

“Apartment Theatre” and the “Authentic Space”

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It is impossible to get around the question of what exactly is an “authentic space”. It seems that, given the contemporary confusion of terms and the degraded meaning of a word, this expression has become just another elliptically employed phrase that on closer examination has often lost its original meaning. The phenomenon of hosting theatre and other artistic productions in such spaces as abandoned factory halls, former breweries or old treatment plants -- spaces that no longer serve their original purpose -- and proclaim their “authenticity” is beginning to ring of trendiness and snobbery. Yet, it is impossible to speak of the “authenticity” of these spaces in relation to theatre. In what way are these spaces *more* authentic than theatre venues as such? Is it not rather that they are just “different” from traditional theatre spaces? “Gutted” factory halls attract attention for their interesting history, not their actual authenticity. People today are moreover always craving “something different”. That is why the “museum nights” are so popular, drawing huge numbers of visitors who would otherwise never set foot in a museum. We scholars of theatre arts also allow ourselves to be easily beguiled by “something different” – I can recall a 2005 performance of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* at the International Theatre Festival in Pilsen that was perhaps somewhat overly praised by critics and was put on by the British ensemble Out of Joint, which is comprised mainly of actors of African background. The performance took place on the premises of the former Pilsen brewery Světovar, and everyone there was consequently expecting an exceptional experience, which was to be amplified by the active involvement of the public in the performance. Ultimately this involved using a small number of audience members to take part in *Macbeth*’s banquet and the meaningless relocation of the entire cast from one room to the next (that is, from scene to scene), which fatally destroyed the rhythm and tension of an otherwise artistically interesting performance.

The fact that a theatre performance takes place somewhere other than in a traditional theatre space is nothing new, just the concept of authenticity has gradually grown vacuous; drama performances have long been held in other locations like religious temples, the nobility had their own “apartment”-type theatre in their palaces, and folk

theatre was organised in rural buildings. In modern history, in former Czechoslovakia, particularly in connection with the oppression of totalitarian regimes, many theatre activities took place in spaces other than theatres. During World War II, illegal performances were held in “authentic” private flats, in the 1950s some artistic activities, suspicious to the communist regime, took place in factory halls; for example, artistic exhibitions and “happenings” took place in still functional industrial spaces. The best-known figure associated with these unique activities was Vladimír Boudník, an artist who worked as a lathe operator in a factory and invented his own artistic stream called “explosionism”. He created artwork in the form of “active graphics” at his place of employment. This was done (in simplified terms) by impressing the shapes of the factory machines onto metal sheets and then making traditional graphic prints of this matrix, or (in outdoor spaces), for instance, by “recording” the structure of cracked walls on paper and completing the image with addition of colour. Boudník taught his worker-colleagues this technique, and because of his unique temperament he actually inadvertently created a small theatrical performance out of his actions. Bohumil Hrabal also devoted considerable attention to Boudník as a friend and distinctive figure in his book *Něžný barbar* (*The Gentle Barbarian*). Also, the artists Jitka and Květa Válová created work much in the way Boudník did when they were working in a factory in Kladno in the 1950s.

After the brief political thaw in the 1960s followed by the Soviet invasion in 1968, the activities and oftentimes promising careers of many outstanding artistic figures were curtailed and in some cases entirely halted. There again began a period of “going back underground,” which not rarely meant private flats, cellars, barns at people’s rural cottages, and so on. As a result, truly authentic spaces, still serving their original purpose, were transformed from time to time into theatrical performance venues. Only the most essential features of these sites were adapted for the purpose of an artistic production, and no costly renovations or illusionary sets were necessary. This created, somewhat inadvertently, a certain aesthetic effect that proved very revitalising for the audience’s imagination, in an environment with features of a poor theatre, an active set, and in short, a form of poetics centred on play and fantasy.

Vlasta Chramostová, one of the most popular and distinguished actresses in the country, who up until 1969 performed frequently on stage at Vinohrady Theatre (where she worked as an actress until 1970) and in film and television productions, dealt with her own situation as a side-lined and persecuted artist by taking part in private performances. The Soviet invasion forced a rapid change in her standing, and after working briefly at Divadlo za branou (Theatre beyond the Gate), which was shut down in 1972 by the state, she definitively sealed her fate by signing Charter 77. Chramostová is an outstanding actress literally made for the large stage, and her acting is characterised by just the right dose of pathos and the ability to carry off and make perfect use of grand gestures. Following the model of illegal apartment universities and art exhibitions, she tried to carry on as an artist in the intimate environment of her own Prague flat. According to an

interview that František Pavlíček conducted with her, this was not an original idea.¹ Chramostová had already experienced this kind of illegal apartment performances during World War II in Brno, in which she actively took part as a student of the Brno conservatory which had been shut down by the Nazis. She herself with just slight exaggeration likened the experience to the famous Living Room Theatre. In the very intimate setting of an apartment, her acting genius, much of which was already apparent from her film and television work, manifested itself in full force, this means her professional readiness, her ability to retune, to tone down her very theatrical expressiveness in front of the camera. Without her acting losing any of its majesty and monumentality, she managed unerringly to transpose it within a small space and render that pathos of hers to conform perfectly to the dimensions of a provisional stage.

The first performance was a literary piece in 1976 on the occasion of the 75th birthday of the poet Jaroslav Seifert (a signatory of Charter 77 and Nobel Prize-winner for literature in 1984). The performance was comprised of excerpts from Seifert's retrospective book (at that time just in samizdat) *Všecky krásy světa* (*All the Beauties of the World*). The next performance, which took place after the appearance of Charter 77, was also a literary piece titled *Apelplatz II* (a collage of texts by B. Brecht, E. Rostand, J. Andrzejewského, V. Havel, I. Klíma, A. Kliment, P. Kohout, F. Pavlíček, K. Sidon, J. Topol, and L. Vaculík).

Stanislav Milota then captured two "apartment theatre" performances that were pure drama: *Hra na Macbetha* (1978, sometimes referred to as *Play Macbeth*) – an adaptation of Shakespeare's play by Pavel Kohout; and a monodrama by František Pavlíček called *Dávno, dávno již tomu aneb Zpráva o pohřbívání v Čechách* (*Already Long, Long Ago – a Report on Funerals in the Czech Lands*, 1979).² Based on excerpts from the difficult life of the Czech writer Božena Němcová (1820-1862), this latter piece actually touched on events and injustices that were very relevant at the given time. Pavel Kohout took recordings of both performances with him to Austria when he was forced into exile by the secret police, and Austrian television then prepared and broadcast them; the second of the two was broadcast in 1983, on the hundredth anniversary of the opening of the National Theatre in Prague. The visual artistry of both productions benefited immensely from the work of the cameraman, Stanislav Milota, who is also the actress' husband and was involved in the production as the "lighting master." Milota was one of the most distinguished artists in his field and, up until the Soviet invasion, worked on several major films that were part of the Czechoslovak New Wave, and in these recordings he applied his almost painterly skill with light and his ability through images to "dramatize" the atmosphere and the originally non-theatrical space. The flat that the performance took place in is located in the beautiful locality of Čelakovský orchards in the Vinohrady neighbourhood of Prague, which has a view of the National Museum and Prague Castle, and the camera shots did not fail to capture these images and incorporate them into the drama. In the flat, two bright rooms are connected by a "portal" created out

of the space left behind by a large unhinged door. From a distance you have the sense of looking at a “portal mirror”. The protagonists managed to perform *Hra na Macbetha* seventeen times before the secret police put a definitive stop to it. Each performance was attended by twenty to seventy viewers; one member of the audience was, for example, the actor Marie Schell. The production and even the very phenomenon of apartment theatre inspired Tom Stoppard to create the play *Cahoot’s Macbeth*.

Unlike the second work, Kohout’s limber adaptation of *Macbeth* was filmed in colour, and it is somewhat more “amateur” in quality compared to the second recording. The set and the costumes were designed by Ondřej Kohout. Pavel Kohout, who directed (as well as writing the piece and performing in several roles), created a carefully arranged, basic “figural” composition, which roughly took the form of a wedge-shaped layout: Vlastimil Třešňák, who sings and performs several roles, such as captain, porter, murderer, and Malcolm, is located front and left; opposite him is Tereza Kohoutová, playing several smaller roles, one of them that of Lady Macduff and the main role of the “chorus”; beside her, closer to the audience, is Pavel Kohout, playing Banquo, Duncan, Macduff, and the doctor; and in the centre, and also further from the audience, are Pavel Landovský and Vlasta Chramostová, as the couple *Macbeth*. This basic “arrangement of positions” is understandably broken up and regrouped during the action, but always, even with small shifts, a careful and precisely laid out arrangement is preserved, entirely devoid of any randomness, which in such a small performance space would have looked amateurish and chaotic. The actors are dressed in dark clothing – relatively modern attire with the occasional accessory to emphasise the clothes and add an historical quality; for example, *Macbeth*’s coarsely knit waistcoat looks like a coat of mail. The dark colours deflect any needless attention from themselves, and at the same time they come across as elegant and mysterious, disquieting and monumental.

An important and integral set piece is the guitar. Its sounds give suggestive visualisation to some events in the story and its setting; “...it is thus the rhythm, the dramatic, thrilling, angry, impassioned rhythm of Třešňák’s guitar, which breaks up the soothing intimacy of the apartment’s interior and batters it into a space of bloody battles and ruthless power forays. (...) the guitar, hewn by beats against the strings and the wood, itself becomes the sounds that accompany the *Macbethian* tragedy, the sound of the drums, the pounding of the horses, the roar of the battles, the glissando tones of eerie sorcery, and it even materialises into Banquo, struck down to the ground in a murderous onslaught where it fades into a dying gust.”³ It must also be noted that the imploring, loud, brassy voice and overall delivery of the bard, Vlastimil Třešňák, blends with and perfectly complements the untamed, ferocious, and nervy sound of the instrument. It evokes the image of rapidly, painfully skipping across the sharp rocks of the Scottish landscape and the damp darkness of castle walls.

The overall artistic effect of the production is also enhanced by the use of candles, not just through their light, but also by their arrangement; they look the spires of the castle

walls (Milota often films them from a slight angle, which in the recording gives them a monumental quality). Sometimes – in the dialogues between the Macbeths – the camera peeks “slyly” through the gaps between the candles, as though some unauthorised person were covertly following and listening to the couple, and yet conversely it also emphasises the furtive nature of the conversations between the nefarious spouses.

The Macbeth production used both rooms in the apartment – including the one closer to the viewer, otherwise reserved for the “viewing public.” A red curtain is hanging in the background, against which the dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth takes place immediately after the murder. The lighting at this time is dimmer, conforming to the dramatic nature of the scene. To evoke the grand palatial setting for the crowning of Macbeth the crystal chandelier in the rear room is lit up. In the context of this play its lustre is at once deceptive and revealing. The spouses are “enthroned” on the large sofa located right up against the back wall of this room.

Unfortunately I cannot refer to any other images of the production than this television version. But if it is at all possible to compare the experience taken from both productions of Shakespeare’s tragedy mentioned above – in the apartment and more recently in the brewery – the impression from the “apartment” version is of a performance that is exceptionally concentrated, agile, and – even though it took place within the space of several square metres, unlike the “brewery” version -- paradoxically more action filled. Milota’s camera recorded *Zprávu o pohřbívání...* in black and white, with small “alienating” pauses in colour. Subtly cached in the text is much of what was troubling the minds of all lovers of freedom at the time when František Pavlíček wrote it, and on another level it is possible to see in the heroine’s fate allusions to the private tragedies of Vlasta Chramostová. That is another reason why the performance comes across as very lively, suggestive, and veracious, and in conformity with the structure of the play its rhythm has the character of a musical composition. The theme and the title of the play evoke references to the way in which the funerals of important figures were held in the Czech lands: under police guard – and this was true both in the past in Austro-Hungary and in contemporary Czechoslovakia (examples in the former period were the funerals of the journalist and writer Karel Havlíček Borovský and Božena Němcová herself, and in the latter period the funeral of the philosopher Jan Patočka one hundred years later; and ultimately even the funeral of Jaroslav Seifert took place under police surveillance, but that was in 1986, several years after Pavlíček’s text was written and performed). This “one-woman” show was directed by the prominent Czech director Luboš Pistorius, who also fulfilled the role of dramaturg.

When viewing the “stage” from the position of the “audience” the familiar flat genuinely gives off the impression of a peep-show space. There are only a few props – a large old leather suitcase, a parasol (occasionally unfolded, like a memento of youth), or a throw wrapped around someone’s shoulders. Otherwise the set is made up of everything else that belongs permanently to the furnishings and decorations of the flat– the

characteristic chair with the oval backrest, from which the upholstery has been removed, creating an unusual peep-hole through the oval gap, and a decorative mirror, a copy of the death mask of Božena Němcová on the rear wall that corresponds to the theme of the play, a relief with a classical theme (Niké tying his sandals?), flowers in a large vase, a chair and a sofa with Biedermeier upholstery, and a large lamp on the right. The “stage” is lit by a lighting device located in the front in the “audience” area, the kind used to film interiors.

The key element of the production’s artistic design is its work with light, and despite the amateur conditions the cameraman Stanislav Milota literally does wonders with it. The light is often focused directly on the face and hands of the actor, who is dressed entirely in black, so that she stands out from the darkened “set”. The first “clause”, titled *Rozhovor s umírajícím synkem* (*Conversation with a Dying Son*), is partly situated in train stations, and partly in the train in which Němcová is travelling in 1853 to see her sick son Hynek in Hungary; even if the large suitcase were not there, the location is obvious just from the way in which the actor is sitting, impatiently in a way, not entirely relaxed, her elbows pulled in, the way they are when a person is in a travel seat. The presence of the dying Hynek is signified by the white cover on the bed. In the second clause (*Rozhovor s opatrnou kolegyní – Conversation with a Careful Colleague*) the actor just throws a large old-fashioned white tablecloth over the trunk set upright to create a table, which is laid out for a guest. The shadows apparent in the first part, boldly and sharply defined, suggesting the dark of night, now change in places and sometimes grow brighter (as Milota raises the lighting), assuming softer contours. *Rozhovoru s nevěrným milencem* (*Conversation with an Unfaithful Lover*) represents an intimate recollection, in which the character faces inward, seeks strength from her experiences. The performance space is initially more illuminated, then the actor lights a candle and Milota again dims the lighting to a minimum. This intimacy breaks suddenly (but at a moment that fits exactly and timely with the rhythm and content of the piece): for a while the actor steps out of character and begins talking about Božena Němcová, and this part is filmed in colour. In the 5th clause, called *Rozhovor s nemilovaným mužem* (*Conversation with an Unloved Man*), the cameraman again works with a darkened space, in which the light focuses mainly on the actress’ face and hands. As a result the viewers can devote their attention entirely to the conflict reflected in her facial expression and in the gesture of her hands: a woman who for her entire life was condemned to be in a defensive position, constantly defending herself against a subtle, flimsy, but still emphatic onslaught. The “defenceless weapons” that are all she has available to her sometimes can cut through thick skin, but these small victories usually backfire on her. The sixth and final movement (*Rozhovor se sebou sama – Conversation with Herself*) brings to a close the trying life’s pilgrimage of Božena Němcová, poverty worn, under constant police surveillance, pursued by misunderstanding, weakened by illness. Her character looks back, recollects, pulls things out of the trunk to write with, but she has no more strength to work. The entire episode is

handled with the greatest intimacy, the candle flame and the lamp dimmed to low, tracing the outline of her figure, chillingly wrapped up in herself...

These legendary apartment theatre performances are evidence of how possible it is, in very modest conditions and, moreover, constantly hampered by interventions from the totalitarian state, to create pure, sophisticated theatrical work, even in scenographic terms. At the time, at least two other productions were in the works: Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, and *Stěhování duší* (*The Migration of Souls*) by Josef Topol, who wrote the play directly for Vlasta Chramostová.⁴ But unfortunately for the history of "authentic space" and theatre history in general, as well as for that specific creative team working in apartment theatre or in a traditional theatre venue after 1989, these planned performances never came about.

Notes

¹ See F. Pavlíček, "V Čelakovského sadech číslo 10" (At Čelakovský orchards no. 10), in: *O divadle II*, February 1987, p. 238-261

² Until 1970 director of Vinohrady Theatre, then similarly persecuted by regime-dictated bans like Chramostová, he wrote, for example, screenplays under the names of his "non-banned" colleagues; V. Chramostová left Vinohrady Theatre in protest against the dismissal of F. Pavlíček from his position as director.

³ Jindřich Černý: "Zpráva o pokojovém Makbethovi" (A report on a living-room Macbeth), *Svět a divadlo* 1, 1990, no. 1, p. 20.

⁴ After 1989 a production of *Stěhování duší* appeared at the Rokoko Theatre in Prague directed by Ladislav Vymětal and with Jaroslava Adamová in the lead role.

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