

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE THEATRE

Yet this earlier experimental Osvobozené divadlo remains an important stage in the development of the second phase of Czech modern theatre and in the avant-garde phase of Czech theatre in general. In addition to Frejka and Honzl, another avant-garde director, Emil František Burian, started his theatrical career there. Likewise, many scenographers had their first professional outings on its stage, for example, Antonín Heythum, Otakar Mrkvička, Jindřich Štýrský and many others. It was also the stage where the principles of modern choreography and modern dance were tried out by artists like M. Holzbachová, J. Kröschlová, M. Mayerová a S. Machov, and it was the venue where

the first stage music scores by Jaroslav Ježek were performed. The experimental Osvobozené divadlo was a necessary preliminary training ground for the Czech modernist and avant-garde theatre.

The economic and political stabilization of the newly created Czechoslovakia in the twenties shaped and developed a network of professional theatres. Theatres established immediately after the war were not in the best position. They consolidated slowly and struggled, mainly with financial problems. The post-war enthusiasm which led some people to believe that the state would provide for these theatres proved a painful error. During

the twenties, theatres outside Prague had contributed little to the overall quality of Czech theatrical culture. However they did provide young actors with opportunities for work, even if they were in-

secure and limited, and these opportunities led to more systematic professional work. This can be seen from the long list of actors who went on from the provincial theatres to become foremost members of the Prague theatres. During this phase both the number and importance of the forty strolling theatre companies diminished. Their nature as moving theatres forbade any complicated staging and – with a few extraordinary exceptions – they were old-fashioned in their productions and performances. They were unable to absorb impulses from the

modernist theatre either purposefully, systematically or creatively.

The situation was different in Prague. Volume IV of the academic *History of Czech Theatre* divides the smaller drama theatres in Prague into two types. The first were small theatres which attempted to take hold in central Prague and to compete with “big theatres” (the National and Vinohrady). The second type were dedicated to capturing mass audiences in the Prague suburbs and attempted to produce popular theatre. The first type gave Prague “big city style.” They were commercial types of “boulevard theatre”, existing on the wave of a prosperously



V+W, *Vest Pocket Revue*.  
Osvobozené divadlo 1927.  
Jan Werich (Sempronius Houska)  
and Jiří Voskovec (Publius Ruka).

stable economy, and they exploited the optimism of the general public that gravitated intuitively towards entertainment, humor and revelry.<sup>46</sup> A large number of these theatres were built around the popularity of a particular comic actor.

One of these was Vlasta Burian at the Rokoko Theatre. He moved there in 1923, after the Revolutionary Stage [Revoluční scéna] closed down. He moved together with Emil Artur Longen, Xena Longenová, Ferenc Futurista and Eman Fiala. After that, from 1928, he performed at Švandovo Theatre. On September 1, 1929, he opened his own theatre at Adria and from 1930 until 1945 he played there, in the luxurious surrounding of the Miners and Metallurgical Company [Báňská a hutní společnost] at Lazarská 7.

**VLASTA BURIAN** Vlasta Burian came from a background of Czech pub camaraderie, of sportsmen's canteens, and was typical of relaxed Bohemian groups. He entertained with his ability to improvise and imitate any real phenomenon, distorting reality with a spontaneity and immediacy that reached dadaist proportions of grotesque parody. He was able to mock and provoke laughter at the same time. He was known for his brilliant control over his body, having trained as an acrobatic. He was able to transform the most usual and obvious phenomena of life into something astonishing. With superb originality he arrived at a kind of poetist-dadaist vision and shaping of reality.

In his book on Vlasta Burian, Vladimír Just interprets him as a destructive clown – the mirror image of an everyday person in the midst of the chaos and confusion

of modern civilization. That was a note that may have found resonance with the ranks of ordinary viewers. But it also found resonance within the modernist attitudes and ideas of the avant-garde. We find proof for this in the essay *An Elementary Actor* [*Elementární herec*] by Jindřich Honzl, and in the statement by Vítězslav Nezval:

**Because of his absurdist humor, Vlasta Burian was for us a big brother to the Fratellini Brothers, to Chaplin and to Max Linder and we swore by him. In return, he was always very kind and amiable to us; I do not know what else he might have thought of us because our art evidently did not make much of an impression on him... Somehow he was ours, but did not trouble himself with the fact any further.**<sup>47</sup>

Burian's work provided an excellent example of boulevard comedy, that is, theatre played chiefly for the purpose of entertainment which made minimum intellectual demands on the audience. The experimental avant-garde artists, Just says, claimed that this "anti-intellectual clown from the Žižkov suburbs" was one of their own because he fulfilled many of the requirements of their artistic creed.<sup>48</sup> He was a spontaneous dadaist author, at home in avant-garde regions; in the world of silent film slapstick comedy; in circus and clownery; in the world that was both marvelously poetic and yet trivial and trashy. That was the same world the avant-garde felt drawn to and which it treated as one of the promising ways to bring the "poetry of joy" into life itself. Vlasta Burian was thus established as a prodigy, making his theatre one of the most frequented and economically most prosperous.

<sup>46</sup> *Dějiny českého divadla IV.*, Praha 1983, p. 158–164.

<sup>47</sup> Just V. *Vlasta Burian*, Praha 1993, p. 87–88.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: 89.

**SUBURBAN THEATRE** Grand Operetta [Velká opereta]

joined the ranks of the entertainment theatres in 1929. It was founded in Pardubice by Bedřich Jeřábek, who prior to the war had strongly opposed operetta as a genre in the East Bohemia Theatre. A new modern building on the corner of Dlouhá and Hradební street became the venue for the establishment of this theatre. Jeřábek's plan was to make it the home of exclusive operetta theatre counting on a rich clientele. But his high-brow expectations were not met and at the beginning of the 1930s he had to open the repertoire to middle class audiences. Only in the second half of the 1930s, after his death, did the Grand Operetta reach a level of exceptional operetta theatre due to the high quality of the ensemble, whose thoroughness in productions was matched by lavish visual displays.

Jeřábek had come to this new venue from Uranie, one of the suburban Prague theatres. The wooden building, which comprised the Exhibition Theatre, had been bought by a Prague Brewery (Měšťanský pivovar in Holešovice). In 1902, it was rebuilt in the brewery garden. It started operation under the leadership of actor/director Jakub Vojta-Slukov. His vision marked the venue for years to come as quality drama theatre for the widest audiences reasserted itself regularly and frequently. Uranie continued this program right up to the beginning of the twenties when the theatre started to lose to competition from

other suburban theatres. When it was taken over by Jan Kubík, who ran the theatre at his own expense, it widened its repertoire to include a substantial portion of operetta.



Vlasta Burian as accordionist Beruška in Pavel Schuek's comedy, *The Street Sings*.

Švandovo divadlo shared a similar fate with Uranie. It was mainly designed for the suburb of Smíchov, but for a long time it held an ambition to become part of Prague's mainstream theatrical life. In the early twenties, it was led by Jan Bor who produced a repertoire of good, often even remarkable quality, accompanied by some cheap commercial comedy. One of the

most successful productions at the post-war Švandovo was František Langer's comedy, *A Camel Through the Needle's Eye* [Velbloud uchem jehly] (opened 1929, 200 performances). After the success of *The Outskirts*, Langer remained faithful to the subject matter of suburban low life, but he started to see it through the perspective of idyllic, kind and humorous humanism that can be labelled "all's well that ends well." The comedy was good hearted and full of joy, the forceful drawing characters developed within an often melodramatic plot. All these features were characteristically present in *A Camel Through the Needle's Eye* [Velbloud uchem jehly] (1929) where a poor girl makes a journey from rags to riches by marrying into a rich family. The Švandovo ensemble included actors such as Olga Scheinpflugová, Jiří Plachý, Bedřich Veverka, Božena Půlpánová and Ladislav Boháč. When Bor left, the quality of the theatre began to decline, and, in 1928, the owner

Ema Švandová was forced by financial constraints to rent the theatre out.

Efforts to create a quality drama theatre for a wide popular audience led Stanislav Langer, the actor and director at Uranie Theatre, to have a new venue built in the district of Nusle in 1921. It was a wooden construction seating an audience of eight hundred and was called after the nineteenth century playwright Josef Kajetán Tyl. Tylovo divadlo was conceived in the tradition of quality popular theatre for everybody. The opening productions of Tyl's history play *Drahomíra* and the ever popular folk comedy *Fidlovačka* aimed in this direction. Nevertheless, despite all his efforts Langer was not able to fill the theatre and so he had to resort to a reliable audience puller – operetta. He left Tylovo divadlo during the 1924/1925 season. Afterwards, a number of theatre managers succeeded each other in quick order but they all had to deal with the same problem. The district of Nusle could not provide a large enough audience, and the transport connections to central Prague were poor.

In the 1927/28 season, yet another theatre tried to attract large audiences to quality drama, but again without success. It was the theatre Akropolis on the borderline between the districts of Žižkov and Vinohrady. The theatre entrepreneur Antonín Fencel at the Arena Theatre in the Smíchov district was luckier. In 1923, he brought over a new kind of show, a revue, and presented it for the first time on a grand scale following the American Barnum type of advertising. Revue went on later to play an important role in theatre entertainment in the 1920s. Substituting the revue format for that of operetta paid off, especially once Fencel managed to put together a good ensemble. The star was a fifteen year

old actress Slávka Tauberová. A twenty year old actor Fanda Mrázek came from the mainstream dramatic theatre and quickly grew into a successful young comedy player. And the nineteen year old comedian Jára Kohout came from Prague's cabaret theatre milieu. Kubík's calculations proved to be good. His revues showed the advantages of revue as a new form of theatre entertainment, defined the main features of the style, and attracted wide audiences.<sup>49</sup>

This brief overview of the history of theatre in this period clearly shows that despite all the flaws, problems, false starts, detours and meanders Czech theatre made in post-war Czechoslovakia, it was able to establish promising conditions for further development and to achieve results that would form a good foundation for differentiated, diversified and stratified theatre network, audience orientation and theatre idiom. In the 1930s, this promising development was affected by events, both economic and political, which gave the decade a completely unexpected new direction.

<sup>49</sup> Many studies about the commercial boulevard theatre and/or about theatres striving to make quality drama for less demanding audiences use the term "popular audience". A similarly vague term – "wide audiences" – is used here just to avoid the dangers inherent to the "popular audience" concept. The word "popular" implies the mainly lower classes, lacking wealth or completely poor. Whenever the word "all-popular," especially in connection with the National Theatre, is used, it means all the Czech speaking population in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, regardless of their social or class status or their participation in a particular social group. When, on the other hand, wide, or the widest, strata of audience are mentioned, it means viewers whose interest in the theatre is primarily defined not by their social position but by a common mentality and a common theatrical focus. When the suburban audience is mentioned, then of course mainly less wealthy or poorer viewers are referred to. But at the same time the lower middle classes cannot be left out from the composition of this group.