

Margaret Mitchell, Professor of Theatre Arts

Study Guide: *Shakespeare in Prague: Imagining the Bard in the Heart of Europe*

UIW Semmes and Student Galleries in the Kelso Fine Art Center

Gallery hours M-F 10:00AM -5:00PM

Exhibition closes Sept. 29, 2017

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Objectives:

- to understand the context of the artworks within political and social climates
- to understand how the theatre was used as a way of expressing artistic, political and social views
- to explore differences or similarities in various designs of the same plays throughout the last 100 years of Czech theatre

A Brief History of Events Related to the Exhibition and Its Artists:

By 1602	Traveling English touring companies performed Shakespeare's plays in Czech lands.
1786	<i>Makbet</i> is performed in Prague. This is the first known Shakespeare play translated and performed in the Czech language.
1830's	Czech intellectuals of the Romantic Period translate more of Shakespeare's plays and a robust interest in the bard's work ensues.
1881	The Czech National Theatre opens. Shakespeare is the focal dramatist.
1907	Director K.H. Hilar practices collaboration with stage designers to achieve artistic cohesiveness.
1918	The Austro-Hungarian Empire collapses and Czechoslovakia is formed.
1920's	Designers are influenced by cubism, expressionism and other new abstract artistic movements that were explored in Europe. Czech designers are influenced by theoretical work of Adolph Appia and Edward Gordon Craig.
1936	Tröster designs an anti fascist <i>Julius Caesar</i> . Most historians mark this design as the beginning of modern Czech stage design.
1938-1945	Prague is occupied by Nazi Germany.
	Tröster is detained and interrogated by the Nazis because of his anti Nazi designs.
1941	Jews are forbidden to work as stage designers. Zelenka continues working.
1943-1944	Zelenka is captured by the Nazis and imprisoned in Terezín and later Auschwitz. He continues to design. He and his family are killed in Auschwitz.
1945	The Communists liberate Prague. A period of totalitarian rule ensues and designers are expected to work in the safe style of social realism.
1956	Khrushchev denounces Stalin and social realism. Tröster develops scenography, an expansion of modernism. New artistic expressions blossom. Designers explore using film, projections and new scenic and lighting technologies.
1958-1963	Tröster Svoboda and Vychodil win major international design competitions in Brussels and Sao Paulo. Czech stage design becomes a major focus for the profession.
1967	The first Prague Quadrennial, an international theatre design competition, is held in Prague. It is the only communist sponsored public event that allows westerners behind the Iron Curtain. The PQ becomes a major point of artistic exchange.

	Tröster is denied leadership of the PQ because he refuses to join the Communist Party.
1968	The Prague Spring, a student supported attempt to overthrow the Communist government, succeeds for four months and then fails. Prague is invaded by the U.S.S.R. In Wenceslas Square student Jan Palach burns himself to death in political protest. Major political oppression of artistic expression ensues. Designers split into two factions: communists and anti-communists. The work of the Communist designers is supported by the government.
1968-1989	Anti-communist theatre artists develop new abstract visual languages with their audiences in order to express the truth and avoid the Communist censors. Artists and writers who appear to work against communism are detained, imprisoned or disappeared. New playwrights are targeted. Shakespeare is left alone; therefore, Shakespeare's plays become a vehicle for subversive communication. The style of Action Design is developed by the anti-communist designers.
1977	The rock band Plastic People of the Universe is arrested. Artists and writers create Charter 77, a declaration of human rights. People who sign the charter are under surveillance, detained and/or arrested. Jaroslav Malina signs Charter 77.
1979-1983	Playwright Václav Havel is imprisoned for his dissident writing.
1983-1989	U.S.S.R. President Gorbachev relaxes communist control with Glasnost and Perestroika, new transparent policies of government including social and economic restructuring.
1989	The Berlin Wall falls. The Velvet Revolution is partially planned in a theatre under the guise of production meetings. The Velvet Revolution commences eight days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is a peaceful and successful revolution, transforming the government to a democracy. Václav Havel is elected as President of Czechoslovakia. He is the first playwright in modern history to become a president of a nation.
1989-present	Stage designers continue to define and redefine their artistic expressions in a post communist environment. Shakespeare's plays are drastically cut and reorganized. In some cases, the plays are used as springboards for adaptations. Democratic liberation creates new problems for artists.

This exhibition is divided into two galleries. The work in the Semmes Gallery was created before the Velvet Revolution. The work in the Student Gallery was created after the Velvet Revolution.

Artistic Styles/ Terms Related to the Exhibition and to Theatre Design:

- **Spoken Décor:** Visual aspects of the play are described to the audience rather than depicted literally on stage. Shakespeare used spoken décor to evoke the environment in the minds of his audience.
- **Abstraction:** An expression that visually depicts an idea rather than a representation of space, location, or time period. Abstract design is typically unrealistic and non site specific. Abstraction may employ symbolism, expressionism, cubism, metaphor, etc. An abstract design allows the audience to interpret various meanings in visual choices.
- **Cubism:** A visual style with a static subject; however, the artist moves around the subject and depicts various viewpoints on a single surface, sculpture or design. The movements

of the artist are often demarcated with straight lines or geometric forms.

- **Expressionism:** visual elements that depict human emotions in objects or spaces
- **Surrealism:** A visual style with elements inspired by the subconscious mind/ dreams
- **Modernism:** A visual style in the theatre that employs a unified vision of the designers and director. A modernist design can be abstract/conceptual. A modernist design depicts a visual world that usually has some recognizable unified elements.
- **Site Specific:** the depiction of a space or a costume that has an identifiable location or time period
- **Non Site Specific:** The depiction of a space or a costume that has no identifiable location or time period
- **Social Realism:** Realistic visual style that supports socialism with a positive viewpoint. Social realist plays usually looked fairly realistic and they had happy outcomes supporting a positive totalitarian government.
- **Scenography:** Visual elements of the play are created as one unified expression. In the 1950's Tröster and Svoboda used new technology as a major support for visual expression. Scenography may incorporate abstract elements or realistic elements or both.
- **Action Design:** Visual decisions come from metaphorical ideas as well as from the work of the actors in rehearsal. Only essential items are used for storytelling. Action Designs are usually contained within a single space even though the play may take place in different locations. The visual elements are usually moved and changed by the actors.
- **Post Modernism:** Style that has no apparent unity; however, various visual elements evoke contexts that suggest juxtapositions and comparisons between individual visual elements in order to make a greater interpretive meaning

Suggested Activities:

1. Identify scenic or costume designs which appear to be visually referencing real spaces or clothing. Identify scenic or costume designs that do not appear to be visually referencing real spaces or clothing.
2. Using the list of terms above, select six scenic designs and attempt to identify their artistic styles.
3. *Hamlet* scenic designs by Hofman, Tröster, Malina and Němcová are in the exhibition. Do these designs have anything in common? Describe in lists of adjectives your perceptions of the worlds the designers make for this play?
4. Contrast Wenig's *Winter's Tale* (1923) with Tröster's *Winter's Tale* (1965). Using the information in the timeline above, why might these two designs look so different from one another? How might the use of abstraction relate to politics?
5. František Zelenka's set design for *Richard III* survived the Holocaust. Now that you know this design was created in a concentration camp, how does the design relate to the environment in which it was created?
6. The characters of Gertrude, Reagan, Elizabeth and Anna are all characters of high status in Shakespeare's plays. Observe their costumes and discuss how status or how a fall from high status is depicted by the designers.
7. Identify designs in either gallery that seem to place the performer in an oppressed environment or situation. Which design choices are used to create a feeling of oppression? Defend your answer.

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Further Reading:

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