

# S K E N È

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

---

**8:1 2022**

Puppet, Death, and the Devil:  
Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

---

*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

*Executive Editor*

Guido Avezzù.

*General Editors*

Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi.

*Editorial Board*

Simona Brunetti, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Susan Payne,  
Gherardo Ugolini.

*Managing Editors*

Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer.

*Assistant Managing Editor*

Roberta Zanoni, Marco Duranti.

*Book Review Editors*

Chiara Battisti, Sidia Fiorato.

*Staff*

Petra Bjelica, Francesco Dall'Olio, Bianca Del Villano,  
Serena Demichelis, Marco Duranti, Carina Louise Fernandes,  
Leonardo Mancini, Antonietta Provenza, Savina Stevanato,  
Carla Suthren.

*Typesetters*

Lorenza Baglieri, Martina Passanante, Cristiano Ragni.

*Advisory Board*

Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater,  
Richard Allen Cave, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Rosy Colombo,  
Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek,  
Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie,  
Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith,  
Daniela Guardamagna, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke,  
Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano,  
Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2022 SKENÈ

Published in June 2022

All rights reserved.

ISSN 2421-4353

The Journal is a CC-BY 4.0 publication  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>  
[info@skeneproject.it](mailto:info@skeneproject.it)

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù

P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

## Contents

### Puppet, Death, and the Devil: Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – <i>Introduction</i>	5
DIDIER PLASSARD and CAROLE GUIDICELLI – <i>Haunted Figures, Haunting Figures: Puppets and Marionettes as Testimonies of Liminal States</i>	11
FRANCESCA CECCONI – <i>Journey into Hell: a Tour through Puppetry</i>	35
EMILY LEQUESNE – <i>From the Grotto to the Grotesque: Puppets, Folklore and the Uncanny</i>	51
MARA THEODORITSI – <i>Literal and Metaphorical Puppets as Supernatural Figures: Echoes of Classical Greek Theatre in Cervantes’s Fiction</i>	69
MANUELA MOHR – <i>Rethinking the Vampire: the Fantastic on the Puppet Stage</i>	87
JEAN BOUTAN – <i>Death, the Devil and the Wife: Danse Macabre Motifs in Nineteenth-Century Puppetry, from Punch to Kasperl</i>	103
FRANCESCA DI FAZIO – <i>Figurations of Evil in Contemporary Puppet Theatre Dramaturgy</i>	121

#### Miscellany

ELENI PAPAZOGLOU – <i>The Dramaturgy of Vocatives: Dynamics of Communication in Sophoclean Thebes</i>	143
FRANCESCO DALL’OLIO – <i>Athens, the Moon and You: Diana and the Female Appropriation of Marriage in A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	167

#### Special Section

LORETTA INNOCENTI – Stephen Orgel, <i>Wit’s Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics</i> , Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. ISBN 9780812253276. pp. 216	189
CRISTINA CONSIGLIO – Tana Wojczuk, <i>Lady Romeo. The Radical and Revolutionary Life of Charlotte Cushman, America’s First Celebrity</i> , New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020. ISBN 9781501199523. pp. 226	201
NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – Ashley E. Lucas. <i>Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration</i> . London, New York: Methuen, 2021. ISBN 9781408185896. pp. 272	209
RAFFAELLA DI TIZIO – <i>A Journey to the Border Between Theatre and Literature: Theateradaptationen. Interkulturelle Transformationen moderner Bühnentexte</i> , Edited by Olaf Müller and Elena Polledri, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2021. ISBN 9783825347857. pp. 257	219
MARK BROWN – <i>From Oedipus to a Voyeuristic Photographer: a Showcase of the Breadth of Czech Theatre</i>	231
SORIN DAN BOLDEA – <i>The Actor-Author: its Presence and Absence in the Romanian Theatre</i>	239



MARK BROWN\*

## **From Oedipus to a Voyeuristic Photographer: a Showcase of the Breadth of Czech Theatre**

Abstract

This article reviews the January 2022 iteration of the HI PerformanCZ series of themed showcases of Czech theatre. The showcases are created for international guests and hosted at regular intervals by the Arts and Theatre Institute of the Czech Republic. Comprised of a day of contemporary experimental theatre in the city of Brno and a series of stagings of classical plays at the National Theatre and other playhouses in Prague, the showcase offered guests an intensive programme of many of the most important productions to have emerged in the Czech Republic in recent years.

KEYWORDS: HI PerformanCZ; Arts and Theatre Institute; Czech Theatre; Centre for Experimental Theatre; National Theatre

There can be few organisations in Europe that are currently more engaged in promoting the theatrical arts in their country to the wider continent, if not the world, than the Arts and Theatre Institute of the Czech Republic. The Institute holds regular showcases of Czech theatre – each with a particular theme – to which they invite guests from various disciplines within the dramatic arts (including theatre directors and, as in my case, theatre critics). Going under the title of HI PerformanCZ Visitors’ Programme, the most recent showcase – of classical and contemporary text-based Czech theatre – was held in Prague (with a daytrip to Brno) in late January 2022.

Since 2016, the Czech government has asked that its country be called “Czechia”. However, it was notable that the English language programme for the January 2022 showcase carried the logo of the “Ministry of Culture, Czech Republic” – an official recognition, perhaps, that it will be some time before the world says “Czechia” as readily as it says “Slovakia” or “Slovenia”.

Whatever you choose to call the country, respect is due to the excellent, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff of the Czech Arts and Theatre Institute for their always superb organisation and curation of the HI PerformanCZ programmes. Respect also to the Ministry of Culture for its continuing sup-

\* Freelance theatre critic; associate researcher Centre for Theatre Studies, University of Lisbon - markbrown.teatro@gmail.com

port for such an innovative and important programme.

Day one of the January programme took the international guests to Brno, which is the country's second largest city after the capital, Prague. Here we found ourselves in what must, surely, be the ultimate post-Stalinist theatre space. A member of the Czech Centre for Experimental Theatre (Centrum Experimentálního Divadla - CED) which is based in Brno, the Terén production platform presented a performance piece in the grey, concrete monolith of a disused, Communist-era shopping mall (which was empty, awaiting demolition, having been replaced by an identikit, late-capitalist mall immediately adjacent to it). There, entirely appropriately, Terén (which is described as "a dramaturgical and production platform without a permanent ensemble or venue") presented a decidedly postmodern work titled *PYL Reality Surfing*.

Ironically, given the showcase's theme of text-based theatre, this piece is a work of physical and object theatre in which we are invited to imbue seemingly random objects (such as oranges or sponges) with the same significance within the performance space as human bodies. Just how we are supposed to do this when, by the company's own admission, the piece requires that we "forget rational logic and surf into a new reality" is anyone's guess.

The hour-long show (which is credited in its writing, directing, choreography, dramaturgy and stage design to an entity called "PYL") has the virtue of experimentation. Sad to say, however, its virtues end there. Its self-proclaimed irrationality is not moored to any emotionally, psychologically or intellectually engaging surrealist concept, or, indeed, to a compelling visual aesthetic. Rather, it carries the mark of so much of the live art and contemporary performance practice that we find in conservatoires (in the UK, at least) these days. Considering itself to be, somehow, path-breaking and unique (and barely aware of its debt to Dadaism and the other pioneers of the early avant-garde), it is characterised by the naïve and (usually unintentionally) arrogant belief that everything it does is imbued with unaccountable and undeniable significance.

Perhaps this is where young performance artists have to begin. If the current enforcers of cultural Russophobia will allow me to hold two entirely reasonable ideas in my head simultaneously (namely, total opposition to Vladimir Putin and his outrageous war in Ukraine and resistance to a blanket cultural ban on all things Russian, which wipes out radical oppositionist artists as well as compliant toadies of the Putin regime) please permit me to suggest that the great Russian company AKHE (who describe their work as "Russian engineering theatre") might be a model for young performance-makers such as PYL/Terén. The secret of the success of AKHE works such as *White Cabin* and *Mr Carmen* is that — far from assuming that every image is inherently as valid as any other (an idea that makes for artistic laziness) — their work achieves its visual beauty and emotional, psychological

and intellectual resonance through what is palpably a long artistic process of adding and removing (a performative editing, if you will) that is every bit as conscious (and, indeed, conscientious) as the writing process of a great modernist playwright such as Samuel Beckett or Caryl Churchill.

When the Terén show was over we walked through the often pretty city centre of Brno to the headquarters of the CED. That in itself was a rewardingly postmodern experience. The architectural juxtaposition between a disused shopping mall from the final years of the Communist state and CED's offices in a beautiful, Habsburg-era theatre building on Zelný trh Square bordered on the surreal. Indeed the visit to the gorgeous building that houses CED HQ and two of its three production companies (Divadlo Husa na Provázku and Terén) was a highlight of the trip to Brno.

Which is not to overlook the strengths of *Silent Tarzan*, a biographical play, of sorts, by Divadlo Husa na Provázku (Goose on a String). Written by Simona Petrů and Petr Jan Kryštof, the piece seeks to capture something of the life and work of the famous (or infamous) photographer Miroslav Tichý. The subject of the drama was a reclusive figure who lived in the Czech town of Kyjov, where he constructed rudimentary cameras out of objects he had to hand, such cardboard tubes and tin cans (see fig. 1). His artistic output — which is characterised by a roughness inherent in the makeshift nature of his cameras — is dominated by pictures of women, most of which he took surreptitiously. Tichý is viewed, variously, as a neglected artistic genius or an odious pervert (the truth, inevitably, lies somewhere in-between).



Fig. 1 *Silent Tarzan*

Petrů and Kryštof's play seems to be interested, first-and-foremost, in evoking something of the atmosphere in and around Tichý's home. The photographer was considered suspect, not only by the authorities of the Czechoslovakian Communist state, but by many (if not most) of the people in his hometown. Some of the young women he photographed noticed him shooting them and struck poses for him (perhaps in the belief that he was a madman playing with toy cameras he had made out of garbage). Director Anna Petrželková has created a production that succeeds in creating an atmosphere that straddles the seediness that many people have ascribed to Tichý

and a more romanticised (perhaps self-romanticised) sense of his life. Impressionistic (not least in a bleak visual aesthetic that is redolent of Tichý's pictures), rather than profound, it is, nevertheless, an interesting window onto the world of one of the strangest figures in modern Czech culture.

Finally, in the Brno leg of the showcase, was a production by the HaDivadlo company (which has its own theatre building – a remarkable former cinema in the Alfa Palace building) which, alongside Divadlo Husa na Provázku and Terén, makes up the trio of CED's constituent companies. Titled *Perception*, the piece explores the idea of non-growth (an important eco-economic concept) in relation to the character of an actor who decides to remain at home being “unproductive”. A friend and fellow actor comes to visit him, concerned about his emotional and mental wellbeing, only to find him lucid and perfectly capable of articulating and defending his choice.

Inspired by Jean-Philipp Toussaint's novel *The Bathroom*, and drawing upon other inspirational texts, the play is – by the company's own assertion – “a staged introspective essay”. As such, it seems like the opposite of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, of which the great English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan wrote: “It arrives at the custom-house, as it were, with no luggage, no passport and nothing to declare: yet it gets through as might a pilgrim from Mars”. *Perception*, by contrast, doesn't convince one of its enigmatic brilliance (indeed, it isn't entirely clear that it wants to do so). That said, there is something brave and interesting in the piece's carefully constructed ruminations.

The remaining three days of the showcase were spent in Prague, including a production of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* at the National Theatre (see fig. 2). At this juncture, it is worth considering, briefly, the totemic nature of the Czech National Theatre. Created in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of the building – which is almost as glorious in its interior as in its ornate and imposing façade – was (and still is) considered an important statement of the Czech National Revival. The building would also become a location of the assertion of the centrality of the Czech language to the national identity of the Czech people. In discussion with leading figures in the Czech theatre today, it is clear that a certain ambivalence towards the institution has developed among artists in live drama. Whilst the beauty of the building is beyond question, there is concern that many audience members attend productions at the National primarily to be inside the playhouse, rather than to engage with the work on stage (much as atheists and agnostics might visit a great place of worship for reasons that are rooted in architectural and/or historical interests, as opposed to faith).

Having been part of audiences in the National Theatre – the auditorium of which is unquestionably stunning – I have to confess to a certain sympathy with the ambivalence expressed by some Czech theatre artists.



In addition to its grandeur, the auditorium has a certain cavernous quality. Unlike some great playhouses, which manage, paradoxically, to be large, yet intimate, the Czech National Theatre feels like a place where actors really have to work to generate atmosphere.



Fig. 2 *Oedipus Rex*

That certainly seemed to be the case with the staging of *Oedipus Rex*. Performed in modern dress and presented as a kind of detective thriller, director Jan Frič's production is a solid, but rarely exciting, rendering of the Ancient Greek classic. Indeed, the most interesting aspect of the piece is its casting of Oedipus (who has famously, and unwittingly, killed his father and married his mother) as a senior Catholic clergyman. Following our viewing of the production, interesting conversations were held with, among others, Czech and Polish colleagues about Frič's somewhat satirical commentary on the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, it was generally agreed that this interpretation caused no real controversy in the Czech Republic due to the prevalence of secularism within the national culture. Equally, Polish colleagues agreed that to present Oedipus as the Pope or a Catholic bishop in Poland today would be to invite the wrath of the powerful Catholic Church and its associated politicians.

Also at the National Theatre was *Marysha*, a staging of one of the best known naturalistic plays in the Czech national canon (see fig. 3). Directed by Jan Mikulášek, the play — an 1894 drama by brothers Vilém Mrštík and Alois Mrštík — is based upon a true story. It tells the tale of the young woman of the title who is married against her will to an older man, thereby sending her desolate young lover, Francek, to war. The oppressive contract in which



Fig. 3 *Marysha*

Marysha finds herself is the logical corollary of an all-encompassing material and moral corruption within her rural community.

Mikulášek's staging is strong in both its sense of dramatic rhythm and its acting (including a powerful and virtuosic performance in the title role by Pavla Beretová). Both of these elements belong in the realm of Edward Albee-style hyper-realism, rather than the promised naturalism. The distinct theatricality of the production is underlined by its juxtaposition of minimalist set design, modern dress and comic-grotesque rural imagery.

*Marysha* was rejected by the National Theatre on numerous occasions over the years, due to its disreputable subject matter. However, it forced its way into the repertoire due to its increasing prominence within Czech popular culture (including a film by Josef Rovenský in 1935). This production is the National Theatre's 11<sup>th</sup>. It is a fascinating play to have become established as a popular classic. It is, perhaps, testament to a scepticism of national self-romanticisation that so many Czechs are drawn towards a tale of a traditional, rural community that is so mired in corruption and violence. The play's success, despite moral objections, is reminiscent of the path to prominence taken by Henrik Ibsen's 1879 classic of *A Doll's House*.

Indeed, the guests of the HI PerformanCZ were reminded of the continued international profile of Ibsen's great play when they were invited to see a performance of *Nora (A Doll's House)* – an adaptation of the Norwegian bard's famous drama – at the Pod Palmovkou Theatre in Prague (see fig. 4). The production is set on a bare, seemingly wooden-floored stage, with a bean bag and an ugly, transparent tower filled with high-heeled shoes and liquor (as might have been owned by Imelda Marcos). It is costumed as if for the 1970s.



Fig. 4 *Nora (A Doll's House)*.

Directed by Jan Nebeský, the piece combines a largely faithful interpretation of the text with cabaret and a melodramatic, often histrionic, performance style. Acclaimed Czech actor Tereza Dočkalová plays the role of Nora Helmer – the blonde-wigged Barbie doll of her financially successful husband, Torvald – with a remarkable, desperate energy that won her the Czech theatre Thálie Prize for Best Performance. It is, perhaps, more surprising that

Nebeský won the 2016/2017 prize from the Divadelní Noviny online theatre newspaper. Not only does the cartoonish grotesquerie (which sometimes borders on commedia dell'arte) of the production grate against the nuances of the play, but the decision to ultimately leave Nora in an emotional limbo, unable to stay with Torvald or to leave him, is nothing short of disastrous.

Much has been written in the almost century-and-a-half since *A Doll's House* premiered in Copenhagen about the immense impact of Nora slamming the door as she leaves her husband and children, and of the sound of that slamming door reverberating around Europe. It would be naïve to believe that so many gains have been made in the cause of women's liberation that this final scene has now lost its significance. Whatever director Nebeský's reasoning, his placing Nora in a position of eternal indecisiveness robs the character of her agency and the drama of its great, resonating power.

The final production in the showcase was *The Woodcutters*, a stage adaptation of Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard's 1984 novel, at the charming Divadlo Na zábradlí theatre, in central Prague, close to the great Vltava River (see fig. 5). Before entering the auditorium to watch the play, we were shown the small booth in which the young Václav Havel worked as a theatre technician — to this day the little compartment is dedicated to the great dissident writer, president of post-Communist Czechoslovakia and, subsequently, first president of the newly established Czech Republic.

Directed by Jan Mikulášek (who is also director of the production of *Marysha* at the National Theatre), this staging of *The Woodcutters* is characterised by a tremendous attention to detail, all the better for the drama to collapse into satirical chaos. In the play a party of detestable, pretentious, pseudo-intellectual, bourgeois "art lovers" await the mutually validating arrival of a big name actor from the National Theatre. When he finally arrives — much more than fashionably late — enough alcohol has been consumed, and enough frustration amassed, that all bourgeois niceties are poised to ex-

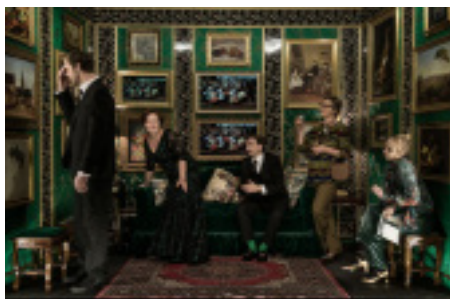


Fig. 5 *The Woodcutters*

plode, creating a tableau of general degeneracy that is reminiscent of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* (both

plays in which, like *The Woodcutters*, alcohol is a character in its own right) Although this challenging ensemble piece is universally well-acted, the star of the show is Marek Cpin's extraordinary set. Claustrophobically cramped, almost garishly opulent and head-spinning in the sheer number of paintings on the walls, the stage design — which becomes remarkably versatile and utilitarian towards the end of the play — is a wonder to behold. Ingeniously the paintings depicted in a number of the picture frames change from time-to-time. For an extended moment, we are amused to see that the most prominent picture on the walls is, not a copy of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's *The Wood Cutters*, but, rather, his image of Bacchanalian excess *The Outdoor Wedding Dance*. Not for one moment, of course, do the assembled literati at the fast-degenerating party realise that they, collectively, are the very image of the younger Brueghel's drunken Flemish peasants.

A beautifully executed, fabulously designed and tightly acted production of a modern European classic was as good a way as any to end what was a very interesting, diverse and superbly organised showcase — for which particular thanks and gratitude are due to Martina Pecková Černá (the inestimable Head of the International Cooperation Department of the Arts and Theatre Institute) and her wonderfully organised and ever-helpful colleague at the Department, Radka Lím Labendz (who looked after the group of international theatre professionals — a job akin to herding cats — with tremendous grace). As with previous HI PerformanCZ programmes, the January 2022 showcase left its international guests in no doubt as to the continued rude health of the Czech theatre sector.