Models of Aesthetic Subversion: Ideas, Spaces, and Objects in Czech Theatre and Drama of the 1950s and 1960s

by

Adam Robert Grunzke

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Adam Robert Grunzke, 2011
Models of Aesthetic Subversion: Ideas, Spaces, and Objects in Czech Theatre and Drama of the 1950s and 1960s

Adam Robert Grunzke
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures
University of Toronto
2011

Abstract

The 1950s and 1960s in Czechoslovakia witnessed a fundamental shift in the dramatic and theatrical realms. Following the Communist takeover of 1948, Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism became the official aesthetic of the Czech lands, displacing the avant-garde trends that had dominated the pre-war era. This normative aesthetic program demanded a party-minded ideological perspective (*partiinost*) and a certain level of accessibility to the masses (*narodnost*). After the death of Stalin, as the political situation began to thaw, various theatre practitioners began to undermine these Socialist Realist demands, widening the literary horizons by experimenting with a variety of trends, and ultimately sowing the seeds that would lead to the flowering of the Czech theatre of the 1960s.

This thesis investigates the ways in which the Socialist Realist model for dramatic and theatrical expression was subverted on the experimental stages of Prague in the late 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, it analyzes the changing role of ideology, dramatic and theatrical space, and objects during this period.

By the 1960s, the earnest, socialist ideology that pervaded Socialist Realism in its purported message to the audience had become a stale aesthetic model. In 1963, Václav Havel’s *Zahradní*
slavnost couches this ideology in an absurd dramatic world, subverting and satirizing the didactic nature of Socialist Realism while simultaneously drawing from the Czech avant-garde and foreign trends like the so-called Theatre of the Absurd.

Prague’s experimental theatre movement in the 1950s and 1960s, though certainly present on large stages like the National Theatre, primarily sprang from the city’s small stages. Both Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr’s Semafor Theatre and Otomar Krejča’s Theatre Beyond the Gate managed highly innovative productions despite limited stage space. This was made possible, in part, due to their remarkable use of the off-stage and imaginary action spaces.

In his article “Man and Object in the Theatre,” Jiří Veltruský notes that human actors on stage operate between two poles: highly spontaneous and highly determined actions. Socialist Realism, which offered its audience models of behaviour for their lives outside the theatre, reduced characters to types, limiting their perceived spontaneity, as they exist primarily to fulfill necessary narrative functions (i.e., the positive hero). In a sense, human beings are objectified. In his adaptation of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu roi, director Jan Grossman takes this to the extreme. By presenting the actions of his actors as highly determined, he reduces the human figure to a manipulated object. When Ubu oversees the annihilation of these beings, Grossman both parodies the Socialist Realist approach to characterization and offers a stunningly subversive rebuke of the Czech political culture.

In this work I show how the innovative spirit of Czech theatre and drama of the 1960s represented an era of shifting aesthetic norms, which reacted to the strict, normative Socialist Realist trend of the 1950s, borrowed from numerous foreign and domestic trends both past and present, and developed unique techniques of their own in order to create impactful works on the stage and on the page.
Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have supported me throughout the thesis-writing process.

First, I wish to extend sincerest thanks to Professor Veronika Ambros for five years of excellent instruction and guidance. Beyond the constructive criticism and advice for this dissertation, her insightful courses and tireless dedication have opened to me the enthralling world of Czech theatre and drama, and for that I will be forever grateful. Without her, this dissertation would not have been possible.

Second, I would like to thank Professors Martin Revermann and Taras Koznarsky, who have been most helpful as thesis committee members. Thanks to their attention to detail, I have strengthened the arguments in this work considerably. They are both truly gifted scholars, and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have worked with them over the past two years.

Third, to my family: your love and support have sustained me in difficult times and kept me motivated throughout my graduate studies. To Rebecca, in particular, I extend my deepest thanks for all of her editorial advice.

Finally, to my wife Kim: your companionship and love have been a constant blessing in my life, and have given me the strength to achieve my goals. You have truly made all of these years of hard work a joy.
# Table of Contents

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................................................. ii

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ............................................................................................................................... iv

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ................................................................................................................................... v

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

**The Argument of this Work** ......................................................................................................................... 1

**The Structure of the Thesis** ........................................................................................................................... 2

**Selection of Material** .................................................................................................................................... 6

**The Importance of this Thesis** ....................................................................................................................... 10

**Czech Theatre: A Historical Context** ........................................................................................................ 11

**Literary Tradition and the Expansion of Norms in 1960s Czech Theatre** .................................................. 19

**Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia: the 1950s Model** .............................................................................. 21

**Opening the Grab Bag of the Theatre of the Absurd** ............................................................................... 24

**One Aspect of Aesthetic Subversion: Language as a Struggle for Individuality in the Model Drama** ....... 31

**The Stage as Imaginary Playground: Subverting the Traditional Theatrical Space** ............................. 40

**Subverting the Role of Man and Object on the Stage** ............................................................................. 44

## CHAPTER 2 THE CREATION OF A NEW AESTHETIC: FROM SOCIALIST REALISM TO THE EXPERIMENTAL SIXTIES.............................................................................................................................................. 52

**A Brief History of the Adoption of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union** .......................................... 52

**Optimism in Socialist Realist Theatre: Drama without a Conflict** ......................................................... 59

**Conventional Forms in Socialist Realism** ................................................................................................. 62

**A Note on Propaganda** ............................................................................................................................. 65

**Socialist Realism in the Pre-War Czech Context** .................................................................................... 66

**Czech Theatre from 1945 to 1948: Out with the Old and In with the New Man** .................................... 71

**Socialist Realism in the Czech Lands: 1948 and Beyond** ....................................................................... 73
CHAPTER 3 IMAGINARY SPACES AND MATERIAL STAGES ......................................................... 118

HOW TO CREATE LARGE FICTIONAL WORLDS ON THE SMALL STAGE ........................................ 118
THE CREATIVE, IMAGINARY SPACE IN ČLOVĚK Z PŮDY ........................................................................ 122
TOYS IN THE ATTIC: A CREATIVE WORLD IN A THEATRICAL SPACE .................................................. 126
FROM CREATIVITY TO CLICHÉ: THE DOWNSTAIRS SPACE .................................................................. 134
CONCLUDING REMARKS ON ČLOVĚK Z PŮDY ..................................................................................... 135
BETWEEN PRIVATE PLACES AND PUBLIC SPACES: JOSEF TOPOL’S END OF CARNIVAL ......................... 137
THE IMAGINARY SPACE IN KONEC MASOPUSTU ..................................................................................... 142
THE END OF THE CZECH DREAM ........................................................................................................ 145
THE END OF RELIGION .......................................................................................................................... 152
THE BEGINNING OF AN ENDLESS CARNIVAL ....................................................................................... 157
THEATRICAL SPACES AND IMAGINARY PLACES IN TOPOL’S KOČKA NA KOLEJÍCH .................................. 160
THE FUTILITY OF PHYSICAL SPACE INTERACTION ............................................................................... 164
IMAGINARY SPACE AS A FORM OF ESCAPE .......................................................................................... 169
HOMeward BOUND? ............................................................................................................................. 175
CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................................................. 178

CHAPTER 4 BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN OBJECT AND SUBJECT ........................................... 181

THE ROLE OF HUMANS ON THE 1960s CZECHOSLOVAK STAGE ..................................................... 181
MAN OR OBJECT? – THE HUMAN BEING ON STAGE ............................................................................ 183
THE ÜBERMARIONETTE AND THE ACTOR ............................................................................................ 188

SOCIALIST REALISM ON THE CZECHOSLOVAK STAGE ....................................................................... 75
PAVEL KOHOUT AND THE SOCIALIST REALIST ERA: DOBRÁ PÍSEŇ ..................................................... 76
PAVEL KOHOUT AND THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIALIST REALISM: TAKOVÁ LÁSKA .................................... 86
VÁCLAV HAVEL AND THE RISE OF CZECH ABSURDISM ........................................................................ 92
ZAHRADNÍ SLAVNOST: A LITTLE GAME OF CHESS .............................................................................. 98
ZAHRADNÍ SLAVNOST AND THE SATIRE OF SOCIALIST REALIST THEATRE ........................................... 104
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIALIST REALISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN ZAHRADNÍ SLAVNOST ........... 109
CONCLUSIONS ........................................................................................................................................... 113
Chapter 1
Introduction

The Argument of this Work

The Czech theatre of the 1950s largely followed the Socialist Realist art norm, which demanded the didactic function in its promotion of the socially unifying concepts of partinost and narodnost, the adherence to Communist Party principles and the uplifting of the virtues of the peasant class. The flowering of 1960s theatre came about through an expansion of traditions and norms, reviving the experimental spirit of the historical avant-garde while subverting this strict, normative poetic of the previous decade. Through innovative staging, various Czech dramatists of the 1960s subverted those norms by creating theatrical worlds into which the individual introduces discord as he struggles to maintain his identity while in conflict with the fundamentally harmonizing and dehumanizing power of society.

This thesis investigates that phenomenon by tracing the development of the Czech theatre from the dawn of Socialist Realism to the Prague Spring (1948–1968), focusing particularly on three developments: the shifting role of ideology and language within and beyond the era of Socialist Realism, the blurring of the line between subject and object, and the increasing prominence of the imaginary space on the experimental stages of the small theatres in Prague. While any of Prague’s celebrated small theatres’ bodies of work are worthy of close scrutiny, this thesis primarily explores the works performed under Jan Grossman at Divadlo na zábradlí (the Theatre on the Balustrade, hereafter referred to as “Balustrade theatre”), Suchý and Šlitr’s Semafor, and Krejča’s Divadlo za branou (the Theatre beyond the Gate, hereafter referred to as “Gate theatre”). This is due not only to the fact that they were more or less contemporary
institutions, but also because they represent some of the most prolific and highly regarded small theatre institutions of the day. Of particular interest is the work of the Balustrade Theatre’s dramaturg and resident playwright, Václav Havel, who delves into this issue with frequency throughout the 1960s.

**The Structure of the Thesis**

The first chapter of this thesis explores the changing role of socialist ideology on the Czech stage from a source of earnest, moral edification to a source of parody and satire, particularly as it concerns the use of language in communication. After a detailed account of the history of Socialist Realist poetics, I draw two examples from Pavel Kohout’s work in the 1950s, most notably *Dobrá píseň* (*A Good Song*, 1951) and *Taková láška* (*Such a Love*, 1957) to demonstrate not only the changing role that ideology played in dramatic works spanning most of the Socialist Realist era, but also the variety of theatrical expressions available to playwrights at the time. Despite adhering to many of the demands of the Socialist Realist norms concerning subject matter, Kohout does not succeed in creating a work of pure Socialist Realism. Even though it was written in the heart of the Socialist Realist era, *Dobrá píseň*, a play in verse, subverts the normative poetics of the day through its rather unorthodox use of poetic language. Even though this break from the aesthetic norms of the time serves as an attempt to monumentalize the party-conscious subject matter by couching it within a discourse reminiscent of the nineteenth century, in doing so, it subverts the norms that its subject matter purports to uphold. *Taková láška* also subverts the Socialist Realist norms through formal means, though by 1957 even the subject matter begins to depart from the formulaic patterns of the aesthetic. By breaking from linear plot construction, Kohout disrupts the causal-temporal dramatic structure endemic of the demands of the official artnorm. Furthermore, the play undercuts the socially unifying trend by presenting a
fictional world in which societal, party-driven issues play a less prominent role than personal ones. By 1957, Kohout has subverted nearly every aspect of Socialist Realism in order to create a play that brings something new to the stage; this paves the way for future playwrights to not only diverge from the Socialist Realist platform, but attack it as well.

These plays of the 1950s will serve as a comparison with Václav Havel’s *Zahradní slavnost* (*The Garden Party*, 1963), a parody of the Socialist Realist tradition that opens to ridicule the socialist ideological discourse that dominated the preceding decade. By examining how this discourse devolves from the unifying principle around which dramas like Kohout’s *Dobrá píseň* were written, to a discourse devoid of unequivocal meaning (though still respected by bureaucratic machinery), I intend to show how the experimental theatres of the 1960s were able to create a new aesthetic by subverting (parodying) the norms of the previous era. Jan Mukařovský noted that the avant-garde theatre tradition of the 1920s became the norm in the 1930s; what this chapter will show is that the opposite is true of the 1960s: the official norms of the 1950s become the basis for a new experimental trend.

Shifting the discussion from ideology to the use of theatrical and dramatic space, the second chapter shows the way that the use of imaginary space to expand the fictional space stands as an innovation in the late 1950s and carries on into the 1960s. In Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr’s experimental, musical comedy *Člověk z půdy* (*The Man from the Attic*, 1958), the main character, a novelist named Antonín Somr, while in his upstairs atelier, uses the other figures on the stage to act out scenes that he wishes to include in his novel. Over time, his dictatorial manipulation of the other characters in the play leads to an absurd kind of play-acting. The frenetic and creative nature of the upstairs space is contrasted with the mundane downstairs space, which by and large provides a conventional space for a clichéd love story. The marked
difference between the characters’ behaviour in these two spaces proves to be a central concern in the play and drives the subversion of the traditional material stage with the increasing use of imaginary spaces (resulting from Somr’s claims to be the author of several wellknown works by other writers) to expand the fictional world of the play.

Topol’s *Konec masopustu* (*End of Carnival*, 1963) is unique among the plays in this chapter, having been staged at the National Theatre in Prague with ample space for scene changes and elaborate set designs. This play concerns the collectivization of private property, which motivates a shifting spatial orientation from private to public. As the play develops, the main character is attacked for his autonomy in his private land. Associations with private land, evoked through dialogue, bring deeper significance to the dramatic space, which serves not only as a place for action to unfold, but also as a symbol of individuality itself. The relatively elaborate set designs of *Konec masopustu* stand in stark contrast to the final play treated in the chapter, Topol’s first play at the Gate Theatre, *Kočka na kolejích* (*Cat on the Rails*, 1965), which featured a relatively small cast and absolutely no scene changes. As in *Člověk z půdy*, *Kočka na kolejích* relies on the repeated use of deixis and especially of imaginary space created out of dialogue to expand the fictional world. The contrast between the way the characters behave in the material world and in the imaginary spaces constructed through their conversations demonstrates a means by which individuals can assert their will in the world. Though the imaginary space proves to be an innovative formal departure from Socialist Realism, the use of space in these plays also underscores the limits of the individual in asserting his identity in the material world and the ways that characters circumvent these difficulties through dialogue and imagination.
The third chapter addresses increasing ambiguity between the subject and the object in the human figure on stage. This chapter will draw examples from two plays from the Theatre on the Balustrade, an adaption of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu roi* translated into Czech as *Král Ubu* (King Ubu, 1963), and Havel’s final play of the 1960s, *Ztížená možnost soustředění* (The Increased Difficulty of Concentration, 1968). For the first play, the director Jan Grossman employs the grab bag that Tynan speaks of in his production, making very creative use of a limited number of objects on the stage to fill many signifying roles. These various items often take on multiple functions (often within the same scene), but in addition to the creative use of props, human beings also become onstage objects. The objectification of the acting subject on the stage subverts the traditional characterization of the Socialist Realist era and constitutes another way that individuality is subordinated to societal demands. King Ubu manipulates and even does away with human beings as if they were mere objects or tools that have outlived their usefulness without regard to questions of morality.

While Ubu’s treatment of the others on stage represents a diminishing role for individual expression of human characters, in *Ztížená možnost soustředění* we find a similar phenomenon from the opposite perspective: rather than the objectification of the acting subject, we have the subjectification of the object. A computing machine named Puzuk designed to investigate the nature of human individuality, which is essentially constructed out of various household items, begins to spontaneously assert a will of its own, even as the human subjects descend into mindless babbling. While Havel’s first two plays of the decade present a fictional world questioning the role of man in society, Puzuk is heralded as the answer to these existential worries. In the end, the machine fails to deliver, but in that failure to answer such existential questions, Havel subverts the very premise of the Model Drama. As one of the final plays of the
1960s before the invasion of the Warsaw Pact in August of 1968, *Ztížená možnost soustředění* serves as an example of how the experimental Czech theatre begins to subvert its own subversion.

By rendering a discussion of these various aspects of aesthetic subversion of the preceding era’s norms in theatre and drama, we can begin to understand the variety of ways that the playwrights and theatre practitioners of the 1960s explore the changing role of the individual in society. In these plays, the individual is defined by a number of discrete phenomena, from the objects that he uses, to the places where he works or lives, and even the language that he speaks. The stage truly constitutes a fictional world that exists according to its own laws, but which ultimately is connected to the world outside of the theatre, so by questioning the role of individuality of human beings and subverting the precepts of the Socialist Realist aesthetic, these various plays of 1960s Czechoslovakia provide new perspectives for a changing aesthetics.

**Selection of Material**

The selection of source material for this thesis covers a wide range of texts, from Model Dramas (*Zahradní slavnost* and to some extent *Ztížená možnost soustředění*) to musical theatre (*Člověk z půdy*), which cover a span of nearly two decades (1951–1968) in order to show the process of evolution (subversion of existing norms) that took place in the period. I have chosen texts by four of the most important playwrights in Czechoslovakia of the 1960s (Václav Havel, Josef Topol, and Jiří Suchý, and Jiří Šlitr) to establish the continuity between the pre-war period and the 1960s. Due to the difficulty in rendering his wordplay in Czech in an English dissertation, the theatrical works of Ivan Vyskočil are not treated here. Nonetheless, his approach to the theatre, which helped give rise to the Balustrade and Semafor theatres, could serve as another example of aesthetic subversion.
Zahradní slavnost offers a useful example of this process, since it seems to adhere to the structure of Socialist Realist theatre, and yet its critical perspective of that norm through wordplay and other means demonstrates how by 1963 the Czech theatre eagerly subverted its forebears to create a fresh work that turns Socialist Realism upside down. Ztížená možnost soustředění lays bare the constant, fluid nature of literary evolution through its subversion of the Model Drama; even the most radical departures from the norm, in time, become stale, so the process of aesthetic subversion continues. By selecting two plays from Havel’s oeuvre, we can see how this process of subversion is not only a function of a critical view toward the work of others, but also of self-criticism aimed at perpetual innovation and renewal.

A similar argument can be made for treating two plays by Kohout, Dobrá píseň and Taková láska, which span most of the Socialist Realist era and demonstrate how far from unified the aesthetic was in Czechoslovakia as an institutionalized form. Kohout was certainly not the only playwright engaged in the Socialist Realist experiment; perhaps better examples of plays that adhere to the Socialist Realist aesthetic could have been included, for example Karel Dvořák’s Boženka přijede (1950) or Peter Karvaš’s Lidé z naší ulice (1952); however, due to the longevity of his popularity into the 1960s and beyond, the treating of plays by Kohout makes it possible to cover the entire period under consideration in this thesis within the oeuvre of one man. Karvaš also continued to be popular after the Socialist Realist era, but as a Slovak writer, he does not provide as seamless a continuity to the other Czech practitioners treated in this thesis. Future studies might include his works as an example of the process of Socialist Realist subversion in the Slovak context.

Člověk z půdy, like Taková láska, provides an alternative perspective to the Socialist Realist approach to theatre. Člověk z půdy demonstrates the breadth of theatrical expressions that
existed at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, due to, among other things, its genre: the musical comedy. Jazz music, which only a few years earlier had been banned in Czechoslovakia as a bourgeois Western influence, by its very inclusion in a play at this time stands as a supreme subversion of the strict demands of the preceding years. The play itself, with its mix of improvised comedy and popular music, constitutes a fundamental link between the pre-war period of Czech theatre and the 1960s.

It might seem unconventional to compare the musical comedy work of the Semafor with Topol and Krejča’s work at the Gate Theatre. *Konec masopustu* (staged at the National Theatre) and *Kočka na kolejích* (staged at the Gate Theatre) exemplify the role of the imaginary space in both the large and small stages of Prague, as well as how these approaches to theatrical (or dramatic) space subvert established conventions. The trends in the Semafor and Gate theatres might be derived from drastically different traditions, but the spacial limitations of the small stages of all types necessitated creative attempts to expand meagre material spaces. The use of imaginary action space proves a solution to these limitations, regardless of the traditions or aims of the theatre practitioners, even if the aesthetic results vary greatly.

Whereas Havel’s *Zahradní slavnost* presents an exaggerated form of Socialist Realism that obliquely mocks the poetics through absurd imitation, *Konec masopustu* subverts it by open dissent. A comparison of the two plays reveals the wide spectrum of possible reactions to the social norms of the past. *Kočka na kolejích* marks a departure from Topol’s earlier work, as it deals with personal rather than broad social problems. Though not an obvious heir to the Socialist Realist era, through its dissociation with the normative aesthetics of the previous decade, the play embodies the spirit of a new Czech stage. In this respect, it resembles Kohout’s *Taková láska*. Both plays seemingly set aside the question of the role of an individual in society
and end with potential suicides (though this interpretation is up for debate). While not necessarily a reaction to Socialist Realism, Topol’s approach nonetheless runs contrary to the aims of the aesthetic to provide a concrete example for society to follow; much of the action of the play concerns private players on the imaginary plane.

Finally, Jan Grossman’s staging (and interpretation) of Jarry’s *Ubu roi*, stands as both an example of the aesthetic subversion of Socialist Realism in the building of new aesthetics in the 1960s and a link to various predecessors that informed the work of the theatrical experimenters of the time. As Esslin and others have noted, Jarry played a key role in the evolution of the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, which in turn played a role in the work being undertaken at the Balustrade Theatre. Being both a staging of a classic from an earlier tradition and a novel experiment in its own right, *Král Ubu* directly connects the Model Drama to a number of foreign trends. This lends credence to the argument that the theatre work of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia was not only a reaction to (or subversion of) Socialist Realism of the 1950s, but also an extension of the experimental and avant-garde theatre of the 1920s and earlier.

The theoretical framework I have chosen in dealing with these plays and performances is based largely on the Prague School. ¹ The first-wave Prague School texts used in this dissertation, such as those of Honzl and Mukařovský, come from scholarship in the 1920s and 1930s, but given the continuity between the theatre of the inter-war period and the 1960s, these theoretical works offer this discussion insights that others cannot. Second-wave scholars like

---

¹ Originally founded in 1926, the Prague Linguistic Circle, or Prague School, is a group of theorists from around Europe, but most notably from Soviet scholars, or the so-called “Russian Formalists” Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev among others, as well as Czech scholars like Jan Mukařovský and theatre practitioners like Jindřich Honzl. Though interrupted by the Second World War and other disturbances, their work continued throughout the 20th century, including such second generation scholars as Jiří Veltruský, Karel Brušák, and Felix Vodička. The group still exists, with the work of third-generation members like Lubomír Doležel.
Vodička and Veltruský prove to be invaluable theoretical resources, as they derive their theories, in part, from the contemporary Czech stage. Beyond their applicability to the period under consideration in this thesis, the Prague School deals generally with both theatre and drama in all their complexity, from aspects of space and objects on the stage to language sign systems on the page. In addition, due to limited available English translations of members’ work, the Prague School is vastly undertreated in Western scholarship; this thesis is an attempt to bring the accomplishments of these theoreticians across the academic Iron Curtain that has kept them in relative obscurity in the North American context.

**The Importance of this Thesis**

The Model Drama as a trend examines the individual’s role in society more than almost any other; but there is a noticable lack of secondary literature on the term as a theoretical concept. One book does exist on the subject, Marie Štěrbová’s *Modelové hry Václava Havla* (*The Model Dramas of Vaclav Havel*); however, Štěrbová adopts Esslin’s approach of providing a general analysis of Havel’s plays, and like Esslin, she merely gives the reader a few impressions on Havel’s work organized chronologically rather than topically. She treats all of Havel’s plays, from *The Garden Party* to *Audience*, as a Model Drama, without offering a definition of the term or developing theoretical categories for the features it contains. One might expect a book of such a title would investigate how Havel’s Model Dramas differ from (or resemble) those of other contemporary playwrights; this simply is not the case. This thesis will provide such a comparison.

Because the absurdist tradition is only one of many competing trends on the 1960s Czech stage, I trace their origins, both within the Czech tradition (such as the avant-garde and surrealist movements of the 1920s and 1930s in Prague) and outside it. For example, the works of Topol
deal with issues of individuality in ways that could be traced to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (the concept of waiting in *Kočka na kolejích*, for example), but they could also hearken back to the works of Chekhov, in which the metaphorical distance between the characters is underscored as they talk past one another. Suchý and Šlitr’s musical theatre productions at Semafor, for example, quite clearly draw from the improvized, jazz music tradition of Voskovec and Werich in the interwar period.

Whether dealing with the absurd theatre or other experimental forms, this fertile period in Czechoslovak theatre and drama is vastly under treated in Western scholarship. This thesis will contribute to the field of Czech studies by carefully investigating the artistic and social issues in the Czech theatre whose surface has been scratched by scholars like Paul Trensky and Jarka Burian; these overviews of Czech theatre and drama provide an encyclopedic account of various theatres and trends, but they do not adequately analyze the mechanisms of evolution in theatrical expression, namely, aesthetic subversion. By exploring the complex relationship that the Czech theatre of the 1960s has to its own theatrical traditions (especially Socialist Realism) and the trends that dominated in the rest of Europe (the Theatre of the Absurd), this thesis places Czechoslovakia within its proper European context, challenging the existence of the impenetrable barrier to European intercultural exchange dubiously labeled the Iron Curtain.

**Czech Theatre: A Historical Context**

From the grotesque, secular parodies of the Middle Ages like the fourteenth-century play *Mastičář* to the avant-garde theatre of the interwar First Republic, the theatre has played an important cultural role in Czech society. During the nineteenth century, while still under Austro-Hungarian rule, funds were collected throughout the Czech lands with the aim of building a
national theatre in Prague in an attempt to assert a sense of Czech nationalism. Stanley Buchholz Kimball notes the importance that theatre had for the Czech people of the nineteenth century:

The National Theatre of the Czechs differed from most other so-called national theatres...To the Czechs, perhaps more than any other people, theatre had a definite political meaning. It did not grow from the need of artists, but from national-political needs. (Kimball ix)

The value that the Czechs placed on the foundation of a National Theatre through monetary contributions and political effort from 1868 to 1881 serves as a testament to the importance of theatre to the Czech people both individually and collectively. Traditionally, the theatre was one of the most important venues for political and cultural expression.

The close of the First World War witnessed a great many changes on the European continent, not the least of which was the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the subsequent establishment of a Czechoslovak state. It may come as no surprise that as they gained political freedom, the Czechs began to exercise artistic freedom as well; as in much of the rest of Europe, Czech theatre began to flourish. Expressionistic plays, such as Karel Čapek’s RUR (1920) and Ze života hmyzu (From the Life of Insects, 1922) exhibited a level of sophistication on par with, if not exceeding, similar efforts in Germany and France. His work helped usher in a new era in Czech theatre that dealt not with nationalist issues but “towards the issues of the contemporary world” (F. Černý, The Czech Theatre 2, 15). Karel Čapek and his brother Josef, who painted, created set designs, and wrote as well, continued to be a mainstay of Czech theatre and art until Karel’s death immediately following the Nazi takeover of the Sudetenland in 1938 and Josef’s eventual murder in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945.

František Langer emerges in this same period as an important figure in theatre. Much like the Čapek plays, his Periferie (1925), which deals with individuality in the modern world,
renders the concepts of justice and guilt to near absurdity. Almost the inverse of Kafka’s *Prozess*, Langer’s piece is about a guilty man who murders an architect, then strives to convince the police and the victim’s wife of his guilt and the necessity for punishment. The style follows many of the same trends *au courant* in Europe at the time, including Expressionistic writing.

The avant-garde movement in theatre was especially strong in the Czech lands. The comedy duo Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (V+W), working with director and theatre theoretician Jindřich Honzl, put together a string of succesful, Music Hall-style performances in a dadaistic or proto-absurdist vein well into the 1930s. Their work in the *Osvobozené divadlo* (Liberated Theatre), typified by its jazz-inspired song and dance numbers, clever word-play, and biting political satire established a tradition of theatre as play (in the sense of both a game and a theatrical production) that continued well into the 1960s. Director E. F. Burian stands as another example of the continuity between the inter-war period and the 1960s, as he supported Josef Topol and co-operated with Otomar Krejča at the National Theatre in Prague. Together, Krejča and Topol would go on to produce many plays of note throughout the 1960s.

With the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1938 came a severe crackdown on any theatre that had (or had ever had) anti-German or socialist leanings; thus, the Liberated Theatre and countless others like it closed their doors for what would turn out to be a very, very long time. The Second World War was a dark period for Czech theatre, and even following the Nazi occupation, it was not long before the Communist party, under direction from Moscow, seized control of Czechoslovakia.

The years immediately following the Second World War in Czechoslovakia, though not yet entirely controlled by Soviet-style Communism, was a transitional period. On the one hand, theatre practitioners like Jan Werich return to Czechoslovakia from emigration to the United
States during the war and began to once again stage plays at his new theatre *Divadlo ABC*, but the times and their audience had changed. On the other hand, playwrights had already begun a willing transition to a normative Socialist Realist theatre, focusing on topical plays exploring recent historical events and creating “plays sympathetic to Communist ideology” (Trensky 5).

It perhaps has to be mentioned that *Divadlo V+W u Nováků*, which rejected aid from the state, to maintain its independence, managed to initiate in an era of frenetic socialization and sovietization of the postwar Czech repertoire aside from pro-American *Pěstí na oko*—and two plays of American provenience … Still less known is the theatre work of Voskovc and Werich after 1948, consequently after Voskovc’s second emigration to the USA. The era of Werich and Horníček’s *Divadlo satiry* resp. ABC is somewhat known.²

Werich’s work, however, was increasingly the exception to the norm. The post-war years, in which Czechoslovakia became a territory liberated by the Red Army and increasingly under Soviet influence, can be characterized by this dichotomy: an interest in staging Soviet (Socialist Realist) plays, which increasingly becomes an obligation, and at times a desire to pick up where the 1930s left off. However, as in the rest of Europe, Czechoslovakia after the war no longer resembled the nation it had been before it, and the artistic trends that flourished preceding the war were greatly disrupted. Any theatrical or dramatic innovation that took place subsequent to the Second World War was wiped away after the putsch of 1948, when the democratically-elected president Edvard Beneš was forced to cede power to Communist Party leader Klement Gottwald. It was not until after the death of Stalin in 1953 and especially following Nikita

---

² Je třeba připomenout, že *Divadlo V+W u Nováků*, které odmítalo od státu subvenci, aby si udrželo nezávislost, stačilo uvést v éře horečné socializace a sovětizace poválečného českého repertoáru kromě proamerické Pěstí na oko—i dvě hry americké provenience, Příšel na večeři, Divotvorný hrnec). Ještě méně známá je divadelní tvorba Voskovce a Wericha po roce 1948, tedy po Voskovcově druhé emigraci do USA. Jakž takž žije v obecném povědomí éra Werichova a Horníčkova Divadla satiry resp. ABC. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.)
Krushchev’s famous address at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 that a true thaw began in Czechoslovakia.

By 1958, Czechoslovakia once again found itself on the theatre map of Europe. At the Expo 1958 in Brussels, Belgium, theatre director Alfred Radok unveiled his *Laterna Magika* (Magic Lantern), which featured a *polyekran* (multi-screen) system making use of simultaneous live-action and projected imaging to produce a unique theatrical experience. After the exposition, *Laterna Magika* returned to Prague, where it became a mainstay of the city’s theatre repertoire. *Laterna Magika* was only one of many theatrical innovations that were beginning to take place in Prague in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the book *Začalo to redutou* (*It All Began with the Reduta*), the musician-theatre practitioners Jiří Suchý, Jiří Šlitr, and others chronicle how, with the help of Ivan Vyskočil, the Prague small theatre scene emerged in the late 1950s from a small Jazz club called the Reduta. Their “text-appeals,” which were organized happenings of an improvisational nature with Jazz music interspersed with spoken word performance, provide a foundation for theatrical work that would later come to dominate the 1960s studio theatre scene in Prague. Suchý and Šlitr, as well as Vyskočil, would go on to create two of the most influential small theatres of the 1960s. While the great *kamenná divadla* or “stone theatres”—that is, large and well-established institutions of theatre like the National and Vinohrady Theatres—continued to produce quality theatre, smaller Czech theatre venues were the centres of the innovative spirit one associates with 1960s Czechoslovak theatre. According to Jarka Burian, there emerged in the 1960s a new kind of theatre:

*Visitors to Prague in the 1960s were particularly impressed by the work of certain “small” theatres (malá divadla): relatively new and youthful ensembles that had broken away from some patterns of the permanent repertory system. (Burian 113)*
Burian singles out four such theatres in particular: Činoherní klub (the Drama Club), the Balustrade Theatre, the Gate theatre, and Semafor.

Both the Gate theatre and the Drama Club began staging plays in 1965, and both of these playhouses reacted strongly to what they considered unoriginal productions in the great institutions of drama like the National Theatre, and took a markedly different approach to theatre in general. For example, The Drama Club, under the direction of Jan Kačer, staged plays in a space ill-suited for theatre containing little to no room for scene changes or costumes changes between scenes. Also, rather than importing well-known foreign plays, it tended to stage original Czech plays. Burian puts it quite well when he describes the modus operandi of the Drama Club in particular, though the statement could apply to any of the small theatres discussed in this brief history: “The term ‘play’ was central to the Drama Club’s rationale and carried several meanings: play as action, as distinct from the static; play in the sense of game; and play with all its theatrical connotations (Burian 125).”

The Gate Theatre began staging plays in 1965 under the direction of Otomar Krejča, who from 1956 to 1964 had been working at the National Theatre. Krejča built an innovative repertoire of domestic and international plays, from Topol’s Kočka na kolejích (Cat on the Rails, 1965) to Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard. The Gate theatre, according to Burian, differed from the other small theatres, due to the control exerted by its director. Krejča’s Gate Theatre became known for original stagings of even the most classic of plays. Burian states: “[I]n an era of dogmatic abstractions and formulas, Krejča probed the complexities of human social behavior” (Burian 128). Often this set the Gate Theatre’s production at odds with received notions of how a play should be staged. For example, Burian describes the Gate Theatre’s production of The Cherry Orchard in the following terms: “Krejča’s Gate Theatre production [of The Cherry
Orchard] was shrill, brittle, and jagged, its movement consistently dynamic and intricately patterned. The characters were presented as highly agitated, tense, essentially neurotic, and in varying states of desperation” (Burian 132). This differs substantially from what one might expect of a play by Chekhov. In short, The Gate Theatre sought to redefine classic texts for a modern audience.

The Balustrade Theatre was the brainchild of Suchý, Šlitr, Vyskočil, and Ladislav Fialka. It continued the improvisational work begun at the Reduta; however, by 1959, according to Burian, the theatre “blended with more conventional theatre elements … they incorporated the small-form, text-appeal features into somewhat more conventionally staged works and laid more stress on literary elements” (Burian 117). As the Balustrade theatre produced more and more plays with “literary elements” (dramas) as opposed to the more uninhibited mixture of jazz music and improvized oral performances, Suchý and Šlitr decided to form their own theatre called Semafor, which continued the musical variety theatre more akin to their earlier work with Vyskočil at the Reduta.

The Balustrade Theatre continued to operate quite successfully under Vyskočil, however in 1961, preferring the more flexible individualistic format of the earlier years, he returned to the Reduta (Burian 118). In 1962 the Balustrade Theatre took on a new director. Under the supervision of Jan Grossmann, who following the suggestion of Jan Werich of Divadlo ABC (ABC theatre) brought in a young Václav Havel first as a stagehand and later as dramaturg and resident playwright, the theatre continued the trend of resisting the demands of the state. The Balustrade Theatre began to develop a repertoire somewhat similar to what Martin Esslin called the “Theatre of the Absurd,” staging plays by Beckett and Ionesco and Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi in 1964, followed by a theatrical adaptation of Franz Kafka’s novel The Trial in 1966. Beyond
these stagings were the so-called Model Dramas, which offered the spectator a model of society, especially social institutions, and subverted the norms of the Socialist Realist tradition. These include such plays as Havel’s *Zahrádni slavnost* (*The Garden Party*) in 1963 and *Vyrozumění* (*Memorandum*) in 1965, among others.

The quality work performed in these small theatres, the innovative inception of the *Laterna Magika*, as well as the continued success of Prague’s large theatre institutions (The National Theatre) all made Czechoslovakia a hub of European theatre activity in the 1960s. This led British Theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, following a visit to the city in the mid 1960s, to write in a 1967 issue of *The New Yorker* that “Prague has a strong claim to be regarded as the theatre capital of Europe” (*Show People* 1). Beyond the domestic achievements of these four small theatres among others, Prague’s status as a leader in European theatre is supported by the quality of foreign playwrights visiting the city in the 1960s, including writers like Slawomir Mrożek of Poland and Friedrich Dürrenmatt of Switzerland.

Until the mid 1960s, the mobility (particularly abroad) of the majority of Czech playwrights of this period (with the notable exception of 1958 Expo in Brussels, Belgium, where Radok unveiled his Magic Lantern) was quite limited. Nonetheless, the calibre of such noted foreign artists as Dürrenmatt and Mrożek and critics like Tynan visiting Prague, as well as the varied repertoire of contemporary foreign productions, demonstrate how despite its position beyond the so-called Iron Curtain, Czechoslovakia was far less isolated than one might expect. Despite some travel restrictions, the theatre practitioners of Prague were fully involved in broader European trends, both by engaging with foreign artists and by having accounts of their experiments published by visiting critics from Britain and elsewhere.
Literary Tradition and the Expansion of Norms in 1960s Czech Theatre

Felix Vodička’s *Struktura vývoje* (*The Structure of Evolution*) provides us with a useful model in dealing with the drama and theatre work of the 1960s within their literary or theatrical traditions. Like Jan Mukařovský before him, Vodička discusses the importance of norms in the creation of literature. In *Kategorie kontinuity* (*The Category of Continuity*), he asserts that literary evolution depends above all upon the norms of the era; at certain times in history, norms are quite restrictive, and literature tends to draw from a more narrow selection of sources. At other times, literature draws upon a wider selection of sources to develop its traditions in reaction to what came before. Vodička’s discussion deals with the literature following the First World War, when Czech literature experienced a profound awakening, exploring literary movements from Expressionism to Surrealism to Dadaism. This era is compared to previous literary epochs, which either through censorship or a lack of available source texts, did not produce as many different trends in literature and art. This conception of literary evolution as a fluid process of oscillation between periods of widening and narrowing of literary horizons has broad implications in the 1960s, which contained a variety of playful trends, from Krejča’s reimaginings of classics to Grossman’s staging of Model Dramas.

The imposed literary and dramatic trend known as Socialist Realism demonstrates one of the most extreme examples of a narrowing of literary traditions. A very strict set of norms dictated both the subject matter and the devices used in the work of art. Following Stalin’s death and the subsequent thaw, Czech literature moved out of the era of Socialist Realism, and drama experienced a similar renaissance to that of the 1920s described by Vodička. By subverting the strict, normative poetics of Socialist Realism, new kinds of art took shape, from Milan Kundera’s provocative novels, which break the previous decade’s norms of linearity of plot to Suchý and
Šlitr’s cabaret revivals at the Semafor Theatre that use jazz music and wordplay to break away from the rigid demands of the Socialist Realist artnorm. In the visual arts, such works as those by Jiří Kollár, who crafted a great number of multimedial collages, fragmented and distorted images in order to cast these images in a new light. In Czechoslovakia of the 1960s, examples of the subversion of norms abound. Subversion, as Roger Mucchielli notes, is “not an armed plot or an effort to mobilize the masses; it is a technique of weakening power and demoralizing citizens”\(^3\) (9). In his discussion of subversion, Mucchielli focuses on political actions against a state, but it extends well beyond the political realm.

In a certain way, all these activities [political protests] are “subversive.” In the sense that subversion (from the Latin subvertere, to turn upside down, to overturn) means, etymologically, the overthrow of the established order.\(^4\) (Mucchielli 8)

Aesthetically, subversion also indicates an attempt to upset the established order. The theatre provides a particularly useful example of this phenomenon for many reasons. Subversion of established norms, as Vodička notes, is an integral part of the evolution of art in general; the literary works of the 1960s by such writers as Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal certainly push the boundaries of established aesthetic norms. However, the theatre provides additional realms of possibility in the subversion of those norms: namely, the collaborative process of creating performance art, the presence (and participation) of the audience during the production, and the

\(^3\) n’est ni une agitation; ni même une propagande politique proprement dite, elle n’est pas un complot armé ni un effort de mobilisation des masses; elle est une technique d’affaiblissement du pouvoir et de demoralisation des citoyens…

\(^4\) D’une certaine façon, toutes ces activités sont “subversive.” Au sens où subversion (du latin subvertere, bouleverser, renverser) signifie étymologiquement renversement de l’ordre établi.
polysemic nature of the art (including the manipulation and presentation of physical objects, language, and space).

**Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia: the 1950s Model**

From 1948 through much of the 1950s, Stalinization gripped Czechoslovakia in a variety of ways, not the least of which was its influence in the production of art, literature, and theatre. This is the era of Czechoslovak Socialist Realism, in which writers become “the engineers of human souls” (Zhdanov 21), a term that A. A. Zhdanov attributed to Josef Stalin in 1934. These “engineers of human souls” are charged with the task of “knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as ‘objective reality,’ but to depict reality in its revolutionary development” (21). As a result, Socialist Realism aims not to create realistic worlds, but rather an optimistic version of a socialist future. Common features of this type of art include predictable schema, in which an upright, model, socialist character sets out to achieve some sort of production goal or further some other socialist cause, working within a system, whether it be a factory, a university, or some other institution. Eventually, he runs into resistance due to saboteurs, but in the end, he overcomes these minor obstacles and the quota or goal is achieved. Thus, the socialist cause is vindicated, and the hero receives his reward, a brighter future. Obviously, this is a rather truncated account of Socialist Realism, but what is of importance to our discussion of Czechoslovak Model Dramas is the idea of character types, which rather than expressing unique personal traits tend to exhibit the model behaviour of a figure of their position, as the young, optimistic factory worker would be in a work of Socialist Realism.

Vladimir Propp, the Russian Formalist, derives a highly valuable means for dealing with the formulaic literary structures in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. In deriving this morphology,
he stresses that a key concern in these texts is “the question of who performs various roles in folktales … The functions of characters are those components of folktales which are comparable with Veselovskij’s ‘motifs’ or Bédier’s ‘elements’” (Propp 19). He then continues by listing all of the possible character functions, and how those functions operate together to form plots. These functional elements are then organized within the structure of the tale based on their motivations. These motivations constitute separate “moves” (a kind of episode), which arise as a result of structural necessity: e.g., villainy might motivate the false hero murdering and replacing the hero, or a lack might motivate the search for a magical object. In this way, Propp establishes patterns that many different folktales share, reducing the elements in these tales to their functions in a (formulaic) structure, rather than fully fleshed human beings. In a sense, Socialist Realism operates in a similar way, by reducing characters in plays or stories to character types, or positions within a system. Propp’s morphological approach to folk narratives proves quite useful in dealing with Socialist Realism, since they both follow certain immutable, structural patterns.

This reduction of characters to types is a concept that extends from Socialist Realism of the 1950s to the Model Drama of the 1960s. In Havel’s Memorandum, for example, Gross, the director of the office, becomes a liability due to his aversion to the artificial office language Ptydepe and is relieved of his post, but this dismissal of the most senior officer in the bureaucracy has little effect on day-to-day operations. Balas, his deputy, takes over Gross’s duties, and the result is no obvious change to the bureaucracy or its power structure. Whatever power one might attribute to Gross is not inherent to his character or his essence, but rather to his position within a structure— within both the bureaucratic office structure and the very structure of the play itself. In Memorandum, we have a model director within a model bureaucracy, so the director’s name and the purpose of the bureaucracy are of no concern. On one level, the Model
Drama parodies Socialist Realism, adopting a similar narrative and a similar approach to characterization. In the process, it also satirizes Czechoslovak society at large, in which bureaucracies including the Communist Party serve as a de-humanizing force.

Socialist Realism is intimately related to the concept of the parable. Susan Suleiman, in her book *Authoritarian Fictions*, discusses a number of different narrative forms related to Socialist Realism, including romans à these, fables, and parables, all of which use characters to illustrate some larger point or moral (serving a didactic function). In these texts, characters are subordinated to the position of models for behaviour. If we take a biblical example, the parable of the prodigal son, we see this type of structure in action. Three character types emerge in the story—the father, the prodigal son who asks for his inheritance, and the diligent son who stays with his father to work. When the prodigal son returns, having spent all of his inheritance, Jesus Christ uses these figures to illustrate the importance of forgiveness and love. The father greets his son with open arms. Christ does not describe the family in any realistic fashion. He gives no names, nor does he describe their physical appearance or their psychology. In analyzing or contemplating the story, it would make little sense to delve into the psychology of the figures or their characterization. Questions of personal or social conditions that led the son to want his inheritance before his father’s death have little bearing in the tale. Rather, the storyteller—in this case Jesus Christ—invites the listener to use the parable as a teaching tool to correct his own behaviour. The parable serves as a model for how we should lead our lives. One critical aspect of the parable is that it depends heavily on the role of the listener. The audience of a parable creates meaning from the text as it is presented by the speaker, and in some cases (as with the parable of the prodigal son), the audience must be conditioned to properly interpret the text.
As Suleiman demonstrates in her book, Socialist Realism operates under a very similar paradigm. The listener or reader plays a paramount function: he interprets the ideological “message” of the text and subsequently uses that message to affect change in his life in other contexts. The characters in Socialist Realist plays or novels conform to a preconceived notion of proper behaviour; thus, they become a worthy example to follow. By creating Socialist Realist art, writers, or “the engineers of human souls” (Zhdanov, 21), provide modern parables for members of socialist society, attempting to teach the viewers or readers the proper way to act.

Opening the Grab Bag of the Theatre of the Absurd

Part of the process of subverting the Socialist Realist model comes about through the intersection of various foreign and domestic trends. Many of the literary and dramatic trends that permeated the rest of Europe and North America—such as the so-called “Theatre of the Absurd”—became new sources of original, Czech artistic expression. In his book Show People: Profiles in Entertainment, Tynan renders an in-depth, critical analysis of the Czech-born, British playwright Tom Stoppard’s dramatic texts and personal life. Inscribed in Tynan’s discussion of Stoppard’s biography is a discussion of one of his contemporaries, the Czech playwright Václav Havel. At first it may seem as though the biographies of these two men, who had not met until well into their illustrious careers, have little in common: one lived in India and Britain, the other has lived his entire life in Czechoslovakia; one was a successful paragon of British theatre, the other was an outcast “dissident” following the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, through his analyses of both Havel and Stoppard’s works, Tynan argues that despite the many differences between their dramatic works, “Absurdism” constitutes the tie that binds these two men. Tynan states:
Using a technique that derived from Kafka, Čapek, and countless Central European authors before them, [Havel] expressed his view of the world in nonrealistic parables. His plays were distorting mirrors in which one recognized the truth. Stoppard belongs in precisely the same tradition, of which there is no Anglo Saxon equivalent. Moreover, Havel shares Stoppard’s passion for fantastic word juggling. Some critics have glibly assigned both writers to the grab bag marked Theatre of the Absurd. (*Show People* 75)

This phrase, “the grab bag marked Theatre of the Absurd,” provides a compelling point of departure for this discussion of the Czech (specifically Prague) absurdist tradition. When one thinks of a grab bag, one imagines a paradigm in which anything goes, in which every possible tool, both physical and ideological, can be used in the theatre regardless of its quality. By using the seemingly pejorative phrases “grab bag” and “some critics,” a reader might adopt the incorrect assumption that the dramas of Havel or Stoppard are unsophisticated or lacking in structure. A grab bag can, in fact, be quite useful as a means of creating innovative art. One can draw upon Čapek or Kafka, as Tynan articulated in his book, but one can also look toward older traditions, such as the *Comedia dell’arte*, or even the French and Czech avant-garde, which do not necessarily operate as works of “high art.”

Tynan specifically mentions wordplay as a manifestation of this approach to theatre, which is entirely accurate, but one need not end the analysis there. Many of the productions at the Balustrade Theatre, such as those of Havel, make innovative use of props, human figures, and space as well. There emerged in the 1960s a new kind of theatre taking place in so-called “small theatres,” like the Balustrade theatre, whose stage spaces were quite limited. This created the necessity for the small theatres to devise creative solutions to their venues’ shortcomings as theatrical spaces, which included not only their use of language, as Tynan suggests, but also their use of objects and space. For example, in the Balustrade Theatre’s production of Alfred Jarry’s
Ubu Roi, various articles on stage were manipulated in unusual or unexpected ways. In one scene a trashcan serves its expected purpose, but in another it becomes a device for executing political dissidents. A table might be a sign indicating a bed, as in the opening scene of the play, but later that same table might stand in for a pedestal, underscoring the fact that items found on stage can take on a multitude of significations. Developing a grab-bag mentality vis-à-vis stage objects was an effective way of making the most out of the limited resources of the theatre while ensuring an innovative production.

Looking at Havel’s early plays in particular, we see that Tynan’s designation of the Theatre of the Absurd as a grab bag proves to be quite accurate, especially with regards to play with language or “word juggling.” For example, in Havel’s first staged play Zahradní slavnost (The Garden Party), the main character Hugo Pludek’s parents continually attempt to impart wisdom to their son by quoting to him certain adages or proverbs, none of which are common parlance, and none of which follow any sort of logical flow from the context at hand. In the first scene of the play, Mr. Pludek lectures his son on the importance of the middle class:

Pludek: Dear Son! The middle class is the heart of the nation. And why? Whoever argues over a mosquito net cannot dance with a goat in Bodenbach. Jaroš would always say—life is an unwritten book. You really don’t know what you will write in it?5 (Zahradní 8)

This particular exchange introduces one of the major conflicts of Havel’s entire play. First, we are introduced to a domestic scene in which the hero sets out to make his mark in the world. This seems to follow the model established by the Socialist Realist tradition, and yet, the father’s...
uplifting of the middle classes rather than the working class undercuts this assumption. We might expect that what follows is a counter-argument to Socialist Realism, in which the middle classes become the new hero, but the father’s wisdom is shown to be utterly absurd. His proverbs, which could really serve no useful application (what is the function of the goat or the mosquito net in this expression?), simply underscore not only his own stupidity, but also that of the class he sees as “the heart of the nation.” Just as Socialist Realism is debunked, so too is the notion of a bourgeois society. Thus, Havel’s play enters the satirical mode, where nothing is sacred, and anything and everything is up for grabs.

In his book, Tynan makes convincing comparisons of Havel and Stoppard, but he does not fail to emphasize that these two men, though strikingly similar in certain respects, still write unique plays. The term “Theatre of the Absurd,” which Tynan calls a grab bag, cannot be viewed as a unified movement. There is no Absurdist manifesto, nor is there an Absurdist school. The term simply refers to the works of a number of playwrights primarily from the 1950s and 1960s, especially Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco in France, Slawomir Mrożek in Poland and Havel in Czechoslovakia. No doubt, as Martin Esslin shows in his book The Theatre of the Absurd, there are some unifying features among these plays, including word play (non sequiturs and logic games), incongruous plot points, and circular structures. However, it should come as no surprise that despite some similar features, the plays these men create all contain their own subgenre of Absurdism; Tynan’s grab bag not only refers to these playwrights’ creative (almost random) use of linguistic tools or onstage objects, but also to the sheer variability of their final products. A play designated as a piece of Absurdist theatre could take almost any form, like the contents of a “grab bag.”
One cannot help but detect Tynan’s sarcasm when he discusses how “some critics have glibly assigned both writers to the grab bag marked Theatre of the Absurd” (Show People 75). The comment “some critics” seems especially directed at the critic Martin Esslin, the man who coined the term in his 1961 book of the same name. While the plays belonging to this type of theatre use various objects in innovative ways, and they do draw from a variety of similar traditions, Esslin’s treatment of them still leaves something to be desired, due in large part to his point of departure: Esslin is a theatre critic who aims to explain a new type of theatre to a theatre-going audience, rather than a theoretician aiming to arrive at a useful theoretical definition of this new type of theatre through the development of categories and criteria for analytical purposes. In his introductory chapter, Esslin characterizes the crux of his argument with the following language:

A public conditioned to an accepted convention tends to receive the impact of artistic experiences through a filter of critical standards, of predetermined expectations and terms of reference, which is the natural result of the schooling of its taste and faculty of perception. This framework of values, admirably efficient in itself, produces only bewildering results when it is faced with a completely new and revolutionary convention … Hence the storms of frustration and indignation always caused by works in a new convention.

It is the purpose of this book to provide a framework of reference that will show the works of the Theatre of the Absurd within their own convention so that their relevance and force can emerge. (Esslin 10)

Esslin directs his work toward a bewildered “public conditioned to an accepted convention,” presumably so that this public will grow accustomed (or conditioned) to this type of theatre. The question arises: why did the theatre-going public, including those in academia, widely accept Esslin’s term “Theatre of the Absurd”? Esslin does not define the term, nor does he set up criteria by which one can decide what is and is not Absurdist theatre. By taking an essentially
critical perspective, delivering his impressions of certain plays to his readers, Esslin’s work is bound to a specific place and time: an era in which the public was not conditioned to Absurdist theatre. But, what happens when the public becomes accustomed to Esslin’s “Theatre of the Absurd”? Unfortunately, what follows is limited and vague understanding of the nature of the beast due to a lack of a theoretical foundation for the term. This thesis, in part, is an attempt to offer such a foundation for the Czech context.

Esslin’s take on Absurdist theatre for the purposes of this discussion lacks precision to the point of gross overgeneralization when discussing Czech theatre. In directing his book toward an English-speaking theatre-going public, Esslin’s treatment of works beyond the so-called Iron Curtain is spotty at best. One should not be overly critical of Esslin—at least he does include a brief discussion of Mrožek and Havel. Unlike Tynan, who writes informed impressions on Czech art following a trip to Prague, Esslin exhibits far less knowledge of the Czech theatre scene of the 1960s, as his generalities border on the cliché. Take, for example, his characterization of the work of Václav Havel in his final chapter, “Parallels and Proselytes”:

Václav Havel (born 1936), assistant to the artistic director of [the Theatre on the Balustrade], to the brilliant critic and director Jan Grossman, gradually evolved into the ‘dramaturg’ and resident playwright of the tightly knit group. His first success Zahradní Slavnost (The Garden Party, 1963) displays a mixture of hard-hitting political satire, Schweikian humour and Kafkaesque depths which are highly characteristic of Havel’s works. (Esslin 278)

In essence, this description offers little more than a critic’s attempt to introduce a playwright to an audience completely unacquainted with either the man’s work or the context in which he wrote his plays. Esslin pulls from his “grab bag” two of the most widely recognized figures of Czech literature (one of whom actually writes in German): Jaroslav Hašek, author of The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Svejk in the World War, and Franz Kafka. While one could argue
Havel springs from the tradition of these two important figures, Esslin does not qualify his remarks. If Esslin had developed certain criteria into which Kafka or Hašek might fall, then his remarks on Havel might have some validity; however, Esslin’s lack of theoretical rigor, due mainly to his approach to the subject matter, does little to define Czechoslovak absurdist theatre either as an individual movement or as an extension of the work done by French absurdist playwrights. The result of Esslin’s approach is to render a collection of half-baked comments and connections to contemporary society pulled out of a grab bag, not an explanation of the workings of the subject matter.

How does Esslin define Theatre of the Absurd? In the introduction to the second edition of his book, he discusses the origins of the term and its uses in the theatre:

‘Absurd’ originally means ‘out of harmony,’ in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: ‘out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.’ In common usage, ‘absurd’ may simply mean ‘ridiculous,’ but this is not the sense … in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: ‘Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose … Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.’(Esslin, 5)

By extension, we can assume that the Theatre of the Absurd would include any play in which the actions of the characters are ultimately purposeless and entirely divorced from our general understanding of meaning in human society. Esslin’s example of Beckett’s play Waiting for Godot illustrates this understanding of absurdity. Vladimir and Estragon are in a perpetual state of waiting, in which all of their actions in the course of the play come to naught. The play ends as it began, with two men waiting for a man named Godot.
One Aspect of Aesthetic Subversion: Language as a Struggle for Individuality in the Model Drama

The absurdist principle of meaningless action that Esslin writes of extends to the efforts of various Czech playwrights of the 1960s, particularly those of the Model Dramas. Many of the actions taken by characters in Havel’s plays also lead nowhere. For example in Memorandum, a bureaucratic head named Gross receives a memorandum in a mysterious, new office language. His quest to uncover the meaning of the message leads him to attempt to abolish the artificial language “Ptydepe.” The bureaucratic machinery eventually acquiesces to his demands, but an unexpected consequence is that a new office language emerges, “Chorukor,” which exhibits many of the shortcomings of its predecessor. Though Gross’s initial conflict with Ptydepe is resolved, the rigid bureaucracy creates another permutation with Chorukor, and the process begins anew. This aspect of absurdity has a profound effect on the structure of the play, bending the plot back to the starting point. In Havel’s works of the 1960s in particular, this leads to an overall circular structure. Thus, not only the play’s structure, but also the dialogical structures return to its starting point.

Returning to the origin of the word “absurd,” the musical notion of being “out of harmony” also plays a key role in the structure of the Model Drama. Continuing the example of Ptydepe from Memorandum, the circular structures that appear in Havel’s play do not arise organically. Rather, one event or object that is out of place within the bureaucratic super-structure sets off a chain reaction that leads to a circular narrative structure. The introduction of this memorandum to the office serves as the disharmonious element in the play. Ionèsco’s rhinoceros from the play of the same name (1959) serves as another example of this phenomenon. These disharmonious elements may not, and usually do not, have significance or meaning in and of themselves. What
is actually in the memorandum does not have any significance to the play. Whether the rhinoceros is Asian or African is also of no concern. In a sense, the signifier “memorandum” or “rhinoceros” is empty; our concern, therefore, is the function of these signs in defining the play’s structure, rather than the significance of the signs themselves. The absurdity in both plays arises from the inability of human beings to understand the world around them.

The Model Drama presents a fictional world, or model, in which the individual collides with society. Trapped within absurd, vicious circles of (bureaucratic) mechanisms are human beings, individuals who attempt to assert their individuality within a societal structure that is fundamentally dehumanizing. Just as absurdity defines the structure of the Model Drama, so, too does it define humanity. An individual cannot assert himself through metaphysical ruminations. He can only act as a position in a bureaucratic mechanism that is by nature a de-humanizing force. In Memorandum, the desires of the director Gross are insignificant; the cogs and wheels of the system still turn.

Havel’s plays can, therefore, be seen through the lens of political satire. To ignore the social and historical context surrounding the Model Drama would be a mistake: Esslin’s categorizing of Havel as a “parallel” or “proselyte” to Beckett and Ionèsco fails to capture the true significance of the Model Drama. While there can be no doubt that the works of these two playwrights were influential in Czechoslovakia, as they were elsewhere, the Model Drama represents much more than an importation of French absurdist theatre. Echoing Vodička’s theory on literary evolution, the 1960s was a decade of widening literary and theatrical horizons, in which artists drew inspiration from a variety of sources. Certainly Esslin’s “Theatre of the Absurd” is one of those sources; however, there are many more that are worthy of discussion.
One source of inspiration that cannot be ignored is the Socialist Realism of the preceding decade, which established the norms Havel subverts.

Model Dramas like Havel’s *Memorandum* do not adopt the didactic approach to their audience indicative of Socialist Realism; rather, they view that approach with a critical eye and leave judgments up to the spectator. On the one hand, they adopt some of the tactics employed in Socialist Realism, like providing the audience with character types rather than fully fleshed-out characters. On the other hand, unlike parables of Socialist Realist works, there is no moral to the story in a Model Drama. The de-humanization of society creates an empty existence. Havel’s bureaucracies no longer have quotas for characters to fill or goals for them to reach; rather, all of the workers in the office are engaged in fruitless actions. As a result, the Model Drama illustrates the absurdity of the Socialist Realist approach to art by questioning the underlying assumption of the parable: that there really does exist an attainable goal, and that the path of the socialist hero will lead to the realization of that goal. Without this assumption, all of the hero’s actions, all of his sacrifices, and all of the on-stage actions amount to nothing.

This constitutes a fundamentally different approach toward the audience. Under the Socialist Realist artistic model, the audience is not an active participant in the theatrical process. The spectator becomes a pupil who receives the wisdom of the play’s lessons. Thus, the theatre becomes a venue for explanations about the way the world works or should work. Adopting a didactic approach to theatre narrows the number of conclusions that the audience can draw from art, since the effectiveness of an explanation depends on its unambiguous clarity. In the small theatres of 1960s Czechoslovakia, the plays take a critical perspective of human society, engaging in what Jan Grossman characterizes as an “appellative theatre,” or a theatre that appeals to the audience for deciding the moral implications of a play. The audience is welcomed,
or in some cases required, to become an active element in the theatre. A social satire or parody is only as effective as its audience is receptive. Unlike the unambiguous nature of Socialist Realist art, a satire is effective when it engages in oblique criticisms and innuendo; the ambiguity of a piece of appellative theatre allows an engaged spectator to draw a variety of conclusions from a single work. In the era following Socialist Realism, the spread of collective wisdom is no longer the aim of the theatre; rather, the plays of the 1960s invite the individual spectator to draw conclusions for themselves. They depend on the active participation and perspicaciousness of the individual audience member.

Model Dramas, in addition to providing a satire of the Socialist Realist model of behaviour, also share a more basic connection to the genre: realism. The notion of realism in relation to theatrical art usually falls within the scope of discussing realistic art holding up a mirror to nature or society. This usually corresponds to a theatre in which human thoughts and emotions are staged to mimic the way humans speak and act outside of the theatre. This, of course, is a dubious axiom upon which to base a theatrical performance. Roman Jakobson characterizes realism as a kind of pravděpodobnost, or verisimilitude:

What is realism in the conception of art theory? It is an artistic trend setting itself the goal of reproducing as closely as possible reality, aspiring maximum verisimilitude. By realistic, we mean those works that appear to us the most verisimilar.\(^6\) (Studies in Verbal Art 141)

This offers us with a much more pliable concept of realism, since ambiguity is inherent to the term. Verisimilitude in art does not imply actual proximity to external reality, but rather the

\(^6\) Co to je v pojetí teoretika umění—realismus? Je to umělecký směr, kladoucí si za cíl co možná nejblíže reprodukovat skutečnost, usilující o maximum pravděpodobnosti. Jako realistická označujeme ta díla, jež se nám jeví jako nejpravděpodobnější...
semblance of such a proximity. This brings us not to a comparison of reality to art, but to an
analysis of devices or strategies of writing, acting, or directing that masks theatricality. Thus,
Socialist Realism need not correspond to an actual reality, so long as it inhibits the use of devices
that would mark its theatricality, like flashbacks or addressing the audience. In fact, Socialist
Realist plays, due to their optimistic stance, tend to present a fictional, future world, in which
contemporary societal problems have been solved.

One would imagine that the Model Drama would not make use of realist staging, since to a
certain extent it follows an anti-illusionist avant-garde tradition whose espoused view of theatre
in some ways is diametrically opposed to nineteenth-century realism. In one sense, it is true that
the Model Drama is an anti-illusionist theatrical phenomenon. Jaroslav Opavský characterizes
realistic tendencies in Model Dramas quite well in his 1966 article on Havel’s Memorandum,
“Absurdita jako dílo lidí” (“Absurdity as a Work of People”):

One has to add that Havel’s Memorandum represents in the last
year by far the most distinctive of this type of drama, which is
called “model,” which doesn’t seek to be a direct, objective, mirror
image of the wide stream of life, but rather picks from here only
phenomena of a certain character, in order to examine them under
a bizarre magnifying glass. This means of dramatic depiction, as
was already stated, today in our domestic production prevails and
doesn’t have at this time a satisfactory counterpart in the plays of
any other type.7 (Opavský 125)

So, Havel’s Model Drama is not a realistic play in the traditional sense of the term—a mirror
held up to nature. Havel does not delve into issues of psychology or internal motivations, nor

7 Zbývá dodat, že Havlovo Vyrozumění reprezentuje v uplynulém roce zdáleka nejvýrazněji onen typ dramatu, který
je označován jako „modelový“, který nechce být zracově přímým, objektivním obrazem širokého životního
proudu, ale vyjímá od tu jen jevy určitě povahy, aby je zkoumal pod bizarně zvětšujícím sklem. Tento způsob
dramatického zobrazení, jak už bylo najednou řečeno, dnes v naší domácí tvorbě převažuje a němá zatím
dostatečnou protiváhu v hrách jiného typu.
does he attempt to build an overly descriptive theatrical world that approximates external realities. The Model Drama looks at the world through a glass darkly, or as Opavský puts it, “under a bizarre magnifying glass.” (Opavský 125) He focuses on one specific aspect of life and subjects it to extensive scrutiny. Havel’s is not a sweeping realism like Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, but rather a targeted attempt to portray a certain category of contemporary human life in all its absurdity.

How exactly can we characterize these “phenomena of a certain character”? In other words, what aspect of human life does the Model Drama scrutinize? Once again, the Model Drama’s kinship to Socialist Realism is revealed, for the Model Drama’s concern is mainly the mechanisms of human society, but these mechanisms are analyzed from a predominantly negative perspective; fundamentally, they do not fulfill the functions that one would assume they would fulfill. Opavský characterizes Havel’s *Memorandum* in the following terms:

Concrete people “create” the absurdity in this play (as in life): by their own actions, by their own compromises and inability to act; by their indifference and apathy, for which the world begins and ends by its own person, reduced to agreeable comfort of the stomach or to the empty, self-pitying gesture that is unable to change anything. In this distinct conception of absurdity as a work of people is the socially active meaning of the play.⁸ (Opavský 125)

Opavský’s near contemporary interpretation of the meaning of Havel’s play demonstrates the play’s relation to other traditions, but more importantly, it places the play firmly within its social context. The play was staged in a period when every utterance on stage was potentially political,

---

⁸ Absurditu v této hře (tak jako v životě) „tvoří“ konkrétní lidé: svým jednáním, svými kompromisy a neschopností jednat; svou netečností a lhostejností, pro níž svět začíná a končí vlastní osobou, zredukovanou na příjemné pohodlí žaludku nebo na prážné sebelitové gesto neschopné cokoli změnit. V tomto zřetelném pojetí absurdity jako díla lidí je společensky aktivní smysl hry.
and the audience, quite practiced at reading between the lines, freely interpreted plays through a political lens. Tynan remarks in his notes on 1960s Czech Cinema following a trip to Czechoslovakia:

> It is virtually impossible for a Czech artist to make a statement that has no political resonance; no matter how remote the symbols and metaphors he uses, the audience at once translates them into practical politics and current events (“Dispatch from Prague” 217).

Opavský sees the Model Drama as a comment on the relative impotence of the individual to change social institutions. Thus, Havel’s play serves as one example of the staging of one tragic aspect of life in Czechoslovakia, not an attempt to stage an exact approximation of all aspects of life in Czechoslovakia, both physical and metaphysical. The audience, then, freely interprets this staging of Czech life as political satire.

Tynan takes an opposing view from Opavský. He cites Vera Blackwell, who claims that “the ultimate aim of Havel’s play … is the improvement of man’s lot through the improvement of man’s institutions. These in turn can become more ‘human’” (Show People 75). Tynan adds, “If Dubček’s policies represented what Western Journalists called ‘Socialism with a human face,’ Havel’s work gave Absurdism a human face, together with a socially critical purpose” (Show People 75). This view is directly contradicted by the outcome of the play’s plot. In fact, there is no “improvement of man’s institutions,” nor are those institutions shown to have become any more human by the end of the play. While the audience might infer this as a lesson to be learned from the play, I would not state that it is the “aim” of Havel’s play. Tynan also contradicts Opavský’s assertion of a kind of realism in the Model Drama. He characterizes Havel’s play as a “nonrealistic parable” (Show People 76), which does not accurately demonstrate how the Model Drama works. The play is not a parable, as one would expect of a
Socialist Realist play, since there is no intended moral of the story. Nor is a parable realistic by nature, as it reduces human figures to character types. If there are lessons to be learned from Havel’s dramatic world, they are not taught to the audience didactically, but rather insinuated obliquely.

Miroslav Kačer provides another opposition to Opavský’s view of the Model Drama in his nearly contemporaneous article from 1966, “K významové výstavbě dramatické grotesky”:

One difference from the overwhelming majority of contemporary authors of absurd theatre is that Havel doesn’t capture the absurdity of the human situation, such as the absurdity of the existential situation of man as an individual, but rather the absurdity of reality, such as the absurdity of a situation, in which man as a creature of society, becomes a mere machine of that which he originally created to be his instrument.  

Kačer interprets the nature of the play’s absurdity in a different way. He places more emphasis on the fact that in Havel’s play, what man creates for the betterment of society unexpectedly becomes a destructive force in that society, which places the production within the tradition of the avant-garde theatre of the 1920s. Plays like RUR or From the Life of Insects by the Čapek brothers explore the destructive force of organizations created by human society, whether they be corporate or military. Many of the later plays of Voskovec and Werich during the rise of Nazism in Germany tackle the issue of the effects of totalitarianism and militarism on human society as well. Kačer’s discussion of machinery or social mechanisms in Havel’s play also brings to mind

---

9 Na rozdíl od převážné většiny současných autorů absurdního divadla nezachycuje tedy Havel absurdnost subjektivní lidské situace, tj. absurdnost existenciální situace člověka jako jedince, ale absurdnost reality, tj. absurdnost situace, v níž se člověk jako tvor společenský stává pouhým nástrojem toho, co sám původně vytvořil jako svůj nástroj.
Socialist Realism, but unlike Opavský, he very much recognizes in Havel’s play a mirroring of the natural world:

Instead of subjectivity, here we have objectivity, and instead of individual problems (problems of the individual person), collective societal problems. What serves here as an example of artistic portrayal, then becomes absurdity of objective reality, leads finally to the feeling that in this type of drama we encounter some kind of paradoxical “realistic absurdity,” and thus we even meet a kind of “absurd realism.”

Whereas Opavský limits his discussion to the theatrical tradition, both Tynan and Kačer quickly link Havel’s play to its socio-political context. The connections between Havel’s dramatic world and the reality of life in 1950s and 1960s Czechoslovak society push the Model Drama into a new category of Realism. This Realism does not explore the entire world of one character to minute detail, including that character’s psyche, social context, experience, and wardrobe. Instead, it focuses on the society at large. Havel’s play eschews the subjectivity (that is, focusing on the subject or actant of the play) of traditional Realism and adopts an approach that treats human beings as objects, as parts of a machine rather than unique individuals. Havel does demonstrate Czechoslovak society’s mode of operation through the staging of the play. So, unlike Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, who demonstrate the struggle of an individual character to come to terms with existence, Havel’s characters assume the role of model figures in an investigation into “collective societal problems” that seem to have no way of resolving themselves. Most importantly, the struggle to resolve these problems no longer bears any

____________________

10 Místo subjektivity tu tak nastupuje objektivita a místo problematiky individualní (problematiky jedince) problematika kolektivní, společenská. To, že se tu předmětem uměleckého zobrazení stává absurdita objektivní reality, vede pak dokonce k pocitu, že se v tomto typu dramatu setkáváme s jakousi paradoxní „realistickou absurditou“, a tedy i s jakýmsi „absurdním realismem“.
meaning. In a letter to his wife Olga from prison in 1982, Havel defines absurdity along these lines: “Absurdity is the experience that something that has, should or could have aspired to meaning—that is, something intrinsically human—does not do so at all, or else has lost it” (Letters to Olga 342). This is one of the Model Drama’s most fundamental subversions of Socialist Realism. In the latter, the struggles of society were meaning-bearing acts. Filling a quota or forwarding the socialist cause could fundamentally change the world for the better. In the former, change is no longer possible, thus all the endeavors of human beings in a society become absurd. This difference in these two diverging approaches to the world constitute two vastly different kinds of “realism.” This is why Kačer is correct in characterizing Havel’s play as a work of “absurd realism.” When a play achieves a certain level of verisimilitude vis-à-vis the society in which it exists, and that society is engaged in absurd pursuits, realism itself becomes absurd. The distortion in the mirror comes not only from realism itself (which is a natural effect of reflection), but also from the very object that is being reflected.

**The Stage as Imaginary Playground: Subverting the Traditional Theatrical Space**

Theatrical space is not a static element of theatre, but a fluid and highly adaptive proving ground where performers create their art. Therefore, it is a major topic both theoretically and practically, since drama is based upon action, and all action must take place on stage in a given point in space-time. Like the real world outside the theatre, the dramatic world is bound by temporal laws regarding the passage of time, but this passage of time need not be identical to that of the real world. According to Brušák:

The reality of the drama, or the dramatic world \((W_d)\), to use the term of Keir Elam, is alien to the reality of the spectator, or the spectator’s world \((W_s)\), by the very fact that it unfolds in time and
space, which are not those of the spectator’s reality. (“Imaginary Action Space in Drama” 145)

This essentially means that while the theatrical world and the world outside the theatre operate in similar ways (bound by the passage of time in a given space), the theatrical world is a world unto itself in which time is a relative concept. Events can take longer in a play than they do in the real world, or conversely they can be condensed. These possibilities for the theatrical, fictional world depend heavily upon the actions of the figures on the stage. Furthermore, these stage figures are the source all dramatic action: “first and foremost, a few actors create stage action collectively, and each one of them contributes something different”\(^\text{11}\) (Příspěvky 123). Thus, the human figures on the stage play a prominent role in creating the theatrical and the imaginary spaces.

Keir Elam points out that in the theatre, “the stability of the conventional setting was altered both by changes made during acts and by the changing arrangements of the actors in their use of the theatrical space” (102). That is to say, theatrical space is constructed both by physical dimensions, including the orientation of objects on the stage, and the way in which the human figures behave in that physical space. A character’s behaviour might indicate a private space or a public space, for example, which in turn will affect the way the other characters respond to his or her actions or utterances. Otakar Zich claims that “the impression of this scenic situation is thus markedly varied according to the current dramatic situation and, on the contrary, a certain dramatic situation can be noticeably nuanced by various formations of the current scenic

\(^{11}\) Především, jevištní jednání tvoří několik herců společně a každý z nich přispívá něčím jiným.
situation” (245). So, the scene can affect the dramatic situation (including the actions of the characters), but the dramatic action also has the potential to affect the scenic impression.

The actions and speech of characters thus have fundamental influence over both the theatrical and the dramatic space. Elam explains that in addition to the material world of the theatre and the concrete scene descriptions that define the dramatic world, characters can, in effect, create imaginary worlds. He points to theorist Klara Pražáková, who “suggested the idea of an ‘imaginary action space,’ an offstage area where performance signs are still produced but they have no visual aspect” (Elam 104). Pražáková asserts that “the means by which it is possible to exceed spacial limitation is the imaginary stage, i.e., the dramatist creates in the viewer an illusion of a stage expanded beyond the visible stage plane” (Pražáková 390). That is, the theatrical and dramatic worlds are extremely limited in scope and size, so it is possible for a playwright or actor’s figure to cause their characters to indicate or even construct “imaginary action spaces” that are not visible on the stage or specifically described in the extra-dialogical remarks on the page. Karel Brušák contends that “although many signs actualizing the imaginary space are produced through mechanical means, their main source is the actor” (“Imaginary Action Space in Drama” 152). Whether through deixis (pointing to or mentioning the offstage space) or by actually discussing places outside the scope of the set design, actors are able to create a larger fictional world than is possible to construct materially.

12 Dojem téže scénické situace je tedy značně různý podle toho, jaká je současná situace dramatická a naopak určitá dramatická situace může být citelně nuancovaná různou formací současně situace scénické.

13 Prostředek, kterým lze překonat místní omezenost, je pomyslné jeviště, t.j. dramatik vzbuzuje v diváku ilusi jeviště rozšířeného za viditelnou jevištní plochu.
The tension between the physical world (the stage and the objects on the stage) and the fictional world inhabited by living actors (including the imaginary action space) constitutes a fundamental topic in theatrical study. Understanding the nature of theatrical space helps us gain a better grasp of the performative process, including the relationship between the actor and the audience. The dramatic world, on the other hand, does not exist in the world of perception and is limited to the mind of the reader. Lubomir Doležel draws a distinction between the theatrical and dramatic worlds, noting:

The dramatic text constructs a complex image *(Vorstellung)* in the mind of its author and is reconstructed as such in the mind of the reader. In contrast, the fictional world of the theatre is a *material world*, available to sensory perception and experienced in the same way as the actual world is. The magic of the theatre is precisely this: it is an island of fictionality made of the same stuff as actuality (Doležel 3).

The dramatic world essentially operates within a single sign system, language, while in the theatre, there are a number of dichotomies that constitute the poles between which any given play operates: “the dramatic text is a homogenous, verbal sign system, while theatre is a syncretism of different sign systems—verbal and non-verbal, natural and artificial, material and symbolic” (Doležel 3). This proves to be the case in all sorts of theatre, from traditional folk theatre to the most experimental kinds of performance art; however, the experimental theatre of the 1960s and its predecessor, the historical avant-garde, both actualized the fictionality of the theatre itself. In many respects, these anti-illusionist performances were more about their performativity than about the unfolding plot, and the result was a theatre that actualized a play’s theatricality through extra-diegetic comments on the production uttered within the production itself. In this way, the theatrical space is fore-grounded even more than the plot, which helps to undermine the fictional world.
By shifting the locus of dramatic action from the material to the imaginary stage, a number of plays from the late 1950s and the 1960s subvert the traditional conception of the stage as a fictional world unto itself. As the imaginary space is actualized on the stage, the external conflict that takes place on the material stage is supplanted to some degree by the imaginary one. Whereas Socialist Realist plays tended to focus most on the external goal that the collective is trying to achieve in lieu of personal hopes and fears, the characters’ creation of the imaginary action space in the theatre of the 1960s allows for a possible fore-grounding of these states of mind. For example, in Josef Topol’s *Cat on the Rails*, through dialogue the main characters build an imaginary space that is superimposed on the real in an effort to mitigate the personal problems that dominate there. As a result, one of the main pillars of the Socialist Realist poetic, optimism through building a socialist society through physical labour, is of secondary importance at best. Fundamentally, as the main conflict shifts from physical to metaphysical (or metatheatrical) concerns, this means that the imaginary action space subverts the material stage (and the material, fictional world it contains).

**Subverting the Role of Man and Object on the Stage**

In a 1931 essay, Jan Mukařovský renders a performance analysis of Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights*, with the aim of demonstrating the hierarchy of signs and sign systems that comprise the craft of acting. He outlines his approach to the theoretical concept of the actor:

> It is clear to theoreticians and historians of a certain work, or even in the history of a given art, we cannot either substitute the psychology of the artist’s personality for a structural analysis or confuse the development of a given art with the history of culture or with that of ideology alone … it is quite risky to use the method of structural analysis for the art of acting, especially if it concerns a film actor who uses his real name for his performances…. The theoretician who tries to separate the appearance from the man and to study the organization of the dramatic figure, regardless of the
actor’s psyche and ethos, is in danger of being considered a scandalous cynic who denies the artist his human value. (“An Attempt at a Structural Analysis” 171)

A naïve approach to the actor would involve delving into the psychology of a given actor or his political views. Undoubtedly, these points of fact have value in the realms of psychology and political history, but they do not address the topic of his theatrical performance. Therefore, it becomes necessary to develop a system, whereby we can acknowledge the existence of an actor with emotions and personal beliefs while maintaining focus on the actor’s performance on stage. By breaking down the process of acting into its essential components, the Prague School developed such a system. If we recognize that there are three categories associated with acting on stage, the actor, the actor’s appearance (actor’s figure), and the character being portrayed, we can then begin to analyze a performance.

The actor’s appearance, translated in the article as “dramatic figure,” is simply the set of signs that an actor brings to the stage or the screen. This includes any physical features and gestures that appear on stage, both intentional and unintentional. It is possible, as Mukařovský shows how the system of signs comprising an actor’s figure can include any previous work performed on stage or in film. Thus, in viewing City Lights, the audience brings expectations to the film because of their previous exposure to Chaplin’s tramp. An actor’s figure does not contain a psychology or political belief, since it is merely a signifying system. It is the means by which the actor is able to create fictional characters; as a sculptor molds his creations out of clay, the actor essentially molds his creation out of himself, or as Otakar Zich notes, “[j]ust as marble is not a sculpture, but only formed marble, so is … the ‘figure’ [character] only the ‘formed
actor,’ with this difference though, that this formation [shaping] the actor does himself, the same actor who is being formed [shaped]14 (Zich 41).

The character is the person that an actor portrays on the stage by means of the actor’s figure. The actions of the characters in a play or film comprise the plot of that play or film. Characters, which are fictional entities, are incapable of political views or particular psychologies per se; however, they can demonstrate various positions in relation to each other, which are often interpreted by the audience as embodying certain traits—political or psychological. Nonetheless, it is the interpretation of such traits that imbues the character with psychology or political values. They are not an inherent part of the character itself.

Breaking down the process of acting into the actor, the actor’s figure and the character shifts the focus of scholarship from subjective criteria, such as the actor’s personality or views, to objective criteria: audio and visual signs that an actor produces on the stage. This thesis works according to that premise and rejects the notion of acting as a transformative process by which an actor “becomes” a character on stage. This allows for a discussion of theatre and drama while maintaining the performance and the text as the object of investigation.

Following the earlier work of the Prague School, Jiří Veltruský’s Člověk a předmět na divadle (Man and Object in the Theatre), breaks down the sign system of the actor into a variety of functions. In doing so, he demonstrates how the lines between a human actor and an inanimate object on stage are not as clear as one might expect. While there can be no doubt that a spectator has little trouble identifying those objects on stage that are human and those that are inanimate

14 Jako není sochou mramor, nýbrž až zformovaný mramor, tak je,…postavou a zformovaný herec, s tím rozdílem ovšem, že tuto formaci provádí herec sám, týž herec, jenž je formován.
objects, the difference between the function of a human stage figure and that of an inanimate object on stage is not necessarily so clear, especially in the experimental theatre of the 1960s.

The purpose of this study is to show that the existence of the subject in the theatre is dependent on the participation of some component in the action, and not on its actual spontaneity, so that even a lifeless object may be perceived as the performing subject, and alive human beings may be perceived as an element completely without will.  

(Clověk a předmět 84)

Veltruský asserts that what a subject does on stage is not a spontaneous action derived from the actor’s own will, but rather a part of the complex set of actions taking place. The actor fulfills a certain role (function) on the stage, just as objects do. It is possible that an inanimate object could assume the function of an acting subject on the stage. The converse is also true; a human “actor” on stage can (and often does) assume the role of an object.

It is this functional spectrum of the human actor in the 1960s experimental theatre, on one end a subject and on the other an object, which brings to bear a number of existential questions about individuality and free will. Essentially, the actor assumes whatever function the situation calls for, rather than exerting his will spontaneously on the course of events in a play. Thus, in some circumstances the human stage figure will drive the course of events, while in others he will seem little more than a prop.

We can see that we cannot even set the limit beyond which the action of a figure ceases to be perceived as spontaneous. Without any break, the line leads to figures whose actions are limited to a few stereotyped acts repeated with minute differences. Such figures carry very few signs beyond those absolutely needed for the given situation. They are quite schematic, the feeling for their

15 Cílem této studie je ukázat, jak existence subjektu na divadle je závislá na účasti určité složky při jednání a nikoli na její faktické spontánnosti, takže jako jednající subjekt může být pocítován i neživý předmět a živý člověk může být pocítován jako prvek zcela bez vůle. (Člověk a předmět, 44)
reality is very weak. For the spectator, such a figure is often linked to a certain action. Thus, for instance, it may happen that the stage represents the sitting room; as soon as a certain servant enters we know that it is to announce the arrival of some visitor. We shall later see that this tie to a certain action is characteristic of props. And indeed, such figures appear to the spectator to be more like props that like active performers.\footnote{Člověk a předmět 85-86}

On the stage, human actors need not signify living beings with wills of their own. Often they can be mere objects or tools. Many Czech plays from this era, particularly those from the Balustrade Theatre, show how the power of language influences individual thought and reduces human beings to cogs in bureaucratic machinery. However, throughout the small theatre scene in Prague, this phenomenon manifests itself much deeper than in the discourse of a given play. It appears in the very nature of signification on stage. If language has the potential to reduce human characters to the level of pawns or tools, then the process of signifying objects on stage necessarily involves the subversion of the traditional (primarily Socialist Realist) connection between human beings on the stage and the personal ideological views of their characters.

Fundamentally, it is important to note that this entire system, or hierarchy of power, relies on the perceptions of the audience. A spectator may still “perceive these other figures as acting subjects” (Člověk a předmět 85), but Veltruský, Mukařovský, and Honzl have demonstrated that these figures are not simply acting subjects; they are also objects manipulated by forces external to themselves. Nonetheless, the theatre operates on perceptions; even where action is known to

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Vidíme, že nelze ani stanovit hranici, za níž již přestává být jednání postavy pocitováno jako spontánní. Bez jakéhokoli přerušení probíhá linie k postavám, jejichž jednání se omezují na několik úkonů opakovaných s nepatrnými obměnami. Takové postavy mívají velmi málo znaků kromě těch, kterých je pro danou situaci nezbytně třeba. Jsou hodně schematické, pocit jejich realnost je velmi slabý. Pro diváka je často taková postava automaticky spojena s určitým úkonem. Tak se např. stává, že scéna představuje přijímací pokoj jakmile vstoupí určitý sloužící, každý vůbec ho slíbí příchod nějakého návštěvníka. Později uvidíme, že se tyto postavy jeví divákovi spíše jako rekvizity. A skutečně se také tyto postavy jeví divákovi spíše jako rekvizity než jako aktivní činitelé. (Člověk a předmět, 45)}
\end{footnotesize}
be determined, it may appear spontaneous. This alone is enough to establish conflict: that is, the antinomy between the perceived will of a given character and the demands of the situation in which that character finds himself. According to Veltruský, “the basis of drama is action”\(^{17}\) (Člověk a předmět 43). Depending on the genre and the trends of a given era, these actions can be markedly variable. In the era of Socialist Realism, action tends to correspond to the struggle to build socialist society; however, in the 1960s, once Socialist Realism no longer enjoys the same prominence on the Czechoslovak stage, action becomes not only the foundation upon which theatre is built, but a topic of thematic concern as well. When actions unfold on the stage, it is up to the spectator to interpret the motivations for these actions by determining the function of the various characters and placing them within a hierarchy. This subverts the didactic function in Socialist Realism by introducing ambiguity in theatrical expression and assumes a more active participation of the audience in the performative process.

Actors are human beings, and dramatic characters are people inhabiting a fictional, dramatic world; however, it is the spectator who bears witness to that world. As Keir Elam notes:

[The spectator] derives from conventionalized onstage happenings a range of dramatic information which enables him to translate what he sees and hears into something quite different: a fictional dramatic world characterized by a set of physical properties, a set of agents and a course of time-bound events. (98)

Furthermore, that which unfolds in the fictional world, the drama, is “usually considered as a “given,” offered to the spectator as a ready-structured whole through the mediation of the performance” (98). According to Otakar Zich, the creator of the dramatic text is the agent that creates this structured whole:

\(^{17}\) Základem dramatu je jednání.
The *dramatic* text is objectively taken as the beginning of a long and complicated process, by which the dramatic work is realized as a theatrical performance; subjectively it is, on the contrary, the end of a mental process, which its author experiences and which we call the *dramatist’s creation*.18 (Zich 59)

As a dramatic work (or piece of literature), the playwright exerts complete control over the text, which is in turn interpreted by the reader. Therefore, the characters belong to a structure in which they act according to the immutable directives of the text. As a script for theatrical performance, the dramatic text is not the sole mediator between the playwright and the reader (or in this case, spectator), since other theatrical elements determine the behaviour of the character in the play: namely, the actor’s figure and the director. That characters’ actions in the dramatic text are understood as determined by the central subject, but in the theatre, the director, set designer, dramaturg and others demonstrate the human being’s inability to assert his own will both in the fictional world and on the concrete stage in the Czechoslovak theatre of the 1960s. With this understanding of signification on stage, human beings on stage may no longer be viewed as completely independent, free-thinking or personally expressive figures, but sign vehicles specifically designed to fulfill performative or dramatic roles prescribed by the playwright and the director. The actor no longer serves fully as his own master. The character ceases to emerge as a product of the pure personal expression of the actor, but as a figure mediated by the actor’s figure, the director, and to a certain extent, the character’s relation to other characters.

It is possible that characters may no longer occupy the role of pure subjects, since their actions are at least, in part, regulated by forces external to themselves. In this way, man can

---

18 Objektivně vzato je *dramatický* text počátkem dlouhého a složitého pochodu, jímž se uskutečňuje dramatické dílo jako divadelní představení; subjektivně je naopak koncem duševního procesu, jejž prožívá jeho autor a který nazveme *tvorba dramatikova*...(59)
become an object both in his ability to signify on the stage (in the process of acting) and in his lack of individualism (in the character’s interface with other characters in the plot). Thus, the use of men as objects in the experimental theatre work of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia subverts the traditional “realistic” theatrical tradition by limiting the personal expressivity of the actor, and through multiple levels of mediation, it undermines the Socialist Realist attempts to create a unified, iconic example (objectification) of the individual.
Chapter 2
The Creation of a New Aesthetic: From Socialist Realism to the Experimental Sixties

This chapter traces the origins of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union and the means by which it was imported into the Czech lands following the Second World War. In analyzing Pavel Kohout’s attempts to establish a working model for the aesthetic, I show how the normative aesthetics of the 1950s become a model against which playwrights in the 1960s, like Václav Havel (whose language patterns echo those of Voskovec and Werich of the 1920s and 1930s), create their works. This is most evident in the shifting role of ideology and language from the dogmatic plays of the early 1950s to the parodic and satirical plays of the 1960s.

A Brief History of the Adoption of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union

The term Socialist Realism, as Régine Robin demonstrates in her book *Le Réalisme socialiste: une esthétique impossible*, originated under a vague understanding of what these two words meant in relation to literature, either separately or combined. This confusion surrounding the term indeed persists throughout the era in which it constituted the prescribed form of artistic expression in socialist society. The earliest uses of the term occur in the course of critical debates among most of the socialist literati in Russia around 1932. These writers working in concert developed the various principles and norms that would become the Socialist Realist aesthetic. So, Socialist Realism as a concept was not solely a top-down phenomenon imposed by Joseph Stalin along with the foundation of the Soviet Writers’ Union. It only achieved its official status as the preferred aesthetic of the Soviet Union in 1934, after the First Soviet Writers’ Congress of 1934. This was a rather feisty debate between various prominent Soviet artists who attempted to resolve the meaning of the term “realism” in a socialist context, but in effect it did little to
demonstrate what the concept truly signifies in the creation of a literary work. In paraphrasing Valerii Kirpotin’s 1933 articles leading up to the congress, Robin asserts:

[W]e do not know if Socialist Realism is a style, a method, one of many methods … a trend, a form, a thematic, and what connection it held with earlier realism, naturalism, modernism, factography, and how it integrates to its aesthetic a certain romanticism, the return of the epic and the monumental.19 (Robin 72)

This ambiguity in the meaning of “Socialist Realism,” which in part stems from a lack of understanding of realism in general, leads to a gamut of socialist realisms: Maxim Gorky’s vision for Socialist Realism does not necessarily coincide with Il’ya Ehrenburg’s. Following the Congress of 1934, Socialist Realism became the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union, but what this precisely meant was not immediately clear.

Despite the lack of clarity concerning the nature of the term before, during, and following the congress, there are a number of features of Socialist Realism that most of the writers seemed to share: it is a literary trend, in which a work does not excessively point to the literariness of that work (i.e., eliminating the use of *skaz*, flashbacks, and other devices that reveal the text as a constructed work of art); however, in addition to aesthetic demands are a number of extra-aesthetic concepts: *narodnost* (accessibility to the masses), *partiinost* (obedience to the party), and above all optimism in the work of art. This last feature arises from the fact that Socialist Realism is ostensibly holding a mirror up to the world. If socialism is on the path to victory in the class struggle with capitalism and the forwarding of its revolutionary development, then Socialist *realist* narratives depicting that struggle must end with the struggle being won. These narratives primarily take place in a working class milieu—either a factory or a farm—and

---

19 …on ne saura pas si le réalisme socialiste est un style, une méthode, une des méthodes…un courant, une forme, une thématique, et quel rapport il entretient avec l’ancien réalisme, le naturalisme, le modernisme, la factographie, et comment il intègre à son esthétique un certain romantisme, le retour de l’épique et du monumental.
involve certain set scenarios: a hero’s efforts to improve the output of his factory or farm, or his attempts to unite the workers with the aim of defeating the class enemies who wish to block the forward march of socialism. Thus, Socialist Realism constitutes a proletarian art form. Though the debates of the time do not address this fundamental distinction, by proletarian art, I mean that the world being depicted is that of the proletarian class (factories and farms), not that one of the proletarian class necessarily created the work. The debates concerning proletarian art attempted to link labor with the creative process. On the one hand, Socialist Realist texts depict comrades at work building socialism; but, on the other hand, those creating Socialist Realist art were encouraged to adopt a working-class perspective regarding their own endeavours. The term Socialist Realism, therefore, is not a description of an art movement, but a program to follow: the various features of Socialist Realist works come from a normative poetics that not only prescribes almost every element of that narrative, from the setting to the plot, from the formal devices used to construct the story to the very ideology that the tale espouses, but also preserves the conditions under which these narratives are constructed.

Socialist Realism as a term does not draw a distinction between the ideological perspective of the author and the ideological “message” of the author’s text. Part of the confusion left in the wake of the congress in 1934 is related to the uncertainty of whether the adjective “Socialist” refers to the art itself or to the artist creating that art. Furthermore, the ideological perspective of the text shapes the structure of the work. Based on the principles of narodnost, partiinost, optimism, and realism, Socialist Realism as a concept encompasses both the aesthetic of a work of art (that is, the way in which a work is constructed) and its ideology or “message.” In early Russian, socialist avant-garde aesthetics, like Mayakovsky’s futurism, the subject matter reflects a socialist worldview, but the formal construction of the text remains lofty and experimental.
Socialist Realism, however, develops a new kind of popular art, which above all else must be understood by even the least educated of the society.

The term narodnost, or accessibility of a work of art to the masses, derives from the word narod, meaning nation or people. A work expressing narodnost depicts the struggles of the people, specifically the working or agrarian classes, but it must also be accessible to (that is, generally understood by) this same demographic. Socialist Realism, then, focuses its plots on actions that are thought to pertain to this group, written in the language of this group. In a text about the collectivization of rural farmland, we might encounter the wisdom of the uneducated farmer, with his proverbs expressed in simple words. One recurrent tendency in Socialist Realist texts involves the glorification of folk culture, since it is an accessible art expressing a national character.

If a work of Socialist Realism must demonstrate a certain level of partiinost and narodnost, then such a work begins to take on a didactic function for its reader or viewer: the hero demonstrates a selfless dedication to the cause of socialism, which ultimately is rewarded, since socialism must be victorious over adversity. Susan Rubin Suleiman provides a thorough discussion of didactic literature in her book Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre. Though concerned solely with works written in French, much of her discussion is certainly applicable to works created beyond the so-called Iron Curtain. Rather than adopting “Socialist Realism” as the topic of her discussion, she opts for the more general roman à these, which allows her to discuss works of varying ideological perspectives beyond socialism. Her approach focuses primarily on the didactic nature of the roman à these, which includes the genre of Socialist Realism.

Such an approach demands an understanding of the relationship between the reader and the text, so Suleiman adopts a structuralist theoretical grounding, breaking down the act of direct
communication into its constituent parts: the sender (the speaker), the receiver (the listener), and the message in the text. This applies primarily to an exemplum text, such as a parable or fable, in which a moral is directly communicated to or even demanded of the listener:

From a particular fact (story) one accedes to a generalization (interpretation), which allows one to accede to another particular fact, expressed this time in the imperative mode (injunction).
(Suleiman 33)

The roman à these, and by extension Socialist Realism, while ideological, do not necessarily conform to this structure, since the ideological “message” is not necessarily directly communicated to the audience, but implied by the outcome of the narrative. Such indirect communication of an ideological message follows many of the same lines as the exemplum, but with an additional intermediate step. Since the “message” is not directly offered to the listener, there exists a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the listener. If we are to accept the aims of Socialist Realism set forth from the 1934 Congress in the Soviet Union, to demonstrate “the victory of socialism … the growing process of the liquidation of the classes … and, finally, the progress of science and culture” (Robin 40), then in order to avoid outright agitprop, a Socialist Realist artist must rely on the principle of redundancy to ensure that the reader or viewer grasps the underlying message of the text as implied by the artist. Romans à these include extraneous plot elements to the point of being repetitive in order to bring about a higher level of clarity vis-à-vis the ideological perspective taken by the artist:

For it is by means of redundancy that plural meanings and ambiguities are reduced, with a corollary reduction of the number of possible readings. In the roman à these, where a single “correct” reading is required (or more exactly, is posited as a desired effect),

20 “la victoire du socialisme…le processus grandissant de la liquidation des classes…et…finalement, les progrès de la science et de la culture”
we can expect that there will be a considerable amount of redundancy. (Suleiman 150)

This places the Socialist Realist work in direct contrast to the avant-garde’s aesthetic trends of the 1920s, like Surrealism and in the Czech context Poetism,\textsuperscript{21} as well as earlier trends like Symbolism, which sought to create works of art with plural or ambiguous meanings. The Socialist Realist work must be uniformly understood if it is to fulfill the extra-aesthetic functions of ideological instruction and inspiration demanded of it. To clarify the ideological “message” of the text, Socialist Realist artists can introduce redundancies through a number of means, which fall under two major types: redundancies in the story (repetitions of similar events) and redundancies of discourse (repetition of character speech).

Because these works are purported to be realistic, that is, they should hold a mirror to the world, yet they also aim to transmit a desired message to the reader or viewer, redundancy is a matter of necessity. Not all characters will necessarily have the same ideological beliefs, so if the writer gives voice to a contradictory position in the name of realistic description of society or in order to create narrative conflict, that contradiction must be mitigated through a repetition of the “correct” ideology.

This structure of reception, which endows the reader with the task of interpretation, presents a distinct challenge to the Socialist Realist work of art. Redundancy by definition renders substantial portions of the narrative as superfluous, or unnecessary to the aesthetic object; yet, without these superfluous segments of the text, the artist runs the risk of failing to deliver to the imperfect reader (or unconvinced reader) the ideological message of the text.

\textsuperscript{21}Poetism was a Czech art movement of the 1920s that attempted a new kind of poetry—playful and fun—that would “cater for the irrational side of man, that side of him which hungered for the bizarre, the fantastic, and the absurd” (French 39). Poets like Jaroslav Seifert, and Vítězslav Nezval created works that, unlike the proletarian works, were not occupied with a serious message or philosophical argument but rather an appealing amusement.
Without the direct communication and slogans of propaganda, the Socialist Realist work always runs the risk of failing ideologically. Equally problematic, the inclusion of extraneous or superfluous material to a text for the sole purpose of clarifying an ideological message underscores the fact that the aesthetic function of the work plays a secondary role to the didactic function.

Despite the importance of the didactic function in Socialist Realism, one must also understand how fiction is constructed following this aesthetic. Katerina Clark provides a well-documented overview of the origins and especially the structure of the Soviet Socialist Realist novel in her 1981 book *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. This book deals exclusively with the Soviet Socialist Realist novel, so the importance of this genre to Czech theatre may not seem immediately apparent; however, the critical debates leading up to and during the first Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934 centered primarily on the Soviet novel of the 1920s and 1930s and its lineage in the nineteenth-century realist tradition. Though the concept of Socialist Realism is later imported to Czechoslovakia in the form of literature, theatre and film following the Second World War, the aesthetic as it was implemented still relied heavily on a Soviet, and especially Russian, theoretical grounding. This theoretical discussion is not greatly concerned, at least initially, in the stage, but rather the novel—due in part to a strong tradition of novelists in Russia of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Though this thesis is concerned with the stage and dramatic texts, much of the theoretical discussion of the Soviet novel still proves to be pertinent to Socialist Realism as it developed for the stage. Clark’s discussion of the concepts of the “positive hero,” “master plots,” and a structural “grammar” of Socialist Realism have an equally prominent place in the theatrical and dramatic works of Socialist Realism. In the opening paragraphs of her book, Clark enunciates the vagueness of the term, echoing official pronouncements that describe what Socialist Realism
should and should not be (i.e., that literature should be “optimistic,” that it should be accessible to the masses, that it should be “party minded”), but this sort of discourse is not helpful in creating an understanding of what Socialist Realism is; instead, it simply describes what it is supposed to do. Nonetheless, all of these features of the aesthetic—optimism, master plots (conventional structures), positive heroes, and accessibility—give a good summary of the general features one would expect to find in a given piece of Socialist Realist literature. This is precisely what we find in the theatre and drama as well.

**Optimism in Socialist Realist Theatre: Drama without a Conflict**

Grigori Aleksandrov’s 1936 film *Цирк* (Circus), about an American performer, Marion Dickson, working in a Soviet circus, is not particularly humorous (though it does contain moments of slapstick humour), but it does contain an optimistic, happy ending. Dickson's story is, in fact, quite unfortunate: while living in the United States, she has a mixed-race child out of wedlock and a manager who treats her poorly. In the end, she decides to become a Soviet woman, she disavows her capitalist ways, and the Soviet society welcomes her and her child with love and compassion. Socialist Realism creates optimistic fictional worlds in which individuals (in particular positive heroes who are assisted by a collective) gladly rise to meet their challenge and overcome their individual obstacles. In a Socialist Realist fictional world, the progress and essential goodness of socialism ensures that the protagonist marches forward fearlessly to fulfill her prescribed role in society. The circus in this scenario is not merely a source of amusement or laughter, but of hope for the future.

The positive heroes in *Цирк* serve the function of demonstrating the traits of members of a perfect society: Miss Dickson yields her individual, monetary demands for the benefit of the collective, Soviet circus enterprise. She proves the correctness of socialism through her selflessness. An optimistic, Socialist Realist comedy is not primarily concerned with laughter; it
must first and foremost depict positive societal change, in which personal gratification no longer hinges on individual desire, but rather on self-sacrifice for the common good and the acceptance of socialism (partiinost). In the 1960s, in his novel Žert (The Joke, 1967), Milan Kundera works against this aspect of 1950s Czech culture by emphasizing laughter despite the politically charged optimism that pervaded the period. The novel depicts the life of a man who is forced to leave school because he facetiously praised Trotsky in a letter he wrote to spite his ex-girlfriend, who was a committed Communist Party member. Kundera’s laughter is not that of a joyful people building a better future, but rather the angry sarcasm of a bitter, self-centered man. This constitutes a subversion of Socialist Realism of the highest order.

Unlike Kundera’s novel, works of Socialist Realism show a rite of passage for the positive hero in which he or she comes to understand the superiority of the concerns of society at large over personal desires:

A hero sets out consciously to achieve his goal, which involves social integration and collective rather than individual identity for himself. He is inspired by the challenge of overcoming the obstacles that bar him from realizing those aims: those “spontaneous,” i.e. arbitrary and self-willed, aspects of himself and forces in the world around him. (Clark 167)

Social integration becomes one of the primary lessons of a work of Socialist Realism; only by harmonizing oneself with the rest of society can socialism truly succeed; the corollary to this is that individualism, as much as any class enemy, is an obstacle to be overcome. Any misgivings about the socialist course of action, any internal (“self-willed”) struggle, must be effaced. The Socialist Realist narrative contains not only a comedic structure (a narrative with a so-called “happy ending”), but also optimistic characters with diminishing individuality.

Robin also discusses individuality in her book, but the focus of her discussion is on the individuality of the artist under a Socialist Realist paradigm. In particular, she highlights a debate
between Karl Radek and Ernst Bloch. According to Robin, Radek sees the individualism of the
writer as a bourgeois, Modernist fault:

Writers who are struggling against fascism, alongside the working
class, alongside the young Soviet Union, must rid themselves of
their bourgeois prejudices—individualism included—and must
learn to close ranks. (26)

Socialist Realism, being essentially a utilitarian aesthetic, demands not only a strict set of norms
regarding the content of the work of art, but also the party discipline of its creators. Bearing in
mind that this is the first congress of the Soviet Writers’ Union, the Socialist Realist aesthetic
becomes a tool designed not only to educate the masses of the benefits of socialism through its
didactic stance towards its audience, but also a measuring stick by which to exclude writers of
differing aesthetic preferences. This essentially forces them to conform to a prescribed program
or lose their ability to publish by removing them from the union.

The necessity of optimism in Socialist Realism affects many formal aspects of a work,
from the language used to the plot. In the realm of theatre and drama, unbridled optimism stands
in stark contrast to the very nature of the art. From as far back as Aristotle, drama has been
conceived as a conflict. For example, in part eighteen of his Poetics, Aristotle describes the plot
in a drama as consisting of two essential parts: complication and unraveling. Complication
involves the tying of plot threads to create a tension or conflict. This is followed by a
dénouement or unraveling of these plot threads, which includes a reversal of the situation. An
agent either acts within a plot that leads away from a bad situation to a good one (comedy) or
from a good situation to a bad one (tragedy). Regardless of whether a play is a comedy or a
tragedy, conflict is inherent to the plot. In order for an agent to change his or her circumstances,
he or she must operate within a state of conflicting forces. In Socialist Realist drama, optimistic
plots become the norm, but these plots do not follow an Aristotelian scheme. Rather than the plot
leading from a bad situation to a good situation, in many Socialist Realist dramas, there is an
evolution of a good situation to a better situation. A conflict between a positive, socialist hero working in a factory and an imperialist saboteur might underscore an ideological debate, but it does not demonstrate a significant reversal of fortunes. This kind of plot conforms to a new dramatic type guided by bezkonfliktnost, or conflictlessness.

The idea of conflictlessness stands in direct contrast to the very nature of drama. Without a conflict a plot cannot exist, and without plots, drama becomes impossible. If a play contains a positive hero whose sole flaw is inadequate amounts of optimism, and the plot merely leads to the hero achieving a greater level of optimism, then to use Aristotle’s terminology, it lacks a certain magnitude. The plot becomes unimportant or trivial. Beyond this, if the fictional world only changes from good to better, there is no reversal of the dramatic situation, an essential part of plot, whose “proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit a change from bad fortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to bad” (Aristotle 54). This is one way in which Socialist Realism demonstrates its inadequacies as the foundation for a new kind of art, or as Robin puts it in her book, this is one example of how Socialist Realism is an “impossible aesthetic.”

**Conventional Forms in Socialist Realism**

One of the main thrusts of Clark’s argument concerning Socialist Realist novels is the existence of “master plots,” or fixed general narrative structures that serve as the theme for the Soviet novel. She evokes Vladimir Propp, who proposed a “morphology” of Russian fairy tales by breaking them down into their constituent functions. Patterns emerge among the thousands of existing folktales, which all contain certain figures: the hero, the magical helper, the adversary, and the false hero, to name a few. These elements are placed together in any number of similar iterations, but their general structures can be classified based on their common (or differing)
features. In the appendix to her book, Clark offers a variety of these structures applied to the Soviet novel, which demonstrates that Socialist Realism is by and large a conventional art form:

When the formulaic patterns of the Soviet novel became fixed in the thirties, a system of signs became the core of the Socialist Realist system. These signs are polysemic in themselves, but, when incorporated in the master plot, they take on very definite, specific meanings. (12)

Since the signs are polysemic, they still contain the potential for plurality of meaning; yet, because of a number of factors, not the least of which being redundancy, under Socialist Realism, there is a diminishing of the polysemic quality of the sign. The existence of master plots greatly limits the possible number of forms that a work might take.

This formulaic quality has fundamental implications on nearly every aspect of a Socialist Realist work, from the plot to the characters, to the setting. As the collective spirit in a Socialist Realist narrative subsumes a character’s individuality, that character becomes a character type. Thus characters become more like variables in a narrative formula or morphology than human beings in a “realistic,” fictional world. Thus, Propp’s approach to fairy tales proves quite useful in dealing with a Socialist Realist narrative. Clark goes so far as to assert that:

The Stalinist novelist must present a fictionalized account of reality and events, but these “historical tales” must be based on something analogous to the “divine plan of salvation” followed by the medieval chronicler, namely, on the Marxist-Leninist account of history. (159)

Socialist Realism begins to resemble modern myth or religious iconography, which has a depersonalizing effect on the narrative; human characters take on larger-than-life positions, becoming mythologized prototypes of the ideal socialist citizen and cease to be mere figures in a fictional world resembling our own.

If Clark tends to view Socialist Realism as a rigid system of archetypal figures arranged in a fixed number of potential master plots, and Robin emphasizes its relation to nineteenth-century
realism in the critical debates of the 1930s, Boris Groys explores its connection to the Russian avant-garde. In his book *Staline: Œuvre d’Art Totale*, he traces a path of lineage from the avant-garde writers of the 1920s, like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov, to Socialist Realism of the 1930s. He argues that movements like Futurism, being predominantly leftist and very much engaged in the creation of a New Man in a new world order, share common interests with Socialist Realism. Politically speaking, they share similar values. Groys does qualify this position with a litany of differences between Socialist Realism and the avant-garde:

The essential differences between the aesthetic of the avant-garde and of Socialist Realism can be summarized with the following points:

--the connection to classical heritage

--the role of representation of reality in its formation

--the problem of the New Man.

We attempt in what follows to show that these divergences do not result in a refusal of the project of the avant-garde, but rather its radicalization for which the avant-gardists themselves were not prepared.  

22 (Groys 56-57)

The avant-gardists (in particular the Futurists) according to Groys, differed from the proponents of Socialist Realism primarily on formal issues, especially with regards to finding a tradition in earlier artistic endeavors. In searching for predecessors, proponents of Socialist Realism were aiming to legitimize their aesthetic positions, in particular their insistence on realism and their belief that art should be accessible to the masses. This matter, of course, is not a small dispute;

---

22 Les différences essentielles entre l’esthétique de l’avant-garde et du réalisme socialiste peuvent être ramenées aux points suivants:
--les rapports à l’héritage classique
--le rôle de la représentation de la réalité dans sa formation
--le problème de l’homme nouveau.

Nous tenterons dans la suite de montrer que ces divergences ne résultent pas d’un refus du projet de l’avant-garde mais plutôt de sa radicalisation à laquelle les avant-gardistes eux-même n’étaient pas préparés.
however, the avant-gardists were amenable to the notion that art should fulfill a didactic function (presumably to further the cause of socialism). What Groys shows in his book is that the avant-gardists were not entirely forced to abandon their art due to the decisions of those wielding political power; they were at least initially in agreement with the goals of Socialist Realism and were partially willing to take part in the new artistic endeavour. The outcome of this ill-conceived agreement on the avant-garde movement would be profound. They would lose both their position as the voice of the Soviet Union and, indeed, their very right to create the art of their own choosing. In essence, the overtly political position of the avant-garde allowed the aesthetic function to be superseded by the didactic function. By 1934, the Russian avant-garde no longer existed, as Jakobson so eloquently described in his elegiac 1930 article, “On a Generation that Squandered its Poets,” in which he foretold:

> As for the future, it doesn’t belong to us either. In a few decades we shall be cruelly labeled as products of the past millennium. All we had were compelling songs of the future; and suddenly these songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history, but have been transformed into historico-linguistic facts. When singers have been killed and their song has been dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost—impoverished in the most real sense of the word. (132)

The age of broad literary and artistic horizons had ended, and a new era of normative poetics began.

**A Note on Propaganda**

Socialist Realism might seem at first glance to be a form of propaganda, but in fact the two are quite different. Matthew Lenoe notes:

According to Lenin, propaganda involved extended theoretical explanations of the socioeconomic processes that underlay surface phenomena such as unemployment. By appealing to audience members’ reason, the propagandist aimed to cultivate in them a
whole new worldview. Propaganda was a process of *education* that required a relatively sophisticated, informed audience. (28)

So, propaganda operates as a direct appeal to its target audience to undertake or abstain from certain behaviour. Lenoe identifies propaganda according to “its *source*, its *intended audience*, its *purpose* in the Bolshevik scheme of agitation and propaganda, and certain lexical and grammatical features (imperative verbs, for example)” (24). Socialist Realism, while highly sensitive to the demands of the time, offers models of behaviour for its audience rather than direct suggestions (imperative verbs). It offers a message that might be designated for propaganda (*narodnost, partiinost*), but coats that message in creativity. Ideally, rather than directly addressing the audience and sermonizing to them, Socialist Realism offers an aesthetic outlet for socially engaged artists. It is this aspect of the aesthetic that can be traced to the avant-garde tradition in the Soviet Union, which pushed for a revolutionary art movement for the new times.

In a sense, Socialist Realist works of literature and theatre must strike a fine balance between their aesthetic appeal and their social utility. The more the aesthetic function dominates the work, the less socially useful it becomes; however, the more overt the intended message, the less appealing it becomes as a work of art. This paradox does not apply to propaganda, which functions on the plane of ideas rather than aesthetics. While certain rhetorical or cinematic devices might make a piece of propaganda more convincing, the work will always be judged according to the persuasiveness of its logic rather than its aesthetic appeal.

**Socialist Realism in the pre-War Czech Context**

Socialist Realism existed in the Soviet Union for more than a decade as an official artnorm before it became the prescribed aesthetic in Czechoslovakia. This does not mean that the Czechs were not aware of the artistic trends of the Soviet Union, or that they were not receptive to a
number of those trends. In fact, a whole gamut of Soviet theatrical and literary movements reached fertile soil in Prague, from Futurism to Constructivism. A number of highly influential artists, like the theatre practitioner Jindřich Honzl, visited Russia and returned with an arsenal of new artistic impulses. Honzl’s Sovětské divadlo (The Soviet Theatre) traces many national and transnational theatrical trends in the Soviet Union. Honzl was only one of many theoreticians working in Czechoslovak lands with links to the Soviet Union. In the 1920s, Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev become members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, and a collaboration between theoreticians and practitioners rarely seen before or since took place in Prague in what in many respects was a continuation of the work begun by the Formalists in the Soviet Union.

A few Czech poets took part in the proletarian poetic trend, most notably S. K. Neumann and Jiří Wolker. Wolker’s poem “The Ballad of the Stoker’s Eyes” demonstrates that interest in proletarian issues was a trans-European phenomenon; yet, Czech poetry of the 1920s and 1930s remained diverse, experimenting with a variety of Soviet, German, French, and even domestic avant-garde trends. Proletarian poetry depicting the plight of the working class, set in factories, and praising socialism as a means of correcting societal injustices or advancing the proletarian cause constituted one small segment of the literary and poetic work under way in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period. Furthermore, this poetic trend might be proletarian in subject matter, however, most of those who wrote so-called proletarian poetry were not themselves of the working class. These poets’ selection of subject matter is therefore not linked to a personal struggle, but rather an ideological battle by proxy. According to Alfred Thomas, for example, Wolker’s adoption of the Socialist discourse in his work is related to the personal belief in the physical strength of the proletarian class, rather than purely a strong commitment to Socialist ideology per se.

The politically galvanized Wolker now repudiated his former work, which he associated with French effeminacy, and began to
cultivate a tough, masculine persona. In a letter to his fellow poet Konstantín Biebl, he dismissed his earlier verse as “satanic verses full of sodomical sins and soda water.”… If this unexpected reference to deviant sexuality marks a determined effort to espouse a new kind of objective and “virile” poetry, it also reveals the extent to which Wolker’s political posture on behalf of the proletariat was suffused with subjective anxieties about his own masculinity and his poor health. (Thomas 110)

Thomas argues that Wolker is writing “on behalf” of the proletariat. In fact, there are very few poets of this generation who come from a working class background; poetry of this sort, then, was more of an aesthetic experiment than a call to action. In the Czech context, Socialist Realism was a concept that “emerged from a tradition entirely existing of socialist literature and which did not cast off the path by existing evolutionary possibilities. There appeared an idea of literature that came about by a dialectical synthesis of the proletarian and avantgarde streams in the existing literature”23 (Vodička 115). As in the Soviet Union, the avant-garde played a central role in the formation of Czech Socialist Realism, though unlike its neighbor to the east, in the 1930s it was only a peripheral movement.

One of the few well-known poets of this period who actually came from the working class is Jaroslav Seifert. Seifert did not himself write poems about factories of working-class men like Wolker and his Stoker. His poetry resembles avant-garde, experimental poetry than politically charged proletarian verse. Seifert, with a number of prominent poets of the Devětsil24, developed the playful art movement Poetism and created new kinds of art for the proletariat that uplifted popular forms of amusement like film rather than dwelling on the struggles of the workplace.

23 Vycházelo z tradice celé dosavadní socialistické literatury a které neuzávřal cestu existujícím vývojovým možnostem. Vznikla představa literatury, jež se uskutečnila dialektickou syntézou proletářského a avantgardního proudu v dosavadní literatuře.

24 Devětsil, the so-called “nine powers” group, was a circle of avant-garde artists in the 1920s and early 1930s that came from a variety of backgrounds covering all different art mediums from film to theatre to literature and the fine arts, including Karel Teige, Jindřich Honzl, and others.
Far from the Soviet notion that art should be accessible to the masses, Poetism constituted an avant-garde movement that, though amusing and playful, was not particularly well-suited for the comprehensibility for the masses. The movement was proletarian, insofar as its subject matter was meant appeal to the proletarian audience, much like moving pictures and jazz music. Formally, Poetist works of art did not follow a rigid poetics, like that of Socialist Realism. They did not offer the reader a slice of proletarian life, nor did they reflect the struggles toward Socialist society on the part of the working class. Though the writers developing the trend were largely leftist, if not members of the Socialist Party in Czechoslovakia, their art was by and large meant to serve as a bit of fun rather than a call to action or an inspirational tale of victorious socialism. In this respect, the late 1920s and early 1930s in Czechoslovakia resemble more the age of the Russian avant-garde, with its plurality of artistic trends, than they do the age of Stalinist Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union. Esther Levinger offers a succinct description of the sharp contrast between Socialist Realism as it was adopted in the Soviet Union in 1934 and the Poetist movement:

> After a short period of involvement with proletarian art and poetry, Devětsil formulated its historicist argument, representing the group’s recognition that the content of a work of art could never have a direct revolutionary impact on society and that form was at least as important as socially useful subjects. Poetism thus signaled the group’s refusal to use art as a weapon in the class struggle and its rejection of the very idea of specifically proletarian works of art. (Levinger 513)

Though one of its practitioners was of a working-class background, and its subject matter was not so lofty as to be “inaccessible” to the masses, the poetists of Prague in the 1920s and the surrealist poets of the 1930s, for the most part, did not accept the notion that art was an oblique form of propaganda. The aesthetic function still maintains the dominant position in Czech art of this period.
Despite the preponderance of avant-garde poetist trends in the 1920s and 1930s, the literary trends leading up to the adoption of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union were certainly also present in Czechoslovakia. Novels like Ivan Olbracht’s *Anna Proletářka* in 1928 concerning events in 1920 genuinely promote socialism. Olbracht himself notes of the time when he wrote the work:

> At that time we were still fighting against the agrarian magnates, nationally democratic bankers and great industrialists, against right-wing elements in the social democracy and in the Czech Communist party, in short, against the grandfather Austria: against bourgeois democracy.\(^\text{25}\) (Olbracht 7)

Here, it seems, concerns regarding capitalism and colonialism were a strong motivating force in the aesthetic realm; however, despite the economic and political situation of the time, Socialist Realism was rarely employed as an aesthetic. In 1934, shortly after Socialist Realism was adopted as the official art norm of the Soviet Union, Voskovec and Werich worked on a new film, *Hej rup!* (*Heave-Ho!*), which mercilessly satirized the new aesthetic. Voskovec later recalled working on the film:

> For me, it is a bottomless well of private fun that when Jan and I made fun of that idiotic “adoration of the tractors” in the silly 1930s Soviet films—the “progressives” and card-carrying Communist Party members were horrified. (Kofroň 16)

Though certainly the filmmakers were aware of the economic and political troubles of the time, the optimism of Socialist Realism, which they viewed most unfavorably, was never more than a peripheral trend in Czechoslovakia of that time. Voskovec and Werich’s film “provoked discussion but also embodied it, since, in itself, it didn’t create—or even attempt to create—any kind of rigid ideological analysis” (Kofroň 18). This trend continued in their later work as well:

---

\(^{25}\) Tenkrát jsme ještě bojovali proti agrárním velmožům, národně demokratickým bankéřům a velkým průmyslníkům, proti pravicovým živlům v sociální demokracii a ve straně čes. Socialistické, zkrátka proti dědičce Rakouska: proti měšťácké demokracii.
In the film adaptation of their own play *Rub a lic*, called *Svět patří nám* (1937), they invoke the fight against the enemies of democracy and of a free, independent state.26 (Farník 49)

*Svět patří nám* (*The World Belongs to Us*) emerges as the cloud of Nazi Germany was spreading over Europe, and once again, though decidedly leftist in its rejection of fascism, the duo never adopt the Soviet Socialist Realist model for their work. In short, Socialist Realism constituted one small segment of an exceptionally wide range of trends in the interwar period.

**Czech Theatre from 1945 to 1948: Out with the Old and in with the New Man**

Of the many Czech directors that took part in the theatre experiments of the 1920s and 1930s, very few enjoyed success in the years subsequent to the Second World War. Two, E. F. Burian and Jindřich Honzl, possessed the socialist credentials necessary for consideration in the increasingly Soviet-influenced Czech theatre institutions, but their work begins to follow a new direction after the war. Honzl, who started working in the National Theatre, produced a few satirical and surrealist plays, including Vančura’s *Učitel a žák* (Teacher and Student), both in 1945. In this play, Honzl “returns to his surrealist roots in the spirit of the avant-garde postulate of a staged dream and poem”27 (Osudy 50). This sort of theatrical expression would be short-lived indeed. By 1948, a number of laws and practices would be adopted concerning the role of the theatre in socialist Czechoslovak society. Honzl himself took part in this process in his capacity as a member of the *Divadelní a dramaturgická komise* (DDR) (Theatre and Dramaturgical Commission). The organization oversaw what would become the centralization of

---

26 “…ve filmovém přepisu vlastní hry Rub a lic, nazvaném Svět patří nám (1937), vyzývají do boje proti nepřátelům demokracie a svobodného samostaného státu.”

27 Vrací se ke svým surrealistickým východiskům v duchu avantgardního postulátu jevištního snu a básně
theatre work in Czechoslovakia, which amounted to external control (by means of “recommendations”) over theatre repertoire and theatre production practices:

In principle, these recommendations, decidedly undemocratically chosen, supported a centrally guided model of theatre production. At the same time, however, being by their very nature formally of an independent organ, they were a democratic residual, and as such they were doomed to extinction in the Stalin regime. They will however still survive for some time, but in the end they will quietly disappear, because the Stalinist (and post-Stalinist) state can direct only nomenclatural cadres, existentially fully integrated into the power structure. Even the slightest independent advisors are undesirable.28 (Osudy 150)

Thus, both the adoption of Socialist Realism and the system that demanded the aesthetic were not entirely a matter of foreign domination. Even prominent Czech theatre practitioners like Honzl, who before the war and immediately following the war had advocated avant-garde techniques and a wide array of theatrical experimentation, over the course of three years eventually took part in the erecting of Socialist Realist norms in Czech theatre, and equally significant for future generations of Czech theatre workers, in establishing the bodies that oversaw the creation of dramatic art. The adoption of Socialist Realism in the 1950s in Czechoslovakia comes about in much the same way that it did in the Soviet Union: the Czechs of the 1940s, as the Russian avant-gardists of the 1920s, aided in the establishment of organizations (like the Soviet Writers’ Union or the Czech DDR) and the adoption of the Socialist Realist aesthetic in the various arts, which ultimately resulted in the demise of avant-garde art experimentation.

28 V zásadě tyto rady, rozhodně zvolené nedemokraticky, podporovaly centralisticky řízený model divadelnictví, přitom však v samé své podstatě formálně nezávislého orgánu byly demokratickým reziduem a jako takové byly v stalinismém režimu odsouzeny k zániku. Budou sice ještě nějakou dobu přetrvávat, ale nakonec tiše zmizí, protože stalinský (i poststalinský) stát mohou řídit jen nomenklaturní kádry, existenčně plně začleněné do mocenských struktur. Sebeměně nezávislí poradci jsou nežádoucí. (150)
Socialist Realism in the Czech Lands: 1948 and Beyond

It was not until the Communist putsch of 1948 that the Socialist Realist trend as it existed in the Soviet Union manifested itself in Czechoslovakia in any official capacity. The period in which Socialist Realism dominated Czech theatrical production, though remarkably short in its span of years, nonetheless had a lasting effect on Czech literary, poetic, and theatrical expression for the next few decades. Paul Trensky characterizes this post-War period with particularly strong and pointed language:

The years 1948–1953 were a “dark age” during which Czech culture was subjected to rigid and crude Stalinist norms. The death of Stalin in 1953 began a slow “thaw” that was given momentum by the official denunciation of the personality cult at the Soviet Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. (Trensky 3)

This impression that 1948–1953 was a dark age is reinforced by the fact that the great variety of poetic and literary trends in Czechoslovakia prior to the Second World War no longer existed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Prague increasingly looked to Moscow for most of its directives, both foreign and domestic; this meant that Socialist Realism, which until this point was an exceptionally small niche within a broader Czech cultural framework, became the official national artnorm and led to “the forced disruption of the existing tradition of modern Czech direction, scenography and acting (the legacy of the avant-garde, improvised theatre, anti-illusionist theatre, poetic theatre, etc.)” (Just, “Malá divadla jako hnutí” 4).

Remarkably, according to Trensky, the darkest of the dark age only lasts 5 years. Though Socialist Realism does not disappear overnight, in the early 1950s playwrights like Pavel Kohout are already beginning to subvert the prescribed poetics of Socialist Realism, foreshadowing the

29 násilné přerázení dosavadní tradice moderní české režie, scénografie i herectví (dědictví avantgardy, improvisované divadlo, antiiluzivní divadlo, poetické divadlo atd).
later emergence of a variety of new tendencies in their theatrical expression, from lyricism to Absurdism.

Though 1956, with the official end of the personality cult and the relaxing of the strict Socialist Realist norms of the first half of the decade, is an important date in the history of Czech literary and theatrical production, this was not the beginning of the so-called “thaw”:

As we have seen, the renaissance of the Czech theater had begun well before 1956. The fall of the Stalinist cult accelerated developments as accumulated artistic energies found application with much less effort. An important feature of the post-1956 era is the very rapid diversification of theater life. (Trensky 12)

This is easily seen in the evolution of the Pavel Kohout’s work in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, there is very little recognizable connection between the work being created in Czechoslovakia and what was discussed in the first Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934. By 1958, a veritable explosion of new work in smaller theatres and other venues like the jazz club Reduta was already underway.

Many of the aesthetic problems that permeated the original discussions of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union appear again in the Czech context. Grossman enumerates a number of these issues, in particular the idea of collectivism:

For we need to know how exactly the realism of Simonov differs from the descriptive and bourgeois realism of the past … it uses until today individualist thought. It deals with socialism and its construction, but it is not an art that arises or will arise straight from the roots of a new socialist society. For it will be collectivist, and collectivism, as we said to ourselves, doesn’t know of realistic forms. 30 (Texty o divadle: první část 47-48)

30 Nebot’ my potřebujeme vědět, v čem se přesně liší realismus Simonovův od realismu popisného a měšťanského…Využívá dosud myšlení individualistického. Pojednává o socialismu a jeho výstavbě, ale není to umění, které roste nebo poroste přímo z kořenů nové socialistické společnosti. Nebot’ ta bude kolektivistická a kolektivismus, jak jsme si řekli, realistických forem nezná.
In fact, Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia does not follow exactly the same arc as it does in the Soviet Union. While Socialist Realism as a concept used for its predecessors prerevolutionary works like Gorky’s *Мать* (*Mother*, 1907) to attempt to develop a unified aesthetic out of a number of progressive, socialist literary traditions, in the Czech context this simply was not the case. Rather, Czech writers used Soviet Socialist Realism as a model. If the writer’s congress that established Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union was haphazard at best, then the Czech path to the aesthetic was almost purely artificial. Unlike its Soviet counterpart, almost none of the influential writers and theatre practitioners from before the war took part in establishing Czech Socialist Realism. The result was an alien form of art that is abandoned nearly as quickly as it was established.

While in the Russian context, works like Gorky’s *Mother* and Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *Что делать?* (*What is to be done?*, 1863) provided a tradition out of which to build a prose trend, in the Czech theatre context this was impossible, since, as we have seen, the Czech theatre scene in the twentieth century was a vibrant, international phenomenon that had very few useful plays in their tradition, aside from those nationalist plays of the nineteenth century dealing with Slavic mythology (which could fulfill the Socialist Realist demands for *narodnost*). As a result, in the 1950s, a great many Soviet plays and plays were written by relatively unknown writers.

**Socialist Realism on the Czechoslovak Stage**

For the purposes of this discussion, I assert that the era of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia begins with the Communist Putsch of 1948 and fades from the scene soon after Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s personality cult at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union in 1956 despite continuing demands to keep it. This era of Socialist Realism in the Czech and Slovak theatres can be further divided into at least two periods: from 1948 to 1953, that is, Socialist Realism while Stalin was still alive, and from 1953...
to approximately 1956 (though this end date is far from clear). The plays that were staged in the earlier period by necessity followed the normative Socialist Realist paradigm more closely than the latter. For the most part, plays of this sort and even the playwrights who wrote them do not remain in the repertoire much after the death of Stalin, which ushered in a new era of artistic expression that did not rely as strongly on official demands of partiiost and narodnost.

Some playwrights did enjoy success both during and following the era of Socialist Realism; Pavel Kohout, for example, wrote a number of plays spanning the entire decade of the 1950s, from Dobrá píseň (A Good Song) in 1951 to Taková láška (Such a Love) in 1957, but his career continued to flourish in the sixties and beyond. Kohout’s work, by necessity, conformed in varying degrees to the normative poetics of Socialist Realism, depending on whether the play was written before or after the death of Stalin. Despite strict norms, Kohout’s work in the early 1950s still deviates from the paradigm set forth by the Soviet Writers’ Union in 1934, and it is for that reason that he is included in the present study. The second half of the 1950s served as a liminal phase in the evolution of the Czechoslovak theatre, in which theatre practitioners had not completely eschewed the normative aesthetic of the Stalinist period, and yet the political and creative climate had not yet allowed for a sustained, productive theatre that adopted different aesthetics. The later into the 1950s Kohout creates his plays, the less they resemble Socialist Realism, both ideologically (not all dramatis personae demonstrate the characteristic optimism for socialism, thus a plurality of voices emerges) and especially formally (as flashbacks, projections, and other stage devices experiment with the presentation of the play’s plot).

**Pavel Kohout and the Socialist Realist Era: Dobrá píseň**

Pavel Kohout’s first play, Dobrá píseň, in many ways can be characterized as a work of Socialist Realism. The title of the play was taken from the poem „Любовью дорожить умейте,“ („Learn how to Value Love“) by the Soviet Writer Stepan Shchipachev, which compares love
with a good song. In drawing inspiration from a Soviet writer, Kohout immediately foregrounds Socialist Realism; his play imports Soviet sensibilities, including *narodnost* and *partiinost*, for which Vladimír Just critically dubbed its opening performance “Prague’s premier of supreme socialist kitsch of 1952”\(^{31}\) (qtd. in J. Černý, “České divadlo a společnost v roce 1952” 7).

It is a three-act play written in verse form, in which each act contains nine scenes. The play concerns a dedicated socialist journalist named Vašek who is in love with (and eventually marries) a young woman named Kateřina. Both of these characters rise to the call of the socialist cause and work enthusiastically; however, when Vašek is called far away for his work duties, he leaves Kateřina for work. After Vašek leaves, a tactless rake named Radovan tries to seduce Kateřina, drawing her away from her unwavering commitment to socialism. In the end, Vašek’s comrades convince him of his error in applying himself only to his work and abandoning his love. Kateřina rebuffs Radovan’s advances, and once the lovers are reunited, they experience the beauty of a love that meets the demands of the new socialist society. Though decidedly optimistic, this ending does not fully realize the demands of Socialist Realism, as personal issues seem to be the main focus of the conflict. As Pavel Kosatík notes:

> Just like the main character of *Slava* not even characters from *A Good Song*, according to Heřman, deal only with their emotional problem, but they express themselves mainly to the societal theme of the commitment to feeling in socialism. Kohout doesn’t illustrate feeling, but he is after the answer to the question, what kind of love is good enough for the builders of communism. And that it wouldn’t be just any love, but burdened by a lot of ideological demands.\(^{32}\) (Kosatík 101)

---

\(^{31}\) [pražská premiéra] vrcholného socialistického kýče roku 1952

\(^{32}\) Stejně jako hrdinové Slávy ani postavy z Dobré písničky podle Heřmana nereší jen svůj citový problém, ale vyjadřují se hlavně k společenskému tématu odpovědnosti za cit v socialismu. Kohout nezobrazuje cit, ale jde mu o odpověď na otázku, jaká láská je dost dobrá pro buditele komunismu. A že to nebude láská ledajaká, ale zatížená spoustou ideologických požadavků.
The primary conflict is not meeting a quota in a factory or on a farm, but rather in defining what romantic love means in the socialist context.

The dedication in the beginning of the play is addressed “to the Vašeks, Kateřinas, and Honzas,” a reference to the main characters of the play. From the very beginning, we are invited to accept the play as a microcosm of society; the main characters are intended to be viewed as character types or models, indicative of average people, and their struggle is assumed to be the struggle of working Czech people in general. The use of the diminutive monickers Vašek and Honza, rather than their neutral counterparts Václav and Jan, further emphasizes that the play will concern average people in common struggles. Through his dedication, Kohout extends the discourse to society at large. The lessons that these particular Vašeks, Kateřinas, and Honzas learn should also be learned by any Vašeks, Kateřinas, and Honzas in the audience. Drawing from Shchipachev, Kohout tries to adopt the Socialist Realist didactic aim to demonstrate how one should behave in the new society that is being built.

The opening scene of the play, rather than setting up a realistic setting, relies on Romantic imagery to describe the beauty of nature. The entire play, written in verse form, does not seem to conform to a realist approach to the world by holding a mirror up to nature. Instead, nature is glorified in an idealized form; Kohout does not describe a specific forest or a specific stream, but offers a harmonious, whitewashed image, almost perfect in its beauty. He describes the world as it should be or would be in an ideal state rather than the world as it actually is:

Vašek: To the clouds at dusk the wind brings a song/ behind the hill the sun is setting/ And it is the time when though the silent woods/ we return the last of all/ because the brigade work is finished/ the brigade work is finished to us/ We wade in the moss with bare feet/ the cloud rains on our heads/ Slowly we walk in

33 Vaškům, Kateřinám a Honzům
through the summer dew/ the comrades in front are a long way away/ and we can stop/ We can stop/

Chorus: Summer gives your hair an aroma/ and you have hot, coarse hands…/ oh, how much joy and beauty/ our simple life has. (Dobrá 115)

Kohout mixes two different levels of discourse; first, he makes use of lyrical, Romantic language, but he uses that language to create a lyrical drama celebrating the working class according to the Socialist realist aesthetic. The discourse evoked in these lines from the first scene of Dobrá píseň conform to that aesthetic and at the same time, due to their lyrical form, subvert it. Kohout connects it to the satisfaction of a worker after a long day’s labour. The signs of this effort, coarse hands, rather than an indication of malcontent or discomfort, are in fact the validation of a life full of joy and fulfillment. In a sense, work in a Socialist Realist text takes the place of love in the Romantic context, as signs of nature which in the past were linked to poems of love take on an entirely new signification in the age of socialism. Kohout’s poem connects the signs of nature—the clouds at sunset, the woods, the weather—to the socialist discourse of proletarian labor, conforming to the aesthetic norms of Socialist Realism, which demand accessibility of a work of art to the working masses. The subject matter of the opening lines of this play elevate the discourse to a kind of Revolutionary Romanticism in an effort to elevate a text about the working class to an established and respected canon (i.e., nineteenth-century Romanticism). This seems to follow the program for Socialist Realism outlined by Zhdanov in 1934, when he claims of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union:

34 Vašek: /K červánkům vůl písně nesou/ za kopce slunce zapadá;/ a to je čas, kdy ztichlým lesem/ poslední ze všech vrácíme se,/ protože končí brigáda;/ končí nám brigáda!/ Brouzdáme v mech v nohou bosou;/ soumrak nám přísluší na hlavy./ Pomalu jdeme lesní rosou;/ soudruzi v předu daleko jsou;/ a můžeme se zastavit./ Můžem se zastavit./ Sbor: Léto ti provonělo vlasy;/ a ruce horké;/ drsné máš…/ ach, kolik radosti a krásy/ má v sobě prostý život náš!“ (Dobrá 115)
To be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life. And this in its turn denotes a rupture with romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams. Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism. (Zhdanov 21)

Zhdanov’s claims regarding the literary heritage of Socialist Realism in romanticism reflect the ambiguous nature of the debates surrounding the aesthetic. On the one hand, he claims that the artnorm should reflect the struggles of “real life,” but on the other hand, he suggests a kind of revolutionary romanticism that traces its aesthetic features to established trends. Kohout’s *Dobrá píseň* illustrates this paradox quite well in its lyrical form and party-minded ideological framework.

The dialogue that opens the play begins with a description of the clouds and forest at the end of the day from the perspective of the first person plural. Kohout writes that “we return the last of all,” “the brigade work is finished to us,” and “slowly we walk in the summer dew.” The use of the first person plural as opposed to the singular throughout the opening lines subordinates the impressions of the individual to those of the collective brigade. In fact, there is no difference between the fate of the individual and that of the collective—they are both finished with their work and heading home. This is further emphasized by the chorus, which by nature is a plurality of figures with one unified voice. In this particular case, the chorus comments on the value of the life of such workers, proclaiming “how much joy and beauty our simple life has.” The notion of a “simple life” and its merits conforms to narodnost, one of the requisite features of a Socialist Realist work. Rather than an example of narodnost, Veronika Ambros connects this phrase to another tradition, namely, the poetry of the nineteenth century:

The expression our simple life “prostý život náš” in the same song makes the connection with the 19th century in two ways: 1. The
word “prostý,” which belongs to the vocabulary of Sentimentalism, appears around the middle of the last century in connection with the Folk, to whom it would be attached to a positive quality … 2. The inversion is typical of the poetry of the 19th century. Therefore, a connection to this tradition also belongs to this technique of style.\textsuperscript{35} (63)

Though his phraseology and word choice, Kohout makes allusions to the Romantic tradition. In doing so, he connects his play to trends that are, if not antithetical to Socialist Realism, at least not useful to the socialist cause and unconventional for the time.

As the earliest example of Kohout’s dramatic œuvre, \textit{Dobrá píseň} follows the aesthetic of Socialist Realism closer than any of his other plays. In particular, his use of language, with its romanticizing of the working class, creates a dramatic world which is, in fact, better than real life. When Vašek and Kateřina praise the rough hands of the worker and the labour that they represent, they do so in an exaulted way. They do not describe the blood on their hands from blisters, or scorching sunburns, or any unpleasant aspects of the work they undertook. Instead, Kohout limits their discourse to the positive aspects of work—the feeling of pride after a job well done—to such an extent that they even praise the unpleasant effect that hard work has on the body. Thus, in an effort to adhere to the norms of Socialist Realism, in addition to displaying \textit{narodnost} in his character and setting selection, Kohout injects a level of optimism into the dramatic world. The torturous longing and idyllic nature associated with Romantic-era works like Karel Hynek Mácha’s \textit{Máj} exist in Kohout’s poem as well, but the interpersonal problems associated with these clichés are ultimately resolved by socialism.

Dobrá píseň’s connection to Socialist Realism stems not only from its plot and characterization, but also in its repeated affirmation of a socialist morality. The Socialist Realist playwright’s attempt at teaching the values of socialism extend beyond work and encompass all aspects of life. When Vašek leaves Kateřina to work, he does so in an inartful way, with little understanding of Kateřina’s feelings. Because his primary concern is his work, he fails to fully appreciate another important aspect of life—romantic love. It is Vašek’s comrades who help bring about the resolution of this dramatic tension by confronting the former about his shabby treatment of his love. They do so, however, with a socialist discourse:

Vasek: Katka … left me …
Vladka: Left? Why?
Vasek: I would like to know that myself … I don’t really get why you are asking, when the sparrows are clamouring about it from the roof tops! Perhaps so that you can enjoy it more …
Helena: Do you know what you are saying?
Vasek: Excuse me … I’m ashamed … Ah, why did this unfortunate time come! We had so much work, and so little strength, we argued, we both lost our heads, and the third of it taught well. So she went away. And then she wrote me not to await her return …
Petr: And then?
Vasek: And then I only know that she went home to her mom. And I haven’t seen her since. And that is all.
Petr: And what do you want to do?
Vasek: Nothing. Why torment yourself? There is work to be done…
Helena: Vasek, how can you say such a thing?
Vasek: Why should I draw out this farce? And what do personal matters have to do with it? Love is dead, life marches on …
Petr: Vasek, aren’t you a communist after all? Why are you acting like …
Vasek: A feudalist?

Petr: No, like a petit bourgeois? (205)

Vašek, who in most respects represents all the good qualities of a socialist member of the working class—hardworking, commited, selfless—demonstrates one shortcoming: his inability to balance his zest for labour with his love of Kateřina. By the very nature of Socialist Realism, the hero of the play cannot demonstrate incurable negative qualities. His shortcomings must be minor. Kohout delivers on this promise in his Vašek, whose only flaw is loving work too much.

In a true collective spirit, it is not the hero himself who brings about the resolution to the conflict in the play, but rather the hero’s comrades. Petr’s questioning of Vašek’s behaviour concerning his love life uses the language of communist ideology. He asks the hero: “aren’t you a communist after all?” and “why are you acting like a petit bourgeois?” These sorts of questions blur the line between political ideology and personal comportment. Petr’s questioning brings the discourse normally reserved to the public space—in this case, a place of work—and injects it into a private conversation. Colleagues have a stake not only in a man’s competency and reliability in his work environment, but also in his personal life.

36

Vášek: Katka…odešla mi…
Vladka: Odešla? Proč?
Vášek: To bych rád věděl sám…Nechápu vlastně, proč jste se mě ptali, když o tom křičí vrabcí na římse!
Snad abyste to lépe vychutnali…
Helena: Víš ty, co mluvíš?
Vášek: Promích…stydím se…Ach, proč přišla ta ztracená doba! Měli jsme hodně práce, málo sil, hádali jsme se, bláznili jsme oba—a třetí toho dobře využil. Pak jela pryč. A potom napsala mně, abych ji zpátky nečekal…
Petr: A dál?
Vášek: Dál už jen vím, že vrátila se k mámě. A od té doby jsem ji nepotkal. A to je všechno.
Petr: Co chceš dělat?
Vášek: Nic. Nač se s tím týrat? Prace přednější je…
Helena: Vašku, jak tohle můžeš vůbec říct?
Vášek: Proč táhnout se má dál ta komedie? A co je tomu po soukromých věcech? Láska je mrtvá—život běží dál…
Petr: Vašku! Vždyť ty jsi komunista přece, Tak proč se chováš…
Vášek: Jako feudál?
Petr: Ne—jako měšťák!
This scene from *Dobrá píseň* demonstrates that society in Socialist Realist works of drama bears a great responsibility, from building infrastructure to building meaningful and healthy “communist” relationships. Love is no longer a personal matter (soukromá věc), but a matter of public scrutiny. Individuals no longer have the power to change their own lives by making personal decisions. Instead, they are confronted by comrades and shamed into taking the “correct” course of action. As Jindřich Černý states:

> But Kohout’s play doesn’t belong to any such watershed works. In it, love as discussed has nothing public with “trembling tenderness,” it is purely publicly controlled feeling, from which come “work, comradery—and children.”

(Oudy 333)

It is this aspect of Socialist Realism, the controlling of personal feelings through socialist political discourse, that will inspire many parodies and satires in the 1960s; the notion that someone would base their decision-making vis-à-vis romance on collective will rather than personal feelings makes sense in the context of 1950s Socialist Realism, but by the 1960s, such an outlook on life becomes absurd. By virtue of the play’s dedication to the “Vašeks, Kateřinás, and Honzas” of the world, Kohout invites comparisons to the struggles of the main characters to the world outside of the theatre. The theatre of the 1960s inherits this paradigm, where plots of any kind—love stories, war stories, or even the classics—are potentially viewed as ideological statements. In the 1950s, the theatre was meant to educate the audience on proper comportment and ideological awareness, but in the 1960s, the theatre becomes a tool to undercut didacticism by means of parody and satire.

As a work of Socialist Realism, the plot of *Dobrá píseň* ends happily: the lovers are together again and continue to work hard for the socialist cause. The play does not contain a plot

37

Alehoutova hra k žádným takovým přelomovým dílům nepatřila. Láska v ní pojednávaná nemá nic společného se „zachvěním něhy“, je to ryze společensky kontrolovaný cit, z něhož roste „práce, soudružství—a děti“…
of a certain magnitude, to echo Aristotle’s description of drama; it is a comedy after all, since our hero does not overcome (or succumb to) any great challenges. One cannot point to any concrete accomplishments of the characters (other than remaining optimistic and being in love) in order to demonstrate the necessity of the play. The characters do not question their ideologies, only their circumstances; the only true victory on the part of the heroes is their ability to achieve personal happiness in the collective societal struggle. This, perhaps, marks the message of the play: that with commitment to socialism comes not only a betterment of the nation as a whole, but also personal benefits; therefore, hold true to socialist ideology. On the level of plot and ideology, Kohout’s play conforms fairly neatly to Socialist Realist demands concerning partinost.

Kohout’s choice of medium—a drama in verse—however, does not place it squarely within the Socialist Realist tradition. Although the subject matter relates to the working class, this lyrical drama is not necessarily accessible to the masses. The lofty lyrical language of Romanticism has the potential to obfuscate the social utility of the play. The play, then, becomes a kind of paradox which reaches into the past formally and yet purports to show society a path to a brighter future:

And in comparison to the majority of contemporary dramatists … A Good Song did not return to the past, but the contrary: to all, who wanted to dream of a happy tomorrow, it said—just go for it.38

(Kosatík 103)

Romanticism might elicit a sense of optimism by presenting an idealized version of grueling manual labor in the opening scene of the play, but it also has the potential to add information superfluous to whatever underlying “message” is being conveyed. Intertextual references and formal creativity in a play of Socialist Realism present two difficulties: first, the reader may not

38 A na rozdíl od většiny současné dramatiky … se Dobrá píseň neobracela k minulosti, ale naopak: všem, kdo měli chut’ snít o šťastných zítřcích, říkala—jen do toho.
perceive the reference (and possibly misunderstand the play), and second, the texts might suggest meanings that are antithetical to the aims of Socialist Realism. Both the former and the latter limit the didactic function, which is by nature the dominant function under Socialist Realism. Kohout’s earliest play, which in some respects is his most faithful work of Socialist Realism, therefore, does not give itself up entirely to the normative poetics of Socialist Realism. Even in the depths of what Trenský calls a dark age of Czech theatre, aesthetic subversion still exists.

**Pavel Kohout and the Evolution of Socialist Realism: Taková láška**

One would expect that a play like *Dobrá píseň*, written in 1951, would conform rather closely to the Socialist Realist norms for drama, but since it did not emerge organically from Czechoslovak trends, there were no Czech examples to follow. As an almost entirely new, imported phenomenon, Socialist Realist norms simply did not exist in Czechoslovakia; Kohout’s play was in some respects an attempt to create them. As the decade drew to a close, Kohout strayed further and further from the aesthetic until eventually, by 1957, when he wrote *Taková láška* (*Such a Love*), his plays only vaguely resembled Socialist Realism in its aesthetic and subject matter. Socialist Realism is a topic of aesthetic debate rather than the official artnorm of the Czechoslovak stage of the late 1950s.

*Taková láška* is a play of twenty-seven scenes divided into two parts. The first part, which includes scenes one to fifteen, introduces the conflict, and the remaining twelve scenes constitute the conclusion of the play, though there is a noticeable lack of a resolution of that conflict. The plot of the play itself is not entirely dissimilar to *Dobrá píseň*; it is the tale of a woman named Lída who is trapped in a love triangle with two men: Petr Petrus, a married man, and Milan Stibor, her prospective husband. Due mainly to logistical complications, Lída’s romantic relationships suffer. Unlike *Dobrá píseň*, an optimistic example of Socialist Realist drama, this play ends with Lída’s apparent suicide (or perhaps accidental death). Tragic endings, unless they
are a willing sacrifice for the betterment of socialist society, generally do not belong to the norms of Socialist Realism. The tragedy of this particular play bears no ideological weight; the main character’s death is a result of purely personal, individual concerns, not those of a broader society.

_Taková láška_ begins with the discourse of a court room. A man in a robe begins proceedings in which he is trying to determine the guilt of various people, the main characters of the play:

Man in the Robe: So, I begin the present proceedings in the incident involving Mrs. Matysova and Co. The public indictment places you guilty of many acts against society, whose effect is first, a nervous breakdown, second, the lasting breakdown of marriage, and third, a killing, aside from further wrongdoing, which cannot be enumerated. The accused Matysova L … L, is it Ludmila?

Lida: Lida …

Man in the Robe: Accused Lida Matysova, studying law, born in 1934, do you feel guilty of these charges?

Lida: Yes …

Man in the Robe: The accused Peter Petrus, assistant of the department of family law, born in 1929, do you feel guilty?

Peter: I … I don’t know …

Man in the Robe: But you must think have some thoughts about it, don’t you?

Peter: Yes … no!

Man in the Robe: The accused Lida Petrusova, general doctor, born in 1926, do you feel…

Petrusova: No!

Man in the Robe: And you, the accused Milan Stibor, born in 1932, constructor, do you…
A Woman’s scream in the Room: Ne!

Stibor: Yes … (Taková lá ska 184)

Kohout begins the play in medias res, making references to events that happened in the past that are yet to be seen on stage, and introducing the characters based on their most basic personal information—their professions, names, and dates of birth. This is a depersonalizing technique which creates a distancing effect. The reader and audience have no attachment to the characters and begin to evaluate guilt or innocence based on facts rather than emotion. The characters in this scene are forced to admit their guilt before a courtroom full of witnesses, bringing to mind political show trials like the Slánský trial of 1952, in which people would be forced to admit to certain crimes, such as the Man in the Robe’s “acts against society.” In the wake of Khrushchev’s denunciation of the Stalinist show trials of the early 1950s, negative attitudes emerge toward this aspect of socialist society. From the outset of the play, Taková lá ska proves not to be a celebration of life under socialism, but a demonstration of the shortcomings of socialism. Whereas Dobrá píseň showed the viewer how societal pressures in one’s personal

---

39 Pán v taláru: No tak…Zahajuji průvodní řízení v případu Matysová a spol. Veřejná obžaloba váš klade za vinu úhrn protispołeczeńských činů, jejichž důsledkem je nervové zhracení na straně jedné, trvalý rozvrat manželský na straně druhé a na straně třetí dokonané zabití, vedle dalších škod, které nemohly být vyčleneny. Obžalovaná Matysová L…L to je Ludmila?
   Lída: Lída…
   Pán v taláru: Obžalovaná Lída Matysová, studující práv, narozena 1934, cítíte se vinna ve smyslu obžaloby?
   Lída: Ano…
   Pán v taláru: Obžalovaný Petře Petrusi, asistente katedry rodinného práva, narozený 1929, cítíte se vinen?
   Petr: Já…já nevím…
   Pán v taláru: No něco si o tom musíte myslet, ne?
   Petr: Ano…ne!
   Pán v taláru: Obžalovaná Lída Petrusová, praktická lékařka, narozená 1926, cítíte se…
   Petrusová: Ne!
   Pán v taláru: A vy, obžalovaný Milane Stibore, narozený 1932, konstruktére, vy se…
   Ženský výřík v sále: Ne!
   Pán v taláru: Vy se cítíte vinen?
   Stibor: Ano…
affairs benefit the individual, *Taková láská* shows the grim conclusion of such a society: accusations of antisocial behaviour and punishment for the personal conduct of the individual.

The Man in the Robe fulfills the Brechtian function of creating a critical distance between the audience and the actions unfolding on the stage. Brecht himself would often use court proceedings in order to allow the audience to make judgements on the actions of the characters on the stage (e.g., *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), and *The Decision* (1930), among others). However, in 1950s Czechoslovakia, this approach to drama takes on new significance; the setting of a courtroom, particularly of a trial where no crime has been committed, stands as a subtle criticism of the state of domestic affairs at the time. Aesthetically, Kohout’s use of the Man in the Robe as a kind of Brechtian voice sets *Taková láská* apart from not only the Socialist Realist theatre of the 1950s, but also from the experimental theatres of the 1960s. While Havel and other playwrights discussed in this dissertation do invite the audience to draw their own conclusions from their plays, they do not work in this heavy-handed fashion. Rather, they offer oblique criticisms in the form of satire. Nonetheless, both Kohout and Havel reverse the Socialist Realist trend of one-sided didacticism.

Formally speaking, this play does not follow the Socialist Realist paradigm, which demands that actions occur in temporal, causal order (facilitating the comprehension of the plot). *Taková láská* is a reconstruction of a death (Lida’s alleged suicide) that does not qualify as an explicit crime in a courtroom setting. The result is a play in which plot information is not organized causally or temporally, but rather by the order of each witness’s account of the events in question. In revealing in the opening lines all of the on-stage actions that will occur in the play (in the form of charges brought forth against the accused), Kohout limits the impact that the story might have on the audience but emphasizes the role of plot construction in a dramatic work.
Taková láška stands as an example of how, by 1957, Kohout’s playwrighting no longer conforms to the Socialist Realist norm with regards to optimism, but it is primarily in the way that the play is constructed that Kohout breaks from the normative aesthetics of the Stalinist period. The play evokes the analytical drama, in which the plot is not presented in chronological sequence but begins at a point after the conflict. Peter Szondi describes the creation of an analytical drama as an intricate process:

The starting point for this thought process is that the form of the drama exists a priori. The analytical technique is pressed into service to permit inclusion of the exposition in the dramatic movement and thus remove its epic effect or to permit use of the “most compound” of actions, those that at first do not seem to fit the dramatic form, as subject matter for a drama. (13)

Thus, the play by its very nature subverts the Socialist Realist demands for a play to be easily comprehensible. In Kohout’s play, the perceptive reader becomes familiar with the earlier events only as the play progresses, denoted generally through a series of flashback scenes projected unto screens. These flashbacks are generally motivated by means of the Man in the Robe asking questions of the defendants. The concept of narodnost, that a play be accessible to the masses, and thus that the plot threads must be easy to follow, demands that a play’s fabula, the temporal and causal chain of events, and its sjuzhet, the arrangement of a narrative, resemble one another as closely as possible (Todorov 12). This dramatic norm eliminates any ambiguity and aids in the understanding of what is unfolding on stage. In Taková láška, Kohout does not construct his plot linearly. It is not until the penultimate scene that the suicide/accident that was mentioned in the opening lines of the play is actually made visible to the audience. While this arrangement of story elements might be realistic in the sense that they mirror actual court proceedings (evidence is not admitted in temporal causal order), it does not conform to Socialist Realist norms, which stipulate that such devices as flashback are confusing and distracting to the reader.
The final scene of the play does show the conclusion of the plot, but unlike *Dobrá píseň*, which provides an answer to the problem created by the play’s conflict (and a lesson to the viewer, who might experience a similar conflict in his or her own life), *Taková láská* ends with a question:

Man in the Robe: Peter Petrus, you are a specialist. Do you know a law according to which you can be punished?

Peter: No …

Man in the Robe (slowly taking off the robe and slowly placing it on the chair): I cannot either, unfortunately.

(Slowly some of them leave.)

Petrusova: And who will judge us …

Man without a Robe (slowly, very slowly points to each one of them and then to everyone in the room): Let them!⁴⁰ (260)

The final scene of the play shows the conclusion of the action, but it does not resolve the fundamental conflict. The Man without a Robe appeals to each character and ultimately each member of the audience to judge for himself the characters’ guilt or innocence. The play gives no answers or optimistic slogans but rather questions the fundamental tenets of society and invites the viewer to do the same. It is clear that, by 1957, Pavel Kohout had all but abandoned Socialist Realism both in its aesthetic demands on composition and on its ideological aims of educating the masses on socialist values and optimistic faith in the Communist Party. Kohout’s appeal for the audience to judge for itself at the end of *Taková láská* precedes a new approach to

---

⁴⁰ Pán v taláru: Petře Petrusi, vy jste odborník. Znáte zákon, podle kterého můžete být potrestání?

Petr: Ne…

Pán v taláru (pomalou svolenou talář a pomalu ho pokládá na židli): Já také ne, bohužel.

(Zvolně od nich odchází.)

Petrusová: A kdo nás bude soudit…

Pán bez taláru (pomalou, velmi pomalu ukáže rukou na jednoho každého z nich pak na všechny v sále): Pokud mohou!
the audience that results in the eventual establishment of Jan Grossman’s *apelativní divadlo* (Appelative Theatre), in which the audience, with its capacity to view plays critically, will play a crucial role in the creation of new dramatic art:

> The important feature of this, let’s call it, intellectual analytic theatre is what we could call the appeal. Apelativity arises where there are problems posed and demonstrated not didactically, but as a provocation to a “conversation.”

(Grossman, *Texty o divadle: druhá část* 141)

The sort of theatre that takes hold under Jan Grossman’s tenure at the Balustrade Theatre provides questions as opposed to answers, and stands in stark contrast to the Socialist Realist model of providing answers to societal problems.

**Václav Havel and the Rise of Czech Absurdism**

The Socialist Realist experiment in Czechoslovakia, which began in the years immediately following the Second World War, ended with little fanfare less than a mere decade after its inception. Kohout’s *Taková láška* broke most of the norms set out by the aesthetic, including a tragic ending, a non-linear, non-causal linking of events on stage, and a lack of sufficient party-mindedness. In posing a question to the audience at the end of the play, Kohout tacitly admits that the artist does not have the answer to the plot’s dilemma and that it is up to society at large to determine the right and moral course of action for the characters to take. In short, Kohout’s play abandons the central feature of Socialist Realism: its didactic stance toward the audience.

Although Socialist Realism is no longer a contemporary trend in the theatre of 1960s Czechoslovakia, it nonetheless has a lasting effect on the work being undertaken on stages across the country, particularly the absurdism practiced by Václav Havel at the Balustrade Theatre.

41 Důležitým rysem tohoto, řekněme, intelektuálního analytického divadla je to, co bychom mohli nazvat apelem. Apelativnost vzniká tam, kde jsou problémy položeny a demonstrovány ne didakticky, ale jako výzva k „rozhovoru“.
Esslin explores the concept of the absurd and its application in the dramatic arts mainly in France, but in the second edition to his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, he includes a brief discussion of Havel’s earliest plays, which he characterizes as an extension of the French Absurdist tradition beyond the so-called Iron Curtain. This thesis does not accept Esslin’s argument wholesale, nor does it adopt the term “absurdist” without serious reservation, due in large part to the fact that Esslin does not define the term in his book. For the purposes of this thesis, “the theatre of the absurd” will refer to a certain theatrical trend in the 1950s and 1960s, which through logical, linguistic, even structural circular traps emphasizes the inability of man to understand or effect real change in his world. This can manifest itself on a smaller scale: for example, dialogues in which characters cannot seem to escape the circular logic of their conversation as in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. However, it can also manifest itself on a larger scale: for example, in Havel’s Model Dramas like *Memorandum*, in which an entire society or bureaucratic system prevents human beings from changing that system or even expressing themselves in it. This state of being arises from the sense that the modern world is absurd—incongruous or illogical.

The trend is not unique to the 1950s and 1960s; in fact, its origins in Czech literature can be traced back to Franz Kafka (though he wrote in German), the brothers Čapek, František Langer, Jaroslav Hašek, and beyond. These earlier works are critical to an understanding of the theatre of the 1960s, as they comprise a selection of sources for inspiration in the period of literary widening in Czechoslovakia following Stalin’s death. In fact, already in a 1937 letter to the Liberated Theatre’s Voskovec and Werich, Roman Jakobson characterizes the duo’s work of the 1920s and 1930s as “absurd”:

> I very much like Your [sic] satire of society and multiform literary parody, but the greatest innovation, the most instinctive and the most topical contribution, I maintain, is “subjectless,” plain comedy
... capable of bringing the viewer to a most enchanting world of absurdity.\textsuperscript{42} \textit{(Studies in Verbal Art 299)}

Already in 1937, Jakobson recognizes V+W’s satire and parody as essentially absurdist, but he provides even more detail concerning the features of their work that render it absurd. He continues:

The characters that you present are, as you so excellently pointed out, “in every circumstance on the side”: “in the situation, they are neutrals, because involvement in any of the warring parties would disrupt their clownish freedom, which allows them to pass by for the whole evening their own world of absurd fiction and far-reaching misunderstanding. They battle to such an extent with reality, which is to them an unfathomable thing, they are so metaphysically idiotic, and so forth … There cannot be one without the other, because they ceaselessly quarrel over the methods of how to outwit evil reality.\textsuperscript{43} \textit{(Studies in Verbal Art 301)}

In his letter, Jakobson describes a number of features of V+W’s work that create a piece of absurd theatre, namely clownish freedom and the limitations of society, which become central to the plays of various writers of the 1960s, but especially Havel. The Absurd as a concept in Czechoslovak theatre predates the period outlined in Esslin’s book. In his letter, Jakobson describes an absurd theatrical phenomenon that develops parallel to the French model, one that will later serve as a theatrical tradition for playwrights like Havel in the 1960s. Jakobson remarks that V+W’s theatre continues a tradition as old as the Czech plays of the Middle Ages,

\textsuperscript{42} Mám sice rád Vaši společenskou satiru a mnohotvárnou literární parodii, ale největší novum, nejpůvodnější a nejčasovější přínos je tvárn „bezpředmětná, čirá komika…schopná uvést diváka do nej Kouzelnějšího světa absurdněsti“.

\textsuperscript{43} Osoby, které představujete jsou, jak jste výborně podotkli, „za každých okolností vedle“: „jsou zaměstnáním neutrálové, protože příslušnost k některé z válčících stran by rušila jejich klaunovskou svobodu, jež jim dovoluje plynouti po celý věcer jejich vlastním světem absurdních fikcí a dalekosáhých nedorozumění. Potýkají se do té míry se skutečnosti, jež je jim věcí nepochopitelnou, jsou tak metafyzicky blbí aťd … Nemohou být jeden bez druhého, protože se neustále hádají o metody, jak vyzrát na zlou skutečnost…
comparing their era to the “liberal times of the beautiful Mastičkář\textsuperscript{44} (Studies in Verbal Art 299), which certainly casts into doubt Esslin’s characterization of absurd theatre in Czechoslovakia as an extension of the works of Beckett and Ionesco in France in the 1950s. Rather, the trend seems to stem from both the contemporary European stage and purely Czech antecedents.

While Czech absurdist drama might have grown from these two distinct traditions, some of its features prefigure what would later be called Postdramatic Theatre. As performance texts, Havel’s (and others’) plays make use of the full signifying force of the stage, from space to objects and dialogue. In this respect, they do not rely on the dramatic text as an immutable force of nature, but rather as a material among many for use on the stage. Hans-Thies Lehmann notes that of Postdramatic Theatre:

> What is emerging in the new theatre, as much as in the radical attempts of the modernist ‘language poétique,’ can therefore be understood as attempts towards a restitution of chora: of a space and speech/discourse without telos, hierarchy and causality, without fixable meaning and unity. In this process the word will resurge in its whole amplitude and volume as sonority and as address, as a beckoning and appeal. (146)

Grossman’s appellative theatre operates under this regime well before Postdramatic Theatre, both in its relation to language “without fixable meaning and unity” (Lehmann 146) and in its relation to the audience. Upholding the avant-garde tradition of Voskovec and Werich, Grossman treats the text of the play in much the same way Postdramatic practitioners would, “only as one element, one layer, or as a ‘material’ of the scenic creation, not as its master” (Lehmann 17).

Havel himself belongs to a young cohort of innovative theatre practitioners. The playwright began his theatre career working with Werich at the Divadlo ABC in the 1950s,
which “was, at that time, a real oasis from something that evidently passed in with diverse
contemporary ideological and aesthetic demands”45 (Just, Werichovo divadlo ABC 47). Thus,
Havel represents a concrete tie between the younger generation and a Czech absurd (and avant-
garde) tradition that was struggling to combat the encroaching normative poetics of Socialist
Realism. Beyond this, we can see the direct lineage of the experimental work of the 1960s: “the
ABC Theater … linked the First Republic to the present day” (Kriseová 32). This process of the
youth injecting life into the Czech theatre scene in Prague began in the 1950s, primarily with the
Reduta club, and eventually came to embody the spirit of both the Balustrade and Semafor
Theatres:

In the last years a few small theatres have appeared around us. From the start, they were mostly collectives of amateurs, in the
course of time some of which became professionalized. The looser situation on the cultural front made it possible. Young people, who
for a longer time carried the notion of independent artistic expression of their connection to life and the era did not have until
that time a platform.46 (Heřman 184)

As one of the major artists to emerge from the younger cohort, Havel stands as a drastic
departure from Socialist Realism in the 1950s. His plays subvert the normative aesthetics
through both parody and satire, revealing the absurdity of previous trends while simultaneously
lampooning broader Czechoslovak society. The looser situation for theatrical expression that
began in the 1950s becomes even more pronounced in the 1960s and feeds Havel’s experimental,
cutting-edge dramas. Being eight years older than Havel, Kohout’s work in the 1950s was far
less ambitious than Havel’s as a subversion of Socialist Realism; however, Kohout’s modest

45 Divadlo ABC…byla v určité době skutečná oáza z něčeho, co se zjevně mijelo s rozmanitými dobovými
ideologickými i estetickými nároky…

46 V posledních letech u nás vzniklo nemálo malých divadel. Zpočátku to byly vesměs kolektivy amatérské, během
casu se některé profesionalizovány. Umožnila to volnější situace na kulturní frontě. Mladí lidé, kteří v sobě delší
dobu nosili představu o svébytném uměleckém výjádření svého vztahu k životu a k době, neměli do té doby tribunu.
subversions of the aesthetic norm occupied a transitional space between adhering to the strict, normative poetic and the outright rejection of it.

It is perhaps for this reason that, while serving compulsory military service in the 1950s, Havel decided to stage an amateur production of Kohout’s *Zářijové noci* (*September Nights*):

Vašek [Havel] at that time was friends with Karel Brynda, later the head of drama at the theatre in Ostrava. They founded a troop theater company—culture, particularly if it was ideological and educational, was well supported in the military service then—and for their first production, they performed *September Nights* by Pavel Kohout. (Kriseová 21)

Kohout’s popularity and socialist credentials (thanks to plays like *Dobrá píseň*) allowed theatre practitioners, who otherwise would have been barred from staging plays, to begin to subvert the established norm. This underscores how the 1960s constitutes a turning of the page from the trends begun in the 1950s by established writers like Kohout to the more experimental work of the 1960s.

Havel’s theatre career began modestly at Werich Divadlo ABC, which according to Havel himself “definitely made [him] decide that[he] would devote [himself] to the theatre”\(^{47}\) (Just, *Werichovo divadlo ABC* 46). That career took a significant turn under Jan Grossman at the Balustrade Theatre, which like Suchý and Šlitr’s Semafor, the theatre was founded by Ivan Vyskočil after his Reduta experiments. Jan Císař, in his article “Z malého se stává velké” in *Začalo to redutou*, discusses Vyskočil’s approach at the Balustrade Theatre:

We identified the absurd theatre with a feeling of hopelessness, with a philosophy of despair and antihumanism; at the same time using the absurd situation in the theatre—and in every art—it can also be only by a method, a means, by which the world is seen. In absurdity art reflects the absurdity of life, as under a magnifying

\(^{47}\) …definitivně rozhodla o tom, že jsem se dal na divadlo.(46)
It is in this sort of creative process that Havel begins writing the plays that brought aesthetic subversion to a new generation.

**Zahradní slavnost: A Little Game of Chess**

In 1962, Havel began work on a new play, *Zahradní slavnost* (*The Garden Party*) for the *Divadlo na zábradlí*, which would be staged in early 1963. *Zahradní slavnost* is a four-act play set in an unnamed city. The action takes place in the Pludek home during the first and the final acts and an office milieu in the second and third acts. Thus it is a symmetrical play, a there-and-back-again structure, in which the hero sets out to accomplish a goal and returns after the goal has been completed, demonstrating the wisdom he has gained in the process. The play concerns a young man, Hugo Pludek, who is sent by his parents to a bureaucratic office party to meet with a family friend named František Kalabis in order to obtain a post in his bureau. Upon arrival at the office, Hugo is swept up in the bureaucratic machinery of the “liquidation office.” By appropriating the office jargon he is able to assume a position of power within the bureaucratic structure. He wields that power to such great effect that eventually he even succeeds in liquidating the liquidation office itself.

At first glance, *Zahradní slavnost* exhibits nearly all of the features of a work of Socialist Realism. A young man sets out to work for the society and returns home with a newfound wisdom. One would expect that the parents would send their son out into the world to affirm the Socialist system. The first scene, however, manipulates these expectations, and one understands

---

48 Ztotožnovali jsme absurdní divadlo s pocitem bezvýchodnosti, s filosofií beznaděje a antihumanismu; zatímco použití absurdní situace v divadle—i v každém umění—může být také jenom metodou, způsobem, jímž je viděn svět. Jako pod lupou se v absurditě umění odráží nesmyslnost života...Gogolova povídka Plášť je přímo klasickým příkladem takové absurdní metody.
almost immediately that the play is not depicting a young man’s heroic sacrifice for the benefit of socialism, but it is a satire of this sort of play. The family is not the pure, socialist entity that one would expect from a Socialist Realist play. Mr. Pludek, who speaks almost exclusively in folksy proverbs that actually demonstrate his foolishness rather than his simple wisdom, supports the middle classes rather than the proletariat. His idiocy, demonstrated in his usage of proverbs (the collective wisdom of a people), truly serves as an affront to the Socialist Realist concept of narodnost.

From the very beginning of the play, Hugo’s brother Peter is on the margins of the action. The family does not include him in their schemes. They tend to send him off stage to perform menial tasks while spending ample time in conversation with Hugo about anything from chess to the garden party. The opening lines of the play explain why this is the case:

       Pludkova: Peter, would you go down to the cellar for a few minutes? (Peter leaves) Kalabis is coming any minute. Perhaps he might yet miss meeting Peter! Everyone says that Peter looks like a bourgeois intellectual—and, after all, you needn’t to get into trouble because of him.

       Pludek: You’re right, Bozka! Damn it, I am, after all, a son of a poor peasant with five siblings! I have five poor great uncles!

       Pludkova: Peter is the black sheep of the family!

       Pludek: Black Peter! (To Hugo) Dear Son! The core of the nation is the middle class. 49

       Pludkova: Pete, nešel bys na pár minut do sklepa? (Petr odchází) Každou chvílkou přijde Kalabis, to by tak ještě scházelo, aby se tady potkal s Petrem! Všichni o Petrovi říkají, že vypadá jako buržoazní intelectuál—a nemáš přece zapotřebí, abys kvůli němu přišel do maléru!

       Pludek: Máš rech, Božka! Jsem přece, sakra, synem chudého rolníka ze šesti dětí! Mám pět chudých prastrýců!

       Pludková: Petr je černá ovce v rodině.


49 Pludková: Petře, nešel bys na pár minut do sklepa? (Petr odchází) Každou chvílkou přijde Kalabis, to by tak ještě scházelo, aby se tady potkal s Petrem! Všichni o Petrovi říkají, že vypadá jako buržoazní intelectuál—a nemáš přece zapotřebí, abys kvůli němu přišel do maléru!

       Pludek: Máš rech, Božka! Jsem přece, sakra, synem chudého rolníka ze šesti dětí! Mám pět chudých prastrýců!

       Pludková: Petr je černá ovce v rodině.

From the outset, the Pludek family comport itself as an upstanding, socialist family: the names of the father and mother, Oldřich and Božena, belie a connection to the ancient past of Czech history. In the 1950s, dramas concerning quasi-historical Slavic heroes were certainly popular among those wishing to promote socialism through a revival of pan-Slavism. For example, *The Romance of Oldřich and Božena*, depicting the “amorous encounter of the proud Oldřich and the socialist youth Božena”\(^50\) (J. Černý, “České divadlo a společnost v roce 1953” 11), opened in 1953 in an effort to adhere to the demands of *narodnost*. Echoing (or subverting) these demands, Hugo’s father comes from a respectable agrarian background, which conforms to the Socialist Realist norm that the hero be of the working class. One of their sons seemingly does not comport himself in a manner befitting a socialist family, and thus he is ostracized: he is sent to the cellar or the attic when company is expected to prevent embarrassment or accusations from the neighbors. On the other hand, Hugo is the golden boy, willing to listen to his father’s advice and wisdom and act on it. Hugo is able to abandon his own personal views (if any exist at all), and adopts the viewpoint of whoever he is dealing with at a given moment.

The sign of the chessboard serves an important role throughout the play. In the first act at the Pludek home, Hugo is engaged in a chess match against himself, playing both sides of the board. Throughout Hugo’s conversation with his parents, he constantly switches from one side of the board to the other, which creates a repetitive stream of conversation:

*Pludek:* Did someone ring?

*Pludková:* No … (Hugo moves and walks to the other side) So, how is it going?

*Hugo:* Well, mommy. (Moves) Check! (Walks to the other side)

*Pludek:* So, how is it going?

\(^{50}\) milostným soubojem hrdého kombajnéra Oldřicha a svazačky Boženy.
Hugo: Bad, dad, bad. Really bad! (Moves and walks to the other side)

Pludková: So, how is it going?

Hugo: Great, mommy! (Moves) Checkmate!

Pludek: You lose?

Hugo: No, won.

Pludková: You win?

Hugo: No, lost.

Pludek: So, did you win or lose?

Hugo: Here I won, and there I lost.

Pludková: When you play here you win, and here you lose?

Hugo: And when I play here I lose, and here I win.

Pludek: Do you see Bozka? Before he first wins completely and second loses completely, it is always better that he wins a little and loses a little.

Pludková: Such a game is not lost! (Zahradní 45-46)
The game of chess serves as a microcosm of the way the dramatic world (and by extension the world outside the theatre) works. Hugo obeys his mother and father regardless of his personal views, and the result is that he is the “dear son,” while Black Peter is banished to the cellar merely for appearing bourgeois. Hugo is able to adopt whatever perspective is useful at the time, thereby leaving him in a perpetually advantageous position. This principle appears in many different contexts throughout the play. From the domestic milieu in the first act to the bureaucratic office in the second and third acts, Hugo consistently appropriates whatever discourse the setting demands, masters that discourse, and as a result becomes the master wherever he finds himself. The chess game, in which Hugo plays both the black and the white pieces, sets up the structure of the entire play. Whatever side Hugo is on, he assumes command. As a result, he exhibits no loyalty to any one side or any one cause. The black and white of the chessboard, like the liquidation office and the inauguration work, merely represent two opposing sides of a nameless structure. Thus, the outcome of Hugo’s chess match, and indeed the fate of the liquidation office, do not bear any significance since Hugo does not affiliate himself exclusively with any one part of the structure. This stands in stark contrast to the fictional worlds of Socialist Realism, where party loyalty constitutes the integral aspect of the characters’ behaviour, and the outcome of the plot serves the necessary function of affirming the utility of the socialist cause.

The prominence of the game of chess in the opening scenes of the play acts as a microcosm of the bureaucratic fictional world in the play. At the office, Hugo takes part in a kind of verbal game-playing, in which he uses a different layers of language to manipulate both the liquidation office and the inauguration office. In short, just as he did at home with the chess game, Hugo plays both sides of the board at the garden party. Furthermore, Havel invites extrapolations of this concept beyond the theatre itself. Before Hugo sets out for the garden
party, his mother imparts one last piece of wisdom: “Hugo! Life is really a kind of large chessboard! Doesn’t that tell you anything?”52 (49). She encourages her son to approach his attempts to establish a career in the bureaucracy as he did the chess match—that is, by masterfully playing both sides of the board—or she could be pointing out to her son that the world operates much like a chessboard, in that human beings are like chess pieces, mindlessly executing prescribed movements without thinking of the broader context in which they find themselves. Both of these potential meanings of Mrs. Pludek’s statement shake the very foundations of a Socialist Realist play. In Havel’s dramatic world, human beings are not capable of comprehending or acting on ideological impulses; their actions are almost uniformly automated. Hugo is able to manipulate this fact, ultimately revealing the inherent absurdity of the bureaucracy in toto.

*Zahradní slavnost* mirrors Kohout’s *Dobrá píseň* in its fictional world. In Kohout’s play, the private concerns of the characters become the domain of the public discourse, as the hero’s comrades correct his misdeeds by reminding him of the proper behaviour demanded of a good Communist, upholding the values of the Party (*partiinost*). In Havel’s play, Hugo’s behaviour in the private space serves as a model for his comportment in the public, bureaucratic setting. Rather than Hugo’s comrades teaching him life lessons in the form of Communist party values, Hugo is able to subvert the bureaucratic system by manipulating the ideological tastes of the members of that system through absurd, homespun wisdom (a subversion of the concept of *narodnost*).

52 Hugo! Život, to je vlastně taková velká šachovnice! Nic ti to neříká?
Zahradni slavnost and the Satire of Socialist Realist Theatre

Havel’s Zahradni slavnost takes a critical perspective of many aspects of Czech society, from its governmental bureaucracies to the institution of the theatre itself. As a result, the play takes on both a satirical and a parodic stance—criticizing Czech politics and referencing various traditions of Czech art from the avant-garde to Socialist Realism. Of particular interest is the way that the characters perceive art as a bureaucratic tool rather than an aesthetic object. At a number of points in the play, characters express a variety of opinions on art, but for the most part, they treat the subject in the same dry manner as their bureaucratic duties. They quote works established in a literary canon, not Socialist Realism or its predecessors, but the Impressionistic tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, e.g., Fráňa Šrámek. In his foreword to Šrámek’s collection of poems Sedm krásných mečů, Josef Brukner underscores the sort of significance when for the youth:

To read Šrámek when one is fifteen means to be rescued. Many of us were, there were legions of us and we all could be thankful that he helped us survive the years of greatest loneliness, the years of agonizing adolescence.53 (8)

In Havel’s play, Šrámek seems to be viewed by the office bureaucrats as a kind of acceptable substitute for the normative poetics of a dark age in Czech literature. Ironically, like Čapek, with whom he “would go out on walks in nature outside the city in friendly company”54 (Odkazy 131), Šrámek belongs a tradition associated with the first Czechoslovak Republic that could not belong to the official canon of the 1950s. Though certainly of left-wing (anarchist) sympathies,

53 Číst Šrámka v patnácti letech znamená být vysvobozen. Mnoho nás bylo, byly nás zástupy a všichni bychom mohli poděkovat, že nám pomohl žiti láta největší samoty, láta bolestivého dospívání. (8)

54 vycházel jen na procházky do přírody za městem, v přátelském doprovodu (Odkazy 131)
his Impressionist poetry in no way resembled the aesthetic norms of Socialist Realism, and yet
Havel’s bureaucratic machinery absurdly tries to appropriate him for its uses.

For example, Plzák, the head of the liquidation office, and his secretary apply a normative
poetics to explain what art should and should not express:

Plzák: Art—that’s what I call a fighting word! The colleagues of
culture certainly know well why they are preparing a decree about
artistic freedom! It will be in effect already in the second quarter!

Secretary: That’s right! Art must provoke with fearless formal
experiments—impressionism and such—

Hugo: Impressionism—

Plzák: It is good that the question of art excites you. You shouldn’t
have to undervalue technology!  

Plzák discusses the topic of art primarily within an economic, materialist discourse. He views
such human endeavours primarily, if not exclusively, as a means to greater efficiency. Even
entertaining the idea of supporting Impressionism belies the absurdity of this situation, since
Impressionism arose out of the very bourgeois class that socialism is allegedly struggling against.

Echoing Kačér’s labeling of Havel’s work as absurd realism, this sort of nonsensical view of the
poet does have credible sources outside the theatre. For example, František Buriánek’s afterword
to a collection from Šrámek’s later years, Poslední básně in 1953, is surprisingly flattering to a
relic of the country’s pre-Communist past:

It is also with a moving testimonial how Fráňa Šrámek remained
faithful to the struggle for the freedom of the nation, how even
through his old age and illness, which separated him from the
turbulent age, he saw in the political perspectives the historical

55 Plzák: Umění—tomu říkám slovo do pranice! Kolegové z kultury jistě dobře věděli, proč chystají výnos o
umělecké odvaze! Bude platit už od druhého kvartálu!
Tajemnice: Správně! Umění musí provokovat odvážnými formálními experimenty—impressionismus a
tak—

Hugo: (pro sebe) Impressionismus—
Plzák: Je dobře, že vás pálí otázka umění. Neměli byste však podceňovat techniku! (63)
struggle with fascism, how with hope he turned his eyes and his heart to the Red Army and to his “great commander,” how joyfully indeed with joy by him the unusual he welcomed a new epoch of our nation.⁵⁶ (76)

Obviously, painstaking attempts were made to establish a link between the great artists of the past, who did support the Czech nation in its struggle for freedom from the Austro-Hungarian empire and Nazi Germany, as well as the Communist Party’s rise to power. This kind of gushing praise aimed at constructing an artificial tradition that was endemic in the 1950s serves as a template for Havel’s parody. He imports the ideologically centred discourse of the 1950s, which established the Socialist Realist normative poetics in Czechoslovakia—with its focus on the need for plays and narratives to demonstrate concrete material gains and the promise of the future of the socialist state—and shows how such arguments have no place in a true discussion of art.

Artistic freedom, a benefit not enjoyed in the 1950s, becomes acceptable to the head of the liquidation office only insofar as it is shown to be of use “in the second quarter.” Ironically, it is for the same purpose that those in power adopted Socialist Realism in the 1950s that the secretary now calls for art to “provoke with fearless formal experiments.” The concept of social utility so vital to the adoption of Socialist Realism here destroys the foundations upon which that aesthetic was built; for, if a given discourse can be used to promote both fearless formal experimentations and a normative poetics like Socialist Realism, then that discourse becomes paradoxical and absurd.

Throughout this discussion, Hugo adds nothing to the conversation, merely repeating the last words uttered by the previous speaker, as in the example. In doing so, he is able to ingratiato
himself to the bureaucratic officers, and, though he is an outsider, he begins to act as a member of the group. This comes about not through any brilliant ideas or actions of his own, as his parents expected when they sent him to the garden party, but by his willingness to forfeit his current discourse and any values associated with it for that of the system in which he is newly engaged.

Immediately upon reaching the entrance to the garden party at the start of Act Two, Hugo applies this technique to great effect. He asks two secretaries where he can find Mr. Kalabis, his father’s friend who was supposed to meet Hugo at the Pludek residence, but they immediately begin a discussion of the lack of space for amusement on the various parquets available at the party. Hugo chimes in with a simple question: “Excuse me, but Small Parquet C is clearly smaller than Large Parquet A. So why not shift the amusement with humorous accoutrements to Large Parquet A and the dance section to Small Parquet C? Why stick your nose into wood, when even a wagtail sings alone? Check!” 57 This seemingly innocent comment creates unforeseen repercussions, as the secretaries debate the issue, involve their supervisor, and begin to question the bureaucratic superstructure. This gives Hugo a foothold in the structure itself; various officials begin to take the boy seriously, and, in fact, they defer to his knowledge later in the play. For the remainder of the second act, the characters attempt to re-establish the equilibrium of the structure that existed before Hugo offered his suggestion.

In this case, the actions of one individual have a negative effect on the normal operations of the office. As in the works of Socialist Realism, where individualism proved to be a pernicious enemy of progress that needed to be eliminated for the betterment of society, in

57 Promiňte, ale Malý parket C je zřejmě menší než Velký parket A. Proč tedy nepřesunout zábavu s rozmanými rekvizitami na Velký parket A a tanec sekcí na Malý parket C? Nač strkat nos do dříví, když i konípas zpívá sám? Šach!
the actions of the individual have the potential to break the bureaucratic machinery of society. This machinery has conditioned the secretaries to assume that the word from on high is informed and infallible—the parquets were chosen for their respective functions for a reason—yet, a seemingly logical conclusion, that the “Large parquet” is bigger than the “Small parquet” creates a cognitive dissonance in the office workers. Their former beliefs are put to the test by their common sense. This attack on blind faith in the command structure of the bureaucracy satirizes the Socialist Realist works of the 1950s, in which characters who exhibit partiinost ultimately are proven correct and duly rewarded. By the 1960s, such an ideological position is simply impossible to retain; if the command structure requires its members to operate under the belief that a “Large parquet” is in fact smaller than a “Small parquet,” then this structure is absurd and worthy of ridicule.

After Hugo gives his suggestion to the secretaries, he offers a piece of wisdom in the same vein that his father did in the opening act of the play, asking “why stick your nose into wood, when even a wagtail sings alone?” This parody of a proverb connotes a certain unlearned wisdom or common sense, reminiscent of the peasant class, which follows closely the concept of narodnost. Because this proverb in fact makes no sense and has no application to the problem at hand—the relative sizes of the parquets—it is laughable and a subversion of the demands for narodnost in Socialist Realism. The old wisdom of the peasant class seems hollow and silly, thus it no longer serves a useful purpose in the 1960s. Yet, due to the external societal demands, especially within the discourse of the Communist Party, it remains a common type of rhetoric. The result is a further alienation of the system from the subjects within the system. The use of proverbs, and indeed language itself, marks one’s position in society rather than serving a purely communicative function. Most important in this exchange is not the meaning of the proverb Hugo quotes but the mere fact that he quotes a proverb at all. Hugo’s use of a proverb,
particularly a parodied proverb that the other characters do not know, places him in a position of superiority over those characters. The secretaries and even their superiors attend to Hugo’s assertions because he couches them within a discourse steeped in *narodnost*, which places them beyond reproach. To attack the proverbial wisdom of farmers or factory workers stands in direct contrast to the ideology of the Communist Party. Therefore, Hugo himself is exempt from criticism and continues his meteoric rise to the top of the liquidation bureau.

**The Conflict Between Socialist Realism and the Avant-garde in *Zahradní slavnost***

In the previous example, Hugo subverts the socialist bureaucratic discourse through the recitation of proverbs. Perceiving Hugo’s attempts to undermine the efficiency of the bureaucracy, the secretaries respond to his assertions with the same socialist-bureaucratic discourse that Hugo used:

> Or would you agree that the dignified progression of the garden party be damaged by some Dadaistic joke-making, which would certainly occur if such an important, so-called junction area like Large Dance Floor 1, were opened to unbridled intellectualism?58

(53)

Hugo’s seemingly logical yet heretical questioning of the garden party authorities’ parquet choices constitutes an attack on the system, so the secretaries adopt a similar discourse to the Stalinist era denunciations, attacking Hugo’s position as “intellectual” (therefore not in line with the concept of *narodnost*), and perhaps even more damaging, as some kind of “dadaistic jokemaking.” The secretaries argue against Hugo not by refuting the logic of his argument or claiming the correctness of theirs, but by attacking his demeanor. If someone exhibits

58 Tajemník: Anebo vy byste souhlasil s tím, aby důstojný průběh zahradní slavnosti byl narušován nějakým dadaistickým žertováním, k němuž by určitě došlo, kdyby tak důležitý, takřka uzlový bod, jakým je Velký parket 1, byl otevřen nezávazným intelektuálštinám?
intellectualism, then that person’s statements should be attended with great skepticism; if someone supports dadaistic jokemaking, then they are a danger to the bureaucratic establishment and the garden party itself.

The word “dadaistic” takes on a very specific connotation within the Socialist Realist discourse, particularly in Czechoslovakia, where dadaistic experimentation and jokemaking flourished throughout the interwar period. Echoing the debates prior to the adoption of Socialist Realism as the official Soviet artnorm in the Soviet Union, attacks against avant-garde artistic experimentations, which were characterized as bourgeois manifestations of intellectual art-for-art’s-sake, become some of the harshest criticisms of a work of art in 1950s Czechoslovakia. This is the case first and foremost because such works elude the Socialist Realist demands for social utility in art, but secondarily because they are not specifically created to be accessible to a working class audience. The ultimate irony of this line is the fact that this play by Havel employs numerous dadaistic jokes, language games, and slapstick that came to characterize the Czech avant-garde of the interwar period. For example, at the end of the third act, when Hugo hopes to liquidate the liquidation office, he has a brief encounter with the director, which exhibits a number of dadaistic elements:

Director: I am liquidating the liquidation—liquidation!

Hugo: If only! Dolezel already left?

Director: Unfortunately he already left, but perhaps I could catch him in the stairs. Should I run after him?

Hugo: I am going to help the guys into liquidating the Liquidation office, and I forgot to ask who was actually going to carry out the liquidation. You see, I wanted to go right away for him!

Director: Pludek.

Hugo: Which? Hugo?

Director: That’s the one.
Hugo: Excellent! I’ll go get him!  

Unfortunately, the linguistic wordplay of lines 2 and 3 of this excerpt cannot be captured in English. Since the name Doležel rhymes with bohužel (“unfortunately”) and odešel (“left” or “departed”), and these lines are repeated in quick succession, Havel brings even more humour to the situation, which is already quite absurd. This absurdity continues in the following lines, when the director, who presumably is in a position of authority, asks Hugo whether or not he should run after the secretary rather than simply ordering Hugo or another subordinate to do so. The ultimate absurdity arises at the end of the exchange, when the director asks Hugo to find himself.

Dadaistic jokemaking takes a prominent place in The Garden Party. The play draws upon the techniques of the interwar Czechoslovak avant-garde, particularly as it was developed on the stage by artists like Voskovec and Werich of the Liberated Theatre, to create humour. Common jokes involve stichomythia, often with cumbersome sound combinations creating a humourous tongue-twister effect as in lines 1-4 of the previous excerpt. The avant-garde theatre also played with the semiotic nature of language, including the difficulties that can arise when two characters engage in a lengthy conversation about a given signifier while the signified remains ambiguous:

This search for a word proceeds in two directions at once: on the one hand, within the synonymic series, to find the most suitable among the various words which might be used for that purpose; on the other hand, within the homonymic series, in order to bring out one of the potential particular meanings of the given word and screen off the others. The act of naming creates a relation between the otherwise unrelated synonymic and homonymic series. In the

---

59 Ředitel: Likvidaci likviduji—likvidaci!
Hugo: Jen aby! Doležal už odešel?
Ředitel: Bohužel—už odešel—ale možná bych ho ještě chytí na schodech—mám za ním rozběhnout.
Hugo: Jdu pichnout klukům v likvidaci Likvidačního úřadu a zapoměl jsem se zeptat, kdo tu likvidaci vlastně vede—chtěl jít totiž rovnou za kovářem!
Ředitel: Pludek.
Hugo: Který? Hugo?
Ředitel: Ten.
Hugo: Výborně! Jdu za ním!
word chosen, they are brought into a definite, though unstable balance. (Veltruský, Drama as Literature 17)

Such is the case with the final three lines of the excerpt, in which the director knows the name Pludek but does not connect this signifier with its signified, the man to whom he is currently speaking. The result is the absurd situation in which a man is charged with searching for himself, an action that underscores the play’s Existentialist questioning of the meaning of individuality within a societal structure like a bureaucracy. On the one hand, Hugo could be seen as the ultimate individual: his talent affords him the opportunity to rise to a level of seniority within the bureaucratic structure. On the other hand, it is only by role-playing and adopting the discourse of the bureaucratic milieu to the point that Hugo no longer exists that he rises to the top. Since the bureaucracy operates in such a way that orders from above are assumed to be well-planned and cogent, all Hugo has to do to gain superiority over any one member of the bureaucracy is to adopt the discourse of those in control. No matter how ridiculous his orders might be (i.e., liquidating the liquidation office), because they are couched within the appropriate discourse they are met with unbridled support.

In the dramatic world of Zahradní slavnost, there is a disconnect between the characters’ means of expression and the meaning they are trying to express. Proverbs, which ostensibly should be connected to some kind of moral or message, become empty signifiers in the sense that they no longer have concrete meaning; however, they still maintain their connotative power as tools of rhetoric indicative of a member of a privileged group within the bureaucracy. Thus, language ceases to serve a communicative function, and characters adopt a certain discourse not to express their individuality, but to facilitate the gears of bureaucratic machinery. The only exception to this is the character Hugo, who masters the bureaucratic discourse so that he might master the bureaucracy itself. Thus, the individual so armed proves to be the greatest danger to the system as a whole. Havel’s satire arises from the collision of Socialist Realist discourse,
Socialist Bureaucratic discourse, and an avant-garde approach to drama. In the opening lines of the second act, Havel’s characters attack Hugo’s suggestions by labeling them “intellectual … dadaistic jokemaking,” but the rest of the play is comprised of a series of absurd, dadaistic jokes. The play itself undermines its own Socialist Realist discourse by employing the very kind of humour that the characters admonish, rendering it a parody of the genre.

Conclusions

The development of the theatre in post-war Czechoslovakia from Socialist Realism throughout the late 1940s and much of the 1950s to the satire of the Balustrade Theatre can only be understood after considering the nature of literary evolution. Vodička demonstrates how different periods of literary development draw upon different traditions and norms: “The basis of literary continuity is the awareness of literary connections and the active use of those connections in the support of new creation”\(^6\) (Vodička 111). Some eras, such as the age of Socialist Realism, demand that art draw upon a strict, normative poetics and a narrow set of traditions. Thus, works from this era tend toward a formulaic structure, as Clark and others observe. The late 1950s, in contrast, witness a widening of these traditions after the normative poetics of Socialist Realism slowly eases in the creative process. By the 1960s, Socialist Realist aesthetics no longer constitute the artnorm of Czechoslovakia, which opens the door to new dramatic forms like parody and satire, which largely take aim at Socialist Realism. Grossman asserts that, in particular, the small theatres of Prague set new trends in the 1960s, instigating a fundamental evolution of dramatic and theatrical expression:

The small theatres spontaneously cast aside many canonized themes and genres and began to work with themes and genres that

---

\(^6\) Základem literární kontinuity je vědomí literárních souvislostí a aktivní využívání těchto souvislostí na podporu nové tvorby.
weren’t originally intended for the theatre or at least stood beyond the range of its main interest.\(^{61}\)\(^{\text{(Analýzy 292)}}\)

This system of literary, or in this case dramatic, evolution depends upon what Jan Mukařovský calls *aktualizace*, or actualization. In his theses presented to the First Congress of Slavists in Prague in 1929, in which he develops a semiotic approach to poetic language, Mukařovský states:

> From the thesis stating that the poetic expression is directed towards the way of expression itself it follows that all levels of the linguistic system, which in communicative utterances play only an ancillary part, acquire in poetic utterances more or less independent values: linguistic means grouped within these levels as well as the mutual relations of the levels, both of which in communicative speech tend to become automatized, in poetic utterances, contrary to this, tend to become foregrounded.\(^{62}\)

The degree of foregrounding of various linguistic elements is different in each poetic utterance and in each of the given poetic traditions: this results, in each particular case, in a specific hierarchy of poetic values.\(^{\text{(94-95)}}\)

*Aktualizace* is closely related to the Russian Formalist concept of *остранение* (defamiliarization), first introduced by Viktor Shklovsky in “The Resurrection of the Word,” in which he asserts:

> Classical works have for us become covered in a glassy armour of familiarity—we remember them too well, we have heard them from childhood, we have read them in books, thrown out quotations from them in the course of conversation, and now we have callouses on our souls—we no longer sense them.\(^{\text{(44)}}\)

---

\(^{61}\) Malá divadla spontánně opustila mnoho kanonizovaných látek a žánrů a začala pracovat s látkami a žánry, které nebyly pro divadlo protivně určeny nebo alespoň stály mimo okruh jeho hlavního zájmu.\(^{\text{(Analýzy 292)}}\)

\(^{62}\) The translator here uses the word “foregrounded,” however a more precise rendering of the Czech would be “actualized,” relating back the concept of actualization. Foregrounding, implying a certain spatial quality to an essentially linguistic phenomenon, particularly in discussing theatre and drama, is potentially misleading.
Defamiliarization is the process by which a writer removes this glassy armour, using different kinds of discourse, perspectives, or other literary devices to shock the reader’s calloused soul, to breathe new life into a stale artform.

Actualization differs from Shklovsky’s defamiliarization because it is concerned primarily with the trends of a given era rather than the familiarity of an individual with a given poetic or literary form. Actualization arises due to changes in “the given poetic traditions” rather than a person’s individual exposure to a work of art. It is actualization that makes Vodička’s theory of literary evolution possible. Different eras of artistic creation draw on different sets of norms and traditions. As audiences or readers become accustomed to a particular trend, the artist must draw from different traditions to bring about literary evolution; otherwise, art will become stale and formulaic. These trends necessary to evolution may be newly invented, or they may be borrowed from early periods in literary history. They may be developed domestically or adopted from foreign sources. As new trends emerge, this in turn creates a new hierarchy of poetic values, which over time will be deformed by yet another set of traditions and norms. Thus, literary evolution does not necessarily unfold in a linear fashion from point A to B to C to D. The process is in fact much more complicated, since point C might actually contain bits and pieces from the previous two points in the evolutionary process. As the Russian Formalist theoretician Viktor Šklovskij put it, “[I]n the history of the art the legacy is transmitted not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew” (qtd. in Erlich 260).

This is precisely what happened in the early 1960s Czech stage, when the evolution of dramatic art encompassed both a departure from the Socialist Realist norms of the past and a reevaluation of avant-garde trends from before the Second World War. Kohout’s Dobrá píseň exhibits a number of the features inherent to a work of Socialist Realism, including the adoption of narodnost and partiinost, the inclusion of positive heroes, and a happy ending that glorifies
socialism. Formally, Kohout’s play draws upon the Romantic tradition, expressing in verse what would in the era of Socialist Realism usually be conveyed in prose. Nonetheless, the Romantic imagery of Kohout’s verse, “covered in a glossy armour of familiarity” as Shklovsky put it, is neither shocking in its originality nor ambiguous in its ideological stance, even if it is unusual in its focus on private matters. Kohout does not employ avant-garde techniques that might obfuscate the message of his play; the verse form complements the theme. In the past, Romanticism used imagery of nature as a metaphor in poetry depicting romantic love. Kohout appropriates this same imagery as a metaphor for poetry depicting the love of socialism. In the era of Socialist Realism, as in every literary era, there is a hierarchy of poetic values. In the case of the early 1950s, all elements within the hierarchy support the didactic function of the work, which in turn supports Communist Party ideology. Despite Kohout’s use of verse, his choice of characters and the structure of his plot bring a kind of unity to the play, placing it within the realm of Socialist Realism.

Havel’s The Garden Party also contains a number of features inherent to Socialist Realism, including the youthful hero who sets out to work for the non-specific socialist organization, elements of narodnost (in the form of Pludek’s absurd proverbs) and partiinost (in the form of socialist, bureaucratic rhetoric), but Havel reorders the hierarchy of poetic values. By 1963, the concepts of narodnost and partiinost no longer belong at the top of the hierarchy; they become two concepts among many which support the satiric and parodic functions of the play. In this way, “the master in this world is one who possesses a cybernetic brain and an absolutely interchangeable, component-like identity—Hugo. Havel’s use of language most nearly resembles that of Ionesco; what is stressed, however, is not the irrational absurdity of experience, but the deadly nature of sclerotic, dehumanized thought and feeling” (Burian 103). Havel takes the clichés of Socialist Realism and actualizes them in a new dramatic context informed both by the
absurdist work of the 1950s in France and by the contemporary situation in Czechoslovakia. The language of the office in Havel’s play remains remarkably similar to that which illustrated the lofty ambitions of the socialist cause. However, when they are employed using a different hierarchy of poetic values, a hierarchy reminiscent of the avant-garde theatre of the 1920s and French absurdism, this language ceases to communicate a message. It becomes absurd babbling, which reflects critically not only on the substance of the discourse, but also on those who employ it.

As Czech playwrights like Havel eschewed Socialist Realist normative poetics, plays began to tackle different issues in society. In demonstrating the futility of concepts like narodnost and partiinost in contemporary society, Havel creates more than a social satire of Czechoslovak society or a parody of cliché Socialist Realist theatre; his play undermines the very foundation of modern society—faith in the bureaucratic machinery and those who run it. Individuals can no longer function solely as dedicated workers in a society, since that society has become absurd. In the Socialist Realist theatre, individuals willingly harmonize their will to the greater will or collective. Havel’s The Garden Party sets a markedly different scene, where even those individuals who attempt to harmonize with the general will do harm to the system. The final outcome in the play is not the characters’ realization that their desires and the needs of the collective are the same; in the end, the aims of the individual unravel the very fabric of society. Czech theatre of the 1960s destroys the illusions of Socialist Realism, in particular the demands of a commited, positive hero, by actualizing Socialist Realist discourse in a new hierarchy of values—the more liberal values of the 1960s.
Chapter 3
Imaginary Spaces and Material Stages

This chapter traces the innovations in the use of space—especially the increasing prominence of the imaginary action space—in plays from three theatres of the 1950s and 1960s. Whether it is Suchý and Šlitr’s use of the imaginary space to foreground the artificial nature of theatricality at the Semafor, Topol and Krejča’s elevating of the dramatic space to a symbol of traditional, pre-socialist values at the National Theatre, or their use of dialogue to create expansive fictional worlds on a limited stage at the Gate Theatre, theatre practitioners of this era approached space in multiform ways. The stage was no longer a limiting condition in the building of fictional worlds, but rather a material space opened up to infinite possibilities.

How to Create Large Fictional Worlds on the Small Stage

In dealing with the impact of Socialist Realism and the function of man and objects in the Czech theatre of the 1960s, the examples drawn for the present study have come primarily from the Theatre on the Balustrade. While the importance of that theatre’s repertoire in setting the trends for much of the decade cannot be understated, many other centres of experimentation contributed significantly to the flowering of the theatre scene in Prague at this time. In particular, the Semafor Theatre and the Theatre Beyond the Gate produced many cutting-edge plays that eschewed the Socialist Realist tradition and helped to establish new trends derived in part from the avant-garde movement of the 1920s and 1930s, but also from a new sense of theatricality unique to the 1960s.

Of particular importance in the creation of a fictional world is dramatic and theatrical space, which serves as the venue for a play’s action. This chapter explores the unique ways that
space is created and manipulated in three plays: Člověk z půdy (The Man from the Attic, 1959), which premiered at the Semafor Theatre; Konec masopustu (The End of Carnival), a play written by Josef Topol that premiered at the National Theatre in Prague under the direction of Otomar Krejča in 1964; and finally, Kočka na kolejích (Cat on the Rails, 1965), a play that was also written by Topol but premiered at the Theatre Beyond the Gate under the direction of Krejča.

This selection of plays encompasses a wide range of Czech stages, from the grand institution of the National Theatre to the far smaller stages in the Semafor and Gate Theatres. By the nature of these venues and the physical restrictions they impose, each theatre demands a different treatment of the dramatic and theatrical spaces. While the material stage is a major concern in this chapter, it is particularly the ways the characters create what Karel Brušák calls the imaginary action space where these three plays share commonalities.

Suchý and Šlitr’s Člověk z půdy emerges in the late 1950s as an extension of their work at the Reduta club with Ivan Vyskočil. The Semafor Theatre, whose name is taken from an acronym of SEdm MALých FORem (seven small forms), as its name suggests, was primarily interested in the collaborative process of performance, from the acting to the set design and, especially, the music. In this respect, though the theatre emerges from the Reduta, it develops from a much older tradition. Vladimír Just notes:

Jiří Suchý together with Jiří Šlitr (died 1969) built a varied repertoire with a steady circulation of genre records from satirical

---

63 A version of this play is available on DVD from Reflex videos (2006).

64 (Just, Divadlo v totalitním systému 92)
or lyrical comedies with songs across cabaret all the way to various forms of musical theatre.  

(Just, Divadlo v totalitním systému 96)

In particular, cabaret-style performances like Člověk z půdy draw from the trends of the prewar period in Czechoslovakia, in particular the playful musical performances of Voskovec and Werich. As Radko Pytlík recalls in Začalo to Redutou:

We recalled the beginnings of the Liberated Theatre, the humour of Voskovec and Werich. Isn’t it correct to assert that Semafor did not achieve this quality. To be sure, the Liberated Theatre did not exist as an example, but as a tradition, as an artistic norm.  

(127)

That Pytlík would claim that Voskovec and Werich constituted an artistic norm underscores even further the drastic departure that the Semafor Theatre took from Socialist Realism. By the late 1950s, the established norm of Socialist Realism had been overthrown. Conventions of the avant-garde period once again began to take hold in the 1950s theatre. The musical numbers as well as the way the actors deliver their lines broke the theatrical illusion by underscoring their own theatricality, and the stage becomes not only a material environment, but also a venue for the imagination; the continual presence of the band within the theatrical space at the Semafor Theatre, by destroying the illusion of a fictional world, evokes the imaginary space.

The two plays selected from Topol’s body of work represent a marked shift in dramatic expression. Paul Trensky asserts that “Topol’s abandonment of the large dramatic format in favor of short one-act plays with a small number of characters was probably as much an artistic development as a development influenced by external circumstances” (56); investigating this

65 Jiří Suchý spolu s Jiřím Šlitem (zemřel 1969) budovali pestrý repertoár stalým rozšířováním žánrového rejstříku od satirických či lyrických komedii s písněmi přes kabaret až k různým formám hudebního divadla.

shift through Topol’s use of imaginary space in plays from both the large and small stages fundamentally addresses the creation of new theatrical trends in the 1960s in general. While Topol’s growth as a playwright might be a function of “artistic development,” the limiting spacial dimensions of the Theatre Beyond the Gate compared to the expansive stage of the National Theatre necessitated a different approach to theatre. In particular, as the size of the material stage decreased, the use of the imaginary space to enlarge the dramatic world becomes an increasingly useful tool for Topol and Krejča.

In analyzing the use of space in various productions from the 1950s and 1960s, and in particular in comparing works from the National Theatre and the small theatres of Prague, it is possible to demonstrate how the collaborative efforts of the actors and the set designers in the city’s experimental theatres overcame the limitations of the small stage and created innovative spaces that pushed the limits of signification. Manfred Pfister outlines three types of special relationships on the stage: “the binary opposites of left and right, back and front, top and bottom within a single scenically presented locale, then, there is the spatial relationship between the scenically presented locale and the space “off-stage” and, finally, there is the relationship between the different scenically presented locale” (257). In terms of the material stage, this seems to be a complete list, but of special importance to the plays discussed in this chapter is a fourth relationship, the relationship between the material spaces (described by Pfister) and the imaginary space suggested through the characters’ dialogue and other means.
Topol’s plays, which unfold “according to the psychological-realistic dramatic of a Chekhovian type” (Just, Divadlo v totalitním systému 77), resolve space issues by evoking the imaginary space through dialogue. Člověk z půdy, like Kočka na kolejích, was produced in a very limited stage space; however, unlike Topol’s play at the Theatre Beyond the Gate, imaginary space is developed at the Semafor Theatre primarily through the music and ironic joke-making indicative of its cabaret tradition. Thus, by comparing the two, we can see the wide range of the arsenal available to the Czech theatre practitioners of the era not only in coping with limited material stage space, but also in developing an innovative trend in Czechoslovak theatre that uses the small stage with sophistication.

While the imaginary space is not unique to the experimental theatre of the 1960s, it is used to subvert theatrical conventions of the previous era, primarily in disrupting the nature of the relationship between human characters and the space they operate within. Rather than the fictional world serving as a collective space where the demands of the many affect the behaviour of the few, as we find in Kohout’s Dobrá píseň, the action space is now created ad hoc on an individual basis, according to the will of certain figures. Taken to the extreme, as we will see, this phenomenon has the potential to elevate the individual to a position of authority on the stage.

The Creative, Imaginary Space in Člověk z půdy

Člověk z půdy was written by Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr for the Semafor Theatre in Prague. According to Jan Kolář, the evening of the premier proved to be an important moment in the

---

67 Vedle psychologicko-realistické dramatiky čechovského typu...

68 Though it premiered in 1959, for the purposes of this discussion, Krát divadlo’s film of the March 13th, 1961 production directed by František Filip will be referenced (Suchý, Jiří. Člověk z půdy. Česká televize. 1962)
history of Czech theatre: “that evening no one anticipated that a theatre was about to appear that would establish an epoch” (Kolář 9). Due to the space constraints that the Semafor Theatre’s stage imposed upon the director, the play is wildly inventive in its use of that space. Borrowing from the Jazz tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, Člověk z půdy is a highly experimental play that partly out of necessity and partly by design lays bare all of its theatricality from the music to the sets. As with many plays from the small theatre scene in Prague, this production sets aside the conventional theatrical traditions of the 1950s and pushes the use of the theatrical space to its absolute limits, employing it in an unconventional way to build a new type of Czech stage.

The story of the play concerns two young lovers named Petr and Martina. At the opening of the play, they exchange words of love, indicating a cliché, romantic situation. As their conversation continues, a man climbs down to the stage from above and strikes up a conversation with the two lovers. We learn that the man is named Antonín Somr and that he is a writer residing in the attic above them. He then invites them up to his place to continue their conversation over tea. Soon, the two lovers discover that the writer is struggling to complete his next novel; Somr then coerces them to help him write by performing the actions that he prescribes for them. In this way, as the title would suggest, the attic becomes the space in which the majority of the play’s action takes place. As they act out numerous scenes and deliver various monologues inspired by the writer, Petr and Martina are joined by other fictional characters from Somr’s alleged novel. In the end, the characters all leave the writer’s attic to escape his absurd and oppressive behaviour. Somr follows them and delivers a rousing speech lauding himself and his art in an effort to win them back, which both the lovers and the characters from his novel

69 Ten večer nikdo netušil, že právě vzniklo divadlo, které vytvoří epochu.
ignore. In the end, they banish him to his attic by removing the ladder that served as his means of leaving it.

The use of the theatrical space in Člověk z půdy depends greatly on the limitations that the Semafor Theatre’s stage affords the set designer. The stage is quite shallow, which gives very little room for complicated set designs and also prevents many elaborate set changes. The stage is so small that the fairly sizable jazz band that provides the accompaniment to the action on the stage remains in the left corner, in plain view of the audience at all times. As a result, the music, which continually interrupts the flow of the plot, becomes one of the most prominent aspects of the play; it provides clear breaks between scenes, allowing time for whatever limited set changes that might occur and comments on what has taken place in the play, even subtly influencing the actions that the characters undertake during the scenes.

Despite the space restrictions, there are two different set designs in the play, which though far from complex, nonetheless belie the experimental nature of the theatre as a whole. The first of the two set designs is the downstairs of a building. The stage is divided, such that action takes place in front of a kind of half-curtain suspended by a clothesline, which separates the visible front part of the stage from the back. Straddling the half-curtain is a ladder that leads to the invisible attic. On the right side of the stage is a microphone that is seemingly out of place in the set design, but which nonetheless plays a prominent part in the actions of the characters on the stage, since the music is an omnipresent aspect of the play. The second set design is what lies behind the half-curtain. The only manipulation necessary to change from set one to set two is to remove the half-curtain that divides the stage. This set stands for the attic, in which Antonín Somr lives and writes. The ladder that was present in the first set design remains on stage as the means by which the characters would move from one location to the other. Thus, though the
space is divided horizontally between the front and the back of the stage, the sets actually suggest a vertical division between a downstairs space and an attic. Illogically, because the curtain is drawn back to reveal the attic space, the latter is effectively twice the size of the former. The play is divided into eight scenes, three of which (scenes 3, 4, and 7) take place in the attic and five of which (scenes 1, 2, 5, 6, and 8) take place downstairs. Although the majority of the scenes take place downstairs, the majority of the action in the play takes place in the attic. Despite the changes in set from the downstairs to the attic, the jazz band still remains on the left margin of whatever scene is unfolding regardless of its location in the theatrical space. This indicates that, although they exist materially at all times in the theatrical space, they ostensibly do not comprise a part of the fictional world.

The use of space in Člověk z půdy depends largely on whether the scene is taking place downstairs or in Antonín’s attic. In the former, there is very little action, since both the space and the available objects are greatly limited; the downstairs space provides a static counterpoint to the frenetic attic space. In the latter, the writer has free reign over all objects of the set, including the actors, and readily employs them in his search for material for his new book. The attic serves as a creative space where Somr constructs his newest novel; characters (other than the two lovers Petr and Martina) appear out of Somr’s alleged imagination, interacting with both the physical space and the other characters that inhabit it. Thus, the attic becomes a kind of hybrid world, where both real and imagined objects and actions can exist simultaneously. This hybrid world, along with other actualized theatrical elements, such as the music (signified by the persistent presence of the jazz band) and the set (laid bare by the conspicuous manner of changing the set for the next scene), underscores the artificiality of the play itself. Thus, the play becomes a
commentary on the process of creating art itself, from construction (the writing of the novel) to appreciation (the reading of the material to the audience).

**Toys in the Attic: A Creative World in a Theatrical Space**

While the first two scenes take place in the downstairs space and largely reveal a cliché sort of love story between Petr and Martina, by the third scene of the play, Antonín Somr has successfully lured the two lovers up to the attic. Somr, who strikes a rather fuddled and disorganized figure, tries to impress Petr and Martina by listing all of his literary accomplishments. He explains that he is the celebrated writer who wrote such works as *Válka s mloky* (*The War with the Newts*), which Martina points out was actually written by Karel Čapek. Caught in a lie, Somr nonetheless continues to attempt to build himself up as a great artist, saying “To je život—iluze” (that’s life—an illusion). He moves to the microphone where he sings a song about his sad situation as an unsuccessful writer, but suddenly stops singing, saying that those words belong to Šlitr (one of the playwrights and the leader of the jazz band on the stage) after which he points directly at him. This is the first instance in which the illusion of the fictional world is disrupted, creating a critical distance between the spectator and the story of the play. After the song, Somr tries to convince Martina to help him with his writing, telling her that she would be helping the great author of such works as *Bílá nemoc* (*The White Plague*), which Martina points out was also written by Čapek. She agrees to help him, and thus begins the process of transforming the attic space from a purely physical space to a hybrid world where Somr’s imagination and the objects in his attic merge.

With all of the references to Čapek’s works of the interwar period, Suchý and Šlitr construct a specific frame through which the play can be interpreted; that is, the playfulness of the play’s structure and the literary references of the main character both evoke a Czech literary
canon that upholds a democratic, pre-war writer and couches that canon within a production reminiscent of the historical avant-garde. By physically pointing to the man responsible for the staging of the play, Šlitr, and citing him as the author of his words, the audience cannot view the play as a drama unfolding in a world unto itself, but rather as a constructed work from a very specific theatrical tradition.

By 1959, when this play was first produced, the trend had already swung away from Socialist Realism of the Stalinist era toward the playful forms like the prewar revue style reminiscent of Voskovec and Werich: “The programs of the small stages, I dare say, resembled the cabaret … We could also speak of a kind of theatrical collage … Indeed we find the tendency to contest traditional genres even in the age of official theatres”\(^70\) (Černý, Kapitoly 355). In addition, the canonized artist that dominates the conversation, rather than a celebrated socialist writer, is Čapek, a man whose literature often warned against fascism, though it never espoused revolutionary ideologies. Both Válka s mloky, a novel about racism and fascistic militarism, and Bilá nemoc, a play and subsequent film about combating the rise of fascism, create worlds in which individuals are destroyed by (political) forces beyond their control. Čapek’s connection to the Czech avant-garde motivates a certain concretization of this play—namely, as a work indebted to the literary and theatrical trends of the 1920s and 1930s.

This is the sort of novelist that Somr wishes to be, but the rest of the play demonstrates how he can in no way fill Čapek’s shoes; he is an abysmal, ridiculous writer. By evoking Čapek, Somr sets up the comedic tone for the rest of the play, as any expectations of Somr’s artistic

---

\(^70\) Programy malých scének nejspíše připomínaly kabarety…Mohli bychom také mluvit o jakési divadelní koláži…Tendenci k popírání tradičních žánrů najdeme v tu dobu i v oficiálních divadlech.
greatness prove entirely unwarranted. Rather than inspiring the other characters in the play with his profound work, Somr enlists their help, directing their behaviour such that they perform the various actions that he imagines for his novel. As the play continues, Somr becomes a dictator, both literally and figuratively. He announces the actions that he wishes to see performed and then types them up, much as a businessman would dictate to a secretary, but he also dominates the other characters into behaving in prescribed ways. The other characters become tools by which Somr is able to construct his work.

As Somr continues writing his novel, he imagines two new characters, which motivates the appearance of two new characters in the play as well, a woman named Hedvika and a young man simply called “malý lord” (the little lord).\(^{71}\) Hedvika bears a striking resemblance to Martina, though her behaviour and manner of speech are that of an automaton. When she speaks, she does so in an unaffected, monotone voice, and it seems that whatever Somr tells her to do, she does, which perhaps marks an oblique reference to Čapek’s robots in \textit{RUR}. The little lord clearly emerges from a different tradition from the works of Čapek. He embodies a childish quality that certainly does not fit the model of high literature that Čapek’s name evokes. The expectations of the sort of writer Somr is that arise when he takes credit for the works of Čapek are immediately dashed when the characters that he imagines for his novel emerge. The little lord, an obvious reference to the title character from Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel \textit{Little Lord Fauntleroy}, immediately associates Somr’s writing with a lowbrow sort of popular literature. In a way, this

\(^{71}\) Little Lord Fauntleroy “was serialized in St. Nicholas, the American magazine for children, from November 1885 to October 1886, and published in book form by Scribner’s in New York” (\textit{Little Lord Fauntleroy}, viii). The book’s sentimental story of a young American who becomes a member of the British aristocracy was widely popular and led to a variety of commercial by-products, including Little Lord Fauntleroy suit costumes, “in which enthusiastic parents dressed their unwilling children all over America and Europe” (\textit{Little Lord Fauntleroy}, viii).
play exhibits a phenomenon that Bogatyrev associates with the mixing of folk and “high”
culture:

However, we must not forget that so-called “high” poetry and
“high” drama were frequently under the influence of folklore.
Instead of a one-sided theory about the drift of “high” art down to
the masses (“gesunkenes Kulturgut”), it is necessary, in fact, to
accept the more reasonable theory of continual permutation both of
“high” art and of folk art. (53)

Much as the bureaucrats in Zahradní slavnost (and those outside the theatre) tried to appropriate
writers like Šrámek to create a socialist canon, Somr tries to establish an oeuvre out of a number
of antithetical trends. Somr represents a haphazard borrowing from a variety of artistic levels, as
he plagiarizes heavily from lowbrow traditions in order to complete his novel.

When the Little Lord arrives on the scene, and Somr asks him who he is, the boy responds
by saying that he is a character from his novel. Unlike Petr and Martina, who act spontaneously
throughout the scene, even if they perform the actions that Somr wants them to, these two
characters (Hedvika and the Little Lord) depend entirely on direction from Somr before they act.
By the penultimate scene, Somr has begun to use Hedvika and the little lord to act out scenes that
he wants to add to his novel, which once again underscores the theatricality of the play and the
artificiality of the theatrical world by actualizing the process of acting and the material nature of
the objects on the stage.

The process of writing in this play is a truly performative act, as Somr’s behaviour is a
spectacle unto itself. For example, after he pulls out his typewriter, Somr spends over a minute
thinking with his hand in the air as he were about to begin writing at any moment. The potential
comedic energy builds until finally he begins to type. He enters one keystroke and then says,
“H...That’s a good start,” and takes a break. After a few moments, he begins to dictate to himself as he types. The sole function of this is to indicate to the audience what he is writing so that the visual and other audio signs on stage can have their full comedic effect. At one point in his dictation, he states that, in his novel, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony can be heard, after which he mistakenly hums the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Šíitr, the band director interrupts Somr, informing him that what he just hummed was, in fact, the Fifth Symphony, not the Ninth. Somr, in order to more fully grasp the situation he is describing in his novel, then asks him what the Ninth Symphony sounds like, at which point, the entire band begins to play the “Ode to Joy.” As in the previous scenes, when Somr brazenly takes credit for Čapek’s work, here he also demonstrates no knowledge of his alleged craft.

Šíitr’s intrusion into Somr’s creative process puts into stark relief the conflict in the play between the material world of the stage and the fictional world of the play. Before an audience, Somr’s typing becomes a performance; however, this performance is supplemented by input from other sources, most notably the music. In the attic space, we encounter intrusions from outside the fictional world and intrusions instigated by the characters themselves, which both provide for a critical perspective on the play’s action. Thus, there is an interdependence between Somr’s performance (writing his novel) and the performances of the other people involved in the production of the play. Somr’s attic becomes a sort of laboratory where his literary experiments take place. Except for the occasional interruption by musical numbers, the downstairs space remains a conventional stage space where a cliché love story unfolds compared to the events taking place in the attic with their ironic self-referentiality.
The conventionality of the downstairs space is immediately undermined in scene seven, which once again takes place in the attic. Somr dictates that four psychologists appear to determine what is wrong with Hedvika, who continues to behave as an automaton. As the four psychologists debate her condition, Somr’s typewriter can be heard, indicating that their speech is determined by Somr’s writings. At one point, when a psychologist begins a monologue explaining love to his fellow doctors, he utters: “but colleagues…ddddddd,” at which point Somr interrupts their conversation, apologizes, and explains that his typewriter is jammed. Once again, the creative process becomes the actualized element in the play, as the psychologist’s dialogue is determined by the script, which depends on Somr. The typewriter that seemingly exhibits agency in affecting the actions of the psychologists in this scene serves as an example of the subjectification of the object, a phenomenon that will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

Approaching the theatre semiotically, every on-stage phenomenon to the most minute and unintentional facial tick is a sign. This extends to include any mistakes in the performance, such as misread lines, coughs, or other unexpected occurrences. These sorts of deviations from the script come to play an important role in the Semafor Theatre, which comes out of the improvisational trend set by the Reduta club in the 1950s. Somr’s typewriter jamming serves as an extreme example of this, in which such mistakes are actualized by rendering them a scripted part of the performance; in doing so, the messy details of the creative process become the performance, and the illusion that constitutes a polished play is nowhere to be seen. The breaking

73 „Ale kolegové…ddddddd“
of the illusion extends so far as to even draw attention to the play itself, advertizing a new play being staged at “the Semafor, a new experimental theatre in Prague.”

Ironically, given that Somr appears to have control over the behaviour of the figures in his attic, the play (and presumably his novel that is being performed) is far less organized than one would expect; there is great discord between the authorial voice and the expected actions of the characters in a play (i.e., fulfilling various roles in order to create a unified theme or a comprehensible plot). As it turns out, like the plot of the play as a whole, the plot of the novel that Somr is writing seems far less important than the way in which it is being produced. The dominant element in the play is not plot, characterization, or ideology, but theatricality itself.

At points during the play, the creative process is actualized to such a degree that Somr begins to lecture the audience about his work and its significance. In scene seven, the four actors who were playing psychologists place a podium directly facing the audience, and Somr delivers a speech in which he proclaims, “I will be a different man, a beautiful man, a new man.” This type of rhetoric vaunting the promise of a better future echoes the proclamations of the Socialist Realist aesthetic of the previous decade. However, because this discourse is juxtaposed with the clownish way Somr delivers the speech, Suchý and Šlitr level a stunning rebuke to norms and conventions that throughout much of the 1950s would have been unheard of. At times during the speech, Somr uses colloquial language, which further differentiates his speech with the lofty pathos of the previous era. The culmination of the speech results in a standing ovation from the audience; Somr, who is still describing himself in the same glowing terms, concludes: “this hand

74 V Praze, v Semaforu, nové experimentální divadlo.
75 Já budu jinej člověk, krásnej člověk, novej člověk.
is beautiful, this hand is real, this hand is human, this hand … is a left hand.”

Mixing buffoonery with the standard rhetoric of those in positions of authority creates a pointed satire of official Czechoslovak society. The elevated speech and ideas of the cadre of officially sanctioned writers look foolish when the writers uttering them are not respected by their audience.

The way that the space is constructed in Člověk z půdy highlights the function of the stage space as a laboratory of creativity. In fact, one might say that the attic is a sign for the construction of art itself. Somr’s atelier is not a concrete space, where actions are limited to what is possible or probable in the world outside the theatre (or the novel), but rather it is a hybrid world where interaction among living beings occurs on a real level (in the conversations between Somr and Martina, for example) and on an imaginary level, as between real and fictional characters in the play (for example, when Hedvika and the little lord act out scenes with Petr and Martina destined for Somr’s book). In this hybrid world, the conventions of behaviour, as well as those of realistic theatre, are suspended. These conventions give way to the commands of Somr, a dictator who directs all the actions in the atelier according to his stipulations (signified by his typing). The actualization of conventions and norms lays bare the devices in Somr’s creative expression, and by extension in the very play itself, underscoring the artificiality of both.

If the fictional world is exposed for an artificial construct, then two things happen: first, in the hybrid world, Somr’s individuality becomes a central motivator in the actions of others, creating a hierarchical power structure among the play’s characters; second, in that fictional world, Somr and the rest of the characters lose their ability to express genuine emotions, and hence they replace their capacity for self-expression (common in characters of conventional

---

76 Ta ruka je krásná, ta ruka je realní, ta ruka je lidská, ta ruka je…levá.
drama) with ironic criticism directed at themselves and at formulaic art in general. The theatrical space loses its ability to merely signify a specific place or time in which a drama unfolds; instead, it begins to signify both a location in the fictional world and the physical space in which that fictional world comes into existence. The stage becomes a sign of theatricality itself, allowing for the ironic joke-making, singing, and dancing typical in the period of the historical avant-garde in interwar Czechoslovakia.

**From Creativity to Cliché: The Downstairs Space**

Thus far, this discussion has focused almost entirely on Somr’s atelier in the attic, in which the majority of the play takes place. The downstairs space resembles the attic neither in its function nor in its physical characteristics. While the attic can only be accessed by a ladder, the downstairs space can be accessed from offstage to the right or from the ladder. With little outside intrusion, the attic becomes the exclusive brainchild of Somr, and the characters act more or less according to his stipulations. The downstairs space, on the other hand, is inhabited by various real characters who act spontaneously. While Somr’s attic contains boxes, a typewriter, a microphone on a stand, and other objects available for manipulation, the downstairs space contains only the microphone. Thus, the attic allows for greater creativity with the use of available space and objects than the downstairs space.

In contrast to the highly cluttered, dynamic space of the attic, due its size, the downstairs affords limited action apart from exchanges of dialogue. As a result, the creative energy that pervades the attic space is almost completely absent downstairs. Instead of self-referential theatricality, in the downstairs space the characters engage in relatively innocuous conversation. In the opening scene of the play, we are introduced to Petr and Martina. Their story offers very little tension; they simply discuss how much they love each other and their plans for the future.
In the second scene, Somr appears at the top of the ladder, which indicates a kind of in-between space or threshold between the attic and the downstairs, and strikes up a conversation with the lovers, inviting them upstairs. This effectively ends the downstairs plot as the central focus of the play, since once upstairs the play centres on Somr and his struggles to complete his novel. Nonetheless, the cliché love story finds its way into Somr’s narrative. Despite its insipid and cliché nature, the outside world serves as an inspiration to the writer, who uses the lovers for his own ends. Eventually, Petr and Martina grow tired of Somr and his absurd ramblings, so they return to their downstairs space, where the play ends with Somr beseeching his friends by saying “musíme si pomáhat” (we must help each other). In the end Somr, as the hero indicated in the title, is locked away in his attic, left to continue to produce his works from on high while having very little influence on the rest of society.

**Concluding Remarks on Člověk z půdy**

What the attic and downstairs spaces share in common is the highly theatrical manner in which the characters act while they inhabit both spaces. In the attic in particular, the actions of the characters belie their own theatricality; this renders the cliché love story downstairs all the more artificial. In both set designs, the microphone stands on the right side of the stage in plain view of the audience, and in no fewer than fourteen instances do the characters interrupt their actions in the fictional world to walk over to the microphone and sing a song to the audience that might have only tangential relevance to the situation at hand. Some of the songs from this play (and many others from the theatre’s repertoire, including Martina’s love ballad “Včera neděle byla” (Yesterday was Sunday), became hits outside the theatre.

This play and Kohout’s Dobrá píseň both use music as an organizing principle around which the theatrical performances were created. The effect, though, is markedly different.
Kohout’s title evokes the importance of music as a symbol of love. Harmony of tones is what makes music possible, but Harmony with socialist ideals in interpersonal relations is what makes meaningful romantic relationships possible in Kohout’s fictional world. Elevating one’s romantic love to the level of a good song is another way that this Socialist Realist work provides a model for the audience to follow. Člověk z půdy might also have music in a prominent position in the hierarchy of signs on stage, but rather than serving as another venue for delivering an ideological “message”, Suchý and Šlitr take the opposite approach. Their songs seem to transcend the fictional world (due in part to the fact that they do not always relate to the situation at hand), which underscores the very premise of the Semafor theatre: that is, to showcase the various forms that make up a performance. Through its anti-illusionary approach to music on the stage, the Semafor theatre not only subverts the Socialist Realist aesthetic, but also defies the notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk by intentionally setting the music apart from the fictional world.

Somr’s blending of lowbrow and “high” literature also turns the concept of a gesunkenes Kulturgut around completely. This evokes work performed at the Liberated Theatre in the age of the historical avant-garde, in particular the Vest Pocket Revue. Voskovec and Werich “for a long time they set up for the Liberated Theatre a useful model of flexible stage formation, the so-called ‘pocket revue’ whose backbone was sing music, parodical action and verbally eccentric comedy central to the clownish couple”\(^\text{77}\) (Farník 8). In both the Liberated and Semafor Theatres, lowbrow humor is paired with references to “high” art in order to break the expectations of the audience and elicit laughter; this is especially important in the inclusion of

\(^{77}\text{Na dlouho dobu ustavila pro Osvobozené divadlo platný model pružného jevištního útvaru tzv. „kapesní revue“ jehož páteří byla swingová hudba, parodický děj a slověně excentrická komika ústřední klaunské dvojice. (Farník, 8)\)
jazz music, which lended a popular flair to the plays that extended beyond the doors of the theatre and into the consciousness of a nation.

Like its interwar antecedents, Člověk z půdy attempts first and foremost to be a fun piece of entertainment. This is evidenced by the literally show-stopping song-and-dance numbers peppered throughout the play; however, the play does not deal exclusively in trivial matters. The play’s action explores the various means of creating works of art, in particular, the connection between the senses and the way that sensual experience can drive the creative process. As a consequence, the play often takes a critical perspective on art. In the attic space, all of the various elements of theatrical production, the dialogue, the character creation process, the context, all combine to create a kind of laboratory of performative art, a hybrid world where fiction and reality exist simultaneously, and as Oscar Wilde put it in “The Decay of Lying,” “life imitates Art far more than Art imitates life” (22).

**Between Private Places and Public Spaces: Josef Topol’s End of Carnival**

Josef Topol’s third and perhaps best known play, Konec masopustu (*The End of Carnival*), first premiered in 1963 at the Oldřich Stibor Theatre in Olomouc and was later staged at the National Theatre in Prague under the direction of Otomar Krejča with Josef Svoboda as scenographer. Krejča’s vision both at the National Theatre and elsewhere was one of the major sources for the Czech theatre revival of the 1960s. Krejča was a director who “rehabilitated the importance of methodical dramaturgical work and enlisted dramatic writers, whom he on the one hand made members of his realization team (Josef Topol) and on the other hand urged them at
that time into unusual intensive collaboration on the texts”78 (Just, Divadlo v totalitním systému 77). Unlike Suchý and Šlitr’s improvisational work at Semafor, the Krejča and Topol team developed plays where the text takes a prominent place in the production. Nonetheless, scenography, and in particular the use of space in Krejča and Svoboda’s productions, remained an important aspect of the staging of Topol’s plays. Concerning Svoboda’s aesthetic choices, Denis Bablet remarks:

Is he an expressionist, constructivist, realist, or surrealist? … None of these terms can define him, since they imply the existence of styles of a specific character, and the work of Josef Svoboda wouldn’t know to be placed under the banner of one or the other of these styles, even if some of his productions bear traces of them … It is true that during the first years of the 1950s Svoboda had to sacrifice for the platitudes of a realism falsely qualified as “socialist”, but at that moment when all efforts that break with the official style risked being labeled as formalist, Svoboda did not abandon … his works.79 (Josef Svoboda 26)

By the 1960s, Svoboda no longer sacrifices his productions to the “platitudes” of Socialist Realism, but uplifts the creative potential of scenography and especially lighting, which included traditional lighting, as well as the manipulation of slide projections and film. Thus, the theatre work of Krejča and Svoboda imply a “synthesis of expressive elements. Almost without exception, moreover, [Svoboda] sees dynamism as fundamental to any work of theatre art; if nature abhors a vacuum, Svoboda abhors a fixed, static stage, which strikes him as being a

78 Rehabilitoval význam soustavné dramaturgické práce a získal dramatické autory, které jednak učinil členy svého realizačního týmu (Josef Topol), jednak je přiměl v té době k dosti nezvyklé intenzivní spolupráci na textech (Just, Divadlo v totalitním systému 77).

79 Est il expressioniste; constructiviste, réaliste, surréaliste? … Aucun de ces termes ne permet de le définir car ils impliquent l’existence de styles aux caractères précis et le travail de Josef Svoboda ne saurait être rangé sous la bannière de l’un ou l’autre de ces styles quand bien même certaines de ses productions en recèlent des traces. Il est vrai que Durant les premières années cinquante Svoboda dut sacrifier aux platitudes d’un réalisme faussement qualifié de “socialiste”, mais à ce moment où toute tentative qui rompait avec le style officiel risquait d’être taxée de formalisme, Svoboda n’abandonna pas … ses réalisations.
perversion of the essence of theatre” (Burian, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* 27). This dynamism that Svoboda deems necessary for good set design is precisely what we find in Topol’s dramatic text as well. Truly, the work undertaken by these practitioners demonstrated “the relationship between stage direction and scenography. The necessity of their co-operation, even their mutual penetration into a scenographico-stage directing component is … beyond any discussion” (Svoboda 6). Thus, the physical space on the stage was if not of primary concern to the director, at least of great importance.

*Konec masopustu* takes place during the period of collectivization of farmland after the 1948 communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. The chairman of the local committee charged with seizing the land for the state and his cadre have successfully appropriated most of the land in their area, but one holdout remains, a man by the name of King (Král). The story of the play centres on the attempts by the committee to convince King to give up his land, but this struggle takes place while the whole town is preparing for the annual carnival celebration. During the celebration, a young rake named Raphael tries to run off with King’s daughter Marie, but in a case of mistaken identity due to the costumes of the carnival, Marie’s brother Jindřich attacks him with a knife as he tries to meet with her after the dance. In the end, Raphael accidentally kills Jindřich, and the play ends with Raphael’s judgment at the hands of the chairman as self-appointed jury. The cruel end to King’s family line and the presumed collectivization of the last sole proprietor in the area marks a different kind of theatre compared to the works of the previous decade. This play works against a number of Socialist Realist tendencies of the 1950s. First, the name Raphael, associated with the archangel, evokes a religious character wholly unconventional in the preceding era, which sought to limit the role of religion in society while
simultaneously vaunting socialist ideals. Second, the theme of the individual at odds with society brings into question the socially unifying aims of the normative aesthetic.

Paul Trensky asserts that “The End of Carnival belongs to the category of plays featuring victims of socialist society; but unlike the melodramatic plays of the 1950s (The Intellectuals and Such a Love), the fate of the victimized protagonist is raised to the tragic, symbolic level” (51). Comparisons with Pavel Kohout’s Taková Láska are quite fitting, as both plays end with a trial of sorts. The main difference is that in Topol’s play a crime is evident (Jindřich is actually murdered), whereas in Kohout’s play, Lída’s suicide is only conjectured. Nonetheless, “socialist society,” as Trensky calls it, creates an ad hoc system of assigning blame, and the individual must abide by the decisions of the group.

The carnival motivates a creative use of various masks in the play, which beyond their traditional role also provide an interesting means of creating (or rather indicating) various spaces. While the masked actors’ primary function is to act as a chorus, they at times also signify elements of the set design. For example, in the second scene they gather together to signify trees in a forest. By serving as a sign that indicates the setting, the people wearing masks in the play come to act out the collectivization of the dramatic space. The masks themselves do not serve any dehumanizing function in the play, since “On the stage there were not ‘masks’ (what is really the old theatre convention and the source of a lot of misunderstanding) but carnival masks … real people in no way differentiated from those who put the mask on”80 (Uhlířová, “Jedna hra v jedné” 114). The masks might allude to the ancient Greek theatre, in which the intrusion of the

80 Na jevišti nebyly „masky“ (což je právě stará divadelní konvence a zdroj mnoha nedorozumění) ale maškary… reální lidé nijak se neliší od těch, kteří si masku nasazují.
chorus breaks the illusion of the fictional world to comment on the action, but in Topol’s play, they serve a much more active function in helping to build the fictional world, often out of their own bodies. The masked people, as Eva Uhlířová noted, can be seen as real people who happen to be wearing masks rather than impersonal chorus disconnected from the events unfolding on stage.

Topol’s play takes place during a politically charged era of Czechoslovak history, which is reflected in its subject matter, collectivization of private land. The play’s use of space reflects this subject matter, since one of the main conflicts of the story, the erosion of the private space by the actions of the state, affects the way King’s private land is regarded by the other characters in the play. King, a local farmer who lives by a traditional understanding of personal property and hard work, wishes to keep his land in his family and rebuffs the committee’s attempts to appropriate it. This, however, does little to discourage his neighbours and the members of the committee from intruding on his property, either attempting to convince him to part with it or entirely disregarding his express wishes regarding his privacy. Even though King stands up to their attempts at collectivization, various characters’ near constant intrusions into the private space undermine his attempts at maintaining control over his property:

But End of Carnival is not a fragile lyrical drama, but on the contrary a strict, almost a cruel drama with compelling objectivity, whose poetry is anchored in the imaginative elevation of reality in the poetic image … the directional discourse creates from the scenic metaphors a metaphor of the world, with which man is continually in contact and in conflict. 81 (Uhlířová, “Pokus o dorozumění” 115)

81 Ale Konec masopustu není křehce lyrická hra, naopak přísné, neúprosnou objektivitou až kruté drama, jehož poezie je zakotvena v imaginativním povýšení reality v básnický obraz … Režijní pojednání vytvoří ze scénické metafory metaforu světa, s nímž je člověk ustačitě v kontaktu i konfliktu.
The nature of the conflict in this play is societal; King’s land becomes a metaphor for the broader social context of the play’s fictional world, which in turn is interpreted through the lens of 1960s Czechoslovak society. By 1963, when *Konec masopustu* was written, the liberalization of Czechoslovak society in the wake of Stalin was well under way. Topol’s play, like Pavel Kohout’s *Taková láška* before it, arrives to the Czech stage at a time of rapid transformation, and reflects the critical perspective that the theatre had begun to take regarding Czechoslovak political institutions. Whereas in *Taková láška*, the authority of the justice system is questioned, Topol’s *Konec masopustu* goes much further by throwing into sharp relief the collision of modern and traditional Czechoslovak social values, including societal attitudes on the right to privacy and the value of hard work. Even the way that the characters view the space varies greatly. King treats his land as a part of his lineage, and thus an extension of his own essence. The committee members, however, view him and his private interest in his land as obstacles to their vision for the future, a collective that incorporates all the surrounding property. This tension constitutes one of the main conflicts in the play’s plot, and it is almost entirely fueled by the dramatic space and the various characters’ desire to control it.

**The Imaginary Space in *Konec masopustu***

Unlike in *Člověk z půdy* and in Topol’s later work *Kočka na kolejích*, the imaginary space in *Konec masopustu* was not a means of addressing the limitations of the stage, since the National Theatre’s size afforded both elaborate set designs and multiple set changes. Therefore, the use of the imaginary space is far less foregrounded than in the other plays discussed in this chapter.

Both his early plays, *A Midnight Wind* and *Their Day*, Topol wrote with the idea of a large stage, which at that time to young authors tempted by the possibilities of the small stages, remained for the
most part unfamiliar. This wish to light on a wide scale with contemporary life of the traditional theatrical space was fulfilled by that time most successfully in the drama *End of Carnival.*

(Kapitoly 359)

So, *Konec masopustu* serves as the high point in Topol’s work on the large stage. Nonetheless, at times in the play, one can already see the sorts of innovations that will dominate Topol’s later work. For example, the second scene of the play introduces the character of Marie, who comes across the masked figures taking part in the carnival. Trensky asserts that “the masks have only a remote connection to folk tradition or to a baroque play. They neither represent superior judgment or any kind of synthesis, nor do they perform the function of the chorus in classical tragedy, acting as commentator and spokesman for eternal truth” (Trensky 54). He chooses rather to connect the masks in the play to classical comedy. The masks certainly do not fully function as a chorus in the classical, tragic sense, but rather as a means of bringing the imaginary space to life. As Marie converses with the masks, she reminisces about the way the road used to look, which prompts some play-acting on the part of the masks:

Mary: (pointing to the lined-up masks) Poplars used to stand here.

Hussar: Now we stand here. Wait, when summer comes we’ll make shade for you. Will you come?

Mary: I haven’t time. And in summer least of all!

Hussar: Then come in spring. We’ll show you how leaves are made.

Mary: You know how?

Masks: We don’t know, we do it.

---

82 Obě své rané hry, *Půlnoční vůl a Jejich den,* Topol psal s představou velkého jeviště, které v tu dobu mladým autorům, vábeným možnostmi malých scén, zůstávalo většinou cizí. Tato jeho touha rozpříčit naplno současním životem tradiční divadelní prostor naplnila se zatím nejúspěšněji v dramatu *Konec masopustu.*
(They raise their arms with clenched fists, sway at the hips, move their arms and forearms, unclench their fists and spread their quivering fingers in a scattering wave-like movement, rattle of drums.)

As the conversation continues, the masks begin to align themselves such that they form an alley of trees. Dramaturg Karel Kraus points to this scene as a threshold between the imaginary and the material world.

For Marie’s entrance in the second scene [the masks] make an alley of trees. Marie without hesitation goes along with the game. All of a sudden the imaginary space is opened. The border between reality and the fantastic game blends together and is wiped away.

Thus, the masks take on a much greater role in this scene than a chorus. While providing commentary on Marie’s comments concerning the way the physical space looked in years past, they also physically embody that space. Marie, in going along with the game, is able to interact in an imaginary space that at the beginning of the scene was only mentioned through her dialogue. In addition, this scene already introduces the conflict between the individual and the collective, as well as past and present, as the masks appropriate and seemingly mock Marie’s memories for use in their own games at her expense. Fundamentally, this play concerns the

83 Marie: (ukáž to na špalir) Tady stávaly topoly.
Husar: Ted’ tu stojíme my. Počkej, až bude lét. Uděláme ti chládek, přijdeš?
Marie: Já nemám čas. A v létě teprve, kdepak!
Husar: Tak přiď na jaře. Ukážeme ti, jak se dělají listy.
Marie: A vy to víte?
Maškary: My to nevím, my to děláme. (Zvednou paži se zat’atými pěstmi, kolébají se v bocích, pohybují pažemi a předloktím, otvírají dlaně, vlní chvějivě prsty, bubny dání.) (Konec masopustu 13)

erosion of spacial boundaries, whether it be the boundary between the material and the imaginary space or the public and private space.

**The End of the Czech Dream**

To King, private ownership of his land constitutes his hopes and dreams for the future of his family. As the collectivist forces at work in the village undermine his authority over his own land, King’s prospect of keeping the dream begins to fade away. The delineation between public and private spaces in *Konec masopustu* seems at first glance quite clear; there are scenes that take place in the homes of certain characters (private spaces), and there are scenes that take place in the town or in fields (public spaces). Nonetheless, the private spaces are not entirely private, since characters are incessantly intruding, either by entering ostensibly private homes uninvited or by appropriating those homes as communal property.

In the third scene of the play, which takes place inside the home of a woman named Mrs. Prager, denoting her association with Prague (i.e., the city as opposed to the rural setting), the constant intrusions of society in the private space begin to shape not only the way the characters view that private space but also how they act in it:

Prager: Aha, that’s Sophia. (Takes another picture) This one is yours.

Vera: But, madam—

Mrs. Prager: Not a word, it’s yours. A fine piece of work! A friend of ours copied it after Raphael’s Madonna.

Vera: But why should you give me such a gift?

Mrs. Prager: No, you’ve done enough for me. And then, I can’t have a picture like that in Prague, it’s religious. Here’s a paper and
First, Mrs. Prager foregrounds the play’s political context when she gives away her copy of the Madonna because of its religious significance. After she moves to Prague, if the neighbours even see that she has a religious painting, this can have negative consequences for her interactions with them. In ridding herself of objects of religious connotation, Mrs. Prager is conforming her surroundings and by extension her behaviour to the norms demanded by the rest of society. Even Vera must be careful not to show the painting too openly, as this would place unwanted scrutiny on her and her family; therefore, she wraps the picture in paper.

The implications of this exchange reflect greatly on the changing attitudes that the characters have regarding privacy and personal space. The neighbours would see nothing wrong in breaching Mrs. Prager’s private space; so, she can no longer keep those things that might reflect poorly on her. The result is that Mrs. Prager’s private space, her home, becomes an extension of the public space. Mrs. Prager, well aware of the prying eyes of others, has Vera cover the painting with paper and string to protect whatever privacy remains to Vera and herself. In this example, we can see that society’s increasing intrusion into individuals’ private spaces leads not only to a fundamental change in those spaces, as certain pictures become verboten or at the very least ill-favoured, but also in the way that individuals behave, since characters become outwardly less religious and increasingly suspicious of the motives of their neighbours. This

---

85 Pražka: Aha, to je Žofi. (Vezme druhý obraz) Tenhle je váš.
Věra: Milostpani—
Pražka: Žádné řeči, je váš. Nádherná práce! To kopiéroval jeden náš známý podle Rafaelovy Madonny.
Věra: Ale jak já k tomu přijdu?
Pražka: Mlčete, udělala jste pro mne dost. A pak, je to religiózní věc. Tady máte papír a motouz, nemusí každý vidět co nesete.(Konec masopustu, 18)
casts in a negative light the sort of societal intrusion in personal affairs that was a positive feature of a number of Socialist Realist plays of the 1950s, most notably, Kohout’s *Dobrá píseň*.

Despite this suspicion, Mrs. Prager accepts the new order and resigns herself to a new life, feeling: “today it’s best not to have anything. I had two houses and I shan’t have anything. The Prague one I’ve gifted to the State—and a good thing I did it in time”86 (*The End of Carnival* 20). In scene five at the dressmaker’s shop, when Crossbones the barber tells his sister Vera his future plans for the shop in the spring, she tells him that his plans must first be approved by the committee, since in the new order, “you’re no longer your own master. You’d have to ask the Local Committee for permission”87 (*The End of Carnival* 29). As with Mrs. Prager, the barber must also suffer increasing community involvement in his affairs, and he has more or less acquiesced to their demands.

This seems to be the sentiment that most of the neighbours have adopted, since there remains only one private landowner near the village. King is the only character in the play that stands adamantly against the new order. The two friends Vera and Marie King discuss matters in the village, but Vera’s brother Crossbones seems particularly interested in the Kings themselves, since they do not acquiesce to the demands of the chairman and his committee concerning their land.

Crossbones: What I like about your dad is his pride. Today everybody bows, but he, say what you like—he stands like a rock! Hat off to anybody who can do that!

---


87 Věra: Holírna ti už neříká pane. Musel bys žádat o svolení na obci. (*Konec masopustu* 27)
Vera: That’s something you’ll never learn.

Crossbones: A barber’s shop has never brought anybody to a fall, there’s no obligation to the soil in that! Yes, to have a bit of land, to call a tiny bit of the globe your own—that’s a bait I’d swallow any time, but try and order someone about on his fields! There I’m my own master—  

(\textit{The End of Carnival 33})

Crossbones’s sentiments regarding King’s unwavering individuality reflect a paradox in the dramatic world: characters might uphold King’s individuality as a source of honour, and yet they actively work to undermine it. Crossbones lauds his neighbour and his ability to remain his own master, and he cites private ownership of land as the main means by which he is able to do so.

Echoing Propp, Pfister notes that often characters are multifaceted beings that fulfill many functions.

\begin{quote}
Figure and dramatic function are thus not identical, but let themselves in every actual situation the figure involved and the dramatic functions organize themselves, whereby a figure fulfills more functions at the same time and a function can be realized by more figures. \footnote{\textit{Das Drama} 234}
\end{quote}

Crossbones embodies this model of characterization, as he is able to assume different functions depending on the situation. Much like Hugo Pludek was able to adapt to various social situations in \textit{Zahradní slavnost}, among the collectivist committee he adopts their ideological perspective and changes it when he speaks with King. One character embodies several functions.

\footnote{\textit{Smrt'ák}: Mně se na tatínkovi líbí, že má hrdost. Dneska se každej ohne, ale on si , pane, stoji jako skála! Klobouk dolů, když tohle někdo umí!
Věra: To se ty nemůžeš naučit.
Smrt’ák: Kvůli holíně si ještě nikdo nezlamal vaz, to není povinnost k půdě! Jo, mít kousek země, kousíček zeměkoulé—tady mě chytí hned, ale hon’ te někoho po poli! Tam jsem jednou svůj pán a basta. \textit{(Konec masopustu 30)}
\textit{Figur und dramatische Funktion sind also nicht identisch, wohl aber lassen sich in jeder gegenbenen Situation die beteiligten Figuren und die dramatischen Funktionen einander zuordnen, wobei eine Figur mehrere Funktionen gleichzeitig erfüllen und eine Funktion von mehreren Figuren realisiert werden kann.} (234)
Crossbones anticipates King’s eventual downfall in his struggle to maintain control over his land, noting that his barber shop has not provoked any action from the committee, since it does not occupy a significant space. In many ways, King’s position is unique and prompts unprecedented action. In the scenes that follow, characters like the central figure of the carnival, Hussar, and the chairman of the committee begin a process of undermining King’s authority on his own land. In fact, not long after Crossbones and Vera have their conversation in the dressmaker’s shop, at the farm, various characters already begin to question King’s neighbourliness when he refuses to allow the masks to pass over his fields. When Hussar and Brickmaker want to cross his fields to take a shortcut to town, he refuses them passage:

King: Not a step! You can take your short cuts anywhere else you like—it’s all yours.

Hussar: We own a drum and a trumpet. That’s our property and our pride![…] Only all in all it’s half of all. We’ve come for your ears.

King: For my ears?

Hussar: And for your eyes.

King: For my eyes?

Hussar: And for your soul.

King: What d’you want with my soul?

Masks: We want to have some good of it.90 (The End of Carnival 38)

90  Král: Ani šlápnout! Všude jinde si můžete nadejít, patří vám všecko.
Husar: Nám patří jenom bubínek a trubka. To je náš majetek, naše pejcha![…] Jenže to je všeho všudy jen půlka. Někdo to musí slyšet. My si jdem pro vaše uší.
Král: Pro moje uší?
Husar: A pro vaše oči.
Král: Pro moje oči?
For the masks and Hussar, breaching King’s private space serves two functions: first, by using his land as a short cut, they undermine his authority over it, thereby rendering it more and more public at the expense of King’s individual wishes; second, the act of appropriating his private space as public serves as an indication that King’s property and his spirit are no longer his own, but in many ways belong to the collective. The collectivization of personal property, which ostensibly aims to provide common economic equity, in reality, has interests that extend beyond mere economics. While King’s land might have innate value that could be of use to the people of the town, the committee’s relentless attempts to appropriate that land seem to stem from a desire to take away that which he personally values most. When Hussar says that he wants King’s soul, he is subtly indicating that he wants him to relinquish that which would prevent him from adopting the collectivism of his neighbours. In this case, the true obstacle is his unbending love of his property and the personal satisfaction of passing that property on to his children. This concrete conflict is elevated to a mythological level through the masks’ use of poetic language.

The tension in this subplot comes to a head in scene eleven, when the secretary and the chairman of the local committee arrive at King’s residence to discuss the collectivization of his farm. The ideological clash between the farmer and the committee illustrates contrasting views concerning the land and property rights. The fact that the committee intrudes on what King considers his private space to explain their position rather than in a neutral public space demonstrates the eventuality that collectivization represents: the end of private spaces altogether.

Husar: A pro vaši duši.
Král: Co máte na mý duši?
Maškary: Cheeme z ní něco mít! (Konec masopustu 35)
King attempts in vain to defend his sovereignty over his land (and by extension over himself), while the committee members try to argue the case for pooling resources.

Secretary: (looking at the chairman) Mr. King … You are a hardworking man, a good farmer, nobody has anything to say against you—

King: What do you want then? I do my job—you do yours.

Secretary: You can’t take it that way.

King: Why not?—Look, my father was a stone-mason. When he got married, his wife brought him fifty gulden and a little bit of land. That’s what he began with. He build this house with his own hands and saved every farthing so as to rise in the world; everything he achieved was through his own effort—not a tile did he take from another roof—and I’m to throw everything to the winds? That’s something I can’t do. I do honest work.

Secretary: You can go one doing what you like to do, but it will be for the common good.91 (The End of Carnival 71)

King, like his adversaries, upholds traditional values like hard work; however, they differ in that the farmer sees his house and his land as extensions of that hard work, as the rewards for his efforts. The private space, cultivated by his hands, becomes a sign, signifying his self-reliance and the legacy of his family. Karel Kraus goes so far as to link King’s loyalty to his land to the dwindling traditional Christian values of the past: “[T]he field is also a part of the moral system which King holds on to, it is the obligation and inheritance in the spirit of the biblical ‘by the

91 Tajemník: (se podívá na Předsedu) Pane Král, vy jste pracovitý člověk, dobrý hospodář, nikdo vás nepomlouval—

Král: Co teda chcete? Svoje si udělám, a vy si taky dělejte svoje.

Tajemník: Tak se na to nemůžete dívate.

Král: Proč?—Pane, můj otec byl kameník, když se oženil, dostal padesát zlatejch a kousek pole, s tím začínal, tehně barák vystavěl svéma rukama, utrhostal si od huby, aby se zmoh, k ničemu zadarmo nepřišel, tašku se střechy nikomu nevzal—a já to mám přes noc vyhostit oknem?—To já nemůžu. Dělám poctivou práci.

Tajemník: Budete dělat dál to, co vás těší, ale bude to pro blaho společnosti—(Konec masopustu 70)
sweat of thy face thou dost eat bread” (335). Since King’s father built his house and cultivated his land without the aid of others, by invading that space and attempting to confiscate it for others’ use, the committee is effectively assaulting King’s identity, something that he will not readily give up.

King’s position as the opposition to collectivization in *Konec masopustu* stems from a changing view of the nature of space in (Czechoslovak) society; collectivization, an effort to equitably share the nation’s capital among all members of society, began with the factories and other means of production, but land (and by extension private space) has significance well beyond its capacity to produce and create wealth. As a nation might bear special meaning to its inhabitants as a homeland, a farmer’s personal property, as King vehemently expresses, is a major part of his identity. Thus, the collectivization of land for the common good signifies an attempt to collectivize the human spirit in general. While most of the society has given in to the collectivist forces by the time the play begins, King’s last stand for individualism creates problems for the rest of society. His desires are diametrically opposed to those of the committee, who in turn needs his consent in order for those plans to come to fruition. In this respect, King’s struggle reflects that of many in the era in which Topol sets his play, disturbing the homogeneity of Socialist Realism and its demands for unifying socialist ideology (*partiinost*).

**The End of Religion**

The many attacks that the committee lays against private land ownership in the play, as we have seen, stem from a desire to form a local collective; however, private ownership is only one

---

92 Pole je také součástí mravního řádu, o který se Král opřel, je povinností a údělem v duchu starozákonného „v potu své tváře budeš jist chléb“.
of many obstacles to the successful implementation of their plans to collectivize every aspect of their society. Other than appropriating land, the committee must also bring about a fundamental change in the beliefs of the citizenry. To that end, those with the authority try not simply to confiscate property, but to undermine the fabric of the previous generation’s society. Forcing Mrs. Prager to sell her house or King to give up his land constitute the outward signs of a much deeper shift in social values. On an ideological level, institutions like religion are another obstacle to socialist collectivization, and on numerous occasions in the play, characters in the collectivist camp undermine the authority of the church.

We have already seen in the third scene of the play how Mrs. Prager gave up her religious painting because of the erosion of her private space. While this abandonment of objects of faith is not in itself a manifestation of collectivization, it is a consequence of it. Because her property (private space) is no longer hers alone, others now have access to it as well. As a consequence, it becomes difficult to maintain one’s place in society if one is seen with religious articles in one’s home. If religion is deemed undesirable in the collective, then this leads characters to change their behaviour (and subsequently their surroundings). So, the attack on religion is at first only oblique, since Mrs. Prager willingly gives the painting to Vera. However, later in the play, the collective literally breaches the religious space by entering the local church to take candles and other objects to use in the carnival festivities:

Hussar: And the dead man—does he need nothing?
Mask: What should he need? He’s had it.
Hussar: A dead man doesn’t make a funeral.
Mask: And what makes a funeral?
Hussar: Rites and observances—bell, book and candle!
Mask: True—he needs candles.
Hussar: Where are they?
Mask: In the church.
Hussar: Off you go for them! (The End of Carnival 59)

Along with the dissolution of private property comes the waning of the sanctity of the church. Hussar and the mask feel absolutely no shame in breaching a space that in the past has been sacred, in essence stealing church property for the improvement of their carnival display. Collectivization ushers in a new era in society where what was once sacred is no longer.

This particular scene belies a certain theatrical characteristic of the committee’s process of collectivization, which while openly hostile to the religious institutions of the previous generation, nonetheless continues to rely on rituals like the carnival in developing social cohesion. The actions of Hussar and the mask reflect a broader change in the society in Konec masopustu. Those responsible for the ushering in of the new order do not simply abolish customs or old ways of thinking, but rather they gradually replace those customs with new ones. Under the new regime, there is a shift in values; the church still exists, but it is no longer an entirely sacred institution. Consequently, its sacred rites and objects are no longer held as such.

Jindřich Honzl, in his article “Ritual and Theatre,” notes that the two are similar in that they are both symbolic actions, but he draws a distinction between theatre and the religious act,

---

93 Husar: A co mrtvej? Nepotřebuje nic?
Maškara: Co by potřeboval? On si stačí!
Husar: Co tě nemá! Mrtvej nedělá pohřeb.
Maškara: Co dělá pohřeb?
Husar: Mrtvej má vejíravu, mrtvej potřebuje svíčky.
Maškara: To je pravda. Potřeboval by svíčky.
Husar: Kde jsou?
Maškara: V kostele.
Husar: Alou pro ně! (Konec masopustu 53-54)
or ritual. Ritualistic acts imply the faith of those taking part in them that what they are doing transcends the physical world. Without such a faith, the performative acts that comprise a ritual become theatrical. The stealing of the candles for the carnival celebration undermines the ritualistic acts of the church in favour of those of the masks; if Hussar and the rest of the members of society no longer view candles in the church as sacred instruments in a religious ritual, then they become mere props even in their function in the church. As objects of religious significance lose their sacred nature, they become viable props for the secular carnival play. These objects might fulfill a ritual function, but without the participation of the public, they lose that aspect of their symbolic power.

According to Honzl, ritual is the “means through which a religion strives to control and change the world in accordance with its confessors’ longings” (142). If, in Konec masopustu, the church no longer stands as a sacred space, then the symbolic power of its instruments diminishes. If the organizers of the carnival then appropriate those instruments for their purposes, they are in effect exchanging theatre for ritual. Just as Hussar wants to appropriate King’s soul for the collective, so too does he want to replace the collective institutional power of God (ritual actions supported by faith) with that of the socialist collective. In so doing, the power of the collective over the individual grows even stronger. Thus, the church (and the religion that supports it) is attacked on two fronts. First, through the intrusion of the public space into the private by a collective that discourages religion, as individuals abandon their instruments of faith (the portrait of Madonna), and consequently they abandon the faith itself; second, collective theatrical performances take the place of ritual actions, greatly reducing the collective’s need for religious institutions. If we apply Honzl’s definition of a ritual loosely to the carnival, we can see that, in fact, the seemingly secular, theatrical actions of the masks and Hussar become a kind of new
ritual. Hussar and the committee aim to change society by means of a signifying action anew in the traditional form of the carnival. Erika Fischer-Lichte notes the connection between the religious rituals and pre-Soviet secular mass spectacles:

Whether innocently or on purpose, the mass spectacles were modelled on patterns provided by Christian mythology. As in the medieval mystery plays—which Evereinov brought to life again—the history of the World was narrated as a teleological process from its creation to the redemption of mankind brought about by Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. Most spectacles followed a similar story line. They narrated the history of oppression from its earliest manifestations through time until the outbreak and victory of the October Revolution. (101–102)

Mass spectacles adopted religious ritual practices in order to establish the legitimacy of the new order, and while faith in God is no longer the ultimate aim of these rituals, that sentiment is transferred to the values and figures of the Revolution. Faith in God, in effect, becomes faith in the Communist Party.

Topol shows this process in Konec masopustu, but by focusing on the struggles of the anticollectivist King, he subverts the intended goal of such new rituals by giving voice to those who have lost faith in the established order. His theatre becomes a theatre of disillusionment, where the rhetoric and ideals of Party-minded characters lose their ability to shape the views of an increasingly sceptical audience. This scepticism concerning rhetoric and ideology extends into aesthetics as well. Václav Havel notes of the modern era:

Modern understanding unmasked old metaphysical certitudes as pseudocertitudes, corrupted the belief even in all set conventions, which grew out of that certitude. Today art finds itself in a place
where it is: in the atmosphere of relative values, lost criteria, losing its communicativity and authenticity.\(^94\) ("Začarováný kruh" 5–6)

The 1960s ushered in a new era of Czech theatre that eschewed the metaphysical certitudes of Socialist Realism in favor of ambiguity.

**The Beginning of an Endless Carnival**

Though the process of collectivization plays a dominant role in the plot of Topol’s play, the carnival is of equal importance. Carnival, a celebratory event immediately preceding Lent in the Catholic tradition, is marked by a suspension of societal norms, creating a topsy-turvey world in which those in authority like the king are mocked by the masses, who during all other times of the year must show them deference. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin notes:

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (223)

If we consider the name of the main protagonist in the play, Francis King (František Král), we see that the entire play, including the collectivization subplot, is related to the festival. Collectivity, in fact, constitutes one of the major features of the carnival. Bakhtin argues that the masses in carnival, far from being a disorganized mob, are actually organized according to certain principles:

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all

\(^{94}\) [M]oderní poznání demaskovalo staré metafyzické jistoty jako pseudojistoty, podlomilo důvěru i ve všechny pevné konvence, které z těchto jistot vyrůstaly. Umění se ocitlo tam, kde dnes je: v atmosféře zrealtivizovaných hodnot, ztracených kritérií, ztrácející se komunikativnosti a autenticity.
existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. (225)

The carnivalesque crowd appears in two separate ways in Topol’s play: first, as the masks and costumed characters of the people in the area taking part in the carnival celebration; second, in the collectivist forces of the town, which like the crowd at a carnival, seek to destroy the traditional fabric of society. As a consequence of this, the collectivist committee systematically undermines King’s authority over his own land by attacking his adherence to the traditions of his father, saying such things as “you are in the fetters of old ideas” or “you are spitting upon the work of our people”\(^95\) (The End of Carnival 75–76). As in the carnival itself, society has pulled the king down and offered him up for abuse and ridicule. In Topol’s dramatic world (and perhaps by extension the world outside the theatre), the traditional way of the world has been supplanted by an absurd, carnivalesque system; the king rules no more, since the mob has taken his place.

Carnival literally means to set aside meat, meaning a time when meat would normally be given up for Lent. At the carnival, a sacrifice is demanded by the crowd in the form of an effigy, which is summarily placed in a coffin. This is a symbolic act that represents the sacrifice that is about to be undertaken by the crowd (Lenten fast). Though it has a ritualistic function predating Christianity, the sacrifice still, nonetheless, can be seen as a religious act. It is significant in this play that such action does not take place on the symbolic level in the form of a ritual, but rather as the actual murder of King’s son. The trial at the end of the play provides yet another example of the continuation of traditions in a new context. Trensky asserts that “the hearing convened by the chairman of the National Committee is more a tribute to the traditions of the past, reenacting

\(^95\) Vy jste v zajetí starých představ o vlastnictví, pane Král…plivete na práci našeho lidu. (Konec masopustu 70-71)
the ancient custom of a trial by the village elders” (56). However, the actions of the chairman and the committee have real, rather than symbolic, results. Since an actual murder took place, this “reenactment” loses its theatricality; those taking part have faith that their verdict will result in justice.

The carnival, which as Bakhtin notes, is a temporary exception to the general societal structure’s norms, uses signs like effigies as means of acting out events that would be unacceptable at any other time. In the finale of *Konec masopustu*, King’s son is brought to his father in the coffin designated for the effigy. Rather than using a signifier to take the place of a body, an actual body is used, rendering what would normally be a symbolic act disturbingly real. Similarly, by attempting to appropriate King’s private space (his land), the crowd is actually acting out what in carnival should be a symbolic act; they are removing the king from power. Thus, though this is the end of the carnival as a temporary respite from societal norms and traditions in the symbolic realm, it is also the beginning of an unending carnival, characterized by what Kraus calls the “dehumanization of human relations”96 (324), leading to the elimination of traditional norms like private ownership and individuality.

The first chapter explored the language rituals in the bureaucratic setting of Havel’s *Zahradní slavnost*; Hugo Pludek masters the socialist jargon of the office, undermining the system in the process. In *Konec masopustu*, religious rituals like the carnival (associated with the Lenten fast) are appropriated by the socialist collectivists in order to subvert their intended purpose. Even in Kohouts’s *Dobrá píseň*, the concept of romantic love undergoes drastic changes from a personal to a collective, societal concern. In all three cases, the establishment

96 dehumanizace lidských vztahů
undergoes irreparable harm due to a subversion of its rituals. Yet, Topol provides no answers to the problems inherent to the restructuring of rituals for a collective society, leaving the ending ambiguous. “So like all large dramatic works, Konec masopustu, too, has in it many possibilities of interpretation, which can never be completely exhausted”\(^97\) (F. Černý, Kapitoly 359). The institutions of society as they are shown in the plays of the 1950s and 1960s are questioned, subverted, and even destroyed, but the significance of this outcome is left up to the audience to decide for themselves.

**Theatrical Spaces and Imaginary Places in Topol’s Kočka na kolejích**

Josef Topol’s opening play at Krejča’s Theatre Beyond the Gate, Kočka na kolejích (Cat on the Rails, 1965), is a work divided into three “situations,” all of which take place in the same dramatic space. The action of the play centres on two characters, a man named Véna and his female companion Évi, focusing in particular on what Kraus, who acted as dramaturg for this play as well, called the “fundamental conflict of man and woman, the fatal and fateful divergence of their relations”\(^98\) (407). The title itself foregrounds this conflict: “kočka,” a Czech word for an attractive young woman, placed on rails immediately evokes Anna Karenina and all of the emotional, relational problems associated with that work. In addition, Topol’s play reflects Kohout’s Taková láška in its foregrounding of the personal, emotional issues of a female character. As the play opens, the two characters find themselves at a “whistlestop” station, where they sit down waiting for a train to take them to Prague. Despite a few interruptions from

---

\(^{97}\) Tak jako všechna velká dramatická díla, i Konec masopustu má v sobě mnoho množností interpretace, které nikdy nemohou být zcela vyčerpány.

\(^{98}\) na elementární konflikt muže a ženy, na osudovou a osudnou divergenci jejich vztahu.
characters arriving from the off-stage space, the play essentially consists of an extended conversation between the two lovers covering various topics, from their relationship and the life that they lead back in Prague to the fond memories of their past. At the end of the play, the train whistle blows, indicating its imminent arrival, and the stage abruptly goes dark, leaving the viewer to wonder what ultimately befalls them.

In part a function of the stage limitations of the Theatre Beyond the Gate, the use of space in Kočka na kolejích seems not to be as elaborate as in Konec masopustu: there are no set changes between the three situations, and the only set design indications are an old shed, a bench, a set of railroad tracks, and the shadows of a tree. Nonetheless, this limited variety of spaces and objects in the play does not mean that the play’s use of space is primitive. In fact, in the play, there is a fundamental interaction between the characters and their space that demands further investigation, particularly concerning the notion of waiting and the construction of the off-stage space by both audio and visual signs (noises, characters coming from other unseen locations, etc.) as well as the two main characters’ own references to the offstage space (deixis). Furthermore, throughout the discussions that take place in the course of the play, the characters create imaginary spaces either by evoking memories of places from their past or by imagining fanciful abstract spaces, both of which have their own functions within the play that are distinct from the setting Topol describes.

Thus, we can explore Topol’s use of space in this play in two different ways: first, in the way that the characters interact with their physical, material environment; second, in the way they construct entirely hypothetical or imaginary action spaces. Although whatever explicit action that takes place in the play does so in their physical environment, the resolution of the conflict (the couple presumably returning to Prague) depends solely on changes in that
environment. The sparsely populated stage space affords the two main characters very little motivation for meaningful conversation beyond their most immediate concern: the arrival of the next train to Prague. As the play unfolds, it is in the imaginary spaces that the characters create where meaningful exchanges between the two lovers are possible. Of central importance to Topol’s use of space in the play is the contrast between the physical world of the train station and the imaginary, fictional worlds that Évi and Véna create to escape it.

The opening description of the setting reveals very little detailed information about the location in which this play takes place. After the list of characters on the first page of the play, the line that follows gives the only initial reference to the play’s specific setting: “The action takes place at a whistle stop of a railway branch” \(^{99}\) (Cat on the Rails 96). Only through the dialogue later in the play do we learn that the characters are at a small station not far from Prague. This piece of information sets the play’s action on the periphery of society, a space that is neither urban nor rural. Topol’s more detailed description of the scene immediately before the action begins reveals very little about the environs, though it does provide the necessary details concerning the organization of the dramatic space:

The scene is a whistle stop of a railway branch line. Shadows of the spreading branches of a large tree fall on a wooden shed, the type found at whistle stops the world over. A single track runs alongside the proscenium. Upstage and parallel to it, a footpath, between the track and the shed. A little distance from the shed, a bench.

\(^{99}\) V noci na jedné železniční zastávce. (Kočka 2)
It is night.\(^{100}\) (Cat on the Rails 97)

While the first indications for the setting place the action of the play firmly in the periphery of civilization, these stage notes seek to do just the opposite. There are no distinguishing characteristics in this whistle stop; in fact, it is quite typical not just of whistle stops in Czechoslovakia, but anywhere in the world. In a sense, the scene takes place anywhere (or nowhere), indicating that the action itself is not limited in place or time, and is thus universal.

In his extra-diegetic remarks, Topol provides the viewer with very few objects that would appear on the stage. In fact, he limits the items included in the setting mostly to those that serve a direct function in the action of the scene. The setting, therefore, does not function as a means of helping the reader understand the specific social or historical context, but rather it divorces the play from such inquiries. Of particular importance to the action (or inaction) of the play are the railroad tracks, which serve as an ever-present sign of the connectedness of this location to the rest of the world. Throughout the play, the characters await the approach of the train that will lead them to Prague, making this location a sort of liminal space or crossroads between the outside world and the city. This liminal space creates a sense of purgatory, as the characters pass the time before finally moving on to their desired destination—Prague. The presence of the tree on the stage echoes Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, another play in which two characters hold a conversation while waiting for an event that seemingly will never come to pass.

The space that Topol creates in this play is extremely limited in immediately perceptible, material visual signs. “In this work he already thought about the chamber space, which Krejča’s

---

\(^{100}\) Stín rozložitého stromu, pod ním dřevěná bouda, jaká stává na železničních zastávkách. Podél proscénia ubíhá z portálu do portálu jednokolejná trat’. Mezi ní a dřevěnou boudou je pěšina, u které, stranou od boudy, stojí lavička. (Kočka 3)
Gate Theatre could provide\textsuperscript{101} (F. Černý, Kapitoly 360). To overcome his spacial concerns, Topol’s characters employ an almost constant use of deixis on the part of the characters in the play, as they refer to sounds or object that they can see, but which are not present on the stage or in the setting as it is described in the extra-diegetic remarks. Thus, while very little unfolds on stage, there is a steady stream of intrusions of the outside (offstage) space; indeed, these intrusions seem to be the main catalysts for whatever action takes place in the play.

**The Futility of Physical Space Interaction**

The first situation in Kočka na kolejích introduces the two main characters of the play as they wait for a train at the secluded whistle stop. Véna and Évi discuss various topics, especially the expected arrival of the train and the day’s events. Only after quite a long exchange do we discover the reason for their being at the train station:

Évi: Don’t you ever drag me into the countryside again.

Véna: Does it bore you to go hiking with me?

Évi: We fight our way through brush like badgers, ford rivers like horses and, like a couple of idiots, we get stuck at a whistle stop. No train ever ran through here. Look at the rails. They’re covered with rust.

Véna: It’s been raining.

Évi: Don’t remind me. I feel like a shirt—wash-and-dry … And wet matches. Won’t one catch? […] They crumble like cheese. Where are we?—Where are we, you and me?

Véna: Don’t ask me. We’re somewhere.

Évi: (sighs) Are we?

\textsuperscript{101} V této práci myslel již na komorní prostor, jaký mu mohlo poskytnout Krejčovo Divadlo za branou.
Véna: Well, we’re not nowhere, are we?
Évi: Nowhere! That’s all we’d need. (Cat on the Rails 103)

Thus, we learn that the characters went out of town for a short hiking trip, and they find themselves in a space somewhere between the countryside and the city. This conversation serves two functions: first, the exchange reveals that the two lovers are not getting along due to their being stranded far from civilization; second, the characters begin to debate where they are and what significance this has for their prospect of getting back to Prague. Évi’s questioning of where they are can be seen as either rhetorical, in the sense that it is meant more to disparage their surroundings (and subsequently Véna for leading them there), or literal, in the sense that she actually wants to know where they are and how they are going to get home. Véna’s response to her question simultaneously continues the banter by giving Évi a short response and raises the discourse to a more philosophical line of conversation. The conversation shifts from a discussion of their immediate physical whereabouts to a more metaphysical subject, the difference between being somewhere and being nowhere. In the end, this difference is only marginal, since both locations are indeterminate spaces, defying any specificity, much like Topol’s rather generic description of the whistle stop station at the beginning of the play.

---

102 Évi: Podruhý mě zase štvi do přírody!
Véna: Tebe otravuje jít se mnou na vejlet?
Évi: Prodiráme se houštim jako jezevci, brodíme přes řeku jako koně a potom čekáme na zastávce jak dva pitomci. Tady to vůbec nevypadá, že by tu někdy jel vlak. Vždyť ty koleje jsou celý rezavý!
Véna. Protože sprchlo.
Évi: To mi nepřipomínaj. Jsem jak vypraná košile, celá zplihlá…A sirky rozmočen. To by nechytla ani jedna?[...]Jako tvaroh. Kde to jsme! Kde to vlastně jsme?
Véna: Jo, na to se mě ptej! Někde jsme.
Évi: /Vzdychně/ Jen aby.
Véna: Přece nebudem nikde.
Évi: To by ještě tak scházelo! (Kočka 10-11)
This conversation tells us more about the space than any description that Topol provides the reader up to this point. The rust on the rails, indicating the rarity of passing trains, reveals that the location where this action is taking place is far from where the characters would like to be. This is what motivates Évi’s feelings of despair. Because of the relative seclusion and the seeming impossibility of ever getting away from this train station, Évi and Véna begin to explore their surroundings more thoroughly. At one point, Évi climbs onto the roof of the shack to get a better view of the environs in hopes of seeing a train, but she fails to see one. In fact, the shed itself is rotten, reminding her once again of their seclusion. Exploring their physical environment, as sparse as it is, serves as only a poor diversion from the drudgery of waiting on the bench. The train station, an unkept place of indefinite waiting on the margins of society, serves as the catalyst for mundane conversation. The dialogue is filled with the sort of awkward tension that arises when people have nothing to say but nonetheless feel a compulsion to say something:

Véna: Enough. Futility’s coming over me.

Évi: Oh, stop blabbering.

Véna: Where does it say two people who are together must blabber all the time? Who says so?

Évi: We don’t have to talk…We can be quiet.

Véna: Gape at the stars.

Évi: What?

Véna: The stars. Gape.

Évi: “Gape, gape”—Don’t talk like that.

Véna: One should be alone.

Évi: One is always alone, anyway.
Silence.

Véna: The thing is, one won’t admit it. You keep on forcing yourself to do things, and forcing everyone else. \(^{103}\) (Cat on the Rails 112)

The irony of this situation is the fact that because they are in a seemingly abandoned train station, there is really no need to communicate with anyone. They themselves admit that they do not have anything to say to each other and that their words are useless, yet they feel compelled to perpetuate the conversation. The silence lasts but a moment, even as the characters admit that there is no reason for them to speak. The futility that Véna speaks of relates not only to the perceived futility of their actions (waiting for a train in a seemingly abandoned train station), but also of their words (mere blabbering).

The characters’ reaction to this futile predicament involves two different responses to their immediate surroundings. Évi and Véna repeatedly invoke the offstage space, hoping that their salvation (in the form of an approaching train) might arrive soon or that a diversion (new people and new events) might arrive from somewhere else. From time to time characters briefly appear, but their interaction with the main characters is limited and does little more than indicate that, unlike at the train station, things are happening elsewhere. One boy enters and mentions that

---

Évi: Tak nežvaň. To je z toho.
Véna: Kde je psáno, že kdýž jsou dva lidi spolu, pořád musej mlejt hubou? Kde je tohle pořád psáný?
Évi: Vždyť se nemusí pořád mluvit…Může se taky mlčet.
Véna Čum na hvězdy.
Évi: Co?
Véna: Hvězdy. Čum.
Évi: „Čum Čum“—tak nemluv…to si vyprošuji.
Véna: Člověk má bejt sám.
Évi: Člověk je stejně sám.
/Ticho/
Véna: Jenže si to neumí přiznat. Pořád se do něčeho nutí a nutí k tomu ty ostatní. (Kočka 22)
other boys are following him; when the other boys arrive, they ask the lovers if they have seen a boy pass by, after which they exit the stage space to chase after him. Whereas the two lovers’ inaction at the station dominates the plot of the play, the actions of these minor characters underscore the static nature of the stage space and characterize the protagonists. In the absence of meaningful interaction with the outside world, Évi and Véna begin to create imaginary spaces in which they have control over their situations as a means of combatting the hopelessness of their current situation. In this way, although the action in the material stage space is limited, the imaginary space proves to be much more dynamic.

The use of the deixis in this play serves a very specific function: the characters invoke the offstage space to either alleviate the boredom of the whistle stop or to look for the expected train somewhere outside of the dramatic space. Their conversation is peppered with moments when one character or the other wonders what is happening in the distance and utters phrases such as: “where can that train be?” (102); “the train may be here any minute” (108); and “the train isn’t coming” (123). These are compounded by numerous wishful statements expressing the characters’ hope that the train will arrive. The train’s arrival, a validation of the characters’ patience, is perceived as an answer to all of their current problems that have emerged due to the isolated, liminal space (between urban and rural) in which they find themselves. From time to time, Évi and Véna express optimism: “if the train gets here by midnight we could be home by two”; “hell, we’ll get a light on the train”; and, “the train will be there soon” (132). However, not until the very end of the play with the arrival of the long-expected train does the offstage space offer any validation of Évi and Véna’s hopes. So, in the course of the play, they must find other more creative ways to make their miserable circumstance more acceptable.
Imaginary Space as a Form of Escape

The dramatic space in *Kočka na kolejích* is open, which allows for the possibility of intrusion from the outside space. Such intrusions occur at various times in the play both by three minor characters and by the train at the end of Situation 3. Nonetheless, Évi and Véna’s expectations of salvation from the off-stage space are repeatedly frustrated. The train never appears to them as they are searching and yearning for it. The futility of their seemingly endless waiting first motivates drug use in order to overcome the boredom of their situation, which in turn motivates a kind of play-acting, in which the characters construct imaginary spaces (expanding the presented fictional world) to distract themselves from the drudgery of their existence. The greater part of the dialogue between Évi and Véna unfolds as the characters navigate their memories and imaginary worlds; by evoking their memories and hopes for the future, Évi and Véna have the efficacy to exert some control over their own fates. In this way, the characters’ situation in the physical world (the train station) stands in stark contrast to that in their imaginary worlds, where they have the power to change their circumstances as they wish.

Évi: (pressing her hands over her face) Do like this.

Véna: What for?

Évi: Do it … What do you see?

[…]

Véna: Kind of a pinky darkness.

Évi: Wait, you’ll start getting pictures.

Véna: I’m seeing shimmers now.

[…]

Évi: Oh, it’s lovely. How do we see? Our eyes are shut. With the soul, I guess.
Véna: I rule this territory. (resting his head in her lap). Here is where I shall settle.¹⁰⁴ (*Cat on the Rails* 117)

Game playing serves as a pastime for the two characters aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of hopelessly waiting for the train to take them back to Prague. This particular exchange underscores the difference between the world in which the characters find themselves, where they are helpless to affect any change to their benefit, and their imaginary world, where they can be kings of a sort. While Véna worries continually that they will wait at the train station forever, he happily would “settle” (119) in his imaginary space, where he and Évi remain close. The desire for self-efficacy serves as the underlying motivator for these imaginings.

Despite their attempts to pass the time with play-acting, the sheer monotony of waiting for the train does not abate. As Burian observes, “They focus almost exclusively upon each other but sense an ultimate sterility and emptiness even there” (98), so as the evening unfolds, it seems that their games become less and less effective at lifting their spirits:

Évi: You could sky-walk if it weren’t for gravity.

Véna: (*sits up next to her, his chin on his knees*). Closed for inventory. Some other time.

*A silence.*

Véna: Let’s pretend we’re hiding in the woods.

---

¹⁰⁴ Évi: Udělej tohle.
Véna: A proč?
Évi: Udělej to! […] Co vidiš?
…
Véna: Takovou narůžovělou tmu.
Évi: Za chvíli se ti začnou dělat obrázky.
Véna: Už se mi dělají mžitky.
…
Évi: To je krásný! A čím to můžeme vidět, když máme zavřený oči? Asi duší.
Véna: /jí položi hlavu do klína/ Touhle končinou vládnou. Tady se uvelebím. (*Kočka* 26–27)
Évi: It’s fun the way we make things up like this …

Véna: Is it?

Évi: Yes. A lot of fun.

Véna: When nothing else works any more.105 (*Cat on the Rails* 119–120)

Véna recognizes that play-acting is a poor substitute for getting what one wants in the real world. An individual is only as efficacious as his surroundings allow him to be. The characters seem to have no means of extricating themselves from their purgatory without some intervention from the outside. The characters navigating the imaginary space are able to look in on their lives in the real world, including their unfulfilling jobs.

As the play continues, the characters’ immediate concern is preempted by personal issues that arise in the course of their conversation. By the end of the second situation, as the cracks in their relationship become apparent, Véna’s commitment issues begin to dominate the dialogue. At one point, Évi brings up marriage, a topic that seems to turn an already tense situation even more hostile:

Évi: Scared of the role, eh? You wouldn’t know where to put your hands during the ceremony. What face to fit the occasion.

Véna: That’s all I meant. Yes.

Évi: All right—marry me at midnight with your eyes closed.
Véna: It wouldn’t be the real thing. (Irritated.) You can’t do that goddamit! That’s what kids do—close their eyes when a car is about to hit them or when they jump out of a window …

Évi: More of your pearls of wisdom.¹⁰⁶ (Cat on the Rails 125)

This argument marks a transition in the way the characters interact with each other and their surroundings. Up to this point in the play, the characters have been searching for outside intervention and passing the time with play-acting. Following this exchange, their discussion seems much more earnest, as they begin to deal with the issues that have been hurting their relationship rather than continue to mask their problems with idle conversation. By the end of the play, the characters seem to resolve their disputes, but it remains undetermined whether this newfound understanding will survive the characters’ return to Prague. Since we do not actually see the train arrive, but only hear it approach the station, another possibility is that the lovers, who are sitting on the tracks, decide to end their lives (in an act reminiscent of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina and Kohout’s Taková láská). Whether or not the characters succumb to despair after understanding the nature of their discontent remains unresolved and ambiguous.

The parallels between Kočka na kolejích and Taková láská merit further investigation. First, both plays end ambiguously. In Kohout’s play, even though the Man in the Robe serves as the judge of the whole affair, the exact circumstances of Lida’s death remain a lingering question. We never discover if her death was a suicide or not. Similarly, in Kočka na kolejích, the play closes with the two lovers seated on the tracks, waiting for the train to arrive. Whether

¹⁰⁶ Évi: Ty se tý úlohy bojiš. Ty bys nevěděl co s rukama, až by sis měl brát. Jak se tvářít bys nevěděl!
Véna: O nic jinýho mi nešlo.
Évi: Tak si mě vem o půlnoci se zavřenýma očima.
Véna: To by neplatilo. /Podrážděně! To nejde—přece! To dělej malý harantí, že zavřou oči, když na ně jede auto, nebo když skáčou z okna.
Évi: Ty máš přirovnání! (Kočka 36)
they move to the side of the tracks and board the train for Prague or remain on the tracks to die is left up to the viewer to decide. In both cases, the aesthetic norms of Socialist Realism are subverted, as one of the necessary features of the aesthetic is to reduce as much as possible ambiguity in order for the play to be understood as intended. For both Kohout and Topol, ambiguity rather than clarity seems to be the ultimate aim.

With regards to the use of imaginary space, Kohout’s play also bears some similarity to Topol’s. As an analytical drama, Taková lásky presents the facts of Lida’s case out of causal-temporal order by means of projections, which expand the fictional world by means other than material set design. These projections serve the same function as Évi and Véna’s perpetual reminiscing and imagining of new spaces (activation of the imaginary action space), to give voice to possible worlds through innovative means. This subverts the traditional view of theatrical space as the venue for a play’s action; the creation of the space itself becomes the play’s primary action.

In the end, the train finally does arrive, but the characters do not react as one would expect from their continual play-acting to alleviate their boredom and their wishing they were back in Prague. In fact, it seems that the space that at first seemed so desolate and dreary has now become a new source of physical and emotional closeness. In the imaginary world, the characters are close to each other; however, all of the arguments that have taken place between Véna and Évi during the play in the material, fictional world lingered despite all their imaginative efforts to ignore their cause. Only after a serious exchange of feelings do these causes for the characters’ unhappiness fall away, leaving regret for the loss of their imagined oasis and an understanding of what truly matters to them: the love that each one has for the other.

A distant train whistle.
Véna: (puts his hand over hers. A beat). D’you smell those sleepers? Must’ve been lying here under this rail some ten or fifteen years, and still they smell of trees. Of resin and wood, fresh grass—a whole forest. Must be the way they dry and fry in the sun all day long … I do love you in my way, I suppose, but there are things that I know only now—What I mean is, tomorrow they’ll be gone. I go to sleep with one thing, wake up with another. It’s as though overnight I had been washed away, drenched through, wrung out—if we could stretch this now to last for life!—It wouldn’t be all that much longer, would it? It’s like now I see you, now I don’t, one day I look for you, the next I can’t—like swinging on a pendulum: when close I start to run away. And when I’m furthest off is when I’m close. You ought to stop me, never let me go. I’m close? Then grab. What with I don’t know. Not hands, no, you’d break something inside me—whatever spring it is that makes me work—

Évi: Now I don’t want a thing. I’m not afraid any longer.

Véna: But afterwards?

Évi: Leave that for afterwards. Just hold me for a while. Don’t say a thing.

Train whistle again. The sound approaches, changes into a sharp dissonance, everything goes dark abruptly. ¹⁰⁷ (Cat on the Rails 137–138)

¹⁰⁷ /Je slyšet vzdálené zahoukání vlaku/
Véna: /položi svou ruku na její, vteřiny/ Cejtiš ty pražce? To je zvláštní, ne? Můžou tu ležet pod tou kolejí už hezky dlouho, deset, patnáct let. A pořád je z těch kmenů cjejit strom! Smůla a dřevo, tráva, celej les! Asi jak do nich přes den praží slunce. Stejně si myslím, že tě miluji. Ale jsou věci, který vím jen ted’ a nevystačí mi to do zejítka. S něčím se večír odeberu spat, z něčeho jiného se probouzím, jak když mne přes noc něco vymaže. Kdyby to ted’ se dalo roztáhnout na celej život, jen o trošku dýl—! Chvíli tě vidím, chvíli nevidím, jednou tě hledám, pak zas nehledám, dneska jsem tady, zejtra budu pryč, jako když se mnoú hází kvyvalo: když jsem ti nejblíž, už ti utíkám, by sis mě měla přidržet, jak jednou přijdu, rukama, to by se ve mně něco zlomilo, nějak pero, co mě pohání—
Évi: Ted’ už nic nechci, už se nebojím.
Véna: Ale co potom?
Évi: To nech na potom. Schovej mě chvíli u sebe a mlč.

/Je slyšet houkání vlaku, zvuk se rychle přibliží, promění se v ostrý disharmonický tón, všecko se rázem zatmí/ (Kočka 52–53)
This exchange reveals a great deal about these characters, but also about their relationship to the space around them. The sleepers supporting the tracks signify much more than the wood of which they are composed; they stand as a vestige of time itself. The smell of the wood reminds Véna of the history of the wood, from its life as trees in the forest to the decades that have gone by in which the wood has supported the metal rails. This sign of the passage of time is what motivates Véna’s discussion of the pair’s uncertain future and his fears that the love that the two have found will be lost once they return to civilization. The physical distance that separates the characters from their ultimate destination is what motivated the dialogue and the actions of the main characters in this play, since without waiting for the train, none of those actions would have taken place; however, there is a shift in the concerns of the characters as the play comes to a close. The metaphysical distance that separates the two characters takes precedence over the physical distance between the train station and Prague. In the modern, civilized world, it has become increasingly difficult for human beings to connect on a meaningful level. Though at the beginning of the play, the characters feared that they would be stranded in a desolate “nowhere,” by the end, they recognize that living a life “somewhere” is not without its challenges either. Though they might return to Prague, the difficulties of maintaining a healthy relationship will still exist.

**Homeward Bound?**

In the end, the long awaited train is not the agent of change that resolves the conflict. Rather, the realization of the importance of emotional connectedness makes the train unnecessary as a means of resolving their primary concerns. When Évi proclaims that she “[doesn’t] want a thing” (138), it is apparent that the original goal of returning to Prague means
much less than her new-found connection to Véna. Bridging the divide between individuals proves much more important than bridging the distance between the peripheral and urban spaces.

Despite the unchanging setting and the limited interaction between the characters and the material space in the play, Kočka na kolejích reveals the fundamental connection that people have with the space around them. Furthermore, the play explores what this does to human interactions on a personal level. Topol actualizes the physical space of the setting with the presence of the rails, which indicate the space’s connection to other places (e.g., Prague). The much-awaited train eventually arrives by means of these rails, underscoring the connectedness of the dramatic space described by Topol and the imaginary action space of Prague, a space only alluded to by the characters. The resolution of the play’s external conflict relies completely on the rails and the train, since the only obstacle that stands between the two main characters and their goal (reaching Prague) is the distance.

Chekhov, in particular, seems to be a figure of importance in the staging of this, and other plays, at Krejča’s Gate Theatre:

> After the introductory presentation of two “small” one-act formations, Topol’s Kočka na kolejích and Ghelderod’s pantomime Maškary z Ostende, he found a collection of “large” stagings of Chekhov’s Three Sisters. (Patočková, “Krejčův český Čechov” 28)

In focusing on the physical and metaphorical distance between characters in the play, Krejča and Topol take up a dominant theme in Chekhov’s dramas and bring it up to date by underscoring the existentialist problems associated with difficulties in human communication.

The ennui caused by the seclusion of the train station motivates the characters to evoke all sorts of fictional, hypothetical spaces, in which all their wants are met. In this imaginary space, the characters enjoy total freedom and complete control, but this does not fundamentally change
their external circumstances. Establishing an emotional connection could not take place by engaging in the physical space or the ideal spaces of their memories. So, the characters in the physical world are detached from each other and from their destination; in their imaginary worlds, they become bound to each other if only ephemerally. In this way, characters imbue words with great signifying power to such an extent that they even affect the signification of the action space, which includes all character interaction; this constitutes a verbalization of physical relationships:

By a similar means it would be possible to describe the whole kinetic score of Krejča’s staging. Inspired by Topol’s text it lives as an autonomous and imanently developing reality, like a stream of natural positions and of spacial relations, which are “the setting” of the text, but in many places as if particular phases of this dynamic structures anticipate the text, as if they would become a direct impetus of a reply: words are the structure of on-stage reality brought to life.108 (Suchařípa 185)

By reconciling both their external circumstances and their hopes for the future of their relationship, the conflict eventually resolves itself. The feasible resolution of the play’s conflict is simple; the train arrives to take Véna and Évi back to Prague. However, the distance between the train station and Prague serves only as a sign for the emotional distance between the characters. By the end of the play, the original conflict of returning to Prague ceases to have any bearing on the characters, whose primary concern has become the preservation of the love that

108 Podobným způsobem bylo by možné popsat celou pohybovou partituru Krejčovy inscenace. Inspirována Topolovým textem žije jako autonomní a imanentně se rozvíjející skutečnost, jako proud přirozených pozic a prostorových vztahů, které jsou „prostředím“ textu, ale v mnoha místech jako by jednotlivé fáze této dynamické struktury text předbíhaly, jako by se stávaly bezprostředním podnětem replik: slova jsou strukturou jevištní reality vyvolávána k životu.
they have found for each other. The physical distance between the characters is inconsequential, since they have overcome the metaphysical distance that separated them.

Thus, in Kočka na kolejích, we can see a departure from the more ideologically oriented Konec masopustu, which foregrounds socialist collectivism. Topol’s first play at the Gate Theatre “ends with no resolution, but with the distinctly existential suggestion that their lives are in their own hands, from which one might infer that no social system is finally capable of satisfying the complex, often tormented drives posed by the human condition” (Burian, Modern Czech Theatre 98-99). On the one hand, like Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, which also foregrounds the existential questions of the human condition, Topol’s play ends without a concrete resolution; however, on the other hand, unlike in Beckett’s play, Topol’s characters at least have a modicum of efficacy in bringing about change to their existence, whether it be through the imaginary space (as they did throughout the play) or by ending their lives.

Conclusion

At first glance, the three plays discussed above seem to have very little in common; Člověk z půdy draws from the comedic, cabaret avant-garde tradition, while Konec masopustu and Kočka na kolejích tackle serious subject matter with earnestness. What all three plays share is that the dramatic and theatrical spaces are in constant flux. In Člověk z půdy, the theatrical space is simultaneously inhabited by real and imagined characters, creating a hybrid world combining reality and fiction. One of the main conflicts in Konec masopustu is the collectivization of private property; the plot of the play takes place at a unique time in history when private spaces have not yet become public spaces, but the property owner’s autonomy is rapidly dwindling over his land and legacy embodied by the imaginary space. The isolated and seemingly forgotten dramatic space in Kočka na kolejích is a source of boredom for the main characters, motivating a
kind of play-acting, which evokes imagined spaces, temporarily rendering their situation more endurable. This transforms the train station from a place of waiting to a place where the pressures and concerns of the material world do not come between the lovers. In all three of these plays, the dramatic or theatrical space becomes something more than an area where a play’s action unfolds. The space itself becomes at once a motivator for certain behaviour and a sign of values that are disappearing in contemporary society, rendering the accepted ideology and behaviour in the (dramatic and imaginary) spaces in the plays highly ambiguous.

Characters exert their own wills on the spaces that they inhabit. In some cases, as with Véna and Évi in Kočka na kolejích or Antonín Somr, his novel’s characters, and the jazz band in Člověk z půdy, various figures collaborate to adapt the space to their needs, rendering the stage a transitional space that is capable of multiple significations (of real and imaginary worlds) simultaneously. In this regard, the characters’ individuality defines the space they occupy, and indeed, it changes the very nature of that space. The way in which the space changes in Konec masopustu does not follow the same pattern. Here, rather than the protagonist’s individuality defining the space, we have quite the opposite: the action of others regarding the dramatic space defines the protagonist’s individuality. King’s land stands for his individuality to such an extent that his rebuffs of collectivization extend beyond the space that he occupies and become a struggle for his individual freedom.

Člověk z půdy and Kočka na kolejích emerge from drastically different traditions, and yet they have in common the limitations that small stages bring in creating fictional worlds out of material sets. In Začalo to redutou, Jan Císař notes that a new era of Czech cabaret theatre emerges from small theatres and serves as one important trend among many genres:
I don’t know what exactly is understood in the term “small theatrical forms.” You see: I don’t know where the word small was taken from. Perhaps it was chosen because the majority of those theatres and small theatres staged—and until today play—in small rooms. Perhaps it happened that way so that it would be appropriately stressed that the genres, which these theatres opt for don’t belong to those recognized, great genres: drama, opera, operetta, ballet, etc. 109 (291).

At the time it premiered, cabaret-style musical comedies like Člověk z půdy and other such small productions at the Reduta were unique in their approach to the small stage; however, by 1965, the small theatre scene in Prague came to include even some of the “recognized, great genres” like drama. In all three of these plays, the theatrical or dramatic spaces become the battleground upon which characters struggle for their individuality, and in some respects, as the theatrical or dramatic spaces change, the way that characters interact with each other changes as well. Certain characters who hold enough efficacy in their world to change (or in the case of King, to protect) the space that surrounds them are able to affect the way that others act around them.

Paradoxically, humans define the space they inhabit, but that space defines the interactions among the members in a society.

Chapter 4
Blurring the Lines between Object and Subject

This chapter addresses the use of objects in 1960s theatre and drama, especially as they affect human individualism and characterization. Two examples drawn from the Balustrade Theatre, *Král Ubu* and *Ztížená možnost soustředění*, present antithetical approaches to human beings and objects on the stage. The former reduces human figures on the stage to objects that are manipulated by the title character, whereas the latter presents inanimate objects with a spontaneous will normally bestowed upon human characters. *Král Ubu* stands as the supreme example of a subversion of Clark’s Socialist Realist character type model, and as Havel’s last play of the 1960s, *Ztížená možnost soustředění* begins to undermine the existential questioning of his earlier plays.

**The Role of Humans on the 1960s Czechoslovak Stage**

Human beings, like inanimate objects on the stage, can serve a variety of functions, from motivators of action, to mere decoration. Dogmatic discourse and Socialist Realist aesthetics in the Czechoslovak theatre to varying degrees effaced individual personalities and replaced them with unifying party ideals; similarly, the way directors used actors on stage and the way playwrights used characters on the page also have the potential to limit the role of individualism in inter-personal relations in theatre and drama. This defies the role of the actor as a being who is embodied by a character’s personality. In other words, the transformation of the actor into the character must remain incomplete.

In theatrical transformation, however, neither the spectator nor the actor should have the sensation of a complete transformation. The actor must not be lost in the character into whom he has
transformed himself: the action on the stage must not be sensed as reality but as theater. (Bogatyrev 52)

Reducing actors to puppets on stage, using actors to represent objects or objects to represent characters all produce a dehumanizing effect aimed at maintaining the performative nature of the theatre. In a number of Czech plays of the 1960s, these staging techniques enhance themes present in the plots of the plays themselves, so that the action unfolding on the stage and the means of staging that action work toward a unified end: the demonstration of the subjugation of the individual by structures (or figures) that are beyond his control. This gives rise to existential questions about the role of the individual in society.

When dealing with objects on the stage, we are in fact dealing with two distinct, yet related discussions: first, the role of inanimate objects on stage, especially props and scenery; second, the role of animate objects on stage (usually presented by human actors). Both types of objects can be classified according to their outward physical characteristics, their capacity as signifiers; yet, the latter proves to be substantially more complex, due to the hierarchy of signs inherent in human actors (their voice, their appearance, and their gestures), all of which work together to fulfill a given function. The a posteriori discovery of the actor as a system of signs, while an achievement of the Prague School, bears similarity to a number of prescriptive theories on acting, most notably, Edward Gordon Craig’s Übermarionette, Bertolt Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt, and to a lesser extent Vsevolod Mejerkhold’s focus on physiology and gesture in acting, all of which approach the actor as a stage material rather than an extension of the actor’s emotive state.

The complex sign system of the actor’s figure, which fills a wide range of functions in the context of the 1960s experimental theatre, takes on a variety of positions, from a dynamic,
central stage figure to a mere object manipulated by other figures on stage. This duality of manipulator and manipulated actualizes the human ability to assert or surrender his will according to the demands of the situation. According to Clark and others, Socialist Realism tended to reduce characters to types that served specific narrative functions; this utilitarian approach to characterization constitutes a sort of objectification of the individual. Just as *Zahradní slavnost* imitated Socialist Realist rhetoric to parody the genre, in *Král Ubu*, Jan Grossman uses human beings as objects in order to subvert the dehumanizing nature of the 1950s artnorm.

**Man or Object? – the Human Being on Stage**

What constitutes an actor? How does an actor present a character, and what are the means this actor has at his disposal in creating a figure on the stage? These questions comprise a great deal of scholarship on performance theory. In his *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam presents the actor as a signifier (as opposed to a vessel of inward feelings):

> Stage semiotization is of particular interest and importance with respect to the actor and his physical attributes, since he is, in Veltruský’s phrase, ‘the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs’ (1940, p. 84). In traditional dramatic performance the actor’s body acquires its mimetic and representational powers by becoming something other than itself, more and less than individual. This applies equally to his speech (which assumes the general signified ‘discourse’) and to every aspect of his performance, to the extent that even purely contingent factors, such as physiologically determined reflexes, are accepted as signifying units. (9)

According to Elam, an actor of “traditional” theatre, or more precisely an actor with a traditional understanding of the theatre, produces a *representation* of a character. By approaching the theatre semiotically, we arrive at a markedly different understanding of the nature of the actor as a mimetic representational force; in fact, he creates a *presentation* of a stage figure. Because the
spectator is limited to what he sees and hears in the theatre and is not privvy to the actor’s emotions or mental states, analysis of stage figures must rely on the signs presented by the actor, who works in concert with the other actors on the stage, the set, the music and other theatrical signs to create a figure. Analyzing a presentation, rather than representation, constitutes the true task of a scholar of the theatre, whether that scholar studies “traditional” (realist) or “modern” (avant-garde) theatre.

Veltruský comments that not only the human stage figure, but also the dramatic character by nature must reconcile the opposing forces he calls “spontaneity” and “determinateness,” which come into play on a stage where so many sign systems are present:

The dramatic character appears as a spontaneous subject forming his speeches on the basis of his own position in the extra-linguistic situation and, at the same time, as a meaning generated by these speeches (themselves formulated by the central subject) and placed by them in the extra-linguistic situation (itself a meaning, too). In other terms, there is an internal antinomy within the character, between his spontaneity and his determinateness.\(^\text{110}\) (Drama as Literature 69)

A character can produce utterances (speech) that affects the course of action in a play, thus demonstrating a spontaneity reflective of an acting subject; however, if we regard the character and his speeches as a product of “the central subject” (playwright), then these speeches that seem like spontaneous actions are, in fact, determinate. If a character’s actions are a reflection of determinateness rather than spontaneity, then that character functions more as an object than a

---

\(^{110}\) Osoba je spontánním subjektem, který utváří své projevy na základě stanoviska, jež zaujímá v mimojazykové situaci, a zároveň je do mimojazykové situace umintována smyslem projevů, které jí určuje ústřední subjekt. Je tedy osoba původcem svých projevů a zároveň pouhým jejich nositelem. Je psychofyzickým individuем a zároveň pouhým „místem“ v psychologické a předmětné situaci. Konkrétní utváření této antinomie, která je specificky dramatickým aspektem antinomie významové dynamiky a statiky, vyplývá z významové výstavby konkrétního dialogu. (Drama jako básnické dílo 77)
subject. In the dramatic text, the resolution of much of this duality depends upon what Veltruský calls the “central subject,” or playwright.

Spontaneity requires that the character’s attributes be as multifarious as possible, so that he will appear capable of the most diverse reactions and therefore will generally behave somewhat unexpectedly. Determinateness, on the contrary, tends to simplify the character’s attributes and reduce them to those by which he is associated with his context. A simplified dramatic character of this sort bears distinct traces of the intervention by which the central subject selects, from all the possible features, precisely those that are required by a given context; to put it differently, the central subject here creates the character “ad hoc,” for the needs of dramatic dialogue.\(^{111}\) (*Drama as Literature* 70)

When approaching theatrical performances and dramatic texts, the concept of the character poses a complex problem; one must identify those spontaneous forces and those forces that relate to the character’s determinateness. In other words, one must piece together whether a character is an acting subject, an acted-upon object, or occupies a position somewhere in between these two extremes. According to Veltruský, the central subject constructs characters in dramatic work based on the needs of the dramatic situation. He decides whether a character’s actions will appear spontaneous or determined on the stage, and thus he is responsible for deciding where characters belong on the continuum of acting subject or acted-upon object. Similarly, in the theatrical performance, the infinite possibilities that the human actor brings to the stage in the form of an actor’s figure and a character must be isolated as either elements of acting subjects and objects, which Veltruský classifies within a continuum of possibilities from acting subject on

\(^{111}\) Spontánnost osoby směřuje k maximálnímu rozrůznění jejích rysů, aby v osobě byly obsaženy předpoklady pro nejvrchnější reakce a jednání; její určení pak směřuje k zjednodušení a zredukování jejích rysů na ty, kterými je spjata se svým kontextem, nebot’ osoba takto zjednodušená nese zřetelné stopy zásahu ústředního subjektu, jímž byly z možných rysů vybrány ty, kterých je pro daný kontext třeba, tedy vlastně zásahu, kterým byla osoba vytvořena „ad hoc“, čistě pro potřeby daného dramatického dialogu. (*Drama jako básnické dílo* 77)
the one end to prop or scenery on the other. In this case, the playwright no longer determines characterization, but rather the director and in certain cases the actors themselves. The director might interpret characters that the playwright may have intended to be acting, spontaneous subjects as determined objects. This will be reflected in the staging; characters will then fulfill their roles in a prescribed manner. While ultimately the stage figure brings the character to life, this phenomenon is a process involving a number of mediators. On the one hand, the actor presents an individual reading of the instructions of the director, and on the other hand, he or she is affected by the actions of the other actors on the stage.

Veltruský demonstrates that the process of acting, which at first glance appears a spontaneous outpouring of emotion or a representation or embodiment of a character by a human actor, is, in fact, a complex sign system depending on a variety of forces. The actions of a given character appear more or less spontaneous depending not only on the actor’s figure, but also on a hierarchy of power. One character might be used as a tool or object by another, in which case, he or she undertakes actions prescribed by a dynamic situation. In fact, those actions performed by figures at the top of this hierarchy, even if they appear spontaneous, are also determinate: they depend to varying degrees upon the roles set out for them by the director.

Drama operates in much the same way. The central subject creates a scenario, a dramatic world with tension, and populates that world with dramatic characters, which follow a set of determined actions. These actions can be perceived as either spontaneous or determined depending on the function of the characters, but fundamentally, similar to the way that the actions of the actor in a theatrical performance are partly guided by the director’s instructions, the actions of dramatic characters are all determined by a higher power, the playwright. Nonetheless, the reader does not necessarily view all actions in a dramatic text as equally
determined. The playwright can still prescribe that a character’s actions be shocking or unexpected, or Machiavellian; in this case, the reader perceives a character as embodying a certain spontaneity or authority, even as the ultimate authority rests with the central subject.

In the Czechoslovak experimental theatre of the 1960s, a tension arises between the playwright and the theatre director. For example, Jan Grossman’s staging of *Ubu roi* at the Balustrade Theatre departs greatly from the dramatic text. The director shows little deference to the wishes of the dramatist, and ultimately he makes use of the dramatic text as one of many stage materials available to him. The creation of a character, then, at least partly becomes the concern of a director, whose primary function is to create a piece of performance art, not bring to life a dramatic text exactly as the playwright intended it to be played. If the dramatic text is a kind of stage material, then characters, too, would fall under that domain.

The playwright (in drama) and the director (in the theatre) ultimately play a central role in determining the relative levels of spontaneity and determinateness in the dramatic action and the actors’ performances; however, there is another mediating force that has the potential to regulate or liberate the actions of the characters in a play: the lead. In most plays (that is, plays with several or more characters) there is a hierarchy of dominance. One character has greater relative importance than another. This often, though not necessarily, includes characters in positions of authority over other character. Veltrusky tells us:

The figure at the peak of this hierarchy, the so-called lead, attracts to itself the major attention of the audience and only at times allows room for attention to be given to the supporting cast. At the same time, by giving impulses for action, the lead affects the performance of the rest of the cast, and at times may even act as their outright regulator. The spectator may still perceive these other
figures as acting subjects, but their subordination is evident.\textsuperscript{112} ("Člověk a předmět na divadle" 85)

It is precisely this dynamic, which comes to the fore in many Czech plays of the 1960s (such as the Model Drama), in which human characters operate according to a strict norm of behaviour. The lead actor assumes the position at the top of the hierarchy, upon which the central subject or director places the greatest amount of attention (in number of lines to deliver, prominence on the stage, and with regards to inter-personal exchanges). Structurally, the lead acts as a “regulator” of the actions of the other actors on the stage. Similarly, the character that he presents on the stage acts as the regulator of the actions of the other more minor characters; he is the fixed point around which the constellation of characters revolves. Thus, the lead actor portrays characters with great power relative to minor actors, whose actions are in many ways dictated by those of the main character portrayed by the lead. This is a key feature of a number of plays from the 1960s, but especially Grossman’s \textit{Král Ubu}, who takes command over minor characters in almost every scene.

The Übermarionette and the Actor

The theoretical model of the actor set forth by the Prague School bears marked similarities to that derived by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century British actor and theatre practitioner Edward Gordon Craig. In seeking to initiate a new theatre without the shortcomings of his contemporary stage, Craig asserted that the actor of traditional theatre, who typically attempted to project emotions from his own psychology, must be replaced by the

\textsuperscript{112} Postava, která stojí na vrcholu té hierarchie, tzv. hlavní role, stahuje k sobě většinu pozornosti diváků a jen chvílemi jí uvolňuje pro postavy vedlejší. Zároveň s tím, že dává impulzy k jednání, má vliv na výkony ostatních herců, ba leckdy se uplatňuje přímo jako jejich regulativ. Divák pocituje sice i ostatní postavy ještě jako jednající subjekty, ale jejich podřízenost je zřejmá. ("Člověk a předmět na divadle" 45)
Übermarionette, or human puppet. This does not mean that Craig was calling for human actors to move like marionettes, but rather that they approach their craft as if it were one part of the material that makes up a theatrical performance.

Craig was convinced that chance, unpredictability or spontaneity in the theatre is nothing to strive for:

“Art arrives only by design.”

This means that art demands planning and calculation. The actor driven by emotion and affect is also, according to Craig’s opinion, no material out of which art should be built. Therefore, Craig believed that through the introduction of the marionette on the stage, which is namely not conceited, capricious, or chaotic, the theatre could be fundamentally revitalized.113 (Laksberg 196)

Craig’s call for actors to become Übermarionette arises from his view that the craft of acting had been taking precedence over the performance as a whole. The cult of the actor, the belief that the actor enters a kind of trance and is swept away by an emotional connection to the personality of his character, introduced a great deal of uncertainty in performances. Like the theorists of the Prague School, Craig views the actor as the material, that is, a signifier that comprises a work of theatrical art (performance). Thus, though human beings exert a certain amount of free will in their actions (there are no strings attached to human actors), in Craig’s vision of the theatre, these actors must perform according to the prescribed directives of the director or producer, and not the capriciousness of the actor’s current emotional state. Craig’s theatre truly represents a top-down approach to performance where: “the actor has to fit into his place and obey the

113 Craig war davon überzeugt, daß der Zufall, die Aleatorik oder Spontaneität im Theater nichts zu suchen haben:

“Art arrives only by design.”

Dazu heißt: Kunst verlangt nach Plan und Kalkül. Der von Emotionen und Affekten getriebene Schauspieler ist auch nach Craigs Ansicht kein Material, aus dem sich Kunst aufbauen läßt. Deshalb glaubt Craig durch die Einführung der Marionette, die nämlich weder eitel, launisch noch chaotisch ist, auf der Bühne das Theater von Grund auf beleben zu können. (196)
instructions of the producer, who carries entire responsibility for the unity of the whole performance” (Bablet 105).

Craig envisioned the Übermarionette as a perfect actor, one whose entire physiology was under conscious control. Such an ideal, of course, could never truly exist: dust can make an actor sneeze, a cold can cause an actor to cough, and excessive sweating may cause an actor to wipe his brow. Nonetheless, a number of important traits of such an actor are replicable. While the actor cannot, as Denis Bablet puts it “[exercise] complete and permanent control over the movement of his body, the expression of his face, and his voice” (Bablet 106), he can subordinate his will to that of the director or producer, fulfilling prescribed actions (presenting a character) without “embodying” that character. In essence, while an actor cannot command every last muscle at all times, he can avoid entering a trance with the aim of becoming the character he is trying to portray. Craig’s notion of the Übermarionette was ultimately an attempt to change the way theatrical works were produced.

His argument was against the “actor,” but not against the human performer per se. He rejected the conventional approach to acting, together with those trained in it who were unable to rise above its vices. In his view, the major of these vices was the display of personality and emotions, which formed the main attraction of the existing theater but which put the body at the mercy of psychological forces under imperfect control at best. (Innes 123)

**A Note on Bertolt Brecht and the Verfremdungseffekt**

Incidentally, this attempt to separate the psychology of the human actor from his character is not strictly limited to the theatre of Edward Gordon Craig. For example, Bertolt Brecht’s theories concerning the Verfremdungseffekt (distancing effect) cover many of the same ideas as Craig’s writings on acting. Brecht sought to separate the psychology of the human actor as much as possible from the character he is portraying in order to establish the critical distance necessary
to signal to the audience that what is occurring on stage is a fictional play. This critical distance was then used to pull the spectator out of the fictional world. Brecht wanted his actors to not simply present their characters, but to present them critically. He believed that by alienating the audience from the characters (by breaking the unity of the actor-character relationship), the audience is in a better position to evaluate the actions taken by the characters in a play. Characters no longer represent a particular psychology, but a particular position within the structure of the play. In Brecht’s own words:

Nowadays the play’s meaning is usually blurred by the fact that the actor plays to the audience’s hearts. The figures portrayed are foisted upon the audience and are falsified in the process. Contrary to present custom they ought to be presented quite coldly, classically and objectively. For they are not matter for empathy; they are there to be understood. Feelings are private and limited. (Brecht 15)

How Brecht differs from Craig is the fact that he focuses greatly on the “meaning” of the play, and how the actor can help in the transmission of that meaning. For Brecht, the actor must abandon empathy in order to unleash the spectator’s reasoning faculties. This greatly changes the way that an actor presents his character to the audience in a Brechtian theatre. When asked how acting should be, Brecht’s answer sounds familiar: “Witty. Ceremonious. Ritual. Spectator and actor ought not to approach one another but to move apart. Each ought to move away from himself” (Brecht 26). This is the basis of Brecht’s notion of Verfremdung, which on the surface resembles Craig’s Übermarionette in that the actor is required to separate his own emotions with the character he is charged to portray. In both Brecht’s and Craig’s estimation, the actor becomes stage material.

Although Craig’s Übermarionette bears striking similarities to both Brecht’s notion of the actor and the Prague School’s theories on acting, these three concepts are all fundamentally
different. Craig and Brecht both derive their theories on acting not in order to explain observable phenomena as seen in any particular theatrical productions, but rather to bring about fundamental changes to the theatre itself. Craig’s aim was to correct what he saw to be the “vices” of his generation of actors and theatre practitioners: namely, that acting had become a kind of vaunted voodoo, where great actors transmogrify into fictional beings, and judgments about the quality of a production rest not with concrete material but with caprice and happenstance. His Übermarionette sought to address the shortcomings of the theatre by reducing the role of the human actor from that of the main attraction to one of various materials comprising a production.

In a sense, Brecht takes Craig’s notion one step further, by recognizing the artificiality of the actor in an aesthetic sense and making use of that artificiality in other realms, most notably socialist ideology. For example, in Brecht’s adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s Mother staged in 1970, the actress portraying the title character, Therese Giehse, refrains from embodying her character to create a critical distance between the actor and the character. This critical space is then filled by the ideology the mother supports, which is provided through an out-of-character reading of Marx and Gorki. In limiting the audience’s ability to become swept away in Giehse’s portrayal of the mother, a Brechtian approach to acting aims to create the critical distance he deemed necessary for the audience to draw more objective conclusions about the actions the mother undertakes. In Brecht’s conception of the theatre, the artificiality of the production serves the more fundamental goals of: first and foremost, entertaining the audience; and second, of convincing them of a particular set of opinions.

The Prague school, on the other hand, has no such aim towards the building of a new kind of theatre. The concepts of the actor, the actor’s figure and the character and their structures arise out of an investigation into various phenomena associated with avant-garde arts, especially
they conclude that the actor’s figure is a signifier that is not fundamentally a spontaneously acting entity, but in some respects an object. This object is by and large a manipulated stage material (much like the actor in Craig and Brecht’s theatres). Rather than attempting to change the theatre as Craig and Brecht aim to do, the Prague School applied theoretical criteria to existing performances, even those that do not follow the Brechtian or Craigian paradigms. Thus, although their conclusions bear striking similarities, the goals of these three conceptualizations of the actor prove to be quite disparate.

The Puppet and the Actor

Puppets constitute a liminal conceptual space between man and object, since they simultaneously present human (and non-human) characters on the stage, and yet they are inanimate objects constructed by an artisan out of wood, paper, or any number of concrete materials. Veltruský has shown that there is a continuum of the role of an actor, from total subject to total object. This continuum can easily be applied to inanimate objects as well. Puppets that present character subjects appear as spontaneously acting individuals, but this is far from the case. Obviously, a puppet (and consequently the character that puppet presents) cannot be a spontaneously acting individual, since all of its inherent traits are consciously created by an artisan, and all the gestures associated with the puppets actions are controlled by the puppeteer. Nonetheless, puppets, like human actors, bring to life human characters on the stage. It is this oscillation between an inanimate piece of wood and a seemingly living being that actualizes the concepts of control and individuality on the stage, since the viewer must make judgments concerning the spontaneity or determinate qualities of a given performance.
Craig lamented the rise of the actor in the hierarchy of signs on stage to the point that he proposed that actors would become puppets. As we have seen, this does not relate to their movements, but rather their role in the sign-conveying structure of the theatre.

What he [Craig] specifically refers to are the puppet’s “noble artificiality” in portraying abstract emotional stages rather than in projecting live emotions; its symbolic character, which presents human nature in generalized or generic, rather than individual terms; and its subordination to the aesthetic requirements of the drama. (Innes 125–126)

In reducing the importance of the actor in the theatre, Craig aimed to base his theatre on the pure presentational power of the human form without the connotations and expectations associated to egotistical actors. Both Craig’s Übemarionette and conventional puppets, as Innes shows, present a generic figure, not an individual. Craig consciously bases his theory on the Chinese theatre and Japanese Noh theatre, which characteristically employ highly stylized, symbolic gestures. In these theatrical traditions, “movements of the facial muscles are conventionalized; binding stipulations govern which facial expression should be used to express a given emotion relative to the character type and age and the nature, intensity, and duration of the feeling” (Brušák 68). Whereas Craig views it the job of the director to reign in the personality of the actor, in the Chinese theatre, mere convention suffices. Nonetheless, in both models (and in the puppet theatre), it is not the actor who is solely responsible for emotive signification, but also norms, conventions of perception and others involved in the theatrical production.

Characters on the stage are made out of the artificial construct known as the actor’s figure in the same way that Auguste Rodin’s Le Penseur is made out of marble and bronze (Zich 41). Ideally, every gesture, every movement of muscle, every fibre of an actor’s clothing is manipulated by a director to present a certain figure on the stage. In conventional theatre, this
system in its purest form is difficult (if not impossible) to achieve; yet, in the puppet theatre, by
its very nature, such a system is a necessity.

And the greatest wish we puppeteers are able to fulfil is the wish for power over others, the wish to “make ourselves felt,” to control our neighbors’ destinies. Whether artist or craftsman or both, we create and populate our own world, and do to our subjects as we think fit. Maybe we behave as just and worthy gods, maybe we reveal the Hitler in us, but we undoubtedly control a kingdom of our own. We rule. Our power and authority are unquestionable. (Bussell 14–15)

Creating a character out of materials like wood and string, as Bussell points out, renders the puppeteer a kind of god, since he is endowing objects with force that is not inherent to them. In a sense, he animates the inanimate. Conversely, the puppet itself can be seen as a kind of god, since as Victoria Nelson reminds us: in the times of early man, “art served religion, not entertainment. The puppet was a god, or at the least a sacred talisman” (25). By no means should the theatre be regarded as a religious gathering, nor should actor’s figures or puppets be worshipped; however, these two antithetical propositions do have a bearing on our discussion of man and object in the theatre. When directors treat actors as puppets, material with which to create characters, like a god, they assume the supreme position in the hierarchy of power in the theatre. Within a play, a character can exhibit this same kind of power over other characters (by manipulating them or controlling them). Thus, they are both the recipients of power (from the director) and wielders of power (over other characters). This proves to be a fundamental feature of many of the plays in the 1960s Czech avant-garde theatre, where human individuals are often simultaneously dominated and dominating, a struggle that applies generally to the human experience.
Ubu roi: a Lesson in Human Objectification and Manipulation

Alfred Jarry’s provocative *Ubu roi* (1896) ushered in a new era of theatrical expression in which the concepts of “high” and “low” art no longer apply, and satire, parody, and pastiche constitute a dominant mode. The play, which was originally conceived by the playwright and his schoolmates as a parody of a particularly despised teacher, follows the fortunes of a grotesque and morally bankrupt man named Père Ubu. In an effort to gain wealth, Ubu is convinced by his wife, Mère Ubu, to usurp the throne of Poland by murdering its King, Wenceslaus. After the coup, Ubu becomes the King of Poland, exerting his authority over the nation, subjugating the nobility and usurping their lands and property, and putting to death any resistance to his iron grip on Poland. In the end, the Russian tsar declares war on Poland, overruns King Ubu’s army, but not before Ubu has escaped justice.

Like Shakespeare’s Macbeth, it is primarily the title character’s wife who devises the stratagems that drive the plot of the play. Ubu has little or no interest in the intelligent strategizing necessary to seize and maintain power; he is far more concerned with the pleasures of the world—food, money, drink—than exercising his authority in an effective way. Thus, Ubu constantly alienates his subjects by stealing their land and livelihood, indulging in his passions, and even executing those who he sees as obstacles to his gaining more wealth. He makes the decidedly foolish and short-cited blunder of constantly treating his court with cruelty for his own pleasure, a course of action that Machiavelli specifically admonishes in his treatise on the exercising of political power, *The Prince*:

> If you take control of a state, you should make a list of all the crimes you have to commit and do them all at once. That way you will not have to commit new atrocities every day, and you will be able, by not repeating your evil deeds, to reassure your subjects and to win their support by treating them well. He who acts
otherwise, either out of squeamishness or out of bad judgment, has to hold a bloody
knife in his hand all the time. He can never rely on his subjects, for they can never trust
him, for he is always making new attacks upon them. (31)

Ubu in no way represents a Machiavellian figure. He simply uses his authority for immediate
personal gain without any outward displays of contemplation or strategizing. Many, including
Judith Cooper, have noted that Ubu is a grotesque figure who indulges in almost every vice,
especially gluttony, “but gluttony is only one aspect of Ubu’s greed; he is avid to acquire riches
of any kind. His decision to murder the king and usurp the throne is, as Mère Ubu foresaw,
entirely motivated by greed and not at all by political ambition” (Cooper 61). Greed is not a
character trait that in and of itself can cause trouble for a ruler, but greed combined with, as
Machiavelli puts it, constantly wielding a bloody knife, has the potential to ruin a reign.

Although Ubu exhibits very few leadership qualities, he nonetheless assumes a position of
authority. His actions on stage uniformly strip the other characters of their individuality. He
denies them basic rights that they previously enjoyed under Wenceslaus, but more importantly
for our discussion of man and object in the theatre, he controls their very movements. Much like
the actions of Hugo Pludek in Zahradní slavnost, Ubu and his wife assume the supreme position
in the theatrical world’s social hierarchy, but they also assumes the supreme position in the
structural hierarchy of the play itself. For much of the play, their actions determine the actions of
all other acting subjects, rendering them acted-upon objects and demonstrating Veltruský’s
subject-object continuum.

**The Role of Puppets and Actors in Jarry’s Ubu roi**

Jarry’s *Ubu roi* truly represented a new approach to theatrical production, and some have
argued that this play was the genesis of what would become Dada during the First World War,
the 1920s avant-garde, and subsequently the avant-garde theatre of the 1960s. While much discussion centres on the characters’ use of language in the play, especially Ubu’s utterance of “merdre” (a kind of deformation of the French word for “shit”) in the opening scene of the play, the method of acting proposed by Jarry for this play proves to be one of its more remarkable qualities that exerts its influence well into the twentieth century. Much as Craig proposes the Übermarionette as a solution to perceived problems in contemporary theatre, Jarry turns to the marionette as a means of liberating the theatre from the grip of the actor.

The Jarryesque actor is stripped of all identity. He becomes a living marionette whose body is altered in the function of the character, whose voice is dehumanized and whose gestures are reduced to an infantile mechanism. The actor, enclosed into a body of cardboard and tissue paper avoids any incarnation of the character. The actor’s identification with his character conforming to the realist tradition does not work. He is not the character; he represents it in a non-figurative and synthetic way. The actor brings himself closer to a distanced acting. Just as accessories are emblematic, Jarry asks the actor for impersonal acting, erasing himself behind the role.\textsuperscript{114} (Jopeck 21)

Before Craig devised his Übermarionette, Jarry was calling for his actors to become objects, which he could manipulate with complete control. These actors are not artists creating a character out of emotions, but objects that signify characters on stage, or as Jopeck says, impersonal and emblematic actors. Ubu, then, cannot be seen as a real human figure with his own psychology derived from an actor’s experience, but a determined entity driven by various impulses. Jarry’s “infantile and mechanic” actor in “cardboard and tissue” underscores the fact

\textsuperscript{114} L’acteur jarryque se dépouille de toute identité. Il devient une marionette vivante, dont le corps se déforme en fonction du personnage, dont la voix se déhumanise et dont la gestuelle se réduit à une mécanique enfantine. L’acteur enfermé dans un corps en carton et en tissu évite toute incarnation du personnage. L’identification de l’acteur avec son personnage conformément à tradition réaliste ne fonctionne pas, il n’est pas le personnage; il le représente de façon non figurative et synthétique: L’acteur se rapproche d’un jeu distancié. Comme les accessoires sont emblématique, Jarry demande à l’acteur un jeu impersonnel, de s’effacer derrière le rôle. (Jopeck 21)
that the theatre fundamentally comprises aesthetic objects, from props and backgrounds to human actors and their speech. This new understanding of the theatre begins a process of European theatrical development away from the realist and the naturalist to the abstract and the avant-garde. The theatre moves away from the business of delivering messages or meanings through characters and instead becomes the milieu for experimental performative art.

Jarry’s *Ubu roi* debuted in early December of 1896, drawing large amounts of negative (and positive) criticism in the process. Some later critics, like Martin Esslin, have demonstrated the connection between this event and the eventual development of Dada, the avant-garde, and the so-called Theatre of the Absurd. Ubu’s grotesque over-indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh, his seemingly idiotic, yet cunning actions and dialogues belie a figure radically different from those of the traditional 19th Century stage. Perhaps it is no accident that Jarry envisioned his play as a true puppet play rather than a conventional stage production. The dehumanized nature of puppet theatre allows for greater dehumanization in plays on the conventional stage. The fresh and provocative nature of the play demanded a new approach to the entire system of signification on stage, so “Jarry, who had not forgotten his experiences with marionettes in the attic at Rennes, realized that there was only one suitable way to stage *Ubu Roi*, and that was *en guignol*” (Cooper 30).

Jarry’s actor must become a kind of puppet in order to adequately present the sort of play the playwright had in mind. In order to achieve the playwright’s vision for theatrical performance, Craig’s actors must become Übermarionettes. These sorts of affronts to traditional acting at the turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries point to a fundamental shift in both the *modus operandi* and the very purpose of the actor on the stage. This approach to art comes to greater
prominence in the Dada movement and the avant-garde trends of the 1920s, where it finds fertile soil in the Czech lands.

**From Ubu roi to Ubu králem: Alfred Jarry in 1920s Czechoslovakia**

The theatrical work of Craig and Jarry achieved continent-wide attention, as the avant-garde theatre of the 1920s dominated the theatre scenes of almost every European nation, from France and Italy to Germany, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. This trend in the history of European theatre includes both the way in which plays were staged (the acting, the lighting, costumes and all other devices) and in the kinds of plays being staged. Jarry’s *Ubu roi* serves as an example of this phenomenon as it took shape in the Czech lands.

*Ubu roi*, or *Ubu králem* as it was translated into Czech by Jiří Voskovec, was one of many avant-garde productions of the 1920s, but it is a testament to the importance that this particular play has in the history of modern theatre that many of the great innovators of the period collaborated in its being brought to the stage in Prague:

In Prague, *King Ubu* was staged for the first time in the *Liberated Theatre* on the 14th of November, 1928 under the direction and staging of Jindřich Honzl and under the creative collaboration of Jindřich Štyrský. In the main roles were Jan Werich (Father Ubu), Světla Svozilová (Mother Ubu), Jiří Voskovec (Captain Obruba).115

This production at the Liberated Theatre became part of the avant-garde repertoire of foreign and domestic plays that would later in the 1960s become the basis of further inspiration and development of experimental theatre. Honzl’s direction and the acting of Voskovec and Werich

bring to the Czech stage many of the theoretical issues so much at stake at the turn of the century in the debates surrounding Jarry and Craig.

The Czech acting in the 1928 Liberated Theatre production of *Ubu králem* corresponded more or less to the notions of acting espoused by Jarry, Craig, and countless other 20th Century theatre practitioners. In particular, it is the functions of the actor, the object, and the character that are actualized in the play. As some have noted about this particular production, “we see that the actor, character and decoration here partially or completely change their functions, that the character is separated from the actor, the actor became decoration, and the decoration the character”\(^{116}\) (Obst and Scherl 101). The fundamental feature of the acting in this play is the ambiguity between the actions and the perceived intentions of the characters. The audience must discern to what degree Ubu and many other characters are spontaneously acting individuals and to what degree they are manipulated puppets of others. By constantly questioning the function of a given figure (whether human or inanimate), the play takes on a greater number of possible interpretations. In fact, the basis of conventional theatre—the relations between characters in the form of dialogue—serves not to reveal inner psychologies of those characters, but to expose them as mere figures that can easily be replaced by decorations. The top position of the hierarchy is no longer solely the human actor.

Honzl’s direction of the 1928 Liberated Theatre staging of *Ubu králem*, like much of his other work at the theatre, emphasizes the importance of on-stage objects. Rather than filling the theatrical space with unnecessary objects for the sake of creating a realistic, fully fleshed-out

---

\(^{116}\) Vidíme, že herec, postava a dekorace si tu částečně nebo úplně vyměňovaly funkce, že postava se oddělila od herece, herec se stal dekorací a dekorace postavou.
setting, he includes only those objects that are of direct use to the human actors or those whose signification bears significance to the actions unfolding on the stage.

The meaning of the prop on Honzl’s stage again results from that which we have written about the whole style of Honzl’s work. He restricted the stage to only functional objects, to things that become parts of the scenic action or support it. And objects—or in theatrical terms, stage props—are now realities, which are mostly connected with the action of the character of the physical world and are sometimes directly part of his outward appearance (gloves, pipe, cane).117 (Obst and Scherl 105)

Thus, in Honzl’s theatre, the object takes a prominent place within the hierarchy of signs. Unlike the traditional theatres of the 19th Century, where the actor and in particular the lines the actor delivers drove the action of the play, the avant-garde began to use objects and the manipulation of objects as the focus of its productions. This shows a marked departure from the conception of the theatre as venue primarily for the discourse of abstract ideas or emotions toward a concept of the theatre as primarily a venue for performance art. Thus, Ubu králem stands as an example of the shift in focus of a burgeoning experimental theatre that approaches material objects in a new light. Václav Havel notes of the production: “it was a performance in every way interesting,” particularly as an “absurd parody of political history and the pseudoideals of the bourgeois world”.118 (Eseje 408).

117 Vyžnam rekvizity na Honzlově jevišti vyplývá již z toho, co jsme napsali o celkovém stylo Honzlovy práce. Omezoval scénu jen na předměty funkční, na věci, které se stávají součástí scénické akce nebo ji podmiňují. A předměty—nebo v názvosloví divadelním rekvizity—jsou právě skutečností, které jsou hmotného prostředí nejvíce spojeny s akcí postavy a jsou někdy přímo součástí její vnější podoby (rukavice, dýmka, hůl). (105)
118 Bylo to představení v každém případě zajímavé…absurdní parodie politických dějin a pseudoideálů buržuaziňho světa…
Ubu Returns in a New Context: Král Ubu

After over thirty years away from the Czech stage, Ubu appears once again in Prague, only this time under the direction of Jan Grossman at the Theatre on the Ballustrade. Grossman’s Král Ubu, which premiered on May 18th, 1963, was as one of many theatrical productions from the early 1960s that breathed new life into the Prague theatre scene. The appeals of a play concerning the despotic rule and eventual downfall of an absurdly foolish man could easily be viewed through an overtly political lens; however, it is mostly in the means of staging the play (and not its subject matter) where its Král Ubu demonstrates the development of theatre craft in the Czech lands.

In many respects, Grossman’s production is the descendent of Honzl’s 1928 production, and the avant-garde trends that dominated the 1920s appear once again in a new guise. Where Honzl sought the resurrection of the object on the stage so that dialogue once again becomes one of many signifying mechanisms in a play, Grossman uses these objects to devastating effect. The line between spontaneous human characters and lifeless stage props is blurred to such an extent that the central conflict of the play is no longer Ubu’s struggle with his subjects or the tsar of Russia, but rather the struggle between man and object. Just as Hugo Pludek’s manipulation of bureaucratic language reduced human characters (including himself) to cogs in a machinery incapable of individual creativity, Ubu’s manipulation of on-stage material (human and inanimate) underscores human beings’ fundamental lack of free will. Human behaviour, signified by the actions of the actor’s figure on the stage, descends into a series of determined actions devoid of any obvious internal impulse.

A version of this play is available on DVD from Reflex videos (2006).
In examining the use of stage materials, both human and non-human, in Grossman’s *Král Ubu* within its extra-theatrical context, a common theme of loss of individual identity emerges. Practitioners in this era of Czech theatre develop this theme from a variety of sources. In some respects, as we have seen, this aspect of the 1960s Czech theatre is an extension of the Socialist Realist tradition of the 1950s, but in terms of staging, it also extends further back to avant-garde roots in the 1920s. Both Grossman’s choice to stage another Ubu play and his means of producing the play allow for the view of the 1960s not as solely an extension or repudiation of Socialist Realism (and the regime that demanded it), but also a return to a tradition that had been interrupted by war and a subsequent hostile political climate.

**Man and Object in *Král Ubu***

The opening scene of the Theatre on the Balustrade’s *Král Ubu* takes place in Ubu’s bedroom, which is sparsely adorned. Very few objects appear in the scene: a table with gratings attached to both ends signifying a bed, a so-called “pataphysical machine” comprised of various household items, two trash cans, two step stools, a ladder and a few boxes. These objects, for the most part comprise the only inanimate objects used in the entire play. In the scene, Ubu and his wife discuss the Václav’s (Wenceslaus’s) rule of Poland. Echoing (or parodying) Lady Macbeth, Matka Ubu manipulates her husband into undertaking the overthrow of the throne that he might become the new ruler of Poland.

As the scene is coming to a close, rather than dropping curtain for the scene change, the stagehands walk out during Matka Ubu’s monologue and begin rearranging the various objects into a new configuration. This on-stage occurrence has multifarious effects on the play itself. First, by distracting the viewer during pivotal points in the dialogue, when Matka Ubu is developing her stratagems, Grossman underscores the importance of the objects on the stage and
their arrangement. This disrupts the traditional notion that plot and dialogue are the most important sign-conveyors in a play. In this play, the underlying action relates as much to the manipulation of objects as it does to the plot itself. Second, the role of certain figures in the play is already in doubt; are these figures “stagehands” or actors in their own right. By definition, since these “stagehands” are human beings taking part in action on a stage, they must be considered actors, even if their movements are highly determined (by the necessities of the new configuration of objects in the scene change). If these figures are actors, then the hierarchy of actors, the separating of human parts according to the actor’s prominence in the play (creating so-called “leads”) comes into doubt. Matka Ubu only appears in a slight majority of the scenes in the play, whereas these stagehands appear in every scene. They assume the critical role of determining the limitations of all other actors’ movements in the following scene, and they draw the audience’s attention due to the fact that allowing stage hands to prepare a scene while the previous scene is ongoing is a highly unexpected means of staging a play.

In the transition from scene 3 to scene 4, the stage hands rearrange the on-stage objects once again, such that the table and grates that once formed Ubu’s bed become a balcony from which King Václav conducts a military review. This gives Ubu, who associates himself with the dragoons, the opportunity to get close enough to the king to assassinate him. After the stage hands rearrange the table, grates and boxes, they move from the left side of the stage to the right, saluting and shifting their bodies to the beat of a military march. This constitutes the first time that the stagehands take an active role in the actions of the play beyond that of constructing the setting for the following scene. They can no longer be viewed as simple stagehands, but nor can they be seen as mere parts of the scenery indicating a military setting. Their role is ambiguated
by the fact that they fulfill multiple functions simultaneously. In this respect, human figures do far more than present a given role; they can, in fact, embody several roles at once.

This phenomenon is not limited to the stagehands, but also to many of the ‘true’ characters in the scene. During the military review, the king’s military advisor announces a specific regiment, signified on stage by one man wearing a bicorn and a uniform. This figure marches from the left side of the stage to the right, saluting and goose-stepping to the beat of the pervasive military march. Once he reaches the far right side of the stage (which takes approximately 15 steps), he quickly marches backwards to the far left of the stage, whereupon he resumes his march from left to right. In this way, one figure signifies an entire regiment. Once the music stops, the whole regiment has passed by the viewing platform, so the figure crouches and crawls from the right side of the stage to the left in full view of the audience. At this point, the military advisor announces the next regiment, and the figure begins the process again. This occurs for a total of four iterations. Thus, this figure, who at first seems to signify a single soldier, comes to signify a whole regiment and finally signifies the entire Polish army. The artificiality of this signification is entirely laid bare before the audience.

Soldiers by nature fulfill a de-personalized function. They wear uniforms in an effort to establish total uniformity; they are organized in numbered platoons, which comprise regiments, which occupy one position in a hierarchy. In serving as a symbol of the army itself, a soldier’s uniform on the stage effaces the individuality of the character being portrayed. In terms of the structure of the scene, this figure occupies a very specific function: instead of portraying a character, the figure becomes another material out of which the set is made. Just as the table, the grates, and the music denote a specific setting (in this case, a military review), the figure merely signifies a given location. His march depends entirely upon the military advisor’s announcement
of a given regiment, and the figure’s march continues unimpeded regardless of the actions of the characters in the scene. His movements become highly mechanical, automated, and impervious to distractions (like the assassination of the king), in much the same way that the march music continues regardless of the characters’ discourse.

The fact that the march continues even though the king is being murdered bears great importance in the play. Once the review begins, those individuals who march perform their determined actions regardless of the circumstances. Even though the king, the figure whose function it is to review the troops, is dead, the march continues without him. Once the machinery is set in motion, the free will of the individual disappears entirely, and an entire set of on-stage actions become mechanical. The marching figure in this scene underscores the fact that these actors are presenting figures on the stage, and in no way are they embodying characters with individual psychologies or emotions. The soldiers display no signs of contemplation concerning the purpose of their actions.

Even the actions of Ubu, who murders the king and assumes the role of the new King of Poland, appear determined by those of other characters. In the opening scene of the play, we see that he is being manipulated by his wife. Ubu’s murder of the king is characterized by highly artificial movements, like those of a puppet. The murderous act appears to be more akin to pretending to murder than actual murder. When Ubu begins his attack, the king’s men jump up and assume the pose of fencers, demonstrating a defense of the king, without actually drawing swords or clashing with Ubu and his men. In the end, the violent action in this scene is tainted by a comic level of determinateness. Figures like a usurper or a sovereign, which one would expect to display a great deal of internal force, seem like puppets on a string.
Ubu’s final line of the scene “and so the crown is mine” (tak a koruna je moje) emphasizes the flatness of these characters. Simply by removing the king from his throne, Ubu is able to ascend that throne himself. He easily replaces the figure at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Like Hugo Pludek in *Zahradní slavnost*, Ubu is completely disengaged from any personal conflict, but rather reacts to each situation by assuming a position regardless of what that might mean. Hugo manipulates bureaucratic jargon to assume authority without ever necessarily believing in what he says. Ubu usurps the throne because he is in a position to do so, acting without displaying remorse or any outward signs of introspection concerning the significance of such an action.

Scene 5 takes place in a church, where the former queen grieves the loss of her husband. During the transition between scenes 4 and 5, the music changes from the boisterous and pervasive military march of scene 4 to the austere organ music of a church. The stagehands appear on stage once again, this time wearing bed sheets, evidently signifying the robes of acolytes. They move the grates from directly in front of the table to either side of the table, and small steps (which served as the stairs to the king’s viewing platform) are moved from the sides of the table to the front, suggesting a chancel and high altar. The garbage cans, which have served as such in every scene up to this point, are moved to the sides of the stage and opened, suggesting baptisteries. After the scene has been set, two of the stagehands remain on the stage as acolytes for the church, but the third ascends the steps of the chancel, stands on the high altar with one arm raised and assumes an air of tranquility. He remains in this position for the duration of scene 5, signifying a statue.

The creative use of objects in scene 5 serve a variety of functions, ranging from the ritual function to the satiric function. The interchangeability of material objects on stage, typified by
the use of a garbage can as a baptistery, introduces a new level of critical distance on the stage. Baptisteries and other ritual objects, signify a sacred nature. If an object is sacred, it is by definition “set apart” for a specific religious function: in this case, serving as a vessel for holy water. By using a garbage can to signify an object of holiness and solemnity, the stage becomes a realm of contradictions. That which is commonly viewed as ritually set aside for the holiest of functions is signified on the stage by that which is used for refuse. Unlike in *Konec masopustu*, in which the collective aims to destroy the Church as an institution in order to exert more power of individuals, the undermining of the Church in this play serves the function of satire, inviting the viewer to laugh at that, which should be taken seriously. The mixing of the sacred and the profane for comedic purposes traces its lineage to some of the earliest literary forms in the Czech lands. Jarmila Veltruský, referring to the mediaeval farce “Mastičkář” (“The Ointment Salesman”), notes that:

> This festive laughter mocks, degrades and debases all that is normally considered sacred, noble and exalted; since Christian teaching and worship were the most sacred realities for medieval society, it was natural that it should parody and ridicule them. But the purpose of the mockery is not to negate or destroy but to renew and regenerate. (316)

By mocking religious piety, the mediaeval play opens the spiritual realm to laughter, which in turn casts it in a new light. In *Král Ubu*, a similar phenomenon takes place; commonplace objects, in particular trashcans, come to signify religious objects. The sacred meets the profane on stage, which in turn throws into sharp relief the religious and the theatrical. By debasing religion, the play subjects it to mockery; however, unlike the mediaeval play, which was staged in a time of submission to Christian dogma, mocking religion does not renew it, but the theatre.
The irony of such a choice of signifier has a twofold effect: the first is grotesque, since the garbage can acts as a liaison between the sacred (holy water) and the profane (garbage); this grotesque feature of the sign-system leads to a second effect, humour. Later in the scene, when Captain Čuřislav walks past one of the baptisteries, to his surprise, the lid opens automatically. He proceeds to shut the lid of the baptistery garbage can, but as he does this, the lid on the opposite side of the stage opens. In a sort of vaudevillian gag, Čuřislav moves back and forth, closing one of the lids, noticing the opposite lid is open, and closing that lid, repeating the process. Initially, this sort of object manipulation shares a great deal with Jarry’s original intent of the play as a provocative satire, evident in the plays opening line of “merdre.” The grotesque and the profane find their place in a setting traditionally (by nineteenth-century Realist values) viewed as inappropriate. In the age of the avant-garde, plays no longer fulfill the role of purveyors of nobility. The grand ideas of the 19th Century were replaced by humorous, satiric antics designed to make fun of them. In 1896, such a blend of the sacred and the profane was decidedly provocative, but by the second half of the 20th century, extreme examples of the manipulation of on-stage signs serves a different function: rather than seeking to provoke the audience, this gag demonstrates a direct links to the theatre’s avant-garde roots, pointing to figures like Jarry, Honzl, and other Dada theatre practitioners, as if to lay bare the play’s performative lineage.

The stagehand’s objectification in the form of a statue creates a tableau vivant, extending the grotesque garbage can gag beyond a momentary source of amusement and into a central feature of the entire fifth scene. Much like the uniformed soldier marching in the military review of the previous scene, here the stage hand functions as a piece of the set. In assuming a pose and maintaining it throughout much of the scene, he effectively becomes a statue, fulfilling a
necessary signifying function in the establishment of the milieu of the church on stage. At the beginning of the scene, the deposed queen of Poland kneels before the statue, establishing a concrete link between the signifying function of the stagehand in establishing the scene and the ritual function that that specific scene demands. Later in the scene, Čuřislav enters the chancel and approaches the statue. This is an obvious affront to the sacred nature of the object; yet, Čuřislav seems undisturbed until he walks past the baptistery. Once he closes both lids, he attempts to exit the stage, but as he walks past the garbage can for the last time, the lid opens. His reaction to the opening of the final lid is to blame the statue, turning and yelling “Chlape!” (Hey, man!). Čuřislav’s actions and subsequent address to the supposedly inanimate statue reveal the inherent ambiguity between the actor as a human agent and the lifelessness of the object the actor presents to the audience. At the end of the scene, once Čuřislav turns his head away from the statue, it comes to life, exiting the scene. This allows Čuřislav to solve the riddle of the open garbage can lids, since he has eliminated all other possible interpretations of the phenomenon. When he realizes that the statue is missing (and hence, that what he thought was lifeless was actually animate), he flees in terror, yelling “Maminko!” (Mommy!).

This interaction between Čuřislav and the statue plays with the continuum of determined and spontaneous actions. On the one hand, we assume that since the stagehand presents an inanimate object that his actions are highly determined. On the other hand, the actor portraying Čuřislav seems to reveal a great deal of spontaneity, which we can surmise from his contemplative expression in the solving of the trash can riddle. These assumptions are dashed to pieces when we discover that the inanimate statue was the one manipulating the trashcans; thus, actions we at first attributed to Čuřislav’s spontaneity are actually determined by the statue. In this case, it is the inanimate that assumes the higher position in the hierarchy of power.
In Scene 7, Ubu, his wife, and Captain Čuřislav discuss the “phynances” of the monarchy. Demonstrating shortsighted greed, Ubu decides to exert new taxes and other demands on his subjects. Ubu is pushed into the scene on a wheelchair, barking orders and possessing the attention of all those in his court. This ridiculous and decidedly un-heroic entry serves a number of functions: first, Ubu is shown to be lazy and more interested in food, drink and money than in the efficient administration of the state; second, Ubu’s movements are greatly determined by his mode of transport, which encumbers his conversation with the other characters in the scene; third, and perhaps most importantly, the wheelchair is an obvious reference to Jaroslav Hašek’s *Good Soldier Švejk*, the Czech cultural icon, who while riding in a wheelchair, bumblingly exposed the absurdity of the Austro-Hungarian military structure during the First World War. For all of these reasons, scene 7 embodies a truly absurd spirit. Ubu proves to be utterly incapable of competent rule, but this extends well beyond the stage. By connecting a figure like Ubu to a long-standing Czech tradition like Švejk, Grossman opens the theatre to discussions of literature, drama, and by extension, even politics.

During the scene, the various objects on stage are once again rearranged in plain view, such that an open garbage can rests horizontally on boxes, creating a kind of tube leading off the right hand side of the stage. The table remains in the back of the stage, signifying a kind of raised platform leading to Ubu, who passes judgment on the various subjects that are brought forth. The horizontal garbage can signifies a device for execution. Throughout the scene, subjects are brought forth, announced, and submitted to Ubu for judgment. Ubu’s judgments are both swift and senseless. After passing judgment on his court (essentially commandeering all of their possessions for his personal benefit), he sends them to be executed. Guards lead the men to the garbage can, which they crawl through, disappearing off the right side of the stage. He then calls
for his administration to be sent forth and summarily judges and executes them all. The process repeats itself with historians, academicians, and the like. It is only as the last person on the list is announced that Ubu finally proclaims “Dost!” (“Enough!”), sparing his life.

This scene demonstrates the sorts of contradictions inherent in the Czech theatre of the 1960s. In a certain respect, it is the extension of Socialist Realism, which as we have seen, tended to objectify certain figures and deprive them of their individuality. Under the Socialist Realist paradigm, a very few number of actors became emblems for an entire class of people in order to illustrate certain social virtues; in the 1960s this reaches its grizzly conclusion: a despotic tyrant gleefully disposes of (in a literal sense, “throws away”) unwanted subjects, who signify a given group (historians and landowners) without presenting any individual characteristics. They march to their deaths quickly, with no visible introspection or regret. Furthermore, the same actors appear over and over again signifying new groups, underscoring the expendable nature of the characters they portray.

Ironically, such a harrowing vision is a source of laughter rather than anger or despair. This comes about partly because of the history of the Czech theatre. As Felix Vodička and others have demonstrated, because the stage acts as a surrogate public forum, audiences readily become accustomed to modes of artistic creation. After more than a decade of predictable, Socialist Realist productions, plays like Král Ubu, which employ a similar Weltanshauung vis-à-vis the individual, provide an ironic comment on the previous generation of theatrical endeavour. Beyond this, violence of the ilk demonstrated in Král Ubu level a not so subtle rebuke of the state violence in Czechoslovakia during the 1950s (i.e., the Slánský trials). One recognizes that these “characters,” like those in Socialist Realist plays, are not human beings, but objectified examples; therefore, their manipulation and even their destruction bear more similarities to the
violent treatment of puppets in a Punch and Judy play than a realist play. Rather than an outpouring of emotion in response to such state violence for the sake of catharsis, Grossman opts for an oblique and biting satire of the state. This tradition can be traced to the inter-war period, when writers like Hašek turned to satirical humour in writing a text that dealt with the horrors of the First World War. Grossman’s approach leads to a rather cynical and sarcastic view concerning violence on the stage, as human beings are objectified to the point of absurdity.

Král Ubu constitutes an important piece of the history of 1960s Czechoslovak theatre because of its relations to both the experimental stage techniques of the avant-garde and the objectifying character-building mechanisms of Socialist Realism. By exposing the stagehands rearranging the scenes (often while a scene is on-going), Grossman lays bare the production’s theatricality and emphasizes the manipulation of the set. In the traditional Realist theatre, scene changes would occur behind a curtain or in the dark; however, in this play, the stagehands become actors, and the set becomes a collection of props. In the scene that takes place in the church, the stagehands even become a part of the set itself. In this respect, the traditional role of human actors on stage as subjects comes into question. In the execution scene, even those figures that seem to embody animate human beings become objects. Ubu treats these figures as tools toward his own enrichment, and sends them to their deaths with no visible introspection. This seemingly heinous act, however, is mitigated by the fact that the figures don’t seem to mind their own destruction. Without a sense that these figures exhibit a drive for self-preservation, they truly do act as objects. Therefore, their death is mundane.

Fundamentally, human figures in Král Ubu demonstrate an ambiguity between man and object on the stage. Those characters that should embody individuality no longer do so, and those figures that at first glance seem lifeless demonstrate an internal power of their own. Nonetheless,
ministers and academicians are human beings in the strictest sense of the word, and statues are objects. The ambiguity arises when we consider the figures’ functions in the actions taking place on stage and most importantly, in the perceived spontaneity of their actions. This is by and large a subjective criterion dependent on the spectator’s understanding of the signifying function of the actor’s figure, leading one to question: what happens if the ambiguity arises not from the sign-system of theatrical performance, but from the figure’s very nature in the dramatic text? What if the figure in question is both human and object? This is precisely what we find in Václav Havel’s final play of the 1960s, *Ztížená možnost soustředění* (*The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*).

**Humans, Robots and Actors: Ztížená možnost soustředění**

Václav Havel’s third and final play staged at the Balustrade Theatre in the 1960s, *Ztížená možnost soustředění* (1968), deals with many of the same issues as his two previous endeavors: the difficulties of asserting one’s individuality in the modern world and the seemingly absurd and fruitless nature of communication. Nonetheless, this play marks a new direction in Havel’s oeuvre, as this play no longer sets up a model of society in order to criticize the society at large. In expanding the Model Drama, Havel explores these existential issues in the domestic domain, showing to the reader or the spectator, that while bureaucracies and governments are most decidedly absurd, this absurdity pervades all levels of society, invading even the domestic sphere.

This two-act play centres on the life of a philandering social scientist named Dr. Eduard Huml. Three separate plots are seamlessly woven into one text: first, we have a simple, domestic situation, in which Dr. Huml takes part in an extra-marital affair with a woman named Blanka; second, we see Huml in his role as a social scientist, dictating a treatise on individuality in the
modern world to his secretary Blanka; third, Dr. Huml becomes the subject of the research of another social scientist, Dr. Anna Balcar, who with the aid of a robotic number-cruncher named Puzuk, attempts to uncover the mysteries of human individualism and personality. These three plots are arranged in a highly frenetic way, such that at any given moment a character from one plot line might leave the room, and a character from another immediately appears. The pace of this switching between the different plots culminates in a cacophony of senseless conversation brought about by the collision of the three separate scenarios in the same space-time on the stage.

Dr. Balcar’s calculating machine, Puzuk, is a problematic figure vis-à-vis the relation between objects and characters in the play. As we have seen in Král Ubu, human actors ostensibly portraying human characters can quite easily serve the function of props and pieces of the setting, depending largely on what end of the subject-object continuum they operate within. Puzuk reveals the flip side to this coin; it is fundamentally an inanimate object, and yet it displays a number of characteristics consistent with an acting subject. On the surface, Puzuk seems to be nothing more than a technologically advanced computing machine:

It is a complicated piece of machinery, faintly reminiscent of a cash register and/or a calculator. It is furnished with a keyboard, various push buttons, a small crank on one side, an eyepiece such as that of a microscope, a red and green bulb, a small loudspeaker, and a long cord with a plug. ¹²⁰ (Havel, The Increased Difficulty 134)

Nonetheless, on occasions, it proves to be much more than this, determining the actions of others. This is demonstrated through its constant need for temperature adjustments in its vicinity,

¹²⁰ Je to složitý přístroj připomínající vzdáleně obchodní pokladnu nebo účetní kalkulačku; má klávesnici, různé knoflíky, po boku klíčku, je opatřen průzorem na způsob mikroskopu, červenou a zelenou žárovkou, malým reproduktorem a dlouho šňůrou se zástrčkou. (Ztížená možnost soustředění 108)
forcing various characters to put it in either the refrigerator or the oven depending on the situation. Puzuk has a voice of its own (projected by means of the loudspeaker), though the words that it utters demonstrate very little profundity or sophistication. Similarly, Puzuk is capable of signifying inward contemplation through the flashing of red and green lights.

Throughout much of the Dr. Balcar plot line, either the doctor or her assistant Kriebel are seeing to Puzuk’s comfort or inputting data into his processor. At least initially, despite the high praise of its developers, Puzuk appears woefully inadequate as a research tool. It is hailed as the tool that might “open a way to a rationally organized limiting of such phenomena as, for example, alienation,” helping to “shape human individuality scientifically” (150), but every time it is about to produce an utterance, it malfunctions do extreme sensitivity to the weather conditions. Once the object finally functions properly, after an entire act of awaiting the enlightenment Puzuk is sure to reveal, it disappoints both the researchers and the reader by simply asking Kriebel: “May I have a little rest?” (Increased Difficulty 152).

For nearly the entire first act, Puzuk functions as an integral stage prop to the unfolding of the dramatic action in the Balcar and Kriebel plot line. Its very precise needs force these characters to constantly care for the machine like a child, and its potential for human speech at least suggests the dual subject-object nature of the prop. In the second act, the machine assumes a much more spontaneous rather than determined role in the unfolding of the plot. While its

\[\text{\textsuperscript{121} otevřít cestu k racionálně organizovanému omezování takových úkazů, jako na příklad odcizení. (Ztížená možnost soustředění 121)}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{122} vědecky modelovat lidskou individualitu. (Ztížená možnost soustředění 121)}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{123} Můžu si na chvílkou odpočinout? (Ztížená možnost soustředění 123)}\]
introductory description focused almost entirely on its physical appearance, we learn very little of its function. It is not until the second act that Puzuk’s function is revealed:

He simply compares the quantum of all the possible relationships from among all the pieces of information about a particular individual which we’ve fed into him, or which he has acquired on his own—he compares these concurrently with the laws and norms of all the scientific disciplines previously fed into his memory—in order to eliminate all those relationships which an existing scientific discipline can establish as predictable. Simultaneously, he rejects those elements which he’d already encountered with other individuals and which, therefore, could be considered potentially predictable. Thus he arrives at a certain comprehensive structure of maximally random relationships—and this in fact is already—basically—a sort of condensed model of human individuality. (Increased Difficulty 171)

In short, it is a sort of computer designed to determine what makes a given human being an individual. What makes Puzuk different from a true computer is the fact that it is capable of acquiring information on its own, in effect making it a being capable of spontaneous actions entirely independent from outside interference. This early dramatic example of “artificial intelligence” brings to bear questions of what precisely makes individuals human beings, a common theme in the science fiction genre; however, even the most robust examples of robots imbued with artificial intelligence in science fiction movies (where this topic seems to have taken hold in the greatest proportion), such figures as the Puppet Master in Momorou Oshii’s

124 V tom sehrává důležitou úlohu právě „Puzuk“, který prostě množinu všech možných vztahů mezi informacemi, které jsme mu o určitém jedincí poskytli a které si především sám získává, průběžně srovnává se zákonitostmi všech vědních oborů, jež má předem uloženy ve své paměti, aby eliminoval všechny z těchto vztahů, k nimž existuje vědní disciplína, která je může vyložit jako zákonité. Zároveň vylučuje i všechny z nich, s nimiž se už setkal u jiných jedinců a které lze tedy považovat za potenciálně zákonité. Tak postupně dospívá k určité ucelené struktuře marginálně nahodilých vztahů, která není v podstatě už ničím jiným, než právě jakýmsi zhuštěným modelem lidské individuality. (Ztížená možnost soustředění 138)
*Ghost in the Shell* (1995) or T101 in James Cameron’s *Terminator* series, do not address the question from as many perspectives.

The fact that a mere object is able to appropriate and make sense of information without a human inputting that information is not a particularly novel concept on the Czech stage. Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R.* (1921) introduces the concept of the true robot, or humanoid machine capable of complex, original thought. The play takes place on a remote island, where an international corporation has developed artificial human beings sold for use as labor. A woman named Helena decides to advocate for robot rights, but as the robots become aware of their power, they succeed in overthrowing human rule. They wish to establish robot rule, but lack the ability to maintain their operations and procreate, the details of which are described in Rossum’s original manuscript, which Helena burned. In the end, a male and female robot begin to exhibit human-like tendencies, and the play ends in a sort of robotic Adam-and-Eve scenario where robots must begin the cycle of life anew.

Čapek’s robots occupy a position somewhere between object and subject: “it was young Rossum who had the idea of making living and intelligent working machines”\(^{125}\) (*R.U.R.* 8), which have “no will of their own. No passion. No soul”\(^{126}\) (*R.U.R.* 22). Thus, the robots are living creatures, what would later be called “cybernetic organisms”. These characters appear entirely human, but their interaction with other characters reveals a lack of spontaneity and emotion. The play, in general, investigates the role of subjectivity in human relations, presenting a fictional world in which individuals do not act according to their wishes and desires, but

\(^{125}\) A teprve mladý Rossum měl nápad udělat z toho živé a inteligentní pracoví stroje. (15)

\(^{126}\) Bez vlastní vůle. Bez dějin. Bez duše. (24)
according to a master’s program. Life potentially loses its sanctity in Čapek’s fictional world. František Černý sees the play as a comment on contemporary society: “these men of the future did not emerge from fantasy, but from the elements of contemporary reality—of the capitalist world—that Čapek recognized and considered being even more typical of the future”127 (The Czech Theatre 25).

In this respect, Puzuk could be seen as another example of a play in the 1960s drawing from the tradition of the 1920s, as Havel, too, seems to take aim at contemporary society; however, unlike Čapek’s robots, which appear physically human but lack a soul, Puzuk is seemingly an inanimate object with a life of its own. Where Puzuk demonstrates its true originality is in his function. While other robot examples might illustrate the problems associated with individuality in the age of advanced machines and computers, Puzuk is the only example of a robot specifically designed to investigate this problem. This creates a fundamental paradox: how can a machine that speaks with a human voice and is capable of learning (and thus contains some sort of mind) possibly demonstrate that any human being is unique? Puzuk’s existence in the play as a kind of prop illustrates in a concrete way the existential questions of human individuality, but beyond this, is purported to hold the answer to these seemingly unanswerable questions that have plagued philosophy and science, as well as the creators of the Model Dramas of the 1960s.

Of course, actually providing answers to these sorts of inquiries in a play is not possible, since the answers have yet to be determined in their proper domains. In the end, Puzuk’s output

---

127 Ces hommes futurs ne sont pas issus de fantaisie, mais des éléments de la réalité contemporaine—du monde capitaliste—que Čapek connaissait et considérait comme étant encore plus typique de l’avenir.
is convoluted and senseless. In the second act, once Puzuk’s light turns green (indicating an answer is imminent), his revelation turns out to be utter nonsense:

Puzuk: Which is your favorite tunnel? Are you fond of musical instruments? How many times a year do you air the square? Where did you bury the dog? Why didn’t you pass it on? When did you lose the claim? Wherein lies the nucleus? Do you know where you’re going and do you know who’s going with you? Do you piss in public, or just now and then?¹²⁸ (Increased Difficulty 175)

These questions, which seem entirely random, do follow a very specific kind of logic. Since Puzuk is designed to investigate human individuality, it asks questions that would distinguish one human from another. These questions can be seen as an attempt to do just that; however, despite its intelligence, Puzuk is no more equipped to solve these philosophical problems than the human researches who designed him. “Havel satirizes humanism itself when it is embodied in rhetoric more than actions” (Burian, Modern Czech Theatre 104); enumerating various specific ways a person differs from others does not tackle the heart of the question of human individuality. In failing to deliver on its promise of human intelligence, Puzuk becomes a prop once again, and a useless one besides.

Ztížená možnost soustředění, as one might expect, fails to answer any questions definitively by scientific means. In fact, plays are in no position to deal with these problems in such a way as to provide suitable answers; there are other fields of study for such a purpose. What Havel’s play does do is present the problematic relationship between man and his world. Making use of a ridiculous machine like Puzuk to answer such lofty riddles of human existence

could never truly happen; instead, what we find is that objects like Puzuk blur the line between man and object, which leads to utter chaos. Once Puzuk begins his questioning, the characters from all three plot lines collide, repeating phrases drawn from their earlier dialogues *ad infinitum*. As the chaos mounts, these phrases become warped and mixed with each other, until character dialogue no longer resembles proper human speech, but rather the futile (some might say absurd) inquiries of Puzuk. What we find is that as the objects become more like humans, the humans become more like objects.

In the end, Dr. Balcar deems the test a failure, packs up Puzuk, and asks Dr. Huml if she might call again once Puzuk is in operating order. Huml declines, questioning the entire methodology of her study. Concerning Dr. Balcar’s approach, Huml argues:

…it replaces reality—i.e. an objective totality—with a chimera of one of its specific relative and wholly subjective aspects. Science is able merely to keep reaching up towards the totality of a unique personality. It can do this within the limits of that which—at a given moment—it is capable of illuminating and describing as predictable. It can never reach beyond these limits, because man, as an objective totality, fundamentally contains the dimensions of infinity. And I’m afraid the key to a real knowledge of the human individual does not lie in some greater or lesser understanding of the complexity of man as an object of scientific knowledge. The only key lies in man’s complexity as a subject of human togetherness.129 (*Increased Difficulty 180*)

In some respects, what Huml attributes to science could equally be applied to the theatre. In essence, the theatre attempts to replace reality with a fictional world. A given actor’s

129 nahrazuje skutečnost jako objektivní totalitu chimérou určitého jejího relativního a zcela subjektivního aspektu. K totalitě jedinečného člověka se věda může vždycky jen vzpínat jako k jakési limitě, osvětující ji v tom, co je v ní dané chvíli schopna popsat jako zákonité, nikdy však nemůže této limity dosáhnout, protože člověk jako objektivní totalita má v podstatě dimenze nekonečna. A obávám se, že klíč ke skutečnému poznání lidského já neleží v lépe či hůře chápané komplexnosti jako subjektu lidského poznání. (*Ztížená možnost soustředění 145*)
performance presents the actions, gestures, and speech of a character, who occupies a quantum of time-space in a fictional world. Fully understanding the nature of man by means of theatrical characterization becomes problematic, since the signifier (in this case, the actor’s figure) produces seemingly limitless signs (gestures, facial ticks, utterances) that could be viewed as expressions of individuality. When these signs are arranged in such a way that what at first seemed limitless and spontaneous becomes determined, repetitive, and even automated, the character ceases to be viewed as an individual, and approaches an object. Huml, in his rebuff of Dr. Balcar’s methodology, describes perfectly the nature of the theatre, which explores the “subject of human togetherness.” Only in considering an individual within a societal structure, by uncovering the mechanisms behind relationships, does individuality hold any meaning. Analyzing an individual in a vacuum and discovering what is remarkable about this figure (as one might do for an object of inquiry) does not help us arrive at a notion of individuality; rather, Huml proposes that one should analyze individuals in their capacity as subjects in a societal structure.

In the final lines of his monologue, Huml draws a bold distinction between analyzing individual behaviour by treating it as an object of study rather than as an acting subject: “by any other means we may perhaps be able more or less to explain man, but we shall never understand him—not even a little—therefore we shall never arrive at a basic knowledge of him. Hence, the fundamental key to man does not lie in his brain, but in his heart”\(^{130}\) ([Increased Difficulty](#) 180).

---

\(^{130}\) Vším ostatním můžeme člověka více či méně vysvětlit, ale nikdy aspoň trochu poznat. Základní klíč k člověku není tedy uložen v mozkou, ale v srdci. ([Zitižená možnost soustředění](#) 145)
works. Dr. Balcar designed Puzuk to explore the former in order to achieve the latter, thus her project was doomed to fail. Drawing back from the fictional world, Puzuk fulfills another function: it demonstrates (presents) the birth of individuality. What at first appears to be various inanimate objects lumped together becomes an acting individual capable of learning, and potentially capable of teaching other human characters.

Ztížená možnost soustředění marks the end of an era for Václav Havel for many reasons. First, it is his last play to have been staged at the Theatre on the Balustrade in the 1960s. The April 1968 premier, which took place in the era of endless possibilities known as the Prague Spring, instead marked the end of the flowering of the Czech stage. Havel’s first two plays Zahradní slavnost and Vyrozumění, presenting the absurdity of bureaucracy and the potential dehumanizing effects that it can have, stand out as prime examples of the Model Drama. Where these two early plays demonstrate to absurdity the difficulty in asserting one’s individuality in society by staging a model of that society, Ztížená možnost soustředění attacks this problem head-on by other means. In the end, the existential questions that the Model Drama evokes become, themselves, a source of parody. Thus, it might have been seen as a potential missing link in the evolution of the Czech theatre, as a sort of transitional play between the Model Drama and a new kind of theatre, if not for the intervention of forces external to the stage. The limitless possibilities that the Prague Spring represented came to an abrupt end, and Havel’s last play of the 1960s was the exclamation point at the end of an era of theatrical innovation rather than a harbinger of things to come.

Conclusions

By approaching the process of acting according to the Prague School theory, a once nebulous domain becomes more manageable. Armed with a concept of acting as a three-part
signification process involving a human actor, an actor’s stage figure, and ultimately the character the actor portrays, we can more easily identify and deal with those elements of a human’s performance on stage as stage material. This process mirrors various trends in acting in the early twentieth-century stage, from that proposed by E. Gordon Craig and Alfred Jarry to that developed by Bertolt Brecht. While these men espoused certain a priori notions regarding acting, and developed these theories with a mind to change the way theatrical works were produced, the Prague School’s methodologies were entirely a posteriori, explaining phenomena observed on the contemporary Czech stage and in other sources. Nonetheless, what both the programmatic work of Craig and others and the descriptive work of Prague School theorists share in common is the view that the actor does not occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of signs on stage, but rather is one of many materials out of which theatre is made. Fundamentally, this leads to an objectification of the actor, who no longer embodies another person’s spirit, but is used by the director or playwright to present a character or an object. Jan Grossman notes:

> We of course can never say definitively: here the stage design was realized “beyond” the actor, and here on the contrary by him and his means—but even so, often times we find works or periods, when the shift of emphasis from one pole to another is not only striking, but even represents an important role. (“Herc a insenační styl” 38)

The changing role of the actor in Grossman’s productions proves to be a great departure from works preceding era. With the emphasis placed on the material nature of human beings on the stage comes a fundamental shift in the way these beings are viewed.

As a corollary to this theoretical framework for the theatre, objects exhibit at least the potential for subjectification. Thus, a continuum exists for all objects on stage, whether they be human or inanimate: on the one end of the spectrum, an object or human figure can be entirely
manipulated, and their actions can be highly determined; on the other end, objects can determine the actions of others, and thus their actions or presence can be viewed as highly spontaneous. Though we still can have a pure object or a pure subject, what we find is that many props and human figures operate somewhere in between these two extremes, ultimately blurring the lines between the individual (with free will) and the prop (lacking any visible internal motivation).

Both the descent of man from subject to object in Král Ubu and the ascent of inanimate stage props from object to subject in Ztižená možnost soustředění present the viewer or the reader with chaotic fictional worlds. When the very individuality of human beings is at risk, society utterly fails to remain a cohesive structure. The potential arises for human figures to become puppets or soulless vessels entirely manipulated by those in higher positions in the hierarchy of power (or on the stage in the hierarchy of signs). Similarly, delving too deeply into the condition of the human soul (or individual personality) defies rationality, and characters simply vanish behind a veil of absurd jargon and meaningless phrases.

The view of the actor as stage material used to present a character rather than as an artist expressing individual emotions through a character, which found prominence in the age of the avant-garde, proves to be a defining feature of theatrical performance following the era of Socialist Realism. In this respect, the Czech theatre of the 1960s can be seen as a continuation of an earlier trend rather than simply a refutation of the trends that came immediately before it. While the objectification of the subject has some satirical elements oriented toward the Socialist Realist tradition, which flattened characters into character types, it also bears a great resemblance to the theatre suggested by Craig, Brecht, and others, which sought to limit the individual personalities of actors in an effort to signify rather than embody a given character. This questioning (if not outright destruction) of the individual on the stage creates a problematic
theatre, one that limits the identification (or empathy) with the character, creating a high level of ambiguity in the interpretation of a play. This ambiguity renders the theatre a venue for critical questions, introspection, and entertainment. Where once spectators looked for answers to society’s problems and programs to follow in their daily lives, in the 1960s they only find more questions.
Chapter 5
Concluding Remarks

This thesis has attempted to place the experimental Czech theatre of the 1960s in its proper context by tracing the wide array of trends and traditions that comprised the artistic scene of the time. Inherent to this analysis is a certain understanding of the nature of artistic creation detailed in the work of the Prague School. Felix Vodička, in particular, shows the workings of this process with distinction.

The artist creates his artistic work such that his talent and his vision and understanding of the world realizes in relation to contemporary literary demands, above all norms, in relation to existing literary means and genres or at least those known to him, in relation to the existing hierarchy of literary values, in relation to literary traditions, influences, modes, etc. The evolution of literature is not, therefore, laid only by the immediacy of the author’s reaction to new life experiences, but it is governed also by intrinsic processes in the organism of literature as a specific area of creative human activity.¹³¹ (Vodička 110)

One might wish to view the theatre work of the 1960s as a reaction to the official artnorm of the previous decade, Socialist Realism, and in a certain sense such a view would not be incorrect.

However, the artistic scene of the 1960s is much more complicated. Aesthetic subversion of Socialist Realism became a common trend in the late 1950s, but with this subversion artists adopted new modes of expression from older Czech traditions like the historical avant-garde and contemporary foreign trends like Absurdism.

¹³¹ Umělec tvoří své umělecké dílo tak, že svůj talent a své vidění a pochopení světa realizuje ve vztahu k dobovým literárním požadavkům, především normám, ve vztahu existujícím nebo aspoň jemu známým literárním prostředkům a žánrům, ve vztahu k existující hierarchii literárních hodnot, ve vztahu k literárním tradicím, vlivům, módám atd. Vývoj a růst literatury není tedy dán jen bezprostředností autorských reakcí na nové životní obsahy, ale je určován i vnitřními procesy v organismu literatury jako zvláštní oblasti tvůrčí lidské činnosti.
Havel’s *Zahradní slavnost*, for example, adopts the general form of a Socialist Realist play, with the hero setting out to work in a socialist society, but he subverts to model by adopting a different hierarchy of values. Havel does not wish to convey an ideological message to his audience through the didactic function, but rather to subject that function to parody and satire. The result is a play that reacts to its predecessor not by open condemnation (or refutation), but by taking its logical progression to an absurd conclusion. By employing the rhetorical norms of Socialist Realism and couching those norms within a new artistic paradigm (informed by French playwrights like Ionesco and Beckett), Havel demonstrates a widening of Czech literary horizons.

In Topol’s *Konec masopustu*, the modus operandi is entirely different. In this play, the Socialist Realist emphasis on collectivity is openly challenged. In this play, not only the hierarchy of literary values is challenged (through the unique staging techniques of Krejča), but socialist cultural values are scrutinized. The values of *partiinost* and *narodnost*, which in the previous decade were offered as exemplary principles by which to lead one’s life, in Topol’s play take on a decidedly hostile air. This is, in part, due to a move away from collectivist dramas that provide general rules to follow (exemplum) and towards a drama about the struggles of a specific family. While Havel undermines Socialist Realism using the logic of its own arguments, Topol does so by showing the effects of general programs on an individual level.

While Socialist Realism was a prominent whipping boy for the experimental theatre practitioners of the later 1950s and the 1960s, it is by no means the only tradition that informed the revival of Czech theatre and drama. *Člověk z půdy*, with its jazz music and witty wordplay, draws from the avant-garde tradition of Voskovec and Werich. For the new cabaret theatre, the Liberated Theatre becomes a new norm under which to create new performances. By eschewing
Socialist Realism entirely, the play adopts a seemingly new and fresh approach to the stage, but in fact it is continuing a trend that was cut short by the Second World War and an era dominated by Socialist Realism.

Though Vodička specifically offers his remarks on literary evolution as it applied to the 1920s, his model is no less apt for the 1960s. While there can be no doubt that the easing of demands on theatre practitioners following Stalin’s death allowed for an increase in performative innovation, that does not mean that every practitioner adopted a uniform response to the previous era. This thesis has explored three different ways that a wide array of artists subverted the normative era of Socialist Realism. Almost every conceivable aspect of dramatic and theatrical production, from the language used by the characters to the creation of the space they inhabit in some way breaks new ground.

In the first chapter we have seen how socialist ideology, which throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s was an organizing principle around which dramas were written, remains so through the 1960s. The difference, however, is that socialist rhetoric in the 1960s context became a source of derision rather than devotion. Socialist ideology not only reigned on the plane of political ideas, but also in the realm of artistic expression. The strict demands narodnost forced writers to adopt a casual-temporal plot structure and simple, comprehensible language. Kohout’s first play Dobrá píseň in 1952 adheres to the former but deviates from the latter through its facile, yet unconventional lyric form. Even in the depths of the Socialist Realist era in Czechoslovakia, artists do not adopt the aesthetic wholesale. As the 1950s continues, this opens the door for greater and greater formal experimentation.

The use of space constitutes a second means by which theatre practitioners turn the page from traditional realistic forms of expression to the experimental small stage. In both Člověk
"z půdy and Kočka na kolejích, the limited stage space motivates a creative use of the imaginary action space to expand the fictional world, but in the process, more weight is given to the hypothetical, imaginative spaces that emerge from the mind of the individual at the expense of the material stage. As productive action, which dominated the plots of Socialist Realist dramas from the 1950s, is replaced by unproductive daydreaming or wish-fulfillment, the once omnipresent aim of the theatre to spur the audience to the building of socialist society outside the theatre seems to be entirely abandoned on the small stages of Prague. Interacting with the material spaces of the fictional world does not bring about meaningful change to that world, and exporting this Weltanshauung to other domains is no longer a meaningful exercise. Thus, we see the rebirth of a new kind of art-for-art’s-sake. In a social context in which any action can be read politically, an apolitical theatre becomes the ultimate form of subversion.

The third means of aesthetic subversion explored in this thesis, the blurring of the line between subject and object, at its core, concerns the perspective that the experimental theatres of Prague in the 1960s took toward human figures on the stage. As Havel’s Zahradní slavnost adopted socialist rhetoric to undermine it, Král Ubu revealed the perversity in reducing human figures to character types. The execution scene demonstrates how in doing so, human interactions can lose their moral underpinnings. Ztížená možnost soustředění, in subjectifying an inanimate object, opens itself to the existential questioning of human individuality itself. In behaving more human that the human figures in the play, Puzuk embodies the very core of the Model Drama’s raison d’être, to question the role of the individual in contemporary society. His failure to serve his function and answer this fundamental question brings into doubt the very premise from which the Model Drama sprang."
Each of the plays treated in this thesis demonstrates one or more aspects of aesthetic subversion of established norms, particularly Socialist Realism, and they all bring to bear dramatic and theatrical forms in questioning the role of the individual in modern society. However, this list is by no means exhaustive. Though this selection has included a variety of genres from a number of different theatres (Balustrade Theatre, Gate Theatre, National Theatre, and Semafor), many other theatres follow similar lines in subverting established aesthetic norms. Theatres like the Činoherní Klub (Drama Club), the works of E.F. Burian and Alfred Radok, Milan Kundera’s work at the National Theatre, and the works of Peter Karvaš in the Slovak context all draw from a variety of influences and traditions in the manner described by Vodička and explored in this thesis. Future studies can place these theatres and writers within the context of experiments in aesthetic subversion in the 1960s.

While plot, space and the use of objects are three central features of a theatrical work, other material means not explored in this work could be fruitful points of departure for future scholarship. For example, I have noted the causal-temporal shift in the 1950s from the Socialist Realist drama (Dobrá píseň) to the analytical drama (Taková láška) and the shift in spacial signification at the Semafor and Gate Theatres. These two formal subversions of Socialist Realist norms could also be considered together, analyzing the spacial-temporal problems associated with certain plays in the 1950s and 1960s, especially Kundera’s Majitelé kličů (1962), in which simultaneous action on separate parts of the stage actualizes this dynamic. This play, which follows the struggle of a man, who during the Second World War, has to decide whether to abet a fugitive from the Nazis or turn them in. The keys mentioned in the title of the play become objects that carry great significance (and indeed hold the power of life and death), and could have been discussed at great length. Other aspects of the play’s staging—including the lighting,
and scenography of Josef Svoboda and the direction of Otomar Krejča—could not be fully explored in this thesis, but nonetheless, might reveal still more aspects of aesthetic subversion in the 1960s context.

Future studies could also deal with this process of subversion in other genres, especially film. The celebrated Czech New Wave, including the works of Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová and others, expand the trends and the norms of film, drawing from a variety of sources, including the cinéma vérité, New Wave, absurdism, and others. Film represents a completely different medium in which artists practice innovative experimentation in order to subvert old norms and establish new trends; however, due to the different means of creating film art (collage, montage, editing, etc.) and perhaps different artistic traditions as well, such a discussion was not pertinent to the topic of this thesis.

On a final note, though Vodička’s Struktura vývoje refers specifically to Czech literary evolution, aesthetic subversion is a universal phenomenon that crosses cultural boundaries. In the Eastern European context, Socialist Realism became the aesthetic norm throughout the region, though, in markedly different ways. In the Soviet Union, for example, film of the 1950s seems to react to Socialist Realism along similar lines to those described in this work. For example, Летят журавли (The Cranes are Flying, 1957) follows the life of a woman named Veronika awaiting her lover Boris, who has left to fight the Germans in the Second World War. In the course of the film, Boris is killed in action, but Veronika never hears the news. At the end of the film, among a throng of ebullient citizens praising the Red Army and the Communist Party who have just won the war, a distraught Veronika realizes that her lover is dead. The optimistic ending for the collective that characterizes Socialist Realism is undercut (subverted) through its juxtaposition with the heart-wrenching personal narrative. Though aesthetic subversion
dominated the works of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Czechoslovakia, this phenomenon was certainly not limited to one country.

By uncovering the mechanisms that eroded the normative poetics of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia, several things become apparent: first, it did not constitute an iron clad norm that completely restricted artistic expression, since even in the darkest days of what Trensky calls the “dark age” of Czech literature, writers like Kohout subverted many of the formal demands of the time; second, the Czech theatre of the 1960s both reacts against and draws from it in order to develop new trends that fit a changing society; third, in many respects the flowering of Czech theatre constitutes an extension of pre-war avant-garde traditions brought into a new context; and finally, despite being a nation liberated by the Red Army, the Czech theatre of the late 1950s and 1960s draws from traditions found throughout Europe, even in the West.

Questions regarding the role of the individual in contemporary society, which dominated the so-called Theatre of the Absurd found a prominent place in Czechoslovakia. Whether they are applied to models of society in the Balustrade Theatre’s Model Drama or to interpersonal relations at the Gate Theatre, the Czech experimental stage of the 1960s showed a great capacity for appropriating foreign trends and concretizing them in unique ways. In short, Vodička’s assertion that the 1920s witnessed an astounding widening of literary horizons could also be applied to the 1960s. Though the many stages of Prague have been described as a “theatre in a totalitarian system,” this did not seem to limit their achievements. On the contrary, the evolution of that system provided the theatre practitioners of Czechoslovakia with an even larger pool of norms and the traditions to draw from in creating the groundbreaking performances that led Tynan to dub Prague the “theatre capital of Europe.”
Works Cited

Secondary Sources


---. „Malá divadla jako hnutí (pokus otologický pohled na jeden z fenoménů šedesátých let)“. Divadelní revue 3 (2005): 3.


---. “Pokus os strukturní rozbor hereckého zjevu: Chaplin ve Světtech velkoměsta“. Literarní noviny 5 (1931).


Patočková, Jana. „Krejčův český Čechov (a jini) na přelomu šedesátých a sedmdesátých let“. Divadelní revue 3 (2007): 27.


Pražáková, Klara. Pomyslné jeviště.


**Primary Sources**


