

Kolařík, Aleš

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Poetics and Contexts of Unofficial Drama in a Totalitarianism

Aleš Kolařík

Lenka Jungmannová (ed.). *Neoficiální drama z komunistické totality*. Praha: Academia/Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2021. 529 s. ISBN 978–80–200–3266–9.

The anthology *Neoficiální drama z komunistické totality* [Unofficial Drama of Communist Totalitarianism] by Lenka Jungmannová, published in the Drama edition of the Institute of Czech Literature, continued the line of research initiated by the monograph *Expresionistické drama z českých zemí* [Expressionist Drama in the Czech Lands] edited by Zuzana Augustová, Lenka Jungmannová, and Aleš Merenus (2020).

The title itself of this extensive publication, which presents eleven genres and stylistically different plays by eleven authors chronologically, defines the period from 1948 to 1989, but also determines the methodological concept of the anthology, which primarily focuses on texts that are still inaccessible to readers, existing only as manuscripts or samizdats.¹ In addition, for most of the authors included in the anthology, drama represents only a minority of their creative portfolio. A significant part of the publication is also focused on the authors in exile. The editors' selection of plays was majorly based on the then foreign and domestic trends in drama, such as typical features of absurd drama or epic drama focused on the expressiveness

of anti-regime statements. The overview of the dramatic texts reflects the diversity of genres and focuses on the often-neglected process of creating a theatrical text or performance. The symbolic space of world literature expresses the emphasis on the Don Juan myth represented in the anthology by two genre-different texts. References to works of world literature gave authors the opportunity to include various inspirations in their work and at least symbolically connect Czech literary production with world production.

Lenka Jungmannová's contextual chapter *Daleko od divadla* [Far from Theatre] (13–65) discusses, by mentioning the imaginary distance from the classical concept of theatre, not only the position of unofficial, underground drama towards official works, but also the characteristic aspect of these plays – these dramatic texts were seldom published or even presented immediately after their creation due to the almost immediate persecution of the authors. At the same time, many of the authors did not even seek to release their plays because they assumed the resistance of the censors. As the period of communist totalitarianism during which the plays were written was characterised by an alternation of dogmatic and liberal approaches to drama, the dogmatic principle dominates

¹ Samizdat is a literary form of dissident activity in the Eastern Bloc. It was often the only way for writers and playwrights to publish censored and underground publications.

not only in the first half of the 1950s but also in a modified form even during the so-called normalisation² (1968–1989) based on the different political situation at that time. That ideological point of view prevailed at that point of Czechoslovak history, and the repertoire, both official and not, became an important part of the official propaganda.

Lenka Jungmannová proceeds chronologically. The individual decades are viewed in several precisely structured thematic areas. Jungmannová firstly offers a view through the lens of unofficial creation in contrast to the official dramatic principles represented by permitted and non-persecuted authors who created according to the norms of socialist literature and did not express their thoughts about the totalitarian regime, and then presents her view on exile drama. The scholar aims at the detailed placement of specific dramatic texts not only in the literary-theatrical but especially socio-political context of the given decade. For instance, the reader learns that the unofficial drama of

the 1950s is characterised by a natural attempt to differentiate itself from the genre of socialist realism. Some of the distinctive features such as uniqueness and isolation of unofficial theatre and radio plays stand out, and literary quality prevails over stage qualities. The circle of surrealists of the 1950s, of which Petr Král, Karel Hynek, and Vratislav Effenberger devoted themselves to the drama, belong to the thus defined sphere of internal exile.³ Additionally, the drama of exile in the 1950s mainly includes authors who left Czechoslovakia for political and existential reasons after the communist *coup d'état* of February 1948. A significant feature of this type of drama is being in the minority in the sense of having a marginal chance of publishing the texts. Emigration is associated with an attempt to capture the human anxiety resulting from real events. Existential poetics is clearly traced in the plays of Jiří Kárnet *Joska* [Joska], *Století před soudem* [Century on Trial], or *Nymfa* [Nymph] (22). Lenka Jungmannová also pays attention to the moments of the genesis of individual texts and focuses mainly on identical features in the early 1950s. The 1950s are represented in the anthology by a synthetic paraphrase of the stylistic icons of world literature, Tirso de Molina and Molière. For example, Mirek Tůma's play *Bloudění Dona Juana* [The Wandering of Don Juan] (65–103) focuses on the background of the Don Juan universe of longing for his homeland, his own war experience, but also fears of the past and future (24).

Jungmannová points out that the 1960s were accompanied by a significant decline in the creation of unofficial texts, due to

2 The period in the Czechoslovak history after 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, when the Soviet Communist Party rule was much stiffened after the so-called Khrushchev Thaw. There is no consensus among historians about its beginning. Some date it from the occupation in August 1968, some from the moment, when Gustav Husák become the general secretary of the Communist Party. In an interview *Diskuze o normalizaci v historiografii* [The Discussion about Normalisation in Historiography] with historians Marie Černá, Josef Vilímeček, Matěj Spurný, Vítězslav Sommer, and Tomáš Vilímeček published in the publication *Podoby česko-slovenské normalizace* [Forms of The Czechoslovak Normalisation], historian Marie Černá (2017) in part *Časové vymezení normalizace* [The Time Limitation of Normalisation] of mentioned interview considers normalization as a process and mentions several phases separated by substantial details, concrete events, such as the Adoption of the Crisis Development in 1970 or the Anti-charter in 1977.

3 Some of the authors who decided not to emigrate had to find ways of working under a totalitarianist regime in order to avoid persecution.

the gradual political release of society (25) culminating in the so-called Prague Spring in 1968. Czech-language unofficial drama was increasingly influenced by the two most prominent trends: the first includes the existential Sartre's influence, and the second one is associated with Dürrenmatt's tragedies with the already clear contours of the absurd theatre or, more precisely, the absurd grotesques of Beckett and Ionesco. The inspiration in the absurd theatre is most evident in Jiří Kolář's play *Chléb náš vezdejší* [Our Daily Bread] (26). An allegorical depiction of totalitarian universalised life using the method of collage can be tracked in the absurd tragedies published in the anthology. In the same category belongs Dalibor Plička's *Finále nadparády* [The Finale of Overgreatness] (159–197) inspired by the dramatic practices of Samuel Beckett through the motive of waiting or a paraphrase of political phraseology. In the second half of the 1960s, satire close to poetics of small studio theatres such as irregular dramaturgy⁴ gradually became very obvious, which is significantly intertwined with unofficial work. Nikolai Terlecký's anti-totalitarian *Commedia dell'arte* (197–223) written in 1968 captures the fear of a possible lack of freedom (32). A parody of totalitarian practices brings the principle of theatre onto the theatre *ad absurdum* at the moment when the audience begins to kill the theatregoers.⁵

4 The concept of irregular dramaturgy is based on adaptations of primarily non-dramatic texts and the use of non-dramatic principles in the theatre.

5 Terlecký used the principle of brutal and violent offending of the audience or theatre, which was used by the Austrian playwright Peter Handke in the play of the same name *Offending the Audience and Self-accusation* (HANDKE 1966). Terlecký created an oppressive atmosphere metaphorically expressing life in a totalitarian society by having malcontent spectators gradually murdering theatregoers.

The normalisation period was marked in Czechoslovakia by a number of practical implications introduced by the Communist Party such as the end of some periodicals and publishing houses, but also restrictions in dramaturgy, liquidation of theatres and personnel exchanges according to ideological key or self-censorship. After 1968, dramatic discourse clearly shifted to the unofficial sphere because during the gradual tightening of the regime, authors could not work freely again. The authors had to suddenly decide whether to continue without the prospect of releasing their plays or to go into exile and publish elsewhere.

In the 1970s, the departure from philosophical absurdity became more and more pronounced. However, the drama of Ludmila Macešková, especially her anti-illusory play *Jak se David stal králem* [How David Became King] (39), remains outside of those trends. The anthology mainly contains the names of the authors outside the main discourse of unofficial drama centred around Václav Havel and his friends Pavel Landovský, Pavel Kohout, Karol Sidon, Jiří Dienstbier, Alexander Kliment, Ivan Klíma, and Milan Uhde. These authors are mentioned in the publication as the most famous authors of this post-Prague-Spring period. Don Juan's theme is touched upon once again in the Kliment's 1970 play *Dona Juana* [Dona Juana] (233–297), in which the issue of moral responsibility and truth emerges. The Brno circle of unofficial drama, presented by the dramatic text of the philosopher Josef Šafařík *Mefistův monolog* [Mefisto's Monologue] (223–233), in which drama and potential theatricality are directly implied, is not left out either. The devil's burning of a man is based on the rejection of morality and

the preference for power and money. Jiří Kratochvíl's drama *Hra pro odposlouchávací magnetofony* [The Play for Eavesdropping Tape Recorders] (47–48) represents a minor representation of the genre of absurdity connected with the postmodern. In this type of plays, the typical plot of philosophical absurdity, in which a person is thrown into an infallible world, is no longer used.

The anthology also focuses on marginal genres such as Lenka Procházková's feminist drama *Čtyři ženy Alexandra Makedonského* [Four Women of Alexander the Great] (48) or underground drama represented by Vratislav Brabenec's drama *Svědkové* [The Witnesses] (49). The totalitarian analogy drawing from the Gospels allegorically reflects the process with The Plastic People of the Universe⁶ from 1976. Brabenec follows the motivic scope of the passion play and the concept of folk theatre, in which the difference between actors and spectators is deliberately blurred.

As Lenka Jungmannová points out there is a relatively low number of newly created exile plays in the 1970s (50). Moreover, the drama of the 1970s can be characterised by a gradual transition from satire to tragedy clearly evident in Pavel Tigrid's play *Neposkvrněné početí Josefa V.* [The Immaculate Conception by Josef V] (297–365) and the tragedy of Jan Novák *Čížci* [Czechs] (373–433), depicting Czechoslovakia, which is gradually losing hope for a sovereign future.

6 The Plastic People of the Universe was Czech underground band from Prague established in 1968. In 1976 the Plastics and other people from the underground were arrested and put on trial. The Communist Party wanted to punish the members of the underground in an exemplary way and gave them prison sentences from 8 to 18 months.

During the 1980s, the discourse of unofficial drama changed significantly depending on the development of the dissident opposition. The plays now often focused on the current difficulties of the authors living in Czechoslovakia such as the regime's harsh approach to banned authors, which is the case with František Pavlíček's one act play *...skok* [...jump] (55), where thanks to the advantageous combination of drama and prose, Pavlíček approaches the issue of fictional authorship. The theme connected with personal persecution also appears in the historical tragedy *Hra o království* [Game of Kingdom] (55) by the teatrologist Jan Kopecký, who was forced by the regime to leave his field after 1968. The play is based on the author's scientific interest in medieval theatre and drama by J. K. Tyl. Meanwhile, the drama of exile in the 1980s is dominated by the theme of identity and the issue of assimilation. Depending on the socio-political context, the individual lines and motifs also changed quite logically. Karel Hvizďala, inspired by Tadeusz Konwický's short story 'Malá apokalypsa' [Small Apocalypse] (KONWICKI 1979) conceived his drama *Hrdina* [The Hero] (58) as a dystopian image of totalitarian dictatorship.

The conclusion of the anthology and the imaginary culmination of the analysed genre, thematic and stylistic changes is presented by the dramatic tetralogy *Mezi lidojedy* [Among the Cannibals] (60) by Libuše Moníková with clear postmodern features. The set of four one act plays *Totem a Tabu* [Totem and Taboo] (449–460), *Kaliban o Sykoraxe* [Caliban about Sycorax] (461–482), *Mozart* (483–492), and *ArAl* (493–500) satirically views modern civilization and its pitfalls in the spirit of postcolonial criti-

cism. She mocks the cultural and thought patterns of modern society and sees them depending on personal experience.

The anthology systematically expands the context of unofficial literature and drama during totality by lesser-known authors and offers a classification and characterization of their dramatic styles in contrast to the official work. Lenka Jungmannová sensitively describes genre and stylistic changes documented by dramatic texts by often persecuted authors standing not only outside official drama but also outside major unofficial trends. The chronological concept and detailed capture of the changes in these texts, depending on the differences in socio-political contexts during the time of communist totalitarianism, makes it possible to perceive the continuity of the development of this type of drama. Many of these texts were created with the knowledge that they would not be published collectively, let alone listed, but the anthology encourages at least thinking about making these texts accessible not only to readers but also to viewers.

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