

AVANT-GARDE ON THE EDGE

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This fascinating volume provides original insights into the historical theatre avant-garde — both Czech and European — and also brings into focus the issue of what could be called the Central-Eastern European avant-garde. In the introduction, the editors, Mariana Orawczak Kunešová and Andrea Jochmanová, declare their aim to provide not only “a general reassessment of Czech interwar theatre” but also “a better understanding of the crossroads at which the Czech interwar theatre is built”. By “crossroads” I understand them to be referring to the dynamics of cultural exchange within the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The point is perhaps more persuasively argued towards the end of the volume, in an essay by the Polish theatre historian Daniusz Kosiński entitled “Central European Theatre Avant-garde: Reclamation or Re-imagination?” Professor Kosiński, founder of the international research project “Reclaimed Avantgarde”, recounts how, in the course of working on the project with Hanna Veselovska (also a contributor to this volume), he had become aware that for Western scholars there is “a big dark hole” lying between the historical avant-garde of Germany and that of Russia. (The image that comes to my mind is not so much a black hole as a quicksand). He notes that while some great figures of the Central European avant-garde have been singled out and honoured, they remain isolated from their environment, without apparent antecedents or influences.

Does this volume validate the concept of a Central-Eastern European historical avant-garde with its own traditions and antecedents that could be studied as a whole? Not entirely, but it helps to fill in the blank spaces. In addition to Kosiński’s essay, we have six substantial papers about different aspects of the avant-garde, followed by an interview with the French historian Henri Béhar and four book reviews. The volume closes with an account of the 2022 conference “The Ever-expanding Horizons of Theatre” in Brno, and an abundantly illustrated survey of the bequest left to the Moravian Museum by the Czech actress and member of the interwar avant-garde, Lola Skrbková. Stage design — or its technological big brother, scenography — plays a major role in many of these contributions, enabling the publication to demonstrate its fine colour printing. Displayed here are costume designs by Alexandra Exter’s colleagues in the Ukrainian theatre, as magnificent as Exter’s own, in addition to stage designs from the Slovenian and Czech theatre and the bonus of two Brueghel reproductions, also in colour.

Two contributions focus specifically on the Ukrainian theatre. In “Technism in the Ukrainian Avant-garde Theatre: A Clash of Meanings and Forms” Hanna Veselovska discusses the ambivalence of Technism; that is, the use of advanced technology in the theatre on the level of meaning as well as in practice. Mechanisation has both



a positive and a negative aspect: technology on the one hand represents progress and innovation; on the other, the evils of exploitation and depersonalisation. Veselovska opens up the paradox that the seductive possibilities of a well-equipped stage make it easier for the ills of civilisation to be presented in the theatre. In the course of this she describes the staging and reception of specific productions, including a staging of Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* that was perceived as irrelevant by audiences in Dnipropetrovsk, where industrialisation was then in its infancy. Veselovska comes to the conclusion that the attachment to Technism was a matter as much of ideology as of aesthetics.

Meanwhile, in "Alexandra Exter Theatre and Ukrainian Scenography in the 1910s and 1920s" Valentyna Chechyk identifies the moment when modern ideas of scenography began to be implemented in the theatres of Ukraine, initially by Exter, but also by the colleagues she influenced — Petritsky, Meller, Khvostenko-Khvostov — artists who lived and died in Ukraine, but who until now have usually been classified as belonging to the Russian avant-garde, not as specifically Ukrainian. Chechyk quotes Bronislava Nijinska's phrase, "symphony of colour" to refer to their unifying feature in the shape of the stage persona as a dynamic abstraction whose full impact can only be captured only when in movement. The outbreak of the Russian Revolution caused the breakup of this creative society, many emigrating to Western Europe and America; but there is no evidence of them settling in numbers in other arenas of the Central-Eastern European region. When Exter left her native Kyiv, she was oriented first toward Moscow but later settled in Paris. A century later, Valentyna Chechyk similarly had to flee her home in Ukraine, and the editors pay tribute to her courage and commitment.

The instability caused by the shifting territories in Europe also affected Slovenia, together with neighbouring Serbia and Croatia, as is demonstrated in the essay by Tomaž Toporišič, "The Slovene Historical Avant-garde and Europe in Crisis". He examines a number of events that took place in the 1910s and 1920s in the Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade triangle, which both provoked and resisted the bourgeois establishment. There was a clash of agendas, not only political but also social and ethical. "They introduced new ways of communication and new genres," he writes, "as well as different kinds of manifestos and did their best to change the modes of artists' social positioning. They tried to invent new media, introduce new standards and to establish new centres of the avant-garde that could decentralise the artistic maps of Europe and the world and add to the existing centres Milan, Rome, Paris, Berlin, Zurich, Leningrad and Moscow and add Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, as well as Zadar, Trieste, Gorizio, Novo Mesto and many others." This paper has less to say than the others about scenography and the visual arts, but more to say about territories, and is possibly the most substantial and intense of the whole publication. "The avant-garde circles and movements were constantly on the move," writes Toporišič, and contrasts the "open situation" in Italy and Yugoslavia at the end of World War I with the darkening of the 1930s.

Two of the contributions have a particular resonance for the Czech lands: Mariana Kunešová's account of two plays by André Breton and their French and Czech presentation (or intended presentation): "André Breton on French and Czech stages"; and Eva Šlaisová's account of Alois Wachsmann's designs for *Těžká Barbora* (Big Bertha; here translated as Heavy Barbara) at the Liberated Theatre: "Between Brueghel,



Surrealism, and New Realism: Wachsman's Stage Design for *Heavy Barbara*". In the former, the plays in question are Breton and Philippe Soupault's *S'il vous plaît* (If you please), première in Paris in 1920 and eight years later in Prague, directed by Jindřich Honzl, and Breton's *Le Trésor des jésuites* (The Treasure of the Jesuits), which never reached the stage in Paris but was première in Prague in 1935, again directed by Honzl. *S'il vous plaît* (Act II only) had a stormy opening at Aurélien Lugné-Poë's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Breton later confessing he had found the experience frustrating. Honzl's production of the complete play, working with Soupault and in the spirit of Poetism, was well received, and is considered to have been one of his best productions. *Le Trésor des jésuites*, originally written for a benefit performance but its French staging abandoned, was simplified by Honzl for his Prague production in 1935 and even so was regarded as incomprehensibly complicated.

Big Bertha was also directed by Jindřich Honzl. Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich's 1937 political satire about an idyllic land threatened by its aggressive neighbour was set in the world of Brueghel's paintings and Slaisová focuses on the designs by Alois Wachsman, particularly an earlier set in which Wachsman gave the paintings a Surrealist twist rather than the eventual *Neue Sachlichkeit* interpretation. The witty and inventive designs contributed to *Big Bertha* being one of the Liberated Theatre's most successful productions. It was also its last.

We return to Mariana Kunešová, who is the author of "Historiography of the Avant-gardes, Fifty Years Witnessing of Research Dedicated to the Avant-gardes in France", an interview with Henri Béhar, founder of the Centre de Recherche de Surrealisme. As a student he noted that Dada was "presented as a prelude to Surrealism, but not as a movement of its own standing", and tried to acquire, unsuccessfully, the archive of the Romanian Tristan Tzara after Tzara's death. Béhar's overview of the historical avant-garde from France thus complements Kosiński's overview from Poland. Béhar also perceives great gaps in knowledge, black holes and blank spaces, but in his case, they are in the history and archives of the Western European avant-garde, and his mission, like that of Kosiński, is to reclaim them. Kunešová features again among the book reviews, where Iveta Slavková reviews Kunešová's *L'absurde dans le théâtre Dada et présurrealiste français*, on the same theme as Henri Béhar's interview.

I have left to the end Didier Plassard's "Western European Avant-garde Theatre and Puppetry: A Reappraisal" for maybe the same reason the editors placed it at the beginning — it does not really fit into the Central European theme of the volume, being based on sources in France, Germany and Switzerland. Plassard's paper reviews the relationship between traditional puppetry and the early avant-garde, noting that in Western Europe traditional puppetry had become fragmented, and was held in low esteem in comparison with the other performing arts. It therefore tended to be poets and artists who saw it as a field for their experiments and it became an activity of literary and cultural circles, where surviving stage effects were reimagined by the avant-garde artists. Plassard's paper also serves as a reminder that puppetry is taken more seriously in Central Europe than in the West.

How far does this volume support the belief in a Central European Theatre Avant-garde as such? It demonstrates that original and innovative work took place in Kyiv, Slovenia and Prague, but it is difficult to say what these manifestations had in common. If we look at the instances in this volume, we can even make a case for not one



but two regions lying between the Western and Russian avant-gardes: Central Europe and Eastern Europe. Professor Kosiński himself betrays that, at the first meeting of Central European researchers in 2015 not only did the “world” know “almost nothing about Central or Eastern Europe avant-garde, “we did not know much about ourselves”.

Professor Kosiński does his best to demonstrate that the shared experiences at the birth of the historical avant-garde gave the various national avant-gardes a kind of unity. In many cases they derived from national movements under preparation during the time of suppression in the nineteenth century, and emerged in the newly-created nation states after WWI. These were marked by insecurity over borders and identity, and by the dual influence of Germany and Russia. The newly-created independent states needed evidence of their own cultural identity to define their political right to exist. As a result, the historical avant-garde in Central and Eastern Europe attained maturity much more quickly than in the West, and was regarded more seriously than in Western Europe: “many states supporting (at least partly) the avant-garde as a part of the modern image they wanted to present for themselves and for the world.” As Kunešová points out, in Paris, André Breton’s plays were regarded as a dispensable part of his work, whereas in Prague these two plays were given a well-prepared professional production. She sees this as evidence that in the Czech lands the theatre was considered an important element in the world of the avant-garde, whereas in France and most other western avant-gardes it remained peripheral. Maybe this is the distinctive quality that marks the Central European historical avant-garde — that though it came later than the Western, it was more significant, more integrated into society, and that the theatre played a major role in this.