

THREE YOUNG CZECH DIRECTORS: FACETS OF CZECH THEATRE ON THE CUSP OF THE MILLENNIUM

Jarka Burian

To the irritation of some but to the pleasure of others, the traditional repertory system continues to be the standard in today's Czech theatre, as does the tradition of government subvention (whether national, regional, or municipal). Nevertheless, subsidies have been seriously cut and all theatres, including the National Theatre, have had to downsize, economize, scramble for corporate and private support, and work intensively on marketing and audience development. Two other kinds of change have marked today's theatre landscape, especially in Prague: some theatres have been cut off from support or have otherwise gone under, and several new theatres have appeared, including some that are private enterprises with no subventions, providing popular entertainment at steep prices for tourist-heavy audiences.

Nearly ten years after the Velvet Revolution, Czech drama is still waiting for the coming of a new playwright or play recognized as important. Czech theatre, on the other hand, has overcome the crises of plunging attendance and the painful reorganization or even liquidation of familiar ensembles, which marked the early 1990s. Younger directors and fresh ensembles have energized today's Czech theatre by creating provocative revivals of an international repertoire as well as generating theatrical adaptations of novels and poetry. When and if significant new Czech plays appear, the current directors' theatre seems ready to do them justice.

Selecting the outstanding young Czech directors of the 1990s is not a simple matter, but neither is it hopeless. For the purposes of this article, I would like to use the Radok awards as a guide. Named after Alfred Radok, one of the great Czech directors of the past hundred years, the awards have been bestowed on the outstanding Czech production of each calendar year since 1992, with the director of each receiving the actual honor. I shall focus on three directors who have won a total of five of these awards: Hana Burešová, Petr Lébl, and Jan Antonín Pitínský. Their careers have intertwined in various ways, and their backgrounds, affiliation with varied theatres, and range of creativity provide a representative cross section of today's leading work in Czech theatre.

In terms of formal training, both Burešová and Lébl studied at DAMU, the Prague theatre academy. Burešová completed the program but Lébl had only brief, intermittent exposure to it; his most sustained higher

education was in graphics design, which is evident in his designing of his own productions, and sometimes those of others. Pitínský had no formal theatre training. His specialized schooling was as a librarian.

Natives of the capital, Burešová and Lébl made their mark in Prague sooner than Pitínský, a Moravian whose early work was in the Brno region. Coincidentally, both Burešová's and Lébl's first professional work in Prague occurred in the same theatre, the Labyrint. Formerly known as the Realistic Theatre, it had for years been known as a bastion of Stanislavskian realism until fresh artistic leadership took over in the 1980s and encouraged the work of new young directors.

Prior to her work at the Labyrint, Hana Burešová (b. 1959) had worked as a director for several years in professional regional theatres developing her inventive and freshly theatrical methods before coming to the Labyrint in the fall of 1992. Her first production there took advantage of the vaulted space of the theatre's cellar studio to provide an atmospheric background for Grabbe's *Don Juan and Faust*. Often regarded as unstageable, the play was so successful in her theatricalized embodiment of Grabbe's grotesque tragi-comic mixture of romantic ideals and all too human folly that it won the first Alfred Radok award for best production of 1992, and it is still being performed in 1998, though no longer at the Labyrint.

Later in the fall of 1992, in the main Labyrint theatre, Burešová staged an adaptation of *The Barber of Seville*, displaying another facet of her talent: a penchant for commedia dell'arte elements of conscious theatricality, bright, inventive stage business, and sharp character treatment. Her flair for incorporating music, mime, and masks both respected and parodied the Beaumarchais-Rossini material. The production had the second most votes in the same Radok competition, tying with productions by Petr Lébl and Jan Grossman. She closed the year, in December, with a double bill of nineteenth-century Czech farces by F.F. Šamberk—*Boucharon* and *I'm Having a Benefit (Mám Příjem)*—that cheerily spoofed the Czech Sokol movement¹ and provincial Czech theatre itself, respectively.

Burešová's two remaining productions at the Labyrint extended her directorial reach: T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1993) and a 1930s Czech comedy by J. Žák, *School, Life's Foundation (Škola Základ Života)* in 1994. Burešová presented an essentially orthodox rendition of Eliot's religious verse drama, but enhanced its theatrical vitality with expressive lighting, sound, and choreography. The Žák play, a generic, comedic depiction of classroom confrontations among high school students and teachers, became in Burešová's staging a lively farce with interpolated music,

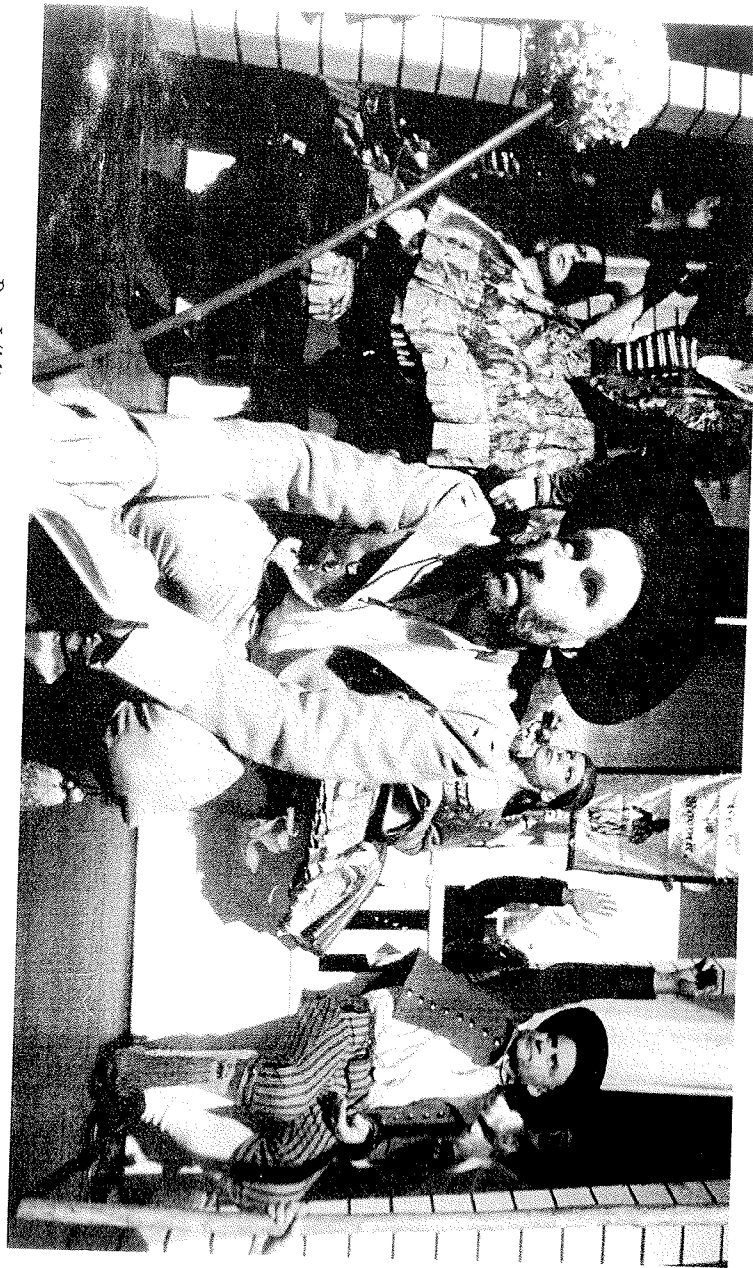
while not losing sight of the work's serious overtones. It was to be Burešová's last production at the Labyrint: internal disagreements on administrative and policy matters led to her ending her work there in 1995.

Meanwhile, Petr Lébl, the youngest of these three directors (b. 1965), had been primarily associated with amateur theatre in Prague before joining the Labyrint. Working in a Prague cultural house with his own ensemble, Jelo, he had produced some dozen works, including his own subjective, poetic, playfully bizarre texts and scenarios as well as equally unconventional adaptations of others' work, such as his 1985 dramatization of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick*, which Lébl translated as *Grotesque*. His first production at the Labyrint, in February 1992 was *Vojcev*, an original Czech play by a younger colleague, Egon Tobiaš. *Vojcev* is an enigmatic, precocious spoof centering on a young author who finally seems to turn into a dog. In what was still the essentially conservative theatre world of Prague, the production created a furor. Many praised it for its provocative challenge to habitual theatre practice; equally many condemned it as a self-indulgent flouting of intelligible, coherent stage action.

The following November, a few days before Burešová's *Barber*, Lébl staged Tankred Dorst's 1992 play, *Fernando Krapp Wrote Me This Letter*, in the Labyrint studio. A dramatization of a novel by Miguel de Unamuno, the production was a landmark demonstration of Lébl's consciously parodistic, highly subjective, and wittily stylized theatrical vision. It tied with Burešová's *Barber of Seville* for second place in the Radok competition for best production of the year. Lébl's staging of Dorst's inherently painful marital drama was almost operatic in its attitudes and tone; every production element, including Lébl's own scenography, was orchestrated to create a disciplined, unified, high-camp version of what had originally been a serious, albeit ironic, work.

Lébl left the Labyrint in 1993, for an offer he couldn't refuse. It came from Jan Grossman, who had once again become artistic director of the Theatre on the Balustrade (*Divadlo na zábradlí*) in 1990 after an absence of more than twenty years. His productions at the Balustrade in the early 1990s crowned his work in Czech theatre. After having seen Lébl's *Vojcev* at the Labyrint, Grossman invited him to stage a production in the Balustrade Theatre later in the 1992-93 season. Lébl turned to an eccentric new play of his slightly older Czech contemporary, J.A. Pitínský, *The Little Room* (*Pokojíček*). The premiere was in the spring of 1993, a few months after Grossman's untimely death. Lébl then successfully competed for Grossman's position of artistic head of the Balustrade Theatre and was appointed in the summer of 1993, at the age of twenty-eight.

Petr Lébl's production of *Our Swaggers* (1994) at Theatre on the Balustrade





Nina and Trigorin in Lébl's production of *The Seagull* at the Balustrade in 1994

First, he began to form a new ensemble, some of whose members had careers dating back to the 1960s Balustrade era, while others were just becoming professionals. Then, in quick succession, Lébl radically adapted and staged Genet's *The Maids* in 1993; a nineteenth-century Czech classic by L. Stroupežnický, *Our Swaggerers* (*Náší Furianti*) in 1994; and, also in 1994, a highly controversial rendition of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which was awarded the Radok prize for the best production of that year. Still another award designated the Balustrade as Theatre of the Year 1994. Lébl's subsequent productions at the Balustrade, even when relatively tamer, have continued to provoke conflicting reviews.

A Lébl production is identifiable by his stylized blend of expressionism, surrealism, camp, and a tongue in cheek playing with his own conceits. He himself has said that his source is always within himself and that his prime motive is to satisfy himself. Redeeming his work from sheer self-indulgence are the precision and artistry of his effects, their overall unity of tone and form, and certain moments when a seemingly perverse stage sequence suddenly suggests a fresh, valid insight into traditional materials. For example, in the last act of his *Seagull*, the arbitrarily white costumes of the older characters and the white fabrics that cover most surfaces suggest an institutionalized, moribund society, perhaps even a mortuary or the lined interior of a coffin, effects that are superimposed on Chekhov's text yet arguably provide a metaphoric comment on the world that callously rejects a Nina and Treplev. On the other hand, many similar effects in the same production do not yield so positive a resonance and often impede the flow and tempo of the performance, such as elaborate visual gags parodying silent film melodramas.

A sense of proportion is something that Lébl is still in the process of developing; even his most inventive stage images and dynamic activity often reach a point of surfeit and lose their effectiveness. On the other hand, after reaching an apex of supercharged theatrical effects in *The Inspector General* and *Cabaret* (both in 1995), he seemed relatively more sober in his staging of Chekhov's *Ivanov* (1997), which won the latest Radok award. The relation between character insight and attention to theme *vis-à-vis* near-extravagant stage business was more nearly balanced in *Ivanov* than had been usual for Lébl.

In the fall of 1997, Lébl extended his career to the National Theatre itself as guest director of Smetana's opera *The Brandenburgs in Bohemia*. In the tradition-drenched "Golden Chapel on the Vltava," he imbued the historical action with the qualities of child-like myth, legend, and folk tales, a treatment that predictably raised the hackles of many while delighting



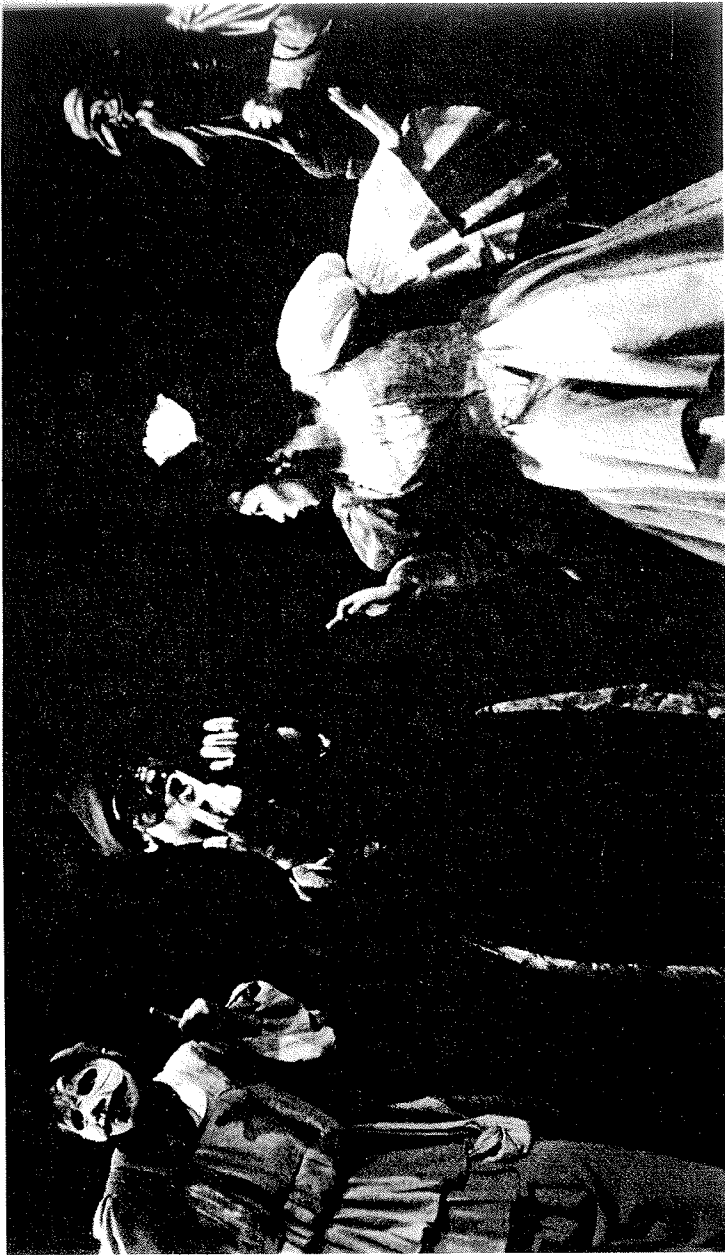
A moment before the hero's suicide in Lébl's 1997 production of *Ivanov* at the Balustrade

some others. Back in his own theatre in the spring of 1998, his attempt to transfer Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding* (1901), a symbolist play rooted in Polish cultural allusions and values, to a Czech milieu did not seem a success to most viewers, even though Lébl's choice of this play with its very skeptical look at romanticized revolutionary ideals that come to nothing seemed relevant to many aspects of life in the post-Communist Czech Republic.

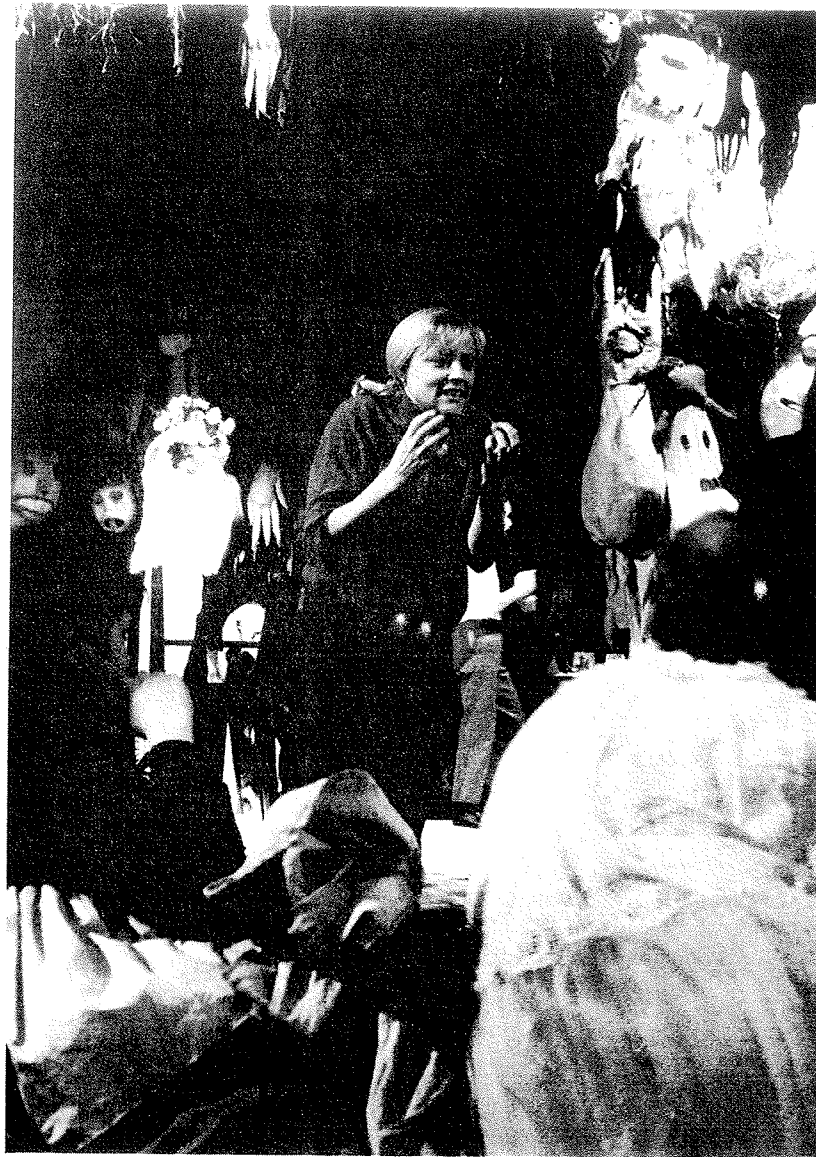
Some continue to regard Lébl's work as perverse, egoistic exhibitionism, while others see in it the theatre of the twenty-first century. His primarily aesthetic (rather than ethical) orientation and his flamboyance were captured by his own words in a 1997 television documentary: "Sometimes theatre seems to be a 'useless' discipline. Indeed, I'm all for such uselessness having kingly parameters; for its transcending uselessness; for its being only music and spirit, and costing frightful amounts, and being loved by people." In any case, the Balustrade theatre is no longer simply the house of Havel and Grossman. It has become the house of Lébl as well.

During his tenure at the Balustrade, Lébl has also brought in other relatively young directors with similarly innovative, even radical methods. In one case, Lébl was so displeased with the result that he closed the production right after its premiere. A more satisfactory result involved Hana Burešová, Lébl's onetime colleague at the Labyrint. In the course of her breakup with the Labyrint, Burešová extended her range with two creditable but not exceptional guest productions in the National Theatre in 1995: Calderón's *Miraculous Magician* and Verdi's opera, *Rigoletto*, the latter an outgrowth of her strong, sustained musical interest. In 1996, in response to Lébl's invitation to the Balustrade, she staged *The Flying Doctor* (*Létavý Lékar*), an adaptation drawing on Molière's "doctor" comedies (*The Doctor in Spite of Himself*, *The Tricks of Scapin*, *The Jealousy of Barbouillé*, and *The Flying Doctor*). The production once again exploited her zest for commedia farce, masks, and exuberant stage imagery.

In July 1996, two months after the Molière production, Burešová became artistic head of her own Prague ensemble, situated in a relatively small proscenium house, the Longstreet Theatre (Divadlo v Dlouhé). Here, the shifting circumstances of Prague theatre life led to her ensemble being joined with a young group of actors, fresh graduates from the Theatre Academy, who had formed the core of the suburban Dejvické Theatre. The two ensembles are now one, with each group retaining some of its previous repertory. The first fully integrated production was Burešová's successful 1997 revival of Josef Topol's poetic social drama of the 1960s, *The End of Carnival*, in which she theatrically amplified the play's use of masks and



Burešová's production of *The Flying Doctor* at the Theatre on the Balustrade in 1994



Hana Burešová directing Josef Topol's *The End of Carnival* (1994)

shifted the emphasis from the older to the younger generation of characters. Then, in the spring of 1998, she directed a well-received production of Fernand Crommelynck's *Magnificent Cuckold* in a strikingly expressionistic manner, echoing her penchant for plays with strong elements of the bizarre and grotesque, such as her earlier *Don Juan and Faust*, which she revived at the Longstreet.

Perhaps of greater consequence than Burešová's guest production of Molière at the Balustrade was Lébl's earlier invitation in 1993 to J.A. Pitínský to join him as director and dramaturg at the Balustrade. Pitínský has staged four plays there: in 1993, *She's Strong in Zoology* (*Silná v Zoologii*), an odd, obscure play prefiguring aspects of the feminist movement, written in 1912 by Stanislav Mráz; in 1994, an adaptation of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*; in 1996, Thomas Bernhard's *Ritter, Dene, Voss*; and in 1997, *Tanya, Tanya*, by Olga Mukhina, a contemporary young Russian writer.

Winner of back to back Radok awards for 1995 and 1996, Pitínský (b. 1956) is more of a theatre nomad than either Burešová or Lébl, rarely staying at a theatre for more than one production at a time. Somewhat older than either Burešová or Lébl, he seems to have the strongest, ripest talents. Like Lébl, he developed from amateur roots, particularly with Brno's Amateur Circle (Ochotnický Kroužek), which he helped establish. But he also worked as writer and director with the Theatre on a String (Divadlo na provázku) and HaDivadlo companies of Brno. Much of his early directorial work consisted of staging his own scenarios of others' poetry and prose, which he transformed into expressionistic collages orchestrating elements of text, music, and choreographed mime.

Lébl and Burešová were gifted actors, whereas Pitínský is an experienced, produced playwright. His plays exhibit a mixture of neo-naturalistic characters and dialogue, Kafkaesque or Strindbergian situations as if adapted by Ionesco, surrealist stage imagery, and flashes of dark, ironic humor lacing generally painful, even violent relationships and disagreeable events. *The Mother* (1988) is especially strong medicine, a depiction of a lowbrow proletarian family dominated by the title character, a woman who is indirectly responsible for the destruction of her family and an innocent outsider. Pitínský referred to the work as "a sad, painful oratorio of anger and impotence against those who steal our lives and who wasted . . . so many other promising human lives. . . . I told myself that this would be the last socialist-realist play, that I would take all of it, the filth, and bury it in this *Mother* of mine."² *The Little Room* (1993), Lébl's first production at the Balustrade, is similar in its nuclear family action,

Ivanov, Vasilij, and the Young Girl in *Tanya, Tanya*
Pitínský's 1997 production at the Theatre on the Balustrade

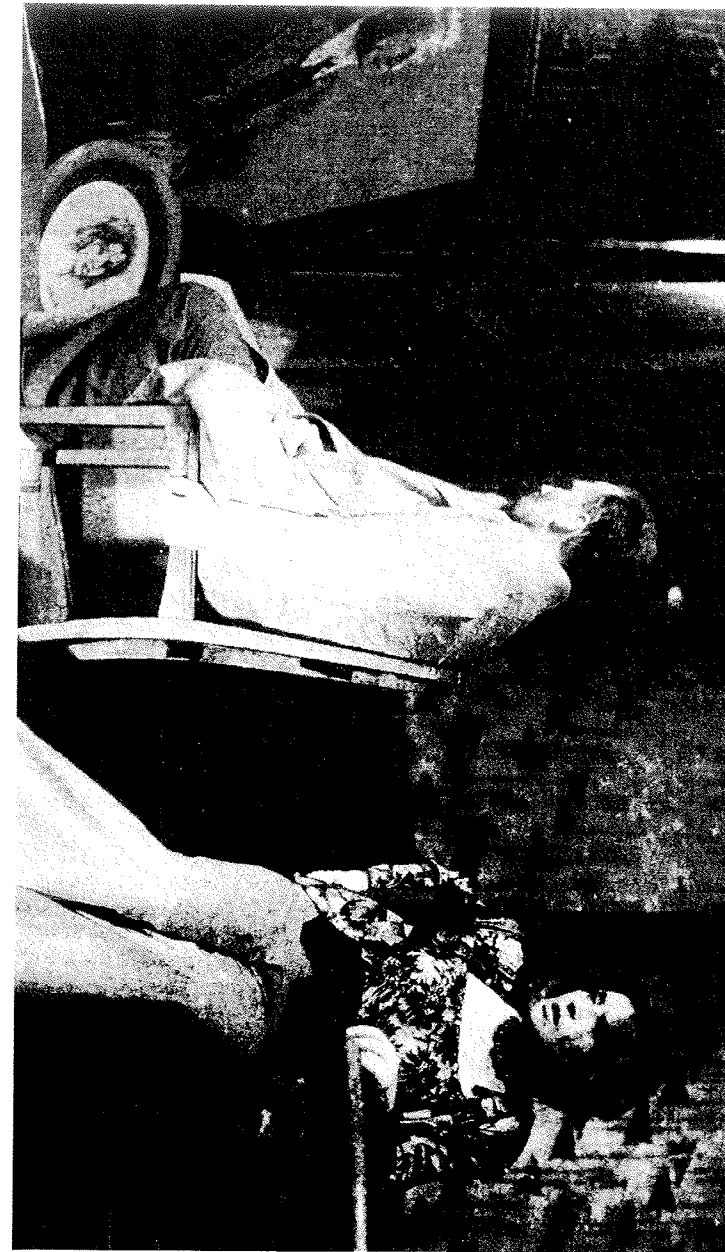


which again results in a senseless, inadvertent destruction of three adult children by their calloused, petty bourgeois parents. In both plays, an aversion to oppressive family values, as well as to any ideology, is conveyed not only by the action but by Pitínský's unique blend of colloquial, often coarse Czech dialects, which he occasionally lifts to near poetry.

It is especially Pitínský who has been extending his range as a director in the 1990s, both in his choice of texts and in his staging, as witness his consecutive Radok awards. The first was for *Sister Anxiety* (*Sestra Uzkost*), produced by the youthful Dejvické group in 1995 (before their union with Burešová's ensemble). Based on his own scenario drawn from folk and mytho-religious motifs in the works of two early twentieth-century Czech writers, Jan Čep and Jakob Deml, it was in the vein of the National Theatre's 1993 Radok award winner, *A Year in the Country*. Both works draw on the rituals, games, and passions of village life during the cycle of seasons, but *A Year in the Country*, based on an early twentieth century novel, is realistic at its core, whereas *Sister Anxiety*, as shaped by Pitínský, became an impressionistic creation of fanciful stage poetry formed from text, mime, dance, and song rather than a staging of epic prose.

Pitínský's second Radok award was for his direction of *Job*, a "dramatic oratorio" by composer Martin Dohnal drawn from a novel by Austrian author Joseph Roth. Produced by the HaDivadlo group in Brno in 1996, it updated the biblical story to the twentieth century and the tribulations of a Jewish immigrant in America. As in *Sister Anxiety*, here, too, Pitínský demonstrated a masterful theatrical orchestration of text, acting, scenography, and an even more substantial musical component that equaled in significance the realistically slanted human story. The two works evoked memories of E.F. Burian's highly expressive work with folk and musical material more than a half century ago.

Pitínský has worked very successfully in large theatres as well as small. His stage adaptation of Fellini's *8 1/2* (1995), his version of Gabriela Preissová's turn of the century work, *Her Stepdaughter* (1996),³ and his adaptation of Kafka's *Trial* (1997) were done in the spacious auditorium of the theatre in Zlin, Moravia. On the other hand, in productions such as Thomas Bernhard's *Ritter, Dene, Voss* or Mukhina's *Tanya, Tanya*, both at the Balustrade Theatre in 1996 and 1997, respectively, Pitínský also proved that he could work very effectively with chamber plays in much more intimate surroundings demanding subtle, revealing details. Pitínský was also able to moderate his strongly metaphoric expressiveness and creative fantasy to serve each playwright's script, while still incorporating his own signature in various bits of business, props, and blocking. For example, *Tanya, Tanya*



The brother and the younger sister in Pitínský's production of *Ritter, Dene, Voss* at the Balustrade in 1996

in his direction comes across as a blend of Chekhov and Noel Coward without sacrificing some of the play's incipient darker tones; much of the dialogue is accompanied by dance routines, red beach balls of varying sizes occasionally drop from the flies, and a toy electric train runs along the edge of the apron from audience left to right at least once. Pitínský's achievement in the much more realistic, psychologically dense Bernhard play was highly praised by critics, who voted this production second only to Pitínský's own production of *Job* as the Radok production of the year.

In the 1997-98 season, Pitínský tackled two monumental projects. As guest director in Burešová's Longstreet Theatre in the fall of 1997 he staged a dramatization of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*; and in the spring of 1998 in the National Theatre a dramatization of a major Czech historical novel of the Wallenstein era in Bohemia, Jaroslav Durych's 1929 trilogy, *Going Astray (Bloudění)*. Instrumental in adapting both works himself, he staged them with respect for their inherent components of theme and action while shaping their complex stories with a sure hand and eye for theatrical values. The sheer scale and length of the productions was daunting, but while most critics had various reservations, they agreed that Pitínský's directorial talents were as vital as ever.

Although other young Czech directors have also shown distinctive talents,⁴ it is the trio of Burešová, Lébl, and Pitínský—especially the last two—who must be considered the most important of the new artists of Czech theatre of the 1990s. In the spring of 1998, nineteen of their productions were in the active repertoire of Prague theatres—and Pitínský has several others still being performed in Moravia. All three have strong theatrical imaginations relying heavily on music and highly expressive visual imagery that in varying degrees agreeably startle the expectations of most theatregoers. Setting them apart from their contemporaries and older colleagues who have exhibited similar postmodern tendencies is the fact that Lébl's, Pitínský's, and Burešová's breaking down of inherited conventions of staging is not randomly capricious or merely intended to shock, although it may seem so at times. More often than not, their creations also possess perceptive insights and an overall mature command in shaping their material. Little seems purely personal, haphazard, or irrelevant to a sense of carefully prepared, total design.

Of the three gradually aging *enfants terribles*, Burešová is the least terrible (indeed, her works are often good natured, cheerful farces). It is perhaps symptomatic that while Lébl and Pitínský have each staged several Kafka works, Burešová has not done any. She also seems most at home within mainstream theatre operations, which may relate to her structured,

Pitínský's production of *Sister Anxiety* in 1995



formal theatre training and subsequent progression within the professional repertory system, in which she has been an imaginative, intuitively theatrical presence. Burešová is also more inclined to work with fidelity to playwrights' fully developed scripts, whereas Pitínský and Lébl lean toward substantial adaptations of given plays, and Pitínský's music-enhanced, poetic scenarios from non-dramatic sources have almost become his hallmark.

Continuing the comparison, though Pitínský and Lébl are similar in many respects, Pitínský seems to be more economical and selective in his stage conceits, and perhaps more responsive to the core humanity and social implications within his plays, whereas Lébl leans toward a prodigality of effects, often at the expense of characterization. Some have also made a distinction between Pitínský's lyrical talents as a director, and Lébl's inherently more dynamic, dramatic bent.

In comparison with the work of their immediate predecessors, that of Burešová, Lébl, and Pitínský has involved a more complete release of imagination and fancy, an unburdened, consciously playful theatricality without the sense of a cultural, socio-political mission that was so striking in earlier alternative theatre groups such as Studio Ypsilon, Theatre on a String, HaDivadlo, and others. Indeed, one would have to return to the heady days of the First Republic in the 1920s, still riding the exhilarating crest of the postwar wave of independence, to find parallels in Czech theatre, specifically in the early work of Jindřich Honzl, Jiří Frejka, E.F. Burian, or Voskovec and Werich before Fascism became an imminent threat. Moreover, the new Czech generation has had access to many foreign models more celebrated for subjective experimentation with forms and metaphors than for socially relevant depictions of character or speculative explorations of human destiny, e.g., the theatres of Robert Wilson, Peter Sellars, Peter Zadek, Frank Castorf, or Pina Bausch. In a broader sense, of course, the work of all these auteur-directors could also be viewed as *fin de siècle* variations of the prototypical visions and practices of Edward Gordon Craig and Vsevolod Meyerhold, who saw the director as a sovereign artist—the prime creator of autonomous works of theatre art.]

On the other hand, the most recent work of these three directors also suggests a move toward productions that seem more fully involved with the problematics of life in a society that has thrown off decades of varied repressions. Without losing their fresh creative visions and methods, but no longer merely having a good time doing theatre or indulging in subjective experiment, Lébl, Burešová, and Pitínský seem to be edging toward the new century with a growing sense of theatre's more serious ties to its audiences and their world, as is suggested in productions such as Burešová's *End of*

Carnival, Lébl's *Ivanov* and *The Wedding*, and Pitínský's *Magic Mountain* and *Going Astray*.]

NOTES

1. The Sokol (the Czech word for "falcon") was a nineteenth-century Czech organization devoted to physical culture, especially group gymnastics, and the nationalistic cause of the Czechs. It became a powerful unifying, patriotic component of Czech society, and it was quickly outlawed by the new Communist regime in 1948.
2. From an interview in *Scéna* 90, 20 (October 3, 1990): 9.
3. Preissová's drama was also the source of the libretto of Leoš Janáček's opera, *Jenufa*, in 1904.
4. The work of Jan Nebeský (b. 1953) might well have been included in this study but for the extremes to which he deforms and distorts his sources. Currently engaged as resident director in Prague's Komedie Theatre, his productions go considerably beyond those of the directors here described in radically deconstructing and supplementing texts to focus on what seem to be his private Freudian-surrealistic perceptions. Operating on the premise that classic works can no longer be done as they were written, his version of *Hamlet* (1994), for example, has Polonius and the Gravedigger played by a single actress. His Hamlet draws insight and inspiration from reading Sophocles's *Electra* with Horatio, and he dresses in a strapless black sheath during his antic phase. In one of their scenes, Hamlet and Ophelia hang upside down by their legs while conversing. More generally, it is as if hardly a speech or even line can go by without the interpolation of a presumably metaphoric physicalization or other visual effect that is more cryptic (if not opaque) than revelatory. The result is a very long performance that became, for me, a source of almost total irritation. Another talented, very productive, and less outre young director is Petr Kracik (b. 1958), head of the Palm Theatre (formerly the S.K. Neumann).