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## Studio Theatres of the 1980s

Barbara Day

Throughout the 1970s the Czech theatre (in common with all the fields of culture and education) suffered from increasing restrictions and the imposition of centralised control. One drastic result of official policy was the loss of several hundred theatre workers. These, who in normal times would have been no more political than their colleagues, refused to sign the document – circulated to the whole of the country's workforce – which denounced the events of spring 1968. Regardless of their professional abilities, they were demoted, moved to other places of work, or prevented from working in their profession at all. Many emigrated. These demotions and departures led to vacancies in key positions, which were filled, not by new young talent but by Communist Party members – most of them opportunists and bureaucrats with little practical experience.

The centralisation policy in the theatre was justified on the grounds that it would result in “good” theatre (ie professionally presented and acted) – a goal towards which all theatre companies should be steered. However constructive this sounded in theory, in practice it meant the elimination of irregular forms and material and the subduing of independently minded personalities (free spirits). An “official ideal” encouraging a sameness of presentation was propagated by the authorities, in place of the energy and enthusiasm which people put into running a theatre “of their own”. The Státní divadelní studio was gradually run down and finally closed in December 1980; its diverse and independent members were either eliminated or placed under the control of “parent” theatres: Ypsilon under the Divadlo Jiřího Wolke, Činoherní klub under the Vínohradské divadlo, Semafor under the Hudební divadlo v Karlíně. In a city like Ostrava, where several companies were active under different sponsors, they were gathered under one administration which decided the programme for them all. In Brno, the Divadlo na provázku which had been operating under the benevolent roof of the Dům umění, was administratively transferred to the Státní divadlo, whose overall director did his best to control Provázek's staffing and programming.

A new Theatre Law came into operation on 1st July 1978, laying down exact conditions under which a new theatre company could originate, or an exhausted one close down (even if all the company members decided not to carry on, the name and activity had to continue with new participants). Consequently, from 1978 to 1990 no new professional theatre group was created in the normal way. New groups could only form when free-lance performers (sometimes including actors employed by permanent theatres) decided on an ad hoc basis to work together, in such venues as they could arrange performance by performance. Such initiatives were often despised

by established theatre workers, who described the groups as “semi-professional”. However, it was largely these groups and also the genuine amateurs, and the student groups, which kept the Czech theatre dynamic and healthy.

Although these small groups came under surveillance they survived because, as Ivan Vyskočil said in 1969 in interview with an American researcher: “...the censors usually followed the theatres that needed financial support. It's based on the opinion that the thing that costs too much money can influence the whole nation...”<sup>1</sup> One aspect of official policy in fact supported the movement; in the 1970s the regime set up a network of youth centres throughout the country, intended to keep young people away from any dangerous independent influences. Although the network was controlled by the Communist Party the managers of individual centres had relative autonomy and needed to run a full diary of events, as did the managers of trade union centres and culture houses. They welcomed the programmes of these small peripatetic groups. Gradually traditions became established; some venues became the home of rock, jazz or pop, others of avant-garde theatre. A flexible and mobile culture developed, programmes changing nightly as performers juggled their timetables to fit in appearances. Approval had to be obtained from the národní výbor for each booking, and a script had to be submitted in advance; but with audiences of a hundred or less, approval and monitoring was not as rigorous as in a proper theatre. (Nevertheless, approval could be refused, often for irrational reasons – maybe an official would take offence at some song or sketch. A group or partnership would find itself no longer welcome in its own district and face months of journeying to other parts of the country; as happened to Burian & Dědeček in the late 1970s, after a song parodying the military had offended someone in the Ministerstvo kultury.)

Another aspect to this, and another pitfall which awaited young performers, was that of becoming too successful. It often happened that performing groups and partnerships evolved out of student appearances, whose informal and colloquial presentation and mild satire – social rather than political – appealed to young people. The performers attracted the patronage of a sympathetic figure from the národní výbor or Ministerstvo kultury who helped them to obtain bookings in clubs and culture houses. Some licence was still allowed while the group retained its amateurism and naivety; but once it began to professionalise and to build up a popular following, the patron would suggest some diplomatic adjustments. Having tasted their first success, the group would be faced with the choice of compromising and conforming, or of receiving no further engagements (at least on the Prague circuit).

The studio theatre movement of the 1970s was made up partly from these “semi-amateur” groups, which had evolved spontaneously, and partly from companies which had turned professional before 1978. They belonged to no particular “line” of theatre, except that they existed on the frontier of official theatre, the “grey area” which became increasingly important during the 1980s. The one feature which they had in common was their “nepravidelná dramaturgie”, a phrase applied by Petr

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<sup>1</sup> Vyskočil, Ivan in Howey, Nicholas: *Who's afraid of Franz Kafka?* (1970)

Oslzlý to the Divadlo na provázku. Of all the studio theatres in the 1970s and 1980s, the Divadlo na provázku was the most important – which in fact makes it the most important company in Czechoslovakia at all. My first encounter with Provázek was in October 1982; I had arrived in Prague to continue my study of the theatre of the 1960s, but was directed by everyone I met (including Jan Grossman) to go out to the Hotel Tichý in Žižkov to see the – to me unknown – Brno company. (I discovered later that it was the final stage of their second Divadlo v pohybu tour.) After my first visit I wrote up my impressions of the company: “I’m told they play in a hotel in preference to a theatre. Traverse stage, floor level, raked seating, platforms at each end. About 300 in the audience, some sitting on the floor. *Svět snít*: based on a fairy tale by Božena Němcová. The use of colour – princess in white or draped in black when sacrificed to the monster, or doubled with the witch, when the prince doesn’t know which to follow. The apple trees, seven actors in green tights and red jerseys, or wearing black cloaks as ravens. Costumes old and improvised, they don’t match, but it doesn’t matter. Effective theatrical moments; the monster’s mouth turns into a giant witch. No dialogue; five musicians, and voice percussion by the actors. Great physical energy. They tell me that it’s a production intended for children; it seems to me to be extraordinarily surrealistic, even erotic, for children.”<sup>2</sup> Two nights later I saw *Hry a hříčky* at the same venue: “Audience flooding in more than half an hour before the start; there must have been more than 500, many standing. Three-sided stage. Japanese kyogen plays, plus one adapted from a Chinese tale and another from a Slovak story. Not an imitation of the Japanese style; rather, exercises in movement. Costumes “thrown together”, almost like children playing – dressing gowns used as kimonos, worn over torn jeans. Actors seem to be responsible for everything.”<sup>3</sup> The third performance by Provázek I saw that week was *Pezza versus Čorba*. “This time the doors aren’t even open; an hour before the start a crowd is surging outside, hoping to get in. A riotous performance, over-the-top clowning. The action revolves around the rivalry between the families of two clowns: the primitive, bossy Pezzas, whose son is half attracted to the other side, and who are constantly outwitted by the naive, gangling Čorba and his grossly huge wife – and then the two men uniting against their dominant wives. Sometimes a master-servant relationship develops, or a boxing match. Knife-throwing, the division of territory, appeal to the audience’s loyalties. A wall is constructed from cardboard boxes; the audience on one side can see only Pezza’s territory, on the other side, only Čorba’s. Very messy – spitting out chewed apple, water, toothpaste, ripping and devouring a whole chicken, and a final Bacchanalia of eggs, flour, icecream.”<sup>4</sup>

These were my first impressions of a rough, energetic company, full of invention. Later I saw many more of Provázek’s productions and learnt much more about the origin and philosophy of the company. However, I think it is not necessary for me to

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<sup>2</sup> Day, Barbara: Journal

<sup>3</sup> Ib.

<sup>4</sup> Ib.

talk to you here in detail about it, because since the founders are among your own teachers I would like just to mention one of the features in particular which it shared with the other studio theatres, and that is that it “did what it wanted”; not in the anarchic sense, for the studio theatres had to be very disciplined, working as they did under stringent conditions, but in the artistic sense. Provázek, instead of conforming to a standard dramaturgy, worked only on texts which Petr Oslzlý and the four directors – Scherhauser, Tálská, Polívka and Pospíšil – believed were relevant for their audience, and which they adapted and reconstructed to a flexible timescale with the co-operation of colleagues both within and without the theatre. This manner of approach raises the question of whether the term “divadlo studiového typu” is not synonymous with “autorské divadlo”; I would say that “autorské divadlo” covers a wider field, including theatres led by such powerful personalities as E. F. Burian and Otomar Krejča. However, it is important to keep the term “autorské divadlo” in mind when talking about the studio theatres, because this flexible reconstruction of material is common to most of them.

In the 1980s Brno was home not only to the experimental Divadlo na provázku but also to HaDivadlo, which moved here from Prostějov, where it had been founded by Josef Kovalčuk and Svatopluk Vála. They had been joined by Arnošt Goldflam, who had previously worked with Večerní Brno, Provázek and X-ka, a Brno poetry theatre led by Radim Vašínska in the 1960s. Vála’s productions had been based on lyrical narrative, whereas Goldflam’s came closer to Surrealism with unexpected juxtapositions and non-verbal language; although he also, like Václav Havel, wrote scripts which played with the linguistic manipulation which was corrupting everyday life. The first HaDivadlo production I saw was in December 1982, when they were performing in the theatre club in Řeznická street in Prague: it was Goldflam’s *Bylo jich pět a půl*. My notes read: “A traverse stage, about seven rows of audience on one side, four on the other. Very crowded. Stage untidy, with three dummies, a mattress, a rostrum on end, about five chairs or stools and three to five actors wandering aimlessly, one playing phrases on a mouth organ, another throwing paper darts. Four spotlights, plus one used occasionally. The start was promising – questions like: ‘What are you most afraid of?’ ‘What do you like most in a woman?’ ‘What slogan do you live by?’ developing from a game into an interrogation. But then it appeared to get very subjective – hard work physically, but very abstruse: sitting the dummies around the table, burning paper, throwing dart at a target on an actor’s body, picking up a haunting little tune. It lasted less than an hour.”<sup>5</sup>

Another original Brno group was the Ochotnický kroužek (known as Ochkr) which performed in a hall in Šelepova under the sponsorship of OKVS Brno V. Most of the members had belonged to the Divadlo na provázku’s youth studio and had previously belonged another amateur group Tak, tak. In 1979 Tak, tak staged *Lyrická agrese*, a compilation of unorthodox poetry by Russian and Soviet authors. This was to have been followed by *Hamletiana*, which included excerpts from Vladimír Holan and

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<sup>5</sup> Ib.

Tom Stoppard; however, the company was disbanded as a result of their unauthorised “street theatre” – homage to Dostoyevsky on the centenary of his death. The person responsible for this was a librarian who was also a stage manager with the Divadlo na provázku, Zdeněk Petrželka; he subsequently took the name Jan Antonín Pitínský to distract the authorities’ attention from his continued theatre activities. Together with Petr Osolobě, who had studied at DAMU in Prague, he prepared a version of Kafka’s *Amerika*, the first Kafka to be staged in Czechoslovakia for 14 years, since Grossman’s production of *Proces* in 1956. Pitínský and Osolobě took a less direct approach to the text than had Grossman, including material from Kafka’s *Letters to Felicia* and Němcová’s *Babička*, but, as Osolobě wrote in the programme, using dialogue straight from the book without trying to impose any interpretation. Pitínský worked out a technique of isolated, highly stylised gestures for each character.

The music for *Amerika* had been composed by a medical student, Luboš Malinovský, who with Pitínský was responsible for the next production by Ochkr, performed under the title *Abrahamus Patriarcha* by Jan Ámos Komenský. In fact, the attribution to Komenský was mere camouflage; the inspiration had been the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and the script was a combination of his text with the Bible and poetry from the German writer Helmuth Heissenbuttel. The staging and presentation was inspired by theatre director Robert Wilson and the composer Philip Glass; although only by what the directors had read about them, for their work could not officially be seen or heard in Czechoslovakia at this time. The production was highly stylised, making use of colour, contrast and unexpected effects, and often provoked a strong reaction amongst the audience. The performers included a chorus led by the composer Martin Dohnal, who was also a leading member of Ochkr.

I have begun by talking about the studio theatres in Brno rather than in Prague, because in Prague at this time there was no company comparable with Divadlo na provázku. Ypsilon (originally from Liberec) had its followers, but in Prague had become an “established” theatre in much the same way as the Činoherní klub, where individual productions might shock or delight audiences, but where there was no serious risk taken, nor any consistent force in the dramaturgy. (The divadlo Na zábradlí was a partial exception to this, where Evald Schorm’s productions in the 1980s, especially *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, were original and relevant; but Schorm himself was a person in the “grey area”, thrown out of film and allowed into Na zábradlí only as an occasional guest: director.) Prague’s most dynamic theatre was found on the fringe, in occasional performances at venues such as the Bránické divadlo, the Malostranská beseda, the klub Futurum in the Ironworkers’ House in Smíchov or the Junior klub na Chmelnice (the last named, well out of the city centre, probably housed the largest number of risk-taking productions of the 1980s – many of them visiting Prague from Brno and the regions.)

The most successful of this type of ensemble was the divadlo Na okraji, a group of free-lance actors who performed mainly in the Cellar club Rubín, in Malostranské náměstí. Working in a space which held an audience of less than a hundred, divadlo

Na okraji introduced a different form of staging for every production: traverse stage for an adaptation of Jiří Šotola’s *Kuře na rožně* (1979), or an end stage for dramatised readings of Jaroslav Hašek’s letters, *Šveji* (1980). In 1934 I saw their production of *Romeo a Julie*, which used roughly-built Elizabethan thrust stage, measuring barely two by three metres. This was “rough” theatre indeed, using only two actresses and five actors, omitting many of the characters. Many critics dislike the production, particularly its verse-speaking, which had been rehearsed to a metronome; I found it fresh and dynamic, with a direct appeal to the young audience. The spirit behind the group and the director of most of the productions was Zdeněk Potužil. Another notable personality in the company was Miki Jelínek, composer and singer, who also worked with a number of other professional companies.

A more amateur, occasional group was the *Studio pohybového divadla* led by Nina Vangeli, a student of Jan Kopecký influenced by the Polish director Grotowski and by the Living Theatre in New York. At one time she had belonged to Bílé divadlo, led by František Hrdlička, which never performed in public; and then to Křesadlo, led by Václav Martinec. Among her productions was Shakespeare’s *Bouře* (1984), which filled the central space of a hall with ladders, poles, artificial flowers, top hats, children, and trains of brilliant fabrics. By contrast, in *Rekviem* (1984) the costumes were grey and black – baggy suits and sleek forties skirts – and a swathe of gold lame struck the eye like sunlight in a tomb. In one sequence a small girl, black beret pulled down over pigtails, wandered through a field of baroque statues which nightmarishly leered and gaped at her: One of Vangeli’s strengths was in knowing how to create effective theatre by setting limited tasks within the scope of the actors’ abilities – most of them students and young workers.

Groups such as Vangeli’s, or the puppet company *Paraple* – which told stories by using inflexible objects moved into position by visible operators – relied on visual expression. Other performers did without props and depended on quick-witted wordplay, often taking the chance that there could not be an informer at every performance. Among such partnerships were Vodňanský and Skoumal, whom I never saw until after 1989 because of partial ban on their performances from the late 1970s. A similar partnership with such a “half-life” was that of Jan Burian (the son of E. F. Burian) and Jiří Dědeček, which lasted until 1985. They had a programme of 150 performances a year – but for most of the partnership’s existence, these had to be scheduled outside the capital because of antipathy on the part of Prague officials. They travelled by bus or train, later by car, with their *Show na heslo*, a kind of serial revue, each on a different topic. They used no props, travelling with just a guitar and their scripts. In February 1983 I travelled with them to Litvínov, and made the following notes: “. . . the small theatre and the clubroom are joined in an L-shape, so that they can share the same stage. This is Burian & Dědeček’s sixth visit; on the first occasion they played in the clubroom, but now the theatre is more than sold-out. They go over the script and check the lightning and sound equipment; Burian gets used to the piano. The show is compered by Dědeček with an easy, throwaway style. Sometimes he leaves the stage during Burian’s more serious songs. The audience is

mainly young, quickly picking up any political nuances. At the end of the first half Dědeček asks them to write their questions on paper he leaves at the front of the stage. They do, twenty or so questions, mainly amusing, or requests. Dědeček tells me that the least they have ever had is six, the most was 53; which was difficult to cope with, but they answer everything except compromising political questions. Very relaxed, controlled show – enthusiastic reception.”<sup>6</sup> The following is one of Burian’s poems from 1981: *Božskej klid*.<sup>7</sup>

Vím že je spousta malejch věcí  
Pro který stojí za to žít  
Hovězí filé dvě tři deci  
Solidní plat a božskej klid

Člověk se někdy třeba těší  
Z toho že venku neleje  
Někde se střelí vraždí věší  
A tady se nic neděje

Někde se plíží pachatelé  
A podminujou koleje  
Někde se končí s kulkou v těle  
A tady se nic neděje

Někde je zločin denním chlebem  
Někde je hlad a kurděje  
Někde by peklo bylo nebem  
A tady se nic neděje

Takovej svět by nebyl pro mě  
Já bych tam nikdy nemoh žít  
Já misám vědět že mám v domě  
Solidní plat a božskej klid

Tak když se vzbudím z rozčilení  
A když mě něco vyleká  
Říkám si vždycky: To nic není  
To jsou jen zprávy zdaleka

(1981)

One of the key figures in this kind of theatre was Ivan Vyskočil who, when he left the divadlo Na zábradlí, began to work on the kind of “unfinished” theatre which he believed was the only kind that mattered – calling it, provocatively, “Nedivadlo”. For fifteen years Vyskočil worked with Pavel Bošek (who died in 1980), and subsequently with Otakar Roubínek, but always preferred to include a third person to give the performance a dramatic dimension; although there was a difference between such appearances as “Kuchyně Ivana Vyskočila”, which was usually himself with a musician, and the Nedivadlo itself which, although it worked to a basic text, could be played with different colleagues and was never the same from one night to another. One of the most successful performances of Nedivadlo was *Haprdans*, which on the occasion I saw it, lasted three hours. To open, Vyskočil told the story with the aid of kitchen utensils as the characters: a wooden stirrer as Gertrude, wooden spoon as Claudius, colander as Polonius, balloon whisk as Ophelia, rotary whisk as Hamlet – a kind of puppet show. Then, in twelve scenes, Vyskočil took us through the story with new insights: for example, that Hamlet is the son of Claudius, and the poison Claudius pours into the King’s ear is the knowledge of this fact – for although the King did know about his wife’s adultery, now that he is *known* to know, he has to do something about it, and what he does – is to commit suicide.

Amongst the “pupils” of Vyskočil in the early 1980s was the partnership Vizita, Jaroslav Dušek and Jan Borna, who began working together as students in 1980. I first saw their performance *Srslení* in the Malostranská beseda in 1982, where I made the following notes: “...before it starts they mix with the audience, greet people in the bar; is this genuine or part of their ‘programme’ – or am I wrong to make a distinction? In the introduction, they ask the audience to call out ‘nuda’ or ‘nedorozumění’ when they wish. I wonder if this contact will be maintained; not in every part, but from time to time, for example the door-opening exercise on theatrical styles – naturalism, expressionism, socialist realism. Quite an intellectual programme – references to Stanislavsky and Brecht. A fair amount of wordplay, most of which I couldn’t pick up. Afterwards there is a beseda, lasting nearly as long as the performance; a number of the questions concern the audience relationship, whether they are in fact offending the audience. Later they tell me that they are surprised by these questions, since they always work on the principle that they are amongst friends and make exchanges on that level. I ask them about the intellectual level of their programme; they do presuppose certain level of education, but feel that their performances can be enjoyed on different levels. It doesn’t require a knowledgeable person but one who is ‘bystrý’. Like Voskovec and Werich, their action is interrupted by ‘předscény’, but unlike them the předscény move the action further on.”<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1980s Vyskočil and his pupils kept up a running battle about the nature of performance with another partnership, the Brothers Vladimír and Jiří Just, who worked mainly in the Rubín klub. To an outsider, the differences between the two schools were not at first sight obvious – both were examples of autorské divadlo,

<sup>6</sup> Ib.

<sup>7</sup> Burian, Jan in Just, Vladimír: *Z dílny malých scén* (1989) p. 44

<sup>8</sup> Day, Barbara: *Journal*

using repartee, word games, and original topical songs. The difference lay in the subject matter and audience relationship. On my first visit to *Ústřední půjčovna myšlenek* – in December 1982 the most recent performance by the Bratři Justové – I noted: “About a hundred or so in the audience, facing an end stage; a piano, two chairs. A programme of songs and story telling, relaxed, casual – not the physical presence of Vizita, more underplayed. Some pointed topical jokes. Use of radio, telephone. My companion tells me: ‘it’s about life as we live it here’. No direct audience contact.”<sup>9</sup> A few weeks later I visited their production of *Vata* (1979) and noted: “Very much the same pattern as the other show – staccato dialogues, rather superficial, monologues, parodies of folk songs. Much of the humour about subjects such as the pollution of the Vltava. “<sup>10</sup> The following is one of their songs, written between 1979 and 1987 – *Knihy koblíhy*.<sup>11</sup>

moto:  
Jsou knihy, jejichž  
společným jmenovatelem  
je absence čitatele.

Jsou knihy píhy  
na bílé pleti písemnictví  
Jsou knihy panny  
Královnyn papírnictví  
Jsou knihy pro pilné  
A pro knihomoly skalní  
Jsou knihy omylné  
A tisíc let už aktuální  
Jsou knihy pro mě svaté  
Co plaší večer smutky  
Jsou knihy nestydaté  
Knihy prostitutky  
Jsou knihy bez koncepce  
Jsou knihy do konfekce  
Jsou knihy bez obrázků  
Jsou knihy na zakázku  
Však proč se mi chce smát  
Když měl bych důvod brečet  
A proč pro pravdu lhát  
Pro postavení klečet  
Proč peníze mě lákají

<sup>9</sup> Ib.

<sup>10</sup> Ib.

<sup>11</sup> Justové, Bratři in Just, Vladimír: *Z dílny malých scén* (1989) p. 47

Víc než bych si přál  
A proč se pilní flákají  
A líní dělaj dál  
Jsou knihy výtečné  
Zabalte mi pět kilo a drůbky k tomu!  
Jsou knihy zbytečné  
Knihy ŠS – knihy Škoda Stromů!  
Jsou knihy koblíhy  
A kdo je rád přeje mu to  
Jsou knihy koblíhy  
Navrch cukr uvnitř dut  
Jsou knihy s kterými  
Se slušný člověk nestýká  
Jsou knihy pro které  
Se ještě dneska zatýká  
Jsou knihy bez koncepce  
Jsou knihy do konfekce  
Jsou knihy nevidané  
Jsou knihy nevydané  
Však proč se mi chce smát  
Když měl bych důvod brečet  
A proč pro pravdu lhát  
Pro postavení klečet  
Proč peníze mě lákají  
Víc než bych si přál  
A proč se pilní flákají  
A líní dělaj dál  
To kdyby někdo sečet  
O tom bych si rád přečet  
O tom bych si rád přečet!

(1979-1987)

Another important figure in this shifting, peripatetic world was the mime artist Ctibor Turba. I have been asked to say something about him in detail, as follows: Turba originally studied in Brno, where he met Boris Hybner, who, influenced by Jiří Suchý, had tried to create a Semafor-type literary cabaret. About 1961-2 they began to work together on an occasional, amateur, basis. In 1966 they called themselves the Pantomime Alfred Jarry and began to get bookings as and when they could – in Alhambra, Černé divadlo, Laterna magika. In 1968, after the success of their performance *Harikiri* they were able to work independently and were even invited abroad, for example, to Sadlers Wells in London. Turba described *Harikiri* as being antipositivist, existential, absurd – it belonged to its time, which was doubtful and

questioning, and was influenced by authors like Samuel Beckett. Turba and Hybner were impatient with the optimistic view of life as expressed, for example, by Ladislav Fialka's pantomime (with which Hybner had worked) and by the whole "pierrot" concept of mime; they asked why they should spend time on stage describing in detail imaginary objects; why shouldn't they just assume that these objects do exist, and get on with describing *what* happens, that is, the relationships between people. They wanted to express the cruelty they saw in life, its absurdities and weaknesses, whilst still keeping a kind of light-hearted black humour: for example, in the sketch "Jubilee" they played two old actors running through the classic gags of silent film, their cruelty exaggerated by their age, but still in the same spirit. They tried to compare man's basic, internal needs with his social image, and deliberately challenged dramatic and social conventions. In 1908 Turba began to work on solo performances, for example, *Turba tacet*, taking the theme of loneliness and the importance of communication. He liked to work with naturalistic objects, to confront the absurd with naturalism. In 1971, in *PAR34471* he was completely enclosed within a plastic cube; an image to show an experiment with a human being. In 1972-3 he was invited to work with Street Theatre in Denmark, then the Swiss group Mummenshans, where he learned how to use space and how to capture an audience – for example, *The Tree*, to be performed in a park. Following this he created the *Circus Alfred* which lasted for five seasons and toured all over Europe. The circus was presented as a microcosm of the world, governed by the Ringmaster; the juggler a perfectionist, the anarchistic element of society. During this time he also worked with other theatres, in film as a teacher, a director and a writer. By the early 1980s he was working in the Puppet Faculty of DAMU where, amongst other productions, he presented his own version of Tolkien's *Hobbit*. I saw this production at the Junior klub Na chmelnice, played on a traverse stage with six large rostra, a screen with a map on one end, bags thrown around the floor. The cast consisted of children, students, and carved wooden puppets. The rostra moved, colours changed, juggling and fireworks were part of the performance. The role of Bilbo was acted by a child and spoken by a student, the two reacting as one. The underground river was a heaving black polythene sheet: with Gollum's head popping up through holes. The ogres wore huge head covered with wet clay which could be moulded and manipulated.

Many of the experimental groups had already started to work together in the 1970s, and covered a range of work which included dramatisations and adaptations of novels and prose works, stagings of poetry and songs, rewritten versions of Shakespeare and other classics, mime, puppetry and cabaret. At the beginning of the eighties these forms were joined by another kind of theatre. Harassment of rock musicians, which had begun with the imprisonment of the Plastic People, meant that much of the popular, unofficial entertainment enjoyed by young people became more and more difficult to put on. Students and young people looking round for alternative entertainment, discovered the "post-modernist" groups with short, aggressive names like Vpřed and Křeč. Their performances were usually put together from short sketches, often poetic or absurd, sometimes using film, mime, or unusual vocal

effects. During the early days their creators denied that the productions and any dramaturgical content but, in the political climate of the time, any independent initiative marked its perpetrators as being dangerously subversive.

In February 1983, in thick snow on an icy winter morning, I travelled to Kladno with like-minded people for a day's "přehled" of these groups. I made the notes: "A crowded uncomfortable ride, a crowded, uncomfortable arrival. We are two hours late, wet and cold. But in the underground divadélko I'm lucky to be given a chair at a table near the front. With coffee from the bar, I should survive the day. They start within an hour of the announced starting time of 10.00. The first group is Vpřed, part of the larger group Sklep, and the performance is *A budeš hodný*. Three musicians, one singer, three actresses, six actors. Eight of the actors wear simple white longjohns and coloured shirts; why is one so grotesque, with his white face and swirling cloak? Four scenes, taking us through life. Some scenes are amusing, but there's a tendency to applaud popular personalities. The third scene (Dospělost) reminded me of the work of a theatre piece I once saw by the American psychologist R. D. Laing – it reads as follows<sup>12</sup>:

Obraz 3. – Dospělost

Muž I: Ty jsi dnes nějaká jiná?

Žena I: Já? Já jsem přece stále stejná, to ty ses změnil.

Muž II: Bane. Já jsem se nezměnil, to ty jsi jiná.

(Postavy, které se nemohou vyrovnat s vlastní proměnou v dospělé lidi, se navzájem obviňují, postupně se začínají s dotazem obracet i na diváky, neboť je nejdříve pravděpodobné, že i mezi nimi jsou změnění. Když se konfrontace stává trýznivou, vystoupí Prorok)

Prorok: Dost, vždyť je to paralýza!

[...] (Všechny postavy padnou na zem, vztyčen zůstává jen Prorok, osvětlen bledým světlem.)

Vypravěč: Jako to mořské hovado v moři si žilo. Když tu pod slupkou náhody zrodil se člověk. A šel. A šel. A stále šel. Šel po návrších (Prorok překračuje Karpaty, Pyreneje), šel po údolích (Prorok prochází Pádeskou nížinou, Šáreckým údolím), překonával překážky a šel. A šel. Až pošel. (Prorok padá.) Byli tu však jiní a ti také šli! (Postavy se zvedají ze země a v mátožném pohybu krouží po scéně...)

Prorok (do vzniklého ticha): Kant byl bufet'ák.

Postavy: Co? Kant byl bufet'ák? To snad ne. Kant bufet'ák! (Apod.)

(A fáma se šíří: se zděšeným pokřikem se postavy rozbíhají do všech světových stran, aby zvěstovaly toto neuvěřitelné poselství. Někteří to neunesou rovnou a padnou už na pódiu. Svět jistot se jim rozpadl, s tím nepočítali. Jejich zděšení se

<sup>12</sup> Tuček, Lumír and Vávra, David: *A budeš hodný...* Scene 3) in Just, Vladimír: *Z dílny malých scén* (1989) pp 118-120

postupně obrací ve zlobu, kterou namíří proti původci jejich deziluze – Prorokovi.)

Žena: Pojd' sem, ty s tím ouškem, máš takový náběh do upíra.

Postavy: Do upíra? Do upíra. Do upíra!!!

(S provoláváním – Do upíra! – postavy Proroka ubíjejí.)

(Ve snaze uchytit se přeci jen něčeho známého, jistého, sjednocují se nakonec postavy v provolávání:

Spart'anská šlechta – jinak to nevidím

Honza Berger – jinak to nevidím

(plus jména dalších ligových hráčů) – jinak to nevidím

Spart'anská šlechta – jinak to nevidím

Re re va kana ka lou ke dokana tuj!

Re re va kana ka lou ke dokana tuj!

(Pohyby se stávají zmechanizovanými, světlo přechází do tmy.)

(1982)

Next, two unnamed mime scenes – one by two youths in swimming trunks and plastic caps, the second by five in caps covered by a long cloth; they use eyes and mouths only, with occasional head movement. It's quick, witty and technically precise; I like it, but a lot of people around me are impatient. Next is the famous Mimoza – three boys from Vpřed and two girls. A series of comic sketches which amuse me at first, but after a while become boring. They all seem to depend on an easy laugh, there is no real imagination. It's very obvious humour and they don't seem technically skilful to me, although it is explained to me afterwards that they are playing up to a friendly audience and have lost a lot of their point and timing.

Next is Kolotoč, in *Panáci a Vyčpanáci*. Apparently they are having to “make do” with the technical facilities and it won't be a complete performance. It starts and ends with film. High rise blocks, people seen through a telescopic lens, coming and going, dummies falling from the flats, lying on the ground, on the floors, on the stairs, then slowly fading away. Dummies suspended from the banisters, dummies eating spaghetti, slow movements, manipulated by human hands. More dummies onstage, watching television, trying to relate to each other. Manipulated by dummy-like figures, on one occasion walking round and round a single chair. Final film projected through a second gauze screen, music, a roundabout among trees, swinging towards us. The lighting is diffused, it seems to come from the back and side.

It's melancholy and poetic but no one in the audience seems to be impressed. Kolotoč is followed by Vizita, Jaroslav and Jan and their accordionist. They have to work hard, particularly with a large-bellied beer-drinker who early on starts to heckle them. Their performance seems less impressive than when I have seen them in Prague and they themselves are disappointed with the audience response, telling me: ‘they only wanted our jokes’. The final performance before I decide to catch the bus is from the group Ambra: a group of three girls and four or five men – a mishmash

of meaningless dance and declamation interspersed with over-long scenes that have obviously been developed from improvisation and not been edited. It's technically weak and they fail to achieve any relationship with the audience.”<sup>13</sup>

It is difficult to give any overall picture of the studio theatres of the 1980s – some of those I have mentioned are scarcely more than small-form theatres, whilst some of the previous studio theatres – Ypsilon, Činoherní klub – remained on the fringe of the genre; and meanwhile, by the end of the 1980s even such an established company as the Realistické divadlo Zdeňka Nejedlého in Smíchov was beginning to evolve towards the studio type of theatre – I'm thinking of the theatre's productions of *Res publica I*, before November 1989, and *Res publica II*, in preparation before November 1989 but premiered in December. In the second half of the 1980s there was a movement – largely initiated from Brno – to build co-operation between the studio theatres. The first such project was *Cesty*; the second was created around the character of Karel Sabina, of which one result was Provázek's production of *Prodaný a prodáná*; a script by the forbidden playwright Milan Uhde, although his name was never associated with it. Provázek followed a similar procedure with their next joint production, this time with HaDivadlo, which I saw – again in Prague's Junior klub Na chmelnice – on 28th October 1988. This was the first in a series of planned “living newspapers” called “Rozrazil” – this first issue centred on the theme of democracy. As one of the texts, the studio theatres included a short play about the founding of the state of Czechoslovakia; the first play for many years by Václav Havel. By the time Provázek and HaDivadlo got round to preparing a second living newspaper, they discovered that their first attempt had resulted in the actual implementation of democracy in Czechoslovakia.

Barbara Day

27th November 2005

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<sup>13</sup> Day, Barbara: Journal