

IVAN VYSKOČIL: A LIFE-LONG COMMITMENT TO THE ALTERNATIVE

Michal Čunderle and Alexander Komlosi

Writer, performer, psychologist, and teacher Ivan Vyskočil was born in Prague in 1929. He was one of the leading figures in the Czech small-forms theatre movement in the 1960s.¹ Over the past two years, Vyskočil has received a host of awards and honors, perhaps more than any other figure in the arts in the Czech Republic during such a short period. He himself has jokingly remarked that these distinctions were given to him for “surviving until eighty years old.” In truth, the accolades have come in acknowledgment of the significant contribution Vyskočil has made to Czech theatre culture. He has received an award for his contribution to Czech theatre from the Czech Ministry of Culture; a Thalie for Unique Contribution to Theatre; the Josef Hlávka Medal; the Humanist of the Year Award; a Presidential Plaque, and more. This sudden flood of official recognition is in contrast with the way Vyskočil and his work were often spurned by the official state apparatus in the past, and it highlights his life-long commitment to the alternative in theatre, education, and life.

Vyskočil's Education and the Reduta

Vyskočil studied in the theatre department of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU). After graduating in 1952 in acting with a minor in directing, he decided not to pursue work in the theatre. Certainly he had no desire to enter the rigid network of repertory theatres steeped in official Communist ideology. He made this choice because, as he himself states, “I studied acting. I didn't study to become ‘an actor’ . . . I wanted to cognize.”² For these reasons, he went on to study psychology and philosophy at Charles University. One of his teachers was Jan Patočka, one of the foremost Czech philosophers of the time.³ Vyskočil only returned to the theatre after his “non-theatrical” studies, when he began performing in a wine-tavern (Vyskočil goes so far as to call it “a dive”) named Reduta.

At the time, Reduta was completely off the official cultural radar (for that matter, there was almost no culture in Communist Czechoslovakia

other than official culture).⁴ It was at Reduta that Vyskočil and Jiří Suchý—a friend from youth who would eventually become a popular singer, song-writer, musician, theatre practitioner, and co-founder of Divadlo Semafor—began performing “text-appeals,” as they themselves dubbed their performances.⁵ During the 1957–58 season, text-appeals suddenly became the hit of intellectual and artistic Prague. These literary-musical evenings, which Jan Roubal would later compare to events at Café Cino and Café La MaMa in New York, were ostensibly simple.⁶ Formally, text-appeals looked like poor literary cabaret in a wine tavern: the spectators sat at their tables and drank. Vyskočil cajoled the public, reading, telling, or improvising his bizarre and absurd short stories.⁷ Once in a while, he and Suchý would chat. Suchý sang his original songs; his music was inspired by jazz, blues, and rock ‘n’ roll, and his lyrics drew on avant-garde traditions of the 1920s and 30s such as poetism and surrealism. Both the stories and the songs were rooted in playing with language. Their style pitted a playful and sultry nonsense against a dark and chilling absurdity. The small stage at the Reduta left no room “for any activity apart from the activity of the imagination.”⁸

Vyskočil’s and Suchý’s text-appeals attracted a large public as well as the wary attention of the political regime—and not solely because of their artistic merit. The significance of these “wine-tavern experiments” lay equally in their ethic. Vyskočil and Suchý performed in front of a public with their own stories and songs and actively cultivated an open dialogue with the audience, something rare at that time. They did not refer to contemporary life directly (the censors would not have allowed that), nor did they hide a message in between the lines.

What they did offer audiences, however, was an experience of honest, palpable free-play—a world seemingly detached from the oppressive life outside. The post-war years in former Czechoslovakia were a dark period characterized by hard-line Communism, imprisonment, and repression. It was precisely the experience of freedom-made-manifest that gave audience members what they were consciously or unconsciously yearning for, what was painfully absent during the totalitarian regime. Thus, evenings at the Reduta served an important social and therapeutic function. They were a revelation and beacon of hope in a dark time. Yet they were not escapism. They were a profound process of (self-)understanding. It had not been in vain that Vyskočil had studied psychology and philosophy in addition to acting.

The significance of Reduta to Czech theatre, however, rests primarily in that it helped initiate the so-called “small-forms” theatre movement.⁹ Václav Havel states that Vyskočil “is inseparable from the history of small theatres in the 1960s. Vyskočil was one of the godfathers of that movement.”¹⁰ This movement, which began at the end of the fifties and experienced its hey-day in the “golden sixties,” was the most fertile current of modern, post-war Czech theatre. It was during this era that a host of small-scale, off-Broadway-type theatre and performance spaces were born, such as Theatre on the Balustrade, Semafor, the Drama Club, Rococo, Paravan, Evening Brno, and Studio Ypsilon.

Theatre on the Balustrade

Encouraged by their success at Reduta, Vyskočil, Suchý and their colleagues founded the Theatre on the Balustrade in the center of Prague in 1958. This move was a significant step in expanding and structuring their irregular performances at Reduta. At the Balustrade, Vyskočil continued his theatrical experiments “focused on the actor-audience relationship: the appeal of the performance was primarily through its performers, and central to the appeal was the creation of a relaxed, playful mood between performers and spectators.”¹¹

Vyskočil’s reputation flourished at the Balustrade. A talented constellation of actors, singers, and musicians gathered at the theatre to craft and present their own original pieces. Compositionally, these pieces resembled revues. Like at the Reduta, they were characterized by word-play. In contrast, the subject matter of these performances made more obvious reference to contemporary life. The Balustrade attracted critical attention, albeit inconsistent in its praise.

Vyskočil and Suchý firmly established themselves as writers, as did Václav Havel. Creatively and intellectually, the Balustrade was at the forefront of the small-forms theatre movement. Vyskočil remained at the Balustrade as an actor and artistic director until 1962, during which time he co-authored five plays and planted the seeds of so-called “appellative theatre,” whose primary proponents became Václav Havel and director Jiří Grossmann. Havel describes the uniqueness of Vyskočil’s appellative approach:

And without necessarily being intellectuals, perceptive members of

the audience felt that even the most grotesque escapade by Vyskočil touched something essential in them, the genuine drama and the genuine ineffability of life, things as fundamental as despair, empty hope, bad luck, fate, misfortune, groundless joy.¹²

Non-theatre (*Nedivadlo*)

Not satisfied by the institutionalized structure of the Balustrade, Vyskočil returned to Reduta, doing everything in his power to make Non-theatre as small an institution as possible, ideally not one at all (hence the negative prefix in the name). Non-theatre was rooted in rehearsing, searching, and experimenting. At the Reduta, Vyskočil was once again at the source of his original aesthetic and ethic. He developed new text-appeals with a greater number of authorial partners, or “co-players.” These included: the passionate improviser Pavel Bošek, with whom Vyskočil formed a dynamic duo until Bošek’s death in 1980; translator and actor Leoš Suchařípa; and future émigré author Josef Škvorecký. Non-theatre gradually became known as a progressive alternative stage.

Apart from its contribution to the small-forms movement and appellative theatre, Vyskočil’s Non-theatre (1963–1990) had other significant influences on the development of modern Czech theatre. It profoundly developed narrative theatre, theatre *in statu nascendi*, theatre emerging from an authentic encounter, theatre as collaborative work, and theatre as open dramatic play. Vyskočil’s Non-theatre was a laboratory like Grotowski’s. Like Grotowski, Vyskočil also advocated “poor theatre,” but he privileged joyous poverty over venerable asceticism.

Vyskočil’s Hey-day During the “Golden Sixties”

The 1960s in Czechoslovakia were a period of liberalization and rich cultural and economic growth known as the “golden sixties.” During this decade, Vyskočil’s radius of cultural activity rapidly expanded. He worked in radio as co-moderator with Jiří Suchý and Jan Werich and on a series of “radio text-appeals” with Emanuel Frynta. Czech National Radio produced three of his radio plays. In the 1960s, Vyskočil began performing in film as well, most notably in one of the masterpieces of the Czech New Wave, Jan Němec’s “A



Ivan Vyskočil (right) with Eva Holubová and Petr Lébl, Theatre on the Balustrade, Prague

Report on the Party and the Guests” (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966).

It was also during the 1960s that Vyskočil made his name as a prose writer. He was an articulate storyteller searching for identity in tense situations. His style was characterized by a thoroughly Kafkaesque absurdity and a fascination with playing with narrative. He published three books drawing on his work at Reduta, the Baulstrade, and Non-theatre in terms of content and form. Now more progressively-minded, the critical public welcomed his prose enthusiastically, calling his work a compliment to Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, or Věra Linhartová.¹³ Vyskočil continued his work as a psychologist by working with troubled youth and collaborating with Ferdinand Knobloch, a Czech psychiatrist who would emigrate to Toronto in 1970.

In the spring of 1968, when forces of the Warsaw pact occupied Czechoslovakia, Vyskočil was at his prime at thirty-nine years of age. His work was difficult to classify: he was an unmistakable original, too bohemian, creative, and playful to be “just an intellectual,” and too meditative and educated to be “just an artist.” Yet this made his place in Czechoslovakian culture unique. Vyskočil was seen as the prototype of a provocative experimenter whose range of activity unconventionally encompassed theatre, literature, and psychology, and was always outside the mainstream.

Vyskočil was forced to leave Reduta at the end of the 1960s. The occupation of Czechoslovakia meant that the brief period of freethinking “socialism with a human face” of the Prague Spring had been turned on its head. Normalization, a twenty-year period of Communist repression that would last from 1969 to the Velvet Revolution, dug in its heels.

Vyskočil Develops His Pedagogical Approach

Once again, a rigid, totalitarian Communist regime ushered in an era of somberness, repression, and despair. Normalization meant total censorship of news media, elimination of the freedom of speech, denial of free political assembly, and de facto one-party rule. Vyskočil, like many others, was severely restricted from performing in public, publishing, etc.¹⁴ For some time, he was forbidden from performing his Non-theatre in Prague, so he toured it across the country.¹⁵

These dark times did bring Vyskočil one positive opportunity. In 1972, he became a teacher at and the director of the Literary-Dramatic

Department at the People's Art School for the Working Man (now the Jaroslav Ježek Conservatory). Hidden under this obscure socialistic title was a three-year study program in theatre, focused primarily on acting. The studies were both practical and theoretical, and boldly competed with contemporary university-level art schools. Its students were those who did not want to go to official schools, or were often not accepted for ideological reasons, and thus had to work. Graduating from the program led almost nowhere, which meant that the students who regularly came to afternoon and evening classes were highly motivated, often very experienced and disciplined individuals genuinely interested in studying for its own sake. These were ideal students for Vyskočil's educational ethos. Vyskočil's experiences with alternative approaches to theatre, and, perhaps more importantly, the questions that emerged from these experiences, were themes he continued to explore through Non-theatre and his developing educational approach. In this sense, the Non-theatre laboratory was complimented by an educational (academic) laboratory—a "Non-school." Vyskočil gradually gathered together a talented team of teachers and began conceiving and experimenting with studies in "authorial acting" as a path of personality education and cultivation. He would have eighteen years to develop his pedagogical philosophy and approach until the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

After the Velvet Revolution, Vyskočil was invited to teach at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU), founding the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy in 1992 and the Institute for the Research and Study of Authorial Acting in 2001. He also returned to public life, now a cultural legend. His books were reissued. His life and work is reflected upon in numerous interviews, articles, books, and documentary films. Due mostly to his deteriorating hearing, Vyskočil ended his Non-theatre activity in 1990.

During his tenure at the People's Art School, Vyskočil began to perceive cultivating a "fitness" for acting, performing, and play as one of the fundamental creative and self-actualizing possibilities of the human being. "Acting" became less and less important to him as art, as something artificial (*artificium*). Instead, he explored acting as "public activity" (from teaching to politics) and as a natural aspect of being human.¹⁶ At DAMU, Vyskočil was able to pursue these investigations more fully, arguably giving birth to Vyskočil's single greatest contribution to education, acting training, and personality development, a psychosomatic discipline he created that is known as (Inter)

acting with the Inner Partner.¹⁷

(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner

The keystone of Vyskočil's pedagogical approach gradually became (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner.¹⁸ Vyskočil developed this unique psychosomatic solo improvisational discipline from his knowledge of drama, psychology, education, and—most importantly—his experiences from Reduta and Non-theatre.¹⁹ It starts from an experience familiar to all: talking to or interacting with oneself. Vyskočil explains:

The basis of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is the experience and experiencing of action/acting (speaking, playing) with yourself (with your inner partner or partners), as a rule, on your own. After some self-reflection, each one of you should be able to recall the experience of talking to yourself or playing on your own with yourself. (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is about studying and learning how to engage in similarly authentic, spontaneous, playful, and co-playful



Ivan Vyskočil, 1962

acting (behavior and experiencing); generating this behavior in public in the presence and attention of “spectators” in a situation of “public solitude.”²⁰

Vyskočil eschews pegging (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner in one hole. He insists it is neither a method nor a technique—nothing “ready-made” for “deployment” for a particular use.²¹ Instead, he states that it is a methodology of study that can open up numerous possibilities and opportunities for a student, for example: as a path of self-discovery, self-acceptance and self-realization; as a means of developing psychosomatic fitness for creative communication, thus “a more profound, ‘conductive’ empathy”; and as a process of studying the principles of dramatic play.²² (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner was profoundly meaningful in the totalitarian society in which it was conceived because it offered an alternative mode of existence where one could experience and explore individuality, joy, and personal freedom. It has found similar significance in today’s consumerism-dominated society.

In the Czech Republic, (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner and Vyskočil’s holistic pedagogical approach have permeated cultural and educational life. In the performing arts, it has infused the work of luminaries like director Petr Lébl, actor-improviser Jaroslav Dušek, visual artist Petr Nikl, writer Jiří Kratochvíl, playwright and singer Přemysl Rut, and actress Jaroslava Pokorná, not to mention a younger generation of theatre and performance artists in the Czech Republic and internationally. It has been integrated into the programs of a number of higher educational institutions, including Charles University, Masaryk University, the University of Southern Bohemia, Tomas Bata University, and the Theatre Academy Helsinki, in addition to its original home at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Workshops in the discipline have been given internationally since 2001, and Vyskočil has trained numerous “assistants” who continue to develop the discipline.

The Lasting Resonances of Vyskočil’s Vision

Summarizing the import of Vyskočil’s work, Václav Havel writes in *Disturbing the Peace*:

He brought several important elements into the theatre: first,

intellectual humor; second, an entirely original fantasy; third, learning (he had studied philosophy and psychology); fourth, a sense of the absurd; and fifth, a completely unconventional aesthetic impulse. He managed to link playfulness with obsession, and philosophy with humor. His need to push a playful idea to absurd extremes, and constantly to be trying something new, was infectious.²³

Vyskočil has been a remarkable and distinctive figure in the Czech post-war theatre whose life-long commitment to the alternative in the theatre and beyond has finally received commensurate recognition.

NOTES

1. Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizďala* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990): 43.

2. Ivan Vyskočil, "Úvodem," in *Hic Sunt Leones (O Autorském Herectví)*, ed. Michal Čunderle (Praha: Akademie múzických umění v Praze & Ústav pro výzkum a studium autorského herectví, 2003), 9.

3. In 1963, Patočka wrote the first serious analysis of Vyskočil's work, which until then had met with skepticism, thus attracting the attention of theatre and literary critics of the time. See Jan Patočka, "Svět Ivana Vyskočila," *Časopis Divadlo* 10 (1963): 70–73.

4. Reduta still operates in the center of Prague, now primarily catering to tourists.

5. Text appeal: *à la* sex appeal, or appealing and attracting by and through text.

6. Jan Roubal, "Dvě alternativní tendence Nediadla Ivana Vyskočila," in *Hra Školou—Dvakrát o Ivanu Vyskočilovi*, eds. Michal Čunderle and Jan Roubal (Praha: Nakladatelství Studia Ypsilon, 2001), 174.

7. The best of these text-appeals appeared in Vyskočil's book *After All, Flying Is Easy (Vždyt přece létat je snadné, 1963)*.

8. Michal Čunderle, "Ivan Vyskočil—Cesty ke hře," in *Hra Školou—Dvakrát o Ivanu Vyskočilovi*, 53.

9. Burian describes the Reduta's role in Czech theatre as "the seedbed of the 'small-forms,' assemblage type of production," which he characterizes as "a looser assemblage or montage of literature and music, consisting of 'small forms' such as stories, anecdotes, songs, poetry, mime, and dialogue." Jarka Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 116.

10. Havel, 46.

11. Burian, 118.

12. Havel, 52.

13. For comparisons between Vyskočil and Kundera, see Jiří Kratochvíl, “Červen je zvláštní měsíc,” *Časopis Národní* 3, no. 4 (2008): 75–76, and for comparisons between Vyskočil and Lindhartová, see Helena Kosková, *Hledání ztracené generace* (Prague: H&H, 1996), 118–138. Both these authors make marginal comparisons between Vyskočil and Hrabal.

14. It was at this time that Vyskočil contracted tuberculosis. His life was saved by Soviet antibiotics, but the tragic side effect was gradual hearing loss, after which Vyskočil required a hearing aid.

15. Roubal, 172.

16. Parallel interest in the extra-theatrical significance of performance developed at approximately the same time in the West, through the work of Richard Schechner and the field of performance studies, for example.

17. Translated from the Czech, *dialogické jednání* or *dialogické jednání s vnitřím partnerem*. The Czech noun “jednání” can also be translated into English as behaving, behavior, conduct, action, interaction. So, other translations of “dialogické jednání,” could be “Dialogical Behavior”; “Dialogical Action”; “Dialogical Action with the Inner Partner”; or “Interacting Dialogically with the Inner Partner.”

18. This is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. For more information about the discipline, including how it is studied, please see <http://www.ivanvyskocil.cz>, or contact the authors for books and articles about the discipline available in English.

19. Ivan Vyskočil, “Rozprava o dialogickém jednání” in *Dialogické jednání s vnitřním partnerem*, ed. Michal Čunderle (Brno: Janáčková akademie múzických umění v Brně, 2005), 13.

20. Ivan Vyskočil, “Dialogické jednání (heslo k autorizaci),” in *Hic Sunt Leones (O Autorském Herectví)*, ed. Michal Čunderle (Praha: Akademie múzických umění v Praze & Ústav pro výzkum a studium autorského herectví, 2003), 176.

21. Each person who has studied and teaches the discipline has his or her own understanding of what it is about. For example, Slavíková agrees that it is about the “holistic development of the individual.” Čunderle has called it a discipline that “continually monitors . . . fundamental play principles.” Komlosi sees it as primarily about the study and training of psychosomatic fitness for creative performance and the development of authorial themes in performance situations, and compares it to what Buddhism understands as experiential wisdom. See Alexander Komlosi, “Aspects of Acting: Studying and Practicing Fundamental Acting Principles through Acting with the Inner Partner” (unpublished dissertation, Prague, 2009), 31.

22. Vyskočil, *Dialogické jednání (heslo k autorizaci)*, 177.

23. Havel, 228.

CONTRIBUTORS

MICHAL ČUNDERLE studied theatre and Czech language and literature at the Philosophical Faculty of Masaryk University in Brno and authorial acting at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU). His doctoral dissertation, *Ivan Vyskočil: Paths Toward Play*, was published as part of *Hra školou* with Jan Roubal in 2001. His research focuses on contemporary Czech acting and drama and has been published in various journals, including *Svět a divadlo*. He also works as a screenwriter for Czech Television and as a playwright for Theatre Minor. He has been a member of the teaching faculty at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at DAMU (IIP, dramatic interpretation of literature) since 2001 and has been vice dean of the school since 2006.

DAVID GOLDFARB serves as Curator of Literature and Humanities at the Polish Cultural Institute in New York. He holds a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has published articles on Bruno Schulz, Zbigniew Herbert, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Mikhail Lermontov and narratology, and East European cinema in *East European Politics and Societies*, *Indiana Slavic Studies*, *Philosophy and Literature*, *Prooftexts*, *Polish Review*, *Slavic and East European Performance*, and book chapters on Józef Wittlin, Witold Gombrowicz, and Nikolai Gogol and Giuseppe Arcimboldo.

JOE HEISSAN is a graduate student in the Ph.D. program in Theatre at the CUNY Graduate Center, currently writing his dissertation on devised theatre and Theatre de Complicite. He is a Writing Fellow at the City College of New York, where he has also taught theatre history, acting, and directing, and has directed several theatre department productions.

KRYSTYNA IŁŁAKOVICZ is a senior lecturer in the Slavic Languages and Literature department at Yale University. She received her M.A. from Warsaw University and her Ph.D. from New York University in Comparative Literature with a specialization in Polish Language and Literature. Krystyna's research interests include Polish language and culture in the global context, theatre and language acquisition, theatre, film, Polish and European modernity, and Polish women and history.

ALEXANDER KOMLOSI is a Czech-American actor, director, author, translator, researcher, and teacher who has lived in the Czech Republic since 1998, where he is now a permanent resident. He completed his master's studies in authorial acting and doctoral studies in theatre at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU). He began studying (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner with Professor Vyskočil in 1998 and started teaching it in 2001. His dissertation was the first exhaustive study of the discipline. He is currently translating a series of seminal texts about the discipline into English to be published in 2011. In addition to working as an adjunct professor (IIP, authorial performance) at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at DAMU, he works as a scientific researcher for the Institute for the Research and Study of Authorial Acting.

ANETA MANCEWICZ is an Associate Professor of English Literature at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland. In 2010–2011, she was a Visiting Scholar at the CUNY Graduate Center as a Kościuszko Foundation Fellow. In 2009, she was a Visiting Lecturer at universities in Padova, Italy and Greifswald, Germany. Her book about the deconstruction of *Hamlet* in contemporary European drama was published as *Biedny Hamlet* by Księgarnia Akademicka, in Cracow, Poland (2010). She received her Ph.D. from Cracow's Jagiellonian University. She publishes articles and reviews on contemporary theatre and performance, and her research focuses on adaptations of Shakespeare and intermediality.

OLGA MURATOVA is a native of Moscow, Russia. She teaches Russian Studies in the department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. She received her M.A. degree in Linguistics at the Moscow University of Linguistics and her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the CUNY Graduate Center. She is a regular contributor to *Slavic and East European Performance*.

SHARI PERKINS has worked as a dramaturg, stage manager, and production assistant at regional and on- and off-Broadway theatres. She is a student in the doctoral program in Theatre at the CUNY Graduate Center. Shari has taught at Hunter College and Harvard University, writes reviews for various online publications, and is currently the managing editor of *Slavic and East European*

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