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The Gypsywood players

In: Sparling, Don. *Outside in : a personal history of the Brno Department of English narrated by Don Sparling*. Kačer, Tomáš (editor); Kamenická, Renata (editor). First published Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2022, pp. 85-118

ISBN 978-80-210-8632-6 (paperback)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/144865>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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The Gypsywood Players

The Gypsywood theatre group has been an inseparable part of the department's history and identity for over fifty years now. In many ways, it's virtually impossible to think about the department and its students without looking back at the history of Gypsywood. This was particularly true in the Communist era, when we weren't allowed to take in many students – in the early eighties we were even forced to reduce entrance numbers to less than ten a year. This meant that in some years a good proportion of the English Department student body was involved with Gypsywood. Being part of the Gypsywood Players brought them a sense that it was possible to do things you wanted to do as well as a sense of freedom, both of which were rare commodities in those days. It also gave them a chance to get to know teachers better – particularly Jessie Kocmanová and me, because we were the directors, but many others as well. And this teacher-student link was strengthened by the many Gypsywooders who later went on to become teachers at the English Department – by my count, more than a dozen. And that doesn't include people who ended up as teachers at other departments at the Faculty of Arts, at the Faculty of Education, and even at other universities.

It all goes back to a practice that dates from 1963, when a group of teachers and students from the English Department travelled to Cikháj, this small village in the Vysočina, where the university had a recreation centre. The purpose was to run an intensive English course for a week. The recreation centre itself was rather curious. Cikháj is a village of some 150 inhabitants. And in the 1950s, when the country was “building Socialism”, the people in the village got this great idea that they'd build a cultural centre there. So up went the walls, on went the roof – and then the village ran out of money. They didn't know what to do with this empty shell. Masaryk University stepped in and bought the building and turned it into its recreation centre. So it certainly wasn't purpose-built for anything that it was subsequently used as. It was pretty basic. All of the accommodation – aside from four rooms for teachers – was in rooms with bunk beds. You had six to eight students crammed into these quite small rooms. It also had very primitive hygienic facilities. This meant that if there were a lot of people there for a week or more – and whenever the English Department was there it was packed – the drains plugged up. On more than one occasion I had to actually grope around in the waste pipes to get the system flowing again. Think of the scene in Fellini's *Amarcord* where Carlini tries to retrieve the countess's diamond ring from a cesspit. Cikháj was always a great place for adventures.

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As I said, the language courses started in 1963. And when it came time for a course for more advanced students in **December 1965**, Jessie decided she was bored with teaching practical English. She liked literature, theatre, and all sorts of other things. So she came up with this idea that some of the students would put on a one-act play. It all began very haphazardly, but soon the production of a play became a separate activity. By the time I arrived on the scene in 1977, the usual practice was for the theatre group to go to Cikháj on a Friday, while the students on the intensive course would arrive the following Monday. The Gypsywooders had exactly a week to



The cast of the first Gypsywood production, *Dear Departed*, at Cikháj, 1965.

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rehearse their play – the opening night was on the following Friday. Some years, if we had a very ambitious project, we went a little bit earlier. Or we went twice, with a week in between. All the theatre activities took place in the dining room, which meant that you had to clear everything away after breakfast to rehearse, and then put it all back in place for lunch. And then move things again for rehearsals in the afternoon and put them back for dinner in the evening. And then go through the process again for evening rehearsal, and finally put everything back, maybe at two o'clock in the morning – Gypsywooders rehearsed very hard and partied very hard – so that everybody could be there for breakfast at 7:30. All the time there was this pervasive odour of cooked food in the air. So it certainly wasn't a convenient or comfortable place to work in.

You could say that the space had the great advantage that it was totally flexible. That's true. But this brought with it one great disadvantage – you didn't have proper exits or entrances, flies, a backstage, or anything else that's normally found in a theatre and that shapes the production. You had to really adapt your acting and production style to these very, very limited possibilities. It certainly made for a minimalist staging tradition, one where strict realism was out of the question. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The first play that was put on in Cikháj was a one-acter called ***The Dear Departed***, by Stanley Houghton. Nothing had been prepared beforehand. The group didn't even have a name. They called themselves "The Cikháj Shiverers" and the play was only put on for that one night in Cikháj. But they clearly had fun, as you can see in a hand-written announcement of the play they prepared for the other students: "Special attraction, fresh from terrific worldwide successes, thousands turned away nightly, make sure of your seat, evening dress essential." That set the tone for the next fifty years.

Jessie used to keep notebooks where she wrote down her thoughts as they occurred to her. When she was at Cikháj she often included little sketches of the place and of costumes, the actors and so on. Once years later she recalled that at first she couldn't get used to the name Cikháj. Whenever she wrote it down, it kept sounding to her like *Sieg Heil!* Obviously she felt she had to come up with a new name and by the next year the students were calling themselves the "Gipsywood Community Drama Group". By the fall of 1967 they'd settled on "The Gipsywood Players". This is a fun name, of course, a perfect example of "folk etymology" – 'Cikháj' sounds like a Czech name for a Gypsy grove. In fact the name of the village is originally from German – it's got something to do with a goat, *die Ziege*. And so the group became the Gipsywood Players, and the actors and everyone else involved in the productions were Gipsywooders.

For the next two productions they stuck to one-act plays by authors such as Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Muriel Spark. Sometimes in the early years they'd also have a spring production, though I don't know if they were at Cikháj to rehearse these productions. The whole thing caught on very quickly. It was very ... how to put it? A student type humour pervaded it, certainly, especially in the early years. And from time to time you'll find bits and pieces of paper in the Gipsywood Chronicle showing how things were done. One year they had a real working programme laid out, which I think is astounding – they had their days broken down into a detailed series of activities. There was something they called "a word and action rehearsal", which I don't think I've ever come across anywhere else – perhaps a sign they were truly amateurs. They were working the whole day. One of the notes says "An approximate end of performance at 22:30. At 22:31, a complete collapse of cast."

This "complete collapse of cast" is quite possible. Certainly when I became involved in the seventies and eighties, we'd rehearse till ten in the evening, sometimes even longer. And when we finished everyone would indeed be exhausted, and collapse. But it usually didn't last very long. After a brief break, everybody sort of came alive. And especially in the early years, in the late seventies, when the Gipsywood Madrigalists were there with us – we'll get to them in a moment – there was a lot of singing and people playing various instruments. Guitar playing and singing continued right to the end of the eighties. But there was also more and more taped music, which could be heard in the students' rooms much of the time and late into the night in the dining room. Basically I had a crash course in contemporary pop music in the seventies and eighties, because the students were really up on what was happening in the world of music. And in fact I learned, to my surprise, that they were very much aware of the cutting edge of pop music. One year when I went to Canada in the summer, some of them asked me if I'd pick up some records by these artists they really enjoyed. They gave me a list of what they were interested in, and in Canada I discovered that nobody in the usual record stores had heard of these groups, let alone have their records in stock. Not even in Sam the Record Man in Toronto, one of the largest record shops in the whole of North America! The students' awareness of what was going on there "outside" was one of the paradoxes of Czechoslovakia in those years. And I think it was partly – or largely? – due to Jiří Černý, who used to travel round the country and put on programmes in all kinds of places where he'd bring out amazing records and tapes from the two suitcases he lugged around and play them for his audience. In Brno his "venue" was the Vysokošolský klub on Gorkého – once the students dragged me there for an evening's education in the latest music. And Černý really did have the latest, not only from the States, Canada and Western Europe, but from countries in the Communist bloc, Russia and elsewhere.

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In **fall 1967** the Gipsywooders put on their first three-act play, Muriel Spark's *Doctors of Philosophy*. This was only their fourth production – they'd made a huge advance in only two years. At

this point Jessie decided that perhaps she should get some legal permission to do these plays. So she wrote to Spark's agent, and got the following reply: "... we are glad to give you permission to do a performance of DOCTORS OF PHILOSOPHY on December 8, provided the conditions outlined in your letter of 2 November are met." Presumably Jessie had explained the performance wouldn't be public, only for students on the intensive course. However, requests for permission to put on plays were usually turned down, so in the end we simply stopped asking – basically all of our productions were illegal. A Gypsywood tradition. Sometimes when we did ask for permission, we were told either we couldn't do it at all, or that the rights weren't available for amateur groups in Czechoslovakia. So what we used to do was to pretend that we were performing for a closed, defined group of people, and claim we weren't selling tickets, just asking for voluntary contributions. Back then in the Communist years, nobody really gave a damn.

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In **spring 1968**, they did **Billy Liar**, by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall. And there're still a lot of people around here in Brno who were in it, people who we know, like Petr Antonín and Lidia Štědroňová (now Kyzlinková). Again Jessie asked for legal permission to put the play on. This time we know exactly how she must have phrased her request, as the author's agency wrote that they had no objection to the two performances she envisaged at the University Study Centre. "As the performances are private and educational, no charge will be made in this instance." This "private and educational" was obviously a good line to use.

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And then there was a break, for obvious reasons – it took a long time for the university to emerge from the chaos following the invasion in 1968. So the next play came in the **spring of 1971**. This was **Heartbreak House**, by Bernard Shaw. I must admit that when I first read through the Gypsywood Chronicle and saw they'd put on *Heartbreak House*, I was amazed – it was incredibly ambitious to tackle this particular play. But then Jessie never lacked ambition. The chronicle includes these funny diagrams she drew, which were her effort to work out the stage movement. They look like something by Jackson Pollock. She must have given up this practice at some point. After I appeared on the scene, and we were rehearsing, she'd say "Well, move a bit over there. Let's see what that looks like." In fact so far as I know, Jessie'd never had any actual experience at any point of being directed by or working with a theatre professional. She simply operated by instinct.

Jessie's programme notes were often very illuminating. She wrote about *Heartbreak House* "This play should perhaps have been a novel. As a drama, it's turned inside out. As it's written, it has no scenic division, nothing much seems to happen." These are really shrewd comments on the play, and they give some sense of how she discussed literature with her students. And she goes on, "Nevertheless, it is played as a new production in England this year and if we include the Gypsywood production, this makes two European premieres in the 64th year after its creation." I love the way she casually includes the Gypsywood Players alongside a London production! She also says that as Bernard Shaw was no longer available for consultation with the Gypsywood producers, they "took the liberty of dividing the play into five acts, but it is capable of so being divided, and may tend to prove that it is a drama after all." It's certainly a very strange play. I personally think it's a magnificent play, but it's very strange, and must have been daunting to produce.

The *Heartbreak House* programme marks the first appearance of the Gypsywood Madrigalists, or at least their first avatar – they're listed as "The Gypsywood Madrigal and Shanty Consort". The "shanty" bit seems to have been a one-off, suited for this particular play. For the next production six months later the programme claims that "Scenery, Lighting and Incidental Music" were



Heartbreak House, 1971.

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the work of the “Gypsywood Galliard Group”. “Incidental Music” in the May 1972 production was by “Gypsywood Madrigal and Folk Song Enterprises”, that fall there were the “Madrigalists of Gypsywood”, and finally in 1974 we have the “Gypsywood Madrigalists”. It was a long birth.

The Gypsywood Madrigalists were created by Aleš Svoboda. Aleš had trained at the Brno Conservatory – he originally planned to become a professional clarinetist. The madrigalists themselves weren’t all from the English Department, but I think they were all from the Faculty of Arts. Some of them were studying in the Music Department or studying something else. They were all very, very good singers. At least two of them went on to professional careers as singers – Ladá Richter, who also ended up at one point as head of the Music Education Department at the Faculty of Education, and Jiří Klecker, who became a soloist with the Brno Opera. The group existed for many years. There was a regular turnover – every year some people would join, and others would graduate. In the years when the Madrigalists were around, there was a phenomenal amount of singing, both in Gypsywood productions and of course in the evenings at Cikháj – everything from Renaissance stuff down to contemporary popular songs, and of course a lot of Moravian and Bohemian folk songs.

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In the **spring of 1972** there was ***School Play***, a one-act comedy by Donald Howarth. It was performed on the occasion of a visit to Brno in May by Maria Schubiger, a distinguished Swiss linguist and friend of Jenda Firbas. And for the second play that year, in **fall 1972**, Jessie went for Shakespeare, with ***A Midsummer Night’s Dream***. Interestingly, it was the second time Jessie had directed it – the first time was a quarter of a century earlier. After the Second World War the

British Council had a branch here in Brno down in Pisárky. It had a beautiful garden, and she directed a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that took place there. Something like the kind of thing you get at Oxford and Cambridge colleges. It was probably her very first directing attempt.

A Midsummer Night's Dream's got a very large cast – twenty characters, in this production, though one of the women played three minor roles. Still, quite a crowd to deal with. Plus six Madrigalists. We're still at a stage where virtually none of the actors were around as students when I joined the department – though over the years I got to know many of them. Brno's indeed a village, and the Gypsywooders form a tightly-knit community within the village.

This was the year that Jessie came up with this inspired idea of giving titles to Gypsywood actors. At least I assume it was Jessie – it's the kind of thing her very creative and playful mind was always coming up with. The rule was you had to have been involved in three productions. And then you were named an Honoured Gypsywood Player – HGP in short. It was meant as an ironic comment on titles like *zasloužilý umělec* and *národní umělec* and that kind of thing. The ceremony where the titles were awarded took place during the backstage party that followed the opening night of the play on Friday evening. This meant that the students' names with their titles after them didn't appear in a programme until the following year – assuming, of course, that they'd gone on to act in a production for a fourth time. But this means it's quite likely we don't have a definitive list of all the HGPs, which is a pity – at least for me as someone who likes historical accuracy. Later we began to invent all sorts of variations on the basic title to honour individuals involved in other activities connected with the play – HGCM (Honoured Gypsywood Costume Mistress), HGSM (Honoured Gypsywood Stage Manager), HGDr (Honoured Gypsywood Driver). This last one was awarded to Joe Hladký, who often used to chauffeur us round town in his car when we were rounding up props and materials for the costumes and scenery.

The students really look forward to being awarded their title. I remember one year I forgot two people, and it was so embarrassing! They'd been there rehearsing in Cikháj for the whole week. We always announced the new Honoured Gypsywood Players at the backstage party following the opening night. So I read out the list, and presented the new HGPs with their pin-on "medals" and announced "Well, that's it for this year." And as I looked round the room I saw these two students – a guy and a woman – and I could see she was kind of starting to break down. I was like "Oh my God!" It's a fascinating phenomenon. I don't know whether there's an amateur group anywhere else that does something like what we do with these titles. But they're something that's very important for the students, something that binds them to the whole group and to the whole history of the group.

The Gypsywood Chronicle jumps here to 1974 – there's no play for 1973. When we had the big 50th anniversary Gypsywood reunion back in 2015, some of the Gypsywooders were looking through the chronicle at one point, and one of them said "Where's *Lady Windermere's Fan*?" And a couple of others chimed in, asking why it was missing. I was stunned. I'd never heard of it being performed. I hadn't prepared the chronicle, so I couldn't explain why it was missing. I did know, though, that there was no record of *Lady Windermere's Fan* anywhere – no programme, no photos, nothing. So I assumed it must probably have been put on in 1973, the missing year. A week or so after the reunion I sent out an e-mail to all the Gypsywooders who'd been in the plays put on in the few years before and after 1973, and I asked for help with this. I even included a list of the characters in the play, to help jog their memories. Very strangely, no one – not a single person – seemed to remember what role they'd played in the play, or whether they'd appeared in it at all. This baffled me. Then just recently I was looking through another chronicle – the chronicle of the intensive courses at Cikháj. And to my surprise, I found there was no entry for 1973. So it looks as though for some unknown reason nothing happened that year – no intensive course, no play. But that doesn't explain why the students at the reunion were asking about *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Unless they were confusing it with *The Importance of Being Earnest* – though that seems unlikely,



Jessie Kocmanová deep into *Twelfth Night*, 1974.

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seeing that it wasn't just one person who claimed it had been produced. Mass false memory? Who knows? There's a mystery here that's waiting to be cleared up.

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1974 is more Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*. Now the Gypsywood titles get put in the programme for the first time, after the actors' names. And this was also the year they came up with the first additional title – HGFP (Honoured Gypsywood Former Player). This was awarded to Mirek Pospíšil, who had graduated, but was staying on at the department as an assistant. He's listed in the *Twelfth Night* programme as “voice production assistant”. The photos from *Twelfth Night* give you a good idea of the random, use-whatever-you-can-get way costumes were put together back then. The atmosphere they evoke is sort-of-kind-of-maybe-Renaissanceish. But were they really into bell-bottom trousers back then?

Josef Vachek came to Cikháj that year to give the annual lecture. In a letter to Jessie he wrote: “My sincere thanks for the program, the performance of *Twelfth Night*, the dress rehearsal which I had the privilege of watching. I am still under a heavy impression of all I have seen in Cikháj. The indefatigable work of the staff and the unfeigned working enthusiasm ...” “The unfeigned working enthusiasm” – what a strange phrase! Though I suppose in the Communist years there was a lot of feigned enthusiasm.

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J.M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* came next, in **1975**. The crowd has now become a mob – twenty-five roles, played by twenty-three Gypsywooders, one of them being Jessie herself.

Gypsywood was always inclusive. Sometime in October we'd pin up an announcement informing students what play we'd be putting on that year and that anyone who was interested should show up at a meeting that'd be taking place at a certain time and place. And that was it. The basic principle was that we'd take everybody who showed up. It wasn't always easy finding something for them all to do, but of course support people – stage hands, costume mistresses, prompters and so on – could absorb limitless numbers of people. But sometimes, as in the case of *The Admirable Crichton*, there were enough, or almost enough, roles to satisfy all the students who wanted to act. Which wasn't the aim with everyone. I think the common aim they all shared was simply to be part, somehow, of the Gypsywood Players company.

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From the look of the photos, 1976 must have been fun. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of my very, very most favourite plays, and it's also one of the most perfectly written plays in the history of drama. Nothing out of place – not a line, not a word. So I wish I'd joined the department a year earlier, and been part of it – though the problem with plays you really love is that no production ever lives up fully to your mental version of them. Jessie played Lady Bracknell – one of the half dozen greatest comic roles in English drama. It would've been a "hoot" – one of her favourite words – to see Jessie in the role. But I've always wondered whether she was able to suppress her Scottish accent when playing it – a Scottish Lady Bracknell would've been a double hoot.

As a prologue to the play, Jessie wrote this short skit called "Interview in Elysium". In it, someone interviews "the shade of Oscar Wilde" in a TV studio in the Elysian Fields. The point of it is that Wilde congratulates the Gypsywood Players for putting on the play, as this will help to make him known in Czechoslovakia as more than the author of "The Happy Prince" – what he calls a "wretched, trivial fairy tale". This is obviously Jessie speaking, but in other places it could almost be Wilde – "Surely you are aware that in these degenerate times, the amateur is the only purely dedicated professional?" It's a clever piece, and the kind of thing Jessie loved to whip up. For years she used to write Valentine's Day poems to accompany the little gifts the female members of the department gave to us men every year.

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1977 – the year when I start to appear. I arrived in the department in November, and two or three weeks later I was dragged off to Cikháj to take part in *As You Like It*. It was a nightmare. I mean, the whole experience was incredible, obviously. But it was also a nightmare in the sense there was a big cast, no one was really able to speak the language of Shakespeare, and Jessie seemed to have no system. We just headed off for Cikháj and started rehearsing. I don't know how she assigned roles, whether they'd even had a read-through of the play, or what. It certainly didn't seem like it. It was also nightmarish in that I was playing Touchstone, the clown in the play. Even English-speaking audiences can't understand Shakespearean clowns, with their obscure puns and even more obscure contemporary Elizabethan references. So how was I to play the role so a Czech audience could get at least some minimal sense of what I was saying? It was one of the most depressing things I've ever done on the stage.

But what wasn't depressing was being there – the Gypsywood experience. This was exhilarating. I had a chance to meet and chat with and get to know a whole group of students. Many of them I'd be teaching for the next few years. I got to really know Jessie. We hit it off immediately, and formed the basis for a close friendship that lasted till her death eight years later. (Having said that, I can hardly believe it was only eight years – we experienced so much together that it seems



My Fair Lady – “The Rain in Spain Stays Mainly in the Plain”, Iva Gardavská and Don Sparling, 1978.
 Left: Jiří Kudrnáč. Background: The Gypsywood Madrigalists.

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to me we must have known each other for a much longer time.) And there was the ever-present music and singing. It was like entering a whole new parallel universe.

At some point after we put on *As You Like It* I said to Jessie “You know, the students can’t really handle Shakespeare, and the audience can’t really understand Shakespeare. I think it’s a bit perverse to get them to memorize this kind of English when what they really need is to learn how to speak contemporary English – the rhythms of spoken English, modern words, phrases. I think we should do modern plays, twentieth century plays, contemporary plays.” Jessie agreed, so this was the point when Gypsywood moved away from older drama.

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1978 saw *My Fair Lady* by Bernard Shaw – one of the two or three most ambitious things we ever did. Apparently the idea of putting on Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s musical had already been in the air for some time, but the question was how to do the music. Aleš Svoboda came up with the idea that it could be sung by the Madrigalists. In other words, the music could be transposed to suit nine voices. In addition, there was completely minimal orchestral accompaniment – a double-bass, a clarinet and some percussion. Aleš was musical director. Michael Beckerman did most of the musical arrangement and he also played in the show. Mike was an American who was here that year with his wife, Karen, on an IREX scholarship. He came to do research on Janáček, so he wasn’t linked to us – he was connected with the Music Department. But he found out about us, and the production, and asked if he could take part. Mike’s a supremely social animal. He’s got absolutely endless energy and creativity, a quintessential New York



My Fair Lady – Don Sparling. Background: typical early Gypsywood makeshift scenery and Gypsywood Madrigalists, 1978.

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Jew. In addition to the musical arrangement, he played the eccentric Hungarian Professor Zoltán Karpathy – wildly over the top, with an absolutely outrageous accent. And in his “spare time” he composed a couple of funny songs based on things he saw or that happened at Cikháj.

My Fair Lady was an extraordinary production – I would say unique, because of the music. But not as many people saw it as we’d hoped. Some performances that were scheduled to be put on in January at the space we usually used in Brno – the Vysokoškolský klub on Gorkého – had to be cancelled because of “coal holidays”. These happened back then every so often – for some reason there was a shortage of coal, and all the schools in the country were closed down for a couple of weeks or so. And then the student who played Eliza, Eva Gardavská (Gilbertová), was chosen to go to Leeds that spring, so we couldn’t take it on tour to places we would’ve like to. It’s a pity we could only perform it a few times, because it was a very great achievement. And this was confirmed by a couple of reviews that appeared in *Brněnský večerník*.

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In 1979, we did *The Beggar’s Opera*, by John Gay. It followed after *My Fair Lady*, but we couldn’t do anything quite as grandiose that year. The Madrigalists had dissolved – most of them had graduated. But we still wanted to do a musical. And so, despite our previous decision not to go back in time before roughly Bernard Shaw, we finally agreed on *The Beggar’s Opera*. It’s an amusing thing. It satirizes sentimentality and attacks corruption in a way that still bites – it’s not surprising that Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill recycled it as *The Threepenny Opera* – and the songs are very simple, since the tunes are taken from popular songs of the day and folk songs. Most are sung by one actor/actress, and there are a few duets, so nothing complicated. We were able to put together a small musical combo consisting of a guitar and a double-bass. And Aleš Svoboda was again musical director.

In a sense, it was easy to do. The costumes were basic 18th-century clothes – no problem. But we needed new people, since we’d lost not only the Madrigalists but a lot of the old guard of actors, who’d also graduated. Jessie posted an announcement: “New talent is necessary and welcome. Urgently needed: talented artists to help with scenic and poster work, singers and instrumentalists, hefty chaps to shift scenery under unusual circumstances, and lasses handy with their needle making costumes.” She also wrote: “Previous experience with acting is welcome, but not essential.” This could perhaps serve as the motto of Gypsywood.

One thing that wasn’t so easy was revising the text of the play to make it comprehensible and current. First there was the 18th-century English, and then the references to the politics of the period. Some of the language changes were simply mechanical – for example, changing “hath” to “has” – but others had to do with archaic terms and complex syntax. We could have done it in the original, of course, but we wanted to stick to our new policy of not making students learn English that wasn’t current any longer.

In retrospect, I think it was one of the most enjoyable productions to put on. Nothing was very complicated, and there was so much music. The songs were very catchy, so a lot of the Gypsywooders picked them up, and we’d sing them in the evenings when we sat around after the end of the rehearsals. There was a custom that went back several years of learning one or more “Cikháj songs” each year. The previous year there’d been one of Mike’s songs about some re-used rubber tires adorning the entrance to the recreation centre. This year we had “*Do lesička na čekanou*” – but in Latin! “*In silvam venatom venit junventus venator ...*” I don’t know who translated it or where we found it, but everyone was singing “*Do lesička*” in Latin. We also had a song in Romani – or perhaps what purported to be Romani. And a well-known folk song from Slovácko – “*Vyletěl fták*” – in Esperanto: “*Bird’ ekflugis super la nubaron / Ege belan havis ĝi plumaron / super ĉia kreaĵar.*” To quote Joe from *Great Expectations* – “What larks!”

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From 1980, we had a new group of actors. There was a clear break from the core of actors we'd had when I came in 1977. Only a couple had acted in Gypsywood before. Alan Ayckbourn's **Absurd Person Singular** was a contemporary play, but rather tricky for us to stage. In one scene, we had to have a kitchen stove so one of the actresses could stick her head in it when she tried to commit suicide. In another scene, she tried to hang herself – and none of the places where we performed had a handy place to tie the rope to! There were three different households, which we had to indicate somehow. We simply put up a sign in the background with the names of the appropriate couple for each scene. Doors were important – people were constantly coming in and going out. So we constructed a flimsy, indeed primitive, structure that'd allow us to open and close a door. But every time we opened it, we wondered whether we'd be able to close it again. So – basic amateur stage design. It required a lot of imagination on the part of the audience.

Officially, the Gypsywood players were a *zájmová divadelní skupina* that operated under the aegis of the faculty branch of the Socialistický svaz mládeže – our plays appeared every year in a report they published on their activities. That's how we could perform officially as a group, travel to put on plays elsewhere, and so on. On paper, of course, we were going to Cikháj for a five-day intensive course in English, working on our language skills. Everybody understood that this was simply a cover, and we were left alone to do whatever we wanted. This was typical of what went on during the Communist years.

The play was hugely successful – really the first time we'd hit our audience with something completely contemporary. There was a lot of black humour, but it's not a black play. Complex, though, and the students had a great time with it. It brought together the next generation of Gypsywood players. There was also an interesting long-term knock-on effect. Later, as part of his final-year dissertation, Tom Pospíšil translated the play into Czech. This was then used by the Divadlo bratří Mrštíků – it's now the Městské divadlo Brno – when they put it on in 1991. And subsequently the play was staged in Tom's translation by theatres in Prague (twice, by two different theatres), Liberec and Jihlava. Never say that Gypsywood doesn't have a country-wide influence!

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1981. Jessie and I searched around and came up with **The Season at Sarsaparilla**, by Patrick White, the Australian novelist and Nobel Prize winner. We both liked the play, but were hesitant. It's a serious play and Gypsywood hadn't done a really serious play before, with the exception of *Heartbreak House* many years earlier. And the staging would be a bit of a problem. Once again the play took place in three different households. But unlike Ayckbourn's play, which presented them in three successive scenes, this time they all had to be on the stage for the whole play. Our solution was to literally divide the stage into three thirds, with curtains separating them from one another that ran from upstage towards downstage. So 1981 was the year when we bought masses of curtains – more than thirty metres of material! They were dark blue and unfortunately slightly shiny – we learned that this created problems with the lighting – but they were very light, which mattered the most. We had to string up cords and use clothespins to attach the curtains to them. Again, primitive, but they served their purpose. And the curtains continued to be used in various inventive ways for the next decade. They turned out to be a good investment.

As I said, we were hesitant at first because the play was serious. But in the end it was well received, I think because on the whole the actors had become fairly good. We have a photo of the audience at Cikháj watching the play, and they look completely caught up in it. The caption for the photo reads "Not a play to take lightly." It was good that we could also put it on in Brno at the Vysokoškolský klub, where we could use the stage more creatively. It was bigger, and had a wide forestage in front of the three households, so the actors could move about freely and even sit on the edge of the forestage facing the audience. This was always something we faced when



Absurd Person Singular – Jessie Kocmanová wondering how to improve the Hopcrofts' kitchen, 1980.

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we travelled – how to adapt the show to the local conditions. That year, for example, we were in Olomouc. The stage there in the Divadlo hudby was very small, and things were so crowded that we had to make extensive changes – no garden with flowers, for example, and a scene where one of the characters was carried in on a stretcher had to kind of worm its way across the stage. From that time on we always thought a bit about the stage in Olomouc when we started planning our productions. There was one real problem there, though – a very large Baroque statue that dominated downstage left. We simply decided to pretend that it didn't exist.

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1982 was *Habeas Corpus*, by Alan Bennett. Another completely contemporary play. The text of the play included the lyrics for several songs, but not the melodies. But we wanted to get back to music – we'd been without it for three years at that point. So I turned to my mother-in-law, Zdena Kurfürstová, who was a phenomenal pianist with an amazing ability to harmonize, transpose to different keys and so on. She had a whole repertoire of popular songs from the 1930s. I asked one of our students, Jana Nezmeškalová, who was also a great pianist, to come to our flat. My mother-in-law played through her repertoire of songs for us, and Jana and I worked out which lyrics would fit best with which melodies. For the production, Jana turned to a friend who was also studying at the faculty (though not in our department), Ivan Doležálek. The two supplied the music, on piano, guitar and a few other instruments. Ivan has since become a well-known musician, playing with many bands (some his own) and a composer in many genres.

Like *First Person Singular*, this was a black comedy with very serious undertones. It was full of over-the-top situations. The theme of artificial breasts, for example, kept cropping up in the play – Katka Kučerová (Tomková) appeared with a ridiculous bosom that stuck out about thirty centimetres in front of her. At one point in the play I was dancing a tango clenching a rose in my mouth and the script called for my trousers to fall down. This is one of the classic clichés of English farce. But how to make it happen? In the end we worked out a system with rubber bands – at one point in the middle of the frenzied dance I released the bands and the trousers shot down. Laughter and applause! Thinking about it now, I wonder if the play is staged much these days. Of course it's in fact a strong criticism of the obsession with sex in contemporary society and of sexism in general. But given the current hyper-correctness in Western society ...

The audience responded to it all brilliantly – there was a lot of visual humour, a lot of (necessary) exaggeration and overacting, and the songs were remarkable. Unlike in many other plays where the music merely adds to the mood, here the songs were integral to the action. The individuals' characters were reflected in the lyrics of the songs: "I'm not too old at fifty-three / A worn defeated fool like me / The tickling lust, it still devours / My waking hours." – "Twas on the A-43 that I met him / We just had a day by the sea / Now he's gone and he's left me expecting / Will somebody please marry me?" The play was full of all these sexually frustrated people, who represented three generations of English society, all of them treated with unsettling irony and at the same time a kind of indirect sympathy. Tying the whole play together was the cleaning lady Mrs. Swab, who would periodically comment on the other characters and deflate their obsessions. Like a chorus from a Greek tragedy, but a one-woman chorus.

I'd say this was one of the most complex plays we put on. And in terms of overall quality, one of our best productions. I'd rank it among our top three or four. Later, when Tom Pospíšil was in Leeds, he learned they were doing *Habeas Corpus* in Norwich. So he went there, saw it, and this is what he wrote to us: "There were no songs. The texts were said without music, like poems. There was not so much fun. The audience were laughing at different places. There was perfect timing, but no enthusiasm." If Tom was correct, the professional production in Norwich was a sorry second-best to our Gypsywood effort. No surprise!



The Matchmaker – band members Dáša Valešová, Jana Nezmeškalová and Laďa Vystrčil, 1983.

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By the way, we ran into a problem that year. The head of the German Department, Zdeněk Masařík, complained to the Dean that several of the Gypsywooders whose second subject was in his department had missed a week of classes by being in Cikhaj. We then received an official letter from the Dean saying “Dear Comrade Svoboda, the *děkanské kolegium* has decided that in future the English Department intensive week shall be held at a time when no lectures are taking place.” In other words, the whole way we prepared our plays would go down the drain. But Aleš Svoboda as head of our department wrote back and made the case for us, and the crisis soon blew over. The irony is that only three years later, after Masařík became our external head, he was the one sending us to Cikháj.

* * *

This was followed the next year, **1983**, by Thornton Wilder’s ***The Matchmaker***. The play has an interesting DNA. Its first avatar was as an English one-act farce back in the 1830s. Then it was adapted as a full-length play by the Austrian dramatist Johann Nestroy. In the twentieth century this in turn was adapted by Wilder and then later rewritten as *The Matchmaker*, and this was subsequently turned into a musical, *Hello, Dolly!* Film versions of both the play and the musical also appeared. And its most recent incarnation is *On the Razzle*, a version adapted from Nestroy’s play by Tom Stoppard. All of this as proof of just how strong the basic story line is.

The play was difficult to costume because we wanted to get a quasi-authentic 1900 look, but in the end I think it looked reasonably believable. It benefited from very experienced actors – almost everybody performed well and was very convincing. Pavel Krutil was with us for the first time, teamed with Radek Klepáč as two clerks in a store somewhere in the countryside who run

away to New York. Katka Kučerová (Tomková) had the main role – she was the matchmaker, but was also looking for a husband herself. This year again we wanted to have music and again my mother-in-law helped us with it. We'd found a set of LPs released by the American government celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. One of them included popular songs from Broadway productions at the turn of the twentieth century. We chose ones we could fit in with the play. My mother-in-law transcribed them and then we tinkered with the lyrics. For a second time we had Jana Nezmeškalová and Ivan Doležálek with us for the music, joined this time by Laďa Vystrčil and Dáša Valešová. All the songs were done as entre-acts – five of them. They were all fun to sing and even more fun to listen to. A couple were popular sentimental songs, there was a rollicking, boozy *odrhovačka*, one song just raised the energy between acts, and Katka had a snappy song about hunting for a husband. She rehearsed it down to the last detail, and performed it brilliantly. She was one of our best actresses, and once had an interesting thing to say about this. Apparently before she started in with Gypsywood, she'd been afraid to speak in public. And it was memorizing lines so she could speak fluently before an audience that helped her to break that barrier. Basically this changed her life. She's the best advertisement that I can think of for the role of student drama in language teaching.

* * *

1984 brought *Kidnapped at Christmas*, by Willis Hall. I call it our miracle play. By mid-October, Jessie and I were completely at our wits' end. We had no idea what to put on that year. We were desperate. And then, about a week before we were supposed to meet everybody for the first time that year and announce what we'd be doing, a play appeared mysteriously in the post. Jessie hadn't ordered it, I hadn't ordered it. But when we looked at it we saw it was a wonderful play. There was only one *háček* – it was a play for kids, and not only that, a pantomime. The Christmas pantomime is an exclusively British phenomenon – it's only put on there. It opens before Christmas and runs till the end of January or even longer if it's successful. For many small companies in the provinces it's the piece that keeps them financially afloat – night after night after night they have parents bringing their children to the theatre to see the show. Pantomimes are usually based on a traditional story like *Cinderella*, which is then parodied – for instance, the ugly sisters are always played by men in drag. They're full of buffoonery and slapstick and stock characters, and they have their own conventions. The villain is always trying to sneak up on the hero or heroine, who are unaware of this, and the kids get excited and shout out and warn them – “Watch out! Behind you, he's behind you!” At first the actors don't react, which gets the kids even more excited. So it's 100 percent participatory theatre, and we had no way of knowing if this could be carried off with our audiences here, even though in this case it was a modern pantomime about two escaped convicts. In the end we decided to risk it.

It turned out to be a real romp. The actors had never seen anything like this, so it was a challenge. We had no idea if it would work or not till the opening night. But Jessie indicated in the programme that audience participation was part of the pantomime tradition, and we also spread the word to friends who'd come to the performance. I even have a vague memory that we told them explicitly that they should take the lead. Whatever the case, it worked – the audience acted like five-year-olds. They picked it up very quickly in Gíkháj and in the theatres later. It was immensely successful.

We took a shortened version of it, which was partly in English and partly in Czech, to Akademické Brno. This was both a festival and a competition for students involved in *ZUČ – zájmové umělecké činnosti*. It met with the same reception there. In one of the newspapers a reviewer described it as “welcome refreshment”. Jessie and I got a prize for our “long-term dramaturgy”, which was a laugh, since our choice of play every year was based largely on what we could

get our hands on, and that year had been dangerously chancy. Radek Klepáč and Pavel Krutil – the two escaped prisoners – were declared the best actors of the festival in the amateur section (there was another section for students at drama schools). Since Akademické Brno was a national event, in effect this meant they were the best student actors in the country! I might just add that, as was often the custom, I played a role in the play that year, and was with them when we performed at the festival. I had to learn a few bits in Czech – and I was hopeless! This experience doubled my respect for our actors and what they were able to accomplish.

* * *

In 1985 we did something very different – ***The Late Christopher Bean***. This was by Sidney Howard, a guy who was a very successful American playwright in the interwar period but is largely forgotten today. Despite the erratic way plays were selected for Gypsywood, over the years we managed to put on virtually every genre of play in the English-speaking theatre world. (Maybe the Akademické Brno jury was onto something when it gave us that award.) And with *The Late Christopher Bean* we added a new one – what’s called the “well-made play”. This kind of play has a very clear, logical structure – the plot and all the little sub-plots fit together very neatly, and there’s often a surprising twist to the plot at some point. It tends to be a realistic play with credible character development. In a sense, it was different from many of the plays we put on because most of them had a very strong comic element. This one had comic moments, but essentially it was a serious play.

The play’s about a dead artist whose work is being rediscovered. A dealer learns that the owner of a large number of his paintings isn’t aware of their worth, and sets out to acquire them dirt cheap. It was interesting for us – for Jessie and me – because we had to work more with the actors in terms of getting them to create characters. They had to get inside their characters and they had to interact with other actors in ways that made their actions believable. Because the play is about this stash of paintings, we had to have a whole lot of them. And because we hadn’t thought about this in advance when we were still here in Brno, we decided in Cikháj that the only solution to our problem would be to go from door to door in the village and ask people if up there in the loft they didn’t happen to have a picture frame or even a painting they could spare. And it worked! We actually managed to get seven or eight paintings. One was a decent portrait. Another was something really charming. It was roughly 25 by 30 centimetres, with a lovely gilded ornamental frame. It was a religious painting – a 3D pre-Kolář Kolář collage. At the back there was an image of the Madonna and Child that you could see when you looked at it head on – something normal. But there was also a whole series of vertical strips of glass inside the frame on which they’d pasted strips of two other images of the Virgin and Child. When you looked at these strips from the left, these lined up to form a second complete image, and when you looked at them from the right, you saw a third image. Amazing! I’d never seen anything like it. We nicknamed it *The Virgin(s) of Cikháj*. And I must admit, it’s the only time I’ve ever stolen university property, or rather would-be university property. It’s now in our cottage. But that’s only about 20 kilometres from where it was originally, so I figure it feels at home there.

When we went through the village looking for paintings and frames and stopped at one of the cottages, an old woman greeted us with “Oh, you’re back again!” Because the year before, when we did *Kidnapped for Christmas*, we needed the sound of barking for when dogs were chasing the escaped prisoners. So we’d wandered around Cikháj to find some dogs that we could get to bark for us, and tape them. And this was the old lady whose dogs we’d taped. Back then we’d wanted to see if we’d got the sounds of barking right, so we played them back. She’d been astonished. “Oh, that’s amazing! How did you get the dogs in there?” Our contacts with the locals were minimal, but memorable.

This was Jessie's last production. Before we went to Cikháj I'd suggested to her that maybe she mightn't want to go there, because she was so obviously ill. But she refused. She always slept in a room on the first floor. But in 1985, she couldn't get up the stairs at one go. She'd have to go up a few steps and then sit down and have a rest. And then a second stage and sometimes even a third stage, before she made it up to her room. She was obviously in very bad shape. But Jessie being Jessie, she simply ignored it. I remember one time she said she had to go up to her room and take her pills. I offered to bring them down, but she said "Oh no, there're too many. You won't know which ones to bring down." So we made this laborious journey up to her room. Sure enough, there was a box with about a dozen different pills. She picked out the ones she had to take, and then announced, "My doctor told me I should drink them down with tea or water." So she poured out some tea and drank them down. And then reached behind the window curtain and brought out a bottle of red wine – her favourite – poured glasses for the two of us, and said "Cheers!" I was aghast. "Jessie, you're not supposed to take your pills with alcohol!" Her response was pure Jessie: "But you saw me taking them with tea!"

And then it was time to leave Cikháj. We usually hired a bus and came back Saturday morning. When we got to Brno that year we ordered a taxi for Jessie because she was in no shape to get home otherwise. That was the last time I saw her. She died maybe two weeks later. And I think she knew she was dying. In fact, I'm convinced she knew it. But she just wasn't going to miss her last Cikháj. She used to do these little sketches when she was at Cikháj. After her death we found a sketch she'd made from the window in the room that she'd always stayed in for those twenty or so years. It's in the chronicle. To say that Gypsywood was an important part of Jessie's life would be an understatement. It was part of her self-redemption. Jessie had gone through a lot personally, and the ideals that she'd brought with her when she came to Czechoslovakia in 1945 had slowly withered. With the death of her husband in 1968, and the death of whatever ideals she had about Communism, her links to the department, and to its students, grew stronger. And the Gypsywooders held a special place in this, since the theatre was a passion for her. She was so creatively bohemian! I think the energy and the work that she put into Gypsywood was probably more important to her than her teaching, because it brought her closest to the students in a way that she found wholly satisfying. The Gypsywooders were like a second family to her.

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1986, *Plunder*. This again was a new genre for us. It's a farce by a guy called Ben Travers who had this whole series of wildly successful farces on the English stage in the 1920s and 1930s. With the war, this kind of play went out of fashion and Travers more or less disappeared. And then he returned big time in 1975, at the age of 89! *Plunder* is witty and silly and was an absolute joy for everyone – director, actors and audiences. We even managed to rope in our Fulbright Scholar, Alan Flynt. Alan had come here with his wife and kids in the fall of 1986, and we dragged them all off to Cikháj for the week and put him to work on the scenery.

Farces usually require a lot of everything – costumes, props, stage furniture, whatever. *Plunder* was no exception, and so a big challenge. We needed to come up with costumes in the style of the 1920s – checked sweaters, pumps, slinky dresses, ropes of pearls. One scene set round a table required half a dozen chairs and a floor lamp and something that could pass for a sideboard. And the props were staggering – dozens and dozens of them. Some had to function, like a siphon bottle that sprayed out soda for drinks. At one point there had to be a roulette wheel, a champagne bottle, four wine glasses, four whiskey glasses, a tablecloth, and a lot of other things on the table. It was very demanding for the props people, because if they didn't put every single one of those things in exactly the right spot, the scene would fall apart. If someone reached into a drawer for

a key and the key wasn't there – the play would grind to a halt. So at every performance the props people and the stage hands had to be on high alert from start to finish.

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Joseph Kesselring's ***Arsenic and Old Lace*** is one of the classics of the American stage. For this 1987 production we had a very strong cast – almost all the actors had been in one or more previous production, and a good portion could boast Gypsywood titles. The staging didn't involve any unusual demands, so we could concentrate on the acting, in particular things like nuances in speaking dialogue, and the tricks of comic timing. I guess the most challenging things were how to make one of the actors look like Teddy Roosevelt – his character actually believes he is Teddy Roosevelt – and how to make another look like the popular image of Frankenstein. By this time, we were getting noticed fairly regularly by newspapers such as *Rudé právo* and *Brněnský večerník*, and were written up in the university magazine *Universitas*. Favourably, of course.

Postscript. A quarter of a century later the play was put on by Městské divadlo Brno. Several of the Gypsywooders who were in our production went to see it. Apparently it was great fun – but not as much fun as the 1987 production (at least for them).

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Arsenic and Old Lace was followed that same academic year, in the **spring of 1988**, by a musical – ***Oh! What a Lovely War***, by Joan Littlewood. I'd actually seen it in England in 1964 – not in Stratford East, where it was put on originally, but in the West End. I was totally bowled over by it. It's a devastating critique of the debacle of World War I – the incompetence of the generals, the ignorance of the public “back home”, and the appalling life of the ordinary soldiers – all done in a kind of distancing upbeat music-hall style that only underlines the horror. For a long time I'd wanted to do it with Gypsywood. But it's complicated to stage because it requires period images in the background – battle scenes, period publications – a whole set of Pierrot costumes as well as lots of military clothing and props. Don't forget this was the Communist years. How could we put all this together?

Then once in 1987 I was talking about the Gypsywood theatre with Jim Potts, who was the British Council man in Czechoslovakia at the time. He was a very dynamic guy, and brought a lot of academics and writers – particularly poets (he was a poet himself) – to the country. When he learned about Gypsywood, he asked whether we might like a British director to come sometime and direct a production for us. My answer was “Wow, yes.” And Jim found this remarkable woman by the name of Marguerite Jennings, who was Director of the Bradford Youth Players. Marguerite wrote that she wouldn't be able to direct a play she hadn't done before just for us – she simply didn't have the time – but we should have a look at a list she enclosed of plays she'd recently done with the youth theatre, and see if there might be something we'd be interested in putting on here in Brno. And there on the list was *Oh! What a Lovely War*. I couldn't believe my eyes.

We communicated back and forth by snail mail – the only way at the time. Among her questions was “What about the costumes and properties?” And I said “Oh, we'll take care of those at this end, and we can find some musicians.” I had no idea at the time where and how. “But we'll need background images, and something to help with the music.” So she brought some taped music for the different scenes, and slides with the background images. She showed up just before Easter. It wasn't possible to go out to Cikháj for a week, so all the rehearsing took place here in Brno over the Easter holidays and during the following week. Our rehearsal space was in the Dům pionýrů a mládeže – now the Centrum volného času – down in Lužánky.

We had a cast of twenty, ten men and ten women. We told them the rehearsals would be intensive, and they should count on being there every day, especially over the Easter holidays. How naive! People “discovered” they had other obligations – not only over the holidays, but throughout the remaining days of rehearsals. They came and went at odd times – something impossible at Cikháj. On top of this, casting was complicated, since the musical’s composed of many scenes, some with all twenty actors, some with only a couple. Marguerite did entrust specific roles to individuals where needed, but generally the actors were playing “representative” figures rather than individualized characters. Which also didn’t help discipline. So the rehearsals were very shambolic.

One of the actors was Jiří Rambousek, and he was employed at the time at the Dům pionýrů. We thought this would be great, since he could arrange for anything we needed, and be on hand for rehearsals. Somehow we forgot being employed there meant he had other priorities than Gypsywood. Marguerite would say “Okay, now we’re going to do act two, scene three.” And I’d say “Well, Mr Rambousek can’t come at the moment ...” So we’d rehearse without him. And later “Uh, his boss needs Mr Rambousek at the moment ...” It went on like this for two or three days. Then one time when I began my unfortunately-Mr-Rambousek-isn’t-here speech, she interrupted me: “Oh, the invisible man. Okay.” From then on, Jirka was The Invisible Man. Eventually he did show up a few times.

Finally, we had the dress rehearsal on stage at the Vysokoškolský klub – in the afternoon of the day the play would be having its opening night. The dress rehearsal was in fact the first time that all the actors were present together. Then about 15 minutes into the dress rehearsal, the manager of the club came quietly up to me and whispered “You’ve got to come with me to my office. We have to talk about something.” I said “Sorry, I have to be here – I have to translate for this woman.” But he was insistent. “No, no, you really have to come with me. Some policemen want to speak to you.” So I slipped away to his office and sure enough, there were two policemen. It turned out they wanted to speak with one of the actresses. I said “I’m sorry, but we’re in the middle of the dress rehearsal.” They weren’t impressed. “No, this is a serious thing. And it can’t wait.” I gave in. “OK. Who do you want?” – “Athena Alchazidu.” As they were taking her away, I asked when she’d be back. “When we’re finished questioning her.”

I went back to Marguerite and began very hesitantly “You won’t believe this, but ...” I explained the whole situation to her and she just sort of looked at me, paused for a moment, and then nodded. Not a word. By this time, I guess she’d become so accustomed to things that she wouldn’t have believed possible before coming here that nothing fazed her. As far as I could make out, she was very much shaped by an approach that’s common in much British theatre, and that’s a tendency towards realism. Costumes should look like their historical models, props should be real props – in this case real military helmets, real guns. Right at the beginning she gave me this whole list of things to get, and I looked at it and thought “Oh, oh. This isn’t going to be easy.” I didn’t say “no” to her, but instead “Well, I’ll see what I can find.” We did manage to get various things from the faculty’s *kryt civilní obrany*, which was in the basement of Building C. They had lots of perfect stuff like little metal boxes with red crosses on them and medicine inside. And they had miles and miles of bandages. These we could use for those weird puttees that soldiers wore in World War I. And they had helmets of course. They weren’t exactly English World War I helmets, let alone German helmets, but they’d do. And we had a phenomenal Costume Mistress, Lenka Čecháčková, HGCM, who coordinated the team sewing the twenty Pierrot costumes.

But of course there were things we couldn’t get for them, like rifles. So we had to explain to Marguerite that we were going to have symbolic rifles. “What do you mean by that?” she asked. I said they would have dowel rods, which they could sling over their shoulders, use for shooting and so on. Not a problem, I said, this is theatre! She looked at me sceptically, but eventual-

ly agreed to this. And we had to sew a lot of things too. The Pierrot costumes mainly, but also, for example, flags. Where could you buy a Union Jack in Czechoslovakia in 1988? And where in Czechoslovakia back in 1988 would you find out what the Imperial Russian flag looked like? We had to do all this research and talk to professors about it. And when it came to the music, we even had to find out what the Imperial Russian anthem had been.

So we gradually managed to put it together, whittling down Marguerite's requests day by day. There was a lot of singing in it, of course, because it's a musical. And most of the songs are popular musical-hall songs of the day, plus religious hymns in one of the scenes. The students loved it all – you're dressing up, you've got these wonderful songs that you're singing, and you're sending out a very strong anti-war message, and a message about the idiocy of generals and politicians. Messages like these had strong reverberations in Communist Czechoslovakia.

We had Zimour for the music. They weren't students, but a local Brno band. Their leader was a guy called Milan Potůček, who's still an important figure on the Czech music scene. They were amazing. We just gave them tapes with the music and they rehearsed everything on their own. Then we met with them once or twice before the dress rehearsal, and that was it. Hard to believe – they were an established group, they had their schedule of performances, but they found time just for these crazy students because they thought it would be fun. It may sound strange, but during the Communist years I had similar experiences more than once. If you were doing something different, especially something that might not be officially approved, there were many people who were extremely willing to cooperate and help out. I guess it was their form of pushing back against the system.

The opening night was a smashing success, and so were a few further performances. When Marguerite came round from the audience to appear on the stage for the curtain calls, she whispered to me "Until this moment I really didn't believe we'd pull it off!" She'd been a wonderful director – able to adjust quickly and with good humour to a completely new environment and all the unexpected complications that kept popping up day after day. Very English. Unflappable.

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The **fall of 1988** saw our regular annual production, and for the first time in twenty-one years we went for one-acters – two of them. The first was ***The Alligator Man***, by Jack A. Kaplan. It touches on a lot of things – racial tension in America, environmentalism, sexism, the longing for escape and adventure – and treats them in a light, frothy way, just enough to offset the more troubling background. The second play was ***Trevor***, by the English playwright John Bowen. This was something very different. It concerns two women who share a flat. Each has invented a boyfriend so that her mother will stop asking her when she's going to have one. And then one set of parents announces they're going to visit and want to meet the boyfriend. The women panic, and one of them asks an out-of-work actor friend if he'll play the non-existent boyfriend, Trevor. He agrees, and the parents arrive. But quite unexpectedly the second pair of parents also turn up. So the friend has to run back and forth between two rooms, pretending to each set of parents that he's their daughter's boyfriend. This is all very funny, almost slapstick, until there's a slip-up, and eventually the women have to confess to their parents that neither has a boyfriend, that they're lesbian lovers.

When I first read the play, I was fascinated by it – not only the theme, but the way for most of the play what you have is a kind of farce, and then it suddenly slews into realism and a deeply serious mode. But I didn't know if I'd have willing actresses. This was 1988 in Communist Czechoslovakia – the topic was taboo. So I spoke to the two students I felt would be best in the women's roles. I explained what the play was about, that if they agreed to play the roles they'd have to make the characters believable, embrace, kiss a bit, and so on. And right away they said yes, no problem, they wanted to do it. Which, I must admit, surprised me.

What was interesting was the audience reaction. From what I've been able to find out, it was probably the first play put on publicly in Czechoslovakia with a lesbian or gay theme. After the performance ended, three women who'd been in the audience came up to me and they were very angry. One of them was a medical doctor, and she said "I don't think that's the sort of thing you should be putting on. This isn't acceptable." She didn't say we were promoting filthy, perverted sex – but that was clearly the subtext of what she was saying. And a man who spoke to me insisted that "this" wasn't something students should be involved with. Other people who would normally congratulate us after a performance sort of quietly disappeared after the play was over. Virtually all the teachers in the department saw it at Cikháj and the adjective I heard several times was "interesting". Without going into any specifics about whether they liked it or disliked it. No one came up to me and said that it was daring, great, a breakthrough or whatever, let alone express congratulations. Just "interesting". I don't want to give the impression that everyone was put off by the production. By no means. Certainly many middle-aged and older spectators were. But not the younger members of the audiences, not – so far as I could judge – our English Department students. They seemed to have no problem. Perhaps they were surprised, but they clearly liked it.

Again, we put a shortened version of *Alligator Man* on for Akademické Brno. We were the only English-language student theatre around, so it was always amusing taking part in these competitions – the other plays were always in Czech. This time we had short little interventions in Czech, explaining what the scene was about – we wanted the audience and the jury to get the gist of the action. Before getting to Akademické Brno, we'd had to go through a *fakultní kolo*, a *celoškolské kolo* and a *krajské kolo*. At the *národní kolo* we won two awards. What was amusing was the reasons they gave for awarding the prizes. *Čestné uznání za 3. místo za kultivovanou interpretaci a inscenaci Alligator Man* and *Čestné uznání za dlouholeté a cílevědomé vedení souboru*. These are lovely, soothing phrases.

Mirek Pospíšil happened to know John Bowen, so he wrote him a letter informing him we'd put on the play and ignored copyright. Bowen wrote a long letter back, among other things saying "I don't mind your department breached copyright of *Trevor*. I'm delighted that they had fun with it and managed to bring it off. It's not an easy play because the timing is difficult. Ping-pong between the rooms of the set, always likely to go wrong ... And then there's the blackness at the end which doesn't work unless one has believed in the reality of the feeling between the two girls." And indeed – Pavel Krutil had ping-ponged brilliantly as Trevor, and Karla Tenková and Simona Šulcová were utterly convincing as the lovers.

* * *

Now for ***Animal Farm*** in 1989. I'd somehow, two or three years earlier, come across a copy of a musical version of George Orwell's classic novella that the National Theatre had put on in London in 1984. And I'd thought to myself "Gypsywood's got to do this ... sometime." Which wasn't then. I didn't want to be kicked out of the country, and I didn't want the department to be blown out of the water. But by the summer of 1989, I felt we could risk it. By that time (partially) free elections had been held in Poland, and Hungary was dismantling its barbed wire border with Austria. Demonstrations of all kinds were breaking out. And I thought, well, things are moving in such a way that even though there'll probably be a *průser*, I don't think it'll be fatal. So at the first Gypsywood meeting early in October I told the students we'd be doing *Animal Farm* that year. Sensation!

A key thing was the music. The text I had contained only words and notes for the songs. But there were no arrangements, and we had no musicians. Luckily, though, we had Petr Brabec, who was one of the most accomplished students we ever had, extremely bright and a great musician.



Animal Farm, 1989.

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What he did was use his synthesizer to compose the music for the show. Each song had its own arrangement, reflecting the character and the mood of the song – each one was as it were individually crafted. They did a great deal to create the atmosphere of the play.

It was yet another very complicated show to prepare. Costumes were a headache – how do you dress people to give some suggestion of the animals they are? And the masks were a super headache – more like a migraine. What we did was to buy the kind of masks kids might wear to a party and then use *papier-mâché* – strips of newspaper that we'd glue to the masks – to build them up in the shape of the animal head in question. And then they had to be painted. But we discovered you couldn't hear the actors properly, so we had to cut away the bottoms of the masks so they covered just the eyes and cheeks. All this took endless hours of picky, boring work. We also had to produce banners with political slogans, and those were great fun. We patterned them on the banners you saw everywhere in those days, with their absurd Communist slogans. The same type face, the same colours, yellowy gold against red – in fact the colours of the Soviet flag. We tried to push it as much as we could, as much as we dared.

We were at Cikháj from from 10 November. The dress rehearsal was on the evening of Friday the 17th. And during a break Mirek Pospíšil came up to us and said “Something big's been happening in Prague.” We finished the thing and tried to find out what was going on “out there”. Saturday brought the final rehearsals - difficult, when we were all desperate for news about how things were developing. Then the opening night on Saturday evening, and Sunday morning we came back to Brno. There was a student at the faculty when we arrived there, and he told us the students would be going on strike on Monday.

Immediately on Monday morning, the strike was launched. Late that afternoon we all marched down to náměstí Svobody. Nobody knew what was waiting for us there. Brno wasn't like Prague, where demonstrations had been going on for more than a year. So we had no idea how many people would respond to the call to meet in the square. It was totally packed, and I guess everyone had the same feeling as I did – maybe it's finally happening.

Earlier that day the students had come to me and said that they wanted to perform *Animal Farm* for the striking students. "That's a great idea, but the problem is that it's in English." And they said "That doesn't matter – we'll put it on in Czech." I was puzzled. "What do you mean?" – "Well, we know our lines, so we'll just speak them in Czech." I was dumfounded – did they really mean this seriously? We agreed we'd meet for 15 or 20 minutes after the demonstration back at the faculty. The main thing was to agree on names in Czech – what will the name be for "Animal Farm", what will the different characters be called? They'd of course sing the songs in English.

They performed the play the next day, Tuesday. The Aula was packed. The atmosphere was extraordinary. I'm quite certain I'll never again experience such a perfect conjunction of art and life. I remember there was one line in the play that went something like "You pigs have gone too far this time!" The whole place exploded in laughter and cheers! I'm still in awe of their feat of translating the lines into Czech as they went. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my twenty plus years with Gypsywood. Some teachers were also present, including a couple of members of the Communist Party. One of them came up and remarked that the play had been "interesting". That word again!

Everybody outside Czechoslovakia was fascinated by what was happening here. Tom Pospíšil had gone down to Vienna to scrounge printing materials for the striking students, and met up with some students from Vienna University. They helped him with assistance, and later arranged for him and a delegation of students from Masaryk University – still then Jan Evangelista Purkyně University – to be officially received by the Austrian Vice-Chancellor Josef Riegler. Here in Brno, Tom also met up with another Austrian, and through him we were invited to perform in a little village just across the border, Langau. So a couple of weeks before Christmas Gypsywood made a little excursion to Austria. For the majority of students this was the first time they'd ever been in "the West". Crossing to the other side of the (ex-)Iron Curtain! It was totally mind-blowing for them. And even for me, since crossing the border in and out of Czechoslovakia always held the potential for some kind of hitch, something not quite in order with my visa or whatever. Now the border had ceased to exist – there was no need for passports, even ID cards. Absolute freedom to come and go.

In Langau, we only did a few scenes from *Animal Farm*, along with several songs, of course. And there were explanations in German of what we were doing. We rounded off the "tour" with a visit to the Christmas market in Vienna. Tom Pospíšil and I and a few students took up an invitation from the Vienna students, who were members of one of those traditional German student fraternities, to visit their clubroom – by coincidence, the fraternity was holding its annual Christmas gathering that day. It was a fascinating glimpse into a whole different world, with fraternity members of all generations there, wearing their funny peaked caps and other paraphernalia of the fraternity traditions. What was fascinating was talking to three older guys who'd been students at the German University in Prague. They'd been expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1945 along with three million or so of their fellow "Germans". Forty-five years later, they still spoke quite passable Czech. Four months later, *Animal Farm* once more took us abroad, to an English-language theatre festival in Warsaw, where we put on the full play. From the audience's reaction, I'd say that, for whatever reasons, Orwell and *Animal Farm* didn't have quite the same resonance for Poles as they did for Czechs.

* * *



“Freunde aus dem Osten”: Tom Pospíšil as the “Studentenführer” of a delegation of Masaryk University students meeting with Austrian Vice-Chancellor Josef Riegler and Günther Wiesinger, head of one of the student fraternities at the University of Vienna, 6 December 1989.

© T. Pospíšil

The next year, **1990**, we did a reprise of *Oh! What a Lovely War*. We hadn't been able to put on many performances when we did it the first time in 1988, and we had a cupboard full of costumes and props from the show. Most of the students who'd been in the original production two years earlier were still around. These were all good reasons for reviving it. And there were personal reasons as well. We were well into the period of transition that came with the collapse of the system in 1989. By now I was head of the English Department and up to my ears in work – the task of finding new teachers, long discussions entailing radical changes in our degree programme and methods of teaching, and so on. I was also in the faculty Senate, where a group of us were revising all the faculty regulations. So I just didn't have time to put together a new play. What we did was kind of “upgrade” it a bit. For example we cut out silhouettes for the rifles, sewed more flags – they made a great contrast with the white Pierrot costumes – made a better job of distinguishing the various allied armies, and so on.

This production also took us abroad – to Erlangen in Bavaria and to Salzburg, both at the invitation of the local English Departments. And for a grand finale in May 1991, we put *Oh! What a Lovely War* on for the 200 participants of the 1st Brno English Teacher Education Conference. The group of actors in this production had been together for many years, and everyone really bonded. And we still meet, every year just before Christmas, to chat and laugh and catch up on each other's lives. I think something like this is unique, certainly in the English Department and perhaps *vůbec*.



Oh! What a Lovely War, 1990.

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It occurs to me that I haven't said much yet about our audiences, and where we performed, over the years. I've already spoken about Cikháj and the way the opening nights there were kind of "internal" events within the English Department – the audiences were made up exclusively of students on the intensive course, other current students plus ex-Gypsywooders, teachers from the department, and guests of the department like the teachers who gave the Thursday evening talk. Back in Brno – and I'm talking here about my time, from the late seventies to the early nineties – we attracted a lot of our students who hadn't been at Cikháj, plus students at the language school and students from various grammar schools. But there was also the general English-speaking public, which covered a huge range of people and all ages. I think the oldest spectator I encountered was almost 90 – Jaroslav Císař, who'd had a fascinating career that included being secretary to TGM just after World War I. Look him up in the online encyclopedia of Brno's history.

Outside Brno, both Olomouc and Bratislava were on our regular circuit – as a rule we'd perform there every year, our visits being organized by the local English Departments. Prague was usually a problem – it seemed hard to arrange for organizational support at that end. But we did go there in spring 1991 with *Oh! What a Lovely War*, and then in 1992 with the *15-Minute Hamlet* and *God*. As far as I recall we organized our 1992 appearance ourselves. We thought it appropriate that on that second occasion we performed in the Divadlo Jára Cimrmana in Žižkov – both plays were rather Cimrmanish. Performances in other cities usually depended on cast members who could arrange things in their home towns. I remember Ostrava, Zlín and Kroměříž. I think that's all.

* * *

Back to the Gypsywood productions. In **1991**, we again returned to the format of two one-act plays. By this time the Vysokoškolský klub no longer existed, so we had to find another venue. The best option was Leitnerka. But it wasn't easy to act there – they don't have a stage, it's really just a space.

The opening one-acter was Tom Stoppard's **15-Minute Hamlet**. It's ideal for Czech audiences, because even if they can't understand the English, they more or less know what's going on, because everybody knows *Hamlet*. And as an encore, we added a **15-Second Hamlet** someone had found.

The second play – Woody Allen's **God** – was longer. It was a joy – a very funny text, and plenty of opportunities for over-the-top acting. But there were two headaches. One had to do with the costumes. The play is set in Ancient Greece, so we had to sew a load of those bloody Greek chitons. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to sew a Greek chiton that actually looks like a Greek chiton and not like a heap of rags. And you wouldn't believe how much material you need for them. It's incredible – yards and yards and yards. The second headache was a very tricky scene where God appears above the stage and descends below. Yes, the Classical *Deus ex machina*. We ended up creating a weird vehicle from the body of an old baby carriage that was launched on a kind of ramp. It was a nightmare to get it to work smoothly – in the first few attempts when it made the transition from ramp to stage the angle was too sharp, or the speed too great, and it kind of reared up and toppled over. Eventually we managed to get it right. Which relieved me, since I was playing God. A very easy role, since when the *machina* eventually stops, it's revealed that God is dead. But every time I went down that ramp, I wondered if this might not end up being literally true.

* * *

Sweetie Pie followed in **1992** – a play that's a little bit different. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, in terms of genre virtually every play we put on can be regarded as something a little bit different. But this was different in that it was a collective creation, the work of the Theatre-in-Education Company in Bolton, England. It was created specifically to be used by and in schools, and for school kids – I assume secondary school kids – as actors. It's about Sweetie Pie, a woman who's just out of school, and is kind of marginal in society. But in the course of the play she finds herself. The whole production was different from what came before for a number of reasons. For one thing, we'd reached a point where putting together a cast wasn't easy. In the early nineties, the whole world was suddenly opening up to the students. They could do all kinds of things that were impossible before, and so they weren't as interested in Gypsywood as they'd been before 1989. So it was good that the play had a fairly small cast. And we still had a lot of "leftovers", people who'd been in productions at the end of the eighties. But there were several "newbies" as well, and they ended up being in only one production. The play worked in the end, though we didn't travel very much with it. And we performed it in a more modest setting than we'd been used to in the past – the Operní studio of JAMU's Faculty of Music in Královo Pole. It was a kind of slow winding down of Gypsywood.

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Then came the **fall of 1993** and at the end of September I did what I did every year – I announced that those who were interested in being in the Gypsywood play should meet on such a such a day at such and such a time in such and such a classroom. Only a handful showed up, maybe seven or eight people. We talked for a while and we all agreed that it simply didn't make any sense to go ahead with Gypsywood. I myself was under increasing pressure from other activities I was

doing. A few of the students – they'd been in *Sweetie Pie* – also admitted that even they had shown up more out of a sense of duty. Nobody was very keen on continuing, and we all had good, objective reasons for our decision. And so in 1993 there was no play whatsoever. The continuity of Gypsywood was suddenly interrupted.

* * *

In **1994** there was a very odd production. It's sort of like the uncle in the family you don't talk about very much. This was **Prime**. It was from a book with short little skits, a whole series of them. It was directed by Derek DeWitt. He showed up in the department one day and said he'd heard about Gypsywood, and we hadn't done anything the previous year – maybe he could help revive it? I agreed. If he could find the students, and was prepared to put in the time, then why not?

Derek was an American, one of the many foreigners that were floating around Brno in the beginning of the nineties, probably teaching English somewhere. And so he went ahead. It was an unhappy production. Virtually none of the students had done any acting at all. It also included some people who were from outside the department – some native speakers of English, some foreigners who were in Brno. So it was a mixed collection of individuals who I guess by the nature of things couldn't really form a company where people could learn from one another. It was also unhappy from another point of view. The department couldn't give them any money. And we didn't have a theatre we could make available. So they had to decide where they would put it on. They ended up renting the Divadlo Bolka Polívky on Jakubské náměstí, which seats around 200. They had two performances, with probably not more than 30 or 40 people at each. So the poor actors faced a huge more or less empty auditorium. Thinking about it now, I can't remember ever talking to any of our students who were in the production and asking how they felt. But it must have been a very strange and maybe even disturbing experience.

* * *

Two years passed, and then in **1996** there was another attempt to revive Gypsywood. A group of students prevailed on Glenn Timmermans, a British Council lecturer in the department at the time, to direct them in a play. He chose Brian Friel's ***The Freedom of the City***. This is a powerful and angry play, set in Northern Ireland and written in the aftermath of the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in 1972. Gypsywood had never done anything like this before, so it was a bold choice. And it was made even bolder by the fact that, again, the students had never acted before – at least in the context of Gypsywood. But the actors dealt with both these limiting factors with great energy, and the play ran for three successful performances in the cellar stage at the Divadlo Husa na provázku.

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Now we jump another two years, to **1998**. Ted Johns, the author and director of the play we put on, is one of my very oldest friends in Canada. We started off university together in September 1961 – we were roommates in the residence in our first year. Ted eventually ended up becoming an actor and a playwright. He's written all sorts of plays, some of them one-man shows that he performed, others plays for full casts. This was one of them, ***The Death of The Donnelly's***. It's about a feud that took place in the nineteenth century in southern Ontario between the Donnelly family and the community. It's part of Canadian folklore, a Canadian myth. Songs have been written about the Donnellys as well as books and several other plays and even a rock opera.

At some point in the eighties or nineties, when I was in Canada and Ted and I were sitting together in the evening, talking and drinking, I said “Why don’t you come over and direct one of your plays sometime for Gypsywood?” So in 1998 he got some kind of grant from the Canada Council for him and his stepson, Chris Royal, to come over to the Czech Republic and put on the play with us. Ted directed and Chris, who was a trained actor, was the assistant director. Chris was also in charge of the music, because there were folk songs in it, and the dancing – typical North American square dancing – and the fights. The music was mostly guitar music, but we also had a violin. And again, we put together an ad hoc cast, though several of the people had been in *The Freedom of The City* a year and a half earlier. The cast worked well together. What probably helped was that many of them knew each other well, as they were studying together in the same year. They gave the impression of being a “company”.

At first sight, *The Death of The Donnellys* may seem like a rough and ready play. In fact it’s quite sophisticated. But there’s lots of action, physical fights, angry encounters, rough language, all of which might give an erroneous impression and creates special demands on the actors. It was an energetic and rollicking production. The singing was good, the dances were good, the fights were good. Even the chickens were good. The plot requires a couple of them to be on stage. Our stage manager found them somewhere in Brno, and they performed well, but she had no place to keep them overnight. So we housed them in our garden shed. I think three nights in all. Ted was very pleased with the production. I’d been talking to him for nearly twenty years about Gypsywood, but he had no idea what to expect, or at any rate wasn’t getting his hopes up. But both he and Chris returned to Canada ready to spread the good news about the group.

* * *

A year later, in the **spring of 1999**, we had a kind of fringe Gypsywood production, ***The Parrot***. This musical creation was based on an essay by Edgar Allan Poe called “The Philosophy of Composition”, where he explains how he created “The Raven”, as well as the poem itself. The essay presents the poem as the product of a coldly rational series of speculative questions and logical conclusions. I don’t think anybody really believes a word of it, but it’s a good read. The text of “The Philosophy of Composition” was abridged and shortened by Pavel Drábek, who was a student in our department at the time – he’s now a full professor at the University of Hull in the UK – and the music was created by Ondřej Kyas, a long-time buddy of Pavel’s and a brilliant composer of serious music. (As well as, currently, a member of the Brno alternative group Květy.) They’d already collaborated on various short sung pieces that they called mini-operas. At that point, these were still basically things they created for friends, so with this they were venturing out into the world a bit. *The Parrot* has three singers. It was sung by Pavel and another English Department student, Lukáš Morávek, and me. The piece has two parts. It begins with my part, which is made up of excerpts from “The Philosophy of Composition”. And the second part is “The Raven” – this was sung by Pavel and Lukáš. Except that in this version the figure of the Raven is replaced by a Parrot. The whole thing was a wonderful parody and full of comic moments. We all had a ball putting it on. We in fact performed it twice, in the cellar at Skleněná louka and then in the cellar stage of the Divadlo Husa na provázku. This latter performance was recorded (a bit fuzzily) – you can watch it online in a series of three YouTube videos.

And in **1999** we did something else new – **we recorded the best songs** from our previous shows over the previous twenty years. We’d had this in mind for some time, but never got round to it. But that year we thought why not? – let’s give it a try. Our idea was that we’d get together and rehearse a bit and then record the songs and that would be it. Little did we know! We made a selection of the songs from the plays that we put on with music, which were mostly back there in the eighties – things like *Animal Farm*, *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *The Matchmaker*, *Habeas Corpus*.



Pavel Drábek and Don Sparling trying their best in a recording studio, 1999.

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But also stuff from the late seventies – *My Fair Lady* and *The Beggar's Opera*. We contacted the people who'd been in those plays and then we all went off to Cikháj, just like in the past. Though this time only for a weekend. We decided which songs we'd record, and practised them a bit just to start getting our voices back in shape. Some people were there with their partners, and a couple of little kids were running around. It was a very special Gypsywood event.

Back in Brno, we'd arranged to record the songs with a professional sound engineer high up in some studio in the Janáček Theatre. It must have been torture for him, dealing with total amateurs. And we had to do it at night. Many, many, many evenings after the theatre closed at 11 pm we trooped into the dark building and made our way up to this remote recording studio, and remained there till two in the morning, determined to do our best. And if you listen to the recording now, you'll see that our best was precisely what's captured in the title of the CD – *The (We Did Our) Best of Gypsywood*.

The singing is far from perfect, but I think it does give at least some feel of the atmosphere that was created by and around the songs originally. I personally found it a bit frustrating. When I came to Brno in 1977 I was fresh from seven years attending the Slovácký krúžek in Prague. I was very active in the group – seven or eight times a month there'd be some activity with singing, either on its own or when dancing. So back then I had a reasonable voice. In 1999 I was faced with the fact that I really didn't have the voice I'd once had. But I was comforted by the realization that nobody else had the voice they'd once had either. The way I put it is that the recording is “very authentic”.

The third Gypsywood event in **1999** was the staging of *Murder in the Cathedral*. This, to my mind, was the most exceptional accomplishment in the history of Gypsywood. And this too came from the fertile mind of Pavel Drábek, who came up with the idea of creating a musical version

of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Pavel adapted the text and was the director, and again Ondřej Kyas composed the music. But this time it was in effect a full-length opera. It had a very large cast. There were nineteen women in the chorus – the “Women of Canterbury”. This was perfect for our English Department. Almost inevitably, given the makeup of the student body, many more women than men show an interest in taking part in Gypsywood productions. But for historical reasons, male roles outnumber female roles in most plays. Which leaves only three solutions. You can re-direct the “surplus” women to things like costumes, props, prompting and the like. Or you can rewrite the play a bit, changing male characters to female characters where this is possible. Or you can paint moustaches on the women and assign them male roles. (I don't think I was ever forced to choose that third option.)

In addition to the Women of Canterbury, there were eight individual roles, all for men – Thomas Becket, four Tempters and three Priests. They both sang and spoke their lines. And nine musicians. The show was put on in the *Dům volného času* in Lužánky, and lasted something over two hours. And you know, I was utterly absorbed in it throughout. They were of course working from a very strong text. But Pavel, crazy Pavel – I use crazy in a very positive sense, as you know – had this brilliant idea of framing T. S. Eliot's play with medieval St. George plays. I've seen this play three other times, including once at Stratford-upon-Avon in England, and it was always a failure. The play's a strange goulash – Classical Greek chorus, high rhetoric and realistic dialogue, that jocular Brechtian ending, when the four Knights, who've just murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket, come forward and speak directly to the audience, justifying their action. For me it never came together, it never really worked. What totally stunned me in this production was that by adding these goofy, entertaining St. George plays at the beginning and end, everything clicked. Somehow the St. George plays tied everything together in an archetypal whole, one where high ritual and the carnivalesque coincided. It was “artificial” in the sense opera is “artificial” – highly stylized but charged with a kind of elemental energy. Even the greatest actors in the English-speaking world couldn't give it life – and here in Brno it sang (literally). It was powerful and moving and I was emotionally exhausted at the end. On so many levels, and in so many ways, it was a brilliant success.

They put it on three times in Brno, and had one performance in Bratislava the next spring. But it was very difficult bringing the whole cast and the musicians together, especially since most of the musicians were already into their professional careers, with engagements elsewhere. Two members of the cast were Americans, here as exchange students. Ben Williams is now a theatre professional in the United States, teaching theatre at NYU and part of The Elevator Repair Service, one of the most progressive experimental theatre groups in the States. In a book he published a few years back he said that all he's ever learned about theatre, he learned with this crazy company called the Gypsywood Players, an amateur English-language student theatre group. Joshua Mensch now lives in Prague and he's a poet – recently he published *Because*, a novel in verse. I think it's a huge shame that *Murder* isn't revived by some professional or semi-professional group. It's extremely effective and works at all levels – the original text, the added dimension with those St. George plays, the music. It was a bold experiment, and I'm still convinced its time will come.

There's a curious footnote to all this, simply as another example of how Gypsywood is connected with so much that isn't Gypsywood. In 2000 I became head of Masaryk University's international office. MU's a member of the Utrecht Network, along with 25 other universities. In 2003 they held their annual meeting in Brno and we wanted to do something special for the final evening. I happened to mention this to Pavel, and he said “What if we create a mini-opera for them?” And so the two of us put together a libretto with a plot that brought in all the different member universities of the Network. Ondřej composed the music, of course. And the singers were staff from our international office, including me and five other people, Lukáš Morávek

among them (he'd played the role of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*). So on the final day of the Utrecht Network meeting we took all the participants down to a wine cellar in Hustopeče for the evening. And then after ample food and drink, I announced there would be some entertainment. And people were astounded – it's not every day you become part of an opera! Each year the host for the AGM tries to come up with something special for the final evening, but *Phil and Sophy*, the mini-opera we created specially for the Utrecht Network, set a new benchmark.

And here comes the point. For this mini-opera, Pavel and Ondřej had put together a small orchestra of five musicians. And these were the musicians that became the core of Opera Diversa – that was their premiere as a group. So – *The Parrot*, the same duo creating *Murder in the Cathedral*, some of the musicians and a lead singer in that production being in *Phil and Sophy*, and then the creation of Opera Diversa, with Pavel as its first Artistic Director and Ondra its in-house composer. Opera Diversa's made a reputation as one of the most interesting new contemporary music groups in Brno – and it has this little drop of Gypsywood in its DNA, like Neanderthals in humans. I find this fascinating, because it's like teaching as a profession. You never know whether what you're teaching students will have some completely unanticipated effect somewhere down the line ten or twenty years later. And it's exactly the same with Gypsywood. You can't know what the implications of Gypsywood will be.

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I mentioned a moment ago that in 2000 I became head of the MU international office, the Office for International Studies. This meant me leaving the English Department, and my contact with it became sporadic. Which means that my links with Gypsywood, which itself had been sporadic in the nineties, became even weaker. So what I'll talk about from here on will be pretty much at second hand, just to put things on record.

As sometimes happens with demanding and successful projects, *Murder in the Cathedral* took its toll. It probably drained a lot of energy from the main protagonists, especially Pavel, and it was the last Gypsywood production for the next five years. But the spirit of Gypsywood was always there. Students would prepare little sketches for the department's Creativity Nights and teachers like Katka Tomková who were ex-Gypsywooders would try to inspire students to do something. But the company needed someone to organize it all.

It was only in **2004** that one of our native speakers, Matthew Nicholls, who taught practical English and academic writing and who's himself a writer, decided to write a play and put it on. He came up with this funny story based on Czech fairy-tales and the British-Czech cultural clash called ***A Bohavian Fairy Tale***. The production followed in the Gypsywood tradition in the sense that it had lots of musical numbers with singing and dancing, and it brought a lot of people together. Linda Kyzlinková (Nepivodová) and Filip Krajník were in the cast, among others. The group didn't go to Cikháj, though. Perhaps that's why this turned out to be a one-time-only thing. Still, it was very popular and successful – they put it on several times at the Barka theatre in Královo Pole. Unfortunately, for various good reasons Matthew wasn't the one to take up the challenge and run the company in the following years either. So there was another long gap – this time for a full seven years. Gypsywood was on life support.

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In **2012**, one of our Master's students, Michal Mikeš, became interested in the company and he began talking to everyone about it. He came to me and spoke about it, too, but I was too busy with other projects at the time. He talked to Pavel Drábek, who'd led the *Murder in the Cathedral* production well over a decade before, but Pavel too was busy as the head of the Theatre Studies

Department and Associate Professor at the English Department, so he couldn't commit himself either. But both Pavel and I recommended Tomáš Kačer, who'd acted in *Murder in the Cathedral* and had just finished his doctorate. Which meant he had – theoretically at least – oodles of free time. Tomáš had no association with the department back then aside from being a graduate, but he agreed to run the project.

Tomáš decided to do ***The Real Inspector Hound***, an early play by Tom Stoppard that – by sheer coincidence – he'd been doing his research on for many years. Michal Mikeš was officially the director of the show but it was a truly collaborative effort where everybody chipped in whatever – limited – experience with theatre they had. Suddenly there was the germ of a new company, with actors, musicians and lots of stage hands. The spirit of the old Gypsywood somehow came back. The group went to Cikháj together – it was almost like a pilgrimage – and then performed the play at the Barka theatre several times in December. It was a great success. And it was especially satisfying for old Gypsywooders, who were heartened to see the group alive and kicking again.

More importantly, though, this turned out to be the first year of the revived Gypsywood as we know it today. In 2013, Tomáš joined the department as faculty member at the same time as Jeff Smith, who had experience with theatre from his earlier years in the US. The two of them have been running the company since then – Jeff as the Artistic Director and Tomáš as the Director of Everything Else (aka *Capo di tutti capi*). In a way these two are doing what Jessie and I were doing – sharing responsibilities, inspiring one another, helping each other out. And having a ball in the process.

At least two generations of students – and counting – have participated in Gypsywood productions in the company's latest reincarnation since 2012. The company continues to provide the department with a strong sense of identity and entertainment. A lot has changed over the fifty-plus years since the beginning of Gypsywood. One of the greatest changes is that the university recreation centre in Cikháj has been closed down so the intensive rehearsals now take place in Telč, where the university has its splendidly refurbished University Centre. Productions there are open for preview as public rehearsals, but it's no longer the custom for department members and students to go and see the current play there. The opening night takes place in Brno. In some ways, the name of the company reflects this change. These days most people really need to dig into the background to understand where this slightly bizarre name comes from, since no one has experienced and very few have even heard of Cikháj.

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However, in **September 2015** we made an attempt to remedy this. That year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first Gypsywood performance, an anniversary we felt should be celebrated. So we announced there'd be a Gypsywood family reunion, and went all out to contact as many former Gypsywooders as possible. The response exceeded our expectations – in the end almost 150 current and former Gypsywooders were present. The event began with a special performance by the current Gypsywood company of their latest production, ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, at the BuranTeatr just round the corner on Kounicová, and continued in the faculty's new Building B. This was beautifully symbolic, since it's on the same site where the English Department was located for so many years before moving to its current location on Gorkého. In fact the new building had just been opened, and our event “launched” it as a public space. Another Gypsywood first! We spoke a bit about the history of the group, declared Eva Golková an Honoured Gypsywood Jubilee Spectator, and then spent the next few hours consuming large quantities of food and drink and renewing old friendships. It was an amazing occasion – people converged on Brno from all over the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and a few even from abroad. Even more amazing,

we had participants from every Gypsywood production over the previous half century, including two from the very first production, *The Dear Departed*, back in 1965 – Lída Molerová (Kolářová) and Ivo Semerád. It would be an interesting exercise to figure out how many “generations” of Gypswooders were present.

And the Gypsywood generations continue. The company is still a place for students to come together, work on a shared project, make new friendships and engage with amateur theatre. And once again the Gypsywood Players is an integral part of the spirit of the department. To use a very old-fashioned phrase, I’m tickled pink the tradition lives on. Performances now take place typically in Brno in mid-December, and they offer an opportunity for a lot of ex-Gypswooders to meet and catch up with the latest events at the department. And as a rule the productions themselves continue another tradition – they’re a lot of fun!