Given only a bare exhibition hall with which to work, the company began a series of experiments in irregular spatial arrangements that included not only reconfiguring the space to suit each production, but experimenting with irregular relationships with the audience. In a Provážek production, the audience area also serves as performance space in various ways. Actors address the audience directly, and spectators are sometimes called upon to create sound effects, take part in the action, or offer opinions and suggestions. Experiments with spatial relationships and spectator interaction served as explorations in breaking down, not the distinctions between performer and spectator as persons playing differing roles but, rather, the distance that keeps the two from being perceived as part of a single community.

Provážek also conducted explorations outside the limited space of the House of Art. While remaining under the aegis of the municipal art hall, the company moved to alternative, irregular performance spaces in Brno eleven times in twenty years. For each move it developed studies, plans, and projects for the new space. In one instance it relocated to an abandoned bakery, in another, to a former fish market. These dislocations and relocations extended Provážek’s attempt to return to the essentials of theatre through irregular means. The unconventional arrangement of the spaces and the associations inherent to them pushed the group to explore each location’s possibilities for aesthetic and political statements. Like the theatres of Kantor and Grotowski in Poland, Provážek could travel easily and perform almost anywhere.

Seeking to diversify and deregularize their activities even further, Na provázku began the first of a long line of tours and collaborative international festival and

22 On the other hand, Havel's essay also discusses the difficulty individuals face in resisting the temptation to "surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system... so that they may be pulled into and ensnared by it, like Faust with Mephistopheles" ("The Power of the Powerless," 52). Havel's play, Temptation, which retells the Faust legend in a modern Czech context, may be considered his artistic expression of the same idea.

23 Milan Šimečka, in Civic Freedom in Central Europe, 110.

24 Shortly after Husák became First Secretary in 1969, it was suggested that Divadlo Husa na provázku remove the husa (goose) from its name. No further explanation was given, but one was hardly needed; the Czech word for a gander is husák.
theatre projects. International recognition constitutes a weapon of irregularity also used by Kantor and Grotowski. Soviet bloc governments were loath to tightly restrict groups or individuals whose actions were closely watched from beyond the country’s borders. In 1975 Provážek also made its first visit to Prague; the company was received enthusiastically and returned roughly once a year thereafter. Most importantly, that same year the company attended the World Theatre Festival of Experimental Theatres in Nancy, France, where it was so critically and popularly successful that it subsequently received thirty-five invitations for visits from around the world. Although the Czech government allowed it to accept only a few of these invitations, Provážek had begun to develop a useful international reputation. By 1989, Provážek had completed almost a score of international tours; today it is the most-travelled dramatic theatre in Czech history.

Meanwhile, Provážek continued to develop strategies of irregularity to resist the structural demands of the authorities. Each theatre was required to submit a proposed season of works, a “dramaturgic plan,” to a cultural committee for approval. For the autorská divadla, this entailed supplying for each work a title, description, and performance dates, as well as a list of materials from which it would probably be composed and the names of those persons who would work on the project. Provážek’s irregularity in this extra-dramaturgical realm might be thought of as an exercise in Derridian supplementarity. Srba conceived of a strategy—one further developed by his hand-picked successor, Petr Oslzly—that Oslzly called “the tactic of the small white dogs.” The tactic, whose name derives from Goethe’s Faust, consisted of including in a list of proposed works, all of which the dramaturg knows to be unacceptable, a play or plays so controversial as to constitute blatant provocation. The watchdogs of culture eagerly hunted the yapping white dog running ahead of the pack, killed it, and then relaxed, content that they had purged the season of rabid subversion. The effectiveness of this tactic was enhanced by party pressure on the committees to demonstrate their critical rigor. Even in a group of the most innocuous works imaginable, something had to be forbidden to ensure that Czechoslovakia was being made safe for socialism. Provážek simply provided the sacrifice. Oslzly also found that if he gave uncontroversial works provocative titles and labeled provocative works as neutrally as possible, he could get approval for a greater percentage of works that spoke to the contemporary situation; he called this tactic “the strategy of the false white dogs.”

Sometimes even one word in a title could play the role of white dog. In 1977, the censors—ever sensitive to the buzzwords of formalism—rejected a proposed project based, as the title indicated, on The Nonsense Poetry of Edward Lear (Poezie nesmyslu Edwarda Leara). The censors objected to the word “nonsense” in the title, and they kept on objecting for six consecutive seasons. Finally, in 1983, Oslzly changed the title to Stories of the Long Nose (Příběhy dlouhého nosu). The text, of course, remained un-

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26 This and the following three quotations are from my interview with Oslzly. Srba chose Oslzly, his dramaturgy student at Masaryk University, to take his place as Provážek’s dramaturg in the early 1970s, when Srba was forbidden by the regime to teach or practice theatre. Srba relocated to Prague, where he was allowed a job in the Institute of History and eventually became a theatre historian, as well as, according to Oslzly, one of the country’s best theatre theoreticians.
touched, but without the offending word “nonsense” in the title, the censors found the piece sensible enough to stage (see cover illustration); the production has remained continuously in Provázk’s repertory ever since.

In 1977, Oslzly took the theory of excess to an extreme by submitting a season composed entirely of white dogs. Of the twenty-eight titles he proposed, he expected six or seven to be approved—enough for the following season’s addition to the repertory of twenty or so works. Instead, he was granted permission for only two. A bit shaken, he went to the civic officer with whom he was allowed to plead his case, with whom he adopted an attitude that was often effective in dealing with the authorities—making “stupid men of ourselves.” Playing the good soldier Schweik, he proclaimed,

It is impossible or I am totally poisoned. Or we all, all our theatre is poisoned. Not only we, but also our audience is poisoned. We are crowded with the audience. Not only we creators—we could be poisoned by some Western thinking—but it’s not possible that these young people in the audience, the students are poisoned. You cannot believe this. If you believe this, you must say all society here is poisoned. But it couldn’t be.

Arguing in this way put the censors once again in a double-bind. Although they sensed that society was “poisoned” and most people opposed them, they could not very well acknowledge an unrepresented, totalitarian rule. Oslzly was able to wrest permission to produce a full season by challenging the authorities to reveal the actual division between nation and state, community and collective. Provázek used its position as spokesman for the community as a lever whose effectiveness derived from the authorities’ unwillingness to openly acknowledge a nation from which they were excluded. One of the company’s primary goals, to represent and serve the interests of the community, became with time one of its primary weapons against external regulation.

Just as Provázek was perfecting its strategies, however, it was forced to develop new ones. In January 1977, a document entitled Charter 77 was released to the Western press and Czech authorities. Drafted in large part by Václav Havel and philosopher Jan Patočka, it called on the Czech leadership to honor in its own country the UN civil and human rights covenants as well as the Helsinki Final Act it had recently signed. The Charter not only constituted a serious challenge to the regime, it also revealed to the world an underground of organized, uncontrolled activity in Czechoslovakia. The communist government reacted decisively with a re-restoration of order in the form of a program of public vilification of Charterists in the media, arrests, and increased surveillance in all areas of life, particularly the arts.

A new Theatre Law was enacted on 1 January 1978 that made it illegal to open a theatre or close down an existing one.27 In addition, all theatres not currently under direct state control were made subservient arms of larger, state theatres. Divadlo na provázku was removed from the municipal control of Brno’s House of Art and made the sixth arm of the State Theatre in Brno.28 As a third measure of control, theatres not already led by a member of the communist party were given new artistic directors.

28 HaDivadlo (Brno’s other authorial theatre) constituted the fifth; the other four parts consisted of Ballet, Opera, Operetta, and “regular” dramatic theatre.
Jaroslav Tučík, a party member who knew little about the theatre but had always wanted to learn, was assigned to the company in this role in order, explains Scherhaufer in his interview, “to break us from this irregular position to the regular position.” After a tortuous year in which Tučík cut the company’s operating budget in half, the breaking began—but in an unexpected direction. As Tučík’s daily work acquainted him with the company’s methods and intentions, his views began to change—or to find a forum in which they could be honestly expressed. By the following year Provaízek had “reworked him to our side,” and created “our Pygmalion.” Thereafter, the company resumed its irregular activities, but under the greater safety of Tučík’s officially administered umbrella. Moreover, tightened government control and the emergence of a visible opposition, recalls Scherhaufer, “radicalized us more than before.” After 1978, Provaízek concentrated on collaborative activity within the opposition movement and increased national and international theatre contacts.

Provaízek focused its efforts in three main areas of theatrical activity. Within Czechoslovakia, Provaízek and other alternative theatres began to meet at an annual festival of professional theatres held alternately in the towns of Český Budějovice (Bohemia) and Prešov (Slovakia). Performances and carefully arranged discussions provided an opportunity for the formation of a loose association of oppositional professional theatres that would become increasingly influential throughout the 1980s. Provaízek also strengthened its ties with the country’s amateur theatres.

In addition Provaízek began projects it called Theatre in Movement (Divadlo v Pohybu), the incipient manifestation of what would later become the Center for Experimental Theatre, an organization begun in collaboration with HaDivadlo. According to its declaration, the Center seeks to be

an umbrella for projects of every kind of art and alternative culture, for research projects in the field of our cultural traditions, in the field of philosophy, anthropology, and social history, and for educational projects in the related humanities. It will seek for their connections and interrelationships.  

The Center takes as its starting point, the search, study and restoration of a Central-European cultural identity. It seeks a resumption of cultural continuity and the “renewal of an interrupted order,” as well as the creation of an atmosphere of cultural tolerance. Its creations and actions fall into the areas of productions, arts management, an alternative theatre school, amateur theatre, documentation and research of experimental theatre and Central European culture, and creation of open space for artistic and cultural activities. Its declaration invites and encourages groups from around the world to join the Center in its work.

Finally, Provaízek shifted from merely touring to actively collaborating across national borders. In 1978 the company travelled to Wroclaw, Poland, as one of the

29 Divadlo v Pohybu (IV) - Brno 93 (Brno: Centrum Experimentálního Divadla, 1993), 5.

30 The recent ethnic fighting of Bosnians and Serbs, among other factors, makes “Central-European cultural identity” a problematic concept. The impulse behind its formation/restoration can perhaps best be understood by considering that Central Europe has been the battle zone and bargaining chip between powers in the East and West for 900 years. Predominantly, its lack of cohesion is said to account for its political weakness. As a conscious movement, the quest for a Central-European cultural identity dates from the nineteenth century.
creators of the first international collaborative street action, called Hope, performed in Copenhagen under the auspices of the Festival of Fools. The company’s participation almost ended before it had begun, however. As part of its 1977 re-restoration of order, the government forbade Provázek to perform west of the Iron Curtain. In response, Danish festival authorities renamed the piece a “work-in-progress” and hid the thirty-two performances in the “workshop” portion of the festival program. Thus able to document that it wasn’t “performing,” Provázek was able to make the first of three visits to the Festival of Fools. Also as a result of the Hope collaboration, Provázek began another collaborative project with companies from Wales, Denmark, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Sweden that culminated at the 1983 Festival of Fools with a performance of Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart (Labyrint světa a ráj srdce), based on a work by Comenius (see fig. 1).

While all these activities strengthened Provázek’s position in relation to the Czech authorities and allowed it to extend the borders of the permissible for itself and other theatre groups in the republic, the company’s increasingly intimate relationship with Czech dissidents gave that position much of its meaning. After Charter 77, the leaders of Provázek began to meet secretly once a month with Havel and other dissidents.31 Havel and Provázek, as unofficial but generally recognized leaders of the dissidents and the oppositional theatres, respectively, began to harmonize goals and practices. As a result, irregular dramaturgy became, in a sense, one of the most visible and widespread of the dissidents’ weapons in the war against totalitarianism.

The meetings continued until shortly before the revolution and were complemented by another form of association. Scherhaufer and Oslzly began producing new plays by banned Czech authors, declaring themselves the joint authors of record. Provázek’s irregular dramaturgy further shielded the playwrights by “dematerializing” their texts—since the plays were “developed” as fragmentary works in progress, there was never at any time a “script” complete enough to hand to the censors. Provázek produced a number of plays using this method, including four by banned playwright Milan Uhde (who later led the Czech parliament until June 1996). And the company was performing Havel’s latest play on 17 November 1989, the evening that the “Velvet” Revolution came to life.

Cries of Freedom, Steps Toward Democracy

Provázek and HaDivadlo had travelled to Prague in mid-November to perform an “issue,” entitled “On Democracy,” of their jointly created living magazine, Rozrazil (Breakthrough). The Brno companies had begun bringing the news-and-issue-oriented performances to the national capital with increasing frequency because Brno received Viennese television transmissions and was therefore aware of events outside the Eastern Bloc, whereas the citizens of Prague lived in what Scherhaufer describes as an “information ghetto,” having no direct access to information other than that which had been sanctioned by the communist government.32 As part of their magazine, Provázek performed a short, semi-documentary play, nominally authored by

31 They rendezvoused in the Gothic Black Tower of Vyšehrad—the site of Prague’s original castle; here, at least, Oslzly notes in his interview, no bugging devices were likely to be placed.
32 Scherhaufer, interview. Voice of America was sometimes receivable in Prague at 5:00 and 10:00 P.M., but the Communist government scrambled the transmission whenever possible.
Scherhauser and Oslzly. Tomorrow We Will Run (Zitra to spustïne), dramatized the activities of Czech insurgents that led to the founding of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. The piece was blatantly nationalistic—in the communal, as opposed to state-collective, sense—and uncannily predicted events as they would unfold during the "Velvet" Revolution. Its real author, the writer who would help found and become president of the second autonomous Czechoslovak Republic, took as his subject the writer and statesman Alois Rasín, who had helped found the first autonomous Czechoslovak Republic, also by working from within the occupied lands.

On 17 November, soon after the White Helmets of the Czech government police and the Red Berets of an anti-terrorist military regiment began their attack on a procession of students requesting access to Wenceslas Square from National Boulevard, a bloodied drama student burst into the theatre club on Chmelínci street and ran backstage to report the event to the visiting companies of his hometown’s two alternative theatres. Oslzly then notified the audience that the next article in Rozrazil would be an interview with a student who had been attacked by police (one of Oslzly’s pupils in the secret university that he had helped found). Following the story, which shocked the audience, Provázk and HaDivadlo stopped their performance, declaring that in the face of such a national drama, the theatre’s drama had no meaning.
The next day, shortly following the declaration of a student general strike, leaders from Czechoslovakia’s theatres gathered at the invitation of the opposition theatres in the Realistic Theatre (today’s Labyrinth theatre) to discuss the situation and the most effective response. When theatre leaders unaccustomed to confronting the authorities began to worry for their safety and waver in their conviction that a general theatre strike would be the best course of action, Oslzý and Arnošt Goldflam, HaDivadlo director and writer, declared that although they had a performance beginning in ten minutes, they were resolute and would not play: “If you decide there will be no general strike, we will be alone and very weak. If you have solidarity with us and with others of us who will do the same, we must do it all together.” Prompted by theatre artists whose dramaturgy had sharpened their sensitivity to the needs of the moment, the assembly declared the general strike, an action Oslzý sees as a hidden but defining moment in the vulnerable, first days of the revolution.33

In the following weeks the nation’s stages became civic forums as members of the parallel polis used the theatres to vocalize openly ideas they had been developing for over a decade. Divadlo na provázku became the center of revolutionary activity for the South Moravian region. Its efforts and those of other theatres outside Prague proved particularly important in spreading the ideas and hopes animating the revolution to the small towns and industrial areas where no colleges or universities existed to help provide information. Throughout most of the nation, the small groups of performers sent by the theatres into the countryside ensured that the revolution would be represented in a perspective other than that provided by the state-controlled media. After twenty years of indirect engagement, the forces of the Czechoslovak social community finally confronted those of the state collective directly, and the theatres openly and aggressively expressed and embodied communal ideals, values, customs, and ethics. All the nation’s theatres, for the first time, adopted overtly the role that had been played covertly by the autorská divadla for two decades.

Not only had the theatres become a cohesive community. With the revolution, the true extent of their community of spectators revealed itself. Enormous public demonstrations were directed—as much as they could be—by authorial theatre artists. In opening their stages, theatres across the country exercised the essence of irregular dramaturgy—to represent and express communal views, and to resist external, authoritarian regulation. And this time, the community they helped awaken did not compromise with the representatives of collective government. Community triumphed, and theatre people were swept up in the triumph. Chants of “long live the actors” greeted them, and they were celebrated as prophets of a better tomorrow. The triumph cast a shadow into the future, however, for it seemed the culmination of all the autorská divadla had labored for. The theatres experienced what, to borrow Havel’s analogy, Sisyphus might have felt if suddenly his boulder came to rest atop the mountain.34

Post-Partum Depressions

Havel was elected president on 29 December 1989.35 The communist party retained control of the military and many other state institutions, however, until general

33 The preceding account of events inside the theatres is drawn from my interview with Oslzý.
35 Havel summoned Oslzý to act as his advisor on cultural affairs.
elections in June 1990. During these six tense months, theatres across Czechoslovakia produced plays by previously forbidden playwrights, most popularly those of the new president. Though the drama outside rivaled that on stage, works by Milan Uhde, Pavel Kohout, Ivan Klima, and other previously forbidden playwrights kept Czechoslovak audiences coming to the theatres, eager to see what they had been denied for twenty years,

After the June elections, however, the tension in the air and the mystique of the theatres’ oppositional position both dissipated. Theatre audiences already had fallen off since January; after June, the drop became precipitous. As nearly any Czech theatre person will explain, the theatricality of life outside the theatres overtook any theatricality the stage could manufacture. The theatres could not compete with a free press, a fledgling democratic government, and daily, unexpected developments in the political and social realms. They had become a diversion, a warm-up act forgotten once the main attraction begins. Theatre practitioners quickly realized that theatre before 1990, and especially the autorská divadla, had substituted within the totalitarian collective for activities fulfilled through different venues in a democratic society. Theatre was free again, as Czech theatre artists recount the transition, to be theatre. What that meant in a country whose theatrical traditions had been closely tied to aspirations of national autonomy and the struggle for democracy for over 150 years, however, was anybody’s guess as the decade began.

Many hoped that the new conditions of freedom would foster a cultural spring like that of 1968. The parallel was, however, sadly inexact. Not only did events in 1989 give theatre creators little time to consider their new reasons for existence or the human purposes they could serve, but as ideological pressures slackened, economic pressures took hold. Ironically, theatres found themselves forced to grapple with material problems they had never needed to confront under the mandates of dialectical materialism. Prime Minister Václav Klaus, for example, had no doubts about culture’s role in the new situation. In a now infamous metaphor, he observed that when the apartment needs cleaning, the books must go on the balcony.36 Fixed funds that previously had been channeled through the Ministry of Culture directly to individual theatres are now shuttled through the Ministry of Finance (which Klaus controls). Regional and municipal governments receive a lump sum earmarked for culture, which they divide as they see fit. What was once a stable situation for theatres, with dependable subsidies from year to year, has become a nerve-wracking competition, in which a city’s needs for museum reconstruction can threaten its theatre companies with extinction. Extreme stories, however, are relatively rare. A few municipalities have evicted resident companies from their prior homes under the belief that reducing staff and renting facilities to visiting companies will generate more income, but other cities have increased theatre and cultural funding in an attempt to attract national and international commercial investment. The number of professional theatres in the Czech Republic now remains relatively stable at about seventy-five.

This does not mean, however, that financial worries are a thing of the past. State theatre allocations have been held at 1989–90 levels, causing an approximately 50-

36 Václav Klaus, as quoted by Scherhaufer, interview. Other theatre practitioners often cite Klaus’s metaphor.
percent drop in real terms. In 1994, the Ministry of Culture ended subsidies to three of the four theatre venues it still supported, retaining only the National Theatre. Of the other three, the Laterna Magika now relies on the tourist trade, the State Opera struggles to find public and private sponsors, and the Theatre Beyond the Gate—to which the post-revolution government declared a moral responsibility in honor of the twenty years of prohibition endured by founder Otmar Krejča—has folded. Further, although the Ministry now awards small grants for individual arts projects, it bars ongoing ensemble repertory companies—the backbone of Czech theatre—from applying for such support. To make matters worse, while ministry policies have increased pressure on theatres to become more financially independent, parliament has failed either to pass legislation that would encourage private donations to cultural institutions, or to grant theatres not-for-profit status.

Once divided around the issue of what it means for theatre to be theatre politically, the Czech theatre community is now split into two camps by opposing conceptions not only of the best way to grapple with difficult financial dilemmas, but, more broadly, of what it means for theatre to be simply theatre. On one side stands the idea of theatre as a living organism composed of individuals who work as an ensemble, usually under strong leadership, with a continually evolving method, aesthetic vision, and sensitivity to the inner needs of Czech society. Provázek, naturally, subscribes to this position, which also represents—broadly speaking—the traditional structure and function of Czech theatre. On the other side stands the conception of theatre as a constructed system responsive to external demands and the material realities of the market, popular taste, and fashion—which usually means a sensitivity for the “new” as it evolves in mass culture. Of course, the strict separation of these two camps is a discursive conceit; much of the hardship and the ongoing transitional character of the current Czech theatre stems from the difficulty the majority of theatres have in necessarily standing with a foot in each camp. The separation does, however, clarify, two prevailing tendencies.

Commercial theatres that have arisen or adapted their programs to cater to tourist trade constitute the most blatant expression of the second tendency. They are marked by their ticket prices, which exceed those of most other theatres by eight times or more. Theatres producing Western hits and musicals fall into this category, of course. But so do the Black Light theatres, which have adopted Laterna Magika’s language of the stage to visually relate stories of old Prague, the Golem, Alice in Wonderland, etc. To an increasing degree, Laterna Magika itself has joined this group. The indigenous Czech puppet theatre also has adapted to commercial pressures.

Over the past six years, these theatres have refined their ability to produce Broadway or tourist fare, but many of the productions seem to be motivated by nothing other than commercial interests. Moreover, commercial exigencies have structured such enterprises according to the capital-intensive, Western production model, in which artistic talent is jobbed in as each particular show demands. The product and its marketability take precedence over the development of ideas, aesthetics, or relationships over time. Responsive above all to the moment and its readily apparent needs, these theatres provide no forum for reflection or for the development of the artistic talent and vision enabled by experiment, continuity, and dialogue. For many theatre people, the choice to avoid this Western model hinges on a question of values.
A related pressure to attend primarily to the material exigencies of the moment, however, also has affected the work of the ensemble repertory companies. After 1990, a new sense of anxiety spread through these theatres as their continued existence became uncertain and directors began to shuffle from theatre to theatre. The flurry of activity has continued and now takes the form of multiple employment. Many people work now in two or three theatres and take additional jobs in other venues. As a result, the thought and care necessary to develop work that makes an impact is in short supply, and an intangible quality of depth or relevance is often missing.

Interpretations of theatre’s purpose in the new environment has diversified Czech theatre as strongly as have financial pressures. Despite difficulty in securing funding, a group of new, small theatres run by young artists has grown up, attracting a predominantly youthful audience—that is, spectators who came of age shortly before or after the revolution. Unlike the socially oriented tradition of their older colleagues, the work of these young directors concentrates on personal issues. Generation-specific venues, in fact, mark an unforeseen by-product of freedom. They reflect, most significantly, divergent and perhaps unbridgeable historical experiences between a generation to which totalitarian rule was an ambiguous childhood condition quickly receding into the past and the older generations for which it was a lived experience that continues to influence perceptions and possibilities in the present. These older generations still staff the larger repertory theatres. They produce work that is now free of mandated political agendas, but still trapped within the “prison of former ideas, ideas that were valid for the environment and social situation then, not now.”

In the smaller subsidized theatres, a few young directors have drawn the greatest amount of attention. Marie Burešová at the Labyrinth Theatre and Petr Kracík at the Theatre Under the Palm have produced classic and period works with fresh perspectives. Petr Lebl, the leading director and artistic head of Theatre on the Balustrade—where Havel and director Jan Grossman worked in the 1960s—has garnered the greatest recognition. He employs a satiric and highly imaginative, imagistic, postmodern approach that has attracted audiences and divided opinions along a deeper divide than the merely commercial. One side sees in Lebl’s highly visual style an embrace of the primacy of aesthetics and a rejection of social commentary, which, they argue, befits theatre in a democratic environment. Opposing this view stands a group of theatre artists and spectators who continue to believe that theatre has a significant social, even spiritual role to play. Divadlo Husa na provázku continues to be one of the leaders of this group.

Community of Absence/Absence of Community

The sense of community and mutual understanding that had characterized the previous twenty-years’ experience in the theatre and society quickly dissipated after the elections of June 1990 as nation conflated with state and community lost the external pressure that had kept it unified. President Havel seemed to be addressing

37 Helena Albertová, former director of the Czech Theatre Institute, interview by author, Prague, Czech Republic, 18 July 1995.

38 One of the company’s first actions after the outbreak of the “Velvet” Revolution was to stuff the goose back into its name.
Czech society as much as the Western reluctance to assist Eastern Europe when he wrote in *Foreign Affairs*: "[T]he world used to be so simple: there was a single adversary who was more or less understandable, who was directed from a single center, and whose sole aim in its final years . . . was to maintain the status quo. . . . All that has vanished. The world has suddenly become unusually complex and far less intelligible."39

The disappearance of this clearly visible adversary has resulted in the dissolution of the old community, since no apparent struggle threatens to crush it. Peter Scherhaufer believes, however, that struggle and conflict remain ever-present; what has changed are the external conditions that once made community so apparent. Czech community has not ceased to exist, Scherhaufer suggests; rather, it has become difficult to see or sense in the current situation. That very invisibility could prove its undoing, however, as individuals lose sight of shared values. Divadlo Husa na provážku and a few other studio theatres continue to search out the struggles and the communal links that surround them, in an effort to make community visible again. Their search combines their pre-revolution goal of saving the nation with the post-revolution necessity of maintaining their audiences.40

The *autorská divadla* undertook the search for such communal links when in 1990 it became clear that they had been broken. Provážek’s strong pre-revolution position enabled it to maintain its traditional focus on difficulties and threats to individual rights and community values, and in this way to transform its practice on the border of the politically permissible into a strategy of searching out the borders of the socially problematic, denied, and taboo.

The company conceded the effective loss of its political and informational roles, but has not forsaken the spiritual. The churches in the Czech Republic cannot fulfill the spiritual needs of Czechs today, argues Petr Oslzly; rather, having rehearsed their role as islands of relative spiritual freedom, theatres are poised to address the nonmaterial needs of the Czech people. Provážek, therefore, has focussed its attention on issues of morality and identity. Like Havel, the company feels that these are the areas of society and the individual psyche that have been most damaged by decades of pressure to live according to conscience-denying, externally imposed mandates. Scherhaufer believes, moreover, that morality and identity have suffered in similar ways in the recent capitalistic environment. In his interview, he tells the story of the head physician of a Czech hospital who, financially motivated, regularly neglects his Czech patients for a week to go to Vienna “to clean the ass of one old person.” Scherhaufer asks himself how he is to teach his students when role models set such examples, then suggests that audiences, too, need alternative models and lessons.

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40 As attendance at many other theatres dropped to as low as 10 percent at some performances, Provážek still retained 83 percent of capacity in its worst season (1990–91). These percentages do need to be relativized, however: at performances prior to 1990, Provážek had been turning away a hundred or more people at the door. The theatre has never offered subscriptions, prompted by the desire to play each time for an audience compelled to visit the theatre because it needs to experience, at that moment, what only the theatre can offer.
Shortly after the revolution, as if expounding on Havel’s writing, Scherhaufer staged a production of Faust that explored the extent of the Czech people’s collaboration with the totalitarianism of the preceding twenty to forty years, and hence the extent of their shared culpability. He followed this production with one entitled Shakespearomanie III (ManStorm), at the core of which was a staging of Hamlet using eight different translations. Scenes were replayed from differing but justifiable perspectives, and six actors—male and female—played Hamlet. The production suggested that the same experience/history/text can be interpreted “faithfully” in myriad ways, and that combining such differing interpretations into a single interpretive event necessitates disjunctions and discontinuities. Scherhaufer tried thereby to highlight problems of individual and communal identity; as he put it in his interview, the production asked the question of “how to be or not to be in this situation.”

In 1993, in conjunction with Denmark’s Den Bla Hest and Poland’s Teatr 77, Provážek undertook a theatre action called Journey to Delphi, which consisted of an actual overland trek to Delphi to ask the oracle about the theatre’s future and society’s needs. (They were stopped by fighting at the Yugoslav border.) Late in 1993, Scherhaufer directed a production of the Marquis de Sade’s Justine at the company’s new theatre.41 Subtitled “the misfortunes of virtue,” de Sade’s novel concerns ethical choices; Scherhaufer shaped his production to question whether values in Czech society were changing for the worse under the influence of consumerism. He also incorporated some of Havel’s words in a way that pointed up the distance between the president’s pronouncements and political realities.42

By 1995, Helena Albertová and others sensed that theatre addressing issues of ethical choice and the problems of individual and communal identity had begun to concern an increasingly larger theatre audience. Czechs were growing weary of or inured to the sensationalism of Western mass culture, and audiences had returned to the theatres strongly. Albertová muses,

I think that people want to listen to what to do with their life. I think it’s something like at the end of the last century. That’s why Chekhov could write plays on what to do, how to live. If you’re speaking with people, they put these questions to themselves. The sense of why? Why? Now we have everything . . . but we feel there’s something missing.43

Provážek is engaged in an ongoing search to rediscover and re-present this missing something. The theatre’s search, however, is tinged with irony, for its experience already represents this absence.

Suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly freed from a clearly defined and containing danger, Czech society and Czech theatre expanded into the available space after the “Velvet” Revolution, moving away from a center that had been defined in opposition

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41 Provážek’s new building is an impressive structure; it incorporates an award-winning, versatile theatre space, an outdoor Elizabethan-style theatre-cum-cafe, offices, a cellar theatre, and the town house in which Austrian Empress Maria Theresa (1717–80) stayed when visiting Moravia.

42 The production’s treatment of Havel angered Oslzly, still functioning as his cultural adviser in Prague.

43 Albertová, interview. Albertová notes that audiences began returning to the theatres in increasing numbers at the end of 1992—interestingly, the time at which the problematic Czechoslovak identity became a thing of the past with the division of the federation into two nations on 1 January 1993. In the 1994–95 season, attendance levels finally matched pre-revolution figures.
to the "single adversary." The long-familiar other simply stopped existing, and the inverted reflection of the self that it provided suddenly vanished from the mirror of cultural and personal definition. In the rush of possible alternatives to fill up the reflective vacuum, theatre companies and individuals lost their prior sense of identity and purpose. Divergence characterized every dimension of experience, from the economic and political to the psychological and filial. The removal of the communist state also removed its polar counterpart: the parallel polis. The death of the bipolar brought about the birth of the plural. Pluralism and deferred meaning were no longer contained by the state's structural apparatus; the body turned inside-out.

Provázek has felt the violence of the body suddenly extrovert as strongly as any Czech institution. Whereas previously a dramaturgically protected freedom of expression allowed a qualified plurality to flourish in the theatre, the pluralism now confronted by theatre and community has dissolved a "common language...and now we must talk and talk." Regular audience questionnaires revealed that at every point their community was "very, very divided" (Scherhaufer, interview). With the body turned inside-out, Provázek, whose work on the margins had allowed it to become a center of communal dialogue, saw its border position vanish, and with it, the efficacy of its poststructural, irregular methods.

Under structural totalitarianism, Provázek had used the idea of the free play of signifiers, but bounded that play with an increasingly defined interpretive community. That community, of course, differed from the one to which Provázek would point when discussing its productions with communist authorities. In those confrontations, Provázek would gesture toward the officially recognized community (actually an externally linked collective) of devoted citizens of a communist state. The unmarked community to which Provázek played, however, was composed of individuals bound together by similar beliefs concerning liberty, Czech self-determination, and cultural and national traditions. The signifiers actively developed by the company, therefore, lay in the realm of the communally real but collectively unmarked, where they could be kept relatively safe from the censor's knife, sharpened as it was to excise determinable "pro-rightist" markings. Now, however, diversity and diversion have undercut the ties that bound this community. An unbounded multiplicity of interpretations unbinds an interpretive community.

Both Provázek and its community have suffered under the loss.4 After twenty years spent developing beliefs and the techniques for expressing them, the post-revolution company suddenly lost arguably the most important element in its identity. Although Provázek has focused since on ethical and moral issues as a way of addressing an

4 The company members make a concentrated effort to stand close to their community outside as well as inside the theatre. In his interview, Oslzly stressed the importance the company places on living a "normal" life so that artists can remain sensitive to the issues that affect the whole of society. By living as others live—going to pubs, riding buses, having children, listening closely to the topics that arise—Provázek artists immerse themselves in the flow of society's common life in order to be personally affected by its predominant currents. Through the irreducible sensitivity such a life affords, they speak and create from personal experience, yet in a way inherently grounded, so their history attests, in common social issues. All Czech theatre is inevitably created in this stream, of course, but Provázek has set itself the task of expressing its currents instead of, as much theatre does, expressing a reaction to them. Its course, therefore, has been particularly expressive of communal patterns and, thus, of the disunities that attend pluralism.
increasingly invisible or absent community, it is not yet clear whether its attempts can re-create what the struggle with a commonly recognized enemy helped form. In a passage that seems to echo Havel, Peggy Phelan remarks on the impossibility of wholly autonomous self-definition:

Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In the declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being.45

The lost relation to an other and the consequent lost possibility of post-revolution self-seeing has affected not only Provázek, but Czech theatre in general. Oslzly describes it as an ongoing loss: “The theatre is in a crisis, a real crisis of its own identity.”46 In addition to the loss of the opposing pole of otherness in the bipolar system, the absence of a home pole of opposition has also contributed to the present crisis.

The boundary on which the communally identified self diverged from the other of the state apparatus formed the unmarked content and shaped the methodological principle of Provázek’s productions. That border skirmish was, most simply, the struggle for the nonexistent: democracy and pluralism. As such, it formed the center and purpose around which the community gathered. The nation assembled in the performance space around an absence. At the center of each Provázek performance lay the community’s lack of freedom, the absence of pluralism, the nonexistence of democracy. Alternative theatre performances “summoned freedom by differing methods” into a virtual presence, a communal dream sustained by the community’s “common prayers for a free life” (28). Today, however, this freedom is marked, all pervasive, external to the community and not created actively by it. It forms the atmosphere surrounding every Czech. The absence that gave the alternative theatres their purpose and the community its definition has dissipated in this atmosphere.

Sustained by an audience that after seven years has begun to sense “that there is something missing,” Provázek has refined its search for today’s unmet communal need(s), the absence around which community can again be conjured into being. Today the theatre concentrates on performing a metaphysical role. Oslzly argues that such a role forms the primal basis of theatre. Theatre expressive of its own deepest purpose, he believes, creates a “holy circle” that encompasses the audience and performers, who serve as priests, as it were, facilitating a link between the community and a “metaphysical horizon” (27–28). After the revolution, he admits, “there was no common metaphysical principle to which artists and community could return” (28). Provázek now works to create the conditions in which such a return might be possible. Seven years following the destruction of what Oslzly calls the clay idol of Marxist materialism, its materialist dust remains in the eyes of Czechs, obscuring their vision of a common metaphysical horizon. Oslzly concludes that theatre’s current role, therefore, is to search for and attempt to create theatre rituals that elicit the “tears of joy or pain [with which] it is possible to wash out this dust from our eyes” (28).

45 Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993), 13. My discussion is also indebted in general to Phelan’s treatment of the concepts “marked” and “unmarked.”
Community remains a central factor in creating such rituals. In providing fuel and a rest stop to humanitarian aid trucks headed for the former Yugoslavia, in devoting its lobby space to the artwork of Bosnian children, and in increasing its international tours to one every month or two, Provázek demonstrates that its definition of community has expanded, not shrunk, since the revolution. At home, a 1995 production built around the interwar cabarets of German performer Karl Valentin addressed not only the deficiencies of materialism, but alluded to the forced expatriation of millions of German-speaking Czech citizens after World War II. Questions of morality and identity thus continue to constitute the center of Provázek’s concerns, and to serve as the means by which it hopes to wash the dust of materialism from the eyes of its past and possibly present community.