

The obfuscatory and burgeoning Czech theatre scene

In the recent decade, Czech independent theatre has become an immense and complex organism, conspicuous by its diversity of artistic approaches, organisational systems and multi-generational nature. Mostly relying on state, regional and municipal funding, independent theatrical production thrives in the capital, while there is also a vibrant scene in Brno and smaller cultural centres like Plzeň, Olomouc and Ostrava. In addition, people who live in towns off

the cultural grid occasionally have the chance of seeing independent productions. This considerable theatrical output is possible even though less than one per cent of the state budget is allocated to the Ministry of Culture. Over the last thirty years, there have been urgent and frequent calls for a more generous cultural budget. Yet, while politicians are not pampering the Czech independent theatre scene, the general impression seems to be one of dizzying abundance.

Vzbudme Vary

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Sadly, most long-term financial support for venues and theatrical groups or well-established individuals is unreliable, insufficient and hard to get. The ability to achieve and maintain a long-term tenure of a building therefore generates a sort of hierarchy within the sector. Such tenants can provide technical facilities, rehearsal spaces and a stage to other artists. As they are responsible for the dramaturgy, they decide which tendencies in contemporary theatre are to be encouraged. I can say that the opinions and affections of those publicly funded producers have a significant impact on the Czech independent scene. Luckily, their direction varies according to their professional affiliations, generational background or relationship with the audience. Let us take two examples: One of the best established 'producers' is Ondřej Hrab, who has run the internationally oriented Archa Theatre since the post-revolutionary period. One of his main interests has been to introduce contemporary theatrical impulses by inviting prestigious foreign theatre-makers and productions. In the local context, Theatre Archa gives opportunities to artists who shape already existing but still evolving trends in Western theatre, such as documentary





theatre (Jana Svobodová, Spielraum Collective) and the interdisciplinary take on theatre and installation art (Petr Nikl, Tabula Rasa, Jan Mocek). Totally unlike Archa's approach is the concept of X10 Theatre, which relocated to Prague's city centre in 2019 after having been active in the city's periphery for six years. Although led by Lenka Havlíková and its core team of directors and dramaturgs, X10 is called a „production house“. As such, one of its primary purposes lies in networking and curating performative events which feature visual artists, small publishing houses and sound installations. These activities often target local communities of artists with different backgrounds and encourage potentially enriching relationships between the participants. X10 also boosts the activities of emerging theatre-makers through long-term support for their spontaneously formed collaborations. One member of this community, Ondřej Štefaňák, has recently become its artistic director.

From so-called stagione to local community centres, Czech independent venues or production houses take various forms. In some instances, they can address a broad public and are sold out for almost all their performances and events (Jatka 78 and NoD, for example). Still, these centres often showcase more demanding artworks, which do not attract crowds of theatregoers – although the artistic community always gets excited about each opening night and any subsequent reruns. Such venues are hosts to theatre and dance groups lauded by art critics and specialists as well as to almost unknown artists. Currently, some of those very vibrant places are Studio ALTA and Alfred ve dvoře, who have both recently changed management while the former has also changed location. The latter's artistic manager is also a member of the recognised theatre company Handa Gote, which creates one new production each year. Apart from putting on their older works, they invite like-minded contemporary artists to create new works in a local and supportive environment. Thanks to such venues, many creators can afford to live a nomadic theatre lifestyle and develop fully-fledged careers while responding to various open calls without settling for any niche existence. Handa Gote has a close relationship to the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, which is crucial for their choice of a younger generation of artists. Alfred ve dvoře has become a laboratory of object-oriented theatre and is known for its approach to non-drama acting, providing attentive dramaturgical feedback and the freedom to experiment. The venue is an abundant source of pedagogical attention, a feature sought-after by independent artists. The aforementioned dance-oriented Studio ALTA puts many philosophical concepts into practice and sees

theatre, dance or performance as a phenomenon that is inseparable from everyday psychosomatic experiences. The keywords which epitomise its activities are „cultivation“, „focused work“, „sustainability“ and „relation to one's immediate environment“. ALTA runs annual residency programmes. Its collaborations are predominantly international and tend to sideline artists striving for perfection or completion. Theatrical aspects of local events coexist with other visual, acoustic and social dimensions. Audiences watching a dance performance or attending one of ALTA's events may find themselves lying on the floor, on a soundproof acoustic foam mat. Or they may spend an evening gathered around a fire while listening to someone's story, or they may experience the latest trends in Western performance art (for example, as part of the ecologically-oriented international festivals Performance Crossings and Bazaar).

There is a diverse independent theatre scene consisting of venues which mimic regular state-funded repertory drama theatres. I can attest that most of them attract theatre critics' attention, and they receive top ratings in annual departmental polls. Such theatre groups – particularly Tygr v tísni and Theatre LETÍ – reside on the Prague river island Štvanice and share a residence, the Vila Štvanice. Original dramaturgy, promoting emerging playwrights and top-class acting are typical of their productions. Both groups are especially well-reputed for their capacity to revisit recent Czech history and their tendency to revise it according to contemporary social discourse. For example, LETÍ's staging of Anna Saavedra's play *Olga (Horror z Hrádečku)*, about Olga Havlová, wife of the first president of the Czech Republic, went on to win several awards in 2016. Similarly, A studio Rubín holds open calls for playwrights and has its unique approach to acting and an incredibly inspiring dramaturgy department. Another noteworthy case is the immersive theatre company Pomezí, which runs a whole house in the centre of Prague but often takes over other houses in Prague or elsewhere. Their productions attract a relatively wide range of theatregoers, theatre professionals and critics. Although, sometimes they end up being disregarded by the latter for not making the most of the intellectual qualities of their plots. However, they boldly experiment with immersive formats, merging them with principles of LARP games. Apart from orthodox immersive productions, one can also visit and experience various buildings. For example, it is also possible to attend the „city tour“ of *My se neznáme*, which makes spectators play more or less silent roles in somebody's life story while visiting various coffee places, pubs, and parks in Vinohrady. Pomezí has garnered much acclaim for their imaginativeness and ability to test immersive art forms.

An extraordinarily elusive and exciting organisational model are festivals for which individual people commission artists to create productions. Theatre festivals like ...příští vlna/next wave... or Malá inventura select and invite artists in line with their clearly defined aesthetic preferences. The first stays true to its roots from the 90s and presents productions by amateur as well as professional theatre-makers who are keen to experiment with dance, installation or performance art. The festival is rather informal and takes place in Prague, Brno and other cities. The organisers tend to stress the experimental nature of their programme. By contrast, the much younger festival Malá inventura appears highly professional. Its dramaturgy emphasises the development of brand new impulses in contemporary theatre and the independent dance scene. There is no room

for compromise with theatrical conventions which do not represent the values of an open civic society. It started out as being a showcase for international audiences as well as for Czech theatre and dance specialists. This aspect of Malá inventura still persists: Apart from watching performances, international guests attend social networking events. Lately, the festival has exceeded this format and hosted its activities together with the cultural organisation Nová síť, whose mission, among others, is to decentralise Czech independent theatre. Consequentially, the festival has spread to other parts of the republic and established stand-alone regional festivals. They regularly collaborate with creative networking organisations and more than fifteen regional and communal cultural centres, including Valdštejnské imaginárium in Jičín or Puppet Gallery in Kuks.

Olga (Horror z Hrádečku) © photo archive of Divadlo LETÍ



Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that the Czech independent theatre scene also comprises an immense number of individuals or theatrical groups who do not derive their artistic existence from the structures mentioned above. One can see their productions at established venues or in completely unexpected and unknown places, just as they might also appear on a programme of some festival. Still, in general, their activities seem unlikely to survive the lack of public support and attention of theatre critics. It is a remarkable sociological and psychological phenomenon, because these theatre-makers attract collaborators entirely because of their solid creative reasoning. In Brno, there is a group with a robust theatrical orientation called D'epog, whose members show unprecedented discipline and enthusiasm. The group trains three or four times a week and gets together for a weekend retreat once a month. In their artistic work, they develop approaches and techniques based on Grotowsky and Barba and combine them with everyday experiences.

But there is also space for encounters with superficial aspects of our culture, even though their approach to theatre does not in any way borrow antiquated ways of expression and relies on original output. Still, while D'epog's productions generally excel at detailed 'raw perfection' and are highly remarkable for their thorough and perceptive acting performances, they generally go unmentioned in professional debates about Czech theatre. Similarly, independent director Jan Kačena also suffered from this relative lack of attention. Sadly, he was also forced to discontinue his activities due to a tragic accident which deprived him of his capacity to make theatre. Nevertheless, his theatre productions were renowned for the actors' abilities to portray uncomfortable and ungraspable emotions. Their performances were painful journeys into one's Id, lethal instincts and passions of a non-causal nature. This approach required special acting skills – the actors, akin to Kačena, were willing to unveil the dark sides of human sexuality and expose themselves in

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undignified positions. They shared a unique kind of sarcastic gaze and love for grim fairy-tale motives, which probably motivated them to rehearse even in disorganised and financially poor conditions. Lastly, theatrical duo VerRich also face undeserved oblivion. They primarily work in the Czech Northern Sudetenland. Their style is mostly documentary and ties together theatrical aspects, performance art and exhibition formats. VerRich's works mostly rely on data research into the experience and opinions of those who inhabit border or culturally neglected regions. Two recent projects were made in cooperation with German institutions, which provided these data sets. In the first case, they focused on retrospective public assessments of the post-revolutionary development of Czech and German society. The second poll focused on the possibilities of Czech, Polish and German cooperation on joint projects in border regions. At other times, VerRich does its research by spending much time on fieldwork – observing everyday life in the area, actively living and making interviews or performance art. Since they mostly perform in Sudetenland or in regional towns, their work escapes most official reflections on theatre.

My selection of independent theatre projects was by no means supposed to be exhaustive. The Czech independent scene is too rich to be covered by a single article. In any case, though, Czech independent theatre shows unique and original dramaturgy. There is also a burgeoning scene of theatre productions, companies and festivals which accentuate care, social empathy and collaboration with 'experts of everyday life' or amateur actors. One of them is the Případ pro sociálku festival, which has presented several original and aesthetically progressive productions starring and developed in cooperation with homeless actors and actors from socioeconomically marginalised groups. Another example of mutual care in theatre is Brno's group Aldente, a well-established community of artists with Down syndrome that regularly performs from a rich repertory of productions.

Step by step, Czech independent theatre creates a strong foundation to transform outdated values in theatre. There are tendencies to decentralise, make it socially useful without any aesthetic compromises, and give a chance to every theatre-maker with an original and viable vision. This openness leads to an overheating of the whole network: so many white spaces exist in this obfuscatory terrain. Not only for those who tend to ignore its complexity, but this is also true from the perspective of the Czech funding system. It seems obsolete because it cannot fulfil the needs of the vast majority of independent theatre-makers. Let us clarify that by the word 'needs' I mean fundamental ones, as many theatre-makers cannot even cover their production



I am the problem © Adéla Vosičková

costs, let alone their rents, even if they receive funding from several public bodies. And there are very few theatre benefactors in our country ... Most of the time, theatre-makers struggle for the bare existence of their productions. The network has already suffered a lot by seeing so many remarkable theatre groups and individuals close down. The Covid pandemic has opened up important debates about the socio-economic problems of Czech independent theatre in the context of Czech theatre as a whole and Czech cultural funding as a whole. Let's hope these debates will lead to more change.

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