Vodička, Libor

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Are These the Last Volumes of Czech Theatrical Encyclopaedia?

Libor Vodička

Eva Šormová (ed.). *Česká divadelní encyklopedie. Česká činohra 19. a začátku 20. století* [Czech Theatre Encyclopaedia. Czech Dramatic Theatre in the 19th Century and at the Beginning of the 20th Century]. Praha: Institut umění – Divadelní ústav/Academia, 2015. 2 volumes; 1296pp.

One saying states that the biggest debts are those we owe ourselves. Much like many other art disciplines, Czech theatre historiography has never had it easy and still has many debts associated with it. At the beginning of the 20th century, with all the attempts to emancipate our lands from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, one cannot truly look for any objective analysis by the scholars and critical distance from the topics researched at that time. Then, World War I began, followed by economic depression and socio-political tensions connected to the birth of the Czechoslovak republic. This state, however, did not last long, as World War II started; when it finally came to an end, Czechoslovak citizens voted for the authoritarian regime and Communist party whose aim was to limit both research and the publishing of its results. Czech historiographers and lexicographers have always faced obstacles, which lowered their chances to research freely and present their results publicly. Thus, researchers in the Czech lands primarily wrote and published contrary to the conditions and possibilities of the time. A lot of first-rate guides, historical overviews, and lexicographic literature arose, yet almost in all cases, there was a 'however'.

One says that books do have their destiny too; such a saying applies to Czech lexicography on theatre as well. Its first huge project – *Ottův divadelní slovník* (Otto's theatre dictionary) – was started in the 1920s and edited by Karel Kamínek and Karel Engelmüller; however, their attempt remained unfinished. Despite this fact, the volume had over one thousand printed pages and offered a lot of valuable information on Czech and European actors, actresses, directors, and playwrights. Financial causes stopped its authors as early as the letter G. The projects that followed did not always have the chance to be realized and/or finished; if so, their contents were strongly affected by auto-censorship up until 1989. Allow me to mention two outstanding projects. The first was still a functional and helpful guide named *Národní divadlo a jeho předchůdci – Slovník umělců divadel Vlastenského, Stavovského, Prozatímního a Národního* (National Theatre and Its Predecessors: A Dictionary of Vlastenecké Theatre, Stavovské Theatre, Prozatímní Theatre, and National Theatre), written by a team of authors led by Vladimír Procházka (Praha: Academia, 1988). The next book is yet to be surpassed, the three-volume dictionary entitled *Postavy brněnského jeviště* (Personalities of Brno

Theatre; Eugenie Dufková and Bořivoj Srba, eds. Brno: Státní/Národní divadlo v Brně, 1979, 1984, 1994) that came into existence during the so-called normalization period and was finished at the beginning of the 1990s. Non–Czech speaking theatre cultures active in the Czech lands were largely ignored; only recently did they attract the attention of Czech theatre historiographers. Now, research is slowly releasing its results (e.g. Margita Havlíčková *et al.*: *Německojazyčné divadlo na Moravě a ve Slezsku 1–3* [German Theatre in Moravia and Silesia, vols. 1–3]. Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011, 2013).

The main department focusing on both personal and institutional lexicography is now Kabinet pro studium českého divadla (located in Institut umění – Divadelní ústav v Praze/Arts and Theatre Institute since 1993 when it was released from Akademie věd, most probably due to financial reasons). They have been continuously publishing guides and dictionaries: *Česká divadla – Encyklopedie divadelních souborů* (Czech Theatre – The Encyclopaedia of Theatre Companies; ed. Eva Šormová, Praha 2000), *Český taneční slovník – Tanec, balet, pantomima* (The Dictionary of Czech Dance – Dance, Ballet, Pantomime; ed. Jana Holeňová, Praha 2001), *Hudební divadlo v českých zemích – Osobnosti 19. století* (Musical Theatre in the Czech Lands: Figures of the 19th Century; ed. Jitka Ludvová, Praha 2006) a *Starší divadlo v českých zemích do konce 18. století* (Early Theatre in the Czech Lands to the End of 18th Century – Figures and Works; ed. Alena Jakubcová, Praha 2007). Its German version was published in Prague 2013 under the title of *Theater in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien – Von den Anfängen bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts. Ein Lexikon*. The latest book published in 2015 is a two-volume, 1300 page dictionary entitled *Česká činohra 19. a začátku 20. století* (Czech Drama Theatre in the 19th Century and at the Beginning of the 20th Century; edited by Eva Šormová).

Allow me to point out from the outset that is seems nearly impossible to review such a huge and fascinating work – in both expanse and quality. One can hardly describe several hundred individual entries and comment on the work of dozens of authors in a few paragraphs.

The title, though, is a bit confusing. Drama occupies the majority of 510 biographical entries; yet, the book also includes entries from different fields (e.g. puppet theatre and cabaret). Besides actors, actresses, directors, company directors, playwrights, and stage and costume designers, other personalities have also been included – those who helped to form Czech professional and amateur theatre in the last two centuries, such as translators, critics, ethnographers/collectors of folk drama, publishers, booksellers, editors, strolling puppeteers, and woodcarvers. Therefore, one is introduced to a complete spectre of theatre professions and works. The encyclopaedia provides not only evidence of the relation between individual personalities and theatrical artefacts but also reflects the way theatre was organized, produced, and perceived at that time. The editor states in the introduction:

> Individual items and their aggregate present the picture of Czech theatre whose significant boom went hand in hand with the development of culture, economy and politics in the 19th century and occurred both in staging and producing/translating new texts. Theatre at that time achieved its full

> professionalism and gained its own stages, including the most representative one – the National Theatre. (p. 9)

The items have been selected according to a given timeline; the authors have followed on from the previous volume *Starší české divadlo v českých zemích do konce 18. století* (Older Czech Theatre in Bohemia till the End of the 18th Century) and end rather vaguely at around the turn of the 20th century. This period concludes the revivalist approach to theatre and its non-artistic function: its linguistic, patriotic-revivalistic, national emancipatory and educational roles. *Manifest České moderny* (Manifest of Czech Modernism; 1895) did not conclude that historical period, the tendencies of which may be observed far into the first decades of the following century. The notional boundaries for this dictionary are thus set by art-forming criteria; and yet, they are not clear-cut. One can find items devoted to artists whose lives and works culminate in realism (Alois Jirásek, Mrštík brethren); realism as such came to Czech theatre and drama first in the 1880s. However, if we look at the modernistic artists, the boundaries seems unclear, even fluid. As far as the married couple Hana and Jaroslav Kvapil is concerned, the situation seems quite comprehensible: whilst the actress Hana Kvapilová (1860–1907) has become part of the encyclopaedia, the director Jaroslav Kvapil (1868–1950) who clearly tended to stage impressionism and symbolism, has not. This fact indicates a turning point sometime between those years. Yet, there are other personalities whose presence and/or absence seems arguable. The encyclopaedia includes e.g. Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951), a decadent symbolist, poet, playwright, and theatre critic; however, items devoted to Jaroslav Hilbert (1871–1936; a playwright, Ibsenist, and promote of psychological realism), Bohdan Kaminský (1859–1929; a modernist writer, proper name Kamil Bušek), or Viktor Dyk (1877–1931; a symbolist writer) are missing. One also cannot find an entry on František Zavřel (1879–1915), the director who was the first to bring about stage expressionism into Czech surroundings around the 1910s. The reason to leave him out might have been the fact that Zavřel is primarily connected to German-speaking context, as well as being a solo artist for a short period of time; and yet, he was of great importance to Czech theatre and should definitely be part of such encyclopaedia.

Omissions are understandable. Authors always miss someone. The question of the relevancy of an artist and their place in such a volume, eventually the amount of space he or she was given is something every author has to contend with. It should be noted that the editor's hand was accurately strict and consistent in this area.

It wouldn't be necessary to mention these discrepancies, should we be sure that the next volume, which will be covering the rest of the 20th century and even the following decades, will include these people and put them in context with later style tendencies and their impact on Czech theatre.

However: due to financial reasons (and once again, we are speaking here about the conditions allowing researchers to publish their results), the project has undergone several structural changes. The volumes to come will, most probably, only be published electronically. The Ministry of Culture could not spare enough money for the research to be published in printed form. The fact that all the

previous volumes would be available online should definitely be more than welcomed; this makes their use much more comfortable. Nonetheless, at least one more 'but' arises: nothing is more valuable than a book – a book which can be lost, destroyed, or burnt; yet despite all the barriers, books remain part of the cultural heritage and you can always find a copy, be it in archives, libraries, departments, or institutions. The internet as a part of new media and with all its unquestionable advantages still remains uncertain; it is enough when electricity cuts for a moment – and where are we?! Not to mention all the technical and system errors and cuts of internet with its possible fatal consequences. Both the authors and the potential publisher would have to look for some external patrons, who would support the publishing. Or should history be repeated and we look back one day at this encyclopaedia just as we do at Otto's dictionary?