

# THE NÁCHOD BURGHER JAN JIŘÍ BRÁT

However important the first stage of the history of Czech theatre is for understanding the roots of the Czech puppetry tradition, sufficient research on this period has not been carried out. The first reference to Czech puppeteers does not appear in our historiography of Czech theatre until the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the study, *Historie českého divadla od počátků až na nynější časy* (The History of Czech Theatre from the Beginnings to the Present) from 1816, the publicist, Jan Hýbl, mentions the attempt of Czechs to be inspired by theatrical productions of Italian and German directors, and in this respect he writes: “*however, since it was difficult at that time to maintain a sizable acting company and subsequently perform larger plays, they oftentimes also performed with hand puppets, figurines, so-called showmen or jokesters (in Czech, tatrmán, which is a corruption of the German word Theatermannel), whose gait and movement of arms, body and head was manipulated by hidden actors with the help of thin wires and threads, who spoke with a changed voice for each figure. Amusement was the only goal of such a play with live persons and puppets, and therefore, when any more serious plays were performed, they always had to contain a significant amount of humour, which for live actors, was primarily the role of a jester, and for puppets the so-called Pimprle.*”<sup>9</sup>

Hýbl’s statement is very important for us. It provides evidence that Czech puppet theatre at the beginning of the nineteenth century was so widespread that the author of the first written Czech history of theatre in the Czech lands could not overlook it. However, it provides very little concrete and accurate information that could explain the process of how Czech puppetry began and that could bring us closer to the first protagonists.

We can conclude from past archival research that the first Czech puppeteers were probably the fathers of the puppeteers Jan Václav Bitter from Mělník and Matěj Vavrouš from Habry in the district of Čáslav. In their applications for a puppetry licence, both of them had expressed that their fathers had already been involved in puppet theatre.<sup>10</sup> If we accept the plausibility of their claim,

<sup>9</sup> Hýbl, J. *Historie českého divadla od počátku a na nynější časy*. Preface to the translation of the play by J. H. Zschokke *Abelíno, veliký zbojník*, Prague 1816.

<sup>10</sup> Bartoš, Jaroslav. *Loutkářská kronika*. Prague: Orbis, 1963, p. 51.

then, with the fathers of the mentioned puppeteers, we can move the beginnings of puppetry to around the 1760s. Unfortunately, we do not have any other concrete documents or indirect reports, and their full names are not known. One of the obstacles to researching puppetry history is the fact that all records of the Prague governorate related to issuing permission to puppeteers for carrying out their activities between 1774 and 1805 were destroyed. However, historical research reliably demonstrated that many Czech puppeteers were working in the Czech lands at the end of the eighteenth century, most being the first members of future branches of puppetry families: in southern Bohemia, these included the families Kopecký, Dubský, Lagron, Kludský or Kočka, and in eastern Bohemia, which is the second region with a large concentration of puppeteers, in particular the Meissner family (later using the surnames Maisner and Majzner), and the families Vída or Fink. Nevertheless, we have only vague notions of the beginnings of Czech puppet theatre during the second half of the eighteenth century.

The accidental discovery of a theatre playbill of the puppeteer, Johann Brat, for a performance of the play *Doctor Faust* from 1804 that the theatre department of the National Museum in Prague acquired in its collection was an incentive to carry out new intensive research on this period, and within several years, this had brought surprising results.<sup>11</sup> It was a significant discovery from the standpoint of Czech puppet theatre, because it was the **oldest theatre playbill of a Czech puppeteer** up to that time. Historians of Czech puppet theatre, of course, have many older puppeteer playbills and posters at their disposal relating to the Czech lands which are preserved in Czech archives and museums. However, these are playbills for performances of puppeteers from foreign countries. Several of the oldest and very valuable puppeteer playbills from the eighteenth century are the only proof of the activity of Austrian, German, or Italian puppeteers in the Czech lands, and often with its puppet signature and scenes, they allow us to identify the repertoire and the manner of performance for a particular puppeteer. Some of the most important include the playbill of a puppeteer (most probably Anton Joseph Geissler), which announced on 19 April 1713 the performance of *Hercules and Alcestis* at the Špork opera theatre in Prague “*with large figures that were one and a half cubits high for a large theatre*” where there were also “*presented the most beautiful operatic machinery with all the poetic divinity that a comedy brings*”.<sup>12</sup> From the playbill of the Venetian puppeteer, Girolamo Renzi (also written Johann

<sup>11</sup> Theatre playbill of Johann Brat aeltere (senior) for the performance of the play *Doctor Faust*, dated 7 March 1804 (no location indicated). Theatre Department of the National Museum in Prague, no. 21/98.

<sup>12</sup> Bartoš, Jaroslav. *Loutkářská kronika*. Prague: Orbis, 1963, p. 18.

Rizzi) performing in 1777 in the Prague Platýz, which was printed in Italian and German, we learn about his rich repertoire of 27 plays with the main hero Pulcinella (the German version of the playbill with Harlequin). The significance of this bill is extraordinary in that a similar list of the repertoire of the Italian puppeteer has not been preserved in Italy or in any other European country.<sup>13</sup> On the playbill of Joseph Marquis the Younger from 1789, we can find at least an interesting signature of a shadow theatre surprisingly constructed from up to 500 perspectives and more than 4,000 figures.<sup>14</sup>

Czech puppetry playbills in the collections of Czech museums come from much later periods, mainly from the second half of the nineteenth century. In earlier times, a typical Czech puppeteer announced his performances in small towns and villages in the Czech countryside as aptly described by Karel Roth in the journal *Lumír*: “namely, he goes out to the village green or square accompanied by his dog carrying pimprle on its back, beats a drum several times, and with a certain air of authority, begins to speak to the men and boys who are gathered around him as follows: *With high presidial consent, we will perform today n.p. Frajštic [Der Freischütz], a grand opera, and during this amusing performance, divertissement, or entertainment, all of our figures will move as if they were alive, and our dear pimprle will complement all with his funny wise cracks, to which we will invite the esteemed public, the famed militia and the high nobility.*”<sup>15</sup> Gradually, many Czech puppeteers started to make their own playbills, mostly with the help of templates or stencil forms. With these templates, the texts were carved onto hard paper or a metal plate, which were then painted and then printed on paper (specific information about the place, date, and time of the performance were added later according to need). These playbills only briefly advertised the name of the play. Only at a later time did Czech puppeteers start using to a greater extent playbills and posters made in printing houses, which allowed them to use more text and more creative graphics in order to attract the attention of potential audiences.<sup>16</sup> However, these are prints from the second half of the nineteenth century, and therefore, the playbill for the performance Doctor Faust from 1804 is exceptional as the only documentation of puppeteer activity from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The second very interesting fact why this playbill attracted so much attention is that Johann Brat who announces his performance with the playbill, is the same person as the puppeteer Jan Brát of Náchod, as was convincingly

<sup>13</sup> *Dějiny českého divadla I.* Prague 1968, p. 237.

<sup>14</sup> Bartoš, Jaroslav. *Loutkářská kronika.* Prague: Orbis, 1963, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Roth, K. Čestí marionetáři. *Lumír* 1851, p. 1095.

<sup>16</sup> For more details, see Veselý, J., Plakáty českých loutkářů. *Osvěta* 41, 1911, p. 828n.

Mit hoher Bewilligung

wird heute Mittwoch den 7. März 1804.

Johann Brat der Aeltere

mit seinen mechanischen Kunstfiguren  
auf vieles Verlangen

die Ehre haben aufzuführen:

# Doctor Faust.

Ein allegorisches Drama in vier Aufzügen.

Die mir zugeflossene Güte meiner gnädigen Gönner überzeuget mich Ihres Wohlwollens, und versichert mich im voraus heute auf dieses mit schönen Flugmaschinen versehenes Stück ein volles Schauspielhaus. Ich werde keine Kosten, noch Mühe sparen, Sie bestens befriedigen zu können, um fernerhin mich Ihrer Gunst und gütigen Unterstützung zu versichern. Der kleine Pimperl will heute nebst dem Kosakentanz zur Abwechslung des Vergnügens, als ein Bettelstudent, Vogelfänger, und lustiger Nachtwächter seinen hohen Gönnern vieles Lachen verursachen.

Zum Beschluß folgt ein böhmisches Nachspiel,

genannt:

## Smotr Mrdšlek a Smotr Čuchálek.

Preise der Plätze:

Standespersonen zahlen nach Belieben.

Auf dem ersten Platz	—	—	—	—	18 Kr.
Auf dem zweyten Platz	—	—	—	—	12 —
Auf dem dritten Platz	—	—	—	—	6 —

Der Schauplay ist bey der golden Weintraube.

Der Anfang ist um 5 Uhr.

Jan Brát's  
playbill  
for the  
performance  
of *Doctor  
Faust*, 1804.