

## Barbara Day

The editor of Czech news website *iDNES.cz*, Tomáš Šrámek, talked to British theatrolgist Barbara Day. With permission, we present a shortened version of her interview. Day has an extensive overview of Czech theatre and first came to know it in the 1960s, during a period of political relaxation. In the 1980s she devoted her dissertation to the Czech theatre. And now, on the basis of this, her book *Trial by Theatre* has been published in English, a presentation of the Czech theatre from the national revival to the present day.

### When did the Czech theatre grow so close to your heart?

Bohemia and Moravia represent a country whose history is very close to the surface, and Prague especially is one great theatre, with dramatic stories, hidden meanings, subtexts, heroic personalities, villains, enduring traditions... More specifically, I am still immeasurably grateful to the student who, in my first days here (October 1965) decided that I had to see *Fools* at the Theatre on the Balustrade – a mysterious, evocative production that had just premièred and that was, I realise in retrospect, the culmination of the pantomime company's work as a group. From there I came to know the work of the Balustrade Theatre's drama company (including the first productions of Václav Havel's plays) and had the great privilege of watching Jan Grossman rehearse Kafka's *The Trial*. But there was much else I admired: Josef Topol's *End of Carnival* at the National Theatre, Suchý and Šlitř at Semafor, Otomar Krejča's Theatre Beyond the Gate, plays by Alena Vostrá and Ladislav Smoček at the Drama Club. But what made the biggest impression on me was how seriously everyone took the theatre – everyone I met had their favourite theatre, it was clearly important to the whole of society.

### In 1968 you even came here to find a job in the theatre. What exactly did you want to do?

I was prepared to do anything. Sew costumes, make the tea, sweep the stage... When the Theatre on the Balustrade came to London in spring 1967 and spring 1968 I was employed by the World Theatre Season on the stage management team, and at the end I asked Jan Grossman (director of the drama company) whether he might have work for me in Prague. He was very enthusiastic, but later in the summer he resigned from Theatre on the Balustrade, and then of course with the invasion everything changed.

### You didn't come back until the 1980s, when you were organising visits by leading European philosophers to the underground seminars on behalf of the Jan Hus Educational Foundation – how did you get involved in that?

I devoted the first half of the 1980s to researching and writing about the Czech theatre (and not only theatre, I wrote for example about the Jazz Section), and the second half to the Foundation's work with the independent/unofficial culture. I felt both to be essential, and that it was a great privilege to be working with such courageous people. I was really angry about how some of the country's finest talents were being humiliated at this time and in 1985, with the help of Petr Oslzlý and Theatre on a String, I arranged a festival in my city, Bristol, to draw attention in our country to the vitality of Czech arts. It was Petr Oslzlý who introduced me to the Foundation in Britain and I began working for them almost immediately – it was just at the moment when the leading member of the Foundation, Roger Scruton, had been detained in Brno and expelled from Czechoslovakia, so I was able to pick up the connections and liaise with people such as Ladislav Hejdiánek in Prague and Jiří Müller in Brno. We remembered it all in November last year, when the British Ambassador unveiled a plaque at the house in Keramická where the Tomin family used to live. They had invited the first British philosophers to their underground seminar.

### Were you afraid of the StB?

I was not doing anything that was wrong or illegal, and I had the protection of my British citizenship, so I didn't feel afraid for myself. I was worried about making some mistake that could put one of my Czech or Slovak colleagues at risk, like forgetting to destroy written information, or talking too freely to someone – even in England, because the StB had their agents there as well. I think I am more afraid of the StB now than I was then, when one knew what regime they belonged to – nowadays they have used their old network and their old methods to grow rich and become businessmen, politicians and developers, and they infiltrate our lives in ways we don't know about.

### Has our theatre kept something of its pre-revolutionary magic?

Nothing remains the same, society changes, the theatre changes, generations change. But I feel the damage inflicted by the Communist "normalisation" regime went deeper than we realised and the theatre has not yet recovered – it's as though a great tree had been felled,



Photos: Universitas



More information on Barbara Day's book *Trial by Theatre* can be found on the back page of this Review. The interview can be read in the original Czech at:

<https://www.idnes.cz>

An extended version of the interview, in English, is available at:

<https://www.bcsa.co.uk>



and although saplings have grown from its roots, they will take time to replace it. The most serious loss was of the playwrights, massacred in the 1970s. There is now the Ferdinand Vaněk Award to encourage new writing (I was honoured last year to be invited to be on the jury). But I remember how Otomar Krejča, Ivan Vyskočil and Jan Grossman used to nurture the playwrights within their companies (as did the Drama Club), and encouraged their audiences to ask questions instead of waiting for answers. After 1989 "self-expression" became a key concept and I sometimes feel the theatre has not grown out of this. There is also the danger of imitation – I would hate the Czech theatre to follow the example of some contemporary British theatre playwrights who choose a "cause" and force it down your throat.