

Mark Brown

Hi and Mighty: On the Czech Theatre Showcases

The Hi PerformanCZ visitor programmes, hosted regularly by the Czech Arts and Theatre Institute since 2018, have invited international theatre professionals, from directors and promoters to critics, to immerse themselves in the variety of theatre on the contemporary Czech stage. Showcased performances, themed in programmes dedicated to theatre for children and young people, puppet theatre, and text-based theatre, among other examples, are accompanied by symposia, meetings with Czech theatre-makers, theatre tours, and museum visits. In this article Mark Brown provides an overview of the Czech showcases from 2018 to 2024, while focusing particularly on four productions: Tomáš Dianiška's *The Magnificent 294* (2020, showcased 2023); Jan Jirků's *Zá-to-pekl!* (2019, showcased 2022); director Jan Mikulášek's staging of Thomas Bernhard's novel *Woodcutters* (2018, showcased 2022 and 2023); and Brno's Goose on a String Theatre's collectively devised piece *Smokeout* (2022, showcased 2024). These productions markedly represent the diverse strengths of Czech theatre in the twenty-first century.

Mark Brown is a theatre critic, journalist, author, teacher, and researcher. Based in Glasgow, he is a regular critic for the Scottish newspaper the *Sunday National* and the UK *Daily Telegraph*. He is the author of *Modernism and Scottish Theatre since 1969: A Revolution on Stage* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), and the compiler and editor of *Oily Cart: all sorts of theatre for all sorts of kids* (Trentham, 2012), as well as of *Howard Barker Interviews 1980–2010: Conversations in Catastrophe* (Intellect, 2011). He teaches regularly at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow, and has taught at most of Scotland's universities.

Key terms: history, Nazi occupation, communism, puppetry, children's theatre, social conflict.

IN MY THIRTY-YEAR career as a theatre critic, I have been privileged to be invited to festivals and showcases all over the world. Consequently, I have encountered not only a tremendously diverse panoply of theatre works, but also the various strategies employed by nation states in their efforts to promote their country's live drama to the world. None of these governmental efforts has impressed me more than the remarkable international visitors' programme titled Hi PerformanCZ, inaugurated in 2018, which is run by the Czech Arts and Theatre Institute.

Led by Martina Pecková Černá, the indefatigable director of the Institute, based in Prague and funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, the showcases are typically held twice a year. Each showcase is themed. Just three examples show programmes of Czech puppet theatre for children and adults, work for children and young people, and productions from the classical repertoire.

In addition to offering guests a broad experience of the work that has been presented on the Czech stage in recent years, the showcases often take participants out of Prague, introducing them to the theatrical and broader cultural life in other cities and towns. As a regular guest over the six years of the programme, I have had the great fortune of attending theatre productions in Brno, Pilsen, Hradec Králové, and Kladno. In Chrudim, my fellow participants and I were treated to a visit to the splendid national puppetry museum. Indeed, the trip to Pilsen also included a visit to that city's fine museum of puppets.

The lands of Bohemia and Moravia, which make up the modern Czech Republic, have a strong tradition of puppet theatre. This has its roots in the Czech National Revival, which began in the late eighteenth century, when the Czech lands were part of the Habsburg

Empire. As in other art forms, there was a growing desire among the Czech people for puppet theatre created in their own language (rather than German, which had been predominant hitherto).¹ By the early nineteenth century, a distinctive Czech puppet theatre culture had manifested itself in a number of popular itinerant puppeteers, most famous of whom was Matěj Kopecký.² Overtaken by rapid cultural change, the itinerant puppeteers had largely disappeared by the second half of the 1800s. However, the Czech love of puppets endured, and 'family theatres', in which puppet performances were created at home, were not uncommon in middle-class Czech households. Despite the turbulence of the Czech twentieth century, Czech puppet theatre endured and thrived in both professional and folk/amateur forms.³ This history is reflected in a vibrant contemporary puppet theatre scene in which a range of professional companies and artists create work for audiences of all ages.

The beauty of the Hi PerformanCZ programme is that each showcase is a carefully curated education in Czech theatre. Every edition includes symposia in which panels of Czech and international experts give short papers as springboards for collective enquiry and discussion. The Arts and Theatre Institute also provides international guests with opportunities to access literature and online resources pertaining to Czech contemporary theatre and theatre history. In addition, each programme includes conversations with theatre-makers whose work is being showcased. Often, the programme includes visits to places of interest (including the puppet theatres mentioned above) and guided tours of theatre buildings, such as DRAK Theatre in Hradec Králové (which specializes in work for children and young people) and Goose on a String Theatre in Brno (which is a national centre for Czech experimental theatre). Needless to say, if one is fortunate enough to attend multiple showcases, that education deepens with each visitor's programme. I remember, in particular, a visit to an exhibition about Czech theatre history at the National Museum in Prague. I was, and remain, grimly fascinated by the 1977 conference held (on the orders

of the leadership of the ruling Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) at the National Theatre. Staged as a counter-response to the civil rights campaign Charter 77,⁴ the event put forward an 'Anti-Charter', and involved the ritual denunciation of pro-Charter artists by figures in the Czechoslovakian arts who were either pro-regime or (in a bleak echo of McCarthyism in the United States) had been cowed into submission by the authorities.

Given this educational dimension, it is appropriate that, of the many dozens of productions at the Czech showcases that I saw, the one that impressed me most takes as its subject a key event in modern Czechoslovakian history. *The Magnificent 294*,⁵ by Tomáš Dianiška, for the Pod Palmovkou Theatre in Prague, takes as its subject the famous assassination in 1942 of leading Nazi Reinhard Heydrich by the young Slovak paratrooper Jozef Gabčík and his Czech comrade Jan Kubiš. Both men had been trained in Scotland for the mission by the British Army under the auspices of the Czechoslovakian government-in-exile in London.

Heydrich was a high-ranking member of the Hitler regime and a principal architect of the Nazi Holocaust. It was in his position as 'Acting Protector' of Bohemia and Moravia that Heydrich was killed in what was code-named Operation Anthropoid, the daring assassination mission carried out in Prague by Gabčík and Kubiš.⁶ The latter succeeded in hitting the Nazi leader's car with an anti-tank munition. It took Heydrich eight days to die of his injuries (Figure 1).

Dianiška's play takes its title from the 294 members of the Czechoslovakian Resistance in Prague (including Gabčík and Kubiš) who were either murdered by Nazi forces or took their own lives to avoid capture in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Heydrich.⁷ Despite the serious and anguished nature of its subject, the drama takes a tragicomic and, in the company's own description, 'B-movie' approach to its story: indeed, there are, in the bleak, sometimes cartoonish humour of both play and production, shades of the films of Quentin Tarantino and Roberto Benigni. Like Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds*, the Czech drama manages to



Figure 1. The *Magnificent 294*. Pod Palmovkou Theatre, Prague. Photograph: Roman Dobeš. Copyright courtesy of Czech Arts and Theatre Institute.

combine absurdist lampooning of the Nazis with a depiction of those resisting Nazism in terms that are simultaneously outlandish, humorous, affectionate, and, ultimately, reverential. As in Benigni's 1997 movie *Life is Beautiful* (and again, according to taste), Dianiška's play succeeds in navigating the tight-rope walk that is involved in any attempt to employ humanistic comedy in relation to the genocidal crimes of the Third Reich.

The Magnificent 294 is, by turns, compellingly naturalistic, fantastically comic, gloriously satirical, painfully tragic, and, ultimately, inspiringly faithful to its subject. Inevitably, given its boldness and vividness, it contains a number of highly memorable scenes. For instance, a scene in which the Nazis search the work premises of a Czech butcher, who is a member of the Resistance, is as urgent and realistic as any cinematic thriller. In stark contrast is the moment when Gabčík and Kubiš are represented – in a gentle satire of the modern

mythology of heroism – as a pair of muscle-bound, Rambo-style caricatures. In this scene, the characters' physiques are exaggerated hilariously by way of moulded foam torsos and arms (Figure 2). At one point, they are raised into the air on wires as if they are cartoon superheroes taking flight. Such images owe an observable debt to comic books, reflecting the stated intention of writer Dianiška and director Ladislav Stýblo to attract young audiences by way of a theatrical aesthetics that encompasses aspects of popular culture – a desire that is also evinced by the production's use of rock music.

The strong, pro-Resistance sympathies of the piece, including its broader depictions of Gabčík and Kubiš, make it obvious that the comic image of the paratroopers is affectionate and, ultimately, respectful. In radical counter-distinction, the extremely funny scene in which Heydrich carries out his morning ablutions and exercises has a caustic wit and a



Figure 2. *The Magnificent 294*. Pod Palmovkou Theatre, Prague. Photograph: Roman Dobeš. Copyright courtesy of Czech Arts and Theatre Institute.

moral anger reminiscent of the work of Mel Brooks.⁸ As the Nazi perpetrator of genocide prepares for another day of brutal tyranny, his stretching causes him to throw the shape of a swastika.

Moments like these are repeated in a staging that is highly original, wonderfully acted, humorous, and, ultimately, deeply poignant. The set design, in line with the production's general aesthetic, is an impressive combination of visual hyper-realism and extraordinary versatility. Individual scenes emerge within different parts of a set that is constructed like a large mechanical skeleton to use the entire depth and height of the performance space. For instance, the above-mentioned scene in which the Nazis search the butcher's shop takes place on a momentary set that has appeared, suddenly, stage right. By contrast, Heydrich's ablutions take place towards the back of the stage, as spectators look down what appears to be the narrow hallway of his house. All in all, *The Magnificent 294* is the kind of theatre production that is worthy of any international arts festival, from Edinburgh to Adelaide, or anywhere in between.

Another piece richly deserving of international attention is *Zá-to-pek!* An ingenious work of puppet theatre written and directed by Jan Jirků for the children's theatre company Minor, which is based in its own splendid multi-space venue in Prague, the production is aimed at audiences aged eight and over. It tells the story of the celebrated Czechoslovakian long-distance runner Emil Zátopek.⁹ The production is notable for its impressive performative aesthetics, which place puppetry and acting side by side in a show that combines a clever and adaptable set with the comic and dramatic possibilities of actor-puppeteers performing, often surprisingly, within and around the audience in the auditorium itself. It is equally memorable for its pronounced historical-political purpose of teaching young audiences about the authoritarianism of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, which sought both to control and extract political capital from top athletes like Zátopek.

The piece boasts a series of innovative puppets, including representations of Zátopek

himself (shown in various sizes), in which wheels are turned to manipulate the legs to generate the movement of running. Puppetry (including humorous object theatre, such as running shoes as puppets) is combined with acting. The action takes place on the stage, and behind and within the audience, which enables the excellent cast to generate an atmosphere of both humour and immediacy. Dynamic and utilitarian sets (such as the simple use of billowing material under a puppet of the running Zátopek to emphasize the speed and dynamism of the race) and costumes (actors change quickly between running gear and the drab attire of a Stalinist secret policeman) create a sense of the performance being almost improvised, on the go (Figure 3).

All of these aspects are intended (and successfully accomplished) to engross the young audience. The story that the company conveys is not only of Zátopek's athletic journey to Olympic success, but also of the suspicion, paranoia, and claustrophobic oppressiveness of the Stalinist state that ruled Czechoslovakia between 1946 and 1989. A highly original and memorably theatrical approach to an established biographical and socio-historical story, *Zá-to-pek!* is a credit both to contemporary Czech theatre for young audiences and the country's strong and enduring tradition of puppet theatre.

In addition to works of new theatre such as *The Magnificent 294* and *Zá-to-pek!*, which draw upon modern Czechoslovakian and Czech history, contemporary Czech theatre also boasts a strong strand of classical theatre. This ranges from innovative productions of plays from the Ancient and Renaissance periods,¹⁰ via stagings of works from the Czech National Revival,¹¹ to vivid expressions of modernist classics.¹² One of the latter, which has been shared with guests at not one but two Hi PerformanCZ showcases, is the stage adaptation of Austrian author Thomas Bernhard's acclaimed 1984 novel *Woodcutters* by the company of the handsome Prague playhouse, Theatre on the Balustrade.¹³

Directed by Jan Mikulášek, the production places Bernhard's bourgeois drinks party on a fabulous set designed by Marek Cpin – a small, impossibly cramped drawing room



Figure 3. *Zá-to-pek!* Minor Theatre, Prague. Photograph: Zbyněk Hrbata. Copyright courtesy of Czech Arts and Theatre Institute.

which boasts a splendid Persian rug and too many classic paintings jostling for attention on the walls.¹⁴ It is in this crucible of socio-intellectual hypocrisy that the pretentious and morally and intellectually insubstantial guests await the overdue arrival of the famous actor from the National Theatre. The latter's promised attendance is their primary reason for being there (Figure 4).

The party that ensues appears like a cross between Luis Buñuel's classic satirical film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and Edward Albee's absurdist play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Lubricated by alcohol – but never for one moment considering themselves capable of the perceived coarseness of the Flemish peasants depicted in the Bruegel painting (which is displayed multiply on a wall of the drawing room) – these apparently sophisticated members of the metropolitan elite are, with increasing velocity, set upon a course of unintentional and ugly self-revelation.¹⁵ The

great actor, when he finally does show up, is an appalling, self-regarding catalyst in the already advanced process of degeneration. Mikulášek's production articulates excellently in text, design, and performance the sense that Bernhard's pungent, sharp, satirical, bleakly comic writing is 'the missing link' between the work of Kafka and Beckett, on the one hand, and the socially and politically discomfiting novels of Michel Houellebecq and films of Lars von Trier, on the other.¹⁶

Let us go now from the imagined social conflict of Bernhard's novel to the all-too-real discord that enveloped the above-mentioned Goose on a String Theatre in Brno, the second city of the Czech Republic, in 2018. Having heard, second-hand, about some of the content of the play *Our Violence and Your Violence* by Bosnian-Croatian dramatist Oliver Frlijić (which includes a scene in which the crucified Christ appears to come down from the cross to rape a Muslim woman), a coalition of conservative



Figure 4. *Woodcutters*. Theatre on the Balustrade, Prague. Photograph: KIVA. Copyright courtesy of Czech Arts and Theatre Institute.

Catholic, ultra right-wing and fascist forces, led by a political group calling itself The Decent People, protested against the piece. The protest included an invasion of the stage itself. Linking arms across the front of the performance space, the protesters sought to prevent the show from taking place. After some time, the police moved the protesters away, and the performance went ahead.

The Frlijić work was a collaboration between a number of companies across Europe. The Goose on a String theatre had no artistic input in it whatsoever, but had merely hosted it as a guest production. Nevertheless, the episode led to legal action being taken against the staging of the production in Brno and to calls from numerous conservative and right-wing quarters for the theatre to be stripped of its public funding. Although the Brno theatre was dragged into a controversy over *Our Violence and Your Violence* only by association, the unwanted national and international attention that Goose on a String had received led the company to attempt an artistic response.

With *Smokeout* – a two-act work directed by Jiří Havelka, which is really two distinct plays in one – the Brno company seeks to reflect both on the cultural and political shock caused by the events of 2018 and the wider questions of freedom of expression raised by the conflict over Frlijić’s drama. The title of the piece, premiered at the Brno playhouse in November 2022, refers to the company members’ desire to cleanse their theatre of the metaphorical contagion of the experience of four years before.

The first act of the piece is primarily comprised of spoken quotations from people on both sides of the debate that took place in Brno in 2018 (including such real-life absurdities as ‘All the actors and the director of Goose on a String should be killed’ and ‘I haven’t seen the show, but I don’t agree with it’). The quotations are not attributed, and a wide variety of opinions and perspectives is reflected. In the second act, aspects of both Frlijić’s play and the protest against it are represented. This includes a reference to the rape scene (which stops short of enacting the rape itself) and a masked portrayal



Figure 5. *Smokeout*. Goose on a String Theatre, Brno. Photograph: David Konečný. Copyright courtesy of Czech Arts and Theatre Institute.

of the on-stage protest that had occurred (Figure 5).

It is unlikely, I feel sure, that the Goose on a String company would describe *Smokeout* as its most aesthetically accomplished production. It is, necessarily, too contemplative and structurally uneven for that. (Indeed, the company describes it not as a play but, in almost Aristotelian terms, as a ‘cathartic stage ceremony’.)¹⁷ However, it is an important piece, a vital, open-ended, and open-minded response to an event that had undeniably damaged the Czech Republic’s image as a progressive liberal democracy (and, ironically, as the most secular and atheistic country in Central and Eastern Europe).

Typically, the Goose on a String company does not hold post-show discussions following performances, preferring that the audience be left to ruminate on the piece rather than be thrust immediately into discussion and debate. However, they made an exception in the case of the Hi PerformanCZ showcase in

February 2024. Consequently, both their international guests and their local audience had an opportunity to discuss *Smokeout*, *Our Violence and Your Violence*, the 2018 controversy, and the issues raised by all three. The carefully considered thoughts and questions of an international guest from the Middle East, who is a Muslim (and who was concerned that, whatever the company’s intentions in *Smokeout*, some of the piece’s visual referencing of Frljić’s play might serve to reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes), were listened to and responded to with sensitivity and intelligence by members of the company. To my mind, these interactions alone more than justified the company’s decision to hold the post-show discussion.

I have discussed above four particularly memorable highlights from the Hi PerformanCZ programmes. There are, of course, many more. In truth, visits to the splendid Estates Theatre in Prague (where, famously, Mozart’s operas *Don Giovanni* and *La*

Clemenza di Tito received their world premieres) were more memorable for the architecture of the building (both external and internal) than for the productions I saw there.¹⁸ By contrast, the superb children's puppet production *Komodo*, by Lampion Theatre, was unforgettable.¹⁹ In this enchantingly interactive piece, young audiences are invited to become actively involved in the story of a little boy whose obsession with dragons leads to his parents taking him on a surprise trip to the Indonesian island of Komodo. Likewise Jan Horák's uncompromising and visually striking staging of the novella *The Old Woman*, by Russian writer Daniil Kharmis, in which the characters inhabit a bleak world dominated by red-eyed corvids and in which their domestic furniture is permanently covered in avian excrement.²⁰ Rich, varied, intelligently curated, and always including opportunities to interact with Czech theatre experts and practitioners, these visitors' programmes provide an unparalleled platform for a nation's contemporary theatre. They are a credit to the Arts and Theatre Institute, the Czech Ministry of Culture, and to Czech theatre itself.

Notes and References

1. From the website of UNIMA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette), <wepa.unima.org/en/czech-republic> (accessed 18 July 2024).
2. From the website of UNIMA, <wepa.unima.org/en/matej-kopeccky> (accessed 18 July 2024).
3. The century included the declaration of independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918; the nation's occupation by Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1945; its effective annexation by Stalin's Soviet Union in 1945, and incorporation into the Warsaw Pact in 1955; the Prague Spring of 1968; and the 'Velvet Revolution' against Stalinist Communism in 1989.
4. The movement was supported by many public figures, including prominent artists, in Czechoslovakia, in the aftermath of the infamous arrest of the rock group The Plastic People of the Universe.
5. This is the title as translated into English for the showcase. However, the Czech title is *294 statečných*, which more literally translates as *The Brave 294*.
6. The operation has been celebrated in numerous works of literature and film, perhaps most famously in Laurent Binet's first novel *HHhH* [*Himmlers Hirn heißt Heydrich*; 'Himmler's Brain is Called Heydrich'] from 2010, and Sean Ellis's 2016 movie *Anthropoid*.
7. 294 was the initial death toll of the Nazi retribution. Ultimately, thousands of Czechs and Slovaks were murdered in brutal acts of revenge ordered by Hitler. The Saints Cyril and Methodius Cathedral in Prague, where Gabčík and Kubiš and a number of their comrades died during a six-hour gun battle with Nazi forces, is now a national memorial and museum.
8. Most notably, in his 1967 film comedy *The Producers*.
9. The Moravian athlete won three gold medals in the 5,000 metres, 10,000 metres, and the marathon at the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki. He is the subject of David Ondříček's 2021 film *Zátopek*, as well as a recent graphic novel of the same name by Jan Novák and Jaromír 99 (Self-MadeHero, 2020).
10. Such as the modern dress production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (2019), directed at the remarkable and iconic National Theatre in Prague by Jan Frič and played by that great playhouse's resident company.
11. The 'National Revival' of the Czech language and culture took place over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Director Jan Mikulášek's 2017 production for the company of the National Theatre in Prague of the Czech naturalist classic *Maryša*, written by the brothers Alois Mrštík and Vilém Mrštík, and premiered in 1894, is a case in point.
12. Such as the National Theatre of Brno's production of Václav Havel's 1968 play *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* in 2022.
13. This medium-sized theatre sits near the River Vltava in the Old Town of Prague. A young Václav Havel worked in the playhouse as a member of the technical staff.
14. Mikulášek also directed the National Theatre in Prague's production of *Maryša*.
15. Pieter Bruegel the Younger, *The Outdoor Wedding Dance* (c. 1600).
16. See the notes on Bernhard's *Woodcutters* on the website of Faber & Faber: <faber.co.uk/product/9780571276103-woodcutters/> (accessed 14 May 2024).
17. From Goose on a String theatre's website: <prozazek.cz/en/inscenace/vykoureni> (accessed 15 May 2024).
18. Jan Frič's self-indulgent staging of *The Bacchae* (2019) for the National Theatre of Prague, for instance, was a notable disappointment.
19. Lampion Theatre is the puppetry and alternative theatre space of the Bohemian town of Kladno. It caters particularly to young audiences. *Komodo* premiered in 2021.
20. First staged in 2023 by the resident company of Prague's exceptional contemporary performance space Studio Hrdinů.