

Theatre Institutions in Crisis

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Radka Kunderová

To what extent has the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989 represented a watershed in the course of the developments of Czech society? This issue of (dis)continuity in the pre- and post-1989 situation has been a contentious one in the Czech public debate and intensely discussed—particularly in the early 2010s. Some social historians challenged the prevailing historical narrative of the communist past, a narrative they found ‘totalitarian’ due to its being based on the binary opposition of the ‘evil omnipotent regime’ and the ‘innocent oppressed society’ (esp. Pullmann 2008; Rákosník 2010, 13–15; Pullmann 2011, 15–16). Most controversially, the historian Michal Pullmann proposed a hypothesis that the actual impact exerted by the post-1989 systemic and ideological changes on the value orientation of Czech society—the so-called ‘social consensus’—might have been less significant than had generally been held. He suggested the possibility that there might, in fact, have been a much more significant continuity between the communist past and the post-1989 period than had formerly been assumed (Pullmann 2011, 225–227). The dominating Czech political discourse has perceived such opinions as highly controversial since the post-1989 paradigm has construed the events of November 1989 as a radical turning point and conceptualised the post-1989 developments as a correspondingly radical, comprehensive social transformation.²

In the field of theatre, the question of (dis-)continuity has not been raised yet, though its answering might fundamentally shape future interpretations of the three post-1989 decades in Czech theatre.³ In general terms, Czech theatre historiography has devoted only minor attention to the issue of how the 1989 political events influenced theatre and its social relevance. A pioneering,⁴ and so far solitary, attempt to provide a coherent interpretation of the post-1989 decade consists of a modest-sized section in the introduction to an extensive chapter on Czech plays of the 1990s written by Libor Vodička, a theatre historian of the ‘middle generation’ (Vodička 2008). It is symptomatic of the current situation in Czech theatre studies, which have been largely oriented towards older historical periods, that this outline of post-1989 Czech theatre was published in a volume on Czech post-1989 literature produced by an institute of literary studies.⁵

In his text, Vodička conceptualises the situation of Czech theatre after 1989 as a ‘crisis of theatre’. His evaluation of the early 1990s strikes one as especially negative coming after a laudatory description of the preceding phase. According to

Vodička, the theatre stage became ‘the main scene of the political life in the country’ in November 1989, and ‘it seemed that the connection of theatre with the society was reaching its apex and that perhaps never before had theatre enjoyed such a highly valued position in the collective consciousness of the Czechs and Slovaks’ (Vodička 2008, 555). Herein, the historian embraces the prevailing narrative in Czech theatre historiography, which regards the role of theatre as an essential factor in the 1989 political events. In doing so, Vodička refers to well-known facts, such as the theatre-makers’ strike in support of the student protest strike against the Communist Party’s policy and the foundation of the country’s leading pro-democratic movement, *Občanské fórum* (Civic Forum), under the unofficial leadership of the playwright and activist Václav Havel, at the Činoherní klub (Drama Club) theatre in Prague and its subsequent residence in the Laterna Magica theatre (*ibid.*). Vodička also highlights theatre’s political and mobilising functioning within the ‘revolution’ in a broader historical context—‘What was taking place at theatre venues in these “revolutionary” weeks seemed to be a historical consummation of the Czech national programme, in which the theatre culture had been enjoying a sovereign position since the beginning of the nineteenth century’ (*ibid.*) Along these lines, he promotes the perspective of viewing the events of 1989 as an apogee of the social role of theatre in the history of the Czech nation, continuing a long tradition in which Czech theatre played a significant role in the building of national identity and the processes of Czech political emancipation.

In contrast, the following years brought, in Vodička’s view, a steep decline in theatre’s social relevance due to an interplay of several factors, and his interpretation thus implies a significant discontinuity between the developments in theatre prior to and in the aftermath of 1989.

Vodička argues that early-1990s society found itself in ‘the first phase of post-totalitarian entropy’ and that the theatre did not manage to maintain its pre-1989 ‘unifying role’, losing its ‘ability to formulate authentic stances and use them as a means to evolve one of its traditional functions’ (Vodička 2008, 557). Moreover, according to Vodička, the 1990s saw the start of a ‘crisis of attendance’ when ‘gradually, the auditoriums emptied out’ (*ibid.*). In this respect, he states that in the early 1990s, theatres lost nearly one-third of their spectatorship within just one season (Vodička 2008, 558), although he acknowledges the fact that the decline in spectatorship was a part of a trend in Czechoslovakia and other European countries, which had been felt even prior to 1989, and that the ‘revolutionary boom’ of theatre in Czechoslovakia was more of a short-term deviation from this prevailing tendency.

A closer study of the statistics Vodička cites when speaking of the audience crisis may, however, offer a more nuanced image of the situation. In fact, the decline in box office numbers was not as severe as he claims. While professional theatres recorded 6,291,000 spectators in 1989, in 1990, the figure was 5,834,000 and, in 1991, 4,584,000, which indicates that the decrease in attendance between 1990 and 1991 amounted to less than one-quarter. Prague theatres—historically considered to have been of the greatest importance—were the least affected by this process (Pištora 1992, 3). Thus, the loss in audience turnout, while surely significant,

was not as radical, swift, and ubiquitous as has been asserted. Moreover, the ebb of audiences did not affect all theatres: even in 1991, ten Czech theatres, both Prague based and regional, recorded 80% to 96% attendance of their performances (*ibid.*). In this light, the claim that ‘gradually, the auditoriums emptied out’ (Vodička 2008, 557) seems to be rather overexaggerated.

Vodička sees another factor contributing to the ‘crisis of theatre’ in the ‘chaos and inconsistency’ and decrease of subsidies coming from state institutions that, purportedly, significantly interfered with theatres’ operation (Vodička 2008, 558). Such interventions, as listed by Vodička, included mass denationalisation of theatre companies and putting municipalities and regional authorities in charge of theatre administration, as well as restitutions and privatisation of some of the theatre venues (*ibid.*). He argues that ‘Economic reforms early in the decade faced theatres with considerable material insecurity’ (*ibid.*) since the post-1989 governments imposed their austerity measures primarily on the field of culture, aiming first to revitalise the economic sector and only then to tend to the needs of culture. Thus, the pressure on theatres to adapt to the adverse economic conditions ‘mounted enormously’, Vodička argues, and ‘In the period of 1991–1996, stringent economic interests gained complete control over all developments in theatre culture’ (*ibid.*). In support of his thesis, he mentions discussions taking place in the early 1990s concerning abolition of some of the stable theatre ensembles in order to economise on salaries and the theatres’ operation. This scenario, however, never came into effect, and the dense theatre network in Bohemia and Moravia, established already in the post-1945 period, was not just preserved but even grew in the 1990s. There were only a few exceptional instances of theatres actually closing down without being subsequently transformed into a different organisational form or being taken up by another authority or owner (Nekolný 2006, 13). The state, in some cases, even expanded the theatre system, re-establishing several theatres, such as České umělecké studio (Czech Art Studio), the Opera Mozart Theatre, and Černé divadlo Jiřího Srnce (Black Light Theatre of Jiří Srnec) (Nekolný 2006, 12, 15). Simultaneously, the 1990s saw the foundation of a number of commercial theatres, often focusing on musical productions (the 1994 staging of *Jesus Christ Superstar* being the first massive box office hit of this kind). Likewise, new theatres specialising in drama and physical or dance theatre came into being, and, in total, the number of theatre ensembles rose by 10% between 1990 and 1991 (Pištora 1992, 3).

Neither is the argument about the somewhat hostile attitude of the state towards the theatre entirely accurate. The relationship between the state and theatre did, indeed, undergo a significant structural transformation yet, at least in the very early 1990s, the government’s motivation was not to release the state from its responsibility for the cultural sphere but to support culture and the arts by providing them with autonomy. This notion was understood as freedom from any ideological obligations towards the state: i.e., liberation from their earlier official role as a propaganda tool in the hands of the Communist Party. Thus, the emphasis on the emancipation of culture from utilitarian social and political roles appears to have been a logical result of the historical development. The supportive attitude

towards culture, and theatre in particular, might also be illustrated by the fact that the first culture ministers—Milan Lukeš and Milan Uhde—were distinguished and committed theatre professionals.

The first post-1989 government, chaired by Petr Pithart, articulated its liberalising mission in its program in 1990:

We understand education, science, art—the whole of culture—as indispensable attributes of a modern nation, as features of its sovereignty and uniqueness. Natural cultural development is given a free rein by the democratic state, which provides it with encouragement, assistance and guarantee.

The old and misleading question of what kind of culture we need has to be reversed in the sense of full respect for the autonomy of cultural values. Henceforth, we shall ask what our culture wants us to be like, that is, how we can best serve its natural growth.

(Programové prohlášení vlády (Government Policy Statement) 1990)

Within the upcoming transformation, the government intended to reduce state subsidies to the segments of cultural life that were considered economically self-sufficient and to subsidise preferentially the areas that would otherwise be incapable of survival. The government was aware of the vulnerable position of culture in the newly forming market economy. This was an additional reason it was willing to seek alternative ways of financing culture, such as foundations whose establishment it intended to support via tax relief (*ibid.*). Indeed, the state took some supportive steps, such as the first grant system established by the Ministry of Culture in 1992 (Nekolný 2006, 15).

Nonetheless, there is validity to Vodička's claim about inconsistencies in state policies vis-à-vis theatres—the early 1990s governments did not provide any tangible strategy for the theatre sphere's transformation (Nekolný 2006, 12), and the framework for establishing a functioning culture within the new market-based economy was not clearly set. Thus, the fundamental share of responsibility was placed on municipalities and regional authorities that could decide what portion of their budgets would be allotted to theatres. Theatre-makers were sceptical about the willingness of these bodies to prioritise theatre over investments in decaying infrastructure (Nekolný 2006, 19). The theatres' financial difficulties were further exacerbated by the austerity measures implemented by the right-wing coalition government chaired by Václav Klaus, elected in 1992 (Nekolný 2006, 13, 31).

Besides the decline in attendance numbers and the state's policy towards theatres, Vodička finds another argument for conceptualising the post-1989 situation in theatre as a 'crisis' in reflections articulated by the people involved in theatre at the time in question. He does so by referring to articles published in the early 1990s in the theatre-oriented press and particularly to the debate on the then-current situation in theatre sparked in 1994 by President Václav Havel at the Villa Amálie and made public on the pages of the magazine *Svět a divadlo (World and Theatre)* ("*Od českého divadla*" 1994). The fact that the president of the country

initiated such a debate seems, in itself, to support the claim that the social position of theatre had still managed to maintain a degree of significance. When summarising the opinions gathered from these sources, Vodička speaks of an atmosphere of ‘widely experienced crisis of theatre’ (Vodička 2008, 560); in his view, theatre was ‘wholly focused on itself, the issues of self-preservation and holding on to whatever social position it could’ (Vodička 2008, 559).

On re-reading the texts cited by Vodička, however, one comes to realise that the perception of the situation then was, in fact, more varied. Perhaps the majority of theatre professionals shared the view that theatre underwent a substantial change once the ‘velvet euphoria’ had evaporated, yet only some of them would construe it as a ‘crisis’. Those who tended to adopt such a perspective fairly commonly based their opinion on the advancing commercialisation of theatre and its propensity for sensationalist repertoire—and it was these opinions that co-form the basis of Vodička’s argumentation. Even some of these critical voices, however, were well aware that this kind of pandering dramaturgy was by no means a brand new trend in Czech theatre and made comparisons to the eclectic, entertaining repertoires of the mid-1960s and even of the late ‘normalisation’ period in the 1980s (Hořínek 1992, 4). Some related Czech theatre’s situation to the overall collapse of the concept of theatre which hoped to provide a critical image of the society and its arrangement (Pistorius in “*Od českého divadla*” 1994, 34) and thus actually undermined the relevance of the post-1989 political and social changes to the position of Czech theatre. Others admitted the existence of certain processes of change in some aspects of the field—in the organisation of theatres, their social position, and their economic situation—but did not observe any substantial change either in theatre’s elementary focus and efforts or in its aesthetics (Kraus in “*Od českého divadla*” 1994, 26). Some voices even questioned the existence of any significant change whatsoever. Especially some representatives of the generation of studio theatres, which were aesthetically innovative and politically dissenting in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasised the current resonance of theatre and the ongoing intense interest of the audiences they were experiencing in the city of Brno (Kovalčuk in “*Od českého divadla*” 1994, 27).

Still, the narrative of change seems to have been prevalent within the theatre debate at the time. Could this finding be considered an argument in favour of conceptualising the relationship between the pre- and post-1989 periods in Czech theatre as discontinuous? In my opinion, the views of the contemporaries on the situation surely need to be taken into account, but care should be taken so as not to overestimate their relevance since the contemporaries, being themselves embroiled in the situation, were ill equipped to reflect on the situation from a more impartial, detached vantage point. Moreover, a close reading of their thoughts on theatre’s position in the early 1990s and its future prospects reveals significant traces of continuity with the pre-1989 and even pre-1945 decades.

One of the most telling examples is represented by the theatre scholar, critic, and dramaturg Václav Königsmark (1946–96), whose perception of the situation belonged to the most sophisticated and complex contributions: he distinguished processes at institutional, organisational, and aesthetic levels. Königsmark was one

of the most influential and respected critical voices, publishing texts on theatre both in the samizdat and in official media since the late 1970s,⁶ and was associated with the studio theatre generation. In August 1990, while summarising his view on the season of 1989–90, he conceptualised the change in theatre's position through the metaphor of the Trojan horse. He argued that whereas the pre-1989 theatre included a 'line of inner resistance, which actually played a role of a Trojan Horse within the diseased society' (Königsmark 1991, 40), after the political shift, theatre's former mission was consummated: 'What to do with a Trojan Horse after a victorious battle? It seems that its past represents a hindrance today: not only has the old mimicry been divulged, but at the same time, it is losing its function' (Königsmark 1991, 46). Thus, he saw the most important change theatre faced at the beginning of the new decade in the loss of the pre-1990 concept of social relevance.

Königsmark identified one of the reasons underlying the 'audience shock' (Königsmark 1991, 44), as he described the decline in spectatorship, with theatre's continuing tendency to appropriate the role of the mass media, even after the 'Velvet Revolution'. The audiences, however, turned their attention towards the news coverage provided by the no-longer-censored media, and, in his opinion, theatres could hardly compete with them. Königsmark, however, did not describe the situation as a 'theatre crisis'—in some contexts, he even understood it as a return to normality. In his view, theatre could finally return to 'communication through a work of art' (Königsmark 1991, 40), which he understood as the natural state of affairs. To keep or regain some degree of social relevance, theatre had better, in Königsmark's opinion, come back to its 'artistic specificity' (Königsmark 1991, 44):

It is time to realise anew theatre's inherent specificity and apparently also the change in its social function. For its own benefit, theatre should no longer identify with a medium whose function is predominantly communicative: it is, after all, a space of encounters with different qualities, for instance a 'ritual' of sorts, producing cathartic effects.

(Königsmark 1991, 40)

At the same time, Königsmark considered this 'artistic specificity' to be threatened by the economically unstable post-1989 situation in theatre, which

is in a quandary: it is seeking its new autonomy amidst an economic struggle for its very existence. Articulated thus simultaneously, these fundamental requirements can put theatre in grave danger; hence it is necessary to create conditions for consistent preference of theatre's artistic concerns.

(Königsmark 1991, 46)

Thus, Königsmark's vision of theatre's desired position within society clearly revealed his belief in the autonomy of theatre and its artistic specificity. These qualities, in his opinion, excluded any instrumental understanding of theatre—he was therefore opposed to the kind of theatre in which propagandist, communicative, or commercial functions predominated. Consequently, his thinking on

theatre resembles the Prague Linguistic Circle's structuralist theories, which promoted the notion of autonomy of the arts and defined them within a functional paradigm—indeed, Königsmark himself frequently used the term 'function' in 1990 (as may be obvious from the excerpts quoted earlier).

Taking into account the fact that the structuralist thought of the Prague School was suppressed by the communist regime, initially after the 1948 coup and then again in the aftermath of the 'Prague Spring' of 1968, this tendency in Königsmark's writing on theatre in the early 1990s might come across as somewhat surprising. The influence of structuralism, however, can be identified and traced throughout his whole career, which shows that the continuity of the Prague School tradition had been—to some extent—preserved in Czech arts studies, the adverse political pressures notwithstanding. Königsmark, who studied Czech and history at Charles University in Prague between 1964 and 1969, was educated by some of the leading figures of the 1960s wave of Czech structuralism—the literary scholars Felix Vodička and Miroslav Červenka (Kunderová 2015). During his tenure at the Institute of Czech and International Literature of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague in the 1970s and 1980s, Königsmark published a number of studies on Czech theatre history and theatre criticism that employed the structuralist approach in a natural and none-too-explicit manner. His writings on contemporary theatre in particular consistently signal the functional perspective, with an emphasis on the dominance of the aesthetic function within the artistic sphere, an analytical approach, and a continuous interest in the issue of values within the arts and society and their mutual inter-relations.

In the post-1989 situation, the autonomy of theatre and the dominance of the aesthetic function over a theatrical 'work of art' represented for Königsmark a vital condition for its future positive development. In this respect, his concept of theatre's autonomy and social function could be understood in terms of one of the key theories developed within the Prague School—Jan Mukařovský's concept of the aesthetic function (Mukařovský 1936). Mukařovský himself considered autonomy of the arts as a permanent initiator of the contact between a work of art and the natural and social realities (Mukařovský 1936, 70). When considering Königsmark's thoughts from such perspective, his understanding of theatre's social function might be construed as a successful realisation of the aesthetic function. Viewed from the Mukařovskian perspective, theatre would realise a number of diverse functions that the arts generally fulfil in society, such as recreational, representative, and communicative functions. These would, however, be dominated by the 'transparent', energy-like, and protean aesthetic function. And it is precisely for this reason that theatre would be part of the autonomous artistic sphere, within which the aesthetic function subordinates all other functions (Mukařovský 1936, 13), as opposed to other parts of social life, such as fashion, in which the aesthetic function may be present but not dominant. In doing so, theatre would fulfil a very specific social function, which cannot be realised by other means, while at the same time responding to many different needs of society.

Václav Königsmark's thinking is representative of the generations that typically employed the category of theatre's social function in their reflections on the

post-1989 situation. Within the Villa Amálie debate, the voices of these generations dominated the discussion, and it is the opinions of these figures that Libor Vodička, too, mostly refers to in his text. In accordance with Königsmark (who was one of the participants in the debate), the representatives of these older generations mostly noted that the original, pre-1989 function of the theatre had run its course and that theatre needed to reframe its social role so as to find a new ‘sense of purpose’. Their thoughts regarding such redefinition were principally rooted in the variety of aesthetic backgrounds that had formed during the earlier decades of the 20th century: in addition to the structuralism of the Prague School in Königsmark’s case, their reflections included references to Brecht (Hořínek 1992, 4) as well as to ‘modernism’, implicitly conceptualised in opposition to ‘postmodernism’ (Kraus in “*Od českého divadla*” 1994, 26).

It is worth noting, however, that the participants in the Villa Amálie debate did not represent the entirety of the contemporary generational and aesthetic range of the Czech theatre. Most conspicuously absent were the representatives of the generation born in the 1950s and 1960s, whose artistic style had been commonly labelled ‘postmodern’ ever since their first achievements in the amateur theatre circuit in the mid-1980s. The leading directors of this generation, such as Petr Lébl and Jan Antonín Pitínský, successfully established their positions in the professional theatre during the early 1990s and came to the fore as the most celebrated theatre-makers of the mid-1990s. Therefore, the conspicuous absence of their ‘winners’ perspective’ in the debate—as well as in Vodička’s text—merits due attention, particularly with respect to the fact that the ‘postmodern’ generation’s approach to theatre seemed to differ considerably from the older generations’ understanding of theatre’s functioning in terms of its social role. This division even emerged in the Villa Amálie debate, owing to a contribution made by the theatre critic Karel Král, himself a member of the preceding ‘studio-theatre’ generation. He shared the sceptical view of the sweeping ‘theatre crisis’ rhetoric and only acknowledged a problematic situation with respect to the branch of theatre that was striving for ‘universality’, identified with a single overarching function of theatre and a single identical, universal effect on the audience members. ‘Postmodern’ productions, however, aimed—in his view—at a different kind of a relationship with their spectators:

If a crisis of theatre is the issue under discussion, then I think it is particularly a crisis in the attitude of theatres to their audiences. It is indeed a crisis of the kind of theatre that systematically strives for universality. The audience, however, can perceive theatre in other ways than by universally espousing some idea, faith or perhaps even positive energy. They may perceive theatre as a succession of images, situations, and stories that each spectator understands according to their own personal experience and their own imagination. And yet precisely such kind of theatre may be attractive to that kind of audience. I think this is the quality found, for instance, in [Petr] Lébl’s productions.

(Král in “*Od českého divadla*” 1994, 34)

Král indicates that the ‘postmodern’ Czech theatre, exemplified by the work of Petr Lébl, promoted not only a distinct manner of aesthetic and communication, but perhaps also a different concept of theatre’s function. The critic proposes the idea that theatre’s functioning in the society may no longer be identified with the idea of one universal ‘purpose’ but rather with the concept of what might be called an ‘individualised purpose’.

It therefore appears that while the older generations displayed a tendency to keep employing the category of theatre’s social function (its ‘purpose’) even after 1989, the ‘postmodern generation’ introduced a different concept of theatre that no longer operated within the bounds of such a category. The presence of this more recent attitude can, however, be discerned in the field before the ‘Velvet Revolution’, and the innovative deconstructive principles of the emerging ‘post-modern’ aesthetic were discussed within the field as early as in the mid-1980s. Hence, the gist of the post-1989 debate on theatre might be briefly summarised as a debate which involved two tendencies. One part of the spectrum was asserting its belief in the category of the theatre’s social function and, finding its pre-1989 fulfilment outdated, sought ways to redefine this function. The other part did not conceptualise theatre’s role by means of this category and, therefore, felt no need to redefine theatre or their theatre aesthetic—rather, they continued developing the creative principles they had adopted in the 1980s. This distinction is only tentative and admittedly involves a great deal of simplification, yet preliminary findings such as these seem to indicate that the affiliation of the pre-1989 debate on theatre with the post-1989 one was of importance.

To conclude, a reconsideration of the hitherto predominant ‘crisis’ conceptualisation of the 1990s in the Czech theatre reveals some inaccuracies and contradictions on the one hand and a number of symptoms of continuity on the other—both on the level of the theatre system and in thinking on theatre articulated by the people involved in the theatre life of the period. These phenomena seem to temper or, in some cases, even oppose the crisis-framed interpretation. To what extent did the political shift in 1989 mean a disruption in the history of Czech theatre? This question still stands and merits a more comprehensive and deeper investigation.

Notes

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- 2 The lively debate unfolded in the pages of the Czech media in 2011. The academic debate on the suggested re-interpretation of the communist past was summarised, e.g., in Sedlák (2013).
- 3 This study focuses exclusively on Czech theatre since the situation in Slovak theatre was specific—it had already represented an autonomous system before 1989.
- 4 The few other available studies tend to share this ‘crisis’ perspective without articulating it so explicitly, focusing exclusively on partial aspects of the post-1989 situation in theatre (Machalická 2000; Jungmannová and Vodička 2016).
- 5 The volume was produced by the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

- 6 The term ‘samizdat’ refers to manually produced underground publications which secretly circulated from reader to reader to evade censorship in the Eastern Bloc.

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