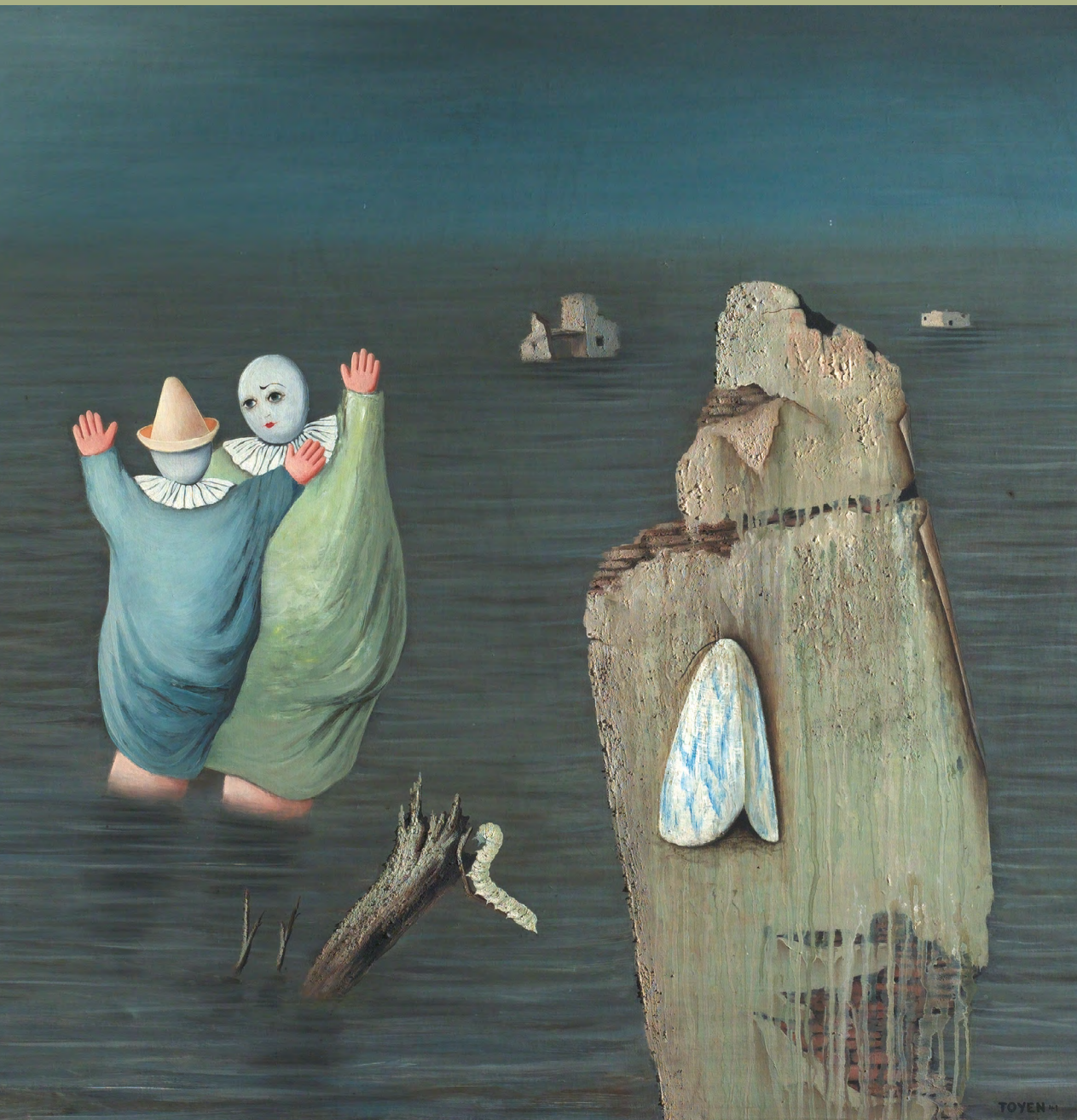
THEATRE THEORY READER
PRAGUE SCHOOL WRITINGS

EDITED BY
DAVID DROZD,
TOMÁŠ KAČER
AND DON SPARLING

KAROLINUM



Theatre Theory Reader
Prague School Writings

Edited by David Drozd, Tomáš Kačer and Don Sparling

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

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

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

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David Drozd
Project Leader
Brno, August 2016

INTRODUCTION

DAVID DROZD and TOMÁŠ KAČER

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

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 Though these dates might suggest something outdated, yet another Theory consigned to the ash heap of history, the following two quotes point to a different conclusion.

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

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

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

These two short fragments from Veltruský and Mukařovský grasp the core of the Prague School perspective on theatre performance. They include all the "material" elements of a theatre performance and key concepts employed by

the PLC (such as structure, sign and component), providing in fact a structural definition of theatre. Although this may sound simple, it was precisely such a simple formulation that was the starting point for structurally oriented theatre studies – and in fact the task outlined by Mukařovský has remained the point of departure for all subsequent research on the theatre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Structure is a term that is almost self-explanatory today, but it is important to remember that it was only in the 1920s that it became a key term for