

Fall 2009

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Outside the Black Box:
“Found-Transformed” Czech Theatres

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Major: Drama

Prague, Czech Republic. Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Czech Republic: Arts, Community, and Transition, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2009

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate the recent trends of non-traditional theatre spaces in the Czech Republic. By profiling four theatres, called “found-transformed” spaces for the purposes of this paper, the study’s original aim was to draw a conclusion about the impulses for the creation and use of these spaces within the Czech context. The four spaces were: Divadlo Tramtarie in Olomouc, Moving Station in Plzen, Divadlo Těchonice in Těchonice, and Kulturní Dům Rozkrok in Varnsdorf. Methodologies employed include personal interview, observation of both the spaces and some of the work performed in the space, and research of theoretical texts about theatre spaces. The study found that, while there is no perfect parallel connecting all four of these found-transformed Czech spaces, each exhibits innovative traits that can be seen in the history of Czech theatrical practices from the National Revival of the 18th- and 19th-centuries to today.

*These buildings were not erected to stage life stories;
they had their own life stories to tell before becoming theatres*
-Zofia Dworakowska and Michala Pohořelá

Theatre is a basic art; people have been making theatre for millennia. In his seminal text *The Empty Space*, British director Peter Brook writes, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty stage whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (9). Any performative act, is an act of theatre, and as Brooks asserts, it can be executed anywhere. Theatre’s origins lie in ancient storytelling traditions; for centuries, people made theatre outside, with nothing to aid their storytelling but the objects offered by nature. In more modern history, theatres have separated the performer from his audience by means of a raised stage, sizes and styles varying over time and place. Even more recently, theatremakers have distorted the actor-audience relationship with the use of the ever-mutable black box, a space that can be arranged to put the performer and the spectator in any number of spatial relationships. But while the word “theatre” may bring all of these trappings to mind, an act of theatre is not necessitated or validated by the imposed “theatricality” of the space it inhabits.

In any theatrical work, the realities of the space inform the performance, effects which cannot be ignored. “If the theatre seems to need a certain crude element, this must be accepted as part of its natural soil” (Brook 66). There exist many traditional theatres in the world. Some of them are ancient, many are beautiful and intricate, and cherish a long history of classic work on their stages. But some of the most fascinating theatre is that which is performed in a non-traditional space, a space where it doesn’t quite seem to fit, and yet somehow blends in perfectly. In the last twenty years, this more experimental,

non-traditional type of theatre has emerged in many of the former Soviet satellite states, as a response to changing political, social, and economic systems. The Czech Republic in particular has a growing trend in non-traditional theatre spaces and site-specific theatre. The genre of site-specific theatre uses this principle by generating works inspired by a given space. According to Tomáš Žižka, a Czech expert in the genre, a place, an empty space, is a storage area for a theatrical idea. A found space brings with it a life and history of its own, which can certainly be explored by an innovative theatremaker. In site-specific theatre works, “the found space becomes an actor in the play” (Dworakowska and Pohořelá 114).

But the term “site-specific” does not adequately cover those non-traditional spaces that house other kinds of work, work not necessarily inspired by the space, but adaptable to and fluid with the space. These theatres, discovered and retooled to suit the needs of their inhabitants are of a different breed. Since 1983, the organization TransEuropeHalles (TEH) has existed as a network for theatres operating in this kind of space. These spaces “offer welcoming freedom for exploration, for contemporary artistic creation and for encounters between different groups” (Bordage and Grombeer 4), by existing in structures at once vital to society and slightly off-kilter with the traditional theatrical arena. These recovered and transformed spaces have the potential to be springboards for fantastically creative work that overcomes a lack of traditional necessities by using the building’s structure for inspiration and theatrical innovation.

In the publication *Factories of the Imagination*, members of TEH offer a general set of criteria for these kinds of spaces:

“...they fulfill the requirements, needs and desires to which classical cultural institutions respond poorly... This re-use, this redeployment, makes possible an

about turn from derelict to desirable, unsuitable to suitable, from past and passé to progressive; symbolizing renewal and reconstruction. These new places of culture transform a neighbourhood's urban environment. They encourage people to get involved, allowing emotional and intellectual exchange, uniting them around common desires and stimulating the rediscovery, through creation, of a taste for being responsible for their lives and actions" (Bordage and Grombeer 5).

The spaces' existence, as TEH indicates, are part of a "phenomenon of recovery and transformation of abandoned space" (Bordage and Grombeer 5). They are all structures that were built for a specific use, and then abandoned, similar to those spaces used in site-specific work. What separate these particular spaces from the site-specific arena are their transformations. The member theatres of TEH use facilities that have been converted into theatrical spaces, however roughly, rather than just empty found spaces. The impulse to transform these previously unoccupied spaces into theatrical spaces, combining the ideology of Brooks with that of site-specific theatre, is a unique one. Because it is a relatively new phenomenon, these type of theatres do not have a specific name; in the interest of brevity, I will refer to them as "found-transformed" spaces throughout the course of this paper. For purposes of this study, a found-transformed space is defined as one that fits the criteria laid down by TEH: a building once used for a non-theatrical purpose that has now been converted and is used specifically for theatre productions.

In October 2009, TransEuropeHalles inducted its first member theatre from the Czech Republic, a theatrical facility in an old train station in Plzen. However, although the Czech found-transformed theatre scene has only just gained international recognition, it has been around and thriving in various different forms for at least the last ten years. It is hardly surprising that this kind of theatrical innovation would exist in the Czech lands. From the time when the Austro-Hungarian Empire ruled over the Czech lands throughout

the tumultuous twentieth century up until today, the Czech people were very rarely an independent, self-governing nation. Under Hapsburg, Nazi, and Communist authority, the Czech people were obliged, in one way or another, to adjust cultural and societal habits to conform to the regulations of their occupiers. In all of these cases, the censorship of arts and culture turned Czech theatremakers away from the purpose-built theatre houses in Prague and the regions. But a lack of traditional houses was not a sufficient threat to eliminate these theatremakers; they responded creatively to these new obstacles, putting on plays in old halls, back rooms of pubs, and any other spaces they could find to reach their audience of motivated intellectuals. Although the Czech Republic now operates with a democratically elected free government, many of these avant-garde theatrical methods of using space have continued. In the Czech Republic today there exist quite a few found-transformed theatres that operate under this framework. These spaces, spread all around the country, have installed theatrical facilities or theatrical projects in buildings that were never intended to house performances. Out of necessity or out of a particular kind of inspiration, the creators of these spaces have welcomed art into industrial, agricultural, and commercial spaces. Their audiences are not typical, nor are the plays they perform, but their work has evolved into a particular niche in the contemporary Czech theatre scene.

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Contemporary Czech theatre has its roots in the theatre of the National Revival. During the 18th and 19th centuries, when the Czech lands were still under the dominion of

the Germanic Austro-Hungarian Empire, the National Revival movement sought to renew interest in all things Czech. The leaders of the movement helped to reintroduce Czech language as the vernacular, both spoken and written, and attempted to carve a niche for Czech culture within the Hapsburgs' dominion. Playwrights began to write theatrical works in Czech, many adapted from the folk traditions that had been passed down orally for generations. However, none of the purpose-built theatres in Prague had resident companies who performed in Czech. These houses were allotted for the exclusive use of Germanic companies, who performed in the official language of the Hapsburg Empire. Dr. Barbara Day, an expert in Czech theatre history, explained that while Czech companies were barred from residency in the city's playhouses, they found alternative venues in which to perform. Small "Šantany," modeled after the French "cafés chantant," in which performers put on small shows with poetry, comedy, and song, took over the back rooms of pubs in the center of Prague. One company occupied an old monastery on Karmelitská street in Mala Strana, using the refectory as a makeshift theatre space. The work produced in these makeshift spaces was fantastically innovative, although the companies' intent was never to maintain permanent residency in these spaces, but rather to have a place to perform while they waited to be able to use a purpose-built theatre of their own.

In the first part of the 19th century, theatremakers appealed to the Prague city council for an approved Czech-language theatre company. They had to explain to the German councilors why this type of company was necessary for the city and its residents. The main argument was intellectual; a Czech-speaking theatre in Prague, they argued, would provide a moral benefit to the community, as well as a unique educational resource

for young Czechs. Theatre had always been more than just idle amusement to Czechs; while in many Western cultures, plays were advertised under “entertainment,” Czech newspapers billed performances as “programs for enlightenment,” according to Dr. Day. Finally, permission for Czech language theatres in the capital was granted, and professional Czech companies began to seep into Prague’s theatre scene, eventually becoming the most popular type of theatre in town.

In the early 1930s, E.F. Burian, the leftist avant-garde theatre director and member of the Devětsil, also used a non-traditional space for his theatre company, D34. However, Burian, whose early work was done during the brief period of artistic freedom of the First Czechoslovak Republic, was not forced into this space to avoid the censors as were his predecessors and the theatremakers who came after him. Burian chose to work out of a small concert hall because of the plurality of design techniques available in the more neutral space. In a traditional purpose-built theatre, the fixed seats, stage, lighting equipment, and rigging system, while useful in traditional productions, can be severely limiting to the more “experimental” work that Burian favored. In his concert hall, Burian was able to use many types of projections and screens, different levels for performers and set pieces, and carefully designed lighting to achieve many never-before-seen effects. The hall, because it was more of a found-transformed space than a theatre, did not come equipped for everything Burian had in mind; he was forced to think creatively and substitute the things he had for those he didn’t. It suited his needs quite nicely: he had an “affinity for spare, constructivist settings of authentic, often unfinished materials,” which sprang not only from budgetary and spatial constraints but from his “intense interest in the traditions of folk theatre” (Burian 46). E.F. Burian’s most famous and creative

productions were performed not in a purpose-built theatre, but in the little hall he rented on Jungmanová street.

During the second World War, the Czech lands were made into a protectorate of the Third Reich. A German government was put into place to supervise the Czech rulers, and to undermine any Czech authority. One of their first actions was to censor all the theatres in the Czech lands, for fear of social activism and rabbleroising in a public forum. While the National Theatre and other large houses were closed down entirely, theatres with fewer than one hundred seats came under a different jurisdiction, and were not regulated as stringently. These different laws provided the impulse for the inception of smaller, underground theatres. One of these was the Little Theatre for 99, so named because the company set up exactly ninety-nine chairs in the small room where performances took place. Of course, as Dr. Day mentioned, many more than ninety-nine people attended performances, standing wherever they could fit, but since the German government did not know about it, they were never investigated.

During the war, the basic principles for Czech stage design were born. Like Burian's theatre a few years earlier, these companies found themselves with few resources to create the different worlds they envisioned for the stage. Designers and directors had to make do with minimalist stage design and creative use of space, and many created "striking effects with the bare minimum of needs" (Day 2009). One could argue that Czech theatremakers became more creative than their Western counterparts during this period for the very reason that they did not have all of the typical means with which to stage their plays. What seemed an inconvenience was in reality a creative boon for Czech designers and directors.

The Communist era provided a whole new set of obstacles with which Czech theatre professionals had to grapple. In the early years of the socialist period, theatres were only allowed to perform socialist realism plays – plays that emphasized the values of the Communist party and the ideal of the content, diligent Czech proletariat. Within these stringent guidelines, theatremakers were naturally stifled creatively; most of the plays themselves left much to be desired dramatically. Often designers were able to spice up even the dullest works of the socialist realism genre with innovative lighting and stage design.

The 1960s was an anomaly in the Communist era. Dubcek's "Socialism with a Human Face" and the loosening of restrictions on the arts allowed innovative and avant-garde playwrights and directors back into the purpose-built playhouses, and out from the underground. However, after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact countries in 1968, the period of normalization began, and plays with a political axe to grind, like those of Vaclav Havel in the early 60s, were no longer permissible in the main theatre houses of the Czech Republic.

In the 70s and 80s, improvised spaces became extremely important for Czech theatremakers. Many people involved in Prague's theatre scene were opposed to the political regime for its censorship and lack of concern for human rights, and were banned from working in the capital as a result. The most famous examples of this phenomenon are the playwright Vaclav Havel and the director Jan Grossman, both of whom had worked with the provocative Divadlo na Zabradli during the 1960s. These theatre people left the city for the regions, strengthening, perhaps paradoxically, the quality of theatre in other cities around the country, like Brno, Hradec Kralove, and Usti, according to Dr.

Day. Brno's Divadlo na Provázku (Theatre on a String), was especially inventive in its use of space. From the late 1960s until the end of the 1980s, they took up residency in a small room in an art gallery. Here, they could arrange the seating and playing area in any configuration they wanted, giving flexibility to the works they performed. Even when they traveled abroad, touring their shows, they requested similarly arranged spaces rather than the opportunity to perform in a purpose-built house.

If theatre companies could find an empty space in which to perform they were very lucky; the use of improvised spaces, and reliance on happenings and events rather than typically advertised and staged shows, made it easier to slip controversial work past the censors. In the latter part of the socialist period in Czechoslovakia, space was not difficult to come by, according to Tomáš Žižka, an expert on site-specific theatre: because the state, and thus the citizens, technically owned everything, it was like “ten years of jungle.” A shop or a factory canteen could be used after-hours to stage a piece of theatre, and there was no private owner to regulate the space or to complain to the authorities.

After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, according to Žižka, the dawn of a capitalist system welcomed many developers into Prague, which changed people's relationship to space. There was no more “ours” in the public realm, but rather a “mine” of private ownership and division of property. Site-specific theatre, a realm of theatre that involves works developed in relation to a particular place, or site, emerged in the Czech Republic as a new tool for activism. People used site-specific methods and spatial relations to protest newly-minted property divisions and the growth of Capitalist commercialism. It

also served as a useful tool for reaction to the post-industrial era, as many factories kept alive by the Communist government were now abandoned on the edges of the city.

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The existence of this legacy of theatrical innovation in the Czech lands was the inspiration for this study. This type of theatrical thinking has continued, whether a conscious reference to predecessors or not. This study surveys four different spaces around the country, each of which seemed to have many characteristics of the found-transformed space. These places are located outside of Prague, the country's traditional cultural capital, in Olomouc, Plzen, Varnsdorf, and Těchonice. At least one of the found-transformed spaces examined here is one to which site-specific theatre is a key ideology. Others use their unique structures out of necessity, and create work that is both inventive and sparse because of their spaces' limitations. Inspiration drawn from the traditions of Burian can be seen in another. These four theatres are not only a product of their creators' brains, but part of a Czech tradition of inventive use of non-traditional and found spaces.

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DIVADLO TRAMTARIE - Olomouc

Divadlo Tramtarie in Olomouc had two separate beginnings. The first was the project of recently-graduated students from Brno's academy of performing arts. They set up shop in Olomouc in the autumn of 2004, with the intent to create a professional theatre

company that would be in residence in the northern Moravian city. They found facilities and student volunteers from Palacky University in Olomouc to help out with everything from rehearsals to organization, and began their work. But after a few short months, the Brno students lost some of their steam. They had little money, and found the independent theatremaking process to be too difficult, so they gave up on Olomouc and went back home. The Olomouc natives who had helped create the initiative, including Petra Němečková, the current business manager of Tramtarie, were disappointed; they had wanted such a theatre company in Olomouc to bring some additional culture to their city. So the Brno students gave the remaining Olomouc students permission to continue using the name Tramtarie, and the second Divadlo Tramtarie was born, officially founded in February 2005 as a non-profit NGO.

According to Němečková, “[the remaining students] didn’t know anything, we didn’t know how, we didn’t have money, it was really...[just an] idea,” but they made it work. The group started out rehearsing and performing in an old theatre building in early 2005, but the price of space rental and utilities was too steep for a group of university students and recent grads to afford with what little income they gathered from their performances. So they moved out of that space, and spent a year working out of another theatrical house, the Divadlo Hudby in Olomouc (Dworakowska 78). This space did not have a resident company, but rather provided facilities and invited various groups to come and perform. However, this space, too, had its limits: Tramtarie was not allowed into the space for rehearsals until the day of their first performance, and because the theatre hosted so many companies, Tramtarie was only allowed to perform five times per

month. After a year in this situation, the company had had enough, and tried to find a new venue for performance.

“[Finding a theatre space] was unreal here, in Olomouc,” according to Němečková. There was no established club or group for independent theatres, so no network like those in larger cities. The Tramtarie team searched everywhere they could, but there was no existing facility that suited their needs. They decided to create their own space, tailored to their wishes at Slovanský Dům, a strip mall-type building not far from the historical center of Olomouc.

The building was originally a house for a German family. Later, the ground floor of the building was used as a dancing hall. Today, the majority of the building is occupied by a Billa, a branch of the Austrian supermarket conglomerate. The rear of the building houses a puppet theatre and a dance studio, both of which are mostly geared towards children. Before Tramtarie leased their portion of the building in 2006, it had been used as a bank, with one large room and three smaller offices attached. Although none of the core group of the theatre company had any experience in construction, they began right away, tearing out the walls, building a stage, lighting booth, and bar area, and wiring the space for theatrical lighting. The space was deconstructed and rebuilt entirely by volunteers, all associated somehow with Tramtarie, with technical consultation from an electrician friend for the more complicated wiring, and some volunteer work by carpenter friends. The building process was completed after less than two months of volunteers working around the clock, and Tramtarie finally christened the space in October 2006.

Although they started with nearly fifty members, today Tramtarie's company consists of about twenty to twenty-five people. The company has an artistic director, Vladjislav Kracik, as well as Němečková, the business manager, and various actors, technical staff, and designers. While their website divides the company into categories and job distinctions, Němečková asserts that everybody in the company helps out with every aspect of production. In addition, Tramtarie sometimes invites other directors, musicians, and scenographers to collaborate with the company. The members of the company are comprised entirely of people from Olomouc and the surrounding area. About half of the members are currently students at the Olomouc's Palace University, while others are recent graduates or just members of the community who are interested in working on independent theatre. None of the actors are paid, and all have full-time jobs on the side, including Němečková and Kracik. The company members' "day jobs" are as varied as television news broadcasting and bricklaying, and many of them commute to the theatre for rehearsals and performances. While this system is working fine for now, Tramtarie's ultimate goal is to be able to generate enough income to pay their actors, thereby preventing a destabilizing turnover of people, and settle down as a professional company.

Because Tramtarie began as a student theatre and most of the company is still affiliated with the university, the composition of the audience is largely university-aged. However, at a recent performance of "I na Batmana Občas Padne Smutek" ("Even Batman Gets Depressed"), the audience was comprised of a large range of people, from high school students to senior citizens, with almost every age demographic in between well-represented. The theatre technically has a capacity of sixty-seven seats, but the

house was filled with nearly eighty audience members, comprised of guests from the city clearly unaffiliated with Tramtarie, in addition to people who seemed to be friends with company members. Tramtarie's appeal is clearly wider than just their circle of friends and acquaintances.

Tramtarie's repertoire is mostly, if not entirely, comprised of original plays written by company members. Many draw on themes relatable to young audiences – love, dating, reality television, and other pop culture references. "Batman," one of the plays written by Artistic Director Kracik, is one such example, a comedic take on the iconic Batman character, and a story about a man who just can't seem to get a girl. The play is not complex or deep, but it was well-acted, and some of the design elements were brilliant. The theatre's facilities are not large, but the company used projection and skrimms to great effect, creating a rooftop in Gotham City on the same stage as a newspaper office in the Czech Republic. Although the space has limits, the company knows the limits, and furthermore has discovered ways to circumnavigate them and create fantastic results.

A large draw for the company seems to be the bar area behind the stage. It is open both before and after the show, for patrons, actors, and technicians alike. The bar area is colorful and comfortable, and one gets the sense that it has become a sort of communal space within the Tramtarie organization; the company gathered post-show for a celebratory toast before dispersing to clean up the stage for the next day's workshop.

Divadlo Tramtarie utilizes the space they have to interesting effect; they took a previously commercial space and created a safehaven for experimental theatre. No purpose-built theatre quite suited their needs or budget, so they were driven to carve their

own space in the Olomouc theatre scene, and made a theatre that, basic facilities and mismatched seats notwithstanding, puts on highly intelligent and inventive work. The exterior of the building appears soullessly commercial, and the interior is a little rough-and-ready, but the way the company uses the space is inspired and inspiring. “It’s interesting because we want to be, or we are, some kind of alternative theatre, and downstairs [is the] supermarket Billa. It’s really a great combination,” Němečková commented. The juxtaposition of the work and the place in which it is performed make Tramtarie a wonderful example of creative use of space.

MOVING STATION - Plzen

Moving Station, the theatrical component of the Johan non-governmental organization of arts, culture, and community development, is a different animal than Tramtarie. Johan was founded in 1998 as a support system for students, artists, and teachers to collaborate on independent creative projects. Since its inception, Johan’s programming has grown to include slam poetry workshops, material and dramaturgical support for amateur and professional theatremakers, art education programs in local schools, an outdoor art gallery, and the Moving Station theatre.

Moving Station began as a workshop site before it was a theatre space in its own right: in 2000, after the city council had abandoned the building, Johan was granted permission to use it for a workshop on site-specific theatre. The workshop, part of an international theatre festival, was called “Moving Station,” and was focused on the methods and techniques of site-specific theatre, according to the organization’s current

director, Roman Černík. Starting in 2001, Johan obtained a lease from the rail company and began a project to transform the space into a center for new culture. “We wanted to make a special space in Plzen [for culture], that everybody would know,” Černík explained.

In 2006, after Johan’s lease on the space was up, the state rail company sold the building to a private owner. Now, the organization rents the space from this landlord, who charges a very low rate, allowing them to spend their resources on cultural projects rather than facilities management. Moving Station has an incredibly low operating budget, which speaks to their dedication to the use of funds for creative work – they jam as much cultural activity into their season as they can, and have put building’s renovation aside for the moment in favor of promoting artistic endeavors. Johan applied to various governmental and municipal funds to get the money to repair the old station’s roof, a project that took almost 4 million Kč and months of volunteer work in 2003. Volunteers installed water lines and electricity to make the building more habitable and to prepare it to be used as a permanent space. However, because of a lack of sufficient funds, the building still is not heated, and so can only be used seasonally.

Moving Station does not have one theatre company attached to it, but rather opens up the space for independent performances. Amateur theatre groups are often inspired by the many and varied spaces in Moving Station, and it is “our role to support them,” according to Černík. Nevertheless, there are a few groups who use the space often and have as a result become unofficially affiliated with Moving Station. These groups include “Evrybaby,” a women’s theatre group, a street theatre group, and “Tyan,” an independent theatre group run by the people who helped to start the Moving Station project. Johan has

an arrangement with its volunteers, whereby if a member of a performance or artistic group works with Moving Station in some administrative capacity, their group can use the space for their own productions. Because of this, the artists-in-residence at Moving Station have become sort of like a family; Černík describes the members of “Tyan” as the parents of the theatre, with the members of “Evrybaby” comprising the younger generation of theatremakers.

Because they do not have one permanent company, Moving Station also does not have many permanent staff or technicians. In the organization there are four part-time workers, in addition to Černík, who work at the office. When necessary, Johan can also hire some technicians, who happen to be friends of Moving Station, who provide their services for a fairly low rate. The organization seems to be able to keep its operating costs down by virtue of its good reputation in both the theatre community and the wider Plzen community.

Moving Station’s audience is comprised usually of friends of whatever group is currently performing, as well as people from the Johan organization, and some guests from the community. Younger people, mostly university students, occasionally populate the audiences, although they are typically unaffiliated with the organization.

The theatre is located in the old Southern Train Station in Plzen, in the West of Bohemia, a short walk from the city’s historical center. The railway station building was built in 1904, when it was a transportation hub for workers from the regions surrounding Plzen. The rails from this station house extend in one direction to Nuremburg, and on another line towards Munich. At the turn of the century, and continuing into the middle of the century, Plzen was a huge center for heavy industry. The many factories and the

brewery in the city's center and outskirts drew workers from around the city, and from as far away as the German border towns. Additionally, students commuting to Plzen's University of South Bohemia used the railway station regularly. The building was closed in 1918, according to Černík, and "[has] been abandoned since 1986" (Dworakowska 86), when a newer station was built across the street. The original was never torn down, and remained unused for years.

At first glance, the building looks as if it is uninhabited: heavy iron gates with locks cover all the doors, the paint is peeling off the sides of the buildings, and all of the windows in the upper level are broken, if not missing. Still, it was clearly a beautiful building at one time, and flashes of its former glory peek through the peeling paint and old posters that cover the doors.

Inside, the building does not look much better off. Piles of wood and scrap metal line the walls, left over from a halted renovation attempt. There is dust on every surface downstairs, while pigeon feces cover the floors and stairwells of the upper levels. The building is huge, with at least three floors and spaces of varying sizes where performances and exhibitions have taken place over Johan's nearly ten-year history in the building. However, nothing in the interior is completely renovated except the bar area. The bar is sparsely furnished but comfortable, the only unchanging space in the whole building. The rest of the building is a maze of cluttered hallways, stairwells, and rooms full of old scenic materials and art supplies. Lights are turned on not from a wall switch, but by plugging their cords into strategically placed power strips.

Upstairs, a few well-lit rooms have been appropriated for use by visual artists. Johan provides studio spaces for local professional artists to work, and the building is

often used as a gallery for displaying the work and an area where the community can come together to discuss art in an open forum. But in the visual arts arena, Černík is adamant that Johan is not a venue for “community art,” but rather one where professional artists and community patrons can come together.

Although the space is bare, one can see the enormous potential for site-specific theatrical work. The dark nooks and crannies lend themselves to provocative exploratory and experimental work, while the post-industrial feel of the whole building adds a layer of mystery and a pulsating need for vibrant work to inject the space with energy. The underground floor is a labyrinth of rooms and hallways with appealingly bare walls that ache to be covered with screens, video projections, and fabric. One room, an old waiting room, is on the docket to be converted into a sort of blackbox space so slightly more traditional performances can also be produced in the building.

Moving Station is the only one of the spaces discussed here that follows the principles of “site-specific” rather than “transformed-space” theatres. In reality, although many groups perform in the space, it can’t exactly be called a theatre. It is unclear whether future renovations to the space will change this categorization, but as it stands right now, Moving Station is a perfect example of a found space, or as Peter Brook calls it, an “empty space”: a blank canvas ready and waiting for any artist with enough creativity to explore it.

DIVADLO TĚCHONICE - Těchonice

Ten years ago, Petr Oukropec and Marketa Oukropcová moved to Těchonice, a small village in South Bohemia. Both had been heavily involved in the arts scene in Prague (she as a production manager for site-specific theatre, he as a member of a film production company), and they wanted to move away, as they put it, to find some refuge from the sometimes-stressful energy of the capital. The house they bought had once been a pub in the town, and was very much a fixer-upper; every building on the property, which includes their house, as well as a large storage building and a barn, was in poor repair.

The Oukropcový had moved to Těchonice for a quiet village life, but the people in the town had other plans. According to Oukropcová, when they first arrived, “people from the village came to meet us, and they said, ‘You know, people used to play theatre here in this building, and maybe you could also do it.’” At first, the couple was reluctant; they didn’t want to be seen as the patronizing people who came from Prague bearing theatre and culture to unintelligent locals. However, there is a long-standing tradition of theatre in the South Bohemian villages: every other village has a sort of community theatre company who puts on performances for the whole town. After some persuasion on the part of their neighbors, the Oukropcový decided to organize a theatre performance with the village.

The theatre performances were originally scheduled to coincide with St. Jacob’s day, a church festival in May that is traditionally associated with song, dance and community celebration. The first year of Divadlo Těchonice’s existence, the actors performed in a small pub hall in the center of town under Oukropec’s direction.

Rehearsals took place in a room in the Oukropcový house all through the spring. When the performances arrived, the house was packed for every performance, with friends, family, and other people from the village barely fitting into the room. The production had almost no publicity, and yet they were filled past capacity.

After such a success, it became clearly necessary for Divadlo Těchonice to expand their premises. The Oukropcový had a barn on their property that had been sitting unused since they moved to the village. Unlike many of their neighbors, they were not farmers, and did not keep any animals, except for their family dog. With no better ideas for the use of this empty space than for community theatre, they decided to convert the barn into a performance hall.

With help from members of the community, including a carpenter and an electrician who also lives in Těchonice, they set to work. The group built a stage with fly space for storing scenery backdrops, several tiers of stationary seats, and designed and built a system of partially removable seating, which could be rearranged to suit a given production's needs. In the balcony area at the back of the house, they built two storage areas for costumes, and they converted a former icehouse attached to the barn into a dressing room for the actors. In later years, they began to renovate the building's roof. Today only half of it has been redone; the progress of the remainder of the project is contingent upon the money made from ticket sales for the next few productions.

The yearly productions are a community effort. Neighbors and friends work on every aspect of the production, from scene building and sewing costumes to organizing the post-performance food, drink, and entertainment, to providing accommodation from actors who live out of town and must stay the night in Těchonice after rehearsals.

Everybody in the surrounding area wants to be involved: sometimes strangers from the community approach Oukropec in the bank or in the supermarket, asking to be involved in the next production, as an actor or as a volunteer. Children from the village also play in the theatre, as small parts and even as the lead roles in three recent productions. Luckily, many people in the area have skills that have been essential for the production's growth: an electrician who lives in the village was involved from day one, and in recent years a professional costume designer who lives in the area has come on board to help with productions. At the moment, there are approximately 120 people involved in the organization. Not all of them are directly involved every production, but all give their support by volunteering time and energy, or at the very least moral support, to the performances.

Rehearsals for the yearly show begin in January. Actors, many of whom are old-timers in the theatre by now, some of whom are new talent, come to Těchonice to rehearse in the Oukropcová house once or twice a week. The number of rehearsal days is kept to a minimum because everyone in the company has a day job, and many of them live considerable distances from the village. Rehearsals continue through the spring until May, when the year's first performances take place. The company performs nine to ten times over the course of two weekends, and then goes on hiatus for the summer. In the fall, usually in September, they perform again, once more running for only two weeks before concluding for the year. Every single performance is filled to capacity, with 300 audience members every show, but Oukropec is adamant that the theatre company will never expand its performance schedule; they are an amateur company, and if they were to begin to put extra pressure or financial incentive into the production, it would drastically

change their mode of production for the worse: “We have to play only those limited performances to love it. [With any] more, its like work,” he says.

Divadlo Těchonice is registered as a non-governmental organization, a not-for-profit group that is eligible to apply for government or regional funding if necessary. The entire intake from ticket sales goes into the budget of the following year’s production. Sometimes, the group uses part of their budget to purchase new equipment for the theatre, or to organize post-show games and activities for the children in the audience. Neither the actors nor the Oukropcový are paid; Divadlo Těchonice is a community theatre, not a professional one. And local community is one of the most important aspects of the theatre. Every season, the company puts on a performance especially for the local school children. This performance serves as a dress rehearsal for the actors, but also as a way in which to encourage children to love and be involved in theatre.

While their actors and technicians may be mostly amateur, their productions are far from it. The stage is small, but each year anywhere from thirty to eighty actors take part in the production. Some years, the plays are more geared toward adults (while still family-friendly), like a recent feminist-tinged musical about a woman who takes control of her life and happiness. In other years the plays have been “total fairy tale,” according to Oukropec, like one play where animals take over a family’s home. Oukropec writes the plays each year, adapting fairy tales, folk stories, and even classic plays from Shakespeare and the Čapek brothers to fit into the company’s hour-long time frame. The plays rarely exceed this length because often two shows play in a night, and also because many of their audiences are composed of parents with their children. The works are sometimes just dramatized versions of well-loved stories, as with a recent production of

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's book *The Little Prince*. In that production, the company brought the illustrations and magic of the children's book to life on their small stage. Sometimes, as with a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, they are adapted, in this case transferring the story's setting from Padua to the circus, complete with a circus ring, tightrope, and trained animals. The quality of the design and technical elements, as well as the theatrical quality of all the shows is extraordinarily high, especially considering the limited resources and time constraints under which the company performs.

After ten years, Divadlo Těchonice's reputation is such that their entire season regularly sells out after the box office has been open for only two days. With 300 seats in the house and about twenty performances, they draw more than 5000 audience members every year. When reserving tickets, patrons rarely inquire as to the nature of the play that will be performed: "They don't care," says Oukropcová, they just know that the production will be wonderful. Some people even call up to three months in advance to ensure that they will have a seat. It is difficult for the theatre company to accommodate the huge demand for their performances.

Still, although they have many returning audience members every year, the most interesting thing for the Oukropcový is the first impression people have of their space: "you don't imagine what can happen here, [in this] small village, small house," says Oukropec. Once people have experienced the small theatre in tiny Těchonice, however, they often run to tell their friends. What started as a small village theatre now draws audience members from as far away as Prague.

Těchonice is an interesting example of this kind of found-transformed space, because while the space is rough and was abandoned before being given a new life by

this theatre company, the works put on there are not avant-garde or “experimental,” like most of the theatrical work performed in the other Czech spaces, or in the TransEuropeHalles spaces. In the case of Těchonice, one can see the potential for found-transformed space to transcend the genre of “new” theatre, and for the space to in fact remind more of folk traditions than new methods of theatremaking.

KULTURNÍ DŮM ROZKROK - Varnsdorf

The inclusion of Kulturní Dům Rozkrok in this paper is slightly tenuous. While it is a space that was once used for non-cultural purposes and has now been transformed and appropriated for the arts, it takes a much different approach to the project than the other spaces examined previously: they list theatre among its cultural projects, but music seems to be the main focus of the organization’s activities. It was also much more difficult to obtain information about this space than the others investigated, as few of the managers of the space work full-time in Varnsdorf. Still, the building has a distinctive vibe: KD Rozkrok, or just Rozkrok, as those in the area know the space, seems to be focused on a certain type of alternative culture.

KD Rozkrok is located in an old inn and pub in Varnsdorf, a post-industrial North Bohemian town not far from the German border. The name “Rozkrok,” which literally means “crotch,” was derived from the building’s location at a fork in the road near the city limits. Michael Šatník, a young resident of Varnsdorf, bought the building in 2003 and with very little trouble converted it into a cultural space. “The Kulturní Dům

Rozkrok [NGO] was established at the end of 2005” (Dworakowska 110) to lend legitimacy to the group’s activities and existence.

KD Rozkrok has a tiny staff – two main managers, others who deal with musical and theatrical bookings, and then the occasional help of volunteers. None of the people who work at the KD earn money from it. Some have other jobs, and some are still in school, like Martin Musilek, the person in charge of engaging theatre performers to come to the KD. Rozkrok is mostly used for musical performances, rather than theatre. They bring in rock musicians, hardcore musicians, and singer-songwriters, with the best-attended performances those by local bands. The KD also offers the space to friends of the organization for private parties: people can bring in bands for birthday and other celebrations for free, as long as the KD’s facilities are not damaged in any way.

The theatre performances at Rozkrok are mostly “independent theatres...or usually it’s like theatre for younger people,” according to Musilek. They come from Prague, Brno, Hradec Kralove, and also other cities around the country. A few times, Rozkrok has tried to organize an evening of theatre aimed at children, but because of poor attendance and little community interest, they no longer sponsor these kinds of programs. In years past, Rozkrok has been involved in the “Velka Inventura” theatre festival sponsored by Nova Sit, sponsoring performances in Varnsdorf in conjunction with other theatres across the country.

However, it is easier, admits Musilek, to bring in musical performers than theatre groups. Bands come with all the equipment they need: drum kits, guitars, amplifiers, and cables. “We don’t have technical things for theatre. So always we have to choose some very simple performance,” he explained. Difficulties also arise because many different

people regularly use the space. Once, during the opening moments of a theatre performance, a band member tried to barge into the hall to get some instrument or amp he needed for a rehearsal.

The alternative reputation of the organization can also work against it when trying to draw in an audience for theatrical performances. Many older people, who make up the majority of the community in Varnsdorf, “don’t like new theatre, they don’t understand the performance,” according to Musilek. The established professional theatre house in the city center is the mainstream location for performance in the city, and if anyone were to want to see theatre, they would go there, not to Rozkrok.

The space looks quite unobtrusive from the outside, apart from the jarring orange color, which, while less than aesthetically pleasing, is certainly distinctive. Inside, one half of the ground floor remains as a pub rented and operated by an older woman, while the other half serves as a performance space. Little cartoons with profane speech bubbles cover the walls of this room. One shows a cartoon man asking another “Do you masturbate?” while the other man responds, “If you ask me another question I’m going to kill you.” Upstairs, one room serves as both an office and a bedroom for visiting performers and some squatter friends of the KD. Another section of the upstairs currently serves as a makeshift artist’s studio, although Musilek, who has been away from the organization in recent months, says that there were plans at one time to turn that space into a small stage for more intimate theatrical performances. Another, smaller room that is a glorified part of the stairwell, has been turned into a small čajovna (tea room), with pillows and colorfully painted walls.

The performance space downstairs is in poor condition. The stage is broken in some places, and much of the house's musical equipment is broken. Bands who are allowed to use the space for rehearsals rarely clean up, and equipment is often missing. The hardcore shows that often take place at Rozkrok have caused some material damage, and also have resulted in a lot of noise complaints from the people who live in the surrounding neighborhood.

Rozkrok's entire niche is that of a non-mainstream, young scene. The name itself is provocative, and the club is most popular among those of the 16-45 year old set. It is very clear to an outside observer that the KD was the project of friends who wanted their own cultural space within the rundown city of Varnsdorf. It seems to be serving just that purpose: at a recent concert, all of the attendees knew each other, and the bar area felt like a private party rather than a public show. There is a specific community drawn to Rozkrok, a very different demographic than that drawn to places like the more traditional theatres mentioned previously. At KD Rozkrok, theatre is not the main focus as it is in the other spaces, and so it cannot entirely be evaluated in the same breath. However, the example of KD Rozkrok serves as a useful example of other cultural projects in transformed spaces currently in place in the Czech Republic.

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After several weeks of study and careful examination of these four spaces, it became apparent that there were no clear parallels that could be drawn across all of the different kinds of theatrical projects in found-transformed spaces in the Czech Republic.

Each of these spaces simultaneously fits within and breaks from the criteria for found-transformed theatre spaces. Moving Station, while a perfect fit in the “found” category, loses some credibility when one tries to call it a “transformed” space. KD Rozkrok, while creating an independent space out of an inherently non-theatrical building, is not exactly a theatre space. Tramtarie’s space, while a creative construction and alternative use of a previously commercial building, is not quite rough enough to be thought of as a “found” space. And Těchonice, whose space itself fits the definition perfectly, does not otherwise conform to the trend of using these found-transformed spaces for “experimental” theatre works.

Perhaps it is a good thing that there is no cookie-cutter example for the trend of found-transformed theatrical spaces in the Czech Republic. These four theatres were originally chosen at random, because of their distribution over the country and a little background knowledge about each space, yet each of these four theatres, in fact, fits into the found-transformed theatre model in a different way.

All of these theatre spaces were born out of some kind of necessity. One group needed to fit a larger audience (Těchonice), one needed a more affordable space (Tramtarie), one needed a safe space for their alternative project (Rozkrok), and another found the space and developed a need to use it afterwards (Moving Station). But while each came to their respective spaces for a different reason, each has developed their project with a high level of innovation. Each has settled into its space, figured out its idiosyncrasies, and begun to use them to their advantage.

This adaptability and innovation has been seen in this region for centuries. It is unclear whether there is anything distinctively “Czech” about these projects, but they are

certainly not without precedent in Czech history and culture. The legacy of Burian can be seen in the site-specific projects at Moving Station and the design of at least one of Tramtarie's shows, while the tradition of community theatre holds strong in Těchonice. Even Rozkrok, the black sheep of the group, has a mode of production similar to those of the National Revival-era Šantany. As Dr. Day explains, theatre in the Czech lands is not only a respectable intellectual and cerebral pursuit, but also one with strong ties to the regional folklore and traditions that predated Hapsburg rule. These regional theatres continue this longstanding tradition of smart, edgy, beautifully-executed work outside of the capital city; "the "provinces" are giving Prague a run for its money" (Dworakowska and Pohořelá 117).

In the history of Czech theatre, many innovations came about because of a need to utilize space creatively. The work produced in these concert halls, churches, and other found spaces reflected important changes in the socio-political climate of the times. These theatres, while perhaps not always actively responding to the recent changes in Czech society, have formed because of it – in many cases a need to carve out their own private space in a newly capitalistic society dominated by private ownership and individualistic ("mine") tendencies.

It is also worthy of note that so much of these theatres' growth and acquisition of space was dependent on the work of volunteers. From an outsider's perspective, it is difficult to speak with certainty, but there is something about the Czech mentality that seems to breed helping one's neighbors and friends in any way possible. Perhaps this is a relic of the not-so-distant Communist era, when very few people knew who could be trusted, and friends of friends were a more reliable source of services than strangers.

Perhaps this is reading too much into a wonderful cultural phenomenon. Either way, the volunteerism involved in the creation of these theatrical spaces has been vital to the role these theatres play in their communities.

These impulses to create and work within the confines of a given space have been extant in Czech society, out of necessity or innovation, for centuries. These four theatrical projects have taken the idea of found-transformed theatrical spaces and applied them within their own national context to create some of the most inspiring theatres and projects I have ever encountered.

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