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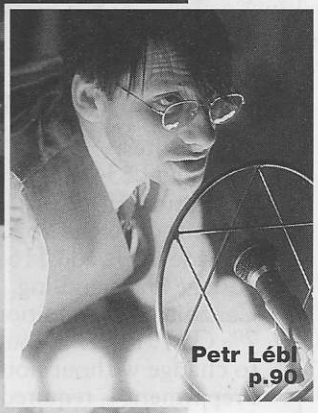

Cover Photo: Kylie Walters, Guilherme Botelho, Marc Berthon, Fiona Cameron, and Louise Hedley in the Alias Compagnie of Geneva's *Moving a Perhaps*.

Photo: Marc Vanappelghem

Director Petr Lébl
postmodern sensibility, modern sense

Dennis C. Beck

Dennis C. Beck is a scholar, director, actor, and lighting designer who spent last year as a Fulbright Fellow researching the dramaturgy and historic role of the Czech oppositional theatres between 1968 and 1989. His previous work has appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *OnStage Studies*, and *Theatre InSight*. Currently he is a National Security and Education Program Fellow and is completing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin.

Photo 1: Lébl's *Cabaret*.
Photo: Martin Špelda

If, as Alan Riding asserts in a January 1997 *New York Times* article, European theatre is beleaguered by a dearth of new plays, actors opting for screen work, graying audiences, and dwindling government subsidies, the situation is compounded in the former communist countries by the simultaneous loss of the theatre's status as an oppositional platform, a rare space for "common breathing," an island of spiritual freedom. That status (and the support structures, financial and other, that sustained it) has dwindled away in a postcommunist environment in which "commitment" seems almost naive, if not suspiciously retrogressive. In the Czech Republic, the theatre's search for purpose and identity, the desire to distinguish positive directions from "decadence" and dead-ends, has underscored the debate surrounding the work of one 32-year-old director Riding might have added to his list of young artists "breathing new life" into European theatre. On both sides of that debate, however, critics uncritically assume that Petr Lébl's work—which looks and sounds postmodern—is postmodern. The assumption highlights both the amorphousness of the term and the way its usage has inherently conflated aesthetics with dramaturgy. By "postmodernistically" using the postmodern like he might any other genre, Lébl, in fact, moves beyond it.

Petr Lébl's position as artistic director of Divadlo Na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade)—where Václav Havel's plays gained notoriety under Jan Grossman's direction in the 1960s and the cradle of the Czech alternative theatre movement was built, a movement whose successors stage-managed, with the students, the brief but effective run of "Velvet Revolution, 1989"—has raised expectations that

he, too, will signal Czech culture's coming moment. It makes him a conspicuous object of contention in debates over the value(s) of the established and the progressive, the past and the present-future, the modern and the postmodern. In a society painfully attempting to re-form itself, many critics don't like what they see mirrored in the productions of "probably the only consistently postmodernist director in the Czech Republic" (Švejda 6). Some admit they find his work incomprehensible, while others disagree about why it might be significant.

Lébl's are highly imagistic productions in which the costumes seem often inextricable from the set, properties clutter the stage in an orgy of semiosis, lighting alters angles and colors, and scenography shifts in the blink of an eye from romantic to surrealistic evocation, from farcical glare to horror-film murk, from musical comedy outlines to naturalistic detail. In Lébl's production of *Cabaret*, for example, a beer-swigging, sausage-gobbling stage manager in the pit becomes a Hitler-wannabe in toga and laurel wreath. Later his Nazi uniform commands respect—until he's reprimanded by his wife for goofing off. In *The Seagull*, the actors' make-up and style of performance recall early silent films, but fluorescent footlights occasionally flash on, boinging sounds signal significant moments, and a bass drum pounds when characters sit. Playfulness, a sense of the romantic and its immediate destruction, the modern, an appreciation for history, kitsch, tragedy, melancholia, farce, melodrama, vaudeville, the grotesque, and the absurd pass by like the weather in mountainous country—or commercials on network TV.

Lébl's images are sometimes strikingly beautiful and evocative. Some, like scholar Věra Ptáčková, believe he has "mined something unique, strangely and mysteriously expressive, which manage[s] to stimulate hidden areas of the unconscious" (37). Others are not so sanguine. Barbara Mazáčová, writing of Lébl's production of Genet's *The Maids*, warns:

> [H]is images are so suggestive and so idiosyncratic that they are not only able, in fact, to change but to intentionally erase the point and substance of Genet.... With his *Maids*, Lébl stands on a border where what seems to be the destruction of theatre language begins. This is effected, however, through means that are very theatrical, even through the foregrounding and objectification of the theatre itself on stage.... It is one of the paradoxes of the end of the millennium, this peculiar kind of suicide through narcissism. ("Těpěře" 4)

Reacting to the same poetics of "destruction" in Lébl's production of *Seagull*, however, Vlasta Smoláková called it "absolute theatre" and a "significant accomplishment within the parameters of European theatre" (4). Such proclamations prompt Vladimír Just to bemoan "the total loss of critical judgement [when] face-to-face with an evil-eyed director" and write off the same production as a "fetching, chic fashion show" (11). The two camps hurl epithets at each other through the press.

Though critics and scholars offer different definitions of Lébl's work, they all agree that its numerous quotations, deliberate plurality and mixing of styles, pervading ambivalence and travesty mark it as postmodern, although the tag is "something of a polite insult" in Bohemia, admits scholar Milan Lukeš (15). In keeping with his unwitting defiance of definition, however, Lébl categorically rejects the post-

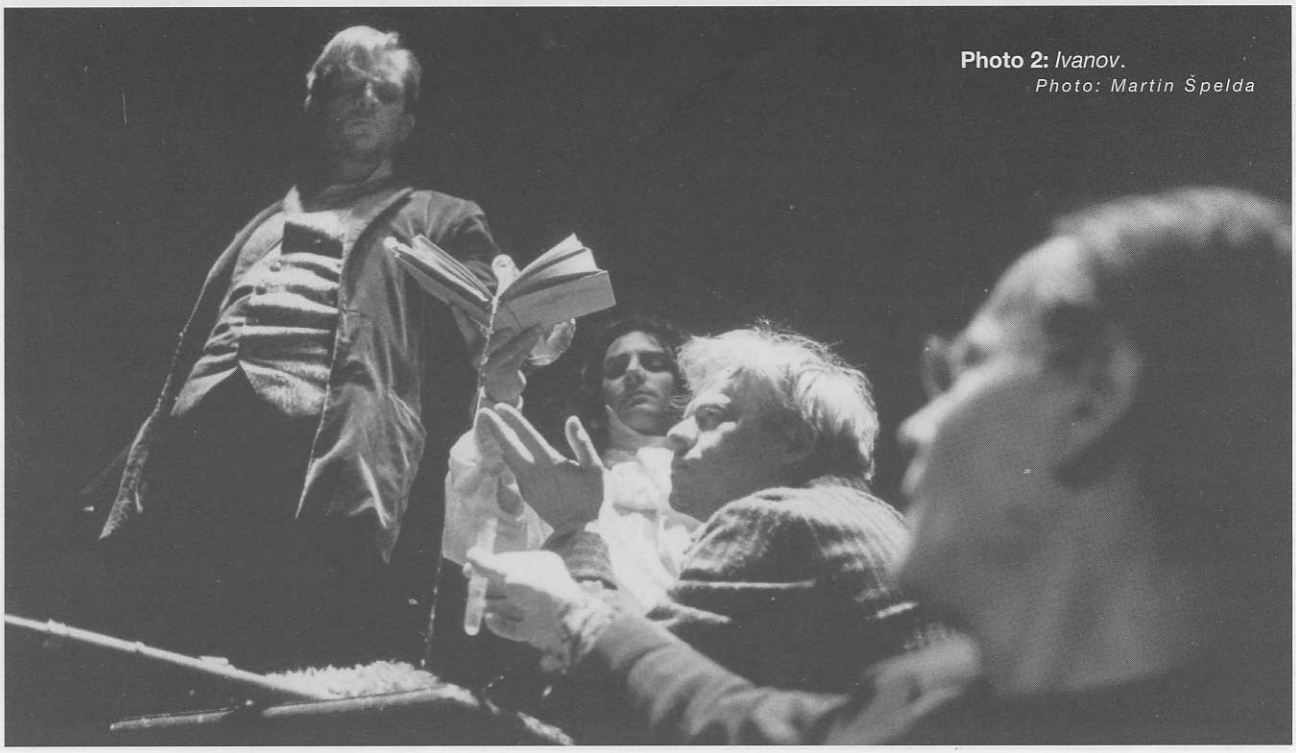

Photo 2: *Ivanov*.
Photo: Martin Špelda

modern label, and attributes it to a fundamental misunderstanding of his work:

> We're all doing it, making the shoes different, the pants different, the belt different, the soul different. And there's also a different composition of varied styles, which is pretty natural.... But just because a person is putting together things that apparently don't belong to each other, he doesn't have to be postmodern. [This and all subsequent unattributed quotes are from a personal interview.]

Lébl blames the inability of the critics to sustain an informed debate about the relative values of the different modes of interpretation for boxing him into "postmodernism." The critics, he implies, by uncritically donning the glasses of postmodernism (a stream of artistic development in the theatre that Lébl sees as still too unformed to provide a useful definition), have blindered themselves to significant aspects of his work outside their received ideas. "What 'evil-eyed director' guides one of the Czech Republic's flagship theatres into uncharted waters if not the expected postmodernist?"

Lébl began directing in 1985 with the amateur youth group Doprapo (short for *dopravní podniky*, "public transportation"), with his own adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick*, (*Groteska* in Czech). The story concerns the present life and recollections of Wilbur, the last president of an economically, ecologically, and morally destroyed United States. Like all the texts developed or chosen by the more wily of Czechoslovak theatre makers, it could be read in at least two opposing ways. Since Wilbur and his sister become a genius when together, but remain somewhat imbecilic when apart, the play passed the city approval committee with the comment that "finally somebody sees that in America every idiot can become president" (qtd. in Král 63). Of course this comment ignores one of the tacit central tenets of theatre—that every production is about the here and now—and disregards hints provided by Lébl. As the audience enters, the character of Věra, later revealed as a slave-owner, reads a list of her slaves using arbitrary Czech names, "like the names of people in the audience," notes Lébl in his unpublished scenario. The direction of his attack was ambivalent, but not necessarily unclear.

Two opposing banks of seats separated a long, narrow playing space. Within its cluttered confines, Lébl designed a picturesquely theatricalized wreck of an automobile and a trash heap of consumer culture, representing the Statue-of-Liberty-crowned gravemound of Wilbur's great-granddaughter. Using a highly stylized, slapstick performance style reminiscent of the classic film comedians, especially Laurel and Hardy, Lébl managed to avoid a catharsis issuing from pathos or love in the final moment's appeal to human-

Photo 3: *The Seagull*.
Photo: Martin Špelda

ness; instead, he effected a *groteskní* catharsis with a cream pie that stops up the speaker's mouth—an action that signified death at the same time it reenacted a comedic trope.

Lébl emphasized the theme and form of consumer kitsch to similar ends, wringing meaningful significance from a form defined by its surface. Since the post-1968 Czech government had bought the complacency of the population with low prices, a menu of cost-of-living subsidies, and a plethora of consumer goods by Soviet bloc standards, consumer kitsch had replaced the social realist kitsch that the tanks of August had definitively driven out. The year before Lébl's *Groteska*, Czech exile novelist and playwright Milan Kundera had, in fact, exposed kitsch as a primary instrument of manipulation of the masses by Communist regimes in his book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Since it excludes everything essentially unacceptable in human existence, notes Saul Friedlander, "there is no kitsch which ends with a question. All kitsch ends with a statement" (235). Though kitsch itself is incompatible with irony and uncensored truth, "as soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie that it is, it moves into the realm of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness" (Kundera 256). By using montage to set kitschy images and situations in juxtaposition, Lébl introduced a third ironic meaning that nonetheless constituted an appeal for humanistic values. "In a period of fallen culture, it feels redundant to me to talk about such a delicate thing as kitsch is," remarks Lébl. "We are walking on dirty streets; meanwhile people as a species should live in paradise" (qtd. in Tučková 29). An ironic attitude combined with the pathos of recognizing human weakness would mark many of Lébl's future productions.

Although Lébl had not yet been pegged as postmodern, kitsch and the postmodern bear a noteworthy resemblance in their dependence on other forms and prior understandings. Lacking "inherent" or "organic" signification, they take their meaning from reference to other forms and from associations spectators bring to the object, and both, therefore, have been called parasitic and surface-oriented, accusations that have also been leveled at Lébl's work in general. But such accusations assume that Lébl is working within, rather than with, the "form" known as postmodernism. However, Lébl uses the postmodern aesthetic for purposes not normally associated with postmodernism, just as he used kitsch in *Groteska* to express something outside its traditional realm.

Before *Groteska*, Lébl had admired Czech performances by the amateur groups known as the Prague 5, which he calls "completely postmodern." Lébl describes their influence, however, by recounting when, as a teenager, he brought a pineapple compote (then a rare, black-market delicacy) to a performance as an expression of admiration, but too nervous to offer it, took it home and ate it: "So this is my relationship with Prague 5." Though Lébl is reluctant to point to direct influences when asked, *Groteska* and his approach to text point toward a small group of theatres that operated in the "grey zone" between official culture and the dissidents.

Gorbachev introduced reforms in the Soviet Union in 1985, and with the indirect help of US Ambassador William Luers, the Czech "authorial" Theatre on a String wrestled permission not only to adapt and produce Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, but to have the author visit their production. Simultaneously, Lébl presented his adaptation of *Slapstick*, which so impressed Vonnegut that he dedicated its Czech edition to Lébl. The authorial theatres had earned their name from the dramaturgical practice of montaging numerous types of texts and styles in order to address audiences as directly as possible as well as to avoid the a priori censorship to which traditionally written dramatic texts were intensively subject following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion. Thus, authorial theatres' artists accepted authorial responsibility for the stage production. The practices of montage, textual adaptation, and adoption of stage authorship would continuously shape Lébl's work: "We are trying for so-called authorial theatre. That means that even though we don't write the text on our own, we are trying to modify it according to our ideas at least" ("Amatéři").

During the 1980s, Lébl continued developing his poetics of connecting apparently unconnectable components in imagistic productions. In keeping with authorial practice, he concentrated on adaptations of fiction and poetry by modernist writers: Mircea Eliade, Christian Morgenstern, Tankred Dorst, Stanislav Wyspianski, and Franz Kafka. During the revolution he also staged a happening called *No Violence*. Besides designing sets, costumes, and performing under the direction of others, Lébl acted in and designed all his own productions up to 1990. Jelo, which Doprapo had evolved into, dissolved in 1991 through exhaustion and disagreements, but Lébl had already begun directing for Opera Mozart, a concern catering to the burgeoning tourist population. Lébl's imagistic tendencies fit well with its entertainment objectives, but the context made critics suspicious of his later motivations. Adding to his ambiguity was an increasing tendency to work under pseudonyms. Previously he had occasionally designed under the name "Arnold Lébl." With Opera Mozart, he directed *Colas* as "Letitia von Brandenstein." Later, at Divadlo Na zábradlí, "William Nowák" took credit for his scenography. When Theatre Labyrinth took the chance of hiring him in early 1992, however, he stepped further into the light with his first professional production.

By nearly every critical account, his first of two productions at Labyrinth was an absolute but provocative failure. With *Vojcev*, the critics unanimously labeled Lébl's work "postmodern," but with their different understandings of the term, they began to divide in their assessment of its significance. Whether the critics saw his work as having been created under the influence of the "fashion drugs of postmodernism"(Rejžek 2)or as "nothing other than clear for-

malism" (Machalická 14), many of them concluded with Barbara Mazáčová that "all this is actually about nothing... [I]t's about an exhibition of most of the participants" (Mazáčová, et al. 19). Other reviewers questioned if 19-year-old Egon Tobiáš's text weren't merely "a deranged play about an unrestrainable derangement...[within which] we can give up searching for some deeper logic, structure, or even causality" (Smoláková, "Všem" 37). The combination of apparently aimless dialogue with a grandiose set collaged of fragments—an unopenable house door, kitschy sculptures of angels on portal edges, elements of a run-down apartment, fragments of Tirol and ancient Egyptian style, a school map of Africa, an old radio, a painted sky over the horizon—lent no meaning to the transformation of characters into lizards or of the Foreigner into a mackerel subsequently eaten by Vojcev, who had, without changing visibly, become a dog.

Tobiáš's accumulation of situations not only lacked the discernible structure and richly expressed themes of the modernist works Lébl had previously adapted, but since the text itself was new it also lacked the accumulated history of popular and canonical interpretations with which Lébl's staging had traditionally entered into a kind of dialogue. Lacking reference, the piece lacked resonance. This lack of dialogic tension, which had become an integral part of Lébl's poetics, may have prompted him to reinforce allusions to Chekhov in the form of birch tree cutouts and to add sweeping Hollywood-style stairs. The Chekhov quotations enraged critics who saw them as senseless travesty, although others noted that the border separating what the production did and did not disparage was ambiguous: "The semantic and structural connections are absolutely, maybe intentionally denied.... At the end of a century in which the art avant-gardes glorified the ideal of freedom in whose name the overproud creating subject was allowed to do anything, we are harvesting in postmodernism the fruits of this sowing. *Vojcev* is one of them" (Šormová 24, 26). Lébl's other productions suggest, however, that an unrestricted poststructural play of meanings is not part of his general intention. But because it lacked the kind of structured or familiar textual boundary within which Lébl's customary juxtaposition of elements could assume meaning, *Vojcev* verged on being about nothing. Lébl, who appreciates criticism as long as it is "just," doesn't fault the critics for not understanding *Vojcev*, but reflects: "Well, maybe I didn't know what I was doing."

Some critics, however, thought they did know what he was doing, and it was the belief that he was forging a new direction in Czech theatre that would lead to his appointment as Balustrade's artistic director in 1993. Věra Ptáčková noted that unlike other post-revolution directors, Lébl seemed unresponsive to the "most transformative external circumstances [and] rejected any trivial bondage to the immediate realities of life [or]...to force theatre to imitate life" (37). Lébl's focus, as well as his means, were elsewhere. Rather than a purposeless, visually impressive game, proposed Daria Ullrichová, *Vojcev* was a "state in evidence—generational, unsuperficial, honest.... [N]ot just an interpretation of this world, it's an expression of feelings from it" (5). A handful of critics viewed Lébl's *Vojcev* as a new type of testimony. That the banality, discontinuities, cultural icons, transformational rejuvenation of the characters (into Elvis and Tina Turner in two cases), and their subsequent metamorphosis into lower forms of life might form a type of modernist critique, however, was never fully articulated.

Unlike many modernists who point toward one particular message, Lébl presents in juxtaposition particular objects, ideas, and effects that dispose reception of their themes and possible meanings within broad but identifiable parameters. Some inspiration for this defined ambiguity might be traced to authorial theatre practitioners, who walked their themes atop a fence from which they might fall into either allowed or proscribed interpretations. Lébl extended this idea, pulling it away from fences (or iron curtains) and into spheres of associations where there was more, but not unlimited, room for the play of meanings. One of the key spheres of his concern at the time seems to have regarded postmodern culture itself. Months before the premiere of *Vojcev*, Lébl visited the United States, where he studied movement. Asked about his trip's influence, he instantly responds: "When I flew back, I threw my TV set out of the window and I lived until last year without a TV." This (r)ejection indicates Lébl's aversion to what he saw broadcast there and suggests that he implicates, like Marshall McLuhan, the medium itself as a definer of its message. Similarly, the medium/form of his works, as much as the content of their fragments, become part of the thematic field he presents for consideration on the stage. Of the critics' propensity to interpret the rich surface of his productions as a screen or charlatan's "fashion show," Lébl muses that "several times the most striking, screaming things are true. But some people just will not and cannot get it." Medium, form, surface itself are part of the message-field in Lébl's productions. In his first new production as artistic director at Divadlo Na zábradlí, he would attempt to clarify the dynamic.

Though again adapting modernist works, Lébl for the first time produced one originally meant for the stage. He translated Genet's *The Maids* himself, inspired in what he calls his "piracy" by Genet's note to the play, which Lébl paraphrases as, "if a director doesn't feel good about some words in my play he should exchange them for words he's going to like" (qtd. in Král 68). Lébl limited changing the play's words, however, to vernacularizations and name-brand references. He "discovered its new meaning and expressive possibilities" (Hořínek 176) through more controversial "exchanges." Lébl decided to put Madam's discussed lover on stage. Lébl's Mister, however, is no inmate, but a menacing guard, symbol of authority, and repulsive counterpoint to Madam's magnificence. The performance, in fact, opens in a shadowy, minimalist prison where two

male inmates begin the dominance-submission game that propels them imaginatively into the maids' world. With these transpositions, Lébl not only introduces a biographical element into the work but attunes it to the "male principle" he feels is at its heart. Though the "dream maids" are played by women, the inmates enter the action in costumes ranging from those of animals to Egyptian pharaohs in the transformed environment of the Madam's home. The stage, replete with mobile, free-standing space heaters from the 1950s (representing the play's "flowers"), vacuum cleaners, and costuming incongruities stands as much as an example of postmodern culture as its parody. At play's end, the stage transforms back to the prison, suggesting that the superficial, consumerist culture in which the servants were empowered was just an inmate's dream—a possible metaphor for recent Czech experience. The poisoned tea one inmate offers the other in a ritualistic, sacramental gesture in Lébl's production, exists in an imagined cup, thus emphasizing metaphorical associations of suicide and sacrifice.

Photos 4 and 5: *Cabaret*. Photo: Martin Špelda

While most critics lauded the performance, which won second place for best Czech production of 1993 at the Alfréd Radok awards, others felt that Lébl had erased Genet with his "never-ending play with meanings" (Mazáčová, "Těpěře" 4). For Lébl, such criticism misunderstands the necessity for everyone to discover an individual attitude to the text, which is "working material for theatre people.... When you take a brick and break a window, it doesn't have to be aggressive. There aren't any rules about it. In my opinion you can do anything with a text, and it's an expression of honor and respect, not disregard." (Later, when he produced *Cabaret*, Lébl learned that some countries do enforce copyright restrictions with respect to changing texts.) He stresses, however, that the company tries to make statements about the characters and stories they enact, and "not only tell the story on the first plane. As Gogol said, even a bear can do that.... And the message that is expected by the audience is a different message than we are giving." Countering expectations, in fact, became a key strategy when he turned to Chekhov in 1994.

In *Seagull*, Lébl provided a less obvious framing device than *The Maids*' prison setting to suggest perspectives on postmodernism. It lay in the opposition of staging style to a text with which Czechs are intimately familiar because, as Nina notes in explanation of her parents' absence, "They say this place is Bohemia." Lébl didn't cut *Seagull*, although he did "adjust" the text through the technique of multiplication by repeating phrases and voicing occasional stage directions. Proliferation is a technique he also follows visually:

> It's good to give a maximum of messages. The audience is sometimes so irritated by this offering of so many messages that they don't understand it at all. But in these relationships [among the numerous messages], when there's too much of it, the audience will come to understand. When a person gets one shock and he breaks, he reacts to it

Photo 6: *Cabaret.*
Photo: Martin Špelda

somehow. But when you have very many crises, it transfers you to a different level. Perhaps you break completely (laughs). Maybe you go somewhere else. And I would like theatre—but this is an ideal—to try to offer you some kind of alternative to the world that, nonetheless, has some logical rules.

Toward this end, Lébl tends to ask more than would seem possible from the Balustrade's small stage. *Seagull* brought his poetic's characteristic tension, produced by large, exaggerated theatre in a tiny space, to its highest pitch.

Chekhov first read *Seagull* to his friends in December 1895, just months after the brothers Lumière introduced their cinematograph in Paris. Lébl juxtaposes these two significant births in modernist methods by stylizing the performances in the hyperbolic mode of silent film acting and limiting the color palate to black, white, and shades of grey-blue. The whole takes on, as Milan Lukeš notes of the character types, an archetypal quality that is "definitely existential and not merely aesthetic" (17). Scenes fit together through quick edits or crossfades, and actors cross the stage or move back and forth on a treadmill like statues, suggestive of camera pans, as others rotate on a small turntable or remain stationary. Characters seem to be, therefore, in differing spaces physically or perspectively. By bringing everything to the surface (where the camera can capture it), the style clashes with traditional, internally focused approaches to producing Chekhov and thus, notes Zdeněk Hořínek, destroys the myth of Chekhov (*Seagull* 214). Whether it destroys Chekhov himself became a topic of critical debate.

In seeking to express something beyond the grasp of Gogol's bear, Lébl uses as text, in addition to Chekhov's playscript, traditions and ideas associated with the playwright—underscored by offstage calls for "Konstantin" (Treplev) and "Seagull." Naturally some critics, notably Vladimír Just, fail to acknowledge this as a dramaturgical possibility. Using a "maximum of messages," Lébl succeeds in simultaneously allowing, as does the text itself, a number of possible readings. Peasant workers, for example, observe the action from behind birch and column cutouts. Banks of bright fluorescent footlights and a modern, stainless steel prop trunk brought on by stage helpers in eighteenth-century wigs and attire add depth to the ideas presented, bringing the present to the stage as the columns define a neoclassical stage space, suggesting the genesis of the screen-like theatrical perception that would lead to motion pictures. The fourth act, in which the columns "dance" on pulsating batons, a gauze scrim obscures the action, and the rope of a hanging oil lamp suddenly freezes stiff at an unnatural angle, introduces the surreal to the alternately grotesque, vaudevillian, and melodramatic expressions of the silent film stylization. The actors pass through these forms of expression—as well as what seems psychological realism—but it could be that they simply accustom us to their hyperbolic level, which some critics called "hysterical." Lébl welcomes the accusation:

> The theatre must be hysterical, a little bit nervous, as well as visual. My private explanation is that theatre means drama.... In the word itself there is some kind of roar, some kind of rumbling. [Peter] Brook, for example, is studying it. He's hitting

> people with drums.... I believe in it, but I can't hit drums with our actors because they would run away or go for a glass of vodka. But the rumbling is holy for us. So I think about entering the rumbling, the real drama, and accepting the consequences....

The theatrical event, therefore, might constitute a drama in and of itself. The final act of *Seagull* suggests this inversion of the traditional relationship between "drama" and "theatre:" the writer-director Treplev—associated with Chekhov and literary conceptions—becomes increasingly debilitated and loses control of his hands as Nina—associated with performative understandings of art—flourishes, finds herself, and leaves an increasingly fragmented stage world. After Treplev leaves the stage and all the other characters except Nina gather, a shot is heard. Treplev has lost control of his hands. Blackout. The theatre becomes dramatic. (Three separate organizations awarded Lébl's *Seagull* best Czech production of 1994.)

With *Cabaret* in 1995, Lébl moved the theme of the power of the performative into more political and historical contexts. He eradicates private space, so that even the most intimate songs and scenes become choral numbers or observed exchanges. The Balustrade transforms into a cabaret in which the play *Cabaret* is being performed. An amplified and disembodied voice sometimes gives orders to the actors, ending any sense that the stage world is safely closed. With placards, the actors advertise the Balustrade's commercial sponsors. Lébl heightens the violence to shocking proportions, emphasizing the anti-Semitism to the point that Schmidt seems beaten to death by three men with a heavy iron; he travesties the romance between Sally and Cliff and the romance of the German national movement. "Maybe This Time" becomes a song about performing to win the audience's sympathy, so that though Cliff remains onstage, Sally completely disregards him. "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" begins sentimentally sung by an Aryan youth, but as landscapes fly in and other elements of Germanic Romanticism appear, the tune slips into a subtly parodic mode. The stage manager, who began playfully performing Hitler, ends by conducting the finale with a sense of incarnating the historical personage.

In fact, Lébl points toward the performative and its power to seduce and coerce in numerous ways. He rearranges the text so that the second act is composed almost unremittingly of songs, thus maximizing the emotional and irrational impact of the final moments. Albert Speer's 1930s aesthetics appear in the use of spotlights, old-style microphones, and the amplification of every character but Cliff through additional body-microphones. Cell phones bring the present onstage, but they are associated only with the German and American characters, who begin the play identically dressed and speaking their native languages with an occasional Czech exchange. Especially in the songs, the three languages coexist. The Master of Ceremonies (played by a woman) sings in Czech, but Sally speaks English and the Nazi characters speak German. The piece, then, puts different cultures into tension as much as it does the history they share. For the spectator assembling the plethora of themes and images Lébl presents, the performance becomes an almost meditative space in which to consider the power of the media, nationalism, xenophobia, and historical repetition.

In the latter productions, Lébl's use of techniques associated with postmodern culture/style became increasingly sophisticated as he set them within frames, not always acknowledged (or perceived) by the critics, that gave "sense" to their fragmented and imagistic character. Thus *The Maids*' dream of overcoming authority, *Seagull*'s filmed performance from the 1920s, and *Cabaret*'s setting in a cabaret open a way to perceive the postmodern within a modernist frame. The relationship Lébl constructs between these two styles, as much as the sets of ideas and values with which they are associated, can also be read as forming the kind of social critique associated with modernism, but offered through the act of assembly that stupefied Gogol's bear.

Lébl may find constructing a modern and postmodern relationship with modern texts more difficult in the future. His changes to *Cabaret* led to his being denied the rights to produce *Grease*. To Lébl, however, theatre is not meant to be a "good boy," but to be provocative for a reason. In the 1960s, that reason in Czechoslovakia was political; today,

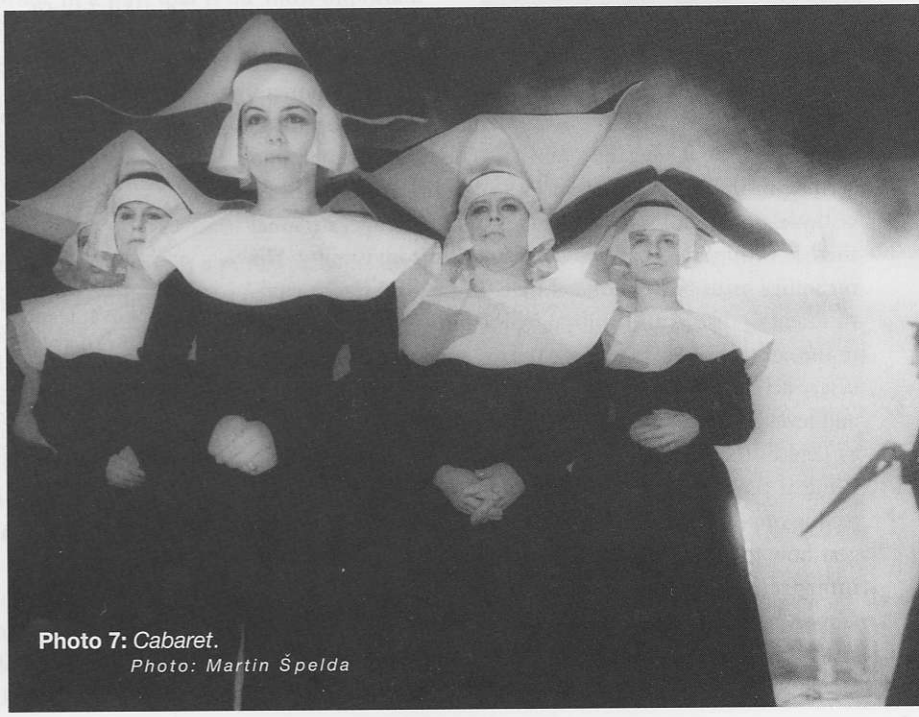

Photo 7: *Cabaret.*
Photo: Martin Špelda

Lébl believes, the important reasons lie elsewhere. His latest production, Chekhov's *Ivanov*, holds close to the original text. With it, Lébl means to provoke in a different way. The production lacks the semiotically packed quality of previous productions. The raised unit set shifts orientation so that with each act a different wall is removed, a different point of view offered. The theme of boredom following youthful years of wild living lends the whole the double weight of ennui and melancholy. If the production holds a modernist critique about the current situation, it would seem to rest here. It is presented, however, without the mediation of any frame. Lébl explains that the economic situation of the theatre made some effects impossible but he forbade himself others:

> In *Seagull* we were obvious about things that would provoke...but after three years I wanted to present things differently. I have some spaces there, and I know that they are very irritating. In *Ivanov* we weren't obviously stopping and pointing to these things, yet they are there. In *Ivanov*, I wanted to have lots of wild spaces, but hidden.

Emotionally it is perhaps the most affecting of Lébl's productions to date, and while on one level it seems the most conventional, the lack of a frame makes the use of fluorescent footlights, a modern trunk, and actors playing characters forty years outside their ages a mystery, or wild space, for the audience's imagination.

With *Ivanov*, for the first time in Lébl's career, all fourteen reviews were positive, which worries him. Perhaps he failed to be provocative and hid the wildness too well. Perhaps, also, it represents the critics' ongoing failure to engage in a debate about interpretation. As a critic from arguably the most postmodern culture in the world, Lébl's productions seem to me to entertain the theme of postmodern culture as presented through a postmodern style set within modernist, socially concerned but imaginatively freeing spheres of meaning. Czech critics and theatre practitioners, however, interpret him as postmodernist and have begun to suspect that he is repeating himself. The middle generation seems put off by his apparent lack of social engagement or critique. Some find fault in the lack of identifiable, personal themes within his work, which they call his invisibility. His meanings seem profuse *and* elusive. In the new Czech environment of disorienting plurality, the limitation of meaning in the controllable space of the theatre may be the most necessary action. Conversely, too strict a limitation of meanings and levels might be seen as unfitting, but their proliferation, as Lébl notes, marks an "attempt at honesty.... The human being is powerless. The theatre might be here to share the feeling of powerlessness with people, and meanwhile to suggest how to get out of this powerlessness." Passing through interpretive powerlessness to achieve a suggestion of empowerment is indeed the kind of catharsis on which slapstick was built, but it may also be a fitting one in today's Czech Republic.

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NOTE: All translations are by the author.