

E. F. BURIAN

E. F. Burian embodied still another type of creative personality in the inter-war era of the 1920s and 1930s. Classically educated K. H. Hilar produced the most creative, apolitical work done on the large, subsidized stages during the first Republic. Remarkably gifted student amateurs, Voskovec and Werich found the exact pulse of their times and achieved huge success in their very own *commercial* theatre, which shied away from any orthodox political commitment even as it became increasingly supportive of the leftist anti-fascist front. Distinct from all three, E. F. Burian was a highly trained musician who eventually created his own marginally financed theatre company in improvised quarters; here he championed the autonomy of art and attracted international attention with his innovative staging, even as he consciously dedicated his efforts to the Marxist-Leninist cause.

Emil František Burian, who was to become the leading avant-garde director in the Czech theatre of the 1930s, was born in 1904, the son of Emil Burian, a leading baritone of Prague's National Theatre Opera, and his wife Vlasta (née Katláková), a teacher of singing. His uncle was Karel Burian, a concert tenor. The musical environment established by his family was sustained in Burian's education: he graduated from the Prague Conservatory and subsequently completed a master's study in composition in Prague under the Czech composer J. B. Foerster. Burian eventually composed seven operas, including one at the National Theatre (*Before Sunrise*, 1925), numerous ballets and chamber works, and most of the music for his theatre productions.

If the roots of Burian's general creativity may be found in music, the roots of his social philosophy may be found in Marxism: in 1923, while still a student, Burian became a member of the Czech Communist Party. In the years of his peak theatrical activity, 1933–38, when Burian's D Theatre achieved international recognition, his art and ideology often reinforced each other, but just as often they produced conflicting tensions and, at least on one occasion, a serious crisis of conscience. His career, like that of V + W, was interrupted by World War II but continued after it. Here, I shall concentrate on his prewar activity, which represents the peak of his achievements.¹

Burian's involvement in theatre began in 1926 when he joined the Liberated Theatre of Prague as a musician and incidental actor. The Liberated Theatre, co-directed by Jiří Frejka and Jindřich Honzl, was at that time a semiprofessional group under the influence of both the Soviet and French avant-garde. The Soviet influence was mainly evident in staging, the French in texts: Apollinaire, Cocteau, and Ribemont-Dessaignes were particular favorites. Administratively, the Liberated Theatre was a casual offshoot of Devětsil, a Czech cultural group of literati, architects, musicians, and other artists, most of whom were inspired by recently acquired national independence and the vigorous flow of fresh ideas and artistic movements from east and west after two centuries of relative stagnancy if not oppression within the Habsburg Empire. Particularly inspiring to many in Devětsil was the ideal they felt present in the youthful freshness of Soviet Communism. It was an era of fertile crossbreeding, when communism and surrealism (or futurism or poetism) were regarded as complementary rather than irreconcilable.

April 1927 was an especially auspicious month, a watershed in the evolution of modern Czech theatre. The uneasy collaboration between Honzl and Frejka dissolved, with Honzl taking charge of the Liberated Theatre and Frejka going on to form new groups. That same month, as described in the previous chapter, Voskovec and Werich opened their *Vest Pocket Revue*. Eventually Voskovec and Werich joined the Liberated Theatre, by the fall of 1929 took it over entirely, and it went on to become the single most popular theatre in Czechoslovakia's First Republic.

In the meantime, still in April 1927, E. F. Burian joined Frejka in breaking with Honzl and became one of Frejka's chief actors; not the least of his roles was Oedipus in Cocteau's *Infernal Machine* in 1928. More important, in April 1927, Burian composed and directed the first of his Voiceband productions as part of Frejka's Theatre Dada repertoire. Burian's Voiceband was a choral rendition of poetry based on the harmonic and rhythmic syncopations of jazz, a wedding of poetic text and musical expression, but without formal musical notation, for Burian wanted greater freedom and variety of vocal expression, including hissing, whistling, and other nontraditional vocalization, with percussion accompaniment. As the singular form evolved over the years, Burian added stage lighting, a certain amount of blocking, and eventually incorporated the principle of the Voiceband – musically articulated and shaped poetry – into a number of more traditionally staged productions.

In 1929, after two years of cooperative effort, Burian and Frejka went their separate ways. Frejka subsequently joined the establishment theatre, becoming a directorial assistant to the celebrated K. H. Hilar at the National Theatre in 1930 and eventually one of its trio of director-producers. Burian was hired as director of the studio branch of the State Theatre in Brno, the capital of Moravia; it was to be Burian's first real experience as a director of

fully staged theatre productions. Coincidentally, Honzl was hired as a director for the main stage of the same State Theatre, but the two former colleagues had little to do with each other. Two years later, in 1931, Honzl rejoined Voskovec and Werich's Liberated Theatre in Prague as their director, but Burian remained in the Moravian province until 1932, spending the 1930-31 season in Olomouc before returning to Brno for the 1931-32 season.

Burian's productions during his three years away from Prague formed an eclectic cluster: boulevard comedy and melodrama, revivals of classics, slightly aged avant-garde (Maeterlinck, Synge, O'Neill) and several Voice-band recitals of poetry. He also appeared several times as an actor, including a role in a Brno production subheaded 'Living Newspaper,' clearly an echo of work being done by the Soviet theatre and by Piscator in Germany. More telling indications of Burian's leftist sympathies were evident in his occasional participation in political meetings and related activities of local Communist organizations, and in his productions of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (March 1930) and several contemporary works from the Czech left, such as Vitězslav Nezval's *Lovers from the Kiosk*, Burian's last production in Brno, in May 1932.

Burian's stance *vis-à-vis* the claims of art and politics was at best an unsettled matter and suggests an ongoing conflict of allegiances that surfaced repeatedly in his career, a conflict no doubt heightened and complicated by what even sympathetic critics referred to as Burian's sizeable artistic ego. In 1930, while a fledgling director in Brno, he wrote 'Dynamické divadlo' (Dynamic Theatre), a study in which he championed the priorities of artistry in relation to extra-aesthetic, e.g., political or tendentious, values. A sampling from the article reveals attitudes that were subsequently criticized by Czech leftist critics as bourgeois remnants of Tairov and the 1920s avant-garde:

Before anything else, theatre is highly artistic in essence: its form or style is its decisive feature. . . . Theatre is relevant not because it presents [topical plays] but because it is sympathetic, because it provokes a human's nervous system to fellow activity. . . . Theatre is a thing of form and style. . . . As a result of theatre's becoming occupied by other than artistic questions, of dramatists and directors raising tendentiousness above creativity . . . evolution was delayed and theatre was being killed. . . . Expressive form must not be sacrificed to [biased agendas]. And then: the stage is life for its own sake . . . its boards are not life but rather a stage and nothing but a stage. And neither is theatre a political tribunal. . . . Every end or objective beyond the stage is inappropriate in theatre.²

Despite such pronouncements, Burian was at root also committed to the cause of militant protest against bourgeois values, capitalism, and the class

structure supported by those forces. Events from 1929 to 1932 undoubtedly intensified his conviction of the rightness of the Marxist critique of the profit system: the worldwide depression had caused massive unemployment in Czechoslovakia, and reactionary forces if not Fascism were becoming increasingly powerful in the nation. Although Czechoslovakia under Presidents Masaryk and Beneš remained an island of liberal democracy in central Europe and the Communist Party was legally recognized and had members in Parliament, the prevailing strength remained in the hands of those hostile to any threat to free enterprise.

Burian returned to Prague in the fall of 1932 but could find only incidental work as a musician or director. It became clear to him that if he wanted to direct his kind of production, he would have to start his own theatre. He assembled a small group of intensely dedicated although largely amateur performers, rented what had been a small concert chamber (The Mozarteum) in downtown Prague, transformed it into a small, minimally equipped proscenium theatre, and tried to raise enough money to begin operations. Finally, with the crucial aid of a loan from Burian's mother, the theatre opened with an episodic, documentary revue, *Life in our Days*, based on a radio script by Erich Kästner. The date was September 16, 1933, less than a month before V + W opened their *Ass and Shadow*. The focus of the respective plays indicates a difference between the two theatres: *Ass and Shadow* confronts the threat of Hitler's Germany; *Life in our Days*, capitalistic oppression of the masses.

Eighteen people made up the theatre, including Burian, who provided the music on a borrowed, upright piano and also changed gels on the two spotlights the theatre possessed. A contemporary leftist critic called it the poorest theatre in Prague in terms of money, but the richest in its united élan for the work ahead.

The name of the theatre, D34, was composed of two elements, D representing the initial letter of the Czech word for theatre (Divadlo) and the number representing the year to come; the number would change each season. Burian's comments in a leaflet distributed on the day of the opening expand on the significance of the theatre's name and reveal the orientation of his enterprise:

The numbers indicate the incessant change of actualities that the theatre will serve. The abbreviation D is for us an aggressive title, for we will be an aggressive theatre. The abbreviation D can equally stand for today as well as for laborer, theatre as well as the masses, drama as well as history. [Each of these terms begins with the letter D in Czech.]³

In strong contrast to his statements on the autonomy of art in 'Dynamic Theatre,' other remarks and polemics by Burian just prior to and after the

opening of his theatre reveal his de-emphasis of sheer artistry and a non-tendential theatre in favor of a position that dismissed so-called 'pure' art, totally rejected the conservative sociopolitical orientation and theatrical methods of the establishment theatres, decried the failure of his former avant-garde colleagues to attack the bourgeois establishment instead of amusing it, and stressed the need of a theatrical tribunal for the masses. Burian declared that his theatre would be at the center of society and categorically aligned it with the Communist critique of that society. One direct citation from May 1933 may stand for many others:

It will be a political theatre. . . . primarily against fascism and cultural reactionism. . . . For a dramaturgic foundation, derived from a philosophic position of dialectical materialism, I plan a repertoire with an exclusively class meaning. For a core I will have the contemporary repertoire of Russian theatres. Beyond German revolutionary plays I will put into the repertoire everything in Czech literature that arose from the futile expectation of a hearing in our official theatres, and then those Czech works that will be inspired by my political theatre tribunal.⁴

Numerous assertions in that letter and in other similar statements were either to be modified or never realized, most notably the expectation of new plays sparked by his efforts. Nevertheless, the sincerity under the rhetoric was genuine, and there is no question that Burian, a product of the cultivated bourgeoisie, was consistent in damning the ills of the class system and capitalist exploitation. But what Burian's declarations at the time do not reveal is that his previously expressed feelings about the autonomy of art were never really abandoned. Eventually, he came to experience the anguish of attempting to serve two strongly conflicting ideals.

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The theatre which began in 1933 as D34 lasted until March 1941 when, as D41, it was closed by the Gestapo and Burian sent to a concentration camp. The objective data about the theatre may be indicated briefly. Approximately seventy-five productions were mounted, ranging in scope from evenings of poetry presented by a few readers to relatively elaborate productions with casts of twenty or more. The number of performances varied from fewer than ten to over a hundred, with forty being an approximate average. (The performances of pure poetry had only one to four reprises.) As in V + W's Liberated Theatre, the productions were performed serially rather than as alternating repertoire, except for special occasions when a number of plays were presented in a one- or two-week period.

More than two-thirds of the productions occurred within the very limited space of the Mozarteum, which could seat a maximum of 387 spectators in

front of a proscenium stage 45 inches above the flat seating floor. It was a small stage measuring 20 feet wide in the proscenium opening, 15 feet deep from the curtain line, and had a maximum height of only 14.5 feet. Additional space in front of the curtain line produced a total acting area of 360 square feet.

The company began with fewer than twenty members, including technical and administrative personnel; eventually it grew to over fifty, including: sixteen actors evenly divided between male and female; six to eleven musicians; three to seven design and technical staff; six administrative personnel; and, notably, but one director. It was an extremely stable company with very little turnover.

The theatre was not subsidized until 1938, when it began to receive a small amount from the state. Because of its shoestring budgets and the willingness of its personnel to work for minimal salaries, it could survive on less than 50 percent attendance. Despite chronic financial crises, Burian's goal was a cultural center, which he very nearly achieved with evenings of poetry, exhibitions of painting and sculpture, dance recitals, and lectures, as well as with the publication of a small but stimulating periodical bearing the same name as the theatre each season. It served as a program of most of the productions and also contained discussion of the plays, reports of related theatre activities, excerpts of poetry, and correspondence with the theatre's public. Burian and his chief technical designer, Miroslav Kouřil, also drew up three different plans for a multi-theatre complex and cultural center to be known as The Theatre of Work (Divadlo Práce). Although the projects never materialized, they did lead to the creation of a theatre laboratory for technical experimentation as an adjunct to the theatre.

The relationship between Burian and his actors was based on their commitment to a theatre of social engagement, communist in all but official designation. Burian ran a well-organized, disciplined collective. Party membership was not a prerequisite, but agreement with the 'progressive' cause was taken for granted, and all meetings ended with the singing of the *Internationale*. In theory, and to some extent in practice, administrative and logistical decisions were made by committee, but there was never any question that the chief was Burian.

Burian's view of acting was quite simply that of an artist toward one of his most valuable materials: actors could communicate the equivalent of dozens of pages of a novel by a gesture, pitch of voice, or facial expression, but they were to be nameless and shapeable means toward the director-composer's end. The director, according to Burian, is the functional center that determines the stream of action in this theatre. 'It is the director . . . who stands above all the elements, commands them, composes or, better, provides the instrumentation of a theatrical score in precise time, tempo, color, tone, harmony, and polyphonal action.'⁵ It is a description that could have come from the lips of not only Hilar, but also Craig, Reinhardt, Meyerhold, or

Tairov, to name only the most illustrious of twentieth-century theatre artists preceding Burian.

In practice, however, according to the testimony of his surviving actors whom I interviewed, Burian never forced the actor to a given interpretation, did not treat his actors as marionettes, was remarkably patient and kind with them, and demonstrated exactly what he wanted only as a last resort, preferring to encourage the actors to find their own way toward the goal he sought. Nevertheless, he took pains to explain the approach to each production and what he wanted by way of interpretation. He preferred to work on stage quite early, taking only one preliminary session for discussion. He never used a *Regiebuch*, but had near total recall of blocking and other directions. He insisted on tightly disciplined, systematic rehearsals, and performances without variations, admitting that he no longer acted because he could not stand its lack of variation or improvisation. In these and other respects, of course, he resembled a conductor of an orchestra. Indeed, one of his special rehearsal techniques was to play the piano in order to illustrate or prompt what he wanted in the rhythm and tone of a speech or movement, or scene as a whole.

One of his assistants, later a great director, Alfred Radok, described to me some of the daily routine in Burian's company.⁶ All actors were present at all rehearsals, even when they were not cast in the play. Rehearsals were preceded by an hour or more of vocal and dance work, the vocal often under the direction of Burian or his mother, the dance under their choreographer. Rehearsals had no set limit; everyone remained as long as Burian held out, and his energy, stamina, and élan were legendary. He would normally come to the theatre early in the morning in order to spend an hour working on the composition of an opera or other musical piece. Another hour was devoted to administrative details, and rehearsals began at 10 a.m.

Particularly noteworthy was his practice of having all rehearsals, except perhaps the very first few, conducted with full lighting and cues in order to assure the fully integrated, delicately controlled effects for which he became celebrated. His emphasis on subtle, musically shaped work with lighting had a counterpart in his stress on vocal control and precise articulation, which eventually produced a distinct speech style in most of his actors and created difficulties for some of them when they worked in other theatres later.

Production techniques remained austere for the most part, partly because of the extremely limited space and facilities, but more importantly because of Burian's elemental antipathy to naturalism and his affinity for spare, constructivist settings of authentic, often unfinished materials: lumber, ropes, straw, bare metal, coarse fabrics. This stylistic tendency had more than one cause: spatial and budgetary limitations, Soviet models, but also Burian's intense interest in the traditions of folk theatre.

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Burian's handling of texts paralleled his approach to production: the writer, like the actor, was significant but secondary, a tributary artist. A striking fact is that more than one-third of Burian's productions were based on non-dramatic texts which he composed into scenarios. Moreover, it was a rare play that he did not radically edit or adapt. Part of his attitude is expressed in the following: 'I know of nothing in literature that could not be dramatically expressed. . . . But I know of many theatre plays that are unplayable on stage even though they were written for it.'⁷ One of Burian's chronic laments was the lack of new scripts suitable to his vision of socially meaningful theatre, but he was not referring to completed, self-sufficient works. His premise seemed to be that the very nature of traditional dramatic construction distorted the vision of the author. He offered the following advice to potential playwrights for his theatre:

Let the poet and the prose writer not be bound by any 'rules' other than those given by their own creative methods. First of all, let them write librettos with the full realization that librettos are what we're concerned with, and that in no way can they create the definitive form of a stage piece at their desks. With that understanding, the so-called violation of the author by the director will be irrelevant . . . and their relation will be that of librettist and composer.⁸

'Librettos' or scenario-like texts not only enabled Burian to communicate more fully the poetic essence that he found in a given work, but also allowed for greater emphasis on a particular ideological slant, whether or not intended by the original author. In the final analysis, however, ideological motivation often seemed secondary to Burian's artistic or ego-centered motivation of confronting traditional interpretations of works with his own sense of their particular truth or of using literary raw material in order to communicate his own statement or 'directorial handwriting.' Above all he wanted to express himself, to create a theatrical performance as a 'sovereignly personal expression' of his own vision. The real subject of Burian's productions was Burian himself: he is the source of everything revealed in his work, 'the noetic intermediary between the spectator and material reality.'⁹ Other symptoms of the inherently romantic nature of Burian's artistry were noted by Jan Grossman when he surveyed the works especially favored by Burian in his period of ripest creativity, 1935-38:

[They] are always highly emotive, rather spread out than concise, internally dynamic, as if vibrant. The hero is a highly individualized figure . . . in conflict with ordered society . . . who has dreams both day and night, hallucinates, and builds an unusually complex life, often on the border of the seeming and the real.¹⁰

The paradoxical point of Burian's 'dramatizations' is that the results were not dramatizations in the sense of tightly knit incidents connected to a central action, but works with a looser structure of relatively isolated but highly expressive events, which were often supplemented by additional writings by the same or other authors. In short, as Grossman observed, 'It's not a matter of the dramatization of an epic or lyric but of epicizing and lyricizing the theatre.'

Given Burian's fundamental subjectivity in handling texts and in staging them, it is not surprising that some of his productions became expressionistic or surrealistic in their effect. This characteristic of his work appeared intermittently and did not become fully evident until the later 1930s. But by that time, ironically, the criteria of Socialist Realism had begun to be applied by communist critics, and a clash was inevitable.

Possibilities of such problems seemed remote in the early days of Burian's new theatre. In theme and form the productions of D34 and D35 were in the Piscatorian vein and generally consistent with Burian's heavily politicized statements prior to the opening of D34. Whether semi-documentary assemblages of current events, original plays, 'dramatizations' of novels, or reworkings of classics (*Merchant of Venice*, *The Miser*, *The Threepenny Opera*), they stressed class conflict and capitalist exploitation with the schematism and crude caricature of agitprop theatre. The staging was simple in the extreme, but Burian already began to make occasional use of projections and a montage principle in textual adaptations and staging. These, however, were without the subjective lyricism that later developed in his work.

• A witty parody of these early productions formed part of Voskovec and Werich's *Keep Smiling* revue in the Liberated Theatre in January 1935. Allowing for comic exaggeration, the following fragment provides a useful impression of this phase of Burian's work:

The interior of a constructivistic submarine.

Scene 1.

The Miser, the Captain, Secretary, Tubercular Young Man, Proletarian Young Woman, the Miser's Daughter, Members of the Crew. All enter through the audience, line up on stage, and sing to the audience: the melody is taken from *Threepenny Opera*:

We're here to present
Topical theatre
We'll illustrate the class struggle
As we see it.

We'll aim spotlights at each other
And enter from the audience
The prompter is abolished
The critics will love it.

Lighting cables litter the floor
A fig for stage flats
Cheers for bare platforms
Away with the curtain.

We'll begin at the beginning
And play to the end
Little Emil has written some lines
The rest is from *The Miser*.¹¹

By 1935, however, Burian's productions moved away from their Piscator-like, agitational phase and began to reveal a more emotive, lyrical tone. It is likely that the accords achieved between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in 1934-35, plus the creation of a united front against Fascism, contributed to Burian's shift away from narrow propaganda and toward fuller artistry.

A landmark production uniting an ideologically based but humanistic theme with complex artistic expression was *War* (*Vojna*, January 1935). Basing his text on a collection of traditional Czech folk verse and setting much of it to his own music, he produced a powerful protest against war, with indirect but telling allusions to class struggle and economic exploitation. Drawing on the heritage of his Voiceband, he constructed a montage of scenes from village life dealing with such traditional rites as carnival, a wedding, army recruitment, and the parting of loved ones: the opening scene of carnival is balanced by the final scene of soldiers bearing home the body of their comrade and denouncing war. The authentic flavor of Burian's text was enriched by the imaginativeness of the production. Using the most ordinary materials, wooden platforms, lathing, hemp rope, straw, and thatched panels, Burian created a setting that captured the feel of the folk environment without a trace of naturalism but with great theatrical reality. Kouřil, the designer, said that they had to think realistically but achieve poetic results. On the relatively bare stage, they blended voices, choreographed movement, and music with lighting that functioned dynamically and rhythmically, softening the harsh wooden structures, casting shadows through the lathing, underscoring the emotiveness of the scenes. This is how Burian described the production:

In its structure it is actually a ballet and poetic suite in a few movements. Not only dancers' feet but also words and verses dance in it - voice on voice and rhyme on rhyme, there are turns of assonance and leaps of metaphor. . . . The style of *War* demonstrated clean stage work . . . purified of feudal painted scenery . . . clean space for a poet.¹²

Burian's stage was rarely curtained; instead, the audience saw the stage

setting when they entered. Then the stage manager would hit a gong, the lights would come up, and the stage was miraculously transformed. The highly selective settings were marked by a sense of stylistic composition, often metaphoric in form or choice of detail, often colorful, but it was in lighting and its extension in projections that Burian's theatre achieved its most distinctive expressive effects. For Burian, light was the heart of the stage and created its fluid space; lighting expressed not only external reality but also the state of the soul. Burian's work with lighting culminated in the Theatregraph, which he employed in several productions that I shall describe. It was a system of lighting, static and filmed projections, and special projection surfaces that, in conjunction with living actors, produced a synthesis further enriched by music and other sound-effects.

Whether or not they employed projections, the productions usually took the form of cinema-like montages formed on musical principles of rhythm, harmony, counterpoint. Burian himself referred to music as the hidden law of the stage, present even when it is not played by instruments. It is present not only in the text but also in mime, in lighting, in the rhythm of space, in pauses, in the melody of speech.

Jan Mukařovský, the structuralist theorist, a close observer and devotee of Burian's theatre, called music the basis of the order that Burian imposed on the potential chaos of theatre. Indeed, it was on the basis of Burian's productions that Mukařovský articulated a basic statement of structuralism as applied to theatre:

A modern stage work appears as a very complex structure . . . that eagerly absorbs everything available from contemporary technology and other arts, but usually in order to apply it as a contrasting force: film is used to set physical reality in contrast to a nonmaterial image, a megaphone confronts natural sound with reproduced sound, the sword of a spotlight beam severs the continuity of three-dimensional space. . . . The result is that the artistic construction of today's stage work has the characteristics of a process that is protean in its changeability, that consists of a constant regrouping of elements, an agitated exchange of dominants, a wiping out of borders between drama and allied forms (revue, dance, acrobatics, etc.).¹³

Burian's productions based on poetry continued to be among his most striking, although some of them began to draw leftist criticism because of their increasing subjectivity and inclination toward surrealism, for example his productions based on the arch-romantic poetry of K. H. Mácha, *May* (April 1935), *Neither Swan nor Moon* (*Ani labut', ani luna*, June 1936), and *The Executioner* (*Kat*, June 1936).

Burian had less difficulty with a more major production significant for its fusion of ideology and creative staging, his adaptation of Beaumarchais's

The Barber of Seville (September 1936). To bring the play up to date as 'a fiery cry of accord and solidarity with the revolution in Spain,'¹⁴ Burian added an entirely new line of action: a series of Spanish folk songs and dances presented by a wandering street singer and a chorus to evoke the revolutionary atmosphere of Spain. One completely added sequence, which illustrates the kind of supplemental, metaphoric dramaturgy practiced by Burian, was intended to echo the death of García Lorca: a special solo dance by a militant revolutionary occurred on a small, high, up stage platform; the dance was punctuated by shots, and the dancer collapsed to the floor.

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Four months after the premiere of *The Barber of Seville*, Burian staged his version of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1937), in what was the most fully evolved form of his Theatregraph system of integrated lighting, projections, and live action. He had made incidental use of slide projections as early as his first production in D34, and by the spring of 1935 had begun to use occasional filmed projection as well. The first production to employ the more complex Theatregraph system was his version of Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* in 1936.

Two things distinguished Theatregraph from ordinary projection systems in theatre. The chief technical innovation was the use of a scrim covering the entire front of the stage and serving as the primary projection surface, thus producing a simultaneous vision of projected images on the frontal scrim with live action behind it. A small, opaque, supplementary projection screen was on the stage itself, dedicated to a separate slide projector in the wings. What is often not understood about the system is that projections were not constantly employed but were used only at selected dramatic moments. In any case, the actors performed behind the scrim, with specially designed lighting that picked out only portions of the scene for illumination, making the effect of the scrim virtually disappear but still retaining its property of providing a slightly diffused visual effect. With the addition of projections, the demands on timing and balancing of lighting intensities were great, but the effect at its best was extraordinary. You could not tell, finally, whether the live actors were in front of, behind, or simply part of the projected image, enveloped in it. The images were not simply illustrational or informational; nor were they at all illusionistic, a naturalistic supplement. They functioned primarily on an emotive, metaphoric level.

Filed stage projection is a spatial concern, non-illustrational and non-naturalistic. Film is most valued by the modern stage for its [enlarged] detail. . . . Only detail makes stage montage possible, particularly the detail that is capable of intensifying dramatic conflict to giant proportions, and brings close to the public that which the unaided eye cannot see on the stage. . . . [Similarly,] lighting must

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Four months after the premiere of *The Barber of Seville*, Burian staged his version of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1937), in what was the most fully evolved form of his Theatregraph system of integrated lighting, projections, and live action. He had made incidental use of slide projections as early as his first production in D34, and by the spring of 1935 had begun to use occasional filmed projection as well. The first production to employ the more complex Theatregraph system was his version of Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* in 1936.

Two things distinguished Theatregraph from ordinary projection systems in theatre. The chief technical innovation was the use of a scrim covering the entire front of the stage and serving as the primary projection surface, thus producing a simultaneous vision of projected images on the frontal scrim with live action behind it. A small, opaque, supplementary projection screen was on the stage itself, dedicated to a separate slide projector in the wings. What is often not understood about the system is that projections were not constantly employed but were used only at selected dramatic moments. In any case, the actors performed behind the scrim, with specially designed lighting that picked out only portions of the scene for illumination, making the effect of the scrim virtually disappear but still retaining its property of providing a slightly diffused visual effect. With the addition of projections, the demands on timing and balancing of lighting intensities were great, but the effect at its best was extraordinary. You could not tell, finally, whether the live actors were in front of, behind, or simply part of the projected image, enveloped in it. The images were not simply illustrational or informational; nor were they at all illusionistic, a naturalistic supplement. They functioned primarily on an emotive, metaphoric level.

Filmed stage projection is a spatial concern, non-illustrational and non-naturalistic. Film is most valued by the modern stage for its [enlarged] detail. . . . Only detail makes stage montage possible, particularly the detail that is capable of intensifying dramatic conflict to giant proportions, and brings close to the public that which the unaided eye cannot see on the stage. . . . [Similarly,] lighting must

work with details and only seldom with the scene as a whole. The setting must not be naturalistic or illusionistic. . . . The action must be presented fluidly and almost as if in a film montage. Simply everything that functions on the stage must stem from the imagery and musicality of film criteria.¹⁵

The final distinctive characteristic of Theatregraph was that it used film and slides designed strictly for the given production, not drawn from stock; moreover, it employed filmed images of the very actors in the production, playing off the filmed and 'real' characters in various ways.

Burian used the Theatregraph system in three significant productions: in addition to *Spring's Awakening* and *Onegin*, his adaptation of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1938). In both *Spring's Awakening* and *Werther*, the projections were clearly supplementary, of fascinating but secondary significance in relation to the more conventional, live action. In both productions it is clear that even though the projections were woven closely to the live action they could have been cut without radically affecting what remained. But that seems not to have been true in *Onegin*, in which the filmed projections and the cinematic nature of Burian's scenario threatened to make film rather than theatre the dominant, essential medium of the production.

A special feature of the *Onegin* mise en scène was a triptych approach to projections on the front scrim. The center section made use of both slides and film projection, sometimes the two together. The two smaller side sections had only slide projection, and, as an exception to the rule, these slide projections were primarily illustrational (a montage of stylized period drawings), whereas the projections on the center section were entirely and consistently for dramatic purposes. Another special feature in *Onegin* was an absolutely bare and level stage floor, but the acting space was flexibly segmented by three black curtains running laterally at different planes in the depth of the stage, thus heightening the possibilities of manipulating dramatic space and having live actors seemingly appear or disappear in the blackness, as if from or into nowhere.

To appreciate the creativity involved in this production, you must study the specially composed scenario created by Burian, the master plan for complex integration of film and stage. Four main sequences were filmed: Onegin's morning toilette, Tatyana's dream, Onegin's duel with Lensky and its aftermath of Olga's wedding, and the ball at Gremin's. All filmed sequences were laboriously shot in 16mm black and white film on the orchestra floor of the theatre once all seats were removed. The scenario is arranged in three columns: one indicates the filmed, projected images; another indicates the live action and contains live dialogue; a third indicates all music and sound cues, including lines spoken off stage into a microphone. A portion of one sequence, Gremin's ball, illustrates Burian's multimedia method as well as the dominance of the filmed portions, live mime, and music over dialogue or text.

Filmed/Projected Image	Live Action and Dialogue	Music/Sound
469. Previous slide projection out. Tatyana and Gremin waltz toward camera.	Tatyana and Gremin waltz off stage. Onegin remains.	Crescendo
470. Tatyana and Gremin split into two pairs, then more and more pairs.	Onegin gazes at filmed image as if in a trance, and mechanically tears the letter.	Crescendo
Cross fade to		
471. Onegin tearing the letter.	Tatyana and Gremin dance back on and circle Onegin.	Fortissimo
472. Enlarged detail of Onegin's hands tearing the letter.	As above.	Continued
473. Camera pans to Onegin's feet, where instead of scraps of paper, petals fall.	As above	Continued
474. Onegin takes a step and tramples petals.	Onegin looks at dancing pair as they move way.	Crescendo
Cross fade to		
475. A rain of confetti.	Onegin starts toward Tatyana but masked dancers waltz between them, dancing around him. ¹⁶	Fortissimo

Essentially metaphoric in its use of detail and juxtaposition, and cinematic in its form – the structure composed of a great many relatively brief 'takes' – *Onegin* marked the furthest extreme of Burian's theatre of synthesis based on musical principles. The production indicates, also, how far Burian had moved from the agitprop topicality of D34. Indeed it is easy to miss the justification of Burian's production of *Onegin* in relation to the ostensible identity of the D Theatre as a 'political tribunal' or as a 'spokesman for the masses.' In this sense, *Onegin* is representative of many Burian productions: one has to squint at least a little in order to perceive the revolutionary or Marxist line. Nevertheless, most of the leftist critics were satisfied that *Onegin*, like *Spring's Awakening*, was condemning a system produced by class exploitation, and attacking the stifling, corrupting pressure of bourgeois values and conventions. And it is true that many of Burian's other

productions expressed attitudes and values explicitly in support of orthodox Marxist premises.

Nevertheless, Burian's subjectivity and emotiveness, his incipient romanticism and fascination with expressive forms, were never far below the surface, and a combination of incidents during the 1936–37 season caused him to reveal a number of long suppressed frustrations and resentments stemming from what he considered to be assaults on his integrity as an artist. It was the great crisis of his prewar career and should be considered in any attempt to assess Burian's identity as an avant-garde theatre artist trying to work in accord with ideological principles.

The circumstances producing the crisis included news of the Moscow purge trials that began in August 1936. Closely related to the implications of the trials was the recently sanctioned 'aesthetics' of Socialist Realism propounded in Moscow in 1934, largely accepted by Czech Communist critics and applied intermittently to Burian's productions by 1935. Burian chafed at the imposed criteria of ready intelligibility and hewing to a dogmatic ideological line, both of which seemed designed to frustrate what he considered the intrinsic demands of art. Moreover, Soviet criticism of Meyerhold, long an idealized source of inspiration for Burian, paralleled the oppression implicit in the Moscow trials and in the doctrine of Socialist Realism. Having met Meyerhold during his visit to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1934



Plate 5 E. F. Burian and V. E. Meyerhold during the latter's visit to Prague in the fall of 1936. Photographer unknown.

and hearing of Meyerhold's difficulties at firsthand during the latter's visit to Prague in the fall of 1936 undoubtedly intensified Burian's disturbance (Plate 5). He went out of his way to defend Meyerhold and drew up petitions on his behalf among liberal, artistic circles in Prague, to the point of being accused of hysteria by local Communist critics. Some of Burian's most intense comments were directed against Soviet positions: he dismissed the assumed excellence of Soviet theatre in general and scorned the concept of 'Socialist' Realism as a bluff, declaring that it was really 'Soviet' realism that was being propagated – and rather stupidly propagated because it was not exportable to countries with different conditions, to countries where 'quality' was important.¹⁷

A particularly painful blow, which Burian must have taken as a personal insult, occurred when photographs of D Theatre productions were ordered to be removed from a Czech cultural exhibit in Moscow in 1937 on the grounds that the theatre was formalistic.

Burian's reaction to these events took several forms. In his non-dramatic writing he raked the tenets and implications of Socialist Realism, angrily mocking its presumptuousness in judging the complexities of artistic creation, and defending the autonomy of art in terms reminiscent of his 1930 comments in 'Dynamic Theatre.' He proceeded to deny the classic Marxist doctrine that class consciousness shapes an artistic work and to reject any criticism of a work of art because the art was hard to understand. His peroration was characteristic:

He who sees in theatre nothing other than a reflection of life without artistic invention, he who would eliminate from the stage any distinctive theatrical expression of this life, he who isn't happy to be present in the audience during the miracle of the fusion of arts in the synthesis of a more beautiful and better life than the one we live, is an enemy of theatre.¹⁸

Burian's frustration and anger were not limited to prose essays. In *Hamlet III* (March 1937), his adaptation of Shakespeare and a novel by Jules Laforgue, he presented Hamlet as the epitome of an alienated artist in opposition to a rigid, unfeeling society (Plate 6). The depiction is of course patently autobiographical (or biographical if one applies it to Meyerhold, as well one might). Burian himself said that *Hamlet III* was 'a manifesto for the freedom of artistic expression,' and used Jacques's lines from *As You Like It* as the motto of his play: 'Invest me in my motley. Give me leave / To speak my mind.' Julius Fučík, the leading Communist critic at the time, dismissed *Hamlet III* as an attempt to justify theatrical effects as ends in themselves and to defend art for art's sake, accusations that probably corroborated the feelings of persecution in Burian's mind. 'God forbid,' Burian subsequently wrote, 'that one day an artist whom people thought they could buy for a few

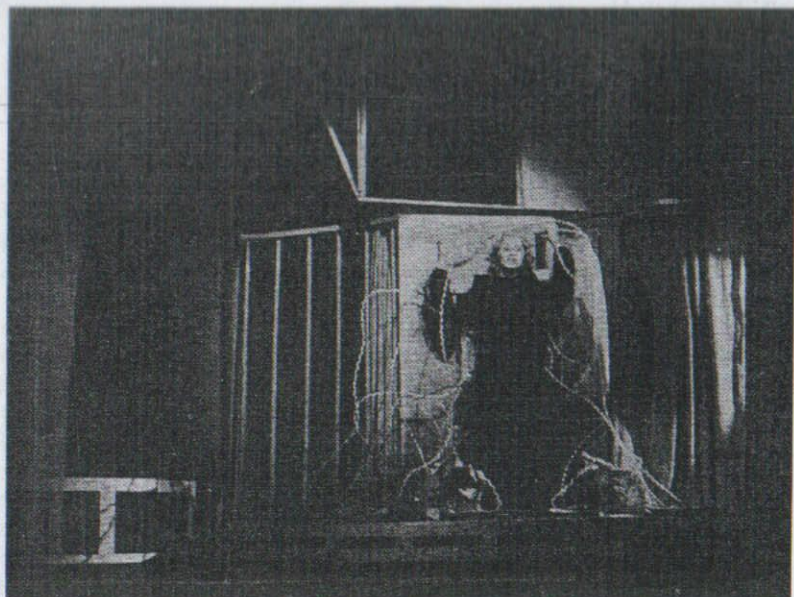


Plate 6 The physical setup for the depiction of Ophelia's drowning from Burian's production of *Hamlet III* (1937). Photo: M. Háek.

pennies lifted his head and declared art the greatest, uncorruptible, and most moral possession of all future societies.¹⁹

The following season, after several productions that once again seemed ideologically sounder in terms of their progressive view of society, Burian staged *Werther* in April 1938, a curious choice, considering the Austrian Anschluss of the previous month and the mounting tensions that were leading up to the Munich crisis of September. (V + W were producing their militant *Fist in the Eye* at the time.) In *Werther*, Burian went to the extreme limits of the romantic subjectivity that had marked many of his plays. He began his dramatization of this most romantic of stories with its ending, Werther's suicide, and presented the subsequent action as the product of a dying man's hallucinations, a shifting, confused state between the seeming and the real, thus heightening the inherent subjectivity of the original text. Moreover, he split the Werther character into the living figure of the story and his dying alter ego, who accompanies the action that is presented. The particular treatment of the story lent itself superbly, of course, to Burian's multimedia Theatregraph method, in which dream and reality could be blended and communicated so effectively by the combination of living actors and insubstantial, evanescent images.

Burian explained the choice of *Werther* in terms of its author: Goethe had been denounced by the Nazis, which seemed a good reason for the Czechs to honor him. Moreover, Burian was also presumably attacking bourgeois society for killing those who would not serve it. But it is difficult not to view the production as still another form of self-expression in which Burian himself is by implication the outsider, misunderstood, driven to extremity. Moreover, the Meyerhold connection was doubtlessly a factor again: Burian staged *Werther* three months after the close of Meyerhold's theatre in Moscow. It is as if Burian felt compelled to turn inward, to return yet once again to an exposure of his most inner, personal crises as an artist. With *Werther* he reached the limit, and perhaps a catharsis. In no subsequent prewar work is the subjective element – that is, Burian's personal ego – of particular significance.

Slightly earlier in the heartbreaking year of 1938, in January, his staging of Villon's poetry *Paris Plays the Lead* (Paříž hraje prim) was welcomed for its undistorted capturing of the rebel poet's spirit. Burian's attraction to Czech folk material also continued and contributed to the united front against the Nazi threat by championing traditional, national values. At a time when V + W were performing their final two satiric revues, he achieved particular success with his *First Folk Suite* (První lidová suita, June 1938). The following year, after the fall of the first and second Czech Republics, he produced his *Second Folk Suite* (Druhá lidová suita, May 1939). Both productions consisted of three authentic Czech folk plays only slightly adapted by Burian, who, along with his audience, found great appeal and inspiration in their naive wisdom and faith. Burian's remaining prewar productions while his D Theatre was still alive are only of secondary interest except for noting his conscious choice of Czech authors, themes, and poetry, as well as his drift toward more realistic, psychologically based work that foreshadows his postwar career. His own play *Věra Lukášová* (1938) was the best example of this new interest.

In the fall of 1939, D40 began producing in a larger but hardly ideal subterranean concert hall less than a mile from the Mozarteum. In spite of Burian's overt communist affiliation and commitment against Fascism, he and his theatre were permitted to keep performing until March 1941, when the Gestapo arrested him and closed his theatre. Burian spent the rest of the war in concentration camps. One possible explanation for the unusual delay in stopping his work is that the German-Soviet agreement in 1939 may have allowed a certain amount of breathing room for artists even as anti-fascist as Burian had been. Moreover, none of Burian's productions had overtly challenged the status quo of the occupation; any attempt to do so by any theatre would have been suicidal. Like Honzl and Frejka at the time, Burian attempted to sustain Czech culture and morale by stressing works with Czech authors (e.g., Viktor Dyk, K. H. Mácha, Vítězslav Nezval, Božena Benešová) or themes that celebrated things Czech and reflected on the harsh realities of the occupation in only the most indirect ways.

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Burian's complexity as an artist with a strong but sensitive ego and an often conflicting dual commitment to art and a programmed worldview makes any brief assessment of his prewar work difficult. His theatre art itself had its share of contradictions. It found equal inspiration in naive folk traditions and sophisticated technology. It exploited the resources of the human voice in the service of poetry far beyond their normal limits and yet drastically subordinated the verbal element in some of his most outstanding productions. It ranged from crude pamphleteering to subtle evocations of mind and spirit. Like V + W, he was admired by youth and by the intelligentsia, but unlike V + W he was denounced by some others as a pretentious egotist.

One thing is clear: he and his theatre were enormously influential on aspiring young theatre artists of the 1930s who came to prominence in the post-war years. Whether they worked directly with him or simply flocked to his productions, they were won over by the combination of his innovative, poetic stage art and his progressive, anti-establishment ideals. Alfred Radok, Václav Kašlík, Josef Svoboda, Otomar Krejča, Jaromír Pleskot and Luboš Pistorius are among the major postwar theatre artists whom Burian inspired, and who took his D Theatre as a model for much of their own work. His prewar artistry also made its mark abroad. E.F.B.'s D Theatre became synonymous with socially engaged avant-garde art throughout Europe and even caught the attention of American theatre practitioners and students.²⁰

What remains distinct in the memory of his prewar work is the impression of an extremely gifted and industrious artist applying his multiple talents to the creation of stage works that fused specifically theatrical elements with related forms of film (frequently) and music (always) in new and striking ways. Equally distinct is the impression of the difficulties that Burian as artist had in consistently coming to terms in practice with Burian as ideologically committed fighter for social revolution, regardless of how ideal the union seemed in theory. The best known instance of the dilemma in theatre is probably that of Meyerhold, but in many ways Burian anticipated its critical, anguished phase. He was spared its brutal denouement, but lived to experience further variations of radical stress from his conflicting commitments to art and ideology in the post-1948 Communist regime. I have explored the later phases of Burian's work elsewhere, but would here simply note that, like V + W, Burian never quite found himself upon his return to Prague after the war. Regrettably, he endured more frustration and embarrassment than artistic satisfaction in his final years.²¹