

**Ethical Goals as a Criterion of Creation:
The Czechoslovak Theatre on a String in the 1980s**

***Os objetivos éticos como critério de criação:
A companhia checoslovaca Theatre on a String na década de 1980***

JITKA CIAMPI MATULOVA

Masaryk University, Art History Department, Brno Czech Republic

Janáček Academy of Performing Arts, Studio of Stage Design, Brno Czech Republic

jitka.ciampi@gmail.com

Abstract

In the 1980s, the Czechoslovak alternative theatre company *Divadlo na provázku* (in English: Theatre on a String) explored the possibilities of combining multiple art forms and crossing the strictly defined boundaries of individual artistic disciplines. The starting point was their artistic programme of ‘irregularity’, which was reflected in all components of theatre production, the staging process, and the organisation of the ensemble. This case study presents a specific theatre project from autumn 1985 called *The 1985 Project*, which moved in between literature and theatre. The focus is on the scenic sketch *The Monument* (premiered on 30 November 1985), which was performed alongside an art piece by sculptor Jan Šimek. The essay considers the company’s functioning within a totalitarian communist regime characterised by censorship and describes the strategies necessary to achieve the première performance in front of an audience. The ensemble understood theatre as a tool in which individual performances were directed towards ethical rather than aesthetic goals.

Keywords:

Czechoslovak alternative theatre – Theatre on a String Brno – Scenic sketch – *The 1985 Project* – Jan Šimek

Resumo

Na década de 1980 a companhia checoslovaca de teatro alternativo *Divadlo na provázku* (em inglês: Theatre on a String; em português: Teatro Num Cordel) experimentou a possibilidade de explorar múltiplas formas de arte e de ignorar os limites estritamente definidos para cada disciplina artística. O ponto de partida foi o seu programa artístico de “irregularidade”, que se refletia em todos os componentes da produção teatral, no processo de encenação e na organização do grupo. Este caso de estudo debruça-se sobre um projeto teatral específico que

decorreu no outono de 1985, intitulado precisamente *O Projeto 1985*, o qual se situava entre a literatura e o teatro. O destaque vai para o *sketch* teatral *The Monument* [*O Monumento*], estreado a 30 de novembro de 1985 e levado à cena juntamente com uma escultura de Jan Šimek. O artigo tem em conta o facto de a companhia funcionar sob um regime comunista autoritário onde vigorava a censura, descrevendo as estratégias necessárias para garantir que o espectáculo estreasse perante o público. O grupo entendia o teatro como uma ferramenta em que as performances eram imbuídas de objetivos éticos mais do que estéticos.

Palavras-chave:

Teatro alternativo checoslovaco – Theatre on a String em Brno – Sketch teatral – *O Projeto 1985* – Jan Šimek

Author's short bio

Jitka Ciampi Matulova is an art and theatre historian and theoretician who specialises in 20th century stage design. She is currently an assistant professor at the Studio of Stage Design at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno, while also finishing her PhD at Masaryk University. She has contributed to scientific journals, anthologies, and monographs, focusing mainly on 20th century artists and scenographers. As a member of the curatorial team, she has collaborated with major Czech galleries on exhibition and publication projects.

| Introduction

The decades of the 1970s and the 1980s in the former Czechoslovakia are officially known as the period of normalisation, a time when the country underwent a significant political and social condition. This refers to the consolidation of society, following previous attempts at liberalisation in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1960s which culminated in the Prague Spring of 1967–1968. The democratic surge was halted only by the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact countries on 21 August 1968. The ensuing process of normalisation affected virtually every aspect of society through the subsequent political purges. Although the political measures were less contrived than during the rigid totalitarian period immediately after the Second World War (1948–1953), the Communist Party continued to rule Czechoslovakia as the sole political entity. In this scenario, the arts, including theatre, once again became one of its instruments of ideological propaganda. The period of normalisation in Czechoslovakia only ended with the Velvet Revolution in November 1989.

The situation in theatre and the arts in general was characterised by specific conditions: on the one hand, pressure to accept the aesthetic criteria of communist ideology; on the other hand, resistance and the inalienable freedom of artistic creation and its sharing with audiences.

Of course, there were also many shades in between, with the aim of finding a certain position and a way to navigate the situation (Černý 2008; Just 2010, 102-134).

Consistently fulfilling the forms and contents of socialist realism, as associated with the totalitarian regime was not the real issue as these dogmas had become empty platitudes. The determining factor was the unspoken requirement not to violate the fundamental principles of official cultural policy and art, which meant submitting to ideology. The existence of censorship, interventions by authorities in the administration of theatrical companies, personnel purges, and the complicated and lengthy process of approving dramaturgical plans and theatre productions influenced theatre creation on a daily basis.¹

In this context, several alternative studio-type theatre companies headed towards so-called author's theatre and irregular dramaturgy challenging the official content schemes. The original texts were written specifically for the needs of the ensemble, often through collaboration between the director and dramaturgist. Sometimes they were improvised during rehearsals or created in collaboration with a like-minded playwright. Original texts enabled a more accurate reflection on the current sociopolitical situation. This was achieved indirectly, through metaphors and allegories, so that the textual component would not attract the attention of the censors and the resulting performance could be tolerated by the regime. Limiting the text to a minimum and emphasising the visual and acoustic components of the production were common practices. Experimentation with crossing the boundaries of individual artistic disciplines and creating new forms of expression were also of great importance. These creations were based on the process itself and had a certain incompleteness to them in order to avoid censorship before the première (Just 1984; Dvořák 1988; Nekolný 1990). These companies attempted to combine a type of theatre that was persecuted with conditions that could nevertheless be tolerated.

Censorship, surveillance and state interference took many different forms in the former Czechoslovakia and, indeed, the whole Eastern Bloc. The severity of restrictions varied in form from region to region and from city to city, often depending on the authorities' individual approach. An atmosphere of uncertainty accompanied the entire production process, right up to the première. Thus, artistic creation in the era of repression forced artists not only to resort to alternative theatre, but also to self-censorship and communication through metaphors, hyperbole and allegory, whether textual, visual or acoustic. Conversely, spectators in the

¹ For a broader overview of some aspects of censorship in Poland within the Eastern Bloc, see Tyszká 2022, 3-57.

auditorium learned to interpret such signs on their own way during the decades of communist domination (Day 1985; Just 2010).

This essay focuses on an event called *The 1985 Project. Scenic Readings from Contemporary Literature of the Peoples of the Soviet Union*, which took place over eight weeks, from 27 October to 17 December 1985, and was staged by the alternative theatre company *Divadlo na provázku* (Theatre on a String) based in Brno. The aim is to demonstrate not only how this alternative theatre ensemble in Czechoslovakia explored the possibilities of combining multiple art forms, but also how it obtained permission from the authorities to perform in public.

My research was primarily based on a study of contemporary materials related to *The 1985 Project*, stored at the Centre for Experimental Theatre in Brno [hereinafter CED Brno]. This includes photographs, the texts of the scenic sketches, programmes, questionnaires, dramaturgical plans and more [Figs. 1 and 2]. Additional sources include contemporary reports and reviews in newspapers and professional journals, as well as interviews with individuals who directly participated in the events (sculptor Jan Šimek, music composer Miloš Štědroň). Although, the ensemble began making audiovisual recordings of its works at the beginning of the 1980s, no recordings were made of this experimental project, and existing photographs are scarce.



Figures 1, 2 – Cover sheet of *The 1985 Project* Programme. CED Brno (on the left);
The 1985 Project Programme front page. CED Brno (on the right)

| The Theatre on a String and its artistic programme

Founded in 1968, Theatre on a String became a professional company in 1972. In January 1979, during the restructuring of the Czechoslovak theatre system, it was forcibly

incorporated into the Brno State Theatre as its fifth ensemble: the experimental studio.² On 1 January 1980, the authorities appointed the Communist Party member Jaroslav Tuček as artistic director of the ensemble. Despite these external interventions, the company maintained its autonomy in terms of texts, theatrical poetics, and the space in which it operated.

The artistic programme of Theatre on a String was based on irregularity, meaning an openness to dramaturgical exploration of themes in non-dramatic texts such as poetry, fiction, documentaries and film scripts. This approach was reflected in all components of the production, including direction, acting, music, scenography and the internal administration of the ensemble (Oslzlý 1982a, 2-8).

An important feature of the work of Theatre on a String was the concept of the theatre medium as a means of meeting and communication, rather than teaching, educating or presenting established ideas. The priority was to make a personal statement and provide a space for reflection, as well as to stimulate social discussion. Consequently, the individual performances were not primarily aimed at aesthetic goals, but rather ethical ones, and took on an event dimension in the form of “performance-meetings” (Voráč 1996, 289; Roubal 2000, 15). According to Martin Pšenička (2013, 408-409), these performances were noetic gestures located in an essentially ontological framework – an immediate, mutual experience of the cognitive process, which is why the aesthetic component was not given much importance.



Figure 3 – Brno House of Arts (today)



Figure 4 – Procházka Hall (House of Arts, today)

Both photos: Michaela Dvořáková. Brno House of Arts.

From the outset, the company was based at the Brno House of Arts, an art gallery [Fig. 3]. The main performance space was Procházka Hall, located on the first floor of the building

² For basic data, name changes and institutional background of the Theatre on a String see Srba 2010 and Oslzlý 1999a, some aspects of the ensemble work are discussed in student thesis available online. See, for example, Seriš 2017, Cimerák 2008, Hejlová 2015.

[Fig. 4]. This rectangular space featured large glass windows along its shorter sides. However, Theatre on a String also used other spaces, such as the foyer, the staircase, and the area around the building. *The 1985 Project* was held in this very place.

| *The 1985 Project. Scenic Readings from Contemporary Literature of the Peoples of the Soviet Union* and the part *The Monument*, by Enn Vetemaa

The specific form of *The 1985 Project* was based on scenic readings representing an original form of “scenic sketches”, formations that exist at the intersection of literature and theatre. The audience was presented with a stage that was an intermediate point between the original literary text and the final theatrical production. The creators worked with various textual sources, including novels, short stories and film scripts. They used the works of authors from different nations that were officially united under the banner of the USSR aiming to emphasise that there was no such nation as the Soviet Union but rather a constellation of different nations that were often involuntarily included in an artificially created multinational whole.³

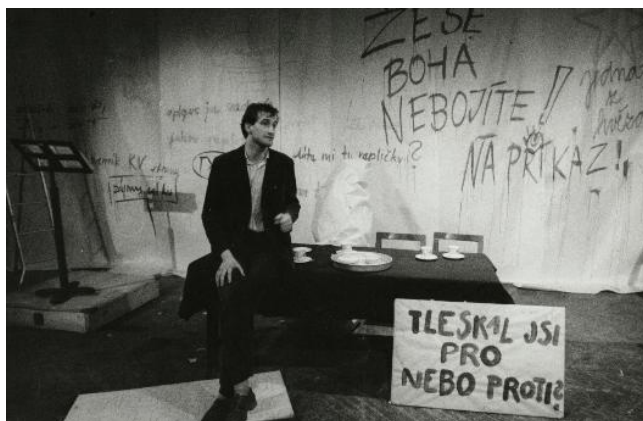


Figure 5 – Alexander Gelman: *The Replica*, the 1st evening of *The 1985 Project*⁴



Figure 6 – Andris Jakubáns, Jurij Nabikin et al.: *The House Full of Phantoms*, the 3rd evening of *The 1985 Project*

³ As in the case of the Baltic republics, today's Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

⁴ All photos from this performance were taken by Vladislav Vaňák. CED Brno



Figure 7 – Jefim Zozulya: *The Doom of Principal City*,
the 8th evening of *The 1985 Project*

As already mentioned, the project ran for eight weeks, but there was a première on each week, serving at the same time as closing night. Each of the eight parts of the project used a distinct form of expression in accordance with its theme. The focus was on the staging process; the intention was not to create a performance with a definitive shape fixed for further repetitions. The creators also encouraged different relationships between the audience and the performers by holding each performance in a different part of the building and its surroundings. The entire project was directed by Peter Scherhauser in collaboration with dramaturgist Petr Oslzlý. The main set designer and consultant for all the evenings was Ján Zavarský in cooperation with other participating artists: Jan Konečný, Vladimír Kokolia, and others.

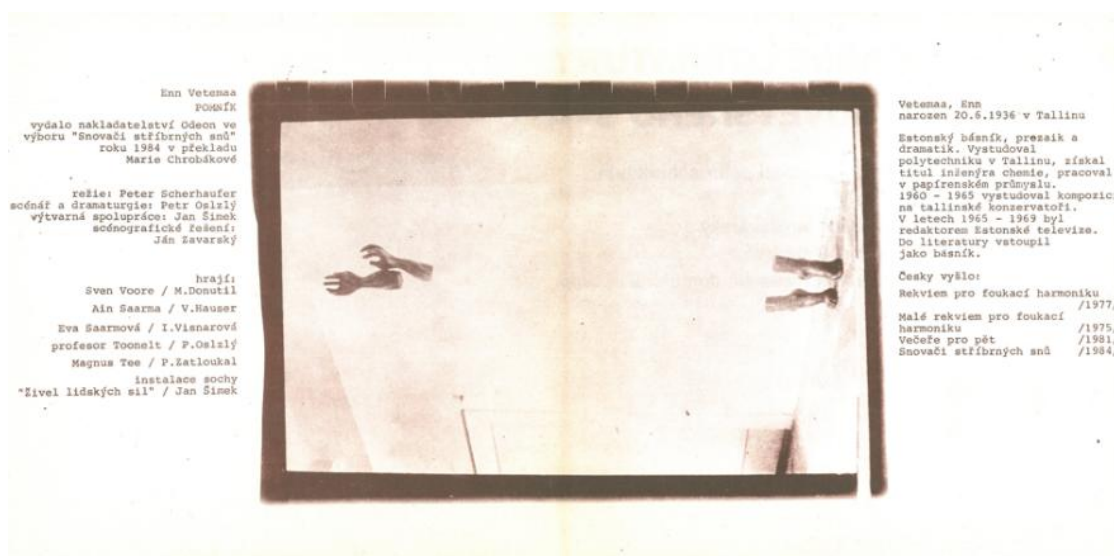


Figure 8 – Programme for the 6th evening of *The 1985 Project*:
The Monument, by Enn Vetemaa. CED Brno

One of the eight nights was devoted to the scenic sketch *The Monument*, which premièred on 30 November 1985. It is based on a short story by the Estonian author Enn Vetemaa (1936–2017), which was published in a Czech translation in 1984. *The Monument* explores the themes of artistic creation and the conflict between natural talent, ambition, mediocrity and self-seeking. Having as background the process of designing and approving a monument to the victims of the Second World War, the story unveils the art world under a totalitarian regime, complete with obstacles raised by approval committees, strategies developed by the artists' union, and the various means employed to promote oneself. A conflict erupts between the untalented Sven Voor and the talented Ain Saarma. Ultimately, Saarma is excluded from the official art union and, potentially, from creation altogether. Conversely, the negative protagonist Voor achieves his goal and gains recognition. As the epic subject of the story, Voor manipulates the reader (or, in the case of the scenic sketch, the viewer) into joining his side by telling the events from his point of view (Vetemaa 1984, 10-83).



Figure 9 – Miroslav Donutil as Sven Voore.



Figure 10 – Miroslav Donutil as Sven Voore, in the background in front of the window
Irena Visnarová as Eva Saarmová

Ján Zavarský designed the set to work with an identical space for the action and the audience. Using practicals, he created elevated platforms rising from one shorter side of the rectangular Procházka Hall to the other. Chairs for the audience covered the entire surface of the platforms, leaving only two open spaces called “sculpture islands”. Through an uncovered window in the front wall, the audience could look out onto a busy city street. Before the audience arrived, actors dressed in civil clothes sat motionless in the auditorium, each holding En Vetemaa’s book. Once the seats were filled with spectators, the auditorium merged with the stage and the actors and audience became one fragment of society (Oslzlý 1999b, 308-332).

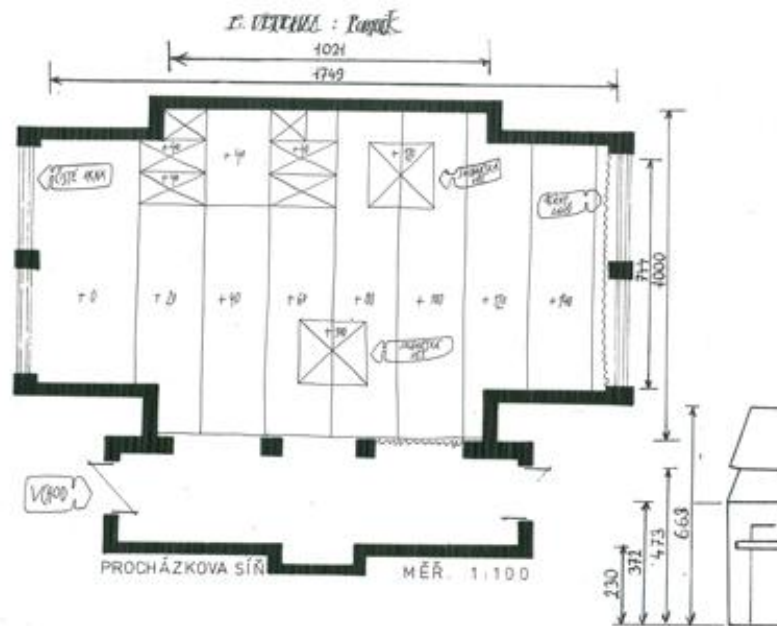


Figure 11 – Ján Zavarský: Plan layout of the Procházka Hall for *The Monument*, CED Brno.

An acoustic component completed the atmosphere: the sound of the “devil's” footsteps, played from a tape recorder, accentuated and graded the situation together with music by the Italian Renaissance composer Giovanni Palestrina. This was chosen by the composer Miloš Štědroň “as a prototype of sterile music” (CED Brno, Box 88/6, Minutes of the Approval Committee, 1).



Figure 12 – Vladimír Hauser as Ain Saarma presenting his vision for the monument



Figure 13 – Vladimír Hauser as Ain Saarma (left), Pavel Zatloukal as Magnus Tee with a drawing of the monument design and Miroslav Donutil as Sven More

At the climax of the story, Jan Šimek, a sculptor who was not a member of the ensemble but had been invited to this event, began a silent performative action. Gradually, he

introduced installation of his own wooden statuary, *The Human Element*,⁵ which was formed from individual parts of human figures with expressive gestures and bodies bent or marked by spasms. These figures supported and impeded each other's movements. The performer finished the exposed pyramidal formation, which was dominated by a dramatic desire to move upwards, at the exact same time the scenic sketch ended. Then, some parts of the artwork were accentuated by a spotlight and the space was finally bathed in darkness (CED Brno, Box 88/6, *The Monument – Instructions*, 2). After the end of the scenic sketch, before leaving the Procházka Hall, the spectators could freely walk around Šimek's sculpture and see it from all sides.



Figure 14 – Jan Šimek performing the sculpture *The Human Element*.
Photo: František Bernát.
Published: *Slovenské divadlo* 47 (1999)



Figure 15 – Jan Šimek: *The Human Element*, 1971-1972. Coloured wood, 280 cm height
Photo: Petr Baran.

In this case the group's experimentation with intermediality enabled the audience to be confronted simultaneously with a work of literature, presented as a scenic sketch, Šimek's artwork, in progress, and the external reality of the world in which they found themselves, by identifying the auditorium with the acting space and by connecting the interior of the Art House interior with the busy city street via a large, uncovered window. Šimek's performance – the

⁵ *The Human Element* wood statue was created in 1971, and Šimek himself speaks of the intuitive creation and of the absence of a primary model. See interview with Jan Šimek, 24 October 2024, entry in the author's archive. On Šimek's work in general see Oslzlý 1998.

gradual assembly of the sculpture – brought a dynamic aspect to the work of art, by confronting static, three-dimensional wooden elements with the moving human body and thus activating them [Fig. 14]. At first glance, the slow action of Jan Šimek, performed in parallel with the flowing action of the sketch, could potentially distract the audience's attention from the actor's performance. However, the process of assembling the sculpture was thematically integrated into the plot and storyline. Aesthetically and in terms of meaning, Šimek's artwork [Fig. 16] contrasted with the monumental pedestal placed on the second “sculpture island”, which was intended for a diegetic memorial to the victims of Second World War [Fig. 17].

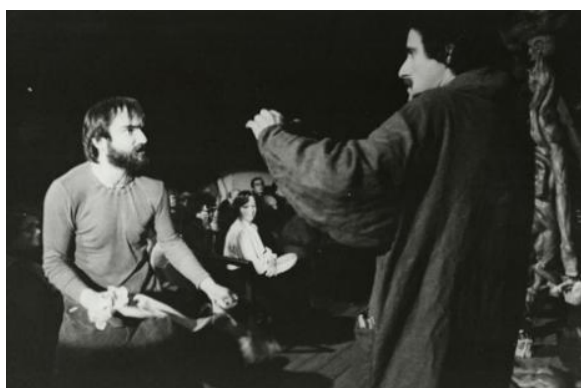


Figure 16 – From left: Vladimír Hauser as Ain Saarma and Pavel Zatloukal as Magnus Tee in front of the Šimek statue



Figure 17 – A monumental pedestal intended for the Second World War memorial

Zavarsky's spatial design, which merged the stage with the auditorium, prompted the audience to consider the presence of similar conflicts in everyday life and the courage required to confront such situations. Whether in art or in life, Jan Šimek himself symbolised the conflict depicted in Vetemaa's short story, as will be discussed later, the wooden statue representing man's eternal struggle to overcome himself was not just a decorative addition. Moreover, it added another artistic dimension to the performance, when after all the event took on an exhibition dimension and the audience was invited to view the statuary at leisure from all sides. Literature and theatre intersected with the visual arts.

| Intermediality in Czechoslovak art and its connection with the work of Theatre on a String

The intermedial approach to creation described here did not appear in the work of Theatre on a String by chance, of course. In Czechoslovak art, the blending of artistic forms can be traced back to the artistic avant-garde of the 1920s within the Devětsil Art Association.

In 1923, the Devětsil theoretician Karel Teige (1900–1951), published his first reflections on the fusion of painting and poetry, marking the beginning of a series of artistic experiments, accompanied by the refinement and elaboration of theoretical concepts (Teige 1923, 19-20). The intention was to produce new complex forms of creation perceived, as far as possible by all the senses: optophonetics, cinematography, liberated theatre, radiogenic poems, etc. (Pomajzlová 2019). In the 1930s, the Czech avant-garde theatre director Emil František Burian (1904–1959) collaborated with the architect and stage designer Miroslav Kouřil (1911–1984) to experiment with the connection between theatre and film. In 1935, they developed a form of light theatre called the “theatregraph”, which incorporated static and film projections into the directorial and scenographic composition. Metaphorical images were projected onto a transparent front curtain and interspersed with the actors' movements on the partially lit stage behind it. Towards the end of the 1950s, director Alfréd Radok (1914–1976) and set designer Josef Svoboda (1920–2002) revived and refined the link between theatre and film in the context of modern technology in the famous *Laterna magica*.⁶

In post WW II, the Eastern Bloc embraced happenings, conceptual art and performance which had appeared in the West (Rodenbeck 2011; Goldberg 2011). Thus, Czechoslovak theatre developed in the context of the American and European post-war avant-garde, which was characterised by experimentation and innovation in theatre and performance (Braun 1979; Aronson 2000; Lehmann 2006; Just 1984, 71-101).⁷

The company Theatre on a String came into being at a time when the dematerialisation of artwork and processual emphasis were beginning to be theoretically reflected in Czechoslovakia (Havránek 1999; Chalupecký 1966; Hiršal and Grégrová 1967). The company's original name Theatre Goose on a String⁸ was adopted from the title of the book of the same name by the Czech playwright and writer Jiří Mahen (1880–1939). Mahen published this collection of six *libretti* intended for practical theatre production in 1925. It contained a preface in which he explained his vision of modern theatre, which was connected to the ideas and experiments of the Czech avant-garde during the interwar period – specifically the Devětsil and

⁶ *Laterna Magika* was originally the name of a show created by Josef Svoboda and Alfréd Radok to showcase Czechoslovak culture and the country's economy at Expo 58 in Brussels. Due to its great success, a theatre of the same name was subsequently founded in Prague and continues to work with a combination of theatre and film to this day.

⁷ For the Czechoslovak context see Morganová 2014.

⁸ The name was changed in 1969 by the authorities for political reasons. During the onset of normalization, people added the letter “k” to the name of the ensemble on posters, referring to the name of the then-president, Gustav Husák. The result was *Husák na provázku* (Husák on a string).

its poetism. Mahen sought new artistic approaches to theatre, finding them through experimentation with literary genres and artistic forms. His *libretti* straddle the boundaries of literature, film, and theatre. The work of Theatre on a String since the foundation of the company has been based on this need to cross boundaries of various kinds (CED Brno, *Box Dramaturgy*, no. 1, Programme sheet, quoted in Srba 2010, 161).

From the outset, the group has been driven by the desire to document their creative intentions in writing. After refining the theoretical foundations in the form of short texts for a period of time, a detailed, elaborated version was finally published in 1982. The text, entitled *Programme Basis of Theatre on a String* (Oslzlý 1982b, 162-165), emphasised the company's orientation towards open theatre, which draws its inspiration from life and art. In terms of dramaturgy and style, the ensemble notably aimed for “events and encounters of a border theatre character: scenic creations connecting individual art forms in a new way (border stage forms), open staging projects, open rehearsals, and so on” (Oslzlý 1982b, 164-165, my translation).



Figure 18 – Hana Müllerová in *Roads (Crossroads – Timetables – Encounters)* (1984).

Among the hybrid projects produced, one finds *Bluff* (1982), which linked theatre with the techniques of silent film slapstick; the joint project *Roads (Crossroads – Timetables – Encounters)* (1984), which was based on the collaboration of four alternative companies; and the scenic magazine *Rozrazil 1/88 [On Democracy, 1988]*. Many of their ideas and intentions were not realised for various reasons or were transformed into new forms. One example is the *Theatre on a String Workshop*, which took the form of free evenings for the ensemble's creative collaborators. The aim was to create new types of attractive, irregular events, such as concerts, vernissages, textappeals and acoustic theatre (CED Brno, *Box Dramaturgy*, no. 3, First Outline, n.p.). Under the leadership of the representative of action art Tomáš Ruller, then a member of the ensemble, a series of “events-staging” with the working title *Documents of Everyday Life*,

or theatre-art events called *Art Objects in Motion and Action*, were planned (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, Ideological and Creative Intention, 29).

| *The 1985 Project* as a mirror of the state evaluation process

The 1985 Project, currently known as *Open Rehearsals from the Literature of the Peoples of the Soviet Union*, first appeared in the undated *Ideally Creative Intention for the 1985/1986 Season*, which was probably submitted in December 1984. (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4) The official practice in question involved a multi-stage approval process for each theatre production, which took place between the end of one calendar year and June of the following year (Krautmanová 2002, 337-357). The lengthy approval process was only completed just before the start of the new season, which led to complications if a title was not approved by the authorities. However, even in its initial version, the outline of *The 1985 Project* was extremely close to the final implementation. The difference laid in the format of the evenings: rather than scenic sketches; the intention was to hold open rehearsals with talks that would allow “a stylistic collage, subordinated to the meaning of the statement, corresponding to the stylistic diversity of the subjects” (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, *Ideally Creative Intention*, n.p., my translation). The importance of the staging plan is supported by the presentation of popular literature by nations of the Soviet Union, especially among the younger generation. Selecting titles from the USSR was one of the “subversive” strategies that distracted the attention of the censorship authorities, although these were often works that clearly opposed the totalitarian regime in their countries (Jungmannová 2002, 329-336).

The follow-up *Dramaturgical Plan for the 1985/1986 Season* advocated for *The 1985 Project's* launch (still under the work title *Open Rehearsal*) by emphasising the relevance of the social issues depicted in the works, which sought the causes of contemporary problems (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, n.p.). Petr Oslzlý, the Theatre on a String's dramaturgist, provided commentary on the presence of self-censorship, the selection of suitable vocabulary in dramaturgical plans, and the defence of a production plan. He tried to build the text in such a way that it could live up to its own content (Plocek 2010, 23). For this reason, too, the project was consistently situated within the context of its potential applications for various anniversaries, such as the Great October Socialist Revolution, the 65th anniversary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the XXII Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

In addition to internal evaluations by the State Theatre and the relevant policy authorities, the dramaturgical plans were evaluated by external experts. One of these assessments is preserved in the archive. In it, theatre critic Jiří Pavel Kříž unequivocally endorsed the project, describing it with admiration as “extremely challenging” (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, Evaluation, 2, my translation). It was only after the dramaturgical plan had been approved that *The 1985 Project* appeared in a document entitled *List of Premières of the 1985/1986 Season*, under its final title and described in its produced form (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, n.p.).

The final stage before the première was the approval performance, followed by a discussion among the members of the Approval Committee. In this case, the Committee consisted of representatives from Theatre on a String (including the artistic director, Jaroslav Tuček, as well as the director, dramaturgist, music composer, and actors' representatives), theatre studies and aesthetics experts (including Zdeněk Srna, Head of the Theatre and Film Studies Department at Brno University), and Russian literature specialists (including the Russianist Miroslav Mikulášek). Representatives of the Department of Culture of the Brno National Committee were also present, including its chairman Štěpán Vlašín, a registered State Secret Police collaborator [hereinafter StB]. Other members of the Approval Committee included the publicist and playwright František Brüstl (who was also an StB collaborator), the reviewer Jiří Pavel Kříž (a contributor to the newspapers *Brněnský večerník* [Brno Evening Post] and *Rovnost* [Equality] or the philosopher, sociologist and university lecturer Jaroslav Střítecký. Thus, the range of personalities present covered the whole spectrum of judges, from representatives of official culture and politics to supporters of the alternativity. At that time, of course, their support was subject to a certain degree of self-censorship.

The scenic sketch of *The Monument* received a very positive evaluation; the discussion mainly dealt with a topic that did not clash with the ideology of the time, so it was not a point of contention. The theme of ethics in art – the legendary rivalry between Mozart and Salieri – could be viewed from two perspectives: that of communist ideology regarding contemporary theatre and that of a critical stance exposing the totalitarian system and its unjust practices in art. For example, according to Štěpán Vlašín, “this production shows very accurately the petty bourgeois survivors in our society” (CED Brno, Box 88/6, *The Monument*, 1, my translation). Other contributions to the discussion emphasised the ethical dimension of the production (František Brüstl, for example). However, it is only in Miloš Štědrón's commentary that the presence of the audience is acknowledged; according to him “the final mass reaction of the

audience” demonstrated precisely the ethos of the work (Ibid., 1, my translation). The intermedial approach, evident in the inclusion of Jan Šimek's performance and the scenic sketch format, was widely praised. According to Jaroslav Strítecký: “The principle of ‘reading’ here showed things that would not have come up at all in the usual staging procedure” (Ibid, 2, my translation).

The entire discussion is permeated by a certain sanctification of *The 1985 Project* as a whole, as well as its individual parts, by official figures. For example, right at the beginning, the dramaturgist Oslzlý revealed that the short story *The Monument* had already been published in Czech by the state publishing house Odeon in Enn Vetemaa's short story collection. Miroslav Mikulášek referred to the official occasions on which the project was presented, such as the celebrations of *Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Month* and the *Days of Soviet Culture in Czechoslovakia*. Zdeněk Srna emphasised that he liked “the whole project because it presents the literature of the Soviet Union’s people” (CED Brno, Box 88/6, *The Monument*, 2, my translation). This was another strategy used to gain approval for the première.

At the end of the meeting, the staging outline of *The Monument* was approved for the first performance, and it was recommended that it be kept in the repertoire. Ultimately, this did not happen, as *The 1985 Project* could not be repeated.⁹

| *The Monument* contemporary press reflection

Reflections of *The 1985 Project* in the contemporary press were largely positive and can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of continuous reviews of individual premières. Of these reviews, only those in *Brněnský večerník* (by Jiří Pavel Kříž and Jaroslav Kravka) and *Rovnost* (by Jaromír Blažejovský) focused on *The 1985 Project* for the entire eight weeks. The rest of the press in this category provided minimal coverage of the project; we may find reviews in the government periodical *Rudé právo*, or in others, like *Zemědělské noviny* [The Agrarian Newspaper] or *Svobodné slovo* [Free Word], but not for each evening.

One of the strategies employed by the government press was to view controversial topics from the perspective of the ruling ideology, thus blunting the critical edge of any objections. We can find it, for example, in the review for the first evening, about the scenic

⁹ Firstly, due to the project's extreme complexity, and secondly, for technical reasons. For example, it was not possible to repeatedly assemble and dismantle the sculpture at *The Monument*.

sketch *Replika* by Alexander Gelman. Here the reviewer describes the conflict and interprets it without considering the criticism turned towards the communist system and the authorities.¹⁰

Jiří Pavel Kříž in *Brněnský večerník* [Brno Evening Post] for example, identified the conflict presented by *The Monument* as:

We have become accustomed to accepting the actions of butchers and greengrocers as social criticism, yet we somehow miss the point of far more fundamental disputes. We walk around them but rarely dare to address them. Those who rely on this state of affairs are the ones who profit from it. An indifferent attitude to morality and truth plays into the hands of minions and empty art, which can trample on any truly committed creative impulse. *Divadlo na provázku* found the courage to voice its disagreement with spineless pragmatism (Kříž 1985, my translation).

The second group of press publications consists of interviews with the creators, in which they explain the project's principles, its contribution to the ensemble and the audience, and their terminology, which was quite new to mid-1980s Czechoslovak theatre. The term “project” was not used in art in general, and the content of the term “scenic sketch” had to be clarified too (Gerová 1985; Blažejovský 1985b; Pavelka 1985b). The creators identified two main characteristics of the term “project”: its programmatic concept and goals, which extended beyond the scope of a single production, and the need for long-term, varied preparation. This preparation included searching for historical materials, consulting experts, and undertaking psychotherapeutic, physical, and other training. The project always enabled a unique exploration of form and meaning, combining external expression and audience impact with the internal enrichment of the participants.

The final group of reviews comprises more comprehensive material. They were published either when the project was halfway through, evaluating the scenes that had already been performed, or several weeks or months later, evaluating the project as a whole. The more comprehensive analyses, published when the production could no longer be jeopardised, are less ideological and focus on professional theatre criticism. The use of communist vocabulary and the suppression of problematic aspects of the production were strategies employed by allied critics in the normalisation press (Kunderová 2011, 301-302), such as the review by Jaroslava Suchomelová in *Zemědělské noviny* [The Agrarian Newspaper] which emphasised *The*

¹⁰ The important replica made to senior staff Okuniev was: 'If you want, you can close your eyes. If you want, you can open them. But what am I supposed to do? Please keep your eyes open all the time or closed all the time, but don't keep changing them.' Gelman takes this opportunity to explain the role of art in a socialist society and goes further, offering a philosophical perspective that suggests the historical optimism of the working class and its ability to manage its own affairs despite individual mistakes and partial failures (Pavelka 1985a, my translation).

Monument as one of the highlights of the project and “a strong appeal to society”, in the moral sense (1986, my translation).

There is also an extremely positive review by the theatre critic Zdeněk Srna. In addition to expressing his full support for the project, the author criticises the theatre machinery of contemporary repertory companies, where dramaturgical plans were made not only for the next five years, but for the rest of the century – meaning the next fifteen years. On the contrary, he saw the project as “a distinctive way of resisting stereotypes, [an attempt] to go beyond the meaning of a production and its performances in the work of the company and in the consciousness of the audience” (Srna 1986, 12, my translation).

Similarly, a few months later, Jaroslav Střítecký, an aesthetician and another member of the original approval committee, published a detailed analysis. While avoiding direct criticism of the project, he outlined the basic characteristics of the experiment from a professional point of view, as well as its contribution to set design, acting, and other components (17 Feb. 1986a and 3 March 1986b). The same author was assigned to write an internal report at the end of the season. Internal evaluation of individual performance and the entire season were a standard part of the authorities’ ongoing supervision (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, Evaluation of the 1985/1986). Ten of the seventeen pages of the report are devoted to *The 1985 Project*. The author views it as a logical progression from the company's previous developments and as their most successful theatre workshop in terms of its contribution to both the company and the audience. He also pays detailed attention to the spatial design and boundary form of *The Monument*:

I noticed that many spectators felt disadvantaged at the start, but as the space gradually unfolded, it could be perceived differently from each place and fully from everywhere. However, all this was merely a prelude to experiencing the main visual and semantic element: Jan Šimek's wooden sculpture. It was precisely the loose thematic connection between the dramatic formation and the sculpture that acquired an unexpected communicative quality. The experience was that only when the entire space was dramatically staged could the sculpture gradually dominate it, i.e. as a pure and undistorted artistic element (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 4, n.p., my translation).

This was probably due to the volatile situation and pitfalls of the production approval process. Director Scherhauser also pointed this out in an interview published in the *Brněnský večerník* [Brno Evening Post] at the end of December, emphasising the importance of critical reflection and audience reaction and highlighting the lack of interest shown by the government press (Kravka and Kříž 1985).

| Audience reflection

Another distinctive feature of Theatre on a String was its focus on audience reflection. According to the *Programme Basis of Theatre on a String*, the intention was to address a younger audience, create an informal environment, and engage with them through discussions, a friends' club, surveys, and so on (Oslzlý 1982, 163). In an era that did not encourage the free expression of opinion, the company used anonymous questionnaires (for the first time in 1974). Respondents could indicate their age, gender and their job in the personal data section, while other questions concerned specific theatre performances or the company's dramaturgy and production.¹¹

In the case of *The 1985 Project*, the questionnaire did not take place until the eighth and final evening. This enabled the audience to provide feedback on the entire project and its constituent parts simultaneously. The archive materials do not provide a specific number of spectators for each performance. According to reports for the State Theatre in Brno, the average number of spectators per performance in the early 1980s was 149 (CED Brno, Box *Dramaturgy*, no. 2, Visitor and Sales Overview). On the final evening of the project, fifty-seven questionnaires were returned, eighteen of which were from people who had seen the entire cycle of eight performances. Thirty-eight of the total number of respondents had also seen *The Monument*, and five of these considered it the most interesting part of the scenic readings due to its relevance and depth of subject matter.

In the context of that period, the responses to the question of whether the company should continue with similar projects are intriguing. The audience agreed that it should be so and spontaneously offered suggestions of critical themes from contemporary Czechoslovakia. A second set of answers are the responses to the question of what surprised the audience most about the project. The importance of highly critical texts published directly in the Soviet Union relating to the problems of life there is often mentioned.

| Jan Šimek's cooperation with Theatre on a String

Since its inception, Theatre on a String has defined itself as a cultural movement. For each production, the creative team was formed anew with the aim of expanding the company's core with several external collaborators – outstanding creative personalities from various fields

¹¹ The questionnaires are stored in CED Brno, Box 88, *The 1985 Project*.

of art. This openness energised the creative process and limited the repetition of creative and ideological stereotypes. Jan Šimek's collaboration with the Theatre on a String as part of *The 1985 Project* was not accidental, it was based on their long-standing friendly and creative relations. Jan Šimek (born on 1941) is a sculptor who was associated with Brno throughout his life and a member of the local artistic and intellectual community. He came into contact with members of the company in the first half of the 1970s. During this period, Šimek's studio in Brno became a venue for informal gatherings of several notable figures. A long-lasting friendship and creative collaboration with the Theatre on a String's dramaturg, Petr Oslzlý, was established among them.

At the start of his career as a sculptor, Jan Šimek focused on woodcarving. However, from the mid-1970s onwards, he expanded his interests to include stonework and monumental landscape sculptures. During his attempts at outdoor artworks, Šimek experienced the very subject of Vetemaa's short story, *The Monument*, first hand. The first instance occurred in connection with a landscape sculpture entitled *Between Heaven and Earth* (1974–1975), intended for the grounds of a garden design studio in Želešice near Brno. He had to submit the artwork for approval by the relevant committee, a process which often involved clashes with conservatism, self-seeking, fear of expressing one's own opinion, passing the buck and a consumerist approach to art. This experience accompanied him in other outdoor realisations and he did not officially attempt to exhibit his wooden statues in the galleries.

Nevertheless, by the early 1980s at the latest, his work had found its way outside the studio or gallery. On this occasion, Šimek presented his work in non-exhibition spaces, avoiding the official approval process, and with a performative element (Šimek, interview, 2024). For example, at the six-day *Exhibition event Jan Šimek. Sculptures – Documentation – Contexts*, held at the Youth Club in Brno in 1983, during the opening the audience was involved in arranging the statues in the space (partly according to a pre-arranged concept, partly improvised by the audience). Šimek then assembled his sculpture *The Human Element* in front of the audience, just as he would do two years later in *The Monument* (Oslzlý 1998, 45-47).

| Theatre on a String and foreign theatre contacts

The founding members of Theatre on a String were mostly recent graduates of the Brno Theatre Academy. Despite, or perhaps because of, their formal training in theatre, they soon sought opportunities for self-expression beyond those offered by traditional theatre at the

time. As previously mentioned, the company continued its work in the domestic theatre avant-garde. However, within its means, it also maintained contact with artistic and theatrical developments abroad. The aim was not to seek primary inspiration, but rather to develop foreign contacts through participation in theatre festivals or projects based on international cooperation beyond the Iron Curtain.¹²

Two years after its professionalisation, in 1974, Theatre on a String was granted permission to travel abroad for the first time, to Wrocław in Poland, within the so-called Eastern Bloc. This marked the beginning of the establishment of contacts within the Polish alternative theatre scene, upon which Polish companies visited Brno cooperation on international projects took place (mainly with Teatr 77 from Łódź and Teatr Osmego Dnia from Poznań) (Oslzlý 2017, 221). The focus was always on the mutual transfer of experience, acting techniques and training. The actors of the Theatre on a String were renowned for their versatility and preparedness, both physical and musical. It is also worth noting that Petr Oslzlý, the dramaturg of Theatre on a String, participated in Jerzy Grotowski's workshop at Teatr Laboratorium in Wrocław as part of the Theatre of Nations Festival in 1975.

However, international contacts were not reduced to Poland, a key source of information about theatre events for people in Czechoslovakia. In 1974, the company, through the dramaturge Pierre-Jean Valentin, was invited to participate in the X Festival Mondial du Théâtre held in Nancy, France, in May.¹³ From that moment on, the company received invitations to many other festivals and theatre events abroad. Unfortunately, the authorities authorised only one travel per year. In an attempt to make the most of this, the company combined several foreign invitations into one trip across Europe, performing in countries of Western Europe (Italy, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, etc.) and of course in the Eastern Bloc (Poland, the former Yugoslavia, USSR, Hungary, etc.) (Oslzlý 1999a).

As early as 1979, the company had secretly joined the theatrical association International Federation of Independent Theatre (IFIT), whose founding members included Comuna Baires, an Italian-Argentine company based in Milano, Teatr 77 from Poland, and Teatr 9 from Sweden (Landowska 2015). As a result of their international contacts, the group participated in several projects involving foreign ensembles. These included the *Hope* project

¹² Preserved materials (tour programmes, correspondence, catalogues, reviews, photographs) are stored in the CED Brno.

¹³ Documentation is stored in the archive, CED Brno, Box 34 *Commedia dell'arte* and Box *Boleslav Polívka*.

in Olesnice and Wrocław, Poland (1978),¹⁴ *Together* in Copenhagen, Denmark (1983),¹⁵ and their activities culminated in the legendary *Mir Caravane* project: a symbolic theatrical caravan that linked divided Europe during its several-week journey from Moscow to Paris in the summer of 1989¹⁶ (Inštitutorisová, 2022).

Their work and vision of theatre was characterised by the need for reciprocity and discussion, the crossing of boundaries (of all kinds), an interest in political themes and a critical approach to society and the times, along with the search for new means of expression, the exploration of traditional theatre techniques and intermediality. In this sense, the work of *Divadlo na provázku* also corresponded with current events in world theatre at the end of the last century.

| Conclusion

The 1985 Project was one of the most significant attempts of the ensemble to expand the boundaries of theatre into visual art and literature. It was a defining feature of the Theatre on a String's work, but, as dramaturg Petr Oslzlý pointed out at the time, the priority was to find a form appropriate to the content being communicated, rather than simply innovating the form (CED Brno, Dramaturgy, no. 2, *Main Directions of Dramaturgic Development*, n.p.).

The shift towards author's theatre, which entailed a slight suppression of the textual component, created better opportunities for non-verbal communication between actors and audience. It also made it possible to introduce subtextual meanings, allegories and metaphors through visual or acoustic means, thereby enriching the work's meaning. However, this mode of communication did have certain pitfalls (Day 1985, Just 2010, 102-125). It could have led to false satisfaction and a false sense of subversiveness, lulling the spectators and artists into a normalised, contented life. On the other hand, the so-called 'timelessness' of the normalisation period – characterised by uncertainty surrounding the boundaries and rules of censorship, and resulting in unconscious self-censorship and the adoption of various intricate strategies – also

¹⁴ Theatre on a String collaborated on this project with Comuna Baires from Italy, Esperanza (USA), Le Temps Fort (France), Teatr 9 (Sweden), Teatr 77 (Poland), Orchestra teatra Ósmego dnia (Poland), Katka Manolidaki (Greece), Liliana Duca (Argentina) and Pavel Büchler (Czechoslovakia).

¹⁵ Other collaborating ensembles were: Together Cardiff Laboratory Theatre (UK), Den Bla Hest and Arhus a Group (Denmark) and Teatr 77 (Poland).

¹⁶ In addition to the Theatre on a String, the project involved: Akademie Ruchu (Poland), Cirk Perillos (Spain), Dog Troep (Holland), Footsbarn Travelling Theatre (Great Britain), La Compagnie du Hasard (France), Licedei and Svoja igra (Soviet Union), Teatr Ósmego dnia (Poland) and Teatro Nucleo (Italy).

provided the audience with an experience of mutuality and harmony, as we can read in the archived questionnaires.¹⁷

The situation changed radically in the 1990s. In the post-normalization era, the theatre company changed its name back to *Husa na provázku - Goose on a String* but faced a crisis of attendance and had to undergo a search for dramaturgical material in a changed political and social situation. However, even after Petr Oslzlý resigned from his position as artistic director, in 2001, the company continued, and the Goose on a String theatre Brno, still active today, remains dedicated to non-indulgent dramaturgy, author theatre, and presenting controversial themes in the Czech theatre space, thereby forcing its audience to think. Therefore, it continues in new conditions and with new means of expression, maintaining its original artistic programme.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Preserved questionnaires for performances of Theatre on a String are in CED Brno.

¹⁸ See the website with the basic information: <https://www.provazek.cz/en/historie/60-leta>

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