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Modern Czech play (1896-1989); Between text and performance (a dictionary of works) : summary

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Summary

Modern Czech Play (1896–1989); Between Text and Performance (A Dictionary of Works)

The project *Modern Czech Play (1896–1989); Between Text and Performance (A Dictionary of Works)* is a collaborative research project of the Department for Research into 20th Century and Contemporary Literature at the Institute of Czech Literature AS CR. Its aim is to create a complex lexicographic publication containing basic information about key dramatic works (texts and their stagings), which considerably influenced the literary and theatre development and which co-created the image of the Czech literary and theatre culture. The project of a work-centred dictionary assigned to fill the gap within the concerned fields of study; to provide the scholarly public with a publication that will bring a comprehensive report of roughly one hundred years of transformation of Czech plays and the history of their staging in the form of approximately 230 dictionary entries. For this reason, the final publication will include the works in a chronological order (based on the date of the first entrance into public communication).

The dictionary will be dedicated to drama of a period (delimited by the years 1896 and 1989) that “lived and created” under the sign of a notion of “modern art”. The publication should thus capture the key lines of the Czech drama of the given period – the presented works will create a representative sample, which represents a kind of canon of the modern Czech drama. The selection will consider several various criteria: the work and its relation to a certain period or art movements, a prominent author’s works, a specific genre, a specific theatre poetics, and exile or the samizdat communication circle. The dictionary will primarily include such works that caused an unquestionable response among critics and audiences (or readers), or such that introduced a distinctively novel poetics, i.e. such texts that have left a clear trace in the Czech dramatic literature and the history of Czech theatre and have thus become crucial for our understanding of the given period and the current state of the national culture.

The inner structure of individual entries is determined by the aim of the publication, which is to analyse and interpret representative works of modern Czech dramatic literature and show them in context of development of the national literature, literary

and theatre life, and critical reception. The first part of the entry will be the **HEADING**, which will be the most visible part of the entry and will include the basic data about the concerned work. It will state the name of the author, the title, the author's subtitle, the date of the first publication or multiplication of the manuscript and the date of theatre première. The second part will be the **CHARACTERISTICS** of the work, which will express the basic generic and stylistic affiliation of the work. The third part will be the **DESCRIPTION** of the work, which will offer the reader fundamental information about the work's composition, main characters, plot, brief spatial-temporal characteristics, etc. The fourth part of the entry will be **INTERPRETATION** of the work, which is the most open part of the whole entry, where the authors can prove their interpretive skills and which proves that the dictionary cannot be considered as a mere offshoot of applied research. This part should characterise the overall significance of the text, introduce its thematic and motivic background, and show ways to understand it. Here, all specific dramatic devices that differentiate the text from other dramatic works and clearly identify its affiliation with a specific line of dramatic literature. The fifth part called **THE WORK AMONG OTHER WORKS** will consist of information concerning the work's position among its author's other works, as well as relationship with works by other authors. It will study various lines of development of dramatic literature as a whole, e.g. on thematic and generic levels. The sixth part, **LITERARY AND THEATRE LIFE**, will present the reader with relevant information concerning creation and life of the given work (such as potential censorship and author's collaboration with certain theatre ensembles). This part will help to place the described work into the context of the author's life, political social and cultural context of the era of its creation, and into the contemporaneous context of literary and theatre practice. The part **PRODUCTION** will introduce the key points of the life of the drama on the Czech stage. It will be based on information included in journal reviews and studies, photographic material, sound and video recordings, surviving costume designs, models of the stage and – with caution – memories of direct participants on the productions (e.g. actors). It will focus primarily on première productions, on productions with innovative interpretations of the text, productions that used a non-standard productions procedure, or such where an actor made an exceptional performance. If the material requires so, this part will also deal with selected international productions (e.g. premières of authors in exile, etc.). The eighth part will be **RECEPTION** and it will offer a precise and comprehensive characteristics of literary and theatre reception of the work from a horizontal perspective (in various periods) as well as vertical perspective (in various journals according to their subject fields, etc.). The text of this part will note what reviewers or authors of studies appreciated in their critiques and what they considered problematic and what their position (methodological, ideological) was when evaluating the work. The last part, called **BIBLIOGRAPHY**, will provide the reader with a necessary bibliographical service with further readings. This part will be divided into the following seven parts that will include bibliographical details about: (1) various editions and publications of the work (including journals), (2) selected translations, (3) productions (theatre, radio and television), (4) studies, reviews, monograph chapters, etc.,

dealing with the work, (5) supplementary secondary bibliography (e.g., articles about the author's other works) and references to databases, where the prospective scholars will find further information. This structure of the entry will provide the reader with basic information about the work and its position within the historical context, as well as references directed towards further relevant sources.

We will join the entries into several historical chapters, thus drawing several stages that the Czech modern drama underwent, in order to amplify the reader's notion of historical development and period context. This "higher periodisation" will be based on the periodisation defined by the present-day literary historiography. The publication will thus be divided into eight periods: (I) 1896–1918, (II) 1918–1929, (III) 1929–1939, (IV) 1939–1945, (V) 1945–1948, (VI) 1948–1958, (VII) 1958–1970, and (VIII) 1970–1989. All these chapters will include a brief introduction (c. 4–5 pp.) that will briefly present key characteristics and contexts of theatre and literary life in the given period (important theatres, directors, etc.).

This layout of the work will enable the reader to use the dictionary in various ways, because it will offer several different frames to dealing with and studying modern dramatic literature. The publication will find its use among readers who wish to become acquainted with the formal or thematic structure of a given work. Users looking for a list of relevant bibliography concerning the given work, information about its critical responses, and basic facts about the creation of the manuscript will also find necessary information here. However, the dictionary will also serve to all persons interested in the individual historical periods of modern drama and the Czech modern drama as a whole.

Period no 1 (1896–1918)

The second volume of an encyclopaedia series, this thematic supplement opens up to the reader to the very beginnings of Czech modern drama, starting at the close of the 19th century when first plays that can be characterized as such were introduced for the first time. Written by Michal Fránek, a literary historian and specialist in the 19th-century Czech literature, the introductory text concentrates at Hilbert's *Vina* (The Guilt), a play which met with a tremendous success immediately after its publication in 1896, combining the already fading techniques of dramatic realism with modern inspirations drawn from the analytical plays of Ibsen and the like. In the same year, the *Květy* journal published another widely popular and often staged Czech fairy-tale play, the *Radúz a Mahulena* (Radúz and Mahulena) by Julius Zeyer, which is also dealt with in the present volume by Michal Fránek. In the same vein as Hilbert's *Vina*, the feminist *Bratrství* (Brotherhood) by Helena Malířová, discussed in the article written by Jitka Šotkovská, a theatre and drama historian, considers the role of women in modern society. Pavel Janoušek, a literary historian and theoretician, concentrates in his article at the dramatic debut of Karel and Josef Čapek, the *Lásky hra osudná* (The Fatal Game of Love), which introduced to Czech dramatic writing a new, commedia dell'arte-like

type of playfulness. The less-known play by Viktor Dyk, *Veliký Mág* (Big Mage), is analysed in the article by Zuzana Augustová, a theatre and drama historian and specialist in German language and literature, while the closing article of the volume on Otakar Theer's *Faëthón* (Phaëthon), a poetic play thematising the "titanic revolt against the human fate", was written by Daniela Čadková, a classical scholar and comparatist.

Dealing with modern Czech drama on the examples of dramatic plays written at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, the second volume of the series points out some of the progressive dramatic techniques and prominent motives that have been, from the retrospect, constitutive of the writing of the given period. The individual examples also allow to trace the influence of contemporary European drama on the Czech cultural milieu both on the structural (cf. e. g. the *Vina*) and thematic (the *Bratrství*) level. That modern Czech drama followed the contemporary trends in dramatic writing is attested by the popularity of fairy-tale dramas authored at that time not only by Julius Zeyer (the *Radúz and Mahulena*), but also Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, Jaroslav Kvapil and Alois Jirásek. Similarly, the examples of plays written in the 1920s are indicative of the gradual development of expressionist drama in the Czech lands at that time, as well as of the emancipatory movement that eventually led to the foundation of the independent Czechoslovak state the 100th anniversary thereof we celebrate this year.