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Marie Zdeňková, and Josef Vomáčka. Miroslav Melena: Scénograf a architekt (Scenographer and Architect) : published in Czech with a (mostly) parallel English translation

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James Loehlin's portrait of Kate Duchêne is rather straightforward – though based on observation and one interview (and Duchêne's only Shakespearean role), it is inspiring in pointing out how Duchêne's experience with Avant-Garde theatre informs her Shakespearean acting. Maria Shevtsova's "Pyotr Semak" and David Pellegrini's "Kate Valk" are not only actors' portraits but also portraits of theatre companies, Maly Teatr Moscow and Cheek by Jowl (Shevtsova) and The Wooster Group (Pellegrini). Especially the latter says little about "actors' Shakespeare" though it ventriloquizes the cultural ghosts of John Gielgud's 1964 Broadway production of *Hamlet* with Richard Burton.

Some of the volume's essays relay on the reader's knowledge of the actor (actress). That does not necessarily coincide with the fame of the individual artists, famous stars such as Judi Dench, Kevin Kline, Ian McKellen, Vanessa Redgrave or Antony Sher. While many of the essays communicate the uniqueness of their personalities without depending on one's memory of experiencing them as actors, some of the generally lesser-known actors' portraits reach the limits of whether one knows their work or not (this is true of Shevtsova's Semak, Pellegrini's Valk or Jeremy Lopez's John Harrell). This, however, does not alter the fact that *The Routledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare* is an enjoyable and inspiring read – a refreshing change to

actors' portraits in that it procures to the reader the opportunity of meeting outstanding people and glimpsing the mastery and mystery of acting.



Christian M. Billing |
Marie Zdeňková, and Josef Vomáčka. Miroslav Melena: Scénograf a architekt (Scenographer and Architect)

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Prague: Arts and Theatre Institute, 2011.
 240 pp.

This book is a very welcome addition to the existing bibliography on post-war Czech and central European scenography and theatre design. It offers for the first time a comprehensive account of the work of Miroslav Melena as both a practicing scenographer, and as an architect whose work in temporary and permanent theatre structures constitutes some of the most interesting explorations of stage space and actor–audience interrelation in the theatre of the Czech Republic (and also in the former Yu-

goslavia) during the latter half of the twentieth century.

An important aspect of any scenographic publication is the inclusion of images that allow readers brief glimpses of a designer's creative processes, as well as insights into his or her work in action (sketches, working drawings, renderings, maquettes and production photographs); this book is happily replete with them. The vast majority are produced very well at a size that enables meaningful ocular interrogation, and most plates are also in good colour. The volume also brings together numerous images that would otherwise be difficult to collate – including many that have been provided (or sourced) by the designer's surviving family. This visual richness, taken alongside a generally astute and fluidly written overarching account of the designer and architect's work (arranged for the most part chronologically by both authors so as to provide an overview of the artist's development) are great strengths of this book. My only reservation is that, despite the two hundred and forty pages it contains, there is not enough space in the written text to allow for full and detailed critical interventions into the aesthetic and philosophical *significances* of many of the designs that the book presents. There is, perhaps, more sustained analysis of the developing techniques that Melena deployed in the section on theatre buildings (by Vomáčka); but, with less of these complex architec-

tural structures achieved in Melena's lifetime than the literally hundreds of sets he designed (as one would expect given the logistics and costs involved in the latter process), and in a volume that divides itself into two clearly defined sections in order to consider independently each aspect of Melena's creative output (approximately 111 pages on sets, 71 on theatre structures), this is perhaps an understandable constraint that is due almost entirely to limitations of space.

Nevertheless, as I read in particular the sections on set design (and was regularly given a series of intriguing tasters of the experimental work that Melena undertook with various Czech theatre companies during his career), I repeatedly heard a little voice in my head saying: "There is room for a more detailed, more theoretical study here..." However, the book must be judged on its own terms and first retrospective volumes have their place. Let us hope that this meticulously prepared, beautifully presented and well-informed summary account of Melena's work will inspire both current and future scholars of scenography to go back to certain of the designs by this doubtless world class scenographer presented here in order to produce more in-depth studies of their individual forms, functions and theatrical effects.

The two-thirds of the volume dedicated to set design is the work of Marie Zdeňková. This section of the book is divided into nine main chap-

ters, followed by footnotes and then a very useful chronology of productions (each with a thumbnail-size illustration of the set in question). Zdeňková first outlines Melena's education at DAMU (under František Tröster), and takes significant time to locate his artistic *naissance* within the tradition of experimental scenographers who were, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, breaking away from the yolk of Soviet Realism in order to move towards what would become known as "Czech Action Scenography" (the scenographic mode that dominated Czech theatre until the mid-1980s). Melena's justifiable place alongside the two other world-famous graduates/disciples of Tröster (Jaroslav Malina and Jan Dušek) is articulated cogently, before more detailed presentation of Melena's 'apprenticeship' work at regional studio theatres is given (particularly at the "Divadlo Petra Bezruče", Ostrava; "Divadlo Pracujících", Gottwaldov and "Divadlo J. K. Tyla", Plzeň). These early designs are described with sensitivity and are shown as having strong and distinctive use of colour, combined with interesting techniques of collage and spatial juxtaposition that take Melena well outside the class of the emulator (of Tröster) and establish early in his career a clear and coherent voice.

The next section of the book considers the hugely influential encounter between Melena and the director Jan Schmid – who ran the "Naïve Theatre Liberec" and then "Studio

Ypsilon". A number of Melena's designs for productions by the "Naïve Theatre" are analysed and, in particular, many productions are presented very capably in which the author draws attention to a fascinating combination of painterly set design, puppetry and live action. This section provides a substantial amount of factual information regarding particular shows that will be of great interest to scholars with the time (and space) to explore further the theatrical interrelation of object animation, live actors and Melena's artistic (two- and three-dimensional) scenographic evocations of magical, mythical or imagined spaces. In the following section (on the interrelation between wider traditions of Puppet Theatre and the work of "Ypsilon") Zdeňková speaks to the symbiotic relationship between Melena's designs for other puppet theatres and his work for the experimental company Ypsilon; the analysis is once again very good. Nevertheless, in a less densely packed volume, there would be more room for further and deeper theoretical consideration of the precise aspects of theatrical representation that are at stake in such overlaps – and, particularly, for consideration of the new semiotic registers they necessitate. Throughout her account, Zdeňková makes cogent and useful references to productions that make exquisite use of shadow puppetry, mask work and bunraku-style stick puppets. Again, the commentary is brief, but very capable. The

following section of the volume considers Melena's use and manipulation of stage objects, and interrogates several instances of his use of "rough theatre" (in which the designer created significant theatrical spectacle with very few scenographic means). In all of the designs presented in this section, the centrality of the *actor* to Melena's aesthetic is argued clearly and is very well documented.

1978 saw "Ypsilon" move to Prague and Zdeňková in her next section outlines the effect that a stage (or multiple stages) in the Czech capital had on Melena's scenography. The necessity for "Ypsilon" until 1984 to use numerous venues saw the designer experiment almost continuously with both stage space and actor/audience relationships – and Zdeňková observes that during this period, Melena's scenography became less art-related and more human as part of a wider "time of transformation [in which] the 'theatre world' became the 'theatre human-being'", alongside a general move "from social themes to personal ones" (both 64). The scenography analysed in this section is accordingly much more stripped-down (for both aesthetic and pragmatic reasons). Nevertheless, rather than assuming simplicity of effect, Zdeňková regularly points out any and all innovative uses made by Melena of the humblest of theatrical means – and draws attention to the designer's ability to create metaphorical abstraction from modest effects:

such as a stretched canvass roof over a stage, or evocative use of draperies. Useful comparison with Jaroslav Malina's use of fabric during the same period could and perhaps should have been made here, but Zdeňková's style (and the limits of space) mean that she seldom has time to consider Melena's work in relation to that of his contemporaries – which is another limiting aspect, perhaps, of this retrospective style analysis. But there is plenty of *information* here about Melena's practices for those who wish to use Zdeňková and Vomáčka's volume as a starting point, and resource for more sustained comparative analysis of individual projects. When "Ypsilon" settled in the "Ateliér" in 1984 – and this space, subsequent to its reconstruction, became established as "Studio Ypsilon" (also called "Studio Y" in this volume), Melena's creative exploration with skeletal stage structures began to reach full fruition. Zdeňková traces this development in his practice through productions of *O ďáblovi, který sliboval hory doly* [The Farce of the Old Devil]; *Matěj Poctivý* [Matthew the Honest] and *Krokodýl etc.* [Crocodile etc.]. In her analysis of these productions, the author explains the connections between such designs and the historical Constructivist period, whilst also speaking of the necessity it entailed that actors' develop complex gymnastic interactions with their deliberately playful and abstracted, often Surrealist, scenery.

The concluding chapters of the section on set design present a range of further interesting productions for “Studio Ypsilon” during the 1990s as well as during the first decade of the new millennium. They also account for much more technologically advanced work on the National Stages of Brno and Prague (particularly designs for *Muž z kraje La Mancha* [The Man of La Mancha], *West Side Story* and *Lazebník sevillský* [The Barber of Seville]). Such productions in many ways constitute the zenith of Melena’s scenographic imagination (although they equally represent work on the type of stages that he did not have access to for most of his career) and Zdeňková draws some interesting parallels in this environment of scenographic abundance to Melena’s earlier, more experimental work on the smaller stages of fringe theatres, and in regional towns. However, Zdeňková is firmly of the opinion that, post Velvet Revolution (1989), this designer’s heart (and creative energy) was more taken with (and more inventively employed within) the realm of theatre architecture and the design of permanent performance spaces, rather than the sets that transiently occupy them.

Zdeňková’s account is lucid and coherent. Above all, it gives a very good general survey of the developing career and artistic experimentations of a stage designer who was especially dedicated to the exploration of theatrical *space* and what could be

achieved within it. This comes across very strongly in a well-written account by a gifted writer on scenography. Whilst Melena’s designs could contain and combine elements of: the painterly arts; sculpture; abstract delineations (of cloth, light and shape); architectural geometry; symbolic structures and great theatrical jokes, Zdeňková is right to place close to the very end of her account the designer’s own observation: “All along my theatrical practice I am advocating the opinion that the most important object in the theatre is the live person and all other things around him are only necessary services facilitating the expression of the mystery of being” (108). It is this centrality of the *human* (as spectator and performer) that so intently occupies the following sections of the book, on theatre architecture.

Josef Vomáčka brings to the volume in the next seventy-one pages a completely fresh insight into Melena’s output as a designer of theatre buildings and open-air venues. Early on in his account, Vomáčka argues that Melena’s surviving oeuvre: “put[s] him firmly among the top theatre architects of Europe” (134). The evidence presented in this volume is compelling in support of this claim. Vomáčka traces Melena’s development from early designs for open-air cinemas and theatres to his prestigious commissions for permanent theatres in the Czech Republic and the former Yugoslavia (particularly Croatia and

Slovenia). The author argues throughout for an influence of Classical architectural principles not only in Melena's use of open air structures, but also in his desire to create, wherever possible, the most fluid and adaptable of interior venues – even arguing that his positioning of small spotlights in the auditorium ceilings of several interior theatres was an attempt to bring the canopy of stars within his enclosed theatres. Vomáčka accounts throughout his analysis for the architect's innovative use of various building materials (membrane roofs, concrete, wood – particularly in reconstructions and as a humanising element of new designs –, steel and glass), and, in each instance in which a theatre is described, the location of the theatre within its community, its heritage (if a redevelopment) and its predicted use is detailed. The effect is to give a very clear account of an architect who was not only interested in geometrical form and the aesthetic quality of his commissions, but of a man who knew and understood the dynamic *social* nature of the theatrical event, and its communal importance. Such designers are rare; and the significance of Melena as a true man of the theatre emerges as a result of his understanding of both theatre architectural and scenographic processes and imperatives, as well as of the importance of their interrelation.

Vomáčka's section on architecture is divided into nine chapters, detailing: Classical Influence; Designing

Theatre Interiors; Redeveloping Theatres (particularly "Divadlo Archa", Prague, and the "Městské divadlo" [City Theatre], Brno); a more extended account of the "City Theatre in Brno", together with the "Highland Theatre" in Jihlava; Redevelopment of one Popular Theatre Venue ("Divadlo na Fidlovačce", Prague) as well as stages for various Culture Centres; Redevelopments of the "Semafor" and "Reduta" Theatres in Prague; Building Stages in Arts Centres (notably in České Budějovice, and Trutnov); Looking for a Solution to the Revolving Auditorium in Český Krumlov (a late but un-realised project of Melena's to re-locate the controversial 'monstrosity' of a stage built in the 1950s and re-modelled (badly) during the 1990s in the castle grounds of Český Krumlov); and, lastly, Melena's work designing and remodelling theatres in the former Yugoslavia (including all of his major theatre projects in Croatia, and Slovenia). Vomáčka's analysis is consistently astute and speaks to the architectural success of each venue as well as its social role as evidence of Melena's developing acumen as a builder of functional performance spaces. The section on architecture is equally beautifully illustrated with photographs of theatre interiors (sadly, however, they are always pictured *empty*) as well as with the relevant plans, elevations and computer-generated architectural geometry. As with the section on stage design, the

architecture section is finished with a chronological list of all of Melena's architectural works, again with thumbnail illustrations of each of the major projects.

This, for the English reader, is very nearly the end of the book (the bibliography at the volume's end is of use, as is the list of reproduction credits – which is a very useful catalogue of holdings for those interested in further research, and is helpfully translated into English). What are possibly the most moving sections of the book, however: the section “Vzpomínky” [Memories] – a collection of personal testimonials from thirteen of Melena's friends, contemporaries and collaborators; and a section “Život je šance zažít velikost stvoření a jsoucna” [Life is a Chance to Experience the Scale of Created Beings] – an edited version of an interview of 2005 between Melena and Ivan Tatíček – are sadly not translated from the Czech. Perhaps the authors considered the personal opinion of Melena and his friends regarding his work of little interest to those born outside of the country of Melena's birth? And yet so much of the story told of this volume is that of a combined *personal* journey of developing aesthetic vision and technical competency (set alongside the development of a national theatrical tradition that emerged as part of a country experiencing one of its greatest epochs of social, intellectual and emotional change) that these missing doc-

uments seem to me a very sad loss for those not fluent in Czech.

Despite these limitations, *Miroslav Melena: Scénograf a architekt* is an excellent first representation in print of a full retrospective of the work of a key practitioner who deserves greater recognition on the world stage than he has hitherto attained. Its authors have taken great time and trouble in the preparation of their visual and verbal accounts. Both are excellent. Let us hope, then, that the emergence of this volume will help both to preserve and also to widen and deepen the appreciation of Melena's work on an international level. This excellent start should also act as a spur for further (more in-depth) studies of individual periods of Melena's working life, of discrete designs, and for deeper analysis of his unique scenographic and theatre-architectural vocabularies.