THEATRE THEORY READER
PRAGUE SCHOOL WRITINGS

EDITED BY
DAVID DROZD,
TOMÁŠ KAČER
AND DON SPARLING

KAROLINUM

Theatre Theory Reader
Prague School Writings

Edited by David Drozd, Tomáš Kačer and Don Sparling

The original manuscript was reviewed by Prof. Veronika Ambros (University of Toronto) and Prof. Yana Meerzon (University of Ottawa).

Published by Charles University
Karolinum Press
Layout by Jan Šerých
Typeset by Karolinum Press
First English edition

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Peter Bogatyrev, Jindřich Honzl *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946* © 1982 University of Texas Press, by permission of the University of Texas Press.

This book is published as part of the research project *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency* (Český divadelní strukturalismus: souvislosti a potenciál; 2011–2015), which is financed with funds from GAČR (the Czech Science Foundation), No. P409/11/1082.

ISBN 978-80-246-3578-1
ISBN 978-80-246-3579-8 (pdf)

Charles University
Karolinum Press 2016

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures 8
Acknowledgments 11
Introduction by David Drozd and Tomáš Kačer 13
Editors’ Choices and Guidelines 28

I Theatre in General 31
Otakar Zich: Principles of Theoretical Dramaturgy 34
Jan Mukařovský: On the Current State of the Theory of Theatre 59
Jiří Veltruský: Structuralism and Theatre 76

II Sign – Object – Action 87
Petr Bogatyrev: A Contribution to the Study of Theatrical Signs 91
Petr Bogatyrev: Theatrical Signs 99
Karel Brušák: Signs in the Chinese Theatre 115
Jindřich Honzl: The Mobility of the Theatrical Sign 129
Jiří Veltruský: People and Things in the Theatre 147
Jindřich Honzl: The Hierarchy of Theatrical Devices 157

III Figures and Play 165
Petr Bogatyrev: Playing and the Theatre 168
Petr Bogatyrev: Chaplin and *The Kid* 175
Petr Bogatyrev: Chaplin, the Fake Count 185
Jan Mukařovský: An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of an Actor’s Figure (Chaplin in *City Lights*) 192
Jindřich Honzl: The Dramatic Character 199

IV From Page to Stage 209
Jan Mukařovský: On Stage Dialogue 212
Jan Mukařovský: Stage Speech in the Avant-garde Theatre 216
Jan Mukařovský: Dialogue and Monologue 220
Jiří Veltruský: Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre 247

V Layers of Space 269
Jan Mukařovský: A Note on the Aesthetics of Film 272
E. F. Burian: The New Theatre Space 284
Jindřich Honzl: Spatial Concerns in Theatre 290
Karel Brušák: Imaginary Action Space in Drama 303
Miroslav Kouřil: Theatre Space and a Visual Artist's Participation in Theatre 320

VI Towards Structures of Modern Acting 337
Jiří Frejka: The Concept of Convention 341
Jiří Frejka: Example in Acting and the Stage as the Superstructure of Life 345
Jindřich Honzl: Defining Mimicry 348
Jindřich Honzl: Mimetic Sign and Mimetic Signal 356
Jiří Veltruský: A Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting 376

VII Ethnographic Encroachments 425
Petr Bogatyrev: Folk Song from a Functional Point of View 428
Petr Bogatyrev: Clothing as Sign (The Functional and Structural Concept in Ethnography) 441
Petr Bogatyrev: Folk Theatre 448
Jiří Veltruský: Broadside Ballads and Dramas 457
Petr Bogatyrev: The Extra-aesthetic Function of Folk Theatre 464
Jindřich Honzl: Ritual and Theatre 482

VIII Art – Media – Society 493
E. F. Burian: The Function of Photography and Film in the Theatre 497
E. F. Burian: The Stage Metaphor 499
Jiří Veltruský: Theatre in the Corridor (E. F. Burian's Production of *Alladine and Palomides*) 501
Jan Mukařovský: On the Artistic Situation of the Contemporary Czech Theatre 519

Prague School Theatre Theory and Its Contexts (Afterword) by Pavel Drábek (with Martin Bernátek, Andrea Jochmanová and Eva Šlaisová) 533
The Prague Linguistic Circle and Its Mission 536
The Prague School at the Heart of the Avant-garde 548
The New Multicultural State of Czechoslovakia 552
Controversies and Ideologies Surrounding the Modern Czech Language 557
The Functional-Structural Method 562
The Role of Theatre in Czechoslovak Life 567
Artistic Experiments of the Czech Avant-garde 572
The Prague School and the Cinema 582
The Prague School and the Puppet Theatre 586
The Prague School, Folklore and Modern Ethnography 590

The Prague School's Ethnographic Theory and the Theatre **595**
The Prague Linguistic Circle and Formalism(s) **603**
The Prague School and Husserl's Phenomenology **607**
The Prague School and Ingarden's Aesthetics **611**
Karl Bühler's Language Theory **613**
Prague School Theatre Theory and Otakar Zich **616**
Hegelian and Marxist Dialectics **621**
Conclusion **624**
Further Reading **626**

Biographies of Authors Presented in the Reader **637**
Index **647**

LIST OF FIGURES

Miroslav Kouřil: Theatre Space and a Visual Artist's Participation in Theatre

Fig. 1–6 Diagrams of theatre space. Kouřil, Miroslav (1945) *Divadelní prostor* [Theatre Space], Prague: Ústav pro učebné pomůcky průmyslových a obchodních škol v Praze, pp. 36, 46–50 (schemes), 73–75 (photos). Photo Miroslav Hák.

Jiří Veltruský: Theatre in the Corridor

Fig. 1–5 Kouřil, Miroslav (1945) *Divadelní prostor* [Theatre Space], Prague: Ústav pro učebné pomůcky průmyslových a obchodních škol v Praze, pp. 36, 46–50 (schemes), 73–75 (photos). Photo Miroslav Hák.

Fig. 1a–b, 2a–b Ground plan of the foyer with disposition of playing area, lights, actors and spectators for Act 1.

Fig. 3a–b Ground plan of the foyer with disposition for Act III.

Fig. 4 Zdeněk Podlipný (Ablamore) and Jiřina Stránská (Alladine) during Ablamore's opening monologue in Act I.

Fig. 5 Vladimír Šmeral (Palomides) and Marie Burešová (Astolaine) in Act II, Scene 4.

Prague School Theatre Theory and Its Contexts

Fig. 1 Cover of the daily newspaper *Prager Presse*, vol. 11, no. 60 (1 March 1931), Bilderbeilage no. 9, p. 1. National Museum collections.

Fig. 2 Cover of *Slovo a slovesnost* (design Jiří Kan), published by the Prague Linguistic Circle from 1935. *Slovo a Slovesnost*, vol. 7, no. 3 (30 September 1941).

Fig. 3 Cover of Petr Bogatyrev's *Czech and Slovak Folk Theatre*. Bogatyrev, Petr (1940) *Lidové divadlo* české *a slovenské* [Czech and Slovak Folk Theatre], Prague: Fr. Borový.

Fig. 4 Karel Teige and Otakar Mrkvička: "Liberated Theatre", photomontage, 1926. *OD* [Osvobozené divadlo – the Liberated Theatre] (photomontage Karel Teige and Otakar Mrkvička), *Pásmo*, vol.2, no. 8 (10 April 1926), p. 89. Moravian Library Collections.

Fig. 5 Jan Mukařovský (with E. F. Burian on the left, in white shirt) at an international conference on the avant-garde theatre organized by Theatre D in Prague in May 1937. *Program D 38*, vol. 3, no.1 (24 September 1937), p. 41.

Fig. 6 Members of the Liberated Theatre company toast Vsevolod Meyerhold following a performance of *Heaven on Earth* [Nebe na zemi], 1936. Obst, Milan and Scherl, Adolf (1962) *K dějinám*

české *divadelní avantgardy* [On the Czech Avant-garde Theatre History], Prague: Nakladatelství ČSAV. Photo Press Photo Service (Alexander Paul, Pavel Altschul, František Illek).

Fig. 7 Karel Teige: collage, 1941 (1968). *Problémy literárnej avantgardy* [Problems of the Literary Avant-garde], Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej akadémie vied, p. 161.

Fig. 8 Cover of Jindřich Honzl's first book, *The Whirling Stage*, 1925. Honzl, Jindřich (1925) *Roztočené jeviště* [The Whirling Stage], Prague: Odeon. Photo Rössler.

Fig. 9a–b Ivan Goll's *Methuselah*, directed by Jindřich Honzl, at the Liberated Theatre, 1927. Obst, Milan and Scherl, Adolf (1962) *K dějinám* české *divadelní avantgardy* [On the Czech Avant-garde Theatre History], Prague: Nakladatelství ČSAV.

Fig. 10a–f Series of photos from the anti-war drama *The Ass and Its Shadow* [Osel a stín], 1933. *Svět ve filmu obrazech* [The World in Film and Images], vol. 2, no. 55, p. 11. Photo Press Photo Service (Alexander Paul, Pavel Altschul, František Illek).

Fig. 11 Adolf Hoffmeister: "The schoolmaster Roman Jakobson examining his pupils", 1933. Jakobson, Roman, "Ukázky z chystané monografie o šlágrech V & W" [Excerpts From a Planned Monograph on Voskovec & Werich's Hits], in (1933) *Tucet melodií z Osvobozeného divadla* [A Dozen Melodies from the Liberated Theatre], Prague: Hudební matice Umělecké besedy.

Fig. 12 Coloured photo from Burian's production of *The Barber of Seville*, set by Miroslav Kouřil, 1937. *Život* [The Life], vol. 15, no. 3–4 (January 1937), p. 114.

Fig. 13 The director Jiří Frejka with a model of the set for his production of Vladislav Vančura's *Jezero Ukereve* [Lake Ukereve] at the National Theatre, 1936. Dvořák, Antonín (1961) *Trojice z nejodvážnějších* [The Bravest Three], Prague: Orbis.

Fig. 14 E. F. Burian (looking into the camera) and the cameraman Jiří Lehovec shooting a film sequence with the dancer Anna Fischlová. Lehovec, Jiří (2002) "Jiří Lehovec vzpomíná" [Jiří Lehovec Remembers], *Iluminace*, vol. 14, no. 2, p. 91.

Fig. 15a–c E. F. Burian's production of his own adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* at Theatre D 36, 1936.

Fig. 15a Lola Skrbková legacy, Theatre History Department of the Moravian Museum collections. Photo O. Skall.

Fig. 15b The Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno Archive. Photo O. Skall.

Fig. 15c Srba, Bořivoj (2004) Řečí *světla* [The Language of Light], Brno: JAMU. Photo O. Skall.

Fig. 16a–b A scene from a production of Vladislav Vančura's *The Teacher and the Pupil* [Učitel a žák] directed by Jindřich Honzl at the National Theatre Studio, Prague, 1945. *Otázky divadla a filmu* [Issues of Theatre and Cinema], vol. 1, no. 6 (31 January 1946), p. 288. Photo Josef Heinrich.

Fig. 17 Cover of Karel Teige's *A World of Laughter*, 1928. Teige, Karel (2004) *Svět, který se směje* [A World of Laughter], reprint, Prague: Akropolis – Jiří Tomáš.

Fig. 18 Puppets by traditional Czech puppeteers, from Petr Bogatyrev's *Czech and Slovak Folk Theatre*. Bogatyrev, Petr (1940) *Lidové divadlo* české *a slovenské* [Czech and Slovak Folk Theatre], Prague: Fr. Borový. Photo CEPS.

Fig. 19 E. F. Burian: *War* [Vojna], 1935. Srba, Bořivoj (2004) Řečí *světla* [The Langugage of Light], Brno: JAMU. Photo O. Skall.

Fig. 20 Staged reconstruction of the performance of the *St Dorothy* folk play in its original setting in Slovakia. Rybák, Miloslav (1904) "Slovenská hra o sv. Dorotě" [The Slovakian St Dorothy Play], Český *lid* [The Czech People], vol. 13, p. 195. Photo M. Rybák.

Fig. 21 Schematic drawing of the main room of a cottage when *St Dorothy* is being performed. Kouřil, Miroslav (1945) *Divadelní prostor* [Theatre Space], Prague: Ústav pro učebné pomůcky průmyslových a obchodních škol v Praze, p. 34.

Fig. 22 From Burian's production of the St Dorothy play as part of his *Folk Suite*, 1938. Černý, František (ed.) (1968) *Dějiny* českého *divadla* [Czech Theatre History], vol. 1. Prague: Academia, p. 329.

Fig. 23 Studio photo of Jiří Frejka's production of Miloš Hlávka's *Lady of the Spring* [Paní studánka] at the National Theatre in Prague, 1937. Just, Vladimír (2013) *Miloš Hlávka – světák, nebo kavalír páně?* [Miloš Hlávka – Dandy or the Lord's Gentleman?], Prague: Akropolis, p. 113. Petr Hlávka private archive, photo Fotoateliér Věra.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book owes its existence to the urgings of Veronika Ambros (University of Toronto) and Eva Stehlíková (Masaryk University), both of whom, *firstly*, have always asserted that the intellectual legacy of the Prague School theatre writings is a cultural treasure that ought to be cultivated and promoted world-wide, and *secondly*, stated their conviction that the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University was ideally suited to put together a team capable of undertaking such a project. The book you are holding in your hands proves their latter point; the former is up to you as reader to judge.

We were fortunate to obtain financial support for our research project from the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR). This enabled us to establish a research team, carry out wide-ranging archival research and hold two international conferences. This reader is the final outcome and crowning achievement of the research project. The concept of the book was refined over time in the course of many discussions amongst international scholars and the members of the team, all of whom have contributed generously with their views and findings. The team members were David Drozd (project leader), Martin Bernátek, Barbora Diego Rivera Příhodová, Pavel Drábek, Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Tomáš Kačer, Radka Kunderová, Martina Musilová, Eva Šlaisová, Jitka Šotkovská, Don Sparling and Eva Stehlíková.

Many thanks go to all those colleagues who attended our two conferences, entitled Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited I (2011) and II (2013), and helped us both to reassess the Prague School in today's theoretical contexts and to discuss the many complicated translation issues. In addition to Veronika Ambros, who has acted as the unacclaimed patron of the project, four specialists have offered constant support: Andrea Jochmanová, Yana Meerzon, Manfred Pfister and Herta Schmid.

Our research would not have been possible without access to archival materials kept in the Museum of Czech Literature (*Památník národního písemnictví*), the National Museum (*Národní muzeum*) and the archives of Charles University and Masaryk University as well as personal family archives. We are grateful for the expert assistance given by all the archival specialists at the above mentioned institutions; special thanks go to Zita Honzlová and Jarmila F. Veltrusky.

Colleagues and friends around the world have helped with the many areas of expertise such a project entails, ranging from linguistic advice through historical and theoretical knowledge to bibliographical assistance: Christian M. Billing, Maria Bochkova, Campbell Edinborough, Francesca Fulton, Elena Khokhlova, Tomáš Kubart, Dita Lánská, Markéta Polochová, Gabriella Reuss, Sergei Tcherkasski, Dmitri Trubotchkin, and James Zborowski.

The results of the research were regularly discussed with students in various seminars held at the Department of Theatre Studies. Their feedback confirmed the continuing relevance of Prague School theory and helped us to shape the selection of texts for the volume.

The whole project lasted five years, throughout which we were fortunate to be able to rely on the administrative (and moral) support of our invaluable departmental Secretary Jitka Kapinusová.

Finally, a symbolic expression of thanks and respect goes to all those scholars who promoted Prague School theory in the 1970s and 1980s. Without their introductions, translations and editions this volume would have scarcely been possible. Among them, foremost respect should go to the memory of Michael L. Quinn (1958–1994), Prague School scholar and enthusiast, editor, translator and author of the seminal book *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theater Theory* (1995).

David Drozd
Project Leader
Brno, August 2016

INTRODUCTION

DAVID DROZD and TOMÁŠ KAČER

Theory can clarify, not sit in judgment. Moreover, theoretical concepts are abstractions that cannot be substituted for concrete facts; these never exist in such a pure form.
Jiří Veltruský, "Theatre in the Corridor"

This book features thirty-eight texts from nine authors connected to the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC), sometimes referred to simply as the Prague School. In the 1930s and 1940s members of the Circle created a complex theory of the theatre. Though these dates might suggest something outdated, yet another Theory consigned to the ash heap of history, the following two quotes point to a different conclusion.

> … the most urgent task of theatre studies is to examine all the individual components within the structure of a theatre performance and to learn how each of the components, with its own specific features, affects the structure as a whole … We should not only describe a word, a gesture or the set as signs but also study the characteristics of the theatrical sign as a whole, which is a synthesis of several sign systems represented by its individual components. (Veltruský 1941: 133)

Jiří Veltruský (1919–1994), who was a member of the PLC, wrote these words in the spring of 1941. That same year his tutor Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975), one of the PLC's founding members, formulated the goal of structural theory, as he called their approach, in a different way:

> We have only a single theoretical task: to show through a few remarks and examples that, despite all the material tangibility of its means (the building, machinery, sets, props, a multitude of personnel), the theatre is merely the base for a non-material interplay of forces moving through time and space and sweeping the spectator up in its changing tension, in the interplay of forces we call a stage performance. (Mukařovský 2016 [1941]: 61)

These two short fragments from Veltruský and Mukařovský grasp the core of the Prague School perspective on theatre performance. They include all the "material" elements of a theatre performance and key concepts employed by the PLC (such as structure, sign and component), providing in fact a structural definition of theatre. Although this may sound simple, it was precisely such a simple formulation that was the starting point for structurally oriented theatre studies – and in fact the task outlined by Mukařovský has remained the point of departure for all subsequent research on the theatre.

Theories of theatre have developed and diversified immensely since the 1930s and 1940s. Fashions changed throughout the twentieth century and even theory as such has often been neglected. This book provides an opportunity to return to one of the founding moments in the history of theatre theory.

The texts in the reader you are holding in your hands were written by a group of critics and scholars, theatre-lovers and theatre practitioners associated with the Prague Linguistic Circle in the period from the 1920s to the 1940s. This whole community has become known as **The Prague School**. Most of its members dealt with language and literature, but those included in this reader explored **methodological approaches to theatre** (as well as drama and performance).

Theatre is much more than a play presented on a stage. There are dozens of professions associated with the theatre, and all of them influence what a piece will be like, from actors and the directing team to designers and tech people, to name but a few. But the list of those associated with each theatrical event ultimately runs all the way through to audiences, without whom the whole concept of theatre lacks any meaning. Put simply, theatre can come into existence in a variety of ways and a variety of activities can be understood as theatre. Today the term can be used to cover a funny sketch by a pair of middle-aged jugglers on monocycles in a piece inspired by *Hamlet*; a local amateur production of the *Oresteia* in a brutally cut version of this Classical play that lacks virtually all props and has a minimal cast, with Clytemnestra and Electra being played by one actress; or – from a completely different context – the Broadway hip-hop musical hit *Hamilton*, which has met with immense critical and popular acclaim.

When we say “theatre” in this book, we often mean what is now commonly referred to as “performance”. The development of **performance studies** in the 1980s was a scholarly reaction to changes in what was understood as performance in the previous decades, and the concepts that were developed then went on to influence performative practices as such. The concept “performance”, with its many secondary and implied meanings (all of which are worth studying), has become commonplace. It distinguishes itself in certain respects from “theatre”, which is often limited to a specific art form. We would like to do away with this division and return to a broader use of the term “theatre”.

In their heyday the Prague School thinkers made a shift in terminology similar to that employed in performance studies. They did not introduce the term "performance" as a generic label for a wide range of human activities, instead using "theatre" in this sense. Therefore this reader calls for an open mind: in nearly all cases, what the Prague School says about the theatre is also applicable to what is now called performance.

This similarity between the two schools is manifested in two areas. The first is their shared interest in non-artistic activities (the Prague School in "folk culture", "popular culture", "audience"; performance studies in "rituals"; "happenings", "performativity"), with the result that they borrow from sociology and anthropology. The second is the conceptualization of the avant-garde theatre movements of their respective eras by both schools. That is why most ideas of the Prague School are applicable to contemporary theatrical activities and to a variety of performative events, including cultural performance. And the latter concept has an immense scope. Imagine you are walking through town, turn round a corner and find yourself in the middle of a political rally. The people gathered there are applauding the speakers, who are addressing them with hand-held megaphones. A minute later, the protesters set out on a march through the streets, holding signs such as "We are the 99%" and "Occupy!" How cleverly shaped this manifestation of exercising citizens' rights suddenly seems, what a brilliant example of the town as performance itself!

Why, then, should we read the Prague School? Can its rather early investigations of theatre shed any new light on how we see theatre today? We believe so. The reason for this belief lies in the fortunate circumstance that what is referred to as the theory of the Prague School was never theory for theory's sake. Although we refer to them as theorists, Prague School thinkers always kept **close ties with theatre practice**. Instead of inventing rigid systems, they developed a multi-faceted set of analytical distinctions that can be used flexibly and universally. Although all these **analytical "tools"** have their grounding in the theatre of that period, most of them continue to prove useful today and deserve universal application.

Among the most innovative concepts, which have not grown old but on the contrary have become a standard part of the toolbox of any serious analyst of the theatre, are the following: sign, structure, dominant, component, stage figure and dramatic space. These are the most crucial concepts for understanding the Prague School. In what follows we have arranged these concepts into clusters, with brief explanations intended to elucidate the relations between them and the dynamic nature of the system.

Structure is a term that is almost self-explanatory today, but it is important to remember that it was only in the 1920s that it became a key term for aesthetics. Prague School scholars introduced structure as something highly organized yet dynamic, full of inner tension yet unified, energy-charged, yet organized. Only such a concept of structure is then capable of encompassing the variability of avant-garde art, which asks for and provokes such conceptualization. In the early 1930s Mukařovský stated that "the conception of a work of art as a structure – that is, a system of components aesthetically deautomatized and organized into a complex hierarchy that is unified by the prevalence of one component over the others – is accepted in the theory of several arts" (Mukařovský 2016 [1931]: 192), thus providing one of the standard definitions of *structure* in the work of art.

The element that organizes the structure is usually called the **dominant**. It might be anything – in the case of theatre, think of a gesture, a motif in the text, music, the shape of a costume or spatial organization. What counts is the functionality of the dominant element or feature: "The *dominant* is that component of the work that sets in motion, and gives direction to, the relationships of all of the components" (Mukařovský 1983 [1932]: 170). Identifying the dominant is often crucial, because the dominant is what makes a particular work of art specific and unique. This approach was of significant help in overcoming a content-oriented aesthetics focusing merely on expression. Mukařovský's study "An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of an Actor's Figure" is an instructive example of the new approach: all he is doing here is trying to answer the simple question "What holds Chaplin's acting together?" Or to rephrase this in technical terms, "What is the dominant in the structure of Chaplin's acting?"

The term **element** (or **component**) describes any part of a structure that is a work of art – in our case, a theatrical performance. The first serious attempt to discuss the *elements of a theatre performance* is found in Otakar Zich's *The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (1931). In this extensive work, Zich provides a detailed analysis of audience perception during a theatre performance and proposes a distinction between its relatively constant elements (such as the setting, costume and actors) and those that are constantly changing (such as facial expressions, gestures and intonation). Prague School scholars took this further. Many different lists of particular elements can be found in their texts; what is striking is their methodological flexibility. When in his *Components of Theatre Expression* (1946) Jaroslav Pokorný sets out to demonstrate the variability of theatre *structure* in the course of history, he makes do with only five *elements* (literary, musical, movement, visual and dramatic), while when Mukařovský analyses Chaplin's acting he offers a much more detailed listing. It is precisely this sensitivity to the material that prevents Prague School scholars from sterile formalism (a fault sometimes attributed to semiotics).

Structure is always more than just a simple summation of its *elements* – what makes it specific is its organization, the internal contradictions of *elements* and the *dominant*. When applied to theatre, this may lead to the following statement:

> Modern art has revealed the positive aesthetic effect of internal contradictions among the components of the work of art too clearly for us to be able to view the interplay of the individual elements of drama as merely complementary to one another. The modern stage work is an extremely complicated structure (more complicated than any other artistic structure) that eagerly sucks up everything that the contemporary development of technology offers and that other arts provide, but as a rule it does so in order to employ this material as a contrastive factor. (Mukařovský 2016 [1937]: 212)

Contemporary theatre is also open to conceptualization in accordance with this concept of theatrical structure.

For example, when discussing directors' approaches to classical drama, whether Shakespeare or Chekhov, we may concern ourselves with differences not only in dramaturgy or rehearsal methods but also in the very structure of productions. It is enough to compare the function of the set and visual design in Robert Wilson's theatre with that of Peter Brook's. Or consider the actor's position: some directors tend to give the actor a prominent, dominant function in the structure of a piece, while in other cases the actor may be subordinated to visually and/or musically organized stylization. A structural approach can also be used on a more subtle level. Think, for example, about different elements of acting (such as facial expression, gesture, posture and movement as well as aspects of voice – intonation, timbre and speech rhythm) in Stanislavsky's system, the Brechtian approach and Jerzy Grotowski's theatre. In each of these "systems" a different dominant element is the organizing principle. Dealing with such issues was present at the very birth of performance analysis when it was becoming established as a field within theatre studies in the early 1980s. The Prague School theory is one of the channels that provided the conceptual tools for developing this approach to the theatre.

The concept of theatre performance as a dynamic event includes the audience. It was Prague School scholars who provided the initial impulse for exploring the interaction between **a performance and its audience**. The audience is part of Mukařovský's definition of a stage performance quoted above. For him the theatre artefact could not exist without the physical presence of an audience. Bogatyrev discusses the audience on many occasions in his explorations of folk and puppet theatre, where it usually plays quite an active role (compared to, for example, its role in the fourth-wall theatre tradition) and can actually intervene in the performers' actions. Such an approach is not limited to folk (and folklore) theatre – many contemporary theatre productions draw on it. Take for example Peter Schumann's world-famous

Bread and Puppet Theatre. Their performances start with sharing bread with the audience in an attempt to create – at least for the duration of the performance – a feeling of real community. Schumann usually employs a mixture of means of expression, combining masks, puppets, clowning and fragments of improvised dialogue in unexpected and innovative ways. The event often takes place in some public space, which is invaded and transformed by the action of the performers. And when a parade of monstrous puppets is part of the show, then theatre has to (almost literary) fight its way through crowds of spectators and passers-by. All of them – the performers, the spectators and the passers-by – then get involved in debates on current political issues. As a result there is a constant interplay between performers and audience and continual shifts in spatial organization.

All discussion about new theatre space arises from a re-thinking of the actual audience and its social status. But the audience is also understood more broadly as the society for which the theatre is made. This perspective is the omnipresent background to many Prague School texts. In their analyses these scholars often focus on the internal structure of a performance or artefact, but the final question is “How does the whole structure relate to its audience?” The materiality of theatre and its everyday reality is never absent from these authors’ considerations.

All the concepts mentioned above influence the way the PLC deals with the term *sign;* for us what is most important is how its members use *sign* for conceptualizing theatre. Originally the concept of the ***sign*** occurred most frequently in connection with linguistics and psychology - that is, in fields dealing primarily with the production of meaning. However, it found its use in theatre analysis in the works of Prague School thinkers. Their principal insight is that, typically, people and things on the stage do not stand there as themselves but rather represent something else (in traditional drama) or create new meanings characteristic of the performing art (in all sorts of performances and happenings). “The whole of stage reality – the dramatist’s words, the actors’ performances, the stage lighting – all these represent other realities. The theatre performance is a set of signs,” says Jindřich Honzl (Honzl 2016 [1940]: 129). But then comes a more difficult question: what is there that is specific about a theatrical sign? “In order to understand the signs correctly, we must recognize them,” claims Petr Bogatyrev (Bogatyrev 2016 [1937]: 97). Is there any unique way in which theatre produces meaning? Honzl gives a very simple but somewhat paradoxical answer:

> Many other examples could be given to illustrate the special character of the theatrical sign whereby it changes its material and passes from one aspect to another, animates

> an inanimate thing, shifts from an acoustical aspect to a visual one, and so on. … This variability of the theatrical sign, its ability to "change its garb", is its specific property. It enables us to explain the variability of the theatrical structure. (Honzl 2016 [1940]: 139)

This passage goes a good way towards demonstrating the qualities of structural thinking: the specific feature of the sign is not something material but rather the relation between sign and meanings. Acknowledging the dynamic character of the theatrical sign is a very strong argument against a literary (or text-centred) concept of theatre. The notorious discussion of the relation between drama and theatre, which can be traced back to Aristotle, becomes rather animated – even dialectical – from a structural perspective:

> … the relationship between the theatre and the drama [is] always tense, and for this reason also subject to change. In essence, however, the theatre is not subordinate to literature, nor is literature subordinate to the theatre. These extremes can only occur in certain periods of development, whereas in others there is equilibrium between the two. (Mukařovský 2016 [1941]: 69)

Drama (that is, a literary genre) becomes only one of the elements of theatre alongside many others. It is no surprise that Honzl formulated his thesis on the **mobility** of the theatre sign based on his avant-garde experiments as a director.

Signs can produce different meanings within one performance, as Honzl shows. A square of white light projected on a backdrop can become a door. The same character can be played by two or more actors – typically, at different stages of life (when young and when old). And a sign can even travel from one performance to another. A good case in point is the well-known melody of the "Wedding March", composed originally by Felix Mendelssohn as incidental music for an 1842 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In time, the March became a sign of the wedding as such and so it is used in countless contexts – even outside the performing arts— to signify a wedding.

There are endless examples of the mobility of the theatrical sign and many directors who use this quality to produce a special effect on the audience. One particularly notable example is Peter Brook's famous production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970), which began with an empty white stage littered about with toys and circus props; in the background the sound of Mendelssohn's composition could be heard. In the course of the performance all these things were turned into signs that gained (and changed) meaning according to the actors' actions. This effective use of the ability of the theatrical sign to shift/change its meaning dynamically made a major contribution to the enormous success of the production.

This simple but basic distinction of **sign** and **meaning** can be further refined. The most fruitful distinctions are those that arise when we think about acting and performance space.

In the case of acting, we arrive at a terminological triad: **actor**, **stage figure**, **dramatic character**. The concept of the *stage figure* has proved to be one of the most productive innovations when dealing with a dramatic text, acting and actors. Otakar Zich was the first to apply the term "stage figure" to what an actor creates on the stage: it is not just a product of the actor's inner creativity but is also an amalgam of the actor's body, costumes and actions. It is the actor when acting. More strictly formulated: "The stage figure is the dynamic unity of a whole set of signs, whose vehicle may be the actor's body, voice, movements, but also various things, from parts of the costume to the set" (Veltruský 2016 [1940]: 148). The dramatic character for Zich is then the audience's interpretation of all the signs they can see and hear on the stage produced by the actor.

This distinction had not been made earlier – and often, especially in connection with realist drama and film, it is still not clear to some audiences even today. But it is extremely difficult to analyse acting without it, because such an analysis requires considering the actor, the stage figure and the dramatic character at the same time. Strange as it may seem, it is clear that we perceive an actor as a "real" person and the actor's specific impersonation of a particular fictional person from a play simultaneously. This claim can be illustrated by an example of an internationally famous star playing a character. Let us take Benedict Cumberbatch playing the role of Hamlet. The audience know it is Cumberbatch and they are familiar with his typical features as a star actor in British theatre and film, just as they know and are familiar with Shakespeare's Hamlet (most likely from discussions in English classes). But when watching *Hamlet* with Cumberbatch, the audience are seeing a particular impersonation of the Prince of Denmark by the actor Cumberbatch; they are watching a unique stage figure. They perceive the actor (Benedict Cumberbatch) and his creation on the stage (the stage figure), while being able to imagine Hamlet (the dramatic character) – all at once. To borrow a term from cognitive theory, the spectator can perceive a stage figure and understand that it consists of an actor and represents a character thanks to **conceptual blending**.

The same phenomenon of co-existing layers can be recognized in the case of **space**. Otakar Zich introduced a strict differentiation between the theatre space (an actual theatre building), the stage (an empty space built intentionally for theatre productions), the set (real space, material on stage that represents another space) and finally **dramatic space**, the imagined (and fictional) place of an action. The pair of terms "stage figure" and "dramatic character" is in fact parallel to "set" and "dramatic space". Mukařovský describes the difference as follows: