Without Theatre, the Czechoslovak Revolution Could Not Have Been Won

Olga F. Chtiguel

As a result of the November events in 1989, Czechoslovaks not only dramatically changed the political structure of their country but also its culture. With the collapse of the Communist regime and its rigid censorship, the aesthetic models of socialist realism and propagandistic art crumbled. A chapter of culture determined by restrictions imposed by the Communist party, the Ministry of the Interior, and self-censorship has been definitely concluded.

Like their colleagues in film and television, theatre artists now face a major restructuring of their unions and theatre administrations. Undoubtedly the new Ministry of Culture headed by Milan Lukš, a distinguished critic, dramaturg, and translator, will revise the system of subsidies and encourage theatres to become less dependent on government money. Powerful units of the Communist party, previously installed in all theatres so as to serve as the Party’s watchdogs, are rapidly being dismantled. Terminating bureaucratic restrictions and interference with spontaneous theatrical life, the ministry will surely encourage the formation of new theatres.

Employment of artists on the basis of their artistic merit, as opposed to their political “fitness,” will determine the future of many theatre companies. Formerly exiled or banned artists, many of them condemned to 20 years of washing windows or working in sewers, will return to these theatres of the ’90s. A star of the ’60s, Vlasta Chramostová, has already announced that she may resume acting. Pavel Landovský, an actor and playwright forced into exile after signing Charter 77, the human rights declaration on 1 January 1977, has promised to divide his time between the Viennese Burgtheater and Prague. Otmar Krejča, a legendary director of Divadlo za branou (Theatre behind the Gate), will work in his newly established Studio in Prague. Jan Grossman, a former director of Divadlo na Zábřadli (Theatre on the Balustrade), has resumed directing in the capital after years of marginal work in the provinces. In addition, a new generation of theatre artists will emerge from the academies and conservatories where admission processes will no longer be subordinated to can-

The Drama Review 34, no. 3 (T127), Fall 1990

88
didates' political profiles—talents and capabilities will now become decisive elements for education.

With the collapse of censorship, dramaturgs will no longer be restricted by bizarre decisions of numerous censors and Party officials. Neither will incompetent clerks sit in auditoriums recording how many times spectators react to lines with possible double meanings. No longer will the Communist administration press dramaturgs to have their repertoires commemorate anniversaries of the October Revolution in the Soviet Union, the Communist victory in Czechoslovakia, or the First of May, the discredited holiday of the workers. Removal of bans on authors blacklisted by the post-1968 government will provide dramaturgs with a vast number of new titles. Without being forced to satisfy ideological requirements, dramaturgs will enjoy the freedom of selecting titles from Western, as well as previously banned domestic sources. Yet selection of titles will be precisely the most vexing problem for a majority of theatres. Paradoxically, with a new democracy, the most progressive and nonconventional theatres of the '70s and '80s face the rather puzzling problem of what their function as well as their artistic and intellectual merits will be.

For the last 42 years, Czechoslovak theatre was connected with the ruling Communist regime. The relationships of theatre artists to this regime determined their aesthetics, dramaturgy, and indeed their affiliation with particular types of theatres. Generally, Czechoslovak mainstream theatres were called kamenná divadla (stone theatres), meaning big repertory companies marked by a rather profuse administration of directors, deputies, and secretaries. These theatres employed ensembles of actors, technical crews, and artistic teams of directors, dramaturgs, designers, and composers. These were all paid monthly and enjoyed many perquisites.

The activities of the stone theatres were largely administered by the Party's members who were installed into controlling positions. Frequently the actors themselves joined the Party in order to advance their careers. The dramaturgy of the stone theatres rarely selected bold titles from Western or even Soviet drama. They basically followed all imposed restrictions and stylistic requirements, largely rooted in conventional aesthetics and modified socialist realism.

The emergence of Czech off-mainstream theatre introduced alternatives to the aesthetics and administrative structures of the stone theatres. These theatres, before developing specific identities were called malá divadla (small theatres) by the critics. They represented nonconventional aesthetics and political expression. The term "small" referred to the fact that a majority of the off-mainstream theatres performed in small auditoriums with spectators literally witnessing theatrical creation in process. With an increasingly totalitarian leadership and strengthened censorship, Czech off-mainstream theatres assumed a leading role in shaping the political consciousness of their countrymen and women.

The first off-mainstream theatres appeared in small night clubs in the mid-1950s as a reaction to the stone theatres, which served as the regime's ideological tool. In the name of socialist realism, the stone theatres produced crudely schematic tales executed in a style mimicking Soviet propagandistic movies. Awakened by political thaw after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, Czech theatre artists searched for alternatives to socialist realism.

The first such alternative, becoming thus a decisive moment in the development of Czech off-mainstream theatre, was Reduta, a small wine-tavern in Prague. In 1956 Jiří Suchý, Jiří Šlitr, Viktor Sodoma and, a year
The small theatres, like Studio Ypsilon, searched for alternatives to socialist realism in their 1988 production of Zdenek Hořinek’s adaptation of Kafka’s Amerika. (Photo courtesy of Olga F. Chtiguel)

Later, Ivan Vyskočil performed collages of sketches, songs, improvised talks, and readings of their stories before a steadily growing audience of young people. Vyskočil’s and Suchý’s emphasis on poetic language, humor, love, and jazz constituted a challenge to the still prevalent socialist propaganda. Their type of theatre was soon called “text-appeal,” meaning that the authors themselves performed their texts and songs. Performing in a personally electrifying manner, Vyskočil and Suchý aimed at “appealing” to their spectators’ minds and souls. All the performers in Reduta were amateurs who nourished their “dilettantism” onstage with purposely anti-illusionistic and antiprofessional performance.

In 1959, Vyskočil, Suchý, and Šlitr founded Divadlo na Zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade), where they developed text-appeal into full-length productions. After Suchý returned to Reduta, Vyskočil remained and wrote Autostop (Hitchhiking) with Václav Havel. A growing number of the Balustrade’s members, however, demanded new artistic goals other than Vyskočil’s type of text-appeal. Vyskočil’s successor, Jan Grossman, and Havel, who became a dramaturg and playwright in residence, transformed the Balustrade into a chamber type of drama theatre. Notwithstanding artistic strategies different from text-appeal, Havel and Grossman sided with off-mainstream theatre’s ambition of “appealing” to social consciousness by presenting humorous yet chillingly truthful pictures of Czech Communist society.

Meanwhile, Suchý and Šlitr established Semafor, in which they developed text-appeal into a musical theatre. Šlitr wrote jazz and rock and roll music to Suchý’s poetic lyrics, which soon became widely popular hits. Because of Semafor’s enormous popularity with the young generation,
critics referred to Semafor as "generational theatre," a term later used for any off-mainstream theatre reflecting antiestablishment views. Suchý’s and Šlitr’s humorous comedies, jazz melodies, rock and roll, and nostalgia for music halls, silent motion pictures, and vaudeville seemed strikingly innovative after dark years of the Communist propaganda. Without employing militant political discourse, Semafor manifested the social power of theatrical performance in marking the emotional and intellectual development of the generation maturing in the '60s.

The Balustrade evolved into a highly acclaimed, synthetic theatre which utilized anti-illusionistic acting, minimal stage design, and topical dramaturgy. Unlike text-appeal, the Balustrade worked with dramatic literature and searched for professionalism and “theatricality” onstage. Two newly established theatres, Činoherní Klub (Drama Club) and Divadlo za branou (Theatre behind the Gate), soon followed in the Balustrade’s path.

Although never explicitly anti-Communist, both text-appeal as represented by Vyskočil and chamber drama theatres suffered after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The work of these theatres, praised by such Western critics as Martin Esslin and Kenneth Tynan, was suddenly terminated by the pro-invasion bureaucracy and censorship. The consequences of the so-called normalization process, designed to return the country to the Soviet orbit, were disastrous. Political and cultural purges resulted in exclusion of half a million people from their jobs. Thousands were imprisoned. Once again, socialist realism was installed as the ruling aesthetic model.

Self-proclaimed critics, such as Jan Kliment, Ladislaz Lajcha, Ladislav Burlas, and Jiří Hájek, declared that '60s theatre was subversive and under the influence of the decadent bourgeois West. The plays of Havel, Josef Topol, Ladislav Smoček, Alena Vostrá, Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, Pavel Landovský, and many others were banned, together with numerous fiction and nonfiction books, journals, and movies. Grossman at the Balustrade, Smoček, Jaroslav Vostrý, and Jan Kačer at the Drama Club, and Krejča at the Gate were forbidden to direct. Vyskočil and Suchý found themselves under persistent attacks and restrictive censorship. Jiří Šlitr’s tragic death in 1969 added to suchy’s desperation, from which he awoke only 20 years later with the November Revolution. The stone theatres underwent a wave of short-lived protests, but soon accommodated themselves to the regime. Otherwise decent actors began prostituting themselves in feebleminded television series and propagandistic movies.

A new phase of Czech off-mainstream theatre was constituted outside of Prague by small theatre companies: Studio Ypsilon in Liberec, Divadlo na provázku (DNP, or Theatre on a String) in Brno, and Hanácké divadlo (HAD, or Theatre of Hana) in Prostějov. Although Ypsilon and DNP were established before 1968, they came to prominence during the '70s. However paradoxical it may seem, the harshest times of the normalization process in the '70s produced the “Golden Age” of Czech off-mainstream theatre.

Ypsilon, HAD, and DNP took a distinctly different route from their colleagues in the '60s. They called themselves autorská divadla (theatre of the auteur), meaning that the true author of the performance was not the writer but the stage creator. All elements in the performance were subordinated to the artist’s subjective attitude toward life. Whether the auteur was a director, dramaturg, designer, musician, actor, or even an entire ensemble, the artist projected through the stage his/her personality and subjective characteristics.
The working methods of these theatres differed from the stone theatres where the creation process tended to be "manufactured" in disconnected phases. The auteur's theatre favored long rehearsals and directors' close collaboration with their designers, musicians, and dramaturgs.

The acting style in the auteur's theatre was antipsychological, nonillustrative, and individualistic, deliberately playful, seemingly unpolished, raw, and spontaneous. The actors were expected to project their personalities as well as a high degree of skillfulness. They were trained in acrobatics, athletics, and ballet. They all read music, sang, and played instruments. Onstage, the actors frequently addressed their audience by engaging in dialogs either as stage characters or as private persons.

The aesthetics of the auteur's theatre were partially influenced by the nontheatrical background of some of its founders and partially by the reaction to the post-1968 purges against the playwrights. Reconsidering the power of spoken words onstage, the auteur's theatre turned toward verbally minimal performances with vivid use of stage metaphors, stylization, pantomime, dance, and clown shows. Stage aesthetics were inspired by visual arts, silent motion pictures, and commedia dell'arte. To stress physicality, visual metaphor, and rhythm in their mise-en-scenes, directors freely explored and combined numerous genres and sources: drama, musicals, vaudeville, melodrama, and cabaret, as well as lectures, meditations, acrobatics, and magicians.

Music and dance became an indispensable part of the productions. In the auteur's theatre, music as well as design were understood as functional
elements equal to the text. In the '80s, designers appeared to be influenced by action design, a concept advocated by Josef Svoboda and his students. Using the simplest means, designers aimed to create neutral, “uncluttered” scenery, the dramatic characteristics and meanings of which became visible only through the manner in which the actors related to it.

The auteur’s theatre largely ignored dramatic literature in favor of adapting fiction and documentary literature, writing its own texts as well as creating text through improvisations during rehearsals. The mostly non-linear texts usually became part of a complex performance script which indicated actors’ movements as well as costume and stage design. Preparation of the scripts was directly determined by stage aesthetics, social consciousness, and the casting potential of a particular ensemble. Due to these specifics, the scripts were almost never performed by other theatres.

Until the emergence of a new theatrical generation in the mid-'80s, the auteur’s theatres dominated Czech theatre with its progressive dramaturgy, nonconventional stage aesthetics, and, however restricted, its contacts with the Western theatre. In the '70s, and more vividly in the '80s, the auteur’s theater substituted for the lack of a free media, transforming itself into a political tribunal. The auditoriums of Ypsilon, DNP, and HAD became the places where spectators and performers reciprocally expressed their despair over the oppressive regime. With increasing pressure from Moscow and from the public for reforms, the Party’s censorship and restrictions strengthened. On the stages of the auteur’s theatre, however, the actors became bold and explicit in their critiques.

With the growing popularity of their performances in the mid-'80s, the Prague amateurs (those who do not earn a living from performing) unintentionally instigated a new phase of Czech off-mainstream theatre. The performers were loosely associated in five groups, known as Pražská Pětka (the Prague Five). The core of the groups was directly or indirectly formed by members of Sklep (The Basement), a sometimes chaotic yet enthusiastic gathering of theatre buffs. Some of its members performed in Mimosa, a pantomime group with rather morbid undertones in its sketches. The Basement also collaborated with Recitační skupina Vpřed (Recitation Group Ahead), a witty, topical, and amusing type of Czech rap executed in full-length performances. Another group, associated with The Basement through occasional collaborative performances, was Baletní jednotka Křec (Ballet Unit Spasm), a highly sophisticated and spectacular rendition of postmodern dance into Czech form. The fifth group, Výtvarné divadlo Kolotoč (Visual Theatre Carousel), created stunning images from everyday life elements.

Unlike the auteur’s theatre, which loaded its performance with ethical and political messages, the Prague Five was directly inspired by the stupidity of the regime. Maturing in a society where everybody—from the government to the media to schoolteachers—lied about the happiness of living under Communism, the performers of the Prague Five regarded the world as a peep show of mentally retarded people. Stigmatized by de-individualized culture and education, the Prague Five obsessively disregarded any artistic unity of style or of concept. Performances ranged from amusing, satirical parodies to spectacular dances and abstract images. The buoyant and angry laughter of the Prague Five provided the way of surviving in a sterile Communist society.

Notwithstanding an imposed isolation from Western trends, the Prague Five produced a unique form of Czech postmodernism by using such
3. One of the Prague Five, Ballet Unit Spasm, in a performance of Ballet Unit Spasm on a Lagoon Varedero, or, Gee, It Can't Be True, conceived and directed by Michal and Šimon Caban (1985).
(Photo by Jan Pohribný)

representational strategies as fragmentation, “schizophrenia,” plagiarism, spectactority, nostalgia, simulation, quotation, and “low” genres. The Prague Five, however, resisted acknowledging any affiliation with postmodernism. As David Vavra, one of the major protagonists of the movement, commented: “When the elevators are not working, how can you talk about postmodernism?” (1989).

With the November revolution, sparked by the initiatives of the students of the Academy of the Theatre Arts in Prague, artistic as well as personal differences between representatives of mainstream and off-mainstream theatres became blurred in a mutual effort to change the course of Czechoslovakia’s future. Actors from the stone theatres, chamber drama theatres, text-appeal, the theatre of the auteur, and the Prague Five united in the tasks of awakening the citizens from their agony. Actors and directors went to the factories and farms to persuade workers and farmers to join the opposition. They read declarations from the balconies on Wenceslas Square and opened their theatres to political discussions.

Without the actors’ intense activities, the Czech revolution could not have been won. After 42 years of brainwashing and propaganda, the words spoken from the theatre stages did move the masses and changed the course of history. As a grand metaphor and derision of the Communist regime, the people of Czechoslovakia elevated playwright Václav Havel to the presidency. Some prominent theatre personalities, such as Petr Osllzlj, a dramaturg of DNP, and Milan Knazko, an actor with the National Slovak Theatre, serve as Havel’s advisors. Some, like Jiří Bartoška of the Balustrade and Petr Čepek of the Drama Club, returned from the discussion tables of Civic Forum to the stage. Others, like Magda Vašáryová, an actor with the Slovak National Theatre, were appointed as state representatives.

With the revolution only a few months old, what are the prospects for Czech theatre? Can the banned drama of the 1960s satisfy the spectators of
the 1980s? Will unrestricted travel and acquaintance with the Western artistic trends change the aesthetics of Czech theatre artists? What will be the theatre’s function in society now that the media has been restored to its proper democratic role? How satirical, for example, will The Basement be about the tremendously popular government of Havel?

The anti-Communist repertoire has lost its appeal as a target. Moreover, the everyday reality of Czechoslovakia has become so exciting and spectacular that no theatre production can compete with it. Life has turned into a magnificent happening of celebrations mocking the February Communist putsch of 1948, parades for Havel, and street performances. Newly opened depository rooms release fascinating secrets. The publishing houses feverishly print Kundera, Josef Skvorecký, Ludvík Aškenazy, and many others. Reporters on TV screens as well as on newspaper pages buoyantly enjoy freedom of speech. Movie theatres screen banned films of the famous “new wave” of the 1960s, and recording companies issue one rock musician after another. And the theatres?

The theatre artists are slightly perplexed and bewildered. With some previously off-mainstream artists assuming leading roles in the stone theatres, and with the loss of the “common enemy,” Czech theatre artists may, indeed, unite with the emergence of a tremendous task—the repair of damaged souls. The theatre’s role as a political tribune may be turned into a platform of humanity. Once again, the theatre artist may support Václav

4. The Basement, a Prague Five group, in Besidka in 1987. The piece was conceived and directed collaboratively. At left is Tomáš Hanák and at right, David Vavra, the main protagonists of the Prague Five movement. (Photo by Radka Vaculíková)
Havel's vision. In order to achieve worldwide respect for an economically sufficient and democratic Czechoslovakia, the theatre artists may set out on a mission of reviving in their countrymen and -women a genuine interest in personal growth as an integral element in forming a decent society.

Reference

Vavra, David
1989 Interview with author. Prague, 10 November.

Olga F. Chtiguel recently received her PhD from the Department of Performance Studies at New York University.

TDReading

For a related article on politics and theatre in the Soviet Union see Konstantin Scherbakov's article "Plays and Polemics on the Soviet Stage," TDR 33, no. 3 (T123).