

1900-1938 From the Turn of the Century to Munich*Jarka M. Burian*

Despite interesting and varied theatrical activity by others, the work of two men dominated Czech theatre in the early years of the twentieth century. Then, soon after the birth of the Czechoslovak Republic at the end of World War I, other, more youthful, talents emerged, and by the mid-1930s Czech stages were at the forefront of innovative, imaginative European theatre. But this promising evolution was aborted by the disastrous international events at Munich in the early fall of 1938, when Czechoslovakia's independence was radically curtailed.

FROM 1900 THROUGH 1920

In the first two decades of the new century, Jaroslav Kvapil and Karel Hugo Hilar led the efforts to create modern Czech theatre, even as the Czech people were continuing a century-long campaign to achieve autonomy. Were it not for World War I, most Czechs would probably have remained content with gradually increasing reforms by the Habsburgs while retaining a degree of security as one of the constituent members of the empire. Autonomy within a federation seemed a realizable goal to the majority of Czechs, including history professor Thomas G. Masaryk (1850-1937), future president of what would become Czechoslovakia. But the war sparked hopes of complete independence in both the Czechs and the Slovaks. While Masaryk led the intensive efforts of Czechs and Slovaks to gain Allied support abroad, other Czechs worked within the establishment at home to gain added concessions from Vienna. This total effort culminated in 1918 with the creation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, which joined the Czechs and their ethnic cousins, the Slovaks, in a single new state sponsored by the victorious Allies.

In the meantime, Kvapil and Hilar had begun their theatre careers in the two largest Czech theatres in Prague, Kvapil at the National and Hilar at the Vinohrady (which was built in 1907). Like many before them in Czech theatre, both had a literary background as writers, editors, translators, and critics, and their first duties at these theatres did not involve directing. For Kvapil, the end of the war marked a high point in his theatre career; for Hilar, it became simply one of several milestones.

Before tracing the careers of these two major figures, it may be worth noting the evolution of the Švanda Theatre, which represented the best of a number of smaller-scale, privately operated, popular theatrical companies running parallel to companies at the more prestigious state- or municipal-supported National and Vinohrady

theatres. The Švanda Theatre continued its productions into the new era under the leadership of Karel Švanda and then, from 1903 to 1906, his sister Marie. Her noteworthy achievement as a producer and artistic director of a major theatre was then carried on by another important woman, Ema Jelinková-Švandová, an actress married to Karel Švanda. In 1906, after Marie's death, Ema took over as actress-manager of the Švanda Theatre. For the next several decades, the Švanda Theatre was primarily a theatre of boulevard entertainment providing a showcase for Ema Švandová's histrionic talents. Nevertheless, realizing that her impact would be heightened by occasionally undertaking some challenging roles, she included works by authors such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Henrik Ibsen, Maxim Gorky, and George Bernard Shaw. As noteworthy as the Švanda Theatre's efforts at a serious repertoire may have been, however, it was the sustained creativity of Kvapil and Hilar in Prague's two high-profile theatres that lifted Czech theatre to international stature in the early decades of the century.

Jaroslav Kvapil (1868-1950) significantly advanced the move of Czech theatre into the flow of twentieth-century Western theatre, both in his choice of plays and in his methods of staging at the National Theatre, where he directed an astonishing number of productions – over one hundred and fifty in less than twenty years. He began directing at the National Theatre in 1900 while employed as a dramaturg there, became chief director in 1906, and functioned as head of drama from 1911 to 1918, which meant that he supervised all nonmusical productions there, not only the plays he himself directed. Until his era, as we have seen, the National Theatre was primarily an actors' theatre, with productions in the familiar genres of historical dramas and folk plays, romantic realism, early naturalism and critical realism with a social focus, and boulevard comedy and melodrama, echoing French, German, and Russian models. Notable work in these genres had already been done by earlier Czechs in the previous decade or two, especially by Josef Šmaha, whom Kvapil later called the first "modern" Czech director. Šmaha was limited, however, by his dual activity as actor and director.

In his efforts to upgrade the repertoire of the National Theatre, Kvapil, the first major Czech director who had not been an actor, drew on his sophisticated literary background. Central to his interests were the classics, above all Shakespeare, but also the Greeks and Moliere. These were supplemented by his strong attraction to contemporary international drama: works by B. M. Bjornson, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Gorky, but also new Czech plays by Alois Jirásek, Fráňa Šrámek, Viktor Dyk, and many other contemporary Czech playwrights.

Equally important, in his efforts to set Czech theatre on a new course, Kvapil willingly learned from his study of foreign exemplars: Otto Brahm, Max Reinhardt, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and the Munich Artists' Theatre, all at the cutting edge of innovative theatre in Europe in the early years of the century. Kvapil was able to observe their productions on tour in Prague (Brahm and Reinhardt in the Neues Deutsches Theater, built in 1888 partly in response to the Czechs' new National

Theatre, and Stanislavsky in the Estates Theatre) or in their own theatres, just as earlier Czech directors had observed the duke of Saxe-Meiningen's players on their visits to Prague. Moreover, through reading, Kvapil was also familiar with the radical (for the time) theories and methods of Adolph Appia and Gordon Craig, including their advocacy of the director as the prime creator of the production as a whole.

Kvapil's work represents a synthesis of the approaches of the major artists just noted. Essentially conservative, and highly respectful of playwrights (he himself was an author of plays and a librettist), as a director Kvapil was inclined toward a subtle psychological realism in acting and a lightly stylized, atmospheric staging perhaps closest to that of the evolving symbolist movement. It is not surprising that he felt a special affinity for Chekhov, Paul Claudel, and the later plays of Ibsen. His crucial contribution to Czech theatre lay in fully establishing the director as the unifying shaper of all production elements, although he had a partial precedent in Šmaha's best work. Eclectic in his tastes, never imposing a strongly personal interpretation, Kvapil blended all elements into a harmonious whole, which almost always included a strong musical accompaniment.

In his efforts to bring Czech theatre up to current European standards, Kvapil was fortunate in being able to draw on a core of experienced, highly gifted actors, above all Eduard Vojan (even today considered the greatest of Czech actors, whose last name became a generic term for "actor") and Hana Kvapilová for protagonist roles and Marie Hübnerová and Jindřich Mošna for character parts. In addition he had youthful Leopolda Dostalová (1879-1972), whose career in the National Theatre was to last sixty-eight years. Kvapil adopted a supportive approach with them, relying more on their creativity than on his own subjective slant on a play. His work with designers was essentially conventional, reflecting the transition from painted, representational scenery to more selective, simplified realism with symbolist overtones.

Although Kvapil inclined toward a *l'art pour l'art* approach to theatre and his work focused on aspects of individual character and on human relationships rather than on overtly social or political issues, he was nevertheless sensitive to theatre's responsibility to issues involving the national cause of the Czechs. In the midst of the world war, with the Czechs still a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kvapil was very active in the Czech "Mafie," a covert resistance effort by influential Czechs working within the law to promulgate the Czech cause. One of his achievements was the staging of a cycle of sixteen Shakespeare plays in the spring of 1916 (most of which he had previously directed), as if to align the Czechs with England. (It says much of Habsburg toleration that no move to stop the cycle occurred.) During this cycle Vojan performed the astonishing feat of acting the leading roles in eight of the plays, including the four great tragedies. In May 1917 Kvapil composed a Writers' Manifesto addressed to Czech members of the imperial council protesting against a previous declaration of loyalty to the monarchy by some of the Czech members themselves. One year later, in April 1918, he organized an

even more stirring action: a National Oath of allegiance to the Czech cause by leading representatives of Czech cultural and political life in Prague's Municipal House. And the following month, to honor the 50th anniversary of the laying of the National Theatre's foundation stone, he arranged the performance of several dozen works by Czech authors to underline the Czechs' yearning for autonomy. Characteristically, when autonomy and independence were achieved in October 1918, Kvapil took leave of theatre to assume an important function for several years in the new nation's Ministry of Education, thus becoming one more example of a Czech theatre person whose commitment to the national cause was equal to his love of theatre.

In the meantime, K. H. Hilar (1885-1935) was making his mark as an even stronger directorial presence at Prague's Vinohrady Theatre from 1910 to 1920. Seventeen years younger than Kvapil, Hilar responded more fully to the vigorous dynamics of the new century than to the relatively more genteel practices of Kvapil's generation. Coming of age at the turn of the century, Hilar was part of the far-flung movement that rejected realism outright as a meaningful artistic mode. Obviously influenced by the symbolists, yet inherently eclectic and too vigorous a man of the tangible world to reside in a passive aestheticism, Hilar was drawn to the expressionist movement that was gathering full force as he began his work in theatre.

A published poet and novelist, editor, and critic, Hilar joined the Vinohrady Theatre as a secretary and reader in 1910, as Kvapil was about to become official head of drama at the National Theatre. Hilar began directing almost immediately and two years later took on the post of dramaturg. In 1914 he capped his swift rise by becoming head of drama at Prague's second most prestigious theatre. In the next six years he staged a series of productions that took Prague by storm and brought Czech theatre abreast of the front ranks of contemporary European theatre. His achievements at the Vinohrady made him the obvious choice to succeed Kvapil as head of drama at the National Theatre after Kvapil left to work for the new state. Indeed, Kvapil was one of the important people to recommend Hilar for the post. Between late 1918, when Kvapil left, and 1921, when Hilar took over, drama activity at the National Theatre was ineffectively supervised by a number of stopgap personnel.

Eduard Kohout, a major actor under both Kvapil and Hilar, described the difference between them: "Kvapil created harmony, Hilar drama. To go from Hilar to Kvapil meant going from expressionism to impressionism. As if you walked out of the studio of Van Gogh or Munch into the time of Monet or early Pissarro."¹ Hilar's own appreciation of Kvapil's contributions and limitations is perceptive, even if a bit biased:

¹ Eduard Kohout, *Divadlo aneb Snář* (Theatre, or a Book of Dreams), p. 52. K. H. Hilar, *Boje proti věcejšku* (Battles against the Past), pp. 280-281.

Kvapil's work seemed to have valuable decorative refinement but without true dramatic rhythm and tension, because the improvisation of the actors' ensemble and the license of individual acting mannerisms scattered the rich and cultivated taste of the director. Kvapil's direction seemed to me a cluster of lucky accidents, not the work of a powerfully cast, unifying artistic program. . . . He created moods rather than drama. . . . [On the other hand,] in an era of dilettantism, Kvapil's work was . . . the first Czech stage direction to be a conscious synthesis of stagecrafts according to creative and poetic aesthetic principles.²

Hilar went farther than Kvapil in embodying the Craig ideal of autonomous, absolute directors like Reinhardt or Vsevolod Meyerhold, who use all production elements, including the script, as raw material for a unifying creative vision embodied in a production marked by theatrically striking, imaginative exploitation of stage space, lighting, and dynamically expressive acting, all closely controlled and sensitively orchestrated by the director. Unlike Kvapil in temperament and instinct, Hilar had little interest in a theatre of psychological complexity or nuance, witty or philosophic conversation, nor (despite an early flirtation with the decadents) in a theatre of symbolistic atmosphere. Instead, Hilar saw theatre as a Dionysian or Baroque rite, a full-blooded, provocative, vibrant celebration. His instinctive histrionic, hyperexpressive sense evolved and manifested itself in various forms, often in grotesque distortions, sometimes in more moderate forms.

Several of Hilar's recurrent characteristics as a director appeared in his earliest work: restricting actors' habitual mannerisms to the immediate demands of the play at hand, tightly controlling their intonation, expression, and rate of speech, drawing on the theatrical stylization of *commedia dell'arte* even for modern works, and introducing elements of the grotesque in characterization, movement, and delivery, especially in such works as Moliere's *Georges Dandin* (1913) and Carl Sternheim's *Merchant Schippel* (1914). It was a sharper, more concentrated, heightened form of theatre than Kvapil's, more aggressive and hard-edged, with a distinct inclination toward irony and satire.

Many of these very tendencies were encouraged by the example of several guest-directed productions in Prague during the spring of 1914 by František Zavřel (1879-1915), a Czech who had learned his craft under Reinhardt in Berlin and then pursued a successful career of his own in the leading theatres of Berlin and Munich. After directing a production of *King Václav IV* by Viktor Dyk (183-1931) at the National Theatre in January, Zavřel directed a production of Frank Wedekind's *The Earth Spirit* in April at the Švanda Theatre, starring Ema Švandová in the role of Lulu, an example of her undertaking more demanding roles than her repertoire usually allowed. Hilar himself invited Zavřel to the Vinohrady later that spring to stage a Czech play based on *Don Quixote*, Dyk's *The Coming to Wisdom of Don Quixote* (Zmoudření Dona Quixota). Zavřel represented a concentrated dose of

contemporary world theatre with a vivid, personally distinctive style that reacted against the harmonious, sensuous theatre of Reinhardt or Kvapil and pointed toward the nervous excitement of expressionism. Hilar described what Zavřel's example meant to him: "His directorial efforts toward a simplification of means, concentration, and intensity of effect were for me a confirmation of my own directorial inspiration."³ Hilar added that Zavřel opened his eyes to something perhaps even more important: the cutting, transposing, and general editing of the text to make it stageworthy and dramatically more effective, as well as the drastic modifying of stage directions concerning scenery and properties to make the staging more expressive. "Zavřel dared to support the poet against the inexperienced playwright, and the dramatic work against the inexperienced poet. . . . he dared to give a helping hand to an untried play against the experienced spectator. This co-creative work of the director-dramaturg became for me a model."⁴ Hilar clearly admired a "daring" that would have been totally alien to Kvapil.

From *Penthesilea* (1914) onward, Hilar was evolving his own brand of expressionism, which for him was far less a matter of theory or quasi-mystical ideology than of performance style and spirit as a reflection of the age: "Intensity of expression, condensation of form, concentration of feeling and meaning, that is what - aesthetically and not merely sociologically - conveys the spirit of our age."⁵ The specific manifestations of Hilar's expressionism were a constant stylization, if not distortion, of voice and body to produce a highly dynamic, rhythmicized total performance with a stress on sheer theatricality. Characterization was often sacrificed to artificial configurations of essential forces and ideas; physical staging and lighting were deliberately and drastically manipulated to achieve striking contrasts and confrontations; the grotesque was a constant though variable element; and a middle range of emotional display was rejected in favor of extreme pathos or ecstasy.

His penchant for satire with grotesque, *commedia* overtones found expression in productions like Sternheim's *The Snob* (1915), Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1916), and Moliere's *Don Juan* (1917), while darker, more spastic variations of this tendency were evident in his staging of *The Dance of Death* (1917) by August Strindberg, a playwright who never appealed to Kvapil. Hilar did not abandon the grotesque but heightened and expanded it in other works that strove for a certain heroic, monumental pathos: for example, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1917) and Pierre Corneille's *The Cid* (1919). Psychological realism was subordinated if not suppressed in favor of markedly stylized, rhythmically orchestrated voices, sculpturesque blocking, and artificially imposed movement as if Hilar, master shaper of the total stage work, were releasing his will toward expressive form.

² K. H. Hilar, *Boje proti věrejšku* (Battles against the Past), pp. 280-281.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

Although expressionistic characteristics were widespread in European theatre at the time, Hilar's form of expressionism was distinguished by a balance and resultant enrichment rooted in his inherent common sense and wit, freedom from didacticism, respect for literary values, and affinity for the sensual and physiological rather than the mystical or allegorical. Moreover, his penchant for the grotesque seems less a matter of arbitrary "effect" or self indulgence than an appropriate reflection of wartime stress and horror.

As the war drew to a close and was followed by revolutionary movements and the birth of new states throughout Europe, Hilar and other European theatre artists were attracted to plays dealing with the masses, their turbulence and aspiration, their ecstasy and pathos. For Hilar, perhaps the most apolitical of all major Czech theatre people, the war and the turbulence of peace were equal inspirations for what concerned him most – his creative work in theatre. In productions like Z. Krasinski's *The Undivine Comedy* (1918), C. Van Lerberghe's *Pan* (1919), Arnošt Dvořák's *The Hussites* (1919), and Emile Verhaeren's *The Dawns* (1920) Hilar reflected the postwar spirit of feverish social turmoil and class conflict not literally but metaphorically. As one Czech critic pointed out, these were not "Reinhardt spectacles of mass movements, but dramatic battles of individuals and collectives for truth and justice."⁶ The same critic went on to say: "No one else on the Czech stage showed a collective hero, presented by a collective, with a comparable sense for its powerful moving drama and suggestive force."⁷

By 1920, thanks to the special talents and total dedication of Kvapil and Hilar, as well as their associates, Czech theatre did indeed belong among the front ranks of European theatre. In the next two decades, until stifled in 1938 by events preceding World War II, Czech theatre established itself even more firmly as a powerful voice in contemporary theatre and in the life of its young nation, thanks to the ongoing work of Hilar and a cluster of new talents from a younger generation.

THE SEIZURE OF A THEATRE AND SOME RELATED ETHNIC MATTERS

In November 1920, as if to crown their independence and reclaim a part of their heritage, Czech demonstrators (some of them actors) seized the Estates Theatre in a spontaneous, problematical show of patriotism triggered by clashes between the Czech army and Germans in Cheb and Teplice, two Czech cities near the German border. The clashes were symptomatic of other political, social, and even military

⁶ Josef Träger, "Hilarova osobnost ve vývoji novodobého českého divadla" (Hilar's Creative Presence in the Development of Modern Czech Theatre) in *K. H. Hilar*, ed. Jiří Hilmera, p. 9.

⁷ Josef Träger, *O Hilarovi* (Prague: Umělecká Beseda, 1945), p. 12.

problems in the new republic during the early years of its independence, such as the integrity of its borders. The Estates Theatre, which had been German in origin and exclusively so since 1862, became a second stage of the Czech National Theatre. The Czech national comic opera, Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*), was performed there the very night of the takeover, and the first new production on its stage was Tyl's *Arsonist's Daughter* the following month.

Although the seizure of the Estates Theatre was criticized by President Masaryk himself, it was a *fait accompli* – and a striking exception to most potentially controversial Czech-German issues in the early years of the new republic. As a testimonial to the toleration of minorities in Czechoslovakia, German theatres established in Bohemia and Moravia during the nineteenth century (one in almost every large city) remained German after 1918 until the end of World War II. In Prague, where Germans constituted between 5 percent and 10 percent of the population, the Neues Deutsches Theater remained in full operation after 1918 as one of the most recent and well-equipped large theatres of the capital.

The broader context of Czech and German relations in the Czech lands suggests that the society remained largely bilingual and that the coexistence of the two cultures was complex but essentially peaceful, particularly in cosmopolitan Prague, until 1938 and the Sudetenland-Munich disaster. Each culture had its own educational institutions, press, and other organizations, both social and political, and each had a vote in the shifting governments extending back to the late nineteenth century. The distinction between the Czechs' perceptions of the Germans and Austrians, however, warrants a few more words. Though the two groups are often lumped together as German because of their common language, there is no doubt that the Czechs related Germans to militaristic Prussians, a force to be feared despite their cultural achievements. Austrians, on the other hand, although the principal authority figures for Czechs for centuries, were viewed as less threatening, less severe, more approachable, essentially more familiar than the Germans. For theatre people, in any case, the German-Austrian distinction was essentially irrelevant. The issue was a matter of creativity, artistry, freshness, and relevance to the times. Until ideology became decisive (e.g., nazism, communism) foreign artists like Stanislavsky, Reinhardt, Jacques Copeau, Craig, Leopold Jessner, Alexander Tairov, or Meyerhold were judged not by nationality but by their talent and professionalism.

To return to the broader question of Czech and German theatre in the Czech lands, the separation of Czech from German, which began in 1862 with the building of the Provisional Theatre for strictly Czech productions, had one theatrical exception: the world of cabarets, an often neglected variant of traditional theatre that attained great European popularity in the first quarter of the new century, with Prague as one of its chief sites of performance. Two Prague cabarets, the *Lucerna* (1910) and the *Montmartre* (1913), provided entertainment that featured alternating Czech and German numbers on the same program; but certain other cabarets had individual numbers actually blending the two languages, much as Czechs (and

probably some Germans) did in everyday idiomatic speech, sometimes making a consciously ironic point: “Ano, já jsem správný pražák, *durch a durch*,” meaning “Yes, I’m a real Prager, through and through” – with the italicized words in German, and the rest in Czech.

Related to the Czech-German issue and the cabaret phenomenon is the question of Jewish involvement in Czech theatre, for it was in Czech cabarets that one was most likely to find Jewish material in the form of musical numbers or skits in Yiddish. There is no evidence of a Jewish theatre company other than one or two touring groups from abroad (Austria or Hungary) that appeared sporadically, performing in Yiddish with some success in Slovak towns, but less frequently and with much less success in the Czech lands. Various factors were involved, including apparently unseasoned performers, but the principal reason for lack of a more sustained presence is that Jews were rather thoroughly assimilated into the Czech or German cultures. One rarely comes across reference to a “Jewish” actor, director, or designer in sources dealing with Czech theatre of the nineteenth century and onward, although such artists existed. On the other hand, especially in Prague, where the German, Czech, and Jewish cultures were most thoroughly mingled, Yiddish performers or Yiddish numbers did appear in some cabarets. Evidence is scanty, but it seems that Franz Kafka, for example, witnessed performances by “a troupe of Yiddish actors . . . installed in a Prague coffeehouse” in 1910 and 1911,⁸ although another source declares that “prior to 1918 the Yiddish theatre was unknown in the territory which later formed the Czechoslovak Republic.”⁹ This latter source then describes some Yiddish theatre in Slovakia, chiefly a troupe from Vienna (HaOr) in 1920. Subsequent Yiddish touring groups from abroad appeared intermittently and with little acclaim between 1921 and 1928, principally in smaller cities and towns, mostly in Slovakia and in the most eastern province of Czechoslovakia, Subcarpathian Ruthenia. In the 1930s a few local amateur and semiprofessional Czech Jewish groups sporadically and briefly appeared in German-language productions in Brno and Prague (e.g., the Jungjüdische Bühne of Brno and the Jüdische Kammerspiele of Prague).

In terms of mainline cabaret activity, the early Czech cabarets evolved from nineteenth-century song-centered entertainments in taverns or pubs called *šantány* or song-locales (from the French *chanson*). Influenced by German cabarets in Munich and Berlin (dominated by Wedekind and Reinhardt, respectively), Czech cabarets became more literarily centered, evolving away from strictly vocal numbers to include monologues, skits, and even short plays, especially parodies of literary classics.

⁸ *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*, 2 vols. (New York: Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews, 1968), vol. 1, p. 485.

⁹ *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*, vol. 2, p. 552.

The most important of these new cabarets was the Red Seven (Červená sedma, named after its founder, Jiří Červený, 1887-1962). Many other Prague cabarets were popular, but the Red Seven combined originality, longevity, and a variety of thematically relevant material more successfully than its contemporaries. Opening in Prague in 1909 on an amateur basis, it became professional in 1914 and performed until 1922; its principal home was a converted ballroom in a hotel. At one time or another virtually all the major cabaret performers appeared in its shows: Vlasta Burian (1891-1962) and Ferenc Futurista (1891-1947), both great comedians at the beginning of their careers; writer, director, and actor Artur Longen (1885-1936), “the most bohemian of bohemians”; Eduard Basse (1888-1946), writer, actor, and master of ceremonies. Among standard playwrights and other writers whose works were written for or adapted to the cabaret setting were G. B. Shaw and Czechs Jiří Mahen, Arnošt Dvořák, František Langer, Jaroslav Hašek, and Karel Čapek. The Red Seven’s popularity peaked in 1918-1920, when its satiric, witty parodies and skits were freer than established theatres to attack both the dying Hapsburg monarchy and the Czech bourgeoisie. The Red Seven and its less celebrated contemporaries represented a lively strand of Czech popular theatre, the off-off Broadway of their day. Most of their work was ephemeral, but they established a mode of performance that evolved into new forms of significant studio theatre in the interwar era and even bore fruit in the subsequent studio theatres in the 1960s and beyond.¹⁰

1920-1938

Considered as a whole, theatre in the First Republic (1918-1938) had great vitality and variety. The vitality was due largely to the enormous release of spirit accompanying the creation of an independent republic after several centuries of alien citizenship within the Habsburg Empire, and the variety to Czechoslovakia’s critical location between East and West, which facilitated its access to the theatrical avant-garde of France, Germany, and the Soviet Union, exemplified by directors such as Jacques Copeau, Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov; and Eugene Vakhtangov. Equally important stimuli were American jazz and film (Buster Keaton, Lillian Gish, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks), which were sweeping the continent.¹¹

The Czechs’ efforts to sustain their new independent cultural identity went hand in hand with a desire to become worthy of world citizenship by keeping abreast of significant culture abroad. In Czech theatre this tendency toward self-improvement

¹⁰ For a more detailed account of the Red Seven, see Vladimír Just, “Červená sedma,” *Divadelní revue* 4 (1991): 91ff.

¹¹ The following section draws in part on my article “High Points of Theatre in the First Czechoslovak Republic,” *Modern Drama* 27:1 (March 1984): 98-111.

by learning from others produced an exceptional potential for creativity. Probably no other country in postwar Europe possessed the combination of a firmly rooted repertory theatre system and theatre artists who were not only talented but as a whole free of feelings of national or cultural superiority or of commitment to native theatre traditions or conventions. The Czechs were eager and receptive. Moreover, they had been spared most of the ghastly wounds suffered by their grander neighbors in the great war, and they were exhilarated by the prospects of a brave new world of national independence and unfettered participation in the artistic turbulence revivifying European culture. For the Czechs, it was one of the rare times when the external pressures of economics or politics were minimal. They were free to create at will.

Not all Czech theatre during this era was provocative, original, or exciting. As in all theatre eras, there existed a body of competent professional work in many theatres, the chief appeal of which was the charisma of the actors, a provocative but shallow new script, or well-packaged kitsch. But the *significant* contribution of Czech theatre to the great flowering of adventurous European theatre of the 1920s took the form of several pairs of contrasting tendencies. Its notable achievements included the work of both large institutionalized theatres and small experimental studios operating on minimal or nonexistent budgets. The plays ranged from standard classics to original plays to works that were less plays than innovative scenarios drawn from fiction, poetry, and journalistic data. Moreover, the plays and the methods of producing them also embodied virtually all current artistic modes, with the most significant productions having one tendency in common: the flight from the dead center of illusionistic realism. Instead, expressionism, constructivism, dada, surrealism, theatricalism, and the special Czech variation of these isms – poetism, which accentuated playful fantasy – marked much of the outstanding work of this era, as did the esprit of such paratheatrical forms as the circus and the cabaret.

Two other general observations may be made about the theatre of the 1920s and 1930s before proceeding to specifics. First, although the name of Karel Čapek towers above all others if we consider the period with regard to playwriting, the theatre, as theatre, was dominated by its directors, first, and its scenographers and

actors, second. Czech playwrights, with the striking exception of Čapek and perhaps František Langer,¹² did not measure up to their fellow theatre artists.

Second, to speak of an overall evolutionary tendency or direction in theatre during the twenty years of the First Republic, one must turn for guidance to events dominating life outside the theatre during that period, namely the sometimes meandering, sometimes rushing stream leading from the first heady days of Czech independence to increasing stability and prosperity, only to be followed by economic crisis and the growing threat of fascism and militarism, culminating in the ignominious capitulation of England and France to Adolf Hitler's demands in the autumn of 1938 at Munich.

Profoundly influenced by these events, the theatre at first passed through an exuberant, richly inventive phase that lasted until approximately 1930. It was a phase marked by aesthetic considerations, whereas the following years increasingly revealed moral or ethical preoccupations which at times became flatly ideological or political, all in response to pressures from the evolving domestic and international crises preceding the devastation of World War II.

In addition to the National and Vinohrady theatres, several other prewar and wartime theatres and artists previously mentioned continued into the new era. For example, the privately run, commercial Švanda Theatre on the left bank of the Vltava had been producing since 1881. Ema Švandová, its head since 1906, continued her policy of selecting plays on the basis of the roles they offered her, but even such plays were occasionally several cuts above the routine boulevard entertainment of the day. Moreover, when she ran into prolonged slack attendance, she would temporarily lease the theatre to others. Among those who made the Švanda Theatre their temporary home during the interwar era were several of the cabaret stars we met in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, even the best work at the Švanda Theatre did not prove memorable on a more than domestic scale. For impact that reached beyond Prague and sometimes even beyond Czech borders, one must trace the careers of

¹² Langer (1888-1965) became known, even abroad, for his contemporary plays with colorful character types from different classes. An M.D. and a habitué of Prague cabarets, he was co-author of some sketches with Jaroslav Hašek as early as 1912. His first real stage success was *A Camel through the Needle's Eye* (Velbloud uchem jehly) in 1923 at the Švanda Theatre. His most successful work, *Fringe Area* (Periferie, 1925), presented a lively slice of Prague semi-low life embodying a Dostoyevskian theme of crime and punishment. Critics consider *Mounted Patrol* (Jízdní hlídka, 1935) his most accomplished drama. It deals with a tragic episode in the lives of Czech legionnaires caught up in the battle between the Red and White armies in the not yet stabilized Soviet Union following World War I. Among numerous other interwar Czech playwrights to achieve more than fleeting recognition were Edmond Konrad (1889-1957), Karel Čapek's wife and National Theatre actress Olga Scheinpflugová (1902-1968), and Frank Tetauer (1903-1954). All managed to capture various facets of contemporary Czech life with some success.

others, some of whom had already achieved renown, and some of whom were just beginning their careers in theatre.

A convenient way to perceive the highlights of the period is to focus on several specific seasons with primary attention to the work of a half-dozen notable individuals who dominated the theatre of the time, while also mentioning the work of a few others in passing. Before tracing the careers of the artists in the top echelon in some detail, a brief introduction to each may be helpful.

Playwright Karel Čapek (1890-1938) was probably the best-known Czech theatre person in the world until another Czech playwright, Václav Havel, gained international attention for his plays and his political stance from the late 1960s onward. To put things in proportion, however, it is best to start by acknowledging that most critics regard some of Čapek's novels and even short stories as more profound and significant than his plays,¹³ several of which can – with some justice – be regarded as melodramatic and awkwardly constructed. Nevertheless, it was his plays that drew the widest audience.

Čapek's complex personality was that of a skeptical humanist and ironic, satiric humorist. A journalist and literary person for most of his life, Čapek also sat close to the seats of power as a member of an informal inner circle around Czechoslovakia's first president, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk.¹⁴ Keenly aware of the enormous potentials and pitfalls of contemporary industrialization and technology, Čapek had deep faith in life, in human reason and even goodness, but he was also subject to profound despair at human folly, greed, and lust for power. He rejected all attempts to apply easy solutions to the mystery of human identity and relationships or to provide formulas or ideologies for the improvement or salvation of societies.

Čapek's plays, which range from light, lyrical comedies to satiric fantasies to tense dramas, are primarily plays of ideas, of conflicting principles, rather than studies of character; they prompt audiences to think rather than feel. Similarly, the form of his plays is less distinctive than their provocative ideas. Nevertheless, he is far from a closet dramatist; he had a sharp sense of theatrical playfulness and dynamics, and an ear for effective dialogue and dramatic confrontations. For several years, in fact, he was a highly regarded dramaturg and also a stage director of about a dozen productions. As a playwright in the interwar period, he evolved from a position of philosophical critical detachment to engaged partisanship. A final point not to be ignored is that he intermittently teamed with his brother Josef (1887-1945), a painter and stage designer who collaborated on several of his productions and co-authored several of his plays.

¹³ Čapek's trilogy of novels in the early 1930s is most highly regarded and made him a serious contender for the Nobel Prize in the late 1930s: *Hordubal*, *The Meteor* (Povětrň), and *An Ordinary Life* (Obyčejný život).

¹⁴ One product of their association was Čapek's three-volume study, *Conversations with T. G. Masaryk* (1928-1935).

Karel Hugo Hilar, who worked exclusively in large institutionalized theatres and was probably the single strongest director in the history of Czech theatre, already had a significant career underway as the war ended and the First Republic was established. His innate flair for dynamic, highly expressive spectacle was reinforced by his most frequent designer-collaborator, Vlastislav Hofman (1884-1964). Surpassing the considerable achievements of his older contemporary Jaroslav Kvapil, Hilar's blend of Dionysian force and expressionistic intensity in the National Theatre thrust the Czech stage onto the international theatre map by the mid-1920s. His remaining career was severely curtailed by a stroke, although he maintained his leadership in the National Theatre and directed a number of major successes before his death in the mid-1930s. Kvapil himself, after several years of important service in the new Ministry of Education, returned to steady theatre directing for six more years in 1921.

Jiří Voskovec (1905-1981) and Jan Werich (1905-1980) in their Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené divadlo) of the late 1920s and 1930s created an entirely different sort of theatre. Law students untutored in the crafts of theatre when they launched their first jerry-built production, they captured the imagination and love of their audiences with a series of semi-improvised revues with music which always had cathartic laughter as their central dynamic but which increasingly matured to important sociopolitical satire as conditions deteriorated in the 1930s. Their unsubsidized theatre, in which they were authors, librettists, star actors, and occasionally even directors and designers, known simply as V+W, became by far the most popular and commercially successful one in Czechoslovakia and a bulwark against the realities of encroaching fascism.

Emil František Burian (1904-1959) was for years a composer and actor before turning to direction. Ultimately he established his own theatre in the 1930s, a frankly partisan, Communist-oriented tribune of social criticism where Burian presented works ranging from semidocumentary agitprop to productions of high poetic and lyrical imagination in which his musical orientation was always evident. Working almost entirely in limited studio conditions with relatively small budgets, Burian nevertheless was also responsible for the development of forms of staging which foreshadowed many of the more sophisticated evolutions of such techniques in the Czech theatre of the late 1950s and 1960s. His achievements in these areas gained international recognition.

During the interwar period, the careers of Jindřich Honzl and Jiří Frejka often converged with each other and with those of others already mentioned. Although neither possessed the unique theatrical powers of the artists already discussed, each was responsible for important work in varied forms. Honzl (1894-1953), especially, had a checkered, at times seemingly inconsistent career. A secondary-school science teacher and a committed Communist intellectual with a strong interest in Soviet theatrical practice, he devoted himself at first to theatre by and for the proletariat. Concurrently, however, he became actively involved in the early 1920s with the

Devětsil organization, a loosely structured leftist group of artists, poets, and intellectuals whose work echoed many radical departures from realism, essentially (and ironically) more elitist than proletarian in their appeal. This apparent contradiction (somewhat analogous to inconsistencies in Burian's own work) surfaced more than once in Honzl's subsequent career, which included extensive work as the director of most of V+W's productions, as an important critic and theorist of theatre and film, and as an independent director of national and foreign classics in state theatres as well as cryptic surrealist works in improvised studios.¹⁵

In contrast, Jiří Frejka (1904-1952) was in the apolitical Hilar tradition. A pioneer and leading figure in the consciously avant-garde, semiprofessional studio theatres of the 1920s, he had a sensibility especially attuned to lyrical, poetic theatre with improvisatory qualities and conventions reminiscent of the *commedia dell'arte*. By the 1930s, however, Hilar had taken Frejka into the National Theatre as his protégé, and in this center of tradition and large-scale production Frejka matured into a more socially and politically responsible artist, but without losing his lightness of touch and poetic sensitivity. Moreover, Frejka, who consistently sought creative work with talented young designers like Antonín Heythum (1901-1954) in the 1920s, also evolved into a major director of theatrically impressive *mises en scene*, particularly in his collaborations in the 1930s with František Troster (1904-1968), the most significant designer in the generation following that of Vlastislav Hofman.

A look at the work of these key figures in four different years or theatrical seasons provides a cross-sectional perspective on certain key milestones of Czech theatre in the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1921, when much of Europe still feared the specter of Bolshevism, the official establishment of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia testified to the essentially liberal and tolerant government of the First Republic under the leadership of President Masaryk. Ema Švandová was again appearing as Lulu in a revival of Wedekind's *The Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box* at the Švanda Theatre, while Artur Longen opened his short-lived Cabaret Bum in rivalry with the Red Seven, taking the hugely talented, dadaistic clown Vlasta Burian with him. In the fall Longen started his more successful Revolutionary Stage by directing Vlasta Burian in Longen's adaptation of *Don Quixote*; later, Longen staged his dramatization of Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*.

¹⁵ Honzl's Czech translation of Alexander Tairov's *Notes of a Director* was a source of inspiration to many in Czech theatre of the interwar years. Two of Honzl's own important theoretical studies, "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre" (Pohyb divadelního znaku) and "The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices" (Hierarchie divadelních prostředků), appear in English in *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Ladislav Matějka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 74-93 and 118-127, respectively.

It was the premiere of Karel Čapek's *RUR* (Rossum's Universal Robots) at the National Theatre in January 1921, however, that brought world attention to Czech theatre for the first time. It was directed by Vojta Novák (1886-1966), a prewar and wartime director in small avant-garde theatres as well as at the Švanda Theatre, and designed by a young architect who would do important work in the 1920s and 1930s, Bedřich Feuerstein (1892-1936). In the fall of that year Čapek also assumed the duties of dramaturg and director in the Vinohrady Theatre at the invitation of Kvapil, who had left government work to replace Hilar as head of drama at the Vinohrady. Earlier, Čapek had written two other plays: an unproduced witty, lyrical one-act comedy in the *commedia dell'arte* vein, *The Fateful Play of Love* (Lásky hra osudná) in 1910, on which his brother Josef collaborated, and *The Brigand* (Loupežník), over which he labored for almost ten years before its National Theatre premiere in 1920. *The Brigand*, a comedy of conflicting generational values, demonstrated Čapek's gift for provoking laughter while also touching on painful human relationships. It is probably his most realistic play with regard to characters, situation, and form.

RUR presents a prototypical Čapek situation: a fantasylike plot device is introduced into a contemporary realistic frame of action. In this case it is a formula for the creation of lifelike robots, who will eliminate human toil and give promise of a paradise on earth. In essence it is a science-fiction melodrama, symptomatic of Čapek's concern for the survival of human values in an increasingly mechanized, technocratic world. The robots rebel and almost wipe out the entire human race except for one survivor – the man who invented the formula. He is saved from complete despair when he realizes that two of the robots, a male and female, show signs of affection for one another. He sees Adam and Eve in them – the beginning of a new, still human race. This arbitrary, sentimental resolution is symptomatic of other flaws in the play: contrived situations and stilted characters and dialogue. Nevertheless, the play created a sensation and was performed all over the globe. Underlying the melodrama is a recurrent Čapek action: a wonderful, miraculous discovery becomes destructive or unbearable. Utopian dreams may turn nightmarish. It is a dramatic action that reveals Čapek's sense of dark irony as well as his skepticism toward all technological marvels or salvationist ideologies in short, all absolutes.

An event of equal and perhaps longer-lasting significance for Czech theatre in 1921 was Karel Hugo Hilar's assumption of leadership of drama production at the National Theatre as a successor to Jaroslav Kvapil, who, as noted, subsequently took over Hilar's abandoned position at the Vinohrady Theatre, where he served until 1928. For the next decade and a half Hilar dominated all drama work on the National Theatre stages, maintaining his stature as one of Europe's major theatre artists. His expressionistically slanted approach was seen to full effect that year in productions of *Coriolanus*, *Medea*, and *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*. The following year Czech theatre and Hilar achieved even greater renown for his direction of the Čapek brothers' *The Insect Comedy* (*Ze života hmyzu*), designed by Josef Čapek. Although the play has

three acts, the action throughout is presented in a series of lively short scenes or “numbers,” and for that reason it was often dubbed a “revue.” The basic conceit is an expressionistic depiction of humanity’s follies and horrors in the guise of insect life, as observed (or dreamed) by a likeable, thoughtful, but aimless tramp who falls asleep outdoors. Each act focuses on a certain segment or aspect of insect-human life: butterflies depict the frivolousness and waste inherent in faddish high society; dung beetles, grubs, parasites, crickets, and killer flies embody a materialistic, acquisitive, Darwinian world of survival by any means, including murder to feed one’s own; rival colonies of red and yellow ants present the horrors of militarism and totalitarianism as they strive to exterminate each other for the possession of perhaps a square foot of soil and grass; and delicate, expiring moths convey the ephemerality of life. The tramp finally has an epiphany about the sheer value of life and how it ought to be lived, but he experiences it in the midst of a fatal heart attack. The Čapeks’, original version ends very pessimistically, or at best ambivalently – so much so that they wrote several alternate endings which offer a not entirely persuasive view that ordinary, simple life will endure and find value in honest work.

Overall, *Insect Comedy* is a much more interesting dramatic work than *RUR*, offsetting its grimmer insights with genuinely comedic, even farcical byplay and a gallery of entertaining, often grotesque types. The first play by a Czech author to have more than one hundred performances in the National Theatre, it also became an international hit and has had many successful revivals. Hilar’s original production involved colorful, eccentric costuming to emphasize the blend of insect and human in the characters. For the butterfly sequence, a gauzy appliqued material backed a curved, raked platform on which lay a carpet with bold floral patterns and large pillows equally embellished. Frequent projections were used on the cyclorama (e.g., black smokestacks against a red horizon in the ant sequence), and a glass floor facilitated special lighting effects for the choreographed play of the moths.

In the meantime, from November 1921 until March 1924, Karel Čapek directed some dozen productions at the Vinohrady, including works by Moliere, Percy Bysshe Shelley (*The Cenci*), Aristophanes, and several Czech playwrights, plus his fourth full-length play, *The Makropulos Affair* (Věc Makropulos), in 1922. The work is more similar to *RUR* than to *Insect Comedy* in that it presents another science-fiction, utopian miracle in a realistic contemporary setting: a formula for eternal life has proved successful in a woman who is three hundred years old but appears to be a glamorous singer approaching middle age (played by Dostalová). The point of this essentially serious melodrama is that she has come to hate her condition and that life with its mortal limits is much preferable to the folly of eternal youth. It is a happy moment when the formula is destroyed and she is able to die. (The play was adapted to form the libretto of Leoš Janáček’s 1926 opera with the same title.)

Jindřich Honzl was already active in theatre in 1921, directing the proletarian Workers’ Dramatic Chorus (Dědrasbor, an acronym for Dělnický Dramatický Sbor),

which mounted mass choral recitations of leftist proletarian poetry. The following year, in addition to participating in the previously mentioned Devětsil, he would be instrumental in the work of another Communist cultural organization, Proletkult. Meanwhile, E. E. Burian was studying composition in the Prague Conservatory, while Jiří Frejka, Jiří Voskovec, and Jan Werich were students of liberal arts in secondary schools.

By the 1926-1927 season modern Czech theatre had taken its place in the mainstream of significant world theatre. Hilar’s work had reached a peak of success with his production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1924, but within a few weeks of its premiere he suffered a crippling stroke that incapacitated him for the better part of two years. Nevertheless, during the season on which we are focusing he had recuperated enough to stage one of his most notable productions, *Hamlet*, with starkly expressive scenography by Hofman and with the services of two of the major actors of the interwar period, Eduard Kohout (1889-1976) as Hamlet and Václav Vydra (1876-1953) as Claudius; Leopolda Dostalová played Gertrude. By this time Hilar had toned down his expressionistic extremes in order to concentrate more fully on internal, humanistic values. Hamlet was a delicate youth trying to cope with the harsh, often grotesque world of the Danish court, a world depicted by the black void encompassing Hofman’s sharply illuminated, hard-edged scenic pieces. That same season Hilar also directed his second play by the Čapek brothers, *Adam the Creator* (Adam stvořitel), which did not measure up to the success of the earlier Čapek works. Once again the basic plot device is a utopianlike miracle, the ability to create the world anew, from scratch, but this time the play as a whole is a fantasy, with Adam destroying creation and God giving him the chance to recreate it. The results of Adam’s efforts prove at least as bad as the world that was destroyed, and Adam is content to leave the world as it is. The action resembles *Insect Comedy*’s series of short, primarily comic sequences, but the underlying motifs are often strained and inconsistent. Čapek did not write another play for ten years.¹⁶

Of the four major Čapek plays of the 1920s, *RUR* and *Makropulos Affair* share characteristics of traditional realistic form, science-fiction motifs, and an absence of humor and textured characterization, while *Insect Comedy* and *Adam the Creator* are more nearly expressionistic in style and revuelike in structure, with capricious, grotesque characters, abundant humor, and themes that are closer to medieval moralities than to science fiction. The divisions, rough as they are, strongly suggest the influence of Josef as a direct collaborator in *Insect Comedy* and *Adam* and the

¹⁶ Josef Čapek wrote one earlier play on his own, *The Land of Many Names* (Země mnoha jmen), an unsuccessful work directed by Karel at the Vinohrady in 1923. It might almost be viewed as foreshadowing *Adam the Creator* in that humankind is presented with the opportunity to create an ideal society on a newly arisen continent; but all of the world’s ills inevitably appear, and fortunately the continent is destroyed by an earthquake.

absence of his influence in the former two plays, which Karel Čapek wrote by himself.

The most important event of the 1926-1927 season was the start of the careers of Voskovec and Werich with their amateur, minimalist production of *Vest pocket revue* (the title was in English) in a tiny makeshift theatre in the Malá Strana section of Prague in April 1927. By now law students, they were an overnight sensation in this zany, lighthearted spoof of contemporary mores. What had been planned as a one-night fundraiser for Voskovec's preparatory school's alumni club eventually ran for over two hundred performances. What was the essence of its appeal? The performance consisted of some eight to ten short satiric scenarios in a revue format with music. The topics were local as well as international, and the wit and great good humor resonated completely with the essentially optimistic mood of the time. A paid professional orchestra played contemporary American swing music with lyrics by Voskovec. Beyond these elements was the semi-improvisational nature of it all, which climaxed in the inadvertent collapse of a stage flat. To cover the pause until it was set up again, V+W improvised totally on the stage apron and did it so well that this segment became the peak of the whole production. Their literate, spontaneous wit, fresh and seemingly naive, was the key. In virtually all of their subsequent productions, this 90 percent improvised forestage sequence – shared directly with the audience, drawing on contemporary events, never the same from performance to performance – became the jewel in their crown.

In many respects, *Vest pocket revue* can be viewed as a product of natural evolution from the cabarets of the earlier years of the century. Indeed, the two major figures from the cabaret era that I have been tracing, Artur Longen and Vlasta Burian, had by now also abandoned the cabaret format for more conventionally patterned plays, however bizarre their plots or actions might be. In the 1926-1927 season they collaborated on productions in the Adria Hotel on Wenceslaus Square (Václavské náměstí), putting on vehicles exploiting Burian's great comic talents, with Longen as author or adaptor as well as director.

The response of the first-night audience to *Vest pocket revue* led to additional performances sponsored by the recently established Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené divadlo), which had been casually launched by Frejka somewhat more than a year earlier. Prior to that, Frejka had several other studio productions dating back to 1923, such as his own adaptation of Moliere's *Georges Dandin*, which he staged in 1925, with Heythum, in a combined constructivist – *commedia dell'arte* manner and retitled *Cirkus Dandin*. As a formal organization, however, this new Liberated Theatre was sponsored by Devětsil and had Honzl as its official co-director. Honzl himself, like Frejka, had been directing relatively short avant-garde French and Czech plays during the previous season for this theatre – dadaistic, surrealist works such as Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias* and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes' *The Mute Canary*. But in the spring of 1927 irreconcilable clashes of

temperament and policy between Honzl and Frejka forced Frejka's departure from the Liberated Theatre, leaving Honzl in charge.

Frejka went on very quickly to form his own Theatre Dada, in which he continued to perform the light, eccentric work that attracted him, such as Jean Cocteau's *Wedding on the Eiffel Tower*. Honzl similarly pursued his own brand of avantgarde repertoire, such as Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Cocteau's *Orphée*, and evenings of poetry by the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti and the Czech Vítězslav Nezval (1900-1958), who exemplified the avant-garde spirit of the time in poetry.

Although Voskovec and Werich became formally affiliated with what was now Honzl's Liberated Theatre (and played roles in *Ubu* and *Orphée*), their continued popularity in *Vest pocket revue* was so great that within two years they took over the company from Devětsil and Honzl and moved to larger, commercial theatre spaces in the center of Prague. Thereafter, the theatre came to be known as the Liberated Theatre of Voskovec and Werich, with Honzl assuming an important but secondary role as their director, supervising the work of the other performers (under V+W's ultimate authority), while Voskovec and Werich wrote the scripts and were in complete control of their own central roles in each production. Their eventual, fully established professional theatre was unusual for two more reasons: it was not subsidized and it presented productions one at a time in series, rather than maintain a number of plays in repertoire. Nevertheless, v+ w still maintained a stable ensemble (including musicians and dancers) instead of casting each production afresh.

Not the least important event in this milestone season of 1926-1927 was the emergence of E. E. Burian as a director. A Communist Party member since 1923, he divided his time and work between choral music for leftist poetry recitals and background music for several National Theatre drama productions. Indeed, one of his own operas, *Before Sunrise* (Před slunce východem), was performed there in 1925.¹⁷ He had also begun to act in the avant-garde productions of Honzl and Frejka. But in the same month that witnessed the opening of their *Vest pocket revue*, Burian first presented his own initial production of what he called Voiceband, under the aegis of Frejka's Theatre Dada. It was a striking performance form that blended complex choral recitation, chant, and other nonverbal human sounds with strongly rhythmic, syncopated music of his own composing; For the next season or two Burian continued to act for Frejka and present further recitals of his Voiceband, which attracted enough favorable attention to be invited abroad to an international music festival in Siena, Italy, in 1928.

The 1926-1927 season was also the high point of the brief career of the multi-talented Vladimir Gamza (1902-1929), who grew up in Russia, where he was influenced by Stanislavsky and Eugene Vakhtangov. After a brief engagement under

¹⁷ Burian's opera *Bubu of Montparnasse*, composed in 1929, languished for years, unproduced, until it was rediscovered in the Burian archive and staged with great success in the Prague State Opera in March 1999.

Hilar at the Vinohrady Theatre (1920-1921) Gamza succeeded in launching two avant-garde studios, in Brno (the Czech Studio) and Prague (the Art Studio), the latter in the fall of 1926. In both he consciously emphasized art above political relevance. His experimental approach sought to fuse the internalized realism of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) (e.g., Charles Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth*, 1927) with Vakhtangov's near expressionism (Gogol's *Marriage*, 1927), but he never found sufficient audiences for his productions, which he not only directed but also designed. Chronically ill, he was nevertheless engaged as a director and actor in the National Theatre in 1928, where he directed a few productions (e.g., Ivan Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*) before his untimely death.

In short, the modern Czech theatre was in the full vigor of its early maturity in 1926-1927. Thanks to economic prosperity and political stability, Czech theatre artists were able to devote themselves to the most varied creativity, from full-blooded mountings of classics like Shakespeare to frequently self-centered experiments and even fads. Theatre activity as pure entertainment – with only incidental social relevance – almost became an end in itself. This would not happen again for more than sixty years.

Conditions had altered radically by the season of 1933-934. The international economic crisis had resulted in massive unemployment in Czechoslovakia. In January 1933 Hitler became chancellor in Germany and shortly thereafter secured even greater powers as a result of the Reichstag fire. So began twelve years of state-sponsored atrocity and mayhem that would affect all of Europe and much of the rest of the world as well – including Czech theatre. In October of the same year a new German political party was formed by Konrad Henlein in the Czech borderlands with Germany, the Sudetenland. Henlein, with Nazi German support, stressed irredentist issues in these borderlands, where Germans were in a majority.

During the next five years hundreds of German (and even some Czech) writers, artists, and intellectuals previously residing in Germany were to stream into these borderlands as well as into Prague, Brno, and other large cities. They had become *personae non gratae* in the new Nazi Reich and sought refuge in democratic Czechoslovakia. The German theatres in the Czech borderlands (Liberec, Teplice, Ostrava) as well as in Prague itself were able to provide such refugees with at least some relief, even if only temporary. Those passing through Prague included Max Reinhardt, Bertolt Brecht, and Thomas Mann, on their way elsewhere. Others, specifically theatre people, found employment in Prague's Neues Deutsches Theater: Alexander Moissi, Ernst Deutsche, Albert and Else Basserman, Max Pallenberg. Other refugees from Nazi Germany organized small groups to perform as guests in some Prague theatres. The cooperation of Czech and German theatre people was made more formal by the Club of Czech and German Theatre Workers, formed in 1935 in Prague.

The world outside the theatre was becoming impossible to ignore, but the implications of what was to come were not yet obvious in the fall of 1933, when the single most important theatrical event of 1933-1934 occurred – E. F. Burian's establishment of his own theatre in Prague, D34, the n representing the Czech word for theatre (*divadlo*), and the numbers changing annually to represent the forthcoming year. Burian had spent three years in Brno and Olomouc (1929-1932) gradually developing his skills as a director in plays by authors from Niccolo Machiavelli and Moliere to Brecht and Eugene O'Neill, while trying to reconcile his aesthetic inclinations toward a Tairov-like artistry with his commitment to proletarian-slanted social criticism. Finally, he experienced enough frustrations in working for others to open a theatre of his own, focused more consistently on Communist goals.

The embodiment of this objective, D34, opened on September 1, 1933, in a small converted concert hall, the Mozarteum, in the center of Prague. The production was *Life in Our Days*, a semi-documentary, propagandistic collage which he adapted from a German text by Erich Kästner. During the next several years, in addition to foreign travel that included Moscow in 1934, he ripened his inherently strong theatrical talents by continuing to stage at least a half-dozen original works or adaptations each season. These productions alternated between Brechtian or Piscatorian sociopolitical commentary (e.g., *Threepenny Opera*, 1934), his own unwavering concern for poetic, musical values, and his keen interest in folk motifs. The most successful fusion of these two tendencies was his memorable achievement in *War* (*Vojna*) in early 1935, his own lyrical, deeply moving antiwar choral drama rooted in the ceremonials of village life. Also interesting were Burian's free adaptations in 1934 of Moliere's *The Miser* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, both of which were slanted toward attacks on capitalism and class oppression, as were his productions of Soviet plays, such as Gorky's *Yegor Bulychov* (1934), the first production of that play outside the USSR.

Like the V+W theatre, Burian's was unsubsidized through most of its 1930s existence, but it played in much more restricted quarters and hewed to the repertory system of alternating productions: The legacy of both theatres was to become very influential in subsequent decades, but Burian's work, while attracting a loyal, enthusiastic following, never experienced the broad popularity of V+W's.

Voskovec and Werich, after a shaky season or two when they diverged from the revue form, settled into a successful format of "Jazz Revues" combining their distinctive brand of partially (at times wholly) improvised humor and light satire with essentially escapist entertainment loosely tied to a farfetched action in exotic settings. *Fata Morgána* (1929) was the first of these new revues that revived their popularity. *The Golem* (1931), the last of this series, was the most finished in its imaginative recreation of the sixteenth-century Prague court of Emperor Rudolph and his astrologers and alchemists. One reason for *Golem's* superiority may have been its direction by Honzl, who returned to V+W after an absence of two seasons. In these

revues V+W usually played characters who inadvertently become embroiled in the main action and periodically step outside it to comment on it and on related issues.

Not the least factor in their ongoing success was the contribution made by Jaroslav Ježek (1906-1941), a classically trained composer with a flair for improvisation, who became their permanent composer in residence in 1929. Also important were fairly elaborate song-and-dance routines presented by professional choreographers and dancing girls. The designer for most of the Jazz Revues was František Zelenka (1904-1944), whose fresh, capricious style was appropriate for them and the rest of their professional company.

During the 1933-1934 season a transition was becoming increasingly evident in V+W's work. In 1932, when Burian was finishing his work in Brno, they had already staged *Caesar*, a more tightly shaped revue that sharply extended their satire to flaws in the contemporary Czech political scene (early signs of Fascist elements) and the grotesque phenomenon of dictators like Benito Mussolini and Hitler. Aristophanic laughter was still present in abundance, but V+W's basic orientation had shifted.

The move from high-spirited entertainment to a concern for sociopolitical relevance and the need to take a stand on public issues was probably due in part to the return of the ideologically inclined Honzl as their director. The next two plays focused on economics and unemployment problems; V+W then returned to the offensive against totalitarianism in their production of *Ass and Shadow* (*Osel a stín*) in October 1933, one month after Burian launched his D34 theatre. Set, like *Caesar*, in Roman times, *Ass and Shadow* was more nearly a play with musical numbers than a revue and also more aggressive in its attack. It presented a thinly disguised, stinging caricature of Hitler and the Fascist menace that drew complaints from the German Embassy in Prague. The apolitical phase of their career was over; with only incidental exceptions, Voskovec and Werich then continued to evolve their response to the forces threatening the very existence of the First Republic.

Among the most sensational of the productions was a spin-off from *Ass and Shadow* to start the following 1934 season: *Executioner and Fool* (*Kat a blázen*), an even harsher depiction of menacing dictators set in a contemporary but mythical Mexico. Actual riots took place in the theatre between Fascist sympathizers and the greater part of the audience, which was beginning to contain more members of the working class. Despite the more fully engaged, partisan slant of the productions, laughter was still at the core and happy endings resolved matters.

Meanwhile, Honzl, like Burian, had also spent several seasons as a director at the State Theatre in Brno after temporarily breaking with V+W in 1929, but he experienced only mixed success and returned to Prague in 1931 to resume direction of the remaining V+W productions. On the side, however, he visited both Moscow and Paris and occasionally accepted an assignment in larger theatres for example, guest directing Vladislav Vančura's (1891-1942) *Alchemist* at the National Theatre in late 1932. Despite this experience, Honzl was unsuccessful in his efforts to become a permanently appointed director at the National Theatre in the 1935-1936 season.

Frejka was one of a four-member committee of the permanent staff who decided against recommending him, an action probably not forgotten by Honzl in later years. Although Honzl directed in the National Theatre once more as a guest (1938), he obviously felt frustrated. It is impossible to gauge the various factors involved in the decision against Honzl, but the question of Honzl's abilities was probably secondary to his explicit affiliation with the Communist Party. The National Theatre was ultimately an organ of the government, and in those increasingly politicized times Czechoslovakia was trying to steer a centrist course between the right and left.

By the 1933-1934 season Frejka had become a permanent director at the National Theatre, after having been invited by Hilar to become an assistant director in 1929. During his first few apprentice seasons there he managed to organize an informal Studio project in which he could concentrate on the relatively smallscale lyrical and fanciful works that had been his trademark earlier. One of them, indeed, was the official premiere of the Čapeks' very first play, the highly theatrical *Fateful Play of Love*, on a bill of one-acts in the spring of 1930. By 1933-1934, however, he had begun to take on works of more substance and larger scale, such as J. K. Tyl's Czech classic Jan Hus and Aristophanes' *The Birds*, a production in which he, too, began to take a more direct stance vis-a-vis the external sociopolitical events in Europe by equating the central manipulators in the classic comedy with contemporary dictators. Like Honzl and Burian he also took an extended trip to the Soviet Union in 1934 to observe its theatre, but in his case political feelings were not an additional motivation.

In 1933-1934 Karel Hugo Hilar was approaching the end of his career. Although he never regained his full strength and drive after the stroke of 1924, he succeeded in mounting a series of impressive productions at the National Theatre that revealed a profounder sense of life's complexities while retaining his genius for total staging. Perhaps the most powerful of these productions was his 1932 *Oedipus*, with Kohout in the title role and a monumental and superbly functional set by Hofman. This was nearly matched by Hilar's penultimate production in 1934, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, with the same designer, and with Dostalová playing Christine Mannon. Both works still retained expressionistic elements, but these were subordinated to a deeper perception of the mystery of human destiny. It is fascinating to speculate on how Hilar's work would have evolved in the following years of growing European crisis had his health and spirit held firm, but in March 1935 he suffered a second and fatal stroke, thus ending one of the great eras of the National Theatre.

In the meantime, the paths of Ema Švandová and Vlasta Burian had briefly crossed in 1928 when he leased the Švanda Theatre. He performed there with Longen until 1930, when he moved into a theatre bearing his own name in the heart of Prague, where he would remain for the next fifteen years. In the 1933-1934 season he began work with a new director, Julius Lébl, who brought a more systematic approach to the staging of Burian's serial productions, which began to have runs of over a hundred performances. Like V+W, Burian also began to appear in films. After Burian left the Švanda Theatre in 1930, Ema Švandová leased it for a year to another

comic, Jára Kohout (1904-1994), but in 1932 she once again formed a company and performed in her theatre until 1935, at which time she retired and sold her theatre concession to Jára Kohout.

Not only the National Theatre, but every theatre in Czechoslovakia was entering a period of maximum challenge as events relentlessly drove toward the crises of 1938. The surviving artists with whom I am dealing, however, were by now in their peak creative years, and it is interesting to note their stance and their activities in what would be the final full season of independent theatre, in 1937-1938. In September of 1937, almost as an ill omen, former President Masaryk died; he had abdicated in 1935 and was succeeded by his longtime associate, Eduard Beneš (1884-1948).

It was the career of Voskovec and Werich that most nearly coincided with the timing and import of events in 1937-1938. Henlein's Nazi-affiliated Sudeten Party had been presenting increasing demands for Sudeten autonomy during the previous year or two. In 1938, not long after Hitler occupied Austria in March (the Anschluss), a series of inept interventions by the British and French brought increasing pressure on the Czechs to accede to Henlein's demands. It was in such perilous times, when Czech mobilization was imminent and war or peace in the balance, that the last two V+W productions were staged. The final productions, *Heavy Barbara* (Těžká Barbora, the Czech equivalent of World War I's huge cannon Big Bertha) in November 1937 and *A Fist in the Eye* (Pěst na oko) in April 1938 (one month after the Anschluss), exhibited their ripened artistry. *Heavy Barbara* contained their fully evolved satire within a sustained plot that presented a thinly veiled parallel to the territorial ambitions of Germany and the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia in the form of rival lands in the medieval era. *A Fist in the Eye*, by comparison, was a masterful culmination of their revue form directly relevant to the problematics and absurdities of the Sudeten crisis. With deliberate echoes of their previous work, but now in a theatre-in-theatre frame, it presented a series of sketches from myth and history showing the common people as the real protagonists behind the heroic facades of history. These two final productions, performed in unaccustomed (for them) rotating repertory during the late spring and summer of 1938, reinforced the morale of their packed audiences with their dynamic optimism and faith in the strength of ordinary but united people. Each performance became a manifestation of the public's solidarity and will to resist the threat to their short-lived independence as a nation. With the fall of the First Republic at Munich in late September 1938, however, the official license of their Liberated Theatre was denied, and less than three months later V+W emigrated to the United States. The most popular theatre in prewar Czechoslovakia was only a memory, but it helped sustain the Czechs in the dark years to come. Before their departure, in an effort to shelter members of their company, Voskovec and Werich worked out a deal with Jára Kohout to have him take over their theatre and employ their personnel. He agreed

and kept performing in their theatre for the next eight years with serial productions of depoliticized musical farces or outright operettas.

Karel Čapek also responded directly to the pressures of the times. He had devoted himself to essays and novels for ten years after *Adam the Creator*. But the rising political and military crises affecting not only Czechoslovakia but all of Europe drew him back to the public tribunal of theatre. His very last play, *The Mother* (Matka), was produced in the last free (1937-1938) season at the National Theatre. During the previous season, his *The White Disease* (Bílá Nemoc) – a more powerful, imaginative work – had also been produced at the National Theatre.¹⁸ Both plays foreshadowed the horrors imminent in Europe, *The White Disease* metaphorically, *The Mother* more literally. The former, set in a nameless contemporary country, presented a military dictator on the brink of war but threatened by a mysterious, deadly plague-like disease ravaging the globe. A modest, pacifist doctor discovers a cure but refuses to reveal it – even to innocent sufferers – unless the dictator abandons his militaristic goals and establishes peace. When the dictator, who has himself contracted the disease, finally caves in to the doctor's demand, the doctor rushes to provide the wonder-drug, only to be accidentally killed on the way by a hysterical, war-intoxicated mob. The basic situation of a seemingly marvelous discovery with complex, humanistic implications was similar to both *RUR* and *The Makropulos Affair* but now had direct topicality. Čapek clearly favors the doctor over the dictator, but complicates the issue by the doctor's seemingly unhumanistic refusal to save others unless his will prevails. The tightly constructed play, full of highly charged confrontations between firmly drawn types, is ultimately pessimistic and despairing. No compensating factor is present, no redeeming element, unlike the denouements in *RUR* or *The Makropulos Affair*.

The Mother, by contrast, culminates with a positive act. The play takes a new tack for Čapek in focusing on a crisis in a single family in a nameless country and their response to a war in progress. The surface realism extends to every aspect of the play except one plot premise: the father, husband, and four sons of the mother – a cross section of personalities and sociopolitical points of view – are already dead and now, in a very normal-seeming way, reappear and converse with each other and the live mother, who deals with them as if they were still alive. The running debate is whether the sensitive youngest, living son should join the battle. Will the mother allow him to do so? She resists the varied arguments of the dead, who say the living son should go. But when she hears the latest radio news bulletins about the senseless killing of innocent women and children by the enemy, the mother finally thrusts a rifle into his hands and sends him off to probable death. War is seen as irrational and destructive,

¹⁸ Both plays were designed by Hofman and directed by Karel Dostal (1884-1966), Leopolda Dostalová's older brother, who in his youth had worked under Reinhardt in Germany before joining the National Theatre in 1922 as both actor and director, becoming chief director in 1935. He is primarily associated with plays of intellectual challenge requiring skilled, finished performances, such as Greek tragedy and works by G. B. Shaw and Luigi Pirandello.

but the killing of innocent victims, including children, by the aggressors has to be resisted.

As a play, *The Mother* is a simplistic, schematic, routinely developed melodrama, but nevertheless generates a degree of tension in its dialogue and confrontations. Produced in early 1938, as Czechoslovakia was edging toward a decision to mobilize its forces against the German threats, the play had immediate resonance. Its run ended early in September as the repeated summit meetings of European powers on the Czech-German crisis were intensifying toward their climax in Munich at the end of the month. For Čapek, the enlightened, philosophic patriot, a confidant of Masaryk and Beneš, the Munich decision to sacrifice Czechoslovakia to appease Hitler was devastating; he died three months later of natural causes, undoubtedly exacerbated by the stresses of that international betrayal.

Honzl, of course, directed both of the final V+W productions. He also directed Bohuslav Martinů's surrealist opera, *Juliette*, at the National Theatre in March 1938, a work with no apparent connection to the tense realities beyond the theatre's walls. Like a bill of one-acts by Nezval, Louis Aragon, and André Breton which he had directed in a small studio setting in 1935, the Martinů work seemed to reveal Honzl's need to balance his sociopolitical concerns with more purely aesthetic activity.

Two of Frejka's most striking productions at the National Theatre during the years of growing crisis had been Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* in 1935 and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in 1936, both of which clearly responded to the increasing dangers of fascism and showed Frejka's growing mastery of large-scale staging in collaboration with František Tröster. Tröster's scenography for *Caesar* was especially powerful. Its grotesquely angled platforms and statues grossly disproportionate in scale to the characters conveyed some of the angst of the world outside the theatre as well as the world on the stage. Frejka continued directing a series of major productions at the National Theatre during the final free year of 1938, the most notable being *Romeo and Juliet* in June 1938 and Jaroslav Hilbert's *Falkenštejn* (celebrating a late thirteenth century Czech patriot) in October 1938.

Burian's D theatre had continued a mix of productions reflecting his multiple talents: productions of poetry and music alternating with semidocumentaries attacking the bourgeois capitalist system and its acquisitive morality. His innate gift for effective staging that exploited the values of complex lighting was reinforced by the design and technical skills of Miroslav Kouřil (1911-1984), who was Burian's associate from 1934 to 1941 and again in 1945. Their projects extended beyond staging to include plans in 1938 for a state of the art Theatre of Work (Divadlo práce) in which Burian's productions would be supplemented by other cultural and social activities. The project was never realized, but it indicates Burian's goal of a complex, multicultural, socially relevant institution, not merely a place for producing plays.

Producing in the Mozarteum, a small, rudimentary facility, Burian developed his theatre of synthesis: a conscious fusion of media, a contemporary, politicized version

of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* in miniature, in which, it was generally conceded, Burian demanded skill and discipline from his actors rather than individual creativity. A special embodiment of Burian's theatre of synthesis was the innovative *Theatergraph*, a complex mixture of mood-evoking projections and other lighting effects integrated with the play of live actors in productions such as Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* (1936) and Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1937), the first of which especially succeeded in being strong social criticism as well as lyrically expressive stagecraft drawing on sophisticated use of the technology of his day. It was work that inspired many young theatre aspirants, who flocked to his provocative theatre.

Although these and other works were leftist in their orientation, they did not seem to confront the Fascist menace as directly as did the work of many other artists at the time. One exception to this was Burian's adaptation of Pierre Augustin de Beaumarchais' *Barber of Seville* in 1936, which Burian turned into an eloquent statement against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. One partial explanation for Burian's only intermittent engagement in the leftist anti-Fascist campaign, beyond his innately complex temperament, may be that he was undergoing an internal crisis related to the conflicting claims of his Communist ideology and his consistently intense feelings as an independent artist. Having been severely shaken by news of the persecution of his idol Meyerhold in the Soviet Union in 1935 and 1936, he went so far as to challenge openly the Communist line that championed Socialist Realism against so-called formalism. In 1937 and 1938 two of his productions in particular, *Hamlet III* (his adaptation of Shakespeare and Jules Laforgue) and Goethe's *Werther*, may be seen as metaphoric personal statements defending his stature as a free artist rather than as reflections of the immediate threats to the nation's existence.

The Munich extortion meant the loss of about one-third of the land and population of Czechoslovakia, mainly in Bohemia. The loss of the Sudetenland, a heavily industrialized area with many mineral resources as well as the Czechs' Maginot Line of defenses, effectively castrated the Czechs. Aggravating the trauma in the following weeks were increased Slovak demands for autonomy, in part incited by a German-engineered plan to isolate the Czechs completely. Denuded and abandoned, they lost their independence entirely less than six months later when unopposed German troops streamed across the borders and established a "protectorate" of Bohemia and Moravia. March 15 was a dark, chill day; rain mixed with snow as German troops occupied Prague and its Hradčany Castle, seat of Bohemian kings centuries earlier. Hitler himself arrived at the castle the following day. Concurrently, Hitler's negotiations with Fascist and chauvinist elements in Slovakia succeeded in creating a Slovak state, in effect a German satellite. Less than a year after Munich, Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and thereby ignited World War II.

To recapitulate, the Czech theatre of the interwar period, led by cosmopolitan artists, exhibited world-class standards and was in the vanguard of significant staging.

A full spectrum of innovative production modes could be seen on its stages in perhaps greater profusion than elsewhere in Europe, especially in the 1930s as increasing conformity and even censorship restricted full creativity in other theatre centers. Equally important, especially in the 1930s, the Czech theatre was able to respond vitally to forces affecting the life of the young state and the fate of its people. In doing so, it recaptured some of the nineteenth-century Czech theatre's sense of mission and focus in the Revival Movement. At its best this theatre combined high artistry with genuine relevance, whether on the stage of the National Theatre, at the commercially successful Liberated Theatre, or in the cramped quarters of Burian's Mozarteum. Not the least of its achievements, finally, was its legacy of general inspiration for future generations, who would be experiencing crises and challenges of their own. In the meanwhile, however, in the spring of 1939 all Czechs were experiencing the anxieties of life in a homeland occupied and ruled by alien forces, with no light gleaming in the distance.¹⁹

¹⁹ Several other Czech directors of the interwar years deserve mention. While a student in Germany, Jan Bor (1886-1943) had become familiar with Reinhardt's work and studied with František Zavřel in Munich. Bor first attracted attention as a strong director of works by Strindberg, Dostoyevsky, and Wedekind as well as Aristophanes and František Langer in the Švanda Theatre between 1919 and 1924. His best work, however, was done at the Vinohrady Theatre (1924-1939), where he became Kvapil's successor as artistic director. From 1939 until his death, he served as head of drama at the National Theatre and was highly regarded for his productions of emotive psychological dramas, such as adaptations of Dostoyevsky and some Czech works, including his own play, *Suzana Vojňřová*. Viktor Šulc (1897-1945?), another German-trained Czech artist, studied with both Reinhardt and Leopold Jessner in the 1920s. Hilar invited him to work in the National Theatre, where he directed from 1924 to the early 1930s before moving to Bratislava, where he headed the Czech drama section of the Slovak National Theatre until 1938. A Communist-oriented artist, he is primarily associated with his bent toward German expressionism, which had passed its heyday by the time he sought to apply it. As an offspring of an Old Czech-Jewish family, he was sent to Auschwitz in 1942, where he was killed shortly before the end of the war. Oldřich Stibor (1901-1943) was another dedicated Communist artist who, like E. F. Burian, worked toward a poetic synthesis of theatre elements. His chief work occurred in Olomouc in the 1930s, where he staged numerous modern international classics and, in 1935, the first production of Vsevolod Vishnevsky's *Optimistic Tragedy* outside the Soviet Union. Stibor's inclination toward Soviet and leftist theatre was intensified by two trips to the Soviet Union to observe their theatre, particularly Tairov's. Although he admired Burian's work, he publicly criticized Burian's inconsistent stance vis-à-vis a united (leftist) artistic front in 1938.