

CZECH DRAMA IN PRAGUE
IN THE FIRST YEARS
OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC

There are periods in the history of nations and states which are considered fortunate by later judges. Such years, often idealised with the distance of time, also give birth to legends. These judgements, however, would not be forthcoming were they not on many occasions rendered possible by the reality, so that even the exacting, suspicious historian must in the end discover and recognize their rational core. One such rare moment in the lives of the Czechs were the first years after World War I, when the Czechoslovak Republic was founded as one of the so-called successor states to Austria-Hungary. That was the beginning of the joyful years of the construction of the state of the Czechs and the Slovaks which, true, were not easy, nevertheless brought results, day after day. Czechoslovakia quickly ensured a place for itself in the consciousness of the world in the political sphere. Under the leadership of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk it purposefully strove for a democratic state set-up, attracted notice also in the economic field, and already before the war Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia were, economically, the most developed parts of the Habsburg monarchy. Also the works of contemporary artists presented the country well.

In the first half of the twenties the life of the Prague theatres was also the city's visiting card, although it must be pointed out that they had attracted notice by some of their earlier feats, too. During the baroque period Prague became one of the European theatre metropolises of the 18th century, which was mainly credited to Italian and German operatic or dramatic touring troupes, that turned the city into an important crossroads of contemporary theatre values. In the 19th century the world gradually started becoming interested also in some Czech theatre performances. At the turn of the 19th century, Prague already had the very mature dramatic and opera ensemble of the National Theatre, it staged the contemporary as well as the classical repertoire of both local and foreign origin, it had good singers and actors. Some Czech artists were among the top personalities of contemporary European theatre. Prague was the town of stage-director Jaroslav Kvapil (1868 - 1950); this was where the masters of the delicate analysis of the human soul performed: Jindřich Mošna (1837 - 1911), Hana Kvapilová (1860 - 1907), Eduard Vojan (1853 - 1920) and Marie Hübnerová (1865 - 1931); this was the home ground and place of return for singers of world renown like Ema Destinnová (1878 - 1930) and Karel Burian (1870 - 1924). Herrman Bahr, the sharp observer of Central European cultural life of the fin-de-siècle repeatedly pointed out the qualities of the Prague National Theatre in Austrian and German press. From the end of the 19th century

Prague attracted the stars, too. Guest performances were given by Sarah Bernhardt, Helena Modrzejewska, Eleonora Duse, Betty Hennings and other famous actresses - it was actually a time when namely women stood at the summit of European dramatic art. But Ermette Zacconi, Benoît Constant Coqueline, Ludwik Solski and others also came. The Meiningen theatre played more than a hundred times for the Prague audience during three tours (1878, 1879, 1883) and the Moscow Art Theatre (MKHAT) stopped in Prague in 1906. Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák found their permanent place on the repertoires of foreign operas. And the rustic drama *Maryša* by Alois and Vilém Mrštík was the most translated Czech drama and the one most frequently staged beyond the Czech Lands.

The theatre in Prague did therefore have something to build on in the Czechoslovak republic.

Moreover, the world of theatre entered the independent state with the gloriole of great political merit because Czech theatre participated significantly in the national liberation movement. In the first half of the 19th century, during the period of the so-called national revival, Czech professional and amateur theatrical performances were the main tribune of this movement and substituted the forbidden forms of direct political struggle especially effectively. The National Theatre in Prague, built in the years 1850 - 1883, was even looked upon as the symbol of the future restored Czech state and became the greatest political event of the Czechs in the 19th century. Finally, Jaroslav Kvapil, the leading personality of the National Theatre drama, was during the First World War one of the leaders of the underground anti-Austrian resistance movement called the Maffie. Until the year 1918 the theatre really was the extraordinarily popular mass medium of the Czechs, aware of its obligations to the society, to the nation - and not only that. In some fields it achieved a noteworthy artistic level. It was a phenomenon in which for decades the Czechs definitely performed in a promising way.

Post-war Prague - contemporaries preferred the term post-revolutionary since the formation of the independent state was commonly called a revolution - quickly changed into a busy metropolis. The city expanded. By 1st January 1921, all the so-called Prague towns joined to form Greater Prague which had almost one million inhabitants. It became the seat of central self-administered bodies and organisations institutions of different kinds developed their activities, new companies were founded, many countries opened embassies. A large number of people from Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Slovakia and also Sub-Carpatian Ukraine, annexed to Czechoslovakia by the peace talks, and also foreigners arrived in the city daily.

Entertainment facilities of all kind rapidly multiplied in the quickly growing metropolis with its remarkably preserved historical centre. Night clubs and a great variety of restaurants opened. In this way Prague wanted

to imitate Paris. On the other hand good conditions were created also for the development of the theatre because many people who lived there, as well as those who were just passing through, sought entertainment in theatres too. The image which most people had of theatre entertainment was evidently based on the operatic stages which started producing variety shows immediately after the revolution. That was a new genre rapidly spreading from America across the whole European continent. The attractiveness of these shows was enhanced by the appearance of partly unclad female bodies, which was something quite unusual in this town with its strong puritan spirit. Cabarets, too, were having a boom. For the less demanding audience Prague theatres presented also plays of a popular leaning. There was a slight increase in the number of theatres. (Several new professional theatres were founded also elsewhere than in Prague.) The National Theatre, however, and the Municipal Theatre at Královské Vinohrady, which after the year 1922 became the representative stage of the city of Prague, remained the foci of theatre life in the capital. For a short while the Chamber Cycles of the Intimate (Švanda's) Theatre and also the Revolutionary Stage enjoyed attention. An important place in the theatre life of Prague was occupied also by the German Theatre.

In the first post-war years the pages of periodicals, and mainly the various meetings of theatre people, were full of reflection on the role of the theatre in the free state. All kinds of people considered such reflection well grounded. There was nobody to claim that it would be just possible to continue in the activities so far, in spite of the fact that these had not produced bad results, as had already been stated earlier. The question most often asked was whether the theatre, which had been a powerful political factor in the new history of Czech development, should continue to have this obligation towards the society or whether it had been relieved from it by the achievement of state independence. The majority of voices from the bourgeois camp was rather in favour of parting with that political tradition of the Czech theatre. Only the spokesmen of the left-wing camp in the theatre, highly activated in the years of revolutionary events in Europe, demanded that the theatre support the class struggle of the proletariat, thus extending the pre-revolutionary tradition. The bourgeois theatre publications proposed various solutions whose common denominator was the accent on the artistic level of dramatic art evoked also by the aspiration to compete successfully with the rest of the world and by the effort to represent. The weakness of all these exercises was, however, that they did not comment on the content of new theatre work.

The image of post-revolutionary Prague theatre was not however created by theoreticians. It was formed by the many-sided creative activities in various theatre genres. In those days the forces of the theatre artists were concentrated in the theatre since there was no film or radio to distract them.

Czech cinematography only just started to constitute itself economically, as an organisation and art. Radio was a slow starter, Czech television did not appear until the fifties of the 20th century.

In spite of the variety of approaches to drama, Prague theatre professionals aspired to world acclaim, drawing on the atmosphere of the thousand year old town on the Vltava river which was once again raised to the capital of the state. There was not only the desire to adopt a lot of what the post-war world had to offer but - and that was of extraordinary value - also the desire to adopt stances not only on local issues but also on issues of concern to all mankind in that epoch. The members of a small nation, once again joining the ranks of the independent countries of the world - this time together with the Slovaks, needed to solve completely different questions for themselves than those which they had been solving just a short time ago. It was therefore not a worldliness born from the desire to attract the attention of the world and find liking in its eyes but a worldliness which grew from the essential interests and needs of the national community entering a new stage of its development, as well as from the desire to participate in the world's destiny. The theatre, which only recently was still the domain of those who could excellently map intimate human fate, was invaded by the themes of nation, war, collective, revolution, masses, generation, leader, technical progress, longevity, reflection on the substance of man, etc. Of course, not all the theatres lived with these issues. Nevertheless, the top performances of Prague theatres in the first post-war years were nurtured on these attitudes.

The most significant artistic personality of Prague theatre of that time was director Karel Hugo Hilar (1885 - 1935), who in the years 1910 - 1920 was attached to the Municipal Theatre at Královské Vinohrady and from 1921 until his death to the National Theatre. Hilar was first of all the leading representative of European dramatic expression which he promoted as early as at the time of the beginning of World War I in the theatre of what was then the separate town of Královské Vinohrady. In the wider European context his name deserves to be mentioned in the vicinity of Jacques Copeau, Leopold Jessner, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov and maybe also Erwin Piscator and Leon Schiller.

Hilar's productions attracted audiences from different social groups with varying demands on art, and in post-war Prague they were considered a peak dramatic experience. Hilar understood theatre as a tribune of ideas and in his stagings he often responded to topical political issues. In the first post-revolutionary years, in the revolutionised atmosphere when the struggle for the character of the republic was going on in Czechoslovakia, and especially in Prague itself, his work also reflected the revolutionary activity of the proletariat. At that time he produces remarkable stagings of Krasinski's *Undivine Comedy* (1918), Dvořák's *Hussites* (1919) and Verhaeren's *Dawn*

(1920). He also liked to introduce demanding, infrequently staged texts of texts considered unplayable and the intellectual society accepted his repertoire as a literary treat. He pulled all groups of the audience by the provocative, unconventional nature of his stagings. It was his great joy to evoke shock, protests, discussion, and at the same time it was a way to win over the tired and indifferent audience and wake it from its lethargy. Hilar tried to achieve an anti-illusory theatre, he consciously moved away from realism, in a marked abbreviation he tried to create a construction of the reality on the stage in the belief that it spoke about the issue and man more forcefully than realistic theatre could. The image of man, which in the preceding period of the Czech theatre was put together with fine intricacy and the evident effort to achieve a comprehensive statement, changed quite substantially in Hilar's stagings. The actor's role thus was to demonstrate the dominant features of the part in an expressive dynamical abbreviation so that the final stylisation sometimes had the effect of even being spasmodic, dehumanised and schematic. Besides that, Hilar, like the expressionists, was convinced that the basic motivation of all human expressions must be sought in the instinctual life of man. Where the actors in Kvapil's ensemble followed the image of people in whom reason and feeling were in balance, or where at least the actor's role inclined to this balance, in Hilar it was not so. Hilar warned that man was ruled by mysterious, dark forces to a much greater degree than he was willing to admit. The development of the world in the 20th century, the fanaticism of the fascists, nazis, communists and other extremists proved him right. In both theatres Hilar had great actors for his productions, namely Václav Vydra (1876 - 1953), Bedřich Karen (1887 - 1964), Eduard Kohout (1889 - 1976), Leopolda Dostalová (1879 - 1972) and Jarmila Kronbauerová (1893 - 1968).

In 1921 when Karel Hugo Hilar became the National Theatre chief of drama, expressionism was already on the retreat. Nevertheless, on this stage too, Hilar continued to produce several stagings drawing on the atmosphere of the first post-war years, which was increasingly filling up with conflict. He first prepared the Prague premier of *The Insect Play* of Karel and Josef Čapek (1922), to which he returned twice more on the same stage, as these writers-expressionists were ideologically and artistically specially close to him. He achieved extraordinary success also with Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliette* (1924), which he interpreted as a passionate dispute between fervent, fresh people and people who were burnt out. The production was also seen by Romain Rolland, who gave it much praise. The latter's words were held in high esteem by his contemporaries. After the first night performance of Shakespeare's tragedy, Hilar fell very ill. When he returned stricken to his work, he tried to achieve a synthesis of his own expressionist break-throughs with the legacy of the Czech realistic theatre.

Also the productions of Karel Dostal (1884 - 1966), in harmony at first with the expressionist vision of the theatre, were accepted with great attention. Dostal, however, soon left the world of grand theatre shows and expressive conspicuousness for the stagings of philosophical and demanding texts, like for example Pirandello's, which he delicately shaped with a great sense of order, composition unity, formal purity, refinement and poesy.

Although the path of the Prague opera cannot be followed in this essay, it should not be omitted that beside the reformer personality of Hilar there was also the head of the National Theatre opera, Otakar Ostrčil (1879 - 1935), who successfully worked for its modernisation and artistic enhancement. He found support in the person of director Ferdinand Pujman (1889 - 1961). Pujman, who started his cooperation with the opera of that theatre in the first half of the twenties, responded to the stimuli of modern theatre, observing however the specific features of the opera genre.

In the first post-war years the attention of many citizens of Prague was captured by the performances of left-wing theatre artists since they, too, tried to achieve something new, topical and global. Soon after the revolution, there were even efforts to create a proletarian theatre with Jindřich Honzl (1894 - 1953) at its head. The first step in this direction was made by Dědrasbor (acronym for Workers Theatre Corps), which started with stage recitation, gradually dramatizing it and finally setting up a festive open air scene at the 1st Workers' Spartakiad, a mass gymnastic exercise event (1920), symbolising the victorious march of the proletarian revolution across the world. The idea of the theatre of the masses, implemented in large halls as well as in open air, was very much alive in the Prague of those times. Theatre performances addressing social issues conceived in various ways most often built on symbolism which culminated on Czech territory in manifestations of the mentioned kind.

Finally, the third creative focus of the Prague theatre of the first post-war years were the attempts at theatre events which entered the history of theatre under the title the Czech theatre avant-garde. In this case, too, it was a theatre movement of left-wing orientation and strong realistic bias, prolonging the anti-illusory line of Czech theatre work. The prologue to the first stagings of small avant-garde scenes of semi-professional nature were some of Karel Čapek's productions at the Municipal Theatre at Královské Vinohrady. Čapek, who was active there in the years 1921 - 1923 as a dramatic adviser, experimented also with anti-illusory playful poetic productions, in which he was inspired by the Italian comedy dell'arte. From his production of Zeyer's comedy *Stará historie* (An Old Story, 1921) the road led directly to the direction work of Jindřich Honzl, Jiří Frejka and Emil František Burian.

Those who sought great dramatic experience in Prague theatres could not, even at that period which highlighted anti-illusively produced stagings,

neglect the psychological realistic theatre which, in Prague at the beginning of the 20th century and under the direction of Jaroslav Kvapil, sometimes reached a European standard. In principle, however, that form of dramatic expression receded into the background and realists found themselves in the firing line of the expressionists, symbolist and also emerging avant-garde camp. The audience nevertheless continued to seek out the great actors of that school who successfully adapted themselves to the new theatre programmes without losing their own personalities.

The base of the realists of the psychological stream was, after Hilar's departure for the National Theatre, the Municipal Theatre at Královské Vinohrady, in which the post of head of drama was taken over in 1921 by Jaroslav Kvapil (1868 - 1950). With a great feeling for talent, Kvapil formed a new ensemble there, since the leading Hilar actors gradually left for the National Theatre. He also skilfully used some of the actors engaged before his arrival. The Vinohrady stage was the meeting place of the remarkable young actor personalities, especially Olga Scheinpflugová (1902 - 1968), Zdeněk Štěpánek (1896 - 1968), František Smolík (1891 - 1972) and Hugo Haas (1901 - 1968) who appeared on the stage before the war, during the war or shortly after it. Mainly, however, he gave them the opportunity to become acquainted with the creative results of the legendary psychological realistic school, the legacy of Kvapilová and Vojan. During the turbulent decades which followed, these actors soon became master analysts of man.

A large accent on acting work of the realistic type was laid also by director Jan Bor (1886 - 1943), who was attached to the Intimate (Švanda's) Theatre in the first post-war years and from the year 1924 to the Municipal Theatre at Královské Vinohrady. Bor, too, had something bold in his personality. His "sanguine" or "robust" realism, differing from the delicate, intimate, moody directions of Kvapil, later captivated with the productions of Dostoevski's novels or those of other Russian authors.

A special enclave of Prague post-war theatre entertainment was formed by good comedians. There was quite a crop of them. People needed to laugh at a world which was becoming fuller of conflict, they longed to shake off the times swaying under the brunt of social struggle sharpened to the point of revolution, and also to forget serious economic troubles for a while. Besides that, the audience were attracted to these comedians also by the traditional inclination of the Czechs to solve even very difficult life situations by humour. The audience in cabarets, which started in Prague before the war, but also in dramatic theatres of smaller or larger type were entertained by Ferenc Futurista (1891 - 1947), Karel Noll (1880 - 1928), Vlasta Burian (1891 - 1962), Emil Artur Longen (1885 - 1936), Saša Rašilov (1891 - 1955) and others. Already at that time Vlasta Burian was proving that he was a truly ingenious comedian. That was when he established his bachelor type, usually a small clerk or employee with a good heart, who

through no fault of his own gets into various fixes but in the end comes out of them well, as well as whoever he wants to help. After some time even Hollywood showed interest in the "King of Comedians", as he was called, but Burian resisted the lure.

In those years of unleashed theatre creation the viewer was also being astonished by the variety of tools used. Prague stages were invaded by some of the novelties known earlier in a number of foreign theatres. Static footlights were backed by the dynamical fleet of spotlights, the circular canvas horizon was introduced as well as the turning stage, some stagings used slide projection and film, the musical component could be transformed from live music to record player. Changes in acting have already been mentioned. In Hilbert's *Kolumbus*, Hilar gives the actors rigid gloves to reveal the basic motoric elements in their movements. The quiet theatre of the previous years, focused on intimate life, was here and there supplanted by a loud dynamical show, concentrating rather on super-individual problems.

The eyes of the audience were also captivated by the extraordinary feats of stage designers, most of whom were at that time architects. The most outstanding were Vlastislav Hofman (1884 - 1964) and Bedřich Feuerstein (1892 - 1936). The tradition of a graphically conceived decoration was developed - usually with a sense of humour - by Josef Čapek (1887 - 1945). So the continuous revival of theatre art work was guaranteed by artists who were not full-time employees of the theatre but were, as independent artists, in live contact with the development in the creative arts both at home and abroad. Czech stage design, which boasted several remarkable personalities already before World War I, was safely on its road to world acclaim, symbolised in the second half of the 20th century by the works of František Tröster (1904 - 1968) and Josef Svoboda (b. 1920).

Prague theatres were really very busy in those years. Their repertoires evoked a lot of interest, too. The theatres presented new names, e.g. Andreev, Pirandello, Ghéon, Rolland, Crommelynck, Vildrac, Marinetti, O'Neill, Kaiser, Werfel, Kisch, and of course the older and more recent classics. The interest in drama works of smaller nations, so typical for Prague, developed and could be traced back to the end of the 19th century. Czech plays were popular too. But in those years there was no staging of an older Czech play which could be marked as a remarkable performance. Fortunately, there were the premieres of several contemporary authors which made up for everything since some of them were so significant that they were attended by experts from abroad. The world acclaim of the Czech theatre in the first post-war years was won mainly by playwrights.

In the beginning of 1921, the official first night of the collective play *RUR* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*) by Karel Čapek (1890 - 1938) took place in Prague and evoked extraordinary interest both at home and abroad. (The

pre-premiere took place on the Hradec Králové theatrical stage, against the wish of the author.) The year after that it was staged in Aachen and in 1922 - 1924 in Warsaw, Belgrade, New York, London, Vienna, Zurich, Budapest, Cracow, Paris, Tokyo and other towns. The play *RUR* opened the world to Karel Čapek. The famous novel *Krakatit* (1924), in which he forecasted the abuse of the atomic bomb, came later.

Karel Čapek, attempting to write plays - together with brother Josef - already on the eve of World War I, focused fully on the theatre towards the close of the second decade. He even accepted the post of dramatic expert and directed plays. In 1920 the National Theatre staged his play *Loupežník* (*The Highwayman*) and a year later the utopian collective drama *RUR. Ze života hmyzu* (*The Insect Play*), the joint work of the Čapek brothers, had its premiere for a change in Brno in 1922 and *Věc Makropulos* (*The Makropulos Secret*) was directed by Karel Čapek personally at the Vinohrady theatre in the same year. Čapek's prolific theatre years introduced movement into the Czech theatre. Čapek, in one case jointly with his brother, posed the great questions installed by the new era or those which mankind always had to reflect upon and he challenged theatre companies to take up unusual exercises. In his plays, Czech drama, which before that focused mostly on home issues, turned towards the issues of the contemporary world, the issues of humanity, mankind. At the same time he was the first playwright who wanted to address the world as perceived by the intellectuals of that time, that was the European and American cultural community. His work, however, found response even in the Far East.

The play *RUR* is about people who produce Robots, beings at first glance similar to people and capable of substituting two and a half worker. The contemporary and ancient desire of man to achieve something similar found its expression in this phenomenon. Čapek's Robots, however, are not mechanisms but the triumph of human activity, both biological and chemical. They are dehumanized people. They differ from people mainly by lacking spiritual life, they feel neither joy nor pain, they do not know the emotion of love and cannot reproduce. At the beginning of the play the Robots are fully manipulated by man; with the advance of time, in result of "humanising" experiments on them, they get out of hand, organise and arm themselves and gradually wipe out mankind - with the exception of one man. The play introduced by a short, comedy-like prologue shows the demise of mankind in three acts. At the very end of the play, however, Robot Primus and Robotess Helena, who had been the product of very bold experiments, discover the emotion of love, so there is hope for the rebirth of mankind.

The most successful utopian play of that time, the favourite genre of the expressionists among whom Karel Čapek as the designer of stage images belonged no less than for example Kaiser, Pirandello or O'Neill, was interpreted in different ways. There was nevertheless one interpretation to

which Čapek in his lifetime vehemently objected. He disagreed with the claim that the play was a warning against civilisation which got out of hand. The playwright stressed again and again that his intention was to warn against the mechanisation of man, against his dehumanisation, against the man of the masses. The three acts of the drama are a kind of obituary for mankind in which Čapek, seeing also the dark sides of the human activity, rises the creative forces of man against the Robots. The plays were written at the turn of the century which, to quote Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, was the time of the rebellion of the masses. The development of the world, and that possibly not only under totalitarian regimes, confirmed his fears. But even the first plan exposition suggestively presented by the story has its urgency. The danger that some manifestations of human civilisation may get out of hand is enormous.

The Prague first night of *RUR* was directed by Vojta Novák, who enjoyed the reputation of being the director of pre-war experimental performances with a symbolistic bias. For the staging, architect Bedřich Feuerstein, inspired by American architecture, created ultramodern interiors of the managing centre of Rossum's Universal Robots which, alas, were in congenial harmony with the text only in the project but not in the implementation. The text demanded that the director and actors fulfil also uncommon tasks. For the first time, for instance, professional actors were confronted by the difficulty of impersonating Robots. "The frightening proximity of men and Robots engraves itself in one's memory", wrote Max Brod in his review. "Of Robots in the blue-grey uniforms, with white labels and a very high number on their chests". Two attached photographs hint that the actors playing the Robots accentuated also a kind of mysteriousness. Although the production had excellent actors, they did not manage to capture the format of the captains of the industry who in the play serve as a certain mankind sample.

Playwright František Langer (1888 - 1965) also started becoming of world renown. His play *Periferie* (1925) took only a short time to run across the European stages. In the characters from the ranks of the lumpenproletariat and on the streets and in the rooms of the periphery - a part of the town very popular at that time in bourgeois and left-wing art - he unfolded reflections on the role of conscience, influenced to a certain degree by Dostoevski and the war stay in Russia. Unlike Čapek, Langer was connected rather to the tradition of the Czech realistic drama of the 19th century and presented himself as a sensitive philosopher-moralist as well as a perceptive analyst of man. He drew inspiration from the Prague periphery earlier too for his comedy *Velbloud uchem jehly* (The Camel and the Eye of the Needle, 1923) written in the popular tone which made him known for the first time also abroad.

And finally, the third Prague playwright who was noticed by the world was Jaroslav Hašek (1883 - 1923). To be exact, it was not the plays of this writer but the dramatisation of his novel *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (The Good Soldier Schweik), published in the years 1921-23. Emil Artur Longen's dramatisation performed in two parts by the *Revoluční scéna* (Revolutionary Stage) in 1921 in three parts was the first of the now endless row of similar attempts. We are looking at a certain paradox. The text of Schweik, processed in various dramatic form, is so far the only Czech dramatic text which has permanently - for a number of decades so far - been included in the repertoires of theatres both at home and abroad. This cannot be said about Čapek or Langer either, although their plays do appear from time to time on foreign stages too. Opinion of the sense of this novel may differ. There can hardly be doubt however that in this novel Hašek mocked the military machine and celebrated one of the possible struggles against it. With the theme of war Hašek was addressing not only his own country but the world which had only recently sounded the retreat of its own world war.

In the first years of the republic the theatre stages of the capital city of Czechoslovakia sent out messages contained in the plays of Czech dramatists which were very relevant in the unfolding 20th century. In the first place it was the protest against the dehumanisation, mechanisation and manipulation of people. Karel Čapek voiced this protest in his play *RUR*. And he repeated it again - jointly with his brother Josef - in one of the scenes from *Ze života hmyzu* (The Insect Play) in which he depicted toiling and fighting masses of ants manipulated by ant dictators. (Manipulation of man by man is a theme touched upon also in Karel Čapek's novel *Krakatit* and in some other works.) The same message is, however, included also in Hašek's novel, promptly dramatised by playwrights. Many people were also captivated by Langer's tormenting search for justice. The stance of the mentioned authors sprouted from the democratic atmosphere of Prague which had started to develop strongly already during Austria-Hungarian rule. It was by no chance that at that same time the monstrous forms of manipulation of man and his alienation were reflected also by Franz Kafka, a Prague writer of German-Jewish descent.

The development of Prague theatre life was, of course, also inspired by visiting foreign companies, mainly Russian emigrée groups, as well as those arriving with the consent of the Soviet government. The city which accepted a large number of Russian emigrées actually became one of their most significant centres. For a short time it also played host to a part of the Moscow Artistic Theatre - MKHAT headed by Kachalov. In 1922 there was much greater response, however, to Mikhail Chekhov, actor of the First Studio of the Moscow Artistic Theatre, closely linked to contemporary expressionist efforts. Many young theatre artists were at that time interested

in the productions of Russian avant-garde, namely Meyerhold, Tairov and Vakhtangov of whom they had previously heard only second hand, the posters announced also other presentations. In December 1921, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti presented an evening of synthetic theatre in Švanda's Theatre at Smíchov in Prague. In 1926, Luigi Pirandello and his company stopped over. Thanks to the Prague German Theatre, Prague became acquainted with the greatest contemporary German actors and also directors, namely Jessner and Reinhardt.

The breakthroughs achieved by artists living in other towns of the republic were, of course, also transferred in the Prague theatres of those days. Prague quite commonly and without any remorse enticed great actors, singers, directors, conductors and other personalities active in theatres elsewhere than in Prague. But it only very seldom took over dramatic texts from these places since good authors almost always gave priority to Prague anyway. (The Brno first night of the brother Čapek's *Insect Play* was a rare exception.) On the other hand, the situation was different in the opera whose prolific post-revolutionary roads cannot be followed in this essay. The greatest contemporary composer, Leoš Janáček (1854 - 1928), introduced his operas first in Brno as a matter of principle. Only then were they rehearsed in Prague.

In the first post-revolutionary years which live in the memories of the Czechs as the beautiful time of setting out on the road of their new history, besides the mediocre and the dead weight which always was present to a certain degree in the theatre, there were performances of peak value which could bear comparison with theatre breakthroughs in other countries. The reasons why it was so were many and probably no one would be able to name them all. The main reason, not influenced by man, was the fact that several people with extraordinary talent for theatre work of various types appeared among the Czechs. But there were also objective reasons. The Czech nation was a nation on the ascent. The sum of the feats of the representatives of the nation and the work of rank and file citizens in various fields of human activity produced a favourable balance. The artists welcomed the restoration of the Czech state with joy and, with faith in the prospects of the republic, longed to contribute to its development. The rise of the Czech theatre of the first republic was the fruit of the concentrated cultural and especially theatrical activity of the Czechs at the close of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Within the Prague theatre world the beneficial movement was assisted by consistent confrontation and eventually also by cooperation with the local German Theatre which, during most of the inter-war years, stood on the same humanistic positions as the main Czech stages. This claim is not contradicted by the fact that the Prague German Theatre had an effect on the audience not so much by its own artistic feats but rather by its inspiring contribution of visiting directors and

actors from German and Austrian stages and, of course, also by the introduction of several important plays. So, for example, in 1923 they presented a play by Bertolt Brecht for the first time in Czechoslovakia - it was *Drums in the Night* (Trommel in der Nacht). And, finally, Prague also had demanding and competent theatre critics, with a high level of expertise, who educated not only the theatres but also the audience for theatre work of large dimensions. In the Czech camp the voices of Jindřich Vodák, Otokar Fischer, Miroslav Rutte, Josef Kodíček, Marie Majerová, Karel Engelmüller, Miloslav Novotný, Zdenka Hásková-Dyková and others were held in high esteem. Max Brod stood out among the German journalists with his reliable and prudent judgements.

Otokar Fischer, professor of Germanic studies at the faculty of philosophy of Charles University, renowned translator of plays, theatre critic, historian, and finally also head of drama of the National Theatre, in his book *K dramatu* (On Drama, 1919) described a nocturnal dialogue with director Jaroslav Kvapil which took place probably at the beginning of World War I. Kvapil, at that time head of drama of the National Theatre in Prague, confessed to his friend: "I would be happy if a giant who could look over Europe and rest his sight on this place would see something high, gold and shining. That would be the dome of our theatre. I would like our National Theatre to become the centre of the world of culture, I would like foreigners to come and pay homage to our spirit." Fischer evaluated Kvapil's bold words as the utterance of a man aspiring to measure the work of a "small" nation in European competition. Well, the time for which Kvapil was calling and for which he worked hard did come for a short time after the war. The attention of foreign countries was however directed not towards the National Theatre alone but also towards the presentations of other stages in the flourishing city on the Vltava.

The Czech theatre in the first years of the existence of Czechoslovakia is the topic of the collective work *Dějiny českého divadla IV, Činoherní divadlo v Československé republice a za nacistické okupace* (History of the Czech Theatre IV, Dramatic Theatre in the Czechoslovak Republic and During the Nazi Occupation), Praha 1983. The actors of the Prague dramatic theatres of that time are the subject of F. ČERNÝ's book *Měnivá tvář divadla aneb Dvě století s pražskými herci* (The Changing Face of the Theatre or Two Centuries with Prague Actors), Praha 1978. The directing work of K. H. Hilar is discussed in the volumes *K. H. Hilar. Čtvrt století české činohry* (K. H. Hilar, A Quarter Century of Czech Drama Theatre), Praha 1936; *K. H. Hilar, Význam inscenační tvorby K. H. Hilara pro moderní české divadlo* (K. H. Hilar, The Importance of the Production of K. H. Hilar for Modern Czech Theatre), Praha 1966; *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philosophica et Historica 4, Theatralia VII, K 100. výročí narození K. H. Hilara* (On the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of K. H. Hilar), Praha 1989. Of the rather extensive literature on K. Čapek see the study of F. ČERNÝ *Die Bühnenwerke Karel Čapek, Maske und Kothurn 28, 1982*, Heft 2 (Wien). The dramatic work of F. Langer - see esp. the monograph by H. KULIGOWSKA *Twórczość dramatopisarska Františka Langera*, Wrocław-

Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1976. A valuable source for the study of the Czech theatre in the first years of Czechoslovakia is the "Czech number" of the Parisian revue *Choses de théâtre*, 2-ème année, numéro spécial, mai 1923. See also the volume *Nové české divadlo 1918 - 1926* (The New Czech Theatre 1918 - 1926), Praha 1927.

(1992)