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## **The performing arts in the Czech Republic: the theatre network, its function, system of financing and support - 2001**

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### Introduction

Theatre in Bohemia and Moravia has a long historical tradition. During the National Revival Movement in the 19th century, it fulfilled more than an artistic function. It was perceived as being representative of national society, as an institution in which the Czech language was preserved and cultivated, as evidence of cultural and artistic self-confidence, as well as an instrument in political conflicts. Ever since that time theatre has enjoyed considerable political prestige, in one way demonstrated by the building of theater venues in every large town. During the First Republic (1918-1938) the theatre retained its prestige both by the high standards of the official stages and by the original and important work of the theatre avant-garde. After the Communist takeover in 1948 all the theatres were nationalized and only the state was allowed to operate in the field. In the 1960s the theatre began to liberate itself from this restriction and from totalitarian censorship, and achieved recognition at a European level. The Soviet invasion of 1968 caused an interruption and regression that lasted for twenty years. During that time any development was limited to studio theatres. Nevertheless, the theatre was driving stimulus for the Velvet Revolution of 1989, when the theatres became a political platform and an open tribune for public discussion. A transformation began to take place in the 1990s, when the state monopoly on running theatres came to an end; most theatres were transferred to the control of local councils; private production management began mainly in the sphere of musicals and dozens of theatre and dance companies were formed as independent non-governmental organizations.

Czech theatre has a multifaceted theatrical network in which, thanks to tradition, there is a predominance of straight repertoire theatres with a permanent ensemble. Most of these theatres are administered and run by local councils (there are 44 such theatres). In the Czech Republic as in Germany, some theatre buildings shelter several ensembles under one roof: drama, opera, ballet and sometimes operetta (9 theatres). Only the National Theatre in Prague, the Prague State Opera and Lanterna Magica are run directly by the Ministry. Most privately managed productions are musicals, but there are also companies founded on the

"star" system. There is also tradition of professional support for the puppet theatre. Several festivals are held yearly: International Festival Divadlo/Theatre in Pilsen, the Festival of European Regions in Hradec Kralove, Dance Prague, Four Days in Motion, the Prague German-Language Theatre Festival, the International Frontier Theatre Festival in Cesky Tesin). The Prague Quadriennale continues as an international exposition of stage and costume design and theatre architecture. Foreign companies appear more frequently and there are close contacts with the Slovak theatre world. Interest abroad for hosting Czech companies is not so great.

Theory, history and criticism are taught at three universities; two Academies of Performing Arts provide specialist education at university level in a variety of fields; and there are a number of specialist secondary schools of the conservatoire type (in recent years some of them private). To these one should add the Theatre Institute, a modern information and academic institution which offers information, documentation and library services; focuses on lexicographical work; carries out statistical research; acts as a mediator between the Czech theatre and the theatre abroad (representing, for example, Czech theater community in the international theatre NGO's); is the largest specialist publishing house in the country; organizes international projects; and creates a forum for public and professional discussions. There also exist other means of publication for specialist literature, and a traditionally broad base of theatre periodicals. The extensive infrastructure of theatrical activity employs a large number of artists and other professionals (the majority, in the case of the municipal and state theatres, on permanent contracts).

Amateur theatre activity, which in the Czech lands has a fertile, multi-faceted and active tradition, is also supported from public funds. Statistics of year 1999:

No. of performances per year: 23.205

No. of premieres per year: 611

No. of visitors per year: 5,198.391

A brief overview of legal and financial conditions of the transformation after 1989

Until 1989 theatrical activities could only, according to the Communist law on theatre, be carried on by the state. Theatres were administered, operated, financed and abolished directly by the government (the Ministry of Culture) or by regional committees as representatives of the state administration. In 1990 the most restrictive passages of the relevant law were immediately cancelled, and eventually the law as a whole. The operation of theatres was open both to the newly merging non-profit sector and the private sector. The existing network of theatres, including the buildings (which are often part of the historical property of the towns), was transferred from the state to the local authorities, the financing of the theatres' activity transferred at the same time through a

change in the tax system and a transfer of income from some taxes. Theatre professionals had some concerns about this essential step towards transformation, wondering whether local councils were going to give priority to other needs such as, for example, investment in the infrastructure of the neglected fabric of the towns. However, in the course of the last decade only five permanent theatre companies have been closed down, those being of a dubious artistic level. Nevertheless, a problem did arise in that certain municipalities acquired responsibility for theatrical activity, which had a regional or even countrywide significance, including tours to other towns and de facto subsidized a public outside its tax base. It was not until the second half of the 1990s that Parliament, in the course of negotiating the state budget, allocated means for the support of professional regional theatre activity. The program was administered through the Ministry of Culture and had at its annual disposition 50-80 million crowns. Since then the amount of money in this grant program has decreased every year.

As early as the first half of the 1990s the Ministry of Culture created a grant system for the support of civic associations (non-profit organizations) which made possible grants for a varied range of unofficial theatre activities, experimental work, festivals and workshops of smaller and newly-founded companies in a wide spectrum of genres and kinds. In the second half of the 1990s a grant system was established for legal and physical persons. There is specialist decision-making, with Quality and diversity as the criteria. The problem of these grants is the size of their budgets, which are proportionally much smaller than the means granted by the public budgets to contributory organizations, i.e. the clear majority of repertoire theatres. This method resists greater dynamism and change in the permanent theatre network and limits the successful passage of the Czech theatre to the next century. In the second half of the 1990s the local administration of larger cities such as Prague and Brno founded analogous programmes and grants for the support of cultural activities. But even here there is a noticeable imbalance between the financing of the permanent municipal theatre system and the independent stages. As a result, outstanding theatrical personalities such as Ctibor Turba have difficulty in obtaining even inadequate funding from public sources, whilst demonstrably dull ensembles functioning in permanent city theatres are assured of financial security, making their members comfortable until they reach retirement age.

It is essential to transform the entire legal framework of the system, so that the post-totalitarian legal form of what is known as contributory organizations can acquire at least in part a public-legal nature and strengthen its autonomy. Once the reform of the state administration has been completed, multi-source financing

on a national, regional and municipal level can take place on the contract principle. In the existing system of financing, the most serious problems are connected with financing high-cost genres (opera); with the support of regional activity; and with the amount of support for independent creation. In comparison with EU countries both the percentage and the nominal expenditure of public budgets is lower; fees and salaries are lower, as are ticket prices.

Cultural policy

In 1999 the government of the Czech Republic approved the principles of a cultural policy in a report with the title "Strategy for a more effective state support of culture". The state took an obligation:

Article 1: To support the widest possible involvement of citizens and civic initiatives in cultural and artistic activities, their access to the cultural inheritance, and participation in the care of the cultural heritage, including their adequate share in the decision-making procedures.

Article 2: In the context of a subsidiary policy, to maintain direct payments by citizens for cultural services at an acceptable level, and to put into effect a system of reductions for selected services and groups of citizens.

Article 4: To increase the size of the chapter 334 -Culture in the state budget to 1 % of state budget expenditure; to ensure a share of regional budgets, and to support the increase of expenditure of general budgets for the financing of culture; to provide contributions in the context of a publicly announced grant policy, also in the shape of programmes intended for material aid.

Article 6: To strengthen the co-operational and long-term financing of cultural activities and projects from public budgets through changes in tax regulations to make it advantageous for donors to support cultural activities. Article 7 To strengthen the role of the financing of cultural activities and projects through public funds and their sources.

Article 8: Through a change in legal regulations to support the increasing of the share of self-financing of cultural institutions from auxiliary activities and the effective use of property held in trust.

Article 10: To transform selected contributory organisations in the cultural field into publicly owned corporation.

Article 11: To create more effective support for non-governmental organisations, as the basic means of financing culture from the public budgets, through improving the principles of grant proceedings.

Article 13: To support entrepreneurial activities in culture mainly by tax relief and contributions.

However, in spite of this proclamation the necessary legislative and financial changes were not made. Decision-making processes are in the hands of political representation

and local administration and to some extent the bureaucracy; expert decision-making about the allocation of means (and about priorities and criteria) is difficult to implement at every level, because of the lack of legislative recourse and political will throughout the entire political spectrum to adopt a "arms-length" principle".

Other sources of funding

Sources of funding in the Czech Republic other than public are extremely limited. There is the State Culture Fund whose main source, the lottery, foundered, and for which another attempt at revival is taking place. Meanwhile, not even a special tax on commercial cultural activity has been established (e.g. the tabloids). During the period of transformation important assistance has been provided by foreign foundations and institutions (the Open Society Fund, Pro Helvetia, the British Council, the Goethe Institute and others). There is no large and wealthy private cultural foundation or clearly conceived donor activity.

The municipal theatres

There are professional theatres with permanent companies in twenty-two cities and towns. In a number of places there are professional theatres of various types (e.g. drama theatre and puppet theatre). In roughly the same number of places there are limited seasons, which do not have a formulated concept and program together ad hoc. In the 1990s, with the liberalisation of the cultural environment, a number of smaller companies and groups renovated some small spaces as studio theatres, theatre clubs and small stages. They frequently used non-theatrical spaces (halls, amphitheatres, historical monuments, public spaces) for their projects. In this sense the Czech theatre really did experience a boom.

The relationship between administrators and theatres, conflict or partnership

Local councils obviously put pressure on theatres to disburse their budgets efficiently and to increase their income. Up to now there have been no recorded demands for inappropriate commercial theatrical activity. For the time being they maintain their artistic civic autonomy; conflicts of a political nature between the local council and the theatre leadership are rare. The theatres in their new form have become an organic part of municipal social life, contributing to the prestige of the town and in the best cases helping the inhabitants to identify with their environment. Directors, however, with a few notable exceptions (for example, the distinctive programme and profile of the theatres in Hradec Králové, Ostrava and Plzeň, which has proved successful both artistically and with audiences) prefer the dramaturgical mainstream in their repertoire policy. There is a visible absence of contemporary original dramatic work and the staging of works by contemporary

European and international dramatists is rare. Graduates of a relatively well-developed educational system only reluctantly appear in theatres outside the large cities because this limits their other activities (film, television, radio, advertising, dubbing), necessary to boost the income from the low salaries in the rep theatre.

Municipal subsidies to theatres vary according to the conditions of the municipal budgets, but theatres in Prague, for example, do not have any real financial problems. New, and at present difficult to estimate, problems will appear with the establishment of the new regional system, when it will be necessary to look for qualitatively new forms of cooperation in public budgets. However, up to now the theatres themselves have resisted transition to any other form of administration, whether as a limited company, a shareholding company with the local council as majority share-holder, or as a type of non-profit organizations, because they see their professional, artistic, social and financial security in the existing model. Small and limited, but secure. This post-totalitarian stereotype is deeply entrenched in the artistic and political sphere and is a serious obstacle for the dynamic development of our theatrical culture.

Local councils and their culture departments actively involve themselves in European cultural cooperation (especially at a regional level), which is a positive feature of the last decade. Czech theatre culture has become as a whole more open, and with entry to the European Union we anticipate that cooperative models will establish themselves together with their own legislature and financing.

The audience

After an audience crisis at the beginning of the 1990s a gradual increase in the size of audiences occurred but pilfered out in the last two years. Theatre is traditionally an interest of the middle class and statistically we cannot avoid the fact that only 4% of the urban population visits the theatre. The younger generation prefers alternative genres, though even here one should not generalize. The division between traditional "high and low" is blurred; the relationship between professional and amateur has changed, with the boundaries less firm; and the audience is not essentially interested (apart from the ticket prices) into the legal status of the theatre and how it is financed. In places where theatre venues have developed a multi-cultural service they have become the focus of interest of its town, whilst elsewhere they will have major problems.

Institutional autonomy

Any legal or physical person can run a theatre. Apart from tax requirements there is no other regulation. The basic difference is only in access to public sources; whereas state and municipal theatres have this access guaranteed by law, other subjects do not and rely on arbitrary decision-making process. The state and the local councils assign not only a

budget to their theatres, but have the right to appoint and dismiss the director (sometimes even the artistic director) and to determine the subject and extent of the main activity. There is as yet no legal context for the delegation of authority to a board of directors or a specialist board, and even when it is sometimes used (for example in the National Theatre) the process of enforcement of this management is questionable. Employees of the National Theatre and the State Opera are employees of the state and subject to its norms, both in the wages and as regarding the Work Code. The employees of the municipal theatres are employees of the local council with similar work conditions. At the present time there is no particular working model for the artistic sector, apart from the possibility of contractual relations on the basis of the law on author's rights.

#### Conclusion

Our theatre system is distinguished by a considerable measure of stability. The dynamic and the variability, the capability for topical communication and the response to new cultural interests, and the postmodern transformation of the theatrical poetic are more strikingly implemented on the periphery than in the center. The traditional theatrical model for central Europe is the type of repertoire theatre with a permanent ensemble and this model will prevail for the foreseeable future. However, the transformation of cultural paradigms has in recent years brought some new theatrical responses. It is clear that it is the duty of the state to provide a natural environment for this kind of response, an environment which relies on an open concept of culture and civil society and a rational use of public resources at a level which both holds its own in international confrontation, and makes it possible by means of the performing arts to respond to the challenges of globalization. Even though the taste and interests of the Czech public in the theatre are relatively traditional and conservative, the status of Czech theatrical culture and the creativity of its outstanding representatives provide some degree of self-confidence, so essential for direct confrontation in the European cultural arena.

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