

Theatre people reacted as quickly to the virus as they did to the velvet revolution

I was not afraid for myself, but of betraying someone else, says teatrologist Barbara Day. In the 1980s she brought British academics to secret home seminars.

By Tomáš Štástka
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Although British, Barbara Day may have a much more extensive overview of the Czech theatre than that of many lovers of the art who grew up here. She first came to know it in the 1960s, during the period of relaxation that then collapsed. 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.

What do you think of the rapid reaction of the Czech theatres and their effort to stay in contact with their audiences during the state of emergency?

It doesn't surprise me at all – theatre people everywhere are quick to react and adapt; they know how to improvise and use their imagination – not only the actors, but the technicians as well. It should never be forgotten how quickly and efficiently they reacted to the velvet revolution – not only in Prague, where they kept the big demonstrations under control, but in the provinces, where every theatre took the initiative in its own area. That was a marvellous feat of cooperation and coordination. I don't think they've ever been properly credited for that.

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 premiered 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 Šlitr 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.

Then 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 like Ladislav Hejránek in Prague and Jiří Müller in Brno. We remembered it all in November last year, when the British Ambassador unveiled a plaque on the house in Keramická where the Tomin family used to live, who 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, 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.

Do you think that the present situation will somehow influence the theatre here longterm?

That depends on the public. I hope audiences will come back and support the theatre – they can start already if they buy tickets online for GoOut – Festival of Nothing before 1 May.

Your book Trial by Theatre essentially concerns the theatre here from the National Revival to the Velvet Revolution. Are you planning to do something similar covering the post-revolutionary developments?

I wouldn't dare! I don't know the recent theatre as intimately as I did the old – and I haven't yet finished exploring that.

Why did you call the book Trial by Theatre?

The first title I chose was *Subversive Stages*, but some of my Czech friends and colleagues protested that “subversive” implied something destructive, and that in the Czech theatre the opposite had been the case, the theatre had helped in the formation of Czech identity and given the nation confidence.

The title *Trial by Theatre* was modelled on the phrase “trial by fire”, which has come to mean a test of truth, courage and commitment. I was thinking of the theatre as a test of authenticity; theatre as a measure by which the Czechs (or any nation, if it has a good enough theatre) can measure themselves, their failures and mistakes as well as their successes and triumphs.

Are you planning to have it published in Czech?

Trial by Theatre was written for foreigners, chiefly my students, so that they could begin to understand what power the theatre can have in culture, in society and in politics. But I would love Czech people to read it, to criticise it and to argue with it, to point out what I got wrong and what I missed out. It depends on my publisher, the Karolinum Press.

Do you follow the Czech theatre today? Before the pandemic started what theatres and artists did you most like to follow?

I have been slowing down these days and often do not catch productions I would like to see but disappear too quickly or are sold out. I watch everything that Lída Engelová (who was assistant to Grossman on *The Trial* directs at Viola, and in the last couple of years I have visited Archa, Ponec, Alfréd v dvoře, Na zábradlí, Bez zábradlí, Činoherní klub, Kalich, Divadlo Na Vinohradech, Divadlo Hrdinů, Alta, Švanda, Estates and National Theatres. Some of the most interesting work I've seen has been in operas by Janáček and Benjamin Britten at the National Theatre, directed by Daniel Špínar with choreography by Radim Vizváry.

How are you spending the state of emergency? Are you following any of the on-line broadcasts, being offered by the Czech theatres?

I'm working from home, just as I've done for years, and that takes up most of my time – although I miss visiting theatres and exhibitions and meeting friends. I admire what the theatre people are doing, they have great energy, but I have to confess that I don't often watch television, it's not my favourite medium and I prefer to read.