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Between Brueghel, Surrealism, and New Realism: Wachsman's Stage Design for *Heavy Barbara*

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Abstract

In 1937, Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich wrote and staged the play *Těžká Barbora* [Heavy Barbara], which was inspired by the art of Pieter Brueghel the Elder and represents a unique experiment involving dramatisation and theatricalisation of his paintings. This article focuses on Alois Wachsman's scenography for this play and explores it in relation to Brueghel's paintings; the poetics and humour of Voskovec and Werich; trends and artists of the period; Wachsman's scenography for the National Theatre; and his paintings. The study brings attention to the previously unknown fact that Wachsman created two different versions of the set design for *Heavy Barbara*. Both versions alluded to Brueghel; however, one was inspired by Surrealism/Wachsman's imaginative painting, while the other accentuated the folk atmosphere of the play through its use of New Realism and New Objectivity.

Key words

Alois Wachsman, Jiří Voskovec, Jan Werich, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Těžká Barbora*, The Liberated Theatre, avant-garde, scenography, Surrealism, New Realism

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The point of departure for this study was my conference contribution 'Translating Between Arts: Voskovec and Werich's play *Heavy Barbara* as the Intersemiotic Translation of Peter Brueghel's Paintings' (ŠLAISOVÁ 2017). In that study, which is conceived theoretically, Wachsman's scenography is on the margins of my attention: I only briefly discussed the borrowing of two motifs (the broom and tarts) from Brueghel's paintings. The focus of the current study is different and introduces new material, which I have since discovered during my research funded by the Czech Science Foundation (GA ČR). In this sense, the current study complements the previous one and elaborates on an aspect which was previously only touched upon. This study was created as part of the research of the Czech Science Foundation project 'Primitive and Folk Art in the Czech Theatre Avant-garde: Context, Theory, Practice' (18-08260Y), which is being undertaken at the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University.

> GUSTAV: But Siska ... Brajgl! That word is not polite to use. An improper word. However, it is interesting how an artist's name is entering our speech with an entirely different meaning. Brueghel, Siska, is a painter, our patriot, who likes painting the environment in which we live, our costumes, our town, our life in movement.[1] (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954a: 401)

> Eidam... Holland – Middle Ages! Brueghel! That started to make sense. (Voskovec quoted in SCHONBERG 1995: 115)

> [Brueghel's] work is not only about admirable painting; it also offers a vision of the world – a philosophy.[2] (DE GHELDERODE 1992: 60)

Visions of the world: Brueghel + V+W

Těžká Barbora [Heavy Barbara] (prem. 5. 11. 1937) is one of the most significant plays by Jiří Voskovec (1905–1981) and Jan Werich (1905–1980) and represents one of the most successful performances of the Liberated Theatre. It is often evaluated as an 'incendiary, combative performance that moved Prague' in terms of social and political issues (Lukeš quoted in JUST 2000: 9); however, it is also one of the most interesting experiments of Czech avant-garde theatre. Its uniqueness lies in its attempt to transform the paintings of Pieter Brueghel the Elder into a dramatic and theatrical form, which, to my knowledge, has no other equivalent in Czech art. With this endeavour, Voskovec and Werich made a name for themselves amongst a range of European artists working throughout the two World Wars who used Brueghel's paintings as inspiration for their work. These artists included George Grosz, Otto Dix, Michel de Ghelderode, Bertolt Brecht, and Jacques Feyder to name a few.[3] Brueghel enchanted all of them, as suggested by Ghelderode, not only with the splendour of his painting, but mainly through the visions of the world that he offered in his works, which resonated with the times in which these artists lived (DE GHELDERODE 1992: 60).[4]

Three aspects of Brueghel's world were crucial for Voskovec and Werich's play. The first was the historical era in which Brueghel lived. *Heavy Barbara* was written in 1937, when Hitler was developing plans to annex Czechoslovakia. Since Voskovec and Werich could not criticise the situation openly due to the Czechoslovakian government's strict

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Czech and French sources are mine.

2 'Son œuvre n'est pas seulement de l'admirable peinture, elle offre également une vision du monde – une philosophie' (DE GHELDERODE 1992: 60).

3 Feyder's film *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935, presented in Prague under the name *Hříšné ženy boomské* in 1936), was one of the ten most watched films of the season in Prague (SZCZEPANIK 2009: 319), and was most likely one of the sources of inspiration for Voskovec and Werich. They borrowed from it the name for the character of the servant Siska, and many formal and thematic parallels can be found between the film and the play.

4 Brueghel's paintings have appealed to many other artists working in later years, such as William Carlos Williams, Peter Greenaway, Lech Majewský, Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Capa, or Caryl Churchill.

censorship of art, they often did so through historicisation, a process based on the premise that one must show what is happening in the present day as if it had happened to somebody else who lived in a different time and place (BRECHT 1964: 190).[5] In the case of *Heavy Barbara*, this 'other place' was a Dutch town. The 'other time' was one of the most tragic epochs in the history of Holland, the period of Spanish occupation in the 16th century, during which Brueghel lived, and which he captured in many of his paintings (e.g., *Christ Carrying the Cross, The Massacre of the Innocents, The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, *The Land of Cockaigne*). The social and political aspects of Brueghel's world which resonated with Voskovec and Werich's times inspired the duo to create the fictitious story of the medieval town of Eidam, which the neighbouring city Yberland wishes to annex and is contriving a pretext to do so.[6] Through analogies between past and present, Voskovec and Werich presented their opinion that history repeats itself and 'that in such difficulties as we are, there were already others' (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954b: 289).[7]

The second aspect of Brueghel's paintings which attracted Voskovec and Werich was the painter's interest in portraying the absurdity, stupidity, perversity, and sins of the world, which also formed the central themes of Voskovec and Werich's plays of the 1930s. *Heavy Barbara* drew attention to these qualities by presenting its fictional world as a reflection of the inverted world of Brueghel's canvases and engravings, such as *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, or *The Land of Cockaigne*. The essence of these Brueghel paintings – as well as Voskovec and Werich's plays – was a carnival vision of the world, which consists of an absurd distortion of everyday life: its problems, personas, events, cults, etc. Through carnival imagery (e.g., hyperbole, flip, decrease), topicalisation, and narrativisation of Brueghel's paintings (most notably *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*), the image of Czechoslovakia was parodied. It was not only presented as a Flemish town of the 16th century, but also as a city of plenitude (Eidam), governed by stupidity and warped morals, and threatened by 'a hungry land'.[8]

5 It is worth mentioning that historicisation was also one of the key techniques through which Brueghel commented on the events of his time. In this respect, his paintings *Christ Carrying the Cross* and *The Massacre of the Innocents,* where Spanish soldiers in 16th century uniforms appear among Roman soldiers, are well known. Here Brueghel draws a parallel between the suffering of Christ/the innocents and the suffering of his country caused by the occupation. Political allusions are also explored in other Brueghel paintings, such as *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* and *The Land of Cockaigne* (see, e.g., FISHMAN 1982; GLÜCK 1936; GLÜCK 1937).

6 The name Yberland clearly referred to the German *über* or *Überland* and the beginning of the German national anthem ('Deutschland, Deutshland über alles') as well as to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.

7 Voskovec and Werich drew attention to the parallels between Brueghel's period and Czechoslovakia of the 1930s by many means. One of the most courageous links was created by inserting Mussolini's statement that Hitler needed more space in the sun (which appeared in several Czech newspapers as a defence of Hitler's expansion) into the mouth of a soldier of the Yberland army (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954a: 414). The statement suggests a connection between the expansive politics of Hitler and the colonisation politics of King Philip II of Habsburg, who was responsible for the occupation and plundering of Holland in the second half of the 16th century, and who is mentioned in the play as the ruler of Yberland and, importantly, as the source of Mussolini's statement.

8 Voskovec and Werich's travestied vision of Czechoslovakia bothered some critics, such as Miroslav Rutte or M. Janer, who (unintentionally) captured the carnival poetics of *Heavy Barbara* in his review: 'It

The name Hungerland appears in connection with Yberland in two scenic designs and in the English translation of the play (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1940: 409).[9]

The third feature of Brueghel's work that attracted the attention of Voskovec and Werich was his interest in the folk environment. His 'genre pictures', often sharpened by humour, depict scenes from the ordinary lives of peasants and townspeople. In addition, they also capture major historical events (such as war and occupation) from the perspective of ordinary people; that is, the position from which Voskovec and Werich also perceived history. This is the case for *Heavy Barbara* (the authors themselves labelled it a 'genre picture' (see VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954b: 389)), which captures the ordinary life of Flemish folk (e.g., their parties, pubs, and street scenes) with comic hyperbole, against the background of the impending conflict with Yberland.

The rationale for the topicalisation of Brueghel's paintings from a folk milieu was thus not a tribute to Flemish traditions (or to Brueghel); rather, his paintings offered Voskovec and Werich an opportunity to dress the world of the little man, who had been at the centre of their interest since *Caesar* (1932), in a new guise. In addition, this allowed them to present the pleasures and sorrows of ordinary people; their characteristic traits; and, above all, their importance for national and world affairs. In the opinion of Voskovec and Werich, ordinary people were the driving force behind social and political changes; through innate wisdom and common sense, they were able to uncover evil and stupidity and defeat them (SCHONBERG 1992: 273–276). *Heavy Barbara* presented the folk in accordance with this view: revealing the deceptions of the town councillors; standing up against them; and defending the city against Yberland's attack.

It is worth mentioning that Voskovec and Werich attributed the same qualities and significance to ordinary people in several plays. They described these everyday characters as 'the only positive component of the human material of a play'; spontaneous, wise, sincere, and passionate, with a sense of humour, but also desperate and exhausted, which influences their behaviour (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954c: 14). This also applies to the characters of *Heavy Barbara,* with the exception that the Eidamians are not desperate, exhausted, or on the verge of poverty as in *Osel a stín* [The Donkey and Its Shadow] (1933), *Balada z hadrů* [Rag Ballad] (1935), or *Rub a líc* [Heads or Tails] (1936); rather, they are cheerful, joyful, and exuberant, which was associated with Brueghel's paintings (FISCHEROVÁ 1937: 13).

These visions of the world, which characterised both Brueghel's paintings and Voskovec and Werich's plays, intertwined in *Heavy Barbara;* what the viewer perceived on stage 'belonged to Brueghel, as well as being the product of the imagination' and creativity of the artistic team (SCHONBERG 1992: 365). *Heavy Barbara* was the result of interpretation and re-evaluation of Brueghel's paintings, and their elaboration and

offends you [...] that these drinking, quarrelling [...] people (*nárůdek*) of Eidam are supposed to be the image of a small nation, which handles the attack of a foreign suppressive [...] power [...] by charging the balls of Eidam cheese [...] into the cannon called *Heavy Barbara*' (JANER 1938: 68).

9 The play was translated into English for its American premiere in Cleveland in 1940 by Tony Kraber. Voskovec and Werich were involved in the translation process.

integration into a new fictional whole reflecting the interests, intentions, and comic style of the Liberated Theatre.

The set design created by Alois Wachsman (1872–1944) played a pivotal role in this transformative process. However, it has not previously been recognised that Wachsman created two distinct versions of the stage design for the play*:* one in the spirit of Surrealism/imaginative painting, and the other in the style of New Realism. The aim of this study is to introduce and compare these versions; to place them into the context of Wachsman's work, artistic trends of the period, and the poetics of the Liberated Theatre; and to reveal the means by which Wachsman created (or aimed to create) Brueghel + V+W's visions of the world on stage.

The comparison is based on a series of photographs of the set design taken by Alexander Paul, the main photographer of the Liberated Theatre, which have been preserved in his archive, as well as twelve stage designs. Ten of these designs are preserved in the collections of the National Museum; one comes from a 2007 internet auction of the Pallas Gallery; and the last one is derived from the collection of Alois Wachsman in the Archive of the National Theatre (from a folder marked 'unclassified'). It seems safe to assume that this last design was also created by Wachsman for *Heavy Barbara,* as there are several artistic and motivic parallels with the other designs, and its four-digit number (written on the front of the design) corresponds to the numbers on the other designs for this play.[10]

Wachsman's vision I: Brueghel and Surrealism/Imaginative Painting

Surrealism was one of the dominant avant-garde trends of the 1930s, and Wachsman was among those artists inclined to this style. This can be observed in many of his paintings, such as *Pasáček* [The Shepherd] (1931, 1934), *Myjící se Oidipus* [Oedipus Washing Himself] (1934), *Pád andělů* [The Fall of Angels] (1934), *Středověk* [The Middle Ages] (1934), etc. A number of Wachsman's unrealised designs for *Heavy Barbara* can also be perceived in the context of this artistic current. These include a total of five designs for the following scenes: two variations of a scene in front of an inn (Fig. 5 and 6); one scene in the town hall (Fig. 7); and two variations of a scene in the Yberland forest (Fig. 9).

Wachsman's portrayal of Eidam was inspired by Brueghel's paintings of Flemish towns with narrow streets, typical red-brick gable houses, and brick houses, which were often ornamented with wooden overhangs above the entrance and windows (e.g., *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, *Netherlandish Proverbs*). Wachsman also adopted Brueghel's colour scheme, using rich shades of different colours for houses and scenic objects (e.g., cheese, clothesline, glass of wine, etc.). [11] Waschsman,

10 The preserved set design proposals for *Heavy Barbara* are marked with the following numbers: 1396, 1397, 1398, 1401, 1402, 1403, 1404, 1405, 1408, 1409, and 1410. The design in the archive of the National Theatre is marked with the number 1407.

11 Brueghel's colours influenced not only the scenography of *Heavy Barbara*, but also, according to Pečírka (1963: 18), Wachsman's paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Fig. 1: Wachsman's set design for *Measure for Measure*. National Theatre, 1935. Theatre Archive of the National Theatre, Prague, Czech Republic.

however, did not capture a Flemish town or its parts with all the details found in Brueghel's work; rather, he chose a few solitary objects (typically houses), which he placed in a stylised form in the scene. Wachsman's stage designs for other plays, including *Veta za vetu* [Measure for Measure] (National Theatre, 1935) and *Lazebník sevillský* [The Barber of Seville] (National Theatre, 1936), employed a similarly unusual spatial composition and use of solitary buildings (PTÁČKOVÁ 1982: 160) (slightly resembling some paintings by Chirico).

The objects which Wachsman included in his designs of Eidam (e.g., glasses, goblets, barrels, bowls, tarts, cheeses, and brooms) were a significant element. In Wachsman's designs, these objects did not appear as props and did not serve their everyday purposes (e.g., functioning as dishes, food, and drink), but rather became part of the architectural composition of the space; at first glance, they appeared as 'bizarre buildings' or decorations (PTÁČKOVÁ 1982: 73; PTÁČKOVÁ 1998: 229). The change of an object's function is related to their dislocation, and, in most cases, the deformation of their shape: hyperbolisation and fragmentation. Such a use of objects is characteristic of both Surrealism and Brueghel. Wachsman's proposals, which find their justification in modern poetics as well as Brueghel's, draw attention to this parallel.

Fig. 2: Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Detail of the roof with tarts. *Netherlandish Proverbs,* 1559. Gemäldegalerie Berlin, Germany.

Fig. 3: Pieter Brueghel the Elder. *The Land of Cockaigne*, 1567. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

Brueghel's paintings are crowded with objects which appear in unusual places and lose their normal functions. They are not, however, absurd decorations, but symbols providing essential information about the depicted world and/or the bearer of the object. For example, a dislocated kitchen and household utensils or dishes act as symbols of individual sins and perversions of this world: a spoon behind the ear is a symbol of gluttony and greed (e.g., *The Peasant Wedding*, *The Peasant Dance, The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*), etc.[12]

Some of these objects appear in Wachsman's designs and can be considered visual quotations of the Flemish original. The most prominent borrowings are the broom and the tarts on the roof. In Brueghel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*, a broom is placed above the highest window of a building (Fig. 2). This represents a Flemish custom which signalled 'that the master of the house is not at home and that a party or a feast is taking place (or will be held) in the house' (DUNDES and STIBBE 1981: 14). In Brueghel's painting, the broom is also hung over a kissing couple, which is interpreted as a forbidden meeting of lovers (DUNDES and STIBBE 1981: 14–15).

The broom can be found in two of Wachsman's designs. In one of them, it is located above the entrance to the pub (Fig. 4). In the other one, it is placed in a hyperbolised

12 It is worth mentioning that the costume of Brecht's figure of Mother Courage (Helen Weigel) in his 1945 production, which was inspired by Brueghel's paintings, was decorated with a spoon, a reference to greed.

form on the left side of the stage (Fig. 5). The motivic connection with Breughel's painting is obvious; the semantic one can be speculated. However, in my opinion, it would be too simplistic to consider Wachsman's choice of the broom motif as a coincidence or a pleasing decorative element since it corresponds to the theme of the first image of the play: a party of Eidam councillors and the secret farewell of the mayor's wife to her lover. Thus, the broom in Wachsman's design could refer to both facts – a party (drunkenness) and a meeting of lovers (infidelity) – and through metonymy, represent the world of sin and the sinners of Eidam.

An alternate design for the area in front of the inn depicts a house with tarts on the roof (Fig. 6). Tarts are among Brueghel's favourite motifs. They visually depict the proverb 'having tarts on the roof', which, according to ethnographers and art historians, is associated with two meanings: abundance and stupidity. The tarts appear in *Netherlandish Proverbs* with a meaning of stupidity, referring to the illogical behaviour and actions of the figures in the painting (Fig. 2) (GLÜCK 1937: 43; DUNDES and STIBBE 1981: 13–14). In the painting *The Land of Cockaigne* (Fig. 3), which refers to the popular imaginary topoi of a land where one does not need to work and has plenty of food, tarts take on a meaning of plenitude (DELEVOY 1954: 63; ROBERTS-JONES and ROBERTS-JONES-POPELIER 2003: 238). It can be assumed that the tarts on the roof on Wachsman's designs also refer to the stupidity/absurdity and plenitude, and were employed in order to characterise the city of Eidam in accordance to Voskovec and Werich's vision.

In addition to altering the place and function of objects, Brueghel often changed their dimensions. Hyperbolisation in his paintings is related to what Bakhtin (2007) calls carnival imagination or grotesque realism, which was a living part of the folk culture of the Middle Ages, and an area from which Brueghel drew inspiration (e.g., *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, and *The Land of Cockaigne*).

Carnival imagery – inspired by both Brueghel and the style of the Liberated Theatre, and updated and modernised by the perspective of Surrealism – permeates Wachsman's designs in the form of exaggerated dimensions of food and drink, which are at the heart of his scenographic concept of the exteriors and interiors of Eidam.

In his design of the area in front of the inn (Fig. 5), disproportionate objects are placed around the realistic core of the scene – the inn. These include a giant barrel presented as a dwelling, the silhouette of a gigantic bottle, the fragment of a hyperbolised bottle, and an exaggerated broom. Meanwhile, the interior of the town hall is composed only of Surrealist objects (Fig. 7), including giant loaves of cheese in the function of a bench or table, the fragment of a large jug in the function of a clerk's table, and other objects which made the town hall appear as a pantry or wine cellar instead of a fancy or official place. Through this design, Wachsman visually expressed Voskovec and Werich's vision of Eidam as a 'town of wine and cheese', linked with the meaning of plenitude and the sinfulness of the Eidam councillors (INOV 1992: 160).

The metamorphosis of scenic objects (in the sense of blurring the conventional meaning and purpose of an object and creating new, unexpected, semantic connections) was characteristic not only of *Heavy Barbara,* but also of Wachsman's paintings

Fig. 4: In front of the inn. Wachsman's set design, likely for *Heavy Barbara*. Theatre Archive of the National Theatre, Prague, Czech Republic.

Fig. 5: In front of the inn. Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara* (H6D-5088). Collection of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic.

Fig. 6: In front of the inn. Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara* (H6D-5091). Collection of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic.

Fig. 7: The town hall. Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara* (H6D-5090). Collection of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic.

Fig. 8: Wachsman's set design for *Intrigue and Love*. National Theatre, 1937. Theatre Archive of the National Theatre, Prague, Czech Republic.

and some of his set designs for the National Theatre. These include, for example, *Večer Karla Hynka Máchy* [Karel Hynek Mácha's Evening] (1936), for which Wachsman created a dreamlike set design dominated by the body of a harp; or the set design for Schiller's play *Úklady a láska* [Intrigue and Love], which was performed in the same year as *Heavy Barbara*. The foundation of the set design for *Intrigue and Love* consisted of hyperbolised objects, which Wachsman combined with ordinary ones and placed in a bourgeois interior: gigantic fragments of columns; a giant candlestick or a fragment of a cello as an ambiguous decoration; and an oversized sheet of music turned into drapery (Fig. 8).[13] Through these objects, Wachsman created a 'strange surreal world' on stage (MICHALOVÁ 2003: 92). In contrast to *Heavy Barbara,* the transformation of objects in this play was not related to a carnival vision of the world, but – in accordance with Schiller's play – the accentuation of opulence and monumentality of the aristocratic court.

The set designs for the above-mentioned productions reveal one important feature of Wachsman's thinking and artistic style, which Pečírka aptly characterised using the words of Vítězslav Nezval as the creation of 'miraculous friendships over the expanse of

13 A similar polysemous game with objects could be found in František Muzika's set designs, most notably in *Jullieta* (National Theatre, 1937).

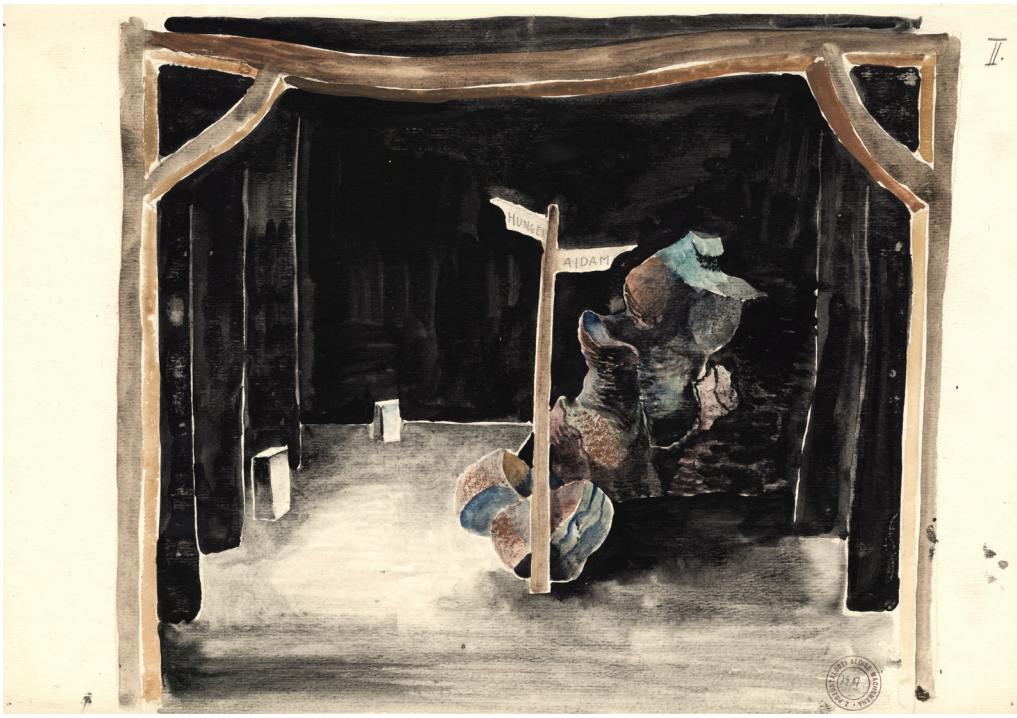

Fig. 9: In the Yberland forest. Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara* (H6D-5094). Collection of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic.

time and the diversity of eras' (PEČÍRKA 1963: 16). On the one hand, this referred to Wachsman's merging of literary, mythological, antic, and biblical motifs with modern ones. Examples of this fusion include the meeting of Mrs. Bovary and Odysseus (*Odysseus a Madame Bovary*, 1936) or the interconnection of characters from biblical stories with modern people (e.g., Wachsman's drawing *Veronika*, 1938). On the other hand, the notion of 'miraculous friendships' also relates to aesthetic principles, as can be seen from the above-mentioned designs. There, Wachsman fuses Classicist principles and modern painting (*Intrigue and Love*); draws attention to the similarities between the poetics of Mácha and Surrealism (which corresponded to the perception of Mácha as a Surrealist by artists of the period); and, in the case of *Heavy Barbara,* connects modern art and Brueghel. Respecting the original context and atmosphere of each text, Wachsman captured principles of medieval, Classicist or Romantic poetics, while updating and translating them into his peculiar, imaginative stage style.

In addition to the proposals of Eidam discussed above, two almost identical designs of the Yberland forest have also been preserved. Both designs have isolated scenic objects at their core: a formless rock, two boundary stones, and a signpost pointing the way to Eidam and Hungerland (Yberland) (Fig. 9). In these designs, Wachsman also created 'miraculous friendships' through allusions to and borrowing of motifs from

diverse sources. For example, one may perceive references to various Brueghel landscapes in which rocks occupy a significant place. Rocks and stones also appear in many of Wachsman's paintings, often in combination with man-made objects (e.g., columns, a sink, a box, a wagon wheel, etc.) or with people; for example, the same boundary stones appear in Wachsman's painting *The Shepherd* (around 1934). These 'random' encounters of disparate objects in unusual places are the source of the surreal, dreamlike, or enigmatic atmosphere in Wachsman's paintings.

Parallels can also be observed between these proposals and those Wachsman created for the production of *Prospero* at the National Theatre (which premiered on 4 November 1937, i.e., a day earlier than *Heavy Barbara*). Its dominant elements were formless, mysterious rocks and stones, creating an impression of the 'enchantment and rigidity of the fictional world on the stage' (PTÁČKOVÁ 1982: 160). A similar atmosphere of rigidity, oddity, or enigma, generated by the tension between white boundary stones (regularly carved blocks with precise meaning) and formless rock, was also characteristic for Wachsman's proposals of forest scenes.

Other quotes and auto-quotes can also be found throughout Wachsman's *oeuvre*: for example, the same woman looking out the window (Mrs. Bovary looking for Odysseus) in the drawing of *Odysseus and Madame Bovary* (1936) appears as a decorative element in Wachsman's scenography for the Shakespeare play *Measure for Measure* (Fig. 1); the motif of a grain field can be found in the painting *The Shepherd* (1931), as well as on the painted curtain created for Burian's Theatre D; a dog from the same painting who is about to eat a bone appears on the painted curtain of *Heavy Barbara,* only this time, the dog is already eating the bone. Through intertextual borrowings within his own and others' works (e.g., Brueghel), Wachsman created multi-layered semantic connections, and surprising, playful, and often parodic shifts.

Despite the fact that these set designs were impressive, creating a Brueghelian world on stage in all its aspects, while also accentuating some of the characteristic features of the style of the Liberated Theatre, they apparently did not correspond entirely with the needs and ideas of Voskovec and Werich. According to their requirements, the set design was meant to be simpler, more straightforward, and realistic, and it should have created an impression of a 'primitive folk painting [...] [or] picture painted on a jug' (Voskovec quoted in SCHONBERG 1995: 115). Most of Wachsman's proposals of this group (with the exception of proposal H6D-5091, Fig. 6) were far from that vision. Instead of intensifying the primitive, folk, more realistic character of the production, their emphasis was on the dislocation, deformation, fragmentation, symbolic saturation, or enigmatic nature of objects, which moved these designs into more abstract and surreal spheres. Moreover, by communicating through allusions and symbols, these designs also placed higher demands on the audience to decode the meanings concealed in visual signs.

In addition, Wachsman's set was quite complicated and static. This likely meant that it did not offer ideal conditions for the development of dramatic action and comedy rooted in action, which was so important for the plays of Voskovec and Werich. For these reasons (and probably many others), this group of designs was abandoned.

Wachsman's vision II: Brueghel and New Realism

The set design *of Heavy Barbara* which was employed on stage was conceived quite differently. For this design, Wachsman drew on and further developed the principles of constructivism, seen in the simple and functional furnishing of the stage with semantically variable objects (PTÁČKOVÁ 1998: 186). Two stable scenic objects formed the basis of his set: one containing a window on the left side of the stage, and the other with stairs leading to an elevated walkway (which connected both scenic objects) on the right side of the stage. These objects, stylised to look like the walls of a simple folk building, remained on the stage throughout the performance and were decorated or obscured in various ways (e.g., with a black/green curtain, straw partitions, a door, etc.). Various spaces, such as a forest, prison, square, town hall or living chambers, were created through modifications (e.g., covering or revealing objects or adding decorative features) (Fig. 10–12).[14] In this conception of the set, Wachsman also tried to capture the characteristic features of Flemish architecture. However, he did not achieve this through imitation of the traditional shape of the houses (as was the case in the previously-discussed designs of Eidam), but through the choice of building material (e.g., white masonry or red bricks in the design for Gustav and the mayor's chambers).

Wachsman also simplified the architectural arrangement of the stage design. This version of the design no longer depended on the installation of different scenic objects for each scene (which was necessary for the first group of designs) but relied more simply on the variation (metamorphosis) of two basic scenic objects connected by a gangway.[15] This resulted in a set which was more dynamic, and thus corresponded better to the rhythm of the play – a revue – with rapidly changing images. In addition, this set was more functional, as it effectively facilitated the dramatic and comic action. A reviewer of the premiere, highlighting the qualities of the set, expressed that Wachsman 'managed to give the play a fitting framework and, above all, a busy pace, maintained until the end' (-ŠKA- 1937: 5).

Another distinction of Wachsman's second set of designs was its greater reliance on authentic materials (e.g., wood, straw, clay, canvas, etc.) and objects (e.g., bowls, jugs, baskets, cheese, etc.). Unlike the first group of designs, these were not presented as grotesquely deformed and dislocated objects, but real objects of standard size, which were mainly used in their primary functions (i.e., as dishes, food, etc.). The use of real objects in their typical manner eliminated the connections with Surrealism, Breughel's symbolism (evoked by the tarts on the roof in the first set design), and carnival poetics

14 An exception is the design H6D-5087 depicting the area in front of the pub or the market square, in which Wachsman proposed to place the façade of a typical Flemish red brick house on the rear prospectus. This proposal was not implemented.

15 It is worth mentioning that the metamorphosis of scenic objects (props and costumes) was also characteristic for Honzl's theatre direction. For example, the actors used high boots, two brooms, and a shallow basket to create a figurine representing the squire Vandergrunt in 'The Second Councillor's Song' [Druhá konšelská], which parodied the vices of Eidam's masters. In this case, the metamorphosis alluded to the playfulness and ingenuity of folk theatre, namely the ability of folk to transform objects of everyday reality into theatrical props.

Fig. 10: In front of the inn, Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara*.
Photo by Alexander Paul. Fund of Jan Werich,
Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, Czech Republic.

Fig. 11: In the Yberland forest. Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara*.
Photo by Alexander Paul. Fund of Jan Werich,
Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, Czech Republic.

Fig. 12: Mayor's chamber, Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara*.
Photo by Alexander Paul. Fund of Jan Werich,
Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, Czech Republic.

related to the hyperbolisation of food and drink. The difference in poetics is evident from the way the two designs differ in their representation of the scene in the town hall (Fig. 7 and 13).

Conceived in this way, the set design that was used corresponded with the tendencies of New Realism and New Objectivity (*nová předmětnost*), which had been gaining ground on the Czech scene since the second half of the 1920s, for example in the sets by Antonín Heythum for *Nový Mesiáš* [The Next Messiah] (1925), Bedřich Feuerstein for *Jezero Ukereve* [Lake Ukereve] (1936), František Muzika for *Černé slunce* [The Black Sun] (1937), or the scenography of the trio Kouřil, Novotný, and Raban for Burian's Theatre D (*Máj* [May], *Vojna* [War], etc.). Despite the difference in their style, all of these set designers shared an interest in simple and functional scenes and the use of authentic objects, materials, and shapes (PTÁČKOVÁ 1982: 73, 75, 101, 107).

The set design of *Heavy Barbara* was closest to the style of Bedřich Feuerstein's sets, which he created for the Liberated Theatre. These include, for example, sets for *The Donkey and Its Shadow*, *The Rag Ballad*, and *Executioner and Fool* (*Kat a blázen,* 1934). For the last of these, Feuerstein cooperated with Wachsman, who enriched it with painted elements accentuating the picturesque qualities of its sceneries (EFFENBERGER 1974:

Fig. 13: The town hall, Wachsman's set design for *Heavy Barbara* (H6D-5089). Collection of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic.

453). It is worth mentioning that Feuerstein's style also inspired the scenography for *Nebe na zemi* [Heaven on Earth] (1936), which was created by Voskovec and Werich themselves. The duo likely discovered a stage form among Feuerstein's sets that closely corresponded to their needs and ideas, and then drew on it in later productions, even when Feuerstein did not collaborate, including *Heavy Barbara*. The sets of all these plays were based on the continuous transposition of a stable number of objects of scenic architecture on stage; their covering, uncovering, and varied decorating; and the verticalisation of the stage space through elevated ramps, stairs, and ladders.

These sets were also characterised by the use of authentic objects and materials. They appeared most prominently in *The Rag Ballad*, where, according to statements by Voskovec and Werich, they were supposed to express the atmosphere of the late 1930s translated 'into the theatrical value of junk and oddment' (Voskovec quoted in KROFTOŇ 2001: 328). The same applies to the set design for *Heaven on Earth,* in which the accumulation of real objects was supposed to evoke an atmosphere of mustiness, disorder, and bourgeois bad (in Voskovec and Werich's words '*hovadný*') taste (SCHONBERG 1992: 325). In *Heavy Barbara,* the use of real objects and shapes in combination with authentic materials was meant to underline the folk tone of the play. The 'palpable objectivity and clearly expressed material' which radiated from roughly hewn benches, clay vases, straw baskets and partitions were considered one of the ways in

which Wachsman[16] 'materialised' Brueghel's 'genre images' on stage (EFFENBERGER 1974: 456; INOV 1992: 161; MICHALOVÁ 2003: 91).[17]

Folksiness or rusticity was a significant feature of Wachsman's set design, but here too he sought to underline the characteristic qualities of Eidam as a town of plenitude and narrow-mindedness. The atmosphere of plenitude, or rather the characters' penchant for eating cheese and drinking wine, was not expressed through hyperbolisation as in the previous set proposals, but, as indicated above, through props of 'feast' objects of standard size, mostly serving their primary purpose. Compared to the previous group of designs, these objects more simply and straightforwardly created an image of a city of plenitude and sins, in accordance with the requirements of Voskovec and Werich.

The characterisation of Eidam as an absurd (carnival-inverted) world was achieved through a principle that Vítězslav Nezval and Vratislav Effenberger called hyperbole, poetic hyperbole, caricature, or exaggeration, in connection with the poetics of the Liberated Theatre (EFFENBERGER 1974: 198). According to Effenberger, poetic hyperbole, which appeared in Voskovec and Werich's work from the 1920s onward, permeated all components of their theatrical expression, including verbal humour, costumes, props, and scenography. Examples of this in set design include František Zelenka's enlarged thermometers in the dance 'Yellow Fever' in *Dynamite Island* (*Ostrov Dynamit*, 1930), Feuerstein's oversized chair in *The Donkey and Its Shadow,* and the large nail scissors and Werich's giant foot in *Panoptikum* [The Wax Museum] (1935).

In the abandoned designs for *Heavy Barbara*, one can observe hyperbole in the transformation of objects (dishes and food) into stage architecture. In the set that was used, hyperbole was achieved by interchanging the sizes of the rooms. For example, the mayor's chamber was extremely small (only the bed could fit in), while the prison was abnormally large (EFFENBERGER 1974: 456). The design also employed hyperbole in the form of a clerk's table in the town hall. In the Surrealist design (Fig. 7), it was conceived as a dissected portion of a jug. In the set that was used, a typically-shaped table appeared; however, its height was exaggerated. The table thus resembled an elevated podium, accessible by a ladder (Fig. 14). At one point in the play, the table actually was used as a podium – namely, in the scene when the councillors begin to fight, and the teacher Gustav comments on the conflict from behind the table, as though in a sports match.

Using disproportionate objects and/or rooms, Wachsman not only contributed to the characterisation of Eidam as an upside-down world, but also extended the comic effects that were distinctive for Voskovec and Werich. By inverting the sizes of the rooms

16 The folk character of the production was also accentuated by other artists participating in the staging process. In addition to Honzl (as discussed in note 14), the production also included Saša Machov's choreography combining ballet elements, gymnastic exercises and folk dances, and Jaroslav Ježek's music merging jazz and folk music. The production's inspiration by folk art was mentioned by some critics of the period (e.g., BASS 1937: 9; PÍŠA 1937: 6; jt probably SEIFERT 1937: 4).

17 The designs with inventory numbers H6D-5093 and H6D-5092 were also created in the same style, and probably represent two alternatives for the interior of Vandergrunt's house. Both are based on the use of authentic materials and real objects, such as a straw partition, a wooden table, chairs, a wardrobe, loaves of cheese, etc. However, their architectural conception was not based on the use of opposite panels.

Fig. 14: Teacher Gustav behind the clerk's table. Photo by Alexander Paul. Archive of Atelier Paul, Prague, Czech Republic.

(the prison and the mayor's chamber), Wachsman applied similar comic principles to those typically employed by the duo, such as their inversion of the meaning of the words soldier and thief, which formed the basis of the comedy of the image in the Yberland forest. Similarly, Wachsman's choice to transform the clerk's table into a podium highlighted the grotesque acting in this scene, as did Voskovec and Werich's use of an axe instead of a knife to cut cheese into narrow slices (Fig. 15) (PTÁČKOVÁ 1998: 228).

In addition to hyperbole, Wachsman transformed other aspects of Voskovec and Werich's humour into stage elements and props. The mayor's chamber, decorated in the folk style (a bed decorated with a plaid canopy, with a matching bedspread and curtain) could be perceived as an expression of Voskovec and Werich's beloved parody of bad taste, kitsch, and clichés (in their words, *hovadno*) (Fig. 12).[18]

18 At the level of text, one can perceive other examples of V + W's 'bad taste' (*hovadno*); for example, the teacher's effort to harmonise relations between people and masters, his purist approach to language, the flowery dialogue between Voskovec and Werich full of archaisms and pathos about the power of a seed to grow into a big tree, the desire of the sheriff's wife to have folk clubs in costumes and bridesmaid's welcoming her husband to the town hall, etc. (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954a: 483, 467). See more about *hovadno,* e.g., (VOSKOVEC 1965: 69–74; WERICH 1982: 77–78).

Fig. 15: Voskovec and Werich as mercenaries. Photo by Alexander Paul. Archive of Atelier Paul, Prague, Czech Republic.

Wachsman further achieved comic effect through surprising contrasts (mostly high and low), which is considered a cornerstone of Voskovec and Werich's comedy, and which many of their scenographers tried to express through their sets (PTÁČKOVÁ 1982: 228). For example, in Zelenka's set for *Caesar*, the Doric columns do not form part of a temple or other magnificent building but adorn swimming pool cabins (PTÁČKOVÁ 1982: 228); in *Executioner and Fool*, Feuerstein and Wachsman decorated the prison (the execution block and guillotine) with flowers. Wachsman used this principle in *Heavy Barbara*, for example, in the city emblem of Eidam composed of a round loaf of red cheese, a (silver) sword, and laurel twigs, embroidered on a curtain in the courtroom of the town hall (Fig. 13). The design of the emblem (as well as the prison with flowers) offers another example of Wachsman's contribution to Voskovec and Werich's poetics of *hovadno*.[19]

All these kinds of humour, articulated through linguistic and visual means, shifted the folk/popular 'genre image' to comic positions. The connection between 'genre picture' or 'images from life' with wit, humour, satire, parody, and caricature was

19 Based on the preserved photograph, it is clear that Wachsman's design of the town emblem was simplified during its implementation, limited to only the cheese and sword.

mentioned by several reviewers of the premiere (e.g., BASS 1937: 9; FISCHEROVÁ 1937: 13; SEIFERT 1937: 4; -ŠKA- 1937: 5). The 'jokey' conception of the 'genre picture' was not only in accordance with the poetics of the Liberated Theatre, but also with Brueghel's paintings from the folk milieu, for which 'vivid humour and a sense of grotesque abbreviation' were characteristic (EFFENBERGER 1974: 456; ROBERTS-JONES and ROBERTS-JONES-POPELIER 2003: 119; HONIG 2019: 172–175).

Another component of the set was a painted curtain, which (similarly to the painted elements in *Executioner and Fool*, as well as *Measure for Measure* and *The Barber of Seville* for the National Theatre) emphasised the picturesque quality of the set design (EFFENBERGER 1974: 453). It is worth mentioning that Wachsman created several painted curtains in his career. For example, he designed two painted curtains for Burian's Theatre D, and a proposal for another unidentified one can be found in the Archive of the National Theatre in Prague. A painted curtain also appears in the design of the city for the *Barber of Seville*. The composition of houses which Wachsman used in this design is very close to the arrangement he depicted on the curtain for *Heavy Barbara*. On the curtain for *Heavy Barbara*, Wachsman portrayed a panorama of a Flemish – Brueghelian – town, with a church on one side, and on the other side, a tree with a jug hanging from its branches (Fig. 16).

The artistic style of the curtain relates not only to Brueghel's paintings, but also to the sets of Voskovec and Werich's plays from the 1920s (e.g., *Vest Pocket Revue*, *Fata Morgana*, or *Dynamite Island*), for which (as well as for Wachsman's early beginnings) naïvism was typical. At the same time, it fully corresponded to the authors' request to depict Eidam in the style of a folk picture, a painted jug, or a colourful medieval woodcut (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954b: 389). However, while the curtain evoked the idyllic and picturesque qualities of a Flemish town, it was also disturbed by caricatural elements: a painted crack in the curtain ('canvas'), a dog eating a bone and, above all, a disproportionately (hyperbolically) conceived tower with a little annex (*prevét*) attached to its side by a large nail (BLÁHA et al. 2017: 268).

The irony presented by Wachsman in the curtain relates to another aspect of Voskovec and Werich's comedy which had formed an integral part of their plays since the days of *Vest Pocket Revue* (1927): a parody of artistic works and genres. Much like Voskovec and Werich parodied 19th-century patriotic literature with the figures of revivalist (*buditelský*) teachers in *Heavy Barbara*, Wachsman ironised the traditional painted backdrop that travelled from play to play in his painted curtain (and unrealised designs of the Yberland forest, Fig. 9). In this sense, the curtain perfectly corresponded with the architecturally conceived scenes, as it also fully participated in the creation of a humorous folk 'genre picture' on the stage, as well as contributing to the idea of Eidam as a city of absurdity (expressed in the disproportional depiction of buildings) and plenitude (which might have been suggested by the jug hanging from a branch).

While the visions of the world offered by the scenic architecture and the painted curtain coincided, they also offered two different perspectives of Eidam. The curtain simulated a view from a distance, a panorama of the Flemish city; while the panels offered a close-up, a detailed view of city life. In describing Voskovec and Werich's linguistic

Fig. 16: Wachsman's painted curtain. Photo by Alexander Paul. Archive of Atelier Paul, Prague, Czech Republic.

technique, Nezval used an apt expression for the alternation of perspectives: a view through binoculars and a view through a microscope (EFFENBERGER 1974: 198). This analogy perfectly characterises Wachsman's set design, in which 'everything – the painted town, the tavern inside and out, the thick wall of the prison [...] – fit[ted] and complement[ed]' (FISCHEROVÁ 1937: 13).

Through the use of the painted curtain, stage architecture, authentic materials, and real objects, Wachsman created the set, to paraphrase the words of Voskovec, as the duo imagined (Voskovec quoted in SCHONBERG 1995: 79). Wachsman's set design 'had [not only] all the beautiful and plastic colourfulness [and humour] of Pieter Brueghel's paintings' (LHT 1937: 11), but also brought the world of his paintings (medieval, Flemish, folk, comic, absurd, and sinful) to the stage, while emphasising the meaning of Voskovec and Werich's play. With his wit, free – liberated – fantasy, ingenuity, and playfulness, as well as his ability to establish 'miraculous friendships' across time and space, Wachsman created set designs which resonated with the poetics of Voskovec and Werich. With his emphasis on simplicity, directness, and 'realism', Wachsman designed a set that was more accessible to the wider public than Surrealist designs, and thus better suited the intentions of Voskovec and Werich's work of the 1930s. In this period,

they aimed to create theatre that could address audiences from all social strata, that is, 'demanding intellectuals, as well as tired workers' (PŘEHLED 1937: 167). According to one of the reviews, *Heavy Barbara* was 'the closest to the popular audience' of all the plays of the Liberated Theatre (LHT 1937: 11).

Given the number of designs Wachsman created for the production, it is clear that 'accuracy of expression' was important to him (PTÁČKOVÁ 1998: 228). To achieve it, to find an ideal form that would meet the requirements of Voskovec and Werich, Wachsman applied not only his fantasy and humour, but also his knowledge and talent in the field of painting and architecture, and his experience as a scenographer for the National Theatre and Liberated Theatre. Probably thanks to his ability to imprint a form to stage images which corresponded to the ideas and needs of the authorial duo, Voskovec considered Wachsman, alongside Feuerstein and Muzika, to be the best scenographer of the Liberated Theatre (Voskovec quoted in SCHONBERG 1995: 79).

Appendix: Vision of Josef Svoboda

Wachsman's set design became an inspiration for some of the post-war productions of *Heavy Barbara*. An example of this is the set design which Josef Svoboda created for the production of *Heavy Barbara* at the ABC Theatre (prem. 14. 11. 1958), with Jan Werich and Jaroslav Horníček in the roles of mercenaries.

In Svoboda's set (as well as the costume designs of Jebenof and Jarmila Konečná), one can find echoes of Wachsman's original pre-war designs. These include, for example, an almost identical composition of the scene in the Yberland forest, the basis of which is a stump and a tree trunk; an analogous arrangement of the mayor's chamber with a canopy bed; the teacher's chamber, etc. Despite these similarities, Svoboda did not subscribe to Wachsman's style (either Surrealist or 'realistic'), but offered his own unique scenographic conception.

This was based on a system of a variable number of screens which Svoboda installed around the stage. These were not Svoboda's hallmark projection screens, (*polyekrán*) which he had used in other productions (e.g., *Expo 58*, *Their Day* from 1959, *Intolleranza* from 1960, etc.), but canvases. Specifically, Svoboda hung and/or built replicas on the stage of various well-known paintings or details from them and complemented them with wooden peasant furniture and objects. Similarly to Wachsman, Brueghel's paintings served as models to Svoboda for his depiction of the town of Eidam. For example, in the first image of the play (in front of the inn), four Brueghel paintings appeared on the stage. The centrepiece of the set was a repainted detail of Brueghel's inn from *Netherlandish Proverbs*, with a real wooden door where characters could enter and leave the inn (i.e., the stage). In addition, three other enlarged details from Brueghel's paintings were hung on the stage: specifically, another detail of the inn from *Netherlandish Proverbs* (also used by Wachsman in his set); a detail of the house from *Children's Games*; and a detail from *The Hunters in the Snow*. Any people featured in the original paintings were omitted and substituted by live actors (Fig. 17).

Fig. 17: In front of the inn, Josef Svoboda's set design for *Heavy Barbara*, 1958. Photo by Jaroslav Skála. Fund of Jan Werich, Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, Czech Republic.

In this manner, Svoboda created the set design that Wachsman had sought to make, and which corresponded to Voskovec and Werich's original endeavour: 'to hang the atmosphere of [...] a colourful medieval woodcut on stage' (VOSKOVEC and WERICH 1954b: 389); to create an impression that the stage world had been painted by Brueghel. In both Wachsman's and Svoboda's stage design, the world of Brueghel's paintings was remarkably 'revived', yet adapted to the distinctive artistic vision and style of each scenographer.

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