

# Prague Structuralism and the Czech Theatre of the 1930s

MILAN PALEC

Although the Prague Linguistic Circle established in 1926, and the Czech theatrical avant garde of the 1930s seem on the surface to have little in common the two belonged undoubtedly together. They were connected not only by geography and date of origin, indeed, both were the result of particular historical and philosophical circumstances. These two groups also shared the same goal, namely the search for new and radical avenues of thought. Finally, the Prague Linguistic Circle and the Czech theatrical avant-garde shared a similar destiny.

In the history of science and art, we rarely see so nearly perfect a model of interaction and cross influences between the two domains, as seen between Prague structuralism and the Czech Theatre of the 1930s. This unusual symbiosis between "art-loving" scholars and "theory-appreciative" artists grew from a common feeling of responsibility for the establishment of a new order in art, science and society. The rush of the "white" intelligentsia from the East in the 1920s and the Left intelligentsia from the West during the 1930s contributed to the extraordinary production of the Prague Linguistic Circle as well as to the Czech theatrical avant-garde.

The beginning of World War Two, with the Nazi occupation of Prague, disrupted the work of the Czech theatrical avant-garde. It suffered a further setback soon after the end of the war, when a communist government took power in Czechoslovakia. This take over also spelled the end of the Prague Linguistic Circle's activity. Several structuralists emigrated, mostly to the United States, where they and their followers continued cultivating the soil for structuralism in the late 1950s and for semiotics in the 1960s.

The Czech theatrical avant-garde was revived in the 1960s during the era of the Prague Spring only to be crushed again in 1968 by Soviet tanks. This time its followers emigrated primarily to West European countries.

When communism collapsed in 1989, students at Charles University, where former members of the Prague Linguistic Circle had taught sixty years earlier, and Prague theatre artists together started the "velvet revolution". Consequently, the Czech and Slovak nations elected a playwright as their president.

This short historical summary should provide the necessary background for an analysis of a process of reciprocity that developed between the two movements in question.

All artistic endeavors have their theories. The practical and theoretical aspects work in symbiosis and are, as a rule, complementary. Theory requires practice in the same way that practice requires theory; each is equally dependent upon the other and necessary in order for a given discipline to evolve as a whole. From the end of the last century onwards, the stage was dominated by "realistic" theatre. This particular style managed to endure well into the twentieth century in communist countries in the guise of "socialist realism" (and also in certain western countries where theatre has been primarily a commercial undertaking). This "realistic" theatre was philosophically based on positivism. Positivism is interested, above all, in objective reality as something that can be measured, illustrated, or located geographically or temporally. It seeks a complete negation of subjective elements and follows the precepts of classical aesthetics. These attributes of positivistic thought are still alive and well in so-called "utility" theatres.

The avant-garde movement likewise looked for some kind of legitimization of its artistic principles. The structural method was implemented in an effort to devise an escape from the chaos that modern art resembled in the eyes of the uninitiated.

Structuralism does not present a philosophy as most philosophical doctrines do. Structuralism is a method, a way of thinking about the world, it is essentially a model in which each part plays its individual role following the law of relationships. If we understand that the stage can serve as the model of the world and an actor as the model of mankind, we can begin to see why the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle was so highly appreciated by the Czech theatrical avant-garde. The individual relationships within the model are more important than the model itself. As Roman Jakobson stated: " I do not believe in things , I believe only in their relationships . " (1929)

The outstanding forerunner of structuralism Otakar Zich with his doctrine of formative aesthetics and early semantics, provided a solid base for several generations of Czech structuralists who were interested in theatre theory. The appearance of Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (1931) attracted members of the Czech theatrical avant-garde to the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle , which offered a continuous elaboration of Zich's ideas.

The Structuralists introduced the concept of structure as not merely the sum of its parts, but as the dynamic relationship among individual parts. Consequently the cardinal question concerns the order within the structural system. Applied to the theatre, this notion meant a revolution in the understandings of the performing arts.

The structure of a piece of theatre expresses the relationship and interaction of its components: the acting, directing, choreography, the literary text, music, dramaturgy, stage design, architecture and, if you will, the spectator. Every component of this structure can be understood as a subsystem which has an internal structure of its own. Consider stage design for example. If perceived as a subsystem, components of its structure are inevitably participating in the following systems: the fine arts, architecture, cinema, audiovisual systems, applied arts, and so on.

The Prague structuralists adopted Jurij Tynjanov's concept of a "dialectic whole" as a model for the artwork. "The unity of a work is not a closed symmetrical whole," maintained Tynjanov, "but an unfolding dynamic integrity; among its elements stands, not the static sign of equation or addition, but always the dynamic sign of correlation and integration. Structure is a process rather than a closed whole" (1924:9-12). Tynjanov's idea was enhanced by Mukarovsky's concept of structure understood as dialectic thought. Here Mukarovsky focused on the dynamic tension of thesis and antithesis within the structure as the key to its evolution.

The theatre served as an excellent laboratory for studies and analysis of the relationships between subsystems and components. Mukarovsky pointed out that the development of an artistic structure must be stimulated by other artistic and, ultimately, social structures, and also that all structures are equally valuable. This is what he called "the interconnection of all art". (1978:201-20)

Function was another concept developed by the Prague linguistic circle. Each system has its particular goal, and we assume that it will develop out of the function of the individual components. The integrated activity of all participating components comprised the functional goal of the theatrical structure which is to create a theatrical production. Accordingly, the concept of function is closely related to the third concept of the Prague Linguistic Circle, namely, that of the sign.

The function of a theatrical system as a sign system- a system capable of reflecting and changing reality always depends upon some component that dominates the system in a vertical direction. Consequently, the dominant component of the structure limits the other components to their particular position and assigns them their meaning in the functioning of the whole system. Jindrich Honzl spelled out these ideas in the following statement:

"We do not maintain that the playwright and the word, the actor and the director are in some way outside factors that fail to determine the balance of theatrical structure. We only wish to show that every historical period foregrounds different components of theatrical expression and that the creative force of one factor can substitute or suppress the rest

of the components of theatrical expression without minimizing the power or the theatrical activity as a whole ". (1976:74-94).

The intentional organization of the functions of a theatrical system as a system of signs, born of the connections between individual components and their functions, relies on integration within this system, which is the only guarantee that all its components will be directed to one final goal. The components of a theatrical system do not function only on the horizontal axis; the vertical organization as well assumes a certain cohesion in the creative process and in the final result, which is built into the sign system itself. Therefore the coordination of a particular structure produces equivalent possibilities of communication. It allows each sign the same capability to provoke meaning whatever character the sign might have.

Prague structuralists succeeded in giving new meaning to classical theatrical terminology. They found that a method can be expressed by the vertical harmonization functions. This method is implemented by mediating the complex phenomenon known as "style". Style in theatre arises as a functional horizontal connection between the individual components of the theatrical system based on principle coordinating verbal and non verbal elements that produce unique yet generally understandable codes of communication for the spectator. Style is not a condition for creating an artistic point of view, and is definitely not identical with it. With regard to the theatre, style is multilateral: a style is born in revolt against a preceding dominant style. Such a revolt occurs when negative signs from the previous style are accentuated, therefore encouraging the program of a new style to arise. Hence the development of art, from the standpoint of style, has a revolutionary character.

With the onset of the theatrical avant-garde, the arts did not have any unified style. Hence style was replaced by form. In theatre it was replaced by "small forms" like "stage-on-the-stage" (or theatre-within-a-theatre), "theatricalization", "oratorio," "ritual," and so on. Post-modern artistic tendencies, in turn are perceived as a result of the reaction of theatre against its avant-garde period; these reactions can be called "style" if this amalgam of historic styles will prove its ability to develop a unifying philosophical frame.

The third crucial concept for the Prague structuralists was that of sign. Jan Mukarovsky distinguished the "Linguistic sign" a term describing its normal usage, and the "artistic/aesthetic sign," which communicates the fact that it is not a mere instrument. (1976:3-11) As Frantisek Deak pointed out, "in theatre, the communicative and artistic signs coexist." (1978:91) In general, communicative and aesthetic signs in theatre presuppose a set of values and functions in their own right, and are endlessly changeable and complex. Moreover, since theatrical convention also changes, and the theatre of a given time and place will highlight certain components and rank

them higher than others, the mutability of the theatrical sign implies that the sign can shift both in its own right as well as in the way in which it is perceived.

In the theatre, signs also have a multiplicity of meanings. As Petr Bogatyrev pointed out "an ermine cape is a sign of royalty in the theatre, regardless of the material of which the cape is actually made. The sign in the theatre is not a sign of an object, but the sign of a sign of an object" (1976:33-50). As a specific example, oakum was used in E.F.Burian's production of K.H.Macha's "May" (1935). At first oakum on the stage was just oakum, a material filling a space. Later, the oakum turned out to have several hidden meanings, even fulfilling a communicative purpose. Both functions of the oakum were alternately accentuated: thus in a particular light setting, the oakum reminded the audience of a tree crown, and did not call attention to its material structure. In a different light, however, it was simply oakum and each of its fibers was clear and lucid. In both cases the oakum was a sign. In the first case it functioned principally as a sign; in the second case it represented itself alone. Both functions were finally integrated to such an extent that in the spectator's mind the existence of the oakum on the first significative plane gave substance to its function on the second significative plane. And what happened to the oakum happens to all objects on the stage- as well as to the actor.

Predecessors of Prague structuralists already recognized the fact that theatrical signs fall into two categories. The first is the "characterizational," actively distinguishing characters and place of action. The second is the "functional," participating in the dramatisation. Moreover the things on the stage that constitute theatrical signs acquire special features, qualities, and symptoms during a play which they do not have in real life.

Prague structuralists active in the 1930s such as Jan Mukarovsky, claimed that: "The work of art has a sign character". Mukarovsky (1976:3-11); or as Jindrich Honzl put it, "Everything on the stage is a sign," (1976:74-94). Forty years later, the Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan had reached a similar conclusion: "Everything is a sign in the theatrical presentation" (1968:52-81). Kowzan distinguished two kinds of signs: 1) the natural phenomena unprovoked by man and 2) the artificial signs created in order to signify or communicate something. Kowzan argued that the theatre is made up entirely of artificial signs.

Theatre uses verbal as well as non-verbal systems of signification. The signs a particular performance displays can be drawn from anywhere: there is no system of signification that cannot be integrated into the production. In the theatre, according to Kowzan, signs seldom appear in their pure state. A richness and variety of signs adds complexity to a performance. Therefore, it is quite daunting to analyze where exactly signs belong in the given system, since most sign combinations are situated in the complex nexus of time and space.

In a work of art, there is a certain configuration of the elements which brings them together and creates a unified artistic sign. The very organization of a work of art as a complex sign has within it a predetermined range of meaning which is built intentionally into the work's structure.

The increasing interest in semiotics in the 1960s resulted in the rediscovery of the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle. The terms like index, signal, symbol, icon, information, message, symptom or badge became part of the vocabulary in the 1970s of not only theatre theoreticians but also theatre practitioners. The increasing interest in the doctrine of sign led in the West to extremes like the "structural" theatre: which attempted to apply the semiotic doctrine directly to the artistic creative process. In Czechoslovakia, however, the theatrical mainstream remains firmly tied to the theatrical heritage of the interwar avant-garde. Both the legacy of the Czech directorial triumvirate E. F. Burian, Frejka, Jindrich Honzl, with designers Jindrich Styrsky and Troster, from the 1930s, and another directorial triumvirate Otomar Krejca, Radok, Jan Grossman, along with designer Jan Svoboda from the 1960s influence young generations of theatre artists today the same way in which the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle continues to preoccupy present day theatre theoreticians.

### Notes and References

- Bogatyrev, Petr (1976) "Semiotics in the Folk Theatre" in: L. Matejka and I.r. Titunik *Semiotics of Art*; the MIT Press., pp.33-50
- Burian, Emil Frantisek (1935) "Production of K.H Macha's *May*" *Theatre D34*, Prague
- Deak, Frantisek (1978) "Structuralism in Theatre" *Drama Revue* 20/78., p.91
- Eco, Umberto (1973) "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance" *The Drama Review* 17/73

- Honzl, Jindrich (1976) "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre " in : L Matejka and I.R.Titunik, *Semiotics of Art*, The MIT Press., pp. 74-94
- Jakobson, Roman (1929) in Prague's *Journal cin* (Action)
- Kowzan, Tadeusz (1968) "The Signs in the Theatre" *Diogenes* 61,pp.52-81
- Morris, Charles (1971) *Writing on the General Theory of Signs*, The Hague; Mouton ., pp 359-68
- Mukarovsky, Jan (1978) *Structure, Sign and Function*, New Haven, London Yale Univ. Press., pp 201-20 (1976) "Art as Semiotic Fact" In: L. Matejka and I.R.Titunik *Semiotics of Art*, The MIT Press ., pp.3-11
- Tynjanov, Jurij (1924) *Problema stichotvornogo jazyka* (the Problems of Poetic Language ) Leningrad., pp. 9-12
- Zich, Otakar (1931) *Estetika dramatickeho umeni* (The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art), Melantrich, Prague