

Martin Čičvák and Ondřej Brousek at the Vinohrady Theatre: the Thematization of the Experienced Reality of a Postmodern Contemporary in Modern Drama Productions

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Abstract: Martin Čičvák is one of the most important contemporary Slovak directors. With the actor Ondřej Brousek in leading roles, he staged four productions for the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague. All of them were distinctive interpretations using the approaches of postmodernist theatre, and they searched for contradictions in the experienced reality of postmodern contemporaries. They constitute an outstanding generational manifestation presented on the big drama stage.

Key words: big drama, the interpretation and deconstruction of text, collaboration between director and actor, tradition and the present

Divadlo na Vinohradech [The Vinohrady Theatre] was established 110 years ago on 24 November 1907. Since the 1920s, when director František Fuksa and artistic director Karel Hugo Hilar took advantage of a strike by dissatisfied singers of the local music theatre to empty the building of opera and operetta ensembles, the Vinohrady Theatre has been the largest specialized Czech drama house. It has preserved this position despite the fact that, owing to various building adjustments, the capacity of the auditorium was decreased by half from its original 1250 seats. The theatre was established and is funded by the capital city of Prague and has been its flagship stage. In the spirit of Central European theatre traditions, the Vinohrady Theatre is a repertory type of theatre with a constant artistic ensemble.

During the entire 110 years of its activity, the Vinohrady Theatre has tried to address an essential dramaturgical problem, aphoristically termed by the theatre scholar Vladimír Just as “the Vinohrady round square”. As opposed to the Národní divadlo [National Theatre], the Vinohrady Theatre was built using the funds of the first generation of the Czech bourgeois and urban so-

ciety that tried to materially express its cultural and social self-identification. However, they also considered the theatre to be a form of entertainment. The contradiction between the values the bourgeois community declared by building the theatre and their actual cultural interests and needs was significant and nearly fatal. During the 110 years of the theatre's existence, these declared values and actual interests have kept changing in different ways. This contradiction was successfully overcome only in certain periods which are commonly referred to as the "Vinohrady eras".

This surfaced already in the first two years of the theatre's existence; there were high artistic ambitions and content demands expected of Jaroslav Vrchlický's tragedy in verse, *Godiva*, which ceremoniously opened the theatre's first season. Despite the fact that Otýlia Beníšková galloped through the stage riding a horse "clad only in her loose hair", which critics considered to be highly aesthetic, praising the actress for nudity that was "chaste and without a single hint at lasciviousness", such period-specific high art did not attract that many visitors to the theatre. After a year, another director – František Adolf Šubert – was withdrawn from the post. Šubert had previously opened the National Theatre, the tabernacle of the Czech national revival, and his activity at the Vinohrady Theatre was compensation for his bitter feelings after being removed from there in 1900. His successor Václav Štech tried to refill the emptied box office (the consequence of Šubert's artistic endeavours) by producing light comedies (including his own opuses) and operettas. The first permanent title at Vinohrady was Leo Fall's charming operetta *Die Dollarprinzessin* [The Dollar Princess]. A reviewer in the *Divadlo* [Theatre] journal wrote: "The audience leaves the theatre in the best of moods, singing and whistling the pleasant tunes on their way home: 'Everyone has to like a dollar princess.'" The production was performed over a hundred times and started a series of highly successful shows, which were mostly heavily criticized by serious reviewers, who primarily also scolded the theatre's artistic management. However, without its more than one hundred repeated performances, the theatre would never have survived.

The effort to merge artistic needs and content demand with a packed auditorium and satisfied audience is the essence of the "Vinohrady round square". This is a task for the theatre genre known as "big drama" – the cultivation and development of which is also the responsibility of similar theatre houses in the Central European cultural context. The greatness of big drama does not lie in the dimensions or capacity of the auditorium, even though

they are both favourable and stimulating elements in its creation. Greatness also does not refer to the size of the acting ensemble or theatre personnel. It is actually all about the greatness of issues or the strength of their impact; great issues are works of stage art that correspond with latent and often anticipated rather than articulated content, which is of vital significance for the audience. These are common issues that are relevant for society; they are social issues.

Such big themes are presented by means of interpreting a dramatic text through the images of human acts in an arranged and riveting plot. They are expressed by characters performed by actors who are acting personalities. In relation to big drama, Jaroslav Vostrý's (the theoretician and director) term "the theatre of directed actors" is applicable. In fact, Vostrý uses this very term to describe the work of Jiří Frejka, the director of the Vinohrady Theatre. The effect of a work of art is multiplied by a large audience's collective or the empathetic perception thereof. When these conditions are met, the audience experiences what Aristotle referred to as catharsis. Such a cathartic experience also makes a production attractive for uninstructed spectators.

Big drama was successful in the Vinohrady repertory only if the theatremakers managed to identify "the latent content that unified the society" and thematize the relevant issues in a dramatically strong, inventively staged, and performatively unique work. The latent content is related to what the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka termed "lived experience", i.e., a reality which members of a community do not try to escape from by underestimating it, pushing it away from their consciousness, or ideologically blurring it. On the contrary, the community perceives it as a burden, commitment, danger, and opportunity. The lived experience of reality depends on the struggle for values, which occurs behind and through the scenery of everyday life as well as in the intensity of this struggle and the relevance of the values in question. The state of society, i.e., what some refer to as the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*) and what Jung calls a "sick collective unconscious", sometimes finds its focus pointed at the epicentre of the struggle for values. Such periods or eras are ideal for theatremakers who are endowed with hypersensitive sensors of subtle expressions of conflict, which contain the latent content of lived experience.

In the Vinohrady Theatre eras, be it Hilar's 1910s, Kvapil's and Čapek's 1920s, Frejka's post-war decades, Pistori and Pavlíček's 1960s, or Dudek and Kačer's late 1980s, the centripetal force of the social movement would always converge with the theatremakers' ability to recognize

it and their willingness, and often also courage, to express it artistically. On the other hand, when issues were forcefully imposed for the theatre to produce¹, for example, during the protectorate, the 1950s, or Gustáv Husák's "normalization" period, big drama became a parody of itself.

After the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the fall of the bipolar division of the world in the 1990s, the enlightened concept of a centripetal society (now enriched by the quest for the identity of national societies in their specific culture, supported by Romanticism) quickly started to erode. Postmodernism disputed the big cultural discourse upon which it had been built and – at about the time the Vinohrady Theatre was established – the form of a modern society and its institutions was finalized. The centripetal force aimed at huge and latent social issues that could be expressed by means of a work of art was weakened in the 1990s by unifying globalization on the one hand and the dispersed plurality of equal discourses and diversification of cultural and social interests on the other. Even the sophisticated and magical marketing was not able to create a single production made by a Czech theatre after 1990, something that previously used to be called and the social consensus was accepted as an "event". What could be done about a "big drama" theatre in such a hectic social situation?

Director Thomas Ostermeier asked himself the same question when he was contemplating about his "concept of theatre in the age of its acceleration". It seems that big theatre houses have once again become just places of entertainment. As if they were able to only sell out entertaining productions and keep drama in small, intimate spaces. Such productions deal with socially irrelevant issues, such as intimate relationships, or focus on various alternative projects which address kindred (clan- or tribe-like) audiences using often idea-based or ideologically tinted messages and subversive social gestures.

But Ostermeier was not the only one to find a solution to this. Owing to the Pražský divadelní festival německého jazyka [Prague German Language Theatre Festival/Theatre], which has taken place every year since the mid-1990s in Prague (with the first events co-organized by the Vinohrady Theatre as the host stage), the model of German theatre and German productions has become a distinctive paradigm that influence a number of authors and

1 Theatre was long mobilized by the power to fight for values that in reality did not create lived experience, and theatre and art were forced to vindicate such values in order for them to become such lived experience.

directors, mostly of the middle and younger generations. However, theatre with socially aware and even engaged political content, using postmodernist means of expression, did not succeed in attracting the interest of large audiences in big theatre houses under the local conditions (as opposed to Germany or Austria). This became obvious after the experience of directors Dušan Pařízek and David Jařab and the ensemble of the Comedy Theatre as well as the attempts of the Vinohrady Theatre, particularly after the praised production of Büchner's *Woyzeck* directed by Daniel Špinar, the production of Kafka's *Das Schloß* [The Castle] directed by Juraj Deák, and the staging of Chekhov's *Vishnyovyi sad* [The Cherry Orchard] directed by Vladimír Morávek.

German society, as was shown in many remarkable productions, cared about the lived experience much more than Czech society. It seemed Czechs wanted to be distracted and entertained. At any rate, a serious sociological survey would be in order, which would either confirm or deny the empirically derived hypothesis that our society is now paying the price for the Zeitgeist of Husák's normalization by being increasingly superficial, consumerist, and hedonistic, having insufficient cultural awareness and resulting limited cultural needs. The cultural interests and needs of today's middle and older generations were shaped in the 1970s and 1980s. Popular and mass pseudo-culture consciously diverted their attention from any real social interest.

The crisis of big drama also became apparent in the almost twenty years of the repertory and dramaturgical struggle of the Vinohrady Theatre during the 1990s and in the early years of the new millennium. The artistic leadership of the theatre – the director and actress Jiřina Jirásková and the artistic directors Jiří Menzel and Martin Stropnický – reacted to the considerable loss of interest in big drama by returning to the so-called “repertory of attractive titles” (in the manner of Václav Štech). It would not be fair to deny the fact that they made an effort to produce big drama. The resulting repertory, however, tried to attract audiences by producing (successful) musicals and staging remakes of famous movies and even television series. This affected the habits and expectations of the audience as well as the shape of the acting ensemble.

This statement does not aspire to be a theatrological assessment; it is rather an opinion of a Vinohrady dramaturge carrying his own burden who returned to the theatre in 2012 to join the director Tomáš Töpfer and artistic director Juraj Deák in offering a programme that showed an effort to draw on the big drama tradition. This artistic leadership no longer in-

cludes productions in its repertory such as musicals or theatre adaptations of famous movies that are professionally impossible to stage dramatically. It has attempted with moderate success to produce all dramatic genres of big drama.

Martin Čičvák has become an important collaborator of the Vinohrady Theatre. Born in Košice in 1975, he graduated from the Theatre Faculty of the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno and works as the main director of the Prague-based Drama Club as a playwright and author in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (including at all three national theatres, among others).

Čičvák's journey to big drama started before he joined the Vinohrady Theatre; his previous work was also characteristic for its competence and feeling for working in big stage space as well as for his respect for the staged authors and his ability to cooperate with actors in performing characters. Just like his contemporaries, Čičvák was strongly influenced by the German production school. The source of this inspiration was Čičvák's long-standing collaboration with the dramaturge Martin Kubran, whose legendary hard disk filled with recordings of model productions of German directors of the middle generation became inspirational for a whole lot of fellow theatremakers, mostly in Slovak theatres. Čičvák's other artistic source – positively related to his thinking about actors as co-creators and partners in the process of the making of a dramatic work – is his meeting and artistic wrestling with Juraj Kukura, an actor who has become a true phenomenon. Čičvák's brilliant play *Kukura* deals with the director-actor relationship; Čičvák produced the play together with Kukura in the Drama Club. The novel title of *Kukura* illuminates other factors of Čičvák's inclination to the German production school.

Čičvák's first work at the Vinohrady Theatre was Max Frisch's *Andorra* in 2013. It is a model social play which, in accordance with the dramaturgical intention, the director read and interpreted as a play dealing with the issue of disputable identity and suppressed historical reflection. The production wisely shifted the original interconnection of the play with "the question of the guilt of German – and in this text specifically Swiss – society" to the socially pressing issue of (not) coming to terms with own (Czech) totalitarian past. The production clearly thematized issues such as problematic identity, experience with social inadequacy, and exclusion in relation to postmodernist discourse. The big story that kept the relationships between characters in balance and was part of the self-identifying mythology of "the Andorran community" falls completely apart.

Dramatic circumstances force the teacher of the boy Andri (the father of the protagonist) to admit that the child he pretended was a foundling, a Jew saved from persecution, is his extra-marital son. But under the pressure of the external power that nationalistically declares itself to be anti-Semitic, the community does not believe the teacher's admission to adultery. The love affair between Andri and his alleged step sister Barblin, in fact an intimate story of incest, is confronted with a transformation of society that gradually starts to collaborate with the external power. The entire tragic story is then viewed in retrospect, through the testimonies of the characters who try to assuage the guilt they feel in consequence of their failures. Today, we witness a very similar relationship between our society and its past.

An essential moment in the preparation of this production came when the director met with Ondřej Brousek, the actor playing Andri. The meeting – which both men years later called “a clash of uncontrolled comets” in an interview for the Vinohrady Theatre's monthly – was the result of a lucky circumstance, just like many other things in the theatre. The artistic director Deák and I mentioned to Čičvák that Ondřej Brousek would be an ideal fit for the character of Andri. We sent Čičvák to see Brousek's performance in Karol Sidon's production *Shapira* at the Divadlo na Fidlovačce [Fidlovačka Theatre], where Brousek worked at that time. However, Čičvák did not manage to see the last night of the production, so all that we could do was give him our recommendation.

Ondřej Brousek, born in 1981 into a family of actors, is a conservatory graduate and an exceptional personality of his generation. As an actor, he focuses specifically on staged work (as opposed to many of his colleagues, he does not appear in any of the endless television series). As an active musician, he plays in the popular band Monkey Business. He is an excellent musician and a productive composer of pop songs as well as musicals and stage and artificial music. His first symphony was premiered by the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra, and more opuses are being rehearsed.

The meeting of Čičvák and Brousek, generational peers and explosively creative personalities, and their work on Frisch's text turned out to be unique and exceptionally productive. Naturally, Brousek also composed the stage score; a bare live piano would appear on the stage, and alongside Andri the other characters in the play performed on it depending on their capabilities. To the joy of the entire theatre community, Čičvák and Brousek started to look alike both physically and in terms of gestures and opinions. The intense message of the production, however, required that the coexis-

tence of their personalities allowed a thematization of the reflection of the lived experience of intellectuals and artists of the younger middle generation, who clearly do not identify with the return of society to the restored pseudo-values of real socialism and protest against the modern Biedermeier of post-communist townspeople.

The appeal of the production was multiplied by the presence of Ivana Uhlířová, an actress from Pařízek's ensemble of the Divadlo Komédie [Comedy Theatre], which ended its activity at that time. Her personal role in the presentation of the theme expressed by the character of Barblin inspired the other actors of the Vinohrady ensemble to perform their characters with passion. An outstanding element of this production by Čičvák – as well as some of his other work – was the conceptualist set created by his frequent collaborator, the Austrian stage designer Hans Hoffer. The space of the Vinohrady stage was cleared all the way to the back wall and featured an iron gate leading to the backstage space. There was a timer counting down the time remaining to the inevitable tragedy that ends the play, but primarily there was a steel cube that starts growing in the middle of the flat surface of the stage whenever there is the first hint of danger (the first anti-Semitic reference); these elements created an insurmountable monstrous construction which divided the characters both vertically and horizontally. Upstage, a ramp was placed creating the illusion of dividing the seemingly idyllic and untouchable world of little Andorra from its dangerous surroundings. And there were microphones, a necessary prop of the postmodern production, enabling the gradual estrangement (alienation) by using narrative commentaries and plot interruptions.

The production was an example of new-age big drama: a strong story, tense situations, intimate themes developed within a rigorous social framework, a clash of values, powerful emotions, and an outstanding acting performance. The means of direction and stage design were part of the postmodern expressivity. Jiří Stach, the translator of the play and one of the promoters of modern German drama, never came to terms with the fact that the stage was dark and anti-illusional rather than idyllically white as the author himself initially suggested in accordance with the intention to demonstrate how the artificially maintained beauty of Andorra would be invaded and devastated by a dark threat. Čičvák and Hoffer showed Andorra in an already devastated world, where Barblin might be talking about whitewashing houses before an upcoming holiday, but in reality she was only clearing the stage using an exaggerated rake, cleaning the mess left there after a dance party.

In spite of this, the production was not an example of postmodern direction, in which the director takes a very free approach to the author's text; instead of interpreting the work and then staging this interpretation, he stages images of the associations the original work evoked in him. Using a postmodernist expressivity, Čičvák communicated an interpretation of the meaning of a dramatic work. He did not use actors as instruments that would demonstrate his theses as dynamic parts of his stage installations, and he did not allow actors to boundlessly present their self-experience or what would often be dishonest self-presentation. Brousek plays his character with inner experience and can rapidly switch to distance himself from the character and comment on his action. In Brousek's performance, the proportion of the mimetic and diegetic elements, one of the constituting features of a postmodernist production, achieves a rare balance and is always subordinated to the play's theme.

The overall anti-idyllic message of the production and the complexity of its content meant that it never became a title that was popular with audiences. *Andorra* was performed thirteen times and was seen by approximately five thousand spectators. However, it helped win back trust in big drama with those people who had missed it in Vinohrady. In the course of the following years, this trust would return to the theatre, albeit more slowly than was desired.

Čičvák's production of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* with Ondřej Brousek in the leading role had a positive critical reaction and met with great interest from audiences. Even though the inclusion of this title in the repertory was clearly the result of dramaturgical calculation, it inspired both the director and the actor to delve into their artistic skills and go beyond Shaffer's well-written, though slightly trashy, text to reach the levels of Alexander Pushkin's original inspiration by the "little tragedy" of creativity and envy. As opposed to the original concept of Morávek's production of the same title (which never came to be staged in Vinohrady), postmodernist intertextuality is not applied here by using direct references to lines from Miloš Forman's movie. Shaffer's text is considerably shortened in the production. However, the used stage format could express all of the necessary connotations with the movie, Pushkin's play *Mozart and Salieri*, and the modern martyr cult of pop stars. Jiří Dvořák in the role of Salieri, Ivana Uhlířová as Constance, and Ondřej Brousek as Mozart perform a jealous, love, and artistic triangle within a conceptually expressed stage design. The stage design for the production was created by Tom Ciller based on the director's idea.

The plot unfolded partly on an elevated stage (on which one had to “jump”), and partly underneath it, as well as in the orchestra pit and auditorium. The characters of court counsels are doubled; they are embodied by dancers who use mime, expressive gestures, and face play with punchlines leading to static stupefaction. The dancers are “dubbed”, like puppets, by a quartet of actors; they are the Little Winds, included in the text by Shaffer. The anti-illusional nature of this solution does not require the production to include the characterization of auxiliary figures, which are puppets in the story anyway. Čičvák executes this metaphor literally and with a surprising effect. This leaves more space for the audience to focus on the central triangle, the technically brilliant Dvořák as narrator, and the ingenious musician who, in Brousek’s stage interpretation, plays several pianos and cembalos onstage. He plays these instruments like a virtuoso in a circus-like manner strutting his stuff with his back to the keyboard.

Brousek does not need to impersonate the character of Mozart, carried by a self-destructive and asocial current of creativity. It seems to flow out of him of its own volition, like a natural force, overwhelming the audience with sheer musicality. Tangible and obsessive passions which are intimate and erotic, verbal vulgarity, social faux-pas, and embarrassing situations are all momentarily balanced by vital streams of brilliantly played music by Mozart. Brousek also plays the piano live in the climactic scene of the production just before the intermission; Salieri is outside of the stage on the proscenium, cursing God for endowing Mozart with so much talent. The podium then starts rising until it is almost vertical to the stage; even though it is high up in the space and in a position contradicting the laws of physics, Mozart keeps playing. It is a fascinating apotheosis of the freedom of what is an inconvenient talent.

In 2015 Albert Camus’s *Caligula* premiered, once again with Brousek in the leading role. The exploration of the lived experience of a person who has reached the postmodernist stage where everything is relative is fully intentional here. The themes of identity loss and the ambivalent attitude of the world towards a self-destructive star consciously continue with the interpretation of Albert Camus’s early and dramatically problematic text, where the main themes include individualism, hedonism, the disintegration of values, and interpersonal relationships. Brousek’s unhappy Caligula, another variation of Mozart in a histrionic register, interprets the story of “a tragedy after a tragedy” as a story of a crisis of trust which paralyses all social and intimate relationships. Caligula provokes his surroundings to react differently than

just being subordinate ones and abuses his authoritative power to achieve this. For him, an authentic relationship with another human would only be possible if the layer of subordination was removed with a distinctive, authentic expression; otherwise, he is stuck in the formal relationship of a mask to another mask. But Caligula never experiences such a reaction. His story, as presented in the production, is the story of a directed and provoked suicide. Čičvák stages the social panopticon of the senators by employing allusions to the currently powerless political scene, which is incapable of adopting an efficient stance to critical issues in society and keeps drowning in phrases that only create an alibi for its own impotence. The production was merciless, depressing, and poetic, and ended up being performed eighteen times for around seven thousand spectators in total.

The last collaboration between Čičvák and Brousek at the Vinohrady Theatre was Henrik Ibsen's monumental play *Peer Gynt*. While in *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen himself led a creative dialogue with another big work of art – Goethe's *Faust* (from the position of a commencing modernity that would eliminate the paradigm of Goethe's world of classical philosophy) – Čičvák and Brousek try to shift this dialogue to the level of a reflection on the fate of postmodern man. The paradox of great self-images and challenges, as well as the eager effort and vain and empty result in the form of a wasted life, is key to interpreting the production.

Brousek and Čičvák tell us more about the craziness of our lives than feels pleasant. Non-authentic existence, these days feverishly supported by economic and political marketing, expressed by Ibsen in the life philosophy of sub-human trolls and its slogan "Be for Yourself", is unmasked by the lost authenticity of the human attitude to the adage "Be Yourself". (Once again, this is all about Patočka's "self-liability for one's life"; the values that establish the horizon of our life and, if moved from that horizon to the centre of existence to our very stomach and genitals, will bring about the mentioned critical emptiness of emptiness expressed by Ibsen's ingenious image of onion peeling, the onion that should, after all, have a core but simply does not.) The production quotes Grieg's famous romanticizing music but takes place on another anti-illusional stage made by Hoffer. During the entire duration of the production, Gynt does not change his worn jeans and orange hoodie, the authentic mimicry of the insecure Plebeian of today, who comes from the outskirts of some segregated location.

In addition to Solveig's song, a ten-minute musical number titled "Be a Troll" is played, renamed by one of the reviewers to "Rock n' Roll". This

is Brousek's work, identifying troll hedonism with today's industrial, mass-produced pop culture. However, as opposed to the production of *Caligula*, *Peer Gynt* features a strong catharsis, brought in the finale by the blind Solveig who barely recognizes her beloved for whom she has waited all her life. The actress Andrea Elsnerová performs with such a strong feeling and the outstanding thematization of authentic emotionality that her performance fully equals Brousek's act.

A lot more could be said about the four productions I have used here to prove that big drama has been searching for (and perhaps even finding) ways to address today's heterogeneous society. I also believe in this path because it merges the best traditions of dramaturgy which has a theme. The generation of my teachers (who in the best cases were also members of my generation) were pioneers of this dramaturgy who had the responsibility of middle-aged theatremakers and did their best to be more than just entertainers of a hedonist, undemanding audience. And because there is not a definite solution to the "round square" issue, I assume we will have to continue with our work in the future. The first production of *Peer Gynt* in the Czech lands was staged in Vinohrady by K. H. Hilar in 1916. The character of Gynt was performed by Václav Vydra, Sr. Čičvák's and Brousek's *Peer Gynt* is a contribution to the 110th anniversary of a theatre that has never stopped trying to stage big drama.

Translated by Ivan Lacko

Biography:

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