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## ***The Reception of Anglo-American Drama on Pilsen's Stages during the Great War***

### **Abstract**

*During the Great War, theatre became an effective channel of communication and a means of encouragement. In times of economic difficulties and political paralysis, theatrical productions were designed to arouse Czech national consciousness. The Pilsen repertoire was oriented particularly towards classical works of national literature (e.g., Klicpera, Tyl, Jirásek, and Vrchlický) and democratic drama (e.g., Shaw). Considerable theatrical space was also devoted to Shakespeare's plays. One of the greatest theatrical achievements was the Shakespeare festival in the spring of 1916, which took place in Prague and in many other Czech theatres. Thanks to Počepický (director) and Karen (chief protagonist), it expressed its distinctive character on Pilsen's stages as well. The Shakespearean play cycle naturally had both artistic and political implications in terms of the desire for an independent state. Shakespeare thus became, figuratively speaking, an inspirer and co-creator of Czech national history. This article describes the amount and nature of Anglo-American drama staged at the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen during the Great War. Applying a chronological approach, it attempts to trace the reception of particular productions (e.g., *The Merchant of Venice*, *Captain Brassbound*, *The Tempest*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *Hamlet*, and *Venice Preserved*) in theatre reviews published in the local daily newspapers *Český deník* [The Czech Daily] and *Nová doba* [The New Time] between the years 1914 and 1918. The article thus contributes to a better understanding of the history of Czech theatre alongside Czech national history.*

*Key words: Reception, Anglo-American Drama, William Shakespeare, the Great War, the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen*

### 1. Pilsen during the Great War

The outbreak of the Great War helped to initiate and eventually realise the long-standing Czech aspirations to disentangle from Austria-Hungary and attain sovereignty. However, the road to independence was to be long and difficult.

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand d'Este, Archduke of Austria and successor to the throne, and his wife Sophie committed by the Serbian Nationalist terrorist group known as the Black Hand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 provided the initial impetus for the outbreak of war. Events quickly accelerated and soon all the great European powers were involved in the war, fighting on the side of either the Allies or the Central Powers. Having started as an Austro-Hungarian military conflict with Serbia, it gradually encompassed almost two thirds of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Although war operations did not take place directly in Bohemia and Moravia, the population had to endure many hardships, such as the shortage of food and coal supplies, the enormous price rise, illnesses, and profiteering (Čornej 1992, 38). The citizens of Pilsen initially responded to the outbreak of war with a detachment that even amounted to curiosity. Given growing economic difficulties, their attitudes towards war began to change.<sup>2</sup> The Škoda Works, which became one of the largest ammunition factories in Europe, employed thousands of newly recruited workers for whom, however, the necessary infrastructure had not been provided. Whereas military production increased and prospered, foodstuffs and fuel were in short supply. Deteriorating economic conditions provoked waves of protests, strikes, and demonstrations. Food riots which broke out throughout the city in 1916 and 1918 were violently suppressed and had tragic consequences. Several children were shot dead in June 1918, when bread supplies were cut off due to the shortage of flour. An explosion in the Bolevec ammunition factory in May 1917 killed nearly 200 people.<sup>3</sup> In September 1917 a devastating Spanish influenza epidemic rapidly

1) *The Great War has been dealt with in many sources (Čornej 1992; Cabada 2010; Kvaček 2013, etc.), thus, for the purpose of this article, the situation in the Czech lands is primarily discussed.*

2) *As the war proceeded, the dominant political attitudes also changed. Although Pilsen Czech Social Democrats had initially expressed anxiety about going to war, they eventually showed loyalty towards government policy.*

3) *The detonation inspired Karel Čapek's image of the atomic explosion in his novel Krakatit (written in 1922, published in 1924). Čapek, who then worked as a private tutor to the son of Count Lažanský in Chyše, heard a distant explosion, saw a thick black smoke rising up from the fire, and became a de facto eyewitness of the disaster (Martinovský et al. 2004, 184).*

spread (not only) in Pilsen. By the end of 1917, an estimated one third of Pilsen's population was infected.

The difficult social, political, and economic situation united political parties in a negative view of the possibility of prospective development within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and encouraged the idea of restoring the political autonomy of the Czech nation. The pace of events quickened when the United States declared war on Austria-Hungary in December 1917. The Great War then slowly headed towards its end. The establishment of the autonomous Czechoslovak state was eventually declared by the representatives of the Czech National Council on 28 October 1918. After four years of fighting and hardship, Czech independence was finally achieved.

### 2. The Municipal Theatre in Pilsen during the Great War

Though the onset of war was marked by disarray and misunderstanding, leading to the temporary closure of the Pilsen theatre<sup>4</sup>, the situation soon returned to normal. Open as usual to influence from Prague, the Pilsen theatre attempted to preserve traditional cultural values and roots, arouse national enthusiasm, and support national feelings against the Austro-Hungarian oppression. Its rebellious spirit was further fuelled by Josef Skupa's revolutionary Kašpárek who became a symbol of Czech national heritage.<sup>5</sup> The Pilsen repertoire was oriented towards democratic drama (e.g., that of George Bernard Shaw), with an emphasis on national plays demonstrating national strength and courage (e.g., those of Václav Kliment Klicpera, Josef Kajetán Tyl, Alois Jirásek, and Jaroslav Vrchlický). In many productions of the time, theatrical attempts to break through autocratic restrictions and establish closer contact with audiences (as in the 1916 production of *Hamlet*)<sup>6</sup> can be traced. Theatre thus served as a platform for the expression of national identity at a time marked by the suspension of many freedoms, including freedom of press.

During the Great War, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy imposed rigid censorship and strict absolutist rules. Parliament was shut down and parliamentary (and in fact all democratic) debates were silenced. Forty-six Czech newspapers and periodicals were discontinued and the remainder were heavily censored. As Milena Beránková (1981, 221) points out, a strict control over the press led to an a priori elimination or neutralisation of unwelcome content, which might have attracted censors' attention. Editors were

4) *After the outbreak of war, the theatre was closed and actors were dismissed due to "the exceptional circumstances of war" (Kříž 1927, 52). The theatre was, however, reopened thanks to the ardour and self-help activities of actors on 15 August 1914.*

5) *Kašpárek was a traditional marionette (a court jester) who triumphantly defeated Death and the Devil.*

6) *Another example of a similar theatrical approach can be found in the production of Androcles and the Lion (1916).*

provided both with instructions regarding content adequacy/non-adequacy and loyal articles recommended for publication as editorials. Apart from topics expressed in text, graphics were liable to censorship, too. Some limited space for expression opened, however, in daily news summaries, covering particular war events, feuilletons, Sunday supplements to periodicals, and articles on food provision. It is perhaps not surprising that theatre reviews were published in close proximity to these journalistic genres.

Regional culture coverage was delivered by two newspapers: *Český deník* [*The Czech Daily*]<sup>7</sup> and *Nová doba* [*The New Time*]. Theatre reviews were published in a regular column entitled Theatre and Arts.

### 3. Objectives and Interpretive Lenses

This article<sup>8</sup> aims to describe the amount and nature of Anglo-American drama staged at the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen during the Great War. Applying a chronological approach, it attempts to trace the reception of particular productions in theatre reviews published in the above mentioned newspapers between the years 1914 and 1918. It furthermore aims to examine the relationship between Anglo-American productions and social and political events during the war.

For this purpose, it is first necessary to pose basic research questions, the answers to which will help clarify the issue:

- What amount of space was devoted to theatre reviews of Anglo-American productions in comparison with other cultural events?
- What sort of information on Anglo-American productions did the newspapers provide?
- Did period reviews make any direct or indirect connection to the war?

These questions are closely connected with the methodological assumption that there exists a correlation (in fact, more or less directly proportional) between period events, theatrical productions, and critical reviews. Together with Wolfgang Iser (1993, 2), we can argue that each interpretation given in the past is a reflection of both historically conditioned attitudes and reactions to antecedent assessments. This duality characterises the history of interpretation in general. The individual work is set off from previous readings (productions) and read (perceived) in accordance with the prevailing cultural code. A theatrical production can thus function as a mirror in which social and political events are reflected. The concept of interpretation thereby emerges as a highly sophisticated process rooted in a given time period, while simultaneously conditioned

7) *The Czech Daily* was established by the merger of *Plzeňský obzor* [*The Pilsen Horizon*] and *Plzeňské listy* [*The New Pilsen Papers*] between the years 1911 and 1912.

8) This study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation project GA406-13-14048S *Anglo-American Drama in Czech Theatres during the Great War*.

by the history of interpretation and the critical response. Reviews are thus essential as sources of information about productions, though in some cases the messages delivered may be regarded as controversial or misleading due to strict censorship or, in contrast, as efforts to conceal subversive content from the censors.

### 4. Anglo-American Productions during the Great War at the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen

With respect to the Anglo-American wartime repertoire,<sup>9</sup> the Pilsen theatre resorted to an eclectic model with numerous representations of comedy: *Charley's Aunt* [6 October] 1914, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* 1914, *The Merchant of Venice* 1914, *The Tempest* 1915, *Comedy of Errors* 1915, *Lady Frederick* 1915, *Androcles and the Lion* 1916, *Hamlet* 1916, *Romeo and Juliet* 1916, *Twelfth Night* 1916, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* 1916, *The Admirable Crichton* 1916, *Caesar and Cleopatra* 1917, and *Venice Preserved* [11 April] 1918. The key role assigned to the drama of William Shakespeare is not coincidental, but stems from a long and high-quality Shakespearean stage history dating back to the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The first English wartime production was *Charley's Aunt*, written by Brandon Thomas and directed by Jaroslav Počepický. Apart from a brief discussion of the production, the anonymous reviewer (A.V.A. 1914b, 4) commented particularly on the development of the repertoire, which was inspired by the National Theatre in Prague and dominated by light comedies and exalted patriotic plays. He stressed the need to limit the number of comedies and "happy endings" and stage more classical, first-rate plays, for in his view, the aesthetic tastes of theatre critics and audiences were more refined than stage directors and dramaturges supposed. The critic, in fact, challenged a commonly shared and frequently professed belief that the audience wanted "*plays which can make it laugh, or cry, or feel excited, and not plays that make it think*" (Williams 2005, 151). But in reality the opposite, as it appears, was true:<sup>10</sup>

*"The management of the National Theatre, as of other theatres, has probably supposed that the audience is not particularly interested in serious works of art and that it is possible to bear on stage either an inane farce, which lets the audience forget the strain*

9) *The Anglo-American wartime repertoire, in fact, consisted only of English plays.*

10) *Although it is difficult to judge to what extent the review was censored or brought into line with official instructions by the city's official censorship body (war plays were not a welcome part of the repertoire as they might have provoked debates on the war and mobilisation, declared on 27 July and 31 July 1914 respectively), it offers a realistic view of the Pilsen theatre's repertoire during the 1914–1915 season, which consisted mainly of comedies and operettas, though some German, Russian, and English classics were staged as well. Similar objections to the dominance of theatrical entertainment over serious plays were, however, raised even before the war.*

of today [war], or a patriotically zealous play, or a war play, which is related, however flimsily, to contemporary events. Experience, however, has taught the National Theatre as well as other Czech theatres that those who stayed at home are even today eager for artistic pleasures. There is no need, however, to be ashamed of such eagerness. Even though our brothers are fighting a life-and-death struggle somewhere far away, why should we not read a book or go to the theatre? If we do everything that is in our power for 'those who are suffering', we are right to please ourselves with the things which once pleased us, and which do no harm to anyone" (A.V.A. 1914b, 4, translation my own).

Although critics considered *Charley's Aunt* to be a "simple and crazy joke", the production seems to have pleased Pilsen audiences mainly due to the "temperately comic" performance of Karel Hostaš as Babberly, impersonating the missing aunt (A.V.A. 1914b, 4).

Another English production, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, was staged on 23 October 1914 under the direction of Počepický in J. V. Sládek's translation. Rather than breaking with a traditional portrayal of Shylock, the director sought inspiration from Josef Šmaha and Eduard Vojan.<sup>11</sup> Also, the representation of the Christian and Jewish worlds was more or less conventional (S-ý 1914, 5). The critic, however, focused primarily on the individual performance of Otýlie Beníšková, the leading actress of the Pilsen theatre company at the time. Taken aback by her rendition of Portia and her declamatory talent, he noted that "*Shakespeare's verse was flowing from her lips like crystal pearls*" (S-ý 1914, 5). The absence of references and allusions to war is understandable, for the inhabitants of Pilsen were initially surprised by the outbreak of war rather than really affected (Procházka 1965, 17). Regarding the date of the play's premiere, rehearsals had probably preceded the assassination at Sarajevo and thus the stage director might not have initially felt the need to question the current situation via a theatrical reality.

In December 1914, Shaw's play *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* was staged, directed by Josef Fišer. According to theatre critics, the wartime atmosphere contributed to a better understanding of the exotic colour and background of the play and made it more topical: "*In fact even today, when in faraway countries international conflicts arise from the casual positions of ships, when coloured armies from colonies are sent to pan-European war, we understand its exotic colour better. Although we [Austria-Hungary] do not possess*

11) Šmaha (1948–1915) was a talented Czech stage director and actor, characterised by his realistic style of acting. Vojan (1853–1920) was one of the greatest Czech actors and performers of Shakespearean protagonists, famous for his deep psychological, almost Protean, insight into the characters. His portrayal of Shylock was that of a merciless villain. As the famous Czech critic Jindřich Vodák (1945, 119) observed, "his Shylock was like an evil God, cast from one solid piece, a bad hater, a demonic avenger, whose irrecusable and racial malevolence threatens and yells with a terrible predatory wildness."

any colonies, we pay attention to these [colonial] matters now" (A.V.A. 1914a, 4, translation my own).

The production met with generally positive critical reactions, except for a diatribe against insufficient enthusiasm for the political content of the play: "*The acting style shows that our actors have not become particularly attached to politics and law. They are not able to talk about them with the necessary inner fervour. But otherwise, it was very nice*" (A.V.A. 1914b, 4, translation my own). It was probably more than a mere coincidence that political rhetoric in the production was subdued. Through the lack of political enthusiasm and a generally ambivalent attitude towards the political discourse of the play, the implied condemnation of war was sufficiently clear.<sup>12</sup>

In April 1915, Shakespeare's *Tempest* was first staged in Pilsen.<sup>13</sup> It was directed by Karel Veverka with Anton Beer-Waldbrunn's stage music under the baton of the famous Czech conductor Václav Talich. Theatre critics (S-ý 1915a, 6) focused particularly on a synergy between direction and a minimalist set design that served as an ideal indicator of the absence of time. Hence, the actual time and location remained unimportant, whereas the *genius loci* played the crucial role. The period review suggests that the modern design of the proscenium sharply contrasted with the elevated portico-style rear stage, where most of the action took place. Despite a certain disharmony in the organisation of the stage space and its design, the director managed to achieve a considerable effect with a simple set and an impressive lighting design. The critics were, however, less positive in their responses to individual artistic performances, particularly to Vedral's portrayal of Prospero (S-ý 1915a, 6). Stripped of the attributes of his magic powers and mysteriousness, Prospero resembled a flat character rather than the rich protagonist of Shakespeare's play. Due to the reduction of his magic power, through which he controls

12) *After the outbreak of the war, the government first initiated partial, then complete mobilisation. As a number of actors and theatre directors entered the armed services, many theatre troupes were dissolved. Those who could not join military service were consequently left unemployed. A special theatre company was therefore established to perform in Prague and in the countryside in order to reduce the poverty into which some actors were plunged through no fault of their own (Anonymous 1915, 6).*

13) *The underlying mechanism for the selection of the play is unknown, but can be attributed to the play's rareness on Czech stages. Given the play's "commentary on dramatic aspects of life [...], which often arouses strong reactions [and] lasting impressions" (Harris 2001, 562), however, an accent on social or political interpretation/implications cannot be ruled out, particularly due to the portrayal of Prospero, driven not by his magic but by his will to power. Although a colonial interpretation of *The Tempest* emerged much later, Prospero, stripped of his magic aura, may have been perceived as the embodiment of authority, and the play as a "narrative of power struggle" (Frassinelli 2013, 181).*

the world, the borderline between reality and imagination (if any borderline can be detected) became increasingly blurred.<sup>14</sup> The audience's actual perception was therefore not necessarily coloured by fantasy but, vice versa, might have become a version of fantasy (and reality as well). Regardless of mixed reviews, the production received a generally positive response from large audiences, and the profit from the production was donated to blinded and disfigured soldiers (S-ý 1915a, 6).

Two comedies were subsequently performed in the second half of the year 1915, probably to ease the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty. Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, directed by Fišer, premiered on 21 November. The only available information on this production is a fragmentary period review limited to a rather vague statement that "the production drew inspiration from Jaroslav Kvapil's performance produced at the National Theatre in Prague" (S-ý 1915b, 6).<sup>15</sup> Insofar as it is possible to judge from the information, it appears that the production laid emphasis on aspects of individual character and on human relations rather than on overtly social and political issues. Concerning individual performances, *The Czech Daily's* review praised a striking resemblance between the Antipholuses (Bedřich Karen and Jan Martin) and the Dromios (Ladislav Fišer and Hostaš).

W. S. Maugham's early comedy *Lady Frederick*, directed by Počepický, premiered just three days after *Comedy of Errors*. The brief period review focused on a plot summary and the final scene in which Lady Frederick demonstrates to her young suitor why he should not marry an older woman (A.V.A. 1915, 6). Somewhat disappointing, though, is the lack of critical commentary on individual performances. The only remark concerns Počepický's stylised portrayal of Paradine Fouldes as a debauchee and philistine. Such a portrayal, however, questions Lady Frederick's final choice of husband and the effect of the happy ending.<sup>16</sup>

14) In contrast, *Benišková* and *Bedřich Karen* portrayed *Miranda* and *Ferdinand* as fairy tale characters. *Benišková's* interpretation seems to have emphasised *Miranda's* innocence and moral sensibility.

15) *Kvapil* was the first modern Czech director. After early work as a poet, journalist, librettist, and translator, he began his directing career in 1906 at the National Theatre in Prague. There he established himself as an impressionistic director of great force. Among his principal theatrical achievements were *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. It should not go without mention that *Kvapil* was a member of the so-called Czech resistance movement *Mafia*. He also organised a group of men of letters behind the *Writers' Manifesto* which was signed by 222 Czech writers and presented to the Czech Council in 1917. It called for renewed constitutional freedom and parliamentary immunity (Teich and Porter 1993, 245).

16) *Fouldes* pays *Lady Frederick's* debt, proposes to her, and she accepts.

In contrast to the light tone of *Lady Frederick*, Shaw's fable *Androcles and the Lion*, staged in February 1916, dealt with the more serious issues of Christianity and religious belief. The central theme that "men must have something worth dying – for an end outside oneself – to make life worth living" (Kuiper 1995, 52) was readily understandable to the audience:

"The play contains an important idea: Did Christianity make human beings different, did they become better, and did Christianity erase signs of human nature and individual qualities in them? And what were the actual interests of the ruling Caesars? They were indifferent to the religious beliefs of people; they only wanted to satisfy those around them and [win] important battles through the persecution of those with other religious beliefs. Whereas faith was a mere formality to them, they valued power and control. For instance, when the former strict Christian, the strong man *Ferrovius*, who had advocated the idea of not fighting against evil, killed six of his Christian rivals while defending his own life in the arena (where his human nature was born), the bloodthirsty Caesar said: 'Persecution of Christians must cease. If Christians are able to fight like this one, I want them to fight for me'" (Anonymous 1916a, 3, translation my own).

Though considerably censored, the production showed strong anti-Austrian feelings. Moreover, it gave rise to a new wartime anecdote, based on strict censorship of the play:

A: It is difficult to say which part in the play is the most grateful.

B: I think it is the part of the lion.

A: Oh no. It is only a mimic performance.

B: Exactly, it was the most expressive part because it could not have been crossed out" (Anonymous 1916a, 3, translation my own).

In 1916, the world commemorated the tercentennial anniversary of Shakespeare's death. As Clara Calvo (2004, 81) points out, the commemoration of the poet's death in Britain epitomised the defence of the spiritual property of the nation, threatened by a German invasion. Similarly, the Shakespeare tercentenary celebration in the Czech lands can be understood not only as a great theatrical achievement, but most importantly as a presentation of Czech national self-awareness and identity. It furthermore attempted to strengthen the autonomy of the Czech theatre and demonstrate the Czech pro-Allied attitude during days marked by the omnipresent hostile exhortation *Gott strafes England*.<sup>17</sup> In Otakar Vočadlo's view (Vočadlo 1956, 108), Shakespeare's glorification on that occasion was immense and incomparable to any other European theatrical event of the time.

Prague contributed to worldwide Shakespeare celebrations with a cycle of sixteen Shakespearean productions, mostly directed by *Kvapil* with *Sládek's* translations.

17) It was originally coined by the Jewish German poet *Ernst Lissauer* (1882–1937).

Due to rigid censorship, the initially planned production of *King John*, employing a symbolic image of Austria's severed head, was banned. The premiere of both parts of *Henry IV* was first allowed as an exception, but later postponed to the autumn.<sup>18</sup> Though the production was marked by considerable cuts, it still represented a serious menace to the monarchy. Fears arose that the spectacularly staged coronation scenes might have been connected with rumours that the new independent Czech state was to be ruled by George V of England. The cuts led to the reduction of the major political issue of the play. Instead, the production was dominated by the figure of Falstaff, portrayed in a rather traditional way as a protagonist typical of nineteenth-century comedies. Overwhelmed by Falstaff's monumental presence and his humour, the audience "did not even notice the intricate political implications of the Falstaff-Hall relationship" (Procházka 1996, 52). The production, however, climaxed in the aforementioned coronation scene that symbolised the long-standing Czech aspiration for national sovereignty. The royal inauguration, accompanied by the act of handing over the royal insignia, served as a theatrical representation of the symbolic recreation of the nation.

The festival was undoubtedly an important event in the Czech Shakespearean theatrical tradition. However, notwithstanding the attempt to transform Shakespeare's work into *cultural capital*, due to the character of the National theatre, it rather preserved its status quo as a sacred gift (Procházka 1996, 51).

The Pilsen celebration of Shakespeare's anniversary was not as magnificent as in Prague; however, four Shakespeare productions (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) were staged at the beginning of May 1916. Of these four, *Hamlet* met with an especially large response. Theatre reviews (Bureš 1916, 4) observed that Karen played a melancholic prince, who succumbed to emotion and his sombre mood. His emotions, however, fused with rational thoughts. Even during his outbursts of emotion, he did not abandon his rational thinking. He mused both on his own inner feelings and the surrounding world, yet this philosophical contemplation led to his complete mental and physical exhaustion. His face was pale and unhealthy looking, with sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes. His mood swings ranged from periods of elation and restless activity to those of resignation and despondency.<sup>19</sup> An important clue to Hamlet's character, particularly with regard to his mental distress, was provided by the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, interpreted most likely in terms of the matter of national independence (Bureš 1916, 4.).

Though the period review (Bureš 1916, 4), commented mainly on individual artistic performances and did not mention any suspect metaphors or even cuts, the idea

18) For more information, see Martin Procházka (1996, 51–52).

19) From a medical perspective, these symptoms may suggest a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

of a search for (not only moral) freedom was probably shared in a circumspect way with the audience, which might have been involved in Hamlet's quest. Even the prince's comment on "the time out of joint" (I.5.196, Shakespeare 2008, 196) or Rosencrantz's remark that "their [players'] inhibition comes by the means of the late innovation" (II.2.328-329, Shakespeare 2008, 220) might have alluded to a political subtext.<sup>20</sup>

Počepický's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which opened at the Pilsen theatre on 14 May 1916, offered a refreshing vision of the play by laying emphasis on its dreamy, fairy-tale character. Though magic and delusion obviously became the keys to the production, alongside the illusionary world of fairy beings, the actual world of real life emerged. The audience was thus allowed to experience the intersection of magic and the real (though within the boundaries of a theatrical performance). To further complicate the delusive state of things, the director feminised the parts of Oberon and Puck.<sup>21</sup> By feminising these roles, Počepický shifted the theme of love and sex into a different dimension of playfulness (Puck) and nobility (Oberon). *The Czech Daily's* review on 16 May 1916 indicated the play's successful staging. The critic paid compliments to the quality of the production, and praised the "joyful and precise acting" (Jb 1916, 6). Antonie Fišerová's Puck resembled a quick-witted and cheerful faun, whereas Antonie Košnerová's Oberon gave the impression of a kind-hearted and gentle king. The production was accompanied by the incidental music of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. The design concept was based on painted backdrops, realistically depicting the locale of each scene (e.g., trees in II.2). The production scored a good success, with particular acclaim for Beníšková as Titania and Marie Procházková as Hippolyta.

In November 1916, James Matthew Barrie's comedy *The Admirable Crichton* was staged, directed by Počepický. The director paid particular attention to Crichton and his transformation from a perfect indoor servant, devotedly attached to his master, to the actual leader of the group of noblemen who were shipwrecked on a desert island during a yachting expedition (I 1916, 3–4). Otto Čermák's Crichton was a resourceful man, who used all his physical, intellectual, and communication skills in the Darwinian battle for survival, and became the virtual master of the stranded community. He assumed his enforced leadership as readily as he later reverted to his subordinate position. Počepický revealed a dual face for Lord Loam, serious and arrogant in a civilized society and humble and comic in the tropical wilderness.

20) With the outbreak of the Great War, the Pilsen theatre was closed (see above). In 1916, the theatre director was appointed a commander of the Pilsen war hospital and a captain of artillery (Kříž 1927, 52).

21) A female cast for Puck and Oberon was typical of nineteenth-century productions.

Počepický's production of Shaw's play *Caesar and Cleopatra* was staged shortly after its premiere at the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague.<sup>22</sup> The directorial conception laid emphasis on the relationship between Caesar and Cleopatra and the portrayal of both figures. Počepický depicted Caesar as a multilayered character: a psychologist, ironist, and a defender of morality and love for others. Through his educational influence, the young Cleopatra was gradually transformed from a pampered and playful babe into a woman and empress. Despite positive reviews of the artistic performances, the critic thought the play too difficult to understand: "*Insufficient familiarity with the play, its theme, and its meaning was observed in the audience. It is recommended that a brochure be issued that would facilitate understanding of such an extensive and difficult play*" (Anonymous 1917, 3, translation my own).

The last wartime production was Thomas Otway's Restoration drama, *Venice Preserved*, directed by Fišer in V. A. Jung's translation. The director interpreted the play as a story of love, honour, and friendship against the background of ambition, hatred, and betrayal. As the critic (X 1918, 5) observed, the production was dominated by Beníšková, whose Belvidera combined romantic passion with femininity and sensibility in a world where cunning and animosity prevail.

Puppet theatre also took an active part in anti-war productions. During the final years of war, Skupa organised evening performances for adults. They were immensely popular among audiences due to their acute political relevance. On 23 September 1918, a satiric scene in which Kašpárek symbolically buried the monarchy was performed for the first time. It met with a passionate response from the audience. Given that the war was likely to end soon, the overtly anti-Austrian attitudes, however, went officially unnoticed by authorities.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

During the Great War the Pilsen repertoire consisted mainly of national classics by Klicpera, Tyl, and Jirásek, for instance, whose works served to arouse a sense of national pride and consciousness, and of the work of German, Norwegian, and Russian playwrights (Friedrich Schiller, Henrik Ibsen, Ivan Krylov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, etc.). English drama, staged mainly in Sládek's and Mušek's translations, was a qualitatively significant, albeit a quantitatively marginalised portion of the repertoire.<sup>24</sup> With respect to genre, the repertoire

showed a mixture of drama,<sup>25</sup> operetta, and opera. The predominance of comedy (sometimes of disputable literary merit) was not, however, perceived as a favourable development, for theatre critics had complained of the shortage of serious productions as early as 1914 and, in fact, even before the war.

The aim of this study was to examine the reception of Anglo-American productions in local newspapers during the years 1914 to 1918. The research indicates that a disproportionate amount of space was given to theatre reviews, as contrasted with political and social events. The examination of reviews furthermore shows that critics' readings of productions were well-informed, though in their assessments they often resorted to the relatively safe strategy of plot summaries and literary interpretations. The majority of the reviews were thus devoted to the critics' commentaries on the plays, which discussed each work in terms of its historical context, as well as its aesthetic qualities. In some cases, however, audiences still had trouble understanding the productions: *Caesar and Cleopatra* is a good example. In order to assist the audience's reception of that performance, the critic proposed publishing supplementary brochures that would help inform those unfamiliar with the play being presented.<sup>26</sup> The performances, in most cases, received positive responses from critics, and met with lively interest from audiences, as the reviews demonstrate.

Although critics generally avoided direct reference to the war, tangential allusions to censorship occur in reviews of *Androcles and the Lion* and *Hamlet* (Anonymous 1916, 3–4; Bureš 1916, 4). Of particular note is the review of *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* which contains references to "*international conflicts*", "*coloured armies from colonies*", and a "*pan-European war*" (A.V.A. 1914a, 4). Although the relationship between the war and theatre reality here reputedly serves as a basis for understanding the exotic colour of the play, in reality it may have alluded to mobilisation, or aimed to reduce the pro-Austrian rhetoric typical of some dailies, such as *Národní listy* [*The National Papers*]. The negative attitude of actors towards the political discourse of the play, substantiated with a commentary on "*insufficient enthusiasm for law and politics*", in fact, confirms the disapproving attitude of Pilseners towards the war (A.V.A. 1914a, 4). Thematically speaking, certain references to war events may have also been found in the productions of *The Admirable Crichton* and *Venice Preserved*, though direct evidence is virtually nonexistent in the reviews.

The monumental cultural landmark of the wartime period was the Shakespeare festival arranged in Prague in the spring of 1916. On that occasion, Czech periodicals devoted a considerable space to pictorial material and articles on Shakespeare by famous

22) *The Prague premiere took place on 10 March 1917; the Pilsen production premiered on 19 April 1917.*

23) *Or, at least, without being mentioned in local newspapers.*

24) *The programme selection was subject mainly to the decisions of the Czech Theatre Company in Pilsen.*

25) *The proportion of tragedies declined during the war.*

26) *Nevertheless, as Paul Woodruff (2008, 198) observes, an understanding audience does not merely follow the plot, but becomes emotionally attached to the staged events.*

scholars and reviewers. The success of the festival was a significant sign of Shakespeare's popularity and the understanding of his work as a sacred gift. Moreover, it signalled sympathy with the Allies, which was, however, considered a treasonable offence (Vočadlo 1956, 108).

Of Pilsen festival productions, Počepický's rendition of *Hamlet* deserves special notice. The play was probably transformed into a comment on the socio-political situation of the time. Through the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, the audience may have felt related to the status quo of the Czech nation. The current situation was thereby identified with the prince's hesitancy, irresolution, and uncertainty. Hamlet was portrayed as a human being susceptible to human weaknesses. The director and actor emphasised his search for truth and the meaning of life. The greatest of the actor's instruments of artistic expression was his body language. Both his face and body expressed extraordinary sensitivity, which, nevertheless, combined with his rationality and pragmatism.

During the war, the theatre played a fundamental role of *spiritus agens* not only in the cultural life of the country, but also in its policy. Drama served as an effective channel of communication, often addressing the audience with the secret language of irony and metaphor. The stage became a *locus communis* where the audience was symbolically confronted with the actuality of war through the fictional world of the play. It furthermore became a form of temporary escape from political and economic realities, and helped to create an awareness of national identity.

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#### Résumé

*Au cours de la Grande Guerre, le théâtre est devenu un instrument communicatif efficace et aussi celui d'encouragement publique. Dans cette période touchée par des problèmes économiques et politiques, les spectacles du théâtre ont contribué d'une façon importante au développement de la conscience nationale tchèque et à la stimulation de l'identité nationale. Le répertoire de base du théâtre était orienté vers les drames classiques des auteurs tchèques (par ex. Klicpera, Tyl, Jirásek, Vrchlický) et vers les drames désignés comme "démocratiques" (par ex. Shaw). Un espace considérable a été réservé pour le drame shakespearien. Au printemps 1916, le festival Shakespeare s'est tenu au Théâtre national de Prague et à d'autres théâtres tchèques. Les réalisations théâtrales ont eu lieu aussi à Pilsen. Grâce aux personnages du théâtre pilsenois Jaroslav Počepický et Bedřich Karen, ce festival a acquis un caractère distinctif. Ce festival représentait un événement du théâtre d'une importance capitale qui n'avait pas seulement les impacts artistiques, mais aussi les impacts politiques. Shakespeare est devenu, au sens figuré, un personnage d'inspiration et*



le co-créateur de l'histoire nationale. L'objectif principal de cette étude est de déterminer quel espace les drames anglais et américains représentaient dans l'ensemble du répertoire du Théâtre de la Ville de Pilsen dans la période de la Grande Guerre et de retracer dans la perspective chronologique la perception de la mise en scène des pièces de théâtre choisies (par ex. *Le Marchand de Venise*, *Conversion de capitaine Brassbound*, *La Tempête*, *Androclès et le lion*, *Hamlet*, *La Venise sauvée*) dans la presse périodique de l'époque, surtout dans les journaux *Český deník* et *Nová doba*. Notre étude vise à contribuer à la compréhension de l'histoire du théâtre tchèque et aussi de l'histoire nationale.

De la multitude de productions shakespeariennes on pourrait rappeler avant tout une production mémorable d'*Hamlet* (1916) dont la réalisation résonnait d'une façon remarquable avec le cycle shakespearien de *Kvapil* mis en réalisation cette année-là à Prague. Une attitude très anti-autrichienne caractérisait le cycle mentionné. Miloš Nový a réussi à unir en *Hamlet* une expérience émotionnelle intense avec des considérations pragmatiques et il l'a transformé en un personnage mélancholique plein de sentiments exacerbés et capable de raisonner rationnellement. Les mises en scène des pièces *Le Marchand de Venise* (1914), *La comédie des erreurs* (1915) et *Le songe d'une nuit d'été* (1916) bénéficiaient avant tout de performances artistiques de haute qualité de la comédienne Otýlie Beníšková (*Portia*, femme d'*Antipholus d'Ephèse* et *Titania*). La réalisation de la pièce *La Tempête* (traduite par Sládek) en 1915 n'a connu qu'une seule montée au théâtre pilsenois. Les mises en scènes des pièces de théâtre de Shakespeare et Shaw peuvent être caractérisées par une conception dramaturgique cultivée, par une étude détaillée des caractères des personnages clés vue dans le contexte des situations chargées d'émotion, de conflits personnels et historiques, de relations amoureuses, sans oublier les performances de théâtre exceptionnelles des acteurs (Otýlie Beníšková, Bedřich Karen).

Notre étude contribue à la compréhension de l'histoire du théâtre tchèque et de l'histoire nationale.

**Veronika Černíková**

## ***L'écrivain fictif au Québec et dans l'œuvre de Gérard Bessette***

### **Abstract**

Since the Ancient World, artists are used to represent themselves in their works and this kind of representations clearly surpasses the limits of a self-portrait. We are now living in the period of extreme narcissism and individualism when personal intimacy is spread in all kinds of Medias. It can't be surprising that the figure of the creator is still in the middle of interest of literary production in Quebec and everywhere else. From 139 novels published in Quebec during the literary season 2009, 10 percent is based on fictional writer. One of the most productive Quebec writers obsessed by the figure of the writer was Gérard Bessette, an important Quebec author, literary critic and university professor who played a big part in the evolution of the Quebec literature. Fictions from his first, traditional cycle are introducing the nascent writer; fictions from his second, modern cycle are substituting the fictional writer by the fictional storyteller; and his latest postmodern cycle fictions are going back to the fictional writer approaching his own death. The writing character is getting older according to his originator. Nevertheless, he is always the same.

Key words: Gérard Bessette, Quebec literature, fictional writer, metafiction, anti-writer

### **1. Introduction**

Dès l'Antiquité, les artistes ont tendance à représenter les œuvres et à se représenter dans ce genre de création qui dépasse largement les limites de l'autoportrait. À présent,