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André Breton on French and Czech Stages

Mariana Orawczak Kunešová

Abstract

The study intends to explore the impact André Breton's plays had on the interwar stagings in France and Czechoslovakia. I will focus on two of Breton's plays, *If You Please* (written together with Soupault in 1919, staged in Paris in 1920 and in Prague in 1928) and *Le Trésor des jésuites* [The Treasure of the Jesuits] (written with Aragon in 1929, world premiere in Prague in 1935, not translated in English), and their staging specificities, including the context: reasons of their staging choice, translation, and reception. The intention of this study is to contribute to the debate regarding the relationship between French and Czech Surrealism.

Key words

Breton, Soupault, Aragon, Dada, Surrealism, Poetism, avant-garde, theatre, staging

André Breton is known for his ambiguous relationship with theatre. His ‘Surrealist Manifesto’ rejects theatre implicitly because it does not draw from spontaneity but is a voluntary construction, and it belongs to a fossilised social system based on capital (BÉHAR 1979: 57–58; CORVIN 1998: 1578). These implicit arguments are confirmed by Breton’s text from September 1924 (BRETON 1934: 265–266), later published in his collection of essays *Break of Day*, attacking theatre for its need to mask oneself and become a stranger to oneself; or in 1929 by the exclusion of Roger Vitrac and Antonin Artaud from the Surrealist group, because they dared to perform a play by August Strindberg¹ (BÉHAR 1979: 58), ‘for profit and boast’² (BRETON 1930: 786). Yet, Breton would, at the same time, state in the ‘Manifesto’ that spontaneity reveals itself nowhere in such a free way than in dialogue (BRETON 1924: 335).³ He himself wrote four plays – together with Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret, and Louis Aragon,⁴ – and desired, as his correspondence shows, to ‘put’ his characters on stage.⁵ During the Dada period, he also ‘put’ on stage himself.

Breton’s relationship with Czechoslovakia is well known especially in the Czech context (see e.g., BÉHAR 1990; HAMANOVÁ 1996; SAYER 2012). Therefore, let me briefly touch upon that context which is indispensable for this study. From 1933 when Breton first met in Paris the future leader of the Czech surrealist group Vítězslav Nezval and one of the future key members of this group, the Liberated Theatre stage director Jindřich Honzl, he warmly sustained Czech partisans of Surrealism. The Czech surrealist group, founded in March 1934, was the first surrealist group set up outside France (SAYER 2012: 56). Breton’s conference stay in Czechoslovakia in spring 1935 was for him and his fellow Paul Éluard ‘a revelation’ (SAYER 2012: 61): they were enthusiastically received, hundreds of people attended their lectures; they gave interviews on the radio, signed Czech editions of their books, and were astonished by the ‘cordial relations’ (SAYER 2012: 61) of Czech surrealists with the Communist Party of the country. The *Bulletin international du surréalisme* [International Surrealism Bulletin], marking the official internalisation of the movement, was a project initiated during Breton’s stay in Czechoslovakia, and the first issue (April 1935) was bilingual, in French and Czech (SAYER 2012: 59–61). After this visit, as Breton wrote to Nezval, the Prague surrealists were his best friends:

1 The performance took place in the Théâtre Alfred Jarry which the two authors founded in 1926.

2 Unless indicated otherwise, all the translations from Czech and French are mine.

3 Breton’s statements regarding theatre are not long; as Henri Béhar notices, the whole of these comments takes less than one page (BÉHAR 1979: 20).

4 Two of these plays constitute the corpus of this study. The remaining ones are:

(a) *Vous m’oublierez* [You will Forget Me] by Breton and Soupault, performed at the *Dada Festival* at the Salle Gaveau in May 1920. The whole text first appeared in *Littérature*, ‘new series’, No. 4, September 1922.

(b) *Comme il fait beau* [What a Beautiful Time There Is] by Breton, Desnos, and Péret, published in the same journal, No. 4, February/March 1923, not performed. To my knowledge, no English translations of the entire plays have been published.

5 See below (Section ‘If You Please’) plus footnote No. 20.

[...] this very rare certainty that I would take away from this city and from you all one of the most beautiful memories of my life. You know, don't you, that I am completely behind you, that I would do everything for you, that you are my best friends. You are men. When I think of intelligence, of beauty, of nobility, of the future, your faces will be the first that appear before me. (SAYER 2012: 59, quoted in English translation).

Due to this very positive context of Breton's reception in Czechoslovakia, and to the important position of theatre in Czech historical avant-garde,⁶ the aim of this study is to explore the trace Breton left on French and Czech stages. I will focus on two of Breton's plays staged in Prague, both by Honzl in the Liberated Theatre: *If You Please*⁷ and *Le Trésor des jésuites* [The Treasure of the Jesuits]⁸. I will study the characteristics of these plays, their staging specificities both in Paris and Prague, and reception.⁹ The intention of this study is to contribute to the debate regarding the relationship between French and Czech Surrealism.

If You Please

This play was written by the duo Breton and Soupault in the period of their first experience with automatic writing – at the end of 1919, shortly after the publication of the poems of *The Magnetic Fields*. Soupault later confessed it was clear to both that no stage director would accept the play, so they knew they could allow themselves anything in it (SOUPAULT 1981: 107–108).

Its characteristics correspond to those of surrealist theatre: the laboratory of automatic writing, experimentation with plot and the presence of values of Surrealism (CORVIN 1998: 1579). The play consists of four acts; each of them is an independent story with a different atmosphere. Their only common point is the disappointment of expectations.

In this article, I will only briefly present Act II – the only one to have been performed both in Paris and Prague. The main character, Létoile, is the boss of a small company which portrays itself as capable of helping anyone in the most delicate situations. But, to a man reporting a theft of jewels, Létoile says that helping him is the concern of the police. He makes the police arrest a young candid man looking for a fiancée as a murderer. Sometimes, he makes a thief return people's stolen wallets. In the last scene, the police come to arrest him. He asks: 'What does this matter to me?' (BRETON and SOUPAULT 1920: 168).

6 The Liberated Theatre was founded in 1925 as the theatre section of the association of Czech avant-garde artists Devětsil.

7 Translated in English by Michael Benedikt and George E. Wellwarth, published in 1964 (BRETON and SOUPAULT 1920).

8 The play was not translated into English.

9 This study is based on my research of Jindřich Honzl's family's personal archives, Prague, the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, and the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris, carried out in 2021.

The behaviour of Létoile, illustrating the surrealist wish of a state beyond morality,¹⁰ contrasts heavily with a realistic décor – an office, with a typewriter, a telephone, tables, and chairs – and with appearances: Létoile is ‘clean-shaven’ and wears the rosette of the Legion of Honour.

The act has the highest proportion of action and of the deception of expectations of the whole play, and almost lacks passages in automatic writing. Hence, it is easily understandable and has an obvious scenic potential, which is enhanced by the attitude of Létoile. This ‘game master’ enjoys playing with his clients. In the scene of the lost jewels (Scene 4), he ‘speaks heatedly, during the whole scene his eyes do not leave the other man’ (BRETON and SOUPAULT 1920: 158). Also, he suddenly asks his client a question which seems totally incompatible with the problem; but it may also be interpreted as a particularly sophisticated investigation method whose logic escapes the common man, which makes stronger the expectation of a marvellous solution, and later, a stronger disappointment:

THE MAN: [...] The room is quite some distance from our bedroom. Before undressing, my wife put her necklace and her rings on the mantel-piece. I remained in the study.

LÉTOILE: Excuse me, were you smoking?

THE MAN (*after taking some time to reflect*): Yes. Several minutes later...

LÉTOILE: Several minutes. You say.

THE MAN (*troubled*): Well, about ten minutes. The jewels had disappeared.

Pause.

LÉTOILE: I would be interested in knowing to what I owe the honour of your visit.

(BRETON and SOUPAULT 1920: 159)

The scenic potential is completed by effective stage directions, a good example being the scene with two ladies who ask for money for charitable purposes (Scene 6). Létoile gives them a generous amount, then accuses them of having stolen it from him.

[And] the ladies tremblingly give him the money. Létoile crumples it up while he keeps looking at them and then throws it into the fire. The ladies, discountenanced, sit down. A pause. Létoile opens a newspaper. The ladies leave, one behind the other. The first one drops her notebook and the second picks it up. (BRETON-SOUPAULT 1920: 161)

At the same time, the play is not a mere accumulation of witty moments. In two scenes close to the end (Scene 11 and 13), the language and the tempo together with a more intimate mood form a counterpoint with the rest of the action and build up a surprisingly poetic atmosphere. In Scene 11, Létoile is alone with his secretary who seems ready to satisfy all his desires and even stirs them up. Just before carrying out the act, Létoile suddenly says action is for him as unimportant as whatsoever, and noth-

10 Which corresponds to what Breton mentions in the definition of Surrealism: ‘exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern’ (BRETON 1972: 26).

ing happens. The dialogue does not consist of the usual seduction language, but seems motivated partly by automatic writing, partly by the Baudelairian themes¹¹ of the limits of transgression and of lost illusions, which opens the doors to the imaginary of the bizarre:

TYPIST: We've had a wonderful time today.

LÉTOILE: It happens from time to time that I pace up and down in front of houses or among the trees on the square. The strollers smile at my impatience, but I wasn't waiting for anyone.

TYPIST: I'll never forget you.

LÉTOILE: Like the wind, forgetfulness blows the leaves of bills over the doorsteps of credit, then chases them all away.

TYPIST: There are other whirlwinds – the intoxication of parties and the contradictory orders that you give. It's like when one is lying in the arms of pleasure close to midnight, when the concern of mother and brothers doesn't count any more; one loses all sense of wrongdoing and leans back with closed eyes against the comfort of a tree. The department stores could catch fire; all the prayers could be prayed: the earthly paradise is far. For the time being one returns to the brightly lit bars and in one's heart broods about the barbarous acts which are being committed all over the world.

LÉTOILE: Your way of unfolding the newspaper enchants me, but this young man whom I've had arrested hasn't done anything to you. [...]

(BRETON and SOUPAULT 1920: 165)

The other scene mentioned, scene 13, takes place just before the police come to arrest Létoile. The telephone rings, Létoile answers, and his words, pragmatic first, suddenly turn into, again, a Baudelairian monologue about 'over there', a place one can never reach. Although Létoile interrupts later his confession and returns to his usual attitude of a demiurge, the Baudelairian mood breaks through:

Hello! Yes, it's me... Not bad, thanks... Nothing... Later? Who knows... I've seen all the trees lose their leaves for a long time... Over there that's what one dreams, but over there doesn't exist. There will never be anything but here... I observe the drops of rain which are all the moments of my life run down the windowpanes... The hours which will never return anymore seem like centuries... So much the better! I no longer want the pleasures I've desired for such a long time because they are within my reach. I know tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and all the other days... The future is the same mirror that is always before one's eyes... My ears buzz with the sound of the bells of pride... (BRETON and SOUPAULT 1920: 167)

11 For the relationship Baudelaire vs. Surrealism, see (RAYMOND 1970).

The Paris show and further projects

Act II of *If You Please* was performed at one of the first big Dada manifestations in Paris, in Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in March 1920.¹² The theatre was run by Aurélien Lugné Poe who had staged *Ubu the King* in 1896 and was sympathetic to the avant-gardes. The evening, with a conception by Tristan Tzara, consisted of various numbers and of very diverse genres: reading of manifestoes, musical performances, presentation of a painting, music hall-like sketches, theatre (among which *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* by Tzara and *The Mute Canary* by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes). The author of the stage set was the painter Francis Picabia.¹³ With only one minor exception,¹⁴ the performers were not professionals, and most of them were not accustomed to the stage (SANOUILLET 2005: 140–141).

If You Please was performed among others by Breton (as Létoile), Soupault, Paul and Gala Éluard. There are very likely no photos from the show,¹⁵ but it seems the ‘actors’ respected the realistic directions as to the costumes. A photograph of Breton, wearing a wing-collar shirt and glasses and reading another piece of the evening, the ‘Cannibal Manifesto’ by Ribemont-Dessaignes, has been conserved. Glasses and formal clothes are also worn by Létoile. The same picture shows an important piece of the stage set – one of numerous placards with messages typical for Dada, offensive to the public for their aggressiveness or absurdity. Breton appears as a sandwich man; on the board he wears is a picture of a target drawn by Picabia and a text saying: ‘For enjoying something you first have to see and hear it for a long time, you bunch of dead heads.’¹⁶

As to the production, the information available regards either the whole evening or Tzara’s text performed at the same occasion, not specifically *If You Please*. As Didier Plassard observes, the event, as well as the other Parisian Dada performances (and unlike what would happen earlier in Zurich), had a clear aim: to deceive all expectations, to show there is no possibility of exchange between stage and public, and not even a possibility of performance (PLASSARD 1992: 156–157).

The reaction of the audience during the whole Oeuvre evening was stormy: ‘unbelievable racket, continuous murmuring, shouting, whistle blasts, formed together a broken glass sound with the most curious effect’ (RIBEMONT-DESSAIGNES 1958: 494).

The reviews did not mention *If You Please* specifically. As Michel Sanouillet noticed,

12 For detailed information about the Oeuvre event and its reception, see (SANOUILLET 2005: 140–146).

13 Francis Picabia (1879–1953) was a French avant-garde painter, poet, and typographer; he became one of the most important figures of Dada in France and the United States. He later developed an interest in Surrealism, but soon abandoned the art establishment.

14 Several sketches were performed by the actress Musidora. For Musidora, see also below (Section *The Treasure of the Jesuits*).

15 Information based on my research from 2021 in periodicals, archives, and publications regarding the topic. Certain sources present mistakenly as a photograph from the performance of *If You Please* the one from *You Will Forget Me*, performed during the following Dada manifestation in Paris (27 May, salle Gaveau) (SANOUILLET 2005: 152).

16 The photograph is conserved in André Breton’s online archives (see BRETON 1920).

the only review which was not 'dicted by passion' (SANOUILLET 2005: 145), was published by *Comoedia*, at the time the main diary dealing solely with culture, by Georges Charensol.¹⁷ This young critic concluded that the only genuine 'Dada men' were Tzara and Picabia, not the others (G.C. 1920: 2), which in the context of Breton's later activities is very interesting.

It seems also that Breton's later distrust for theatre could have been rooted in the Dada manifestations period. Thirty years later, Breton confessed how frustrating this experience was: according to him, Picabia would each time urge the group to find ideas for a programme. It was difficult to make up, was constituted mostly of Tzara's *The Celestial Adventure... No. 1 - No. x*, and its realisation was even worse.¹⁸ Such a situation did not suit most of the participants, but they were mostly 'very poor', the tickets expensive, and the money earned would easily meet their needs (BRETON 1952: 466–467). He confessed, however, scenic action had made them feel some ecstasy: 'Soupault and me, for example, didn't take for a humble satisfaction that one sketch of ours [...], brought us a bombardment of eggs, tomatoes, beefsteaks the spectators fetched after the interval' (BRETON 1952: 463).

If You Please was published in the journal *Littérature* No. 16 (September/October) 1920. Since 1967, in the French editions, it has been commonly published as part of *The Magnetic Fields*.

After the Oeuvre event, the play was no longer performed in France. However, less than half a year later, Breton's correspondence shows he wished to introduce it to Jacques Copeau (BONNET 1988: 1172–1173).¹⁹ A few weeks later, his opinion changed radically: 'I am not their author [of the plays] anymore.' In another letter he added these plays contain 'childish scepticism'.²⁰ The last information available about a production project appears in a letter from Lugné Poe from 22 January 1921: 'too many actors', 'no one would learn the text for two or three shows', 'but there is a lot of talent!' (quoted in BONNET 1988: 1173).

Hence, Breton's attitude towards his first play would fluctuate. The desire of performance alternates with sensations of childish senselessness and frustration of theatre experience. Nevertheless, *If You Please* was hailed by a renowned stage director.

17 Nevertheless, Lugné Poe appreciated the evening and encouraged the Dadas to write new texts for the stage (SANOUILLET 2005: 143, 145).

18 Breton added he remembered these difficulties very well, because once the programme existed, he was the one to try to make the most of him to keep a minimum of 'commitment' it contained (BRETON 1952: 466). Thus, he underlined how his attitude was alternative to the Dada conception.

19 A letter from the 25. 9. 1920 to his future fiancée Simone Kahn. Breton wrote in the same letter he intended to publish together three plays: *If You Please*, *You Will Forget Me* and some 'light text' (seemingly never written). He added the publication should represent a 'love cycle' and had for him 'quite some importance' (BONNET 1988: 1172–1173).

20 Letters from 18. 9. 1921 and 24. 9. 1921 (see BONNET 1988: 1173).

Honzl's production

Lugné Poe was not the only stage director to appreciate *If You Please*. This attitude was shared by Honzl, as shown in his correspondence with Philippe Soupault, the co-author of the play, who visited Prague in 1927 (JHFPA, Korespondence – sl. II).²¹ One letter makes it apparent that Soupault even lent the manuscript to Honzl.

The choice of the play corresponds absolutely to Honzl's effort to create avant-garde theatre using the texts of, and ideally in collaboration with, avant-garde poets, as well as musicians and painters (OBST and SCHERL 1962: 92–93).²²

For the purpose of the staging, the play was translated by Bohumil Štěpánek²³ and premiered in the Liberated Theatre on 18 May 1928, with Miloslav Jareš²⁴ in the role of Létoile. It would be later performed together with another play, Škeřýková's *Cape of Good Hope*.

The production was not a surrealist one, for Surrealism was adopted by the Czech milieu only in the 1930s. It drew, on the one hand, from the playfulness of Poetism, the artistic programme the Czech interwar avant-garde initiated since the early 1920s, defined by Karel Teige, in his first 'Poetist Manifesto' (1924) as: 'easy-going, mischievous, fantastic, playful, non-heroic, and erotic' (SAYER 2012: 65). On the other hand, the production resulted from Honzl's own theatre reflection. He was one of the first Czech directors who created a homogeneous conception of theatre. It was based on lyricism, and both the stage and the actors were used in order to build up a series of unexpected meanings (OBST and SCHERL 1962: 88–91).

Honzl's production of *If You Please* enhanced the dynamism of the action, surprise, and the comic. One of his first intentions was: 'Action of a very busy man. Coloured bulbs turn on on their own. The bell rings. The tables change place by themselves. As soon as Létoile stands up, his chair raises off the ground. Or even the table. To perform with very light, carton properties' (JHFPA, 085-II).

Honzl finally modified the technical side of this solution and made use, for transporting furniture, of office boys. These also functioned as a dynamising element, creating the comic. Sometimes they imitated 'mechanical movements of machines' (JHFPA, 085-II), sometimes they secretly watched Létoile's 'clients' and showed mocking reactions, etc.

21 In the letter from 16. 7. 1927, Soupault writes: 'I don't share your point of view, I don't think it's very good, but since it amuses you, I authorise you to perform it.'

22 Thus, Honzl, in the Liberated Theatre, staged Czech avant-garde poets like Nezval or Hoffmeister, and an important part of his repertoire was represented by French (pre)avant-garde authors: Jarry, Apollinaire, Goll, Ribemont-Dessaignes, or Cocteau.

23 Bohumil Štěpánek (1902–1985) was a screenwriter, dramaturge, and translator from English (mostly of Shakespeare's plays among which *Hamlet*, 1926) and French.

24 Miloslav Jareš (1903–1980) was an actor and stage and radio director. He performed in the Liberated Theatre from 1926 to 1929.

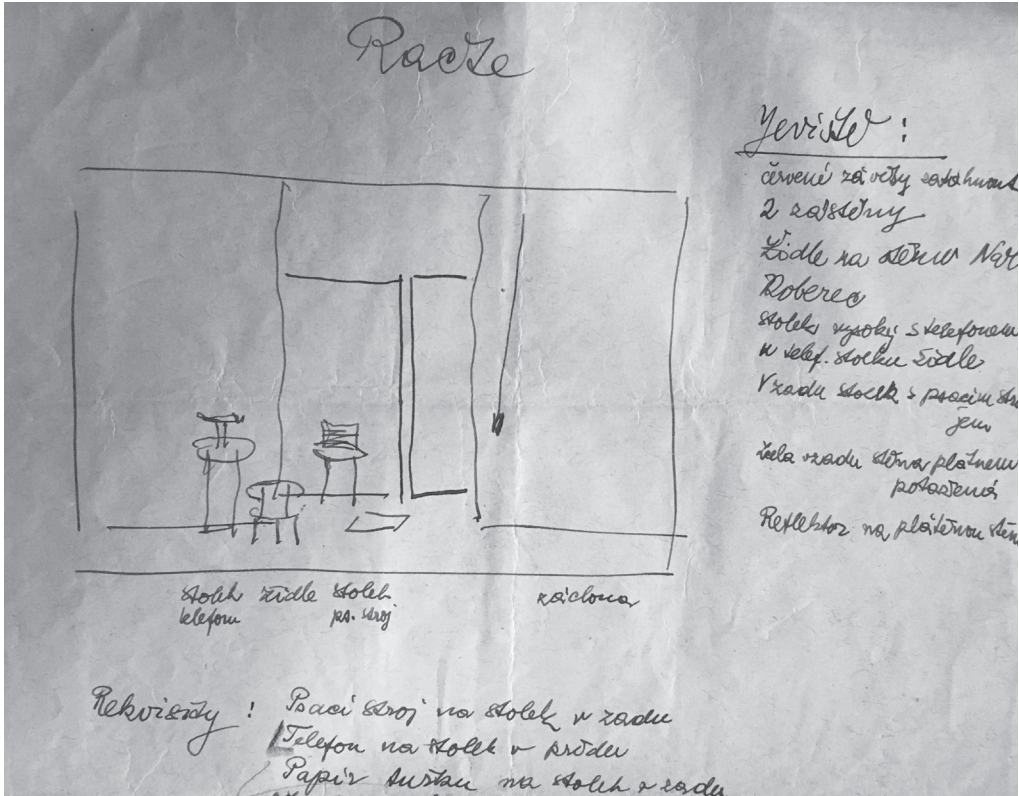


Fig. 1: *If You Please* in the Liberated Theatre, 1928. Stage set draft (JHFPA, 085-II).

The stage set was by Honzl and Vít Obrtel²⁵ (see Fig. 1). An essential part of it were screens used to modify space dimensions. Thus, in Scene 4, with the man reporting the jewellery theft to Létoile, the screens suddenly narrowed the space in such a rapid way that this man had to run to the front of the stage.

Honzl also added to the text a number of stage directions, which sometimes go as far as adding a micro-story to the play. Like in one of the final scenes where Létoile's staff rebel against him (Scene 12), for they do not understand the purpose of his absurd decisions. While in the original the scene consists of a dialogue only, Honzl's directions show the employees had prepared to murder Létoile, but an unexpected movement he makes and his authority make their intentions vanish.

Certain staging solutions, e.g., the insistence on coloured bulbs, may, together with the strategy of the deception of expectations, remind one of Futurism which the Prague public were familiar with. Marinetti visited Prague in 1921 and took an active part in various performances of futurist 'synthesis' performed in two theatres.

25 Vít Obrtel (1901–1988) was a Czech architect, architecture theoretician, designer, furniture designer, stage designer, book designer, poet and editor, and typographer. He was a member of the Devětsil avant-garde group.

However, the goal of Futurism in the context of colour and light was visual *aggressiveness* (MARINETTI 1913: 252–253), which Honzl’s playful strategy did not share. In the programme of the play Honzl also sets himself explicitly apart from Futurism: he believes it only brings surprise for surprise’s sake. While in *If You Please*, surprise leads to poetry, leaving ‘a deep impact on our mind, in order to settle among our sensations like a germ of a plant, which with its crawling roots extends itself towards our farthest associations’ (JHFPA, 085). Thus, Honzl, in spite of the fact he adhered to Surrealism only six years after the premiere of *If You Please*, showed himself as a very accurate interpreter of the play. The effort to suggest, in the programmes of the shows, quality interpretations of the avant-garde plays which might otherwise not be understood by the public, was one of the characteristics of Honzl’s work (OBST and SCHERL 1962: 97).

The press reviews were very positive, claiming that it was the most brilliant, the most elaborated Honzl’s production, which lacked nothing in the character depiction (AMP 1928), or mentioning ‘new lyricism on stage’ and spectacularity (IF. 1928: 5).²⁶

The Treasure of the Jesuits

The play was written by Breton and Aragon in the autumn of 1928 to be performed at a benefit event organised to support the widow of the actor René Cresté, who had played the main character in *Judex* (1916), one of the famous silent serials by Louis Feuillade. These were profoundly admired by both Breton and Aragon for their ‘naive but unsubstitutable spirit of freedom’ (HUBERT 1988: 1749). In 1916, both men were only shifting to their twenties, taking part in the World War. As they later confessed, the dark cinema rooms were the only places capable of making their imagination wander freely (HUBERT 1988: 1749).

Therefore, the play was intended to be a celebration of the serials, disregarded in the 1920s because of the development of the technical possibilities of cinema. Like in Feuillade’s films, the main female character is a vamp, and refers, with her name and appearance, to Feuillade’s actress Musidora (Jeanne Roques, 1889–1957). Musidora was in the 1910s, according to Aragon, ‘[...] a great sexual revelation. The whole generation fell in love with Musidora’ (Aragon quoted in CAZALS 1978: 7–9). The actress was invited to perform this character, and she accepted.

The play, with three tableaux, one of them having the form of partly an end-of-the-year review, and containing several hits released in 1928, was written quickly, but ultimately it was not performed. This may have happened because, as a journal wrote in autumn, Cresté’s widow was afraid of seeing two surrealists’ names in the programme (P.L. 1928: 2).

The Treasure of the Jesuits was never performed in France. It was published in June 1929 in the Belgian journal *Variétés* and much later on, in the complete works of both Breton and Aragon (BRETON 1988; ARAGON 2007).

26 Unfortunately, no photographs of the production have been found so far.

The play does not contain ‘automatic’ parts but is surrealist in its themes. The first of them – continuous, strong, and fascinating action, social disrespect, and irresistible eroticism or even ‘mad love’ – are connected with the serials and popular culture. Several episodes are directly inspired by the serials, others are collages from journals of the year like *Le Détective* (HUBERT 1988: 1749).

Hence, in Tableau 1 of the play, Mad Souri (anagram of Musidora) kills a traveller in a hotel room and steals his map leading to a treasure hidden by the Jesuits. She is later visited by Simon and manages to get him arrested as the murderer. In Tableau 2, the treasurer of the Jesuit company is spectacularly murdered by none other than Mad Souri. In Tableau 3, Simon, who found the Jesuit treasure, is received in the Freemason lodge. The highest Freemason authority, Mario Sud, has to appear. It is again Mad Souri – the ‘woman whose incomprehensible orders have always directed my life’ (ARAGON and BRETON 1988: 1013), as Simon had earlier said.

The play uses cinematic details of objects or body, often reinforced by light. For example, in Tableau 1:

The door of room 333 opens again. A woman’s arm, naked, leaves slowly a pair of shoes. At this moment, the 332 opens too; the traveller looks at the arm, then at the shoes. He comes out to the landing [...], then stops. The door of the 332 opens more. Spotlight on the door of the 333. Atmosphere of light at the head of the bed. Through the door opening we see, gradually, [...] a coat, a skirt, different pieces of lingerie fall. Then, a foot is placed on a chair. (ARAGON and BRETON 1928: 997)

The play is also inspired by cinema, placing each of the three Tableaux in a considerable time interval from the following one. Tableau 1 takes place in 1918, Tableau 2 in 1928 and Tableau 3 in 1938. The notion of time for Surrealism, using among others the example of *The Treasure of the Jesuits*, was magisterally analysed by Georges Sebbag (2006). He stated that time represents for the Surrealists a collage of Bergsonian *durées*, for which the notion of past is irrelevant. Surrealist time could be qualified as ‘wireless’ (SEBBAG 2006).

Another Surrealist theme is the bizarre with a particular power of imagination, before all in the first part of Tableau 2, where the end-of-the-year review takes place. The review consists of independent ‘numbers’ presented by the hosts as realities which had passed from cinema to real life. Among them, various objects at the border of the living and the non-living appear: an automaton, mannequins, or an object called ‘vague areas’. The last ‘object’ is represented as follows: ‘The torso of a naked woman emerges. On her head there is a top hat, and she’s holding a metal pot and a tin of sardines’ (ARAGON and BRETON 1928: 1003).

Finally, values essential for Surrealism are present: like anticlericalism (e.g., the treasurer of the Jesuit company is killed with a giant crucifix) – to which the authors add the distrust of Freemasonry, – or adherence to the ideas of psychoanalysis. The respect for psychoanalysis appears in a short passage from the beginning of Tableau 3, where the French psychoanalytic society is passionately criticised (ARAGON and

BRETON 1928: 1008), and its critics show themselves as comically limited. The satire of Freemasonry can be seen, in the same Tableau, in a high number of pseudo-hermetic rituals and formulations, or in the conclusion of the play, when the highest Freemasonic authority is revealed to be Mad: she lays down, Simon kneels down; they kiss. The stage is gradually invaded by café tables and chairs which hide the two characters. The Freemasons sit down at the tables and mingle with other customers. Finally, the actress Musidora comes to the front of the stage, saying: 'Future, future! The world should end with a lovely café terrace!' (ARAGON and BRETON 1988: 1014).

Hence, the play does not hesitate to use the comic. Its weak points are: first, the length of the Freemason lodge episode, with a tiring number of pseudo-hermetic rituals and formulations; and second, the end-of-the-year review in Tableau 2, which follows too many aims. We find there surrealist objects and the story of the death of the treasurer important for the action, but also, allusions to events of the year impossible to understand and appreciate with the distance of almost a century.

Honzl's production

The Treasure of the Jesuits was translated into Czech by J. Prymš.²⁷ The premiere in the Liberated Theatre – a world one – took place on 17 May 1935, with Blanka Waleská,²⁸ in the role of Mad Souri. It was a few weeks after Breton's visit to Czechoslovakia, which was certainly an inspiration for Honzl, one of the key members of the Czech surrealist group.²⁹ The show also contained Nezval's play *The Delphic Oracle* (see Fig. 2).

Honzl 'cleared' the text significantly. He gave the Freemason lodge episode a suitable length and simplified several of the very abstract formulations here. He also shortened the end-of-the-year review but maintained the confusing plurality of its themes. In parts referring to the French context of 1928, Honzl made a few modifications to adapt it to the Czech public of 1935. Thus, the critics of the French Psychoanalytic Society (founded in 1926) became the critics of the surrealists (the Czech surrealist group was founded in 1934): 'a public danger', 'erotomanes and onanists', 'they subvert public moral and their influence on children – that's definitely a scandal' (HONZL 1935a).

In the production itself, Honzl maintained the original directions. The production is based especially on the use of light, used for cinematic effects, and contributing, in Tableau 2, to the creation of the surrealist objects. Such a strategy is not surprising: Honzl was actually the first Czech director to draw attention to the potential of cinema aesthetics in theatre (SRBA 2004: 52). Another characteristic of the production is, in

27 The name appears in the prompt book in the form used here. My research as to the translator including his forename has matched no results.

28 Blanka Waleská (1910–1986) performed in various Prague avant-garde theatres. From 1948 until her retirement, she was a member of the Prague National Theatre ensemble.

29 No correspondence seems to have existed between Honzl and Breton, although Honzl spoke good French.



Fig. 2: *The Treasure of the Jesuits* in the Liberated Theatre, 1935.
Blanka Waleská as Mad Souris (JHFP No. 069a).



Fig. 3: *The Treasure of the Jesuits* in the Liberated Theatre: The Freemasons (JHFPA No. 069a).

the last Tableau, a grotesque exaggeration of the Freemasons, represented as members of the Ku Klux Klan (see Fig. 3).

The stage set was by the painter Jindřich Štyrský, with whom Honzl collaborated regularly.³⁰ Štyrský's paintings were considered by another essential stage director of the Czech avant-garde, E. F. Burian, as theatre in their own right (BRAGANT 1996: 261). For *The Treasure of the Jesuits*, Štyrský, just as in his paintings, used such combinations of objects that these objects would lose their common meanings and open themselves up to surreality (BRAGANT 1996: 262). Such a process was partly suggested by the text of the play, especially by the 'objects' from Tableau 2.

Regarding these objects, it should be added that the stage set and the production were influenced by occasional translation errors, although Prymš' translation is very good, which will be shown in the following two examples. The first one concerns the object named '*vague areas*' (emphasis mine). The original text says it is represented by a naked female torso wearing a hat. The Czech version calls this object as '*dangerous areas*' (emphasis mine), which seems to stimulate the imagination of the bizarre and of transgression even more. Štyrský, in his stage set, replaced the hat with a bandage on

30 Jindřich Štyrský (1899–1942) was an outstanding Czech surrealist painter, poet, editor, photographer, and graphic artist. He also wrote on Rimbaud and Marquis de Sade, and from 1928, he was a designer for the Liberated Theatre.

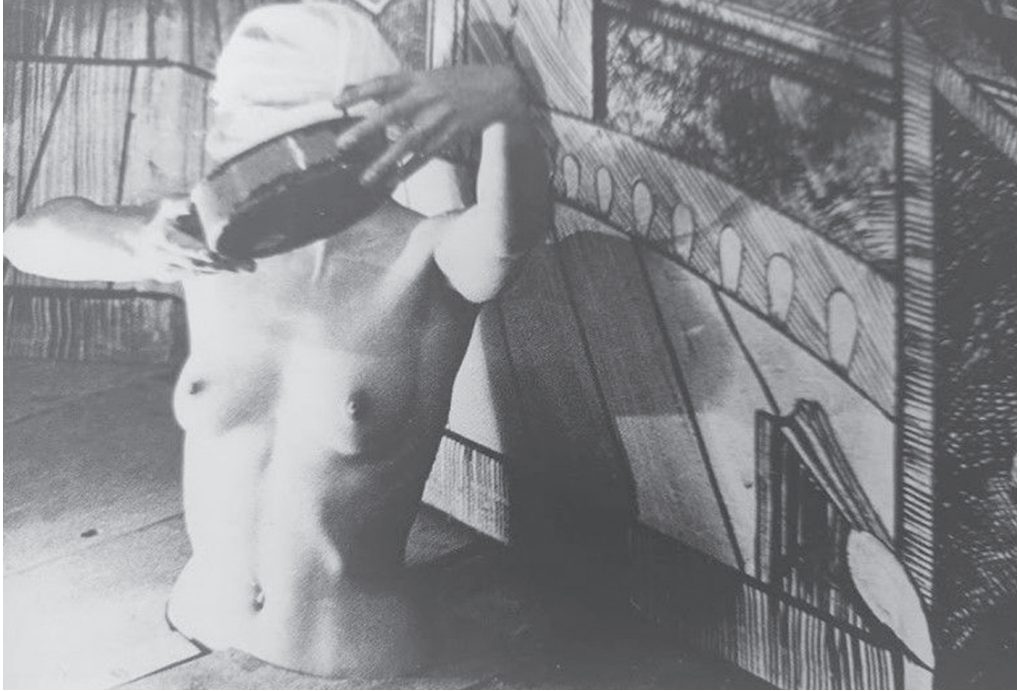


Fig. 4: *The Treasure of the Jesuits* in the Liberated Theatre: 'Dangerous areas' (JHFPA No. 069a).

the head (HONZL 1935), a powerful enigmatic motif of surrealist painting as well as of his own *oeuvre*. Thus, a translation error seems to have contributed to one of the most intriguing elements on stage (see Fig. 4).

The other example concerns the dummies. The French word '*mannequin*' was incorrectly understood by the translator in the sense of a live model. Which led Honzl to a comic interpretation, using among others a figure of a man with his body bandaged (HONZL 1935a). The original text of the play says: 'One corner of the stage lights up, we discover a male dummy, a female dummy, the silver Siegel dummy, in front of which a live model from the rue de la Paix parades' (ARAGON and BRETON 1988: 1003).³¹ Which was translated by Pymš in the following way: 'One corner of the stage lights up, we discover a female model (in a women's dress), a male model (in a men's dress), a silver dummy (certainly women's lingerie). In front of them a model from the rue de la Paix (certainly the most luxurious one) walks' (HONZL 1935a).

In the programme of the show, Honzl appears again as a very accurate interpreter of the play (see Fig. 5). He does not use the word 'Surrealism' but explains its principles he sees in the play. The first one is the role of surprise, leading imagination to a new world where everything is possible:

31 Siegel was, between the wars, a prestigious manufacturer of dummies. In rue de la Paix (Paris) the *haute couture maisons* were located.

[...] to new and unknown paths like an admiring tourist, to whom beauties of landscapes, seas and islands are revealed. [...] There are people who would laugh at the monsters of *Nosferatu* or *Mysteries of New York* and would take seriously the monster-like symbols of the Freemasonic Society. Allow us to invert these relations, to be charmed by the leanness of Musidora and not to refrain from laughing at the knights of the Great Orient. (HONZL 1935b)

The second principle is the rejection of genres distinction – which draws from over-use of rationality, Surrealism believes. Authenticity is far more important: ‘everything capable, in man, of impression, record, excitement, attack, or laughter’ (HONZL 1935b).

The reviews of the production are quite critical and considered it artificial and aggressive calling it: ‘[an] impression of “an aesthetic masturbation”’, ‘similar rather to a mechanical shooting range’, ‘mould romanticism’ (RUTTE 1935: 15). A more moderate review perceives the main problem to be the incomprehensibility of Tableau 2. It states however that the actors played surprisingly well (IF. 1935: 5). A special opinion is offered by the communist newspaper *Rudé právo* [Red Right] (F.N. 1935: 4). This review is the only entirely positive one discovered, for Czech surrealists had, until the late 1930s, good relations with the Communist Party. But its ‘arguments’ make clear these relations may easily become problematic: the aim is political, and the ‘main idea’ explanation does not correspond to the play itself at all.³²

Two years later, Karel Teige, the main theoretician of Czech interwar avant-garde, published an essay where he perceives the production of *The Treasure of the Jesuits* as an example of poetry where reality becomes surreality and an outbreak of Surrealism (TEIGE 1937).

Nezval exchanged enthusiastically about the show with French surrealists, as two of his letters show (NEZVAL 1981: 136, 202). The first one was written on 19 May 1935 two days after the premiere to Éluard: Nezval says here among others he is sorry he could not go to the show with him and Breton (NEZVAL 1981: 136).³³ In the other one dated 17 June 1935, a short message to Honzl sent from Paris, Nezval writes: ‘He [Breton] liked the photographs; I gave him a detailed commentary’ (NEZVAL 1981: 202). To date, Breton’s online archives dispose of one of the photographs of Mad Souris from the Prague show.³⁴ No reaction of French surrealists to the performance has been found.

32 ‘The main idea of these apparently incompatible fragments and “shards” is that destruction and chaos of the bourgeois civilisation reflects itself more than in big and understandable things but rather in episodes that are tiny, enigmatic and ordinary at the same time’ (F.N. 1935: 4).

33 ‘Today, all the newspapers write about this new Surrealist evening. Honzl’s and Štyrský’s work was magnificent. No day will pass without me visiting again and again that small theatre where these two shows take place, and I am sorry I can’t go there with you and with André Breton. The performer of Mad Souris, the phantoms from Tableau II, the death of Mr. Peredes and the whole surrealist atmosphere of the Soirée, that’s great. We were well received in communist press’ (NEZVAL 1981: 136).

34 See (BRETON 1935).



Fig. 5: *The Treasure of the Jesuits/The Delphic Oracle*. Programme. Illustration by J. Štyrský (JHFA No. 069a).

Conclusion

This study confirms the complexity of André Breton's relationship with theatre. If his initial attitude towards the staging of his first play, *If You Please*, was enthusiastic, his later fluctuation and then rejection of the genre, around 1920, was likely influenced by his deception of the Dada *soirées* in Paris he would take an active part in (if not by Dada itself). Which did not impede Breton to write again for theatre in 1928 and to create *The Treasure of the Jesuits*, a play referring explicitly to the genre he was particularly fond of – cinema.

Both texts analysed are strongly inspired by popular culture: they contain criminal plots and continuous, fascinating action beyond morality. Thus, they deal with the surrealist value of surprise leading imagination to unknown worlds, or with social disrespect and 'mad love'. 'Automatic' passages are almost or completely absent; on the contrary, both plays contain effective stage directions. Moreover, *The Treasure*, using the 'surrealist object', shows an important connection with visual forms of Surrealism, and with visual arts in general ('cinematic directions').

If the Parisian production of *If You Please* (1920) belongs to the tumultuous Dada period, in which Surrealism started to germ, both Prague productions (1928, 1935) come from years strongly marked by this aesthetics (although the Group of Surrealists in Czechoslovakia was founded only in 1934). Both of these productions were also inspired by the visits of figures of French (early) Surrealism,³⁵ whose relationships with the Czechs were, as we could see, very friendly.

Regarding the productions themselves, the Parisian show of *If You Please* at the first big Dada manifestation in the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre was performed by non-professionals – Breton himself and other then Dada members and sympathisers. The conception of the whole event was by Tzara, with the participation of Picabia for the stage set. No staging details have been conserved. The most important characteristics of the event was also its limit: to show the impossibility of performance. As to the production of *The Treasure*, cancelled soon after the show was announced, it shows the fragility of the reception of Surrealism by French mainstream culture at the end of the 1920s.

The Prague productions benefit from the fact theatre was, since the 1920s, considered an important part of Czech avant-garde activity, and from Honzl's experience and attitude towards staging. When staging *If You Please*, he was running a professional theatre, and was one of the first Czech directors who created a homogeneous staging conception. It consisted of a poetic use of space and the actors' work, in the aim of creating a series of unexpected, often metaphorical, meanings. Collaboration with avant-garde poets, painters, architects, and musicians made up conditions, among others, for staging *The Treasure of the Jesuits* with Štyrský's stage set during the world premiere.

Honzl's productions also took advantage of his very accurate interpretative skills and of his directorial qualities. Even when he did not adhere to Surrealism, he carefully 'translated' the atmosphere of *If You Please* and made the most of its dynamic and

35 Soupault was excluded from the French Surrealist group in 1926.

comic potential. In the case of *The Treasure*, even translation errors resulted in powerful enigmatic solutions or in comic recreation. Both productions have, according to Teige, a special place within the activity of the Liberated Theatre, for they illustrate ‘the process of transformation of Poetism into Surrealism’ (TEIGE 1937: 72).

While the reception of *If You Please* was very positive, and the production was considered by certain critics as the then peak of Honzl’s directing work, *The Treasure of the Jesuits* was called incomprehensible, or aggressive and artificially aesthetic. It should be stressed however that the play’s main failing is as a result of its overambitious attempt to achieve too many goals at once, and thus the impression of incomprehension the critics confess is not to be related only to their lack of openness towards Surrealism.

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